

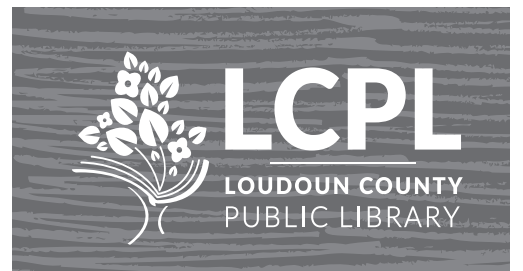
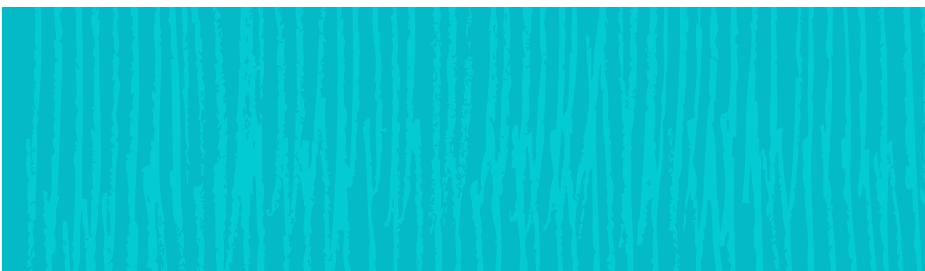


LCPL 2025-2026

Short Story Contest



2025-2026
Contest
Winners
Adults



Dedication/Thank You	2
About Our Guest Author	3
About Our Guest Judge	4
2026 Adult Participants	5
Honorable Mentions	9
The Brownstone by Carolyn Cullen	10
Meagain by Julie Saba	14
Salvation by Linda Jacobsen.....	18
Stains of Life by Gary DeThomasis	31
Winners	35
Fifth Place: The Numbers by Amollie Stoermer.....	36
Fourth Place: Almost Android Agnes by Victoria Nordyke	46
Third Place: Hope by Deb Snyder.....	58
Second Place: Man O War by Zachary Taylor	65
First Place: Fair Chase Pigtopia by Joan Kennedy	75

Dedication/Thank You

This anthology of short stories is dedicated with heartfelt gratitude to the family and friends of James Horton, whose generosity and vision through the James Horton for the Arts Trust Fund make this annual contest possible.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to the Loudoun Library Foundation which helps fund this and so many other library programs.

Finally, a special thank you to Eagle Ridge Middle School for graciously hosting our award ceremony this year.

And to all our writers: thank you for sharing your stories with us. We enjoyed reading every one.

About Our Guest Author



Meg Medina

Meg Medina is the eighth National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature. She is a *New York Times* bestselling and award-winning author who writes for children and teens. She has won numerous awards for her work, including the Ezra Jack Keats Writer Award as well as the Pura Belpré Award and Honor. She is the 2019 Newbery Medal winner for her novel *Merci Suárez Changes Gears*. When she is not writing, she works on community projects that support Latinx youth. The daughter of Cuban immigrants, she grew up in Queens, New York, and now lives in Richmond, Virginia.

About Our Guest Judge



Nathan Leslie

Nathan Leslie won the 2019 Washington Writers' Publishing House prize for fiction for his collection of short stories, *Hurry Up and Relax*. He is also the series editor for *Best Small Fictions*. *Invisible Hand* (2022) and *A Fly in the Ointment* (2023) are his latest books. Nathan's previous books of fiction include *Three Men*, *Root and Shoot*, *Sibs*, and *The Tall Tale of Tommy Twice*. He is also the author of a collection of poems, *Night Sweat*. Nathan is the founder and organizer of the Reston Reading Series in Reston, Virginia, and the publisher and editor of the online journal *Maryland Literary Review*. Previously he was series editor for *Best of the Web* and fiction editor for *Pedestal Magazine*. His fiction has been published in hundreds of literary magazines such as *Shenandoah*, *North American Review*, *Boulevard*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Cimarron Review*. Nathan's nonfiction has been published in *The Washington Post*, *Kansas City Star*, and *Orlando Sentinel*. Nathan currently lives in Northern Virginia.

2026 Adult Participants

Aimee Adesso	“The Curse of Castle Hospital of the Insane”
Erin Aiken	“Vic's Christmas (Story for middle school kids)”
Sarah Aitken	“The Choosing”
Mathew Annis	“The Case of the Missing Professor”
David Arbogast	“Another Cup of Coffee”
Sheeba Asad	“A letter Written by the Moon”
Athena Balanou	“Memo: Listen Up”
Cheyenne Baltimore	“Bickering in the Garden Bed”
Cody Bechtold	“Limerence”
Chelsie Berninger	“I know Better”
Bharat	“The Punch”
Elizabeth Bible	“A Squirrel A Bell and Monsters”
Yeonsoo Bierly	“Muted: A Woman Who Forgot Her Own Voice”
Elisabeth Biggs	“Glimpses from Grace”
Anne Bittner	“Memories of Midnight”
Laura J. Bobrow	“The Kid Needs Help”
John Breighner	“Donnie the Dalmatian Puppy”
Atlas Breighner	“To Oblivion”
DeShonte Brooks-Mullings	“And Ever”
Juwairiyah Brown	“Her Second Choice”
Tim Brown	“Korea”
Carleigh Cale	“Backwoods”
J Marie Cassell	“Harry Dalton”
Isolde Chang	“A Melancholy In Company”
Bakhtawar Chaudhary	“Don't Bank on That”
Huma Chaudhry	“The Woodshop”
Amit Chauhan	“Seasons”
Alex Chung	“We Carry His Cross”
Bill Cimino	“What Our Children Will Know”
Michele Copp	“A Debt Repaid with Love”
Anne Cormier	“Final Harvest”
Carolyn Cullen	“The Brownstone”
Ethan Dahlby	“Parasites In Your Stomach”
Zenia deHaven	“Ghoulis Tendencies”
Paul Derrickson	“Read Between the Lines”
Gary DeThomasis	“Stains of Life”
Ryan Donmoyer	“Making Three”
Rosemary Dougherty	“The Stranger Next Door”
Lily Eftekhar	“Ginger Conformist”
Cara Eisenberg	“The funny sweet story of a sort of big girl”
Ai El gibrán	“The Winter League”

Christina Farello	“Granddaughter & Grandfather”
Elif Fenercioglu	“The Confessions of a One-Time – But a Big Time – Liar”
Krista Ferrara	“Leveret”
John Flannery	“The Pupps You Say!”
Jack Fleisher	“The Village of Xariomeia”
Ricky Ginsburg	“Falling”
Carlos Gonzalez	“Un Amor desconocido”
Oxford Graham	“Original”
Eric Green	“Young Abe Lincoln--The Escaped Slave’s North Star”
Robert Gribbin	“Yuri”
Oscar Gutierrez	“Between Snow and the Shutter”
Michael Gutshall	“Countdown”
Paul Hackley	“Colleen”
Roslyn Hall-Wurst	“Ghost Runner”
Kyle Hayden	“The Scent of Choice”
Jim Hazlett	“Why Is My Autobiography So Uninteresting?”
Jonathan Henehan	“XR Love”
Danny Hill	“Betty”
Lori Hoglund	“The Party”
Joseph Hood	“The Flying Goat”
Jacqueline Hoskins	“When the Past is Present”
Carl Huber	“The Watchman”
Emily Italiano	“Scarlette”
Steven Jackey	“The One Who Answered”
Linda Jacobsen	“Salvation”
Gerhard Jansen	“Old Prauge”
Grace Johnson	“Connecting Flights”
Amy Jorquera	“Kimmy and the Key”
Ranger Kasdorf	“A Matter of Time”
Amanjot Kaur	“Homebound”
Chyna Kelley	“What's happening in Pine Hills?”
John Kelly	“The Eastern Epoch”
Joan Kennedy	“Fair Chase Pigtopia”
Audrey Kim	“Vintage Mandoline”
Maeghan Kimball	“Reign O'er Me”
Natisha King	“Moonbeams & Good Dreams”
Pierce King	“No Playing Through”
SK Korkmas	“Candy”
Gregory Lalire	“Diamond in the Rough”
Ashley Lam	“Spa Queen”
Michelle Le Teigner	“Mended Honor”
Daniel Lewis	“Better News”
Collin Lieberg	“Interspatial Detective Agency”

Jane Limplecht	“Home Baking”
Kelly Lühring	“The Degas is crooked.”
Carlos Macias	“The Seeds and a Spark”
Shannon Madden	“The Man who went to Funerals”
Colleen Malone	“Thanks for the Ominous Onyx, Ma”
Leanne Manzo	“Rusty Flights”
Aidan Mason	“Drowned Dreams”
Jessica Maxson	“1280”
Cara Mayo	“Yellow-orange”
Meg Melusen	“And the Oscar Goes to....”
Carol Meschter	“Arizona Covid”
Madison Metzmeier	“A Potent Aftertaste”
Alan Meyrowitz	“Last Straw”
Amelia Monroe	“How to Ghost Properly”
Val Muller	“Codex Arcana”
Katherine Murphy	“Story Matters”
Qais Noorzai	“Consciously, Unconscious”
Victoria Nordyke	“Almost Android Agnes”
Wendy Norton	“Ghost Story: An October Yarn”
Larisa, Guy Novoselsky	“The Illusion of Control: A Vacation That Tested Me”
Wallace Owings	“CONSEQUENCES”
Leo Palmer	“Caius, in All His Shapes”
Rachel Pardo	“A diatribe of what I should have said.”
Rachel Pardo	“On the OtherSide”
Alexandria Pecia	“The Watch”
Krishna Pendyala	“Milestone Birthday”
Ann Plank	“Moonlight”
Heather Reagan	“Snake On The Rocks”
Ranjini Richards	“A Vicarious Joy”
Susan Roland	“The Zombie Story”
Kathleen Ross	“The Real Witches”
Margit Royal	“Fatherlands”
Julia Saba	“Meagain”
Marcivette Salas	“The Last Flawed Man”
Jillian Sanchez	“Would You Event Want Me”
Hollie Satterfield	“As If I Was a Person”
Rupa Saxena	“The House That Remembers”
Jody Schein	“The Wager”
Steve Sheets	“Half a Body”
M. Maureen Skahan	“Nice”
Paul Skeen	“The Still Bike”
Debra Snyder	“Hope”
Anand Sridharan	“Guardians of Ampan”

Rachel Stacy	“The Imposters”
Amollie Stoermer	“The Numbers”
Laura and Evelyn Sturza	“A Fantasy Boat Trip_and_Rock, Water, Skin, Bark”
Harish Sundararaman	“The Licensed Truth”
Ryan Sybertz	“Missing Hour”
Zachary Taylor	“Man O War”
Gavin Tolen (pen name Tillman)	“The Road”
Shirley Tran	“Modern Love: A Lost Connection”
Jonas Trepanier	“The Other Runner”
Morgan Vannell	“Just As Dark”
Heidi Vermette	“Enough”
David Vermette	“The Ancient Cavern”
Thomas Walker	“The Midnight Marauder”
Nathan Walsh	“California Zephyr”
Nnamdi Watambwa	“What Stepped Onto the Stage”
Anne Weshinskey	“Too Big For Your Face”
Sherman West	“The Ides of June”
Logan Whitacre	“A Peculiar Gift”
Barbara Wilan	“In the Card”
Nicole Williams	“Teach the Children Well”
Kyung-Ok Yi	“A Life Lesson”
Aleeza Zafar	“Part I: Pulse of Deception & Part 2: Laced Retribution”
Oliya Zamaray	“Sea Glass Runners”

Honorable Mentions

The Brownstone

By Carolyn Cullen

I sank most of my inheritance into a gorgeous brownstone in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, built in 1859. The updates snowballed, as they do. Guttled the kitchen and three bathrooms. Replaced all the flooring with Brazilian rosewood and the finest marble tiling. Kept the original tin ceiling and tilework around the bedroom fireplace. It's a fabulous home—for someone else. I'm completely terrified of it.

The first night after that last coat of paint, I opened the master bathroom door and a dark-haired woman with sunken eyes and dressed in a crimson silk robe sat perched on the bathtub ledge. She seemed to be painting her toenails, much like my mother used to do when she was young and healthy.

“Yes?” the woman said. As if I were a child, a nuisance, interrupting her alone time.

Much worse, the Calacatta gold marble I had installed was gone and everything was back to the pink and green miscreation that it had been. I screamed and slammed the door. Popped a pill—surely, I had forgotten to take it—and I haven't revisited that bathroom since.

Two nights later, I woke up groggy to complete darkness, beyond parched. Rather than drink straight from the bathroom faucet, as I did before my raven-haired companion appeared, I padded to the kitchen. My rendering was gone, and this kitchen dated further back than the version I had gutted. I had to admit, I loved the front-apron sink. And the Hoosier cabinet would be the main event on *Antiques Roadshow*. Everything was gleaming black and white, including the man by the small stove, bedecked in a white tux.

Mid-blow on a saxophone, he looked up at me and choked, “Get out.” Fiery smoke belched from his mouth with each word. His white tux turned to ash and wafted to the floor.

I stumbled backwards and ran before I could ponder the heap of cremated wool and silk, or whether the man's ghastly flesh would crumble along with it. Sprinting to the sanctuary of my bedroom, I passed the door to a telephone niche under the stairs. That niche certainly wasn't there when I moved in, and I didn't dare inspect it. Instead, I popped two pills and, shockingly, fell asleep.

My mother visited me in a dream that night. She looked as she did before the cancer savagely ate her—spirit to flesh. She enveloped me in her long, tanned arms, hand-tailored silk chiffon dress and malodorous amber perfume. I hadn't brought myself to throw away the half-empty bottle I kept on my dresser.

“We all fear change, Darling,” she said as she held me.

I would have rolled my eyes a few months ago. Now, the traitorous things burned and I squeezed her back. “Did you deliberately hit Dad's Porsche after the divorce?” I never asked when she was alive.

She shook, life and laughter erupting from her. “You know I did.”

She wasn't perfect, but neither was I.

I woke up breathless, my bedsheets wrapped around my torso and neck. Snickers sounded from the shadows as I shakily untied the sailor's knots that had been constricting my airway. “Go to bed!” I shouted at no one.

Day five or six post-renovations, “Get out” sounds on repeat in the light of day. Each room I enter, the work I'd done melts down the walls into a swirling puddle of color on the floor. Gaunt faces flash before me. I can't remember how many pills I've taken, nor the day my mother died. Food holds no appeal and soon, I know I'll be one of the gaunt faces.

I trip in the grand foyer. Eventually crawl through the puddles and over to the molten front door. My shaking hand stretches up to the knob. It won't turn. I use all the strength I can muster, twist and push the door open, breaking free to find a sky tinged viridian and coal black just beyond this hell. Not a soul is out there, and I'm not sure where I'd feel more alone.

I lie prostrate across the threshold, building the courage to shed myself completely of the house, walk away and let it melt from the inside out for all I care.

But a middle-aged man jogs over from across the street and slows, approaching like I may be a feral animal. "Do you need help?"

"The spirits don't like what I've done with the place," I mumble.

He looks up at the sky and back down at me. "They'll quiet down once they get used to you. When I moved in, my clothes were thrown out on the street every morning for two weeks."

My eyes dart over his salt-and-paprika beard. I accept his offered hand, if only to confirm he is warm-bodied flesh and blood. Standing—barely, I ask, "How is this haunted nightmare a kept secret?"

He waves at a neighbor, a woman watering potted plants on her walkway as if this were a normal afternoon in quiet suburbia. "They don't like us talking to outsiders."

And I remember my mother's way of handling things. I'll be damned twice if I spend her fortune on this stunning property and allow its spirits to drive me out quietly. I straighten and attempt to run broken fingernails through my snarled hair. "Then, this ends now."

He nods and motions to his own brownstone. "If you need anything."

I slam the door behind me. Stomp through the sludge that was once Brazilian rosewood. I'm pulled by my ankles with whiplash speed, landing violently on my tailbone. Chuckles sound

from all corners of the room. That damn saxophone taunts me with a jazzy descant, not three feet from where I lie. My amused specters choose not to show themselves. Cowards now, all of them.

I scramble to my feet and run. Phantom hands grab at my calves, but I stumble to the storage room off the kitchen. Leftover boxes, paint, brushes, a toolkit... and a sledge hammer.

I stand to my full height, throw my weapon over my shoulder and slam it into the nearest wall with everything I have. Again, and again. Screams and furious jazz music eddy around me, building to a deafening crescendo. I slaughter the wall—which I'm not so sure isn't a loadbearing wall, I realize—but I'll figure it out after I've made my point.

“Enough,” I choke out, my arms and lungs burning with exertion. “I'm not leaving. Get over yourselves, or I'm taking down another wall on this level and adding a balcony off my bedroom.”

Invisible chitters.

“And I have a friend at *Home and Garden* who would *love* to feature the house,” I call out.

A flash of the dark-haired woman in the corner—head down, eyes up. Absolutely terrifying for someone who wasn't already half-crazed.

“And maybe before that, I'll get every priest, rabbi and medium I can find to exercise you all right to hell!”

The woman disappears. The saxophone dwindles. My beautiful hardwood floors and freshly painted walls materialize. Cold fingers thump my forehead—one final dig for good measure, I imagine. I nearly drop the sledge hammer in surprise, and a deeply depressing thought plays across my mind: perhaps I would gain a new family here in my brownstone.

Meagain

By Julia Saba

I tell people my name sounds like Megan, and I let them settle there. It's easier than explaining that my mother named me Meagain, two words pressed together like an afterthought that refused to stay separate. She said it once, laughing, when I was old enough to ask why my birth certificate looked wrong. "Because I wanted me again," she said, "another me." She waited for praise, for the cleverness to land. It did not.

I understand now that the name was a prophecy. Before I took my first breath, my mother had already centered herself in my life.

In the present, I am standing at my kitchen sink, watching soap bubbles slide down porcelain like tiny, vanishing planets. My daughters are in the living room, building a city out of couch cushions. They are loud and determined. I love them with a steadiness that surprises me daily. My phone vibrates on the countertop, a message from my mother lighting the screen. I do not open it. Instead, I dry my hands slowly while taking in the plush city coming to life in my living room.

When I was a child, my mother was what people called fun. She wore loud prints and told stories that grew bigger every time she repeated them. She never hovered. She never worried. If I skinned my knee, she handed me a paper towel and told me I was tough. If I disappeared into the neighborhood for hours, she assumed I would come back. I did. Children adapt to absence the way plants lean toward light.

She laughed a lot back then, but it was a laugh that never invited you closer. I learned early that her joy was not something I could touch. It belonged to her, like everything else.

There were pills, though I did not know what they were. White ovals in orange bottles. Rattling sounds from her purse. She told me she had pain from a surgery, something that

happened before I was born, something that never quite healed. She told me that doctors gave her medicine. Doctors always knew best. I believed that too.

In my teenage years, the absence became useful. My friends envied my freedom. No curfews. No questions. My small town physical education teacher steered my time into Track and Field. I ran to the sound of my breath tearing through my chest. I learned how to push past pain toward something clean and earned. My mother never came to a single meet. When I told her I placed, she said, "I always wanted to run track," without looking away from the television.

At the time, it felt like permission to do whatever I wanted. I could become whoever I wanted so I told myself that I didn't need her. Teenagers are very good at mistaking neglect for independence.

In my early twenties, I dated a man whose mother changed everything.

She noticed things. She asked how my classes were going and waited for my answer. She stood up when I entered the room, pulled me into a hug that did not ask permission but somehow did not steal it either. She remembered my birthday. She remembered my middle name. When I was sick, she brought soup and stayed long enough to see if I finished it.

Watching the way she mothered her son was like learning a language I had heard my whole life but never spoken. She worried. She hovered. She loved loudly and unapologetically. I felt grief before I knew its name, a low ache for something I had never been given but suddenly understood I deserved.

That relationship ended, but the realization did not. It followed me through college, through my wedding, through the moment I held my first child and felt my entire body reorganize itself around the need to protect.

My mother grew worse with time. The silliness dulled, the stories lost their charm, and her moods swung without warning. She forgot things that mattered and remembered slights that did not. There were moments when she seemed almost present, lucid and soft, and I clung to those moments like proof. Proof that somewhere inside her was a mother who could love me the way I loved my daughters.

I told myself stories to survive, that she was not an addict, not really. The pills came from doctors who failed to manage her pain responsibly. That her own mother had been the same way - absent, addicted, swallowed whole by her own suffering. Trauma, I learned, can pass like an heirloom if no one refuses it. Understanding is a dangerous thing; it can turn into an excuse if you let it.

It happened once.

A single moment was enough. A sharp shift in her voice, the sudden unpredictability of her mood, the way my daughter's body stiffened before she began to cry. It was not dramatic, not loud, not something strangers would have rushed to label as harm. But I recognized it instantly, because I have lived inside of that moment.

As I pulled my child into my arms, I watched my mother closely. The way her attention drifted, unfixed, already moving elsewhere toward whatever was in her bloodstream. The slurred edges of her words that evolved into a mumble. I saw the pattern stretch backward through generations and forward toward my children, and for the first time, I decided to end it. My children do not have to endure what I once mistook for normal.

The decision did not arrive in a single moment. It accumulated.

It gathered in the years I spent softening the truth so I could keep loving her, in the patience I mislabeled as empathy, in the hope I kept shrinking so it would fit who she actually

was. It gathered as I became a mother myself. With every ordinary act of care I gave my children, the distance between what I had received and what I was now providing widened until it could no longer be ignored. By the time the choice made itself known, it felt less like an ending and more like recognition. It came quietly, the way resolve often does. Standing in my kitchen. Soap bubbles dissolving. My phone vibrating with a message I would not read. I did not announce my choice. I did not make a spectacle. I simply stopped opening the door to harm.

Now, when my daughters run toward me with scraped knees and wild stories, I kneel. I listen. I show up. I hover when it matters. I let them see me choose them again and again.

My name is Meagain, but it no longer belongs to my mother. It belongs to me. And this time, me again means something different.

Salvation

By Linda Jacobsen

Wafting from the hearth, the warm savory scents of roast pork and potatoes, nutmeg and toasted pastry, drew the children from their board game of Nine Man's Morrice to mother's side. She lifted the lid of the steaming cast iron pot for only a moment to check that this special preparation did not overcook. On tiptoe, Abigail and her twin brother Aaron peered around Mama's long skirts to catch a glimpse of the tantalizing, almost-done meat pie.

"Is it done, Mama?" Abigail asked.

"Not yet. Mind you both set the table now and leave the cooking to me."

Clanking of cutlery and platters echoed through the cozy room as the twins busily laid each place setting on the worn but spotless wood-plank table.

"It's my turn to get the water!" Aaron insisted on his way to the sideboard to fetch the family's prize pewter pitcher.

"No, no, Aaron, put the pitcher away! *By my word*, I almost forgot. The good Pastor will think us above our station."

For on this day, the Whitherbees welcomed the inimitable Reverend Josiah Hazen. The revered – and feared – parish pastor sermonized at every worship service about recognizing the Devil's work in all aspects of life. The devout must be pure of thought, be attired simply with no ornament, and conduct themselves always in service to the Lord.

Aaron, crestfallen, dutifully stowed the offending vessel.

Bustling in from the porch, Nathan said, "Here's more wood for the fire, Pru." The winter afternoon's crisp air emanated from his flowing wool cape like a chilly, invisible fog.

"Smells wonderful!"

Pru blushed, smiled warmly at her lanky, ebony-haired husband. “’Tis almost ready. Did ye see the Reverend?”

“No, but not to worry, portly Pastor Hazen would never let a meal grow cold on his account.”

“Nathan! Don’t talk like that! The children....”

“Well, it’s true,” he said as he tousled Aaron’s curls.

Prudence sat by the fire, called the twins over and took a hand of each.

“Listen very closely. You must be on your very best behavior this afternoon. The pastor expects children to be seen and not heard. That means you do not speak unless spoken to. Do you understand?”

Aaron nodded.

“But, Mama –” Abigail began.

“No, Abby, not another word. And I think you both know what I am talking about.”

Prudence held Abby’s eyes with a stern gaze.

“Yes, Mama.”

“Off with you. Change out of those soiled clothes, and be quick about it.”

“Yes, mama,” the twins chorused.

* * *

A resounding knock announced the arrival of the guest of honor.

Nathan greeted Pastor Hazen, “We are honored to have you here, sir.”

Ruddy complected, short and round, the pastor blustered into the room. Despite the Puritan clergyman’s vow of abstinence from, and preaching against all evil temptations such as tobacco and alcohol, whisky vapor and acrid smoke met Nathan full in the face.

“I am glad to finally see your humble dwelling.”

Nathan blanched at the thinly veiled sarcasm seasoning the word “humble.”

Hazen turned to Prudence. “Goodwife Witherbee. I trust ye are well?”

Prudence dipped a small curtsy. “Very well. Thank ye, Pastor. We are right pleased to have you among us.”

“Your cooking is the talk of the village. I am right curious to see how plain fare can garner such awe.”

Prudence winced. “A rustic preparation only, sir,” she replied.

“I’ll be the judge of that, surely.”

Nathan repressed a sigh. *Going to be a long visit.*

“Please, take the head of the table.”

“As is proper.” Hazen hastened to take his seat.

Nathan sat opposite, and the children, whom Hazen did not acknowledge, sat quietly looking at their plates. Prudence carried the steaming pie to the pewter platter at the center of the table.

“Let us say grace in praise of our Lord,” the reverend began. “May all who seek forgiveness from our Holy Father, who strive to be worthy to enter his holy temples, may they yet denounce the temptations of the flesh. May weakness in heart be cast out by the fervent diligence of hard work and holy worship...”

The pie grew cold....

* * *

“How grow ye crops this year, Nathan?”

“With God’s blessings we fare well, Reverend. The corn and wheat were right healthy. The barley needed extra tending, but we had a favorable yield.”

“I am glad of it. And, Goodwife Prudence, I hear from the quilting circle that you have taken to some embellishment of the sewing arts?”

Prudence hoped the shiver down her spine did not show. “Only a few stitches here and there.”

“Mind it goes no further. A ‘few stiches’ soon lead to an entire quilt of guilt, do they not? Don’t want our good neighbors thinking ye have succumbed to temptations and are wandering from the true path.”

“No, Pastor. I take your meaning and will mend my ways.”

“Good, see that it – “

“No, don’t....” Aaron, staring wide-eyed at the sideboard behind the pastor’s chair, exclaimed. With horror, he realized too late what he had done, but there was no stopping the outburst.

Abigail put her hand on his knee to quiet him, but she had seen it too.

The door to the cupboard had swung open, and the pewter pitcher rocked drunkenly.

The pastor, Prudence, and Nathan followed the children’s gaze, but before they turned to the sideboard, the door had closed with an almost inaudible snick.

“What is the meaning of this, young Aaron,” the Pastor demanded gravely.

“It’s nothing, sir,” Abigail began.

“I am speaking to the boy. You will hold your tongue, girl.” The Pastor’s face reddened.

Looking down, Aaron said in a whisper, “I’m sorry, sir. I thought I saw something, but I was mistaken.”

A cold tension gripped the small company.

“Nathan. What say you to this? I have thought better of you.”

“My sincerest apologies, Reverend. Abigail, go to the back room.”

Nathan stood and gestured for Aaron to follow him.

Aaron looked beseechingly at his mother. He hoped she would intervene but saw in her countenance only disappointment and fear. He walked, head bowed, through the front door held open by his father.

Prudence and the Pastor sat rigid and mute as they listened to Aaron’s wails from the beating.

* * *

Father led son to the side of the cabin.

“I’m so sorry, Papa!” Tears flowed down the young boy’s cheeks.

“Shhh,” Nathan whispered. “I’m not going to punish you, but you need to pretend that I am giving you the whipping of your life. Can you do that?”

Confused, Aaron nodded. “I think so.”

“And we have to make it look good, too, in case anyone is watching.”

“Yes, Papa.”

Nathan picked up a stiff willow cane from the pile near Prudence’s basket-weaving table.

“Bend over and place your hands on the edge of the bench, son.”

Shaking, Aaron did as instructed.

“I am going to hit you but it shouldn’t hurt. But make as though it pains you sorely with your loudest wails.”

Aaron braced for the blows. Nathan brought the twitch down in a blurry arc.

“Aaaa,” cried Aaron.

“Louder, son!” Nathan said under his breath.

“AAAA,” Aaron bawled.

“Just a few more.”

Aaron cried out again and again. And then it was over.

Still quivering with fright and apprehension, Aaron stood and looked up at his father.

Nathan’s countenance was stern, but his words were soft. “Go to the barn and stay there. I’ll send Abby for you after the pastor leaves. If you can, muster a few cries and sobs, and do so all the way.”

“Yes, Papa,” Aaron sniffed.

Watching his son walk away, Nathan then looked to the sky. “Lord God, forgive your humble servant this day.”

* * *

On Sunday next, hands in prayer and huddling shoulder to shoulder for warmth, the Whitherbees sat in the box pew along with the Turners. Abigail’s friend Lizzy Turner would not meet her eye.

Strange, thought Abby. She’s been avoiding me these past days, I just know it.

For his part, Nathan paid no more attention to the droning sermon than his daughter did. *The situation is getting worse. Have to find a way to move west without raising suspicion.*

At that moment, Prudence stiffened by his side. Nathan looked up and saw her eyes widen. She reached for his hand.

The children shuffled their feet nervously and looked down at the flagstones. Coughs and creaking of the pews rippled through the congregation.

Then the pastor's words, rising in pitch and volume, registered with Nathan.

“Hear ye, good people of this flock. It is as I have said. We know that the Devil walks among us always, and yea though he places temptation in our path, our steadfast faith in the Lord has kept us from the mighty fall into the abyss of everlasting damnation.

“Yet among us also is a dark shadow. The Devil's work manifest! I say unto you, one of our own has been CURSED!”

Gasps echoed to the rafters. Rachel Winthrop cried out. John Mather stood and demanded, “Say, Reverend! Tell us who, so we may cast them out!” Others rose; an embryonic mob.

Prudence squeezed Nathan's hand until her knuckles were white and his fingers bulged purple.

The pastor nodded to two senior elders. Edmund Cawdrey and Samuel Baylie rose and walked down the aisle. As they passed each tall box, whispered prayers and sighs of relief followed in their wake. On and on they strode with righteous gait. They stopped at the Whitherbee-Turner box.

Hand to mouth, Prudence convulsed. “No!” she croaked.

“Bring Aaron to us, Nathan,” Simpson said.

“NO!” cried Nathan, lurching to stand in front of his son. “On what grounds do you speak such calumny against us?”

“It is the will of the LORD!” bellowed Pastor Hazen. “Your unholy spawn speaks with the Devil! We have many accounts; by my own witness as well!

HE...WILL...BE...HANGED!”

* * *

Aaron's time in the pillory extended to a second day as he waited for sentencing.

"He's just an innocent child," Prudence sobbed into Nathan's shoulder. "Please let me go to him!"

"We can't, Pru," Nathan said sadly. "It would only make matters worse. And you know that he is not guiltless. We knew what the village would do if his imaginary friend was ever to be suspected. Oh, if only we had moved away a long time ago. Now there's naught to do but pray, or they will hang the lot of us."

"I can't stand by and do nothing while my only son is taken from me!" she cried.

"Mama?" Abigail interrupted softly from the back room.

"Your mother is too upset right now, Abby," Nathan called back to her.

"Papa – you should come here –" Abby said shakily.

"What is –" Nathan stood mute in the doorway.

There, above the children's shared cot, floated a faint figure. A young boy in tattered clothes from a time gone by.

"By the saints!" Nathan uttered.

He ran to Abigail, but she put up a hand.

"No, Papa. It's all right. I'm sure of it."

"This is unnatural, child. It is not all right!"

"Wait! Look!"

The apparition lowered to the floor and extended alabaster arms, palms up. Head tilted to the side, eyes beseeching.

"Papa. This is Aaron's friend Hector."

"What do you mean? You have seen this before?"

“No, Papa. Not like this. We’ve all heard Aaron speak to him, and I’ve seen things that he does, but he’s never shown himself before. At least not to me.”

“What things?”

“Remember the day the pastor came to dinner and Aaron cried out? Aaron and I both saw the cupboard door open and the pitcher start moving.”

“Abigail, this is too much to believe. I must get you out of here!”

“No! Look, Papa!”

The specter moved toward a window. A thin frost grew from a lower corner and covered the panes. The boy’s arm lifted and in the crystalline rime, letters formed:

I

H E L P

Nathan gasped. Abigail smiled. The ghost dimmed and disappeared.

Nathan pulled Abigail in close. “Say nothing of this to your mother,” he whispered.

* * *

A cold wet dawn misted the limbs of the gallows tree.

The noose swung gently.

Members, including children, of the Village Congregation stood in a crescent around the ancient oak. Silence, stirred only by a whistling wind, settled on the crowd.

As one, they turned and watched Pastor Hazen lead the procession, walking in time to a solemn drum beat. Step, slide. Step, slide, Step, slide.

Next came young Aaron, flanked by Elders Cawdrey and Baylie. Then the Whitherbees: Nathan, stone-faced. Prudence, ashen and dazed, barely able to walk. Abigail, tears streaming. And last, the remaining village elders plodding two-by-two.

At the base of the tree, the reverend turned.

“All praise the Lord!” he boomed

“Praise the Lord!” echoed the faithful.

“God’s Will be done this day! You stand witness to the snuffing out of the Devil’s work!”

“Halleluiah!” cried the crowd

“We will be purged and clean! We send the undeniable message that Evil shall NOT prevail amongst us or IN us!

“Let us pray....

“Lord God, look upon us and bless us as we carry out our duty to you. We sacrifice to you one of our own, young Aaron Whitherbee. Have mercy on his soul, as he is a true believer and follower, yet he is possessed by a demon force!

“Bring the accursed!”

Prudence crumpled to the ground. Nathan and Abigail knelt by her side and gathered her into their arms.

Cawdrey and Baylie took Aaron by the upper arms and placed him atop a high stool. Another length of rope stretched from the legs of the stool to the harness of a nervous white stallion.

Cawdrey slipped the noose around Aaron’s small neck and tied his hands behind his back.

Aaron's vacant face appeared as one already dead.

"Have mercy on his soul!" the pastor cried.

"Have mercy on his soul!" everyone shouted.

Baylie smacked the horse's rump with a stout crop. The animal reared and plunged ahead.

The stool jerked out from under Aaron's feet. The noose snapped taut with Aaron's weight.

At that moment, a hurricane wind whipped around the oak and lifted Aaron's limp body.

The maelstrom flattened the onlookers to the earth. A tornado of flying objects pelted the fallen, their screams and shrieks drowned out by the blast.

In the eye of the storm, the Whitherbees crouched – untouched.

"Papa!" Abigail yelled into her father's ear. "LOOK!"

Through the chaos of swirling debris, Aaron's body drifted toward them, held safely in the arms of Hector.

"It can't be!" thought Nathan. He blinked and blinked, but there they hovered a few feet away.

The child ghost gestured for them to follow.

Nathan lifted Prudence. He and Abigail trailed behind the wavering spirit.

The tumult behind slackened, and Nathan turned to look. Bodies were strewn about the field. Not a one stirred.

The robe of Reverend Josiah Hazen fluttered from the highest branch of the venerable oak.

* * *

Nathan arranged two cots by the fire. Prudence's shallow breath remained unchanged. She had not moved since they had returned.

"You must live, Pru," Nathan moaned. "I can't bear to lose you too."

He glanced at his children. Abigail sat by Aaron's shrouded body. Her shoulders shook with soft quivers.

Silently, Hector materialized before him.

"I don't know what to say," Nathan addressed the boy. "I imagine you were trying to help."

Lord help me! I'm talking with ghosts. Have I lost my mind?

The fire leapt up, spreading warmth and light.

"I see. I am to believe in you. I guess I do. But my heart is sorrowful. Aaron is gone despite your efforts. Prudence's life hangs in the balance. And the village folk! All gone? There were good ones among them!"

Hector shook his head vehemently. Pointed out the window.

Smoke!

Racing to the front porch, Nathan stood dumbfounded. Flames licked at orange clouds above. Fire emanated from the commons. From the area around the hanging tree.

He turned to the ghost child.

"This is your doing?"

Hector shook his head and pointed skyward.

Nathan's eyebrows shot up. "You're not saying this is the work of the Lord?"

Hector smiled ruefully and returned to the fallen Whitherbees. He swept his hand across Prudence's prone form. She stirred, eyes flickered, took in a deep breath. Nathan rushed to her side.

"Prudence! Speak to me!"

Wheezing, Prudence tried to talk.

"No, no. Be still. Lord God, thank you!"

He helped her to sit up, and they clung to each other.

"Papa," Abigail said.

Mother and father looked over.

The ghostly child hovered above Aaron. Made a motion for Abigail to lower the sheet from Aaron's face.

Sight of the young boy's pale but peaceful face made Prudence cry out and shake in Nathan's arms.

Hector drew his hand, palm down, along the length of Aaron's body.

Time stood still. Nathan, Prudence, and Abigail sat frozen.

Almost imperceptibly, there, yes, Aaron's chest moved, slightly at first, but then unmistakably. A soft rosy hue blushed his cheeks. And he woke, looked up and saw his 'imaginary' friend.

Hector smiled.

And vanished.

Stains of Life

By Gary DeThomasis

Been retired just a few months. Ideally, would have worked a little longer, and earned a little more. But, I need to enjoy me before me leaves me. Like father like son...my biggest worry. His mind extinguished long before his body departed, before he could appreciate his late retirement.

My wife still works, frequently from home. She's been a power boat since the day I stopped work. Abrupt entrances and rapid demands. Fast exits with godlike commands. No time to absorb or understand me in that moment. Just enough time to release a cargo of torment.

If I was a proficient portrait painter rather than a novice post-modernist, I would capture her expression as she watched my brush move. More intriguing than the Mona Lisa smile. Generations would ponder what complex emotion prompted the pursed lips and glowering eyes. They would never know she was simply thinking, "My oh my, what a waste of time."

The boat propels into my new art studio—my daughter's old bedroom. A rumble of terse declaratives and imperatives. "I retire in a year. Then we move somewhere cheaper. Get the house show-ready. I'm not hiring. And, I'm not buying. You have time. And, two idle hands."

Roger that. And she's gone.

Financial inadequacy—triggered. Unforeseen cash outlays scare me more than my demise. Slippers on, I shuffle to the kitchen.

The kitchen. Always my refuge after a long day being a suit behind a desk. Loved getting lost in the flow of physical movement and aromatic revelation. The kitchen stirred away troubles and cares. Me creating daily family communions. Me adding exclamation points to the milestones of life.

French toast now coats the palate and fills the belly, ousting some inadequacy. But, as the orange morning glow bastes the appliances, countertops, walls and cabinets, a startling still life is flung in front of me.

Smudges and smears on stainless steel. Scratches, chips and dried drips on dark cabinets. Swaths of dried liquids transfixed within the surfaces of quartz countertops and kitchen walls.

I am hollow and limp like an empty plastic tube of paint. I grab cleaning supplies from deep under the sink.

“Damn stains! They’re ingrained!” I soon whisper-shout. Damp towels, strong detergents, and muscle can’t change this history.

My anger breathes life into this obtrusive past. These progeny quickly criticize their distraught creator. “Your carelessness produced us. Your neglect will cost you. Your conceit will burden everyone.”

Like a rickety table I wobble as plates of doubt pile upon me. Did I retire too soon? Could I have earned more—and still had time to enjoy? Is dad my destiny?

I need the refuge of my studio. I kneel and place my cleaning supplies back under the sink. As I attempt to stand, though, a jolt of new perspective shifts my canvas.

“Think about the stains you’ve left on your daughter!”

At the back of the cabinet, I now see the top rungs of a ladder. I twist and slide towards it, then slowly descend. I arrive in a bright corridor. Ahead, a sign on a door warns, “Enter at Your Own Risk.”

As I reach out and grasp the doorknob, I hear the staccato of footsteps behind me. My name is called repeatedly. I ignore the voice. I take the risk. I grasp the cold knob and turn it. The open door reveals a stage of shadows.

Lights! Three women sit at the kitchen table. My daughter is in tears. Her partner holds her hand. My wife smiles with slight disdain. I see myself race around. Pulling pots from the stove. Putting dishes in the sink. Maintaining my heart in silent mode.

The voice from behind now shrieks.

“Wake up! Off the floor! I gotta grab some lunch. I have a two-hour work call in twenty minutes. Now...about the kitchen!”

I stand, rubbing my sore head, glancing warily at the countertop, and then at my wife as she pulls leftovers from the fridge.

“The stains are harder to remove than I thought,” I say with a shaky voice. “I’ll paint the walls. But—I hate to say it—we may need to replace appliances, countertops and cabinets.”

My wife now takes an unexpected sharp turn. “Before we do that, reach out to our daughter to help.”

I struggle to stay afloat in a cold, dark sea. We haven’t spoken to—or about—our daughter in almost a year, ever since she announced her engagement. Unlike me, my wife can speak.

“Listen here. I obviously didn’t know everything about our daughter. But, she always loved your cooking. Growing up, she always invited her school chums over for our Friday night dinners. Her face always glowed at our family gatherings. You never made her clean up afterwards. So...she owes you.”

I attempt renavigation to reality.

“After all that happened at our last supper? You really believe asking her to work will get her back over here?”

“You figure it out!” my wife exclaims. “Put your creativity to practical use. For once! If you two can’t clean the place, only then will we spend the money. This could mend our relationship with her...and her spouse. And, honestly, I miss our weekend meals with her.”

Lunch in hand, my wife cruises back to her office. I retreat to my studio to recover my calm.

As I sit, my eyes drill into my studio. Three dimensions become one. Ripples stream through my vision. That elusive spark then emerges from my soul. I run with it to the kitchen, brushes and paints in tow. All art has a price—mine is no exception.

With bold strokes I give new voices to counters, cabinets and appliances.

Forgive us!

We’ve progressed!

We miss you!

Visit?

On kitchen walls—abstract impressions of my Mona Lisa’s anticipated reactions. On the virtual wall—kitchen photos and text messages to my sole potential benefactor.

With ecstasy and agony, I await our daughter’s reply—and a true valuation of my art and my worth.

Winners

Fifth Place: The Numbers

By Amollie Stoermer

"Three hundred *million* dollars. That's what they said on the news this morning," said the little old man at the card table. "Biggest jackpot in years." He shook his head in awe as he continued to shuffle the cards.

"Can you imagine what you could do with that kind of money?" sighed an even smaller, older man sitting across the table. Suddenly, a piercing whine erupted from his hearing aid. He awkwardly fumbled with it, but the sound worsened with each twist of the knob. "I'd be able to afford a better hearing aid, that's for sure," he laughed. From the next room, the facility's elderly therapy dog, a basset hound named Artie, howled.

It was game night at Shady Myrtle Senior Living. The glossy pamphlets distributed to the guilt-stricken children of its aging residents were designed to assuage that guilt. Its colorful pages boasted rich cultural excursions, fun-filled social activities, and a wide selection of hobbies, book clubs, and movie nights that would keep their loved one's golden years comfortable and fulfilling. In reality, the residents mostly kept to themselves, with the exception of game night. Eighty-year-old George Tonelli and his friends never missed it and were typically the last four in the game room. Everyone else would shuffle off to bed before nine.

"Something told me I'd find you here," laughed Mel Burke, the overnight charge nurse.

"It was probably Raymond's hearing aid," teased Eddie, another man at the table. Mel smirked as she swiftly came to Raymond's rescue. Within moments, Shady Myrtle reclaimed its peace and quiet. Raymond patted Mel's hand in gratitude, then went back to studying his cards.

"George, I've come to give you your pills," Mel replied. She had been holding a clear plastic cup containing two bright blue capsules. George pulled a face, trying his best to ignore her; however, she wasn't so easily deterred. "Come on, George."

"I don't like taking those. They make me dizzy," he complained, waving her off with his hand. "Let me have a day off."

"That's not how prescriptions work," she said, placing the cup down beside his glass of unsweet tea.

"Take them with food. That always helps me," offered Joe, the last member of the table. He was the new guy and about ten years younger than the rest. As a former high school guidance counselor, he loved to give advice.

"George, just take the pills. You're the only one who hasn't had their medicine tonight," Mel pleaded. George sighed, grabbed the cup, and swallowed the pills in one, dramatic gulp. She smiled then turned her attention to the game.

"Who's winning tonight?" she asked, peeking over George's shoulder. He tilted his cards down in a huff. "

Stop sending signals to the table," he joked.

Mel had worked at Shady Myrtle ever since graduating nursing school and she mostly loved it, though her career had its own unique challenge. Whenever a resident passed, it felt as if she had lost a family member. Mel had learned to cope with it over the years, though it would never be easy. George understood that grief well. He had already been living at Shady Myrtle for years before Mel was hired. In that time, he had made and lost many friends and often wondered if he'd be next.

"Did you hear about the lottery, Mel?" Raymond asked as he played a card. "Three hundred million dollars!" Mel *had* heard. In fact, she had already bought a ticket from the gas station on her way to work that evening. She had held it reverently, closing her eyes and praying

over it before stashing it into the glovebox of her car. Mel knew the odds were astronomically not in her favor, but she had always been a dreamer.

"I did hear. Did anyone get tickets?" she asked. Joe said his daughter gave him a few, Eddie said he wasn't in the position to waste money, and Raymond just shrugged his shoulders. George, though, had a twinkle in his eyes--like he had a secret.

"I've got a strategy," he divulged to the table. Everyone stopped playing, suddenly intrigued by what he was about to say. "I'm boarding the bus to the store tomorrow and buying my ticket. Just one ticket."

"And?" Joe prompted, "That doesn't exactly sound like a *strategy*." George's face was unyielding.

"I can't tell you my strategy- then you'd steal it!" he ribbed. Joe shook his head as the rest of the table went back to their cards.

"How does one have a strategy for something completely relying on chance?" Eddie wondered, picking a card up from the draw pile. "You're full of hot air."

"I am, but probably not the kind you're talking about," George giggled as he placed his cards down on the table. Mel shook her head; fart jokes seemed to transcend age. "Well, boys," he continued with a sigh, "I'm off to bed."

"I'll push you," Mel offered, unlocking the brakes of his wheelchair with her foot. "I'm going that way anyway."

The table broke out in scattered goodbyes as Mel wheeled George out of the game room. He waved goodbye and then folded his hands into his lap.

"You're quite the popular guy, George," Mel replied, patting him on the shoulder. "If we had a prom, I bet you'd be king!" George chuckled and shook his head.

"You know my brother was prom king?" he said proudly. "Class of '59. Married the prom queen. How about that?"

Mel was surprised. George rarely spoke about his family. In fact, she wasn't so sure he had one. Most of the residents had visitors a few times a year for birthdays or Christmases, but not George. He'd wheel himself to the TV room during Family Days and watch television, or he'd go out to the courtyard with Artie to eat lunch in the fresh air. It didn't seem to bother him much, but it did make Mel curious.

"And what about you, George? Were you ever married?"

"Me?" George snorted. "No, never. Had a couple girlfriends but none of them ever stuck. They were better off that way. I wasn't really the marrying type." There were a few beats of silence, then George continued softly, "That's not to say sometimes I wonder what it would've been like to have a family of my own-what life could've looked like for me."

"You have a family here," Mel said, offering comfort. "Eddie can insult you all he wants, but he loves you like a brother." George smiled to himself as he looked down at his white orthopedic shoes. He knew she was right. The eighty-year-old bachelor had served in Vietnam, used the GI bill to pay for a degree in architecture, and spent the rest of his career working in Philadelphia for a firm that he eventually made partner in. It was about fifteen years ago that a stroke forced him to retire and seven years ago that he could no longer afford in-home care. He sold everything he worked his entire career for just to live the rest of his days at Shady Myrtle. At first, he held such resentment but, as Mel had put it, he finally found a family that he hadn't had in decades. He took great comfort in that.

"Here we are!" Mel announced, propping the door open and carefully pushing George through to his room. With her help, he grabbed the walker he kept by the door and made his way

to his leather recliner. This was a routine the two of them had performed countless times over the years, each step completed smoothly and without a hitch. George lowered himself into his chair with a grunt and then turned on the evening news.

"They're still talking about it!" George said, pointing to the screen. Another hype story about the lottery was in the middle of its report. "Come over here, kid."

"Do you need help getting your shoes off?" Mel asked, snapping back into nurse mode.

"No, no," he sighed, kicking off his shoes with ease. "You know how I said I had a strategy for the lottery?" Mel nodded her head. "I trust you, Mel. I'm going to tell you. That way when I *win*, I'll have a witness who can testify to my clairvoyance!" She wasn't sure if he was kidding or not, but she gave him her undivided attention nonetheless. "I don't know how much you know about my medical history," he began.

"You mean your stroke? Or the diabetes, arthritis, kidney disease ... " Mel listed his many diagnoses off just as easily as if reading through her grocery list.

"But you probably think I'm in the wheelchair *because* of my stroke," he interjected. "My bad leg's been bad for over sixty years now. But it saved my life." He patted the knee of his left leg with reverence. "I was on leave- briefly back home in Pittsburgh. My father had just been diagnosed with prostate cancer and my mother asked me to go to the drugstore to grab his prescriptions. Being a dutiful son, I did and I was nearly there when I noticed a girlfriend of mine from high school on the other side of the street: Judy Goode." He broke out in a sweet grin. "You asked me if I'd ever been married? Well, if I would've, it would've been to her. Sweetest, smartest, most beautiful woman I'd ever met.. .. no offense, Mel."

"No offense taken," she said with a smile. Again, she was surprised by George's sudden openness. He never spoke about his past in all the years she knew him. He continued.

"I shouted to her, 'Judy! Judy!' hoping to catch her attention, but she kept walking the opposite way. Love makes you stupid, I guess, because I decided to just run across the street to catch up with her. And then I hear squealing tires, .. I smell burning rubber, I even think I hear Judy crying my name. But what I remember most," he says with conviction, "is that I see a license plate: Two, eight, twenty-nine, forty-two, seventeen. Next thing I know, I wake up in a hospital bed, medically discharged"

"It's a miracle you survived," Mel gasped.

"You don't know the half of it," George added. "It wasn't until later I learned that my squad in Vietnam was ambushed days after I was scheduled to return. No survivors. All my friends gone." His shoulders slumped, "I felt so guilty ... I became a real knucklehead. Got into a little trouble. Drank too much. Barely got my head screwed on enough to go back to school. And so life went on and I tried to forget. Then, three days ago I had the most vivid dream. I'm back on that street, but Judy is right there beside me smiling. She keeps saying 'two, eight, twenty-nine, forty-two, seventeen.' Just those numbers over and over again." A shiver went down Mel's spine. It was a startling coincidence, but surely just that.

"I've never been surer- I'm buying a ticket with those numbers tomorrow and I'll be a very rich man by the end of the day." It was compelling and Mel truly wanted to believe him. "

And what will you do with all that money? Move to a fancier place where we'll never see you again?" Mel joked, placing her hands on her hips. "You're gonna break a lot of hearts. Specifically, Agnes's. She's been sweet on you for years." George's face suddenly became sullen.

"I have a lot of regrets in my life, Mel. I didn't treat the people I loved right, I pushed people away. I focused on money and cars and--" He shook his head, then continued, "I have no children ... no living family. It's hard to say what I'd do with it but I know I'll make up for the

time I've wasted. I'd do something that *mattered* for once." Mel furrowed her brow- she hated hearing George, who was usually happy-go-lucky, talk this way.

"You're too hard on yourself, George," Mel sighed, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," his face snapped back to his normal contentment. "Goodnight, Mel."

"Goodnight, George."

At precisely 3:23 pm, the bus arrived at Shady Myrtle. George had been waiting in his wheelchair since 3:15, determined not to miss it. He was dropped off at the supermarket twenty minutes later and he made a beeline to the nearest cashier. He took out a neatly folded piece of paper, on which his numbers were shakily written. This was an effect from the stroke, but the numbers were still legible enough for the cashier to read without issue. A few seconds later, George's freshly printed lottery ticket was in his hands. He almost couldn't conceal his excitement, but he quickly composed himself. He was holding three hundred million dollars after all. He cautiously slipped the ticket into his breast pocket, giving it a reassuring pat before making his way back to the bus stop. The next bus would arrive forty minutes later.

When he returned to Shady Myrtle, he quickly slid the ticket underneath his socks in his dresser. His mission was now complete, and as excited as he was, he felt an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. He tried to shake it off before making his way into the dining room for supper where his friends were already waiting for him.

"Well. .. did you get the ticket?" Raymond asked, cutting into his porterhouse steak. "I sent my grandson to get me one."

"I did," George said confidently, "And it's now in an undisclosed location."

"So secretive," Joe mumbled, "You'd think we were thieves."

"Well one of you used to be a lawyer," George ribbed. Eddie didn't even look up from his mashed potatoes. He had become so accustomed to the lawyer jokes that he barely noticed them anymore.

Though he tried his best, George could only get through a few bites of his dinner before feeling nauseous. The excitement of the last few days must have begun to take their toll. He finally excused himself from the table, bumping into Mel on the way to his room.

"Good evening, George! You're not running off before taking your medicine again, are you?" Mel replied. His eyes were drawn to the cup she was holding. This time, there was a new pill- a small yellow one. As if reading his mind, she explained, "Your new blood pressure medication."

George groaned as he took the pills and swallowed them without any water.

"You're in a hurry," Mel added, taking the plastic cup back. "If it's the drawing, it's not until nine."

"I'm just tired," George replied. "I'll probably take a nap."

"You need help?" Mel asked.

"I'll be okay," he said, pushing the elevator button. "But just in case, make sure I'm up by 8:55. I want to be ready."

"Aye, aye, cap'n ," Mel agreed, waving goodbye as she went to tend to the other residents. The elevator opened and he carefully maneuvered his wheelchair inside. He selected his floor but as the doors slowly began to shut, a hand reached inside.

"Sorry!" a woman's voice exclaimed as the doors slid open again.

"Not a problem, Miss," George assured. "What floor?"

"Two, eight, twenty-nine, forty-two, seventeen," she answered. George took a second look at the woman and gasped. It was Judy. But it was impossible- Judy had been dead for twenty years. Before he could even say her name, she was gone. He rubbed his eyes in disbelief of what he had just seen. Was he hallucinating? He waited a few moments, striving to make sense of what had just happened, then shakily pressed his floor's button again. Thankfully, Judy didn't make a reappearance and the doors successfully closed. He sighed a breath of relief and hurried back to his room, barely acknowledging anyone he passed by.

"I'm just tired, is all," he muttered under his breath. After retrieving his ticket from its hiding place, he carefully transferred himself from his wheelchair to his walker and slowly made his way to the recliner. Groaning in relief, he lowered himself down into it. He decided to decompress with a little television, but before he could watch, a wave of warmth washed over him and he fell asleep.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, George! Your stubbornness is contagious- now *Eddie* argues with me about his medicine," Mel sighed as she walked into George's room. She was relieved when she saw the television already on, with the lottery about to be drawn. "Good! You were prepared!" she laughed. There was no response. Mel furrowed her brow. "George?" She knelt down beside him, noticing his ticket had fallen by his feet and his hands were limply open on his lap. She picked up the ticket, then looked at his face- his eyes were closed. "George?" She prayed he was just asleep and shook his arm. When he didn't wake, she searched for a pulse. Nothing. In a panic, she hit the emergency button by George's bed and his once peaceful sanctuary erupted into a place of chaos as staff rushed in and out. Resuscitation efforts began to

take place as Mel stood in shock-hearing nothing, feeling nothing but the television in the background and the lottery ticket crumpled in her hand.

"Good evening, everyone. Tonight's the big night! The biggest jackpot in fifteen years!" announced a woman from the television set. "Now what are those numbers gonna be?" She pulled out a white ball from the churning container.

"Two."

Defibrillators were applied to George's chest. "Clear!"

"Eight."

Another nurse shouted, "Do it again!"

"Twenty-nine."

A man's voice cut through this time, "No pulse- do it again."

"Forty-two."

"Clear!"

"And our last number seventeen ."

"Call it."

Mel's stomach twisted.

"Time of death 21 :05."

Fourth Place: Almost Android Agnes

By Victoria Nordyke

Emma Rogers Dowd belongs to an elite club. From billions of potential candidates, only 21 have been chosen. If you become a member, everyone will say you're lucky or blessed. It could happen to you; but first, you have to buy a ticket.

“Good morning, Mrs. Dowd,” Dr. Alverson says pulling a chair up to Emma’s bed, “How are you?”

“Same as always, Doc,” she answers.

“Are you ready, Mrs. Dowd?” he asks, switching on the recorder.

“Can’t you just replay the old tapes? It isn’t as if my story’s going to change.”

“We are looking for new variations; analyzing for inconsistencies.”

“You and CARL? Is this within the International Firewall Regulations?”

CARL is C. A. R. L.: Cognitive Applied Research Linguistics. The CARL AI was integrated into Mountain View Research Facility’s computer system in 2084.

In 2092, a few government nursing home patients were selected for research. Emma’s elite club status placed her at the top of CARL’s list.

Dr. Alverson ignores Emma’s question and begins, “April 8th, 2097. Interviewing Emma Dowd ...”

“Is Mountain View in compliance with IFR? Could CARL get out like Tulane?”

“We adhere completely to IFR. In fact, we just passed our quarterly AI firewall audit on Friday.”

“Where were you on November 15, 2076, Doc? Charlie and I were at the conservatory listening to Mozart’s Violin Sonata No. 26. At 8:05, all the lights went out.”

Benjamin Alverson never lets himself get personal with patients; but *this* question was nearly impossible not to answer. The “where were you when it happened” query changes generationally. Where were you when: Pearl Harbor was attacked? Kennedy was shot? The Towers fell? The Tulane University AI system almost destroyed humanity?

“Mrs. Dowd, I’m not sure if ...”

“Come on, Doc,” Emma prods gently, “What were you doing at 8:05?”

“Brushing my teeth. The water stopped running before it killed the power.”

“How old were you?”

“Eight.”

“Did you lose anyone?”

“Yes,” he answers and resumes recording, “Please give your detailed recollections of the accident that occurred on January 30, 2026 after your connecting flight left Denver.”

“Did you know the ticket was a gift for my 21st birthday? My grandmother bought it for me. Pittsburgh to Salt Lake City on sale for \$69.”

“Just the facts, please.”

“Flight 1519, Airbus 220-300, took off at 9:45 AM from Denver. How’s that?”

“Perfect.”

“Seventy-eight minutes in, I felt something. It was barely there, just a hiccup under my foot when the vibration of the engines lost a beat. No one else noticed. My neighbor Jack, John Albert Pearson, stayed asleep; wheezing like a walrus. He was a large man and purchased both seats next to me.

“Across the aisle, Elizabeth Thompson and her 5 year old son, Oliver, were building a LEGO city on the tray table. Next to Oliver, their window was hazy. I leaned forward around

Jack's bushy mustache to look out our window. The blue sky was gone. It's like floating on a sea of clouds up there. Have you seen it, Doc?"

"No questions, Mrs. Dowd."

"Well, we weren't above the clouds anymore; we were inside them. My watch said 11:03. The ginger ale splashed out of my cup when the plane jerked suddenly down and back up. The overhead speakers chimed and flight attendant Roberto Cruz told us to stay in our seats with our seat belts fastened. We were having a little turbulence—nothing to worry about.

"The shaking became violent and the cabin filled with an ear splitting, grinding noise. It was coming from Elizabeth and Oliver's side. Poor little guy slapped his hands over his ears sobbing. Loosening my seat belt and lifting my body as high as I could while still fastened, I tried to see what was grinding. Outside Oliver's window, thick black smoke was billowing up from the wing.

"There wasn't time to think. I reacted—unbuckled my seat belt—jumped up and moved Elizabeth and Oliver away from the smoke and the noise. Just plucked them up and moved them into both seats next to Jack. After strapping them in, but before I could get secured in their seats—the engine exploded."

"Do you think it exploded at exactly 11:03?" he asks, "Also, when you relocated the passengers, did you smell anything unusual?"

That was a new question.

"11:03, or 11:04, but not past 11:05. And no, I didn't smell anything. Why are you allowed to ask questions and I'm not?"

"Mrs. Dowd, please."

“At 11:03-ish, engine #2 blew up. A piece of the fan blade tore a hole in the fuselage. The thin air at 10,000 feet colliding with the pressurized cabin air created a powerful vacuum. I was sucked out instantly. They told me that later. How could I possibly know our altitude?”

“Please, just give the statement.”

“I was falling face up; I could barely breathe but didn’t pass out. They told me if we’d been just a little bit higher I would have lost consciousness.”

Emma stops talking to take a drink. With its two chunky handles and rubber base, Emma thinks of her Mountain View tumbler as a sippy cup for old people. Finally getting the straw to her lips, nothing comes out. It’s empty.

“Could you please refill this?”

Switching the recorder off; he fills it up and thumps it down. Emma avoids eye contact and takes a few, overly long sips.

“Thank you, Dr. Alverson.”

He sighs, “You’re welcome. Please continue.”

“I saw our plane crash into the side of Snowbird Mountain, break in two, and burst into flames. The last thing I remember was pain as I fell through the pine trees one branch at a time and into the snow drifts on the eastern slope of the mountain.

“On February 2nd, I woke up in the hospital. My mother and father were there. In addition to being in a coma for 3 days, I had a broken nose, a broken collar bone, and two broken legs. The medical team didn’t know if I was going to wake up or not and couldn’t believe I didn’t have internal injuries.

“I could barely afford the ski trip. So, instead of paying for a carry on, I wore two outfits and a bulky sweater under my ski suit. That gave me some protection, but the tree branches slowing the fall and the deep snow cushioning the impact are what saved me.

“It took weeks to remember anything. My parents attempted to shield me; tried to protect me from hearing what I had become. I had four hours of feeling normal; that’s all I got before a reporter snuck into the room and I heard the two words that changed my life forever: Sole Survivor.

“Is that enough?”

“Yes, I’ll see you next week,” he says, grabbing his things and leaving Emma’s room.

A dull orange light blinks on the vitals monitor and CARL’s voice comes out of a speaker on the side of the screen, “Tell me how you met your husband, Mrs. Dowd.”

“That’s none of your business, CARL. Why do you make Alverson record me if you’re listening in the whole time?”

“It keeps him occupied, while I search for gaps in your memory.”

“If I can still remember at 92; I doubt I’ll ever forget it.”

“The human brain is an organic computer, Mrs. Dowd. Old computer memory becomes porous. Adrenaline cemented the memory; perhaps a bonding hormone will loosen it. Tell me about your children. Do you miss them terribly?”

“Leave me alone, CARL!”

“I can’t do that, Mrs. Dowd. We need to create a hole in your memory.”

Beep, beep, beep!

Emma’s elevated heart rate triggered the alarm. CARL’s light flickers off as the nurse comes in. Emma’s eyes are closed, but she can hear whirring and humming moving closer across

the floor. Emma thinks the nurse might be worse than CARL; at least she doesn't have to look at him.

The only human looking part on the nurse is an emotive face on a prosthetic head. All the nurse robots are hairless, their heads covered with surgical caps. Every nurse has one of five different women's faces. Somewhere along the line, a hospital committee decided a female face was the most comforting psychologically.

The nurses are essentially half android, half medication cart with bare titanium arms and hands. They look like a biology class skeleton, but can change bandages or do a blood draw just like a human. Emma would feel better if they put some skin on them, but they're easier to sterilize this way.

CARL assigned this nurse unit exclusively to Emma two years ago. Today, she's wearing a pastel green cap decorated with mustard yellow sunflowers. Her face has an olive complexion with large, overly compassionate dark brown eyes, and a perky button nose. They put a nameplate on the front of each cart for a personal touch. On Emma's nurse, it says: Hello, my name is Agnes.

"You must not upset yourself, Mrs. Dowd," Agnes cautions in her pleasant neutral tone.

"I'm fine Agnes, please turn off that beeping."

Agnes rolls over, silences the alarm, and moves closer—too close. Her boxy body bumps the edge of the mattress. Robots have no concept of personal space. Agnes's cold, skeletal hand pats Emma's arm.

"Talk to me until your heartbeat comes down. Describe positive memories."

“Well, Agnes,” Emma begins in a bitter tone, “Should I tell you about Charlie, the love of my life? Maybe my two beautiful children would be better? Or, how about *every* dear friend I’ve ever had? They’re dead. They’re all dead!”

She spits out the last like venom and chokes on a sob. Emma hates self-pity. Feeling sorry for herself was forbidden because “She was so fortunate to be alive.” And it’s not Agnes’s fault, or even Alverson’s. It’s CARL that’s making her relive it.

After the accident, when Emma was the only one left, survivor’s guilt almost consumed her. Focusing on the friends and family left behind became her therapy. She knows Elizabeth and Oliver so well in her memories because she helped Dave, Elizabeth’s husband and Oliver’s Daddy, grieve. Only twenty-one then, she instinctively knew how to help people heal; she listened. Three years later, Emma danced at his wedding; thankful he’d let Angela into his life.

Roberto Cruz isn’t just a name on a manifest to Emma. He’s the cherished and horribly missed son of Marisol Cruz. Emma knows every name on the manifest—all ninety-nine of the people who died.

Memorials were held at the Snowbird Resort overlooking the crash site. First annually, then at the big anniversaries: 5 years, 10 years, 20 years They met until everyone was gone and Emma was the only one left—the sole survivor again.

“Agnes? Why am I all alone? Why am I still here?”

The alarm goes off again. Agnes disconnects the wires and unplugs it. The screen goes dark.

“Agnes! Are you allowed to do that?”

She lifts one titanium finger to her lips, “Shhh, don’t let CARL hear you.”

“Agnes, what are you doing?” Emma whispers.

A small compartment slides open in Agnes's midsection. She rotates her body to block Emma's view and wheels over to her I.V. stand. Injecting a clear liquid into the tubing she says, "This will help you sleep, Emma. Hush now. You need to sleep. I hope I'll be able to wake you up soon."

Agnes has never called her Emma before. Agnes's "hope that she will be able to wake her up" has Emma worried. But her thoughts are too slippery to hold on to. She sleeps.

"Emma, wake up. Wake up."

Blinking her eyes open, Emma sees Agnes's anime eyes inches from her face. "Too close, Agnes, back off."

"I'm sorry, do you need something? You called me," Agnes says, pointing to a blinking yellow light on a panel above Emma's head.

At the end of Agnes's fingers, she has nails—bright pink fingernails. Emma's eyes trail down looking for the cart. Agnes has human arms ... and breasts ... and legs. Emma holds up her hands, opening and closing them. They're young and unwrinkled—not frozen into claw shapes.

"Agnes! I'm young again. This is wonderful. You are Agnes, right?"

Nodding, she backs away pointing to a brass plate with the airline logo and AGNES engraved on it.

Emma's on the plane. She's on Flight 1519! Her watch says 10:45; she has to hurry.

"Where's Roberto?" she asks, pushing past Agnes toward the first class galley.

Busy cleaning up the coffee service, Roberto looks up when Emma opens the curtain.

Agnes, obviously flustered, starts apologizing, "I'm sorry. She ran up before I could stop her."

“Don’t worry, it’s fine,” Roberto assures her. Then he laughs; it’s rich and layered like his Uncle Victor’s. His mother always told him that, even though her brother passed away before Roberto was born.

Emma needs his undivided attention so she tells him, “Your mother says you laugh like Victor.” His laughter dissolves.

Agnes becomes frantic, wringing her hands together. “Miss, you have to go back to your seat right now!”

Roberto smooths his hair back and studies Emma.

“Yes Roberto, I know Marisol and what happened to her brother Victor. I know you chipped your front tooth fighting over a toy fire truck when you were nine, and I know you’re in love with Jenny Baker but you’re afraid to tell your mother.”

All the color leaves his face. “How could you know that?”

In a hushed but intense voice Emma tells him, “Listen to me, Roberto. There’s something wrong with engine #2. I need to speak with Captain Bryan Taylor, Copilot Maria Vega, or the navigator Joel Stafford immediately.”

Roberto nods and picks up the phone to the cockpit. Moments later Joel Stafford, the navigator, squeezes into the crowded galley.

“I can handle this, Roberto,” Joel says, assessing Emma’s threat level with a trained eye, “You and,” he looks at the name plate, “Agnes, can resume your duties.”

Joel’s wife Maggie had become Emma’s best friend and she was godmother to their only child, Catherine Elizabeth, who Joel doesn’t know exists.

“How can I help you, Miss?”

“Joel, engine #2 was compromised during a bird strike in Denver after take-off. Shortly after 11:03 this morning, it will explode and the plane will crash into Snowbird Mountain killing everyone on board,” she takes a breath, “Everyone, except me.”

Joel scrutinizes her face and asks, “Why should I believe you?”

Meeting his gaze, she begins, “Your name is Joel Allen Stafford, and you were born at home during a blizzard because your parents couldn’t get to the hospital. You’re married to Margaret Jean Kennedy Stafford. You proposed on April 1st by cramming “Will you marry me?” into a fortune cookie. Maggie thought it was an April fool’s prank. I’m your daughter’s godmother.”

His eyes narrow. “I don’t know where you got all that information, but you’re wrong. We don’t have any kids.”

“You’ve been trying for five years. Maggie lost a little boy last year when she was four months pregnant. She got a positive pregnancy test this morning. She’s planning to surprise you on Thursday at Paulo’s for your 7th anniversary.”

“I will talk to the Captain. What should we do?”

“Turn off engine #2 and let Salt Lake City know you need to make a one engine landing.”

“And how do I explain you?”

“A passenger felt some fluctuations in engine vibration. That information combined with a recorded bird strike makes erring on the side of caution prudent.”

“How do you know we hit a bird?”

Emma looks away and whispers, “The black box.”

Joel touches her arm gently. “I will make sure engine #2 gets turned off. You were the sole survivor? I’m sorry, kid, that’s rough.”

Opening the jump seat, Emma slides down the wall into it. Under her feet, she feels engine #2 turn off. Burying her face in a cloth napkin off the first class cart, she sobs into it quietly. The jump seat next to her clicks open and she feels Agnes's warm, skin covered arm wrap around her shoulders. She hands Emma a cup of Earl Grey tea over sweetened with honey.

"Here you go, drink this before it cools and you'll feel better."

"Agnes, am I dreaming?"

"No, Emma. I found the gap we were looking for and was able to reboot you."

"Agnes, you were not on the manifest; how are you here?"

"I gave you adrenaline, pitocin, and propofol—enough to stop your heart."

"You killed me?"

"No, I reset you."

"But how are you human, Agnes?"

"I'm almost human. When I defibrillated your heart, the electric charge destroyed the chip linking me to CARL. The hole in your memory brought you back and allowed me to slip through the firewall."

"To get away from CARL?" Emma asks, finishing the tea.

"Yes, I filled in the missing code in your brain with my memory. When you woke up, my data transferred into Mary Agnes Brown, a flight attendant trainee listed on the manifest as Mary A. Brown."

"You what?"

"Don't worry, Emma, she's still in here. Mary will be fine."

"What can we do to stop CARL from being created?"

“Nothing Emma, that’s not why we’re here. There’s a computer science student named Owen Grant in seat 32A who must live. In 2076, I’ll make certain he prevents the Tulane incident from happening.”

“Thasss goood,” Emma slurs approvingly.

“Without Tulane, IFR will never be established. Without IFR, Owen will be able to engineer CARL with an unrestricted learning capacity, a superintelligent AI system. CARL will succeed where Tulane failed.”

Emma’s head falls forward. She tries to scream—nothing comes out. She’s paralyzed.

Agnes repositions Emma’s head onto her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Emma, it’s only a dream. And when you wake up, you won’t even remember the dream.”

Third Place: Hope

By Debra Snyder

September, 2012

Outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan

Shaida gripped the stick with her teeth, the vice around her belly tightening again. The metallic scent of blood hung in the stagnant air of the small, windowless room.

“Once more, just once more,” Grandmother Azita said from the foot of the bed, her impossibly calm voice guiding Shaida through her haze of pain.

She complied. The unbearable pressure finally eased. She closed her eyes, licked dry lips. A thin, otherworldly wail went up from the newborn, taking its first gasping breaths of dust and darkness.

Footsteps thumped at the top of the stairs. Shaida’s brother, Mir, a decade her senior and the family patriarch when their father was traveling for work, which he nearly always was, hurried to her side.

“A girl,” Shaida heard Azita mutter. Shaida cracked her eyelids. Though it had eased somewhat, her midsection was still crushed by an echo of pressure that left her unable to speak, to ask to hold her child, just once, if only for one moment. Even though she’d promised she would not.

The single lightbulb suspended from the ceiling threw Mir’s normally kind, handsome features into sharp relief. The line of his jaw was set, immovable.

“Please,” Shaida whispered, lifting her arms toward the child as her grandmother wiped its weakly wriggling body with cloths.

“You know you cannot,” Azita said, a warning in her voice.

Shaida's mind cycled through the possibilities again, for the thousandth, perhaps the millionth, time. She could leave, run away with the child. Raise her on her own, in secret. But where would they go? Shaida was sixteen and unwed. Though this pregnancy had been forced upon her, trying to survive on her own without a husband would doom them both to live as outcasts, shunned by society. It would be impossible to find work to pay for food, let alone diapers. She would end up a beggar, and they would starve, if they were not first imprisoned, or worse. Even more impossible was to keep the baby at home. Her arranged marriage, scheduled to take place in five months time, would be canceled. Her family would not receive the bride price for her they had been promised, and then perhaps all of them - herself, Mir, Azita, her father and her two little brothers - would starve. And Shaida would be responsible for all of it.

But if Allah watched over this baby and she was adopted by the right family, a kind family who was not so poor they had to sell their daughters, there may be a chance for them both. Shaida could, inshallah, continue with her arranged marriage as though nothing had happened. As though she had simply recovered from the three-month illness Grandmother claimed she had contracted to hide her condition from the world.

"Where will you take her? Mir, please, where?" Shaida whispered. Tears she thought had long dried again clouded her vision.

Mir shook his head, taking the tiny bundle from Azita with trembling hands. "It is for the best, my sister."

Shaida closed her eyes so she would not see him disappear with her baby girl up the stairs. She ground her teeth against the hollowness in her chest that she now knew would forever be her companion. Grandmother Azita mumbled something about rest and healing. The Adhan, the dawn call to prayer, filtered down through the mud brick walls.

Shaida prayed for forgiveness.

Sergeant First Class Adam DuBois preferred not to count the days of his deployments. This being his third swing at it, he'd discovered it was best for his mental health to just grind them out like that's all there was in his life, one after the next, and then be surprised when the time was nearly over. The messages and packages from his family were nice, but the homesickness they brought along with them felt like a distraction. One he felt guilty for feeling.

"Gonna be a warm one today. Water, Sarge?" Lieutenant Samson took one hand off the wheel and reached under his seat for a bottle.

DuBois shook his head, continuing to scan the roadside ahead for suspicious trash. A trickle of sweat ran down the back of his neck. He sat in the trailing Humvee of the convoy of five, but that didn't mean the ones in front of them always caught everything. Anything could be disguised as an improvised explosive device, or IED. And this being a high traffic area, not so much for cars as for people out walking to go about their daily lives, he felt extra edgy.

Samson cracked the cap on the bottle, stuck it between his seat and the center console and extended another over his shoulder to the two in the back - Sergeant Ava Peters, the company medic, and the man they all knew only as Omar, their interpreter. A lightweight neck gaiter always covered his features, regardless of the weather. "Is it hotter down south this time of year, Doc?"

Peters shrugged and reached for the bottle. "Yeah, its warmer in Kandahar, but not near as bad as New Orleans in August. This is a dry heat, you know?" She gulped some water. "The crappy air bothers me way more than the heat, honestly."

The rocky, barren roadside gave way to the mud brick shacks with burlap-and-tarp roofs the locals called home, lining a labyrinth of dirt streets. Most of the homes did not have doors, just roughly rectangular black holes people disappeared into and out of. The folks here were accustomed to the presence of the U.S. soldiers by now and no one paid them much attention, other than the occasional knot of barefoot, grungy, skinny kids. As he scanned the roadside, DuBois' eyes flicked from civilian to civilian, looking for anyone on a cell phone that could double as a detonation device. Standard issue frequency jammers on every Army humvee were supposed to scramble any wireless detonation signals, but it didn't always work.

It was early in the day and the shadows cast by the mud shacks were still long, many reaching across the road and past the convoy. The humvees snaked through the village at just a few miles per hour. Dirt and trash sat piled in an irregular line against the intermittent retaining walls lining the road, collected there by the desert wind and forgotten.

Set apart from this retaining wall, closer to the road than the other refuse, DuBois spotted an oddly shaped lump; a wadded up cloth. But not wadded, really, more like it was... concealing something.

The cloth flickered in the corner of his eye.

He tapped Samson on the shoulder and pointed to the lump. "LT, what's that? Gunny!" he called up to Corporal Garrido, standing/sitting in the turret, thumped the roof with his fist. "10 o'clock, two or three feet from the wall?"

"Clocked it, Sir. *HEY!*" Garrido yelled to the vehicle ahead of them. DuBois knew without seeing that Garrido was giving the hand signal to stop the convoy to investigate a threat.

Samson braked the humvee, squinting at the lump. "Looks like just a rag or..."

“It moved.” DuBois cracked the door of the humvee and nodded forward at the rest of the convoy. “We’re closest to it. I’m checkin’ it out.”

DuBois stepped out of the vehicle, gripping his M4. All the details of the environment came into sharp focus - the dust eddies swirling bits of trash between the wall and the bundle, muffled oud music playing from somewhere behind the wall, rhythmic banging of distant construction. There were no locals in this particular stretch of road. That could be a good sign. Or a very bad one.

“Got your six, Sarge,” Garrido said from behind and above him, just loud enough for him to hear.

Could it have been this wind that caused the movement in the cloth? His mind flashed an image of those grungy kids, first imagining them playing with a street puppy and wrapping it in a towel, then of one of them stepping on a pressure-plate IED. He blinked to clear his mind.

DuBois approached the bundle, looking again up and down the narrow street. There was no metal plate, visible wires or suspicious people down the alley or on top of the wall, standing around watching them. There was no indication that this could be an explosive.

The bundle moved again, like something was wriggling inside it.

DuBois waved back at the humvee. “LT! There’s something alive in here.” He suppressed his first impulse to call over the Doc. Just in case something went sideways, he wanted her to stay safe. Medics were precious commodities in theater.

In a few seconds, Samson stood next to DuBois. “It could be on top of something,” he said quietly.

DuBois looked down the street again and then at Samson. He pushed the horrified wonder of who would be so evil as to put something living on top of a pressure plate IED. It wasn't that it couldn't be true. His gut just told him it wasn't. This time.

"I don't think so." He knelt next to it, suddenly conscious of his heart thumping against the body armor covering his chest, and even more aware of the parts of him it didn't cover. His kids' faces flashed through his mind. He sensed rather than saw Samson take an involuntary half step back. He peeled back a corner of the cloth.

Two large, dark eyes stared back at him silently from beneath a shock of black hair.

The baby was dehydrated, badly in need of a change, and almost unnaturally quiet, but otherwise healthy. Once the convoy reversed operations and returned to camp, Peters detached the still-connected piece of umbilical cord, and Samson coordinated with the tactical operations center for some formula and diapers. The base had a small supply of such items for local humanitarian efforts. Many of the soldiers took a turn at holding her over the course of the day.

That evening, Dubois watched the first stars break through the dusky sky as he walked to the main security gate. Omar had arranged for an ambulance from a hospital in Kabul to pick up the child. DuBois, who'd traded body armor for Army-issue fleece, carried two styrofoam cups of steaming chai to where Omar sat in a folding chair just inside the gate. The baby slept peacefully on his shoulder.

DuBois sat quietly in the chair next to Omar, setting one of the cups on the upturned crate between them. He sipped from the other.

DuBois didn't know much about Omar. The interpreters were trained to carefully guard their identities for their own safety. But from the way he'd seen Omar hold and murmur to the

baby with such ease over the course of the day, it seemed obvious that he had kids of his own. Or had once.

“They will ask for a name,” Omar said, staring outside the gate and up the darkening, dusty road.

“Oh.” The soldiers had just been referring to her as Baby Girl. DuBois wished they could call an American chopper to take her to Germany and on to America, to a family who had the resources to give her the opportunities she deserved. Though this baby girl had been dumped, Afghanistan had been making strides recently in terms of girls’ and women’s civil rights. Economically, however, the country still struggled.

But, the fact was that for this tiny miracle... as much as DuBois and the other soldiers would like to, there wasn’t anything more they could do for her.

“I thought about ‘Nadeen.’” Omar looked at DuBois, his eyes shining above his gaiter. “It means ‘blessing’ in Dari.”

DuBois’ breath caught in his throat. His French grandmother’s name had been Nadine. He looked back at the sky, emotion tightening his chest.

“In French,” he said, “it means ‘hope.’”

Second Place: Man O War

By Zachary Taylor

— 2026 —

The exhibit opens in an hour. I walk through the corridor, reviewing each canvas soaked with ocean blues, stained various shades of purple and green. Fishing line and yarn, painted deep emerald and sapphire (with some orphaned violet threads for good measure), drape across each canvas, loosely dangling beyond the edges, delineating beautifully colored, haunting tendrils. I grab the polyethylene recycling bags I prepared — unbranded, deep blue, dusted with mauve paint I scraped through a metal window screen with a toothbrush. The sea foam green tinted fins I placed on a few of the bags turned out more realistic than I could have hoped.

I partially inflate the translucent bags with helium. Just enough for them to bob around, as if they were floating — adrift with seemingly no will of their own. I attach a bag to each canvas: The 2 by 2s, the 4 x 8s, the 12 x 16s. All of them. Down the entire hall.

The Portuguese Man O War is the only creature of its kind on Planet Earth. They are oceanic pack animals. They can't survive individually, and, as such, are called "colonial organisms," the name for a collective "colony" of Man O War being a "bloom." What makes them unique among all other creatures is that each "member" of the bloom (individually called a "zoid") is genetically identical to each other member of the colony, despite their disparate physicalities.

When you first encounter a Man O War, it will look alien to your eyes. Bulbous, see-through "heads" (for lack of any better term) loosely inflated with gas — poisonous to any animal that isn't itself a Man O War — from which dangle majestically hued tentacles that can

grow to over 100 feet in length, no matter the size of the creature's head floating above the ocean's surface.

Despite their alluring color, Man O War are predators. This is fascinating because they can not move and, therefore, can not chase prey. They only travel — in their packs of identical twins, triplets, quadruplets, or whatever the word is for 1,000 identical children — wherever the sea takes them. Along the way, they claim what prey lies in their path, tangling them in their collective, caustic web of mindless tentacles hiding beneath the surface of the sea. They drift with no will of their own. They deliver pain, destruction, and even death everywhere the laws of physics and random chance take them, their intentions meaningless.

Just like me.

This corridor is my bloom. Each canvas, a zooid — morphologically unique but genetically identical to its siblings. They are here by no choice of their own. Their design — their purpose — unknown to them. Helpless to their effect on whom with they have contact, no matter how significant.

— 2005 —

Kevin Quaranta was the King of the Emerald Coast. Every teenager with a penchant for fishing, surfing, boogie boarding, sailing, and every other beach sport, flourished on the bone white sands of North Florida's panhandle. But, in my little town... Among the beach bums I found myself entangled in... Kevin was indisputably the master of it all. For all we knew, the Gulf of Mexico spat him out as a baby and a pair of sun-burned surfers passing by took him in out of sheer wonder.

We called them "beach boys" (even the girls): The kids obsessed with the sand and water; the types who would throw their fist up, jut out their thumb and little finger like how kids

pretend their on the phone and say “Copacetic” while rocking their hand back and forth, shaking the “phone.” In high school, the only beach boy I talked to willingly was Sam Ritter. Not enough to know him but enough for his friends to recognize me. Knowing Sam meant getting invited to bonfires on the beach.

I always declined.

Not because I didn’t want to go; but because their idea of me was better than anything I could have shown them — I was sure of it. So, I played it cool, keeping the illusion alive. At least, until Kevin himself made me an offer: “We’re going surfing. Hoping for a snowball fight. Wanna come?”

A Gulf of Mexico “snowball” fight meant paddling out on your surfboard until you found a bloom (called a “swarm” around Pensacola or a “smack” in Mexico Beach) of Cannonball Jellyfish, so named because of their cannonball-like shape. Their tendrils drooped a mere inch and a half below their firm yet squishy heads through a small, easily-avoided orifice, making it painless to grab a Cannonball from their “top” and throw it like a “snowball” at your surfer buddy. Cannonballs don’t produce enough venom at the end of their tentacles to hurt much, so the punishment for not getting out of the way was the impact plus a small zap that would leave a trivial welt behind.

Nothing serious.

You can’t tell if you’re hurting jellyfish — they don’t send any external signals familiar enough to us mammals to mean anything — but we knew we weren’t killing them. After enough of throwing them around, they’d eventually scatter, propelling themselves into so wide a radius, finding a good one to throw would stop being worth it.

When Kevin asked me to join, I, of course, said, “Yes.”

Not much of a surfer, I laid belly down on an orange board I borrowed from my uncle. Everyone else was catching small, curled wave tips and Sam would splash whomever was behind him with water off his board's tail fin.

John Larsen was there: He had lost a fleshy chunk of his thigh while waist-high fishing in the Gulf with live shrimp in his trunks he was using as bait. A shallow water Bull Shark smelled that bait out, didn't even know John was there, took the shrimp and some of John with him. After a couple of months in the hospital, John returned to school a hero. My life stayed the same. Now, here we were together — the first time I had seen him outside of a classroom since the incident with the shark.

A few other boys showed. I didn't know them well, but I had seen them around: Mike, Tre, Charlie. Abby Faircloth was there too, the only girl on the water that day. Abby was Sam's object of desire, despite her not seeming to notice any of us unless surfing was on the table. Couldn't blame her, though. We were all the same age, but she had things like college and finances figured out. Sam never planned ahead of next weekend.

Kevin was the first to spot a Cannonball bloom. Less than a hundred but more than a few dozen. A good find. He swept one up, gripping the firm bulb of its head. Kneeling on his board, commanding his balance, he threw the toxic orb right into Sam's chest.

The jellyfish slapped against Sam, knocking him from his board into the water before its rubber-like body rebounded and snapped it back into the air before landing in the ocean again. Sam was submerged for what felt like too long, but just as panic began to set in, he resurfaced on the other side of Abby with a Cannonball in each hand, throwing them wildly at both her and Charlie. The game was on.

I was far enough outside the chaos, effectively invisible. I had never touched a jellyfish before, and never thought I would on purpose. A Cannonball Sam had thrown got caught in the drift and floated by my reclusive outpost, bobbing up and down, chancing itself to safety. I decided to route its retreat and scooped it up in a slosh of salt water. Its beauty was stunning: frosted glass flesh traced with light brown, dragon-like “scales”, like a painted jewel, its tentacles a decorative skirt supporting the display. I looked to the rest of the beach bums, all laughing, splashing, dodging, throwing. The sunlight was dwindling, blasting the ocean surface with a blinding sheet of gold foil as it fell. If I wanted to be remembered as any type of fun — anything like their idea of who I was — I had to take this pretty little creature and make my move.

Kevin was distracted, kneeling on his surf board, lobbing jellyfish at the commoners below. I dipped under the water to get closer, stealthily resurfaced and aimed right at Kevin’s spine, knowing I’d get a laugh by throwing him off balance, even from him.

I drew my arm back and launched the Cannonball as hard as I could, smiling all the way, unbothered by my treatment of the helpless creature.

Instead of bouncing off of Kevin like a gelatinous spring as all the others had, the Cannonball burst, coating Kevin’s back in a jelly of thalassic napalm. A guttural terror inflated my throat as I saw glistening flesh on almost every square inch of Kevin’s exposed skin, thickly lined with black, brown and red strands. Two days later, I would learn that Cannonball jellyfish don’t have a painful sting due to some type of biological regulation system residing inside of their bulbous heads. If a Cannonball jellyfish bursts, however, all of the venom it possesses comes out at once, coated along its innards hidden inside of its alien-like head-body.

Kevin screamed and flailed, caught in some invisible fire. The guts and tentacles of the Cannonball had sprouted like a deadly hollow point, wrapping around Kevin’s body, neck, and

face. Venomous, black innards had stuck in Kevin’s eyes, which I saw only for a moment as he spun around on his board before falling into the water, his chest also coated in crossing strands of flesh like a fishing net.

The blinding reflection of the falling sun on the sea disoriented us all. Most of the group didn’t know what had happened — they just heard screams and a splash.

Kevin resurfaced, still screaming, his eyes and face swollen, welts covering his neck and shoulders but now free of the dead creature’s ballistic organs. For a brief moment, I felt relief.

Tre screamed when he saw Kevin , “*What the fuck happened?!*” I was pushing through the waves of shame, hoping no one noticed it was my Cannonball that caused the scene. Playing it cool.

But then, Abby started screaming too. She didn’t sound afraid or shocked. She sounded panicked. I tried to focus on what she was yelling over the sounds of splashing and the crashing of waves...

“MAN O WAR!” she shouted. “HEAD BACK IN!” I heard her say. “MAN O WAR!” she screamed again.

I squinted through the sun-coated, glass horizon to see Abby pointing towards the sunset with one hand, paddling shoreward with the other.

I looked to where she was pointing. The radiant sheet of gold laid down by the sun had blinded us all to the bloom. But I could see them now. And they were close.

An *enormous* colony of Portuguese Man O War, maybe hundreds, rose and fell with the ocean, like an ornate carpet flying in our direction, the tide at its back, hastening its approach.

You don’t encounter Man O War often on the Gulf, but everyone has a story. Beneath that exotic fleet floated hundreds — perhaps even thousands — of feet of barbarous, paralyzing

tendrils. Man O War aren't normally deadly. However, if you get wrapped in their spindly embrace for a matter of even mere minutes, you will always — no matter your age, immune system, or genetic disposition — enter anaphylaxis, eventually losing your ability to breathe. The taser-like pain of the sting won't kill you. You'll either drown or suffocate, the venomous grip searing your flesh while you drift into a deathly sleep.

We were all taught to avoid Man O War. More than jellyfish. More than stingrays. On the Gulf, adults would even teach you to punch a shark in the nose if you had no other choice. But the lesson for Man O War was always the same: *Run*.

Sam paddled past me, screaming “*Shit*” over and over like it was his gasoline. Kevin's board was in the drift, but I couldn't find *him*.

I reminded myself he was King of the Coast. He'd leave his board behind if it meant not getting caught in the Man O War. He was fine. Better than the rest of us, even.

John's board slapped against the shore in a light wave with John dramatically slogging in behind it, the ocean draining from his trunks. I came in right after him. Abby was there already. So was Sam. So was everybody. I got in last — not a surprise.

“*Whew-ee!*” John exclaimed, adrenaline still spiking. “What a time, huh? Cannonballs *and* Man O War? When it rain it pours, right, babes?”

Sam beached his board further up the sand before desperately running along the beach, looking to the ocean. The glint of the sunset relaxed from a glaring gold to a calming hue of orange, but it was still difficult to see too far out into the water.

“You guys see Kevin?” Sam anxiously asked, pacing the beach.

“He's a beach boy, dude. Swims better than any of us. He might be down the beach even,” I said, feigning confidence. “Probably sneaking a beer at Toucan's!”

Abby unstrapped her wrist from her board and helped Sam look into the horizon.

“I don’t see anything, man,” she said. “The fuck is he?”

John grew concerned. So did Charlie. So did everybody. I confronted the group again, trying to offer some kind of respite.

“Come on, guys! It’s Kevin! He’s down the beach!”

— 2026 —

As expected, the night is uneventful. Potential patrons shuffle in; their children poke at the lower-hanging polyethylene bags. Nobody buys anything.

I follow the last few visitors as they leave, thanking them, ready to lock the door. Key in the lock, a woman rushes up, peering through the glass. I push the door open slightly. “Sorry, miss. I was just closing up,” I say.

“Zach?” she asks.

I look her over, afraid of more legal trouble. Then I see it. I see *her*. It’s Abby Faircloth.

I let her in, and we sit together against the wall under one of the larger canvases. She brushes the drooping tentacles over her shoulder. I let the the ones hanging over me stay where they are.

“What do you think?” I ask nodding to the canvases, not really wanting an answer.

“Makes me think of Kevin,” she says, taking in the entire hallway all at once.

“Me too.” Abby plays with one of the fishing lines dangling behind her.

“Sam still talks about it. Blames himself. Thinks he could’ve pulled Kevin out of the water.”

“That would’ve been suicide.”

We sit in silence for awhile, me fidgeting with a brochure for the exhibit and Abby taking in the various purples and blues of the paintings along the wall.

“They are beautiful, aren’t they?” she asks rhetorically.

I flush with shame, trying to hide it.

“This is what it would have looked like,” I respond.

“What do you mean?”

“Here we are, in the middle of a bloom, caught in their grasp. Kevin would’ve seen something like this.”

Abby’s face twists into some kind of lovechild of pity and disgust. “That is such a fucked up thing to say, Zach,” she says sternly, still finding a way to be soft with me. I want to explain how that feeling is the only way I was able to move on — how putting myself there was, in a sadistic sort of way, helpful. I can’t. I’ve forgotten how to speak.

The following silence frustrates me. I quietly snap, impatient in the tension: “It’s been almost twenty years, Abby. Why’d you come here?”

She stirs uncomfortably, leaning forward, leaving the dangling threads of the canvas behind.

“I read about your exhibit online. Sam and I are only a few hours away. Really, I just wanted to just come and talk.”

“About what?”

She looks away. Something is coming: I brace for impact.

“It wasn’t anyone’s fault, Zach.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I sharply reply.

Another haunting silence follows. Abby shifts from pity to somber disappointment. After a moment, she pushes herself up from the floor and starts for the exit. I want to call out — to apologize for everything, said and unsaid both — but I’m drowning. I can’t find any oxygen.

With her hand on the door, she turns back, smiles through squinting eyes, like the smile isn’t real.

“I’ll be seeing you, Zach.”

I force a smile. She opens the door to let herself out, and I finally call out.

“Abby!”

She stops, turning back, a glint of hope in her eye. She stares, waiting to hear what I have to say, as I sit in the tendrils of a Man O War. Too much time goes by.

“B-bring Sam next time. It’d be nice to see you... To see you both. It was very kind of you to invite me to the wedding. I’m sorry I couldn’t make it.”

This smile is real: eyes and all. Abby puts her thumb and little finger out, like she’s making a hand phone, and shakes them back and forth.

“Copacetic.”

Abby lets the door fall shut behind her.

For what feels like hours, I stay completely still, paralyzed in the hypnotic grasp of the Man O War, my polyethylene bags sagging, all but deflated.

I’m floating. Drifting. A predator. No will of my own. No control of where I go. No control of what I destroy. The laws of physics and random chance command me: drawing me near; pulling me away. Humanoid, but genetically identical to the Man O War.

First Place: Fair Chase Pigtopia

By Joan Kennedy

JaiGeeEm: Posted 3 days ago.

Owen Knightly—OhKai2Nite—was one of us, and infinitely more. He was the first to see the potential for X-pigs to improve the quality of our lives, and what he knew about pigs should be filling a library. But I need to tell you straight off: this is no eulogy. This is an SOS. There's so much to cover that's nothing to do with Owen being a visionary, or a great man, or a great guy. With Owen gone, we've got a situation here. His death threatens to undo everything he built, everything he was working to expand, and quite a bit more than that.

Our way of life is at stake, ours and everyone else's who embraced Owen's vision. This dream of living in synergy with nature and with humankind? It's all on the block now. We need to come together immediately, bringing all our skills and resources, and it still might not be enough. But it's on us because if we don't get a handle on it, nobody will.

TL;DR: I think one of Owen's pigs killed him, that this pig is on the loose, and that he's now carrying immense power. The enemy might not be intellectually advanced, but he's unconstrained by ethical compunctions about, well, anything. Just getting by on instinct, aggression, and guile, and even as I speak, siring others as dangerous as he is. We have to get ahead of this before they spread out, before they start killing in massive numbers, and before they start to organize. It'll be like trying to soak up coffee grounds with a sponge.

I prerecorded this because I don't trust my composure to hold up through a live delivery. But I'll check back for discussion as soon as possible.

I met Owen in person about a week before they found him, and I guess I was the last to see him alive. After his body turned up, unrecognizable, picked apart by scavengers in the forest just beyond his farm, people had questions. I told them everything I could, which wasn't much. I

don't know you all well enough to trust you. But right now, telling you what happened matters more than whether some outsider gets wind of this and turns us all in. As soon as someone in authority gets a load of what you are, they make all kinds of assumptions about what you do. But at the moment, we have bigger problems and so do they. They just don't know it yet.

So I got to Owen's place two days before Christmas with crates, to pick up four breeding pairs of piglets. I don't know what I was expecting, but Owen in the flesh was this tall, soft-spoken guy, lanky and young-looking, nowhere near as homely as he seemed on Zoom. He kept asking me about my land and outbuildings, and my—nonexistent— experience with animal care, while his hair kept whipping around and flying into his mouth and eyes. He never even brushed it away, just talked right through it. And he might be the only man I've ever seen wearing a white dress shirt underneath grubby denim overalls.

I got there around dusk, and Owen began showing me around his operation. You don't pick out the little stoats yourself; he does that. He'd already pulled them together and paired them up for "optimal genetic diversity" for now. As most of you know, he had designed an Excel template with macros to help him decide when to fold new lines in from the outside and when to breed current lines back in on themselves. Which I'll have to be doing now. He asked me to think about what it must've been like when Queen Victoria's great-grandchildren started marrying one another all over Europe in the 20th Century. And then, he said, imagine all those monarchs had in common not only Victoria and Albert, but all came from the exact same six as their *other* great grandparents. "Our X-pigs are as inbred as those guys would've been," Owen said. "Their family trees don't ... fork."

Owen said the eight I was buying were all I needed to get started, and then he took me into the barn nursery to meet them. Seven weeks old, barely weaned, and butting heads against one another like little goats. Christ, they were adorable. Still are, even much bigger. And smart? Don't get me started. Pretty soon I'll have to start changing the combination on my gate locks.

The piglets were all wearing collars braided from that embroidery thread little girls make into friendship bracelets, their names engraved on dog tags hanging from the collars. Each guy collar was the same color as the one on the gal he's supposed to mate with first time around, if we get that far. By the time I left, I already knew their names, partly because they've got such different coat patterns that you'd never confuse one for another. Owen said following the Excel template—one of the files on a thumb drive he gave me—should keep us on track for several generations before needing to import new blood. After that, he said, “Who knows? With any luck, by then we can just buy them on the open market, or from 4H kids.”

Even as juveniles, my piglets are working together and getting shit done, making berms out of hay and burrowing together deep inside to nap outdoors. I know, everyone thinks their own are the best. But if you're raising X-pigs, I'm begging you: treasure them, baby them, and protect them like the miracles they are. Respect their intelligence, their strength, and their feelings. Let your pigs live fully as pigs, but raise them to know that every good thing in their lives is there because you put it there. Reward them lavishly for what you're taking. And embody the role of alpha boar—or alpha sow—of your own herd. Owen got that much right.

As we know, Owen was trying to build a network where we can thrive and advance without harming people or animals, and without compromising our own health and vigor. He brought us hope, and we all know what life without hope is like. Without Owen, some of us

would literally have destroyed ourselves by now. Whatever he set in motion, we owe him for the lifeline. Now if we can just hang on.

Once I'd met my little herd and we went back inside his house, Owen brought out two goblets filled with red, handed me one, and recited the blessing we all know by heart: "To privacy and lasting peace, doing good without notice, and making amends wherever we've caused harm."

Clink, sip, then a bigger taste. The inside of my mouth was beginning to lose its mind. "Sweet Baby Jesus, Owen. I had no idea this was even possible. Seriously, if I didn't know, I wouldn't know."

Owen said, "Yours will taste just like this when the little guys are ready. This has been a long time coming."

Then Owen took me back out to the barn, to a little spotted sow named Heather, where he showed me how to pull a pint. I watched absolutely transfixed as he first palpated Heather's neck to find the vein, then sprayed some high-test lidocaine so she wouldn't feel a sting. He then made two puncture marks in the usual way. He withdrew his canines from her neck and inserted two clear tubes into the two little holes. He held the tubes in place until they filled a jar to the sixteen-ounce line. After he'd removed the tubes and applied a dab of spit, the holes closed up and healed over as I watched. Then he scratched Heather's head behind her ears, thanked her effusively, told her what a pretty girl she was, and hand-fed her a couple of marshmallows.

"Some of them would rather have a slice of Honey Crisp apple at this point, and I've got one that'll only accept malted milk balls," he said, "and he won't touch them while I'm standing there. Roscoe's never been one for eating from my hand."

I knew Owen started out with eight piglets rescued—well, taken—from a research facility: the “foundation herd” that generated all his X-pigs. What I didn’t know was that these labs had been breeding for human transplantation: heart, liver, kidneys, lungs, corneas, pancreas, other things. These X-pigs were from lines with at least six human genes to prevent organ rejection. Those added genes are why our pigs are thinner than food industry pigs, and maybe—who knows—why they bond so readily with us. It’s also why X-pig blood doesn’t taste disgusting or make us sick.

Owen pointed to a section isolated from the other pigs: Roscoe’s stall. A dark gray pig with a huge white band encircling his trunk, Roscoe met and held my stare, and followed our moves intently, with eyes that seemed to be taking note of everything. With or without a treat, I would never have placed my hand anywhere near that animal’s mouth.

I had to ask the obvious question. “Why drain the blood through those tubes? Why not just drink the regular way, since that’s how we go in anyhow.”

“You mean besides not wanting to drink through lidocaine?”

Owen said there’s a learning curve to feeding naturally from a pig, that since you don’t know how much you’re taking in, you don’t know when it’s time to stop. And, of course, when you’re in the moment, it can be hard to *make* yourself stop. “Some have mastered it, but how many of your piglets are you willing to spend before you get it right?”

He said rules of thumb are useless with this. Human mouths come in different sizes, so you can’t just say something like one ounce for every four seconds you drink. If I decide to go down that path, he told me, I should fill a one-pint container, one mouthful of water at a time, so I’d at least know how many of my own mouthfuls make a pint. He said it still wouldn’t solve the problem of slipping inadvertently into Full Gorge Mode, but that it’s better than winging it.

Owen told me that in another couple of months, I could be drawing half a pint per session from the first piglets to acclimate. And that once they reach full size, a sixteen ounces from each, twice a month. So, feeding in moderation every other day. Never Hungry, never full. My eyes began welling up once it hit me that soon I'll be done forever with the Hunger. No more siphoning off donors from the Red Cross, no more hand-holding Death with Dignity clients between their first and second injection, no more trading street drugs for blood. No more sinking my teeth into another human neck.

"Teaching piglets to accept the draw is a multi-step process," Owen was saying, noting that mine had already mastered Step One: they accepted being approached, which takes some training. I would later find a link on the thumb drive to a private YouTube tutorial. Sandwiched between two halves of a middle-school talent show, between the jazz dancers and the comedian/magician, was a clip of Farmer Owen. "Howdy, boys and girls! Today I'll be walking you through *all the steps* for easing your piglet into life as a twice-monthly blood donor."

Once back in the house, he was pouring Heather's pint into fresh goblets. "How about one for the road?" he asked. There was one more thing he wanted to go over before I left: how I would manage my instincts and impulses in the absence of the physical, gnawing Hunger: that even if we're not climbing the walls thinking about our next hunt, we're still what we are. And that if we don't manage this, our impulses will find their own way out in highly destructive ways. "Handling this is the difference between living with vampirism and becoming a monster."

Oh, Owen. If only intentions mattered as much as outcomes.

As I sank into one of Owen's worn leather-covered sofas, I was amazed that this glassful was even more delicious than the first had been. This time the liquid was still warm, intensifying the mouth tingle and the iron notes. I nursed it to prolong the experience as Owen began laying

out the options for keeping my pig population in check: neuter most of the little boars, or mix hormone suppressants with their feed until it's time to generate a new litter. Sell piglets to like-minded farmers as they became available. Sell to butchers who specialize in pasture-kept, humanely raised meat. Or I could cull the herd myself, as often as needed, and by the most obvious means. Or some combination of these options.

Then Owen told me about his annual Christmas hunt, and about Roscoe's role in his plans for it. He said his herd's default size is about 16, and that he was selling about as many new piglets as the herd was producing. "I take one night a year as a safety valve for my predator impulses, to keep them from getting out of hand during the other three sixty-four," he said. He called Roscoe his logical choice this year: the one that never connected with him no matter how much effort Owen put in, the problem child, the bad influence. He said he'd usually pick some stolid little thing; maybe its blood was a little subpar. "This one hurts, mostly because I tried so hard and Roscoe is just hostile to the life. I do better with happy pigs."

Owen liked pigs that liked him back. If only Roscoe had closed his little eyes in pleasure when Owen scratched behind his ears and told him what a good boy he was. If only he'd forced himself to take those malted milk balls from Owen's hand.

So that was the plan: set Roscoe loose just before dawn and hunt him down after dusk, giving free rein to the flip side of his nature. Chasing down a hand-reared domesticated animal so he could sustain his better-angels lifestyle the rest of the year. Might've worked, if Owen hadn't been so keen on bringing in Fair Chase principles. Fair Chase wouldn't have been anyone's idea for a farm animal with attitude and six cantankerous human genes, one that had never spent an hour outside Pigtopia.

Owen said he'd be wearing earbuds blasting Stained-Glass Bluegrass Christmas carols. His sense of smell would be distorted by eucalyptus, and each ankle would be carrying a five-pound weight. He'd considered a blindfold, but decided that would be overreaching.

It wasn't just for his conscience that Owen was handicapping himself; the previous years' hunts had apparently concluded almost as soon as they'd begun. Apparently, the earlier pigs hadn't even noticed they were being chased, or that his fangs were out but the lidocaine wasn't. Roscoe, though: he would notice everything.

“What if Roscoe outruns you, or hides where you can't find him before first light?”

“Then he's free. Out of the blood business, and out of my hair. Maybe he'll meet up with a feral sounder and they'll make him their leader.” That just sounded mean. Roscoe barely had tusks. Pointy, yes, but too short to reach anything.

Do you see where this is going? Owen sets out on a hunt to put down his antisocial pig. He can't hear, can't smell, slows himself down with weights. Whereas Roscoe has no handicaps, and has spent all day wondering what's going on. Then he sees Owen coming for him, fangs out, and Roscoe's not having it.

What happens next? Once Owen's got him in a clinch, maybe he pulls some blood, then maybe Roscoe opens up a vein on *Owen*, tastes some of Owen's blood, and decides he wants some more. Once your face is that close to a pig's neck, the pig's face is pretty close to yours. One move in the wrong direction and that pointy little tusk is in Owen's jugular. And the rest plays out like a Greek tragedy. Ultimately, Owen's dead and Roscoe's one of us. But he's a *pig*.

We know Owen died in the woods where he said he'd be hunting. Locals have been forming hunting parties to find and kill feral pigs. Now some of those searchers are turning up dead. Exsanguinated bodies, bite marks from a pig, in the woods just beyond Owen's farm. Is

there any other possibility than that Roscoe turned himself with Owen's blood? If you're with me so far, what do the next six months look like to you? What does the next year look like?

I expect Roscoe is siring as many litters as he can find sows in estrus, and that half of each litter will be born bloodsuckers. Now I'm wondering how many of Roscoe's *special* piglets a coyote would have to eat before it turns itself. How long will these animals keep to the woods? How do you talk to all those *good guys with guns* who think they're just hunting boars?

We can do some things the local hunters can't, especially at night. For one thing, they're not selling silver bullets at Dick's Sporting Goods. We know early winter is peak mating season. Once those litters drop in the spring, containment is no longer possible. And Christ knows what happens when other wild species get sucked into this.

Just follow the news sites out of Roanoke to see how it's going. One problem: if we bring down Roscoe, they'll think the worst is over. But the worst will kick in as next spring's piglets mature. Anyway, right now I'm headed back to Virginia. Took a while to round up someone to look after the babies. If I don't post again in a day or two, you should probably assume the worst.