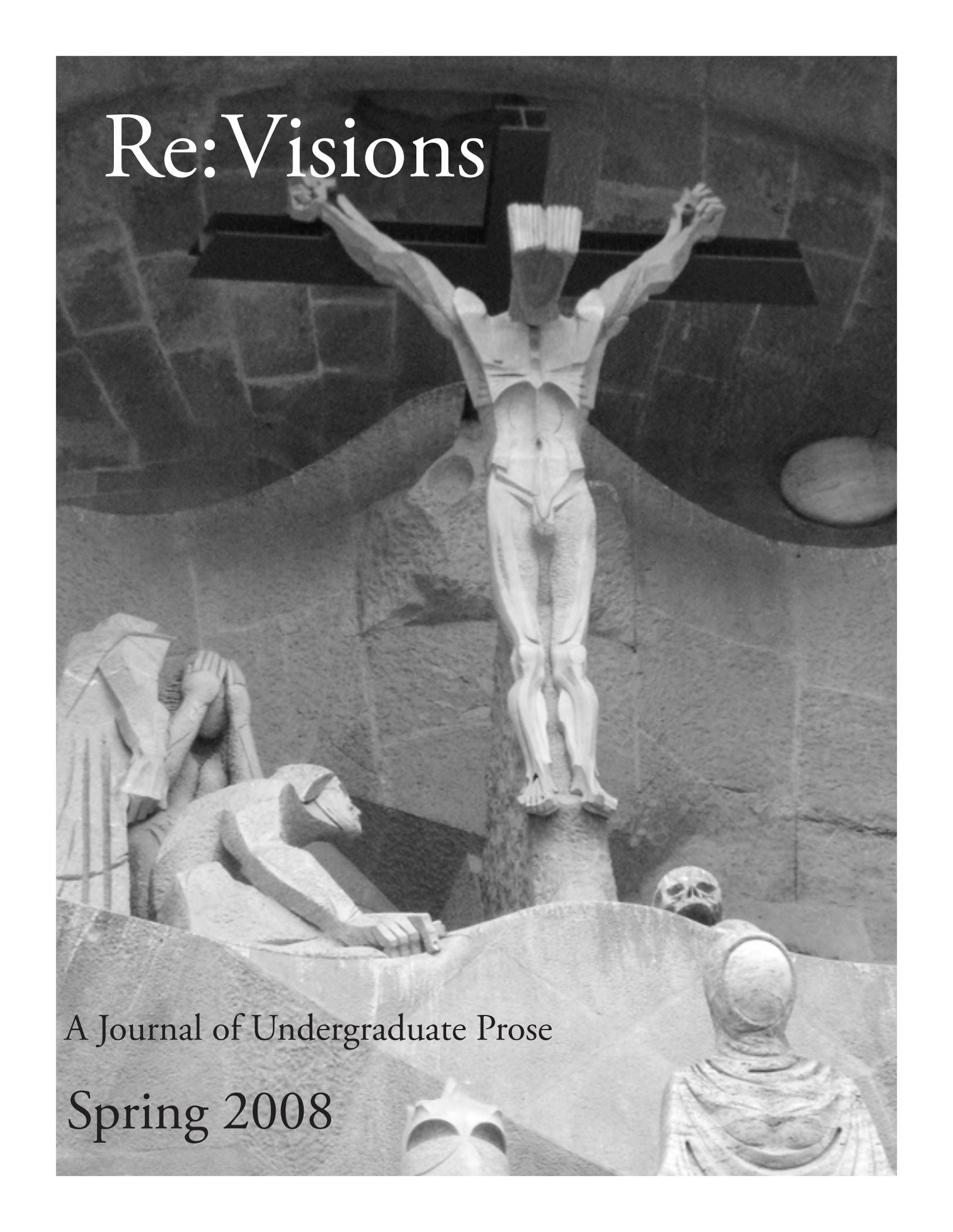


# Re:Visions



A Journal of Undergraduate Prose

Spring 2008



# Re:Visions

*A Journal of Undergraduate Prose*

*Sixth Issue*

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*The University of Notre Dame*

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# Habit

Jackie Burke

My sister and I stare at the brooch that lies between us. We're shouting at each other, but neither of us can take our eyes off it. The pale pink petals of the porcelain rose stick out sharply, supported only by two sage-colored leaves and a super-glued safety pin. The flower is unnecessarily large, and it would be embarrassing to wear nowadays even if brooches were in fashion. In its own subtle way, it's gaudy. And we both want it.

Meg says something that startles me—maybe about how it means more to her, or that I got the class ring, so she should have this—and I glance up at her. People tell me she looks like me, I believe “identical” is the term used most often, but all I see is her: a jagged auburn bob she cuts every two months, fierce green eyes, and a stern, prominent chin. She's playing hacky sack with a piece of gum. I grimace and look back down.

If there were a will, this fight wouldn't be happening. Everything would be settled and everyone could mourn in peace. But Erin's death was sudden, unexpected, and about 60 or 70 years too soon. Without a will, Meg and I are forced to determine which possessions are meaningful, which things of hers we can't live without. So here we are, the leftovers, standing in my apartment kitchen, fighting over a flower.

“Tari!” Meg shouts, pounding her fist on the counter and causing the brooch to bounce. I flinch. “You've always been the selfish one, and I'm sick of putting up with it!”

The whole argument has been like that. Talking in definitive statements, meticulously picking apart past behavior.

“I've always been a pushover,” I say softly. I can feel the stiffness of my expression. “But I'm not gonna give this thing up again.”

The first time this fight happened, Erin, Meg, and I were eight, and there were a lot fewer accusations and a lot less fist pounding. Back then Mom took donations of broken jewelry and fixed them, reselling the pieces at art fairs. She gave some of the newly fixed items away as gifts, and kept a few for herself. She let us keep a few rings and necklaces, but only after we begged and told her how beautiful they were, how great it was that you couldn't see the bobby pins holding them together. All three of us had wanted the rose, but Erin won out, I think because she had taken the least amount of Mom's merchandise at that point. She wore the pendant on floppy hats and frilly dresses, never bragging about it, but never letting us borrow it, either. Fifteen years later, I have the chance to win the fight I lost back then.

Meg snatches the brooch. “This. Is. The. Last. Thing. If you can just let this go we can all get on with our lives.” She slips the flower into her small, leather purse. “I’m going home. Call me when you get over it.”

Without a word, I watch her go, maybe out of habit. I’ve submitted to her dramatics for as long as I can remember.

I walk toward my room, keeping my head down as I pass the two other bedrooms that face each other. One has only been empty a few weeks now, but the other has been vacant, furnished, and hopeful going on two years. Meg and her boyfriend had moved into an up-scale apartment across town after college, and I thought that she would move in with us when the jackass left one night without a word, but she didn’t. She stayed.

Fighting with Meg has left me feeling sick. I can’t remember the last time we fought like this. Although we’ve gone our separate ways multiple times in the past twenty-three years, my sisters and I have always felt bonded. We’re a rare and special phenomena; only one in 500,000 births result in identical triplets. But I’ve found that life has ways of killing any feelings of specialness.

In high school, Meg started keeping her hair short. Her body became curvier than Erin’s or mine. It was then that I first overheard people comparing us, asking, “Which one of the Hueth sisters do you like, the Popular One, the Quiet One, or the Smart One?”

I was the Smart One, not because my grades were all that much better than my sisters’, but because I engaged in more academic and student government activities than they did. Senior year, I was class president. Erin was considered quiet, even when she started acting. Our classmates were surprised to see her get up on stage, fully in character, never missing a line. My friends would say, “I thought Meg would be the actress out of the three of you,” and my head would grow hot. I knew that Erin loved plays and had an incredible memory, and that Meg was too sporadic to ever commit to something as demanding as a production. It made perfect sense to me. People have never understood us the way we do.

I go to the bathroom and start brushing my teeth. I look at myself in the mirror. I picture my long, straight hair twisted into soft curls. People would think I was Erin. I imagine walking around like that. People would stare, mouths agape, slanted brows and eyes filled with tears.

I climb into bed and switch off my bedside lamp. I lie with my eyes open, closing them every once in a while to observe the pitch-black of both settings while thinking about the strange feeling that came with standing in my kitchen as two, just two. I remember seeing the girl people used to mistake me for in a casket, a real body but lifeless and unnatural. I remember hearing, “One of the Hueth girls just died,” followed quickly by “Oh no! Her poor sisters.” I remember laughter and water, and then my thoughts fall away.

Meg calls me in the afternoon after her weekly therapy appointment. Our parents insisted that she get counseling after her boyfriend left her and she wouldn't come out of her room for a week. She almost got fired from her job as a saleswoman at a Verizon Wireless store, but therapy helped her regroup, and now she has two jobs. She started working at Tini's, a bar in the toughest part of Atlanta, so she could afford the rent she had been splitting with her boyfriend. I guess moving in with her sisters would have been easier on her wallet but harder on her ego.

Meg starts talking about her session. She doesn't mention the brooch or the fight at all. She says that Dr. Lucier has really helped her cope with Erin's death, and that she thinks I should go to an appointment with her. That I need to go.

"Why?" I ask.

"You haven't talked to anyone about what happened. Dr. Lucier says that's not healthy."

"I don't remember—"

"That's what you keep telling people, but it's not what you told the police, it's not what got that guy arrested—"

"Well then I've talked about it, haven't I—?"

"I can't imagine what that must have been like, Tari. It's the kind of thing you should really talk to a professional about."

I tell her I'll consider it and get back to her before next week.

I haven't been denying Erin's death. It's been real in every aspect of my life. Big things have changed, like the way people treat me, and my relationships with my parents and friends, but so have little things. I don't have to be quiet when getting ready for work in the morning because there's no one to wake up. I've gotten pretty good at cooking since I don't have someone to make me dinner anymore. I've learned a lot about current events because I keep the news on to drown out the quiet.

I focus on the little things.

I don't think about her actual death, though. Never. Yes, I explained what happened to the police and the lawyers, but since then I've blocked out the events. Erin is gone. What happened is irrelevant.

Meg tries several approaches over the next few days, and the Nothing to Lose argument finally wins me over. She drives us into the city, and I'm scared that someone I know will see me getting out of the car under a large sign that reads, "Zimmerman Counseling Center."

Meg signs us in, and five minutes later an old man with hair like weeds sprouting from the sides of his head calls

her name. We both get up, and he looks at me.

“And you must be Tari.” Half his mouth lifts into a smile. His voice is relaxed and soothing, like I’d imagine a pedophile’s would be. I shake his boney hand. “I’m Dr. Lucier. Please come in.”

I follow him into a cramped office that smells like Febreze. A grey couch faces a desk covered with neat stacks of folders and files. The back wall is made of shelves lined with books and notebooks. I read the titles *Blink*, *Why Dogs*, *Pavlov?*, and *Notes on Neurosis* as I sit next to my sister on the couch.

Dr. Lucier rolls the leather chair behind the desk closer to us and slowly sits. He smiles warmly at my sister and says, “Meg, great to see you again.” She nods, and he turns to me. “Tari, I’m very excited to have you here. I think it will benefit you personally in addition to helping in your, ah, sister’s counseling.”

He looks at me blankly for a few seconds, and I stare back.

“So, now, mm, Tari, how-how have you been feeling since your sister’s death?” He grabs a yellow notepad from his desk as he speaks.

“Pretty awful,” I admit. Meg looks at me.

“Understandable.” Dr. Lucier takes a pen from his shirt pocket and begins jotting something down. I wonder what he’s writing because it looks a lot longer than “pretty awful.” “But your sister said you were reluctant to try therapy, why is that?”

I look at Meg, but now she’s looking at her jeans. “I don’t know. There just isn’t anything to say. It’s horrible, and yes, I’m sad. But why would I spend money to dwell on something I just have to deal with?”

“I see what you’re saying, Tari, but by not discussing how you feel or what happened, you’re isolating yourself from your sister.” He’s practically staring me down. “This is an experience that you are sharing, and you need to talk about it together.”

In that one statement Dr. Lucier kills any hope I had of him helping me. His approach is the same as everyone else’s. He wants to treat us as a set, as a pair. And Meg, well, I start to think that she only wants me here so she can find out what happened that night. She’s dying to know, but she would regret finding out. I know she would. I envy her ignorance.

I control my words even though my heart is racing. “Thank you, doctor. When I’m ready, I’ll start talking. Excuse me.”

I stand and walk out the door. I hear Meg call my name, but I ignore her and she doesn’t follow me. I sit in the waiting room and call Mom, who says hurriedly that she’s driving home from work and will call me later. I read *Time*, *Psychology Today*, and *Parenting* until Meg’s appointment is over.

She's still chastising me as we pull up to my apartment complex. She calls me overdramatic and I can't help but laugh. She tells me I'm a bad sister. I point out the fact that she was the one who wouldn't live with us and slam the car door.

I climb the stairs to the second floor and jam my key into my apartment door. I open it slowly, checking briefly for anything suspicious. Now that there isn't a familiar face to greet me when I come home, I'm worried I'll walk in on someone robbing me or something. I walk in, stiff silence and the feeling of emptiness assuring me that no one at all is here.

A loud buzzing rings in the kitchen and my heart jumps. I put my purse on the counter and grab the phone. I glance at the Caller ID screen before pressing Receive.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, honey, I'm sorry I couldn't talk earlier. I just hate talking while driving—"

"I know, Mom. I was just calling to see how you were."

"Aw, thank you. I'm ok, I'm ok. How are you?"

"Fine."

"Yeah? Seen much of your sister recently?"

I hate that. I hate when people ask about my sister, my sister, and they don't have to specify. "Some. We're still deciding about some of the stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Jewelry and whatever." I hope she understands what I'm talking about so I don't have to explain further.

"Oh. Right."

I breathe in deep, but my chest feels shallow. "We've been fighting over the brooch. You know, the rose one?"

A short pause. "Right. Mhm. I remember."

I wait. I'm hoping that she'll help, that she'll have some new insight into why I deserve it more than Meg. A minutes passes, and I give up. I ask about Dad, about work, about things back home. Then she says that she has to shower and start on dinner, so we say I love you and hang up.

I put the phone down, and I'm suddenly aware of the quiet. A shiver runs up my arms. I hurry toward the TV and press the large red Power button, holding my finger there until the weekly weather forecast fills the room.

At six I realize that I don't have anything to make for dinner. I debate between grabbing fast food and going

grocery shopping, and finally decide to buy a Panini to-go at Panera. Getting to the restaurant requires driving into Atlanta, which is a pain any time of day, but I think I've become desensitized to the chaos for the most part.

I get into the Mazda Dad gave me a few weeks ago and start toward the city. I haven't driven the car until recently; when I lived at home I always took the Lincoln before anyone else could. I fiddle with the stereo and air conditioning as I drive.

I finally find the Seek buttons on the radio. After finding a good pop station, I look up and see a car stopped less than ten feet from me. I slam on the breaks, but soon my car is bouncing back from impact, and my head is slamming against the seat while the seatbelt digs relentlessly into my stomach.

My chest is clenched. My head feels like I've been hit with a hammer. My whole body is shaking violently. My eyes are open, but I don't see the car in front of me.

I see rain. I see headlights. I see someone lying in the street.

Within a second, several loud honks are bringing me back to reality, and I watch the silver Acura I hit take a right into Starbucks. My breathing is still unsteady as I check my mirrors. The cars around me have stopped, leaving me room to follow. Slowly, I flip my blinker on and turn into the café.

I park a few spots away from the other car, which now has a noticeable dent in its bumper. I lay my head on my steering wheel, and I listen to my own shallow, rapid breathing.

I hear a car door open, and my stomach convulses. I see a boy step out from the car and I know I'm going to vomit. I shove my door open and head for the bushes lining the building.

When I'm done, I sit on my knees and try to steady my breath.

"Hey, whoa, lady, it's just a little dent. It's really no big deal."

I'm heaving as I turn to look at him. He looks about seventeen, and he has messy blonde hair and lots of freckles. I stare at him, and he raises an eyebrow.

"Ok, um, I'm gonna call my dad. I'll be right back." He walks behind his car and glances at me periodically while holding his phone to his ear.

Still shaking, I make my way back to my car and wipe my face with some tissues from the glove compartment. I take my phone from the cup holder and call Meg. She doesn't understand why I'm so upset, but she promises to come help me.

I lean back in my seat and close my eyes. I hear rain.

"I'm glad you've decided to reconsider counseling, Tari. I think you and your sister will really benefit from today's

session.” Something about Dr. Lucier’s voice is different now. It feels light and comforting.

I shake my head, staring at my hands. “No. I’m sorry, Meg. You shouldn’t have to live with my memory.”

“No, no, I want to know,” she says. Of course she does.

No one says anything for a few seconds, and I realize that I haven’t prepared to talk about it. I haven’t once thought through that night. What if I really don’t remember?

The silence pounds on and I know I have to start somewhere. I open my mouth, inhale, and talk.

“I had driven Erin to an audition at a theater in Atlanta. I hadn’t seen her act since that time you and I went to Middle Tennessee freshman year, and I wanted to support her. It’s really competitive, you know, and she has to—she had to do a lot of auditions to find a decent theater that wanted her. Meg, you were working at the bar that night. She did really well. It’s amazing, she really was a whole different person on stage. I would hear her practicing her monologues in her room with the door closed, but I never really paid attention. It was so cool to watch. I think they liked her. I don’t know. It’s really competitive.

“We were driving home, and it started to rain. It got pretty heavy, so I pulled off onto a back road where there wouldn’t be as many cars. The rain was coming down in sheets, so I slowed down, but I wasn’t really worried because there weren’t any other cars around. I pulled up to a stop sign and stopped a few seconds, even though there wasn’t anyone else around. Then I started pulling forward. I remember that we were talking about food. Neither of us had eaten dinner yet. Erin was going to make soup when we got home, and I would make the grilled cheese because that’s pretty much all I could do. And that’s when it happened.

“He came from the right side, and his headlights blinded me, and the impact sent us flying. The next thing I know a tree trunk is sticking through the back of the car on my side, but I was fine. Erin was...Erin wasn’t. I, uh, I knew that right away. My whole body was aching but the sides of the car were crunched in and there was blood on the dashboard and I wanted to get out. The door was stuck shut, so I threw my body against it a few times. It bruised my shoulder, but I finally got out. The rain was still really heavy—the second I stepped out I was completely soaked through. I could hardly see. The other car’s lights were still on, so I started walking that way. Someone was lying in the street. I found out later he was so drunk he couldn’t get up, but at the time I thought he might be dead. But then I heard him. At first I thought he was crying, but he wasn’t.”

Here I stop because I really don’t want to say anything more. Dr. Lucier and Meg ask at the same time what the sound was.

I open my mouth to speak and I feel something stuck in my throat. My eyes fill with water and my chest feels

tight and hollow at the same time.

“He was laughing.”

And then I cry.

When I come home from work Wednesday, I crack open the apartment door. I wait for the feeling of emptiness, but instead I sense someone inside. I freeze, and then take a few careful steps backward.

“Tari?”

I pull the door open slightly and stick my head inside. “Meg?” I push it open all the way, and my sister approaches me. She’s wearing a track suit and her hair is pinned back, though a few strands stick out rebelliously. I look past her and notice suitcases and boxes piled like a fort in my living room.

“How was work?” she asks.

“It was fine. I, uh—”

“Here, help me with these,” she says, starting toward the mess. “There’s more stuff in my room that I need to unpack if I want to have space in my bed to sleep tonight.”

I watch her disappear down the hall, wondering if that’s all she can really say. I realize I don’t know what to say, either, so I just grab scissors from the kitchen junk drawer and start tearing apart boxes. I open them like presents, discovering some of her things—DVDs, books, old pictures—and some of Erin’s things, too. I leave Erin’s boxes in a corner, thinking that Meg and I should go through them together later. I place Meg’s books and picture frames in various temporary places around the apartment. I listen intently to the sounds of suitcases being unzipped, drawers being opened, and boxes being torn apart in the room across from Erin’s as I set the DVDs on top of the blank TV screen.

Meg and I fight over one thing: a lamp she and her ex-boyfriend bought together before moving into their apartment. It’s covered in pink seashells, and will probably clash with everything in our apartment, if we can even find room for it. I feel like telling her that her time with that guy is not represented in any way by a lamp, that it’s not important. But in the end I let her win, maybe out of habit.

# Color the Sky

John Minser

My little sister picked the big marker out of a box marked “Assorted Crayons, 25 cents.” I looked hard at the ugly thing and tried to get her to put it back. It was a fat, stubby white stalk stained with the pawprints of a hundred little brats. The cap was a funny shade of gray. At the bottom was what looked like a color wheel, with color blending into color, with all the hues of the world represented. I popped the cap open and took a big sniff, then coughed. At least the color wouldn't be running out any time soon that marker smelled like a bottle of iodine dipped in ammonia.

The actual tint of the marker was a kind of cocky red, the type you might see rich tough guys painting their hot rods. Between the red marker, the gray cap, and the funky stains all up and down the sides, I figured that this had belonged to some five-year-old who had chewed the cap off one day and whose mother had placed it into a yard sale box.

“Alyssa, you don't want this nasty thing, do you?” I groaned. “That's a quarter we can use to ride the horse at Wal-mart.” My sister just looked at me with those cute, miserable eyes, not uttering a sound, until I finally caved.

“Okay, but you know we can't play the claw machine now, right?”

She smiled, laughed, and buried her face into my chest in the stranglehold she calls a hug.

“Thanks J-man!”

I couldn't stay mad at that. She got her nasty marker. I handed my quimier to the ragged man sitting next to the grocery store, and he paused, enveloping the money and my hand with his filthy glove. He looked at me for a second with his cloudy eyes. His breath smelled like whiskey and bad meat. I regretted my decision to buy my sister her marker. Forget not knowing where the marker had been; I knew exactly where it had been. It had been with this guy, and that made me feel a little queasy.

“Your sister's got a keen eye, she do,” he said, blasting me with his hobo breath. “Smart girl.”

I didn't say anything, but the old guy started to laugh. He put on his coat, which matched the rest of his ensemble in a dingy, Industrial Revolution gray-and-brown, and picked up his box of crayons.

“Two of you take care now,” he said, and wandered off down the street.

“Alyssa, don’t you ever do what I just did,” I said. She wasn’t paying attention. She was coloring on her arm with the marker. I sighed, took her hand, and finished up my quest to buy the milk.

Two days later, Alyssa woke me up from a mid-homework nap to show me her arm.

“Jake, the marker’s not coming off,” she said, scowling at her miscolored arm. “Was the marker permanent?”

“I don’t think so,” I told her while removing my face from my calculus. “Besides, permanent marker fades off skin in a couple days. Let me take a look at it.”

Her left arm was crisscrossed with spidery veins of brilliant lavender, all swirled around into a dustball cloud of nine-year-old body art. Two things immediately caught my attention. First, the marker hadn’t faded significantly in the two days of youth baseball and mandatory baths that Alyssa had just experienced. Second, the marks were lavender.

“Alyssa, were you playing with any other markers?” I asked.

“Nuh-uh.”

“So this is the same marker we bought from the weird guy outside the grocery store?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Alyssa, that marker was red.”

She broke into peals of victorious giggles.

“I know something you don’t!” she squealed. “Ha-ha! Jake isn’t as smart as me!” “What is it?” I asked, menacingly approaching her with tickling fingers ready. “Tell me or you’ll get it.”

“No! No! Don’t tickle me!” she shrieked. “I’ll tell, I’ll tell!”

I wasn’t merciful. After a few squirrely contortions, she stopped laughing enough to show me.

“You see the tumy-thing on the bottom of the marker? You gotta move that while the cap is on. Then the marker’s that color.”

“So it’s one of those multi-colored markers? Cool!”

I was genuinely excited to see the mechanism in action. I wasn’t much of an artist, but I had done some sketches of comic-book characters for an old girlfriend, and I had always gotten A’s in my high-school art classes. I thought that maybe I could use this marker for a few ink drawings or some color sketches. Funny how, when someone else gets something interesting, you immediately think of how you can use it.

Alyssa dug around in her Disney Princess purse and shoved the marker into my hand. It felt greasier than it did two days ago. I uncapped it with a measure of distasteful decorum.

Sure enough, the little felt tip was as lavender as lilacs. It still smelled like a chemistry lab, though. I tried to turn

the color wheel at the bottom of the marker. It wouldn't budge.

"No, Jake, put the cap on!" Alyssa ordered. I followed her instructions, recapping the marker and twisting the wheel. It moved this time, so naturally that I could hardly believe how stuck it had been without the cap on. I chose a pale aquamarine color and popped the top. The color was an exact match to the one I had picked on the wheel.

"How do they keep all those colors in there?" I asked, eyeing the short, dirty tube.

"I don't know. Science," my sister informed me.

"Thanks."

"Jake, aren't we supposed to be fixing my arm?" Alyssa demanded.

"Oh! I totally forgot. Yeah, let me go get some rubbing alcohol from the bathroom."

I set the marker down on the table and retrieved some isopropyl alcohol and a wad of tissues. Seating myself next to my unfortunate sibling, I set to work on cleaning her arm. Despite repeated treatments from the alcohol, the stain on her arm stubbornly refused to fade. Finally she stopped me.

"Jake, this hurts!" she cried. "You're rubbing my skin too much."

It was true. Her skin had been rubbed too hard, and had gone raw. I put the bottle of alcohol back in the bathroom.

"Hey, I'm sorry, kid. It doesn't look like it's coming off anytime soon. Want me to try to cover it up?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I can wash it up and try to color over it with the marker!"

She looked at me with a skepticism belying her youth.

"Jake, that's stupid."

I shrugged and turned back to my calculus.

"Suit yourself. . ."

She stared at me for a moment, and I could almost hear the little gears turning in her head as she tried to work out just how serious I was about my suggestion. I was surprised to find myself more serious than teasing. I was burning to find out exactly what range of colors and applications this strange marker had. After about twenty seconds of faking my homework, Alyssa left the room and came back with a wet rag and the marker.

"Okay," she said. "Make sure my arm is clean, first."

I set the marker to what seemed to be an exact match to Alyssa's skin, then gently patted down the raw places on her arm with the cool washcloth. Then I uncapped the marker and softly touched it to her skin. I exhaled in a long, slow gasp. It was a perfect match. I wasn't covering lavender marks at all, I was filling in gaps. Tensely the marker

traced out its former path, obliterating the purple trail and restoring Alyssa's arm to its former state.

"Thanks, Jake," Alyssa said, turning and running to the television, where Spongebob Squarepants was currently cavorting.

Which left me holding the marker. I wasn't exactly sure what to do with it. It was like having a magic wand and no directions for its use. Finally I went to the art cabinet and removed a pad of sketch paper.

Holding the marker in my hand like a scalpel, I set the wheel to black and uncapped the top. When the tip touched the page, it was like watching a transformation. Where the paper had once been white, now it was black. It wasn't as if had just put ink on the paper; it was as though the darkness of space were seeping through the paper. I was breathless. Hesitantly, I put down another line, and another. Before long I was working faster, then faster yet. My tongue poked out of the side of my mouth as I recapped the marker, switching time and time again to different colors and different shades. I was a whirlwind, dabbing eyes in glorious hazel, forming clothes of true-to-life

orange and pink, creating hair of deep chestnut. When I was finished I found myself with a portrait of my sister, who smiled back at me from beyond the canvas. I called Alyssa over.

"What do you think?" I asked, standing back.

"Oh wow, that's me!" she said. "Can I hang it on my wall?"

"Sure!" I tore the page out carefully, handing it to my sister.

As she dashed up the stairs, I heard her shout back:

"I'm so going to frame this!"

While she gloated over her picture, I stepped outside to gloat over my success. I really am a mediocre artist, and the affirmation of knowing that my sister wanted to frame the picture was enough to make my head swell several sizes. I figured that I could let it deflate outside without irritating anyone. Walking along the sidewalk, I flipped out the marker and let it rest in the hollow of my palm. I liked its weight in my hand. It felt ready, as though it could do anything. Grinning, I set the color to a vivid goldenrod and uncapped the marker. I held the marker up to the setting sun' and pretended to add a few finishing touches to the horizon.

At least, I meant to pretend. When the marker came down, I saw that what I had put up on the sky had stayed there. I didn't believe myself. Shaking my head to clear out the crazy, I capped the marker and reset it to an ugly neon green, the kind nature abhors. Just to be sure, I tilted my head up and put a splotch of neon on a passing cloud. It stayed, leaving an unnatural streak of green across the bottom of an otherwise puffy white nimbus. I stood stunned and watched the neon-spotted cloud pass into a line of trees and out of sight.

For an instant, all the power in a thousand electrical plants flooded through my arm. I thought of painting the sky in all the beautiful shades of pink. I thought of writing love letters into the sidewalks, of making autumn green and summer speckled red and gold .I thought of bright blue roses and tangerine lilies. I thought of all the people I would impress, and then of Alyssa, who rightfully owned the marker.

Then I thought of generals and presidents, of skies gone black forever, of invisible camouflage, and of ugly brown water where poisons and soldiers hid. I thought of blinding white torture rooms and dark gray cities. I wondered if wars would be fought over the power contained in this marker, the power to color the sky. Then I stopped wondering if there would be blood, and began wondering how it would begin to spill. I slipped the marker in my pocket and started back home.

When I got there, I went into the garage and pulled down the ladder into the attic. Climbing up between the wooden shelving, the cardboard boxes, and the years of dust and insulation, I wound up and threw the marker into the back corner, far away from any lights or boxes. Then I descended the ladder and sealed up the attic.

When Alyssa saw me, she ran up and gave me a huge little sister hug.

“Jake, where’s my marker? Didn’t you have it last?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know where it is,” I said. “It’s gotta be around here somewhere. You’ll probably find it eventually.”

I figured that a half-truth was forgivable in this circumstance. Besides, I knew that the loss of one marker wouldn’t bother her too much. She might whine a little about it in the next few days, or she might not care at all. At any rate, I knew that within a week she would have forgotten about the marker and would have moved on to some new distraction.

The next day, the newspaper headlines called for the immediate shutdown of a nearby chemical plant, on account of the neon-green clouds spotted over the downtown business district.

# Wednesday

Katherine Khorey

Jenna had officially opened two days ago, and not surprisingly there hadn't been any guests yet. Right now that wasn't a problem. But if no one showed up in the next few nights, it would be.

In the morning, she had cleaned, vacuuming the rooms and wiping down the counters and smoothing every last wrinkle in the beds. She washed and folded fresh sets of towels, and checked the silk flower arrangements in each of the bedrooms; real flowers might wither away their usefulness before anyone could enjoy them. Then she had made the hour drive out to the nearest Costco. When she was only buying for herself, she went to the little IGA in town.

Jenna didn't want to jinx herself by overloading on supplies, but she didn't want to be unprepared for anyone who might show up, either. Besides, she kept telling herself, there were so many travelers, all going somewhere else, coming through town each weekend in the summer, that someone would have to stay for a night.

She didn't officially offer any meal except breakfast, but she wanted to keep plenty of extra food on hand, just in case she had to ad lib dinner and snacks. If people were treated well their first stay, they would come back later: a little extra expense right now would be an investment in the future. After all, there were no decent restaurants in town, or not the kind the guests she hoped to have would think were decent, anyway.

So as a compromise, she employed the shopping skills she'd picked up in college and chose some cheap and the long lasting foods to use in case she had to fix guests an unexpected late meal. But for their breakfasts, she splurged. There would be no half-assed Comfort Inn style boxed cereal and stale Danishes served in the newly-opened Mountainside Inn, "a complimentary home-cooked breakfast, variety of unique and beautiful rooms available, breathtaking mountain views, friendly for families and, upon prior consultation, pets" etc.

She also bought, with more than an ounce of shame, several packages of frozen Break and Bake cookies, oatmeal and sugar and chocolate chip. One day, when she was more settled, she'd start doing all her baking from scratch, but right now there was just too much else to focus on. But Jenna liked the idea of serving her guests milk and assorted warm cookies in the evenings, like she thought the classiest hotels did for free. One day, she thought.

In case it got to be Friday and no one had shown up, Jenna also bought supplies for herself. She'd gotten a decently stocked liquor cabinet when she bought the big old house, but not much in the way of wine. Anyway, she needed what she had for the guests, so she grabbed a bottle of Merlot that was on special, then blew whatever

savings she'd realized on a deep, wide box of chocolate truffles. This weekend, she might need them. In the checkout line she picked up a copy of the latest Nora Roberts book.

Jenna arrived home from shopping around five o'clock. She went to the kitchen, put some water on the boil, drizzled a little olive oil and salt into the pot and pulled a box of whole wheat ziti out of the pantry. While the water heated, she put the groceries away, helping herself to a handful of fresh spinach after she'd filled the vegetable drawer in the fridge. She ate the leaves one by one as the water began to simmer. Privately, she didn't much care for salad.

When the water began to boil, she tossed in two handfuls of pasta, then opened a jar of marinara sauce, poured it into a saucepan, and added a bay leaf and some oregano. She pulled a jar of red pepper from the spice rack, but then thought better of it. She ate quickly, rinsed her two pots and plate and fork, and loaded them into the dishwasher. The counters looked clean, but she wiped them down again anyway.

Around eight it started to get dark. With nothing much to do she started to get anxious about whether any one would show up for the first big weekend of her first season. Trying to shake it off, she found her Nora Roberts, opened the Merlot and poured herself a glass, and went down to the den to light a fire.

Before she'd bought the old place, she'd actually looked forward to hanging out in the living room, which was awash in formal lavenders and powder blues and paneled with glass cabinets of delicate ornaments and antiques. A huge bay window on one side overlooked the town below. She figured that once she'd owned the place, she could chill in there and be comfortably proud of her elegant new surroundings. But as it turned out, she tended to avoid the living room except to carefully clean and polish the classic furnishings. She couldn't remember the last time she'd sat in any of the chairs.

The den, on the other hand, with its huge stone fireplace nestled against one wall, was much more conducive to hanging out alone on a Wednesday evening.

She could afford to use the big fireplace whenever she wanted. There was plenty of wood around, and since Mr. Bryant, who owned the hardware store in town, had taught her to chop it herself it cost her nothing. Her anxiety subsided as she arranged the wood and kindling in the fireplace and lit some old newspapers under the grate to get the fire started.

Jenna settled down on the leather couch and watched the flames spread and grow, golden and orange against the grey hearth's soot-covered walls. The ruddy reds and greens and warm plaids of the room reflected the glow. She didn't start reading just yet. She kept watching the flames flicker and twist, and through the pop and hiss of the newly cut wood she could hear the vague to the vague beginnings of thunder. She reached behind the couch for a wool blanket she kept folded neatly on the floor there. For a moment she didn't even feel like reaching far enough

for it. Her limbs were getting too warm and heavy to move, her mind, for a moment, too sleepy and at ease. But finally she grabbed the blanket and pulled it over herself as she reclined on the couch.

Just then, she thought she might have heard a car driving up on the road. That was odd: she didn't really expect anyone to be driving around tonight. She sat up, and listened more closely. Yes, there was definitely a car out there... it was slowing down, and stopping. She grinned.

Of course, it might just be some poor lost kid looking for directions, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was some retired couple, members of a wealthy active living community full of still-traveling residents always on the lookout for hotel recommendations, who were going to visit a new grandchild but were worried about driving in the oncoming rain. They'd probably be nice and quiet and polite, and want to go to straight to bed and get a nice early start tomorrow...she could pack them some bacon sandwiches and fruit for the road, unless the man needed to watch his cholesterol, in which case she could substitute with...

Then she heard a car door slam. It was definitely in her driveway. Rain began to patter slowly outside. A man's voice said, "We'll stay here, sweetie, okay?"

Jenna didn't hear any reply, but that may have been because she'd stopped listening. The man hadn't sounded terribly old: maybe he and his wife wanted to use the den tonight. In that case, she couldn't just leave a half-drunk glass of wine sitting down there.

She set her book down and slid off the couch. The kitchen was too far away, so she raced for the little bathroom off the den, where she poured her wine down the sink. She cursed herself for not changing the white basin when she'd remodeled. The knock on the front door came just as she slipped her glass into the cabinet under the sink.

"Hello?" A voice called. The den was just around the corner from the front door.

"I'm coming. Hang on." Jenna ran back through the den. She had just reached the archway that led to the front hall when, from the corner of her eye, she spotted her book lying facedown on the corner of the couch. Damn. Most of the books in the house were old and impressive, anciently bound classics or out-of-print novelties that one wasn't likely to find anywhere else. She'd vowed never to let her own books stray out of her bedroom.

But now here were some potential guests knocking on her door ("Hello? Is anyone inside?"), and her guilty pleasure now lay in plain sight. There was no time to run back to her room.

She grabbed the book and the blanket and tossed them both behind the couch. Together they hit the hardwood floor with a soft thud.

She ran up to the entrance hall, slid on the pair of sandals she'd left there deliberately, thanked God she was still wearing a nice skirt, and pulled the heavy front door open.

“Hey.” She said. “I’m sorry it took me a second. Come on in.”

“No prob.” The man had cropped brown hair and a plain, clean-shaven square face. He was tanned and broad-shouldered, as if years of working outside had agreed with him. He carried a worn tan satchel with one hand and had a scuffed brown leather jacket draped over the same arm. “I was actually kind of scared that you weren’t really open. We saw your sign outside.” A little girl stood beside him: his free hand was on her shoulder. “We were just driving a long way today, and thought we might be a little too tired to go on.”

“I definitely understand.” Jenna smiled back, and opened the door wider. The man stepped in, ushering the girl ahead of him. “There’s that storm coming. It could be dangerous to keep going.”

“Yeah.” He shut the door behind him and shifted his satchel to his other hand. “And Maddy here doesn’t really like those storms. Do you?” He smiled down at the girl.

Jenna followed his lead. Maddy was small and pale and exhausted looking, with large sad brown eyes and fine dark hair. She wore a pink windbreaker with a matching vinyl backpack, and her arm was wrapped around a large stuffed brown rabbit. Jenna guessed she was about six or seven.

“Well, Maddy.” Jenna said, smiling wider. Maddy looked up at her, and smiled faintly back. They must have been traveling since very early this morning. “We do have a room down in the basement, where you two can stay. You won’t hear the storm down there.”

“It’s okay.” Maddy’s voice was subdued, but clear. “They don’t bother me anymore.”

“Really?” The man looked down. “Are you sure, honey?”

“Yes.” Maddy nodded up at him. “That was a long time ago, Dad.”

“Oh…” He frowned, and looked away from her, staring awkwardly down at the floor. Jenna swallowed, unsure of what to say, but finally the man spoke for her.

“Okay.” He said. “So, we’ll just sleep in whatever room this young lady has ready for us, right?”

Maddy nodded again, smiling a little more brightly.

“Well, I have just about every room ready.” Jenna walked forward, and motioned for them to follow.

Maddy took a few steps into the front hall, but her father lingered back a moment. “Um…do you want us to take off our shoes, Miss?”

Jenna glanced down at his feet as briefly as she could. His chinos were shoved into a pair of relatively clean work boots. “Oh, no. Don’t worry about it, Mr…?”

“Oh. Ludlow.” He shrugged and followed his daughter. “Jeff. Jeff is fine.”

“Jeff then.” She went to the coat closet a little ways down the front all, and opened it. “I’m Jenna Colton.” She

pulled out two wooden coat hangers.

Jeff set down his satchel and grabbed the leather jacket that hung over his arm. Jenna was about to take it from him, but instead he took the hanger from her and hung his jacket up himself. Meanwhile Maddy had set down her rabbit, slid off her backpack, and unzipped her pink coat. Jenna took it from her and slid it onto the hanger, zipped it up and hung it in the closet. She noticed it was stained and that there was a tear in the seam along the zipper's edge. She shut the closet door, grabbed the ring of keys that she kept, while she was alone, hanging on a nearby nail in the wall, and turned back to her guests.

"Well." She said. "Would you like to see the upstairs?" And, to Maddy, "I bet your dad will let you choose which room you want to stay in."

"Yup." Jeff said, and Maddy's smile brightened just a little. She'd put her backpack back on and picked up her rabbit.

"Okay." Jenna said. "We can just head up now. I think I might have the perfect room for you."

They walked out of the entrance hall. When Jenna had first bought the house, that hall had been magnificent and imposing, like the living room, but walled in grey stone and floored with gleaming tile. But she'd whitewashed the walls herself, and picked out a few bright rugs and rough-hewn benches. Now it looked more like the front hall of an old farm cottage, cozier and un-intimidating. She liked the entrance hall: she felt it was truly hers.

"Okay." Jenna turned the corner, and the two of them followed her. "So the stairs are right here..."

She heard Maddy gasp in response. The staircase, with its polished maple railing and thick burgundy carpet, was almost as showy as the entrance hall used to be. But Jenna had kept it intact.

"Wow." Jeff said. "This is some place you have here."

Jenna focused on climbing the thickly carpeted stairs for a moment. Then she said, "Thank you. I guess I'm lucky to have it."

"So are you new in this business? I mean, no offense, but—"

"Oh, yeah." Jenna reached the top of the stairs. She jingled her keys in her hand, and turned back to face Jeff and Maddy. "This house actually belonged to a friend of mine. I just bought it last year."

"Oh. Okay. Well, this is pretty nice."

"Thanks." Jenna stopped at the third door on her left, and after some fumbling found the key she wanted. "Are you ready to see this, Maddy?"

Maddy nodded. Jenna held her breath as she unlocked the door and swung it open—Maddy seemed to favor pink—to reveal a small room with electric blue walls with a lighter carpet and lime green curtains and trim.

Jenna looked down to see Maddy's reaction. She breathed again as the girl smiled with a shy brightness.

"You like that?" Jeff asked.

Maddy nodded.

"Great." Jenna smiled. "Now, if you and your dad would rather sleep in the same room, then we can find someplace else."

Maddy shook her head. "That's okay. I like having my own room." Jeff looked down at her, frowning a little sadly. Jenna followed his gaze for a second before going on,

"Okay. So if you'll just look through this other door..." She walked into the room and motioned for Jeff and Maddy to follow her to a second door in the side wall. This one wasn't locked: she opened it. "We have this bathroom here. And through here..." She opened another door, on the other side of the blue and white bathroom. "...is another room, where your dad can stay."

This room had belonged to a child, too, but was distinctively male: white walls and navy bedding and a good, sensible hardwood floor. One day, when she saved up a little more money, Jenna wanted to add more elaborate decorations—some nice patterned trim around the walls, maybe—and maybe even buy some classic toys to fill the old wooden chest in one corner. Right now this room looked fine for a thirty-some year-old man to sleep in.

"That looks good." Jeff said, his frown fading. "This look okay to you, Maddy Jade?"

Maddy nodded again, and looked like she was about to say something, but her reply evaporated out into a yawn.

"Sleepy girl." Jenna said, and Maddy smiled politely. "Well, you can leave your stuff up here, and then I can check you in downstairs."

Jeff set down his satchel: Maddy trotted through the bathroom to deposit her backpack. Jenna stood with him for a moment in the white and navy room, before he said,

"She looks like her mom."

Jenna turned to him. He was frowning again, his kind and open face furrowed painfully. "Oh..." She said.

"Yeah." Jeff twisted his thumb in his belt loop. Jenna wondered if she should say she was sorry, but then Maddy came back through the door. She still held her rabbit.

Jeff's frown shattered into a bright smile. "You coming downstairs with us?"

Maddy nodded, and for the first time Jenna saw a tiredness in her eyes that ran deeper than a simple lack of sleep.

"Great." Jenna said, and turned away. "Let's go." She could barely bring herself to smile when she went to her

little desk in her downstairs office and entered Jeff's full name and address into her computer.

"Um..." Money was the last thing she wanted to bring up right now. Jeff saved her when he asked,

"How much'll this be?"

"Oh. Well, normally it's fifty dollars a night." Per person, but despite near-overwhelming common sense she couldn't add the two words. She was about to rattle off her policy on breakfast inclusion and check-out hours, but Jeff cut her off before she could begin.

"Okay." He dug into his pocket and withdrew a battered brown leather wallet. As he rifled through it for the correct bills, Jenna casually averted her eyes to the other end of the room. Maddy had wandered to a chair in the corner, and now sat quietly, holding her rabbit on her lap and gazing at the rain sloshing down the window ahead of her.

"Here you go." Jeff went on, and held out two crumpled twenties and a ten.

"Thank you." Jenna unlocked her cashbox, and felt a tiny surge of pride at laying the bills inside. But she was quick to close the lid on them and lock the box again, shutting them out of sight and mind for the rest of the evening. "Now, that includes your breakfast, and actually, any other food you might want, too. Have either of you eaten dinner, by the way? If you're hungry, I can make you just about anything you want."

"We stopped at McDonalds a while back." Jeff turned to Maddy. "But do you want anything else, hon? I know that was a long time ago."

Maddy shook her head, barely turning her gaze away from the window. "No, thank you." She said. "I think I just want to go to bed now."

Jeff nodded. "Okay." He walked over to her, and she slid her hand into his, tucking her rabbit under her free arm.

"Well, you've had a long day, haven't you, Maddy?" Jenna asked, and Maddy nodded. Jenna went on, "Before you go up, though, I need to know what you'll want for breakfast tomorrow, so I can have it ready for you when you wake up. So, what's your favorite thing to have for breakfast?"

Maddy raised her rabbit toward her face and took a small step behind her father. "I don't care."

"Okay. I just bought a ton of food today, so there are lots of things I could make you. Let's see. Do you like pancakes?"

"You still like pancakes, don't you?" Jeff said.

Maddy, still pressing the top of the rabbit's head against her mouth, nodded.

"Do you like chocolate chip pancakes?"

The rabbit stayed where he was, but Jenna saw Maddy's smile creeping up above his head as she nodded again.

"Have you ever tried peanut butter chocolate chip pancakes?"

This time Maddy shook her head, and Jenna was again pleased and warmed to see the extent of her grin.

"I think you found a winner." Jeff smiled at Jenna, and then looked back down at Maddy. "Tell Miss Colton thank you."

"Oh, Jenna is just—"

"Tell Miss Colton thank you, Maddy."

Maddy uncovered her face, and stepped forward. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I will have peanut butter chocolate chip pancakes ready for you first thing tomorrow. Oh, that reminds me." Jeff, on his way out the door with Maddy, stopped and turned back to her. "Will you need a wake-up call tomorrow morning?"

"Nope. We just have one more hour to go tomorrow. Right, Maddy?" Maddy nodded again. "So I guess I'll just be up whenever she's up."

"Okay." Kids were early risers: Jenna made a mental note to set her alarm for six-thirty tomorrow. She could stick the pancake batter in the fridge if it turned out that Maddy was tired enough to sleep in until much later. "So, Maddy, now I just to figure out what your dad wants for breakfast."

"Oh, it's okay. I'll eat anything." Jeff shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

"Okay." Jenna said again. She'd make sausage and fried eggs as soon as she knew the two of them were up. Maybe bacon, too, in case he had a preference. "Well, good night, Maddy."

"Good night." Maddy said, and let her father lead her out the door.

Jenna sighed as their footsteps faded down the hall and up the stairs. She wasn't sure if she could expect Jeff to come downstairs again, or what she should say to him if he did. She decided to go downstairs, back to the den, and maybe retrieve her wine glass and put it in the dishwasher where it belonged. Then she could retrieve her book from behind the couch, or turn on the TV, on a low volume so that she could hear Jeff coming down again.

She did go down to the den, but rather than going into the bathroom she sat down on the couch. It crossed her mind to reach behind and search for her book, but somehow she couldn't make herself do it. She couldn't quite even think. Again, Jenna just sat and stared at her now dying fire.

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When she heard footsteps coming down the stairs, Jenna snapped back to the real world. She ran from the

den, and reached the main staircase just as Jeff was halfway down it.

“Um...” He said, stopping for a moment. “I just figured it was kind of early still, and...”

Jenna was pretty sure she could complete his thought. He had, after all, been driving all day with a motherless little girl, and he looked like he could use a grown-up to talk to.

“I have a fire going downstairs.” She said. “Well, actually, it’s dying down now, but I can light it up again.”

“That sounds good.” Jeff said, but he slowly looked behind him. “It’s just...”

“Oh.” Jenna said a little too loudly, and then, carefully lowered her voice. “You can hear her from down here. The kids’ rooms are right above the den. They—I mean, the first owners—designed the house that way on purpose.”

Jeff looked relieved. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Jenna smiled at him. “Can I get you something to drink?” Jeff looked like a beer man, which was frustrating, but she thought that he might be happy to have something else once in a while. “Some wine, or a maybe a scotch?”

He shook his head so fast and so intensely that watching it made her feel a little like she had been punched in the stomach. “No.” He said. “I mean, no thanks. A Coke or something like that would be great, though.”

“No problem.” Jenna managed to keep her voice from cracking. “You go ahead and make yourself comfortable downstairs. I’ll bring that down in a minute.” And she entered the kitchen before he reached the bottom of the stairs.

Jenna breathed deeply, opened a cabinet and took out two tall glasses. She poured a Coke for Jeff and, mindful of caffeine at this time of night, a Sprite for herself. She realized that she hadn’t asked him if he wanted ice: she added three cubes. She took the two glasses in her hands, thought briefly of breaking out her box of chocolates but decided it might send a wrong message, and went downstairs.

When she got there Jeff was standing in front of the fireplace, raking the poker through the now-blazing fire. He’d added fresh wood from the rack and mixed it with the embers.

“Thank you.” She said. “You didn’t have to do that.”

He started a little as he turned around. “Oh, it’s okay. I just—I mean—well, you were right, it was dying down, so I thought I should light it again.”

“Great.” The coffee table was already laid out with coasters: she set each of their drinks down on one of them. “Was there enough, well, flame left? I didn’t leave the matches down here, did I?”

Jeff looked down at the floor. “I have a lighter.” He said. “I still smoke. I mean, I’m working on that one, but I figured it wasn’t as important as—well, just not as important right now.”

“Of course.” She said. “That’s not a problem.” She sat down on the end of the couch nearest her Sprite: Jeff remained standing, the poker dangling from his hand. “And if you need to smoke in here tonight, that’s fine.”

“It’s okay.” He shook his head, and gently replaced the poker on its hook alongside the other fire utensils. “I don’t need them at night any more.”

“Okay.” Jenna said, and decided to shut up for a moment. Jeff stared at the fire. She couldn’t see his face. Finally she said,

“You can sit, if you want.”

Again he started. “Okay. Thank you.” Slowly he edged toward the couch, and eased himself onto it. He noticed the glass of Coke sitting on the table. “And thanks for the drink.”

“No problem. Did you want anything else?”

“No, this is fine.” He settled his elbows onto his knees, and continued to gaze into the fire. Jenna tried to look in the same direction, tried not to turn back to his face and watch how the light of the flames reflected on its simple tanned lines. But when she did look, she found the fire made hot shadows of worry and heartbreak and frustration dance through his features, and wondered what it would feel like to run her fingers through the contours of his face, and to feel the fever of his skin cool beneath her hands.

# Silence

Jenni Fong

“It’s just such a shame, isn’t it? Her parents have no idea how people will react to her.”

“Almost six and still not talking? Have they tried...”

I’m always amazed by people. I’m five years old. I play tea party. I watch Dora the Explorer. I wear my long red hair in pigtails. But I know that not being able to talk is different than not being able to hear. Mrs. Barnett doesn’t seem to know that, though, and she’s old—maybe sixty or seventy. I don’t think Ms. Roche is as old as Mrs. Barnett because her hair’s not as white, but she’s still old, and she doesn’t know the difference either. Maybe it’s just something you forget when you’re that old.

I like Mrs. Barnett all right when she’s not talking. When it’s just the two of us, we do fun things like color pictures with crayons, or bake brownies, or even plant flowers in her garden if it’s warm enough. She lets me watch cartoons while she knits, and sometimes I watch her soap operas when she thinks I’m napping on the couch. When we’re doing stuff like this, Mrs. Barnett doesn’t talk too much, just “Oh, how pretty, Dana!” or “Would you like a taste, sweetie?” every once in awhile. I guess she figures what’s the use of talking if whoever’s listening can’t answer back that she agrees with whatever she had said. Just now, we were sitting down at the kitchen table, and she was gonna get me some cookies and milk and get some camel tea or whatever for her, which would’ve been all right if Ms. Roche hadn’t come to visit. Ms. Roche usually agrees with Mrs. Barnett about everything, which means Mrs. Barnett talks a lot when she’s around. One of their favorite things to talk about is my “condition.” She always whispers it—“her condition”—and puts her hand in front of her mouth, as if her hand would block the sound from reaching my ears. It would really help if she didn’t look at me every time she did it.

“...Have they considered home-schooling? You know, because of her condition” Ms. Roche puts down her teacup to do the thing with her hand too. Ms. Roche does pretty much everything that Mrs. Barnett does. I guess it’s because they’re sisters. I think the only thing Mrs. Barnett has done that Ms. Roche hasn’t is get married. Ms. Roche says it’s because she never wanted kids, that she’s no good with them. I believe her.

Mrs. Barnett sighs. “I said the same thing to her mother, I did, and she said to me, ‘Mrs. Barnett, we have kept Dana isolated at home when she should’ve been in nursery school, and we can’t do that to her anymore. She needs other children her age, Mrs. Barnett,’ she told me. ‘Every child does.’” She stops to take a sip of her tea, looks at me, and shakes her head. “Poor thing. Children aren’t old enough to know how to act around her. Such a bright, pretty

little darling, and she won't have any friends!"

"Well, who knows, Joan? Maybe that's exactly what she needs to loosen her tongue—others her own age."

Mrs. Barnett opens her mouth like she's going to say something else, but the doorbell rings first. Thank God. "Oh, there's Mommy now!" She says this to me in a different voice than the one she uses when she talks to Ms. Roche or Mommy. Maybe she thinks kids can't understand the voice she uses for grownups. But kids understand a lot more than she thinks; I know I do. I put on my coat and run to the door to see Mommy.

"Got your seat belt, honey?" Mommy asks just as I click it into place. I nod. "Good girl." She smiles and drives away with one hand as she waves goodbye out the window to Mrs. Barnett and Ms. Roche. They smile and wave for a moment too, before Mrs. Barnett turns to Ms. Roche and shakes her head. I look out the back window at them as they turn to go back inside, probably to talk about the same things they talk about all the time.

"How was Mrs. Barnett's today, Dana?" Mommy's question makes me turn back around. I twist my face like Oscar the Grouch, and my throat squeaks. It's those noises I make that let Mommy and Daddy know how I feel. This one means I had a poopy time with Mrs. Barnett.

Mommy laughs—she understands. "That good, huh?" We stop at a red light, and she turns to face me. "Why does she have to talk so much, right?" She tickles me, and my laugh squeaks out of me. When I stop, Mommy looks me in the eye. "It's going to be okay, sweetie," she says in a more serious voice. She smooths my hair down, and I can't tell if she's talking to me or to herself. "You won't have to see her for awhile. You're starting school tomorrow." We sit there silent for a minute, thinking about tomorrow, until the car behind us beeps his horn to tell Mommy the light is green. She faces back forward and stares ahead. "Everything will be fine. You'll be fine."

She's been saying that a lot lately, but her voice says the exact opposite. I don't know why she bothers to say it if she doesn't believe it's true. It would be so much easier just to say what she really means: That she's scared of what could happen tomorrow. That's what her eyes say. They're blue, just like mine, except that hers always look so sad lately. I don't want her to worry. She shouldn't worry. She should be the one who knows that everything really will be all right.

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It's now dinnertime, and once again I'm sitting at a table between two grownups. This time, it's Mommy and Daddy. Unlike Mrs. Barnett and Ms. Roche, they don't talk too much; they barely talk at all. When they do talk, it's usually to me: "Eat your vegetables," "clean your plate." Which is all right with me, at least for today. I've had enough of hearing people talk.

After dinner, Mommy gives me a bath. She puts something in the water that makes it smell like bubble gum.

“But don’t drink it!” she says, like always. I blow bubbles just to tease her—I know by now you can’t drink your bath! After that, Daddy reads me a bedtime story. It’s strange how Mommy and Daddy do that: pass me off between them without saying a word, barely even looking at each other. It must be a talent grownups have.

After Daddy finishes Good Night, Moon, he gives me a kiss and closes the door. I hear him go down the stairs, then it’s quiet for awhile. I’m already starting to fall asleep when I hear him say, “What?”

Mommy doesn’t answer at first. When she finally does, I feel trouble in her voice. “Are you sure we’re doing the right thing?”

I hear Daddy sigh and the crumpling of the newspaper he was probably reading. “Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts again.”

“Well, no, look,” she breathes in, “I just wonder if maybe she’s not ready yet.”

“Look, Tina, we agreed—it’s time that Dana went to a real school. End of discussion!” Daddy’s voice scares me. This is what it sounds like right before he starts yelling. I pull my blanket tighter around me.

“Yes, we agreed to send her to school.” Mommy’s voice is deeper than usual; it shakes even though she tries to keep it steady. To make up for the shaking, her voice gets louder and louder. “But we did not agree to send her to a normal public school. There is no reason we couldn’t have enrolled her in a special needs program, where she could learn sign language, and—”

“Yes there is, she’s not special needs!” I put my fingers in my ears, but I can still hear him. He’s yelling now. “You heard the doctors—there is nothing wrong with her.” He would count the tests off on his fingers. “Her vocal chords vibrate properly. She can grunt. She can groan. She can follow instructions. She is not some retard—”

“Do not use that word in this house! I have heard too many children use that around my daughter already.” I start to cry now because I can hear that Mommy is about to. “Have you even thought about that, Bill? About the other kids? You don’t know because you don’t spend time with her, but I do, and I hear it every time we go to the playground or just run into other kids: ‘Hey, look, it’s the stupid girl who can’t talk!’ You just...” She starts crying before she finishes what she’s saying.

It’s quiet for a few moments. I want to run downstairs and give Mommy a hug to make her stop crying, but I’m afraid that any second the yelling will start again. Then I hear Daddy’s voice very softly. “Tina? I—I’m sorry. I...” It’s a good sign when Daddy can’t find his words; when this happens, the wrong ones don’t come shouting out of him, and he only says what he really means to say. “I shouldn’t have said that. I just, I, I can’t...” He breathes out hard. “You think I don’t hear them? Calling her names, thinking she’s not as good as everyone else? I do. I hear them in my nightmares, I, I hear them whenever I think about the future, and it scares the shit out of me, Tina. She doesn’t

deserve that, we both know that. But I'm afraid that, if we don't push her, she'll never snap out of this, she'll never be, you know... normal."

It's a long time before Mommy says anything; when she does, her voice comes really soft and low. "And what if she doesn't, Bill? What if she doesn't 'snap out of it'? Are you prepared for that, the possibility that all the doctors, all the tests might have missed something? Are you still going to be willing to love her if she's never quite normal?"

I can picture her looking hard at Daddy, waiting for him to answer. When he doesn't, I hear her stand up, come upstairs, and close the door to their room. She leaves before she can hear him say, "I will be."

It didn't used to be like this. They never used to shout before. Daddy didn't used to sleep downstairs. I didn't used to cry when I went to bed. It wasn't until the doctors, and the tests, and the people looking at us like we were scary monsters. And all this because I don't talk! But why should I talk? I hear other people talk all the time, and what good does it ever do? When people talk, they lie. Like Mommy, when she tells Daddy nothing is bothering her. Or like the boy at the park who broke his brother's toy truck, but told his mommy that another boy did it. They lie, or they hurt you. Like Mrs. Barnett, who hides the mean things she says with a smile. Or like Daddy, who doesn't mean to, but says the wrong things because he doesn't know how to say them right. I don't want to fool or hurt anybody. So I don't say anything. This way, you always know what I mean.

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The next morning, Mommy and I get to the school before any of the other kids are there. She says we're going to have a special meeting with my teacher. This school is a big place, bigger than my house and Mrs. Barnett's house put together. I've never been in a place this big, so I hold Mommy's hand tight as we walk through the building. Finally, after we pass probably a million doors, Mommy opens one with a big star taped to the front. "Mrs. Strickland?" she asks.

Inside the room, there is a lady in a fuzzy pink sweater putting toys in a box. She stops when she hears us come in and shakes Mommy's hand. "You must be Mrs. Fox. Welcome! And you," she says, turning to me, "must be Dana. Good morning! How are you?"

Mrs. Strickland seems like a nice lady, but they always seem like nice ladies until they hear about my condition. Mrs. Barnett's a little bit different, because she's always nice until she talks about my condition, but either way it means that they stop being nice. I grip Mommy's hand tighter and bury my face in her leg. Mrs. Strickland tilts her head to try to find my eyes and smiles. "Oh, are we Little Miss Shy?"

"Actually," Mommy cleared her throat, "we—er, my husband and I—had spoken to your principal on the phone about this. You see, um, Dana hasn't quite begun to talk yet." She holds her breath. She's afraid Mrs. Strickland

might laugh at her or something. It happened once at a store. Mommy was paying the lady for some clothes, and the lady asked me if I wanted a sucker. I nodded. When she asked me what kind, I clicked my tongue and said “Uhhh!” The lady got confused, and Mommy told her that I wasn’t talking yet, and the lady laughed right in her face like she told a joke. She stopped when she saw Mommy’s face—her eyes were big and wide and scared. Mommy had those same eyes right now.

“Oh, yes, I remember now.” Mommy eyes go back to their normal size as Mrs. Strickland kneels beside me. “That’s okay, as long as you can laugh, right?” I finally pull my face away from Mommy’s leg and look up at her. She’s still smiling, but not in that fakey way that Mrs. Barnett does because she always thinks she knows better than you. And it’s not the way that Mommy smiles when she wants to make you think she’s happy even though she’s sad. Mrs. Strickland’s smile is real—she’s smiling because she’s happy and wants to make you happy. I’m glad people still smile that way. I smile back at her, and her smile grows even bigger. “Now that’s what I like to see!”

Mrs. Strickland and Mommy talk for a little bit while I color a dinosaur with some markers. When the other kids come in, they look at me, and I look right back at them. They don’t know if it’s okay to play with me, and they can’t ask Mrs. Strickland because she’s busy talking, so they play with each other around me. I don’t care; I just want to be left alone. If they don’t talk to me, they can’t find out about my condition, and then they can’t be mean to me. But that doesn’t stop me from watching them while I keep coloring. Some boys are building a castle out of Legos in the corner that some other boys try to knock over by throwing little racecars at it. Most of the girls are playing dress-up on the other side of the room. There are lots of sparkly scarves and feathery things for everyone to wear, and they don’t seem to have a problem with sharing until a crown is pulled out of the box. I guess there’s only one crown, because they all start fighting over who gets to wear it. Finally, a girl with dark, wavy hair yanks it out of another girl’s hands and puts it on her own head. “I get to wear it—I have a princess on my shirt, so I get to be the princess!” She points at the picture of Cinderella on her shirt and does her best impression of a princess.

The look on her face and what she just did tell me that the Princess is the one in charge around here. That everyone listens to her and lets her wear the crown says I’m right. I know right away that I should stay away from her as long as I can. I’ve seen that look before on other kids at the playground, and those kids are always the ones who cut in front of me in line at the slide or push me off the swing because I can’t tell them stop. Really, I don’t bother; I hear other kids, even other kids’ parents, tell them to stop pushing or bullying all the time. It doesn’t matter who says it—they never listen.

I’m just about done coloring when Mommy comes over to me. “Okay, Dana,” she says softly. “School is about to start. Be good, okay?” I nod and give her the dinosaur. For just a second, a very happy smile takes over her sad,

scared eyes. “Thank you, sweetie!” She gives me a hug and a kiss and heads for the door. “I’ll see you after school,” she calls from the doorway. I blow her a kiss before she leaves.

I’m nervous, but Mrs. Strickland comes over right away to take my hand. A loud bell rings, and all the kids stop what they’re doing and sit in a circle in the middle of the floor. Mrs. Strickland leads me to the middle of the floor and whispers to me, “Don’t be shy,” before talking to everyone else. “Class, this is Dana. She’s just joined us today. She’s a little quiet, but I’m sure you’re all going to make her feel right at home with us, right?”

“Yes, Mrs. Strickland,” they say together. Mrs. Strickland gives my hand a squeeze, and I feel better. Good enough, at least, to let go of her hand.

After a minute, Mrs. Strickland asks for someone to help her pass out construction paper while everyone else sits down. While one boy goes up to help her, all the other kids head for the tables. I’m about to go back to the table where I was coloring and sit by myself when I see the Princess coming up to me. This makes me turn and start to walk a little faster, but then I feel her grab my arm. So much for avoiding her. I turn around and am surprised to see that she’s actually smiling a nice smile. “Hi, I’m Diana. We have almost the same name! That means we need to be friends! Wanna sit with us?” She points at a table across the room where a few other girls are already sitting. I smile back and nod my head yes. I’m embarrassed that I thought she’d be mean to me. I guess I was wrong about her.

“Can I sit with you, too?” a small voice behind us asks.

I turn around to see who said that, and I jump back and gasp. I know the second I do it that I shouldn’t have because it’s really mean, but I’m too surprised to stop myself. There’s something wrong with this girl’s face. One side looks like the skin melted off, like a candle, and new skin’s trying to grow back, but it’s doing it all wrong. Instead of being smooth and the same color as the rest of her face, it’s all bumpy and bubbly and red puffs out around her eye so much that it’s almost completely covered. I’ve never seen anything like it before, and I don’t think I want to again. I let out a low grunt and grab at my new friend Diana’s hand.

“No, you can’t, Samantha, there’s no room ‘cause we’re sitting with Dana” Diana says over her shoulder—she doesn’t even turn around. She pulls at my hand, and we go to sit down at the other table. “That’s Samantha,” she whispers in my ear. “We don’t like to talk to her because her face is all weird and icky. My mommy said she was in some fire axe-uh-dent or somethin’, and we shouldn’t make fun of her, but she looks weird! What if she makes our faces do that, too?”

“Diana!” Mrs. Strickland calls out. She sternly puts her finger to her lips.

“Sorry,” Diana says. Mrs. Strickland smiles and starts to draw shapes on the board. As we sit down, Diana says softly to me, “You’re good at keeping quiet.”

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All during the morning, while we were supposed to be cutting out shapes or learning how to write j's and i's or listening to stories, Diana kept leaning over and whispering, "I can't wait for recess! This is so boring." Finally, after what seemed like days, it happens: Mrs. Strickland lets us out for recess. Everyone runs outside screaming—except me, of course. The boys grab a kickball and go across the playground to play a game, while us girls decide what to do. All the girls except Samantha. She was the last person to walk out the door, and she looked like she was going to join us, but a sharp look from Diana stopped her. Now, she's sitting by the door, watching us with big eyes as the girls call out what they want to do.

"Hopscotch!"

"Tag!"

"No, Red Rover!"

"No, I wanna play jump rope!" Diana shouts over all of them, and, of course, everyone has to agree, so she runs and gets one from the toy bag. When she comes back, she hands one end of the long, purple jump rope to me and shows me how to turn it. "See? You just hold on to this end and twirl your arm like this." Because she's the tallest, Diana picks Phoebe to go first.

"Down by the valley where the green grass grows, there sat Phoebe, sweet as a rose! She sang, and she sang, and she sang so—"

"Wait!" Phoebe suddenly stops jumping. "Dana's not singing."

I was hoping they wouldn't notice; after all, the rest of them were singing it loud enough. "Do you not know it?" Diana asks. "It's easy—just repeat after me. 'Down by the valley where the green grass grows'...Now you go."

I don't know what to do. I want to say something, I want to do what they're asking me, but after all this time of not trying, my voice gets scared and runs away. And they just keep looking at me, waiting for me to do something, but that just makes the sound run further and further away. I'm too scared to say anything, too scared because I know I'm going to fail. My heart starts beating faster, and I think it's going to explode from my chest. I look quickly from one girl to the next, and each one stares back at me, waiting. I don't know what will happen, but I open my mouth just because I know they want me to. A tiny little noise escapes the back of my throat. I pray that that's good enough.

"Come on, Dana!" Diana is annoyed now. "Just say it already." Phoebe and everyone else join her in the chant: "Say it, Dana, just say it." They don't realize that makes me even more nervous, makes it even harder to try. I feel my eyes widen as I start breathing really hard, and now I can't even make any noise. I look desperately at my friend, who

crinkles her face at me. “You can say it, can’t you?” It’s back—the look from before—the look that the other kids get right before they do something mean. I can only shake as I wait for what comes next. “Come on!” Diana throws down the jump rope and pinches me hard on the arm. I let out a high-pitched squeak and grab at my arm.

That does it for Diana; I know from now on I can never call her my friend again. “That’s it? That’s all you can say?” She laughs at me, and her laugh makes me want to go back to Mrs. Barnett’s house and never leave again. She turns to the other girls, who are also now giggling and pointing at me, and says, “She’s a dummy! She can’t even talk! What a dummy!” It isn’t long before they’re all saying it: “Dummy! Dummy! Dummy!” I start to cry, and this makes them laugh even more. “Listen to how she squeaks!” someone says. “She can’t even cry right!”

I don’t know how long it took for Mrs. Strickland to get here, but I finally hear her voice shouting for them to stop it. She pulls me away from the group and kneels in front of me to wipe my face. “Dana?” She takes my hand, and I look tearfully at her. “Dana, honey, I’m so sorry, I…” She stops, but I know she means it; her voice doesn’t lie. Still holding my hand, she stands up, and I feel her grip tighten. “Recess is over.” Her voice even makes Diana’s face get all serious. “Everyone inside—now.”

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The rest of the afternoon is a blur. Once everyone is inside, Mrs. Strickland takes me down to the principal’s office and calls Mommy to come get me. Then she sits me in the hallway, and I’m sure she tells me some really nice things, but all I can think about is how much I want to go home. Then she says she’s going back to talk to the class about why what they did was wrong, and that she’ll send someone with my things. When Samantha comes by with my coat and lunchbox, I don’t want to look at her. I don’t want to be with anyone. She looks like she wants to say something to me, but right then Mommy arrives, and she never gets the chance. Samantha leaves, and Mrs. Strickland returns to tell Mommy what had happened. Mommy’s face looks like she had just seen all her bad dreams come true. I know the feeling.

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Daddy comes home early today; Mommy had called him in the car to tell him what happened. The moment he walks through the door, I jump up from Mommy’s lap in the couch and throw myself around his legs and hug him hard. He bends down and picks me up. “My baby,” he whispers to me. “My poor baby.”

“Are you happy now?” I had never heard this voice from Mommy before; I don’t like it. It makes her sound like the evil witches from the movies. She rises. “Is this what you wanted to happen?”

Daddy puts me down and says, “Dana, honey, go watch TV.” I turn it on, but I know I won’t be able to hear it. I watch as he and Mommy go into the kitchen; he forgets to close the door. “Tina—“

“They stood in a circle and called her a dummy over and over again.” Mommy folds her arms over her chest. “She was still crying when I got there half an hour later.”

“I am so sorry, I, I don’t...”

“Now do you understand what I’m afraid of, Bill? Do you get it?” She points her finger at him. “It was your idea to send her to public school, your idea not to enroll her in special ed—you tell her that she has to go back to that school again tomorrow.”

Daddy stands there, unsure of what he should do next. At last, he walks back into the family room and sits down next to me. I watch him, waiting. He clears his throat, pauses, then clears his throat again. “Dana—” I can see my reflection in his eyes. I wonder if he sees his reflection in mine. That could be why he had stopped and was staring at me. He starts again. “Dana, what happened today, it...It was wrong. What those girls said to you was mean, and, and nasty, and I know it hurt you. And I understand if you maybe don’t want to go back there ever again. But, honey,” he says, taking my hand, “if you don’t go back—if we keep you here again, or, or if we send you to Mrs. Barnett’s house again—those girls will think that what they did was okay. That—that they can make fun of people who are different from them, and make them feel bad, and make them not welcome in the world. But you are.”

He stops for a second and brushes the hair out of my eyes. “You are welcome in this world, Dana. And even if you are different”—he looks up at Mommy, who by now is standing behind the couch with her arms still folded across her chest, but looser, then back at me—“you have a right to be there as much as they do, but they will never have the right to make you feel bad. Do you understand?” I nod. I do understand. I know it’ll be hard to go back—I can’t imagine Diana being nice to me again just because Mrs. Strickland put her in time out—but I know Daddy told me the truth. Mommy knows it, too. It wasn’t the answer she thought she would hear, but she’s satisfied with it. For the first time in a long, long while, the three of us sit together on the floor and watch *Spongebob Squarepants* before dinner.

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Mommy and I have to go to school early again. This time, Diana and her mommy are in Mrs. Strickland’s classroom, too. While the grownups shake hands and talk, Diana and I stare at each other across the table. She pouts her mouth out at me and stares at me with the meanest eyes I’ve ever seen. Finally, Diana’s mommy pushes her forward and says, “Diana, is there anything you want to say to Dana?”

Diana looks up at her mommy, who mouths, “Go on,” then looks back at me. “I’m sorry I called you a dummy, Dana,” she mumbles quickly.

“And?”

Diana sighs. “You’re not a dummy. You’re a very nice girl, and I I nicer to you yesterday.” At least, that’s what her mouth said. Her eyes and her voice kept on shouting, “Dummy! Dummy!” just like yesterday.

I guess Mommy didn’t hear that, because she says, “Thank you.” When Mrs. Strickland walks our mommies to the door, Diana whispers to me, “Just because my mommy made me say sorry doesn’t mean you can sit with us again. You can go play with Samantha—we don’t wanna get dummy cooties.” Luckily for her, other kids have begun arriving, and she shoves past me to go play with them. Which is fine by me—I don’t want to listen to her talk anymore, anyway.

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I’m glad that you’re supposed to be quiet during school. While I could feel that everyone was whispering and giggling about me, at least I didn’t have to hear it. But they don’t have to be quiet at recess, so when we get outside I head for the edge of the playground and just start picking at the grass. I never minded playing by myself; I usually had to whenever Ms. Roche came to visit Mrs. Barnett. I just didn’t think I’d have to do it forever.

I’ve been picking at the blades of grass on the edge of the playground for a little while now when I feel a tap on my shoulder. I look up and can’t help jumping again—it’s Samantha.

“Hi, Dana,” she says quietly. I blink at her, then look down at my hands to brush off the grass. Samantha pulls a piece of chalk out of her pocket. “Do you wanna play hopscotch?” she asks. “I usually play by myself, but it’s more fun with other people...” She looks at me with big, hopeful eyes. I just continued to stare at her. The last time someone was nice to me like this, she called me a dummy in front of everyone. Maybe Samantha doesn’t have that mean look on her face like Diana does, but I was mean to her yesterday. At least, I let Diana and the other girls be mean to her. Why would she possibly want to play with me? So I don’t even blink.

After another moment, Samantha lets her hand drop. “No, I guess not,” she says, her voice growing softer with each word. “Even you don’t wanna play with me. I just thought...” She looks at me, and I see that she’s about to cry. “Maybe you’d wanna because you know how they are.” She starts to walk away. “But I guess not.”

I feel a horrible feeling come over me. I know the sad feeling Samantha had. I felt it every time Mrs. Barnett or someone said something about my condition, or yesterday and this morning when Diana called me a dummy. And now I was doing it to Samantha. I don’t want Samantha to be hurt by what I don’t say. I want her to feel better.

“Okay.”

My voice is squeaky, scratchy, uneven, because I had never used it before. But somehow, Samantha knows it’s me, because she stops. She turns around slowly. “Really? You wanna play with me?”

I nod. Words don’t have to hurt. I know that now. As long as they’re the right ones.

# Strokes

Jess Hagerman

You know those male ballerinas more effeminate than your average tomboy who wear spandex like a second skin and it may as well be skin for everything you can see through it? The swell and dip of every sinew and a package well-padded and well you can't take your eyes off him because he's like nothing you've ever seen before some kind of male anomaly definitely male but nevertheless radiating that kind of seamless and perfected grace usually found only in the depthless curves of woman, naked. In fact he's so perfect he's beyond comprehension west of the imagination and so you scrutinize examine dissect every delicate pliee for the minutest of missteps and when his faultless form fails to satisfy your need for derision you scoff at the one detail you have left to hold over him—obviously he's a fag what kind of self-respecting man lists ballerina under Occupation and you envision with contempt the greedy hands of another man on him and you disguise your reaction with a veneer of disgust while secretly you admit that at least he's getting some and you can't exactly say the same. Anyway that's beside the point I'm talking about the seamless grace of the lycra-corseted male and how when flying nimbly across the stage he pirouettes precisely on target on the masking tape X buttocks tightened for a gracious bow and anyway the point is that's how Mike plays guitar. Fingers dancing along a wooden neck of a stage, frets for masking tape X's, flawlessly forming chords ever more complex withdrawing from the strings strokes of passion as vivid as the best ballet and well I don't know about Mike's buttocks. You'll have to ask him if you want to know or better yet just sneak a not-so-subtle ogle when he's wearing tight jeans which is never and if you're bold then time it so he'll catch you looking.

I love to watch Mike at the guitar. Which is really just an extension of his own being. One night he helped me practice my kicks for taekwondo but made sure to offer his right hand his writing hand as a paddle because that way if he did get hurt at least it wouldn't affect his chord-forming left hand and I thought Now there's a man with priorities. I can't really explain it so I guess you'll have to feel it—the way I get wet the moment Mike puts hand to string as if his fingers pressed on nylon would somehow leave an impression in my flesh. Then he sings and I zigflasm. Not a true orgasm mind you but one that builds in the hollow between my shoulder blades then swims tendrils down to my toes and I shiver as with chill but it's delicious. Mike says that watching me at jewelry-making is like me enjoying him on guitar, that I'm in my element, more focused than he's ever seen me but he's never mentioned if it gets him off in the same way and I meanwhile am too focused to notice.

It's not something we'd talk about anyway it's something we just do. Arouse each other I mean. Both of us entertain other and separate commitments, but at night when I'm cold and can't sleep and all I hear is his music, my head, well I'm already soaked by the time I'm close enough to smell him. Slinking into his sheets sometimes he just holds me lets me talk. It's too dark to practice guitar so I let him practice kissing then list whore under Occupation. At least I'm a woman and it's expected even respected over male ballerina.

# Double Death

Alana Stelton

My job, they said, was to pick an outfit for you. I went through your things, but ultimately decided that if it were you choosing, you'd go straight for my closet. It would be so like you to borrow something for entirely too long and return it unwashed, buttons missing and mysterious stains aplenty. I finally selected my favorite black dress—the one that I was supposed to be wearing today. When Mom saw what I'd picked, she said it was a morbid thought. I told her that morbid seemed appropriate, all things considered.

It is odd, though, looking down at you now in the stillness of the chapel as a procession of friends and family pay their respects. Our matching skin, eyes, and identical DNA are turning your wake into something surreal. It is the fulfillment of the fantasy of living through one's own funeral. It is as if I am watching myself sleeping unmoved through the impromptu eulogies of whispering passersby. It is as if I am mourning my own disappearance, as if I am witness to my own passing.

The sun began slipping under the edge of the forest. Small talk had brought us to the sunset, and visiting hours were nearly over. I waited for the question.

“So...”

“Yeah?” I stretched out my right leg as if to dangle a toe into the lake, fully knowing that the dock was much too high to permit this.

“Did you know, Case?” Natalie averted her eyes from mine and stared straight ahead. She was mentally barricading herself against me, just in case my answer proved me a traitor.

“No. No, I didn't know, Nat.” I was telling the truth, and she knew it. “They figured that it wouldn't be fair to ask me to be at your intervention.” Actually, they thought it would probably be bad strategy to invite an addict's enabler and co-conspirator, but I knew that my sister could figure this out on her own.

We watched the descending sun succumb to the pointed arrows of the evergreens. An hour ago, the docks surrounding the lake-side “Reflection Sanctuary” behind the rehab center had been dotted with visitors and patients. Now, only a lingering few remained. It was time to confess what I'd been unable to say the last two times I'd visited her at the treatment center.

“You know, part of me blames myself...” I cringed. It was the type of thing you hear on daytime talk shows, but I didn’t really know how else to say what I’d been thinking. Nat and I had done the teenage rebellion thing together, except that at some point I’d realized it was time to stop. To my twin, it was just time to move on to harder habits. I honestly didn’t worry about her—she was tough. I had told her that maybe she was onto something when she decided that college just wasn’t for her, and I’d figured that shit sometimes really does just happen when she was hospitalized after another car accident. Time and time again, I had assured our parents that Nat could take care of herself. When our mother decided that I was wrong, the psychotherapists at New Beginnings Rehabilitation Center came and took her away.

“Yeah. Totally your fault that I’m here. I’ll forgive you if you Parent Trap them with me. We switch places—you detox, and I’ll get the hell out of here. Deal?” Nat let out her tell-tale, high-pitched laugh, the kind that meant she was only mostly kidding.

The sun had disappeared from view, its absence bleeding pink-orange from behind the triumphant line of spear-like trees. I looked down at my watch absently, already aware that visiting hours were over.

“I think it’s time for you to head back,” I said quietly, my eyes pretending to examine the sand that had fallen into the grooves of the wooden dock.

I walked Natalie back up the hill to the rehab center, and after hugging her goodbye, I reluctantly started the trek back to the parking lot placed at a deliberate distance.

“Hey, Casey...” Her voice, soft as it was, made me turn.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll be out of here soon, ok?” Nat’s frail arms were crossed over her chest as if to keep her warm. For the first time, I noticed how pale my sister had gotten in the month since she’d entered rehab.

“Sure, Nat. Just be good, alright?”

She bit the inside of her cheek before waving goodbye. I convinced myself on the ride home that she had nodded her head ever so slightly. Natalie would be ok—she had promised me.

Last night, I dreamt I saw us walking together at the dawn of the Apocalypse. We floated through a deserted expanse, and I got the sense that everyone else on earth had already died and left us behind. We did not weep for them. I saw our heads thrown back in laughter; our mouths open as if to catch the debris that was left of the life we’d known. Frost had been right—ice had also sufficed, and the end of the world came in heavy snowdrifts through which only we could pass. With our fingers entwined, you looked at me, and I knew in an instant that we

would both die—that neither of us would make it through the night untouched, that the end of the Apocalypse would be a thing left unremembered.

It was a dream I'd never had before, though I'd often imagined while awake what it would be like if you died. I'd picture what I would say in your eulogy, even fantasized about seeing my own face looking up at me from a coffin. I guess I needed to feel your stunning absence from my life because the way you lived made a day like today a looming probability. By watching you slip from me thousands of times, I thought I could prepare myself for the surreal—I thought I could learn how to be a twinless twin.

The dream comforted me in a way that these macabre fantasies never could. Understanding that we would both be taken in the storm, I sensed that I could forever keep you with me on that frozen night, that our identical death would be nothing but melting memories in our mouths. The end of the world marked only by our chilly hands linking snow angels in the drift.

Everything that night was light and explosion, vibrancy and motion. It radiated off her hair and through the droplets of rain that soaked into our skin. I spun faster and faster around a light post, rejoicing in the desertion of the sidewalks. Bright bursts of light blinded me as the camera's flash bulb cut through the darkness. I spun with redoubled energy and sang something about love that didn't quite work out as the camera's flash went off again. For a single moment, I could see every raindrop on its way down. They hung suspended, frozen multitudes glittering and gathered against the night sky. It seemed indecent to watch them. Suddenly convinced of the immorality of the eyewitness, I asked Natalie to stop taking pictures.

But Natalie's only response was to start chasing me, her drunkenness making her unreasonable and flash-happy. I ran ahead of her, trying desperately to evade her grasp. I could feel every flash of the camera envelop me in bright light, could imagine each photon slipping around my body. I felt as if I were living in an old motion picture—the world flickered in and out as I strained to keep my lead. Every footstep resounded in my head like a heartbeat's throbbing throb-drub, throb-drub. It was the sound of a shadow giving chase, the doubled thumping of an image in pursuit of itself. The flashes continued, and bright lights shattered into kaleidoscopic fractals before my eyes. It made me dizzy, and the pounding and the panting and the throb-drubbing were getting louder and louder and I couldn't concentrate on keeping my feet straight and my knees parallel.

“Nat! Nat!” I forfeited the race. My hands fell to my thighs, and I heaved to catch my breath. I was surprised by my own inability to make it back to my apartment without tiring.

There was no answer to my calls besides the maddening sound of the snapping shutter.

“Nat! Please!” I sat on the pavement, desperately trying to will my heart to slow its furious pounding. I put my hands over my eyes, but the flashes were still blinding.

“Damn it! Turn that off!”

I could feel her staring down at me, but I still couldn't hear an answer. My heart felt like a dish towel being wrung out, and I started to worry that blood would seep out of it like so much dirty water. I told myself that if I could slow time just a little bit, everything would be ok. As I looked up at her to relate this brilliant revelation, my eyes fell onto something small and metallic hanging from my wrist. It was my camera, soaked by the rain. Confused, I held it up to her, accusations in my eyes.

“Nat?”

I could see her mouth moving and her empty hands gesticulating wildly, as if she'd been trying for some time to get my attention. But there was no sound.

“Natalie? I can't hear you...” I took a long look at the camera and her silently moving lips, and I suddenly remembered the long lines of white and our faces reflecting off the slim mirror my sister kept in her purse. I could recall her saying that it was her first time snorting too, and I found myself wondering once again how a novice could have hands so deft. But I justified the lie, just as I always had. Natalie had always been the talented twin.

They will close the lid soon, and they will put us both away. The death of one requires the sacrifice of the other, and everything becomes past tense. I had a twin. I was a twin. I was once two, but I am now one.

Yes, they will say that I am no longer a double image--that I am singular, individual, and unique. This, like the shit you hear about twin ESP, is bunk.

There is no singularity in the double. You are in me, and I am become you. You are forever the addiction swirling within my blood, concealed within our shared helixes and spirals. You are forever my guilt and my unpleasant sense that whatever spoke to you also speaks to me in bright flashes of frenetic need.

It was the right dress for so many reasons.

# The Salesman

Gawain Patterson

Mark turned the box in his hands, searching its sides and base for a price tag. “How much is this?” he asked as the young man behind the table handed change to another customer. He glanced over and responded, “Twenty-five” and attended to an old woman holding a vase. Mark looked at the box again. It was covered in fading, oily black paint. Dark brown wood peeped through splinters on the sides. The paint was no doubt an attempt at improving its appearance. “It failed,” he thought, inspecting it more closely. Despite his own distaste, he knew that Sarah would love it. She was always going on about needing something to enliven her sitting room table. This would complement the seashells perfectly. “It’s ironic,” she would say to guests at her parties, “the contrast between the beauty of the seashells and the morbidity of the box.” Mark would have mentioned some such idea when he gave it to her and she would have been passing it off as her own ever since. Her unoriginal epiphanies were just some of the many idiosyncrasies that he had grown to appreciate in college. And now he even found himself enabling, and exhibiting, some of them.

“You interested?”

Mark looked up to find that he was now the only customer and had garnered the salesman’s full attention. “Twenty-five’s a little steep don’t you think?” he said as he prepared himself for the tango of flea market haggling. “No,” the salesman responded with an unexpected hint of apathy. Mark smiled at him, trying to mask his surprise and disappointment. “I was thinking more like ten,” he said as he hardened his expression and attempted a more direct approach. Firm and unmoving—or at least attempting to appear so—he locked eyes and waited for a response. The salesman’s light brown curls fell just below the bridge of his nose, hiding any response that might exist in the bright green orbs peering through. He was younger than most of the other vendors. Mark could tell that he wasn’t there because he had a family to feed or needed a solution to poverty. He imagined him working to pay the rent that he shared with three or four similarly aged, similarly enthralling consorts. They would all have names like Chad and Sebastian and one would be foreign; he would probably be Raul. This one looked like a Derek. Or maybe he lived with his parents and this was just a way to fund a Starbucks addiction. Maybe he was the type to spend his days selling crap to old women and conscientious yuppies and his nights trolling the alleys of Chelsea for the back entrance to this weekend’s hot spot.

“Twenty” the salesman said, his expression and tone unchanged.

With more than a little enthusiasm, Mark replied, “Fifteen.” He was shocked by his own zeal and, worse, the young man’s indifference was, if only for a moment, disrupted as well. Mark quickly forced a smile and tried to regain his composure. They stared blankly at one another, apparently losing track of whose turn it was to lead. But as their prolonged silence grew more and more awkward, the young man shifted his weight and said, “Fine, I’ll give it to you for fifteen, but that’s as low as I can go.”

Theoretically it was over. Mark had won. He could accept the price and walk away, but instead he said, “What makes you think it’s worth that much?” The answer to his question could be simple: “you want it, I have it,” but he hoped that his stubbornness might force a little more emotion from his quarry. Though he recognized that he might evoke the wrong emotion, he hoped that he at least appeared more charming than annoying. He smiled again and waited for a response.

“I made it with my own two hands,” the salesman said with a smirk. It was a breakthrough, the first inkling of interest he had offered beyond his desire to be paid. Mark knew that his next sentence was critical.

Maybe he should say, “Yeah, like you’ve ever used those hands for building anything.” They would both laugh and Derek would reply, “That and so much more,” with a wink and a sly smile. Again they would laugh and Mark would hand him twenty-five dollars and a business card; adding, “Then I guess I should be paying full price.” Derek would smile and look away, his cheeks crimson and his lips flushed. Mark would reach out to lift his chin, look him in the eyes and smile. Then he would walk away having said all he needed to say.

Mark cleared his throat and spouted, “Like you can build anything.” He swallowed again, his mind racing through all the responses that would have been better than what he actually said. He suddenly realized that his mouth was dry and wished he had grabbed a bottle of water before he left home. He redirected his remaining energy to salivating so that he would be able to speak when his turn arose.

The salesman mumbled some recognition of Mark’s attempt at humor and walked to the other end of the table where a man was looking at garden gnomes. Conscious of his awkwardness and still clutching his box, Mark began browsing through the other items strewn across the table. He inched closer to where the salesman now stood laughing at some unheard joke with the customer that, Mark realized, could easily have been his Chad. He got close enough to hear just as the customer whispered, “Maybe next time” and strolled away, with Derek gazing dreamily after him. It seemed that they had accomplished in moments the kind of intimacy that Mark had searched for throughout his feeble attempts at conversation. With newfound resolve he approached the salesman again. He widened his eyes and asked, as casually as possible, “So what brings someone like you to a flea market?”

Roused from his apparent reverie, the salesman murmured, “What?”

“I mean, how come you’re working here?”

The salesman stared at him for a moment but as he contemplated the question his face contorted into a blank look of confusion. Not the feigned docility of a damsel in need but a genuine bewilderment.

“I don’t know,” he finally said, “it’s a cool job I guess. Why?”

Mark found that his own words had yet again lost their meaning somewhere between his mind and his mouth. But he at least had the opportunity to correct himself, and that Derek cared enough to answer and even to prolong their conversation suggested that perhaps there was some hope.

“You just don’t seem like the type to be working in a flea market.”

“The type?”

“I mean, you’re not exactly average in here.”

The salesman hesitated. He had visibly withheld a response and Mark was again convinced that he had said something wrong. This, he was certain, would be the last straw and he prepared himself to be reprimanded, perhaps insulted by someone at least ten years his junior. Mark stood aghast as the salesman stared at him with an expression that had grown all too familiar in their short affiliation and opened his mouth to begin what was sure to be an epic tirade.

“That’s what this place is about isn’t it, variety?”

He leaned on the side of his van and offered Mark a pleasant smile.

“So I guess not being *the type* is a plus?”

Mark realized that he was ahead for the first time, and as the saying suggests, it would serve him well to quit. He handed a twenty to the salesman and said,

“I guess it is.”

He gave a parting smile and walked away, feeling Derek’s eyes as the distance between them grew. He hadn’t been too forward, and they had ended on a high note. After a reasonable number of days—so as not to appear the stalker—he would return to Derek’s stand and resume their progression to wherever it was that they were going.

Mark was proud of the initiative that he had shown that day and felt that at least one more glimpse would be a suitable reward for his efforts. He stopped at the closest stand and idly browsed through the merchandise, more or less ignoring the elderly woman offering him assistance. After a few moments, he moved to a table with a better view. He looked over and saw the salesman remove a vibrating cell phone from his pocket. Mark was certain that this was one of those consorts calling to finalize the details of the night’s impending escapades.

The saleswoman in front of him said that she was closing up and asked if he needed any help. Mark quickly muttered, “No thanks, just looking” and continued making his way down the table. As he reached the end, a pretty brunette walked over to embrace the salesman. Mark was thrown for a moment but realized that Derek must have female friends as attractive as his roommates. He watched as the two talked and concluded that she must be secretly in love with Derek—because after all who wouldn’t be—and remained his friend, hoping in vain that she might change him. The saleswoman approached Mark again, disrupting his vigil, and informed him that she was leaving and he needed to finish up. He took this as his cue to head home and started making his way to the exit. As he did, the salesman leaned in to kiss the brunette. Mark took no notice, assuming that guys like Derek always kissed their pretty female friends on the lips.

# From a Humble Devotee

Ravenna Swiftfoot

To Mr. E. Blue, Athletic Director:

As a devoted follower of your tradition, may I humbly add my congratulations to the recent honors garnered by so many of your University's athletic programs?

I have heard that the most sincere form of flattery is imitation and hence have emulated your University's administrative blueprint at my own school. We hope to benefit from your wisdom to enjoy similar success on turf, grass, hardwood, rubber, mats and in the pool. The process has been delightfully enlightening; we have never produced such exquisite specimens of Scholar-Athletes under our care before. I have, I admit, audaciously ventured to improve upon some of your methods, some of which seem outdated. Please do not take offense, as the only reason that your staff may have become somewhat complacent in their pursuit of excellence is because, like lizards, they bask in the warmth of unchallenged, perennial success. Two Directors like us, however, must always strive to develop the most elite of athletic programs. I hope you will generously grant me pardon and learn in turn from what I have to offer.

Being that we are primarily a Science-focused University, my colleagues felt the need to test your Program's Methods before implementing them. I admit, it was great fun slinging dozens of eggs against our Stadium's outer wall (especially as I am not overly fond of the groundskeeper there). We collected those that did not break in a tremendously thrilling *sptllpt!* against the concrete and brought them back to the biology lab. Sir, I commend your perspicacity—the most robust eggs did indeed have a thicker shell more suitable for such stress than their inferior fellows!

Admittedly, we probably wasted three dozen eggs for every one kept, and the Professor of Economics had a fit watching the jagged shells bobbing in a sea of macaroni-and-cheese yellow ooze at the base of the Stadium, but we had such an enjoyable time in the process that I think it was worth it. We experienced one casualty, however; one

Professor, of some minor department in the College of Arts & Letters (a sub-specialty of Philosophy based on some Scotus or Hercules, I believe), hypothesized that if we *rolled* the eggs gently against the stadium, we could judge what force was best *for the eggs*. The Professor of Economics latched on to this suggestion like a suckling chimp, arguing that we could collect a greater return on our eggs. But really, can you imagine us all in a row out there, stooped over, *rolling* eggs like decrepit grandmothers nudging their lapdogs along, applauding them for urinating outdoors and not on the afghans? I spoke to the Head Researcher about it and he dismissed the Philosopher on the spot for lack of conviction in your excellently demonstrated application of Darwin's Great Theory.

I noticed that several eggs slung received only minor cracks in their shells. At the insistence of the Professor of Economics, the Doctor on staff tried different ways to repair the salvageable eggs, which we had paid good money for. Some of his remedies were quite ingenious; he reinforced some with tape woven through with rubber, padded a few bruised eggs with cotton and hard plastic and even incubated some in ice cold water to stem the white weeping through the cracks. The eggs that had been donated to us for free by local farmers interested in our University we left at the foot of the Stadium.

Like good scientists, we repeated the experiment, but it became painfully clear that the repaired eggs were not as strong as before they were slung with such enthusiasm against the concrete wall of our Stadium. Repeated repackaging could not put the shells back together again, although it did staunch the dripping yolk and seeping white innards. We even hired an expert egg-slinger to oversee the experiment, but he had no further success than we in increasing the number of salvageable eggs.

Purely in the interests of furthering Science, in obeisance to our fervent love of physiological efficiency perfected in the Scholar-Athlete—*and* because we have benefited so much from your generously shared secrets—I feel compelled to return a few of our own. I here humbly suggest a few supplements to your methodology that I think your Program, as well as your University, will find especially laudable:

One of the greatest risks in signing young athletes during their junior and senior years of high school is that one can never be sure they will live up to the expectations we hold for them. The elite high school athletes are not necessarily those eggs that we can be sure to collect at the end of an enthusiastic training day; this places an undue stress on our Program's purse-strings, since we must fund enough elite athletes to ensure success while knowing,

statistically speaking, that not all of them will perform as they have in the past.

Some money, as you well know, can be saved by forgoing medical diagnostic tests. I believe it was our Professor of Economics who once so aptly castigated our Doctor of Medicine, “If you can’t tell for sure if a bone is broken until it is broken, then wait until it breaks so there is no need for testing or the possibility of erring in the diagnosis.” Other funds can be augmented by placing pressure on underperforming Scholar-Athletes to bow out of their contractual obligations, thus freeing us from our half of the bargain and allowing them to pursue other interests or join the team again on a voluntary basis.

It has been our practice to invest these savings into younger, undamaged High School Scholar-Athletes (the juvenile form of the breed), but recent developments have proven extremely lucrative; these advances are what I excitedly share with you today. It is common knowledge that your University aims to equal ours as a top research Institution, therefore I suggest that you, like us, direct these monetary savings into exploratory research that will not only help propel your University into the forefront of avant-garde developmental science (complete with potentially astronomical returns), it will also help reap the most return from monetary investments in current Scholar-Athletes’ contracts.

We have developed delicate techniques to recycle the healthy parts of injured or underperforming athletes. I dare not go into the procedural details at present for fear that this letter may fall into a competitor’s hands, but suffice it to say that it would revolutionize the sports industry beyond all recognition if it got out. And it works! Using our new procedure, we cultured fast-twitch muscle tissue samples of a sprinter who broke his leg and was out for his spring season and surgically implanted them into our starting baseball pitcher’s throwing arm, thereby enhancing the his fastball performance. The donor took several weeks to recover from the surgery, but it proved convenient for him since he could not compete during the spring anyway. Likewise, we fixed a wrestler this past winter who was in every physical aspect a perfect Adonis, but who had lost the mental nerve that is essential for elite competition. To correct his defect, we harvested the amygdala from an especially aggressive and currently miserable linebacker, out permanently with a torn Achilles, and planted it into the wrestler’s diencephalic region, thereby remedying both situations.

Indeed, it has proven to be such a successful technique that we are expanding our Health Services department

and adding clauses into the contracts that the High School future Scholar-Athletes sign, asking whether they'd like to voluntarily donate parts of their body that are superfluous to their own sport's performance. They will receive an advance, a waiver past the scholastic application procedure and our hearty thanks, if they agree.

No one involved in the projects of our Athletic and Research Departments has had a single objection to any part of the Procedure because all clearly see how this will revolutionize athletics, as well as medical treatment for patients suffering from diseases like Multiple Sclerosis and muscular dystrophy. The only dissenter to our current endeavors is, as you can guess, that clucking Professor of Whatever Subset of Philosophy it was he *used* to work in. He claims that our practices violate nationally standardized rules in the same manner as steroid use and exploits the Scholar-Athletes who trust in our ability to "capably sling them against the Stadium," as I recall he put it.

I deny that our Procedure resembles steroid usage, aside from the fact that we sometimes manipulate a Scholar-Athlete's hormones with those from a donor if his or her own prove inadequate, but this is merely a remedial medical treatment that we, as a University, feel incumbent to mitigate for the health of the Scholar-Athlete. As to exploitation, I attest that the High School future Scholar-Athletes know what they are signing up for, as they pay several visits to several Universities before *they choose* which to compete for. Furthermore, if, for example, a long-distance swimmer is injured, it has been observed that she usually suffers from the most dismal spirits because she cannot contribute to her team. Under our new directive, she now can have the satisfaction of knowing that while she heals, a star soccer player has benefited from receiving some of her slow-twitch muscle fibers and a transfusion of her hemoglobin, both of which increased his endurance and helped him lead our University's soccer team to the National Championships.

Nonetheless, the criticism remains that we go too far in our quest for excellence. But I argue the reverse—we do not go far enough! Far from curbing natural selection in the athletic training process, our combined successes suggest, nay, *compel* us to pursue its maximum benefits. Why limit our quest for building the Ultimate Athletic Program by pulling only from the reservoir of current High School Athletes? Many of them have talents that are simply the result of a freak genetic combination from parents who probably could not block a fork if you threw it at their eyes. Since our egg-chucking experiment preserved the most naturally fit Scholar-Athletes, I propose that our Universities pursue the tenets of natural selection to the furthest possible means by encouraging evolution via sexual selection among the most fit of our male and female Scholar-Athletes. We will breed a race of Super-Scholar-

Athletes.

I have never had the honor of setting foot on your campus and hence cannot make specific suggestions toward reorganizing your Scholar-Athletes' living quarters, but I think that both of our Universities should construct buildings designed specifically for such breeding purposes. I would like to add that it may be beneficial to separate the sexes in such an enterprise so that females may more easily discern which among the competing male suitors is the most fit and worthy of passing on his genes. Additionally, housing females together in such social settings would give the aroused males an assured place to go to find a potential mate, thus increasing the likelihood of social interaction and reproductive success. Conservationists have shown that creating artificial structures to increase the probability of interaction works remarkably well for slowly propagating endangered species.

To preserve the sanity of the females, who, I imagine, may easily tire from such constant solicitation by amorous males, I would further add that we should heed Nature's design for many reproductively successful species by instituting a seasonal mating period—in our case, an *off*-seasonal mating period. If the male Scholar-Athletes (and, undoubtedly, non-Scholar-Athletes posing as such), were required to leave the single-sex housing structures at a certain time every night, it would give the breeding females a much-needed reprieve. Furthermore, it would allow the fertilized eggs a chance to develop overnight without the risk of miscarriage due to excessive liquid consumption (our Scholar-Athletes swear by Gatorade, and I fear electrolyte imbalances) or overexertion in other social activities.

Obviously, it may hurt the Athletic Program if its best female Scholar-Athletes were not training during part of the off-season, but the long-term benefits of successful breeding outweigh the current costs. Anticipating competitor Universities' desire to recruit the future generations of Super-Scholar-Athletes, we have added a Rumpelstiltskin clause in our current Scholar-Athlete contracts binding all offspring from such unions to our University. In time, we foresee great waves of elite Super-Scholar-Athletes coming into our Program, brought up in its values and training and bred from elite genes so that they can properly withstand any physical stress prescribed by coaches.

It seemed impertinent to revise the methods of such a bastion of Athletic and Academic Excellence, but our University has benefited so much from imitating yours that I felt it only right to return the opportunity to improve. I urge you to follow us in our return to glory and I look forward to pitting our Elite of elite Scholar-Athletes against yours in brotherly competition. I have every confidence in your ability to keep our scientific advancements to

yourself and will do the same in return. Perpetually, I remain

Your most ardent admirer,

Ravenna Swiftfoot





