

The Footstool: A Christian Short Story Collection

By Kim Bond

This short story collection is dedicated to our Lord Jesus Christ.

“...The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool...” —Isaiah 66:1 (KJV)

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IMPORTANT: The works contained within this publication are purely fiction. They have not been written to teach Christian theology or doctrine.

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Gumdrop Alley

We lived on the east side of Peru. Mother would send me to the market on account of her sick leg. I went frequently and became friendly with a man named Pedunk. He seemed genuinely interested in me—asking all kinds of questions. Later, I understood he was only calculating how much I would be missed, if my family would search for me, and with whom he must contend if he was caught.

I guess my answers made me a good kidnapping candidate. He offered me a piece of gum; I do not remember much after that. When I awoke, my body was being lifted by unfamiliar arms from an old pickup truck to a hut in Gumdrop Alley. I never knew the exact location. I only knew it was where a mountain curved into a slope. We were hidden away in thatched huts shaped like gumdrops.

Pedunk and the Missus kept a close eye on us from the windows of their stone house. The Missus concerned herself with our cleanliness, food, and clothing. At times, I got the impression she viewed the twelve of us girls as

her children in some twisted way. Pedunk considered only our behavior toward the clients to be of any weighty significance.

The clients were part of an underground ring. Men from all over Peru came to see us. They saw us greet them at the doorway with long black hair cascaded over one shoulder. They saw us remove bright colored skirts and lay down with them on mattresses.

The guard sat in a chair outside of Pedunk's home day and night. The machine gun's strap was draped around his neck, his hand always on the trigger. He paid little attention to us. He was paid to watch over the clients—not to protect us girls. They did not fear us leaving either. We were too scared to flee, and the village was too isolated for us to travel to any town on foot.

All the girls lined up every morning to be inspected by his wife.

We held out our hands for inspection—palms down. The Missus walked down the line, scrunching her freckled nose now and then. At the end, she turned around. We flipped our hands in unison—palms up. She inspected them again. If we had clean hands and nails,

she gave us a small ration of rice and fruit, usually a pawpaw. If a girl's hands appeared dirty to her, she denied that girl's daily food ration. She approved my hands daily—almost smiling as she handed me the food.

That is every day until March. It started when I laid in bed half asleep and heard the crunching of leaves underfoot. I assumed one of Pedunk's clients had come to receive my service, but it was Pedunk himself. His familiar silhouette stood in my doorway, lit up by the moon like a ghost.

At first, I felt relieved to see him. Maybe he wanted to ask me to fetch an extra jar of water from the well by the road because Mara was sick again. But the way he leaned against the wall and stared for so long gave me an uneasy feeling. He said nothing as he began unbuckling his belt and unbuttoning his jeans.

I treated him as I would any client, laying still and spacing out. My thoughts drifted away from my usual hope of returning home and turned to a new, more desperate hope: one of the clients might haggle with Pedunk to take me away and make me his wife. Together, we would have children, and I would never let

them out of my sight. Ever. I envisioned this so fully that I only snapped back to reality as Pedunk walked out the doorway of my hut.

The following morning, I scrubbed my hands same as always. However, the Missus shook her head as she walked past for inspection. As she walked past the second time (palms up), she smacked them down and said, "Put those filthy things away. No food today."

It was then I realized the girls who failed inspection in the past did not fail because their hands were literally dirty. And I had not passed inspection prior to this moment because I scrubbed my hands so adequately. All this time, she had been punishing us for Pedunk's wandering.

Still, her cruelty was kindness compared to that of Pedunk's behavior, especially in the company of his guard. Together, the two men behaved inhumane. I discovered just how humane the following night.

I laid in bed and listened to my stomach growl after not having eaten all day. I clutched the handmade doll I had stitched together. Salwa's face was shaped like a pancake with black

thread stitched in the shape of X's for the eyes, and the shape of a minus sign for a nose, and a smiling mouth. She was made of old material—dull brown coffee color for the face and a floral print for her undersized torso, floppy arms, and understuffed legs. I had been careful to stitch a belly button right where a belly button would go. It made her more lifelike. I needed Salwa to be lifelike and sweet. The girls seemed too coarse for my liking, too callous for a best friend anyway.

Mara's hut was beside mine, so I heard everything perfectly. Pedunk yelled something about how long she had known she was pregnant and kept it secret. I considered how well she had hidden it under baggy dresses because I never noticed. Pedunk said his customer requested a new girl since he had accidentally chosen the pregnant one.

I hugged Salwa tighter and slid further under my cover as the first smack echoed in my ears. Pedunk demanded to see her belly.

“Oh man, oh man. What have you done? Six months. You have to be six months pregnant, Mara. I might have been able to fix this for you. I could have made it disappear painlessly, but

now....”The next sound was more thuddish like a punch. Though my whole body trembled, I commanded myself to get out of bed.

I stood there wanting to go next door and defend Mara but either out of cowardice or honest prediction, I convinced myself I would only make things worse for her.

Pedunk’s voice started again. “The baby’s too strong now to go easily. Might as well shoot her.”

Another voice cackled. That is when I realized the guard was in there with them. I imagined him taking aim at that moment. I jumped back in bed and covered my head completely with blankets. Under there, Salwa and I hid and listened to Mara try to explain.

“I just wanted to keep my baby. I want someone for my very own, someone to love. You do not understand how it is to feel the baby grow inside you.”

Afterwards I heard a loud crack as if the gun had slammed against her head or something else. I did not hear Mara’s voice any more that night.

For the next two weeks, I thought she was dead. Then one morning Mara appeared at lineup. The Missus said her hands looked extra clean and gave her more food than usual.

That is when we heard a baby's cries from Pedunk's house. The Missus set down the pail of rice and rushed away.

I leaned forward in line and strained to see Mara's face, about three girls down. Her face was stone. She dropped her jar of rice on the dirt and walked back toward her hut. I chased after her, careful not to spill one grain of my own rice. By the time I reached her doorway, her face was buried in her mattress. She sobbed without pride; her tears absorbed in her blanket.

I returned to my hut next door and set down the rice. Salwa smiled from where she sat in the middle of my mattress. I wrapped my two hands around her torso and lifted her up to my face. I stared into her little X'd eyes.

"I am sorry, my dear friend, but it is time we part ways. I do love you. It is just Mara needs you more right now."

Dragging her by the hand, I marched over to Mara's hut. The sobbing mound did not acknowledge my presence. I placed Salwa by Mara's arm. At that, Mara seemed to have been startled. She grabbed my arm and pulled me close. She embraced me though my arms hung lifelessly at my sides.

In my soul, I knew I could never understand what she had gone through. A chasm of maturity had been formed in such a short period of time. She had become a mother and become childless all in one day. I had nothing to offer her—no advice or words of comfort. No bridge ever built could close the gap between us at that moment in time.

Mara did not seem to notice the chasm. I doubt it mattered who I was, only that I was a living being—warm and near. She eventually stopped squeezing me so tightly and simply let go. She looked down at Salwa, who was still laying on her mattress, then back at me again. "Thank you." After that, she laid on her mattress, face first as she had been when I entered, except now she wrapped one arm around Salwa.

I backed out of her doorway and into the morning light, once again hearing the baby fuss. My hut seemed the right place for me to go even though Salwa would not be waiting on the mattress for me.

I retrieved my hidden sewing kit from a stack of clothes. With the sewing shears, I cut a shirt into the size of a pancake head. The rest of the afternoon, I threw my focus into making a new Salwa, a better Salwa—a Ximena.

After that day, we saw less and less of the Missus and of Pedunk. The guard was there, same as always, and the clients came and went as usual.

That was until an unusual client entered my hut. He looked like the medical missionaries I used to see in the marketplace. He spoke better Spanish though. His first words were, “Do you like it here?”

I pondered the question as I unbuttoned my shirt. It seemed an absurd question. He placed his hand on mine to prevent me from unbuttoning my shirt.

I dropped my hands to my sides. "It is alright."
I did not want to say the wrong thing.

"What if I told you that you could be free?"

My heart skipped a beat. I thought, "Could it be my dream come true? Has this man come to buy me, rescue me, and marry me?" I said aloud, "Oh yes, I want to be free!" I wrapped my arms around him as he stood like a statue. The moment had a strange resemblance to the embrace I endured from Mara. The man's seriousness quieted my heart about the hope of becoming his bride.

I scratched my arm. "Are you a medical missionary?"

The man sat on the mattress. "I am a missionary of Jesus Christ."

Suddenly, it occurred to me he was not speaking about a literal freedom from Gumdrop Alley but a spiritual freedom from something or other.

"Oh." I could think of nothing more to say, so we sat in an uncomfortable silence for a few

moments. “So why do they call this Gumdrop Alley?”

I inhaled deeply, much relieved to discuss something definite. “I think it started with the huts shaped like gumdrops.”

The man leaned forward and put the tips of his fingers together as though he pondered his whole life’s burdens in that one instant.

“Look, the man who took my money to sleep with you...”

“Pedunk.”

“Yes, Pedunk. He says I have thirty minutes with you. We need to get to business.”

“Right,” I said, unbuttoning my shirt again.

“No, not that kind of business.” This time he put his fingertips on his forehead and then through his full head of hair. “I mean getting you out of here. Today is the fifth of April. On the twentieth, I will have a car waiting at the road alongside the well. Can you be there just after dark?”

My heart started beating right out of my chest.
“I cannot. The guard...”

“We will take care of the guard. Will you be there?”

“We? We who?” I felt my eyes squinting.
Everything seemed so confusing all of a sudden.

“I know people that can help us. First, I want to talk to some more of the girls. You might see me around in the next few nights. Just act natural. Most of all, be there.” He stood and walked out, leaving me with so many unanswered questions and the doubt I could make it outside of Gumdrop Alley alive. Time moved slowly until the twentieth of April, but it arrived nonetheless. I stood in my doorway scanning the landscape. Just as the man had said, the guard was not in his normal spot.

Just then, Pedunk came around the side of my hut. “Where are you goin’?” He smelled of liquor and pushed me back in the hut into my stack of clothes. My heart hammered in my chest so wildly, I wondered if he could see it beating through my shirt.

Still looking into his eyes, I reached my hand under the clothing stack behind me to feel for my sewing supplies. I felt a needle, a spool of thread, and shears! I pulled the shears out of the pile. I jumped to my feet. In one swift movement, I jabbed him in the left eye with the scissors.

Pedunk pulled out the scissors from his eye and covered it with his hands. As I backed out of the hut, I said, "When a girl has hope in her heart, she has already been set free. Nothing can stop someone who is free!" I burst into a sprint to the well. I heard others around me, but I did not look back. One of the girls darted past me.

When we arrived at the well, there was five of us. Mara was not one of them. I thought, "Why didn't she come? Of all people, she must hate Pedunk the most. The baby! She wants to see her baby grow up."

A large black car, larger than any I had ever seen, coasted slowly up the road without any lights on. The back door opened. Two girls crawled inside. I was the third. As I stepped inside, I glanced at the well. I had to pause when I saw Mara starting over the hill.

“Wait, here she comes. Mara,” I whispered. Just then, I saw she was not alone. First, I saw Pedunk’s short figure through the darkness, and then the guard’s huge frame. Mara stopped and pointed in our direction.

The girl behind shoved me in the car and dove in next to me.

Shots rang out. The fifth girl cried out and fell. We reached out and dragged her in the car and slammed the door shut as the car sped off.

In the backseat was the man who visited my hut. “Are you alright?” he asked the girl bleeding from her leg. She made no reply.

“You are safe now. This limousine is bulletproof.” Turning his eyes to me, he said, “I told you I know people.” He smiled contented with himself and began dressing her with supplies from the car’s compartment.

It seemed so strange that a ride with a stranger was how I got in this mess to begin with. My heart sank as I allowed skeptical thoughts to entertain my mind. I thought, “What if he is

only kidnapping us to take us to his own Gumdrop Alley? Or worse.”

“Man of Jesus Christ, where are you taking us?”

The man continued to bandage the wound with a certain gentleness that suppressed my apprehension about the future. “There is a safe house for victims of sex trafficking. They will give you a bed and hot food until you feel ready to return to your families.”

I wondered if my family would recognize me. I felt like a different person than the girl who was kidnapped a year ago. I relaxed in the velvety soft seat and closed my eyes until thick warm tears welled up in them.

The man of Jesus Christ probably assumed they were tears of joy. I might have cried from joy if my heart allowed it, but the feeling seemed too strange and unnatural. Honestly, I cried from sorrow because I realized I had forgotten Ximena—my sweet half-made doll.

Old Kal's Cave

On July 25th 1983, Daniel turned eleven, which meant a small party and a cake decorated with a green tractor—like the one his father used to plow the soil. His mom was there, and his Gramma, too. His dad stayed until the birthday song was over, but then he went to get some work done. When there was no cake left and nothing to do, Daniel walked down to the lake to skip stones.

He saw Jay there, leaning on a rock and holding a book. Daniel could make out some of the words on the cover: The Red Badge of..., but Jay's hand covered the word on the bottom.

“Your momma lock you out again?” Daniel asked.

Jay did not look up. “Yep.”

Daniel reached in his pocket, pulled out a lighter, and started flicking it over and over. “What does she do when she locks you out?”

Curious about the flicking noise, Jay looked up at Daniel. “I do not know; I am locked out! Duh! Where did you get that?”

“Oh, this?” He held up the disposable lighter. “Found it on the road. Don’t ya ever spy on her? Look in the window to see what she’s doin’? We should do that. Let’s go.”

Looking down at his book again, Jay said, “You go. I don’t care.”

Daniel returned the lighter to his pocket and walked closer to the lake to survey the rocks for a good skipping stone. Without turning around, he said, “You’re no fun.” He inhaled deeply—taking in a familiar dead fish smell—before exhaling loudly. He quickly spun around, “I know where a cave is! My dad told me

‘bout it. It’s behind Old Kal’s barn.”

Jay closed the book. “You are full of bullhockey, Daniel. I have been in back of Old Kal’s barn a million times and have never seen a cave.”

“Is too! Old-old Kal, Old Kal’s dad, covered up the hole with a rock before he died. My dad was in his twenties back then. He said they all

used to go down there. That's why he covered it up, all the kids trespassing on his property. I betcha we can move the rock together."

Jay stood up and tried to look Daniel right in the eye, even though he was a few inches shorter. "You don't even have a flashlight. How are we gonna see?"

Daniel took the lighter out of his pocket again. "With this! You ain't scared of the dark, are ya?"

That is when Jay started walking in the direction of Old Kal's barn, and Daniel was at his heels. The two strolled in silence past the cornfields until they turned the corner of the wooden barn. Jay's eyes widened a little bit when he saw there was actually a fairly big rock, hidden partially by overgrown weeds.

Daniel pushed the weeds down with his hand. "Told ya!"

"We can't move that rock. You're crazy!" Jay turned and started walking back the way they came.

“Bawk. Bawk.” Daniel folded his arms in like wings and flapped them.

Even though Jay was shorter and less developed than Daniel, he felt empowered by his intelligence and irritation. He shoved him down.

Daniel rolled on his knees. “Jay, you’re stronger than ya look! Why don’t you just help me move the rock?” He tapped on it. “Then you can leave if you really want to.” Daniel pushed the rock as hard as he could. “See, I need ya, brotha.”

“I am not your brother or anything like that. We are hardly even friends. We are just stuck out here together because we have nothing better to do.” He sat down next to him and picked at weeds that smelled like onions.

He laid his hand on Jay’s shoulder. “If anybody says they’re your friend or your brother, you shouldn’t argue with ‘em. You need every friend you can get. Now help me move this rock!”

Daniel was right, and Jay knew it. He did not have a lot of friends, but that never bothered

him. Still, he felt inspired from the book he was reading to do something other than go home and check to see if his mom unlocked the front door yet. “Your leg muscles are stronger than your arm muscles. If we can move this rock, it is going to have to be with our legs, not our arms.”

The two boys put their dirty boots on the rock and counted to three. The rock budged. They counted again and again and again and again until they uncovered a hole the size of a basketball. Daniel disappeared through the hole into the darkness. He fell back, but he was not hurt. As quickly as he could, he flicked his lighter and looked around.

“C’mon,” he yelled to Jay. “It’s really rad.”

Jay took a deep breath and jumped through the hole. He grabbed for the lighter, but the metal burned his hand. It fell to the ground. It was pitch black.

Daniel crossed his arms. “I thought you were a genius. Now, we can’t see anything.” Jay fumbled on the ground for the lighter. “Ow!” The lighter’s metal tip burned his hand again, but this time he did not let go. “Got it.” He

flicked it. The flame seemed to give off so little light in the grand room of the cave. The two walked around looking at litter left down there.

Daniel kicked a pile of soda cans, which gave off a loud crashing sound that echoed in the cave. “These are proolly my dad’s.”

Ignoring him, Jay explored the walls of the cave and saw it branched off in several directions. There were piles of string leading down each vein of the cave and chalk arrows on the walls.

Daniel promptly followed after Jay and the lighter that was truly his. “Let’s go down this one,” he said pointing to a narrow opening.

“Just for a minute. Mom usually opens the door around dinner time, and my stomach is starting to growl.”

The boys were only in that tunnel a minute when it split into another tunnel and another. At times, the walls were wide apart and the ceiling was high. Other times, they had to trudge like army men to get through. Jay felt he was living out the character of his book and kept going deeper and deeper into the cave until they came to a ten-foot drop off.

“C’mon, let’s jump,” Daniel said as he looked over the edge. “You can see the bottom even with that little lighter.”

“The cliff has a flat face. How would we get back up?” Jay turned around.

“Oh yeah.” Daniel followed after Jay.

“Duh. We have to turn back.”

Jay led the way back the best he could but nothing looked familiar. The chalk arrows on the cave walls pointed in opposing directions. Eventually, Daniel snatched the lighter back from him and started leading. It seemed like hours and hours they walked through that cave.

Jay stopped and sat on the ground. “I am scared, and I do not even care what you think about it.”

“Me too.” After a moment, he said, “God, if you are up there, me and Jay—remember us? We are stuck down here and would appreciate some help finding the way out of this place. That’s all. Amen.”

Jay stood up. “I did not know you believed in God; I don’t.”

Daniel started walking. “I don’t know if I do either. If he gets us out, I will believe. Maybe.”

The boys walked and walked. Still, nothing looked familiar, but Daniel spotted some chalk words on the cave wall. He read them to Jay, “Jesus saves. This way out!”

The boys started running in the direction of the arrow underneath those words. Before long, they returned to the big room of the cave. Daniel stood on Jay’s shoulders to escape into the fading sunlight. Daniel wedged his foot behind the rock they had moved to get inside and pulled Daniel up.

“Thanks, brother,” Jay said to Daniel.

The boys pushed the rock back in the same way they moved it to uncover the hole—with their feet. They ran together past the cornfield and all of the way to the gravel road where Jay’s house was. Then, Daniel walked home the rest of the way alone.

The two were friends for the rest of their lives, even after Jay became a preacher and Daniel became a farmer like his dad. In all of that time, they never returned to Old Kal's Cave. No person ever did. Old Kal never told Little Kal what was hiding under the rock, not even when Little Kal became Old Kal and Old Kal became Old-old Kal and Old-old Kal was long forgotten.

Mud Maker

The halls of Maple Hill High School buzzed with the type of excitement that only the first day of school brings. The nauseating wafts of Salisbury Steak from the cafeteria at nine a.m. did not detract from the students' enthusiasm to reconnect with old friends. Nor did the September day's dreariness weaken puberty's propulsion toward the opposite sex, which brought about exertion of one's own superiority in various ways. For a freshman named Scott, the advantage over his fellow students was gained from a careful choice of wardrobe: the most expensive jeans his mother would buy, name brand shoes, and a second-hand tee shirt to give the impression none of that mattered to him. His clothes, combined with his longish hair, won him a conversation with a girl more beautiful than any he had known in middle school.

Scott surprised himself with this small victory and was determined not to ruin the opportunity. His determination to say something clever drowned out her words. Her words also neglected to take precedence over

his fantasy of kissing pouty lips, lips that he imagined tasted like watermelon gum. If not for Scott's daydream and pressure to say the right thing, he might have noticed his neighbor, Cameron, approaching.

The sight of Scott as he talked with the young beauty unleashed Cameron's method of clamoring to a higher social position, which was to demoralize other students. To him, everyone in middle school was "stupid" and "an idiot." These insults, somehow, secured him a loyal group of subjects, a group he intended to expand by adding nasty schemes to his repertoire. Spurred on by jealousy, Scott became his first high school victim. Cameron snuck up behind Scott, grabbed the sides of his expensive jeans, and yanked them down to his name brand shoes.

The crowded hall of students roared with laughter as Scott stood there with his pants down, transparent and frozen with fear.

Even Miss Watermelon Lips giggled and retreated without hesitation, betraying her tongue-tied and blushing acquaintance. The long moments required to drop his books and free his hands to pull up his jeans magnified the

humiliation. In his mind, it seemed like slow motion.

When Scott regained his mental faculty, he ran down the halls to the nurse's office. The truth was that he did feel nauseous, so his plea to go home because he felt ill was not exactly a lie. Even though the thermometer read normal, the nurse excused him from the remainder of classes, admitting he looked a little pale. The valuable piece of paper that allowed him to leave campus unchallenged was as critical to Scott as anesthesia is to open heart surgery patients. He could not get home fast enough.

He jogged most of the way in the mist that had begun to fall. When he reached Cameron's house, he stopped and stared at it bitterly. He cut through Cameron's yard, wondering if morning glories normally stayed in bloom this late in the morning and why they bloomed in his yard at all. In Scott's opinion, the flowers falsely announced the potential for a favorable creature to reside within, but he knew better. Well, he thought Cameron's parents were alright.

As he approached his front door, he debated whether or not he should tell his own parents

the truth. On the one hand, he could perpetuate the lie that he was ill and suffer their excessive coddling. On the other hand, he could tell the truth that Cameron humiliated him and endure their inability to understand. He chose the latter, based on the hope he could persuade them to let him change schools.

Even though he developed his plan of action, it would be hours before his parents returned home from work. He marched directly up to his room and reclined on his bed. He stared at his wooden desk and his action figure collection, which up until high school were referred to as “toys.” When he grew tired of looking at those, he watched through the window as the mist turned to rain. The intense sound of rain pelting on his pane inspired him to rise up from his bed and also from his attitude of self-pity. He took up his drumstick and began to play a violent tune, one that expressed the hatred he felt for Cameron, the betrayal he felt towards his would-be girlfriend, and the anticipated frustration with his parents.

Time passed quickly while he drummed and before long, his father and mother were knocking at his bedroom door. Scott welcomed them and sat on his bed to tell them about the

day's events. He promptly followed the story with a desperate plea to change schools.

"Embarrassing things happen in every school, Scott. It will be alright. Everyone will forget by tomorrow," his mother said as she pushed the hair out of his eyes.

Scott stood up abruptly. "No they won't! Not this!" he yelled and knocked a stack of books off his desk for emphasis.

"I better handle this, Doreen. Go to our room and relax awhile. I got it," Scott's dad said to his mother. As she closed the door behind her, he turned to Scott with a sympathetic look. "It's not real." He placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Dad, how can you say that? I was there. It's real. That's all there is to it." It wasn't Scott's intention to flail his arms and point his finger as he spoke, but the surge of uncontrolled emotion seized him.

His dad boomed, "Nothing is real, Scott. I did not want to have to show this to you, but you forced my hand."

His father's blue coveralls transformed into a strange robe made of gray rags knotted together. An image emerged on his face suddenly; it seemed an invisible hand was sketching bizarre designs with henna. His nose became like a beak. His boots changed to enormous bird claws.

"I gave you these things..." He reached up and pulled away the wall as if it were an actual sheet of paper. Gone too were the action figures, desk, and drum set. He crumpled it all up and dropped it on the floor.

Then, Scott could see right through the hole, where his wall had been, to his mom in her bedroom. "...and I chose your mother to protect you...." He reached up, pulled her and the rest of the house and all of its contents, from its proper place and crumpled it. This, he also dropped on the floor.

The two stood together on the grass, and Scott could see Cameron's house and yard with its morning glories. "I gave you these obstacles to overcome..." His father reached up and pulled away Cameron's house, along with the rest of the neighborhood, and added it to the pile.

Scott could now see the school. "...and these friends to support you." He added it to the pile.

Finally, he reached down and pulled the grass away. It ripped right up to the moon and stars. He crumpled those up too. At that point, the papers were piled on cracked, dry dirt. It was so dark that he could hardly see his dad anymore, but he could make out his silhouette.

"Now, let's see what you are without them!" The creature bent over to pick up the crumpled paper with his beak, and he ate them. Then he flew away. It was too dark to see the direction.

Scott assessed his desolate surroundings. If he could see an outline of a mountain or hill or any hope of landscape other than the dry dirt, he would have explored it. As it was, he had no hope, so he sat down on the dirt. Feeling forlorn and non-existent, he began to trace the cracks in the dirt that splintered off like veins when he noticed he was still clutching his drumstick.

He began to drum a beat on his leg to distract himself from the pervasive loneliness. He thought the tune was pretty good and wished he had his drum set. He wished the girl was

there to listen. He wished he had someone to talk to, even if it was Cameron. After considering these things, he realized his drumming was making him even lonelier.

He stopped and laid down on the ground and looked up. When he was confident there was not even a single star in the sky, he felt tears swell up behind his cheeks. He took pride in the fact he had not cried since sixth grade, so he held them back until the buildup of tears began to hurt. Then he realized he no longer had anyone to impress or disappoint. He relented and began to cry. He rolled over with his hands on his face to hide his tears from himself.

The tears rolled off of his hands and seeped into the dry ground, making mud. Scott reached deep within himself to find any source of strength and emerged with an ounce of defiance. He stopped crying and sat up. Scott yelled angrily up to the sky, "You want to know what I am without my room or my friends or my enemies? You thought I would be nothing, but I am not. I am a mud maker, you see? That's what I am!"

Silence boomed back in answer. No crickets or any other noises, just dull silence. With his last

morsel of defiance exhausted, Scott felt more vulnerable than ever. He stood up and yelled desperately, "Come back, Dad. Come back."

Again, there was no answer. He fell to the ground, almost pushed by the sheer absence of will. He doodled with his finger in the mud he had made. As he doodled, he began to see streams of colors. He began to dig. Soon he could see the green grass. Then he dug harder and faster. He could see the school and Cameron's house. He dug further and saw his dad standing over him in his room. Then he stopped and looked at his hands. They weren't even muddy.

"A mud maker, huh?" his dad said, standing over him. "So, did you learn your lesson? Will you be ready to return to school tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," Scott replied with a sincerity he had never felt before.

When he returned to school the next day, he stood a little taller. He even shook Cameron's hand and told him that his joke was "a little funny." Cameron was relieved Scott did not tell on him, and the two bonded over the experience. Scott found out later that her

name was Lillian. He also discovered her lips actually tasted like cherry cough drops, but no one knew about it because he didn't kiss and tell.

He did not even tell anyone about his strange experience, which was a hard secret to keep. He wanted to ask his dad about it, but his dad died before he gained the courage. He hoped his dad knew a special kind of magic or the secret to unlock a parallel universe. Scott needed every part of the real world to be real. His mother. His friends. And even his obstacles.

The Baths of Cadara

Tuning out the soldiers' argument just outside of the Cadara library, Gaius reached for the papyrus covered in mulberry linen. With a tug of the corn silk string closure, he loosed a world of exotic lands and distant wars. Many of the other Evorans, even other citizens, were illiterate so Gaius could often enjoy these hours of peace until sunset somewhat in seclusion.

By a mandate of the general, all Evoran guards were given formal instruction in reading as well as their physical training due to the worsening conditions with Pleuthoria. Guards briefly inspected the letters carried by messengers with a strict command to intercept anything suspicious. Gaius hadn't discovered a letter of treachery breaching the city, but he treasured his literacy more than the coins he earned. There was something he treasured even more than the pleasure of reading: Aemilia.

Standing at post one day at the city's gates, Gaius spotted capers rustling in a large bush forty paces off. A closer examination revealed two unkempt women with dark olive

complexions. One of the women looked fortyish, and the other woman seemed to be in her early twenties. Hoping to retrieve a reward for runaway slaves, he stowed them in his mud-brick home. During the months he sought their owner, Gaius grew to appreciate the older woman's skills and resolved to keep them as his own slaves.

Though the younger of the women possessed no particular aptitude, she cleaned and served Gaius wine-drenched bread adequately. Amelia was not even particularly attractive in comparison to the Evoran women strolling through the marketplace. Those women wore vibrant-colored cloaks, smelled of cloves, and glittered with flamboyant jewelry. Aemilia wore only her beguiling charisma and hypnotizing appeal, but Gaius's attraction to her escalated. Even now as he carefully turned the pages of the papyrus, his thoughts drifted to her silky hair.

In frustration, Gaius closed the book and deposited it back on the wooden shelf among the others. He opened the library door and proceeded down the long marble hallway past the disputing soldiers and various rooms devoted to preening his fellow Evoran citizens.

This particular complex, the Baths of Cadara, was exclusive to Evoran citizens and boasted a costly admittance fee. However, it offered the best collection of books so Gaius preferred the Baths of Cadara.

The modest changing room Gaius entered consisted of a wall of stone alcoves overflowing with robes and sandals. Gaius spotted an Evoran soldier by the name of Filo who frequented the baths regularly. Since soldiers' incomes loomed over the incomes of most Evoran citizens, the Baths of Cadara complex pampered much of the Evoran army.

Rather noisily, Filo complained about his missing robe and sandals before he turned and greeted Gaius. Chuckling, Gaius told him to use a leaf. Filo grunted, looked down both hallways, then snatched up the robe from a neighboring alcove. Laughing harder now, Gaius entered the bath area.

About forty men, some nude and some scantily clad, stood in the bath area and talked in small groups. The baths and social stimulation normally pleased Gaius, but today he rushed. He longed to be home with Aemilia. Gaius

emerged from the water and allowed the attending young man to pat Gaius's feet and sinewy legs with the towel before strolling down the marble pathway alongside the bath. Gaius dressed in his robe and sandals and quickly walked home.

When Gaius entered, Aemilia noted his early arrival and apologized for not having the meal prepared. She quickly sliced some cubes of cheese and placed them onto his bronze platter.

After she served the platter, she giggled and sat on his lap.

"Take me to the baths," Aemilia said whimsically as though she were the master and Gaius the servant.

Gaius's eyebrow furrowed as he replied, "You are free to go to the baths any time I am at my post, Aemilia. You do not need me to take you to the baths."

"No, take me to the Baths of Cadara with you," Aemilia pleaded.

Gaius sighed, "It is just not that simple. You must be an Evoran citizen, and you are not, my dear." In fact, to make Aemilia an Evoran citizen was his intention. With all of his heart, Gaius wanted to free her and be wed to her. The monogamy between them drove him crazy, but he did not want her to sleep with him because he was her master. The only way he would know she loved him was to set her free. But what if she received her freedom and left him? This fear sealed his lips about the intention to free her even in this opportune moment.

Gaius finally spoke, "Tonight, late at night, I will sneak you in."

Aemilia clapped her hands and said, "Oh, I cannot wait. Maybe I will do a dance for you in the pool." Gaius covered his face with his hands and walked to his bedroom hoping she would sleep all through the night and forget the whole thing.

Aemilia did not forget the whole thing. When the moon was high in the sky, she sat next to Gaius on his bed and stirred him. The two ran through the streets of Evor and climbed the gate of the vacant Baths of Cadara. Aemilia

seemed breath taken by the grand statues and large pillars on either side of the pool. The shimmering waters gleamed with moonlight negating the need for candlelight, but Gaius went in search of candles anyway when Aemilia began to disrobe.

Gaius was gone only a few moments, but he thought the silence peculiar as he returned to the bath. Then he saw her. Aemilia's body lay next to the steps of the pool. The blood from her silky black hair mixed with the water on the gray marble walkway. Gaius grabbed her tiny body and held her to him sobbing like a child. Gaius reasoned she must've slipped.

Aemilia was a woman and a woman slave, at that. There would be no trial. Gaius was not concerned for himself in the least, except they were in the Baths of Cadara. He would be barred from ever entering again if they found his slave here. It would be difficult enough to live on without Aemilia; the library could not be taken from him too. So Gaius scooped up her body and threw it over his shoulder. He struggled to climb the gate bearing the weight for both of them, but he managed.

Gaius took Aemilia home and apologized to the older slave for her close friend's death. The slave woman seemed fearful as if Gaius had murdered her. While her master wept over Aemilia's body, she gathered a few belongings and fled through her window. If Gaius were not in this wretched state of mourning and loss, he might have noticed the older slave had left him—maybe even cared.

In spite of the pain, Gaius reported faithfully to his post every day. He intercepted the letters and read them rather stoically until he came across Aemilia's name one day in a letter from a Pleuthorian general to his general. Gaius read, "Following this messenger is an army of four hundred thousand Pleuthorian soldiers sent to avenge the death of King Pzan's cousin, Aemilia. Aemilia was murdered at the hands of an Evoran guard while on a special mission to Evor. This news has been brought to us by a worthy informat, the Duchess who accompanied her on her mission."

Janine's Condition

Derrick sensed something was wrong as soon as he turned into the driveway. Janine did not wait for him on her front porch as she did every morning before school. She obsessed about arriving on time, and he avoided agitating her due to her condition.

Derrick's mind raced with possible scenarios as he banged on the front door. He repeatedly attempted to force the lock. Hope nearly slipped away when he remembered Janine had given him a key. Janine had snuck him a copy of the key for emergencies such as this.

Sweat beaded on his face upon entering the Baton Rouge home. He reckoned Janine had switched the thermostat to heat after her parents left for work that morning. After thoroughly searching the house, he found her laying in the fetal position under a desk in her parents' bedroom—curled up on a vent. Gusts of air caused her long T-shirt to flutter. Still Janine shivered, teeth chattering.

Derrick tried to conceal his panic. He kneeled by her side. “Honey, is something wrong? We are going to be late for school.”

“Who can care about school at a time like this? Two kids are missing. I saw it on the morning news.”

“Janine, do you know the kids who went missing?” He brushed the bangs from her eyes.

“No.” She sniffled and pulled her hair back over her eyes. “But what difference does it make? They’re missing. They might be alone and scared. Or worse.”

Derrick could see why she empathized with the children; she was fragile like a child herself. His friends called her “damaged goods,” “psycho,” and “unstable” when he began dating her, but Janine’s condition intrigued him.

As a freshman, Derrick dated a girl—a polished, intelligent girl who possessed an uncanny wisdom. She outwitted him at every turn. Her explosive temper reduced him to a mouse. When he did not assume the role of her play toy, he felt he had no role at all.

With Janine, he always played the hero role. She would need him eternally—or at least until she got better, if that was possible. No one informed him specifically what mental illness she suffered. He only knew they needed each other.

Derrick knew talking sense into her as she lay under the desk was impossible. He figured if he tried to remove her by force, she would start screaming or muttering examples of how the whole world conspires against her. He could not call her parents because they would send her back to the Baton Rouge mental institution, maybe for good this time.

If he could help her finish her senior year, he could marry her. He would protect her from everything. Derrick wished they could begin that life today—run away together. At last, he stumbled onto a viable appeal to Janine’s twisted logic.

“What if we went missing too? Then you could not feel sorry for the kids because you would be in the same situation as them.”

Janine ruffled her brow. “We are not missing though. We know exactly where we are.”

A smile widened on Derrick's face. "Let's get lost. C'mon, get your parents' tent. We will drive until we are lost."

Janine crawled out from under the desk. She disappeared into the basement while Derrick filled his arms with canned goods and sodas from the pantry. When they finished packing his Volkswagen Jetta with camping gear and supplies, Derrick drove south on I-10 for an hour or so. He exited onto another road and another. They crossed bridge after bridge until the paved road ended. Derrick followed the dirt road past swamps, grand antebellum homes, and homes on stilts. After nearly three hours of driving, he parked the car on a small sandy beach.

Derrick turned to his girl. "We will end up in the sea if we go farther, darling."

Janine opened the door and stepped out. She looked at the tree barrier that lined the beach and separated her from the rest of the world. "We are isolated. It is perfect."

The two wrestled with loops and poles until they erected the tent. “Tada! Our new home,” Derrick announced proudly.

Janine giggled and opened her arms wide as if she were about to present an upcoming act. “We are officially missing.”

“Let’s celebrate with a soda.” Derrick and Janine walked to the Jetta holding hands. As Derrick rummaged through the car, Janine watched the wind hasten. It began blowing the tent, making flapping sounds. The tent lifted in the air, as if carried by an invisible force.

“Derrick.”

“Hang on; I have dug down to the diet soda. One second...” He stood up and presented her with the soda. As he did, he witnessed the wind carry the tent over the waves like a kite—an offering to the sea.

“Our home went missing now.” He sighed. “What do you want to do now, sweetie?”

Janine kissed him tenderly on the cheek. Derrick closed his eyes and bathed in the

moment. Rain started to fall and lightning streaked across the sky.

“The missing kids would go home if they were able. Let’s go home for their sake.”

Thunder cracked in a strange fragmented way. “I think that is a great decision.” He hoped the compliment would elicit a smile.

She did not smile. She simply said, “I will never forget you...no matter what happens.”

Derrick’s heart felt heavy. His soul cringed as he pondered, “Will she leave me for an institution? For someone else? A better hero.”

*

Janine’s parents moved away from Louisiana a few months later. Derrick worried she was committed to a mental institution after he stopped receiving letters. He asked one of her old friends what had happened to her. Her friend said Janine started going to church. One day, a bunch of people prayed for her. After that, she felt like everything was new and joyful.

Derrick decided to try church out and started to see changes in himself too. The two never saw each other again, but Derrick reflected on how oddly things had turned out. He was never able to save her, and she was even better off after she moved away from him. Ultimately, Derrick felt Janine had helped him more than he had helped her.

The Fine Line

Helaine snarled as she tossed her crocheted purse on the marble countertop. Jim silently wondered how he had disappointed her this time. He mentally checked off his usual list: trash had been emptied, litter box was clean, and he had switched the television to her favorite channel.

“Rough day, honey?” Jim cocked his head in her direction and stopped thumbing through the mail.

“It’s the neighbor.” She sighed hoping to evoke her husband’s pity. “I can accept it when the neighbor does not wave to me from across the lawn—that’s fine. But he parked right next to me at the farmer’s market, and you know what he said? Nothing. I find it odd and disturbing.” She looked to Jim as if he held all the answers. To her, it seemed he did. He was twenty years her senior and mingled in intellectual circles. Some even thought him to be a genius.

“Well, did you say something to him?” Jim studied a five-dollar off restaurant coupon.

“No.” She scrunched her face and smoothed back wisps of her wild hair.

Jim analyzed the situation and determined his wife and the neighbor were suppressing their attraction to one another. If given the opportunity, he predicted Helaine and his neighbor would ride off together into the sunset. All that stood between them was his presence. He abruptly vowed never to leave her home again.

His mind tossed and turned over the decision. Not only was it unrealistic to always be with her, he valued trust and considered it an integral aspect of love. He decided his situation warranted a trust test. “I bought a gym membership.” Jim fiddled with a string on his trousers to hide his lying eyes. She lifted her eyebrows. “Good for you!”

“I think I will go right now.” He scooped up his keys and pecked her cheek. He mentally told her this is a test and she should try to pass. He closed the door behind him and drove to a nearby hill, where he parked the Toyota Avalon. He stared out the open window at his and his neighbor’s homes below.

After eight minutes, nothing had happened. She did not leave her house to knock on his door and ask for an egg or other kitchen staple as a ploy to weasel herself inside and spend time with him.

After twenty-two minutes, nothing had happened. He did not peep in her window. He stared directly at the houses, only watching the sky darken out of the corner of his eye. By that time, he had noticed the two televisions flickered simultaneously as if they were synchronized. They were watching the same television show. He raised his eyebrows.

After twenty-three minutes, Jim's stomach growled. He felt around the floorboard for an old fry. That is when he noticed his loafers. He envisioned his one pair of gym shoes on the floor on his side of the closet. If she decided to poke around in there—which he felt sure she did, she would automatically know he had lied. He planned to instantly forgive her because he does the same thing while she is gone. He reasoned she had probably figured out he had lied and was wondering where he was at that very moment. He deduced this was the reason she did not knock on the neighbor's door.

Jim concluded he should call it a day and resume the spy session another time. He noted he must bring gym shoes for the next spy session—as well as rice cakes and binoculars.

He put the car in gear and drove the short trip back home. When he walked inside, she barely looked away from the flat screen television hanging on the wall to greet him. Still, he doubted she could focus on the show with all those lustful thoughts about their neighbor playing over and over in her head.

Life's Equation

Harper sat in my swivel stool and requested the same haircut every six months for the last five years, but he wanted something different this time. However, his small patch of white hair lent little inspiration.

“No sense livin’ in the past,” Harper said trying to force a smile. Since he became a widower in May, I noticed he dressed a little edgier.

I could empathize with Harper’s sense of loss since my ex-girlfriend had recently broken up with me. I had given her the cutest little teddy bear for her birthday. It even sang the birthday song. As it turned out, she had been expecting an engagement ring. Harper and I were both struggling to persevere in life when the women we loved were no longer by our side.

“Lucas,” Harper continued thoughtfully, “how would you like my old sofa? It’s in great condition. Mable took such good care of things. I thought I might change the furnishings now that she’s gone.”

I contemplated the lawn chairs I used as living room furniture since I moved out of my parents' home and readily accepted. Harper snatched my business card from its caddy and scribbled his address on the back. Little did I know, that sofa was about to change my life.

As I swept hair and tidied my station, I considered how to transport my new acquisition since I had no car. Then through the painted "Beauty Shop" sign on the glass-front window, I spotted Scottie attempting to parallel park his catering van. He managed my apartment building as well as the bistro above my apartment.

Turning to my coworker with cropped black hair and chartreuse highlights, I announced, "Look, Shasta, I am gonna wrap it up for the day. Under no circumstances should there be any combs missing from my station tomorrow morning."

Before I even cleared the striped awning's shadow, I was unloading pallets of white paper packages that smelled of pastry from Scottie's arms and making small talk.

I had waited like a crouching tiger ready to pounce for the perfect opportunity to ask. “Do you think I can borrow the van? One of my client’s offered me a used couch.” It seemed I had strategized unnecessarily.

Scottie promptly handed over the keys and said, “Sure, take it. Just don’t wreck it.

*

The Victorian sofa did not mesh well with my TobyMac posters and miscellaneous neon signs, but I plopped on it and found it more comfortable than the lawn chairs. I simultaneously put my feet on my make-shift coffee table and grabbed the remote when I felt a drip on my forehead. My instinctive look up to the ceiling was rewarded with a cool drip on my eyeball. Scottie must’ve hired a new dishwasher for his bistro and failed to warn them to be careful about overfilling the sink.

The dripping grew so bad last time, I had walked next door to the Beauty Shop and slept in my swivel stool. When I awoke with a crick in my neck, I looked into the mirror and nearly fell out of the chair. Shasta had taken the liberty of

transforming my rocker locks into a bowl cut as a prank. That certainly wouldn't happen twice!

A waft of garlic hit me in the face as I stood on the sofa. I banged on the ceiling and yelled, "Scottie! It's dripping." Scottie's muffled voice spoke, "I know, I know. Alright." Shouting and clattering of pans commenced as I stripped the damp cushions from the sofa. A ring from the sofa cushion flew across the room. It's amazing I even heard the clinking of the ring as it fell to the floor. There it sat twinkling, staring at me, waiting for me to make a move.

I figured I'd give it to Harper the next time he stopped in for a haircut, but as I slipped the diamond ring in my jeans pocket, I reasoned to myself, "Mable probably lost this ring twenty years ago. Harper forgot all about it. He is trying to move on anyway. No reason to tear up the old man unnecessarily."

This little trinket was the only thing standing between me and my happiness last year. I wondered if I could track down my ex-girlfriend and woo her with it.

Memories flooded my brain. Savannah's voice echoed in my head, "Life is an equation made

up of goals with a few unknown variables thrown in. Sure, no one can control the variables, but you have no goals! You refuse to commit to anything—good or bad.”

It was true. I had no plans for my future. I applied for the hairdresser job because it was easy to walk to from my apartment. I never once questioned whether or not this was something God had put in my heart to do. A prayer rose in my heart in that instant. “Lord, help me to find the career You want for me in this life.”

Hope ballooned in my chest. I considered how refreshing it was to hope for something beyond making rent. This reminded me rent was due in two days, and I was still three hundred dollars short. I wondered how much a pawn shop would give me for the ring.

*

“Can I help you?” the greasy-haired man behind the counter of the pawn shop asked. The sunlight shining through the barred windows refracted off the twinkling ring my hand opened to reveal, causing him to mutter and squint.

When the man's countenance changed, my hopes grew high.

To my dismay, he studied the ring and offered, "I could give you two hundred dollars for it. If you find something in here under three hundred, I'll go ahead and give it to you."

Since two hundred dollars wouldn't even cover the rent, I caressed an acoustic guitar and relinquished thoughts of practicality. Before I knew it, the guitar lay on the counter. We made an even trade for the ring.

Sitting on the sky blue sofa, I practiced the cover songs I had learned to play. When I heard a knock at the door, I knew it was Scottie coming to complain his patrons could hear it upstairs, so I yelled, "I'll keep it down, Scottie."

"That's not what I want, Lucas. I want you to come upstairs and play. Bring a tip jar," Scottie called through the wood door. "Maybe you'll make the rent this month." I heard him chuckle as he walked off.

*

The crowd was cheering, and I was beaming when a dark-skinned girl in jean cutoffs and a neon shirt jumped up and started singing with me. The crowd cheered louder. I felt as though I could fly.

The Puerto Rican girl called herself “Nadia.” We fused into a band by the time the night was over. By Sunday I earned my rent in the tip jar, and Nadia earned her car payment. She came down to my apartment to celebrate. I must have been distracted while she circled a classified ad for cruise ship entertainers, but I agreed to audition nonetheless. Once the cruise liner agreed to hire us, it seemed silly to refuse

*

Our music improved as the chemistry between us became more apparent. There weren’t any tips, but the cruise liner paid us well. In fact, the pay was so good I bought plane tickets for us to return home for a visit. I also intended to retrieve the ring from pawn.

I would not make the same mistake as I did with Savannah. A new goal had become clear: I needed to make Nadia my wife. I decided to

propose to Nadia in the bistro with the ring that brought me such good fortune.

*

As requested, Scottie delivered the check with the diamond ring on the payment tray. Nadia blushed as she slipped the ring on her slender finger. It was easily two sizes too big. Looking more closely at the ring, she must've noticed some scrapes in the gold because her brow furrowed. She asked, "Where's the box, Lucas? Are you proposing to me with a second-hand ring?"

My heart raced. I tried to explain. "The ring is special. I found it in the sofa. It's..."

Tears brimmed in Nadia's eyes as she stood up. The twinkling ring was discarded onto the taupe tablecloth. "You found it in the sofa! That's it. Lucas, you really did it this time." With that, she zigzagged through the maze of tables and out the exit.

Once again, I managed to capture an audience at the bistro. This time, however, I wanted to crawl under the table. Instead, I snatched up the ring, stood, and bowed to horrified couples

on the left and right before waltzing out the door.

With my pride in one back pocket and my heart in the other, I prayed, “Lord, I thought I was following your plan. Why did you let me fall in love with Nadia if you did not want me to marry her? Are you even there? Can you hear me?”

The questions went unanswered. Without Nadia, there would be no gig to return to on the cruise ship. If I hurried, I might be able to catch Shasta before she locked up for the day. Perhaps I could rent my station again if no one took my place at the beauty shop during my absence.

When I opened the glass door, I saw a familiar patch of white hair sitting in my swivel stool. Harper spotted my reflection in the mirror and cried out, “Lucas! Good to see you, young man.”

Shasta had dyed her chartreuse highlights to violet highlights. She stopped cutting Harper’s hair and rolled her eyes at the sight of me.

“You want your station back?” She breathed out a deep sigh.

I ignored Shasta's question and turned my attention to Harper. I decided the power to change variables beyond my control comes from making better choices at every crossroad, and this was certainly a crossroad. "Mable lost her ring in the cushions of the sofa you gave me. I found it and pawned it. I'm so sorry, Harper," I confessed as I laid the ring next to a comb dispenser filled with red disinfectant.

Harper picked up the ring and analyzed it before saying, "This isn't Mable's. Mable got the sofa reupholstered to match her blue curtains. I betcha this belongs to that upholsterer. Mable is the only one who would know the name so you might as well keep it."

I took the ring extended from Harper's wrinkled hands and thanked him. I apologized again before returning to my apartment. As I walked home, I prayed aloud to the Lord. "Thanks for the opportunity to do what was right with the ring. I messed that up, but now it's straight. Forgive me, Lord. I want to marry the person You want me to marry and nobody else. If it is not Nadia, let me never see her face again."

I placed my key in the lock and turned it, which made me realize it had been left unlocked. Even though I kept up on my apartment's rent, Scottie stored boxes in it during the months I worked on the cruise ship. I figured he left it open. I had trouble getting to the light switch in the midst of the boxes, so I grasped the chain of a neon sign. The glow lit the room enough for me to spot Nadia's silhouette on the sofa. She sat in her floral sundress with a smile on her face.

"Scottie let me in. I hope you don't mind."
Nadia leapt to her feet, hugged me, and whispered in my ear, "I'm sorry. If the ring is special to you, it is special to me. Let me see it again."

I dropped to one knee and clumsily withdrew the ring from my jeans pocket. Drawing a deep sigh of relief, I asked, "Nadia, will you be my wife?"

*

Nadia accepted, and we married on the cruise ship. We continued to play for the cruise liner. That is, until we met TobyMac on the ship one day, but that's a whole 'nother story.

Skin Deep

The theatre ceiling looked like an inverted pottery bowl painted a sapphire blue with twinkling lights to mimic the night sky. The mixed smell of perfumes and colognes blended into a hypnotically calming scent. Men in dark suits and women in black cocktail dresses bustled and chatted with excitement.

Like the other men, Evan wore a dark suit. As a lawyer, his wardrobe consisted of almost nothing else. His client, a neurologist who lived in lab coats, settled on a white shirt with black piping and a bolo tie for his evening attire.

The usher lead the two to their theatre seats. Evan lagged behind, a little embarrassed by his client's dress and disheartened he was not spending his birthday in his boxers watching *Star Wars* for the umpteenth time with his Golden Retriever. He finally took his seat behind a woman dressed in red from head to toe.

She looked like a rose in a garden of black delilahs. Her wide brimmed hat obstructed

Evan's view, but that did not bother him. He had seen the musical many times with other clients his law firm had insisted he wine and dine.

"Who is playing Eva tonight? Do you know?" he asked Dr. Stein only to make polite conversation. He truly took no interest in any actors, particularly since he would be unable to see the performance due to the large red hat.

Dr. Stein seemed immensely concerned with who would be performing. He fumbled around for the play bill, which he managed to lose in the few minutes the two had been seated. Evan watched as Dr. Stein grew increasingly frustrated with himself. He wondered how this man could possibly be a neurologist. When the lights dimmed, he sighed in relief. A hush fell across the theatre. The burgundy curtains opened.

As the musical captivated the crowd, Evan stared at the hat. He studied the red satin band around it. He decided it was designer and guessed the woman wearing it had money at her disposal. The woman's ivory shoulders were barely visible over the backs of the uncomfortable theatre seats, but he surmised

she was quite stunning and found himself fascinated by her.

He watched her swanlike neck crease as she followed the actors across the stage. Cascades of red feathers billowing from the hat blocked Evan's view of her face, which intrigued him even more. He waited impatiently for intermission when the theatre's lights would brighten so he could steal a glance at her face. Perhaps he would tap on her shoulder and say something clever.

As the curtains closed for intermission, Dr. Stein asked, "Could ya show me where the restrooms are? I could get lost in this 'ere place."

Evan screamed inside. He bitterly escorted Dr. Stein to the restroom and waited outside the mahogany door. He stared at the elaborate design on the tiled floor until he heard a champagne glass shatter in the distance.

When he looked up, he saw her. The woman dressed in red wore a strappy satin dress with matching apple red lips. Her perfectly symmetrical, almost unnaturally symmetrical, face was framed by wisps of blond hair and the hat he knew all too well.

“Don’t look at me; I didn’t break the glass,” she said.

Evan realized he was staring at her. “Are you here alone?” He blushed at his own forthrightness.

“Yes, I normally spend a great deal of time with people. For my birthday, I thought I would enjoy some time alone.” The woman caressed her wine glass and looked into the distance.

“Today is your birthday?” Evan asked. After she nodded, Evan offered, “Today is my birthday too.” He mulled over the coincidence while she moved past it.

“I’m Tara.” She outstretched her hand to shake.

As he took her hand, he felt her skin. It seemed oddly soft, yet inelastic—like his grandmother’s hands before she passed. “Evan. Nice to meet you.”

Just then, Dr. Stein emerged from the restroom, still zipping his zipper. He gravitated to Evan’s side like a child to his mother.

“This is Dr. Stein. He is a renowned neurologist and client of the law firm where I work as an attorney.” Evan never failed to mention his profession when a woman was involved. He did not use his profession as a tool to impress women, but it boosted his own sense of self worth and gave him confidence to pursue the females he might have otherwise considered out of his league.

The woman outstretched her hand to Dr. Stein. “Nice to meet you, Dr. Stein. I am Tara Bolling of Bolling & Associates, where I work as an attorney.” With a high degree of poise, her hand disappeared into a beaded clutch and withdrew two business cards: one for Dr. Stein, the other for Evan.

Evan read and reread the card. He could not believe his eyes. In his mind, he envisioned himself rolling a single die that repeatedly landed on “eight.” He concluded it was fate. They were meant for something. Partnering in marriage. Partnering a law firm. Initiating a coup d’état. Attacking aliens. Something.

He had to evade this client and be alone with her to find out what destiny had in store. Placing a hand on the client’s shoulder, he said,

“It’s a nice evening. I think I’ll walk to my loft from here.”

He caught Tara’s eyes in a momentary glance—a glance pregnant with suggestion. Then, he turned his attention back to the neurologist. “Dr. Stein, the limo driver will be happy to take you home.”

Tara said to the doctor, “A limousine? Do you mind if I ride with you?”

Evan shoved his hands into his pockets as Tara grabbed Dr. Stein’s arm and disappeared into the crowd. During his long and lonely walk home, he imagined Dr. Stein flirting with Tara in the spacious backseat.

*

Evan sat at his desk Monday morning, staring out the window when the phone rang.

The voice said, “I’m calling on behalf of Dr. Stein. He appreciated your service but has selected a new lawyer to represent him. He wishes you all of the best.”

Evan had the feeling he knew exactly who was now representing Dr. Stein. He stood up from

his chair and took Tara's card from his wallet. Looking at the card, he responded, "I am sorry to hear that. Give him my best regards."

He hung up the phone and grabbed his briefcase. He impatiently punched the elevator button until the doors opened. The elevator descended to the lobby. He jumped in a taxi and read the address to the driver. As they crossed town, he wondered which he should concentrate on first: wooing Tara or berating her for stealing his client.

Before he had come to a decision, the driver stopped at a pretentious looking office with too many fountains and ferns. Evan marched in the building demanding to see Tara Bolling. The mousy brunette stared at him through bottle cap glasses with familiar eyes. "I am Tara Bolling."

"No, you're not! I met her; she's a tall blond that stole my client."

She said, "Evan, good to see you again. Oh yes, the blond one. I only wear that skin on my birthday." Tara pressed a code, which opened two automated doors revealing hundreds of human and animal skins. The lifeless skin of the

blond he had met at the theatre was draped on a swivel chair, creased and naked.

“What are you? Some kind of alien poaching humans for their skins?” Evan walked inside with the brunette version of Tara at his heels.

“Nothing is wasted. I reuse the skins, and the insides are so tasty.” She licked her lips.

Evan decided to focus on getting himself out alive. He turned to search her eyes for compassion. “We were made for each other, you know?”

“I know,” Tara said as she pressed a button that shut the doors. She reached in her desk and withdrew a knife. “You have great skin.”

*

Tara threw Evan’s skin on top of Dr. Stein’s. She said to herself, “Those silly men will never learn beauty is only skin deep.”

Green Filter

From petite models to architectural details, every image I captured in my camera lens earned rave reviews from critics. Customers flocked to buy my work after it appeared in the photography exhibit. My name, Gavin Beck, grew larger than life.

I abandoned noodle package dinners alone in a one-bedroom flat and took up sushi in a new apartment alongside my favorite model. At first glance, I saw nothing special about Vanessa. She was beautiful like other models. But when she began to pose, she unleashed her inner self. I watched Vanessa through the lens as she bit into a plump orange and juice sprayed from her perfect lips. I knew she had to be mine.

I begged her to go to dinner with me. For the next few months, we were inseparable. She loved what I loved, ate what I ate, and watched my favorite TV shows. We both wanted the same things out of life—marriage, children, and a white picket fence. So one afternoon as she sat at her kitchen table flipping through a magazine with a deep conditioning treatment

on her hair and an oatmeal facial on her face, I proposed.

She jumped up from the colonial chair she had undoubtedly bought at a consignment shop. She slid the ring on her finger and screamed, “Yes!” She kissed me, leaving oatmeal gobs around my mouth which she carefully wiped away before kissing me again and again until I looked as though I was wearing an oatmeal mask.

Everything was not perfect though. She described herself as “green”—unlike me. This minor detail grew more detrimental after I proposed. Even when wearing her lemon-colored stilettos, my fiancé refused to ride in my newly leased Mercedes to any destination within five miles. She cringed every time I threw away cottage cheese containers and junk mail. Soon I found these items reused as decorations for my apartment

Modern society told me she was correct and I was the ignorant buffoon for making it a point of contention, so I bit my tongue until I thought it might bleed. Truly I loved her, but I soon found myself making excuses not to see her and considered breaking off the engagement.

I decided to clear my head and escape the city awhile. Under the guise of work, I booked a mountain cabin for the whole month of March. Vanessa drove me to the airport and blinked away tears as she kissed me goodbye.

Once the plane landed, a sense of freedom washed over me. The rented sports utility vehicle contributed to my new sense of identity, one more hardy and less debonair. Most mornings, I relaxed on an Adirondack chair waiting for the sun to position itself for a shot of the glorious snow-capped peaks.

The towering mountains and boundless sky chased away decision-making woes and the static in my head. When March ended, I was no closer to calling off the engagement or committing to marriage than the day I arrived. I dreaded the thought of life with or without Vanessa.

She would have picked me up from the airport had I called, but instead I hailed a taxi. As the driver accelerated, I stared out the window. The city projected a dark hue in contrast to the pure landscape where I had spent the last month. Graffiti-stained buildings and broken

windows I had seen hundreds of times appeared filthy to me rather than as a part of the landscape. Industrial smoke filled my lungs.

Once in my apartment, I absentmindedly flipped the light switch when my hand grazed the uneven surface of the light switch cover. I turned to familiarize myself with it again after my month away. Vanessa had decouped the light switch with unsolicited catalog scraps some time back. I remembered begrudgingly rolling my eyes without even really looking at it.

In this moment, I could not remove my eyes from the color collage created with sheared images from the ads. My careful study of the images revealed the pores of an orange, a colonial furniture leg, and half the face of a child. My body rushed with excitement at the jewel I unearthed in my very own apartment. The light switch decoupage seemed pregnant with symbolism about my and Vanessa's past, present, and future—all of which promised to be irrefutably beautiful.

Jerusalem Happened

Maria jumped to her feet and dropped the magazine on the glass coffee table. Her boss tightly crossed her arms. She said to her assistant, “You idiot, why did you do that? Find the page you were on—the page with the scalloped necklace. It is memorable. If anyone in America does not know the name Lana Falls or my songs, the upcoming video shoot will fix that.” She paced back and forth as she spoke. “A necklace like that one would complete my look. I need that jewelry designer.”

Lana knew when she behaved unreasonably. Sometimes she could not help herself. Other times, she purposely dramatized her actions to clarify the distinction between herself and her workers. Lana’s fondness for her assistant exacerbated the irrational fits rather than curbed them.

The personal assistant smoothed her practical trousers and sat again to find the page. “Would you like me to get Daphne Edmond on the phone for you?”

Lana rubbed her eye carefully to avoid makeup smudges. “Who?” She preferred to emphasize the quantity of her acquaintances by pretending to let names slip her memory occasionally.

“The magazine editor, Daphne Edmond. She is your friend.”

Lana grinned. She was unsure if anyone was truly her friend anymore, but she loved hearing the word. She snatched the magazine from Maria’s grip and stared at the ad. “I don’t want to talk to her. Just find out who designed this necklace. Arrange for the designer to come tomorrow at noon.” She hesitated a moment. “No, the personal trainer comes tomorrow at noon. Two o’clock.”

Maria took a black organizational device from her pocket and disappeared into another room of the upscale New York apartment. Five minutes later, she returned with a legal pad and read her scribbled notes to the famous pop star.

Lana’s nose flared. “I don’t care what his name is! I want him to come and create a custom necklace for me. I cannot wear anything off the rack. It isn’t me.”

The assistant held back a sigh. “I asked, but he lives in Jerusalem.”

Lana closed the magazine. Through clenched teeth, she demanded, “Get me a flight to Jerusalem then.”

After a moment’s pondering, she decided to alleviate Maria’s frustration by asking a stupid question. She considered the dopey act every beautiful woman’s best manipulative ammunition. Without it, she figured she would still reside in a Lansing suburb. The stupid question made homely women view the playing field as equal. It coerced intimidated men to relax. It allowed people everywhere to listen to their favorite music—his or her own voice, particularly when spouting “worldly wisdom.”

Lana tapped her index finger to her mouth several times. “Should I bring energy bars and toilet paper? Is Jerusalem a third world country?” Then she added, “You really need to come with me.”

“Lana, you know how sick I get on planes. You will be fine.” Maria suppressed a giggle. “Incidentally, Jerusalem is Israel’s capital. They have an ample toilet paper supply.”

Following the arrangements and packing and preening and the cancelling of several days of appointments, Maria drove her employer to the airport. She walked her as far as allowed before the two exchanged their typical icy goodbyes. The hostile undercurrent evolved from Maria's irritation with Lana's arrogance and Lana's frustration with Maria's inability to sense her every desire. Despite this, both knew they depended on each other. Lana needed a responsible mother figure, and Maria, having had no children of her own, needed someone to nurture. Regardless of their aggravation with one another, they spent nearly every waking hour in New York together.

Nevertheless, Lana had grown accustomed to travelling alone and tolerated the long flight to Israel. After the plane landed, Lana trusted her rhinestone laden sunglasses to hide her from the photographers she felt certain waited for her. However, none stood on the sidewalk when she arrived. None waited in the hotel lobby as she entered. She pretended to be relieved.

At the bar, she ordered a drink. The bartender did not recognize her famous face. Lana

reassured herself the \$25,000 in personal training fees could still be seen on her buttocks whether she held fame's power in this town or not. Fiddling with her spaghetti straps and twirling her blond extensions around her finger, she requested the bartender's telephone number in case she needed help navigating the town. He wrote only his email address on hotel stationary before he abandoned her to attend to another guest's needs.

The frustrated pop star was more ready than ever to meet the jeweler and receive the type of attention only money could buy. She felt confident the relationship between a seller and a buyer was international—one that consisted of butt-kissing by the oodleful.

As she strolled through the market, she felt men stare. Already so familiar with lust's hungry look and desire's intense stare, she acknowledged these men's stares lacked both qualities. Their looks showed disapproval, seemingly saying, "You are a disgrace! Put more clothes on!" She wrapped her hand across her chest and quickened her pace to a sprint.

When she finally arrived at the jeweler's shop, she pushed the door open with an aggressive thrust. The bell on the door rang with a loud and obnoxious jingle. The shop owner appeared suddenly from a back corner of the shop. He laid down an ornate dreidel to reach out for her hand. "Ms. Falls, you are early! How lucky I am to meet such a famous and beautiful young lady." He grabbed the hand extended to him and stroked it. "And how have you enjoyed your stay here in Jerusalem?"

Lana gently withdrew her hand to fiddle with her dangling earring. "Terrible, really. The service at the five-star hotel is more like that of a two-star." Lana accepted the seat offered to her at a small table. "And what is wrong with this town anyway? Everyone looks so serious. Middle-aged men glare and frown, walking around as if they were really important. So condescending!" She gazed at the shop owner as he moved towards a glass case containing a gold replica of the ark of the covenant.

The jeweler unlocked the case and pulled out a black tray with precious jewels inside. "Jerusalem is different." He closed the case again and rested the jewels on the table before her. His eyes locked with hers. "We value

things the rest of the world overlooks and overlook things the rest of the world values.”

He continued to speak, but Lana’s mind wandered because he seemed to mix a foreign language with English as though they were one language. She directed him to design whatever he deemed best and wrote her home address for the necklace’s shipment upon its completion. Lana ignored his cordial sentiments in a rush for the exit.

Back at the hotel, she stuffed her luggage with clothes. She arrived at the airport six hours before her flight was scheduled. She passed two hours by thumbing through magazine pages and calling everyone she knew. With the next two hours, she wrote new song lyrics about a lover who rejected her as she felt Jerusalem had rejected her.

As the time to board the plane drew nearer, two uniformed officials walked toward her. She grinned like a cat with a mouse in its mouth while she pretended to be distracted by her zebra purse’s contents.

The officials stood on opposite sides of her. “Mam?” Lana looked up, unable to contain her

excitement a second longer. "I knew someone would recognize me!"

The older of the two men stood with wide shoulders and feet hip-distance apart. "We just have a couple routine questions, that's all."

Lana rose to her feet. "Routine, huh? You are not undercover journalists for a celebrity magazine, are you?"

The younger and significantly thinner man spoke up. "No, we just want to know if there was anyone you met up with during your stay here in Israel. Did you receive any gifts while you were here? Any phone numbers exchanged?"

"The jeweler. I met with a jeweler, but I only ordered a necklace. He is shipping it to me. Oh, and I have an email address from the bartender. Here," she said as she handed the younger man the hotel stationary. He read the name aloud. The two men glanced at each other.

They grabbed her arms and escorted her to a back room for more questioning. After she profusely denied the onslaught of acronyms they mentioned, she glanced at her diamond-

studded watch. She grew certain she would miss her flight. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“I hate this place; I cannot understand why anyone travels to Jerusalem.” She spit on the airport floor.

The older man chuckled. “Where are you headed...” He looked down at a piece of paper. “...Ms. Falls?” Before she had time to respond, he answered for her, “New York, is it? You love New

York, eh? Tell me this. Someone wrote a song about New York, but has anyone called New York ‘a song’? ‘A song and a lamentation.’ That’s what David Shipler called Jerusalem. You cannot fully appreciate that because it means noth...”

The other official grabbed his arm. “Now, now. I doubt she is a threat to security and that is our only concern.” He raised his eyebrows at the older man. “Would you like a drink of water, Ms. Falls?” He gestured to a nearby water cooler.

“No, thank you. I just want to go home.”

The younger man escorted her on the plane. As soon as Lana was seated, she pulled a satin eye mask over her eyes and pretended to sleep. Behind the mask, tears flowed from her eyes.

The time spent in Jerusalem reminded her of when she was called Laney Falanopholis. Everyone had appeared more important than her in the years before she had the outrageous wardrobe, breast augmentation, and thousands of crazed fans. She had felt invisible back in Lansing. When words rose from her lips, it was as if they dissolved in midair because it seemed no one cared what she had to say. She knew people would pay attention if she could develop the kind of confidence she projected after she transformed from Laney Falanopholis to Lana Falls. But she could not do that without the fans to tell her she was worthy to be heard. Jerusalem had stripped her props away from her.

She could not feel invisible again. She wiped the tear that had escaped from under the eye mask and rolled down her cheek. Laney and Lana were one person. If Lana's words were valuable, Laney's were also. If they mattered in New York, they mattered everywhere else.

In the New York airport reporters swarmed around Maria like zombies waiting for a taste of celebrity blood. She innocently tapped her cheap vinyl flats against the metal chair legs and tried to blend in with the other passengers. That is until she spotted Lana.

The pop star's hair was disheveled. Her eyeliner had smeared. And her arms were wide open. Unsure how to react, Maria gently wrapped her arms around Lana. Reporters snapped pictures from every angle. Still joined in the embrace, Maria whispered to her, "What happened?"

Lana replied, "Jerusalem happened." She let go of her personal assistant and lifted her purse strap back on her shoulder. "And I am all the better for it."

As the two walked through the airport, Lana slid her arm in Maria's. Lana stopped shouting orders at her employees and gave everyone a raise. She treated Maria less like a servant and more like a friend.

Annette's Café

Sapphire eyes blazed from under the cowboy hat as he sauntered past the yellow mop bucket. He removed the felt hat and adjusted the fist-sized belt buckle before he sat in the corner booth. When I approached him, he grabbed a menu and pointed to biscuits and gravy with his sun-aged hand, the good one that still had five fingers. He was no drugstore cowboy.

Though he was a regular, no one at Annette's Café knew his name. He never spoke to anyone. When he finished eating, he routinely carried his guest check to the register, paid with a five dollar bill, and left a dollar fifty tip. Annette instructed us not to disturb the lone cowboy.

Something like the feeling a child gets when warned not to touch the sugar caddy rushed over me that day. When the lone cowboy lay down his guest check at the register, I pulled ones from my black tip apron and paid his bill. He didn't smile or say anything, but he left a twenty dollar tip. I broke the routine of the

untouchable cowboy. To me, this seemed a small victory.

Good Deed Collector

Arthur Meeks loved his job as a guardian angel. He had worked his wings off for five hundred years protecting generations of human lives, and other angels respected him for it. No one stole his manna from the refrigerator. Heaven's most infamous gossip never whispered about him at the Spring of Life water cooler.

Honestly, the loud mouth preferred to talk about humans anyway. Her favorite topic was the human inclination to reveal surplus skin—making her flesh envy oh so obvious. She also loved to discuss major human concerns like population growth.

She cackled as human leaders grew more perplexed by the population problem. She laughed because angels saw the comet's trajectory long before the humans did. She insisted some of the less pious angels drank too much wine before they went bowling on the fringes of the solar system causing the comet to veer. (That theory remains unverified.)

Regardless, the angels knew the frozen rock would strike Asia thousands of miles sooner than the scientists. They knew it was too big to be stopped and would devastate the human population. However, they did not foresee its affect on heaven's unemployment rate. With so many humans dead, millions of guardian angels—including Arthur Meeks—found themselves unemployed.

Arthur knew it would be several generations until the human population could support the number of guardian angels it demanded prior to the comet. This reality forced him into a depressive state. Most times, he sat on clouds feeling sorry for himself until he finally succumbed to the inevitable and accepted a job as a lowly good deed collector.

Angel Resources must have reported his negative attitude to the archangels because they assigned him to a region known as

America—the hardest place to collect good deeds. Not only that, but his first assignment did not consist of the standard 'motivate someone to let a car out in traffic.' No, the assignment required Arthur to prompt a stranger to help a blind man cross a street.

Upon receiving the detailed paper of the assignment's when, where, and what, Arthur exhaled a deep sigh. He had a two-hour-long sulking session before his assignment began. Then he dragged his feet during takeoff, flew slowly through the heavens, and arrived at Fifth and Main Street a few minutes late.

When he finally arrived at the intersection, the situation had nearly reached a code red. The blind man had already entered the first lane of Main Street's four lanes. Honking cars careened around him in a whirlwind.

Amidst all this commotion, the blind man's guide dog sniffed after a chicken bone that dangled from a demon's palm. The demon glanced up at Arthur and snickered before he resumed walking backwards, tempting the dog, and leading the blind man into the second lane of traffic.

"It's about time you got here, Art," called a second angel assigned to the task. The younger and more virile angel flew erratically in and out of cars, yanking their steering wheels to avoid the blind man. "You could have cost Frank here

his life and cost me my job all for the sake of a silly good deed.”

Arthur knew good deeds were not silly, but deeds did seem like chump change compared to protecting human life. “Sorry, Sam,” Arthur said to the younger angel. “I’ll get right to work. Say, I could use some potential Samaritans. Could you stop that second lane of traffic for me?”

Sam groaned, but he jumped in front of a blue sedan. He thrust his arms forward and stopped it. Tires skidded and brakes squealed as the other cars screeched to a halt behind it. The blue sedan’s driver busily inspected his gauges, wipers, and blinkers because he planned to swerve around the blind man—not stop completely. He could not understand why his car suddenly failed to move forward. The driver could not see the guardian angel, the demon, or Arthur.

Although the entities were invisible to humans, they could be heard, sort of. When angels spoke to humans, it occurred to them as a random thought. Arthur figured he would begin with this approach. He flew into the passenger seat of the sedan leaned forward,

and whispered into the driver's ear, "Help the blind man cross the street."

The man thought to himself, "Somebody should help that man cross the street, but I have my own problems to deal with right now. What a lemon this car turned out to be!" He popped his car's hood—hitting Sam in the face—and jumped out of the automobile.

Arthur rolled his eyes. He flew out of the car and shook his head in Sam's direction. This fellow was no Good Samaritan.

The driver in the next car, a yellow compact, appeared to be a young woman. She was tapping her nails on the wheel as she waited for someone to let her out in traffic.

Arthur flew to the side of her car, stuck his head in her open window, and whispered, "You must help that blind man cross the street!"

The young lady thought to herself, "I should help that man cross the street." She felt tingles—a side effect of Arthur's excitement.

Just then, a demon appeared in the passenger seat and smeared some goopy doubt on her

shoulder. Suddenly, she suspected the man was not really blind at all and would mug her as soon as she began helping him. The young lady locked her doors and rolled up her window. Arthur yanked his head out of the window in the nick of time.

Although all of this occurred with lightning-fast speed, time remained in motion, as did the blind man. About this time, he had entered the third lane of traffic. Sam let go of the blue sedan and ran to stop a truck in that lane.

Luckily the blue sedan's driver did not realize he could start his car again, so he attempted to push his car to the side of the road. Arthur might have gotten someone to help him, but that was not his assignment. Instead, he watched as Sam struggled against the truck.

"Sam, I promise the next person will perform the good deed. I'll make sure of it." Arthur flew to the car behind the yellow compact, where a middle-aged woman fiddled with her radio. Since she was unable to see the blind man from her vantage point, Arthur knew he needed a new strategy.

He wanted to make the task more convenient somehow. He looked up at a storefront sign advertising donuts, and it dawned on him. He blew the scent of a chocolate frosted long john right under her nose. Immediately, her mouth started watering.

Without delay, she pulled into the vacant spot on the side of the road. She hopped out of the car and began digging in her purse for meter change. When she looked up, she saw the blind man entering the fourth lane of traffic.

Without pausing to check for oncoming cars, she ran into the street and hooked his arm in hers. Together, they stepped on the curb—much to Sam’s relief. She introduced herself to the blind man as Irene and petted the guide dog, which incensed the demon.

Arthur snickered at the demon. The angel snatched up the good deed and placed it in his canvas bag. He drew the strings tight and soared back to heaven with his treasure, satisfied with himself for accomplishing the challenging task.

In heaven, Arthur placed the good deed bag directly on the archangel's desk with a wide grin.

The archangel did not look up when he spoke, "Good news, Art. An African woman is celebrating the birth of her baby girl. She needs a guardian angel. You feeling up to it?"

"Nah, I think I'll pass. I just got this good deed collection figured out. Anyhow, it seems really rewarding—the kind of reward you feel inside, ya know?"

The archangel looked up and raised his eyebrows. He opened the canvas bag and peered inside. His face became radiant; he smiled. "Yep, sometimes the littlest things have the greatest ability to make you feel good inside."

Arthur was not sure who got the African assignment. It could have been any of the unemployed ex-guardian angels. In the following months, Arthur rejected numerous offers.

Over time, nearly all of the ex-guardian angels returned to their former positions. Some good

deed collectors even received promotions to guardian angels. Sam was eventually promoted to archangel. Arthur, however, continued to blissfully collect good deeds until he happily retired.

He moved into a humble cloud dwelling over Irene's house. When her flowers started to droop, he squeezed the cloud to rain droplets of water onto them. When she planned a family picnic, he shoved the cloud out of the path of the sun's rays. All of her friends were confounded by her great luck, but Arthur knew it was not really luck at all.

American Balloon

A red latex balloon was tied to the child's chair like a beloved yaht in harbor. It bobbed and weaved, blown about by the vent's breath. The birthday song overpowered the conversational roar, and the aroma of simmering sauces filled the restaurant's air.

Across the room, Mr. Raffio spoke to his waitress with a subtle accent. His waitress, Cheri, leaned in. "Say it again. I could not hear you."

"I want another glass of milk and a balloon for him." He rested his hand on his son's shoulder.

The waitress stood upright and adjusted her tuxedo shirt. "I will be happy to bring you another glass, but we don't give out balloons here."

Mr. Raffio's carmel-colored hand motioned to the child with the balloon. "That kid has one."

Cheri cleared appetizer dishes as she spoke, "His parents must have brought it."

Mr. Raffio glanced at the five other guests seated at his table. “Then, could you go buy my son a balloon at a corner store?” He grabbed her arm and slid her ten dollars.

“Sir, I am sorry; I can’t do that. Friday nights are really busy. I’ll be fired if I leave now, even if it is for a patron.” With two fingers, she held out the ten dollar bill for him to take back. Instead of accepting the money, he handed her several more bills.

She chuckled out of awkwardness. After she counted the money aloud, she looked up at Mr. Raffio. “One hundred dollars? I would love to take it, but I need to keep this job.”

Once more, she attempted to return the money to the patron.

The man slouched further in his chair and made no effort to accept the money back from her. “You are treating me like this because I am a foreigner...”

The waitress interrupted. “I am treating you like an American who thinks he can buy anyone

or anything!" She sighed. "You cannot buy me."

Mr. Raffio took a money clip from the shirt pocket of his sheen button-up. He placed it in her hand.

After counting the money, she said, "One thousand dollars? And all I have to do is get your kid a balloon?" Cheri paused. She threw her arms up in surrender. "I suppose you can buy me after all."

The waitress shoved the cash in her apron and walked over to the child with the balloon. She stooped to whisper in his ear. The child beamed and opened his hand. She plunked three gleaming coins into the youthful palm.

Afterward, she peeled the blade on her wine opener and cut the balloon's ribbon. She closed the knife, returned to Mr. Raffio's table, and tied the red balloon to his son's chair.

The red latex balloon bobbed and weaved, blown about by the vent's breath. Mr. Raffio grinned at his boy and rubbed him on the head. Cheri disappeared into the kitchen, where she counted her money next to cucumbers and

lettuce. Yes indeed, pride is a profitable little gem.

The Van Table

It all started during a science exam. Miss Cheswick challenged her fifth grade students with most questions but expected everyone to receive a point for marking their home planet correctly. Van penciled the circle corresponding to Jupiter.

He performed exceptionally well on the other exams, so Miss Cheswick assumed he mistakenly marked the wrong letter on the multiple choice. She called Van to her desk while the class quietly completed a web of life handout.

When the square-faced boy with bushy eyebrows and hair of the same coarse texture approached her desk, she swiveled in her chair to address him. “Van, I think there may be some confusion about a question on the exam. Perhaps we can take an oral approach to this question.” She cleared her throat. “What is your home planet?”

“Jupiter.”

Miss Cheswick thanked him and told him to return to his desk. She marked a bold “X” on Van’s test form, then scratched her head with the grading pen. After a few moments of brooding, she scribbled a note on a post-it. It read: Van-parent conference.

Just then, the bell rang. The teacher led her twenty-four children down the hall to the cafeteria. They lined up together, purchased their lunch, and sat down at their respective tables. Boys sat at the ‘boy table.’ Girls sat at the ‘girl table.’ Van sat at the ‘Van table.’ The others did not abandon Van because he was a nerd. Nerds congregated at the end of the boy table. For some reason, Van had abandoned them. He did not seem to have much to say to other kids. If he did, he tucked it under a blanket of tightly held insecurities. Still, other children made no efforts to include him.

The behavior did not surprise Miss Cheswick. After fifteen years of teaching, she had seen fifteen other boys and girls—one from each class—isolate themselves in similar ways. One girl, Maria (Miss Cheswick could never forget) finished the entire year without saying an audible word to anyone and no one, besides

herself, made an effort to elicit one word from her.

Other teachers might have grown hardened to these forlorn children after so many years, and Miss Cheswick wished she could behave with such apathy. However, she remained compassionate toward them and often fought the urge to take her lunch beside them—an act she neglected to do because she knew it would only further isolate them from their peers.

So she walked to the teacher's lounge where she always took her lunch. Instead of grading papers in silence as she often did, she placed a call to the number listed as Van's home phone. A woman answered, whom Miss Cheswick presumed was his mother.

"Mrs. Lojze?"

"I don't know of any 'Mrs. Lojze.' I am Ms. Layla Bower. May I help you?"

"I am trying to reach Van's mother."

"In that case, you are looking for me. Van Lojze is my son."

Miss Cheswick and Ms. Layla Bower arranged to meet for an informal conference after school. It would be their first meeting since she did not participate in activities like other parents. Ms. Bower never graced the bake sale fundraiser with her prizewinning sugar-laced brownies, nor did she exhibit her exceptional organizational skills by heading up clever games at the class parties. Although there were many stay-at-home moms within the school's invisible boundaries of semi-affluent neighborhoods, sometimes both parents worked full time. If Ms.

Bower was a single mom, as the teacher suspected by the different last names, there would be little or no time for her to engage in anything besides providing for Van's basic needs. Miss Cheswick mulled over these thoughts as the fifth grade art teacher entered the lounge.

The eccentric teacher fluffed her purple peasant skirt and sat beside Miss Cheswick. "Whatcha doin'?"

"I just got off of the phone with Van's mother."

"Oh, that kid. He's odd. I gave the kids free time today, and they had a field day—splashing

paint all over themselves and one another. Van, he just sat there and looked at a lump of clay for fifty five minutes. No kidding. I don't think he has any imagination whatsoever."

"Funny you should say that, because he marked 'Jupiter' as his home planet on his science test."

The art teacher stole a celery stick from Miss Cheswick's lunch and began gnawing it as she spoke. "Maybe he just likes planets. That's what we'll do next! The class can make a whole solar system." She spread out her arms to emphasize her vision of the project before leaving Miss Cheswick to her celery sticks and thoughts.

She remained in this pensive state until Ms. Layla Bower arrived for the conference. Ms. Bower stuck her platinum blond head in the classroom door.

"Miss Cheswick?"

The teacher welcomed Ms. Bower. She instantly sized her up as an atypical parent by her distinctive clothing choice—a fur-collared cardigan and tight black jeans. Miss Cheswick appreciated the difficulty she might have fitting

in with other parents. The teacher's own conservative attire sharply contrasted Van's mother's flashy clothing, but she resolved to make her comfortable enough to convey some insight regarding her son.

Van, who stayed after school to be picked up by his mother, did not acknowledge his mother in any way when she entered the room. He did, however, eagerly comply with Miss Cheswick's request to wait in the hall until after the conference.

The teacher sat at her desk and thumbed through the three-page test, bound by a single staple in the top left corner of the pages, until she found the question. She turned it 180 degrees, so the test would be upright for Van's mother.

"Van is a pleasure to have in class—very bright. The fact that he is so intelligent makes his answer even more disturbing. Do you know any reason Van might think his home planet is Jupiter?" A bouncing ball sound caused Miss Cheswick to look into the hall, where another student stood and glanced at the two adults. She excused herself and closed the door while Ms. Bower analyzed the test booklet.

When Miss Cheswick sat again at her desk, Ms. Bower said, “This is my fault. I haven’t been very forthcoming with Van about his roots. You see, his father and I only dated a short time. I knew very little about him at the time, and we did not stay in contact. I want to say he moved to Alaska. I can assure you that his father is not from Jupiter—unless we are talking about Jupiter, Florida, in which case he may be. He did look a bit Cuban. Is Arik, spelled with an ‘A,’ a Cuban name? I’m rambling, aren’t I? Well, I will send Van to his uncle’s this weekend. The two are fond of each other, the way a father and son would be. Maybe that will help.”

Monday morning, the teacher did see a change in Van, but the change was not what she had hoped. The boy she had seen walking past them in the hallway during the conference was talking to Van and the other kids. She overheard him saying, “Van is an alien. I even heard Miss Cheswick say he admitted it.”

Miss Cheswick pretended not to hear the conversation.

Van replied, “I did not say I was an alien. I said that my home planet was Jupiter.”

“Same thing,” another boy called out.

“No, it’s not. My father is an alien, but my mother is human. I guess that makes me part alien.”

Yet another boy asked, “Well, where is your father now? Can we see him?”

“He had to return to Jupiter. He flew me back to Earth with Mom. He thinks we belong here.” When the boys started to turn away, Van added, “But he put this microchip in my hand to keep track of me. Look.” He extended his hand for the boys to see.

Miss Cheswick glanced over, squinting to see a splinter or something else un-extraordinary. Whatever it was, it was too small for her to see, but there was something because the boys ooh’d and ah’d before bombarding him with a series of questions.

She stopped listening in. On the one hand, she was appalled that the children would embrace an alien, yet allow a normal child to alienate himself without taking any measure to include him. She did take comfort in the fact he was

interacting, in some way, with the other children.

The interaction extended to more than just the other children over the next few days. She was not sure which of the boy's dads was a reporter for the Warrrenton Heights newspaper, but she was certain that's how Van's story got in the headlines. She rolled her eyes when she saw the newspaper and thought how ridiculous it all was.

Somebody else did not think it was ridiculous at all. A man in a black suit came to visit the school the day after the article was published. He requested Van's presence in the office about a 'classified matter.' Miss Cheswick learned no more about the visit until the following day when dozens of reporters showed up at the school—scribbling notes. And dozens of photographers showed up too snapping pictures.

She heard on the news that night the man was with the FBI, and scientists aimed to identify the shiny substance in Van's palm.

Ms. Bower's interview was aired as well. She was very ambiguous about her relationship with

Van's father. In fact, she played into the rumor—saying she oddly did not remember much about that time period. She glowed. It seemed to be her moment in the sun.

Miss Cheswick did not think Ms. Bower's moment in the sun should be at Van's expense. She looked online for Arik, with an 'A,' Lojze that lived in Alaska. Before long, she was on the phone with him—discussing Van's need for his father at such a time of distress and confusion.

The gruff male voice said, "Do you know what a flight from Alaska would cost? I don't care what he needs. I cannot afford that."

"I'll pay." The teacher wished she could suck the words back into her mouth the second they fell from her lips. She hoped she had enough room on her credit card for such a trip. "Well, I will get back to you when I see if it is possible."

She did manage to charge the flight, kicking herself even as she requested an extension on the card's limit. The truth was that she felt some responsibility for this media circus since she called attention to Van's Jupiter exam answer. So she grew determined to bring an end to it. She called the local news station and

the press—telling them they would have an opportunity to interview the alien father at her house.

After Arik arrived at the airport, Miss Cheswick invited him into her home. He was burly and handsome—square faced with bushy eyebrows and hair of the same texture, just like Van. She asked him if he would like to call Van or if he preferred she do it for him. He let her coordinate their meeting with the reporters, requesting they get it over with as soon as possible.

When they all arrived in her living room, the whole family sat in a row of kitchen chairs she put in front of the fireplace. Who knows? These would probably be the only family photos Van would ever get.

*

The teacher loved seeing the family together, but she hated the way they all fired questions at the father without sensitivity of any kind.

One pushed through the crowd. “Are you really from Jupiter?” She shoved a microphone under his mouth. Miss Cheswick rolled her eyes.

Arik scratched his head. “No, I was born in Nebraska. I am fully human.”

Another held up a recording device from the back of the crowd. “Did you implant a tracking system in your son’s hand?” Miss Cheswick watched as Van looked intently at his father (as if he did not know the answer already).

“A tracking system? No.” Arik shot a disapproving look at Van.

A man in the front with a notepad and pen in hand asked, “Why doesn’t Ms. Bower recall her time with you?”

Arik looked at Ms. Bower and smiled. “We cared about each other, but our marriage was short. We went to the movies. We did, you know, normal things.”

As the crowd directed more mundane questions at Arik, Miss Cheswick realized all of Van’s questions—questions he had wondered his whole life—were being answered at this very moment. All of them except one, and it was that one that would never occur to a reporter.

Miss Cheswick yelled from the edge of the room, “Mr. Lojze, do you love your son?”

Arik reached over and hugged his son for the first time. “Of course, he’s my blood. How could I not love him?”

The cameras snapped wildly for a few minutes before Miss Cheswick made it through the swarm to the door and started motioning for the reporters to leave.

When the house was quiet again, she cooked dinner for the two Lojze’s and Ms. Bower. With some probing, she got Van to reveal that the ‘tracking device’ in his palm was a tiny metal shard that stuck in his hand while drilling in his uncle’s basement pole. Van’s dad let out a belly laugh.

Arik said he would keep in touch with Miss Cheswick and Van. He also promised to repay he for the trip, even though it would be paid in small increments. He said it was important to him because his time with his son was invaluable. Van never returned to the ‘Van table,’ and the kids seemed to quickly forgive his barrage of lies—seeing him more as a star, a fallen star, but a star nonetheless. Although

there were plenty of seats at the 'boy table' for Van and the other thirteen boys, a new boy began sitting alone. His name was Brett, so Miss Cheswick called his table the 'Brett table.'

The solitary boy made Miss Cheswick feel as though her actions were futile. It was as though there must always be at least one child sitting in isolation. She relinquished her desire to give every child a sense of belonging and, instead, put her faith in the idea that all 'aliens' claw their way out of obscurity when the stars align just so.

After more time passed, Miss Cheswick's and Arik's pen pal letters developed into love letters. When they could no longer stand to be apart, he applied for a credit card of his own and promptly purchased a diamond ring and a one-way ticket to Warrenton Heights. Miss Cheswick became Mrs. Lojze, and the married couple kept Van on weekends. When Ms. Bower left for Canada, she awarded the Lojze's full custody of Van. Mrs. Lojze locked Mr. Lojze's drill in the utility closet, just in case.

Pesky Specters

The aroma of gold lilies and lavender sprigs masked death's scent. However, the obnoxious floral arrangements did little to distract Jacob from the corpse. He embraced his weeping wife as he stared over her shoulder at his father's pale skin poking out of the casket. The crowd shuffled past them, murmuring about the unexpected loss as the funeral home employees twisted their faces to match the patrons' somber expressions. Jacob neither wept nor twisted his face. He was a rock.

After politely declining Aunt Jessica's invitation to a post-funeral gathering, Jacob and his wife got into their SUV. He put on his sunglasses and coasted down the cemetery's narrow lane and onto the main road. His mind fixated on a work project until his thoughts were interrupted by something he saw through his car window. It was a homely woman positioning her trashcan on the curb. She looked at Jacob and grinned. It struck him odd that she smiled while performing such a menial task. The vehicle and sunglasses shielded him from the etiquette of returning a smile, but his wife Nancy grinned

through her tears. Like a knight in armor, Jacob drove past the peasant to slay the dragons of the finance world.

Not tonight though. He quickly changed out of his black suit and into a burgundy robe. Nancy went right to bed, but Jacob sipped tea in between uncontrollable yawns and stared blankly at the fine art print framed on his wall. Edvard Munch's *The Scream* was crooked. He wondered how and when it might have gotten jostled. Partly because he was too tired to straighten it, he reasoned the artist would have preferred it that way and dozed off.

Next thing he knew, the early morning sunshine flooded through the windows and awoke him. When he called his boss to apologize for his tardiness, his boss suggested he take a few days off to mourn his father's death. Jacob assured him that it'd be best to move forward. He worked his usual cycle—spending days at his office under the hum of fluorescent lights and nights working at their small dining room table.

One Tuesday evening Nancy left for her Bible study, and Jacob stayed home to finish some extra work. The radio blared in the background. Suddenly he recognized an unforgettable song

from his past. A feeling like a balloon rose in his chest. Jacob jumped up and changed the station to an upbeat hip-hop song that he didn't recognize to avoid the emotional surge.

"How long will this go on?" a voice asked.

Jacob's heart raced as he looked around the room. He quickly got on all fours, rolled into his bedroom, and hid behind his bed stand.

"Nice going, Ninja." The voice chuckled. "I asked, 'How long will this go on?'"

"Who are you? Where are you?" Jacob asked from his hiding place.

"I am up here. I will come down to you," the voice said.

Jacob spotted the shadowy figure near the ceiling, and it descended down the wall. Jacob leaped from his hiding spot and swung at it. His hand went straight through the figure and into the drywall. The figure examined the hole in his side. He put his shadowy appendage through it. This instantly regenerated the shadow into its former state of wholeness.

“Not bad. I really didn’t think you could fight.” The figure moved to the right. “Now, you’ll have to fix the hole in the wall. May I come down now? We can speak amicably, can’t we?” With an eerie adeptness, the black figure glided down the wall head first. He dove into the floorboards, momentarily disappeared, then emerged upright. “I’ll start. I am your sorrow. You know, the sorrow that normally manifests in a heart when it encounters a loved one’s death.”

“I came to terms with death years ago. It was in high school actually. An angry student gunned down my best friend and eight other students while I hid under a desk praying for my life to be spared. I outlived them, but I’ll die someday. Mourning something as natural and common as death seems senseless,” Jacob explained bitterly.

The shadowy figure sobbed intensely for several minutes. At times, his whimpers and moans resembled a wounded animal. When the tears let up, he began, “My hosts always have some unnatural atrocity that steers them left where others go right. I am so sorry you experienced that. It’s just terrible!”

The shadow composed himself and continued, “Nevertheless, you didn’t allow sorrow to enroot in your heart. The energy created by sorrow does not evaporate. It must exist somewhere, even when it’s unwelcomed by its host. The energy of your sorrow manifested itself into what I am—a specter. Don’t worry; I’ll only be here until your heart opens to death’s unconditional terms of sorrow.”

Jacob replied, “We don’t have a guest bedroom. You’ll have to sleep on the couch, assuming you do sleep.” Jacob’s cell phone began to vibrate in his pocket. “Excuse me.” Jacob longed to hear the voice of a client begging him to dig into his work to avoid this emotional audit conducted by an entity that defied Jacob’s understanding of the world as he knew it.

Rather than a client, it was his wife’s voice. “Hello, Jacob. There’s something I have been meaning to tell you all week. I simply cannot get up the courage to tell you to your face.” There was a long pause. “I’m pregnant. There...I said it!”

Jacob could not say anything nor could he feel anything. The only thing he could think was how odd it was that he felt nothing when his

wife told him they would be having a baby. He did not allow himself to feel happy or sad. He was not scared or proud. Just then, a white figure appeared next to Sorrow. Jacob asked the new specter, “Who are you?”

A hopeless sigh emitted through the earpiece. “I’m Nancy! Oh man, the shock is too much for you. This is even worse than I thought. We met three years ago. I am your wife. Now I will be the mother of your child!”

Jacob replied, “I know it’s you, Nancy. I’m sorry; someone is here—uh, the neighbor kid selling fundraiser stuff. I’ll call you later.” He shoved the cell phone in his pocket.

The white figure introduced himself in a cheery manner, “I’m Joy. It’s nice to meet you!” Turning to Sorrow, he continued, “It looks like we have a party of emotion avoidance. Shall we have roll call? Stress?”

Sorrow answered, “Stress has not manifested. Something tells me this guy has no problem experiencing stress. I’m Sorrow.”

Jacob groaned with frustration. “Gentlemen or whatever you are, you are infringing on my life. Please leave!”

Joy explained, “Jacob, we are a part of your life. Life is about experiencing joy and sorrow. When you avoid us, you avoid life altogether. If you want us to leave, I have a suggestion.”

Jacob replied, “Anything.”

“Write a letter to your unborn child,” Joy said.

In desperation, Jacob picked up a pen and scribbled on a legal pad:

Dear Son (or Daughter),

I haven’t met you and don’t really know what to say. I don’t know what you will be like, but I hope you like art. If you do, I promise to take you to the art museum like my dad took me.

I loved creating pasts and futures for the moment in time captured by the artists as my dad intently listened to my absurd stories. I also listened intently as he managed to invent captivating histories for the art that looked like boring paint splats to me. More captivating than his stories or the art was my dad’s

happiness to be there with me. I want you to know that feeling.

Sincerely,
Your Dad

Jacob paused and allowed himself to cry.

The white specter's nose wrinkled in confusion. "Why aren't you happy, Jacob? Having a baby is a wonderful thing! What did he do wrong. Sorrow? Sorrow?"

It was quiet.

Joy glided back and forth in a pacing-like fashion. "I suppose I'm stuck for a little while longer."

Jacob dialed Nancy's cell phone number. "Nancy? I'm sorry about what happened earlier. I am happy we are having a baby. Ecstatic! Hey, I have an idea. Let's decorate the nursery in da Vinci! Where are you? Stay there; I'm gonna meet you."

Jacob grabbed his keys, crossed the threshold, and slammed the door behind him. The white specter attempted to follow his host through

the closed door but never manifested on the other side.

Jacob, preoccupied with a newfound excitement, didn't even notice Joy's disappearance. "No da Vinci? Okay. Dali?"

What I Saw

I am a plain man. I do not believe folks can read the future or your palm or your mind. Things too wonderful for me to understand, I don't even ponder. Who can claim to know what happens when we die? Whether we go to heaven or sleep until Jesus returns or something else? For Edna, I suppose it was something else altogether.

Since my wife passed, me and the girls only go to church once a week. Edna insisted on some church activity six or seven times a week. She was a noble woman, a woman of hard-earned character. When the townspeople called her a good woman, she did not accept the compliment. A humble ol' girl, she was. I don't know how in heavens the girls turned out the way they did.

When the girls were first born, Edna was delighted to have twins. Her face shined like she just won first prize in the pie contest. She even said how wonderful it would be for the girls to have each other as companions for all

their lives. They weren't companions though, not even close.

From the time they were toddlers, they clawed and scratched at each other, fighting over toys and clothes and whatever else. Bonnie was the biter. They aren't the kinda twins that look alike, mind you. Bonnie has wild and wiry blond hair; Serena has ivory skin and jet black hair just like a china doll. Edna and I called her Doll, but Bonnie just called her Serena.

Doll and Bonnie kept on at that quarrelling even when Edna was lying on her deathbed. She lay under the covers with her eyes closed in our bedroom. The girls stood on either side of her.

Doll grabbed her hand and said with more sadness than an eleven-year-old girl should ever know, "Mama, remember Elisha and Elijah from the Bible? Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit right before Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. I will be Elisha; you can be Elijah. Give me a double portion of your spirit when you go."

Tears, the kind that fall when your heart has just been squeezed like a piece of fruit, fell from Bonnie's eyes. "No, Mama. Don't give it to

Serena. Give me your spirit.” She laid her head on Edna’s lap. That’s when Edna died.

The men came to get Edna’s body from our home shortly after that. Some ladies from town brought us dinner that night. I told the girls an early night would do us all good and tucked them in their beds.

I could not bring myself to sleep in the bedroom. Just hours earlier, Edna was so there. And then all of a sudden, she was so not there. Like a black hole in our bed had swallowed the sun. And if I laid down where the black hole was, it might suck the moon up too.

So I tossed and turned on the couch. I thought about things the way Edna would want them. At the funeral, I mean. Since I couldn’t sleep, I decided to check on the girls.

As I quietly opened the door, I saw both Doll and Bonnie sleeping sound in their beds. But when I closed the door, something gold flashed like lightning. I only saw it out of the corner of my eye, so I opened the door again.

Standing at the foot of Bonnie’s bed was someone like an Amazon woman dressed like a

dancer on stage in Las Vegas. Auburn ringlets covered her head, but it looked as if a great light was shining on some parts of her hair and, in those places, it shone gold. She wore a leather and metal bodice with a frilly skirt. She held a bow with an arrow pointed at Doll. It was transparent in appearance and vaguely resembled Bonnie in some ways. I figured it was Bonnie's spirit.

Just then, a ghostly figure rose right up out of Doll's body—her spirit. Also exceptionally tall, this woman wore a long sapphire gown. She drew a sword and blocked the arrow shot at Doll's sleeping body. I was frozen in fear and could not believe my own eyes as the two battled in the girls' bedroom. The spirits paid no attention to me and just kept on battling until the woman in the blue dress stepped close enough to the Amazon woman to catch her bow with the tip of the sword's blade. She flung it across the room.

Then the Amazon woman—er, Bonnie's spirit—ran right through me into my bedroom. I spun around and pursued her. As I stood in the doorway, she snatched something from the bed like a folded robe. When the robe had unfurled, wafts of Edna's rosewater perfume filled the air. Not only that, but the robe

emitted Edna's very presence. Doll's spirit leapt right through me and took hold of the robe. They yanked and pulled. It was a regular tug of war over Edna's spirit.

Finally Bonnie's inner apparition leaned forward and bit Doll's spiritual arm. The lady in blue suddenly let go. Bonnie's spirit quickly slipped the robe over her Amazon attire. I stepped aside (so as to avoid her walking through me again).

I followed her back to the girls' bedroom. The Amazon woman lay atop Bonnie and sunk into her body. Doll's body sucked the woman in the sapphire dress right through the hallway and back into her body like a high quality vacuum sucks up a peanut.

The next morning, I thought it all was a dream. But when the two girls awoke, things were unusually peaceful. I thought it was the despair of their mother passing. However, Bonnie offered to make breakfast and when she whipped my eggs, she hummed a joyful song.

Then she called out, "Doll, how do you want your eggs?"

At that moment, I knew it could not have been a dream. Bonnie never called her Doll. She had most certainly inherited Edna's spirit. From that time on, Doll and Bonnie became the companions Edna had hoped they would be.

As for me, I told you I am a plain man. Things too wonderful for me, I don't even ponder. I just know what I saw.

The Other Me

I drove down the highway listening to talk radio when I glanced in the rear view mirror. That was when I saw me in the car behind me. It was a younger me. The me before the kids were born. The me before I needed a chiropractor.

That me was speeding. It reminded me how reckless I had been during those years. I hated that me. That me drove without headlights in the dark of night just for the challenge and stole from unlocked cars. I performed stupid stunts without regard for anyone else. That me could not fathom how challenging life would become without resorting to careless risks. As I cursed me, that me passed on the left and got in front of me.

I reminisced about the car the younger me drove. It was a gray Honda Civic. Boring-looking old thing, but I had some good times in that car. My college buddies and I penciled our autographs on the dashboard. We ate sunflower seeds and spit them right on the floor mats. I cannot recall changing the oil in the

car—ever. Yet, the engine cranked up without complaint day after day.

As the younger me zoomed into the distance, I could only make out the bumper sticker's white outline. I remembered the sticker said something funny and sped up to read it. Something about a chicken. Just then, traffic suddenly stopped.

The other me slammed on the brakes and skidded a few feet before coming to a perfect stop. A little less alert and agile, I also slammed on the brakes. My tires squealed right before my Buick crunched into the Honda's rear end. It was only a mild collision and the other me was alright, so I mostly felt dread. How would I ever deal with me after an accident? I had no intention of apologizing to that young pleasure-monger. Still, I looked at the deadlocked traffic and got out of my car to hand over my insurance.

I could feel the other me try to make eye contact, but I averted my eyes. As I avoided eye contact with myself, I noticed all the other drivers gawking unsympathetically at my plight. Some talked on their cell phones—probably reporting the accident to local radio stations.

Without a word, the other me walked to the bumper to inspect the damage.

Young me said, “Meh, it’s nothing. Forget about it.” With that, the other me let me go scot free.

As I returned to the driver’s seat, I reflected on how bitter I had become after life had dealt its remaining cards. After my salaried position became a part-time job. After the bank foreclosed on the home where we raised our children. After my wife had a stroke.

The younger me was the me she married. That me knew how to relax and have a good time. I was not reclusive then. I was much cooler when I was young. Stupid and selfish, but cool.

When traffic resumed a normal pace, I lost sight of the old me and exited the highway. I pulled into a gas station and purchased sunflower seeds for the first time in ten years. I could not bring myself to spit them on the floor mat.

Food-o-phobia

Diane was not anorexic. She contracted food-o-phobia. Psychologists probably named it something technical and derived from Latin, but that is how I referred to my sister's infirmity. The condition caused her to grow very thin and frail, which fostered the rumor she was anorexic. But she wasn't. She merely found some fault with every food type.

Pesticides tainted all produce. Either that or it was a food hybrid. You know, a watermelon-orange or something. Come to think of it, she frequently used the hybrid excuse when rejecting meat too. Diane said hot dog manufacturers used goat-pigs. What is a goat-pig? I do not know. I doubt it exists, but in my sister's mind it did. All chickens have been injected with antibiotics by the way. That is what she said.

What if they were? You would think she never tasted tarragon chicken sprinkled with feta and smothered in sautéed mushrooms. Incidentally, she had eaten tarragon chicken. She consumed all kinds of food at one time.

The food-o-phobia onset was gradual. It started about two years after she met her fiancé Ethan. He served in the Air Force and engaged in dangerous activities—like skydiving and eating normal food normally. He was not the one who convinced her of food’s harmful intent.

My theory focuses on three suspects: online newspapers, 24-hour news stations, or her chiropractor’s newsletters. They probably fed her this information. I cannot say why she happened to be more vulnerable to info-excess than restaurant commercials.

Advertisers have no trouble enticing me with a double cheeseburger. She would not eat a restaurant cheeseburger though. Oh, how she detested the restaurants! She rattled on and on about the germs, both accidental and deliberate, in all restaurant food.

“Ranty rant. Rage. Roar,” she would say. That is how I heard it anyway.

“So?” I would respond. Then, she would roll her eyes and steer conversation to unrelated events.

That is, until one day, her fiancé died suddenly. Ironically, he choked on a turkey sausage. Grief seized her, and melancholy pierced her perspective. Nothing seemed significant enough to trouble her anymore—not even food.

It kinda makes me wonder what worries would suddenly erode if tragedy struck me. Maybe I would not write checks at the dinner table or something. Maybe they would be late, and I would stay calm. It must be liberating to have something tragic happen.

Nobody whispers about Diane's "anorexia" anymore. She does not diet, and she is not fat. She's just free. I still feel sad for her fiancé though. By all rights, he should have been killed by a faulty parachute in a heroic display rather than having been thrust into the throes of death by turkey sausage.

The Collector

George blamed his early balding on never having married or even fallen in love. Living alone wasn't as bad since he found Midas. The oversized white cat gave him someone to talk to when he felt lonesome. If he grew bored talking to Midas, he dusted and reorganized his vast collections. The apartment's lack of space did not deter him from shopping for additional items every Saturday afternoon.

George browsed the outdoor flea market aisles one Saturday when he felt a pinch on his back. He swung around to see an odd looking man dressed in a coffee-colored fedora and tattered khakis.

The little man analyzed a piece of white fuzz that he clutched between his wrinkled fingers. He looked up and asked, "Do you have pets?"

"Just one cat. Midas is his name." George brushed off his faded black T-shirt.

"I'm Earnest. Nice to meet ya." The little man extended his hand.

“George,” he said as he shook it.

Earnest lifted his hat and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. “George, I don’t suppose I could interest you in some Egyptian figurines. I need to sell a few and get out of this heat. It could kill a man my age, ya know?”

Partly out of sympathy, George agreed to follow the vendor to his table. He was impressed with the figurines’ detail and thought the vibrant colors would give his studio apartment an exotic flair, a real sense of soul.

“How much?” George asked the little man, who was quick to sit in a folding chair behind the table.

“Ten dollars. Forty for all five of ‘em.” Earnest reached in a bag to reveal a stack of registration cards. “The purchase includes a full lifetime warranty as long as you fill this card out.”

He took the forty dollars extended to him and handed George a pen. He grinned as his customer scribbled his name, address, and telephone number on the card.

George handed it to him. “My clumsy cat may force me to redeem this warranty.”

Earnest’s toothless grin grew wider. He said, “Visit my table next week. I may jus’ be gettin’ a new shipment in. You’ll be here, right?”

George replied, “There’s more? I’ll be here. See you Saturday morning!” He grabbed his new treasures and eagerly returned to his studio apartment.

Bookcases stuffed with alphabetized book, CD, and DVD collections lined the walls. George surveyed the apartment for the ideal spot to display his five statues and settled on a console table. He carefully arranged them in a semicircle and glanced suspiciously at his cat. “Midas, you stay off this table. You hear me?”

The shorthaired cat did not even open one eye in response. He remained curled in his basket soaking up the warm sun. George sighed as he walked to the kitchen, where he filled a pot of water for the stove. When he turned around, he noticed the figurines formed a straight line. They angled toward the window.

George shook his head in bewilderment and rearranged the five wooden statues back into a semi-circle. He stared at the figurines until he heard the sizzle of his overflowing pot. He was present-minded enough to adjust the heat, but distracted by the puzzling situation, added handful after handful of spaghetti.

The racket in the kitchen stirred Midas, and he jumped on the counter. “Bad Midas, get down!”

Midas eventually leapt from the counter when he was satisfied there were no open tuna cans. He kneaded the seat of a worn chair, circled his tail twice, and curled up for another nap. When George entered the living room, he again noticed the figurines changed position. They formed a straight line and angled, this time, toward the couch.

He decided to ignore the wooden statue and pushed Midas off his favorite chair. Out of the corner of his eye, he witnessed the Egyptian figurines swivel toward the cat as he moved back to his basket. As illogical as it seemed, George accepted these figurines moved of their own accord. He noticed Midas’s placement in the room affected their angle.

George jumped to his feet and grabbed the “E” book from his encyclopedia set. The four-page Egypt entry briefly mentioned a cat god known as Bast. “They’re worshipping him,” George mumbled to himself as he closed the book.

George knelt on the floor and peered at the figurines for several minutes, trying not to blink. The five statues stood motionless. George’s legs grew stiff, so he sat on the floor with his legs straight out to ease the discomfort.

The stiffness spread to the rest of his body. Careful not to remove his gaze from the statues, he laid flat on the floor. The mild discomfort grew to severe pain, enough to warrant a moment’s glance at his hand. Then he noticed his new tawny complexion. He closed his eyes in disbelief. He had become a figurine!

The pain abruptly stopped. George opened his eyes to see

Midas sniffing his face. The cat appeared enormous! He batted at George’s head with a paw. As the figurine spun, the room seemed to whirl around George as if he had a high fever.

He wanted to scream for help, but he was paralyzed.

*

The man from the flea market waited in vain for George's visit to his table on Saturday. He dialed George's visit to his table on Saturday. He dialed George's phone number from the registration card. The phone rang without answer. After several more phone attempts, Earnest figured it was time to pay a personal visit to the address on the registration card.

The landlord unlocked the door and waited impatiently as the little man looked around.

"Thanks so much," he said to the landlord as he handed him a fifty-dollar bill. "It's unlike him to leave town unexpectedly like that. He must be in some serious trouble. Let's see, George only wanted me to get a few things." Earnest tried to ignore the cat urine stench.

"Here they are," he said as he gathered six wooden statues.

Midas purred and rubbed against his feet. He stooped to pet him. "And the cat, of course. He's probably starving."

"I don't need no dead cats around here, that's fo sho," the landlord said as Earnest clumsily scooped the cat in one arm and held the statues tight in the other.

Earnest scurried out of the building to his car. He threw the cat in the backseat and carefully placed the Egyptian figurines on the passenger seat. As he drove away, he caressed his new statue and said, "I used to be just like you, George. You start a collection and when it's complete, you feel complete. But only for a short while. Then you need another quest, another collection to complete, to feel whole again until you spend all of your time caring for your things and shut everyone out of your life. All you ever really needed was people. That's why I only collect people now."

He picked up one figurine. "This is Chloe, I found her at the supermarket. Fred, well, I've had him since high school. I was an only child, you see. Now I have friends that will never hurt me or abandon me. It's all just so perfect, don't you agree?"

George heard all of the crazy little man's words, but he could not move his mouth in reply.

After a few moments of silence the little man said, "I thought so."

Death's Countdown

When my wife died, I realized every tick of the clock brings us nearer to death. So I began thinking more and more about my death. I thought about my funeral. It would be something simple—something with music. My brother Mike and his family would come, but Mike would be the only one to cry. Some of my old coworkers would make an appearance—mostly because they are retired and have nothing better to do. A drab man would recount my life in twenty minutes. Then I would be underground.

I envisioned myself laying there inside a powder blue casket with folded arms, unable to move. Even with closed eyes inside a casket, I would sense the ground encircling me. Six feet of dirt would separate me from the living world and my gravestone, which would read: James “Jim” Hennex, Beloved Husband. My only comfort would come from knowing my wife would slumber so near to me. That is what I saw in my mind’s eye as I listened to the ticking of the clock—death’s countdown.

Therefore, I grew determined not to waste any time. Time is valuable and should not be taken for granted. Money—you can always earn more of that. When you have no more time, that is it! Make the most of your time. Get things done, practical things that will last and benefit you in the future. Be a busy ant that works all summer to stock up loads and loads of time.

Hobbies were disposed of first. Every plastic model ship and superglue tube became rubbish. I stopped waiting hours to photograph the perfect angle of a magnificent bird. Goodbye, camera. I stopped paying my gym member dues. Adios, racket balls and rackets. I sold off the cabin and the land it was on. Sayonara to you, tents and fishing poles and canoes.

With no hobbies, I found myself watching more and more television. Waste! When I did not watch television, I listened to the radio. Waste! Those electronics—well, I loaded them in my car to donate to charities that collect time-wasters.

It was as I was loading my car that my brother called. Mike wanted to chat about this and that, trivial matters and frivolous things. I told

him I had to go and loaded that phone right on top of the heap I somehow managed to squeeze into the trunk of the black Volvo.

When I returned from the charity, I looked upon my furniture—the dusty, dusty furniture that I wasted time polishing. I knew it would not fit in the Volvo, so I dragged the wood furniture to my front lawn. I wrote “FREE” in black marker on three pieces of paper and taped each paper to a full bookshelf of books, a dining room table, and a full bureau of clothes.

It then occurred to me how much time I wasted changing the oil on my Volvo and pumping its hungry belly with gas. In broad, thick strokes I wrote “FREE” on one more piece of paper and taped it to its window.

After that, I returned to the couch and stared at the pendulum swinging on the tall grandfather clock. I listened to the tick, tick, ticking of the clock. For three hours, I sat and watched and listened without a single second of wasted time.

And I never felt deader in my life.

So I wrote my own death certificate on a piece of paper in black marker. I wrote my own

name: James "Jim" Hennex. I wrote the cause of death: Insanity. I wrote the time: 7:47. And I decided it could not end this way.

So I immediately created a birth certificate on a new piece of paper. I gave myself a new name: Peter Barello. I wrote the time: 7:48. And I decided this would be my new beginning, one in which I allowed myself to waste a little time. But not too much.

Petition

A girl in her late teens shuffled up the footpath as I maneuvered through the early morning fog in my Mini Coupe. She bore resemblance to someone from 1972 in her chocolate-colored suede skirt with swaying fringe punctuated by round wooden beads. Her stringy ash blond hair had not been straightened by an iron nor had it been enhanced by gel and shine. No, the hair appeared natural—a genuine detail modern day hippies tend to forget. A wooden guitar was slung over one shoulder with a wide embroidered strap.

Moments later, a boy walked in the same direction as the hippie holding a black guitar case in his whitened knuckles. His dark hair clashed with his gray eyes—which screamed for relief from some secret emotional turmoil. The boy's ragged clothes echoed his inaptitude to pierce whatever monstrosity mesmerized his mind. He looked as if he were off to play the blues with aged black men who strum with thick strokes impregnated by some inherited soul burden from slavery times.

More guitars approached. Some with slicked black hair; others wore bouffant hairdos. There were middle-aged women with orchid tattoos inked into elegant skin that poked out unapologetically from cotton sundresses. Asians wearing silver suits with purple cummerbunds sauntered past without taking notice of me. I gazed at tweens, who strolled by in striped knee highs with feather boas dangling from their necks. All carried guitars: classic, electric, and steel guitars of every shape and color. In mobs, they crowded the streets and made it impossible to accelerate a single inch without striking ninety-five pedestrians.

At first, I suspected they were headed to guitar lessons. As more came, I concluded a competition was set to commence. Next, I assumed the guitarists were elements of an extravagant flash mob. As the droves continued steadily, the situation grew more eerie. I punched the dial on the car radio hoping the disc jockey might mention the event as a side note to the morning traffic report.

Instead, he reported the horrific news with a tremor in his voice. In the night hours, the world's end had become evident with unequivocal signs. Cows had stopped giving

milk, and hens refused to lay eggs. People near Mount Vesuvius had been buried in ash while Hong Kong's citizens were covered in snow. World leaders urged mankind to gather together in cities across the globe to petition God for his compassion with dulcet notes offered up via human fingertips plucked harmoniously on guitar strings.

I did not abandon my vehicle to join them as you might think. More logical matters entered my mind like stocking up food and locating a fallout shelter. After the crowd thinned, I continued down the back street. I stopped at a grocery store. Aside from the lobsters that swam in the tank, the store showed no other signs of life. I estimated the cost of groceries I had swiped from the shelves and left that amount of cash—not a cent less—on the counter. From the parking lot, I phoned my sister and urged her to take refuge with me.

She replied, "If knowledge, logic, and intelligence are spawns of wisdom, they should cower in the face of expression." She said it as though she were reading the Gettysburg Address. I waited for her to expound on the subject, but after a few silent moments she simply said, "Huey, I can't play the guitar and

talk to you simultaneously. I have to go.
Goodbye and....good luck.”

I tossed the cell phone on my passenger seat and stared into the distance. I scratched my forehead under the front of my ball cap and tried to remember the way to Aunt Jane’s farmhouse.

An hour and several wrong turns later, I finally arrived. Aunt Jane was nowhere to be found, but the storm cellar was just as I remembered. I had scarcely unloaded the food and closed the doors when a massive blast shook the ground. Intense heat gusted on my flesh.

It was several hours later when I awoke. Chili from an exploded can dripped from the shelter’s ceiling. Burned flesh odor filled my nostrils. My muscles were tight. My swollen eye throbbed.

Then I reached up and touched my face. I patted my lips. I realized my mouth had been burned into a permanent sneer. Broken bones prevented me from standing on my feet. So I laid there and wished for a guitar or a banjo or lyre. After awhile, I began to hum.

Fickle Humans

Joe's fresh corpse lay still beside the creek. An angel promptly appeared to lead Joe's soul to places beyond.

Joe's soul protested, "I will remain with my body until it's found."

"Very well," she said and floated away.

Flies buzzed around his head and laid eggs in his open wounds. His muscles stiffened. His skin grew waxy, shrank, and decomposed until no skin was left. Heavy rains fell; the creek swelled. His bones washed away, disjoined by the current.

"Angel! Angel!" Joe's soul shouted. "Come back." But she did not return.

The Sinner's Prayer

Abi, Mrs. Walker, and Reverend Walker finished the Sinner's Prayer with a simultaneous "Amen." Uncomfortable silence followed the solemn moment. Mrs. Walker, as hostess, felt obligated to fill this silence with the clatter of gold-trimmed teacups.

Rev. Walker smiled widely at his new protégé. He exclaimed in his southern accent, "Wot a pleasure it will be to baptize ma neighba b'fore th' congregation on Sunday!"

Abi asked, "Isn't baptism for children? I don't think it's right for me. I do appreciate the tea and your time, Reverend."

Abi wanted to get acclimated to her new status as a Christian before she practiced rites and rituals. She'd simply accepted a casual invitation for tea, but the reverend proved to be rather persuasive about the religion.

"I'll think about it," Abi conceded. They bid their goodbyes, and Abi walked home.

The art deco skunk print greeted Abi with his usual bouquet as she entered her foyer and dropped her keys on a desk that overflowed with a collection of skunks, stuffed and sculpted. She climbed the stairs and readied herself for bed. Painted in lotions and adorned in her pink chenille bathrobe, she crawled onto her wicker bed and curled up with a romance paperback.

She barely read a word when an evil voice shouted, "You are..."

Abi clasped her ears, but the voice continued, "...not allowed to..."

She closed her eyes tightly, froze her thoughts, and wished the voice away. It was silent. Abi opened her eyes once more.

Two yellow eyes framed in green-black scales glared right back into Abi's. The figure stood upright. The female form appeared to be naked except for the scales which served as her skin.

The voice seemed deceptively sweet, "I don't think you know what trouble you started, sweetheart. Why don't you just recant the little prayer? If you do, we promise to leave you alone with your kissy book." The lizard-like

creature snatched the book and analyzed the cover. Abi said nothing but simply stared.

Perturbed by her silence, the creature fanned out her neck, opened her mouth, and hissed in Abi's face. Abi's shrill scream distressed the creature. It climbed the wall and onto the ceiling where it looked down on Abi before it scurried out of the bedroom door.

When the scampering sound grew distant, Abi forced herself to breathe again. She was suddenly aware she'd curled into the fetal position and rolled onto her back to regain composure. She, then, noticed her back never touched the covers.

She looked down and saw her bed six inches below her. As her fear increased, Abi hovered higher and higher. She grabbed the wicker headboard in an attempt to cease the levitation. Abi was not strong enough to pull her body down. She needed to find a calm state of mind.

Contrived images of beloved objects flooded her mind's eye. Quilts and skunks pacified her terrified mind. Abi fell to the bed like a concrete block dropped into a muddy river. She

felt so alone. For a brief second, she wished the lizard would return.

Abi was wrong though; she was not alone. The corner of her eye caught a flash of light. She twisted her head and saw an evil silhouette. This figure appeared to have been dead sometime. Streams of light outlined rotting features. It lulled Abi into a feeling of powerlessness. The demon of light beckoned, "Come." Abi complied. Hand in hand, the demon led Abi to the kitchen where she suggested, "Take some medicine for your head." Abi's head began to ache so horribly, it felt as though it had been struck with an ax.

Abi took one pill. The pain subsided. Moments later, the pain returned worse than before. She took more and more pills until vomit spewed from her mouth. She vomited time and again, until the thrust caused fluids to ooze from her other bodily orifices. Abi's body was at its weakest when her mind defiantly concluded she would not allow herself to die like this.

Abi pulled her body to the door. She propped herself up on the doorknob and managed to leave the house. Abi struggled to her

neighbor's doorstep. The weakness overcame her and she passed out.

*

The couch seemed unfamiliar to Abi, but the southern accent was unmistakably familiar. "Call th' hospital. I'll git a quilt," the Reverend directed Mrs. Walker. The Reverend fussed with the contents of an overstuffed hall closet while Abi dragged herself to the bathroom unnoticed. She sat fully clothed in the running bath when Rev. Walker rushed in.

"Baptize me now!"

The Reverend knelt. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, I baptize you." He dunked her head in the bath water.

The Reverend's wife cleaned the vomit from her mouth and hair. A fresh set of clothes were handed through a crack in the bathroom door. Abi reassured the couple of her health as she stepped out the door.

"Now don' miss church this Sunday," the Reverend called after

Abi. "We'll be takin' communion."

Abi groaned.

A Christmas Gift

The plane shook violently from left to right and up and down. The flight attendant's announcement that they had simply hit some clear wind turbulence did little to comfort Brad. He repeatedly ran his hand through his thick black hair.

In an effort to relax, he closed his eyes to picture his destination, a place he still referred to as home even though he moved to Las Vegas a year earlier to work as a missionary for a small church. He envisioned the holiday table complete with the real silver and expensive china from the glass cabinet that had been given to his parents as wedding gifts from obscure rich relatives.

He could nearly hear his father's corny jokes followed by his mother's giggling. He could almost taste the jalapeno stuffing, pumpkin cream cheese pie, and hot lemonade. He imagined the familiar smell of cinnamon from burning scented taper candles neatly tucked into a silk poinsettia centerpiece.

Brad asked God to experience this Christmas tradition once more. He made wild promises to God if the plane would land safely in New Hampshire. When the plane did land securely, Brad promptly ordered clear soda to settle his stomach from an airport restaurant.

An hour later, he acquired an upgrade to the economy rental he reserved. An insincere apology fell from the lips of a car rental representative who looked like he might quit at any moment. Brad drove off the lot in a metallic Ford Mustang with a grin. He did not stop until he swerved into his familiar driveway—edging so close to his father’s Chevy that the rental may have nudged the bumper. He sauntered up the pathway in front of the house and peered in the picture window. A foggy pane shielded Brad’s view of the living room. He could only make out the fake fir nestled up against the glass and the dreamlike shimmer of multicolored Christmas lights.

Despite his inability to see, he knew the brown couch boasted a pristine appearance from under a clear plastic cover. The box television, never signaled by a remote, faithfully rendered whatever channel two broadcasted. That is when the front door swung open. In the

doorway, his mother wiped her hands on her apron. They embraced for a long time before she led him into the kitchen.

“So good to see you! Jay, Brad’s here,” she called to his dad as if he were not sitting at the kitchen table beside them.

His father glanced up and nodded his head. A little confused by the unwelcoming nod, Brad said nothing but hung his suede coat on the wooden peg between his father’s work coat and his mother’s knitted shawl.

His mother piled food on the china and set it before the three of them. His father shoveled the steaming food into his mouth.

“Dad, I think we should bless the food especially on Christ’s birthday, don’t you?”

“Are you still going through this God phase? First it was science, and all you ever did was blow things up in that lab you made out in that there shed. Next it was drinking, which got you fired from every job you could find. Now it’s God. What’s next?”

“Dad, this is not a phase! God helped me understand how He created the universe. He persuaded me to get sober. He changed my life, and He can change yours too if you let Him.” Brad realized he was shaking. He took a few deep breaths, bowed his head, and folded his hands.

His mother followed his example. Ruthie said to her husband, “Come on, Jay. You know what’s right.

His father bowed his head but did not fold his hands as Brad led the family in prayer.

“Lord, we thank You for this time together with family and for this delicious meal. We thank You that You sent Your Son to die on the cross for us so we would be reconciled to You. In Christ’s Name, Amen.”

Jay asked his son, “So what’s this ‘reconcile’ all about? Why must I be reconciled to God? I never even knew me and God was fighting.”

“Sin separated us from God. Not just you, Dad, but all of mankind. All we have to do is accept his free gift of salvation. Then God will save you

from your sins, and you will spend an eternity with Him.”

“That church has you thinkin’ you’re so smart and got everything all figured out. Nobody knows what God is like ‘cause He don’t talk much.”

“Actually, Dad, we do know what God is like because He gave us the Bible to help us understand our relationship with Him.”

The rest of the holiday dinner was oddly silent. The pumpkin cream cheese pie did not taste sweet. The jalapeno stuffing tasted dry. And the hot lemonade was lukewarm. The tension thickened to such a point, Brad felt compelled to ask, “Dad, do you want to receive God’s salvation?”

A tear seeped from his mother’s eye. “Tell him you do, Jay.”

His father fussed with the collar of his plaid button up from some inexpensive mart. “You might need forgiveness for all that stuff you done back when you was drinkin’ but I never done much bad stuff in my life.”

Brad sat up straight and stopped plowing fork tine trails in his pie. It felt as though flames might burst from his mouth. Miraculously, words came out instead, “Dad, everybody needs forgiveness.”

Jay looked away quickly. He grabbed his coat from the peg and walked out the door. Ruth shook her head. Brad felt compelled to stroke her back a couple of times to soothe her before he snatched his jacket and walked out the door. He jogged a little until he could pace his steps in stride with his father, who was walking down the sidewalk in front of the neighbor’s house.

“I’m sorry for putting you on the spot like that, Dad. It’s a big decision to give your life to Christ. When you’re ready, you just call that church up there on the corner and talk to somebody.”

Jay patted his son on the back and wiped a tear from his eye. “I’m sorry, Brad. It’s just, well...I changed your diapers. It’s hard for me to believe you know what you’re talking about.”

“I just trust what the Bible says, Dad.”

Jay scratched his neck. “Alright, well I guess I can trust in that. I do want God to save me from my sins.”

Brad breathed out a deep sigh of relief. “All we have to do is get on our knees and say a short prayer.”

“Our high knees or our low knees? Get it high knees—hineys? Like sit on our butts. ‘Cause I’d rather do that.” Jay chuckled.

Brad rolled his eyes. “Forget the knees. Let’s just stand. Repeat after me: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, I know that You died on the cross and were resurrected on the third day. I know You are alive now and hold the power to forgive sins.

Have mercy on me, a sinner. I give my life to You and proclaim You as my Savior. In Christ’s Name I pray, Amen.”

As Jay repeated Brad’s words, tears rolled down his cheeks. Jay tried to wipe them as quickly as they fell, but his hands could not keep up with the overflow pouring from his heart. When Jay finished, Brad hugged his dad. Though he had said this prayer with lots of strangers in Las

Vegas, this time it meant so much more. His eyes welled up too.

His dad interrupted the silence and pulled away from his son. The two turned around and headed back toward the house. “The Harrisons still don’t know how to hang their Christmas lights. Look at ‘em.” He pointed at his neighbor’s Christmas decorations.

“Yeah, dad. The Harrisons can do better than me. You oughta see my apartment in Vegas. It needs serious help.”

Jay led the way on the path past the picture window. “So you still need your old dad, then?”

Jay stepped in the door with Brad close behind. “Of course! And mom too.” He looked at his mom as she placed the piece of clean china back in the glass cabinet. “The jalapeno stuffing recipe would come in handy. I tried to make it once, but I used too much cinnamon.”

Ruth giggled. “Cinnamon? Heavens no! There is no cinnamon in that recipe.”

“Oh, I think I may have gotten the french toast ingredients confused with the jalapeno stuffing recipe.”

Ruth, Jay, and Brad walked to the living room. His father sat in his recliner and Ruth sat on the plastic covered couch. Brad distributed the gifts like he did every year since he was a little child.

Jay said, “Before we get started, I want to thank you, Brad. You know—for what you did outside.”

Ruth wrinkled her brow. “What happened outside?”

Brad said to his mother, “Dad gave his life to Christ.” He turned to his father, “But that was not a gift from me. That is a gift from God...”

Ruth interrupted, “...to all of us.”

Note to Readers

Maybe you are like Jay's father from "A Christmas Gift" and you have never given your life to God. Even though Jesus died on the cross for all the sins of mankind, you must personally accept the free gift of salvation. If you have never made this choice and would like to accept Jesus' blood as payment for your salvation so that you can be in a good relationship with God, pray this prayer with me right now:

Lord, I confess I have sinned against You. I claim Jesus' blood as payment for my sins. I believe Jesus is the Son of God and my Savior. I believe He died and rose again. Send the Holy Spirit to teach me and guide me in the way I should go. Thank You that I am now reconciled to You, Father. In Christ's Name, Amen.

Congratulations on making such a wise decision! I pray you will maintain this close relationship with God by attending church and reading your Bible. Thanks for taking the time to read *The Footstool: A Christian Short Story Collection*. I look forward to meeting you in heaven one day!

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