

W R I T E
O N

Short Story
Writing Contest

2022
Contest Winners



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First Place: Bobbi Carducci

Round Hill, VA

Call Me Silver

My given name is Barbara-Ann. For years I was mad at my momma for that. Have you noted the hyphen? Now isn't that somthin'? It sits there makin one name out of two, complicatin' things when people ask for a middle name. More than once someone who thinks these things important has been most insistent on that second name, or even an initial if I could only conjure one up. Eventually I just let that hyphen go. Started pretendin' it wasn't even there. Next thing I knew no one bothered about it at all anymore.

Next come the nickname. Where I come from no one can be content to call ya by your given name. No sir, you can't bother to use the one your momma gave you, the one the preacher said to God at your Baptism. That one's not for everyday use. That one's reserved for special occasions like marryin' or goin to jail and things of note like that. For a long time, I was known as Babs. Now I ask ya, what kinda sawed off soundin' name is that? Better than Barbie is about the only good thing I can say about it. But when you start off with Barbara 'hyphen' Ann, what do you expect to get out of it? It ain't like a name such as Catherine. With Catherine you can get, Cat, Kate, Cathy, Kitty, all of which have a fine enough sound and a little bit of meanin' behind them. Nothin' like Babs which just sort of sits there. Kinda' heavy and leanin' more toward the shade than the sun if ya know what I mean. I didn't like it much but I answered to it. Had to, else I'd a missed a whole lot of suppers and I did like Momma's cookin,' even if her choice of names left somethin to be desired.

It coulda' been a lot worse too. Like what happened to my best friend, Jackson. You see, sometimes in order to get a nickname, the old one isn't lopped off but gets turned around a bit instead. Sometimes somethin is added on, to make it more interestin' soundin'.

Back when we was kids, people weren't so open minded about being different. That's what drew Jackson and me together in the first place. Bein' different. In my case it's the look of me. I bear the mark of some long-ago ancestor who had the unfortunate luck to be an albino. Most of my family is red-headed and freckled, testifyin' to our roots back in Ireland. But every now and then one of us blondes pop up. Now there ain't been a true albino come along for a long time but about once every generation we get one like me with pale skin and hair so blonde it's mostly white. You know we ain't albinos no more cause of the eyes. Albino's have red eyes. Like a rabbit. Mine are blue. The lightest blue I ever seen on a person.

"Kinda' spooky lookin'," some folks said, but honest to God they're just eyeballs and they work well enough so what's the fuss all about?

So anyway, there I was growing up in Buck County, a tall skinny girl with wild white hair down to my butt and spooky eyes, and oh yeah, I almost forgot, way too much curiosity than ever was good for me. The Lord might as well have painted trouble on my hide when he made me this way for that's all it ever got me.

"Quit your whining," my Granny would say. "Everything you have is a gift from God and God will see to it that things work out in the end. Mark my words."

I tried to believe her but often it was hard to see the good in being different. That brings me back to Jackson. Jackson lived down the road. An only child in a poor community kept going on the generosity of family. Every house was filled with brothers and sisters, six to ten bein' the norm, any more than that might be considered a bit excessive but was well tolerated just the same. I have six brothers and two sisters. None of whom can find time to spend with a strange lookin' little sister who's often up a tree and who knows way too much about the mischief they been gettin' into.

Jackson was it in his house. The only child of Ruth and Charlie Curley. She'd been a school teacher before Jackson was born. No one thought she'd ever marry, not after she passed the age when a single woman in this county was considered a spinster. She musta' been past thirty when Charlie Curley, the man who delivered the milk every mornin', slipped a note into an empty bottle and left it on her porch one day. No one ever did find out what was written there, but after readin' that note they started keepin' company and next thing you knew there was a wedding to go to. Just about a year after the weddin', Jackson was born. That was the same year Momma had me. We were born on the same day. Musta' been somethin' in the air that May, bringin' two odd ones to this place at the same time.

With Jackson it ain't how he looked. He's a fine lookin' cross of genes from both his parents. Tall and well built like his daddy without his big ears or stooped shoulders, Jackson was a handsome boy. He looks like his momma. The strong features that made a pretty woman look haughty and way too smart for her own good, scarin' off all but Charlie Curley in Buck County, VA came out just right on his face. He would grow to be

6'5 with dark hair that curled just enough to make women want to reach up and touch it. He would grow into his large white teeth too, endin' up with a movie star smile and lips that a girl just knew held promises she would beg him to keep. She would find herself deeply disappointed. But in that regard, I'm gettin' ahead of myself. He was smart too. Couldn't really help it now could he, his momma bein' a teacher and his daddy spendin' any extra money they had on books they all sat around readin' after supper each night.

Jackson coulda' been a real hell raiser. The other boys would've followed him all over creation if he'd been of a mind to lead them but he just wasn't interested. He was a quiet boy. Most often he would go off on his own studyin' plants, fishin' in the creek, or lookin' deep into the night sky. Hell, he even read books when school was out for the summer. He preferred the company of girls.

After a while other folks began to notice how he talked a bit too soft. Admired the women's clothes a bit too much. Rumor told how one day the preacher's wife went by the Curley home collectin' for the poor and spied

Jackson through the window walkin' around in his Momma's shoes and Sunday hat.

"There's somthin' off about that boy," she told the Reverend at dinner that night.

Much to their dismay, their son John overheard that remark and reported it to the entire sixth grade next mornin'.

“He’s off all right,” retorted Dan Carson, the class bully. “He’s Jack-Off. Yeah, that’s right. He’s not Jackson Curley. He’s Jackoff Queerly. He’s a big fag. Let’s get him after school!”

Now Jackson had no experience with fighting. He hadn’t been able to hone his skills tormenting younger brothers and sisters like most kids around here. Never even had a shovin’ match before. He was gonna get creamed and I knew it.

“Hey Jackson,” I called as I ran over to him after school that day. “They’re gonna kill ya.”

“I know,” he answered. “But I gotta go. If I don’t it’s just gonna be worse when they do catch me.”

“You gotta’ hurt him or they’ll never stop. They’ll be all over ya everyday”.

“How do you think I’m gonna do that? I never fought before”.

“You gotta buy some time. Postpone it for a few days. I’ll teach ya how to fight”.

“You? You’re a girl. What you know about fightin’?”

“Well, they say you’re like a girl. But I can fight. I’d be whapped every day if I couldn’t defend myself. I got all those brothers, remember?”

“So how do I get more time? Not that I’m convinced you can fight, but if I were to let you try to teach me, how do I get out of meeting him today”?

“Leave it to me,” I said. “Just leave that to me.”

Right after the bell rang, Jackson and Dan were called to the principal’s office.

“Unless you boys want detention for a month you will drop this matter right now,” Mr. Boyce growled. “I will not tolerate fighting among the students on or off school property, is that clear? I called your parents and told them to escort you home after school for the rest of the week to allow you both time to cool off.

“But, he’s a qu……,” Dan started.

“Mr. Carson, you will zip your lip this instant. I will not hear any name calling in this office. Both of you get back to class and get on with your schoolwork. NOW.”

“I’m gonna’ get you for this,” Dan warned as they hurried back to the classroom. “Ratting on top of being a fag is gonna get you a double dose of these,” he said shaking his fists.

“I didn’t rat on you and I’ll gladly meet you anywhere any time,” Jackson bluffed, “but we have escorts for the rest of the week. ‘Whatta’ ya say we settle this after we get old man Boyce off our backs?”

“You got it,” Dan barked. “I’ll think of a place and let you know where and when. Just keep away from me. I don’t need no queers breathin’ germs all over me trying to turn me into one of you.” He stalked off, waving away invisible cooties.

I slipped Jackson a note as he passed my desk on his way to his seat.

‘Meet me at the tire swing by the creek after school,’ it read.

“How’d you do that?” he demanded as he came out of the woods onto the creek bank. How did you get Mr. Boyce to stick his nose in?”

“Me? I didn’t talk to old man Boyce. I stay away from that office. You never know when he might get the urge to just up and make you write an essay on “How to Behave Like a Proper Young Lady.” or somthin’ like that. No way.”

“Come on, you did somethin’, didn’t ya?”

“Well.....I might’ve been talkin’ just a little bit too loud when Miss Sherman went by as I was tellin my brother about the big fight between you and Dan after school and how it was a big secret and all.”

Miss Sherman was Mr. Boyce’s secretary and she seemed to think part of her duty was to patrol the halls and report any student taking too long coming back from the lavatory.

“Thanks.”

“It was nothin’, I hate a fight that ain’t fair. Let’s get started. He’s still gonna beat ya but at least he might not kill ya. Not if you listen to me anyway.”

“Gee thanks for the confidence.” Jackson grinned.” Show me what you got.”

A week later the fight was on.

Jackson didn’t hesitate. He met his foe behind the funeral home on 4th Street right on time and with a quick right hand followed by an impressive left jab, blackened Dan’s eyes. Either the shock or the pain caused Dan to lose his lunch all over the shoes of anyone unfortunate enough to be in his path as he staggered away.

Kids still called Jackson, Jackoff Queerly, but only under their breath and from a great distance.

“You better stop hangin’ around with Jackson,” my brother warned me one day.

“Why, what’s it to ya?” I demanded.

“The kids is talkin’. Callin’ you names and stuff. Sayin’ you took his side”.

“Let ‘em talk, they do anyhow. And I did take his side. He’s my best friend. Nobody likes him and nobody likes me, just cause we’re different somehow. I know queerly means strange. They think I’m strange too. They been callin’ me spook and ghost since kindergarten. What’s a jackoff anyway”?

“Never you mind what that means. It’s nasty and Momma will paddle your behind she hears you sayin’ that. Stay away from him.”

“No! And you can’t make me.”

“Fine then, you go on like you are now and let kids call you Queerly and the Silver Ghost, see if I care.” He stalked away, his ears glowing red with anger.

“Silver Ghost, huh? I like it,” Jackson said when I repeated the taunt to him.

“I ain’t no ghost,” I insisted. “I’m a person, alive and thrivin’ in Buck County, Virginia and one of these days I’m gonna bust out of here and show em all.”

“I just bet you will,” Jackson answered. “I think I’ll be busting out of here too someday. Hope we meet up somewhere, bet you’ll have some stories to tell when we do.

I'm gonna' call you Silver from now on. It suits you with that white hair. Sometimes you're shiny and soft and sometimes you're hard. Yep, Silver is the right name for you."

"You can call me that. I guess. But only between us. Lord only knows what other folks would make of it if they heard ya. And leave off the ghost part. Otherwise you'll be sorry. I didn't show you all I know about fightin' ya know, not by a long shot".

"I'm sure you know a lot more about that and a lot of other things too." He grinned.

He swears he didn't tell no one but he musta' cause next thing I knew eveyone was callin me Silver.

Eventually I realized Jackson was right. It suits me. I guess he knows a whole lot more about namin folks than my momma did.

Turns out I never did leave Buck County, but Jackson did. Reading all them books led to a college scholarship. After graduatin' with honors, he joined the Marines and went to Viet Nam. Lt. Jackson Curley now lies in Arlington Cemetery, a bronze star decorating his headstone. I took myself to Washington, D.C. one summer and spent some time lookin' at his name up on that wall. I paid my respects and moved on to do the same for Dan Carson. Both brave. Both willin' to die for their country. It seems them two weren't so different after all.

Second Place: Annika Hudson

Chevy Chase, MD

Invisible Walls

The whooshing sound of the automatic glass doors opening and the rush of cool, noticeably disinfected air hits her all at once. This is a place all your senses quickly become overwhelmed. The hallways she walks through are long, white and sterile, broken up occasionally by a jeering, colorful poster warning of some deadly disease or a new medicine to treat it. Ironically, both types of message seem to have the exact same design. On the uncomfortable metal chairs along the hallway she sees an elderly couple. They are holding each other and sitting very still. She cannot see their expressions under the masks that cover most of their faces, but their eyes look tired and tearful. She cannot smile at them because her mouth is also covered. For fear of looking like she is staring for a reason other than compassion, she looks away and leaves them sitting along the sterile hallway.

She enters her least favorite place through another glass door. The only sounds here are the clicking of the receptionist's keyboard and the ticking of the clock above her head. Despite the silence, you can barely hear the breathing of the handful of people sitting around. Here, it is as if everyone is always holding their breath. She disturbs the peace with the beeping noise that comes from scanning her ID on the machine by the door. Letting whoever is behind the screen know that she has arrived. Against her will. Then, the peace is disturbed again. This time by a woman in a gray scarf. She has a

young boy by the hand. She quietly asks if her son can accompany her today. The answer is yes. All Anne can think is

A little child? Here? Poor thing. Poor mom. Poor everyone.

Then, a familiar face. A young woman in a leopard print coat and matching hat. Anne sees her every day. Although they share their days in this place, they have never once spoken and barely ever made eye contact. Just like the unwritten rule of no breathing, people keep their eyes down and mouths closed here. The woman in the leopard print is tired, Anne knows that much. Every day that they come in here they both look a little more worn down. At least the woman still has her fashion sense which Anne lost many years ago. The silence is broken again. This time it is the sharp call of Anne's own name. In this space the reading out of your own identity can frighten you. You become scared of yourself here. The loud voice confirms that you are actually here when you'd rather be anywhere else in the world.

The room she is lead back to is half full. There are ten large chairs and five small bodies occupying half of them them. Despite these five bodies, there is still silence. The silence is broken by the squeaking of a cart full of supplies. Infamous squeaking. There is woman in the chair next to Anne. All five women strain their ears to hear any of the occasional whispering or discussion. Despite the cold silence in the room, they are all interested to know each other's stories. They would never admit as much. The woman next to Anne is asked for her date of birth. It is 1998. Anne glances over briefly to look at the woman who is wearing a light pink hat. She is 24 years old. Anne's brain might be

fried, but she can do simple math. Anne had been feeling pretty pitiful earlier that day. Knowing that there is a 24-year-old next to her makes her feel so lucky.

The only sounds after that are the moving of the squeaky metal supply trolley and periodic, sharp intakes of breath from the women in the chairs. They never exclaim, shout or curse even though they have every right to. Their stoicism rubs off on Anne who otherwise never used to hold in her feelings. It seems that the chair swallows her up as she sits there for hour after hour. Some of the chairs get new occupants and others leave sooner. Because there are no words exchanged, Anne can only sit and wonder what they are going through, what is being pumped into them and what difference it really makes. She stares at the pages of her book, but rather than reading she is quietly imagining the lives of the fellow occupants of the room. Making up hopes and dreams and families for them all. Their lives could be much better or much worse than the stories she conjures in her head, but she will never know.

Finally, she is set free. Light-headed and with pins and needles in her legs she slowly walks back through the waiting area. It is the same receptionist all these hours later, still clicking away. The room is fuller now. As if it's rush hour in their terrible bubble.

As she leaves through the glass door she sees a bed against the wall in the hallway. The woman with the leopard print outfit is lying there. The coat is carelessly crumpled at the foot of the bed. Her eyes are closed but the hat is still perfectly placed on her head. She looks a lot smaller surrounded by all the white bedding. Anne doesn't know why she is lying down now. She hopes it is simply for a well-deserved rest.

She passes through the seemingly never-ending hallways once again. She goes to take a seat and wait for whoever has generously volunteered their time today to come and pick her up. Even though they are late, she would never call and ask why. They are giving up so much for her already, they have her permission to leave her waiting all day. She sits on the red chairs in the lobby. There is a small café on this floor and it is always bustling. No chatter or talk, but the sounds of the movements of many busy people. Everyone there is grabbing something to keep their bodies going. There are the people dressed in white briskly and energetically gulping down smoothies and sandwiches in a rush and then there are the rest. The goal is the same: they also wish to energize their tired bodies. The difference between them and the ones dressed in white is that the ordinary people trudge slowly through the café as if wishing to stop time and some roll in wheelchairs so rusty that they seem to have been passed down for generations. They do not have that bounce in their step anymore.

Across from her is a young man and child. The child is sipping on chocolate milk, but not with the excitement you would expect of a three-year-old. He is too small for the lobby chairs, so his feet stick out straight in front of him. His father looks at his phone and sighs periodically. After the chocolate milk is empty, the child sits there without a word. He has accepted that he is here in this place and uses the same acceptance towards his now-empty drink. He is mature beyond his years.

A woman in a red woolen hat and dark brown hair comes and sits a few chairs from Anne. She throws her backpack to the ground as she sits down and gets out her phone. Her gestures are big and shaky. As she gets out her phone Anne averts her eyes

but listens to every word. Soon the woman cannot hold back her tears any longer. She sobs as she relays her sad news to her mother on the other end of the call. Tears roll down Anne's cheeks and spatter the page of the book she is pretending to read. The woman's despair takes up the whole lobby. Others avert their eyes as well. Soon she hangs up the phone and puts her head in her hands for a brief moment. Then she zips her backpack up, wipes her face with matching red mitten and walks out of the lobby and through the glass doors.

As fast as she left her chair it is occupied again by a heavily pregnant woman in a gown. Her equally pregnant friend pulls up another chair beside her. They smile and chatter and drink the same café-bought container of chocolate milk as the young boy. The lobby is no longer quiet. It made space for sobs of despair and within moments loud laughter. They are excited to be welcoming their children to the world soon. Anne looks over at them, jealousy mixing with her tears and slowly clouding her vision. She looks at their round forms carrying a new life and at the same new happiness. She sees their companionship and wonders whether their new additions will now have automatic lifelong friends. Some people come to this place to learn the worst news they will ever get while others come to receive the best. Anne thinks of the how peculiar it is that we have found a way of being born and dying in the same place. Lucky people have access to multiple different institutions so as not to have to emotionally mix up the bad and good in life. Others just come to accept it as the place where tragedies and miracles are occurring simultaneously at all times.

Anne is tired now. It has been eight hours since she first arrived. The space in her heart for everyone else's emotions is quickly filling up. She wants to go home and not feel anymore for a while. At least until she comes back tomorrow.

At last the text arrives. There is a neighbor in a Prius outside waiting for her. She gathers her things and walks through the halls towards the exit once again. As she leaves, she sees the elderly man standing by the entrance, face plastered against the glass looking in. Looking back over her shoulder, Anne sees the woman from earlier being led away. She is waving slowly to the man outside the glass. He waves back with an identical motion. Then, they both look away and soon she has been taken too far down the white hall for him to see her anymore. Where she is going Anne doesn't know. Where he is going now and who will be with him in the time he needs it the most she doesn't know either. She is tempted to open the Prius door and usher him inside, but that wouldn't be right. The old man has already slowly turned around and started walking towards the bus stop.

Her neighbor is chatty and cheerful, but Anne is drained and can only think her bed at home. Her neighbor's detailed description of her warm-water aquatic fitness class goes in one ear and out the other. Once she gets home she politely declines the offer for casserole dinner even though she can tell she's getting hungry. She lies down without changing her clothes and closes her eyes, finally.

All around her she sees blurry faces and hands reaching out to her. She recognizes the faint leopard pattern in a blob over her head. Their light weight is over her as they

comfort her in her sleep. She reaches out and takes hold of a rough and wrinkled hand. She holds it tight and it holds onto her in return.

When Anne opens her eyes she looks around her dim bedroom. All the people are gone. There are no hands to hold. She is alone in the house just like every day. The comforting weight of people around her is lifted and there is no more warmth. She pulls the covers of the bed tighter around her face and wishes for them to return. As she closes her eyes for the second time that evening, she knows exactly what she must do tomorrow when she goes back to the hospital. Hold their hands.

For all the people who silently made a mark on my life during the most terrible time.

Third Place: Cathy M. Tsang

Silver Spring, MD

The Eggs from the Market

The cast iron kettle pot came to a boil and Jing quickly poured the hot water into the stainless-steel thermos. The weather was turning cool, but no matter what the temperature was outside, Jing made hot tea every morning.

Brother Lin was already up, brushing his teeth at the communal sink outside. His work shirt hung beside the door. Bicycle grease was smeared across the front. His shirt was always dirtiest on Friday, the end of the work week. Tomorrow is Saturday and all the clothes will be laundered fresh.

Jing lived with her elder brother Lin and her elder sister Jade in a small one-bedroom apartment. Jing and Jade slept on a mattress in the bedroom. Brother Lin slept in a cot in the living area. They shared a communal kitchen and bathroom with the rest of the neighbors. The siblings were poor, but they had clothes to wear and food to eat every day. Each sibling had two sets of clothes, which they alternated each week.

Jing's brother and sister both had jobs, but Jing hadn't found employment yet, so she took care of most of the household cleaning and cooking. Jade worked at the fabric store and Lin helped out at his uncle's bicycle shop. When business was slow, Lin also picked up odd jobs here and there. Together, they made enough to eat congee every day with vegetables, tofu and peanuts. Sometimes, Jing bought a fish from the market

when she had a little extra cash or even a bit of pork when the ration coupons were handed out.

Every morning, the siblings ate a breakfast of congee and tea together. Then the elder siblings went to work. For lunch, Jade sometimes came home to eat with Jing. On busier days, she might buy a bowl of noodles from a hawker. Brother Lin seldom came home for lunch. The bike shop was far away. He bought himself a bowl of noodles. Jing made sure to pack him two red bean buns as a snack.

After breakfast, Jing cleared the table, wash the dishes and headed to the market to buy produce for that evening's dinner. She would almost always buy two kinds of vegetables in season. Once a week, she tried to buy something special. Lin gave her 1 yuan per week for the groceries. Vegetables usually cost 10 – 15 fen per day. If she saved a bit every day, she might have 50 fen at the end of the week to buy a fish or some eggs.

In the afternoon, she swept the floors, did some sewing and sometimes looked after the neighbor's children. Once a week, the recycling peddler came and collected old glass bottles in exchange for 5 fen each. Jing was twelve and wanted to find work like her elder siblings, but many places thought she was too young. She eagerly anticipated her next birthday. At 13, she could possibly be a nanny or find work at the fabric shop like her sister.

At the farmer's market that morning, she carefully looked at the array of produce, eggs and fish for sale. A street beggar looked at her and spoke, "Please...little sister...take pity on me...anything you have, I haven't eaten for many days."

Struck at the beggar's directness, Jing glanced over for a brief second and then quickly looked away. There were hundreds of beggars on the streets of Hubei, China. Jing learned not to make contact and quickly walk away. She held tightly to her 55 fen, hoping to find a nice fish for Friday's dinner. Her elder brother and sister worked so hard and every bit of nourishment counted to support their energy.

Her eyes stopped at a woman selling an assortment of eggs. Eggs at 30 fen? What a bargain! She could buy four eggs and still have plenty left over for vegetables...or she could save the remaining coins and combine with next week for a nicer meal. The mid-autumn festival was coming up and she could use her savings to buy a double yolk mooncake.

"Anything wrong with these eggs?" Jing asked suspiciously, trying not to appear too eager.

"They are delicious and fresh from the farm!" the seller boasted. Of course she would say something like that.

“Alright, I’ll take four.” Jing handed over her 30 fen and the woman handed her the four eggs, which Jing wrapped carefully in cloth and put in her basket. She couldn’t wait to surprise her siblings with dinner that night. She’ll make a fresh tomato and egg soup with a tofu and mushroom stir-fry.

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In the kitchen, Jing chopped the tomatoes and added them to the pot of boiling water. Once the tomatoes stewed for a few minutes, she added some salt and cracked an egg into a bowl. Whack! The egg cracked, but no yolk came out. Puzzled, Jing looked at the egg and used her fingers to remove some of the shell. Oh goodness! The egg wasn’t raw, it was boiled already. The farmer at the market sold her cooked eggs! How could Jing fall for that trick? Who knew if these eggs were fresh? They could be old from weeks ago and boiled to hide the age.

What now? She could serve the boiled eggs as is, but are they safe to eat? She’ll wait until Jade came home to ask. What if they weren’t? What a waste of 30 fen she spent!

The afternoon never seemed so long. Jing nervously finished cooking the rice, mushrooms and tofu. She then waited for her siblings to come home.

Right on time, Jade arrived home first. Jade found her little sister sitting quietly at the dinner table. “What’s wrong little sister?” Jade asked, hanging up her jacket.

“Are cooked eggs...fresh to eat from the market?” Jing asked.

Jade walked over and looked at the eggs on the table. “What do you mean?”

Jing explained the entire ordeal and almost cried, she felt so guilty for wasting the money.

“Oh, little sister, I think these eggs should be fine! Maybe they were not fresh to cook with, but I think we can give them a try.” Jade laughed and showed the situation was not as grave as the expression on Jing’s face.

Brother Lin came home. He learned of the story from Jade, who made the matter sound light and funny. But Brother Lin frowned, he didn’t like someone tricking Jing.

“Tomorrow is Saturday, I’ll go to the market with you.” He suggested.

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The next morning, Brother Lin took Jing to the farmer’s market bright and early with one yuan to spend. Jing had twenty fen left, she grabbed the coins in case she saw something she liked for the mid-autumn festival. The same beggar recognized Jing, though this time, he did not speak directly to them. Instead, he shook his steel bowl of

coins and spoke to no one in particular, “Have mercy on me, I haven’t eaten for many days! My wife is dead from illness, my son is sick at home.”

Brother Lin paused and reached into his pocket for fifty fen. He headed over to the beggar.

“Brother!” Jing took Lin’s hand in surprise. ““But we hardly have anything!” Jing protested.

Brother Lin stopped and looked at his little sister, who was still feeling guilty about the eggs. His little sister, who never had the opportunity to attend school or enjoy carefree days at home as a child. She became an orphan at the age of three.

“Jing,” Brother Lin said softly. “No matter how little we have, there is always someone with less.”

They thought of father, who only ate vegetables and rice as a devout Buddhist. When father worked as a dockworker and given salted fish and rice to eat, he only ate the rice and gave the fish away.

Jing felt tears well up in her eyes. It wasn’t fair she didn’t have any memories of father; her imagination produced pictures from stories told to her by others. Mother used to get a faraway look in her eyes whenever she spoke of father, he was a gentle man of few

words. No one could predict the Japanese warplanes would drop bombs over their small farming village one afternoon, taking away their young father when Jing was merely an infant.

“Fine,” Jing said, a bit sharper than she intended. She didn’t say any more, just handed her 20 fen to Brother Lin, who added the money to the beggar’s cup. The beggar kowtowed to the two of them, “Thank you, I must be in the presence of the god and goddess of bounty today. Thank you, thank you.” He bowed so deeply his head touched the floor.

Embarrassed, Jing looked away. After using the remainder of their money to buy some chives, Jing and Brother Lin walked silently home.

At dinner that night, Jing served congee with chives and peanuts. It was a modest meal, but no one complained. Jing felt hungry though and wished there was more to eat.

After finishing his congee, Brother Lin took out a small mooncake. “Uncle Sun is giving me a bonus for the mid-autumn festival next week.” He announced smiling. “I am thinking we can use the bonus money to buy you girls some new shoes.”

New shoes! Before the spring festival? What a treat!

“Oh Brother Lin!” Jade exclaimed. The sisters looked at each other, relishing in the good news.

“I’m getting a bonus for the holiday too,” Sister Jade shared excitedly. “The tailor’s wife gave me two extra cotton sets and I can make new shirts for the two of you.”

New clothes and a pair of new shoes! Jing swallowed in happiness. She was no longer hungry. Jing thought and thought. She didn’t have any money and she didn’t have any job that gave her bonuses. What could she do?

“I’ll clean the house from top to bottom!” she announced. Her voice never sounded so clear and bright.

Honorable Mention: E. A. Smiroldo

Rockville, MD

Diamonds

Success late in life is like a deathbed confession. All is forgiven, all is forgotten. Only the glorious afterlife winks from the finish line, with zero expectations for an encore. And if the soon-to-be deceased leaves behind a trail of destruction? All the better. No one looks past the “V” signs for “Victory.”

Young overachievers have no such luck. Consider Dara Bouldin: prodigy, *wunderkind*, inventor. But when the brainchild turns *enfant terrible*? That’s the downside of early success. Consequences scatter before you like fallout, no finish line in sight.

##

“WE BUY GOLD.”

Black lettering, flame-yellow background. Dara couldn’t miss the sign if she tried, driving past it to work every day when she used to have a job. It hung over the awning of a resale shop in a strip mall that flanked the road to her new neighborhood. The other businesses were a Hanna-Barbera backdrop of 7-11s, pawn shops, Dollar Generals, liquor stores.

She’d spot an old timer with a loupe behind the counter, ever present, usually with a customer or two. Most likely some jilted lover selling off tokens turned painful

reminders. Or the other possibility, career criminals liquidating stolen goods. Loupe Man probably didn't ask too many questions.

Gentrification hadn't come to this sliver of the Washington, D.C., suburbs, and likely wouldn't. Besides the occasional shooting, car dealerships were the only reason most people in the DMV knew about this place. Or perhaps they'd heard of the megachurches that replaced department stores shuttered decades ago. A couple of pastors had been the subject of *Washington Post* exposés, using tithes to buy designer clothes, deluxe vacations, McMansions. One of them even had a private jet.

The DMV's least fashionable address, yes, but Dara saw a different kind of gold: cheap rent. Two things: she wanted to start a STEM tutoring business, and she needed to move out of the apartment she shared with her father. Even though she'd finished her Ph.D. in nuclear engineering three years prior, her student loans kept her in hock. "Ph.D.: 'Piled Higher and Deeper!'" said some joker at graduation, surely referring to interest payments. A chunk of the funds, ostensibly covering living expenses, chipped away at her dad's gambling debts. Losing her job only prolonged the agony.

Mistakes were made – how's that for euphemistic use of passive voice? Not that it mattered. In job interviews, Dara learned that you're damned if you say you didn't quit your job voluntarily, damned if you don't. HR people can smell failure as if Zoom came with odorama.

That settled it. To live on her own and get her business off the ground, Dara needed to keep her overhead "ALARA" – "As Low as Reasonably Achievable" in radiation safety parlance. She named her tutoring app Angstrom Learning, for the unit

of length used to measure wavelengths of light. The unit had fallen out of favor for the less poetic-sounding “nanometer,” but the “angst” part of the term spoke to Dara. Not to mention the symbol “Å,” which gave her a ready-made logo.

She dreamed of offering a sliding scale to children from low income families, the ones who needed her services the most. Or giving prizes to kids who got their grades up after signing on to Angstrom. For now, no dice. She barely got by as it was, and gig economy realities kept it that way. Tutors and tutees would sign up, then ghost her. Not to mention inflation made a mockery of her attempts to save, the bear market her attempts to invest.

Money, always money. Not much came in, too much flowed out. Sure, money wasn’t everything. But only people with money ever seemed to say that.

##

One day, the “WE BUY GOLD” proprietor added a second sign: “WE BUY DIAMONDS.”

Diamonds. As Dara knew all too well, their status as “a girl’s best friend” was highly overrated. Inherently high maintenance, they required safes, insurance policies, sometimes vows. A high neckline helped, too, at least in Dara’s neighborhood, since showy jewelry was best worn inside one’s shirt. Which defeated the purpose of owning a diamond the size of a lima bean in the first place. She considered using a safety deposit box at a bank, but they charged rent, and, in any case, the FDIC only insured cash up to \$250,000 – not belongings.

Dara called her sparkler the “No Hope Diamond,” since it was a gift from one of the many ghosts in her life. Not a tutor or tutee in this case, but a man who disappeared from her world two years ago. She’d read that the actual Hope Diamond in the Smithsonian was cursed, which made perfect sense. Hope and No Hope were probably related.

Yes, it dazzled. Dara would model it in front of the bathroom mirror, her brown hair curled just so, the object of beauty draped over her collarbones. Embroidery floss stood in for the gem’s original serpentine chain. That was long gone, sold off to another merchant in the “keepsake reduction” trade.

Her modelling rituals always followed the same trajectory: take selfie, delete selfie when it became clear how much she blushed in the photo, cue/rue the foolish feeling creeping in from the cold. At least she no longer had to deal with the little poems and motivational claptrap her dad would tape to her bathroom mirror when they were roommates. Now living solo, her embarrassment was hers and hers alone.

Ah, diamonds. Tokens of love and commitment, rewards for a job well done: push present for a new mom, tennis bracelet for graduation, solitaire pendant as anniversary gift. Billboards claimed that diamond engagement rings should cost at least three month’s salary because she’s worth it.

Dara’s diamond wasn’t any of those things, but it didn’t matter. Actually, the gem was worth more than the diamond industrial complex’s pronouncement about three months’ wages. And it was hers. She owned nothing else of value: a past-its-prime

laptop computer, an ancient Hyundai worth less than its annual collision insurance, a twin bed that doubled as a sofa, a freecycled table that doubled as a desk.

Of course, value was relative. Dara and just about everyone else who passed high school chemistry knew the truth: diamonds were nothing more than a few carats of compressed carbon. Carbon – it was always going to be a problem. CO₂ in the atmosphere, emissions that fouled the sky, dreams Dara had of turning the tide on climate change with her nuclear engineering research before her life imploded.

She shuddered at the irony of it all: the Earth's scourge might just save her.

##

The man with the loupe introduced himself as Walter Smith.

"Hi, I'm Dara," she said, making eye contact with the cheaters he wore on a chain around his neck rather than his actual eyes, unsure of how to start the proceedings.

"Can I help you with something?"

Her eyes shifted to the countertop. "Uh, yeah, I think so. I saw that you buy diamonds, and I have a diamond I...need to sell."

"Sure, let me see," he said, holding out a clean, manicured hand. Despite all the resale jewelry locked in the shop's cases, Loupe Man wore none, not even a wristwatch.

She reached for her purse, fumbling with the zipper and contents inside. Dara felt her mouth go dry.

“Did you forget to bring it with you?” The man went to the water cooler, brought Dara a small cup of water.

She cleared her throat, took a sip. “I’m sorry. It’s here. I see it.” She pulled out a white envelope, followed by the gemstone hidden inside.

The man put on his glasses and stared at the diamond, then at Dara, his eyebrows halfway up his forehead. “One moment, Miss. We’re going to need some privacy.”

He went to the front of the shop, put up a sign that said, “Will return in 15 minutes,” locked the door. “Follow me.” He motioned for Dara to join him in the back office.

While Mr. Smith examined the diamond under a microscope, Dara took in the surroundings. The table was scattered with loupes, pungent bottles of Windex, microfiber rags, jewelry cleaner – tools of a trade she knew nothing about. Forcing herself to look into the man’s eyes, she hoped she could trust him. His eyes seemed kind. But then again, trusting the wrong people had always been Dara’s specialty. For all she knew, he might have been thinking the same thing about her.

“Miss, I’m going to level with you,” he said. “I thought I’d seen it all. But you have something really incredible here.”

“As in, not real?”

“No – it’s real. And flawless. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s one in a million...hey, are you alright?” He went to the desk in the corner, retrieved a small package of tissues, placed them on the table in front of her.

She had broken into sobs. “Miss Dara, please, it’s okay.” A second cup of water appeared by the tissue pack.

She gulped it down, wiped away tears. “Mr. Smith, I’m so sorry. I have to sell it. There’s no other way. I’m really struggling. I apologize for coming into to your shop like this and falling apart.”

His eyes looked even kinder now. “Don’t you worry about that, Dara. Lots of people cry in my store when they have to sell their jewelry. You’re not the only one.”

“Thanks.”

The room got quiet, so much so that Dara could hear soft ticks from a pile of Rolexes on the desk.

“So can you tell me where you got it?”

Dara looked at the floor. “From a man I used to know.”

“It must have been serious.”

She made eye contact now. “I thought it was, but he just vanished from my life.”

The man smiled. “I promise you; no one would give you a gift like this if they weren’t serious.”

Dara shook her head slowly.

“Believe me.”

The smile on the man’s face stilled Dara’s head. It was something her dad would have said. She made a mental note to give him a call tonight, something she hadn’t done in a while.

“What do you think I can get for it?” Dara’s voice cracked a little as she spoke.

The man took a sip of his own water. “Miss, you know how they say life is short?”

She nodded.

“It’s not. It’s long. I should know. I’m in my 70s.”

Dara smiled, probably for the first time all day. “Is that good or bad when you’re broke?”

“It’s good. You’re young and have decades ahead of you to make money. You can always make money. But you have something more important than that. Someone loved you dearly. Maybe they still do.”

She felt her face grow warm. “You think so?”

“Miss Dara, the finish line is miles and miles ahead of you. Before you get there, you’ve got a life to live.”

She looked away. “But I made a mess of it.”

“It doesn’t matter. You can fix it. I know you can. And that man’s coming back for you. If not for you, he’ll want his rock! It’s worth a fortune!”

Dara laughed.

“Look, I could make a lot of money off your diamond. It’s your call. You have to think really hard about what you want.”

She looked at her new friend, beaming now. After a few moments, she thanked him, put the diamond back into the envelope, and returned to her old Hyundai in the parking lot. With no finish line in sight, she had all the time in the world to figure it out.

Honorable Mention: Alyssa Casanova

Round Hill, VA

Only My Mommy Can Be My Mommy

My mom said I had to eat ALL of my spinach before I got dessert. Yuck! Who actually liked spinach? I was so frustrated, I threw my fork on the floor. When I looked down, I spied my magic wand, among other toys, sitting on the floor. I was supposed to put that away before. Oops! So I picked it up, waved it high over Mommy's head and said "POOF!"

I turned my mommy into a dog. Dogs don't care if I eat my spinach. Everything was great! Mommy was so happy, she was wagging her tail left and right. I gave her some belly rubs and she licked my face. What could be better than having a dog for a mommy?

Then her hound nose picked up the smell of my dinner, spinach and all. So I gave her the plate and she licked it clean! That was one way to get rid of my spinach and since the plate was so clean, I didn't need to wash it. Win! Mommy as a dog was working out well, at least until she sniffed out the homemade strawberry shortcake for dessert and ate that too. Shoot.

That wouldn't do, so I decided to try again. I raised my wand up high. "POOF!" I said.

This time, I turned Mommy into a dinosaur. Go big or go home, right? And boy was she big! But even though she had giant claws and a spiky tail, she was still Mom. She stood with one tiny T-Rex arm on her bumpy T-Rex hip and pointed a sharp T-Rex claw at the messy playroom floor. I guess she also remembered that I didn't clean up my toys

earlier. I quickly got to work. I've heard Mommy yell before. I did NOT want to hear her roar.

This would not do either. Next, I tried a cat. "POOF!" Mommy was cute and snuggly, but bath time was a bit difficult. Instead of a warm bath with bubbles, she cleaned me with her rough scratchy tongue. And when I started wiggling for the bathroom she led me to a litter box. Nope!

An elephant. Definitely an elephant, I thought. I raised my wand. "POOF!" Mommy was strong and mighty, but she stomped a little too hard marching up the stairs. Daddy had some repairs to do.

We trampled into the bathroom so I could brush my teeth but rather than getting a drink of water to wash out my mouth, Mommy used her trunk to spray me down. I got a little wetter than usual, though it beat the cat bath I had earlier.

Hmm... Finally, I had it! This time, I'd turned Mommy into a worm. Everyone thinks worms are icky but I've always loved them! "POOF!" I could carry her around pretty easily, but she couldn't reach my bedtime books. I grabbed my favorites but when she tried to turn the pages, they got a little slimy. GROSS! Plus her voice was so tiny, I couldn't hear a thing she read!

I was running out of options. I liked worms but Mom liked giraffes, so "POOF!" Mommy was tall and glorious, but she didn't fit in my bed, which made snuggling a bit awkward.

Daddy likes lizards. “POOF!” Coolest mom ever! But her long tongue made bedtime kisses a little less comforting.

This was not going well. I tried animal after animal, but nothing worked. So after giving it some thought, I realized there was only one thing left to do. “Only my mommy can be my mommy,” I decided. So I raised my wand one last time. “POOF!” I turned Mommy back to normal and gave her the biggest hug. It was perfect. No one can hug like my mommy can! Next time, I’ll just eat my spinach.

Honorable Mention: Taryn Noelle Kloeden

Clear Brook, VA

Ouroboros

Ethel's first memory was a rabbit shrieking in terror before her father snapped its neck. The wailing now echoing through the winter forest sounded like that rabbit.

No. It *was* that rabbit.

It was all things dying and dead, desperate, and clawing. It was the hungry screams of her starving infant, sharp milk teeth needling at her shrunken breasts but finding only blood. In its horrid screeching was an accusation she could not refute. This grotesque thing was her doing and she could never escape its wrath.

Ethel had been a child like any other, dreaming of sweets and Christmas oranges. She'd been her mother's favorite for her cornsilk hair and gentle disposition. Unlike her six siblings, she never complained about going to church or questioned her parents' authority. She was a good girl, a patient girl. The kind it was easy to forget had needs of their own because they were always so attentive to everyone else's.

It had been simple and warm back home in Carolina. Chores were constant, her slender body accustomed to aches and pains from the start. She'd had bullies and heartbreaks, but she also had friends and family, and so many lovely nights filled with fireflies and juicy blackberry pies. Ethel had wanted nothing more than to live and die in that little town. She'd had no desire for adventure, to be known or praised for anything more than little, ordinary things by little, ordinary people.

But that was not to be her fate.

Ethel's fate strode into her uncle's general store the summer she turned sixteen. Being a good, helpful girl, she spent her free time helping run the shop. It gave her a break from caring for the younger siblings, and she liked to meet new people on the rare occasion a stranger came through town. But if she'd known the effect this chance meeting would have on her life, she would have hidden in the storeroom rather than greet the handsome newcomer.

"Welcome, sir." Ethel did not look him in the eye.

He tipped his hat. "I apologize for tracking dust into your lovely store, Miss." His voice was like no other man's she'd ever heard. It was low, but smooth. It dripped over her ears like honey.

"It's no matter, sir." Ethel gathered her courage to look up.

He was older than she'd thought, perhaps mid-twenties. His dark blonde hair curled where it peeked from his wide-brimmed hat. Early wrinkles sketched around his deep brown eyes—a sign of laughter, hard work in the sun, or both.

“Miss?”

His honeyed voice broke her reverie. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

He smiled, teeth white and sharp. Ethel didn’t know it then, but that smile, so warm and sunny on the surface, belied a cold and broken soul hungry for others to damn alongside it.

“I said, I’m Jack Parrish. I’m in town for the summer for work. And you are?”

“Ethel Robbins.”

“Miss Robbins, it is a pleasure.” He shook her hand, and though Ethel’s hands were not, she was shocked by the roughness of his skin.

Ethel wanted to lay down and die. She wanted the beast to take her. And yet, some instinct deep within her unholy, mortal body forced her onward. She did not deserve to live, but she could not bear to die, either.

The monster howled. Between the discordant notes, she heard a voice. A memory from lifetimes before brought the taste of honey to her dry mouth.

Ethel!

The beast bayed her name, full of hatred and hunger. She could hide, but the snow betrayed her path. Besides, there was no hiding the scent of her guilt. She was an atrocity just as much as the monster was. Like called to like and evil things always found each other.

Jack Parrish wasted no time in making his intentions toward Ethel known. He did all the expected rituals—brought flowers, smoked cigars with her father, and started sharing their pew on Sundays. He said he loved her, and Ethel dutifully parroted the sentiment back. But in truth, she didn’t know what she felt, other than this was what she was supposed to do. Her parents had enough mouths to feed, and the sooner she was out of their house the better.

Jack worked hard, he knew his bible, and he wasn’t old, strange, or ugly like more than a few of the men in town were. She counted herself lucky and didn’t consider over-much whether a life with him was what she wanted. It was placed before her, and she would

not resist, any more than she would an unappealing supper plate. Good girls took what they were offered and left no crumbs, even if they had to choke it down.

The Parrishes were wed by August. The day before the ceremony, Ethel's mother took her aside and explained what her husband would expect of her. Her advice was simple. Men had hungers beyond food, and it was their wives' duty to satisfy such needs. Jack would know what he wanted; she need only obey. There might be pain and some awkwardness, but it would pass, and such acts would bless them with a child in time. Ethel nodded her understanding. She was a good and helpful girl, and she would be a docile and obedient wife.

Ethel never complained that first year they spent together. Their house was small, but she kept it well. She could walk to her family's home. It was a quiet and peaceful life.

But Jack wanted more. This town, so safe to Ethel, was nothing but a blot on the map to him. He'd never intended to stay, and that didn't change just because he'd taken a wife. He kept a close eye on the papers for any opportunity to leave, and the longer he waited, the more frustrated he became.

Unlike Ethel, Jack had no qualms about complaining. In fact, it was his favored past time. He complained about the weather and his job. He complained about her family and the time she spent with them. Eventually, her cooking, the way she ironed his shirts, or the style she wore her hair were all subject to his criticisms. It did not help that she did not fall pregnant right away.

And because she was good and dutiful, Ethel took his words and did not defend against them. She changed her hair and avoided her family. She drank bitter, gritty teas the midwife brought her to help her womb quicken. It seemed to work, changing herself to suit his moods. And when the day came that she told him they were to be parents, his smile was warm and sunny once more. Ethel could breathe again and took joy in her pregnancy.

But it was not to last.

Even before Johnnie was born, Jack had turned mean again. Ethel tried her best to calm his storms, but he would never be happy there. Secretly, Ethel wondered if the problem were truly the town and his job. But she discarded that traitorous thought before it took hold.

It was a letter from Jack's cousin out west that would change everything. Land was cheap and the soil rich. Jack and his new family had to join him in the land of milk and honey. Her husband's ship had finally come in, and she had no choice but to board it with a newborn on her hip.

But their vessel was no seafaring one. Theirs was a wagon and a sturdy pair of oxen. They didn't know she was with child again when they began their journey. Ethel doubted

Jack would have delayed it if they had. The rough terrain and the endless walking to spare the animals left her reeling and ill. But they could not stop.

When she lost the baby, Jack didn't hide the accusing look in his eyes. It didn't matter that Johnnie was healthy and well-fed despite her pain and exhaustion. It didn't matter that she'd been the one to feel the life growing within her drain away and die. Jack saw only failure.

The monster stopped wailing, but Ethel sensed it was close. The moon gleamed over the snow. It was quiet.

Her stomach gurgled. Hunger had been her constant companion these many months. It had grown within her as her sweet children once had. But where they had filled her, the hunger had been a sculptor, chiseling at her soul until something new emerged—something wicked.

A growl sounded from behind her, echoing her hunger pangs. The beast had found her.

They should've known the land was cursed the first night they spent in the Wyoming territory. She dreamed terrible things by the campfire. She saw cackling demons and witches, savages dancing, praising their heathen gods, and woke to a snake rearing at her face.

Ethel screamed.

Jack reached over her and tossed the serpent into the fire. He rolled back over without a word.

Ethel watched the creature writhe and struggle. It bit its own tail in its panic. The snake burned to ashes in a smoldering ring of terror and confusion.

When they arrived at the cousin's homestead, there was no one to greet them. Instead, there was a letter from his wife and a freshly dug grave.

Jack's cousin had perished of fever and his wife abandoned the so-called land of milk and honey as soon as he died. This was no promised land, she warned in her letter. The land was blood-soaked and cursed by the atrocities committed to claim it. This was not God's country.

But this was their home now, and Ethel was determined to make the best of it. Their first winter was lean, but bearable thanks to the stores left behind by Jack's relatives. They worked hard to make a life for their growing family. And grow it did. Amelia was born in the height of summer. It did not heal the wound between Jack and Ethel, but her sweet baby coos softened the ragged edges.

It wasn't long until coos turned to hungry shrieks. Their second winter was not as forgiving. They'd done everything right, but the land hadn't cooperated. What had managed to grow withered with sickness they could not name. Jack took to hunting for days at a time, leaving Ethel and the children alone to wonder if he would return. The ceaseless crying, the bitter cold, the wrenching hunger all seeped into Ethel's skin and bones until she no longer recognized herself, or her thoughts.

When Jack did manage to bring them a scrawny rabbit or fox, his criticisms of her cooking grated more deeply than before. It didn't matter the meat was stringy and gamey—somehow it was *her* fault their meals left them wanting. Everything she did was wrong. There was no changing her hair to please him now. Nothing would ever be enough.

Jack tormented Ethel. When his hateful words did not cut her enough, his rough hands made do. He took his belt to her so fiercely that Ethel rejoiced the day they decided to boil it for the leather.

When he turned his ire to the children, Ethel broke. Their short lives had been nothing but hunger and suffering, how dare Jack add to their pain—especially when it was his doing? She threw herself in front of Johnnie and gladly took the beating meant for her skeletal little boy. With each blow that fell, Ethel became more certain of what had to be done.

Jack left her with two skinny partridges. His snide parting comment about not ruining the meat he worked so hard to provide fell on deaf ears. His words couldn't hurt her now. The children still slept as Jack disappeared into the woods to check his snares.

She'd considered running away. But the children were too weak. They would never survive the journey to the nearest town. She wouldn't let their last moments be ones of pain. She brushed a lock of cornsilk hair out of Amelia's face. Sleep was the only time her children knew peace.

She had no warmed milk to mix in with the laudanum, but she made do with hot water and the last of the honey.

Jack didn't notice the children's absence. The enchanting aroma wafting from the stove was all he could think about.

He sat at the table. "Have you learned to make proper use of the bounty I provide, Ethel?"

She smiled as she ladled the steaming stew into his bowl.

Jack ate greedily. He slurped and scraped the bowl. He did not ask whether she or the children had eaten before demanding seconds. Ethel obliged. It was not until his belly was full and his bristly face gleamed with grease that he looked around the empty room.

“Are the lazy lumps abed?”

Ethel shook her head.

“Then where—” He stopped, eyeing the bloody apron hanging by the larder. It was far too much blood for butchering a pair of partridges. Far too much *meat* as well.

“You...” He stumbled to his feet, retching.

“I’m glad this meal was more to your liking, husband.” She ignored his horrified cries as she set about cleaning the dishes.

“You wicked creature!” Jack grabbed her shoulders and shook. The bowl crashed and broke at her feet. “Why have you done this? You witch! You bride of Satan!”

She did not disagree that she’d wed the Devil himself.

When she did not answer his accusations, Jack roared and threw her to the ground. She cut her hand on the broken bowl and was surprised her husk-like body still bled.

Jack stormed out the door. When he returned, heaving, a moment later, he held his ax aloft. Ethel screamed as he brought it down. She rolled away, cutting herself on the ceramic shards. She closed her hand around one as she scrambled to her feet.

Again, Jack struck. It hit the wall where her head had been. As he struggled to free the blade, Ethel slammed the shard into his neck. She pulled it out and struck again and again. Jack fell to his knees, gurgling from his mangled throat.

Ethel crawled away from the horrors. The gurgling ceased as blood pooled around her husband’s head. She didn’t know how long she sat there holding herself and swaying. Night came and the full moon with it. As its silvery light filtered through the blood-soaked cabin, Jack stirred.

His eyes opened, revealing crimson irises with goat-like pupils. His starved body twisted, broke, and re-formed. Devilish horns sprouted from his matted hair, branching into antlers. The creature stood, bones snapping and growing until it had to crouch to stand within the house.

This was not God’s country. *She* was not of God anymore. Not after what she had done. Ethel was prepared to let this demon take her.

Until it opened its mouth and shrieked.

Honorable Mention: Shannon Taft

Reston, VA

Picture-Perfect

Ellen wandered the mossy path near the Perlan and took a deep breath, reveling in the earthy scent. She couldn't understand people who chose to stay in Reykjavik's city center. Not when this oasis of greenery was barely two miles away. Nevertheless, as was often true when she traveled to Iceland in March, she had the spot to herself.

Over the course of her vacation, she'd taken plenty of excursions to the countryside too, carefully documenting each locale with photos. She had pictures of the waterfalls cast against a gloomy sky as well as some of the Laugarvatn Fontana pools. She'd been careful to avoid capturing the tourists in their bathing suits at the pools, just as she had at the Blue Lagoon.

Although, some of her pictures did contain people. In Thingvellir National Park, she'd photographed her fellow visitors as they'd wearily boarded the bus at the end of a long day. She'd chosen to use the vehicle as a background for the shot and felt it had worked out well, blocking the gorgeous landscape.

On the glacier hike, she'd asked a fellow traveler to take a photo of her. Bundled in two layers of pants, a zippered ski jacket with the hood up, and thick gloves, Ellen looked ten pounds heavier than normal. She grinned as she thought of that image.

It would do.

She checked her watch and sighed. Time to return to the hotel, catch her bus to Keflavik Airport, and go home to Virginia. She smiled at a tree, its branches coated in some sort of lichen, and whispered to it, "See you again next year."

The trip to the airport was uneventful and the wait to board the plane tedious. Sitting by the gate, she ruthlessly scoured her photos one last time and forwarded any that looked too attractive to her email account before diligently deleting them from her phone.

When the airline began the boarding call, she headed for a water fountain, popped a motion-sickness pill, and swallowed it down with a slurp of water. She lingered while others rushed to board, as if they thought that the plane would take off sooner for the people who got to their seats first.

Eventually, the line shrank enough for her tastes and she got on the plane. Within minutes of fastening her seatbelt, she drifted off to sleep.

Ellen awoke in time to experience the dubious pleasure of the plane landing in a mix of sleet and frozen rain. "The temperature here at Dulles is twenty-seven degrees," a female voice announced over the speaker system as people leapt to retrieve their carry-on luggage.

Ellen peered out the window at the messy precipitation and suppressed a groan.

Stuck in her seat until the aisle cleared, she switched her phone out of airplane mode. A text message immediately arrived from her husband, Jeffrey. *Fridge is mostly empty. Do you want pizza or Chinese?*

She replied back that either would be fine. Jeffrey had offered to meet her at the airport, but she'd told him that was silly. No reason for him to bother leaving work early and wait around for her to get through baggage claim, which could take between ten minutes and forever, depending on the whims of the travel gods.

It made far more sense for her to take a taxi and meet him at home.

An hour later, she scurried from the cab to her front door as little pellets of ice pinged down on her. With relief, she found the door unlocked, which meant she didn't need to pause to unearth her keys.

"Jeffrey?" she called as she rushed inside, dragging her suitcase behind her.

"Back here," he hollered from the vicinity of the kitchen.

Ellen could smell the pizza. She pulled off her coat and draped it over the back of the sofa. Abandoning her luggage, she headed down a hallway toward the siren call of food.

As she stepped into the kitchen, Jeffrey rose from one of two red leather stools at the breakfast bar, where the cardboard pizza box sat closed on the quartz countertop next to two pristine plates. He came over to hug her, and she gave him a long kiss.

"You didn't have to wait on dinner for me," she told him.

"No bother," he said, an audible grumble from his stomach giving lie to his words.

She grinned. "Well, I'm here now. Let's eat."

He lifted the cardboard lid, displaying a pizza that had one-half festooned in vegetables, while the other half was blanketed in bacon, ham, and pepperoni.

“Sorry, they were out of pickled shark,” Jeffrey joked as he put a meat-laden slice on one plate and handed it to her. He grabbed two from the veggie side for himself.

After she’d devoured her slice and declined a second one, he wiped his hands with a napkin and said with lukewarm enthusiasm, “Wanna show me your pictures?”

Ellen pulled out her phone, opened the photo app, and handed it over.

As she briefly named each place a photo had been taken, Jeffrey dutifully swiped through the images, giving a shudder when looking at the one on the glacier, as if the cold could reach out to touch him. He handed the phone back, saying, “I’ll never understand the appeal of that place for you. But, I gotta say, you’re a saint for not making me go with you.”

Ellen tucked the phone in her pocket and looked out the kitchen window at the coating of ice on the naked branches of the nearest tree, mentally comparing it to the greenery where she’d been less than ten hours before. She almost felt guilty for tricking Jeffrey into thinking that Iceland was miserably cold and barren.

She loved her husband, she truly did. But when they’d gotten engaged, his mother had given her some excellent advice. “The key to a good marriage, Ellen, is one week a year away from your husband. Find something he’ll hate to do, if only so you can do it alone. Otherwise, somewhere around your tenth anniversary you’ll start dreaming about burying him in the backyard.”

Ellen eyed the untouched brown grass outside the window, then turned her head toward Jeffrey. "You don't make me go to your football games, so it's a fair swap."

"Fair," he agreed with a nod, looking relieved.

She thought that in a few more decades, she might let him know that she'd come to like football but had not wanted to spoil his fun with his friends by pressuring him to take his wife along.

Besides, she and Jeffrey had the sports package at home and an 80-inch TV. She didn't need to sit outside in miserable weather to watch it in person. Iceland, however... that had to be experienced. Photos couldn't do it justice.

At least, not the ones she took.

That's what made them perfect.

Honorable Mention: Richard L. Towers

Ashburn, VA

Prince Alium

The first time Benny encountered Prince Alium was in March of 1942. He had just turned 6, World War II was raging and his Dad was overseas in the midst of the fighting. It was hard times for the country, especially in towns like South Portland, Maine, where Benny lived with his mom and Sis, his older sister.

It had now been over three months since the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and although the little boy didn't know exactly what that had entailed, he was quite certain from the grownups' terrified expressions whenever the subject came up that it had been a very bad thing. Like most small children, Benny was finely attuned to how and what grownups within range of his sight or even just hearing transmit, whether purposely or not. And this also applied to their emotions. He could almost intuit the fear people around him had that the Japanese would come to South Portland and do to them what they'd done at Pearl Harbor (wherever that was), although he still had no real notion of what exactly that was. When he asked his mom about it, she assured him there was nothing to worry about; his and the other dads who were fighting overseas would never allow it. Somehow that didn't make him feel any better. He still missed having his dad at home with them. And, although he was only 6, he had no doubt that with his dad overseas (wherever that was), things were harder for his mom. And he was not wrong.

With the dads overseas fighting in the war, many of South Portland's young women, like Benny's mom, now worked at the local ship yard doing the jobs their husbands had done. Mostly, they were conscientious and what they lacked in experience they made up for with enthusiasm and a willingness to learn. But life during wartime was not without a heavy cost to them and their children. Few, however, complained; they knew these were dangerous times and that they also needed to do their part—"pitch in and pick up the slack"—even if it meant enduring some hardship.

As it happened, South Portland's ship yard happened to be operated by the New England Shipbuilding Corporation, part of the government's program to build and remodel what would be known as the "Liberty Ships" whose purpose was to insure we'd be able to transport supplies and soldiers overseas. Everyone working there knew that the President himself had charged the country's ship yards with achieving this national priority as quickly as possible. German U boats had already sunk too many of our own and our allies' cargo ships, and that could not be allowed to continue.

The way Mom explained it to Benny, her tow-headed little boy in whom she daily saw the image of her absent husband, was that since all the dads were away

fighting the Nazis and Fascists overseas and, therefore, not able to do their jobs at the Yard, she and the other moms would have to do them. Otherwise they would not get done, and our President and country were counting on us to get them done and help protect our democratic way of life. “Besides,” she added caressing the young boy, “we’re on our own now, Sweetheart, and we need the money.”

As precocious as he was, at his age Benny’s understanding of terms like “Nazis,” “Fascists,” “freedom” and “democratic way of life” was still fuzzy, but there was nothing unclear as to the meaning of what Mom had shared with him: She needed his help. Of that he was sure. His Mom was his best friend and constant caregiver; she was the object of his admiration and devotion, and he loved her without any reservation. As far as he was concerned she was more beautiful than any movie star, not that he knew any. (Sis had assured him they were all very beautiful.) He also knew that before going overseas his Dad had been in charge of most chores around the house like fixing leaks, shoveling coal into the furnace each morning and before turning in each night and putting up the storm windows in the fall and taking them down in the spring. Having heard Mom’s message, however, it was not hard for Benny to discern that with Dad overseas, Mom, therefore, would now have to take over those chores. Benny’s course was now laid out for him: Whenever a pot needed scrubbing, a leak fixing or the worn, old linoleum on their kitchen floor mopping, he’d be there to help his Mom—along with Sis too, of course. That would be *his* commitment to the war and to his Mom.

What Benny didn’t know, however, was that while some moms had no problem dealing with new tasks or asking others for help with them, his Mom did. Not that she couldn’t have successfully accomplished them if shown how. But she’d never thought to watch when her husband made repairs around the house; frankly, it wasn’t anything she thought she needed to be concerned with. But now it was, and so whenever a leak occurred under the sink, for example, she’d try her very best to fix it, no matter how frustrated it might leave her. If *she* didn’t, who would?

* * * *

It was the middle of the night and all was quiet when little Benny suddenly sprang awake. It was not at all certain what woke him. The spring equinox had come and gone, but it would still be at least another month before the temperature along Southern Maine’s coastline began to warm. Mom, who slept nearby in her own bedroom, was fast asleep, worn out from a full day at the Yard plus meal preparation and clean-up and putting the children to bed after she got home from work. Sis, who shared a room with her little brother, also was asleep. Benny generally slept through the night, provided that he’d used the bathroom before getting into bed for his story and goodnight kiss. Perhaps the furnace had gotten low on coal and turned off, resulting in the chill Benny felt when the blanket fell from his shoulders and woke him. Or maybe he’d forgotten to relieve himself before going to bed and no one had checked to see if he had.

But now that he was aware of it, his need to pee had become urgent, and confident that he needed no help, he quickly exited his room into the kitchen on his way to the bathroom. As he passed the sink, a musty smell reached him and, since by now even he knew that usually signaled a leaky drainpipe, he paused, wondering if Mom and Sis had sensed it. Perhaps not, he decided, since they'd prepared fish for dinner and the smell may have masked it. And also, Mom may not have wanted to deal with it when she'd gotten home from work. She'd looked tired, he recalled.

The light shining in from the lamp post outside the kitchen window was just enough to see most of what was under the sink as Benny peered in. Nonetheless, he rubbed his eyes more than once, for there among the Drain-O, Ajax and Tide containers stood what appeared to be a leafy celery stalk. And it was looking right at him! Still groggy and with the urge to relieve himself growing even more urgent, Benny continued on to the bathroom, arriving just in time for at least some of his puerile stream to reach the interior of the toilet rim.

The next morning, remembering the strange dream he'd had, Benny went straight to the kitchen. The mustiness that had seemed so strong the night before, however, was now gone. In its place a clean, fresh smell prevailed. And although he looked about very carefully under the sink, he saw no trace of any celery.

"What happened?" he asked his Mom, who was already up preparing breakfast. "Did you fix the leak without me after I went back to sleep?"

"No, Honey, I was too tired," she said.

"So I didn't just dream it? There really was a leak?"

"Yes, I thought so. I was going to get up early and see what I could do about it before I went to work. But now it doesn't seem to be there anymore. In fact, it smells better under there than it usually does. You think maybe some fairy princess is running around town while we're all asleep, making all these leaks disappear?"

Young as he was, Benny knew when his mom was making a joke, so he simply shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. But it got him thinking—maybe he didn't just dream that he saw that celery stalk under the kitchen sink last night. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more plausible it seemed that what he saw under the sink might have been real. From then on, he checked under the sink almost every day for what, with Sis's help, he now knew was a kind of green onion known as a "leek." *Funny name for an onion.* But if Sis said that's what it was, then it was good enough for him.

After a couple more months had gone by, Benny had begun to forget about what he'd thought he'd seen under the sink, but then, lo and behold, he saw it again—that same leafy stalk, working away in the middle of the night but this time under their *bathroom* sink! And then, every few months over the almost three more years that his and the other dads were away fighting overseas, what Benny now thought of as his magical, special friend continued to appear—always in the middle of the night and always under either the kitchen or bathroom sink, never anywhere else. Nor did it ever speak, though it would from time to time look directly at the boy who somehow was always present to observe it work.

By now, taking a cue from what Sis had told him was the Latin name for a leek, Benny had given his special friend the name, Prince *Alium*. Rather than being surprised or even shocked by the regularity of *Alium*'s visits, Benny was grateful. By quietly fixing his family's leaky drainpipes, it was relieving Mom of one more thing to worry about. To show his gratitude, Benny started talking to *Alium*. True, it never answered or even acknowledged him except for the brief, occasional stare. But even so, talking to *Alium* made him feel good, and he continued doing it. Sometimes he would ask questions, and other times he'd tell it what a great job it was doing and how big a help it was to his family. That's what Mom always told him when he helped her, and that always made him feel warm all over. He also began to draw pictures of the Prince and color them in with some crayons Mom got for him at the thrift store. *Alium* had now become more than just his special friend; he was Mom's and their whole family's Faerie Prince, here to help while Dad was away. He was sure of it.

After a while, however, Mom noticed that her young son seemed to be spending a lot of time sitting on the kitchen and bathroom floors, talking to himself.

"Who are you talking to, Sweetheart?" she'd ask with a look of concern on her face. She'd heard about how children would sometimes have conversations with what were called "imaginary friends," and it worried her to see her little Benny possibly falling prey to this malady. She'd have to keep a close watch for any signs of deterioration.

"No one, Mom. I'm just looking to see if there are any leaks."

"Are there, Sweetie? It sure doesn't smell like it."

"No, I'm checking just in case."

"Thank you, Sweetheart; that is so nice of you," she said stroking his light silky hair. "Be sure to tell me when there is one, OK?"

“OK, I’ll be sure.”

There was one thing, however, that puzzled Benny. Mom and Sis hadn’t seemed to notice that their under-the-sink drainpipe problems had disappeared. If it was so obvious to him, why hadn’t they noticed? Nevertheless, Benny continued to keep Alium’s visits and existence all to himself. It was enough that *he* knew that the leaks had disappeared and why they had. Even if no one else ever knew, he would always be grateful for it.

Finally, after a very long time, Benny’s Dad returned home from the war, and life slowly returned to normal with Mom and Dad resuming their customary roles and routines. Eventually, Benny forgot about Prince Alium. The years went by and Benny grew up, got a job, married and had a family of his own—all with never one thought of his special wartime friend and confederate.

* * * *

Three-quarters of a century has now gone by. Benjamin Alexander Philburn is bald and walks with a cane. His wizened countenance has been etched by a lifetime of good and bad experiences, but his character is upright and his spirit content. He knows that he is approaching the Next Big Phase, and it occupies his thoughts. His wife has already preceded him, and at the urging of his children he treks up to the attic to rummage through their belongings, accumulated during their lifetime together, and identify “anything that can be thrown out.”

Reaching into a dust-covered box, he retrieves what appears to be a scrapbook of old photos and other memorabilia from his childhood. His mother, he recalls, put it together for his now deceased wife shortly before they were married. He sits down on an old foot locker and begins to leaf through it. He soon comes across a child’s drawing, and in a flash a long-submerged memory surfaces. There on the brittle, yellowed piece of drawing paper is his forgotten wartime friend. For a long while, he sits and stares at this drawing he made as a small child more than 80 years ago. Gradually,

the figure's expression seems to change. Bringing it closer to his face, he struggles to articulate a word and finally gets it out: "*Alium*," he mutters in a raspy voice and is amazed when the figure in the drawing winks at him.

The next day, when the old man's children come to check on him, they find him in the attic, slumped over an old foot locker with a brittle piece of drawing paper clutched in his hand and, inexplicably, a smile on his aged face.

Honorable Mention: Bari Lynn Hein

Germantown, MD

Still Yvonne Evanovich

On Saturday morning, the following sounds reached Yvonne's eighth-story window:

1. Horns honking. Come on. Didn't the cabbies realize that if *all* of them were honking *all* of the time, they were, in essence, cancelling one another out?
2. A siren wailing. Probably a police officer trying to get through a barricade of horn-honking cabbies.
3. A jackhammer. This had been going on for a few days now. Yvonne had no idea where it was coming from; she had found neither work crews nor torn-up streets in her neighborhood.

On Sunday morning, between the yellow lace curtains of her childhood bedroom, she heard:

1. A mourning dove cooing. Funny side story: Yvonne didn't realize, until she was in her early thirties, that the birds were actually *mourning* doves, not *morning* doves, and that this was the reason they did not restrict their cooing to the early hours of the day.
2. A rain shower clicking against the windowpane. At first, this sounded like Jiffy Pop to Yvonne. She realized she'd become unaccustomed to the sound of rain. Thunderstorms, sure, but showers, no. She had forgotten the tap-dance of raindrops on fallen leaves.

#

She pulled the covers up to her ears and stayed motionless for a while, listening and remembering unhurried mornings like this. But she could not allow herself to be unhurried, even on a Sunday, not when she had a four-hour drive ahead of her and a pile of work to be done.

Her parents were seated at the kitchen table, their plates empty, their coffee cups stained with fragrant remnants of the Maxwell House Original Roast they'd been drinking forever. When her mother saw her, she jumped up as if she'd been caught in the crime of relaxing. Wonder where I get it from, Yvonne said to herself, as she gave her mother a kiss on her soft cheek and said "good morning" to her father over his newspaper.

"Morning, Vonnie," he said.

"Breakfast?" her mom said. She opened the dishwasher and began shoving plates onto the bottom rack, then dropping silverware into plastic slots. "I can make you pancakes and eggs."

"Honestly, I'm still stuffed from last night. Just a cup of coffee would be good."

Her mother dried her hands and poured. "I want to hear all about it."

"Are you going to sit down first?"

The older woman leaned back against her kitchen counter. "Maybe some toast? I just bought strawberry jam, on sale. Your favorite."

Yvonne sighed. "Fine. Strawberry jam on toast. Sounds good." The sight of her mother placing two slices of bread into the toaster and the scent that filled the kitchen when she lowered them set off a brief wave of nostalgia. "Julie asked about you. She said she hasn't seen you at the Safeway lately. She told me to say hello."

Her mother shrugged. “Oh. Well. That’s nice of her, I guess. The last time I saw her, she seemed, I don’t know... Distracted. Embarrassed, maybe.”

“Embarrassed? What happened?”

“Oh, nothing. Well, you know. She’s working at Safeway and you’re working on Wall Street.”

“She seemed perfectly happy with her life when I talked to her last night. She has a cute husband; he was there, too. Three cute kids. I saw their pictures. Wait. Are you telling me you’ve been avoiding shopping at Safeway because you think one of my old classmates envies me?”

“No, of course not,” her mom protested, passing Yvonne a plate onto which she’d placed four triangles of toast in a pinwheel pattern. “I told you I wanted to hear about the reunion, and so far, you’re telling me about the one classmate I see all the time.”

“The one you *don’t* see all the time, apparently.” As Yvonne sat down to eat, her father wordlessly passed her the Sunday crossword and winked at her. She patted his hand and unfolded a napkin onto her lap.

Her mom began to explain her grocery shopping strategy as a way of justifying her absence from Safeway. One store had a sale that ran from Friday through Thursday, while another ran from Sunday through Saturday. And there were coupons to consider. Yvonne wasn’t paying attention. She was reviewing data in her head. Of the classmates she’d seen last night:

1. Twenty percent had one child.

2. Forty-five percent had two.
3. Fifteen percent had three.
4. About three percent had four or more.
5. The remainder had no children.

Yvonne fell into this last category. She also fell into the overwhelming minority of women who did not have three names. There was Julie Cox-Shultz, Margie Fleming-Forester etc. They'd probably tacked their maiden names back on for the purposes of being identified at the reunion, but anyway, it was amusing and disconcerting and somewhat annoying, all at the same time. She wanted to write the word *still* on her nametag so that she too could have three names: *Still Yvonne Evanovich*. If and when a husband ever did come into the picture, Yvonne would never give up her homonym-inspired name.

“What about that boy who took you to prom? Danny.”

“He looked good, actually. I was hoping he wouldn't, after what he put me through.” She took another bite of toast. How did her mother manage to make the simplest things taste so good?

“And you told everyone about your job, I hope?” her mother said.

At this, her father folded his newspaper and looked up.

Yvonne chewed slowly and deliberately, washed the toast down with coffee, savoring the certainty that her mother's stiff posture would not disengage until she'd heard a satisfactory answer to her question. “By the time I was explaining for the third time what a quantitative analyst does, I was putting myself to sleep.”

“You work on Wall Street, Vonnie,” her dad said. “Nothing boring about that. And you live in Greenwich Village, which is a lot more interesting than living around here in a rundown home and working a dead-end job just to make ends meet.”

Yvonne said nothing. By *dead-end*, did he mean Phyllis Cooper-Hernandez’s part-time job at the bookstore, which she had talked about with great fondness, or Shanice Simon-Landau’s job as a preschool teacher that allowed her to pick up her own children from school? How about the bagel shop that Gary Murray had been running for the past fifteen years? Would *rundown* describe the one-story log cabin that Lonnie Parks and Regina Sykes-Parks (high school sweethearts) had built in West Virginia, or the townhouse near the junior high school where Fred Lane lived alone with his son, which made it easy to walk over and coach his kid’s soccer team on weekends during the fall. Even Julie Cox-Shultz, the Safeway cashier, had found positives in her job: her connection to the community, the good people she worked with, the fact that she never had to bring her work home with her. Not one of Yvonne’s former classmates had inserted the words *rundown* or *dead-end* into a conversation.

She had come close to starting a family of her own a few times. There’d been:

1. Steve Yaeger, a “quant” like her, who had decided, after the wedding invitations were sent out, that he just couldn’t “go through with it.”
2. Julian Kirk, a stockbroker who was cute and smart but emotionally absent. Yvonne had poured her heart out to him, but it became apparent, over time, that he did not believe her innermost thoughts were worth remembering.
3. Ken Carter who was nice enough but, face it, not at all attractive. At least not to Yvonne.

That was it. Three strikes and out.

Okay. So maybe she had secretly hoped that some former nerd, now a gorgeous stud, would confess his twenty-year crush to her, and the band would play “Endless Love” while they danced the night away, cheek to cheek. But the men at the reunion had paid less attention to the quantitative analyst with the designer dress and expensive haircut than they had to Becky Gibson-Wallace, who was now an aerobics instructor and had probably bought her dress off the rack at K-mart.

“Mind if I shower now?” Yvonne asked her parents, with far more urgency than she’d intended. “I want to get back to New York before dark.”

Her mother set her hands into her lap. “I was hoping you’d stay another night, tomorrow being Labor Day. I was planning pot roast for dinner.”

“That sounds great, Mom. Really it does. But I have work to do.” She wanted to comfort the older woman, who suddenly looked so sad. “Another time, maybe?”

Her mother dismissed her from the kitchen with a slow nod and a reminder that fresh towels were in the closet outside the bathroom.

As soon as Yvonne came out of the shower, her mother was trying to feed her again. Lunch this time. “You can’t drive home on an empty stomach,” she said. She’d made chicken salad sandwiches on mini twist rolls and had placed a basket of chips on the table alongside a plate of pickles. Her chicken salad was the best.

Yvonne sat down.

“And you’ll be home for Thanksgiving, right? We can have the pot roast that weekend. I’ll store it in the freezer till then.”

Yvonne assured her mom she'd be home for Thanksgiving.

Then her dad started talking about a Christmas visit to New York City. Maybe taking in a show. They had wanted to see *The Phantom of the Opera* for some time now.

"There's something I want to tell you guys," Yvonne said. She spoke quickly so she wouldn't chicken out of sharing her news two days in a row. "I might not be living in New York at Christmastime. I put my apartment on the market. Last month."

Her parents looked at each other, and her dad raised an eyebrow. She had envisioned this reaction on the drive over; Mom and Dad did not disappoint.

Finally, her father ventured to ask, "Where will you live, then?"

"You remember that trip I took to Maine last month? Well, I fell in love with this town near the coast."

Her father chewed a potato chip slowly, then reached for another. Her mother looked at him with visible hope that he would know what to say.

"Probably aren't too many jobs for quantitative analysts on the coast of Maine." His eye twitched as he slipped a third potato chip into his mouth.

"Then I'll get a different kind of job. There's no hurry. I've saved up a lot of money."

A period of silence followed, maybe a minute or two but it felt like an eternity. Yvonne had known for over a month that her parents would not react well to the news.

Then her mother fired the final round of ammunition. “I just don’t see how you can give up that amazing apartment and that amazing job to go live in some small town in Maine.”

It was time to wave the white flag. Yvonne could shoot back convincing arguments for the rest of the day and her parents still would not understand.

“Well, I’d better head home soon. I don’t want to get stuck on the turnpike too late. Listen, you guys, I haven’t even been able to sell the condo yet, so...” She let the sentence end there.

“Just maybe give it some more thought; that’s all I ask,” her mother said in a meek voice.

“You may change your mind, Vonnie.”

Yvonne kissed them each on the cheek. “I promise I’ll be here for Thanksgiving, no matter where I’m living.”

With her overnight bag in her hand and her dress encased in plastic over her shoulder, she headed out to the car and started the engine. Her parents stood on the porch and waved, as they always did when she left.

She put her hands on the steering wheel and looked at them for a moment, then climbed out and returned to the porch, leaving her keys in the ignition.

“I know you guys want what’s best for me, but I haven’t been very happy for some time now. With my job or my home, or my life in general. I think I found a place where I can be happy. That’s all.”

Her parents nodded and instinctively reached out to hold one another.

She took a step back toward the car. “Get three tickets for *Phantom*, okay? If I’ve moved before Christmas, I can still drive to New York and we’ll stay in a hotel together.”

Thanks to the holiday weekend, traffic wasn’t too bad on the turnpike. Soon the towers came into view. For so many years, making the approach into Manhattan had filled Yvonne with awe.

Not anymore. Now she longed to drive up the coast of Maine. She felt something was waiting for her there, beyond the cliffs and lighthouses and the little white homes. Something she couldn’t quite identify.

She parked in the garage. With the late afternoon came a fresh, cool breeze to carry her home. A few of her neighbors were sitting outside, enjoying a break from the heat. Two little girls were playing hopscotch on the front sidewalk. Yvonne said hello to their parents, who watched from the steps. She knew her neighbors’ names only from what was printed on the mailboxes that surrounded hers. She shoved the contents of her mailbox—a phone bill and a coupon for pizza—into her purse and boarded the elevator.

This was what she believed awaited her in Maine:

1. The ocean pounding against moss-covered bluffs.

2. The sound of children—her children—playing hopscotch.
3. A kitchen large enough to enable her to prepare Thanksgiving dinner for her family and parents and in-laws.
4. A beautiful man who would love her unconditionally.

A special lockbox had been installed on her door; she opened it and went inside. She wondered if her real estate agent had used it over the weekend, if anyone had shown an interest in the apartment. A message on her machine answered that question.

“Good news. The couple I told you about got their financing approved. I’ll be away from my office on Monday but you can call me Tuesday.”

Yvonne ordered a pizza and paced her kitchen. She was really going to do it. No backing out this time.

She ate the pizza in front of a cable movie but felt too sleepy to finish. The high school reunion and long drive home had drained her. She covered herself in a blanket that her mother had crocheted decades ago and stretched out on the sofa.

Yvonne fell asleep to the sound of cabbies honking their horns, and to a lone siren wailing in the distance.

Honorable Mention: Douglas R. Thompson

Hyattsville, MD

The Apology

He stood there facing her and took a deep breath. "Honey, don't say anything till I'm done talking, just listen. Please. Just hear me out."

George took a seat, a full autumn moon shimmering above the space the two occupied. He had thought about what to say all day long, and finally knew he had it right. At least he hoped so. He unconsciously fumbled with his wedding ring as he stared at his hands.

"First, I'm sorry about walking out on you in the middle of our argument two weeks ago. I had no right to do that, I know". He felt a hollowness in his chest.

He continued in a cracking voice, looking down mostly, but occasionally lifting his head. "Honey, when I left that night, I admit I was angry. But I was more angry at myself than I was at you. I know that now.

"I thought that if I just went away for two weeks, and didn't let you know where I was, it would teach you a lesson. Teach you a lesson? Imagine that! What a fool I was for doing that. What was I thinking?

"I suppose you wonder where I went. I wasn't sure where I was going to go when I left. I just drove around thinking. Finally, I picked Oscoda State Park where we used to go camping together. Of course, I didn't have a tent, so I just slept in the car.

"The first couple of days I was thinking about you missing me, and maybe being scared. You know what? That thought made me happy. I *wanted* you to worry. I *wanted* you to wonder. What an idiot I was.

"Then, I rented a canoe. Remember when we canoed down the AuSable River? I'll never forget that time. It was 240 miles and 5 dams. But we made it in five days. Look, honey. I brought some of the pictures with me. Remember that one? That was

you laughing when we came around a bend and a fisherman was in the middle of the river peeing. He never saw us coming until we were three feet from him!

"Anyway, after I canoed around a bit, I started to realize something. I realized that no matter what I did, thoughts of you kept popping up. Thoughts of all the times we had together. After two weeks, I couldn't stand being alone anymore. And that's when I came home.

"When I didn't find you there, I thought for sure you were just out shopping. And so I waited for you. And while I waited, I thought again about you and me. I was remembering that time we took our son with us when we went grocery shopping. And when we got back we realized that we had left him there! Remember? When we got back to the store, he was in the parking lot making money by loading groceries into people's cars.

"Finally, Judy, next door, came and told me where I could find you.

"Sweetheart, the thought of spending the rest of my life without you...well, I just don't want that to happen. We are soul mates. Remember how many times we said that? We belong to each other, sweetheart. We belong together.

"Please say you forgive me. Please. Please?"

George stared in her direction and waited in hopeful anticipation. Silence. Icy silence. After a moment, he sighed and stood. Obviously, he still needed to work on his apology. Slowly he walked back to his car, his body stooped, his hair unkempt. The moon was now at its apex, and he shivered from the coolness of the evening. As he reached for the car's door handle, he turned one last time to look at her headstone off in the distant edges of the cemetery. Maybe tomorrow, he thought. Maybe I'll get it right tomorrow.

Honorable Mention: Elizabeth Morrill

Ashburn, VA

Tree Hunt

The website for McConnell’s Cut-Your-Own Tree Farm was artfully dated, with dancing trees parading around an eye-watering block of neon green text. The website claimed the farm was the oldest and most authentic pick-your-own Christmas tree farm in the state, with memory-making add-ons like wagon rides, a hot chocolate stand, and “photo ops galore.”

The tree farm was 2.5 hours away, up rough and windy mountain roads that strained their minivan to its limits. There were other, closer farms (not to mention the large and well-supplied plant nursery down the street), but those were for *other* families. Less committed families. Those were Christmas trees for the masses, all perfectly round and full and pre-wrapped for easy delivery.

Larissa spent a week researching tree farms before settling on McConnell’s. Then, she spent another week explaining to her husband why *this* farm was the perfect farm, and didn’t a daytrip out of the suburbs sound nice? Sure, it was a bit of an inconvenience, but the kids deserved a magical Christmas and what better way to get into the holiday spirit than—

The rest of her argument had been drowned out by a screech from the baby, who was being gently smothered by her toddler sister wielding a stuffed raccoon.

On Saturday, Larissa started loading the car as if the decision had been made. She didn't look at Marc as she wrestled shoes onto the three kids and adjusted the girls' matching headbands.

"Are you ready for an adventure? We're picking our Christmas tree today!" Larissa exclaimed. "Here, let's take a quick picture before we go." She lined the girls up on the front stoop next to a display of Christmas elves and a large wooden sign reading, "HO HO HO" that she'd found on Etsy.

Marc, sighing, started lacing up his workbooks. "I guess we're doing this."

Larissa avoided Marc's eyes as she corralled the children into the car. While Marc fished through the garage for twine and tarp, Larissa queued up the holiday music playlist she'd made while the kids napped last week.

The last twenty minutes of the drive involved little more than a gravel path up the side of a mountain. The minivan strained as it gained altitude. Larissa gripped the sides of her seat as her teeth rattled, occasionally glancing at the tight set of Marc's jaw as he maneuvered around potholes and hairpin turns.

Finally, they pulled atop a wide alpine plateau, the sun bright overhead. A small pond glittered in the sun. Several log-hewn buildings dotted the landscape amidst a rolling forest of pine.

They were not alone. The parking lot was overflowing with holiday merry-makers, and it took Marc ten minutes to find a spot to park.

Larissa stretched as she got of the car, the scent of pine deep and quiet around her. She jumped, mid-breath, as her four-year-old slipped from her carseat while singing an off-key version of Jingle Bells.

Larissa turned to unbuckle the baby from her carseat, glancing around the parking lot to figure out where to go next.

"I think the bus picks up over there." Larissa squinted, trying to make herself heard over an increasingly loud chorus of "Jingle *bells*, Jingle **BELLS**, Jingle **BELLS**."

Larissa hefted the baby onto her hip and pointed towards a sign sticking askance out of the graveled parking lot. There were no words on the sign, just the silhouette of an evergreen.

"Why would the bus pick up out here? I think we should walk into the farm -- girls! Come back *now*." Marc lurched forward and grabbed the hood of his toddler daughter's jacket just as she was about to dance into an oncoming line of traffic.

The lines around Larissa's lips thinned, but she said nothing. She grasped the hand of the other wayward child, who had abandoned her singing in favor of sucking on a strand of dingy blond hair. Larissa hooked a finger around the lock and pulled it back, the ends wet with saliva. She patted it smooth behind the child's ear.

"Cora, where are your shoes?" Larissa let exasperation bleed into her voice.

The child shrugged and pulled a hank of hair back into her mouth, sucking assiduously.

"Marc, help me --" she called as she fumbled with the straps of the baby carrier and searched for the missing shoes in the backseat of the car.

"Little busy!" Marc stumbled backward, trying to hold onto the toddler with one arm while muscling a stroller from the trunk.

"What are you doing? We can't take a stroller into a Christmas tree farm."

"You want to carry both kids? How am I supposed to chop down a tree and keep Margot away from the ax at the same time?" Marc puffed as he heaved the stroller onto the ground. The contraption swung open with a *click* and Marc jumped aside as if stung.

Larissa sighed again and finished tying the straps on the baby carrier. She squatted down and pulled the older child onto her knee, twisting shoes onto the child's feet while the baby screeched, unhappy at being constrained again so soon. Just then, a bus pulled into the parking lot, tinny Christmas music pouring out of the open-air vehicle.

"We're coming!" Larissa waved, jogging towards the bus stop and dragging a partially shoe-less Cora behind her.

The bus rolled to a stop. A teen boy lolled in the driver's seat, his bare arms covered in goosebumps in the winter chill while his jacket hung, ignored, on the back of his seat.

Larissa flashed a smile at the driver. "Thanks. My husband is right behind --"

Larissa turned and saw Marc dragging both the toddler and the stroller, the wheels still locked, his face pinched.

"I wasn't ready!" Marc's voice was tight with annoyance.

Larissa started to rub the baby's back within the carrier on her chest, although the child had not made a noise.

"I was just trying to catch the bus before it left," she said helplessly.

Marc grunted, reclosed the stroller, and hauled both toddler and stroller up the stairs.

"Take your seats!" the teen called back, pulling on the drive shaft in a long, fluid sweep. The bus began to roll forward, launching between stands of stunted trees. Scraggly branches scraped against the side of the vehicle.

"Look, girls, look at all the trees! Which one should we take home?" Larissa stretched a smile across her face.

Cora scrambled onto a seat and leaned out of the window. Behind them, the toddler started to screech, and Marc released the child to scramble forward next to her sister. Larissa did not look at her husband as she hooked an arm around the girls' waists.

"Careful," Larissa chided as the girls leaned out the window, but her voice disappeared underneath the children's delighted shrieks. She aimed her camera phone at the back of their heads and snapped several pictures.

Marc leaned forward and grabbed the toddler, who had been leaning ever further out of the bus window.

"Come on, Larissa, she nearly got whacked by a branch!" he chided. Larissa said nothing, slipping her camera back into the diaper bag.

The bus navigated a narrow turn and then began to climb up a rise, the parking lot disappearing into woodland below. After several minutes, the bus died to a stop. A large family shouldered their way up the aisle, expensively dressed in matching flannel shirts and fur-lined hats. Cora stared intently as another girl trotted past, the other child's hair bouncing in neat pincurls as she walked by.

"Should we get off here?" Larissa looked around dubiously. This particular grove was full of little families studded throughout the woods, all of them searching for that one thing they could take home and say, "*Here. Here is our Merry Christmas.*"

Marc squinted through the trees. "Nah, let's wait for the next one. Find a little breathing room."

The bus churned onwards, but Marc vetoed the next two stops as well. "We're going to find the perfect spot, girls, don't you worry. Your dad is going to find you the perfect tree."

But when the bus rounded the next curve, the parking lot swam back into view.

Larissa stifled a laugh. "Did you girls enjoy the ride?"

Marc's face was red. Larissa started to rub the baby's back again.

"Why don't we just walk?" Larissa suggested, pulling the girls to their feet. "I see a nice grove right up the hill over there, and I bet no one has been there yet!"

But the girls had spied a playground over by the checkout corner. Marc attempted to herd them up the hill, but before long the two children had bolted for the swings.

Larissa shrugged. "I'll watch them, just find us a tree and meet us when you're done."

The girls were shouting, bickering over who would go down the slide first. Larissa jogged over before Marc could answer. She sorted out the little ones, now screaming the words to *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* at the top of their lungs. Then, she eased the baby into a bucket swing.

"*Hush now, my baby, hush now, don't cry...*" Larissa started to hum. The baby gurgled, oblivious, batting happily at the rubber swing. She pulled her camera back out and started snapping pictures of the kids as they played.

"Cora, put your arm around Margot – no, put your dress down. Please? Just one picture for Mommy?"

Cora ignored her. "Mom! Watch this!" she shouted, leaping forward into a messy somersault. Her headband fell off into the grass.

"Great job, sweetie." Larissa picked up the headband and stuffed it into the diaper bag.

She adjusted the filter on the phone and snapped a selfie with the baby. Glancing at the photo, Larissa frowned, then dug through the diaper bag for a pack of baby wipes. She pulled one out and started dabbing at her mascara, which had smudged under her left eye.

Marc returned forty minutes later, after lugging a nine-foot Douglass fir back to the parking lot and strapping it to the roof of the car.

"I can't believe we drove two and a half hours so the kids could play on a run-down swingset," Marc muttered.

"Should we get some hot chocolate?" Larissa asked, ignoring him.

Marc wiped his sweating forehead with the bottom of his shirt. "Sure. Might as well."

The girls squealed, running towards a rustic-looking gift shop.

The shop was thick with tourists and the scent of potpourri. Larissa fingered a hand-made wreath, then added a jar of apple butter to the counter.

"Four hot chocolates, please," she said. "Margot, do *not* touch that," she hissed under her breath, rescuing a glass-blown nativity set displayed at toddler-level.

The woman behind the counter rang them up with a cheerful, "Merry Christmas!" Then, she handed them four small Styrofoam cups and pointed them towards a large, stainless-steel urn labeled, *Hot!*

Larissa filled the cups and balanced them carefully, splashes of hot liquid scalding her hands as she tried to blow on the drinks while the older girls jumped against her legs.

"Leave your mother alone!" Marc scolded, swooping in to grasp a cup of hot chocolate before it tipped onto the baby's head. "Here, sit down over there and we'll bring it to you."

The girls each tried a sip of hot chocolate before declaring it "too hot." They wandered off in favor a dog laying mournfully in the sunshine, just outside the shop door.

Larissa rescued the dog from the ministrations of her toddler, who was attempting to pry open the dog's jaws with a stick -- "*Fetch! Fetch, doggy!*" -- while Marc dumped the nearly full cups into the trash.

"Should we, I don't know...walk around a bit? I think there's a walking path around the pond..." Larissa started.

"I want to beat the traffic," Marc responded, glancing at his watch. "Besides, I still have to get this tree unloaded and set up before we can even start decorating. It's a lot of work."

Larissa bit her lip and nodded.

Later, after the children had been strapped into their carseats and plied with snacks and juice boxes, Larissa accepted a call from her sister.

"Hi, guys! What are ya'll up to today?" The voice of Larissa's sister crackled over the speakerphone.

"Hey, sis. Girls, say hello to your aunt!" The girls, entranced by a movie playing on the car's video screen, were silent. "Sorry, it's been a long day --"

"That's right, you went to the Christmas tree farm today! How was it?"

Larissa fiddled with a strand of hair. "Oh, the kids had a wonderful time." Larissa tucked the strand of hair behind her ear, staring out the window at a wide expanse of treed valley. "It's such a fun tradition."

Her sister launched into a story about the holiday lights tour she'd taken her own kids on the night before.

While she listened, Larissa opened the photo app on her phone and started scrolling through pictures from the farm, editing each one for brightness and contrast. She applied a filter to a close-up of the baby, added a border, and then posted it to her Instagram with the caption, "Such a fun day at the Tree Farm! Love making memories with my Christmas angels. #familytime #merryandbright"

Larissa reached up and gripped the handhold in the ceiling as Marc took a switchback a touch too fast. Her stomach lurched. The car settled, and they began to descend into the valley.

Larissa sank into her seat, listening to her sister's voice burble over the speaker. Closed her eyes. Said nothing.

Honorable Mention: Cara Cavicchia

Aldie, VA

The Last Log

The wind howled outside. The grey skies promised a long night of snow. Bella put her hands to the window that was already covered in frost. Small flurries had already begun to fall, but the news warned that this could be a blizzard to remember.

Bella blew her breath against the glass and watched it fog up. She drew a small heart with her finger and smiled. She always loved winter and watching the snow fall, even if Mommy didn't seem to enjoy it very much anymore. This was the time of year that Mommy would always start listing out the reasons why they should just pack their bags and move down to a sunny beach in Florida. Of course, they would never do that. But, Mommy did like to dream about starting over somewhere far away.

Bella shivered as she pulled her bright pink fuzzy socks onto her feet. The house was always cold, but this night felt especially chilly. Even with the heater on, the downstairs of the house never felt warm anymore.

That's why Daddy always kept a fire going throughout the winter.

Bella walked across the cool floors of the living room and searched her toy box for the perfect stuffy to take to bed tonight. She kept glancing over at the empty fireplace. She settled upon a blue bunny that Daddy won for her at the arcade. After many failed attempts of moving the claw into the perfect position, he had finally secured that blue bunny. Now here it was just stuffed into the toy box. Bella did not like that. Bunny should definitely be up in her bedroom.

She grabbed the bunny and walked over to a long couch in front of the fireplace. Bella remembered when Mommy and Daddy would sit on the couch drinking hot chocolate while she pushed her Barbies around in their pink convertible. And whenever Daddy would catch Bella yawning, he would grab his acoustic guitar and start singing a lullaby. Then Bella would cuddle up by his feet with the family's trusted Golden Retriever Simba by her side.

Even Simba seemed to miss the evening fires. Simba seemed to avoid this room altogether unless Bella called him over. He had taken up the role of man of the house and protector of Bella.

Bella didn't understand why Mommy refused to just light the fire, especially with since this winter seemed to be colder than ever. These old wooden floors felt absolutely freezing under Bella's tiny feet. Mommy would talk about wishing there was carpet, but everyone reassured her that she would be thankful for the beautiful wooden floors once the house was up for sale. She also talked about getting some area rugs, but she just wasn't very good at making decisions these days.

Mommy would sometimes walk into the living room and just stare at the empty fireplace. The last lonely log sitting in the wood holder beside the fireplace.

At the beginning of winter, Grandpa had offered to cut some new logs for them. He enjoyed that sort of thing. In fact, Grandpa and Daddy used to have a contest every Fall to see who could cut the most wood into logs. Grandpa would always win, and Daddy would wink at Bella saying that he just didn't have half the strength as Grandpa.

Mommy would laugh and yell from the window for the boys to be careful and not hurt themselves.

But when Grandpa offered to cut more logs, Mommy just screamed and screamed. Bella could not even make out any words from Mommy's agonizing screams. The pain on Grandpa's face was unlike anything Bella had ever seen.

"It's okay, Bella. Mommy is just under a lot of stress right now," Grandpa said.

Bella watched as Mommy went into the kitchen, uncorked a bottle, and poured the deep red liquid into a large glass.

Then Grandpa put his arms around Bella and said, "How would you like to have a sleepover at our house this weekend?"

One last attempt was made during New Year's Eve. Grandpa and Grandma brought a large box of fireworks to shoot off in the oversized driveway. Even Aunt Crissy came to visit with cousins George and Holden in tow. Everyone laughed as the kids held sparklers, threw poppers, and sang every incorrect word of Auld Lang Syne.

"It's OLD LONG SONG!" George declared.

"No, no, no. It's the days of Old Lin Sin," Holden argued.

“What is a Lin Sin?” Bella asked, opening yet another box of poppers.

“Hey, don’t use all the boxes!” George cried.

“I’m not!” Bella shouted.

“Old Lane Son?” Holden asked.

“Auld Lang Syne,” Aunt Crissy corrected.

When all the fireworks were used and the chill in the air became more prominent, the party moved inside. The kids all insisted on staying up to watch the ball drop on TV, and Aunt Crissy made the mistake of pointing out the unused fireplace.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to light the fire and sit around singing songs while we waited for midnight. Just like we did when we were kids,” Aunt Crissy said nostalgically.

George, Holden, and Bella gleefully agreed. Bella ran into the kitchen to look for mugs for making hot chocolate. George started pulling blankets from the couch. Holden asked if there was any popcorn.

But Mommy wasn’t having any of it.

“That is the LAST log. THE LAST LOG!” Mommy exclaimed.

“Katie, I know that. But...” Aunt Crissy tried to calm her.

“No! I can’t! I just can’t!”

Grandpa and Grandma just stood watching as Mommy went into hysterics.

All of the kids moved more slowly as they raided the kitchen, trying to pretend that they weren’t eavesdropping on the adults.

“Sweetheart,” Grandma said gently, “We don’t have to use THAT log. We can use other logs.”

“No. No fires. That was his thing. The logs. The fires. Everything. It was HIS thing,” Mommy said before collapsing to the floor in tears.

Grandpa and Grandma carefully made their way over to Mommy and wrapped their arms around her.

“Shhh, shhh,” Grandma consoled.

“He should be here,” Mommy cried.

“Come on kids,” Aunt Crissy said, “Let’s make that hot chocolate and popcorn and get snuggled up on the couch to watch the big ball drop in New York.”

And that was it. Aunt Crissy never mentioned the fireplace again. Nobody did.

Bella knew the fireplace made Mommy sad, but that didn’t stop her longing to see the fire and bring some warmth to this cold night. She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to imagine it. She imagined how Daddy would tease Mommy and call her “old lady” when she would suggest skipping the fire and just going to bed early. Mommy always gave in once Daddy got the flames roaring.

Bella stretched out her favorite blanket across the floor near the fireplace. It was pink and white and knitted by Grandma when Bella was just a baby. She loved the soft woven yarn and wondered if it had taken Grandma 17 years to knit such a large blanket like this.

Bella laid down on the blanket. It was incredibly cold on the floor, even with a blanket beneath her.

“Simba. Come here, Simba.”

The golden dog stretched out before slowly making its way over to Bella. He was getting old and not the biggest fan of changing his nap zone, but he was always obeyed Bella’s wishes. Simba collapsed beside her. Bella gently rubbed the dog’s belly, and

Simba closed his eyes in contentment. Simba was like a big, warm space heater. Bella tried to cuddle up next to him, but it was still quite cold. She looked around the room and saw another throw blanket on the couch. She jumped up and grabbed it before returning to the floor. She covered herself and Simba with the blanket. There. That was better. Not perfect, but better.

“Bella, Bella are you in there? It’s almost bedtime,” Mommy called out.

“Yes, Mommy, I am in here.”

Mommy walked into the room and paused.

“Bella, baby, what are you doing on the floor?” She asked. She walked over and kneeled beside Bella and Simba. They were cuddled close under the blanket, but Bella still had some goosebumps on her.

Mommy went to pick up Bella.

“Come on, let’s go upstairs,” Mommy said.

“No, Mommy, no,” Bella protested.

“Bella, it’s cold on the floor. Let’s get up and go to bed,” Mommy said. She was exhausted and didn’t have the energy to argue.

“No, I have to stay here with him in our favorite spot.”

“Who Simba?” Mommy said with a laugh.

“Daddy.”

Mommy froze.

Bella gazed longingly at the fireplace.

“Daddy wouldn’t want you to be cold,” Mommy said softly. “Why don’t we snuggle in bed and watch a movie.”

“He left us one last log, and we haven’t even used it,” Bella said.

Mommy’s lips started to tremble.

“It just doesn’t seem right to use the fireplace without him,” Mommy said, her voice quivering.

Bella sat up. She stared at Mommy’s deep brown eyes. Mommy’s eyes seemed to get darker every day. The flame was out in the fireplace, and it was also out in

Mommy's eyes. Bella just wanted to go back to normal life with Mommy and Daddy and Simba all laughing together.

Bella looked at Simba, snoring away. She put both her arms around Simba. And she started to cry.

"Oh baby. No, no, don't cry," Mommy said as tears also started to form in her eyes.

"Why Mommy. Why can't he just come back? It's not fair."

"I know, sweetie. Sometimes life is just not fair."

"I don't even remember what his voice sounded like. I am going to forget him," Bella said quietly.

Mommy took a deep breath and wiped Bella's tears.

"I will make sure you never forget him," Mommy said.

"How?"

Mommy stood up. Walked over to the coat closet and opened it up. She reached in and pulled out a black guitar case. She lifted out the shiny acoustic guitar that had been sleeping in its case for the past year. Mommy admired it and brought it over to the couch. Bella sat beside Mommy's legs as Mommy tuned the guitar.

Mommy gently strummed the strings.

"I am a little rusty. Sorry. Daddy was the real musician in the family," Mommy said. Then she started playing a melody that Bella would know anywhere, one she used to hear almost every night.

The moon hangs up above

The stars sparkle and shine

You are here with me

Listening to this sweet lullaby

Stay here in my arms

Hold on to me

I'll take care of you

Never let you cry

Happy little dreams

Will soon be yours

Just close your eyes

Sweet daughter of mine

Angels fly around you

Watching you sleep

Guarding you all night

Until the sun awakes

Darling little Bella

As perfect as can be

To you I give this kiss

As you slowly fall asleep

When you wake tomorrow

If I am not there

Remember this song and my love

Will always be inside you

Bella looked up at Mommy in awe. Mommy stopped playing and set the guitar down beside her on the couch. She wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands.

“Daddy’s song,” Bella whispered.

Mommy gave her a small smile. She stood up walked over to the fireplace. She picked up the last log in the wood holder and placed it inside the fireplace. She rearranged some kindling and newspaper that were set aside. She slowly grabbed the lighter and lit the paper with shaky hands. She stood back as she watched the small flames spark. Then she grabbed a small, ornate wooden box sitting on the mantle.

She took the small wooden box and cradled it in her arms. Then she sat down on the blanket beside Bella and Simba.

“Thank you, Mommy,” Bella said.

“I love you, Bella.”

“I love you Mommy,” she said. Then she put her tiny hands on the box, “I love you, Daddy.”

They sat on the blanket together and watched the flames engulf the last log.

Honorable Mention: William Kohudic

Ashburn, VA

The Snack King

It was a normal, quiet summer morning when Steve Nichols burst through my bedroom door. “Mark! I found it! The Holy Grail!” He dropped his sweat-stained gray backpack on my bed, tore it open, and yanked out a crinkly orange-and-black package. He held it up and yelled, “The long-lost missing ‘E!’”

I sat back in my desk chair, book lowered and eyes raised, ready to bask in the glory of... “A bag of chips?”

Steve had always been a serious snack hound. He was all about the latest thing; the new candy bar, the radical chip flavor, the seasonal fruit pies. He’d buy at least one of *anything*. Steve also wanted to be a JV football starter, and his idea of ‘endurance training’ leading up to sports camp was to hike or bike to every hole-in-the-wall c-store in town in his quest for new foods.

I studied the bag. “They’re called ‘Elitos?’”

“Yep, and look at the brand.”

“It’s a Lay’s product. I don’t see—”

“It’s the ‘E’ chip!” Steve shouted. “Don’t you get it? They’ve always had Cheetos, Doritos and Fritos, right? Longer than you and I have been alive. That’s ‘C,’ ‘D’ and ‘F.’ But we’ve never had ‘E’ until *right now!*”

“Sure, I guess. So?”

“So, what I’m holding is the missing piece—released *in our lifetime*. You and I could be the *first* to try them all!”

I had my doubts that we were actually the first, but Steve’s enthusiasm was contagious.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Rip it open!”

The ‘chips’ turned out to be dense potato spirals. “A little thicker cut than Ruffles,” Steve said between crunches. “Dry like a Dorito, coated with a mixture of cheese like Cheetos and spice dust like Fritos.”

“Or like Cool Ranch,” I said around a mouthful.

“No, they’re not colorful and they’re spicier. Man, these are good!”

The 9.5-ounce bag didn’t last long. “Do they have a bigger size?” I asked hopefully.

“Not that I saw. You got any soda?”

In the kitchen, Steve's eyes narrowed over his can of Sprite. "You know what we have to do," he said.

"'Betcha can't eat just one,' right?" I agreed, quoting the ad.

"Grab your cash and our backpacks, and I'll get our bikes." Steve gulped his drink, burped loudly, and headed toward the garage.

We hit the road moments later, bike wheels clicking their freedom song. "The store we're going to is called Bodega Sombreada." Steve said.

"I don't know that one. Must be in the part of town mom told me not to ride to."

"Well, it's on the strip, but it's on this side of the highway so technically we won't cross over into that part."

"If you say so. I'm staying on the sidewalk, though."

Soon, we left the quiet streets and green lawns of our subdivision behind, coasting more than pedaling down the broad, scrub-lined road that led to Cherrydale Avenue; a.k.a., the strip. The strip had been the only highway through town before they built the bypass. Now most of the old businesses were long gone, leaving their empty shells to

be filled by new stores that came and went like hermit crabs: pawn shops, cigarette outlets, tattoo parlors, nail salons, palm readers, gas station convenience stores.

We rode through a long, dusty mile of exhaust fumes and engine noise, heat haze blending the storefront logos into a garish blur of feral consumerism. By the time we reached the Bodega, my hands felt melted to the handlebars. “Water,” I croaked, and let my bike fall onto the cracked concrete.

“Don’t be a wuss,” Steve said as he hitched his pack and led the way to the door. The interior was dimly lit and barely cooler than outside, and I wrinkled my nose at my first breath of the dull, sour air.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Have your mom drive you to the Alpha Beta if you want to pay extra for clean; it all tastes the same after you get home. What’s up, muchacho?” he said to the guy at the counter. The man lifted his chin and went back to watching sports on his little five-inch TV.

Steve led me to a narrow wire rack display crammed between the soda cooler and the auto supplies. A sign taped to the top said “CA\$H ONLY” in sharpie; the rack was empty except for a handful of items on a middle shelf. “They still got two bags!” Steve crowed as he grabbed the Elitos. “The rest of this stuff is foreign; I don’t care about that. Hey, man!” he called to the clerk. “When you gonna restock this shelf?”

“Special rack?” the guy asked. “Should be any time now. Or maybe mañana.” He shrugged.

“Mark, grab a couple Mountain Dews—I have a plan,” Steve said.

We took our purchases to a low cinder block wall that divided the faded asphalt of one parking lot from the next, and huddled in the weak shade of a skeletal shrub. Steve offered me chips, but I shook my head. “It’s too hot to eat. If this snack guy doesn’t show up soon, I’ve got air conditioning calling my name.”

“Relax,” Steve said, “I’ve been here before and that rack is always full of weird stuff. From here, we can watch the front and the back. I wanna see what company he drives for.”

“It’s probably stolen; I bet that’s why it’s cash only.”

“No, I think it’s something else. My dad’s in marketing, and he told me about this thing called ‘harbinger zip codes.’ When a company wants to test a new product, they release it in one small area first to see if people buy it. Then they decide whether to take it national or cancel it. I think *we’re* in one of those areas, man—that’s why I was saying we might really be the first ones ever to try these chips. And I want to *buy* more so they keep on *selling* more. Now do you get it?”

I had my doubts, but when Steve sounded that sure of himself, there was no point in arguing. Instead, I zoned out for a while, listening to the cars zoom past and watching distant vultures circling in the cloudless, gray-blue sky.

I don't know how long we sat there before I heard a metallic rattling sound; it seemed familiar but I couldn't place it. Then Steve whispered, "Hey, check it out," and pointed at a scruffy guy pushing a grocery cart full of plastic bags toward the Bodega's back door.

"Where did he come from?"

"Around the dumpster, it looks like."

"Yeah, but there's no parking on the other side, see? It's just the back of the next building. He couldn't have just pulled up. I wonder what he's got in those bags."

The man walked with his head down, and we couldn't see his face behind his long, gray-streaked hair. He wore faded jeans, a ratty t-shirt, and a pair of old no-brand canvas shoes. He pushed his cart to the back door and knocked, then just stood there, staring at the ground.

Before long, the battered steel door squealed open and without a word, the man wheeled his cart inside. Steve's eyes narrowed. "Dude, that's just weird. You stay here and see if he comes back out—I'm going in the front."

Steve raced across the lot and then slowed down to stroll casually past the front window. Hands in his pockets, he walked slowly toward the door, craning his neck to see inside. He stopped, stood still for a moment, then ran back.

“Mark, he’s the guy! He’s stocking the special rack right now!”

“A shelf stocked by a probable drug addict who brings knock-off snacks in a rusty grocery cart. I think I lost my appetite. How much are you gonna buy now?”

“We’re not gonna buy more. We’re gonna follow him to his source! I need to find where this stuff comes from, it must be close by since he doesn’t have a truck. Come on!”

Steve had a way of overcoming my better judgment with his enthusiasm; without a word, I followed him around the dumpster.

The space between the dumpster and the adjacent building was dirty, smelly, and overgrown with tall weeds that sprouted from every crack in the pavement. “Quiet,” Steve said before I even had a chance to complain. “From here we can see which way he goes without him knowing it.”

“Why would he even care?” I asked, holding my nose and regretting every decision I’d made that day. We hunkered in the sweltering shade of the dumpster for what felt like half of forever, until finally the door squeaked open. The rattle of cart wheels on

blacktop followed, and the scruffy man soon shuffled into view. He stopped by the wall and stood facing away from us, whistling a somber, aimless little tune.

He pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and flipped through it while peering in all directions. Steve and I pressed as far back into the shadows as we could, but the man never looked our way. After a moment, he reached down into his cart.

He straightened, looked around once more, and grabbed the handlebar. I thought he must have turned on a boom box because I heard a weird, high-pitched sound, like a million ants frying bacon. Later, Steve said he thought it sounded like a lake of Crystal Pepsi. As we watched, the man pushed his cart straight into the side of the next building through a shimmer like the heat haze on the highway.

“What,” Steve sputtered, “there’s no door there!” As one, we ran to the spot where the man had been, and stood speechless.

A big patch of the cinder block wall rippled like the surface of a pool. It was clear like water, too, but an oily, purple-green film pulsed at the edges. On the other side, the man stood with his cart by the busy street.

“It’s a *building*, no way the street goes right past here,” Steve whispered. The traffic looked heavy, but we couldn’t hear it over the sizzling sound, which had gotten louder.

The strangest thing about the scene to me wasn't the street, but the jagged brown mountains that loomed beyond the seedy storefronts. We didn't live near mountains.

"Steve, I don't think that's Cherrydale," I whispered back.

"Maybe not, but the door is closing," Steve said as he grabbed my wrist. "Come on!"

For a split second it felt and sounded like we were at the bottom of a pool, looking up through 12 feet of water—then we were standing on a grimy sidewalk with cars whizzing past. The air smelled like sweaty socks and scorched tires. I gagged, and the scruffy man turned and scowled through his short, sparse beard. "Followed me, did'ja?"

"Yep!" Steve said with a big smile. "What street is this?"

"Heh. No street you know. How ya gettin' back?"

A crackle like an overpowered bug zapper sounded behind us; we turned around to face a dusty, off-white cinder block wall where the rippling doorway had been. I put out my hand—it was solid. "How'd you do that?" I asked.

"Didn't *do* aught, just let it go back to normal," the man leered. "Where ya think y'are?"

We both looked around. Behind us, a high wall; in front, a street even dingier than Cherrydale, streaming with cars that looked just as run down. Power lines hung like

abandoned cobwebs between leaning poles. The storefronts across the road seemed oddly familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, with chipped and faded signs proclaiming “Chiffonne’s Bail Bonds,” “Check Cash Now,” and “Pritie Eyebrow.” The dollar sign on the middle one had two vertical bars through the “S” that met at the bottom to form a “U.”

“I’ve never seen these stores,” Steve said quietly.

“Or those mountains,” I added. “Where is this place?”

The man leaned toward us, his face shadowed and unreadable. “Ain’t no place,” he hissed. “We’s *between* places. Maybe us’ta be a place, I dunno.” He gestured with both arms. “Could walk this road ya whole life, never see th’ end. Some folks call it ‘the Groad.’ Your money spend here; little bit go a long way. When it run out, strong boys like you c’n allus earn more, yeh?” The man cackled. “Glad ya followed me now?”

Steve backed up against the wall and held up his hands, his eyes wide. “Hey man, we’re sorry. We just wanted to know where these awesome new snacks came from.”

I followed Steve, hard grit crunching under my shoes. My voice cracked as I added, “We didn’t mean nothin’, honest. We just want to go home now, ok?” I pointed back at the wall.

The man laughed again. “Home ain’t that way. That’s just a ol’ warehouse. Home for you is far on.”

“How do we go...far away?” Steve asked.

“I said *far on*; ya can’t go that way on your own. I c’n send ya. Maybe. How much cash ya got?”

We both pulled out what we had and held it out.

“Leven bucks? Eat for a month on that; it’s a deal if ya swear I never see ya again.” We agreed vigorously. “K then, stand aside,” he said, and reached into his cart. “Got this here from an inventor man; he said all the worlds ‘re like soap bubbles bunched up together, and this here ‘laminar devitalizer’ makes a way between ‘em. He was dumb in some ways but he was right about this.”

Something hidden in the cart buzzed like an electrical short and we felt a rush of hot air; the rippling doorway had opened again. I yelled, “Come on!” but Steve looked back at the man.

Once again, his curiosity had overwhelmed his common sense. “What happened to the inventor?” he asked.

The man's eyes took on a swirling silver sheen; I tried to tell myself it was a reflection from the doorway. "Dunno. I done stole his device an' left him stranded." He grinned, teeth yellow and jagged.

I grabbed Steve's arm and pulled him through the opening. I didn't let go until we got back to our bikes. Without a word, we both mounted up and pedaled hard for home. Nobody was ever so happy to be riding along our own polluted, sun-bleached Cherrydale Avenue as we were that day.

We didn't talk on the way back, but every so often, I heard Steve mumbling to himself, 'laminal devitalizer,' like he'd learned a magic spell and didn't want to forget it.

I'd seen enough of that other place to last me a lifetime, but Steve—well, once he got a taste of something new, there was no holding him back.

