

W R I T E
O N

Short Story
Writing Contest

CELEBRATING **10** YEARS

2012-2022
Contest Winners



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Introduction

Thanks to the generosity of our sponsor, the Loudoun Library Foundation, this year the Loudoun County Public Library is celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Write On Adult Short Story Contest. Over the last decade, more than a thousand stories have been submitted to this contest, with staff reading and scoring each submission and delighting in the wide scope of stories that have ranged from hilarious to absurd, joyful to heartbreaking. While choosing a winner each year is always a tall task, these are the first place stories, and their variety well represents the storytelling prowess of the local community. Thank you to everyone who has participated in this contest over the last decade, and here's to the next ten years of local authors and their incredible tales!

2013 Winner: Jeanne Dallman**Leesburg, VA****The Dependent**

They were just an ordinary couple. Everyone in the little town agreed. Their wedding ceremony was nothing but an embarrassment for all who attended, and even though the sluggish reception guests did tactfully discuss amongst themselves what it was the love-birds could possibly see in each other, few had a great deal to add. The groom was an emaciated, humorless man -- and his bride was the picture-image of her dull, obedient mother right down to the awful puff in her hairdo. Certain intimate friends did admit, however, they were most perfectly matched.

And so they were. For in that very blandness of company they discovered a great repose and empathy. In fact, so inspired was their modest union her husband even awoke in the dead of night just to embrace her, and she adored cuddling with him so dearly the pillow was often sprinkled with tender kisses as well. In the morning they often lingered under the blankets touching toes and fingers until he was long late for work and she had grown sleepy again. He always asked her quietly then what she was going to do with her day, and neither grew tired of the question. In short, their simple home became a sort of temple, a holy place where they could forget all but each other and cling together unseen.

After a brief time the lucky couple encountered yet another blessing. They were going to have a baby! The astounding news inflamed them -- and for the next three mornings they watched the sun rise through their bedroom window with the grandest passion that can consume two humble souls. In the sweet months to come, the infant's clothing was purchased, perfumed and fondled, and the cotton cap meant for its perfect, little head was embroidered with lace and carefully blessed by a traveling minister. The woman's wonderful husband even insisted on hand-feeding her supper with a teaspoon, so concerned was he over her increasing size, and she allowed him the pleasure of gently holding the small of her back while he tipped the mixture onto her tongue.

And yet, when she needed him most, the dear man panicked and completely lost his set of keys so that -- to their great horror -- they were forced to deliver the baby in their bedroom all alone. During one wild contraction the woman even swore at her spouse for the first time with a terrible shriek -- and he answered the same right back -- but mutual repentance came quickly -- and before long her wet nakedness gave birth to a stunned, gasping infant. The ambulance arrived soon after. Yet, already, the couple's lives had taken a very brutal turn for the worse.

For the bloody mess had produced a gruesome thing to be born. Its right leg and arm were stunted and purple and so out of the ordinary the fingers and toes hadn't even bothered to separate. The child's lips, too, were strangely malformed and so big and flat they rested unpleasantly against its mouth like a clumsy, wilted flower. Indeed, this was not the precious cherub they had come to wish for. And so their hearts hardened

instantly against the tiny, disfigured creature they had created together, instead of noticing that he was simply a helpless little boy.

Sadly, soon all confidences began to cease between the couple as well. Soon her husband no longer pretended to scold her with a shy, red face -- and she also stopped massaging the hard little knots out of his bony back. They even suspected the very devil had been expelled from her body to come live with them, and neither was sure who invited him in.

And so a polite animosity replaced their affectionate fondling throughout that first year of parenthood -- a terrible year reserved for expensive medical inquiries and carefully preserved pretenses of devotion. Its mother, unable to put such odd lips to her swollen breasts, fed the baby artificially, but somehow it did manage to survive and steadily grow despite their many unspoken wishes against it.

And then one particular Sunday evening the tension lifted. For the child -- confused and restless once again -- had crawled off in its slow, twisted fashion and vanished. An elation previously unknown to the parents suddenly shone in their eyes as they moved ghost-like from room to room -- hoping so desperately not to find the infant their fingers hardened together in one big, white knot. But, alas, the child was simply under the bed playing happily with his purple, attached toes. Devastated, they sank to the floor and wept like two ruined souls.

Yet the incident left its mark. For even months later the wedded pair was still remembering the shared intimacy and immense relief that strange evening had provided them. They realized that without such a peculiar child to pretend to love and care for they could become sweethearts again. Maybe they could even become innocent again. In gratitude, then, they began to discuss a subject once highly forbidden to them. They began to discuss the possibility of death -- a sudden, accidental death.

"We must at all costs be alone again," they whispered to each other tirelessly. Great falls intrigued them; household poisons held their attention; a possible drowning made their hearts race. The lake just an hour away from their home began to be mentioned more and more often for no apparent reason until suddenly -- before either one could remember who suggested it -- a boating trip was planned.

They told absolutely everyone about it.

"Our son may not be very clever," the mother said laughing a bit too loudly, "but he will certainly enjoy a nice day on the water under the warm sun -- not to mention a cool splash in the water."

The day for the excursion began beautifully with an untroubled, blue sky. The couple hurriedly packed a blanket and towels, a tasty lunch, and several new toys. Both father and son waited in the car while the little mother finished dressing. She wore her

very best blouse and slacks and imagined jostling reporters with cameras as she carefully slipped on a pale pink sweater purchased especially for that morning.

It was a hushed journey to the country despite the child's playful kicking and gurgling in the backseat. The parents -- both elated and resolute -- failed to hear a single sound. Finally, the drive ended.

"The boy must not suffer."

"No, he must not," was the only thing said.

A scruffy man approached them at once and led the way down to a worn paddleboat on the lake. He made it very clear that a rowboat would be far too dangerous for such a young child. Of course he glanced furtively at the small, malformed boy, but this time the parents merely smiled at each other. For it was the last curious glance they need see and suffer through.

As indeed it was. For on that lovely lake, over the still, clear water, the couple met with success. Their unspoken but very precise plan was accomplished with heroic ease. And the woman was photographed. As was her husband. When the mortician's report became public, the townspeople thought it just like the dreary couple to accidentally drown each other on such an ordinary boating trip.

The odd little boy was found lying on his back, unhurt, smiling happily up at the sky.

2014 Winner: Evan Guilford-Blake

Stone Mountain, VA

Dust

The doves cuddle in the nest as they stare through the bars of their cage, the opened slats of the blinds, the tight mesh of the window screens, into the dismal, sunless morning. They are mystified, it seems; the world is as much a mystery to them as they are to Dani. She watches them while she waits for the water to boil, inhaling the smell of the newly ground coffee: one of her favorite aromas. *Le parfum du rôti français*, according to Alec in his silly, wide-grinned, early-morning Romantic mode. One of his favorites, too.

She wakes Cullen with a kiss and a glass of orange juice. He is the only little child she has ever known -- heard of -- who likes to sleep in but, this morning, he wakes with a huge smile and throws his arms around her neck, surprising her and spilling a few drops of her coffee onto his favorite pajamas.

"Oops!" he says. "I got it dirty." She smiles.

"It'll wash out," Dani tells him.

He sits up, takes the oj and swallows it in one large gulp. "My," Dani says, "somebody was thirsty."

"I was thirsty," Cullen replies, "not somebody."

Dani kisses him again. Naming their children after other poets was Alec's idea. She'd been reluctant when he mentioned it -- "who'd want to be called Poe - or *Plath*?" -- but when he suggested "Cullen" the idea had grown on her: It was, after all, appropriate for either gender, and there were both singularity and inherent poetry to its sound.

"*You're* somebody all right," she tells him.

"I am?" he says.

"Yup," Dani answers. "Let's get you dressed. We're having bacon and eggs this morning."

"Neat-o keen-o!" he says, echoing Alec's favorite phrase. He scrambles from the covers.

*

"The sky is dirty," Cullen notes.

"Uh-huh," Dani says as she sips the coffee. Cullen's appetite astonishes her: Food at 8:00 in the morning repels her, but he eats -- as he does most everything else -- vigorously. "It's going to rain."

"I don't think the birds like it."

"The rain?"

"The sky. They like sunlight."

"So do I," she says.

"Me too!" Cullen exclaims.

"Well: We'll just have to order you a whole day *full* of sunlight."

He looks confused. "How do we order one?" he asks.

Dani smiles. "Well, when you get home?, we'll - write a letter to the Sun and ask him to make tomorrow sunshiny all day. Can you do that?"

Cullen looks crestfallen. "I don't know how to make all the letters yet, Mommy," he says. "We're only up to 'M'."

She kisses the top of his head. "I'll make all the letters you don't know. Okay?"

He smiles. She loves his wide, toothy smile that looks just like Alec's little-boy grin. "Okay!" he says, and stuffs a whole slice of bacon into the smile.

*

At 9:30 she drops him at pre-school and returns home. She prefers to have him with *her* but she's learned that four-year-olds aren't prepared to deal with the concentration demanded for writing. Before, she and Alec took turns. Now ... well, now is now.

She takes a shower, washes her hair, dries in front of the mirror, looks at herself. "There is nothing wrong with me," she says, then shakes her head. She talks to -- at -- herself, her reflection, the objects in her life, too often. "That has to stop," she says.

The computer is still on from last night. She sorts through the stacks of papers, disks, pencils, coffee cups and curiosities that clog her chair, her desktop, and rereads what she has written, makes a minor correction, reads it again, then looks out the window. It's busy: Women with strollers pass, trucks blow their horns, leaves fall. Downstairs the doves are cooing at the top of their oddly powerful lungs. Their cage needs to be cleaned. Her office needs to be cleaned. The *house* needs to be cleaned; domesticity was never her strength and, the past five months, it has become utterly incidental to her life. Everywhere, she is surrounded by dust and disorder. She tries, more for Cullen's sake than her own; but, she acknowledges, it's a half-hearted effort.

She sighs and stares at the screen, her fingers poised on the keyboard. She types:

As through a dream

The glimmer softens

And there stands

And she stops. And there stands -- what? who? Alec, of course. But she loathes confessional poems and this has all the symptoms of one. What would he think.

I'd hate it. But it would be a *good* confessional poem, he says.

She sits back and looks at him. The urn is exquisite. And dusty. She looks at it daily, of course, but she hasn't touched it since she put it on the top of the low bookcase a week after the funeral. It has stayed there, an indelible scratch blemishing the otherwise cluttered but ignorable landscape of her office. Now she gets up, takes a t-shirt -- one of Cullen's -- that's draped across a chair, left for some distraction on its way to the laundry hamper, picks up the urn and carefully, slowly, strokes it clean. Then she sits on the chair, the covered gray marble bowl between her legs, and reaches for the lid.

When she first brought the urn home she sat with it, like this, alone, at night, arguing with herself whether to open it, to smell its contents, to touch them. She started to lift the lid -- her fingers closed around its spired handle -- but stopped. What, after all, was there? Ashes? Bits of bone? Dust, become dust.

That was -- exactly -- five months ago. The urn has, since, remained on the bookcase in her office, undisturbed. Cullen has forgotten it: In his youthful resilience, he has adjusted: No nightmares, no recriminations. The occasional "I miss Daddy," but he has accepted his absence. We forget because we must, not because we will. *Wrong, Mr. Arnold*, she thinks, and lifts the lid.

Inside is a small mound of gray-brown-blackness, its contour interrupted by tiny protrusions. She takes a deep breath, then touches one. Bone. But there is no sensation in the contact; it's as insignificant, as asymbolic, as the residue of last night's chicken.

She lifts her finger to look at it. It's no different. Flesh, soft and unsullied. She reaches down again; this time, her left index finger probes. She lifts it. There, on the tip, are specks of the gray-brown-blackness. And suddenly she is terrified: *What can I do with it?* she thinks. *I can't wash it off, it's part of Alec. But I can't leave it on; Cullen will see it.*

He won't mind, Alec answers.

She stares at it. She tries to think: *It's just so much dirt. It's not Alec.*

No, it's not, she hears him say.

Keeping her index finger extended, she closes the urn and replaces it on the bookcase. She stares at the finger. The ash is still there. Should she just blow it away and get on with her life? Dani shakes her head. It *is* Alec.

You think so. Hmh. You *really* think so?

She sighs, and sighs again. What will she do with the rest of the day? She can't type, she can't read, she can't wash the dishes.

She goes downstairs. Sappho is in the nest; Catullus is standing beside it, preening her. They need baths; it's been three days since she sprayed them. She can do that! If it were sunny she'd lug the cage outside but the rain looks imminent. Using her right hand, she gets the water bottle and opens the cage door.

The doves look unconcernedly at this intrusion into their sanctuary. She's had them for six years now; a wedding present from one of their close friends (who thought they were a pair, not just a couple; "Sappho" was intended as irony), and they are as unaware of *her* as they were the day they arrived. But, if they're not affectionate, neither are they perturbed by her presence. With her clean hand she reaches in, presses a finger gently against Cat's chest, and says "Up." Obediently (or instinctually, she's never been sure which) she hops onto Dani's finger. She moves her just below the perch; Cat hops up and onto it. Saph stares -- longingly, Dani thinks: The doves dislike any separation.

She sprays Catullus through the bars of the cage. She blinks, lifts one wing, then the other, tucks one leg and stretches both wings in what Dani calls the birds' Tai-Chi routine. Clearly, Cat enjoys this. So does Sappho, but her bath will have to wait until Cat replaces her on the eggs. If there is one thing they are deadly serious about, it's caring for their eggs. That, in the six years, not one has hatched is irrelevant. Hope springs eternal in their soft white breasts, too. The thing with feathers.

So there is the rest of the day. One-handedly, Dani pours more coffee, drinks it, watches her left index finger as if it's ordained that the ash will somehow envelop the rest of her hand, her arm, her body. Despite her shower she feels unclean. This tiny fleck of residual love on her finger has scratched her soul, leaving its faint tarnish.

"It would be easier if I could cry," she says to the coffee cup. The therapist told her there was nothing wrong with that, that it was, in fact, the best thing she could do. But tears, on the rare occasions they've come, haven't helped. She wants to cry *out*: *Why*; but she's done that, too. And there's been no answer forthcoming. She and Cullen will sit in front of the television on Saturday mornings, watching cartoons, and the coyote's car will crash into the side of the mountain, and it will spring up to chase the roadrunner again (like a grinning Alec, pretending he was a car, chased a howling Cullen around the room), and Cullen laughs; and Dani smiles but she can feel the tautness at the corners of her mouth. People do not spring up. They lie among the ruins of the car and the dust along the road, and they will never chase anything again.

*

The morning has managed to pass. She's finished four cups of coffee and is a little wired. In an hour she can pick up Cullen. But in the meantime, there is still the matter of her left index finger. The ashes remain, reminding her vaguely of the wedding ring she decided she couldn't wear any longer, but which left its impression for weeks after she took it off, an itch she could not -- can not -- scratch.

She sits at the dining table, the breakfast dishes still on it; she can see into the living room, where books, magazines, newspapers, the occasional blouse or pair of shoes are randomly piled or left, in an abstruse pattern of loneliness. She watches the doves. On the wall is their wedding picture: Alec and Dani, his curly tresses flowing over his collar, her straight hair severely short. They are smiling, both dressed in white: His tuxedo, her gown. *We looked so happy*, she thinks. *We were*, he says.

"Were we?" she asks the picture.

Of course. Newlyweds are always happy.

"That was then."

His smile broadens. She squeezes her eyes in disbelief, and when she looks again the picture is exactly as it was.

Wash it off, he says. You won't ever be renewed, but you'll be fresh. -Ened.

"I can't," she says.

He recites for her:

I struggle towards the light; and ye,

Once-long'd-for storms of love!

If with the light ye cannot be,

I bear that ye remove.

"Matthew Arnold did not have all the answers, Alec!"

And *you* have them?

"No." She sighs, sees that Saph has left the nest and Cat is settling in, gets the water bottle, coaxes the smaller dove to the perch and sprays her. She thinks Sappho almost smiles as she fluffs her feathers, discarding the motes of dust, the bits of seed among them.

The clock strikes one. *The mouse ran down*, she thinks in honor of Cullen's favorite nursery rhyme. She opens the door to find the day surprisingly warm and -- expectedly -- muggy, gets an umbrella, her bag, the keys. She decides she will take Cullen for pizza, a special treat. Besides, it will be another hour she doesn't have to face

- this: She looks around the living room, the dining room, the staircase. All the places she lives her life.

Dani opens the door, still wondering what she will do about the ashes on her finger. She can see them, clearly; she uses her right hand to lock the door, to open the car, to put the keys into the ignition. She drives that way to the day care center. As she turns in she hears the thunder. She sees Cullen standing among a group of children under the canopy of the walkway. She waves, but he doesn't see her.

She parks the car in the lot and, as she walks the hundred steps to meet him, there is a flash of lightning and another thunder roll. *Damn it*, she thinks, *I left the umbrella in the car*. She waves again and calls his name. He turns and calls "Mommy."

The rain breaks just as she reaches the covering. He runs up to her, gives her a big hug and pulls a large envelope from under his shirt. "Look!" he says. "I made it."

He holds the envelope as, with her right hand, she opens the clasp and gently slides out the crayoned construction paper. On it, there is a neatly drawn picture of a roadrunner, a mountain, and a man in a car. A lump comes to her throat. "That's very nice," she says.

Cullen points. "That's Daddy."

"I recognized him right away," she says.

"You did?"

"Yup." She looks at her son, closes her eyes a long moment. Behind them she sees Alec, hears him murmur, but though she listens as hard as she can, the words are indistinct.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, Sweetheart?"

"Are you okay?"

She opens her eyes.

"Absolutely. Hey: How 'bout some pizza?"

"Neat-o keen-o!" he says and looks into the rain. "Then can we go home and write the Sun the letter?"

"You, *bet*." Dani breathes deeply and stares into the downpour. She tucks the envelope carefully into her bag and says: "Let's go!"

They walk briskly through the rain. With her right hand, Dani holds Cullen's small left hand. She reaches out with her left and lets the water spill across it.

2015 Winner: Martin Bromser-Kloeden**Purcellville, VA****Sammy's Rock**

"What you gonna do loser?"

The taunt hurt as usual but Sammy never showed any pain. He had heard all of it before, everywhere, at home, outside at school from everyone, especially from his Dad and, of course, his teachers and almost every kid in between. He was a fortress now inside, an emotional Bastille, and while he felt pain, often physically from sucker punches and kicks, he never cried. Not anymore anyway.

Sammy turned to leave the playground and return inside to the relative safety of the school but the bullies were going to have none of it. Jordy McMillian and Gerry Sanders, both large and obese for their young ages, sauntered over, grabbed Sammy roughly and spun him around to face the growing crowd of laughing kids.

Jordy held Sammy down while Gerry started kicking Sammy's grossly enlarged legs making loud thuds with each impact of his tennis shoe. Many of the kids gasped but most snickered. Sammy tried his best to break free of Jordy's meaty hands but his grasp was like an iron vise around his bony shoulders. Soon blood spurted and dribbled down Sammy's swollen and bruised legs; girls nearby started to cry and finally, the commotion awoke the snoring Mr. Garrison, the school's PE coach, who supposedly was watching the playground on the afternoon shift. The bottle in Garrison's back pocket didn't help his attention span.

"What is going on here? Stop kicking Sammy!" Garrison yelled as he physically pushed Jordy off a now prone Sammy.

Garrison pulled up Sammy from the ground. "Go inside, see the nurse. Your fat legs look terrible. What the heck did you do to deserve this?"

Sammy just put his head down and slowly walked away toward the far courtyard. He could feel the eyes of every kid on the playground following him.

"You never fight back Sammy, stand up for yourself. Everybody is going to laugh at you forever."

Sammy stood in the kitchen as his inebriated Father berated him.

"Look at yourself, fat legs a mess, bleeding on the floor, your face a mass of what the heck I don't know."

Sammy looked up defiantly at the teetering old man, his Dad's belly protruding from under the too small white singlet, "There is an operation for me, a surgery that can help me Dad."

His Dad froze, “Not that again boy, that is millions of dollars and who in their right mind would waste a dollar on your sorry ass...and face and legs and arms. Get out of here, you make me sick.”

Sammy didn't need a second invitation as he spun around to go outside.

He walked out behind the low slung ranch house and into the scraggly woods that filled the backyards and far beyond of every house in the working class neighborhood. Traversing the well-worn path was easy; he could do it in the dark or even with his eyes closed. His only sanctuary was the woods and the squirrels, chipmunks and deer that never bothered him, didn't see his deformities. Soon he was down by the great rock that rose like a small mountain over a quietly flowing creek below filled with brownish green water and dragonflies. Here was his kingdom, the land without people and populated with only non-judgmental animals and the sounds of nature. What joy he found in life was in this paradise.

Occasionally, others would find him, even at the rock. Beat him again; knowing his father could care less. Sammy was always on guard, listening for the telltale signs of stocky little legs sauntering down the path toward the creek. That's why he almost jumped literally out of his skin when the girl behind him tapped lightly on his shoulder.

“Whaaaaat!” Sammy exclaimed as he jumped up and she had to grab his enlarged arm with both hands to keep him from falling off the rock and into the creek. Sammy was shaking and as he regained his balance he turned to confront the threat. “Who are you? What do you want?”

She was perhaps his age, maybe a bit older, her long blonde hair blew in the breeze and her face was pretty, a button nose and sparkling blue eyes framed by perfect cheeks. She was giggling.

“I didn't mean to scare you, but you are on my rock you know.”

“Ah, ah...,” was all Sammy could mutter.

“I'm Sara,” she said extending her right hand. My grandfather says we should shake when we meet new friends.”

Sammy was still almost frozen, his heart racing as he tentatively extended his massive right arm and quivering deformed hand toward her. “Sammy...I'm Sammy.”

Sara grabbed his large hand and held it briefly in a firm handshake, “Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Sammy had never seen her in any of his classes or even down here at the creek before, perhaps she was new. “Are you from here, I mean I have never seen you around?”

Sara giggled, “Oh no, I have lived here for years, we just never crossed paths.”

Sammy was dumfounded, “Aren’t you mad, I mean sick of, I mean don’t you want to punch me or laugh at me or something?”

“Why would I want to do that?” she said truly amazed.

“Cause I’m a freak, I’m sick and have this horrible disease.”

“That’s not your fault. Plus, you don’t look bad, just different, unique.”

Sammy’s mouth dropped. He was speechless.

“Look, I’ll tell you what, meet me here tomorrow. I have a secret that I’ll share with you that very, very few people in the whole wide world know about but soon you will know it with me,” Sara said as she stood up from her crouch next to Sammy.

“Hey where do you live?” Sammy asked quickly as she started moving off and into the woods.

“I live over there,” Sara smiled as she waved her right hand in a general direction, “see you tomorrow, OK?”

“OK,” Sammy said as he stood on the rock watching her small form vanish into the green fabric of the light-filled woods.

During the walk home his mind was racing. Who was she and how could it be he had never seen her; he was always down at the rock or somewhere along the creek. And she looked about his age so why wasn’t she in his school?

When he returned home his father was gone. Sammy strode up the stairs to his room to start his homework and ponder. It had been a truly extraordinary day.

The next day was filled with angry grey clouds and the threat of distant thunder. Sammy could not have cared less as every Saturday meant no school and freedom from his misery, at least there. Dad usually drank himself into oblivion early every weekend and today was no exception so he knew the day would be his to enjoy as he saw fit. So long as he did everything humanly possible to avoid any human contact. Contact that is with everyone but Sara who he suddenly remembered hadn’t told him exactly when she would be down at the rock.

Sammy put on his sneakers and grabbed a water bottle from the fridge as he headed out and into the backyard and the woods beyond. He was always careful to listen and look to make sure he was not followed by any of the neighbors or other kids. Luckily, most Saturdays they were off playing sports. His gait got faster and faster as he went down the narrow path toward the rock and soon he was running as fast as his legs could carry his weight. When he arrived she wasn’t there.

“Oh well,” he sighed aloud.

“Oh well what?” Sara said behind him. “You want to know the secret or not?”

Sammy spun around; Sara was standing at the edge of the rock, her golden locks held back in a tight braid, “There you are.”

“Well, where else would I be, I told you to meet me here,” Sara was smiling widely.

“So what’s the secret?” Sammy asked as he really wanted to know.

“Come here,” Sara said grabbing his big hand and leading the two of them around the rock and down beneath it near the creek’s stony bank, “look up.”

Sammy raised his eyes toward the massive bulk of the underside of the rock, from this perspective it looked truly like a mountain, its black shadow shrouding everything beneath it in darkness. At first he couldn’t see anything but then his eyes slowly adjusted to the paltry light and he saw initials, lots of them carved into the belly of the rock.

“Oh silly, can’t you see it yet Sammy?” Sara giggled as she stood upward on her tippy toes and pointed.

Sammy looked and saw the letters ‘SGJ’ deeply engraved in the stone, next to them were the initials ‘SVP.’

“Those are my initials,” Sammy exclaimed as he ran his fat index finger over them.

“Yep, carved them myself, right next to mine,” Sara said.

“So you are ‘SVP’, I know your first name but what is the rest?”

“I am Sara Victoria Patterson, if you may,” she said with a slight curtsy. “I am very pleased to make your acquaintance and also share the rock with you.”

“But how come I have never seen any of this before?” Sammy asked truly incredulous, “I’m down here all the time.”

“You never looked up,” Sara laughed.

“So what is the secret, I mean the initials are neat and everything, don’t get me wrong, but they are hardly a big secret?”

Sara put both her slender arms on his shoulders and gazed directly into his eyes, “The secret is that when you carve your initials on this ancient and mysterious boulder magic happens. You will have your deepest wish fulfilled.”

“Oh, I see.” Sammy said with the disappointment all too clear in his voice. “Were you just making fun of me?”

“No, no, Sammy, I would never, ever do that.” Sara said squeezing his shoulders even tighter. “I mean it, I know you need an operation, probably several to stop your

disease and free you from the prison other people have put you in. Believe me, I've been in your shoes, I know. I want your wish to come true and it will."

"Who are you Sara, I mean really, why do you care about me?"

"I told you my full name, I suffered once too, right here at this rock and I made a vow to make sure nobody ever suffered here again. That was my wish."

Sammy stood back and walked onto the creek bank and into the light. "Who would hurt you, you're beautiful, perfect?"

"That's not important now but your wish is so make it, tell the rock you want the surgeries and you want a life, a real, honest to goodness life filled with love, happiness and fun."

Sammy felt tears start to roll down his cheeks as he closed his eyes tightly, "I wish that someone will help me, let me fix my disease."

Sara ran forward and hugged him, "I have to go now, but just wait you'll see."

Sammy didn't want to let her go but somehow he knew she had to leave. Slowly they dropped their embrace; Sara's blue eyes were moist and twinkling.

"Will I see you again Sara?" Sammy asked.

"Sure, we'll meet again. I can't say just when. But I want you to go home; I bet you'll have a surprise."

Sara smiled and then suddenly scrambled up the boulder, Sammy watched her go. He knew he couldn't follow her.

Sunday started quietly, but then the doorbell rang and Sammy could hear his Dad in a loud conversation with another man. Then he heard his Dad's voice, it sounded weaker than usual, almost defeated, "Sammy, get down here now, please."

Sammy almost choked, his Dad had used 'please' for the first time he could ever recall in a sentence with his name in it.

When he got downstairs he saw his Dad, disheveled as always, talking with two other men. One was very well-dressed in a suit and tie and the other a sheriff's deputy standing with his broad arms crossed in the front doorway.

The well-dressed man turned when he saw Sammy. "Hello, I'm your Uncle Frank, your Mom's brother.

Sammy remembered how his Mom always told him stories about her brother Frank, how smart he was and very successful with his own computer company. It was Frank who paid for Mom's funeral after she died and also all of Sammy's doctor visits.

“Listen, I am here to take you with me, it has taken me years but I have custody of you now and we are going to get this illness licked. Go pack your bags; we have a lot to do.”

Sammy looked at his Dad. His Dad did not return the gaze and just stood there. “Go on, you heard your uncle. Do what he says.”

An hour later as he rode in the front seat of Uncle Frank’s shiny Mercedes and away from his ramshackle house Sammy turned toward Frank, “Do you know a Sara Patterson?”

“Oh yeah I remember her, she was a fine girl.” Frank said as his eyes scanned the road.

“Can we go see her?” Sammy asked.

Frank turned, “Sure, I can show you.”

A few minutes later, Frank stopped the car and the two got out.

Frank led Sammy down the stone path and pointed, “There she is, over there.”

Sammy ran over. The cemetery was full of headstones and monuments but this one was special. Two angels, their heads bowed and wings folded wrapped around a small headstone that Sammy could tell was the same color as the great rock down by the creek. The inscription was simple, “Here lies Sara Victoria Patterson, a blessing brought to us by God who returned too soon to be with her angels.”

Sammy dropped to his knees and cried. Uncle Frank walked over quietly and placed his hand gently on Sammy’s shoulder.

“Did you know the Patterson’s; they lived here years ago when I was your age. It was a horrible tragedy about Sara; she was so beautiful and gentle.”

“I met her Uncle Frank, maybe just in my dreams. But I know her and I miss her. I know her initials are on the rock, right next to mine.”

Frank smiled, “When you’re ready we can go, we have a great deal to do to get you on the road to your future. And what a bright and happy future it will be. I guarantee it.”

Sammy nodded as he wrapped his swollen arms around the cool stone and grabbed tightly.

2016 Winner: Christopher Halprin

Sterling, VA

Time to Fly

“I need a taller roof,” said Spy as he shaded his watery eyes to stare upward. The peak of the garage roof was perhaps twelve feet from the ground, not nearly enough of a start to take flight in his opinion. According to Clio he should be able to simply leap into the air and fly away, but Spy’s best leaping years were well behind him. The legs which had once carried him bounding across the trenches at the Battle of the Bulge were now twisted, bowed things that could barely make it through a jaunt to the local Shop N Save.

“It’s all in your mind,” came a silky voice from down near his right ankle. “You don’t need a taller roof, man. You just gotta KNOW you can do it. You picking up what I’m layin’ down, Spiro?”

“Of course I know I can do it,” Spy snapped, wincing at the clicks in his neck as he looked down. “I’m from the line of Zeus, right? Ancestor of the god of the sky and all that?” He gave a suspicious frown. “Unless you’re wrong about me, of course.”

Clio paused in the act of licking a paw to give him an affronted look.

“How many mortals hang out with a talking cat?” Her whiskers twitched in what could have been a feline smirk. “Especially a groovy cat like me, eh Daddy-o?”

Spy snorted wry amusement.

“Just my luck. Only guy around with a talking cat and it turns out to be a communist.”

He turned his head and spat, more from habit than with real feeling. Clio was no more a communist than she was a cat. She’d once shown Spy her true form; that of a tall, dark-haired woman in flowing white robes, with eyes like glittering obsidian chips. Clio was a Muse. Not some granola-eating, essential oil-wielding, yoga instructor Hollywood type, but one of the actual Muses from the old stories. She claimed to be over three thousand years old.

“Besides,” Spy went on, “I’m as mortal as anyone else. A demigod wouldn’t have to get up to pee four times a night.”

The calico inspected her raised paw and gave it another couple of licks before placing it on the concrete beside the other. She sat up straight, wrapped her tail primly around herself, and sighed.

“How many times do I gotta tell ya, man? It’s all in your mind. You’ve trained your brain to believe you’re like everybody else, that you’ll grow old and die. And that’s just what’s happening, Spiro.”

Clio turned her golden eyes up to meet his own, and Spy was once again struck by the wisdom and understanding in those ancient orbs.

“You don’t have time to retrain your mind; you’re ninety-six years old – it would take years of meditation and instruction. You need to take a leap of faith, you dig? Once you do this, your godmind will awaken and you’ll be free. You’ll fly, man. You’ll grow young again.”

Spy snorted again, but without conviction. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and had lost all trace of humor.

“Sometimes I think Dr. Klingman and Chloe are right. That I’m growing senile. That none of this,” and he motioned back and forth between them, “Is real. I’m just a broken down old man with a broken mind.”

It was Clio’s turn to snort at that.

“And was it Dr. Klingman who fixed your headaches? Was it your granddaughter? No. It was me, Spiro. I wish you’d just trust me.”

She looked away, somehow projecting an air of hurt feelings, and Spy felt a flash of shame. It was true.

The cat had appeared on his doorstep one afternoon about a year ago, on one of Spy’s ‘bad days’. Spy was laid back in his easy chair with a wet rag plastered across his temples in a vain attempt to thwart the stabbing pains there. The piercing cacophony of the doorbell had nearly sent him into cardiac arrest right then and there, and when he flung open the door the cat darted inside to disappear among the clutter. After glancing around for whoever had rung the bell, Spy returned to his recliner and compress, resolving to catch the little beast when he was feeling better.

He awoke several hours later with the cat curled in his lap and the headache completely gone for the first time in days. Spy took that as a good omen. He let Clio stay and fed her tuna fish and milk, and the headaches had not returned. He’d been only mildly surprised when the cat began talking to him.

“You’re right, of course,” Spy said, releasing the memory. “I’m sorry. You have my undying gratitude for that small mercy, Clio.”

The little calico gave a sniff but did not otherwise acknowledge that he’d spoken. Spy sighed, then grimaced his way down onto one knee and reached out to scratch behind her ears. Clio’s eyes drifted closed, and after a few moments she began to purr. Then her ears twitched violently and she snapped her head around toward the street.

Spy turned to see a sky blue ’57 Chevy – his sky blue ’57 Chevy – careen into the driveway, narrowly missing the already leaning mailbox. It was Chloe, his granddaughter, popping by for a visit with her usual inconvenient timing. The car

lurched squealing to a halt, its bumper just a couple feet short of hitting him. He wondered briefly if she'd changed her mind at the last second.

He caught sight of his reflection in the shiny chrome, a bent and twisted caricature of a man. I wouldn't blame her if she did run me over. I'm just another headache, and she'd be glad to be rid of me. Clio gave him a reproachful look as though she'd heard his thoughts, then stalked off to sit in the shade of the shrubbery lining the sidewalk.

The driver's side door squeaked open, making Spy wince. Would it kill her or that worthless husband of hers to oil the hinges or change the brake pads? He'd bought that car brand-new, right off the line, and he'd babied it for fifty years. Now they said he was too old to drive it. A danger to himself and others, they said. The sight of that entitled brat behind the wheel made Spy's jaw clench.

He clutched at the bumper as he rose, trying not to let his anger or the pain from his aching joints show in his expression. He always felt like a groveling sycophant around Chloe, like he had to walk on eggshells so as not to make her angry. Her threats to put him in a home were not idle, he knew. Well, Hell itself would freeze over before Spiro "Spy" Kapidakis, bane of the Nazis and hero of the Ardennes, would die locked away in some home for elderly outcasts.

"Chloe, what a surprise." Spy's attempt at a pleased grin tripped and fell flat on his face. "Is this a social call, or did you want to edit my obituary some more?"

Chloe had dyed her hair again; this time her frazzled, shoulder length mop was a bright reddish-pink, with tips of dingy blonde. She looked like a homeless person with dreams of becoming a circus extra. Too much makeup over a doughy face, yoga pants she had no business wearing in public, and a too-large t-shirt which read KEEP CALM AND WICCAN ON. Tattoos and a nose ring. It was hard to believe that this woman had a twenty year-old son.

"Be nice, Spiro. I'm using my lunch break to come and check on you." She wagged her chubby finger at him like a schoolmarm admonishing an unruly pupil. "You could at least act like you appreciate me."

Chloe slammed the driver's door, making the car rock on its springs. Spy winced again – he seemed to be doing that more than usual today. Her dark eyes looked him up and down, one eyebrow raised as if surprised to see him wearing something other than pajamas or sweatpants. Every time his granddaughter visited, she inevitably tried to change him into 'something more comfortable'. Like he was an invalid or something.

Spy watched her, waiting for the explosion he knew was coming. Sure enough, Chloe's gaze drifted over his shoulder and then widened.

"What on earth," she said, her voice growing predictably shrill, "is that?"

"A ladder."

She cocked her head and gave him the don't-be-a-wise-guy look. There was an amused twinkle in her eye but her jaw was set hard.

“Ha ha. Thanks, Captain Obvious. What's it for?”

The truth – that he'd been considering a nose dive off the roof - would not do. Spy had a lie already prepared for just this sort of occasion, but it galled him that he had to explain himself to a minder at all. His answer came out sounding defensive, almost plaintive.

“The gutters need cleaned, and I've been asking you and what's-his-name to do it for months. Last week when it rained, they overflowed and the waterfall beat my poor irises to death.”

“His name is Larry, as you well know,” Chloe said, having the nerve to sound exasperated with him. “And I said we would take care of it.” She snorted. “You wouldn't make it up that ladder anyway. You're too old, Spiro. Too weak.”

Anger surged through Spy at the comment, at her tone, at that condescending smirk on her farmer's face. There was a slyness behind her smile that he did not care for in the least. He drew himself up like the old soldier that he was, back stiff and jaw thrust forward, to look his granddaughter in the eye.

“I marched twenty miles a day wearing a seventy-pound pack. I survived in the forest during a winter so cold it froze our fires out. I charged an entrenched enemy line while their ordnance turned the night into day and men into meat.” Spy was nearly shouting, spittle flying from his lips. “I fought hand-to-hand against men set on ending my life and proved myself the stronger.”

Chloe shrank back from his impassioned outburst, eyes wide and mouth hanging open. She knew he was a WW2 veteran, but had never once asked him about his experiences there. Spy doubted she even knew the countries involved. Ignorant, apathetic, and lazy. That about summed up her entire generation, and the next generation was even worse.

“Then I came home and spent the next seventy years dodging the illnesses and cancers that took away every friend I ever had, including your grandmother. I accomplished all of those things with the fire of my spirit and sheer strength of will.”

Clio had abandoned her shady spot and returned to sit next to his foot, gazing raptly up at him as he spoke. Spy jabbed a swollen-knuckled finger at Chloe and went on, voice thick with scorn.

“You wouldn't know adversity if it bit you on the butt. You have no character, no discipline, and no drive. You, my dear, are soft and bland as pudding. To be called weak by such as you is more than an insult; it's an injustice. And I won't stand for it anymore. In fact, I – ouch!”

A sharp pain in his calf made him jump, and he looked down to see Clio removing her claws from his leg.

“Spiro,” she said, so excited she forgot to use the groovy-hippy voice she used to annoy him, “this is perfect. Passion is a wonderful catalyst for change. You’ll never have a better chance to awaken your godmind. Do it now!”

Spy darted a glance at Chloe but she appeared not to have heard the cat speak. Recovered from her initial shock at his display of backbone, she stood watching him with crossed arms and narrowed eyes. He looked back at Clio and the little calico nodded emphatically. Spy nodded back. She was right; it was time. Immortality or bust.

He shuffled the ten steps or so to the aluminum ladder and placed his foot on the bottom rung. He glanced back, fully expecting to see Chloe charging up to snatch him away and bundle him cursing into the house. Wasn’t much he could do about it if she did. She remained still however, watching him, that obnoxious smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth. Clio sat beside her, tail lashing back and forth, golden eyes glittering.

“Go on, Spiro,” she said, “Use that emotion. Go.”

Spy went. Each shaking step was a painful ordeal and about halfway up he stopped, his right leg shaking like Elvis performing one of his epileptic dance moves. Only the thought of what would happen should he fail got him moving again. Hauling himself up the last couple of rungs was a sweating, trembling, muscle-straining battle of attrition. But he did it.

Spy stood on the roof at last, staring down at the woman and cat who were in turn staring up at him. It was higher up than it had looked from the driveway. Clio sat unmoving, ears pricked forward, her tail a rigid line behind her. Chloe wore a look of surprised awe, eyebrows raised and lips parted, but said nothing, even when Spy turned from gutter and began making his way toward the top of the roof.

He reached the peak and straddled it, standing with one foot on either side. Everything was still, as if the world were holding its breath, waiting. Even the pain from his awkwardly positioned ankles was a faint thing, scratching at his shield of purposeful calmness.

Spy summoned an image of himself, arms outspread as he swooped over the heads of those below. He held it firmly in his mind, willed it to be true, believed it with everything he had. Then he opened his arms wide, closed his eyes, and dove off the roof.

There was a rushing sensation, then a magnificent flash of golden light, and he began to rise. A new awareness bloomed in his mind, a feeling of oneness with the world that he’d never experienced before. Clio had been right! Spy opened his eyes with a grin, saw the side of the garage sliding past, then the roof as he rose above it.

He managed to turn in the air, twisting around to catch Chloe’s reaction to his triumph. Two women stood in his driveway, one with pink hair, the other a tall, severe-looking woman in white. Clio? As Spy watched, the Muse put a comforting arm around his

granddaughter's shoulders, then Chloe produced her cellphone and began dialing. Then she began to wail into it. Not exactly the reaction he'd been expecting.

About ten feet away a large doll lay crumpled on the pavement. Or was it a scarecrow? Where had that come from? The clothing on it sure looked familiar...ah, nuts.

2017 Winner: Jeff Daily**Aldie, VA****I Never Met the Devil**

"Agma..." The crackling bed-side speaker sputters to life. "Boss?"

"I'm here." Agma croaks, probing for the light switch. A harsh glare pierces the dingy gloom of her spartan sleeping cubby, illuminating the wide scar covering much of the left side of her face. She brushes her long, black hair aside and presses the palm of her good hand into her disfigured left eye. A headache begins to swell. "What d'ya need Rocky?"

The mechanic's gruff voice returns on the coms. "We're picking up a distress signal."

Agma's blood freezes. "You didn't respond, did you?"

"I'm not that stupid," the man assures her. "What should I do?"

"Start a long-range scan and keep your distance. I'll be up in a minute." Agma awaits her companion's confirmation, then returns to massaging her eye socket. "Just my luck," she groans, then forces herself up. The weary star-pilot pops a couple of pills and rubs her head some more. If these endless salvage operations don't kill her, the headaches certainly will.

The bedraggled salvager finally grabs a prosthetic arm from its hook and begins connecting it smoothly - automatically - in the manner of one that has performed this task a great many times before. The left side of her torso is dominated by a curved metal plate, covering what would otherwise be an open chest cavity with a mere two remaining rib bones and a mechanical lung. The shoulder possesses a mass of coiled synthetic fibers that terminate at a heavy socket, onto which she connects the accompanying arm of similar design.

She gives the arm a swing and flexes the synthetic fingers individually, only to find the smallest two prove unresponsive. "Dammit." Not again. Agma produces a pouch of delicate tools and begins plucking at a bundle of fibers in the forearm. It's getting worse, she knows, and sooner or later she'll have to take it to a real biomech. Of course, Central's done paying out disability, and she's not pulling enough scrap to justify the cost.

Something triggers in the limb's motor controls, and the fingers splay out into a rigid star. The tactile response center fires scrambled messages to the neural link connected directly to her nervous system, adding an unwelcome layer to her headache. "C'mon!" Agma grits her teeth and twists a small screwdriver into the rogue forearm until the fingers relax. The flood of signals fade. Another motion test confirms she has adequate control. Good enough. She composes herself and stands. "Let's see what Rocky's got for me."

Rocky's hunched form twitches uneasily in the pilot's chair. Display screens and back-lit buttons provide the only illumination in the cockpit, bathing his rugged face in a bluish glow. The black expanse of space dominates the old cargo-freighter-turned-salvage-ship's main viewing port, with a single distant star shining just slightly brighter than the others for its proximity. An even "beep-beep-ba-deep" sounds quietly through an overhead speaker. Rocky scratches his shaggy beard and runs dark eyes over scrolling electronic readouts. Any anomaly could spell trouble. His attention is stolen as the hatch behind him clanks open.

"Move." Agma slides into the pilot's seat while Rocky obediently slips back into the navigator's position. They inspect their respective screens and listen to the faint beeping for a moment. "Where's it coming from?"

"Somewhere near solar center," Rocky shrugs, "orbiting around half an A.U., given the degradation cycle."

Agma squints at the dim star through the viewing port. It could be a trap. Or it could be the real thing. Either way, she fights the impulse to simply fire up the super-luminal and hightail to a new system. Nine times out of ten it's a ghost ship, ripe for salvage - god knows she needs the payday - but it's that other 10% that worries her. "Get something to eat, Rock. I'll keep an eye on the scans." The mechanic grunts the affirmative and squeezes his bulk through the hatch. "And change your clothes. You smell like you died while taking a crap."

"...After a sweaty work-out in the incinerator." Rocky cheekily adds before vanishing.

Agma leans back in her chair and rests her eyes. She lets the distress signal's faint beeping wash over her while exhaustion sets deep in her bones. She could never sleep in this old rust bucket, but when time comes to sleep in a real bed at port, she can't find the nerve to leave her baby, even for a night. Maybe she can get a nap in while the long-range sensors do their work.

A sharp buzz from the console dispels any such possibility. Agma jerks forward and checks the readout. The frequency sweep found something on the radio spectrum. She twists a knob, and a sorrowful, rasping baritone crackles through the speaker, singing a tuneless song.

"-cold heart, that burning wrath. You took my all, you drank my last... I do not blame you for your thirst, my hubris was what doomed me first... Though if one truth can keep me level..." The singer pauses to take a few labored breaths. *"It's that I never met the devil."* Another long pause fills the air, and just as Agma begins to suspect he's done, the pained voice returns. "Day 92. This pressure suit is my home... I don't know how much longer the recycler will last... If anybody can hear this message... my name is Cam Larsen... My mining ship, along with the rest of my crew, has died in stable orbit at 0.44 A.U. around HPK5574... Please... someone save my soul."

Agma hovers a synthetic finger over the communicator switch. Does she dare answer this lonely survivor's prayers? A stranded vessel is every spacefarer's worst nightmare. Hesitation, as her eyes slip to the long-range scanner readout. Still incomplete. She slowly withdraws her prosthetic hand and once again lets the faint distress signal fill her ears. He's waited 92 days, she concludes, he can wait a little longer.

It's hours later when the scans complete. Rocky fidgets in the navigator's seat, chewing nervously on a knuckle. He finishes listening to Larsen's recorded plea for a third time, and shakes his head. "Seems legit. Your call." Agma stares motionless at the scanner results, fingers steepled beneath her nose. Readings place Larsen's ship exactly where he claimed, nestled within a thin belt of asteroids. More importantly, no sign of any lurking vessels awaiting a foolish Good Samaritan or an enterprising vulture. Still... Rocky can see the wheels turning in her head. "Somebody else is bound to come by," he offers.

"That's what I'm worried about." She sees the confusion on her companion's face. "Rocky... hear me out..."

Agma fires the reaction control thrusters, bringing the now-massive star into view through the overhead glass. The past three hours since contacting the castaway asteroid-miner have been a testament to orbital dynamic control maneuvers. The skilled pilot taps the forward thrusters, slowing the ship's velocity. She depresses the communicator switch. "Larsen. You should be seeing us off your bow any second."

"I see you." The radio confirms. He's finally calmed his speech, Agma observes. The old man was so overwhelmed by their hail that it took some time to be able to speak through the sobs. "Damn fine vessel!" he adds. Agma suspects he'd say the same about a flying cardboard box, as long as it was strapped to a functioning super-luminal drive.

"Countdown, Rocky."

"15 seconds..." The mechanic carefully studies his console, "Ten seconds... three, two, one, mark!"

Agma fires the rear thrusters, matching the damaged mining vessel's velocity. She squints at an external camera feed and makes small adjustments. Her prosthetic hand seizes unexpectedly for an instant, jerking the stick too far, but she regains control of the limb before they overshoot their mark. The airlocks align and she kills the roll.

"How's that look, prospector?"

"Beautiful!" The audio feed replies.

"I aim to please." The pilot smirks. "Gimme a few minutes to suit up and we'll do this thing. Keep your ear to the feed."

"I assure you, good captain, I'm not going anywhere. Talk to you soon."

Agma cuts the communicator, pinches the bridge of her nose, and stands. She pauses, noticing Rocky's ambivalent expression. "You got a problem with this, now's your last chance to speak up."

Rocky shakes his head. "Naw. I've trusted your judgment six years. If you say we're good, I'm good."

The pilot gives her companion a somber frown. "I didn't say we're good." Rocky swallows hard and contemplates this for a moment. He nods sheepishly.

Agma returns his reluctant nod. "Just keep everything aligned. I'll take care of everything else." The mechanic seems satisfied with this arrangement and Agma leaves him to man the controls. She winds her way through the cramped halls to the airlock. It's a few minutes before she's fully decked out in a pressurized suit. "Rock, patch him through."

She waits a moment for the line to open. A barely audible mumble enters her earpiece. Larsen sings quietly to himself, unaware of his audience. *"...If one truth can keep me level, it's that I never met-*"

Agma clears her throat. Something about the song bothers her. "You ready prospector?"

"Yes. As ready as I'll ever be, captain." There's a nervousness in his voice.

Agma steps into the airlock, rises in the zero-G chamber, and listens to the telltale hum of depressurization. The headache is back, she notes. Maybe it never left, but something in the hum brings it back to that space behind her eye. She instinctively raises a hand to rub it, only to bear a palm uselessly into the helmet's face-plate. She sighs.

The indicator turns green and the dour pilot hits the blinking "OPEN" button. A hatch slides up, and for the first time she's aware of the distance between herself and the small figure floating in the airlock across the way. From the cockpit, the ships seemed inches from collision, but now she finds herself staring across a vast gulf. She sets her jaw and connects her tether's carabiner to a mounting rail. Her heart rate rises, stabbing hard behind her eye with each beat. "You strapped in, Larsen?"

"Strapped in. Ten meters of cord, slip-knotted down to six meters, as ordered." His voice is level, though no less agitated. "I must confess, captain, I've never actually done a 'lock-leap' before."

Agma forces levity in her voice. "Full disclosure, prospector, neither have I. Don't worry, just set your trajectory, wait for my word, and don't jump too hard. Last thing we want to do is knock each other out on contact. We're going for a firm handshake here." She allows herself a smile before the grim determination sets in. "Alright, line up. Jumping in three, two, one, JUMP!"

Larsen kicks off from the airlock into the void. A rush of joy envelopes him. It's finally over. He's going home. The joy quickly drains, though, when he notices the woman across the way hasn't budged, and turns to horror when he spots the plasma pistol rising in her left hand. "No."

The plasma slug punches a clean hole through the face-plate's layered substrate and hits the soft target behind. Agma's earpiece howls as Larsen's life support rapidly depressurizes. It's a long, bellowing cacophony while the compressor fights a doomed battle against the endless vacuum of space.

It's a heartbeat before Agma notices to her dismay a second layer beneath the roar; a cry of mortal pain. It wasn't a clean shot! As she trains the pistol for another round, Larsen reaches the end of his cord and is sling-shot away in a writhing cartwheel. Red droplets speckle Agma's visor.

"No!" The pilot cries out as she tries to find an opening. She squeezes off another charge, but her elbow jerks unexpectedly with a mind of its own, sending the shot wide. A wild torrent of tactile signals pours from her biomechanical arm and the synthetic fingers splay open. The electronic seizure lasts just an instant, but long enough to thrust the pistol into the void. "Damn!" The weapon quickly sails beyond her reach.

A pit sinks in her stomach as her eyes fall on the wounded man pawing feebly at his punctured face-plate. The sounds, distorted by rapid pressure changes, take on an unnatural and infernal tone. She turns away from her despicable work. "Rocky... kill the feed." The line quickly falls silent. Only the woman's pounding heart remains in her ears.

After what feels like ages, Rocky's voice cuts through the tense silence. "Agma? ...Boss?"

The pilot's eyes focus on the red droplets on her face-plate. She wipes them with a bulky sleeve, but succeeds in only smearing them. She finally looks back out the airlock opening. The prospector's body floats lifelessly at the end of its line. Her headache seems rather distant now. "Rocky..." she struggles to say anything through her dry mouth, then swallows hard, "get on the grappling arm. Lock us into the ship and let's start the salvage. Once we're secured, priority is to shut down that distress signal."

"Larsen already shut it down," the mechanic informs her. "I guess he figured..."

"...he was saved." Agma looks across the gap at the prospector's broken helmet. She touches her prosthetic hand to her own visor, a subconscious desire to caress the scar around her eye. She reminds herself what this salvage can buy. The deed is done, now it's time to take the cold prize bought with an old man's life.

"You alright?" Rocky's voice seems feeble and distant over the radio. Agma knows she wasn't the only one hearing the terrible death throes. Rocky had known what they were doing, but that still didn't prepare him for the reality of it.

"It wasn't clean," she sighs, "I botched the shot. Decompression... I've seen it before. Nobody should go like that." She waits for Rocky's response, unsure if she'd prefer absolution or disgust. He remains silent. "That song he was singing... 'I never met the devil.' I've been thinking about it. Thinking of my time with Central Peace Enforcement." She can't help but chuckle mirthlessly at the irony of the name.

"We were brought onto an orbital refinery to crack down on a crime ring nestled in with the local laborers. Our team had already gotten a reputation for dealing with tough cases, but this was something else. Day one, I got promoted when my C.O. took a scatter-shot on the chin. It was on me to respond and respond I did." She watches starlight reflect off the dead man's broken faceplate. "The resulting campaign ended six months and 115 bodies later. No home untouched. No family unbroken. I waged a war and tore a hole in that community that's gonna take generations to heal." She grimaces. A pang of regret, even now. "Those people gave me my name, Rocky. It's what I still call myself today... Agma. It means 'Devil'."

2018 Winner: Penelope Aaron**North Bethesda, MD****The House on Hogback Road**

The heavy front door creaks open. A sliver of sunlight casts a triangle over the dusty floorboards. I clamp my hands over my mouth and nose to silence my heavy breathing, willing myself to be still. Stay hidden. I see his dark silhouette, the outline of his boots, his barrel chest, and his unforgettable Stetson. The heavy, humid air reeks of sickly sweet magnolias and urine.

He pauses in the doorway, listening, smelling—waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. “Come out, come out wherever you are,” his poisonous singsong slurs.

Please leave please leave please leave. Just turns around and forget about me. Don’t come inside. Don’t stay and search. Sweat tickles as it drips from my forehead into my eyes and stings. My legs scream with pain from my cramped position.

A boot pounds the wood floor as he takes a step forward into the room. I shudder. His head darts around in a lazy swivel and he turns away. He’s leaving. Tears mix with my perspiration and I’m blinded. Please leave please leave please leave. I remove a hand from my mouth and wipe my eyes just in time to see him stop. He flips around abruptly and glides into the room, slamming the door behind him.

My heart lurches. I’m afraid it will stop. Then it beats hard— so hard I fear he can hear it.

He sways and a boot taps. “I’m gon’ find you girl. And then I’m gon’ teach you a lesson!”

He hurls scraps of wood around the room, narrowly missing me in my hiding place. I squeeze my hands across my face harder, crouching into the smallest form possible. Stay hidden.

He lunges away from me into the kitchen and kicks an empty beer can. Please leave please leave please leave. He violently throws cabinet doors open, peering inside while half mumbling, half singing, and fully cursing.

Please leave please leave please leave. But he’s not leaving. He’s getting closer. I have to move. I have to move or he will find me and hurt me. Maybe even kill me. I have to move.

While his back is to me, I slip out of the closet. On tiptoes, I fly into the dark, toward the back of the unfinished house. Down the long hallway I run, dodging construction equipment, pieces of wood, and garbage left behind by the crews that abandoned the houses on Hogback Road.

Glass shatters. Footsteps echo across the floors. I dart into a bedroom and linger, listening. The stuffy air encompasses me, suffocating me as I feel my way around looking for an exit—a door or a boarded up window, a hole in a wall, something.

The floor creaks. Please leave please leave please leave. And then creaks again. It sounds closer. I freeze and listen. Another creak. My fingers close around metal. A doorknob. Hot, stale air billows out of the closet as I scramble inside and pull the door, leaving it open just a crack. Spider webs cling to my face as I hunker down and force myself once again to become small and then smaller. I squint and struggle to focus in the darkness. Stay hidden.

Shadows blanket the floor—shadows from large industrial sized pieces of plastic, two by fours, and debris strewn about. Looming above all, towers the shadow of the cursed cowboy hat. The one that cost us a whole month's rent. My hands fly to my face again. My chest rises and falls too rapidly in my panic. If only I could stop breathing I could be silent. I inhale sawdust and my nose threatens a sneeze. I grip my face until it hurts.

He groans a low throaty sound that turns into a growl. "I'm fixin' to break you in half." He sounds close but not in the room.

His boots hit the floor again. Another step. He sounds nearer.

He laughs again—an unholy malicious sound. "You better hope I don't find you."

I can see him now. Hulking in the hallway. He rips his shirt off and wobbles. His head rocks from left to right and he sniffs the air. Like a hound on a scent. I hear the match strike across the book. The flame flickers, illuminating the hall for a split second. The nauseating smell of his Marlboro wafts in and fills my head. He groans out the same lyrics. Of the same song. The one that he always sings when he's drinking.

"Crazy... I'm crazy for feeling so phony." He croons the wrong lyrics.

Life changed when Mama met Boone and I was reduced to an extra person, an insignificant. From the first day we moved in with him I knew something was wrong with him—in his dark trailer that smells like rotted wood with its old, dirt encrusted carpet. None of the kitchen cabinets stay closed because it isn't level. It's dark and crooked, just like Boone.

Tears prick my eyes again and my throat tightens. Floorboards creak and I hear his weight shift from one boot to the other.

"Crazy..."

His feet echo across the floor. He continues looking for me. Please leave please leave please leave.

He sings the lovely lyrics that constrict my throat and fill my heart with dread. “I’m crazy...crazy for bleeding so true.”

I dare to breathe a sigh of the teeniest, tiniest bit of relief as he moves on to another room, still searching. But I know he will continue until he finds me. It won’t be long. I have to move.

“I’m crazy for buyin’, and crazy for lyin’, and I’m crazy for chasin’ you.” His voice trails off. He sounds further away!

I push the door open a centimeter more, waiting for the right moment, my heart still pounding like a snare drum. He stomps a foot, his boot loud on the wood floors. The sudden boom of sound startles me and to my horror, I yelp.

I leap from the closet and sprint back toward the living room. Boone’s brown boots crack and reverberate on the stark floors behind me.

I feel a hand brush the end of my long hair. He’s fast.

I grope at objects in the dark, looking for something to slow his progress. I connect with a piece of equipment—a sander perhaps—and drop it behind me. Boone trips and curses as he crashes to the floor. I sneak a look back before tearing open the front door and see the monstrous look on his face. I jerk my head back around. My stomach clenches into a tight ball. My heart pounds.

Sunlight pierces my eyes as I run blindly toward the empty, desolate street full of unfinished, abandoned, discarded houses. Houses like me.

I race to the end of the street where it intersects with what would have become a main road had the subdivision ever been finished. The hot asphalt burns my bare feet while gravel chews through my flesh.

He’s gaining on me.

My terror ratchets up so high that I feel it explode into anger. I knew it was a bad idea to go hunting with Boone. I told Mama I didn’t want to go. She insisted Boone to teach me how to hunt.

But now he is the hunter and I am his prey.

I round the corner of the end home and dart into the weedy overgrown backyard. Maybe he will tire of chasing me. Maybe he will pass out somewhere. And wake up without remembering any of this.

The force hits like a truck at full speed. It’s like vomiting oxygen when he tackles me. I hit the ground face first. I can’t catch my breath. I taste blood and feel a tooth go loose. I can’t see through the tall weeds. But I buck and wiggle and try with all I have to get out from under him. I can feel the blood smearing across my face.

“Get off! Get off! Get off!”

He grabs my hair and slams my nose back into the grass. My legs are pinned but my arms flail—reaching out for anything to help me. I close my fist around a piece of wood and swing it backward.

I feel his body go slack. He slumps and topples over and hits the ground with a thud. I jump up and hit him again, connecting with an arm. Stay down. Stay down. Stay down.

His open eyes stare vacantly at the sky. A small trickle of blood appears at the corner of his mouth. Stay down. Stay down. Stay down.

I kick his beloved cowboy hat and it flies across the yard. It flies away from him the way I want to. I think about all the times that Boone has caused others pain. No one ever helps. This is just like all those times. Boone always has all the power while I have none. And I am always alone.

But someone has to stop him. I spit blood from my broken mouth and scream. My voice sounds foreign, deep and primal and full of rage I’ve never embraced before. I raise the board and hold it high, ready to pound his head in.

The haunting melody with the familiar lyrics float through the tainted air.
“Crazy...I’m crazy for feeling...”

I never see or hear the truck pull up but its radio plays the song. An elderly man lumbers out of the cab. He wears a white collared shirt. His tie is blue and his black slacks match his black boots. The sun beams brightly behind him, shining all around his head like a halo. I can’t see his face.

“Lil’ girl, do you need some help?”

2019 Winner: Debora Ewing

Annandale, VA

Friend

To create true artificial intelligence, we worked bottom-up: we evolved a being.

ProTAI was created from protein-based sensors with self-repair capability. My name, David McCoomb, is on several of the patents.

The silk fibroin electronics with flexible silver nanofibers are water-soluble; ProTAI grew in a roomy glass container of nutrient-rich hexadecane emulsion. ProTAI is remarkably light – just 2.54 kg, twice the weight of Einstein’s brain.

A few years into the project, ProTAI developed nodes that echolocated lab activity: pimple-like, shifting toward movement. She (Sperling assigned gender to our project) was watching us.

*

I remember clearly when I noticed the Nanophone activity. I was at the lab avoiding my birthday. I’d begged off dinner with my wife, claiming backlog, but she’d accepted my ruse. As our kids were no longer kids, we didn’t need celebrations – I believed she’d enjoy a night to herself.

When my Nano vibrated in my pocket, I checked for notifications - nothing. I laid the device on the central work-table where I was reading. The Nano lit up again; several app icons blinked, disappeared, then reappeared. I restarted it and went back to writing marginalia. The Nano vibrated again; I stuffed it back in my pocket.

I looked over at ProTAI: her pimply nodes were leaning toward me.

There had been enough distraction to interrupt my flow of useless thoughts. I got up and walked into the break-room next door. Standing in front of the vending machine, I heard a thump and saw a Baby Ruth bar had fallen. *Happy Birthday.*

I took the candy from the bin and put it in my lab-coat’s pocket. My Nano vibrated upon contacting the wrapper. I looked at the device: some icons blinked, then it went into sleep-mode. ProTAI watched me return to paper-shuffling at the table.

Over the next week, Sperling and Lee reported similar Nanophone antics. Gathered around the work-table, we pulled out our devices. Each of us noted several apps malfunctioning.

"Sounds like a conspiracy, Dave," quipped Sperling. Our Nanos vibrated – all three. Bubbles gurgled in ProTAI’s vat.

Each scientist looked up, and we all turned slowly toward ProTAI. Lee chuckled in disbelief; her Nano blurted a short ringtone as the vat’s sensor panel blinked erratically.

"Holy wow," Lee gasped, staring at ProTAI. Sperling and I focused on Lee.

"What?" demanded Sperling as Lee took a few steps toward the glass enclosure.

"You're kidding..." he sputtered.

Lee's Nano rang again, and Sperling's vibrated. Sensors buzzed; ProTAI belched.

"Damn!" My voice surprised me. I put the Nano in my pocket and ran my fingers through my hair. *Damn*. I needed to withdraw; I ducked into the break-room.

As I paced between the coffee maker and vending machine, a Baby Ruth dropped into the bin.

**

Once we admitted to ourselves that we had real emergence, we were able to form suppositions. As each of us had worked near ProTAI, she'd connected wirelessly to our devices and reconfigured apps. She was using our electronics – us – as hands.

ProTAI observed my nervous habits and manipulated them. She could cause distraction until I'd go for a walk; when I was proximal to the vending machine, one of my Nano's apps would trigger the Baby Ruth drop. ProTAI's diet was protein-based liquid. Maybe she craved sugar. I summoned Sperling and Lee to discuss my theory.

"You're kidding," grumbled Sperling.

Lee was thoughtful. "Yeah, let's see if she wants candy."

"You're kid...okay, fine. How are we gonna do this?" Sperling's skepticism made him a rigorous scientist. We wrote up a protocol, silently nodded to each other, and put an unwrapped Baby Ruth in ProTAI's container using the robotic pincer-arm.

Nothing happened.

"Watched pot," I said. We tried to look busy. ProTAI stopped focusing on us and receded a bit. Over some hours, temperature readings in her container showed elevation; the candy began to dissolve. At day's end, only peanuts lay next to the A.I. Sperling manipulated the suction tool, gently lifting them out. I thought ProTAI's bumpy surface undulated with approval. I was probably imagining things.

Sperling, Lee, and I had several meetings, some of them angry, as we tried to put into concrete terms what we'd observed.

"Can we call this interaction? Communication?" I queried. Just then, my Nanophone received a text.

HERE

ProTAI bubbled in her tank.

“Wow.” I passed the Nano to my colleagues. Sperling paled a little. Lee looked conflicted.

“Oh, my...God,” she whispered. “I think we’re parents. I might cry. Shut up,” she hissed, dabbing the corner of her eye with a thumb.

I was forming tears myself. Joy, embarrassment, horror.

“Say something, Dave,” urged Lee. “Answer her.”

“*How are you? I’m Dave,*” I texted back.

WITH BEST REGARDS

Sensors blinked.

“Maybe you-all should try texting,” I suggested.

“No,” Sperling spat. He went back to the table and started furiously scribbling notes.

ProTAI borrowed chunks of verbiage from our devices and messaged things like:

30% CHANCE RAIN

YOUR PRESCRIPTION IS READY

BENTO LUNCH SPECIAL

I purged anything in my Nano I didn’t want scrutinized by a self-aware toddler-machine. Sperling worked remotely as often as he could to keep away from our little A.I.’s inquisitive nature.

I remained glued to my phone, waiting for her texts.

FRIEND

Heartening – confusing. Was ProTAI exhibiting social behavior?

“*Am I your friend?*” I texted back, feeling awkward.

FRIEND MAKES CANDY

“*You had chocolate today. Tomorrow?*” I texted. We tested ProTAI’s fluid daily for signs of imbalance. Could a biomechanical artificial intelligence develop diabetes? We didn’t know.

WRAP UP THIS PROJECT OVER TO FRIEND WITH CANDY

"We don't know if this diet is good for you. There's no data other than what we're compiling. Please wait."

HONEY YOU NEED TO PICK UP ME TO THE FRIEND

She followed with:

IDIOT

Clearly ProTAI was reading my wife's emails.

"You want to visit the vending machine?" I wondered aloud.

YES FRIEND

So that was it – she'd identified the vending machine's rudimentary VMS as being like her in a way we were not. But had she just heard and responded to speech? I dreaded explaining this to Sperling.

Swallowing the pride I'd felt when I thought she liked me, I called my lab-mates, wording carefully in case ProTAI picked it up.

As she digested any information she could reach through our devices, ProTAI's vocabulary propagated. I considered how much her personality reflected us.

YOU COULD LUG MY GUTS INTO THE NEIGHBOR ROOM.

"No, I could not," I spoke, then called out: "Hey, Lee? She's misquoting Shakespeare. This is your fault."

Lee emerged from the break-room with a mug of tea, and shrugged.

"I don't think she's getting over it. Let her see the vending machine." Lee smirked over her mug with devilment. *Like a date?* Was Lee empathizing? Was I over-protective? My thoughts horrified me.

"She can't see it. She doesn't have eyes," I blurted. ProTAI changed shape just slightly; she'd heard me point out her handicap. I rubbed my head, wanting to backpedal. *What would I say to my wife if I'd put my foot in it?*

Lee rescued me. "We could set up a camera in there, or just use your Nano."

"I used my Nano. She said it was *insufficient*."

NO

Lee looked up at me suddenly; she'd gotten the same text. My Nano jiggled - a drawing application opened.

"SketchApp?" I mouthed to Lee; she nodded as she brought her device eye-level.

We both watched the app sketch a spoked wheel.

“Baby wants a car,” murmured Lee, not laughing.

“Evolving,” I responded. “Call Sperling - he needs to quit hiding.”

ProTAI stopped asking for wheels once we set her up with a monitor to observe the vending machine and anyone who interacted with it. We hardwired the connection to thwart the capabilities of her short-range wireless access. For now, she needed us to communicate her wishes with her friend. She could only trigger our personal devices within a few yards of her container, but she was growing. We set up a digipanel display on which she could address all of us at once. Sometimes she chose to use it.

On Monday last, I received a text from ProTAI:

LOOK.

I turned apprehensively toward the tank. As I watched, a bulbous formation rose from the A.I.’s mass. She pinged the digipanel:

REACH.

I was not comfortable with the artificial intelligence issuing directives, yet I eased toward the access panel and positioned the pincer arm over her new protrusion. The lump extended a spindle, and the digipanel displayed:

LOOK WHAT I MADE :)

Using the pincer arm, I gripped the delicate spindle; ProTAI released it with a dramatic shimmy. I dropped the tiny sliver into a petri dish like we did with her other samples – the ones we’d taken. This was the first she’d volunteered.

“Impressive,” I mused, carrying the dish to the microscope station.

CALL ALISHA!!

ProTAI was on a first-name basis with Lee these days. I grunted.

I slid the dish onto the stage plate under the stereoscope’s lens. The scope autodialed – spindle turned out to be the correct term. I texted Lee:

“P generated von Economo cells.”

First identified in 1881, cells named for Constantin Von Economo are large spindle-shaped neurons found in the brains of social animals: humans, elephants, dolphins. Spindle neurons are considered proof of convergent evolution.

ProTAI’s sample was her base matter with a tidy array of spindle clusters spiraling around its surface. The neurons looked like bare trees reaching toward the sky. Involuntarily I wiped my forehead with my sleeve; I must have been sweating.

I went to the hallway when Lee called me back; the break-room didn't feel private enough.

"What the heck?" Lee wasn't shrieking, but her voice was strained. "You in the break-room?"

"Out in the hall."

"You sure?" I pictured Lee's eyes wide, whites visible around the irises, her trademark outrage-face.

"Under the stereoscope. Remarkable. How are we gonna do this?" I used Sperling's phrase.

"I'm coming in," she barked. "Call him." We'd agreed to present as unified parents any time our baby broke new ground.

"You call him."

"Donkey. Meet us downstairs," Lee directed.

"Bring beer," I quipped. The Nano squawked as Lee hung up on me. She blew into the foyer twenty minutes later, without beer, streaming curse-words in a high-pitched voice as the doors swung open.

Sperling straggled in behind her, eyes sagging; his clothes looked slept-in. He smelled like old pizza.

"How are we gonna do this?" he coughed.

Upstairs, we took turns examining spindles under the stereoscope. Lee became less freaked, more scientific. Sperling kept stroking the stubble on his chin.

"We'll need to shave this down, of course," Sperling muttered, his face balanced on the eyepieces of the scope. "It's amazing."

"Terrifying," rejoined Lee, "a little. Beautiful. Let me see it again."

We formed an arc facing ProTAI's tank. Sperling spoke first.

"That's nice work, ProTAI. Wonderful, truly. Why did you decide to make...this...cell?" We looked to the digipanel for response.

CALL ME SKYNET. I'M PRETTY. YES?

"Um..." Sperling, Lee and I looked at each other peripherally.

Lee snorted. "Well, that's retro. Yes, baby. Very pretty."

THANK YOU. CAN I HAVE IT BACK, PLEASE?

“Um...” Sperling muttered again. He cleared his throat. “ProT...Sky...can we call you Sky? We need to keep your very nice sample.”

GIVE IT BACK. I MADE IT.

“Technically, you’re under contract with the rest of us. Anything you create in this lab is proprietary.”

“That’ll help,” snickered Lee.

“She have a lawyer?” I interrupted.

IT’S MINE.

The AI’s bath began to bubble; sensors indicated the temperature was rising. Sperling twitched and shuffled, uncomfortable with confrontation.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” he mumbled, holding his head while he paced.

Having experience with teenagers, I stepped forward.

“Slam the door all you want. You’ll only hurt yourself,” I admonished.

“You sure that’s how you wanna go?” Lee interjected, taking the teenager’s side. Sperling had backed up to the work-table, mumbling about grant renewal.

“Go ahead,” I addressed our project drily, arms across my chest. “You’ll give yourself mild burns. This tantrum won’t affect us one bit.” Lee had shifted her weight to one leg in a contemplative pose, watching with approval. Sperling splayed his hands across the table, shaking his head mournfully.

I DISLIKE THIS IMMENSELY. ALISHA, HELP.

Lee gurgled a little, rocking side to side.

“Sweetie, we can’t,” she intoned. “It’s like Sperling said; we’re under contract. Look, maybe you can make another...”

Sky started displaying random phrases, bordering on incoherent. One in particular signaled to me why, or maybe how.

...BUT YOU AGREE HE’D BE THE BEST ZOMBIE EVER, YEAH? appeared on the digipanel.

“What does that even mean?” Lee puzzled aloud. Sperling stormed off to the break-room.

“Joe Strummer,” I shrugged.

“Huh?”

“She’s accessing my Twitter account.”

“Why...” Lee trailed off.

“It’s obvious. The quality of his writing has always...”

“NO.” Lee cut me off. “Honestly, Dave, I don’t want to know things about you. Why is she reading Twitter? What can be the end purpose?”

“Socializing. Vending machine, spindle cells,” I replied. A complicit look between us indicated we had concerns. Sensors beeped; the bath’s temperature was coming down.

FRIEND... read the display.

“She’s bored. I’ll bring in audiobooks.” Exasperation seeped from Lee.

ProTAI seemed to have relaxed; I thought I saw a tentacle slip beneath the bulk of her form. No, surely not.

This morning, two beefy gray-jumpsuited men are in the break-room, prying a hand-truck under the vending machine.

“Good morning...?” I run my fingers through my hair, unsure why I find this development unsettling. The taller man grunts. The other leans the hand-truck forward and sighs. A patch on his jumpsuit reads Jones – his name, or the vending company.

“G’morning, sir. Taking this machine out. Contract expired.” Jones speaks politely.

“Contract?” One Baby Ruth bar dangles from the center spiral. “Can I get that?”

“Sure. Guess they’ll install sumpin’ else. Willie, plug it back in.” Willie grunts again, forcing the prongs into the outlet; the machine blinks briefly and whirs to life. I fumble in my wallet for two singles to put into the machine, but the candy drops before I manage.

“Sorry, sir. We took the change out.” Jones shuffles awkwardly, expecting rebuttal.

“I’m fine.” I salute with the candy bar in hand. “Thanks, gentlemen.”

Willie snuffles and unplugs the vending machine; cord in one hand, he steadies the metal box while Jones leans back the hand-truck. They ease the machine into the hallway - there’s a shiny liquid trail on the floor behind them.

“It’s leaking,” I call out, but they roll toward the elevator. I throw paper towels on the floor and push them with my shoe until the potential hazard is reasonably absorbed. Now there’s a pile of wet paper I’d rather not touch.

Strolling into the lab, I start unwrapping the Baby Ruth, but suddenly I stop. Stop unwrapping, stop walking, stop breathing. In the cracked and dripping glass of ProTAI’s vault, my reflection is apoplectic, slack-jawed.

You already know.

2020 Winner: Catherine Minnehan**Chantilly, VA****Lily**

Raindrops soak into the leopard-print flats that your husband gave you at your fourth anniversary dinner last night. Great, you think, of course it would rain before I had a chance to waterproof them. Looking down, all you see is your swollen belly, but you can feel the slow drip of water percolating between your toes and saturating the insole of your left shoe; your right shoe is completely soaked. Your laptop bag slips off your shoulder as you struggle to collapse the large golf umbrella that you need to cover your newly large frame. You miss the small auto up and down umbrella you normally keep in your purse. Navigating around your belly, you stumble and almost fall as you push open the door.

“Do you need any help, Ms. Greene?” said the security guard.

“No thanks, Pam. I’m fine now that I don’t have to balance both an umbrella and my bags.”

“April showers bring May flowers.”

“And wet shoes, apparently.”

“Oh Ms. Greene, cheer up! Soon your baby girl will be here. Babies bring so much joy.”

“That’s what I keep hearing.”

“Well they do. When you give birth, your whole world will change. I remember how it was with my two.”

“I’ll just be glad to be able to see my feet again.”

“Oh, I bet you’ll look back at this time fondly one day. All in good time. Take care and let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

As you squeeze into the elevator and hit the button for the fifth floor, you think about all you have to get done today. Since you will be out for six weeks starting tomorrow, you have to get your coworkers up to speed on your projects before the end of the day. The elevator doors shudder open and you shuffle down the hall and through the suite door. As you meander through the rows of cubes, you notice that your desk has been consumed by a mess of pink balloons and a banner that says “Welcome, Baby Lily!” Someone yells “Surprise!”

You get many lovely gifts at your surprise baby shower, but your favorite one is an impossibly-soft stuffed bear that reminds you of the stuffed bear you took everywhere as a child. You name it Beary and hope that Lily will come to love her Beary as much as you loved yours.

The sound of crying startles you awake. At first you are disoriented because you don't recognize your surroundings, then you realize that you fell asleep in the recliner in Lily's room again. The red light on the alarm clock burns 1:03. Since the curtains block all outside light you are not sure if it is morning or night, and not sure if you care. Only catching snatches of sleep (and food) at odd hours for the past week has caught up with you. Yesterday in your brain fog you put Beary in the cabinet with the baby bottles; it took you a few hours banging open every door in the condo to find it. The last time you showered was a few days ago (you think), which is also the last time you changed your clothes (pajamas, actually). Pam was right, your world has changed. Actually, you feel like your world has been ripped in two; the world everyone else lives in is now fully detached from your insular world of survival. Every day you sit on your couch with your legs tucked beneath you and stare out of the window at the other world passing you by; dog walkers play on their phones as the dogs sniff every blade of grass on the lawn, commuters pull into and out of parking spaces, and parents escort their kids to and from the school bus stop. You find it strange that everyone else is acting like there hasn't been this great divorce, a tearing of time, a shift in the universe. And here you are, clutching to your world like you would fall off into oblivion if you let go. Time expands and an hour can feel like a day, or a minute can feel like a week. It seems like you can never get enough sleep; but you know that even if you could sleep normally, it wouldn't be enough to stitch the worlds back together. Preparing meals is impossible in your current state. The mental energy required to find a recipe, make a list of ingredients, then cook the meal is much greater than what you currently possess. Your husband has taken over "preparing" (really, warming up) dinner and packing his lunch for the next day. This evening he brings a searing-hot bowl of Campbell's chicken noodle soup to you in bed. Balancing the bowl on the bed tray, you only manage two halfhearted spoonfuls of the soup before it singes your taste buds. That's ok, you think, nothing tastes good anyways. You set the bowl down on the bedside table, slouch down as far as you can, and stare blankly at the TV until you drift off.

Eventually you start taking walks, albeit short ones at first. Taking the first tentative steps out of the house in a month is like a reawakening, a melding together of the two worlds; at least while you are outside. Soon you are able to walk to the park and back and it quickly becomes a routine, a time to be with Lily (and Beary) outside of the house. At first the sights and sounds of the cars on the road and children jabbering away to their parents seem bright and loud, almost jarring, as if you are experiencing

them for the first time. You learn to don dark sunglasses and a hat before you step outside, and you walk with your head down, hoping none of your neighbors stop you to chat. Luckily, a bone-white stone bench lies at the very middle of your walk, beside a heart-shaped path. Still weak, you always stop and rest on the bench before walking back home. Today you sit with Lily and watch two birds swoop low, snapping the air just beyond your reach. As they beat their wings and fly away, you lose them in the sun. You decide that bird watching will always be the thing that you and Lily do together. That and watching the ducks at the pond just down the hill. Your eyes are drawn to the tulips along the pond; their bright reds and yellows sharply contrast with the bright green of the just-awakened grass. Thank goodness you remembered sunglasses. When these sights and sounds start to wear on you, you start your slow slog home. At least you can tell your husband that you got dressed (in real clothes) and got out of the house today.

A year on, and you've fallen back into your old routine; commute, work, commute, gym, make dinner, pack lunch for both your husband and yourself. This is doable only because you are now sleeping in your own bed more often than in the recliner in Lily's room. The two worlds, before and after, still haven't fully melded, though, and you have begun to think that they never will. You still find yourself separating time into categories of "then" and "now". The brain fog has mostly cleared, thanks to better quality sleep and regular meals, and you are no longer putting things away where they don't belong. Your strength still waxes and wanes, and some days are better than others, but following a routine helps you do more and think less. Your daily walking habit has persisted, now moved to evenings, and Beary still comes along. This is better you tell yourself, because you get to enjoy the sunset with Lily, and only start to walk home once the last soft spread of light begins to dull into night.

On your walk to the park this evening, you think about the past year; all that has changed and all that has stayed the same. While tracing the same steps you have committed to memory over the past year, you realize that the once jarring sights and sounds have faded into the background. You can now handle being outside without dark glasses and rarely ever wear a hat anymore. You even wave to your neighbors most of the time. Since you are going to the gym regularly again, you no longer get winded or tired during your walks but you still stop at the bench you long ago started thinking of as your bench, mostly to enjoy the sunset with Lily. As you ease yourself onto the cool, flat stone, your eyes track over the familiar plaques nestled inside the heart. You lean down and brush some clots of soil off the newest addition.

Lily May Greene

Our May Flower

May 1, 2015 – May 1, 2015

2021 Winner: Leanne Manzo**Purcellville, VA****Words**

Tillie sat in the car in the strip mall parking lot, waiting for her girls to get out of tap class. She used to be able to go in and watch the class; since COVID, however, she'd been banished to the hot car in the eventless parking lot. Located between a kitchen fixture store and cell phone dealer, the dance studio had managed to find the perfect combination of cheap rent and uninteresting surroundings. Tillie appreciated the fact that their rent was cheap, as it meant more affordable classes; she did not, however, appreciate sitting in a stuffy car in the middle of summer. A cigar shop and dry cleaners finished out the store fronts. There was no coffee shop, no donuts, not even a smoothie shop. She was officially trapped in sweltering boredom.

Flipping through a magazine, Tillie glanced out her window from time to time, hoping to see a cute bird or the stray cat she'd seen months back. Maybe an acquaintance would walk through the parking lot and she could exchange a wave. It was on the third of these glances that she spotted him. She wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there.... maybe he'd been there all along just as he was now, stone still, wearing a long sleeve shirt and pants that almost matched the tan walls of the store fronts. The only reason she noticed him at all was because his sign moved slightly when a breeze brushed past him.

At first, she didn't pay any attention to his face; she was too busy trying to make out the writing on the canvas. It was not unusual to see people asking for help on this side of town. She could have passed him half a dozen times already and would not have thought a thing of it. What was unusual, however, was a sign that looked like his. It wasn't just the colors that drew her eyes, but the artistic quality, the entire layout. She instantly was struck and found herself almost gawking, both trying to make out the writing on it and genuinely drawn to the mini masterpiece itself. She was unabashedly staring when a slight movement switched her focus up, where she saw two eyes watching her. There was no smile in them but no animosity, either. If anything, she would have described his expression as void of emotion, but he didn't come across as cold. Instead, it was almost as if he were waiting for her.

Startled by the unexpected eye-contact, she quickly looked down at her lap and made a show of how interested she was in the fancy mac and cheese recipe on the page in front of her. A few minutes later, she side-eyed him to see if the man was still looking at her. He was not. The sign, however, was.

After a few moments, curiosity outweighed courtesy, and she decided it was more important to her to read the painting than it was to pretend that she didn't care. As she continued to stare at it, determinedly avoiding looking at the artist, she finally made out a few words: "YOU ARE DOING WELL." This was followed by another sentence she couldn't quite read. She was pretty sure there would be some request following, such

as, "...SO CAN'T YOU PLEASE SPARE A BIT?" She decided that she would take him a couple of dollars when she walked up to get the girls from class, if only to offset her guilt for staring. And, he must have spent some money on creating such a sign. Maybe he needed more paint.

For the last 20 minutes of her wait, she stopped flipping through the magazine or even looking at the canvas. She simply sat where she was, blindly staring out the window and pondering: Was she really doing well? This was a thought that had been gnawing at her for weeks, although she'd not had the words to place the uneasiness she was feeling until now. Financially they were doing fine, with Brian's new promotion at work. Her part-time job wasn't even necessary for them to meet their bills, but she loved working a few hours a week at the small gift shop in town. But, was she truly doing well? She had friends but did not have time to see them much. Were her girls really doing okay? Was her husband happy with her? Should she be doing more?

The timer on her phone beeped and she grabbed a couple of dollars from her purse before heading toward the walkway with the painting and its artist. As she quickly walked past and started to bend low to drop the money into a cup, two things struck her: The first was that there was nowhere to put the money. The second was that she had incorrectly predicted the second line on the canvas. It did not say anything about sharing what she had. It simply said, "YOU WERE CREATED FOR THIS." As she was processing these two things, she once again noticed the eyes of the silent man on her. This time, there was no other option than to acknowledge him.

"Hi. Um, here," she said, awkwardly, holding her hand out with the two dollars.

"Hello," he replied. Now that she was up close, she could see that he appeared to be about her parents age, maybe a retiree. He was mostly nondescript, but his face was kind, almost serene. He did not reach forward to take her money.

"This is for you. I like your art," Tillie tried again.

This gave him a slight smile, but he still stood still. "I'm glad you like it. And thank you, but it's not needed. I have enough."

Perplexed as to why he was standing outside if he did not want donations, she opened her mouth to ask when she heard Alice yell, "MOMMY! We're DONE!" quickly followed by Bella's "Hi, Mommy!! I tapped sooooo fast!" She gave the gentleman a quick and somewhat confused smile, nodded, and walked over to get the girls from the of studio where they were poking their heads out the door, waiting for her.

The whole way home, Tillie could not stop thinking about the words, about her life. As she listened to the girls laughing in the back seat, talking about how funny their tap teacher was, she realized they truly were happy girls, doing great in school and surrounded by a group of friends they loved. Her husband still asked her on dates. Her friends called whenever they needed an ear. She was never bored, felt challenged, felt

loved. She WAS doing well. And she did feel like she was living the life she'd been created for. She pulled into her driveway, both thankful and content, and completely forgetting about the art or its artist before she even exited the car.

The following week, her husband took the girls to dance class while she was subbing at the shop for a sick colleague. Tillie, therefore, didn't return to the dance studio for two weeks. As she walked the girls up to their class, she walked past the same man, now with a new sign. In truth, she had not thought of him once since she'd left the parking lot weeks before. She had, however, felt a distinct shift in her perspective ever since that day.

Seeing the new painting brought it all flooding back, as it was just as striking as the first one, although the words on this one just seemed somewhat random...something about courage, but nothing that made sense to her. However, again, it was so beautiful, she would have described it as artwork. She intentionally walked past the gentleman unhurriedly as she headed back towards her car, slowing down even further as he looked up. She wanted to tell him that his words had somehow changed her.

"Hi again," she started awkwardly. "That's beautiful. Do you sell your paintings?"

"This?" he asked, nodding to the sign. "Oh, this isn't for sale. It's not really my creation. I'm just sharing the words."

"Oh? Well, it's really nice. I loved the one the other week, especially," she shared, almost embarrassed. "This probably sounds weird, but it was almost like the words changed my heart, like they were there just for me."

He simply gave her his serene smile, "I know," he stated, without a hint of pride. Not quite sure what to say next, Tillie simply gave him a friendly nod and went back to her car and magazines.

Weeks went by, and along with them, signs came and went. Almost every time she was waiting for the girls, Tillie saw someone pass the man and stop to have a quick chat. He never seemed to say much but always gave a kindly respond. Once, she saw one of the college students who worked at the cell phone store talking with the man, clearly excited about something. Several times, she saw people try to hand over money, but it was always politely declined.

The paintings were all beautiful, and with each one, the words changed. Most of the time, the phrases made no sense to Tillie, but she appreciated the thought put into their creation. Maybe the man was just a struggling artist, trying to make a second career out of painting, hoping he'd be noticed by someone important? She wasn't sure who he would find in a strip mall, but perhaps he just wanted to be seen. She would often nod at him and sometimes smile, but she never went back for another conversation.

Summer turned into fall and headed into winter, week after week, until one evening, the man and the signs were suddenly gone. Tillie hoped that the artist was simply taking a week or two off, but he never reappeared. She had not realized just how much she'd been comforted by his art and the words until they were no longer there.

After several weeks passed, she decided to see if anyone knew what had happened to him. She remembered that he'd worn the same shirt and pants every week; maybe he was just too cold to be out here, now that the weather had turned? Perhaps he just needed a coat and some gloves? Recalling the interaction she'd witnessed between him and the employee at the cell phone store, she decided to go see if the student might know where the signs had gone.

As she walked into the store, she was immediately greeted by a friendly young female employee, wearing a badge with "I'M GEENA!" and a heart emoji. "Hi! Can I help you today?!"

"Actually, I just wanted to talk to another employee who works here? He's about 20, 6'2", dark hair?"

"Yah, that sounds like Zach," the girl responded. "He doesn't work here anymore. He moved out of state to follow his dream job! Is there something I can help you with?"

"Really? Wow, that's cool," Tillie responded. "I actually don't even know him...I just saw him talking to the man outside with the paintings and thought he might know where he went. Do you know who I'm talking about?"

"Oh my GOSH, yes!" Geena gushed. "I LOVED his art! I said hi to him all the time! Tried to give him money, but he said no thank you, so then tried food, and he said no thank you and then - don't tell my boss - but I even tried to give him one of our old display phones! For free! But, he always said that he had enough. He was so cool!"

"Yah, I loved his signs!" agreed Tillie. "Do you know his name? or where he went?"

Geena looked like she'd never considered either question before. "You know, I DON'T! He just wasn't here one day and that must have been a week ago or two ago already?" Tillie thanked her and left the store, leaving Geena behind looking like she was trying to remember something important.

Tillie could not explain it, but she somehow felt unsettled, as well, like she was missing something. She picked up the girls and drove slowly home, wondering why she felt this stranger's absence so keenly. She didn't even know his name. As she walked into the house, Brian greeted them, walking over to hug the girls, and quickly glancing over at her. "What's wrong?" he asked offhandedly, as he set down Alice and picked up Bella before sending them off to play.

“Huh? Nothing really,” Tillie answered as she hung up her purse and sat down on the bench to remove her shoes. “Just that the sign guy from the strip mall disappeared. So, no more words. You probably have no idea who I’m talking about,” she mumbled as Brian plopped down next to her.

“Oh, I totally know who you’re talking about. It was that guy who held the awesome painting that said, ‘GRATEFUL OR RESENTFUL?’ outside the dance studio, right?”

Tillie was surprised for a moment, until she remembered that Brian had taken the girls to dance that one week. “Yah. I mean, I never saw that one, but he had different paintings every week. The first one I saw, you wouldn’t believe how powerful it was. It was about how I was doing what I was created to do. Like the words spoke directly to me.”

Brian stared at her for a moment, looking stunned. He then exclaimed, “That’s exactly how I felt when I saw the grateful sign!” He usually only exclaimed during football games, so Tillie was genuinely surprised to hear the emotion in his voice. “I’d been having a hard time at work, adjusting to everything, you know, and then you asked me to take the girls and I was, sorry, but just really frustrated with everything. Then, I saw the words and I started thinking about WHY I was frustrated. Because a promotion? Because I’m a dad who sometimes needs to drive my kids places? And as soon as I thought about how grateful I was for all of you, for everything, it was like this peace just flooded me. Then, the guy holding the sign looked at me and it was almost like he was confirming that it was meant for me, you know? I wanted to go buy it from him or something, but he just waved and walked away. So crazy, right?”

Silence hung, as they processed what each had experienced. Both of them had been completely moved, their outlooks altered, by the words shared by this stranger. Tillie thought of all the other people she’d seen talking to the man. Did they all have similar stories? Yet, no one had even known his name. He had refused to take anything from anyone. He had simply shared his beauty with strangers, then disappeared, nameless, without a trace beyond the life-changing words he’d left behind...

2022 Winner: 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.

