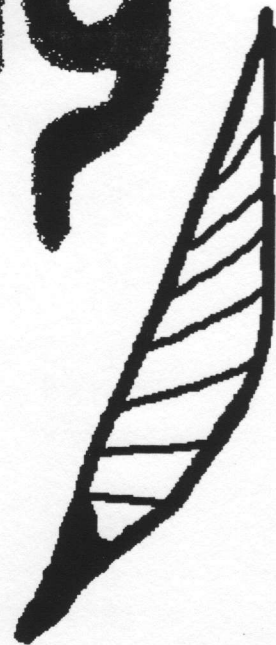
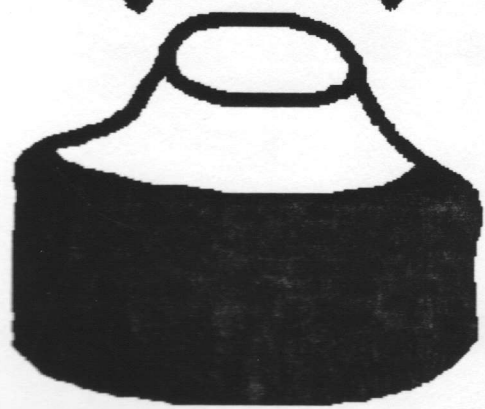


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Drippings
From The
Inkwell
Spring 99



Drippings from the Inkwell

Volume 5

Spring 1999

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Internal Anthropology

by Thomas Alfera

I am thinking now of an abbreviated chautauqua--reminiscent of the tent shows of old that used to travel across America, our America, providing education and entertainment on particular topics--one that contains the informational, educational, spiritual, and live elements in an essay format. For this chautauqua my intention is to discover designs, stir up the ghosts of intention and ultimately reveal the truth, my truth, about why I put pen to paper, or in my case, fingers on the keyboard. This paper is, specifically, then, more about intentions than processes. Processes are necessary and functional, but limited in their potential as an interesting topic. Write, rewrite, edit, cut, add, rewrite, organize, rewrite, and hand in, are essential elements, a means of achieving a satisfying end, but they only explain the technical aspects of writing while they avoid altogether the intentions, motivations and rationale for writing in the first place, which is what this chautauqua hopes to reveal.

In her self-effacing essay, Joan Didion comments on the limited access to her own mind acting as a catalyst to write. Writing becomes, then, a means of self discovery. For Didion there is a need to draw meaning from the emotional response brought on by an object that attracts her attention. This emotional response then bridges the gap between an object's reality and what it means to her. Furthermore, her

emotional response also dictates the tone she will use in a potential fictional story. This needs some unpacking. Didion writes, for example, of the sinister feeling she associates with an oil refinery. Through writing about her feelings regarding the picture in her mind of the oil refinery she may discover that her feelings can be traced to an unpleasant experience with an oil can or an oil man, etc. The important thing is that she uses writing to discover what lies beneath the surface and to trigger a particular emotional response associated with a given object. It may be that the sinister feeling has fictional implications as well and sets the mood for a story that develops. Perhaps a macabre murder mystery, or a conspiracy story where the oil company poisons the water supply of the local town but lies to preserve its image of corporate integrity. Whatever the story becomes, its mood and the words she chooses all stem from her initial emotional response to the image of the refinery.

This type of self discovery, or cathartic writing, has proven itself to be an invaluable tool in my life as well. It has resulted in poetry, song lyrics, revealing prose and sometimes combinations thereof. I remember witnessing the imploding of The Soreno Hotel in St. Petersburg, Florida, in the summer of 1989. The act itself moved me. I was sad but could not articulate exactly why until I began to dig a little

"Come to Dinner," said she.

deeper with my knife of rationale. The Soreno opened its doors in 1908 and served as a vacation haven for the wealthy, white, elite of the South for years. After World War II Jewish people were granted access to its posh offerings. After 1970 Blacks were finally allowed to grace its hallowed halls as guests. For the better part of a century, The Soreno stood as a microcosmic example of the changes that our nation went through and principles we've stood for until its destruction. My friends and I met weekly, sometimes more, at Ollie O's, the restaurant on the first floor of the hotel, for breakfast for three years. We shared the restaurant with Blacks, Hispanics, Jews, Yippies, Yuppies, old folks, young folks, and any other kind of folks one can imagine. On the yellowed walls were framed headlines and front page newspaper stories that bore testimony to a century of change and growth as a community, and as a nation. The Soreno was the embodiment of who we were and what we had become as a society. It was as if the destruction stood for more than simply clearing space for the new Cineplex--it was personal: a washing away of memories and a willful attempt to erase the past, our past. *Goodbye to The Soreno*, a cathartic poem, helped me understand the intense feelings of sadness I had as I witnessed the hotel's destruction. It is with this story in mind that I value writing as a means of self discovery.

In her essay, *Push It*, Annie Dillard states emphatically that as writers our primary purpose is to give voice to our own astonishment. This is reminiscent of a sentiment echoed over a century earlier by Ralph Waldo Emerson about genius. Paraphrasing here, Emerson

believed genius to be the ability to recognize and give voice to one's own thoughts because they belong to one personally. The emphasis here is on personal feelings and the thoughts that result. The power of these thoughts coupled with the imagination can arm one with the capacity to empathize, thereby transporting one into any number of "real life" situations. For example, Dillard says, "write as if you were dying," or "write about winter in the summer." This type of writing has proven itself a valuable tool for writers for centuries. Shakespeare wrote convincingly about the lives of warriors and yet he was never a soldier, just as Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote convincingly about the life of the southern slaves' experience from her home in Connecticut.

I too have been the beneficiary of this style of writing. *Opinions*, a song lyric, is the story of a man who lives on the street while I have, as yet, remained fortunate enough to avoid this particular fate. *Tienneman Square*, also a song lyric, is the story of a female student who has the misfortune of living under communist rule in a time of democratic fervency in China. I have never lived under communist rule but I can empathize with those who do and wish they didn't.

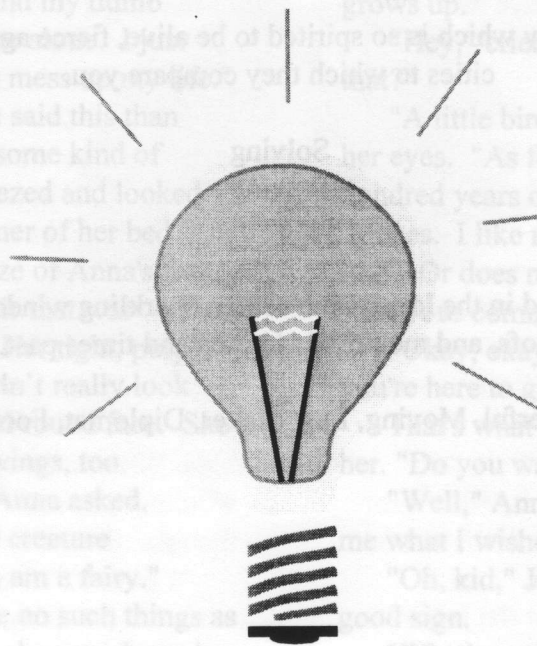
Using writing as a vehicle to voice one's own astonishment, anxiety, fear, frustration, or whatever, affords a clarity that may not otherwise exist. This allows one the unique opportunity of revisiting a painful or pleasurable experience with a fair amount of resolution, hence recalling why they may or may not have liked something or someone. Furthermore, putting thoughts

and feelings into written words allows others to relate as well validating their own unspoken truths. How many times have we heard *Positively 4th Street*, by Bob Dylan, and said to ourselves, "Oh yeah, I know people like that."

*

I'd like to close this brief chautauqua by altering Francine Gray's declaration that she writes as a revenge against reality. I'd prefer to say that writing is the defense against the disintegration of reality. A need for permanence and continuity lay the groundwork for my writing. Time, the enemy, erases thoughts and memory provides a distorted, unreliable recollection of the past. I wake up in the middle of the night with an idea and go back to bed thinking I'll remember it in the morning only to forget it as soon as my head hits the pillow. In contrast, I write a thought

down on a restaurant receipt and stuff it in my wallet, revisit it months later and it becomes an idea worth developing. There is a constant and epic battle taking place between two worlds. The world of ideas struggles for recognition against its arch enemy, distraction: a lawn mower outside my window, the cat jumping on my lap, or, worst of all, the telephone. Distractions team together with time to force an idea into memory space where it is doomed to wither away and be forgotten forever. Make no mistake, when I put my pencil to paper and give an idea life it is a matter of survival. More specifically, a matter of defense against the disintegration of a specific moment in time. Within this framework I can readily see where I'm from, what has happened in the past, and how it has shaped my feelings, regarding various subject matter, today.



The following was inspired by Carl Sandburg's poem, "Chicago."

Washintgon, D.C.

by Elizabeth Cusin

A Focus of the Nation

Law Maker, Diplomat

Center of Business

Strong, Powerful, Moving,

City of the Big Decisions.

I have driven through your congested streets, walking by where the homeless
sleep, tired from last night, haunted by the thoughts of what today
may bring.

I have heard of the crime which fills your veins through gangs, drugs, and guns,
the anxiety and pain the victims feel.

So many have scorned you, blinding themselves from the beauty in your heart.

Find me another city which is so spirited to be alive, fierce against the soft little
cities to which they compare you.

Solving
Raising
Renewing

Your splendor found in the long green center, sparkling windows, green copper
roofs, and memorials to men and times past.

Proud to be Strong, Powerful, Moving, Law Maker, Diplomat, Focus of the Nation.

Careful! Wishes *Do* Come True

by E. Gin McCartney

Anna had been in a bad mood all day. First, she woke up feeling all sick, but her parents made her go to school anyway. Then, she tried to catch a fly ball during the baseball game at recess but got tangled up in the jump rope that the other girls were playing with and fell. She had to go to the nurse to get the blood to stop coming out from the cut in her knee, but the nurse used this stuff that just made it burn a lot. Then, she got home to find no one there. After a few hours, her parents came home. Her Dad made liver for dinner, so Anna didn't eat much. And, after dinner, her parents sat down and told her that they were all moving to another state. Now, Anna got into bed and cried.

"I don't want to go away," she said to herself. "I just wish those dumb girls and that dumb nurse and my dumb parents would leave me alone. I just wish they all wouldn't mess up my life."

No sooner had she said this than Anna was covered in some kind of sparkly dust. She sneezed and looked up. Sitting on the corner of her bed was a creature about the size of Anna's foot. She had long white hair that was streaked with purple. Her tight, purple shirt and torn jeans didn't really look good with her beautiful round face. She had pointed ears and wings, too.

"What are you?" Anna asked.

In a soft voice, the creature answered, "I, my dear, am a fairy."

"A fairy? There are no such things as fairies." Anna thought she was dreaming or something. Maybe it was the liver she'd eaten for dinner. Liver always did funny things to her. She knew that

fairies didn't exist, but the fairy got a little upset at the idea.

"Oh, really?" The fairy raised her voice and cried, "Then what do you *think* I am, a cow? Look, kid, my name is Jana, and I am here to give you your wish. If you don't want to believe that I'm really here, then don't, and I'll be on my merry way. So, what's it gonna be? Am I real enough for you? Heck, I'm standing right here. What else do you need?"

"Well," Anna thought out loud, "you do have wings like a fairy. And those ears are definitely fairy ears. Aren't you supposed to be wearing a dress or something?"

"Oh, yeah," Jana laughed, "this coming from the only girl in her class that wants to play baseball when she grows up."

"Hey," cried Anna, "how'd you know that?"

"A little bird told me," Jana rolled her eyes. "As for the dress, I'm only a hundred years old. Only old fairies wear dresses. I like my comfy jeans. You like? Or does my *fashion* sense clash with your common sense?"

"Okay, okay. I believe you. So, you're here to give me my wish, huh?"

That's what I said, kid," Jana told her. "Do you want it?"

"Well," Anna thought about it. "Tell me what I wished for again. I forgot."

"Oh, kid," Jana said, "that's not a good sign.

"What's not?"

"Why, you forgetting your wish, of course," Jana told her. "You see, if you've forgotten it, then it must not have

been what you really want. I have to be very careful about giving out these wishes. People make one, and it's not what they really want. You wouldn't believe how many times we've been sued by people who got what they asked for and then didn't want it."

"You've gotten *sued*?" Anna was surprised. Her mom was a lawyer and she knew that getting sued was bad. It meant that someone was really mad about something you did and wanted you to give them money to make up for it. "I don't understand why you can't just tell them you're sorry."

"What?" Jana was a little confused.

"Oh, nothing, I was just thinking about something my mom told me," Anna said.

"So, how about this wish?"

"Well," thought Anna, "I wished for people to stop screwing up my life, right? I don't think that's what I meant."

"Good," Jana told her. "To make that one come true, I would have had to send you to the desert to be alone for the rest of your life."

"Oh. Really?" Anna was a little surprised. "No wonder people sue you. Who would want to be stuck in the desert?"

"Exactly." A few minutes went by; then Jana asked, "So, do you have a wish? Or shall I leave now?"

"Can I reserve a wish," Anna asked, "and use it later?"

"Oh, I see," the smart little fairy chimed, "you want to think about it for the next fifty years, huh? Well, it won't work. Here are the rules:

1) adult wishes are not the job of fairies, only children's wishes;

2) age is nothing in deciding who is a child and who's an adult;

3) wishes are good for one year unless the person making the wish becomes an adult during that year;

4) wishes cannot be given away; and 5) no wish can harm another person.

Do you understand all of that, Anna?"

"Yes."

"So, would you like a wish?" Jana was getting impatient.

"I don't know," Anna told her. "Are you going to play a trick on me? Like sending me to the desert when all I want is for people to leave me alone?"

"Trick," cried Jana. "What trick? How much more alone can you get?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it." Anna wanted to be sure that her wish was perfect.

"Well, shall I come back later," Jana asked, "or can you think of one now?"

Anna thought and thought and thought, but every time she came close to making a wish, she found a loop hole in it that could really hurt her. She was going to wish for all the money in the world when she realized that if she had it *all*, the police would think that she stole it and put her in jail. She was going to wish that her parents wouldn't make her move, but then she thought that they would go away anyway. Then, she was going to wish that there was no such thing as jump rope, but her school had a jump-rope-a-thon every year to help sick kids. Without jump ropes, the sick kids wouldn't get any help. Finally, Anna thought of the perfect wish.

"I have it!" Anna was so excited. "I wish that I was the best baseball player ever!"

"Are you sure?" Jana asked her.

"Positive. I want to be the best baseball player in the world." Then, Anna asked if Jana could do it.

"Of course I can do it. Ready?" Jana pulled a little bag out of her pocket and opened it. "One wish, coming up

People of the Fairy Hall,
Listen to this child's call.
Grant her power above all,
To play the game of baseball!"

Jana threw more sparkly dust over Anna. "There. It's done."

Anna didn't feel any different, but her hands *looked* different. "What happened?" she asked.

"Take a look." Jana smiled proudly and pointed to the mirror.

Anna crawled out of bed and went to the mirror. She couldn't believe what she saw. Jana had turned her into someone else! She was a grown man!

"What's this?" Anna screamed. "Where's my body?"

"You wanted to be the greatest baseball player of all time. This is it. You are now Babe Ruth, the great player from the New York Yankees.

Congratulations!" And Jana flew out of the window.

Anna was in shock. She stared at the mirror for a long time, not saying a word. Then, she went back to bed and cried herself to sleep.



Road to Destiny by Dan Whitesides

"Oh I'm the type of guy who never settles down. I'm never in one place, I roam from town to town."

Kameron Greensworth Branderson hummed along to Dion's song as he drove down the road in the middle of the country he was in. He didn't even *know* what country he was in. Kameron was on the road way too much. It went with his job of traveling salesman. The last known location he knew of was Sioux City, Iowa. That was on the fifteenth. It was now the thirtieth. Kameron had no memory of what had happened in the last two weeks. The last thing he remembered was being at a party, downing a shot of Jack Daniels laced with cocaine. Then, the next thing he knew he was driving down this road. He could have been all the way around the world and not known about it.

"Well, I guess I'll just end up where I'll end up," Kameron said aloud as the song ended. He was driving in his red Ford Mustang, so that was good. He looked into the rear-view mirror. His suitcase was still there, full of the insignificant knickknacks he sold to make his living.

"Cheap pieces of junk," Kameron said with a sarcastic laugh. He switched to another station, since this one had died while he was making sure the car he was driving was his. But he couldn't find another station. All the buttons he had programmed into the radio couldn't get their signals. He flipped on the "search" command, and turned it off when the channel he had first been on went around

three times. Kameron drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Well, sir, you need to find something to do." He looked at the road ahead. Straight as an arrow. Same in the rear-view mirror as well. Kameron looked at the speedometer, and then the gas gauge. He was going forty-five miles per hour, and he had half a tank left.

"KGB, you're good for now, but if nothing shows up on this road soon, you're going to have to walk." He chuckled to himself. KGB, what a set of initials he had. His parents, Claire and Jimmy Branderson, had decided when they had their little bundle of joy to give him the initials KGB, after the Russian CIA. Claire and Jimmy already had the "G" (from Greensworth, Claire's maiden name) and the "B" (from Jimmy's last name, Branderson). So all they needed was a name that started with a "K." They decided to be different and go with Kameron, changing the first letter from a "C" to a "K." The nickname "KGB" had stuck with him since then.

KGB blinked his eyes, knocking him out of his memories. Still the straight, flat, road. No turns, no dips, no nothing. The landscape was as bleak as the road. Dirt. Brown, flat dirt. He flipped on cruise control, and took his foot off the pedal. He stretched and looked at his watch. Seven thirty. It would be getting dark soon.

"Hmmm. I wonder," Kameron said aloud. He let go of the wheel a second.

The car stayed on the road. He let go again for five seconds. The car stayed perfectly straight, which meant the alignment was perfect. He then took his hands off the steering wheel, and put them into his lap. The cruise control was still on, set at forty-five miles per hour, so his foot was off the gas. Kameron shifted slowly over to the passenger seat, eyeing the wheel, daring for it to move even a millimeter. KGB sat down in the passenger seat and looked at the road. Straight, flat, barren. The sun was still in the cloudless sky though it threatened to start falling soon. He stared out the window. Flat, brown wasteland. Not even a hill.

"I wonder," Kameron said again, "who built this road." Did he go crazy building it? KGB looked at the road again, and realized he felt tired. This straight road was beginning to bug him. But could he trust the road not to pull a curve on him while he slept? Thinking a minute, he was surprised that he could trust the road. He closed his eyes.

Kameron tried to go to sleep, but two things bothered him. First, he couldn't sleep in this position, and second, he couldn't sleep with this many clothes on. He turned around and looked at his suitcase, sitting on the seat. "That could go on the floor," he said aloud and tilted back the seat until the headrest was leaning on the back seat.

Before moving to the back seat he wondered, just for a brief second, if he should actually do this. Then he decided that Kameron Greensworth Branderson just didn't care anymore. He put the suitcase on the floor and laid down on the back seat, placing his head on the headrest of the laid-down seat. He then started to strip. First the black sports coat. Then the tie. Then the white dress

shirt, then the black T-shirt underneath that. He was naked from the waist up, and leaned forward to untie his shoes. As he leaned forward, his suitcase caught his eye. Kameron stared at the gold-plated clasp that kept his "knickknacks" from spilling out. And what expensive knickknacks they were. Just a kilogram of what he had in that suitcase cost two thousand dollars on the street. What was in that suitcase was worth more than the car he was sitting in, or him for that matter.

KGB reached to open the suitcase, but instead turned on the radio and put on the search command. He then took off his shoes and socks, and then his pants. He was now clad only in his underwear. He leaned back on the seat and fell asleep listening to the whine of the tires on the road, and watching the radio go through all of its stations in its databank, trying to find a signal that it could read...

While Kameron slept, he dreamt of his high school geometry class, where he had learned about parallel lines, and how they could never cross each other, and can go on forever, just like a number line, or a road...

KGB awoke from his dream with a jolt. He sat up quickly, making the car swerve. "Ahh!" he grunted in frustration, as he grabbed the wheel and sat back down in the driver's seat. It was now dark out, and there was no moon tonight. He looked at his watch; it showed nine o'clock. Kameron flipped on the headlights. The gas tank was now on the "E." The radio hadn't found a station yet; it was still going around like an endless circle, or two parallel lines, or a road...

Kameron turned off cruise control, and slammed his bare foot on the gas

pedal. The car jerked forward, engine racing. Sweat started creeping out of his skin, on his legs, arms, and groin. His back started sticking to the seat. And in the midst of all of this, Kameron was crying. Crying because he was alone, on a road that hadn't had a turn in the three hours he had been on it. Crying because it was dark. And crying, for the first time in his life, because he was scared. Scared because he knew if he ran out of gas, he would die out here, and nobody would know where he was, and he would die alone.

The speedometer was just passing one hundred and forty, twenty miles an hour short of the car's limit. The headlights ate up the road, that straight, straight road. KGB was bathed from head to foot in sweat. The tears flowed from his eyes. He was driving blind. He couldn't see the road, he couldn't read the speedometer, and he certainly couldn't read the sign that said "Caution: sharp turn ahead."

Kameron stopped crying, and switched over to screaming. Yelling because of anger at this road. He was going to beat this road, or die trying. The gas pedal was floored under his bare foot, then quickly switched over and floored the brake pedal, but by then he was already a quarter way down the cliff. He was going way too fast to negotiate the turn, so he flew straight off, and through the cheap wooden fence that protected the road from the cliff's edge.

Kameron Greensworth Branderson did several things as he fell to his death. The first thing he did was to stop screaming. He started laughing instead. Laughing at what he saw down below. Below him, where he was rapidly approaching, were several other cars that had been destroyed, that had flown off

the cliff before him, though he did not know when it had happened. Kameron was laughing, because he wasn't going to die alone, after all.

"I'M WITH YOOOOOOOOU!!!" he screamed. And hit the ground. He had not put his seatbelt on when he had woken up. He was ejected through the windshield, which sliced him to ribbons. He hit the ground, bones cracking and breaking and projecting through his sliced skin. A split second later, the car landed on top of him, crushing anything else he had that was fixed. Then the car exploded into flames. But if you could look under that car, and turn that lumpless mass of a person over, you would see a smile on his face, and you would think he was the happiest man alive.

In a house right next to where KGB's car had flown off, an old man smiled as well. He was over one hundred, but his memory was failing him after all the years, and he had lost count after that. He was pretty sure at least one hundred and ten, but after that he was not sure. He was smiling because he had built that road that Kameron had just flown off. KGB didn't know it, but he was right. Whoever built that road would go crazy doing it. And he did. So when the old man came to this cliff, crazy as a bedbug, he made the turn ninety degrees, knowing people would be more than anxious to get off the road after being on it for so long. They would be in a panic, and have the gas pedal floored. Five people had proved that to him. Five people in one hundred years was pretty good. He enjoyed waiting for the car, and enjoyed it as it took off the cliff. But what he most enjoyed was that he could see the people's faces turn from fear to happiness.

The old man started laughing, getting out of his rocking chair and going over to his shed where he kept the wood, the wood to make the fence that protected the road from the cliff. He would fix the fence, and then go to his rocking chair,

and rock and wait until somebody else flew off the road. Then he would fix it again,

And again,

And again...



Shadowfall
by Bryan Dieterich

The leaden sky, which had threatened rain since mid-day, at last unburdened itself as dusk fell upon the land. Throughout the borderlands, roadways rarely maintained even in the best of circumstances promptly flooded, their broken cobbles giving way beneath the torrential onslaught of nature.

"Cover that feed!" shouted Barak, a coarse woolen blanket held over his head to keep the rain from him. A stable boy ran past him toward the open corral, several pieces of burlap wrapped loosely around one arm. Cursing, Barak stomped back into the relative dryness of the stable, hanging the blanket over a stall door to dry. Running a hand through his thinning hair he looked to the sky, then spat into the wet dirt of the door yard.

Barak had managed the Inn of the Dove since he had inherited it from his father, a cursed drunkard of a man, some twenty years before. Standing near the boundary of the Empire, the Inn offered only a marginal trade, it being the final mark of the civilized world. To the south of the Inn lay untamed realms beyond even the formidable grasp of the Imperium. Muttering softly to himself, he watched as the young stablehand fumbled burlap over the open barrels of feed. Overhead, lightning crashed. Shaking his head, Barak turned, trotting back through the dooryard toward the warmth of the Inn.

Damn his father for settling at the edge of the world. Damn his dreams of easy wealth made far from the confines of the Imperial city states. And damn

him for chaining the cursed Inn to him, a millstone to wear around his neck long after the old bastard had passed from this world.

Yet like his father, Barak was not fond of the agents of the Empire, who came with their regulations and edicts. Not three years prior he had been forced to provide lodging for the Duke of Tarstallan, who had been traveling, unannounced, through the outlands for some reason or another. "Imperial business" was all Barak had been told, and, he considered, he had been lucky to receive that much information. Regardless, several days before the Duke's arrival, bondsman of the house of Tarstallan had arrived, insisting that Barak improve conditions around the Inn and surrender his own private quarters to the Duke. Insisted! After all, was the Inn not his to operate? He had not appreciated the intrusion then, and was not at all anxious to experience such an incident again, not as long as the task of running the Inn fell to him.

So it was that his mood soured considerably when a stableboy rushed into the kitchen with word that a mounted man in the dress of civilization approached the Inn.

*

The common room of the Inn of the Dove was unusually crowded, rain or no, its tables overflowing with men--the majority filthy--in stained overalls and straw hats, all jostling for the attention of the serving girls.

"This damnable weather," growled an immensely fat man entrenched at a table near the hearth. The bench upon which he sat groaned as he shifted his girth in order to catch the attention of those around him. Gesturing vaguely towards the door, he sneered, "Ruin the crops like as not."

"And when was the last time you set foot in the fields, Lazlo?" inquired an apparently ancient man seated at the head of the table.

Lazlo scowled at his companion's accompanying chuckle. "Aw, shut your mouth, Malkas," he grumbled.

The old man snorted, forking a chunk of venison into his mouth. "And what are ye laughing at, boy?" he asked, turning to the young man seated at his left. Unlike the others, the young man wore a thicker, fur-lined vest and leather britches. "When was the last time any of your pelts fetched more than ten pieces of silver? Nay, trapping yields no better profit than does farming these days."

The young man shrugged, smiling. "This is true, but it keeps one in better shape." With this he dropped Lazlo a sly wink. Again the table burst into laughter as the big man's face reddened.

"I...You..." Lazlo sputtered, waving his mug of ale at the younger man.

"Take heart, Lazlo," wheezed the old man. "You are among friends."

Lazlo's only response was a resounding belch as he slammed his drink back onto the table.

The door to the common room opened on a wave of rain, a thin wind threatening to tear it from the grasp of the stableboy as he pushed it open and turned, gesturing for another to enter. A tall figure, disheveled from the rain, pushed past the boy, removing a mud-stained cloak dripping with the wet. He

handed it to the boy along with a small coin bag. The boy bowed slightly, offering the man a shy smile, and gestured at the stairs leading to the rooms above the tavern. The newcomer nodded, mounting the stairs in silence.

"He was armed," muttered Lazlo.

"Aye," the trapper agreed. "And wealthy by the looks of him."

Another snorted. "Wealthy perhaps, but I saw no weapon."

Lazlo turned a scornful eye upon him.

"Boy," Malkus called. The stablehand turned, gathering the wet cloak in his arms. Malkus simply gestured at the stairs.

The boy shrugged. "I was told he carries the Imperial Seal."

"He was armed," Lazlo repeated.

At this the boy's eyes grew round. "Indeed he was. His mount carries weapons the likes of which I have never seen."

"Yer dripping all over the floor, boy," Malkus muttered.

Nodding, the boy quickly made his way toward the kitchen area, the wet cloak still cradled in his arms.

"I don't like this," Lazlo began, "I think--"

"I think you need another drink," Malkus interrupted. Raising his own stein, he offered a slight nod. "Lads...." Reluctantly, the other men accepted the toast.

*

Night fell upon the land, yet the storm showed no sign of abating. The Inn had emptied, all but a handful of men braving the weather to return home, muttering of saturated fields and flooded cellars.

The table by the hearth had emptied as well, though Lazlo and Malkus remained. The latter had lapsed into a sullen silence, speaking only when forced to do so. This did not dissuade Lazlo from commenting on a wide variety of topics, many which he knew little of and understood even less.

"So I told her, ye musn't...." He trailed off as he realized that he had lost the attention of his audience.

"What are ye--" he began. Malkus cut him off with a curt gesture, his eyes fixed on the archway leading to the stairs.

Lazlo turned and fell silent, watching in rapt awe as the stranger descended the stairs. His hair had been braided into a thick cable which hung halfway down his back. His shirt, open at the throat revealed a thin silver chain which encircled his neck. Belted around his left hip was a short bladed sword, its hilt wrapped in a white silken cord which knotted around the belt. In the larger cities of the Imperium this was known as a "peace knot," a gesture of good will.

"Bounty killer," the old man breathed, rubbing a grimed hand across the table. Others nodded; none met the newcomer's gaze.

"Loyal to the Emperor?" Lazlo questioned in a low voice, peering into his empty mug.

"Loyal to himself's more likely," someone muttered.

Malkus snorted, raising his glass to his lips. "I'd watch my tongue," he warned, taking in the group. "He's got a certain look about him, he does."

*

Barak himself stepped forward to meet the stranger, dropping into a low

bow as the man approached the bar. "Greetings, sir," he called out, setting a glass upon the polished oak plank.

Shaking his head, the man raised a hand. "You are very kind, but I must refrain. I come on Imperial business." His tone was cold.

Barak's smile faltered. "My lord?"

Reaching beneath the folds of his vest, the man withdrew a thin parchment case, laying it upon the bar. Barak looked at him questioningly.

"Perhaps we could speak in private?" he inquired.

Barak nodded, slowly removing the apron tied about him. He laid it upon the bar, refusing to acknowledge the sympathetic stares of the half dozen remaining customers.

"In the kitchen," Barak said thickly, gesturing for the man to step behind the bar. "We can speak in the kitchen."

*

"Damn the Imperium," Lazlo growled, rising from the table to throw open the shutters of a nearby window. Malkus shook his head, raising a hand to silence the obese man.

"Would you prefer the witchling ways of the southlanders?" inquired Jarkell the woodcutter, who had joined their party not long before. He was a tall, thin man who looked distinctly uncomfortable folded as he was into one of the high-backed chairs at the far end of the table. "I grow tired of your blasphemies."

Lazlo silently replaced the shutters, then returned to his seat, glowering at the woodcutter.

Malkus sighed, pushing his mug to the center of the table. "Perhaps we should return to our homes, gentle

friends. The hour grows late and the storm shows no sign of abating."

"Aye," Jarkell agreed. Rising from his chair he tossed several coins onto the table. "I grow weary of such company." Several others rose as well, Malkus among them.

He placed a hand on Lazlo's shoulder. "Come my friend, I am sure your wife wonders about you."

Snorting, Lazlo nodded. "Perhaps, yet I hate to travel in such foulness." He jerked a meaty hand toward the door.

*

"Leave us," Barak commanded the cook as he and the noble stranger entered the kitchen area. When the two of them stood alone he turned to face the man. "How may I be of service to you, my lord?" he asked bitterly. Already he envisioned the Inn overrun with courtiers and silk robed noblewomen.

"I am to meet several of my fellows here, if not this evening, then on the morrow," the nobleman replied.

Barak blinked, awaiting the inevitable.

"I will need quarters for at least a dozen men."

"And how long will you be staying?" Barak forced a smile upon his face.

"No more than the night," the stranger replied.

Barak tilted his head, not quite sure if he had heard correctly.

"A...One evening, sir?"

"That's correct. Our business is most pressing. Can you accommodate us?" His voice was flat, yet his eyes hinted at amusement, however slight.

Barak came back to himself with a start, nodding emphatically. "Most assuredly, my lord. I--"

He was interrupted as the stableboy, soaking wet, threw open the outer door.

"Name of the Gods, boy!" Barak thundered, grabbing the young man by the shoulders. "Ye bring the storm in with you."

"I am truly sorry," the boy managed, sketching half a bow at the nobleman. Then, turning to Barak he blurted, "Riders approach!"

"My fellows?" the stranger cut in.

The stableboy shrugged. "I would think not, sir, they approach from the south at great haste and do not wear such finery as yourself." Barak cuffed the boy, groaning inwardly.

The nobleman raised a hand impatiently. "It matters not," he told Barak, pushing past the boy to stand in the doorway, windswept rain lashing against him with stinging force.

Lightning lit the ravaged landscape, revealing three men on horseback galloping towards the Inn at great speed. The lead rider lashed his horse mercilessly as it tore through the wet sod, foam spraying from its jaws.

"Prepare for them, boy," the nobleman called, absently fingering the cord that bound his sword to its scabbard.

Barak slapped the stablehand on the backside as the boy ran back into the night to fling open the stable doors.

And then the three were thundering into the dooryard, swinging down from saddles before their beasts had fully come to a halt. They wore tattered cloaks over mail armor, red sashes belted around their waists. The lead rider bore a naked blade thrust through the sash so as to hang against his right hip. The others bore arms as well.

"Praise be to the Imperium!" shouted the smallest of the three, passing

into the warmth of the kitchen. His hair was cropped short and shot with gray, as was the thick beard that covered his face.

Barak fell back, busying himself with mugs of warm cider for the newcomers.

"We feared ourselves lost," said the man with the naked blade. Peeling the cloak from his shoulders, he gripped the nobleman by the arm.

"What of the rest of the company?" asked the nobleman.

The man lowered his head. "I am truly sorry, Yarin."

Yarin sighed deeply. "Tell me of it, then," he said in a low voice.

Barak placed the cider on a small table by the stove. "My lord," he began.

"Leave us," Yarin said shortly.

Nodding, Barak retreated to the far end of the kitchen.

*

"Baladran, our time is short," the bearded man warned.

"Aye," Baladran agreed, pulling the blade free from his sash. Leaning forward, he bowed low before Yarin. "My lord, I bring word of failure."

"Tell me of it," Yarin repeated impatiently.

"Very well, sir. We tracked the heretics to a small village no more than a day's ride beyond the border of our realm. We arrived just before shadowfall and rode directly into the village square as custom demands. Yet we were not greeted with the respect due emissaries of the Empire. Truth be told, we were not welcomed at all. The entire company was ignored as we rode among the people." He paused, licking his lips nervously.

"And with good reason," murmured the bearded man.

"And..." Yarin prodded. "What cause did these folk have to treat you so?"

Baladran cleared his throat. "The mark of unreason was upon them, my lord. Such horror we witnessed. The townsfolk were engaged in dark rituals and seemingly unaware of our arrival. They danced and cavorted with..." he licked his lips once more. "Inhuman beasts."

Yarin raised his brows, but before he could speak, Baladran raised a hand, continuing.

"Blood soaked the streets, flowing from sacrificial altars. Braziers burned throughout the square, casting strange shadows and unholy light upon the scene. The village folk themselves bore the mark of chaos. Truly this was the shelter that the heretics had sought.

"Our warrior priests were enraged and charged forward, engaging the enemy without care for personal safety. They sought only to purify. Thus engaged, we battled. Battled against the sheer insanity of all we had come to witness.

As Baladran fell silent, the shorter man placed a gauntleted hand upon his shoulder. "But we quickly fell, my lord, overpowered by the hellspawn," he said with downcast eyes.

"Aye," Baladran began again. "Those of us left alive reformed and fled. We were pursued. Again we attempted to stand, and more of our brethren fell. At last..." his voice shook. "We are all that remain," he finished simply, gesturing at his two remaining comrades. "We are all that remain," he repeated. "And their pursuit continues, even into Imperial realms."

"I fear we have placed you in danger, Lord Yarin," said the shorter man. "We dishonor you with our ineptitude. Our one hope was to encounter a border patrol. Perhaps with the aid of templars we would be able...." He shook his head slowly, eyes trained on the floor. "But this cursed storm--" He was silenced by the crack of timber quickly followed by the panicked shriek of horses.

Barak stumbled towards the door. He was unsure of these men, did not completely follow their talk. Yet he feared the southlands with all the superstitious dread of his ancestors. Baladran caught the stout innkeeper up in his arms and dragged him away from the door. "The stable," Barak groaned. "I must see to the animals."

"You must look to your patrons!" roared Baladran as he hurled Barak back towards the common room. He collapsed in a heap, hands raised as if to shield himself from further attack.

Now the screams of many horses filled the night, rising over the pounding storm like a swelling chorus of the damned. Rising, rising, and then ending raggedly as thunder crashed again.

Such is the price paid for failure, Yarin thought as he undid the cloth binding his saber.

Barak rose to his feet, looking at the men gathered in his kitchen with bewilderment. "What is this?" he roared, now crying himself. "What is this?" Turning, he pushed open the swinging door of the kitchen area and strode back into the common room.

Baladran dropped to his knees, presenting a defenseless neck. "My lord, we have failed both you and our Emperor. I beg--"

"We have no time for this," Yarin said, slowly drawing the saber.

"I beg you," Baladran began again. "To accept--"

"We have no time!" Yarin roared, dragging the kneeling man to his feet.

The outer door shook as a heavy blow fell upon it, then exploded inward in a shower of splinters, the storm entering quickly on its heels.

"No!" the shorter man spat defiantly, as if his denial alone could erase encroaching doom. And then a crouching shape filled the broken frame of the door. Lightning flashed on a chitinous shell lined with gleaming ridges of bone. Before the third guardsman could raise steel, the thing snaked forward, a ridged appendage grasping the man's upper thigh, jerking him back through the door and into the storm-swept blackness of the night, his cries drowned beneath the crash of thunder.

Roaring negation, the shorter man charged through the doorway after his fellow.

"Damned fool!" Yarin cursed.

"Erikson!" Baladran called out, but the man had already vanished into the storm, still shrieking denial at the violent loss of his companion.

*

Jarkell pushed open the door, scowling into the darkness. Shaking his head, he moved into the wet, pulling his cloak tighter about him.

"I'll have the boy ready my wagon," Lazlo muttered.

"You'll be soaked to the skin regardless." Malkus wheezed contemptuous laughter.

Lazlo snorted, pulling his own cloak over his shoulders. The others looked into the night, preparing for the inevitable.

"Perhaps I'll have another round after all," someone muttered. There was laughter.

"I swear," Malkus began, and then the shattered window on the far side of the room burst inward, daggers of glass and wood pinwheeling across the floor.

Barak stumbled into the common room, his face flushed. "What is this?" he yelled, his gaze traveling from the group clustered by the door to the shattered window. "What--" he stopped in mid-sentence as Jarkell pushed his way back through those gathered at the door.

"Shut it," he screamed. His face was pale, hair plastered to his skull from the rain. Grabbing the door he slammed it shut himself, a low moaning sound escaping the back of his throat. He turned, and his gaze fixed upon the window. The scream died in his throat. "Oh," he said softly.

"Have you all gone mad?" Barak roared, starting across the room.

A shape filled the broken window frame, lean and glistening with rain water. Tendrils of darkness seemed to flow from its form, as if it wore the night like a cloak. Barak stopped short, uttering a high, piercing laugh, then turned back toward the kitchen, waving a hand as if to dismiss the reality before him.

A thick, armlike appendage shot forward, circling the stout innkeeper's middle, and then pulled tight. He shrieked, falling to his knees as the beast, using Barak as an anchor, pulled itself into the Inn.

Barak toppled forward, unable to draw breath, as the creature first cleared the window, then flopped to the floor, slowly sliding toward him amidst an encroaching sea of blackness.

The innkeeper could not completely comprehend what it was that approached him. The nature of the creature was simply beyond his scope of reason. All he could really register was the darkness the rolled from its form in shimmering rivulets. And pain, a galaxy of pain originating from his midsection. Then it was upon him, and for a moment it seemed as if the darkness would part, allowing him a glimpse of the thing's true form. He barely felt several of his ribs give way, was oblivious to the sudden rush of blood that filled his mouth. The darkness was parting. Or was it that he was being drawn into it? A stern, agitated voice filled his mind.

"Father?" Barak wheezed. And then the blackness crashed over him and he knew no more.

The remaining patrons watched, mesmerized, as the thing fell upon Barak. As the dark covered the innkeeper like a funeral shroud, frenzied feeding sounds filled the room.

"Bolt the door!" Malkas cried in his trembling, old man's voice.

"Are ye mad?" Lazlo roared, grabbing the old man by the shoulder. "We'll be--" A heavy blow fell upon the door, scattering the men like quail. As one, they turned, flinching as the door shivered in its frame.

*

"They grow bold," Yarin said, rapping the hilt of his blade against the wall in frustration. "To attack emissaries

of the Imperium so close to the border!
To enter our very realms!"

Baladran kicked at the remains of the outer door, cursing his comrades' ineptitude; then, gathering himself, he turned to face his lord.

"Sir?" he inquired softly. From the common room Barak screamed.

"My lord," Baladran began again. Ignoring him, Yarin turned and pushed through the door, reentering the common room of the Inn.

A low hiss of disgust escaped his lips as his eyes fell upon the wet form beneath the open window. It raised its head briefly, then seemed to dismiss the nobleman, returning its concentration to the feast beneath it.

"What are we to do?" Malkas shrieked, his wrinkled face filled with fear and loathing.

Ignoring him, Yarin stepped toward the shattered window, his feet grinding broken glass beneath their heavy tread. Baladran moved to stand between Yarin and the shadow beast, his own blade drawn, though it seemed to tremble in his hand.

"If you wish to redeem yourself, then do so here, through combat," Yarin said harshly. "If, upon our return to the North, you still wish to give up your life in atonement, then perhaps I will consider." Turning to the men clustered around the door, Yarin raised his arms, as if in benediction. "Arm yourselves, if possible. Here, in the name of the

Imperium, we shall make a stand." His eyes swept the remaining men.

Malkas snorted contemptuous laughter that shrilled with hysteria. "Will we?"

In the corner, Jarkell wept softly.

At last the creature beneath the window began to drag itself upright, a keening wail that seemed to reverberate more in the mind than in the ear issuing from its shadowy form.

"What choice do we have?" Yarin countered.

As if in response, the door shivered as a series of heavy blows fell upon it.

"Damn you," Malkas growled.

Yarin drew a dagger, tossing it toward the older man with practiced ease. Dropping it at his feet, Malkas stared at the knife as if unsure of its purpose. Pushing him aside, Lazlo bent, snatching up the knife, then took a wavering step towards the center of the room. As he did so, the frame of the door buckled, jagged shards of wood splintering away on either side. The fat man froze, a look of near comic uncertainty stamped upon his features.

The door burst inward.

*

Outside, lightning shattered the darkness.

"Mad Jack, the Be-Bob Cat"

by Richard Hoffman

When I think of Jack
in a big, black
Cadillac,
I want to go back
to meet Jack,
'cause he had this knack
for bringin' it all back
into focus in white and black
in a crusty old notebook-paperback,
that he carried on his back
in a beat old knapsack
from Frisco to Hackensack
and back,
or up in a mountain shack,
no heat and walls a-crack,
with literary attack
from those who lack
any knowledge of Jack,
and they call 'im a hack,
but I want to meet old Jack
Kerouac.

The Mall
By Bonnie Cashdollar

"I'm in deep. I have been in trouble before but never ever like this. I look bad, real bad, real bad. My situation, my name is Michael West, the public I am known by a lot, the ever amazing Michael West, Metro City's first line of defense. I am a self-appointed vigilante and things aren't going too well. My deadliest enemy, Dr. Impersonator, has taken out my identity and has kidnapped my daughter Ashley. I went looking for her, fell into his trap. My daughter is dead and it looks like I am next on his agenda."

Excuse me, sir! But you are on the agenda at work?"

OK, I'll level with you, I am not Metro City's first line of defense. I am not a hero, but I am Michael West. So here goes. I am a college student and I work in a comic shop and sometimes, time, my mind likes to wander. Unfortunately it had to wander. I have no clue what is going on with the customer as quickly as possible. Anyway, here is my story. Like I said before, I am Michael West, Metro City's first line of defense, born and raised outside of Metro City in a town called Navicovia, population 2,500 including the cows. Yippee! I attend Metro University where I am majoring in marketing and I am a masters in screwing things up. I like this, I have a tendency of screwing things up to be put in nicely. No, I am not a fat guy, I have a 3.3 GPA. I am a fat guy, and no matter how much I diet, it just won't happen. It's my way. This is my agenda:

fat women curlers
screaming babies loud
designer labels skinny asses
teenagers haughty proud
credit cash checks theft
mass of crowds crowding masses
claustrophobic hordes
chattel herded store to store
sale sale sale
come buy this
you gotta have that
don't be left out now!

Cash checks theft your credit's good at any store
president's day columbus day
halloween in august
have your picture taken with santa
fat screaming loud
you don't dare be seen without your head or chest or feet
covered with someone else's name
you really aren't complete
layaway
pay some day
have now what you cannot buy, what you do not need
black Friday, blue light special, red tag sale today
feeding frenzy food court
burger king reigns supreme
fat gross stuffing mouths
super size that please
attention all shoppers attention all shoppers

the mall will be closing soon
chattel herded out the door

I think I'll take a rain check.

Jaulpolaris Now

by Thomas M. Read

" I'm in deep. I have been in trouble before but never ever like this. From the looks of it, I look bad, real bad. Here is the situation; my name is Michael West but to the public I am known by a different name, the ever amazing Mauldoon; Metro City's first line of defense. I am a self-appointed vigilante and things aren't going too well. My deadliest enemy, Dr. Infinity, has found out my identity and has kidnapped my daughter Ashley. I went looking for him and fell into his trap. My daughter is already dead and it looks like I am next on his evil agenda.

Excuse me, sir! But you don't have an agenda at work?"

OK, I'll level with you, I am not Metro City's first line of defense. I am not a super hero, but I am Michael West. So here we go. I am a college student and I work in a comic shop and sometimes, well all the time, my mind likes to... well, wander. Unfortunately it had to wander at work and I have no clue what is going on. I deal with the customer as quickly as possible. Anyway, here is my story.

Like I said before, I am Michael West, Metro City's first line of stupidity. I was born and raised outside of Metro in a little town called Navicovia, population 2,500 including the cows. Yippee yah-ki-ah! I attend Metro University where I am majoring in marketing and what seems to be a masters in screwing things up. Let's put it like this, I have a tendency of screwing things up to put it nicely. Now, it is not like I am stupid; I have a 3.3 GPA but sometimes I just lack common sense. Here is my example and my current problem. Women. Now did you know that would happen?

Here's the skinny. Through some

miracle of the will of whoever is in charge I have a girlfriend. Now, I am not a bad guy or anything but my own mother gets tired of my craziness after ten minutes. See, the thing is I have no internal monologue. I am the type of person that says things instead of just thinks them. It is like a bad Saturday Night Live skit sometimes, especially when dealing with the fairer sex. Let me tell you one thing, when a woman asks you what is on your mind, never tell them what really is. We all know what is on a man's mind, but it doesn't have to be broadcasted to women. I am still trying to figure this simple thing out.

Anyway, I have been going out with Jessica for like seven months now. I call her Jessie, she hates it. The only reason I do this is because the Flash's daughter's name is Jessie. I read way too many comics and it shows. I am the most animated person I know and this is not a good thing. Oops, that was a little bit of a tangent, see I do this all the time. You are talking to a kid that for his senior history paper in high school compared Superman to Christopher Columbus in that they both were pioneers of new worlds. Superman started the world of heroes and Columbus discovered America plain and simple. I got an A- on the paper, by the way. OK, where was I? Right, Jessie.

The thing is I like her and all, not sure if it is love; cause who knows nowadays? I mean out of all my friends, my parents are the only parents that are still together. Anyway, I enjoy her company and that should be enough, well it is enough for me. She on the other hand wants it all; the picket fence, the house, two point five kids...what the hell does point five of a kid look like anyway? Is it like half, or the innards or...

Drippings from the Inkwell

well, you get the point. The thing is she is too dedicated to me, and that scares me a bit. I don't want to hurt her and I am afraid that I might lead her on sometimes. It is not intentional but it happens accidentally, sometimes. See, I want to keep her around, but not forever. She asked me one day, "What do you think about us in the future?" I knew I was screwed either way so I thought, What would my mentor do in this situation? Then I realized that Batman wouldn't be in this situation and if he was he would have a batarang or something. I checked my pockets, no batarang or Mauldoon-a-rangs here. (If I was a hero I'd have a Mauldoon-a-rang, it is like a batarang but it is shaped like an "M.") So I say the first thing that pops into my head, "What, do you honestly think we are going to get married or something, cause frankly I don't see that happening." This is immediately followed by a knee to my groin, I deserve it. We then patched things up and everything was honkey dory again. There has got to be a limit to the number of times that you can flush a relationship down the toilet and not have it come back up. Coincidentally I am on the number 714 right now and she still keeps coming back. Either I am much better looking than others say or she has the impression that I am rich.

I look over the lab and I see her, now it falls into place. The whole situation is ironic since Dr. Infinity created me. See, Dr. Infinity accidentally killed my wife, Lois, without knowing it years ago. But not before she left me with my Ashley. Upon my Lois's death I took up the mantle of Mauldoon which was once my grandfather's and dedicated myself to stopping Infinity. That was nine years ago. Nine long years of lying to the people I loved and cared about. Nine years of leaving Ashley with sitters so I could try to stop Infinity. And I thought I

did five years ago.

Our second to last battle pitted us together evenly for once. Due to the fact that the re-generate serum that Infinity takes to keep himself young was failing. He no longer had any of his powers. Now it was just two men whaling away at each other. Without his formula, Dr. Infinity is close to 80. I am 35. I crush him easily but at the last minute I don't kill him. My first big mistake. I simply break his neck and put him in a coma for four long years. Who knew that the coma would heal his body and his serum would kick in again. He woke up yesterday at full power and began tearing my city apart. Yesterday was pretty bad, my current girlfriend, Laura, turned out to be Infinity's daughter. When she saw me change to go after her father she took my daughter and set me up. This gets us to now. Women.

See, even my imaginary alter-ego has women problems. I told you I am a marketing major, but what I really want to do is write comics. I got to the second round in the Image Comics submissions department, but my proposal was shot apart. Live and learn. Anyway, this is my woman problems. See...well... the thing is IgotAThingForMyGirlfriend'sRoommate! Well, I feel better now. Let's see if I can slow this down...I-got-a-thing-for-my-girlfriend's-roommate. That's better but not good. Come on, you can say it, it is a bit weird. I know it, you know it, society knows it. But like my friend says, "Whata gonna do?" Now, it is not like I don't care for Jessie, but well her roommate, Tiara, is really, really nice too. You can like two women at once, but you can't date them. It is like going to Burger King, you might be able to look at the menu, but you sure can't order from it. I have been up front about it, hell, I told Tiara that I wanted a shot at her

Drippings from the Inkwell

in front of Jessie. They thought it was a joke. Live and learn. The point is I was truthful, they just don't think I was serious. Let me expand on this. Tiara works as a waitress late at night, Jessie doesn't work. Anytime Tiara works, I...I...OK, I get rid of Jessie early and I go up and see Tiara. Now, Jessie doesn't know this, she gets a bit jealous. She is so jealous in fact, that when I told her she doesn't fold laundry like my mom, she flipped out. She was actually jealous of my mom. Remember, no matter how old you are, nothing separates a mothers from her son. Even though it is completely innocent when I see Tiara, I couldn't tell Jessie. I wish I was like Spider-man or something. See, he has a mask so he gets to date women when he is Peter Parker and date super-heroines when he is Spidey. Now that is the life. Unfortunately, I am not Spider-man, it would be cool though, so I can't do this. It really doesn't matter though since Tiara doesn't know I am interested in her. Live and learn.

Infinity comes up to me and asks me how I have been these last four years. I say nothing. This has nothing to do with the fact that I can hardly breathe since I have been beaten so badly. I see Laura look over at me and away. I loved her, but she killed my daughter and her father killed my wife. That I can never forget. Even if Infinity killed Ashley, Laura still brought her here. There is sadness in her eyes, but I cannot worry about that now. My time is almost up.

She is going to kill me, I am late again. I cannot keep this up. I get up at 6:30 am to get ready for class, I go to classes, see Jessie, and then go see Tiara. I don't go to sleep until about 2:00 am. I cannot keep this up. You know, if I was as fast as the Flash I could do a whole day's work in about 3 minutes. Cool. OK, where was I? Oh yeah, lack of sleep. It finally caught up to me

yesterday, I accidentally called Jessie by Tiara's name. Not good. Not good at all. We were at my apartment when it happened. The way she was screaming my roommates thought the apocalypse was coming. Well, she knocked over my desk and all my books on it. I wouldn't have been too angry except they all landed on my foot. Yeah, I need a broken foot now. My roommates Marcus and Steve took me to the hospital.

We got there and they x-rayed my foot. A nurse did the x-rays. She asked me how this happened so I told her my tragic tale. She wasn't the least bit amused, I forgot that women stick-up for each other. I watch the sharp tools on the table, just in case she tries to stab me for women everywhere. She told me the foot wasn't broken, just three of my toes. I really needed this.

I look over at Ashley's body again. I can hardly see her through my tears. Then Infinity tells me to look at the display screen. I look at the screen as it lowers. It is of Metro City, population 7.78 million, including all the wackos. He tells me he is about to destroy the city to make it pay for letting me operate all these years. I try to explain that the police aren't too fond of me, just look the other way. He isn't listening. I ask him why he hates me so, how can a man hate so much? His answer? He just says, "Because I can." Then he laughs. I really don't need this now.

I got out of the x-ray room and I am on crutches. Oh how fun. My roommates helped me to the car. I got some lectures on my stupidity and a few smacks on the back of the head. I deserved that. We got back to the house and Tiara was there. I really need her, but not then and not in this situation. We sat down and talked a bit. I can hardly concentrate on her as she talked, she is beautiful. She explained that she didn't know I was interested in her, she just figured

Drippings from the Inkwell

I was mouthy. She then said that I was a nice guy but... this is where I tried to cut her off. Every man knows what "you're a nice guy but..." means. It means that you are never gonna win. Look it up in the dictionary, I swear that's what it says. Go ahead, I'll wait. She continued again and said that she thinks of me as a friend but could never even consider going out with me because of my "late" relationship with Jessie. She looked at me and told me to get some sleep and to get better. At the same time that she walks out of the apartment, I know that she is walking out of my life. I may deserve it, but I don't deserve this much pain. That was a real crappy day.

The day is not going well, my daughter is dead, my girlfriend has turned on me, my arch-enemy is back, Metro City is about to be destroyed and I cut myself shaving. It was a deep cut and I put aftershave on it. Sometimes the best way to keep calm is to make light of a situation to keep your sanity. Of course how sane am I to dress up in tights and fight crime huh? I look at the screen and I see all the faces of innocent people who don't even know what is going to happen. I see a young man, what looks like his wife and daughter. They look like Lois and Ashley. I may be beat, I may have brought this upon myself, but I am not going to allow innocent people to take the rap for me.

I got up and hobbled to the door. My roommate looked over and asked where I was going. I told him I was going over to Jessie and Tiara to apologize. He then told me not to hit on any women on the way over. Jerk. The walk over seemed to take forever. When I finally got there I heard screaming. I went to the door and they were fighting with each other. Then it clicked, I had to own up to this. I broke them up but managed to knock over a lamp onto my foot.

It had to land on my bad foot you know. I sat down and explained that Tiara and I never did anything and that she didn't even know that I was interested in her. We settled some things, it took hours. Jessie wasn't very happy at me still, but was on good terms with Tiara then. The last thing I wanted to do was come between two people. Jessie and I were going to try to work things out. I owed her that much. I guess I really did care about her. I still have the hots for Tiara, but let's not talk about that now. I guess everything ended up OK.

Things are not OK. The bomb that is going to level Metro is set to go off in under five minutes. At this time, Infinity takes his leave to escape the blast and Laura goes with him. Before she leaves she comes over to where I am imprisoned and slips me one last kiss. She then tells me that she took Ashley to keep her away from me in case her father came after her. Unfortunately, Infinity found her and took them both here. In the end, Infinity killed my daughter and Laura tried to stop him. Infinity then tells me that I am in chains to watch the city I love be destroyed. The level of wherever I am is a bomb shelter so I will survive. He tells me that he took away my wife and daughter and I didn't break. So he has decided to destroy my city to finally break me. After the bomb goes off and I am broken, he will find me and destroy me. He wants to watch me suffer first. He laughs and takes Laura with him against her will and they leave. Finally they are gone. The clock has 15 minutes left and I smile. A bomb is going to destroy Metro and I smile wider. Through my teeth a lock-pick appears. Laura slipped it to me when she kissed me. Gotta love that girl. I spit out the pick into the air and I manage to move my hand just far enough to catch it. I undo the locks and I head towards the bomb

Drippings from the Inkwell

locale. It must be near the center of town, Kale Plaza. I burst out and start swinging across town. By the time I reach Kale Plaza, I have a little over 50 seconds left. I find the bomb immediately, you would have to be an idiot to miss it. I look it all over and I realize that I have no idea how to turn off the bomb. There are no wires and I have ten seconds left. Then it hits me like a mule kick to the groin. There is an "off" switch on the bottom of the bomb. I can't believe my luck and I turn it off with two seconds to spare. The city goes on like before since no one knows what just could have happened. then I realized that I have still lost my daughter's life and I have no idea about Laura.

I go back to Infinity's hideout to pick up my daughter's body and I hear shallow breathing. Ashley is still alive. Infinity just heavily drugged her to make it look like she was dead. Infinity may wipe-out a whole city of nameless people but not even he would kill a small child he knows. She looks up at me and smiles. I just smile and cry.

All is well, I am still alive, beaten beyond belief, but still alive. Ashley is alive and unharmed, she starts the third grade tomorrow. The city is safe and well as it ever has been. Laura is gone, but I'll find

her and stop Infinity. She risked her life to save me and the city. If Infinity ever found out that she slipped me the pick, he'll kill her. I pray he never finds out. It started out as a crappy day, but it all worked out in the end. I'll find Laura again and we'll see what happens. You have to be an optimist.

Well, it didn't work out. She finally got fed up with me and now Jessie and I are done. Probably for the best. Although I don't know if I'll ever find a replacement for her. At this time I trip on my crutch and fall down some stairs in front of Kirby Hall coming from marketing. Someone picks up my stuff and helps me up. I look at her and she is an angel. She asks if I am OK. I tell her I have had a rough couple of days. She then asks if I have any plans for dinner. I tell her no. She invites me over for dinner and we head out. Her name is Gwen. I like that name. Hey, my week started out crappy, I lost my girl, I lost the girl I was interested in, and my toes are broke. However, without that I wouldn't have met Gwen. This is definitely something that would only happen in a comic, but hey it's my life. Maybe it will work, maybe it won't. But with my luck even if it doesn't, I'll find another. I know it sounds bad, but you have to be an optimist.

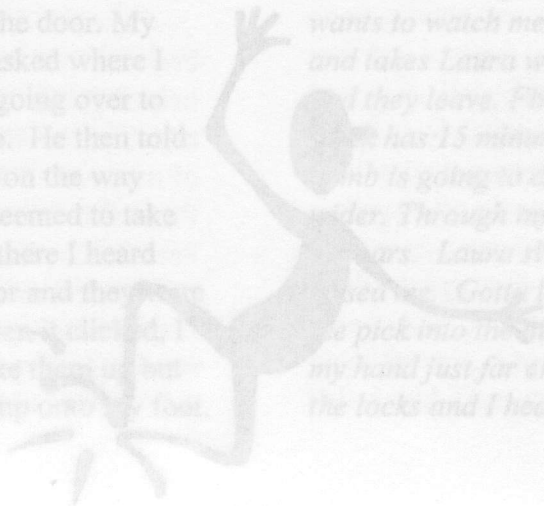


Coming Home the Last Time

by Amy Dimeler

Riding the crowded transit bus that stops on every street corner,
I watch the scarlet sun setting behind dirty snow piles.
The bus reaches Penn Station just as night reaches Newark.
I buy my ticket, find my train combined with the commuter train,
So I have to stand.
All the way to Philadelphia
I stand
With the men in their suits with their briefcases,
With the people in their heavy winter coats packed in the train car
I stand, almost crying.
One man in a suit and a tan trench coat watches me, not crying.
I look past him--
I look over the tops of the heads of the people sitting down,
I look away to the back of the train,
I look back,
I stand.

I got up and hobbled to the door. My roommate looked over and asked where I was going. I told him I was going over to Jessie and Tiara to apologize. He then told me not to hit on any women on the way over. Jerk. The walk over seemed to take forever. When I finally got there I heard screaming. I went to the door and they were fighting with each other. They decided I had to own up to this. I broke things up and managed to knock over a lamp over the floor.



After the bomb goes off and I am broken, he will find me and destroy me. He wants to watch me suffer from his laughs and takes Laura with him because her will they leave. Finally they are gone. The bomb has 15 minutes to go and I smile. A bomb is going to destroy Metro and I smile under. Through my teeth a lock-pick falls. Laura slipped it to me when she was with me. Gotta love that girl. I spit out the pick into the air and I manage to move my hand just far enough to catch it. I undo the locks and I head towards the bomb.

A Band of Brothers by Chris Cunningham

To understand the bonds shared by men who have experienced the terror of bloodshed and death is difficult. It goes without saying that when you cradle the head of your dying friend as his blood and his life pour out, you experience change. When you come home, your family cannot understand why a song on the radio brings a tear, why some obscure expression makes you turn away, why you can't talk of those days and nights far away when men, total strangers at one time, were united in soul and cause. A bond is made that can't be split, or shared. I wear a silver dolphin on my finger as a reminder of those bonds that I made with six men, six brothers.

In the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Diver community – fewer than 500 people all together – the Navy permits a period of isolated training in order to let the team or detachment (det.) become acquainted. My det., which included Radioman Chief, Joe Hendricks; Gunners Mate (Guns) First Class, Kevin McAfee; Boatswain Mate Chief, Steve Marshal; Machinist Mate Second Class, Brian Portnoy; Sonar Technician (Submarine) Second Class, Joey Rameriez; and me, was THE BEST; of course every det. feels that way; it's part of what builds those bonds.

All of us were Deep Sea Divers, Naval Parachutists (parachute into water), and trained in small unit combat tactics. It's only natural that when you're called special, treated with respect by your superiors, held in awe by other sailors, and feared by your adversaries,

that you feel special; we walked with a swagger! We were it. In a hand-written letter to us President Bush called us his "Loaded Six-Guns." The sun didn't set until we were ready, period! Over our office door we painted a passage that read: "Through this door pass the finest FROGMEN that ever swam the Seven Seas. The WEB FOOTED WARRIORS of DET. 15-1. Remove your cover [hat]; or, when you finish the 100 push-ups, you're buying the beer!" During a visit by Admiral Larsen, Commander of the Pacific Fleet, he entered our office with his hat on. Steve Marshal was the det. chief then and pointed to the passage over the door; Adm. Larsen looked up, removed his hat and said, "I'm too old for 100 push-ups, but I'll buy." He then gave Steve his number at the VIP quarters and said to call him. Our next party was paid for by the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet!

From time to time we performed some pretty daring tasks; we parachuted into the ocean to help a ship with a missile accident; we've cleared submerged and floating mines from the sea so ships could pass safely; we've rendered safe a terrorist's improvised explosive devices; cleared a road of landmines and traps so that relief workers could reach refugees near a village in Somalia. On a lighter note, we had a huge snowball fight once *inside* Steve's room at the Detroit Airport Sheraton, and we were the Bay Area Naval Athletic Association, Flag Football Champions in 1993. The details of most of our operations will forever be

classified. "Forget what you saw, forget what you did." Right!

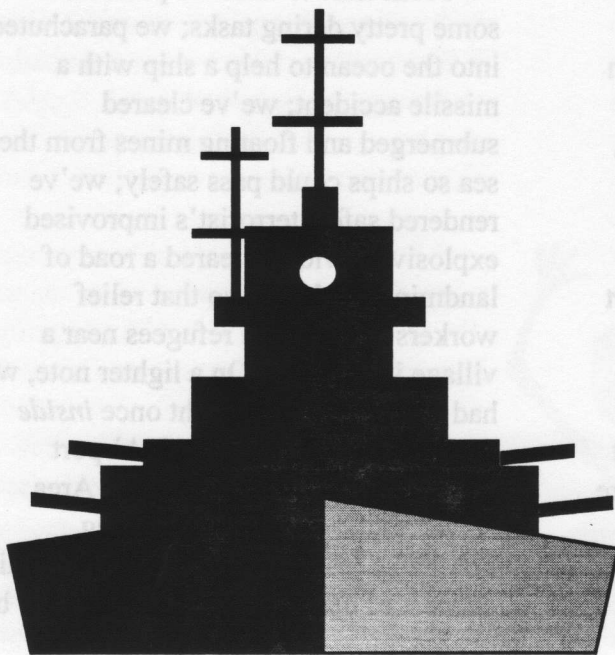
There is a modern myth that when a "frogman" dies, his spirit leaves the surf or terror of the combat zone and becomes a dolphin to play forever in the sea we love, and it is also believed that the dolphins in front of a ship are securing a safe passage for that ship. Periodically, the detachments are split up to allow for shore tours, promotions, and the chance for us to move on to other things. When ours was disbanded, our wives bought silver dolphin rings for us to remember, as if we could ever forget, us by. I still wear my ring with pride and love.

When I'm on a boat or ship and I see the dolphins playing in our wake, I know that they are smiling at me, playing for me, and granting me, their brother, safe passage. I also think of my brother frogmen who also wore dolphin rings; Steve Marshal and Joey Rameriez both

died in the same helicopter crash last summer; Brian Portnoy was shot and killed, a casualty of the "war on drugs" – mine was the last face he saw; Joe Hendricks died when a submerged mine he was rigging to destroy prematurely exploded in the Persian Gulf.

As I look at my silver dolphin ring, I see Steve, Joe, Brian, and Joey. My ring is more than jewelry – it is a source of vitality drawn from those powerful bonds we made. I know that my brothers are waiting for me to come and play when it's time to go. I know they don't want me to hurry, they know I have a new life now. I know that their spirit is in my ring and that they will grant me safe passage to my future.

Kevin and I are all that's left of DET 15-1, and we both still wear our rings. We both still speak of our brothers, and share the good times, remember the bad times, and envy the playful dolphins with a smile on our face and a tear in our eye.



How to Talk to Your Mother (Notes)

by Kelly Winters

1997. She tries now and you realize that maybe she did in her own way all those other years. Your roommate calls her mother just to say "hi" and the guilt takes control, like a painful, fatal disease, consuming your whole being. The guilt is because you can't forgive.

She buys you a bedroom suite for your new apartment. You pick it up when she is not home and send her a "Thank You" card a few weeks later.

Fashion mogul Gianni Versace is gunned down outside of his mansion by a serial killer.

1996. She takes care of you after the surgery. She sits on your purple leather chair and crochets a blanket for your sister's Christmas present. She makes you tomato soup and makes sure you take your medication. You find it hard to find anything to talk about so you sleep a lot while she is there.

She tells you she loves you for the first time, ever, at the end of a telephone conversation. You feel that telltale lump at the back of your throat and try to swallow it, but you can't. You say "bye" and quickly hang up. In the background you hear Mick Jagger singing, "I can't hear. I won't speak. Let it out; let it in, all this pain, from within. And I just can't pour my heart out to another living thing." You wonder how he knows what you are feeling and the guilt creeps in.

1995. You move in with your lover but don't bother to tell her. Somehow she finds out, probably from your sister. She stops by at Halloween with her new boyfriend. They are both dressed in silly costumes. You feel

obligated to ask them in.

The Rolling Stones win a Grammy Award for their album *Voodoo Lounge*.

1993. The Brady Bill clears Congress, imposing a five-day waiting period on would-be gun purchasers, so background checks can be conducted.

She kicks you out for the third time. It is because you want to see your father and she does not think you should. It is because you hate her alcoholic boyfriend. It is because she wants a friend, not a daughter. You move in with your grandmother and the pain makes you cry yourself to sleep at night. She sends you a card that says she thinks this is for the best and that maybe things will be better. You doubt that things will be better but know that this is for the best.

Bill Clinton is elected as the forty-second President of the United States.

1992. Your father tells you they are getting a divorce. You don't respond, you knew it would happen. After your father leaves, your youngest brother, the one that you take care of, sleeps with you every night. You get up almost that often, when the strange men come over, to shut her door so the little one will not hear those awful noises. You cry. You wonder if everyone has to go through this.

Madonna's book *Sex*, containing controversial erotic photographs, is published.

She tells you to leave, but later decides you can stay. You are grateful, relieved.

China detonates the most powerful nuclear bomb it has ever tested.

1991. She asks you to quit college at the end of your first semester, "so you can work and help pay your father's bills," she says. You quit college and get a full-time job; you would do almost anything to please her. You graduated from high school only six months ago and feel the weight of this household on your shoulders, pressing down.

The US enters the Persian Gulf War in hopes of removing Saddam Hussein's Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

Your sister gets married and moves to her own home. Everyone puts a smile on their face for the wedding. You are happy that she has this chance to escape.

1989. She asks you to come to her work to talk. You go, nervous with anticipation. She tells you she knows you are "into sex and alcohol" and wants to know if it is because you hate them, her and your father. You realize she doesn't know anything about you. You feel guilty anyway and cry "No!" She tells you that she did hate her parents, and because of that she did the things she thinks you do. She tells you she only married your father to get out of her parents' house. She tells you she had another baby before she had all of you. You have another sibling somewhere. You ask if it was a girl or a boy. She says she doesn't know; she doesn't want to know.

Listening to the radio afterwards, you hear Lenny Kravitz singing "What goes around comes around":

This world keeps spinning does the future know? We're destined to screw ourselves one blow. We've ruined what's pure down from nature below. You'd better look back it'll all be gone. What goes around comes around.

The Chinese People's Army brutally suppresses a pro-democracy demonstration in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing hundreds of people.

She throws you a surprise sixteenth birthday party.

You have sex for the first time.

1988. Your father calls all of you to his new business and seats everyone around a table in one of his offices. He tells you that he has been having an affair and he is in love with the other woman. They all sit there and say nothing. You think, My God they are acting like he told them what he had for dinner last night. You scream at him, "How could you do this to us?" and at her, "Why don't you say something, anything?" Everyone, except the cheater, goes home and you make dinner for them.

The first California condor conceived in captivity hatches in San Diego.

Your knight in shining armor no longer exists.

The Duchess of York gives birth to a daughter, Princess Beatrice of York, who is fifth in line to the British throne.

You think, maybe there is a reason why she is the way she is.

1986. Reagan and Gorbachev hold a summit meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland.

She comes to school to tell you that your paternal grandfather has passed away. He had a massive heart attack. The paramedics said his heart exploded. This is the first and only time you see her cry. You don't do anything to comfort her, you can't. The two of you sit together in the guidance counselor's sterile office and grieve, without touching, alone.

Irish voters choose to keep a constitutional ban on divorce.

British surgeons carry out the world's first triple transplant, replacing a patient's heart, lungs and liver.

1983. Another baby is born. This one is a last ditch effort to save their marriage.

Sally K. Ride, mission specialist aboard the space shuttle *Challenger*, becomes the first American woman in space.

1982. Your great-grandfather has a stroke. He is outside shoveling snow when it happens. He is your best friend. He calls you "his baby doll" and sings silly songs to you. They won't let you in the hospital to see him, "you are too young," they say. He dies and you don't even get to say goodbye.

A mass wedding by the Unification Church in New York's Madison Square Garden joins more than 2,000 couples.

1980. Iran-Iraq border battles erupt into full-scale war.

It's three o'clock in the morning, and you are awake, feverish and coughing. She comes into your bedroom with a bottle and a spoon. She feeds you a spoonful of the awful tasting liquid. You wish she would hold you and rub your head. You wish she would wipe your tears away and tell you everything will be all right. She doesn't.

She leaves your room without touching you or saying a word. The pain grips your heart like an iron fist and clenches it tight.

John Lennon of the Beatles is shot to death in New York City.

1976. She has a baby. He is red-faced and has fine blond hair. His fingers and toes are so small. She tells you if you are very careful, you can hold him. You climb up onto the sofa and she puts him on your lap. "You are a big sister now," she says. Your face lights up with a smile.

The United States celebrates the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

1973. In Watkins Glen, NY, 600,000 fans gather to hear the Allman Brothers, The Grateful Dead, and The Band.

You are in a big hurry to enter this world. You arrive before the doctor does. You see her looking down at you smiling, with love in her eyes. She looks at your father and smiles again. She seems so happy right now.

Spiro T. Agnew, vice-president of the United States, resigns, pleading "no contest" to one count of income tax evasion.

The Supreme Court hears the case of *Roe v. Wade*. They rule to lift all legal restrictions on abortion.

poor dumb bird

by Joe Prince

Early October in western Virginia. The leaves still hang limply from the trees in efforts to keep the blood flowing. A tepid sky, slate grey most of the time, threatens rain. On the clear days, when the air is crisp, it feels like the sky can wrap around you, miles of it, the smell stinging your nose, clearing your throat. It's on these days when I wish that my life was back in order, that Route 47 would swallow me and carry me back into the city.

I moved back to Hollow Springs when my mother broke her leg while talking a walk on the fifteen acre plot of land she owned. My mother, crushed and wrinkled, needed someone to coddle her, but above all, she needed the company. My brother, Harris, was in Montana with his new wife, Maggie, and I was only five hours away in Washington. Either kindness or stupidity begged me to come back.

I managed to get a job at the National Forest that was near the house. I ran the crafts department and gave the history hike twice a week to gleaming tourists from New York who had never seen a mountain range like the Appalachians. There wasn't one day that passed which had me hoping I could wash up on another shore. My mother and I had never gotten along: different planets on separate orbits, revolving around a blistering sun. She grew up in Hollow Springs and would probably die in Hollow Springs.

My father died when I was thirteen. He had a rare case of tuberculosis. Coughing blood, he died in a hospital, his eyes ponds of oil that stared through my heart. I spent my adolescence wondering why I never spent the time to know him. There was a

courtesy line that separated us; our relationship was sterile and passive. I don't think of him often anymore. Every now and then, I'll stroll around the lake that borders the eastern point of our property and remember seeing him in the dusk, his hands stuffed in his pockets, graying hair blowing in the breeze. He used to wear an orange hunting vest though he never hunted; a beacon, he stood at the mouth of the lake staring at the sinking sun.

Hollow Springs was a small town that harbored more resentment than it did inhabitants. The gossip of a small town is its blood and that blood is poisoned and vile. The snide and jealous work the social circle, spinning and threading the Venus fly trap, fingers working quickly like spiders under the pale moon. Controversy was high as a kite when I came home, my green Saturn pulling into my mother's driveway.

"Jennifer's coming home because her firm went belly up."

One morning, four weeks of living with Mother, I came out on the back porch to tell her I was leaving for work. She had wheeled her chair over to a corner of the French door and was staring intently at the porch's stained wood. I slowly eased behind her to see what she was scrutinizing. A sparrow, brilliantly plumed, was a crooked wreck. The beak pouting, the feet curled, eyes as black as coal, stared silently at the sky.

"Good God, Mother, " I mustered.

"Poor dumb bird," she sighed. She wheeled in reverse, stared at me intensely and silently rolled back into the house. Mother never said too much to me, and she

was full of clichés and idiosyncratic quotes. I walked back into the house, pulled a paper towel from the rack, and walked back into the cool air of the morning. Six o'clock in the morning, tucked in between the mountains, is the epitome of morning. The grass, dusted with freezing dew, the sky shades of purple and yawning, are little pulls toward ecstasy. Nature has always had a profound effect on me. The trees that blanket the sides of a mountain, orange pine needles that rustle as you walk to the car add up to a conglomerate beauty that is unmatched by anything.

I picked up the small creature in the paper towel and walked quietly to the edge of the woods. I dusted the ground of needles and laid the bird on the earth. I quickly made a makeshift grave and walked to my car. Mother was sitting on the front porch watching me. Just as I put the key in the lock, she hollered, "Jennifer, stop by your Aunt's this afternoon. She's canned some jam for me and I can't pick it up in my condition." I nodded and smiled, climbing into the car.

*

My aunt lived on the side of one of the valley's adorning mountains. On my lunch break, I took the tram to her house. The tram ride was always relaxing: the creek of the wires pulling the car safely along, the lush undergrowth below me swaying slightly in the wind. Going up the mountain was always much more comforting than going down. For some reason, seeing the earth swirl below you as the car creeps menacingly slow toward its destination always crept me out.

The tram ride was never more than five minutes, and my aunt's house was a short walk from the tram station. Aunt Sidney

was my mother's sister. She never married and made her living making cloth dolls and other quaint souvenirs that tourists gobbled up with a fervor I never quite understood. Her house, a simple, one floor, clapboard cabin, had one of the most beautiful yards in the state. Roses violently grew up trellises, intertwined with ivy and morning glory. A bird fountain surrounded by rows of peonies and marigolds always seemed to beat out the autumn. The garden usually withered in November, so even on this slightly cold afternoon, the yard seemed to vibrate with vicious vibrance. Four oak trees guarded each side of her house, their monstrous limbs reaching and scraping in sweet harmony against the windows.

Aunt Sidney was waiting at the door for me. She was slightly plump, very grandmotherly looking, with twinkling eyes and a coy grin. Growing up, I had always wished she was my mother. To this day, I can't believe they were raised in the same house. My mother was a bitter rainstorm and my aunt, a rainbow.

Sidney beckoned me to come in. The house was filled with the smell of cherry pie. "Ladies' Society meeting," she confided. "Thought I'd surprise the girls with a treat." I managed to smile. I was out of place in my aunt's antiquated world, where carriages were still ridden in and courting the boy next door was a scandal.

All of a sudden, a swell of memories came spilling from my head and into my mouth. I tried to choke them back, but a swatting from the inside forced them out. "Tell me why my mother is so unhappy," I blurted out. Seeing Aunt Sidney standing in the kitchen with her apron on grinning somehow made me remember that I had never, in my 25 years of life, seen my mother smile.

Sidney stared at me for a minute, time

slowly erasing the smile that graced her face. She slid into the kitchen chair across from me and looked me in the eyes, frowning slightly. "Jennifer, is something wrong?"

"Everything's as fine as it's going to get. I'm just curious as to why you and Mom are completely different people."

The soft lighting of the house seemed to get brighter and then fade. Outside, a short wind whipped around the peonies, a slight cloud passed over it all and then bright blue again. Sidney and I just looked at each other for a while. I could see that something was bothering her. Swells of water would slip into the corners of her kind eyes then disappear, only to resurface seconds later. The side of her mouth twitched and she forced a half smile. "I suppose your mother never told you what happened when we were growing up."

*

In 1935, Hollow Springs wasn't any more than a resting point for weary travellers making their way to the north. No one ever travelled south, especially in the summer. All the promise was focused on New York City, Washington or Boston. I always swore I'd make it out of this town by the skin of my teeth. Your mother was the same way. We were going to save money, buy a car, and drive west. We had no idea where we would go, but that was the game plan. The sky could swallow us whole, but Hollow Springs would be a receding horizon in the rear view.

We had just graduated from Anseque High School and were working at the perfume counter in the neighboring town, Mangrove. The department store, Grady's, was at the forefront of a major monopolizing scam. Based in Manhattan, Grady's

planned to buy out the competition and build an empire of commerce. Business was always relatively fair: the people in this area had never really been exposed to this sort of big city conglomerate and flocked to see what the store had to offer.

In August, two weeks before Rose and I were going to leave for our big trip west, the owner of the Mangrove Grady's called us in for a management meeting. The owner's name was Paul Stanmore and he was a real firebrand. Handsome, suave and above all charming, his grip over the store was what kept us all in line. Very few people were ever invited to his office and very few left the office with their job.

Sure enough, I had been fired. Rose, on the other hand, was asked to stay. Paul somehow had fit her into the future of the store as his secretary. Rose refused, but Paul insisted.

All I remember is Rose coming out of his office looking a wreck. There was a smear of blood from the side of her mouth that stretched to her earlobe and her eyes were wide and frightened. I had been waiting on the corner of Sycamore and Hurst for her and when I saw the look on her face I ran to her, a flurry of questions. She stood there, whimpering. Fear.

The rest was filled in by the police who spent all weekend at our house. My family was informed that there had been a long history of harassment involving Rose and Mr. Stanmore. Apparently, his promoting her to secretary was a ploy to have her stay in Hollow Springs. He blackmailed her, raped her on the occasion and the last episode involved him and his two guards beating her. Power was Stanmore's tool and Rose another pawn in his game. Three more women at the department store came forward accusing Stanmore of his ways. Grady's closed down the first week of

September.

Rose was sent to a retreat for women in South Carolina and she stayed there for a year. When she came back, she wasn't the same person. She rarely talked. The months passed with her sitting in front of the picture window watching the years flip by like pages in a tattered book.

Our dreams of leaving Hollow Springs float away on a cloud.

She married your father three years after she returned from South Carolina. Some believed it was because she was trying to forget her past. I knew it was because she wanted to experience love. Stanmore had shattered any possibility of that happening. When your father died twenty years after their marriage, he died without ever hearing her say that she loved him. She always wanted to say those three words, but the memories of a ripped life kept her from doing so.

Your mother probably wants to die keeping her past hidden, but it's time it was let out. She's scared that she'll die unloved, too.

*

I stare at Aunt Sidney, not believing the story she had just told me, not wanting to believe it. I try to pull the tides of pain in my chest, my hands shaking under the table. Clenching my knees together to try to stop the feeling. The sun beginning to set. I look at my watch and let out a small gasp. Close to 5:30. The afternoon had slipped, I missed the rest of my shift.

"I have to leave," I blurt out.

Sidney looks at me, her face suddenly worn and old. A corn cob doll, trying vainly to smile at me. She reaches for my hand.

"I've never told Mother I love her," I say to Sidney.

"She knows you do."

"No, I don't think so," I whisper.

I get up to leave. A cloak of light purple had begun to swing around the horizon, wrapping the sun into a foil ball. I turn to say goodbye to Sid, but she just hands me the jam. "No words, Jennifer. Go take care of your mother. She needs you."

I run to the tram station, barely catching the last one down the mountain.

Low point: the tram is suspended above the ravine. I'm inside, shy to the dark around me. A bird has flown into the motor, stalling the engines. I'll have to wait it out. I press my head against the cold glass, trying to survey the dark below me. A swish of the land, an owl beginning to cry.

I close my eyes, trying hard not to think about the story Aunt Sidney has told me. A breaking surf of memories begins to cloud my perception.

Harris and I are in the backyard. Mom is calling us in for lemonade. The renegade, I give her the finger. "I don't want any fucking lemonade!"

Graduation. I hug Harris, Grandmom, Aunt Sid, and shake Mom's hand in mock admiration.

I leave town for my new life in Washington without looking back. Not at Mom, not at Aunt Sid, not at any one of my friends. I wait a year before I write Mother. She says she's hurt. I don't believe her.

A jerk and the tram is running again, slipping effortlessly toward its destination. The bird has been removed from the engine. Another dumb bird. I touch my face and feel that it's wet. Only a course for the emotions to run. I let my head bang against the glass. I can't believe the mistakes I've made, the regrets I have.

*

The clock in my car screams 9:00 in glaring green numbers. I pull into my mother's driveway at the speed of light, and race up the stairs to the front door. I open it as quietly as possible and slip into the darkness. I switch on the rust lamp sitting on the hall table and walk to my mother's bedroom. A soft glow from under the door, curiously warm and inviting. I knock quietly and open it.

Mom is lying curled in a ball, her face to the wall. Asleep already. Instead of leaving, I turn off the light, and lie down next to her. The smell of lavender, old lady

whose life hasn't been as beautiful as it should. I wrap my arms around her, trying to keep tears from stinging my face.

"I'm sorry for everything," I manage to whisper. She doesn't hear me, asleep for hours. Our hearts beat in time with one another; the feeling of her warm back to my chest sparks a glow within me. I start to cry quietly. "I'm so sorry." And I fall asleep, my arms wrapped around her, our hearts still beating.

When I wake up the next morning, mine is the only one still beating.

The Day Daddy Got Beat

by Cotelia Reed

They say I was just a little thing, not much older than a minute and just about that big. My Mama says she don't know how I possibly can, but I remember.

My Daddy had finished working in the field for the week and it was time to party. Nobody could party like my Daddy. I never understood why he would leave home on Friday afternoon and not return until late Sunday night. Did my Daddy have a weekend job, was he out of town, didn't he like to be home with me on weekends?

When Daddy got all dressed up in his white suit, you'd never know he had been out in the field or hauling pulpwood just hours before. He had jet black dark skin with the build of a weight lifter. I don't understand how he let those white men beat him up like that; he was stronger than they were. They say I'm too young to remember when it happened, but I do.

It started out to be an ordinary Friday night. Mama was shelling peas. My sister and I were listening to Big John R. on the radio and dancing. Tonight my sister was playing the role of the boy and asked me to dance, and I said, "No, thank you."

Suddenly, the living room had an eerie glow from the headlights of a car coming up the driveway. There was a knock on the door, and a voice from the other side said, "Open the door, Daisy; it's Cecil, I need your help." When my Mama opened the door, my eyes were the biggest that they have ever been, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The most brilliant red liquid and unforgettable flesh tone was before me. There in the doorway stood Mr. Cecil Green, holding my Daddy up to keep him from falling on the floor. Daddy's nice white suit

was now a mass of white, red, dirt and grass. I could tell that the magnificent red liquid was coming from a gash on his head, as his head rolled around from side to side. I had never seen my Daddy like this before. They say I was too young to remember, but I do; I remember.

I remember my Mama was calm; she didn't even cry. She just proceeded as if she knew what she was doing, almost like she had done this before. Mama don't think I remember, but I do.

My sister and I had to go to bed. We weren't allowed to look at all the blood, so we laid in our bed being very quiet, listening to Mama and Mr. Cecil talk. Mr. Cecil said that Kenny Owens and his boys had jumped my Daddy on one of the dirt roads up to the juke joint, because my Daddy didn't want to sharecrop anymore. I never did like that Kenny Owens; he was a big, fat, mean looking white man, and now he had hurt my Daddy.

Time passed, and Mama and us kids had to do all the field work by ourselves. Daddy was still sick and couldn't walk for about a year. Daddy didn't talk much anymore; most of the time he just seemed to stare into nothing. Didn't Daddy care anymore; was something broken or didn't Daddy want to do anything anymore? I missed him coming home from work every day. He always brought me something, either an apple or saltines. Daddy knew how much I loved salt and that sometimes I would steal a few shakes from the shaker and hide while I licked it up. Daddy told me once when I was combing his hair that I was his cutest girl. I knew that meant he loved me.

It was almost time for the field work to start again, and Daddy was walking, talking and even laughing sometimes. This was the Daddy I knew and loved. Mama seemed very quiet since Daddy got sick, but she always did nice things for him. Sometimes she would give him body rubs and comb his hair or do his finger nails. It was nice to see Daddy smile when Mama

combed his hair.

By the time cotton harvest was due, my Daddy was good as new, and we went to the field every day and listened to the radio every night while Mama did chores. It seems so funny that nobody ever talks about that night. When I bring it up, they say, "Oh you're too young to remember," but I do; I remember the day Daddy got beat.



Come Into the Water...

by Alyce Kenée

My mother picked me up and threw me over the edge of the boat.

Just like that.

I was probably eight years old, terrified, and begging not to have to go into the water.

"But you love to swim! You're just being silly. Everyone else is going to the shore to swim, and so are YOU!"

!!!!!!SPLASH!!!!!!

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

!!!!

I do love to swim. In fact, I adore swimming, and I'm a great little fish in the water. It's all the other little fish in the water that I can't handle.

I have an acute fear of fish. Natural bodies of water hold deep, dark secrets under their waves. Fish of all sizes and varieties lurk below the surface. They wait for me. They know I'm coming.

I think this fear of fish was born when my well-meaning mother mercilessly cast me to the waters. From the boat I could see hundreds of brown fish hovering in the murky water-grasses. Nobody else seemed to notice, but I was fixated by those fish-eyes. They were taunting me. *Come into the water... Join us, forever... Come into the water...* They are evil.

The phobia has grown worse over the years. When I was sixteen, my boyfriend thought it would really help me get over my fear, not to mention make everyone else laugh, if he would throw me overboard while boating on the Susquehanna River. He scraped me up into his arms and sent me straight into the water. I didn't speak to him for the rest of the day. I couldn't. I was traumatized beyond words.

Ironically, I love to water-ski, but I have to do it my way. First, I watch the water for at least an hour. I determine if the fish are very active or not. If they are out in great numbers, I scrap the entire possibility of getting into the water. If they seem to be hanging out in other waters, so to speak, I move to stage two. Here, I incessantly quiz everyone else on the boat about their experiences in the water so far that day. "Did you feel any fish?" "Did they swarm around you?" "If a fish came close to you, and you swatted at it, did it swim away, or did it move closer?" I do this until I am satisfied with the answers. Next, I insist that someone else get into the water right before I do to scare the fish away. Then I jump in, trying not to sink too low, splashing furiously with arms and legs. I figure the more I flail, the harder it will be for the fish to get anywhere near me. I rush to get the skis on. I keep the backs of the skis under my behind (so the fish cannot nibble my heinie), then I yell "GO!" If the boat does not start right away, I hyperventilate.

My family wants to know why I put myself, not to mention them, through this agony. I have given the question considerable thought, and my answer is still the same. I have no idea.

They used to play with my fear. Years ago, Dad slowed down the boat while I was skiing. Sinking into the water, I arranged myself "skis under butt" to wait for the boat to come back for me. Then I saw it. To my left floated an enormous dead fish. Words cannot express the anger which rushed through me when I saw the family laughing on the boat. His deliberate prank cost him dearly. Between my trauma and

my anger, I ruined the rest of the day for everyone.

This past summer we vacationed in San Diego. My brother-in-law is an experienced sailor, so the family rented a sailboat in the San Diego Bay. I thought this would be great. I had never heard of anyone being attacked by fish while sailing. As we walked down to the boat, I hummed the tune to "Come Sail Away." My mood was euphoric.

Soon after, I was silently reciting, "Our Father, who art in Heaven..." The boat lurched to the left, then to the right. I found myself face to face with the vicious water. *Come into the water... Join us, forever... Come in, come in....* I shook with fear. I felt sick. The boat was careening about above FISH, and they knew I was on board. Tears streamed down my face. Despite everyone's reassurance, I felt the terrible possibility that we were going to end up in the water with my finned foes. Holding the rail too tightly, I sprained my shoulder when the boat

suddenly leaned to the other side.

We arrived back at the dock. I was sore all over, my shoulder throbbed, and my knees shook. I walked up to the dock, skimming the water for a look at my enemies. Finally I saw a fish. He had the nerve to sort of smile at me! I glared, I swore, I spit into the water. Then I surrendered. I will never go sailing again. The fish have won that battle.

The fish will continue to taunt me. They will stare up at me when I go near the water. They will float in fish tanks in every Chinese restaurant I patronize. They will continue to lurk and to call to me. *Come into the water.... Join us, forever.... Come into the water....*

Let them beckon all they want. I will not enter their domain. I will swim in chlorinated pools. I will avoid boats. As I wait on tables, I will vengefully recommend the Orange Roughy.

Take that, gilled villains.



Growing Up, and other painful lessons

by Jennifer Redman

I sit as a young girl, around the age of seven, on the loving lap of my grandmother, her raven-colored hair shining in the firelight. The air is chilling in the small, stone house by the stream within the forest.

As my grandma strokes my hair, she says, "I have something for you."

My eyes sparkle with anticipation, she always has something for me when I visit. (After all, this is the same woman who gave me five dollars from the tooth-fairy, when I put my first baby tooth under her pillow.) She walks away, and returns in a few moments from her bedroom – that clandestine chamber where the door must always be kept shut. She kneels in front of me and opens her hand to reveal what she has hidden inside. My eyes widen as I view the gold ring with the round, onyx stone as dark as her hair in the light.

"A special man gave this to me," she said, staring outside as if she could see him standing there once more.

She slipped the "magic" ring onto my finger (at least it felt magic to me). It made me feel so grown up. My heart sank – the ring was, of course, too large for my tiny hand.

Grandma saw my face droop, and quickly said, "Never mind, you will grow into it."

She gave it to my mother to keep safe until I was older; but I would take it out from my mother's jewelry box and look at it whenever I wanted to feel the special powers of the ring again. Also, I wanted to check if my hand was the

perfect fit yet. A peaceful scene of innocent youth, it makes me smile.

Strength is the first word that comes to mind when I think of my grandmother. She had a difficult life. She became a single mother after the sudden death of my grandfather from a ruptured appendix. The responsibility of raising a teenage son (my father) and three small girls, ages three, four, and five, rested alone on her – no doubt often weary – shoulders. She learned to drive a car, passing the test on the third try. No matter what life presented to her she always put others first before herself. Grandmother has endured years of kidney dialysis. This has left her arm with a mass of mountainous ridges. Only those who realize their life-saving meaning can look upon them with love. But that was not enough. She was tormented with the pain of intestinal cancer (much embarrassed by the hair loss that required her to wear a wig), and several heart attacks. The blessing of a kidney transplant was also successfully granted to her (God bless that organ donor and all others). Even her body, as mighty as any oak, had to eventually fall. That's always the way it is, isn't it?

On New Year's Eve, as everyone else was ringing in the upcoming year, and giving their loved ones a kiss for another year of good luck, my grandmother lay in bed at home alone. She hadn't been feeling well, but as usual didn't want to spoil anyone else's time. A relative found her that night, silent and not breathing, lying in the

position of birth on the cold tiles of the kitchen floor. As the world watches the first rays of 1997 approaching, the ambulance sirens wail as the men inside beat upon her chest to make her frail body work once again. Her "recovery" is complete, the men in white jackets say; but she will never be the same person again. Grandma cannot go home.

"It's so cold," I remark to my parents, as I get out of their car.

I survey the cold, hard grounds of the county home and shake my head. It is March seventh, Grandma's birthday. Her loneliness is all I can bear, as she sits in a wheelchair in the spartan room.

Grandma's roommate is a blind woman with MS who cannot move from the neck down. There is no hope in this place. I notice my grandmother's hands and feet which are a pale color bordering on blue. The warmth of life never does seem to completely return to her limbs. One extra kiss, before we leave to drive home in silence.

There heart attacks later and she is back in the confining hospital room. My heart jumps now every time the phone rings.

Then one day the quiet voice at the other end of the line says, "I think you should come visit Grandma at the hospital."

That night was THE TRIP. My fiancé drove me to the hospital – I was shaking too badly to drive myself. The trip that should have taken less than an hour took three, and it wasn't just my imagination. Sitting in the still traffic which inched along was almost more than I could take. When we finally got to the hospital, it was almost completely dark inside. Visiting hours had just ended. I ran through the carpeted halls as if my life, or someone else's, depended

on my swiftness. I felt like a mouse blindly searching for the cheese at the end of a maze. When I turned the final corner I slowed down as my aunt came to greet me with open arms, giving me a warm hug.

She said, "Don't worry, visiting hours are over but they are still letting you go in to visit."

I avoided looking her straight in the eyes as she said this. It was unnecessary to tell me that the hospital staff's lenience was not a good omen.

My aunt and I walked arm in arm down the hallway. The nurse's station sat in the middle of a large room, and a group of six rooms radiated from it like little pods out of a science fiction movie. As we approached, I noticed a strange glow coming from around the person in the room straight ahead. I prayed Grandma was not in one of these rooms. She was.

My aunt quickly entered the room, but I stood back lingering in the doorway. I needed to take it all in for a couple of minutes. That wasn't my grandma in the room, there must be some mistake. I gave a sideways glance at the room number to make sure. The form on the bed was pale and lifeless – so still. She wore one of those short, white, hospital gowns with blue designs on it. You know the kind, the ones with the numbers stamped across the chest in black, as if representing your convict number. Her small body seemed to be supported by the noisy machines surrounding her bed. The noises of life. I watched the line of her heartbeat on the small, blue screen – just to make sure. Numerous IV poles stood nearby, like rows of steel soldiers holding bags of fluid. The slow drip of the morphine,

and other pain-controlling medications, traveled down the tubes into her body.

I reached to grasp her hand and realized where the light I had noticed earlier was coming from. Her fingertip glowed orange with the light from the heart monitor that was attached to it. I smiled momentarily as memories of the little, squatty alien from the movie *E.T.* flashed into my head. Grandma had hated that movie with a passion, christening him the most ugly creature she had ever seen.

Where could I touch her? Every part of her seemed to have some object attached to it, or to be bandaged in some way. Then, she spoke.

"Jennifer, my darling baby girl," she said, opening her eyes. I will always be her baby, no matter how old I get.

"She has been asking for you all day," my aunt whispered.

I tried to speak but couldn't, stroking Grandma's soft cheek instead. The tears flowed freely in silent streams.

"I'm here," I finally managed to choke out, "I'm here, Grandma."

For the next several minutes she rambled about topics that had no significance. Will we make sure the house has not flooded? She is worried about the apple pies she promised to bake for church.

It's the morphine, my aunt mouths to me as she says, "Don't worry, Mommy, it's all taken care of."

For the next thirty minutes, my grandma and I talk. Well, mostly she talks to me. It's as if she can tell, even with her eyes closed, that I can't speak. For some reason I can't stop sobbing. I try to be strong in front of her, but grandparents can always tell. My fingers run slowly through her curly hair, which has recently grown back fully from the

cancer. She has fought so hard. As she lies back with her eyes closed, she talks in an endless stream. "I'm so proud of everything you've accomplished," she tells me. "You are beautiful, smart, and you can do anything you want to do in life. You and Kyle [my cousin] are my special babies and now you're both so grown-up. I love Chris too, he's a really caring man. The two of you will have a wonderful life together and beautiful children. Don't let him go."

"I won't, Grandma," I smile. She will never see me graduate from college, or kiss me on my wedding day.

A grim-faced nurse and doctor pop into the room, and scurry about checking the equipment and Grandma's vital signs. I am still sobbing, and can only mouth the words, Thank you, as the doctor looks at me and leaves the room quickly. How do they cope with seeing families like this every day? I walk slowly down the dark hall after planting one last kiss on her lips, and telling her that I love her one last time. It is to be the last time I will ever see my grandmother alive. I realize this on the empty ride home.

The one remaining kidney that functions shuts down completely soon after. For the next nine days her children keep a twenty-four hour vigil by her bedside. She remains strong, fading in-and-out of clouds of pain.

Through it all she screams, insisting, "I am not ready to die, not yet!"

The children, my flesh and blood, try to placate her, assuring her that it is okay. They tell her she has done everything she can for each of us and we are all fine. She can go, if she wants to. Words cannot express the pain of watching a loved one's life slowly drift away.

One day as the sun was rising, her kidney suddenly began to function again, better in fact than it had for months before. She had selected her time, said she was dying, and passed on quickly and peacefully. The sun rose that day, despite our grief. It was the first day of spring. In these last days Grandma finally needed our help and strength to get her through the darkness.

Many of the people surrounding me are strangers, even though I am told they

are family members. I sit silently in my black jumper, staring unblinkingly at the oaken coffin sitting in the room ahead. It is being suffocated by an entire room full of flowers. A tear lands in my lap.

Looking down, I see the gold and onyx ring on my right hand. The magic ring. It fits me perfectly now, as if it were made for my hand. You were right, Grandma, I did grow into it. This comforts me. Maybe it will help the pain to fade. I miss you, Grandma.

"Come to Dinner," said she.

by Anu Dass

A soft breeze rustled among the cabbage leaves
And Father was there, blue dungarees and dirty gloves
Serenading his garden,
A gondolier and his hoe.

An August wind inspected the clothesline with its gusts
And Mother was there, shower curtain prints on her gown,
Pins puckering her mouth, brows knitted in their toil
An artist and her gruesome paintings in bleach.

A brewing storm gust rudely pushed past the porch swing
And Grandma was there, silently musing
At the urban world cowering in the wrath of nature
A stoic and her Main Street TV.

Torrents of rain pounded on the wharf,
And Grandpa was there, wet yellow slicker
A beacon in the murky midnight blue of the sky
Drops of rain spouting from his grey mustache
A fisherman and his bass.

A calm blow eavesdrops in the folds of Victorian curtains
And Mother's laugh tinkles in the air
As Father raises a few decibels on the Beethoven
Gourmets and their party fetishes.

A soft breeze blows in from the ocean wharf pushing past the swing,
and alights on the primly folded hands of Mother, Father, and mine
As we prepare to dine on Grandpa's bass.

The Chair

by Jennifer Cossentino

The old woman sat crouched in the wooden chair. Each new creak brought with it another pang of memories. She rested her head back as far as she could until the sunlight shone onto her face. She barely had the strength to squint. She was only about seventy years old, but the calculated wrinkles on her face would have made you think she was ninety, at least. She sat there posed as if she were a human painting, immobile and lifeless. A small tear softly fell down her tired cheek as she thought. It took all she had just to make it to the chair each morning. Soon, that option might not exist for her. But she loved that chair. It was itself old and decrepit like her but it would last. It represented something much stronger than time. The old woman closed her eyes and for a moment was transformed.

"Anna dear, come downstairs. James is here."

"I'll be right down, Mother," spoke a girl of eighteen years. The young woman was a complete figure of confidence as she tucked her long brown hair up under her hat and pinned it to stay. She took a quick glance in the mirror for recognition and went downstairs. James was waiting for her, patiently as always.

"Yes, Mrs. Taylor, I did hear it may rain today, but I'm sure Anna and I will be fine," James said.

"What shall we do today, James?" Anna questioned.

"Actually I thought we might just go for a small stroll down by the water," James replied in an unusual tone.

"Fine then, I won't be too long, Mother," Anna said matter of factly, and she and James quietly left. The couple strolled arm in arm by the ocean's shore and talked sweetly to each other. After a few minutes the conversation took on a more serious nature.

"I think it is time we talk seriously about things," said the young man.

"Oh, please James, don't bring this up again, you know the way I feel," Anna said in her most annoyed tone.

"I'm sorry, Anna," replied James, "I feel I have waited long enough for you. You must make a decision. Are you going to marry me, yes or no?"

Anna shook her head, slowly but determined. "You know I cannot marry you until I have a career for myself. I don't want to be one of those silly old women who sit around all day and gossip about the day's events and wait for their husbands to return home."

"I know you are an independent woman, Anna, in fact I have always admired that about you, but I need someone who will be there for me at all times," James answered sternly.

"I plan to be there for you, darling," Anna said sweetly, "but can't you wait until I am finished teacher's college? It will be no time at all and then we can begin our life together."

"No, I can't wait, I think I've waited long enough – it has to be now or never," said James.

"But darling, you know how much I love you, why can't I have this too?" questioned Anna.

“Anna, you know I love you with all of my heart, but I need to start a family now. I’m very sorry,” James said.

“But surely you could wait just a little...”

“I can’t,” James interrupted. Tears welled up in Anna’s eyes as she watched James begin to walk away. As he was leaving he turned around and said, “I already have a gift for you. There is no reason why I should keep it. I’ll bring it by later on this evening.”

Anna just nodded because she could not make her mouth form any words, even an okay. She finally couldn’t hold it in any longer. She burst out crying as she watched her one true love fade away into the distance.

That was the last Anna would see of her love. She took her time getting home because she felt no need rushing back and having to explain things to her mother. When she finally returned home, the sun was barely visible and the moon was beginning to show. Her mother was sitting on the porch swing, and when she saw her daughter approaching, she leapt up immediately to go to her. Without speaking, Anna’s mother put her arms around her daughter and spoke the words that would end up haunting Anna on her darkest of days, “Everything will be all right.” She led Anna back inside and told her that she knew what had happened. James had already been to Anna’s house to drop off his gift for her and had explained everything to her mother. Anna’s mother told her that James had put the gift in her bedroom. The walk from downstairs was long and one that

Anna would never forget. The door to her room was slightly closed, so Anna pushed it open. When she stepped in, her eyes immediately fell upon the gift. In the center of her room sat a small wooden chair, simple to look at, but obviously handmade. As Anna got closer she noticed the initials AMT carved unevenly but neatly into the smooth oak surface. The initials were Anna’s. It was the most basic gift she had ever received, but Anna loved it and she vowed to herself on that day that she would keep the chair forever as a memento of the great love she once knew.

The clock on the mantle rang its hourly reminder and the old woman was transformed back to her reality. The single tear she had shed had turned into a puddle of salty memories that now stained her cotton dress. She had no more tears to give away. She glanced around the cold dark empty room she occupied. No pictures of family brightened the dreary walls, only empty hooks hung where they should be. No sweet memories flowed through her mind of little children running and playing or a husband there to confide in. There was no comfort in sight. All she had was the chair which she had sat in through storms and sunny days, the only thing that got her through. And one day when the memories become too painful to suffer through, the woman herself will become a memory, but the chair will remain, as solid as the day it was made. And it will tell a story of love, loss, and regret, to all who will listen.

Contributor's Corner

Alyce R. Kenée was born and raised in York. After graduation from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1995, she returned to York to join her father in launching Greenbriar Restorations, an upholstery shop. She will student teach in the Fall of 1998 at Dallastown High School. She seeks certification in secondary education-English.

Bonnie Cashdollar.

Bryan Dieterich.

Chris Cunningham is 35 years old and a freshman biology/ secondary education major. He enjoys working with Dr. Ricker as her Lab Assistant. He spent twelve years in the U.S. Navy as a Submarine Sonar Technician and an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician—Deep Sea Diver/Parachutist. He also spent three years as a surveyor-navigator/technician in a commercial diving company doing U.S. and foreign government contracted salvage work such as TWA flight 800, Bergen Airways flight 301, M/V Mineral Dampier, and Valujet flight 592. He graduated from Dallastown Area High School in 1982. He is married to the former Wendy Flinchbaugh, and they have a seven-year-old son, Cody, and an eight-month-old daughter, Keely.

E. Gin McCartney.

Elizabeth Ann Cusin, originally from Maryland, is a junior at York College majoring in English and minoring in Business Marketing. After graduation next May, she plans on pursuing a career in writing/advertising.

Jennifer Redman is a native Yorker who graduated Cum Laude from York College in December 1997. After graduating with a B.S. in Behavioral Science and minors in English and Sociology, she began working as a Crisis Intervention Specialist at Adams-Hanover Counseling Services. She expresses sincere gratitude to all the inspiring English/Literature teachers that have encouraged her over the years. "Growing Up, and other painful lessons" is dedicated to the memory of Clara Redman, her grandmother.

Joseph Prince is a 21-year-old senior majoring in Secondary Education in English at York College. His interests include music, writing, reading, gay rights, and driving around aimlessly thinking. In fact, the car is where he formulates most of the ideas for his writing. His influences include Virginia Woolf and Annie Proulx. In the future he plans to be a writer...hopefully one with marginal success.

Kelly Winters attends York College part-time with a major in Behavioral Science. She works full-time at Bell Socialization Services, Inc. as a Program Coordinator of the Supported Living Program, Mental Retardation Department.

Mr. Dan. This is his second work published in the former York Review; the first one was in the Spring issue of 1996. "Road to Destiny" is one of his first ever written. Besides writing fiction, he also had a column called "Random Words" in the 1998 Spring semester of *The Spartan*. Out of all the things he has done, he feels his greatest accomplishment is writing ten short stories in three months for a Western Civilizations II class in the style of Bocaccio's *Decameron*. This feat has inspired him to finish his *Decameron* throughout his lifetime.

Richard Hoffman is a writer of poetry, prose, and drama who enjoys acting and directing for theater and screen. He recently graduated from York College of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in English and a minor in philosophy/religion. He hopes to make a career in film through acting, directing, and writing.

Thomas M. Alfera is his name despite and crises of identity he may have experienced to date. When he was ten or eleven he read *Huck Finn* the same way he listened to his copy of Meatloaf's *Bat Out of Hell*: until the grooves no longer existed or the binding could no longer contain the pages. These activities ruined him forever. By the time he turned fifteen he graduated to smoky basements, Nabokov and Orwell, and Pink Floyd. Now he drinks too much coffee, reads anything, and writes to find out what he is thinking.

Thomas M. Read is currently a sophomore at York College. He hails from Cazenovia, New York and is an Eagle Scout. He is in the process of working on his marketing degree with minors in retailing and banking and investing.

Till Riley Reed was born in Alabama, the baby daughter of parents who were illiterate sharecroppers. Most of her writings are inspired by experiences from that era. She is the Customer Service Representative for PA Corporate Banking at First National Bank of Maryland and is currently pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Business at York College of Pennsylvania. She is a woman of God.