



# touchstone

2014

*Kansas State University*  
No. 42

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Cover Art:  
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2014

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# Editor's Note

Corrina Honeycutt

It has been an exciting past few years for *Touchstone*. With our move to an entirely online publication, we have been able to expand our selections to include some of the best works from undergraduate and graduate students from universities across the country. As we continue to grow, we are also expanding our genres and awards to include flash fiction and art. This edition, like those before it, is a representation of the best work submitted in the fall of 2013. I offer my congratulations to the ten undergraduates whose visions were selected as the best of Kansas State University for this volume.

While the quality of work submitted added to the success of this publication, **touchstone** would not have been possible without the skills of its devoted staff, the advisors, and the English department. And for them, I am forever grateful. In working with new formats and adapting to the every-changing technology for publication, this edition's staff has been dedicated to providing the highest quality literary and arts publication that it possibly could. The genre editors and our submission manager have helped to "spread the word" through various channels about our local publication. Because of their efforts, **touchstone** has received submissions from all over the United States and Canada. I would also like to thank the various assistant editors for their long hours of reading, the copy editors who worked through spring break to get the manuscripts ready for publication, and the production team who united the various submissions into a quality digital publication.

I hope that you enjoy the works presented in this volume and that you will continue to support the growth of literature and art not only at Kansas State University, but around the world.

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# Mid-Campus

*Dillon Rockrohr*

En route from Hale Library, mirrors on the nighty street,  
droplets of water suspended under a branch or two  
above my brow—whisper of a breeze.

I had mindfulness on my mind—  
the way a raindrop slides down thick glass,  
whistlesong of a mourning dove,  
beetle rolls along by my feet,  
catches of slant conversations  
like skewed lines hoping to meet—  
I took in more than I have known.

I thought about time's playhouse mirror;  
we project our view on months and seasons,  
amateur movies which aim at realism  
but get taken up in subjectivity  
(I've been reading Lukács, you see.)  
It will take a mason to deconstruct these  
barriers I've made.

Squeaky bicycle squeaks by and her face is  
set forward—skewed lines; I see you.

This tree will always be my favorite, I think,  
and yes it's what anyone might think—  
reaching white limbs alongside the walls of the chemistry  
building, at the corner of the art building where  
mein Deutsch lernen occurs,  
grain science where I've never been,  
leadership studies where I once waited for a girl  
but at least the smell of coffee sticks around,  
and the slanted uphill path over there  
to the quad, where all ways cross.

I caught a peripheral reflection in the black glass,  
and I noticed that I was here again—  
the third evening this week  
with the leafgreen leaves all lit up in the light  
and the 11 o'clock shadows all puddled around me  
in the night, a rhyme without a signified

still intimating the black ocean above  
rippling with its silver ghosts.

The London Planetree in a rainy fall night  
moves me differently than does that one magnolia tree  
in all its springy bloom, pink fairies falling to the earth,  
and in their falling I understand;

here I wanted to reach its settled heights  
to be taken up in brother arms  
and to lose myself in the tide up there—  
no need for festivity, only the green-black  
mystery of my being, his heavens...

I disappeared up the further sidewalk  
figuring out alarm clocks and class starts,  
the faces and voices of tomorrow, maybe her,  
the steady scattered progress of my skewed line  
in a derivative mirror  
and another moment in the background.

# Here, I'm Alive

*Dillon Rockrohr*

In my peripherals I take in both memory and premonition and neither can be trusted. I strain my eyes at every moment to penetrate this myopic inversion, this blindspot enshrouding all of my present. I am desiring that pristine vision, lucidity — to see with naked eyes the unfolding of my life without tint or warp. The lens is cracked and cannot find itself.

*So here I am, in the middle way,*

stuck at a fork in time, my feet locked into the very ink of the line. I may try to

*follow the optic glass The whirling ways of stars that pass,*

and I can always only drift or drown. I have read that every river flows into the sea, but before such great release into the expanse, we pass through countrysides, cities, under bridges, under oceans above, picking up passengers along the way. I stretch out my hand to pull them in with a running start, or I meet them at the port. At times, under the curtain of night, we pass each other unaware.

And here at this port, or just around the coming bend, or somewhere along this rocky bank, I am numbering my rations to measure the journey ahead.

*for you are not ready for thought*

but the silence is a movement in itself, a dance of the blind and lame trying to find a partner who fumbles in synchronized rhythm to muffled music from a farther room.

*There are two colors in my head.*

I can only hope they will fade to white when the light breaks.

I am looking for wisdom in imagined echoes from corners of rooms, or I am whistling along to the tune I think I hear. I am drowning out the noise in a controlled torrent of sound, or I am blacking out the colors in a monochromatic illusion. I construct opponents and try to reason with them while ever feebly preparing for the imminent fallout.

*What is that you tried to say?*

I breed my own entropy, but I know no better.

# Everyone Can Pick Up Heavier Things Than Me

*Cormac Badger*

And it's not like the passage under berries red hanging  
But the constant hazed-up gasp rhythm of metered out lines passing;  
Ghost lines rise in the windshield, shimmer and what's next  
But one more, one more, one more,  
Because who really cleans their cars that careful,  
Who wipes the bug's death-smear each time they pass anyway

And there's a point miles down where the collision waits—  
Someone's shaken too stiffly, heads crack, a bloodlet, a bruise—  
All the people pump their brakes, pretend blindness  
While they stare at the crumpled paper wrecked cars  
And say poor souls, tough luck, poor souls, better them than me,  
I should help, could help, lines still pulling them down-road

And it's too hard to see, sinking down the hill before the two-finger ginger lift of  
the horizon  
But it's there, somewhere between where slate black tarmac hills grasp at orange  
night coming,  
Along a line of dumb will o' wisp taillight processions  
And I have to think, goddamnit, think about it as long as the lines are straight  
Because someone blasted through hills just to get me home

# Suburban Lamplighter

*Cormac Badger*

Sometimes I think  
It's a good idea to go on a walk,  
Fresh air, for Chrissakes, fresh air, for  
Too long till I remember:  
Oh right, all this, sure,  
All sidewalks lead to Home,  
And home and house and home  
On record scratch, lurch repeat.

Sometimes I think  
My mind wanders  
So I'm a kid again  
And the day's death's slipping the pinhole  
With beautiful accuracy.  
Waiting for the lights to come,  
Gold beams call me home  
When they haunt the street  
And my heart's so thick  
Because no one ever wants to leave, not really,  
And it's such a terrible noise  
Waiting for streetlights,  
And it sounds like this—

# The Collection

*Cormac Badger*

Forthright split the drip of  
Gold light spilled from windows' slits,  
Home tumbles out in beads  
Separate by silver pins and stick  
To darkling hills waving green—  
Frozen butterflies, crystal comfort—  
Under Fuji-san,  
Sighing.

# Do You Deserve the Eggs?

*Grant Samms*

Pick them up. Put them down. Count the money. Question your choices. Both in cartons and love. Do you deserve them? What have the eggs done for you lately? Are you too harsh? Damn it. Buy the eggs. Now the bread. Pick it up. Look at the packaging. Reconsider your judgmental attitude. Sure the slicing is a little off. Is any loaf perfect? Do you see yourself living with this loaf for the rest of your life? Damn it. Buy the loaf.

You wanted to make cookies tonight. Distract yourself from trying to decide if you are an ogre or his kidnapped damsel. Get some flour, butter, brown sugar. Don't forget the M and M's. How dare you forget the M and M's? How dare you think about life prospects with the chocolate chips? It doesn't matter if you think the white chocolate gave you "the look". You are dedicated to the M and M's! But are they dedicated to you? Have the M and M's really thought out how the relationship will progress in the next two years? What if you don't want to give up your life goals just to travel half way around the world so that a bag of chocolates can fulfill its fantasies which have changed six times over the past year? You don't want to live in Denmark. Your work is here. You don't even like bikes. Why won't the M and M's listen to you? Damn it! Listen to me! But you scared the M and M's. They guilt you into feeling like a wretched person. They are right. The M and M's don't deserve your harsh and off-putting company. None of the chocolates do.

You go home and make plain sugar cookies. That's right. Eat the whole plate. What kind of an awful person lets his loyalty to chocolate who has stood beside him for two years waver in the candy aisle? Eat the whole plate you fat bastard. Maybe you will die in a diabetic coma and rid the M and M's of you. Let them live free to date the other, nicer candies.

No! That's not right. Every time you want to go somewhere, do something, the M and M's get sick. They suddenly get a migraine and can't stop by the pet store after you drove them around to do their errands for two and a half hours. Just leave the M and M's! It's a doomed batch any way.

These cookies taste awful. You go back to the store and buy the M and M's. Overanalyzing ever ingredient that goes into your new batch of cookies, you just stick with M and M's. Maybe you can get them to break up with you.

# Act IV

*Erica Ruscio*

I opened your curtains to witness the blizzard, I couldn't drive home that night, so you let me keep you warm—I felt ghosts of your hands on my legs for a whole day after that sudden storm. After that, the world stayed sheeted in winter, and

white became regular, frost scribbled on your windowpane, your sheets fallen around me. Your white tracks walking to my door. White sheets of your handwritten notes. Plain white walls of my room with the silhouettes of our lovemaking

playing like shadow puppets in the light bleeding through your mostly drawn drapes. One day we drove your car to the movies along snow-white fields. I was in my red dress, you were in your crisp new coat. We looked sharp, us two.

Suddenly, there was ice on the road, slick—*screetch!*—breaks slamming—locking steering wheel—car sliding off the road—down and tumbling down—

# Flyswatter

*Carl Conway*

A fly, miniscule as my pupil, orbited  
My pink-blotched skin,  
Soaking moisture, and circling.  
Laughter as it imposed on my chest.

Its wings fanned as if winking.  
In its eyes, I saw myself.  
A mirrored multitude, shattered  
Into separate images and ideas, converging  
As one thought, process, or man.

Its hexagonal lenses folded into circles.  
Water erupts from form into chaos,  
splattered across the floor.

The fly nudged its wing with hind legs.  
Cleaning himself.  
Mimicking me.

I slapped my hand on my chest,  
Then opened to reveal a black blotch,  
I inched my head closer to inspect  
His blood for a heart, or intestines,  
or a mind.

But all that remained was a speck of ink,  
as if a pen had melted in my heart,  
and the fly's eye.

One red, bulging eye  
Stayed still on my shoulder  
As I wiped his existence,  
black, grained,  
indiscernible from mine.

But the eye  
remained, waiting  
For the hand that would smash me,  
reduce me  
to nothing.

# Mark the Walls

*Carl Conway*

Four stories of students  
For years of hope.  
We receive marks  
We leave them too.

In the basement, I slept  
With spiders and Ceiling pipes  
And silent women.  
The walls were thin.

Theta Kappa's above me  
They wiped the house,  
forgetting past with pink paint.  
Walls creaked with each stroke.

They churned and lurched  
Filled with fist-sized holes  
Orange blotched stains.  
Scratches hinting at a heated exchange.

But nothing was spoken.  
Each story, my own.  
Each lease leaves, holes remain.  
Only the perspective changes.

# Trying Out

*Carl Conway*

The oil seeps through  
We are grazing an ocean of blubber.

Lard bubbles behind bricks.  
Carcass bleeds beside boat.  
Deep red blotches spill into  
disturbed-sea white.

Slippery feet and pungent fat.  
Simmering faces of sweat.  
Boiling lard below barbarians,  
savages, civilians, and sinners.

Mechanized hunters need lubricated  
joints. A leviathan feast,  
then we wait.

I watch burning sky  
melt with slimy sea.  
Or whale heart  
with fired fat.

# Stones

Carrie Cook

Beacon is quiet at night – everything happens behind closed doors and drawn curtains. It's claustrophobic. I know they're watching, though. Peeking through the curtains. Mom says they talk about her, and she's right, even though it isn't like she says.

We pull up in front of the Reformed Baptist Church. It's on the middle of Broadway, a former furniture store, squatting between a barber shop and what used to be the Duckwall's. Mom gets out, stumbling, dragging her left arm and leg like they are disobedient children that won't keep up.

"They're watching," she says.

"I know."

"Those bitches. Always talking about me. Always sneaking in my house."

"I know, Mom."

"Your father lets them in. Your father –"

"I know, Mom." I cut her off. My father has the patience of a saint.

I open the tailgate and reach for some pieces of broken paving stones.

"Here." I put the stone in Mom's right hand, the one that still does what it's told. "They're in that building."

She hurls the chunk at the large plate window, nearly falling in the process. It bounces off. Mom used to be a pharmacist, at the Junction City Walgreens. Her lab coat still hangs from the hook by the door.

I hand her another chunk, a bigger one, the size of my fist. She plants her feet as best as she is able and pitches. She used to play softball, too, before the stroke. Dad and I would drive down to Junction after school in his landscaping truck and cheer for her team.

The stone shatters against the R in Reformed but it doesn't break the glass.

I hand Mom another rock, and I keep one for myself. A large one that still has corners. She throws again. We were here before the church. Before Pastor Dan and his flock of Quiverfuls. Before the gossip-mongering women in the long denim skirts and the high necked blouses. We didn't think much about them until it was too late. Until they edged Dad out of a job. RBC members hire their own.

I palm the stone in my hand and stand with Mom, shoulder to shoulder.

"Fuck you!" she screams. "Fuck you, you God damn cunts, you whores!" Mom starts to cry and she tries to pace in a jerky motion, like she does in front of the window at home, looking out on the women walking with their double strollers. "I can't do this; why can't I do this?" She slaps at her wet face with an alien, floppy hand. Mom used to tell stupid chemistry jokes and laugh while we stared at her. She drank her coffee from a Shakespearean insults mug.

"Wait, Mom," I say. She turns to look at me.

Eons ago, it seems, Mom helped me with quadratic equations. Dad made hamburgers that had stuff in the middle of the patties – cheese for me, grilled onions for Mom, a little of both for him. I cock back and throw the stone. This time, it crashes through.



**Ellis, Erica Ruscio**

# John Player Specials

Charles King-Hagen

It was getting darker outside. Streetlights were turning on. Inside the café, the ambience felt very much the same. It was as though it was dusk inside as well. The lamplights were reflected in the windows.

I finished a sip of coffee. “You don’t think I could flirt my way to a free cup?”

She rolled her eyes. “I think you’re a little too confident.”

“The lady behind the counter knows me.”

“Why does that matter?”

A car horn blared close to the front door. I looked up.

“Is that Kara and Conner?” Hannah asked.

A bell jingled above the door. They walked into the café.

“Hannah!” Kara squealed. Hannah got up from the table and hugged her.

“What a pleasant surprise,” Hannah said. “You’ll have to grab two chairs and join us.”

“I think we will,” Kara said. “Is there room for two more?”

Hannah picked up my work from the table and handed it to me.

“Of course there is.” She smiled at me.

“We were just here to do some work,” Conner said. “I am damn tired of school.”

“How is Arkansas, Hannah?” Kara asked as she and Conner sat down.

“It’s great. The independence is really nice. I think the distance from home helps.”

Conner nodded. “We feel the same about Vandy.”

“Plus, you know, Nashville isn’t too bad of a place to spend time.” Kara smiled. “How are classes? Awfully busy?”

“Very,” Hannah said. “I’ve got to watch my GPA.”

“How far is the drive?” Conner asked.

“About six hours or so. Depends on if I’m speeding. Interstate cops hound I-60. It’s a wonder I haven’t been ticketed yet.”

“But she has been pulled over,” I said.

Hannah grinned and stuck out her fingers. “Three times. No tickets.”

“Impressive,” Kara laughed. “Your secret?”

“I can flirt when I need to.” Hannah looked at me.

“I seem to remember something like that,” Conner said. They laughed.

Kara turned to me. “How is school for you, Dan? Ass-ten-ton, right?”

“Astenton, yeah,” I said. “But it’s actually pronounced Az-ten-ton.”

“Unbelievable, Kara.” Conner laughed. “What school would put *ass* in their name?”

“Well, I didn’t know,” Kara said.

“We were actually just talking about it,” Hannah said. “Dan was telling me he’s looking forward to transferring and moving away from the ‘still-living-under-mom-and-dad’s-roof’ experience.” She smiled at me.

“Well it’s true, yeah,” I said. “The free housing has been nice, though.”

“He’s just ready to be done with community college.”

“I think I’m going to get some coffee.” Kara stood up. “Have you had anything yet, Hannah?”

“I haven’t.”

“Who goes to a coffeehouse and doesn’t get coffee?” Conner joked.

“The jury’s still out.” Hannah smiled. “I might.”

“Nonsense,” Kara said. “On your feet. This one’s on me.” Hannah stood up and they went to the counter.

I looked at Conner. “I’m going for a cigarette.”

Conner stood up. “Want company?”

“Sure.”

It was fully dark out. Headlights were zooming by from the road. I reached into my pocket and grabbed my Marlboros as Conner let the patio door close behind us.

“Put those away.” He reached into his pocket. “John Player Specials; some of the best on the market. They are hand rolled before being packaged.”

I lit one. “Must be expensive.”

“Not terrible, though I don’t really pay attention when I buy them. Maybe they are expensive.”

I took a drag from the cigarette. It was colder outside than I had expected. I had left my jacket on my chair.

“I could really go for a fuck right now,” Conner said.

“What?”

“You know, of the dick-in-the-hole variety?”

“Right.”

“I actually get headaches,” he said. “Four, five days without it. Headaches, man.”

“Good that you have got Kara then, I guess.”

“You’d think the tall, blonde with the lack of self-esteem would work,” he said. “Eager to please and all. But she just lies there. Wants to talk to me. Doesn’t know what to do with her legs.”

I lit a Marlboro. His John Player burned at his side. He smiled.

“Vandy’s ridiculous, man. Blonde southern belles are everywhere. It’s like every Playboy orgy you’ve ever dreamed of, but the girls really do have daddy issues.” He laughed. “You wouldn’t believe how often I’m getting up.” He pulled out his phone.

“You remember Becca Deyers? My goodness is she tight. Fucked her last summer and have been seeing her when I’m in town. Think I’ll see what she’s up to later.”

“I dated her for a while in high school,” I said. “Seven months or so.”

“Tell me you got in on that.”

“Dan?” Hannah and Kara were shutting the patio door. Conner dropped his cigarette and stepped on it.

“We went out for a smoke,” I said.

“I came to keep him some company,” Conner said.

“Kara invited us to her place tonight,” Hannah said to me.

Kara smiled. “My parents are out of town for a few days.”

“I’ll be blacking out,” Conner said.

“I can’t tonight,” I said.

“That’s fine,” Kara said. “You were mostly a courtesy invite anyway.”

She and Conner laughed.

“I think I’m going to go with them,” Hannah said to me. “You don’t need to drive me home.”

“Okay.”

Hannah turned towards Kara. “We should take our mugs in before we go.”

“We’ll just take them,” Conner said. “You guys haven’t even finished, anyway.”

“He has a point,” Kara said. “Wait, isn’t you guys’ anniversary coming up?”

“Two years tomorrow.” I looked at Hannah.

“That’s just wonderful,” Molly said. She hugged Hannah around the waist.

“Congratulations, Dan,” Conner said. He shook my cigarette hand with his.

Hannah looked at me. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“I’ll call you in the morning.”

She kissed me goodbye, and the three of them made their way to his car. The horn honked on the way out.

# Pay Day Loans Ad

*Kari Bingham-Gutierrez*

After the shower, I throw on tattered sweats and a hoodie, a remnant from a past, failed relationship, something to do with being too stubborn and prideful. I plop onto the couch. My ass lands in the indentation I've formed over the years. I stretch forward to scoop my laptop up, but halt. Shadow gnawed through my charger cord about a month ago. That damn cat. Time and money deter my plans of replacing it. So instead I guess I'll just watch TV. "Well that's fucking great!" The TV clicks on. A blizzard dances across the screen. The cable company shut off the service. Didn't I just pay that bill? I glance over at my desk. Of course the cable bill is on top, mocking me.

My cat, with piss yellow eyes, perches on the bookcase. He is judging me, and I know it. He probably thinks I'm pathetic. I bet when he is outside, he meets up with other neighborhood cats. They all gather around their feast of dead mice, bragging about how great their owners are, each one trying to win a coveted prize. Shadow will sink into the background or else be jeered at. Who wants to live with someone who can barely afford to keep the lights on? Someday he will disappear; he will replace me. I'm surprised he hasn't left already.

...

Acid starts eating the lining of my stomach. I can hear the low rumble of hunger. There's no food in my kitchen unless you count cat food, which I don't; I'm not that desperate yet. Give it a few more days. I had popcorn and a few boxes of Snowcaps at work. That should suffice. I'll just get breakfast in the morning. I say that now, but in the morning I won't have time and I'll tell myself I'll buy a big lunch. Lies. All Lies.

...

Book spines stare at me: Ibsen, Chopin, Wilde, Bukowski, etc. I scan them; hoping hands will extend for the tattered spines and pull me in. Death of a Salesman. Willy Lowman's heart wrenching, depressing tale sparks my interest. His mundane, crumbling life resembles my own. However, our stories will end differently. I'm too proud to commit suicide. More than likely, I'll die on the job. Some whack-job will probably go on a rampage after paying fifteen bucks to watch a film that fails to match media's hyped up trailers.

...

The sun shines through the dusty one-dollar curtains in the living room. The alarm buzzes from the other room. My eyes flutter open and shut between each buzz. Arthur Miller rests on my abdomen. Aches up my back cause me to rotate onto my left side. Miller slides onto the floor as if defeated.

Ouch! I lurch awake. A stabbing pain courses through my toe. I look down at my feet and Shadow is using them as a punching bag. Sliding them out of reach only makes the lashing worse. But, somehow I manage to roll onto the floor next to Miller in retreat. I toss him outside, where he really wants to be.

...  
He doesn't return home that night. I don't put up missing fliers. Neither one of us is missing the other.



**Reclining Figure, Kelly Potter**

# What Are the Odds?

*Grant Samms*

All this noise makes counting these cards difficult. Four. Count is five. Two. Count is six. King, seven, five. Count is five, five, six. Dealer shows six. Count is seven. Discard has four decks racked. Two more decks in shoe. Point five decks until cut. Dealer runs seventy percent penetration. Three more hands. True count is three point five. Consult index plays. Take insurance if offered next hand. Count is seven. I look down. Two cards, thirteen. Dealer shows six. Stay. Dealer draws king. Busts on twenty six. Count is six. True count three. Still take insurance. Keep same bet.

“Nothing like a table win, huh guys?” The dealer chimes in as if to suggest that he is on our side.

The count is six.

The old man next to me offers the dealer a verbal jab. I am sure the dealer took it well. That is his job. I don't pay attention to the jabber. The old man is probably in from his retirement home. He keeps taking the three card poker side bet. It annoys me. Slows down the game. The odds are against him anyway.

The count is six.

Surely this man knows that these side bets are engineered to hurt you. There's no way to predict a side bet win. The house wants money. He has money. The house gets money. A man in his forties and smelling of barley and hops slops into the chair on my right. He wants to play two hands simultaneously.

The count is six.

A cocktail waitress approaches me.

“Can I get you something to drink, sir?”

The count is six.

“No, thank you. I'm good.”

The count is six.

Finally the forties man gets cashed in. The next hand comes fast. The count moves seven, eight, eight, eight, nine, eight, nine, ten, eleven, ten, eleven, twelve. I stand on nineteen. Dealer makes eighteen with a four. I win. Count is thirteen. One hand left. Two decks. True count is six point five. Increase bet from five to fifteen. Take insurance if offered.

I win the hand.

A break ensues for the dealer to shuffle in the new shoe. I am up twenty dollars after the first two shoes. I'm not making a ton of money, but that's not why I love this game. Most of the casino I hate, but this blackjack table is my oasis. Not for the reasons that the man to my right or my left are drawn here. They enjoy it for the dopamine their brain excretes when they take a risk that pays off. Their brain even gives them a squirt of the stuff if they lose so long as

they feel the outcome was close. I like this table for one simple reason. I get to break the rule, and the casino has only one rule: Lose. That's it. That's everything. At this very table, I am ordered to lose 51% of the time.

As much as I dislike casinos, they are at least grotesquely interesting in the same way as a serial abductor. It takes victims; snatches them out of their lives. It fills them with false promises. Offers them a nice little treat and then hauls them away into a dark and smoky room. Then the Stockholm syndrome sets in, compelling them to return again and again. But I, too, return. Sometimes I return to watch the victims lumber by. I come to catch bits of drunken conversation or to examine the control of the brain high on its own chemistry.

Other times I come to see if I can fly in the face of the kidnapers, to wander into their own dungeon and steal back what they have taken. That's a rush that is hard to match. For all of their security, all of their cameras, all of their pit bosses, I can still break their one rule. By counting cards, I have the advantage of knowing when the odds are considerably in my favor. This is when I strike. Calculating the odds. Running the numbers. Beating the house. This is when my brain provides me with my own fair dose of dopamine. And unlike the men beside me, I have control over *mine*.

In the early 1990's, a team of 30 students from MIT made almost a million dollars doing this very thing. They formed a card counting team designed to use simple math to extract money from the Vegas strip like an ATM. By studying odds and statistics and running computer simulations, these math nerds became the world's most productive and privileged high rollers. It wasn't rare for them to bet \$10,000 a hand when the odds were good. They were so successful in fact that on certain weekends they could legally rob a casino for half of a million dollars. Their biggest secret was not their luck or their ritual or their superstition or their sitting position; it was their control over their brains. The ability to take all emotion, put it into a little box, and run their brains purely on math.

The seasoned reader knows that on a casino floor you won't find a clock or a window to the outside world. The purpose of this is to draw you so deeply into their engineered experience that you lose all notion of the progression of time. But there are other, more subtle ways that the house will drag you in. A common feature of casinos on the Vegas strip is to have a long curved gaming floor. This creates mystery, compelling the brain to seek out whatever is at the end of the path. Of course, once you get just a short way into the building, you no longer have a line of sight to the exit. Most casinos, in fact, make the exits as inconvenient to find as the fire marshal will let them. Find a casino and walk to the back, then walk around and maybe go to the bathroom. Then try to get out. It will take an embarrassingly long time just to leave the room. All the lights and sounds will pull your attention in every direction. The large entrance and vaulted ceilings will tug you into the poker room or the high roller area, and the isles will lead to the restaurant and the bar. Finding the squat, drab door is an intentionally laborious process.

On my twenty-first birthday, my dad sat me down next to him and kept covertly handing me twenties (as if the overlords of the casino floor cared whose money it was I was losing). The machine was Alice in Wonderland themed, brand new and licensed. The Cheshire cat flitted across the digital reels as the two hundred and fifty pound machine sucked down bills like they were potato chips. For each twenty, it burped out two thousand credits on to the display. Immediately I started dissecting the conspiracy of the machine. The use of credits instead of currency lessens its value in your mind's eye, making you much more willing to lose. I hit a button on the machine. A barrage of lights flashed and an audio jingle clearly designed for the hard of hearing played. I won thirty credits. The machine counted then out at a painfully slow pace and presented me with the sights and sounds of accumulating wealth. Alice walked in from the left of the screen and tossed handfuls of gold coins into the air. The irony was that I had bet one hundred credits. In my victory I had only succeeded in losing less. The woman on my right provided the excitement I was supposed to display.

“Oh child! You won! You won!” She danced as well as a woman overweight and over the limit could while sitting down. I couldn't share in her excitement. This thing was all digital. It was run by a computer that could analyze, control, and mitigate. It recorded my play style, how my betting was affected by wins and losses and used that data to control the outcomes of future spins. This machine had one true purpose: to manipulate my brain chemistry and trick me into losing more and more money.

The overweight woman, who in response to my lack of dancing began to rock me by pushing on my shoulder, must have been oblivious to this. She couldn't see past the Monte Carlo fallacy. That's what psychologists call it. The belief of people, particularly gamblers, that they have more control over the outcome of chance than they really do. I had spent the better part of the week leading up to my birthday researching gambling psychology. So far the woman's machine had sucked down four one hundred dollar bills, safely depositing them inside its intestines for the casino to collect later. I watched the woman spin a max bet. The Cat popped up on her machine and did a little dance.

“Go to the lucky banquet!” The machine screamed at the woman. She was presented with an apparent choice. She had twenty cards to pick from. According to the machine, if she picked the five cards with the queen on them she would win four hundred thousand dollars. She could only make three mistakes. As her heartbeat quickened, she began to touch cards. The first one was a queen. The second was a queen. The third had Alice. The fourth was a queen. The woman's forehead beaded with sweat. Three queens and only one mistake. She was doing well. The next card came up Alice, but amazingly, the next card came up a queen. This was the moment. If she picked the right card, she would be rich. She made the insignia of the cross in the air, closed her eyes, and then tapped a card. The card turned slowly, building tension. A waterfall of sparkles and glitter tumbled down the screen as the card began to come up right. I could see the woman's jaw muscles constrict as the smoke and glitter drifted away to reveal Alice.

“Aww damn it. What are the odds of that happening?”

Exceptionally good, I thought, as if that outcome was anything but engineered. While the screen was releasing glitter to obscure the card, the woman's brain was releasing massive amounts of dopamine. When it was revealed that she had come so close, but ultimately failed, her brain squeezed out more of the reward hormone than if she had actually won the money. She immediately tried again.

In one study, the anthropologist Natasha Schull interviewed gamblers who get annoyed when they win large sums of money because it slows down the pace of their play. That's the state people can find themselves in, addiction gripping their lives so much that the actual purpose of gambling—winning—becomes an infuriating road-block.

In a separate study, the famous behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner ran an experiment on rats. He implanted an electrode in the rats' brains on the nucleus accumbens. This region sits near the bottom of both hemispheres and near the brain stem. This positioning allows any signal to be transmitted throughout the body with increasable speed. Skinner found that if he stimulated this region with a mild electric current it would cause the accumbens to release dopamine. Doing so tricked the brain into thinking that it was doing something positive for its survival.

Consider a rat that has not undergone this procedure. If the rat ate, the nucleus accumbens released dopamine. If the rat evaded a predator, the nucleus accumbens released dopamine. If the rat had sex, the nucleus accumbens released dopamine. These things all furthered the species of ratkind. With his electrode, though, Skinner could make the rats think that any activity he chose was positive for their survival. Skinner found this interesting, but he thought up an even more intriguing idea. He put the rats in a cage with food and water off to one side. On the other side sat a button that controlled the electrical current to their tiny brains. When released into this cage, the rats would eat, drink, and explore until they found the button. Once they did, they would spend the vast majority of their time pushing the button. This often came at the expense of behaviors that were actually important for survival. Over half of the rats pushed the button until they died of dehydration or exhaustion, spending their final moments of life slipping away in a pile of their own excrement that had accumulated over as many hours.

The six decks finally come out of the shuffler and are ready for cutting. The dealer first offers the cut to the man who cut them the last time. He rejects on the grounds that his last cut was bad and he doesn't want the table to get mad at him. I pluck the yellow plastic card from the dealer's hand and slip in into some point between some two cards. The only purpose of the exercise is for the casino to prove that the deck isn't stacked. I never even consider this to be the case. The casino doesn't need to cheat when statistics and their guest's brains do all the work for them. The dealer loads the cards into his clear, plastic shoe and begins to spin cards to us players. My first hand comes up a twenty. What are the odds of this? I think back to the woman the first time I had come to this casino

with my father. The odds of this are easily calculable. Not that I stop to do the math; I have to keep the count.

The count is six.

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# The House That Built Me

Chelsea Aeschliman

When I was growing up, my mother set Saturdays aside for cleaning. After breakfast she would turn on MTV, and we would spread out across the house to do our various chores. I was in charge of wiping down the bathrooms and organizing the toy explosion in the family room. My little sister, Sammie, was queen of sweeping the hardwood floors and dusting the knick-knacks. My mother tackled the kitchen, dining room, and living room. She threw out trash, mopped what Sammie swept, and doused the area in Clorox. By the end of the day, everything was in its place, nearly spotless. Everything but Dad's den, that is. The back porch was his space, and Mom let him do with it what he wished. Boxes of garage sale finds were piled together in the center of the room. Dozens of National Geographic magazines and books on art coated the shelves. Sam and I weren't allowed on the porch. It was too dangerous. After my parent's separation, things changed.

*"People who board often claim parts of the home that are for other family members, but the control of how that space is used or what items should be thrown away is often up to them. Family members aren't allowed to make decisions, which lead to feelings that family members are living in someone else's home, causing discomfort and disrespect."*

Glow-in-the-dark plastic stars shiver on the ceiling. White dwarfs, soon to be black. Within the year their cores will cool and they will fall to the floor and be swept under a piece of furniture. Loose plastic on the windows, remnants of last year's preparations for winter's chill, tremble with every gust of wind that hugs the sides of the house. Nasal, gasping snores echo up the stairs from my father, who is lying in a heap on a musty couch tucked within the room I once called my playroom.

I curl further into the blankets, my cocoon, my haven from whatever may be crawling in the darkness. Ten porcelain dolls stand at attention on a shelf to my right. A layer of filth stains their petticoats and parasols. I meant to dust today, but didn't get that far. I hate those dolls. In the corner slumps an old computer, the third my dad has found, as well as a few stacks of books. This foreign collection clashes with the rest of my childhood possessions.

In the semi-darkness I hear a skittering of tiny nails on hardwood. My muscles tense. A mouse? A rat? A opossum? The room gets smaller, darker. Twenty porcelain eyes in various shades glare in my direction. I imagine the dolls charging me in my sleep, banding together with the league of rats under my bed. I jump up and grab my bags, which are always packed. Then I tip toe down the hallway, and push open the door to my sisters' bedroom. I curl into a ball beside

her on top of a tattered quilt, Mom's quilt. Her fingers braid through mine. We will take on the rats together.

*"As clutter develops and stays, it becomes impossible to remove accumulated dust from spaces that are most affected because people are not able to vacuum or dust their homes, sometimes for years. Additionally, spilled liquids, such as, soda, juice, and water are often not cleaned up causing mildew, fungus or unwanted pests. Health-related effects of boarding reach all members of the household, not merely the person who boards."*

The summer of my junior year of high school, Sammie and I attended a tennis camp at Emporia State University. Because it cost extra to stay in the dormitory on campus, we stayed at our dad's farm less than a half an hour away. Sam and I would drive back to the country around five every evening, sweaty and mildly sun burnt, calluses on our hands and blisters on our feet. I made dinner from whatever was in the cabinet and then attempted to clean the house without Dad noticing. He always noticed.

Halfway through the week in the wee hours of the morning I was ejected from sleep. Dad's baritone voice shadowed Sam's quick whispers in the hall. The back door slammed shut and I listened to the rumble of a truck engine, the crunch of gravel, and then silence. I peered at the clock. 5:00am. No way. I buried my face in the sheets and desperately struggled to return to dreamland. Just when I was about to fall back into the haze, I felt Sam's presence prodding me.

"Chelsea."

"Sam, I swear."

"Chelsea, please."

The request caught in the base of her throat. She *would* cry. I ripped the sheets away from my blood-shot eyes.

"This better be good."

Her arm was outstretched toward me, an offering. In my semi-awake state I grabbed her hand. The scream that erupted from my little sister's body then was like nothing I'd ever heard before. It was drenched in agony and misery, spiked with torment. I jerked away. The room came into focus and, gently, I reached for her a second time. Two dime-sized blisters oozing a substance like apricot jelly throbbled against the inside of her elbow. The surrounding skin was a deep purple-red.

"Chelsea, I can't move my arm." She gasped through shattered sobs.

I grabbed the keys rushed my baby sister into town to the emergency room. On the way to the hospital Sam struggled to keep her eyes open. I begged her not to pass out until we arrived. Sam had been bitten by a Brown Recluse spider or some other kind of poisonous insect. The ER nurse pulled me into the hallway and told me she was in stage two of three. If I had waited, the damage would have been much worse.

I stoked Sam's forehead and fed her peaches. I talked to the doctors about her treatment. Then I watched my little sister, her cheeks dry and salty, drift into a drug-induced sleep. Her muscles relaxed. I held Sam's hand for a few minutes, my eyes fixed on the IV creeping from the crook of her good arm. An

hour after we arrived, despite my frequent calls, our father finally shrugged through the sliding emergency room doors.

“She’ll be fine, Bud.”

I took a deep breath and swallowed the foul taste of morning breath still lingering on my tongue.

“You didn’t spray for spiders. I asked you to do it, Dad, but you didn’t, did you?”

*Adult children often copy or oppose the behavior that they witnessed as a child. Either boarding behaviors are learned and repeated, despite living separately, or the adult child, embarrassed and disgusted at how they lived, keep next to nothing.*

Every now and then I go back to that old house in the country, the place my dad still calls home. I go back to check on his progress, to see if anything has changed. I hope it has, I always hope, but I’m always disappointed. Last semester I drove out to the farm while Dad was at work. He acts like it’s been six years. It’s only been a few months.

The valley was dismal. Untended brush has crept across the yard and blurred the distinction between forest and lawn. The grass was patchy, a smattering of brown and dull green, and though I dared not explore the possibility, I sensed the clumps of sandburs hidden beneath layers of weeds, all seeking purchase on an unprotected ankle. Ivy has slunk up the siding of a pale yellow house, under the clapboards, constricting the flaking wood with the curl of each vine. Broken glass gleamed on the earth beneath one of the front windows, remnants of an accident long passed.

Inside is worse.

The last time I went back, my bedroom was not as cluttered, save the floor. The floor was drenched in letters, newspapers, and pictures. A few of the envelopes displayed names of companies and insurance agencies. Among the flood of paperwork were hand-written cards and letters. Some had been trampled and left to die on the ground as the years passed by. Others were pristine, as though they had been recently written. I recognized my own handwriting. Photographs were intermixed with the letters, pictures of children, of our family. There was one in particular that I chose to pluck from the floor. It was a portrait, most likely done for the church phonebook. There was a woman with shoulder pads and thick-rimmed glasses, a boy with brown floppy hair, two little girls with missing teeth, sporting pristine white dresses, and a man in a jaunty sweater. They stared back at me, smiles spread thick across their cheeks. It was my family, but I felt no tug on my heart, no recollection of affection. They were from a time long since buried beneath the towers of garbage that shell of a home contained. I backed out of the room and got myself out of that house as quickly as I could.

That night I spent an hour cleaning my apartment.

*“Adult children often have a very strained relationship with their boarding parent. As adult children move out of the home, they may become estranged from their boarding relative due to*

*disagreements about how hoarding should be handled. Adult children may also blame the parent for the condition in which they were forced to live as a child."*

*Quack, Quack, Quack...* my phone buzzes at me from the cup holder, summoning me to answer, but I know that ring. I ignore it.

"My dad...it's complicated," I explain to my friend, BJ.

"Have you tried to talk to him about what you're feeling?" he asks.

"I send him letters. Nothing changes."

"I'd give anything in the world to be able to talk to my father," BJ says.

I take a deep breath, debate whether or not to continue, and then exhale.

"He says it will be different, Beej, but it's only getting worse. The house still looks terrible. People tell me it looks condemned. Even the idea that his future grandchildren can't see him doesn't change a thing. Nothing gets through. He won't change. Sometimes I feel like he's never going to change."

Later that night I dig my phone out of my bag to check the voice mail. *Call your dad if you get a chance. Love that ol' Chelsea.* I press delete and glance at the clock on my nightstand. It's past ten now. He'll be asleep. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll call. After class or something, I'll call.

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# Hazel Kinder's Lighthouse Theater

*Charles King-Hagen*

I first met Hazel Lapele on the cool, caked sands of the Chesapeake Bay. It was in late September and the days were turning cold. She was down close to the shore one night when I came out to the water, a candle-lit lantern next to her. The flame was bright enough that I could see she was reading. I had just finished a long day's work, so I stripped to my shorts and waded into the bay.

By the shoreline, the Chesapeake isn't very deep; you can wander out about fifty yards and still be standing at around waist high. It's a little tricky to get so far out, with the sand being very slippery and constantly crumbling beneath your feet. But there is a connected feeling you get when you are resistant against the slight pull of the tide, and as far off as you can see is water illuminated by the stars and the moon.

I soaked my body in the saltwater for some time. It was one of those nights where constellations were easy to find, so I traced Capricorn as I returned to shore. I glanced at her as I walked up out of the tide. She was still seated on the sand some ten yards away from where I had left my clothes, her legs tucked underneath her. Water trickled down from my beard and onto my chest. I ran my towel up and down my body, and looked out at the water, which seemed to be unnaturally black with the reflection of the moon sitting right on top of it. We were silent for a few moments, her sitting and me standing.

"The moon is awfully bright tonight," I said in her direction.

"Isn't it?" she said. And then, "You're not from here."

"No." I continued to keep my voice up so she could hear me. "How did you tell?"

"Because I don't know you. I know everyone here."

I left my towel and walked over to her. I held out my hand.

"I'm Sullivan."

"You're still wet." She laughed.

"It's only water."

She rolled up her sleeve and shook my hand gently. Her skin was soft.

"I'm Hazel. Hazel Lapele. I live two houses up the road. Are you Henry and May Kinder's nephew?"

"Yes. Did they tell you I was coming?"

"Somebody mentioned something. Word just sort of gets around in this town. Plus, you came from their gate."

"Right." I laughed abashedly and looked back out at the water. The ripples made it look like the moon was floating on the surface.

“You make me wonder what the water looks like where you’re from,” Hazel said.

I looked at her and smiled quietly. “What are you reading?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Just a book.” She pursed her lips for a moment. “Well, not really a book. It’s a journal with blank pages.”

“Is it for poetry, then?”

She laughed. “I mean they used to be blank. I’m memorizing lines. I wrote them in here.”

“Memorizing lines as in acting?”

“Yes, as in acting.”

“You’re an actress?”

“Thus the line memorizing.” She smiled.

“For how long?”

“A while. I started in grade school, so ever since then.”

“I could never act,” I said. The cold September wind was drawing goose bumps on my skin.

“Never is a long time. Too long to be sure of anything, I think,” she said.

“I just know I couldn’t. I don’t have much of an imagination.”

“Everyone has an imagination.”

I sat down. “Well, I guess I just mean that I don’t have an acting imagination. I can fix things, you know. I’m good with my hands, but I’m no actor.”

“Have you ever pretended before?” she asked. “Thought up something that wasn’t true and then behaved that way?”

I shrugged and nodded. “Sure.”

“Then you’ve acted. You’ve probably acted more than you think. There’s no difference between pretending and acting.”

“How do you do it? Read lines out in the dark and then become some other person?”

“Well, it’s like I said, pretending and acting are the same thing,” she said. “And I’ve always been really good at pretending.” She stood up, dusted sand off of her legs, and stooped to pick up the lantern.

“It’s getting late, I imagine. I should be heading up.”

“It was nice to meet you, Hazel,” I said, standing up.

“And you. We’ll be seeing more of each other. Chatworth is only so big.” The lantern light illuminated her smile. I couldn’t see her eyes.

“Maybe I could watch you perform sometime?” I said.

“Sure, if you’d like. Goodnight, Sullivan.” She turned and walked the remaining steps to the gate to her house. I walked to my towel and then watched while the lantern made its way through the backyard, up the stairs and into the patio, and then was put out before Hazel disappeared inside.

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Over the next few weeks, I saw her down by the water just about every night. As it became October and the days grew shorter, from inside my aunt and uncle’s house I would see her lantern down on the sand, a tiny light amidst endless darkness. Some nights I would go down and talk to her. It was never for

very long. We would talk about simple things: I would tell her about my hometown and how it felt to be in Virginia. She would tell me about Chatworth, both its popular history, and also the things she said nobody knew. I learned that it was built on high school football, and that, in the summertime, makeshift stands with fresh crab popped up around all of its streets. She also told me that, in the five years since the war had ended in '45, the population had been growing quickly. It was near 20,000 now. It was a good time to be in Chatworth, she told me. I was amazed by how much attention she paid to the city.

"How do you know all of these things?" I would often ask.

"People tell me," she would say. "It's good to know about where you are from. People love to share what they know."

She had a nice voice for telling stories. I wouldn't go out if it was too late, or I was too worn down from work, or whatever other reasons kept me inside. But I always knew that she was out there. Whenever I didn't go out, I always made sure that I knew Hazel was down by the water, reading her lines by lantern, a tiny light in the dark on the sand.

I went into town one Saturday. My Aunt May was planning some desserts and had needed a few things, so I bought the bread, the baking soda, and the brown and white sugar and then, since none of them needed to be refrigerated, set them inside my uncle's truck on the passenger's seat and wandered down Main Street. I walked back the opposite the way I had come, and found Kathy's Diner, which was tucked between a tackle shop and a homemade candle store. It looked close to empty from the outside.

"What'll you have, hon?" a woman with curly blonde-gray hair asked me from the cash register as I went in to the counter.

"My aunt told me to get a milkshake here."

"Your auntie is a sharp lady." Her nametag said Kathy. She looked to have softened a bit with age, a woman fit to greet customers. "You're Henry and May's nephew?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Sullivan," I said. She pointed at the menu.

"You'll go ahead and have the crab cakes. We pan fry 'em and season with some Old Bay over the top. Fries and corn on the cob, too."

I looked over the menu and found the milkshakes. I skimmed through vanilla, chocolate, strawberry and banana, but my eyes stopped when I saw one called the *Hazel Lapele* near the bottom of the list.

"What's this? The *Hazel Lapele*?" I pointed to it.

She smiled, and there was a spark in her green eyes. "It is the crown jewel of this establishment. Tall and vanilla, mixed with hazelnut flavoring, sprinkled with cinnamon and topped off with a red cherry."

"Why is it called the *Hazel Lapele*?"

She blinked. "When did you get here?"

"Early September."

She shook her head. "They really haven't been telling you much, have they? She's an actress, Hazel Lapele, and a fine one at that."

"I met her a few weeks ago," I said.

“There’s something to her that doesn’t often roll through towns like these,” Kathy said. “Mark my words, there’s gonna be a road sign on the way in one day that says ‘Chatworth, VA, hometown of Miss Hazel Lapele.’ That girl will be putting us on the map.” She took the menu from me. “Let me get started on those crab cakes.”

I left the counter and found a booth as Kathy disappeared back into the kitchen. The diner was beginning to get busier with the lunch hour. I looked out the window at all of the shops on the other side of the street, and I wondered to myself how long they had been there, and if the original owners were still alive and knew each other. Then I thought about Hazel and how she had a milkshake named after her at eighteen years old, and that she must be one hell of an actress to have her own dessert. Kathy brought me out my lunch and didn’t say anything, but underneath the napkin lay a neatly folded copy of Chatworth High’s printed theater schedule. I unfolded it and looked to where, furiously circled on the top third of the page, a performance of a play called “Our Town” was scheduled to open that evening. I took the cherry off the top and started in to the shake. It was very good, so I drank it quickly. I finished my lunch and walked my dishes to the counter, where I waved thank you to Kathy for the meal.

§

I pulled into the driveway, carefully picked up the grocery bag from the passenger’s seat, and then made my way inside.

“You’re back later than I thought you would be,” Aunt May said as I walked into the kitchen. She was pouring fresh iced tea into a jar to go in the refrigerator.

“I had a long lunch. Crab cakes at Kathy’s Diner on Main.”

“That Kathy Bainer is a sweetheart. You had that shake I told you to get?”

I thought to the schedule in my back pocket.

“Very good,” I said. “Was I out too long?”

“It’s no worry, dear. Your Uncle Henry and I will actually be out tonight, so I probably wouldn’t have had time to bake anyway.”

“Where to?”

“A production put on by the high school students.”

I set the bag on the kitchen counter. “Would you mind one more? Kathy said it is going to be excellent.”

“We do have a very strong theater program,” my Aunt May said. She smiled. “Doors open at 6:30. Let’s try to leave here around 6.”

“Okay.” I set the keys on the kitchen counter.

“Would you tell your uncle on your way up?” she asked.

“Got it,” a voice called from the other room. “6:30 doors. Leaving here at 6.”

“I mean it, Henry,” my Aunt May said. “You know we can’t be late.”

We pulled into Chatworth High around 6:35. It was very crowded. There was a line when we got to the ticket booth.

“Standing room only?” my Uncle Henry asked the ticket man, when we made it to the front of the line.

“I’m afraid so. First of the year and all.”

My uncle looked at my Aunt May. “Will that be okay?”

She sighed good-naturedly and patted him on the arm. “Yes, dear. That’ll be fine. Sullivan, do you mind standing?”

“All the seats are taken?” I asked.

“We got here a little late,” my uncle said. We walked into the auditorium and I looked down and across the audience. There were so many people in attendance that the pre-show buzz throughout the auditorium sounded like hail striking against the roof on a stormy Maine night. We found an open spot against the right wall.

“And now we lean?” I asked.

“And now we lean,” my Aunt May said.

I shook my head and laughed into the noise of the crowd. Uncle Henry caught the eye of someone in the front row and waved.

“The Lapeles, May,” he said. My Aunt May waved and then turned to me.

“Dick and Jean Lapele,” she said. “Neighbors of ours to the north. Their daughter, Hazel, is the lead tonight.”

“She’s the reason everyone is here,” Uncle Henry said. “The reason we’re not sitting down.”

“Henry,” my Aunt May said. She turned to me. “She’s a very talented actress. Quite popular throughout town.”

“A little too popular, if you ask me,” Uncle Henry said.

“When did you become a critic?” She pinched his side. At that moment, the lights dimmed and the noise in the audience quieted down. The curtains opened, and “Our Town” began. A guy who looked to be Hazel’s age, two or three years younger than me, walked out and introduced himself as the stage manager. He talked about the story, briefly touched on some of the characters, and informed the audience that no props were to be used throughout the entire play. Whether someone was having a smoke or setting down milk bottles, he said, it was all pretend. My Aunt May leaned over and whispered in my ear.

“It’s true what I said, Sullivan. So you are forewarned, when Hazel walks on stage, the crowd will erupt.”

Behind the stage manager, Hazel entered the stage and began doing imaginary dishes, her back slightly turned away from the audience. Everyone in the auditorium began cheering. You couldn’t hear the stage manager’s voice it was so loud. She was wearing a simple nightgown. The white of the dress made me think of the color of foam left bubbling on the sand after the crashing waves fall back out into the tide. Her blonde hair fell to her shoulders and was slightly curlier than I remembered, and it teased at the straps of her dress. I was in love with her the moment that she walked out. She moved with such ease on stage. It was as if she were born ready to act. In one simple moment of doing imaginary dishes in an imaginary sink, with imaginary soap, I believed in her more than anything else I had ever seen.

In the second act, she married one of the other characters and I wanted to wring his neck. I wanted to climb on stage, knock him out cold and take her away with me.

During the intermission, I tapped my foot, counting down the minutes until she would be on stage again.

In the final act, she died, and I wanted to fall to the floor and let miserable sobs come ripping out of my body.

I believed every moment. Over and over again she convinced me. When it ended, she walked out and curtsied, and the entire audience gave her a standing ovation. Standing in my corner, I clapped with every ounce of effort that I had, trying to rise above the applause and let my complete and total affection reach her ears. I loved her in the ensuing bustle that followed, as the clapping finally died down and the audience members reached for their bags and belongings and headed for the exit doors. I loved her in the backseat of the ride home, while Aunt May and Uncle Henry discussed the play without my input. I loved her in the silence of my bedroom late that night as I stared out the window, anxiously hoping to catch a tiny light work its way down towards the water in the dark.

§

Around one in the morning, I saw the tiny light down on the sand. I swung my feet off my bed and grabbed a sweater and a hat from my closet. I made my way down the stairs and through the front room, and then eased my way out the screen door and down to the gate. It clicked open. The sand was soft and cold underneath my feet. I called to her in the darkness.

“I’ll marry you. Right now. If you want to, I’ll do it. I’ll marry you.”

A voice answered from around the lantern. “I don’t have a dress. And you probably don’t have a ring.”

“We’ll figure that out later.” I sat down next to her. She had her book. “I drank you today. The *Hazel Lapele*.”

“Oh, that silly thing.”

“I saw ‘Our Town’ tonight. When you died at the end, I wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out.”

“When Emily died.”

“And you have a milkshake named after you. And people pay to stand in an auditorium, just to watch you do imaginary dishes. You’re extraordinary. Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?”

Hazel looked at the water. “Would you like to know a secret about my name?” she asked. “My full name is Hazel Courtney Lapele. The Courtney has two E’s: one in the normal spot, and the other between the T and the N. Lapele derives from the French word ‘*l’appel*,’ which means ‘the call,’ so the reason my middle name is Courtney with two E’s is that, when you rearrange the letters, and take out the N and the Y, it can spell ‘*écouter*,’ the French word for hear, listen and heed. So, my whole name can say, ‘Hazel heeds the call.’”

“It’s like something out of a story,” I said.

“I am not a story.”

“You are the most incredible story I’ve heard.”

She got up and went down the edge of the water. I got up and joined her. We stood at the edge of the tide, water lapping up around our ankles, in the light of the moon. The water was cold.

“Think of something, Sullivan. Anything you want,” Hazel said suddenly.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We’ll act, ourselves. Just the two of us. Think of anything you want, and we’ll act it out.”

“Right now?”

“Yes!” She cried. She kicked her feet in the tide and water splashed on our legs. “What is something you want to be? We’ll be it. Right here on the sand. We’ll act the whole thing out. Make it up. What is something you want to be?”

“Well, I don’t know,” I said.

“For God’s sake, won’t you even try?” She started walking back to her lantern. I stood there and faced the bay. An idea came into my head. I kicked out of the water and ran back up to the lantern. Sand clung to the top of my wet feet.

“I have an idea,” I said. “It is a dream that I had as a kid.”

“What was it?”

I hesitated. “It’s going to sound foolish.”

“Won’t you even tell me?”

I took a breath. “When I was young I had a dream of owning a lighthouse. I wanted to guide ships on the ocean.”

She didn’t say a word, but bent down, grabbed the lantern and ran down to the shore. She got back to where the water just reached her ankles, and then, with both hands, stuck the lantern as high above her head as she could. From far enough away, she looked like a beacon in the night.

“Well, come on, Sullivan! This is your show!” she yelled up to me.

I blinked and then jogged down to meet her.

“What first?” she asked.

I shook my head, laughing. “Well, we’ve got to keep the boats away from the rocks on the shore.”

“So, it’ll be a stormy night,” she said, nodding out to the bay. “Look, Sullivan, can you see the lightning off in the distance?” The storm was upon us. Wind howled off of the Maine coast. Thunder rattled in my bones.

“Can you believe this rain?” she yelled to me over the noise. It pounded down on us. Chunks of hail were beginning to fall from the sky.

“We’d better hope that there aren’t any boats out on the water tonight,” she said. “That’s nothing but an accident waiting to happen.”

“Hazel, look. Look!” I yelled. Down in the water, a tiny motorboat was about fifty yards out, heading straight at the shore.

“Can it see its path?” Hazel yelled.

“The damn thing is going to beach itself right up on the shore. The boat will be destroyed.”

“Sullivan, we’ve got to do something.”

I swore and grabbed a flare gun. I ran out deeper into the tide and shot it off up in the air.

“Pull out! Pull out!” I waved my arms wildly above my head in the water. “Look at your imagination go, Sullivan. Look at it go!” Hazel said behind me.

The boat stalled to a stop, revved the engine and headed to the right, back out into deeper water. I heard the faint sounding of a horn as it pulled away. I grabbed at the hair on the back of my head with my hands, and then raised them up, fists to the sky. My voice had gone hoarse from all the yelling.

“That was amazing!” Hazel cried from behind me. I turned around and saw that, under the light, she was grinning. I started to make my way back to her, legs splashing through the water, but as I got close, I tripped and fell. She dropped her arms to grab me and support my weight, and the lantern slipped out of her hands and fell into the water. The glass protection around the candle clicked open and the tide rushed in and put out the flame. The next tide rolled in and began to slowly take the extinguished lantern out to the bay. Hazel’s eyes followed the lantern as it went. She let go of me and walked back up to the sand. I stayed on my knees for a moment, until I really began to feel the cold of the water. I grabbed the lantern from the tide and went up after her. I put the lantern down between the two of us, and then I sat down next to her. She shivered. I took off my sweater and handed it to her.

“I don’t want your sweater,” she said. I draped it over her book and her lantern, so they wouldn’t get any more wet.

“Do you think if I asked people here what they actually thought of me, they’d have anything real to say?” she said.

“What do you mean? This town loves you. Surely you know that.”

“They don’t love me,” she said. “They love who I can become. The actual me would just be a distant memory from long ago. It’d be like one of those dreams where all you remember is that you were wearing red and that red was a no-good color to wear.

“And you.” She looked at me. “You don’t love me. You don’t even know what love is. You’ve known me for a month, and you think you can say that to me? You fell in love with Emily Webb tonight. You don’t know a thing about who I am.”

“I couldn’t take my eyes off of you from the moment you walked on stage. I know what I saw. I know what I felt.”

“Goodnight, Sullivan.” She stood up, shivering, and began walking home.

“Why are you leaving?” I called after her. She walked to her gate and opened it.

“Keep the book and the lantern,” she called to me. “They are yours now.”

# Sirens

J. Tanner Rush

I'm sitting on the deck behind Lil's lake house, looking out across the water. It's dappled with thousands of reflections of the sun, like a sea of shifting stars. The planets had to align perfectly to get Lil's parents out of town and for my own mother to lend me her car. It's been...three years? Three years since the last time I've seen them. Lil says that Lowend Lake is haunted by a ghost. She also says that Evelyn wasn't going to show up this weekend until she heard I'd be here. I don't know why she'd tell me that, and I believe it about as much as I believe in ghosts. Adam walks into my view, looking at me through his pink-tinted aviators. He's gotten kind of fat in the past two years. Lil and Adam were always playing together at Holder's daycare. They were the oldest, the ringleaders back in the day. Seems like they've always been dating. Adam's got his head tilted and eyebrows cocked now.

"Pardon?" I ask him. I must have missed something he had said.

"Dude," Adam says. "I said that there's only two bedrooms in this house."

"Okay?"

"Yeah, so there's Lil's room which we'll be in, and then her parent's for you *and* Evelyn. Get me? Sex?"

My mouth goes dry, and I feel a distracting shift in my pants. I haven't seen Evelyn, or any of the others, since my family moved to Olan Pointe. She's got to be eighteen now, but I can still see her as that small, wild tangle of blonde curls and skinny limbs. The thought of sharing a bed with her, though? Having sex with her?

"Well," I start, very much wanting out of this sleeping arrangement.

"That just doesn't seem... *appropriate*."

"Appropriate?" Adam asks as he slaps his aviators off his face, in what I assume is a failed attempt to pull them off dramatically. "What does that have to do with anything? She's hot, man."

"Sick," I say. "Shit, man. We've known her... We've all known each other since we were kids!"

"Yeah," Adam agrees. "And she's been trying to get up on you since we were kids. You don't remember her always being, like, two inches off your ass at all times? Giggling at every single thing you said? You should have been talking to her more. She loses her shit whenever you *do* text her."

"I probably should have," I say. "I talk to *you* all the time, though. There's no one in Olan to talk to."

"Rachel's been in Olan," Adam says. "You don't ever talk to her? She and Lil are always texting each other."

One Friday night, back when we still lived in Lowend, Rachel had to stay over at my house. We had a swimming pool in our back yard. My family could

afford that stuff back then. Rachel and I snuck out that night to swim. We floated on our backs in the pool. The lights made the water look like some kind of ethereal dream-cloud. She named all the constellations in the sky. She told me that some of those stars are already gone by the time their light gets to us. I used to think Rachel was the smartest person I knew. Both of our fathers got laid off, and both of our families moved to Olan Pointe. We both went to Southwest, but I never really talked to her.

“Wait,” I say. “She’s going to be here. Where is she going to sleep?”

“Uh,” Adam moans. “The fucking coach, I guess.”

The gravel of the driveway groans as two cars pull in. It must be Lil back from picking up Evelyn. I guess the other car is Rachel’s. Their voices float over the house as they get out of their cars. They’re squealing at each other, talking about the Lady of Lowend Lake.

The legend of the Lady is even younger than the lake itself. Lowend Lake is manmade, built because families like Lil’s simply wanted a lake to build new houses around. I wish Olan Pointe had a lake. Although, when the sun isn’t shining on the water like it was earlier, Lowend Lake was nothing more than a gigantic bowl of green slime. I can’t imagine any kind of ghost would want to haunt this place, but I suppose people had to have seen something. Lil and Adam used to lead us in ghost hunts in Holder’s backyard. I guess Lil thinks it’s cute for us to go hunting for the Lady now that we’re all going to be back together.

Adam slaps me on the arm with the back of his hand. “You and Eve are both going to Mizzou, right? Now’s the time to lock her down!”

Through the glass door on the back of the house, I see Lil, Evelyn, and Rachel walking in. Evelyn’s hair is just as golden as ever. She drops her phone, and as she bends over to pick it up she doesn’t look like that scrawny ten-year-old anymore. Not from this angle.

“Just look at that,” Adam says, nodding towards Evelyn, chin wobbling slightly. “That girl in there wants to have sweet and sweaty times with you. Trust me.”

“Really?” I ask. “I’ve never...with a girl...did she say that?”

“Hell yeah, she said that.”

“Look,” I say, shaking my head. “I just want to hang out, alright? I’ve missed you guys. I’ve missed everything about Lowend, really. Olan Pointe is shit.” I look down at Adam’s aviators still lying on the deck. My reflection in the lenses look like faceless twin shadows. “There’s nothing there.”

“Whatever,” Adam says, voice lowering down into a whisper. “Look, there’s going to be thousands of dudes at Mizzou. Which means there’s going to be thousands of dudes with peeners, understand? Do you want peeners that aren’t yours getting nice and consensual with Eve?”

“No,” I say. Katie Waller laughed at me when I asked her out back in middle school. I was wearing that Godzilla shirt. Maybe I should have worn something else. Evelyn wouldn’t have laughed. She loved that shirt. Do I still have it somewhere? It probably doesn’t fit anymore. Maybe.

Lil and Evelyn finally come out onto the deck. We all say hello at the same time. I lock eyes with Evelyn and smile. She smiles back. A cool breeze moves inside me, from my head to my toes.

“Aw,” she starts to say to me. “Isaac, I’m so glad you came!” She hops over to me, hugging me. Her ample chest presses and shifts against mine.

“Well,” I start. “We got a ghost to find, don’t we?”

“Hell yeah!” She giggles and then raises her hand for a high-five. An eternity passes before my arm figures out it’s on the same team as me and agrees to complete the gesture. Her skin isn’t quite as soft as I would have thought. It was still skin, though. Girl skin.

“And,” Lil begins. “We’re going to get it on tape. We got a camera, bitches.”

“Please,” Rachel says, walking out of the house. Her black hair waves like a pirate flag in the wind. She looks at me, a smirk twisting on her face. “You guys don’t still believe in that stuff, do you?”

“Oh,” Lil says, “don’t try to sound smart. You’re the one that made me come lead you here because you got lost in your own hometown.”

“Well,” Rachel starts to explain, looking at me, smiling, head cocked to the side. “I’ve never been over here by the lake before. Sorry for delaying things, though. I can’t stay the whole weekend, or even the night, but I figured I should at least hang out for a few hours. I’ve got some finals tomorrow at the ol’ community college.”

“Yuck,” Adam says. “Why did you want to drive three hours out here just to go back?”

“Well, why’d you jokers want to have a weekend at the lake starting on a Sunday? Really, I just wanted to see you guys. It’s been so long.” Rachel shrugs at me, like she’s sorry or something. Why is she looking at me?

“Guys,” Lil shouts. “The sun’s going to go down in a couple of hours. We should start looking for the Lady, now. It was sunset when I saw her back in May.”

With that, we set out towards the east side of the lake. The ground rises up into a thickly wooded hill. Rocky cliffs, some no more than two feet above the water, others around twenty- peek out over the lake from the trees. Lil insists that it’s the best spot to find the Lady.

“Why the cliffs?” I ask as we make our way down a trail, cans and broken beer bottles dotting the ground on either side. Lil and Adam lead the way, me and Evelyn behind them, and Rachel behind us.

“That’s where I saw her last time,” Lil says.

“The cliffs at sunset? Evelyn asks me, leaning her head forward and whispering so I have to lean my own head towards her to hear. “That’s got to be beautiful. Why wouldn’t the Lady be there? I’d be there if I was a ghost.”

“Seems a bit too romantic for a dead person, don’t you think?” I ask. I hear Rachel snort behind me.

Evelyn makes some kind of pouty noise, lightly slapping my arm, but smiling all the while. I hear something crash into the grass off the side of the trail

behind me. I turn around to see Rachel stepping back on the trail, trying to regain her balance.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Oh,” Rachel half-giggles, red-faced. “Yeah, I just tripped.”

“Careful, back there,” Adam calls back. “You’re going to scare off the Lady.”

“Can you scare a ghost?” I ask.

“No,” Rachel answers, “but I think you can scare off *real* things.”

“What about the ghosts of real things?” I turn around to face Rachel, grinning. We both laugh. I kick the absolute shit out of a rock in front of me and start to fall over. Rachel leaps forward and grabs my hand. Her hand feels like what I thought Evelyn’s would. I steady myself, but Rachel doesn’t let go.

“Thanks,” I say. “We’re just falling all over ourselves, aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” she says, yanking her hand back suddenly. I wince at a sudden throbbing in my foot.

“You okay, Isaac?” Evelyn asks, skipping forward and grabbing my hand, pulling me onward. “Let’s go find the Lady!” Her hand makes my own start to pulse; a music in my veins that drowns out the pain in my foot.

“So what’s the deal with this ‘Lady,’ anyways?” Rachel asks.

“She was an old woman who used to live in a cabin in these woods,” Lil explains. “She refused to sell her land, though. So, the people who were building the lake murdered her and buried her where the lake now is. Her spirit now haunts the lake!”

“That sounds kind of made up,” I say.

“And unoriginal,” Rachel adds. “Besides that, wasn’t your family some of the ‘people’ who built the lake? You want to go find the ghost of the woman you guys killed?”

“Yeah,” I say. The hand Evelyn is using to hold mine is sweating. Sweet, sweaty times. “What if she tries to get revenge?”

“My family didn’t kill anyone,” Lil says. “We just built that little house.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I say. “We’re all going to die.”

“What do you think she’s going to do?” Evelyn asks, bubbling with laughter. “Drown you?” She squeezes my hand.

“She’ll drown you, too, if she can,” I say. She loosens her grip on my hand slightly.

“But,” she starts to say. “You wouldn’t let her drown me, would you?”

“Well,” I say, dragging out the word. “If it’s between me and you, I’d rather it be you.” This time I laugh and squeeze her hand.

“Wow,” she says flatly, taking her hand away and quickening her pace. I stop myself from trying to snag her hand back.

“Oh,” Rachel says, walking up to my right side. “That doesn’t sound like the brave kid I used to know. You saved me and Evelyn from monsters all the time.”

“Did I?” I ask. Evelyn’s slows down a little, head turned slightly, her right ear aimed back at me and Rachel. I should say something funny, something to get Evelyn to come back and walk with me again.

“Yep,” Rachel answers. “You used to say you’d go to college so Indiana Jones could teach you how to fight monsters better.”

“Dr. Jones knows a great many things about monsters,” I say.

“So, are you?” Rachel asks. “Are you going to Mizzou to major in monster fighting?”

“Uh, no. Business. I want to make some money out of college, you know? Move somewhere nicer than Olan Pointe.”

“Somewhere like Lowend?” Rachel asks, smile draining off her face.

“Maybe,” I say.

“Get a two bedroom house with a gravel driveway by a lake like this?”

“Maybe not.”

Adam and Lil pass through a break in the trees and stop. I come up behind them. There’s a strange coldness here. Goose bumps creep down my arms and legs. The cliff we’re standing on is a good fifteen feet above the water. From this angle the lake looks like an egg turned on its side, or rather, a giant green eye peering out from the earth.

“Oh my god,” Lil says hopping up and down, rubbing her arms. “Why is it so cold?”

“Maybe it’s a cold spot,” Evelyn suggests.

“Pretty sure this *is* a cold spot,” I say.

“No,” Evelyn says, turning to me. “Like, a cold spot means there’s a ghost nearby.” She’s looking at me like I stopped saying something midsentence, waiting for me to continue.

“Okay,” I say. What the hell am I supposed to say to that?

“Oh,” Evelyn pouts. “You’re no fun.” Oh, god. She hates me.

“Well,” I give in. “So the Lady’s nearby, then. What does she look like?”

“Disgusting,” Lil says as she peers over the cliff’s edge. “There’s blood pouring out of the hole in her head where she was shot. And she’s old. Come on, there’s some lower cliffs over here. We can get closer to the water. That’s where I saw her.”

Lil and Adam hop down some rocks off to the left. Evelyn looks ever so slightly over her shoulder at me before following. I hear Adam say something from below. Evelyn giggles. *I should be saying things to make her giggle. I can’t let her hate me. I’m screwing this up. Dying. I need to do something.*

When I make my way down to the rock outcropping Lil, Adam, and Evelyn are standing on, I see Evelyn’s got the camera out and Adam’s pointing at something in the water.

“Isaac,” Adam whispers, waving me over. “Come here. There’s something out there.”

I start to walk over to them, hearing nervous little noises coming from Evelyn. I should put my hand on her shoulder. She’s scared. Maybe it would make her feel safe? She’d know I’m sorry for acting like a dick. Rachel’s standing beside me. We look at each other, and she starts to open her mouth.

“Don’t worry,” I shout, stepping out of my shoes. “I’ll take care of that ghost!” I start to run. Evelyn will laugh. They’ll all jump in after me. They’ll do

something. This cliff can't be that high. Five feet? More? Lil and Evelyn are standing on the edge. I jump in between them.

Evelyn screams, twirling around and nailing me in the face with her camera as I pass by. My nose crunches like snow, my brain screams like it's being split in two, and all I can see are blinding, pulsing red lights. The ground isn't below me anymore. My insides are spinning. There's water. It slaps my chest and face, then I'm in it, floating. I open my eyes and shudder, feeling all the green filth of the lake getting inside me. Blood flows out from my nose and clouds in front of my face, almost like a thought bubble you'd see in a comic. I start to float up through it. I see my friends' faces as I move through the red cloud, the rippling of the water distorting them into amorphous monsters.

When I reach the surface of the water I hear either Lil or Evelyn shout something at me, but I don't know what was said. I grab the side of the cliff and start to climb. No one's talking. No one's laughing. No one's doing anything. It feels like something is trying to burn its way out through my nose. I get to the top. Adam, Evelyn, and Lil take a few steps back as I fling myself over the edge of the cliff. I struggle to my feet. Evelyn's eyes are wide, eyebrows almost on top of her head. I smile, despite myself. The horrendous pain in my face stops. I'll tell her I'm fine, she'll say how sorry she is. Maybe she'll feel so bad she'll kiss me. She better kiss me.

"Isaac," she says to me. "Did...you hear me? Did you see my camera in the water? You knocked it out of my hand when you jumped."

"What?" I ask, feeling the pain in my nose thundering back.

"We think we caught the Lady on video," Lil says. "Before you jumped."

"What?" I shriek, voice cracking, my nose punctuating the question with a short spurt of blood.

"My camera –" Evelyn starts to say.

"Still in the lake, I guess," I say, throwing my hands up in an exaggerated shrug, flinging water, lake scum, and blood at the three of them. "Maybe you'd still have it if you didn't decide to break my fucking face with it."

"But," Evelyn whimpers, "there was something in the water! You scared me!"

"There's nothing in there, *Eve!* Ghosts aren't real!"

"Whoa," Adam says, taking a step towards me. "Isaac, man, calm down. Are you okay?"

"A-a-a-am," I sputter, like the motor of a chainsaw. "Am I okay? You know what, guys? Keep looking for the Lady. I'm going back to the house to try to stop myself from bleeding out through my face." I push past them, moving towards the woods. I see Rachel. She looks at me and then at the others. No one says anything.

I slog out into the trees, not knowing exactly how to get back to the trail. The blood in my nose congeals, no longer running down my face. I'd kill for a shower. The lake water's leaving a disgusting, sticky feeling on my skin as it evaporates. I rub my hands and arms over and over again, trying to get the feeling off me, but it's not working.

“Isaac,” Rachel shouts, running after me. “You okay? I’ve been trying to catch up. You walk really fast when you’re mad.”

“Yeah,” I say, looking down at my feet. “I, uh, freaked out back there. My nose was just hurting. I don’t think it’s broken, though.”

“You could have taken Eve and Lil over that cliff with you, you know.”

“I know,” I say. My eyes start to sting, but not from pain. Not from anything. “I used to do things like that all time when we were kids, didn’t I? I just...”

“Yeah,” Rachel says, “but you’re not a crazy kid anymore, are you?” She smiles.

“Maybe...maybe my nose *is* broken.”

“Let’s get you back to the house then,” Rachel says, pushing me forward with her hand on my lower back.

“Rachel?” I ask. “Why didn’t we hang out in high school?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “Why didn’t you ever talk to me in high school?”

“I didn’t...” I start to say, but I don’t really know. I have no reasons.

We find the trail and walk in silence. I see her lips curling, like there’s something in her mouth trying to pry it open. The sky is getting dark. The sun barely holds onto the horizon, burning with all the warmth of a dying fire. I want the sun to go down. I want to look at stars.

We get back to the house and go inside. I go into the bathroom and clean the blood off my face and out of my nose. I walk back out into the house and Rachel is standing in front of me, leaning forward, and staring at me. I see myself floating in her eyes. She opens her mouth slightly. I start to lean my own head forward.

“So, is it broken?” She asks as she leans back, smiling like she knows something I don’t.

“I guess I don’t really know,” I say, having to stop myself from falling forward.

“Well,” she says, reaching out and grabbing my arm with a single, soft hand. “I’m going to get going. Would...would you like a ride home? Get your nose checked out?” My arm is buzzing underneath her hand. I don’t want her to go.

“I don’t know,” I say, pulling away from her and turning as my eyes start to sting again. “I don’t think so. I drove myself here, anyways. Don’t you think...that I should wait for them? Say I’m sorry?”

“You know,” Rachel says, “I think they’re just looking for ghosts.”

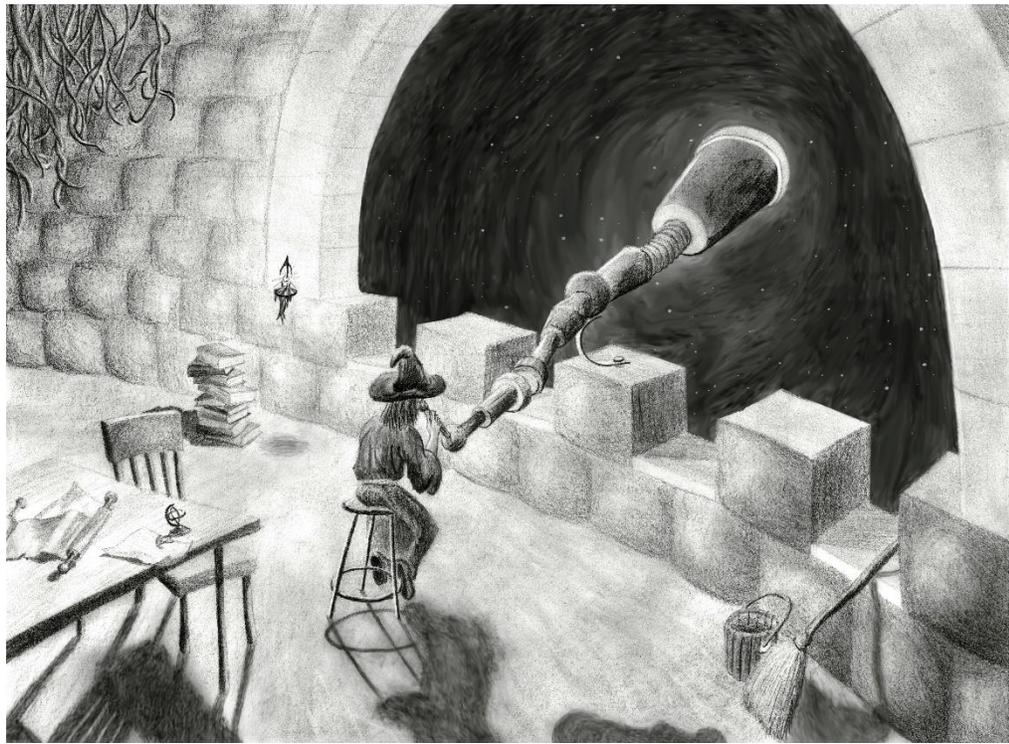
Are they really still looking for the Lady? Why did *I* go looking for her? They should be here. It’s all so stupid.

“I have to get going,” Rachel says, spinning slowly around and making her way towards the door.

I follow her outside. Her car waits behind mine at the end of the drive way. She opens the driver-side door but doesn’t get in. She turns to me, her lips doing that odd twitch again.

“Bye,” she finally spurts out. “Goodbye, Isaac. I’ll see you when I see you.” She steps forward and hugs me. We start rocking side to side. It’s like we’re dancing. I’ve never danced with a girl. Never went to any of the dances at school. I’ve been missing out. She lets go and gets into her car.

Rachel’s car pulls out of the driveway and takes off west toward to last light of the sun. I walk over to where she was parked and look down the road to see if Adam, Lil, or Evelyn is coming. No one is there. I stab at the gravel with my foot. The chalky, white rocks look like burnt coals. I look up towards a dark and starless sky. The emptiness of it gives me this feeling like I’ve just walked into a room, but forgot what I went in there for. I get into my own car and start the engine. I want to go home.



**The Seer in His Study, Brian Hampel**

# Radioisotope

*Cormac Badger*

“It was only one person. His time was up. I don’t see how it’s that big of a deal.”

“So you’re the angel of death, now?” Karl said, reaching for the sugar and a stirring stick. The little sticky mixing station seemed like a good confessional booth. Why not. “Is that what you’re calling yourself?”

“No. No, just normal Brad.” Brad looked at his coffee and wondered what else humans can put sleeves on. There should be more practical applications for sleeves. Sleeves are nice. “He had to have been eighty.”

“Did you touch him?”

“Of course not.”

“Were you doing that thing you do?”

“A little,” Brad said, looking for an open table in the sweet, burgundy coffee shop. All coffee shops are the same color and the same sweet. “He was bothering me, so I wanted to scare him.”

“To death. Man, that is intent. That’s manslaughter, I think.”

“I was twenty feet away from him, Karl. On a bench.”

“Sounds like intent. Is that a crime? You’re an accomplice to accidental death.”

“Malice-filled coincidence,” Brad said. In fairness, there’re a lot of them out there. “It isn’t my fault he has a history of cardiovascular disease and chooses to smoke at such a ripe old age. Did I invent the idiot? Of course not. I’m just trying to press on in a post-moronic society best as I can.”

Karl stirred his coffee for the third time. He would drink it after blowing on it for half a minute, stirring it again, and blowing once more for an improvised increment. “What color were you? What did him in?”

“There’s a couch in my grandfather’s basement from the 60’s. It’s a faded orange with a floral pattern—carnations?—and a black trim, with leaves of a greenish-blue. It’s hideous.”

“You were an ugly couch?” Karl says. He was blowing again.

“I turned into an ugly couch, and killed a man.”

They both took a sip of coffee. A young woman laughed. It was nasal and inward and awful.

“Why the hell are we in a coffee shop?” Brad asked.

“I like coffee,” Karl said. “You like coffee. Coffee shops are nice. They are nice things, Brad.”

Brad looked down at his cup. “I’m not overly fond, I guess.” An espresso machine screamed. “Am I a bad person, you think?”

Karl didn’t wait; he was no longer nursing his fully-realized beverage. “You’re awful, Brad. You’re downright poisonous.”

“About that,” Brad said and looked outside. At some point it had started to rain.

“About what?”

“Turns out I am.” Brad took another sip of coffee—it was bitter, and clawed the roof of his mouth. There was something to the Karl method. “I’m poisonous. One hundred percent toxic. So there’s that.”

All of his concentration was centered on the back of his hairy hand. They were all pricked up, the hairs, standing at attention. Brad thought better, closed the blinds, turned on his desk lamp, and turned off the ceiling fan light. He sat at his desk, laid his hand in the center of the surface, and looked at it. The hairs jumped back up. He was trying to turn his hand into a theoretical material. It was called vibranium.

Brad began to sweat and his hand itched. After waiting the usual amount of time, he reached out and scratched it. It looked detached from him, or rubber. It was someone else’s hand sitting on his dusty desk. Brad sighed. The hand didn’t feel exactly bulletproof. It felt like regular old Brad skin, flesh, blood, and vulnerability.

Finding it inappropriate to move his failed, normal hand, he sucked down deep and then spat on the desk next to his fingers. It shimmered and quivered and settled. It looked like an early-formed galaxy. Half-expecting the glob to start smoking and hissing he watched it, then sniffed it, then watched it some more. A loogie’s a loogie’s a loogie.

Brad figured he should fess up and go to the doctor. Was he destroying freshwater systems with each piss? How many times had he and Catelyn swapped spit by now? Was a sweaty towel a potential weapon? Do his boogers glow under black lights? These were elevated, technical medical questions that no amount of spitting and moping could answer.

There would almost definitely be government involvement. His mother would be heartbroken. The piss-washed fish-people of the sewers would rejoice and sacrifice rats to their slimy fish gods. And Catelyn had to go.

Most of all, as soon as possible, Catelyn had to go.

Brad reached for his phone and found his thumbs dredging up the messages. Most of him didn’t want to read them, but most of him was an idiot at heart.

“Is it bad?” he had asked. This was in blue.

“I don’t know yet. I just thought you should know.” This was in grey.

“Wow. I’m so sorry. I don’t even know what to think.”

“Me either. Hey, you should come visit sometime!?”

“Yeah. Yeah, totally. Send me the hospital address or name or whatever and when would be a good time.”

She still hadn’t answered. Brad scrolled up and down, up and down.

It was the first of January and the sort of fine, sunny weather that makes for sleepy, womb-like comfort careening southbound down I-380 at fifteen over the speed limit. Brad had been listening to *The Eagles* and thinking of his lady-friend down-road waiting, golden hair shimmering as she brushed it in the windowsill of her second-story apartment. Birds were chirping and lady-friend’s

skin glowed like moonbeams. They were non-exclusive, Brad and the lady-friend. It was a nice thing, most of the time, but a bitch of a drive. Brad watched tan-blurred waves and barbed wire fences melt by.

He was trapped behind a line of cars, five or six of them, that were held up by some old man adjusting his radio and bumbling along at ten under. The right lane was occupied by a massive flatbed semi, laden with two levels of dull, black and oppressive drums. The truck made sure to remind passersby that it made wide turns, might be flammable, and may or may not be containing highly irradiated materials. Grandpa's immediate tail tried to dart between the old man's Subaru and the front of the truck, but Grandpa panicked, braked, and drove the car into the truck. Grandpa and the gutsy stunt driver spun off ahead. Two cars dove off the road and skidded onto the grass median. The trailer of the flatbed moaned and came swinging out across both lanes; it picked up the remaining car and sent it tumbling off the road. Brad smashed on the brakes and fought for control. Drums went flying.

These drums were special drums, ones that had a steel shell, inches of thermal insulation and a pressurized chamber inside containing highly radioactive material. They were virtually indestructible; only one reported case of these special drums rupturing exists. They can easily survive a drone strike. Pretty neat. Flying down the highway, they might as well be meteors. One of them smashed into the side of Brad's car, split open, and began spilling its contents over the interstate.

Brad was bleeding from the forehead but he was otherwise unscathed when he crawled out of his car. There was glass all over the road and a murky liquid like gasoline was reaching its tendrils from the steel drum to Brad's worn tires. He phoned his mom and told her he had been in a wreck that was entirely not his fault, asked how he should proceed, and what it would take to rain legal hell down on this driver. Partway through the conversation he thought it was a brilliant tactical move to lie down on the wet asphalt, tuck his arms in, and roll around in the nuclear waste. He rubbed some on his face for good measure. It stung when it mixed into his gash.

A large, hairy man in a tight sweater and dangling jeans hobbled towards him, clutching his Cowboys hat in his hands. "Oh my God, Jesus," he said. "Are you okay? Just stay there and I'll call for help. Just stay there."

"In this crap?" Brad said. He slowly pressed himself upwards and regained his feet. He affected a stagger for sympathy. "You're going to suffer for this, bub," he said. It was the first time he'd ever said bub and he regretted it. "I'm going to sue the pants off you. You'll never work again." Brad dropped his phone; the swagger was becoming convincing even to him. "What are you doing? Call for help, you idiot. Can't you do anything right?" Brad threw up. The driver dropped his hat, doubled over with his hands on his knees and threw up as well. Brad lost consciousness.

He had powers. Everyone else died. The incident wasn't widely reported.

"First of all, it's all fucked. All of it," Karl says.

“Why couldn’t you just tell me over the phone? Why couldn’t you just text me? Is this a date? I like you, Karl, but I’ve never seen us progressing as anything more than comrades,” Brad said.

“Oh shut up,” Karl said.

“And why are we back here again?” Brad gently lifted a hand and waved at the burnt, sweet aroma of coffee. A gaggle of scarf-choked, swaddled young girls spilled in. They looked like pillows with pink faces.

“Oh just shut up,” Karl said and he blew on his coffee. “You’d better sober right the hell up, Brad. I mean it. This is a trail of bodies we’re talking about. Not some guy on a bench no one will remember.”

“Is that figurative, this trail of bodies? If you’ve been talking to Jen again—”

“Brad, Jen is in the hospital.”

Jen was one along a long line of slam-pieces Brad had tucked away. He always suspected that Karl was somehow stung by that one. Brad, too, blew on his coffee; things *were* getting serious. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know,” Karl said and he drank, too early, and choked on the heat. “When’s the last time you talked to Rachel?”

“Heck, I don’t know. A few months?” Brad placed his coffee on the table. He was beginning to feel he didn’t care for coffee so much. “How is she doing?”

“She’s in the hospital, Brad.” Brad began turning red, first in the cheeks like a normal person, and then slowly it bled to all his exposed skin. “And Jasmine?”

Brad gripped the table. He was starting to look like an oompa-loompa. “In the hospital?”

“Not at the moment. But she has cancer.”

“Is it bad?” Brad’s voice was growing softer.

“I don’t know man, it’s cancer. Isn’t it always bad?” Karl took a long draught for dramatic effect and choked once more. “Do you, you know, do you *wrap* it?”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?”

“Do you use protection? Like when you’re with girls?” He looked at his coffee. “Doing it?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes, I guess.” Brad’s color was returning slowly. He wanted to check his phone.

“God, how many girls have you slept with, Brad?”

“A lot, I guess. All things told.”

“And since you’ve been with Catelyn?”

“Uh, also a lot, on that particular count. All of the things told.”

Karl leaned back in his seat. He looked like he was going to be sick or that he might be soaking in radiation just by looking at Brad. Some of the preteens giggled and Karl’s stubbly mouth slid downwards. “You’ve got to do something. I don’t know what the timeline here is, but it’s not just some coincidence. You’ve got to act, Brad.”

“You’re right. She’ll totally know if she talks to a single one of them, and then I’ll really have hell to pay. Catelyn’s got to go.”

“No, you goddamn Satanist. Why are we friends? Why do I help you at all?” Karl sighed and looked at his cup. He slid the heat sleeve up and down and his eyes followed the rhythms of the taps against the table. “I mean you’ve got to do something about all of this. Make it right. Or fess up or *something*.”

“You’re right,” Brad said. He couldn’t look at Karl any longer. “You’re totally right. I’m so sorry. It’s just all so shitty.” He shifted in his seat. “I’ve got to act. I’ve got to put this to rights.” He folded his arms, unfolded them, and then ran his tongue against the roof of his mouth where the coffee had scalded. “I know what I have to do. I know how to give back,” he said, slamming both hands on the table. His skin began glowing, just slightly, like the afterimage of an afternoon sun. “I’ve got to fight crime.”

Brad wore the darkest clothes in his dresser, donned a black beanie, altered his skin to retain as much heat as possible, and slipped out the back door of his house. He wandered the streets for three hours, went to a gas station to purchase two energy drinks, sat in the parking lot of a supermarket for three hours watching halogen lights quiver, prowled till the sun rose and finally went home around five in the morning. He lived in a town of a little over two thousand. For his first and only night of justice, the town went virtually without incident—his greatest success.

Brad sat in a squeaky chair that was incapable of comfort and placed beside Catelyn’s bed. The room had a small balloon and some fresh carnations in a mason jar on a small table, and it smelled like hand soap. Brad looked at the How-Are-You-Feeling-Today chart on the wall. There was only one semblance of a smile out of a week’s worth of poorly-drawn faces. Brad laced his fingers together and leaned forward, mostly thankful for the fact that Catelyn was in a drug-soaked slumber.

“I just don’t think anyone knows how much I’ve suffered, you know?” Brad said. The television was on and the hum filled the room while he supplied his own answers. “Nobody except Karl has ever known, and you know what he does? He scolds me. Like a mom. He just says oh Brad, how could you do that, oh Brad, why don’t you just listen to me, oh Brad, you’re going to kill me one of these days.” Brad spun his thumbs. “That last part may, in fact, be true.”

Catelyn had lost twenty or thirty pounds and her skin was nearly void of color. Her greasy hair fell around her neck and her breasts slid from the ridges of her bulging sternum. They were rising and falling, and that’s all Brad could watch. “Nobody took into consideration what effect this was having on *me*, Cate. I’m a human being, not some freak. They’ll probably lock me away for all of this. Maybe they’ll just take me out back and put me down like a sick dog.” Brad leaned back and wiggled his fingers. His skin flashed from organic copper, then lasagna noodles, and finally to the same grim pallor of Catelyn’s fading skin.

“I don’t know what I should do, Cate. Write you a letter?” He pressed his finger to his other palm, a faux pen and pad. “Dear Catelyn. I don’t know if

anyone has ever been this special to me. Maybe use a better word than special. And I'm really sorry that you got sick. Sorry? And I think we are really great for one another, but there is a huge amount of things going on in my life. I just don't know if I can handle this. I'm not sure I have the strength to pull you up with me. I know you may or may not be dying and all, but I think it's best if we don't see one another right now. Or possibly ever." Brad's skin melted back to its normal healthy glow and he sighed. "Shit."

Catelyn murmured.

"Yeah," Brad said. "Yeah, you're right."

Out the window the sun had already gone down, but a strip of pale fire hung underneath the clouds along the horizon. Brad considered jumping out of the window. The hospital wasn't immensely tall, but they were still on the sixth floor. He could fly out the window and turn to rubber, and just bounce and flail till he ran out of energy and rolled himself silly. Or he could leap and switch to steel, pound into the pavement and leave a human-shaped cartoon crater. Supposedly most suicides die of heart failure during the descent. Brad wondered if he had the gumption to watch that thin red line blazing the horizon, unwavering, while the world lurched to meet him. He leapt to his feet, rushed to the door, jimmied it for a few minutes and sat back down. Of course it wouldn't open.

Catelyn sighed. She shifted her weight to the left and some thin strands of hair fell across her nose. Brad wanted to move them but stayed still. What could he do to make her better? To fix anything at all? What could he turn into? Nothing—shaggy carpet, pizzas, mirrors, chalkboard, skin and only skin—and no form could stop a thing, and certainly not his own. So there the hair stayed, and Brad in his chair.

"I know what I'll do," he said and he leaned forward. The moon slid from behind some clouds and suddenly Brad was glowing, everything was glowing, and it wasn't even his fault. "I'll call Ashley," Brad said. He clapped his hands. "Ashley always knows what to do. She always says the right things." Brad stood up and felt light in his own skin. "And it's been a while. Yeah, I'll call Ashley."

Brad called Ashley. He asked her if she wanted to grab some coffee. Catelyn's eyes fluttered.

Turning to Mahogany as he walked out, Brad blew Catelyn a stiff kiss, whirled around and was on his way. He walked down the hallway that smelled like bleach with its bleached lights. No one was around so he became a photorealistic gingerbread man, and then a walking stress ball, and a shimmering, black silk. Brad wondered if he would ever manage to become invisible, or if he would ever get stuck like that, walking into the mall and the bank and his parents' house eternally as a living Cheeto. He wondered if Karl would ever call him again, and if this was a problem or not. Forever he could fade away, invisible and trapped, filling rooms with his ghost voice until no one bothered to listen anymore. He wondered if Ashley would be wearing lipstick.

# Secrets From Camp Manitowa

*Ora McIntosh*

I kill ants. In the summertime just before my parents ship me off to camp, I sit on the sun-warmed driveway and I draw chalk circles around any lone pavement ants that cross my path. I watch as they scurry from one curve of the circle to the next. I think of my mother who invites her gay friend over on Saturdays to do yoga when my father is out playing golf with his colleagues. I think about marine knots and untold secrets and the boy I'll one day kill even though I don't know it yet. I think about the black-brown ants moving their tiny bodies to repeat the same 360-degree process they've just completed several times more without pause. Then I get bored of watching them and I use the flat end of the chalk to crush the ones that take more than a minute to leave their powdery prison. Very few of them ever escape.

Camp Manitowa is located in southern Illinois nestled between two lakes. After a six-hour drive from Kansas City I get checked in. Then, because it's the first day and there aren't any camp-wide activities planned until later this evening, I wander off to loiter in the forest that surrounds the summertime settlement. I make my way to an ancient plant and clamber up to one of its lower-hanging branches. It is here, legs dangling from the large, white oak like an abnormal mutation, that Eugene finds me.

I met Eugene here at camp two years ago. The first time I saw him his shoulders were hunched and his arms were crossed tightly over his chest. He was a turtle trying to escape into his shell, but an arm wrapped around his shoulders prevented him from retreating and tethered him to the world instead. I remember the man in the army green saying the words 'shy' and 'quiet.' Then Eugene was given a gentle push towards the counselor and the man walked away. Eugene didn't even watch him go, just picked up his bag from the ground and shied away from the counselor's hand as she led him further into camp.

"Hey," I say.

Eugene climbs the tree and takes his place next to me. He doesn't make eye contact, not even after he is seated comfortably on the branch and says, "Hello, Julius." Instead, he swings his legs and watches them like mother's cat watches the pendulum on the grandfather clock. I wonder if he doesn't know how to act around me after having spent the year apart. I lean into him and nudge him with my shoulder.

"Is that one of the knots we learned how to make last year?"

Eugene nods and holds his wrist out for me to examine. I admire the bracelet, made from a simple cul-de-porc knot surrounded by double overhands, and smile at him. His marine knots have always been better than mine.

"How did you get them into a bracelet like that?" I ask.

Eugene begins playing with the string.

“I got bored.” He says.

“Will you teach me sometime?”

I say the words even though I’m not sure if I mean them. The question seems to be enough for Eugene, though, because he finally smiles and looks at me with doe eyes as if to ask if I really mean it and so I just nod.

“Yeah, teach me sometime.” I say.

We sit around silently for a little while longer before we hear the camp leader calling out on her megaphone and we rush down the tree and back to civilization.

As the days pass, I often find myself thinking of the dead ants caught in circles back home on the driveway. I imagine myself as one of them. Bright faced counselors become my chalk lines and the smell of hickory and maple trees transform into powder. I try to content myself with the thought that eight weeks is a lot longer than the one minute I usually allow my prisoners. The shimmery white of my father’s Prius will be the final blow.

In an effort to make my time at camp memorable I try not to focus on the negative. Instead I think about Eugene. Three of our five daily activities for the first week are ones we share together. During this time we learn how to make rabbit traps, among other things, and he quietly complains to me that the yurt we stay in with ten other boys is always cold in the mornings. It isn’t until the third week, when we’re back in our summertime groove and he remembers we are friends that he discovers enough courage to begin crawling into my bed to borrow my warmth on the nights when his teeth won’t stop chattering. I don’t really mind.

Time passes and I learn how to make the bracelet. Eugene and I spend our free periods setting up rabbit traps and perfecting the art of knot tying. We never catch anything in our 45 minutes of freedom. When a megaphoned voice calls us to dinner Eugene disassembles the snare before we leave the forest. We start the process all over the next day.

There comes a time when I wake to Eugene every morning. On the nights when I’m not dreaming about ants I lie awake and listen to his stories about his broken family. He whispers secrets in the dark about his mother. He speaks as if his life is both a tragedy and a war, executed on an empty battlefield with no audience. He weaves tales about what things would be like for him if he told his father but he says he can’t do it because his father tried to keep him once already and his mother won.

After he’s told me that I think about my own family and I wonder what would happen to my father if I told him my mother’s secret. I imagine him as one of the few ants smart enough cross the line of chalk. I realize that I don’t want him to leave.

When I’ve gone too quiet Eugene reaches for my hand and whispers. My name is a silent prayer on his lips. I am not a god. I have no answers. I squeeze back to let him know I’m awake.

“Don’t tell anyone what I told you, okay?”

I promise that I won't. He sighs and I feel him nod his head against my chest. He mumbles good night and I say it back. I don't sleep because I don't want to dream about ants. Instead I stay awake and think up ways to keep my family together because I don't want to be broken like Eugene.

Eventually the eight weeks of camp comes to an end and a new trap awaits me in the form of my mother singing loudly to Gretchen Wilson as we return home. Back in the city, I have a week before school starts up again. I find reasons to sit outside because the weather is still warm but on Saturday my mother gives me one: Tobias. He's a French masseuse at the ritzy day spa mother frequents twice a month. He always smells like incense and his fingers are soft. I know this because he shook my hand once.

When Tobi arrives mother cups my face with a perfectly manicured hand and rubs her ruby-painted thumb across my cheek.

"Why don't you go outside and play, hmm? Get some fresh air?"

It is always a suggestion. Sometimes I wonder if I'm allowed to say no but I never do. When I'm surrounded by what little bit of nature the city holds I kill more insects. Since my time with Eugene I have graduated and instead of just battling ants with sticks of chalk, I also wage war on spiders with a bottle of Windex. I'm sure the maid will probably complain about the lack of glass cleaner tomorrow after mother, father and I return from our last family picnic of the summer, but that doesn't stop me from catching my enemy and forcing them to play in my weekend war.

For a few hours my driveway is a battlefield. Then Tobi leaves the house. On his way to his car he tussles my hair. At times like these, when he's close enough to breath in, he reeks of sweat and mother's flowery body wash. He never says anything about the bubbles of dead ants on the driveway or about the spiders drowning in pools of running liquid. Maybe he never notices.

As he drives away mother stands in the doorway waving. There is a smile on her face making her freckles bunch together like ants carrying chunks of old, forgotten candy back to their nests. Her eyelids become clouds that cover the sky and blot out shades of blue. When we can no longer see Tobi's car she calls me inside. Eventually there will come a time when Tobi doesn't bring his yoga mat anymore but he still comes over. I won't tell father. My secret becomes a flimsy adhesive and we will go on masquerading as the perfect family.

When summer is officially over Eugene and I write to each other. He sends me pages upon pages about his mother and all the things she does to him. He writes about missing the summertime because the week before camp is the only time he sees his father. In his letters, he asks me if I'll always be his friend and he says he promises to always be mine. I write back that promises are for marriage and they are meant to be broken but I scribble it out really hard so he can't decipher it later. Instead I tell him about my mother and Tobi. With my response I send him my shoelaces--from two pairs of sneakers--woven into a bracelet with a double carrick bend as the centerpiece. At the post office, I pay extra because of the weight. At school I start a new trend.

I am thirteen when I return to camp. For the first week I am alone. I ask the counselors about Eugene and they tell me they aren't sure if he's coming.

"Maybe he'll show up during the second session." One of the counselors says.

It feels like a lie. I am possessed by a violent urge to tell them the truth but I don't. Eugene has sworn me to secrecy. I spend my free time watching the rabbit snare. It is a sad excuse for control but it helps me watch my tongue. My word is all I own.

It's sometime during the fourth week when I catch the pepper-coated cottontail. It hangs from the tree like an apple and I watch as the rabbit begins squirming, so much so that the movement causes the rope to swing. I don't let myself think about anything else. Just the cottontail and its big, beady eyes and the sound of the tree branch creaking--my father's groans if he knew the truth.

The hare's hour draws near with every sideways arch and I briefly wonder if there is a point in coming to camp if Eugene won't be here anymore. Then the rabbit squeaks and I jump down from the oak and begin untangling it from the wire and rope that spelled its doom. The celery I used as bait has mirrored its placement from my lunch tray, a forgotten heap on the ground.

"I was starting to think there weren't any animals out here or that they'd stayed away from this spot because they were scared of us, you know? Cuz we haven't caught anything before. I mean, I know we always take the snares down and that the free period isn't nearly long enough to attract anything but I always thought, maybe."

Eugene shrugs. He is always like this when we see each other again. I want to shake him and remind him that I am the last person he should fear but my hands are full of rabbit. I hum to let him know I'm listening to him ramble, although I know the real reason we never caught anything in the past is because I had Eugene convinced that we didn't need any bait. I kick leaves and cover the pale green vegetable.

Eugene takes a step closer to me and holds out his hands.

"Can I hold him?"

"It's a baby," I say.

Eugene's awe fades as he takes the hare and cradles it gingerly against the crook of his arm. The rabbit's body obscures my view of his shoestring bracelet. In his letters he says he never takes it off and I believe him. The rabbit is making soft grunting noises and twitching in his hold. Thin fingers get lost in soft fur. Eugene begins rocking the rabbit slowly, whispering to it and cooing softly. He looks like a mother. I can't look away.

"Can I tell you something?" He asks.

"You mean something that wasn't in one of your letters?"

He nods and strokes the rabbit's fur.

"Okay." I say.

"Sometimes I feel like it's my fault."

I don't know what to say. I think about telling Eugene that he isn't to blame and I think about telling him that I know how he feels. Then I remind myself that the only fault Eugene has ever committed was promising to be my

friend and teaching me all the ways to keep him and I realize I can't say that either.

"You should count yourself lucky." Eugene says.

He's looking down at the rabbit but I know he's talking to me. I know he couldn't have stopped his mother, not the way I could have stopped mine.

"Your mother uses Tobi the way she could have used you."

He is whispering now and his head is down. The rabbit is silent but it continues to twitch.

I want to take it from him and hide it away somewhere. I don't want it to die in his arms. I don't want him to know what I really am.

"I told my father," He says.

"Did you get my letter?"

"You should tell your father, too," Eugene says.

"I wrote about the picnics. I wrote that I don't talk to mother anymore."

"It'll hurt him, Julius. You're gonna hurt him."

"You can write me back when camp's over, Okay? It's okay."

When the rabbit finally dies I help Eugene bury it. He cries openly and when we head back for dinner he is silent. Come bedtime he hasn't spoken a single word to me in hours and I start to worry. Then, he crawls into bed with me when he's sure everyone else is asleep and laces his clammy hands with mine. As he falls asleep I let my mind wander to the spiders and the ants. There is only so much torture a creature can take before it gives up. When that happens the war stops being fun and it's better to just put them out of their misery. I don't know how to put Eugene out of his misery.

There comes a time when Eugene and I outgrow camp. I spend the summer of my sophomore year alone. It's the first time we aren't living out of each other's pockets during the hot season. Eugene still writes me letters. He says he's trying not to blame himself anymore and that his dad is surprisingly supportive. I think I'm proud of him. I write the words even though I'm unsure.

Even after the incident at camp I still kill rabbits. Sometimes I go back to the insects but they aren't as entertaining anymore. Mother's cat goes missing and she is devastated. I imagine her despair on father's features and I feel guilty. Not over the cat but over secrets kept. I never tell any of this to Eugene, though, because animals tend to run when they are frightened.

I do, however, tell him about how mother has started seeing someone new. Father still doesn't know. In fact, they're still married when father becomes president of the company where he works and he buys her a diamond necklace to celebrate. That goes missing too and mother blames the maid and fires her. She doesn't hire a new one.

My parents go on a trip for their twentieth anniversary. When they come back home mother acts like she loves my father six days of every week. I hate her for it. We don't talk. It's been three years. Father gets suspicious that there may be more to my distance from her and he asks me if she's abusing me. I tell him no.

"Would you tell me if she was?" He asks.

“You love her too much,” I say.

“But I love you too, son.”

His eyebrows knit together as if his statement was an inquiry and he squints his eyes slightly like he is trying to get a better look at me. He presses his lips into a thin line. Not for the first time in my life I notice all the wrinkles in his face and wonder if Eugene was right and if I should have said something long ago. Would forty-two still look so old if I had?

“Then believe me.” I say.

He nods. His hand lingers on my shoulder for a moment too long after the second pat. He never asks me about my silence again and there comes a time when I don’t even talk to him unless I’m directly spoken to. Eventually, the only person I talk to anymore is Eugene. It’s better that way.

After our senior year Eugene convinces me to move in with him. He leaves Missouri and we get a place together in Wichita. He becomes a veterinarian. I enlist in the Air Force. He saves lives and eventually adopts a cottontail and names it Manitowa. I go to war and drop bombs on sandy ant colonies out of an F-22 and admire the thick billows of smoke and pretend they are powdered chalk.

Eugene still writes.

In the letters Eugene talks about how he writes to his father and tells me the man is getting remarried to a young high school teacher named Trisha. He lets me know how his therapy sessions are going and confesses to writing letters to his mother that he never sends off. He says he does it to help him cope but that he isn’t quite ready to forgive. Other times, he boasts about the animals he takes care of as if they are his children. Each word is a picture and each sentence a frame. I imagine the snapshots of all the animals and I conjure up ways to kill them.

He says he loves me.

I write back as often as I am able. All of my letters are short and boring. I tell him trivial things like how I hate the desert and that I miss pizza. I tell him that sandstorms make me think of the spray setting on Windex bottles but I never explain why. Mostly I ask him a lot of questions to keep from talking about myself. Occasionally I tell him I miss him. I do this for seven months.

During the eighth month of my deployment I get a letter from my father. It says: “*You were right. I loved her too much.*” I don’t know what to make of it at first but a few days later I’m sent home because my mother has been shot to death. My father will plead temporary insanity at his hearing and escape the chair but they lock him up for life.

Mother’s wake is open casket. This is the last bed she will ever sleep in, alone or with another man. Her hair has been styled in such a way that it covers the bullet wound. I tell her she’s a selfish bitch even though I know she can’t hear me. Eugene does, though, and he steps away from the pew and places a hand on my shoulder.

He is still wearing my shoestrings. The colors have faded with time and the purple and black look like a large bruise on his pale skin. The aglets have

been chipped away by his nervous chewing of the plastic and the edges of the shoe strings are frayed like blades of dead grass trying to break away from the earth.

I used to think that I was clever for creating such a trap. Now I see that my noose is made of shoestrings. Eugene wraps his arms around me and begins to pull me away from the coffin and it isn't until then that I realize I'm crying; that I'm screaming. My family is broken. I am broken.

I write one last letter to Eugene. I finally tell him about the ants. I go into great detail about the other creatures as well; spiders, rabbits, mother's cat. I tell him that he was right, that I should have told. I express that I wish things would have ended up differently. I explain where I keep mother's diamond necklace and I ask him to send it to my father. I admit that I am at fault for many things. I say that I am broken but I ask him if I was a good friend despite all of that. I ask him to keep wearing my shoestrings and I know he will because he's better than me.

As I write, I recall a moment in time when Eugene and I were at camp. We asked a counselor what Manitowa meant and why they called the camp that. She told us it was derived from the Native American word Manitowoc and that it meant dwelling of the spirit. I remind Eugene of this in the letter and I tell him every spirit must eventually return home. I tell him I'll wait for him but not to rush things. I tell him I am going back to camp.



**Here's Johnny, Gabrielle DeFonso**

# Bunker Birthday

*Dana Stelting-Kempf*

It was his birthday again. He awoke to total darkness. He fumbled for the tap light whose dim LED light miraculously lit up the room. His skin, translucent from years of living underground and age, was predominately marked by cyanic veins, a roadmap of his years, his skeletal arm shook as he reached for his old, torn and tattered robe. Once it had been a luxurious thick and cozy terry cloth, so white it almost shone. He used to take it to the beach each morning and wrap up in it after his morning swim. He used it now, like a child with a security blanket, to wrap his shivering body.

Now, it was beyond grey and full of holes. Truthfully, it was barely a robe at all. It was crisscrossed with the tracks of futile repairs; one thin thread searching out a firm patch of cloth on which to anchor, yet pulling the weave apart instead.

Drawing the thin belt around his even thinner waist, Jefferson made his way to what served as the bathroom—a tunnel about 100 yards to the rear of the base. Despite being so far removed and shut away behind metal doors, the putrid odor of feces and urine seeped into his quarters. The sanitation system had finally failed just before his last birthday.

He had been alone down here now for about twelve years. The old missile base and silo were deep underground, 140 feet at the deepest point to be exact. He learned of the co-op one Saturday afternoon when his down and out college roommate, Denver, called to tell him of his latest endeavor.

Jefferson agreed to meet, despite his misgivings. He braced himself, for he was sure of the onslaught of begging for cash he was bound to get from his poor old friend; the rumors had not failed to reach him, even as he scoured the rain forest in search of his next multi-million dollar medicine.

Denver, it seemed was keeping rather bad company, and had been seen taking twenty year old strippers half his age out to breakfast at the 7A Café in the East Village. His family was embarrassed by his flagrant flaunting of his newfound wealth, but had long ago stopped apologizing for it. Denver it seemed had been burning through the money faster than a crack-head, which of course led to speculation that he must be on drugs.

He looked like he was on drugs, his hair was rarely combed and he had the appearance of one who never sleeps, and the odor to go along with it. The strippers didn't seem to mind, even if the wait staff at 7A did.

Denver had bought the abandoned missile base at the end of the cold war and “all” of them in the Midwest were decommissioned. He had this crackpot idea that the world was going to end, or suffer some great catastrophe, and he was going to be one of mankind that would survive. He had this huge plan to build some sort of underground city out of this metal behemoth.

As Jefferson sat across from him, he studied him for signs of drug use. They had smoked a little pot in college, but they never really partied and at forty, he hoped the same could be said. It was true that his clothes were a tad disheveled, and his chin had more than a day's growth and his hair hadn't seen a comb in days, maybe more—it was hard to tell. He didn't seem to be incoherent as one would think a crack head might be. He wasn't hostile or paranoid—well at least in terms of the relative situation.

True he was tired and looked like he wasn't getting much sleep, but there was about him a strange sense of urgency, like he didn't have enough time to do what he needed to get done. He explained how he was only letting in the very elite, and their recommendations that the co-op approved. Each of the seven co-op elite members would have spacious apartments that would line the exterior of the silo and base. The owners are free to decorate any way they chose. Each of the seven apartments would essentially give the occupant their own floor.

Underneath, the next few floors would be divided up into several units, for the bright undergrads Denver had been working with and was inviting, and upper level staff; like programmers and skilled personnel. These units would be nice, but normal. The people occupying them would be comfortable. In the core of the complex, there would be shopping, dining, and entertainment fit to rival any Broadway show. The entire city would be fully self-sustaining. Denver had a team of engineers he had spent his inheritance on, working out all the specifics.

“No wonder you're broke. We all thought you were strung out on crack!” Jefferson mused.

“Ya, sorry about that, had to have a cover story to chase away the corporate spies.” Denver winked back at Jefferson.

Of course he would have a sanitation and housekeeping staff at the ready as well, but their housing would be the old bunkhouse that would serve as a dormitory. Every co-op member would be allowed to bring one personal service employee, and three family members; pets would have to gain approval from all members or not be permitted, but Denver told him not to get his hopes up.

As Denver spoke, Jefferson slowly began to wonder what *would he do* if something happened? What would he do? Where would he go? How would he survive? The more Denver talked about bioterrorism, droughts, floods, global warming, nuclear holocaust, Nostradamus, and the end of the world, the more Jefferson felt that he must purchase an apartment in the co-op.

“So, the seven,” Denver said. “They are the royalty; these are the big dogs, the guys that have always had the insight and the power to get things done. I have five others already signed up. I need the last one. I need you. I need your skills, I need your money too, but that isn't what it is about.” He stopped and took a sip of his Astica, a nice little chardonnay from Argentina.

“Why me?” Jefferson asked. “What makes me so special that you think you want me in this co-op, and what makes you think I want to be? And you said you had five other guys, who's the sixth?”

Denver shot him a grin. “Who do you think?”

As Jefferson continued to scrutinize his old friend, he slowly began to realize he was neither crazy nor on drugs, he was serious, he really believed this project was important and that he was running out of time.

Denver continued, “We need a chemist. We have the other disciplines covered, but we need the best damn chemist we can find, and buddy, the last time I checked my stock, your company had record sales. I can depend on you to find that elusive answer the others have been searching for. The way you look at molecules, man, you know your shit! Besides, you fit. I can’t reveal the identities of the members right now, but trust me, you’ll be happy, and, like I said, you fit. I need you.”

Before the meeting was over, Jefferson had signed the contract of living regulations and handed Denver a check for eleven million dollars. The plans boasted beautifully furnished rooms with nice appointments and so many amenities one would never feel as if they were underground.

Denver asked, “If you could wake up in any city to watch the sunrise, where would you be?”

Jefferson thought this an odd question but answered, “Paris, I suppose. Why?”

“So we can program your view. Living with no windows underground would drive you nuts after a while. Jason is one of the seven. We recruited him for his programming skills to make this thing run. He is also in charge of creating your windows and you’ll need a view. When you pull your curtains, you’ll have view of Paris, but not just some dumbass still. When you look out your windows, Jason will have a program running and you will swear you are watching the Boulevard Peripherique, teeming with tourists en route to the Eiffel Tower. It’s wild man; you won’t believe your eyes.

He’s been running the prototype at the dollar theater—he rents the screen during dead time. When he gets it finished, you’ll believe that days are coming and going, as if nothing ever happened. Right now he’s working on a user interface so you can change the weather, and personalize your view, change streets and stuff like that. He has only had time to work with a panoramic view schematic from this boulevard, but once the project is finished, you’ll have several locations to choose your view from among your Paris themes. If you get sick of Paris, you can always buy a view upgrade. You’re gonna love it. It’s sic.”

*For eleven mil plus, thought Jefferson, I better.* And with a check, a signature, a handshake, and a pat on the back, Jefferson’s life path had been permanently altered.

If he had told Denver he just couldn’t make the appointment, he wouldn’t be stuck here now. His eyes wouldn’t be burning as he relieved himself in the dark recesses of what was once a glorious architectural delight. He wouldn’t be alone, 140 feet underground, wondering what he would wipe with once these last three rolls of paper were gone.

Finished, he rolled the giant metal doors shut once more and took a breath. It smelled hideous, but he was used to it. At least on this side of the door, his eyes didn't burn. He had been using it for about a year, when the last of the bathroom and bathing facilities had finally crashed. Since its original function as one of two green houses had long since ceased, Jefferson thought he could keep his waste buried and perhaps things would still be sanitary. He was surprised that it only took a year to consume that resource and now there was no fresh ground to dig, as he did not wish to disturb the graves of his friends.

“Self sustaining my ass.”

His voice spun in an echo, traveling along the twisted metal of the walls of the tunnel. He was still working on figuring out how to make a composting toilet. He knew it could be done, but he never really understood that sort of thing. (He had mentioned this when they were in the building stages, but Denver had assured him that everything was so high-tech they would have no need of them.)

He got the chemistry of it; that was a no brainer—except that he had little to nothing to compost with—that wasn't the problem. The problem was he had never wanted to learn to use a hammer and saw and get dirty and feel the pride of building your own birdhouse or your own anything for that matter. He would rather pick one out from Niemen Marcus and have it delivered.

“Ass....AAAASSSS...” His voice came back at him.

He had reached the galley. Despite Denver's best planning, there was very little Jefferson had to work with. At least he was great at chemistry, which is after all, the secret behind all great dishes. He hadn't had fresh milk or eggs in so long he would probably get sick if he did. He did, however, have a very small bit of cocoa left. The apple cider had turned into vinegar. The other of the two, now inoperable, green houses that was once a six-acre tunnel had given up its produce long ago.

There were still some dried herbs and wheat. He had picked the pitiful okra, beets and cucumbers he managed to coax into fruiting. Some of the beets provided him with sugar. There was still a small amount of ancient vegetable oil and lard. One thing he did have an abundance of was water and dried beans, along with salt and other various baking necessities like soda, powder, lard and a few rarely used spices. By some small miracle or a bit of good luck, the well providing water was still strong, and for some reason, it looked as if Denver had stored enough beans to last forever.

*Perhaps he had only finished stocking the beans when it bit.* Jefferson thought.

Jefferson would have been long dead if it weren't for the well and the oxygen production system he had helped the engineers create. Even this system was in danger of failing, but Jefferson understood it and took care of the issues

he knew how to fix. One thing that still brought him pleasure was spending time on it and taking care of it. He took in a deep breath as the fresh well water spilled out of the Designer faucet. While both hot and cold still drew water, the water heating system was inoperable as well.

Studying chemistry had served him well over the last few years as the systems in the co-op began to fail. He had become more and more dependent on his knowledge of molecular bonding and macro and micro molecules. Too bad he hadn't cared this much about everyday run of the mill tasks, like repairing circuit board systems. Here, he was lost.

Today he would employ his gift in the baking of a cake. It was his eightieth birthday. His mind wandered to a boy he knew in school and how the sun shined on his hair as they swung on the swings. He wished he spent more time with Ken. He was a good egg.

Eggs, oh how he wished for eggs. Fried. Scrambled. Poached. Sunny-side-up. Burned. Any egg would be welcomed as a lost friend and eagerly devoured, yet every bite would be savored.

He grabbed an eight-inch square pan and set to work. He began to gather the ingredients. Sugar, flour, salt, baking soda, cocoa powder, lard, vegetable oil—he still hadn't decided which he would try—apple cider vinegar, a small amount of Mexican vanilla clung to the bottom of the bottle, desperately trying to maintain residence in the dark brown glass, and beet sugar—he briefly wished it were cane—but he was grateful for any sugar at all. Next year there would be none.

He hoped there was enough wind power from the generator to turn on the oven. He pushed the button and was rewarded by a little red light and the immediate feel of heat, warming the cool, damp air. He did love the convection oven. He had used it many times to simply warm his hands and to chase the isolation away, to glean some sort of psychological comfort.

“Well, Happy Birthday Jefferson!”

He returned to the ingredients. He had created this recipe a few years ago when he still had butter and margarine and canned goods and rice—he missed the rice terribly.

He checked to see if the last stove top burner would be of service, it had been sporadic as of late. After filling the kettle with well water, he set it to boil. There were still enough tealeaves left from his precious English Pickwick Classic that he could savor a cup this morning and still have some left. He readied his cup and saucer and tea strainer.

The commercial grade galley kitchen had once produced some of the finest dishes Jefferson had ever tasted. He missed Marvin, the chef, more than

any of the other survivalists. Marvin had the most amazing pallet and his creations were beyond any he had ever tasted in any of the finest Michelin star restaurant. The man was a culinary genius. He had served royalty all over the globe, hiring himself out as a personal chef and a wise choice for the co-op seven. He had been close to Marvin while they went through school and had helped him pass his chemistry.

Marvin lived for his food. A short, round red haired man, his only flaw was his hygiene. For some unknown reason, shortly after they went underground the normally fastidious Marvin simply stopped bathing and grooming himself. The man never touched a comb and bathed only when the co-op counsel served him with a demand to bathe or face isolation—the co-op’s best solution to the one thing they hadn’t counted on, dissent and anarchy. Isolation was the most severe punishment they could deliver. Modifications were made, and a portion of the east storage became, essentially, a small series of private, steel encased jail cells. No plumbing could be run so the Sanitation Staff had to remove the waste daily of anyone that was sentenced to isolation.

There were three members of the community that had the displeasure of spending a few nights sleeping on the hard cement floor, with only their blanket and pillow for company. The crimes committed were what you might expect of one that had slowly gone round the bend from years of underground living.

One young man had just watched his new wife and baby die in childbirth, and began destroying the infirmary. He had to be subdued and removed until he could regain his composure. He worked at waste removal and had gone into the waste system control center and begun to destroy all the system interfaces. He swore the devil had come in through the interface and had killed them both.

Another had decided to harvest everything in Greenhouse One. She was certain everything had fruited and the produce the best ever grown. She was wrong. In addition, she destroyed the hydration system and made “mud-angels in the rain.”

The last guy was just plain crazy and had to be kept there up until the day he died, as he had taken to randomly stabbing people with steak knives to make them stop glowing.

The darkness of isolation, made the rest of the silo/base seem to fill with radiant sunlight. Once confined to isolation, it wasn’t long before the dissident had been tamed into submission, and things were back to normal.

Marvin decided it best to bathe, yet never resumed his regular regimen, but kept his odor at a somewhat more tolerable level. When Jefferson would see him, he would do his best to maintain his distance and always turned his head when Marvin would raise his arms to gesture, which he often did.

Jefferson had spent a few years working on his cake. Once he felt he had it right, once he had tweaked it to his satisfaction, he had written the recipe down. He named it after how was beginning to feel, being alone underground.

### Wacky Cake

Prepare 1 cup of hot water

In an 8-inch square pan combine the following:

1 ½ cups flour

1 cup sugar

3 tablespoons cocoa

½ teaspoon each of salt and baking soda

Mix thoroughly.

Make three holes in the dry mixture to hold each of the following:

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 teaspoon vinegar

6 tablespoons melted butter or margarine

Pour the water over the mixture in the pan. Stir and bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes. If doubled, increase baking time by five minutes.

This year there was neither butter, nor any margarine. He would have to substitute either oil or lard. He chose the vegetable oil and hoped it would be edible; he didn't have enough cocoa to bake another. The glorious smells from his childhood began to sneak into his nose, and replace the faint but ever present odor of his own waste. His mother mixing his cake with an old Hamilton Beach mixer greeted him with her traditional cheer.

“Another year older already? Where does the time go? You are my fine young man and today your birthday will be the best one yet, Happy Birthday Jefferson Darling.”

She vanished as the timer went off. He did hope the oil was the right choice. He had done the math and felt it should be, but still he worried. The aroma of chocolate filled the air as he removed the cake from the oven. It looked normal, nice and firm but not rubbery. That was a good sign. It was a bit on the shiny side though. He set it on a cooling rack and patiently watched and waited for signs that something had gone wrong.

As he let the cake rest, Jefferson began to laugh. The round walls vibrated with it and filled the space, overpowering even the smell of chocolate. He and the rest of the seven had planned to go Scuba diving off the Malta coast with a bunch of the guys from their fraternity on his eightieth. They all had birthdays close to one another and had vowed to spend the entire two weeks together hitting the sea, no matter where their lives took them after college, as long they were alive to be there.

*Well, that's definitely not an option,* he thought, as he slowly stopped laughing. He stuck a fork into the pan.

“Mmmmm,” he said, “that’s damn good cake.”

# Contributor Bios

**Dana Stelting-Kempf** is a native of Garnett, Kansas but grew up in Topeka. She has traveled the country and now lives in Burlingame on the Santa Fe Trail, taking in stray kittens on her small property. She will graduate in the May of 2014 from Washburn University with a degree in English. She enjoys writing fiction using her knowledge of science, along with the occasional modern day fairy tale. She also writes for the Washburn Review.

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