



B&P

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FREE

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INKDROPS

Welcome to the April 2024 issue of Books & Pieces Magazine. This issue is available as a PDF and on our Heyzine platform where you can read it like a magazine, or download it. If there is enough demand for a printed copy, we will arrange for that, also.

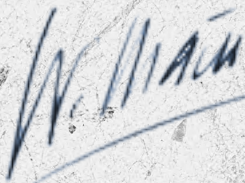
This issue has eight submissions, both stories and poems, some short, some long. And we have many lined up for the May issue which will be out the first week of May.

We also accept artwork, photography, screenplays, and music, the latter would be a link to your YouTube or Rumble platform with a introduction printed. We should be able to imbed the video, at least that's the plan.

Our website BooksNPieces.com is also undergoing a makeover to speed up page load time and change the items offered.

With that said, enjoy this issue and please let us know what you think. Please share the link on your social media and tell your friends (writers, readers, artists, musicians etc) about us.

All the best,



William Gensburger

WAR TORN

by Corey Villas

He had gone into town to pick up his usual haul - canned vegetables and potted meats, bottled water, batteries, candles and matches, toilet paper, duct tape, and whatever else he could get his hands on. The day was unseasonably warm for this late in the fall, not entirely uncommon in the Southeast. Wearing his trademark look of laceless combat boots and an army helmet, he was loading all of his essentials into the back of his Chevy when a group of boys came up behind him. He recognized them from several encounters before, too many to keep count.

“God damn, he smells like fart and rotten garbage,” one of the boys said, the one with the blonde hair.

The others howled, one boy laughing so hard that he had to lean against another boy to stop himself from falling over. The man



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ignored them, his belly hanging out of the bottom of his stained shirt as he reached across the bed of the truck for the last strap to secure his cargo.

“When’s the last time you took a shower, you crazy bastard?” the short, red-headed boy tormentingly asked.

“This dipshit probably doesn’t know how to clean himself, bet he can’t wipe his ass right either,” the blonde boy mocked.

The man got into his truck and closed the door, ignoring the boys, and started the engine.

“That’s right, go home and hose yourself down, you damn weirdo,” the man heard through his window as he took off down Maple Street, heading out of town for home.

This was a normal day in the life of Randy Boggs. It had not always been like this, though. Before the war, he lived a normal life, working in a local auto shop turning wrenches and doing body work. Some might even say he was reasonably handsome. But all that changed after Vietnam. When he was drafted into the Army, the last thing his Mama told him the day he left for basic training surprised him: you come back to me the same, don’t let over there ruin you. He figured she just meant don’t get killed. But as it turned out, some things might be worse than death.

When he returned home in ‘71, he tried to live his old life again, tried to pick up right where he left off. But anyone who knew him

from before knew that he was not the same man he once was. Things were bad at home, where he still lived with his Mama. Sometimes he would sit at the window in a kitchen chair, staring outside for hours, silent, unresponsive to anything, lost within himself. Other times, his Mama would catch him biting his fingernails so badly that all shreds of nail and cuticle were gone, blood running down his hands and wrists, oblivious to the mess and the pain. She even came home from bingo one night to find him with a skewer of whole squirrels he had trapped and kabobbed in the backyard. Things got worse when he eventually got fired from the auto shop. The owner, Mr. McGill had moved Randy into the office to keep him away from tools and loud noises, trying to help out a veteran and a once good employee. But when customers began to complain about him - his hygiene, his uncomfortable and awkward demeanor, his inability to communicate, one even claimed he thought Randy was going to attack him - Mr. McGill had no choice but to let him go.

As time went on, Randy began to slowly assimilate back into some semblance of life. But even as he did, he could not shake the feeling of being unsafe anywhere and everywhere he went, constantly exposed, vulnerable. One day, he went to the grocery store to pick up a few things for Mama, and returned with an Army helmet from the surplus store the next town over. He began to wear it everywhere.

Sometime later, Mama got sick and eventually passed. She left the trailer, a couple of acres of land, and the little bit of money she had all to Randy. When she died, Randy became a recluse and has been ever since. His new hobby quickly became stockpiling survival goods. He built a ramshackle wooden shed to store all kinds of supplies in, hoarding all sorts of items in there for whenever he might need them. Stores in town began carrying more of the items they knew he'd buy, as his visits into town were only to buy more and more supplies and nothing else.

This is when the torment from locals began. Mostly it was just kids, like the group of boys giving him hell. But there were others. Not too long ago, a group of mothers had started a petition for the sheriff to ban Randy from town, calling him a "dangerous nuisance" and "a threat to the safety of the town's children." Another time, when Randy got bent out of shape about a store not having SPAM in stock, the owner called the police. No reason was given as the police hauled him off to the local jail, where he spent the night screaming and cowering in the corner of his cell. The police let him go early the next morning, mostly because they couldn't take the noise anymore. Nonetheless, he continued his trips into town to restock, never concerned with what might happen.

When Randy returned home, he drove around back to his shed and

immediately began unloading his latest haul. He stocked and organized everything in great detail inside his shed,

taking note of how much he had of every item. As nightfall neared, Randy locked up his shed and went inside for the evening.

Once inside, he sat in front of the TV and watched whatever station he could pick up, the images blurring in and out, the static contorting the shapes on the screen. Randy watched, unblinking, not concerned with the poor reception, not even aware of it. When he realized he was hungry, he went to his freezer and pulled out a frozen TV dinner - Salisbury steak, corn, mashed potatoes, and a small brownie. After he microwaved it, he returned to the living room to watch more of the static waves roll across the screen. He was eating dinner, and watching TV as the night wore on, like so many others do. But he was not there and hadn't been for a long time.

Suddenly, a loud thud came from atop his trailer, filling the living room with its reverberation. Randy broke his stare from the TV, wondering if he had really heard it or if it was only in his mind, like so many other things.

Then another thunderous bang echoed throughout the trailer, this time from near the front door. Randy dove to the floor, covering his head with his hands. Looking up at the kitchen counter, he could see his helmet sitting on the edge. He frantically crawled to the counter, reached up and felt around the helmet, quickly grabbing it by the strap and pulling it down.

Another loud thud rang out from the roof. Then, not but a second or two later, Randy heard glass shatter from down the hall, where he could see a rock of some kind lying on the floor. The thuds and bangs and reverberations grew. Randy put on his helmet and crawled under the coffee table in the center of the room, his half-eaten TV dinner almost falling as his back bumped the table from underneath.

The deafening noise continued. Randy looked around from his position on the floor, scanning in terror at what was happening. He couldn't discern what was real and what wasn't, reality from horror, the present from the past. The faces of so many of his fellow soldiers flashed before his eyes. The smell of napalm, of burning foliage, of diesel filled his nose. He buried his face into the floor, holding his helmet in place, screaming the inhuman screams and sobs of true, brutal, unobjectionable fear.

Then, through the noise, he could hear voices. Not just voices. Laughing. His eyes widened, realizing his enemy was close, just outside. He crawled to the corner near the door, where he kept a .270 bolt action rifle propped up in the corner, loaded and always ready. Grabbing the gun, he clutched it to his chest and rolled across the floor to a nearby window. The sounds of the attack against his trailer still radiated throughout, another window breaking somewhere near the bathroom.

Randy climbed to his knees, his eyes wide and heart racing, overcome by the kind of involuntary relentlessness that takes over in

combat. He swung the rifle around, smashed the window with the butt, and slid the barrel out. The noise of war continued, the smashing of the window blended in with the sounds from his enemy's attack. Without aiming, he fired the first shot into the darkness, not even hearing the blast or feeling the recoil. He pulled the bolt back and pushed another round into the chamber, and fired again. He fired two more shots until the weapon was empty.

Randy fell back to the floor, out of the enemy's line of fire. He began looking for the box of ammo to reload when he realized the thuds and cracks had stopped. All he heard was silence. He climbed to his knees again, and peered out into the night, but could see nothing. He got to his feet, pulled his pants back up over his belly, and made his way to the front door. Seeing the box of ammo on the side table by his keys, he reloaded the rifle quietly, and slowly, listening for any sounds of the enemy from outside.

With the rifle tight in his sweaty hands and pulled snugly against his shoulder in the firing position, Randy opened the front door and stepped out. The porch was littered with rocks and bricks, a result of the attack on his trailer. He stepped down the few stairs to the yard, the grass was wet under his bare feet. He readjusted his helmet and continued onward, patrolling the area for any sign of the enemy.

That's when he saw the body. He kept his rifle at the ready as he approached it. When he was close, only feet away, he saw bright blonde hair, not black hair like "Charlie" always had. He knelt down

to look over his defeated enemy, rolled the body over, and saw the face of the boy from town earlier that day, the one who had made fun of how he smelled. He realized as he examined the boy that the bullet must have hit him in the back as he ran away, a massive exit wound in the center of his frontside, just under the chest plate. Randy didn't bother checking for a pulse - he knew death when he saw it. He could feel the tops of the boy's ribs in the exit wound, heat radiating from his flesh, his lifeless eyes shimmering in the light of the moon.

Randy could hear the sirens coming down the road, turning onto his property. He had left the door open so they didn't have to knock. When they entered, they found him sitting on the couch, watching a static-filled TV and eating the rest of his dinner, enjoying the small brownie. From the back of the squad car, he watched the coroner wheel the boy into the transport vehicle, the body bag off-white and zipped closed. As the car made its way down the gravel driveway and onto the road, Randy knew what he had done and why he was on his way to jail. But instead of being full of emotions, he was full of nothing. He was empty. No remorse, no fear, no self-preservation. As if nothing happened at all.

At that moment, for some reason, he suddenly heard his Mama's voice as clear as ever, saying what she had told him years before

when he left for basic - you come back to me the same, don't let
over there ruin you - unsure if her voice was real or in his head.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



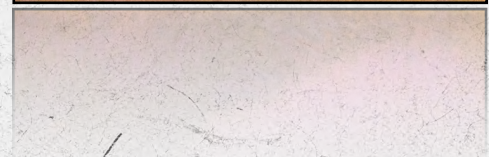
Corey Villas, a native of Indian Trail, NC, is a full-time professional in the Supply Chain and Logistics industry, and a graduate of Auburn University. He is a proud husband and father of two. In his spare time, Corey enjoys golfing, fishing, reading, and traveling.

3 POEMS

by James Croal Jackson

PINK MEASURING TAPE

I smack pink measuring tape against the wall
there are fireworks in Bloomfield above the dying
grocery store chest-pumped with paranoia the aluminum
foil toy mouse falls to floor I watch tape crumple into
carpet snake then wonder what I am doing with my days
right shoulder my lower back there's a day dangling
in my past when I'd miss people because I could go
now I miss the cool night air at April's end when
weather wants to turn the corner but my plastic
water bottles never last I am surrounded by shit
I never want to get rid of a blue plush Smile
Slime a Yeti microphone when will I start recording
again these mornings have been productive
under the market's probing light they declassified
unidentified objects on my timeline money
nails someone cuts hundred dollar bills glues
pieces of Ben's head where people can see them
but what people I haven't seen anyone in weeks
I'm watching the night shift into night not
measuring days anymore nor my place in them



I'LL EAT THE MOON IF I MUST



Gazing at the crescent moon is the key
to my heart— no lock. Its peel I unpeel

til the moon's in my palms,
that fruit hanging til dawn

the whole year like the dull paint job
of my kitchen, where my hanging

fruit is *I could do better*. Chew to
dust. Don't mind what gravity

you have caused.

AFTER-PARTY

We walked downhill to Lawrenceville,
first snow of fall. The newlyweds were

the only ones wasted yet we still gathered
around a bonfire of aqua rocks, questioning

the consequences if we piled firewood
the family brought. Research: explosion.

So we did not, but the bride's sister doused

the flame with a hazy IPA to our *no oh*

god no— the sizzle zippered. Propane
turned off, we walked uphill.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



James Croal Jackson is a Filipino-American poet who works in film production. His latest chapbooks are *A God You Believed In* (Pinhole Poetry, 2023) and *Count Seeds With Me* (Ethel Zine & Micro-Press, 2022). Recent poems are in *Hello America*, *Little Patuxent Review*, and *Ballast Poetry Journal*. He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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THE DINNER IS RUINED

by David Lightfoot



“Thanks so much for coming over to help,” Kathleen Hobbes says to two of her dinner party guests. “I’m so glad to have switched shifts with Phoebe so I can be home today.”

Her younger friend, Lucy Brown, is busy chopping lettuce and other vegetables to make a garden salad. Kathleen’s sister, Cheryl Place, is cooking a second of three batches of beef noodle Hamburger Helper to be served as a side. As a large turkey roasts in the oven, Kathleen is busy chopping half a bag of potatoes to make potato salad, the other half to be peeled and mashed later.

“Hey, anything for my sister,” Cheryl replies. “There’s no way anyone can work half a day, then come home and cook for eleven people in just four hours.” She adds milk and sauce mix and stirs, then retrieves a large canister of mayonnaise before Kathleen can ask. “Let me know when it’s time to do the mashed potatoes. That’ll also be my station.”

As they work, Lucy tells Kathleen about some surprise guests. "Before I forget," she says, "I got a call from Pamela Shearer last night. Her long-time friend, Margaret Whittle, is in town for a conference, so she's invited her to the dinner party tonight."

"Pam sent me an e-mail two nights ago," Kathleen replies, "and I replied that it's okay. Also, her husband is in California on business, so her brother Gordon Meighen is coming in his place."

Kathleen's husband, Sherlock comes home at four o'clock. By this time, she's making another batch of stuffing. Cheryl has finished a third batch of Hamburger Helper, putting it in a large serving pot she brought. He comes into the kitchen, attracted to the strong smell of turkey and hamburger.

"Oh, it looks as wonderful as it smells," he compliments, then gives Lucy a surprising look. "Why, Lucy, how long have you been here? I sent a reminder to Dennis and Bruce about this party. I thought you and Dennis would be here together. And what about your kids?" He knows Lucy has a daughter with physical and mental disabilities.

"Don't worry, the kids were still at school when I left," Lucy replies. "I called Dennis before leaving, saying I was coming early to help Kathy prepare. He actually encouraged this. I left the kids a note saying they are to watch Darlene if they get home before their stepfather. The sitter's coming around four-thirty to watch the kids. Don't worry, everything's in good hands."

She searches the kitchen drawers for a turkey baster. She asks Kathleen where it is and says, "We'll need it for the turkey gravy later on."

Sherlock immediately rushes to the basement pantry for some cartons of chicken broth. "Let's use these instead," he suggests. "With enough flour and butter, this will be enough to serve eleven people, and it'll come out thicker and heartier. I think you ladies have done enough, let me take care of the gravy later."

"Maybe you can check on the turkey, too," Kathleen says. She takes Lucy and Cheryl out to the living room, all of them sitting on the sofa. Lucy starts thinking about Pamela and her family and has some disturbing thoughts.

"I don't know about Margaret," she begins, "but both you and I met Gordon when he came here with Pam and Richard on Christmas Eve a couple of years ago. I know Pam and Gordon are related to the one-time Prime Minister, Arthur Meighen, and both of them are staunchly conservative."

"Pam isn't nearly as conservative as Gordon," Kathleen answers. "For one thing, she's an advocate for working mothers and families. She thinks all mothers should work outside the home and have a backup self-supporting plan to keep the résumé fresh... especially police, firefighter and military wives. But she saves this for political events and writings. You know that. At parties like this, she'll mostly talk about books, theatre shows and movies."

“And what about when Gordon brought up child discipline while you were talking about the state of youth crime today, and how it was when we were growing up?” Lucy laments. “Gordon told Dennis and me directly that we should put Darlene in a group home if she’s so impossible to discipline, and that she was hindering the family. He wants the government to build more institutions for children who can’t learn from spankings. I think poor Pamela was stunned when she heard that.”

“I remember Gordon made you cry so badly, Dennis had to take you home right away,” Cheryl says to her.

Kathleen rises and brings Lucy some Diet Coke. “That’s nothing compared to what Pamela tells me about Gordon’s stance on certain issues,” she continues. “She’s been working at the same non-profit organization that caters to newcomers and refugees to Canada for the past twenty years, and he’s been after her recently to quit her job, saying she has no business as a Canadian-born citizen to be reaching out to those who want to take over the country with Sharia law. He’s told her to find something that helps ordinary Canadians and to avoid anything having to do with immigrants and refugees.”

“I’m really nervous about him being at this party,” Lucy says.

“Pam’s a loyal friend to me. I’m sure she’ll remind him about manners and not to utter a word about politics.”

Kathleen decides to change topics, telling Lucy and Cheryl some gossip she’s recently heard at the women’s centre where she

works. They chatter and laugh wildly, and Lucy starts to feel more comfortable. Suddenly, they hear the first doorbell of the evening, and Kathleen excuses herself to answer.

“Speaking of work,” she exclaims happily. “Welcome to the party, Phoebe!” She lets in Phoebe Swinton, a young-looking blonde woman in her mid-thirties. “Thank you so much for covering the afternoon for me.”

Phoebe looks at Lucy on the sofa and giggles. “I was coming here thinking you wouldn’t be able to pull off everything in a day. I would’ve helped if you asked before.”

Phoebe begins to talk about her shift, telling Kathleen, “I’ve spent the whole day typing up the final report for that women’s program you’ve been overseeing these past few weeks.” She is just starting to tell the other guests about it when the doorbell rings a second time. This time, the guest lets himself in as he recognizes his wife in the living room. Lucy smiles and hurries over to kiss Dennis hello.

Kathleen also smiles at Dennis, ready to give him a report. “Lucy was a terrific help in the kitchen. Because of her chopping and salad prep skills, both of them are now cooling in the refrigerator.”

“We’d be eating at eight at night if it weren’t for me,” Lucy adds.

Phoebe makes an impatient face, still eager to speak about Kathleen’s program. She starts to talk again when Kathleen explains, “For the past eight weeks, our centre got a bunch of housebound

women together for afternoon sessions of baking, sewing and crafting. Can you believe that many of them didn't know how to sew at the start?" She talks about the dresses that were made, then notices that Sherlock is too busy looking out the living room window to pay attention. Just as she's finishing this part, he sees a royal blue Cadillac - painted to look like a police car - going past Sherlock and Kathleen's driveway, finding a good parking spot.

Sherlock speaks as if he knows that Cadillac anywhere. "Oh good, Bruce's arrived. We also invited our personal secretary. I'll bring them inside." He leaves the house to meet Bruce Gelbrath in the driveway, staying out for a couple of minutes. When they come back, Bruce is telling Sherlock the punchline of a joke the rest of the party can't seem to understand. Bruce enters the home with a younger-looking man, dressed in a polo shirt and tan slacks.

The others are staring at Bruce's six-foot-ten height and his enormously brawny body mass; three hundred pounds or close to it, they guess. Bruce is dressed in blue jeans, a tropical shirt buttoned up halfway and what looks to be a black sleeveless shirt underneath, a police badge on a chain around his neck. Kathleen approaches Bruce and hugs him hello. The younger man smiles and introduces himself.

Sherlock brings the younger man into the living room to introduce him to the other women. "This is Kevin Jackson," he says. "He takes care of the paperwork, the reporting, runs errands, and all the other boring stuff none of us cops want to do."

Bruce approaches them and slaps Kevin's shoulder. "This kid is one of the most flamboyant report writers we've ever seen," he brags. "You should look at his business communication package. On top of that, he's got an amazing typing speed - seventy words per minute."

"Although my crew and I have to proofread his work before we send it to the courts," Sherlock says.

Kevin laughs and recalls, "Yeah, one time, I was working on a report on a string of bank robberies from the same branch, and I omitted a zero in the total amount of money that was stolen. Sherlock pointed out to me that it was \$20,000, not \$2,000."

The smell of turkey is strong enough to entice Bruce, and he licks his lips. "Sherlock, Kathleen, if you don't mind, I'd like to help you with the carving."

Sherlock is also staring at Bruce's body mass, and Bruce tries to plead. "Aw, come on. I'm not going to eat half of it before it gets to the table."

"You do get agitated if you don't eat regularly, Bruce," Dennis says.

Kathleen looks up at the clock. It's almost five o'clock and she anticipates the turkey will be ready in around fifteen minutes. "Sure, I'll leave the carving to you two. In the meantime, Sherlock, why don't you get started on the gravy? I'll look out for Pam. She should be arriving with Gordon and Margaret any minute."

At ten minutes after five, Kathleen sees her friend, Pamela Shearer, walking with a more familiar man and less familiar woman on the edge of the front lawn to the driveway. The man has a full head of chocolate brunette hair - darker than the mixture of brunette and blonde that Pamela has - and is wearing a black suit with a brown and red necktie. The woman is also dressed in full black and has red hair the color of a ripe tomato. Kathleen wonders if they've been to a funeral at first, but then notices Pamela is wearing a purple blouse and magenta skirt. As they approach the front door, Kathleen stands ready to open it and does before they can ring the doorbell.

Pamela hugs her friend hello as the three of them step in. "Kathleen, it's like you've anticipated me all day."

"Darling, all we had to do was look outside the window," Kathleen says, then takes her and Gordon to Phoebe, Bruce and Kevin. "Guys, I'd like you to meet Pamela and her brother, Gordon." She notices Lucy is holding Dennis' hand.

"Lovely to meet you," Pamela says, then turns sternly to her brother. "Now remember what we discussed, Gordon: mouth shut about Ottawa and Washington!"

Lucy starts shaking while hugging herself as if she's getting cold. She feels she is. Gordon is looking sternly at her. She anticipates another lecture about Darlene, ranting about special needs people.

They all remove their shoes and enter the living room. Pamela turns around and says, "Everyone, this is my friend, Margaret Whittle.

She's attending a conference at the convention center here in the city."

"The pleasure's mine," Margaret says.

Everyone starts to introduce themselves, but when Bruce introduces himself, Margaret looks horrified as she remembers something about him. "Bruce Gelbrath!" she cries. "I remember you from some of the pictures Pamela shared on my Facebook page! I am shocked that you don't wear a shirt outdoors and all those risqué poses you do when photographing yourself with your car. Your shirtless body in those jeans and athletic shorts, showing off as much as you please! Don't you have any modesty?"

"He also has those pictures on his Instagram," Sherlock points out.

"Hey, I'm married and I think Bruce looks quite sexy without a shirt on," Kathleen says.

"Uh, Margaret, Richard certainly doesn't mind seeing those pictures on my Facebook," Pamela adds.

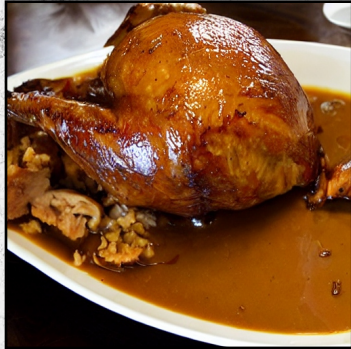
Right away, Bruce starts explaining. "Yeah, that's only during the hot summer weather when I'm off-shift... and when the A/C isn't working in my house."

"Still, the way you offer yourself to hordes of other women online..." Margaret says.

Bruce laughs, trying not to show how offended he is. "I'm not putting naked pictures on adult websites, or have tons of dating profiles, so just relax."

Cheryl is thinking about Margaret's conference the whole time, looking for an opportunity to bring it up. She asks her, "So, Margaret, what's the name of the conference you're at?"

"It's called, 'The Importance of the Lord in Your Future,'" Margaret answers her. "It talks about ways society can get back into the Christian and religious lifestyle, and how to be obedient to the Lord in order to make the world a better place. I had quite an informative day."



Lucy holds Dennis' hand tighter, and Kathleen, Phoebe and Cheryl see she looks like a frightened little girl. Cheryl looks into the kitchen and says, "Uh, Kathy, I think maybe it's time to do the mashed potatoes."

It's tense and silent for a few minutes until Sherlock comes from the kitchen and announces, "The turkey and gravy are coming along very nicely. I believe dinner will be ready before six."

Kathleen sees Lucy is very nervous and fidgety, watching Gordon and feeling as if she's about to step on a land mine. Maybe if she starts talking about Darlene. Kathleen takes her from the couch. "Here, Lucy, you can help me set the table, and put some food on it."

The women work on setting the cutlery on the table, but leave the plates on the kitchen island.

Margaret watches this with curiosity. "Excuse me," she says, "but what kind of dinner is this?"

Kathleen grins at her and answers, "Smorgasbord. Everyone serves themselves, but don't take too much."

Margaret goes back into the living room and says silently to herself, "Please let no one start eating right away."

At several minutes to six o'clock, Sherlock announces, "Okay, the turkey's sliced, the gravy's thick, and the potatoes are mashed. Everybody come get served!" Each guest takes a plate to the table, Margaret still praying that nobody starts eating right away.

When everyone is sitting, Margaret announces, "All right, now that everyone is ready, I say it's time we bow our heads for the blessing."

"Uh, Margaret, we're not really—" Kathleen begins, but Margaret looks rather insisting, her hands out for others to take. Gordon smiles as he takes her hand and Pamela's. Everyone else looks skeptical, but they go along.

"Lord, please bless us this day for the food You have given us and the friends You have gathered here this day..." Margaret begins.

She has a long list of items to be thankful for, and her grace takes a few minutes at first. Kathleen and Sherlock look up at each other. It's certainly the longest grace they've ever heard, but they

silently agree not to interrupt her. Lucy looks up at them, looking agitated and uncomfortable, too frightened to say anything. Sherlock and Kathleen quickly lower their heads so Margaret doesn't catch them, but Lucy's head stays up as she stares at the ceiling.

"And last, dear Lord, may Your beauty and grace shine upon us all forever more, and may Your love shine upon us so that we may continue to do Your work faithfully, steadfastly and without stumbling. You are our sanctuary, and for this, we shall be forever grateful," Margaret concludes. "Amen!"

Everyone adds salads and casseroles to their plates in a death-like silence, everyone except Margaret and Gordon staring at one another. It takes a few minutes for many of them to start eating, but Bruce and Pamela try breaking this tension by taking their first bites of turkey, and shoveling moderate amounts of potato salad onto their forks.

Kathleen feels she needs to explain to Margaret. "Uh, Margaret, some of us aren't on the same page as you regarding your God."

"I should know, I'm one of them," Lucy says. She sounds as if it's a confession she's proud to make.

Margaret wants to be shocked and angry, but realizes that she's never met this woman before. "This will be very interesting," she declares. "Now, dear, I've heard many stories of bad experiences in church, but that's no reason to turn your back on God."

“Really?” Lucy’s tone suddenly becomes upsetting. “So, what do you think about taking a belt, a paddle, or whatever else to a child with intellectual disabilities? Apert’s Syndrome! I’ll bet you don’t even know what that is!”

She starts to make angry faces and breathes hard as if she’s being forced to tell about her experiences. She hates to discuss taboo topics, but her conscience is telling her to reveal why she became an atheist. Her eyes look around at Bruce, Phoebe, Cheryl, Gordon and Keyin; for Kathleen, Sherlock and Dennis already know this story.

“Darlene was seven, this was before I met Dennis. When we went to church, we’d always leave our daughter behind because she was never able to behave in solemn public settings before. She was that age when she learned to sit properly.”

Cheryl looks surprised at this. “I thought most disabled and special needs kids would learn to sit properly before they hit five,” she says.

“Well, when you have to take your child in for lots of corrective surgeries, developments are delayed for a lot longer than normal.” Lucy speaks normally, but Kathleen and Sherlock think she’s going to break down any minute. She takes a few breaths before she can mention her ex-husband’s name. “Michael - you’d get along so well with him, Gordon, he’s just as conservative as you if not more so - he wanted to push Darlene to be as normal as possible, even though I knew she might never be one hundred percent. He pressured her to

make friends, yelling at her when she couldn't, but very few kids wanted to play with her. He complained that all these trips for all the surgeries were taking food off the table, and we had two other kids to support."

Dennis can see she's starting to cry, so he continues for her, "Michael stayed around long enough to have another daughter after Darlene, but like their big brother, Shannon has to guide her more than the other way around."

Gordon starts thinking about Lucy's tearful confessions that Christmas about spanking not working for her daughter, sighs harshly and rolls his eyes. He says, "And that is how you and Michael got divorced when she was seven. He obviously had enough!"

Lucy immediately starts bawling and falls into Dennis' arms. Dennis glares at Gordon and spitefully reminds him, "And this is why I, a police detective, had to tone down my conservative viewpoints for her." He looks around to tell people who don't know. "You know, before I met Lucy and Darlene, I was very big on spanking kids. One look at Darlene told me I had to take that off the table if I wanted a future with Lucy."

Margaret looks eagerly at Lucy, wanting the other part of her story. "But what happened that made you quit church?"

Lucy pauses and breathes to compose herself. She wants Dennis to tell this part of the story, but she knows this was before she met him, so she must tell. "The topic was respect in the home, and it

was Darlene's first time in church since learning to sit nicely. The preacher was talking about how children should be reared with the rod of discipline in order to learn to honor Mother and Father, all this Proverbs 13:24 and 23:13 nonsense. In the middle of this sermon, he called Darlene and about two more disabled children up to stand with him, then started talking about how the disabled shouldn't be excluded from this, how the weapon of discipline will make them normal. The next thing I knew, he had Darlene bend over on the pulpit and..."

She starts to get worked up, fighting the urge to cry and scream, but she gives in. "He started to demonstrate this on her. He was whacking her behind and upper back for a good fifteen minutes and he wouldn't stop until he was satisfied!"

Bawling again, she snatches her cloth napkin, turns her head away and blows her nose. She looks misty-eyed at Gordon, not wanting to reveal the conclusion to anyone. This incident was why she and Michael divorced, after yet another argument about Darlene's discipline, but Lucy always insists she's a sweet girl.

Gordon starts to say something, but Kathleen puts her hand up to stop him. "And this is why we don't talk politics at dinner parties," she wants to say, but can't figure out how to do it without lecturing. Conservatives don't like being treated like children, she reminds herself. Instead, she says, "Gordon, I swear, if you bring up the spanking laws in Canada-

Sherlock puts his hands up to silence everyone. "Let's talk about something more party-friendly," he suggests and turns to Pamela. "Pam, tell us about Richard's latest project. Tell him we said hello and that he missed a wonderful party."

"Richard's a team leader in disaster relief," Gordon says to everyone else.

"And these California wildfires are getting out of control," Pamela adds. "Southern California, especially Santa Monica and Paradise Valley, has been devastated. Everyone's lost their homes and most of their possessions. Richard has to relocate them and help take care of food and water supplies, set up alternative and new housing. He does this for hurricanes, floods, tornadoes and earthquakes in all parts of the world. Thank heavens nobody's been killed in these latest fires, but for those who have, he also has to set up counseling for surviving family members and survivors who have PTSD from the trauma. You wouldn't believe the nightmares these people have." She looks mournfully at Sherlock and Kathleen. "So sorry I have to say this, but Richard says this is the only good thing about having a billionaire for president - all this pot the world is going to is keeping him working."

"Working' is the key word here," Gordon says. "All the conservatives want is to see more people living the dream - workers making a hundred thousand a year building houses, working steel and lumber yards, restructuring the mining industry, creating more

factory jobs, having people in higher positions make lots of money so they can retire before fifty and send their kids to university.”

Kevin becomes so bothered, he shovels some lettuce and chopped peppers into his mouth, chewing and swallowing rather quickly. He blasts at Gordon, “Hey, us desk workers with computers and knowledge of Microsoft Office can make a difference in the world too, you know.”

Gordon gives a fake sympathetic look. “My boy,” he says, “all you’re doing is sitting on your ass typing up spreadsheets and reports and business letters and whatnot, and fetching coffee and doughnuts for officers. What do you do in your spare time, work on your novel or poetry collection that nobody will read?”

“You’d better be glad I’m younger. I’d bloody well slap you.”

“Well, Canadians need to live to dream as well, which is why we need to stop this flow of Middle Easterners and Africans migrating here.” He takes a combination of turkey and mashed potatoes and keeps talking with food in his mouth. “Or at least, stop spending our hard-earned money on them, like what that damn Trudeau is doing. Living the dream means earning the things you want, and taking care of yourself and your own family successfully. I mean, don’t you care about your family?”

“I don’t have a family of my own,” Kevin confesses.

“Yeah, Lisa dumped Kevin about a month ago,” Sherlock tells Gordon. “Bruce and I were on shift when he came in and told us. Oh,

but he looked so miserable, and he was just crying when he was telling us about it. You should've seen the big bear hug Bruce gave him."

"In the last few months of our relationship, Lisa kept making up excuses about why she couldn't see me and kept canceling dates," Kevin says. "Then last month, I went to her place and this taller, beefier man - almost Bruce's size - answered the door in his underwear. I pushed the man aside to go look for her and there she was in her bedroom, sitting up in bed topless. I could see her goods. She said this new man worked construction year-round. I went up to her, snatched the ring off her finger, and just ran out of there. I tried not to speed on the way home, but I did go faster than I normally would."

"And how much do you make working for Sherlock and his crew?" Gordon asks. "It's no wonder your girlfriend dumped you. I'll bet her new man makes at least ten thousand more than you."

"That's none of your business, asshole!" Kevin snaps back. "And what do you do, pray tell?"

"I'm head manager of a trucking company," Gordon answers. "My drivers were responsible for getting all this food to the stores for Sherlock and Kathleen to buy!"

Phoebe tries to suppress her anger as she asks Gordon a question. "So, what do you think about what's going on with the environment? You know, the reason why we're having all these

wildfires and hurricanes, and all this air and water pollution, is because people care more about money and profits. Let's not forget that animals are going extinct because people want to make money poaching and hunting. It's not just for sport anymore."

Margaret sips some wine and advises, "Phoebe, please take heart that the world will end with the second coming of the Lord. I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm not expecting that to happen in any of our lifetimes."

"Yeah, well, I think the Lord would be very angry at what many of His 'followers' are doing to this world," Phoebe responds. She waves two fingers on both hands at the word "followers." "If the second coming happens in twenty years, it wouldn't surprise me."

During the discussion, Cheryl notices that everyone has casserole on their plates except Phoebe. She passes the pot over to her. "Phoebe, darling," she says, "you simply must try this beef noodle Hamburger Helper. Maybe on your second serving. I made just enough for everyone."

"No, thank you," Phoebe replies. "I don't eat hamburgers or anything else that comes from a cow."

"I don't know what the hell you're complaining about," Gordon says. "Look, in order to improve the prosperity of our country, some sacrifices have to be made. All this talk about the environment and solar energy and saving the planet is nothing more than just a ploy to waste money and kill important jobs. Back in the seventies, everyone

was worried about preventing the ice age from coming and freezing everything up, thus why all this nonsense about preserving the water, the air, the trees, started in the first place.”

Pamela glowers at her brother and says insistently, “I’m sure that isn’t the reason why, Gordon!”

“My point, Pamela,” Gordon replies condescendingly, “is that we conservatives fell for it in the seventies and all this time, it turned out to be a ploy to give money to other countries. That’s how globalism began. Now, everyone’s suddenly all about global warming? That’s a bunch of horse manure, and we’re wise enough to be suspicious about it.” He turns back to Phoebe, pointing at her uneaten turkey with his fork. “And I find it hypocritical that you’re calling yourself an environmentalist, talking about saving the world, and you’re eating meat!”

Sherlock tries to stop the conversation but can’t get any words in. Phoebe retorts by informing Gordon, “I’m a semi-vegetarian, okay? The only meats I’ll eat are fish and poultry. No hamburger, no bacon or ham, no steak, no chops, and certainly no veal!”

She takes a few deep breaths to calm down, and Kathleen tells her, “It’s okay, Phoebe, just relax.”

Phoebe sees a bottle of champagne on the table with the salads. She pours herself a glass, filling it three-quarters of the way. Lucy holds out her empty glass, and she pours some for her as well.

Kathleen looks sharply at Gordon. She mouths at him, "See what you've caused?" but she doesn't make any sounds.

When she is calm, Phoebe starts to explain. "Okay, true story, and this is why I'm not a total vegetarian and refuse to go vegan. Fifteen years ago, when I was in university, my sister Allison went vegetarian in her efforts to be an environmentalist. She cut out the entire meat food group and resorted to breads and grains, fruits and vegetables, and milk and milk products. Couple this with the fact that she's allergic to all nuts. After about a month, we noticed she couldn't walk properly on her own and couldn't balance herself. She wasn't all skin and bones, but she was pretty damn close. Then, after a family dinner, she fell and couldn't get up. We had to get her to the hospital right away, and she had almost no muscle in her body because of the lack of protein. They fed her nothing but animal meat until she was well enough to walk again. Because of this, now she limits her meat intake to fish, poultry and meat alternates as prescribed by her dietician and specialist. I decided I didn't want the same for myself, so that's the only meat-eating I also do."

She, Kathleen and Pamela all look at Gordon and notice he's softened a little bit. He says, "Well, I appreciate your honesty, Phoebe. But I still don't understand young activists who tell us elders how the world ought to be, then go home and do the opposite of what they preach."

Pamela makes a “facepalm” move, then reaches for a bottle of wine and pours herself an almost full glass.

Kathleen tries to think of something to talk about, but can't think of anything, so she looks at Cheryl. “Cheryl, you haven't been very talkative this evening. Why don't you tell everyone what's been going on with you lately?”

Gordon looks back and forth between Cheryl and Lucy as if they're secretly best friends. “Let me guess,” he says sarcastically, “Cheryl also has a child with learning disabilities whom she refuses to spank at doctor's orders, and her husband left her because of it.”

Pamela slams her hand on the table, and Cheryl looks hotly at Gordon. Cheryl snaps, “You know I don't have a learning-disabled child, mister! But even if I did, I'd still listen to the doctor on alternative measures and hope that Roger listens along with me!” She exhales a sharp breath and excuses herself, returning with a new book, a large paperback novel that looks recently released. “This is the new pick for our book club next month.”

All the women except Margaret start gushing and making ooh sounds. The men just smile with casual interest, but Gordon is grumpier than ever. Margaret says nothing, but Gordon blurts out, “Terrific, more stupid crap. Cheryl, I know you're an event hostess for the city's largest bookstore - another useless job, if you ask me - but can't you promote more nonfiction books, and especially books

about conservative opinions and real issues? Really, who has time for crap like that?"

Cheryl stretches her arms out so the cover is almost in his face. "You know," she answers, "with the political climate the way it is, people who are cynical about that stuff are looking to fiction now more than ever." She looks at Pamela with interest. "They need an escape from stuff that makes them crazy."

"More stupid fiction like that just promotes more liberalism," Gordon argues. "With the world going further to hell because of it, people need to focus more on real-life stuff and less on horseradish fantasies."

"Dammit, Gordon, will you just take a break from politics for just five minutes?" Cheryl nearly explodes.

"My sentiments exactly, Cheryl, thank you," Pamela declares. Cheryl puts her book on the edge of the kitchen island as Pamela keeps speaking. "Now I want to sign up for your book club, Cheryl. Where can I fill out an application?"

"I'm hosting this month's event tomorrow afternoon at two at Words & Pages," Cheryl answers. "Why don't you drop by, listen in, and I'll help you after the event." She looks smug at Gordon. "And for your information, I also host a nonfiction club, but the selection hasn't been announced yet. Maybe you and Margaret should read more books besides boring political stuff and the Bible. I can only imagine how much fun you are at parties."

Soon afterwards, almost everyone is finished. Sherlock is feeling quite cheerful, so he says, "Everyone, help yourselves to seconds. There's still plenty left."

When everyone is back at the table with their plates full, Bruce starts talking about his latest girlfriend, whom he thinks is starting to get serious. "Sorry you couldn't meet Sandy tonight, but she's off celebrating a friend's birthday that was planned for weeks," he says.

For the first time at the party, Gordon shows a smile and some interest in a story. "How did you two meet?" he asks.

"I volunteer for a downtown juvenile center where we have an evening and sports program," Bruce answers. "After Linda died, the chief and all my other colleagues urged me to stop taking the evening and night shifts so I could spend more time with my two boys. But everyone in Linda's family urged me to start dating again right away. Sandy has two boys of her own, and they became friends with Jason and Shawn at their school and the sports program. She and I met through them after I brought them home following a Father's Day camping weekend - they moved here when her husband just left her - and I swear to God, I saw fireworks." He looks ahead rather dreamily.

Margaret gasps, putting her fingertips over her mouth. Gordon looks at him with widened eyes and asks, "How many women have you had since your wife died?"

“Before Sandy, twenty women in seven years,” Bruce answers as if he’s proud of this.

Margaret looks horrified and stuffs herself with potato salad and stuffing to keep quiet. Bruce looks at her as if he can tell what she’s thinking.

“I’ve been saving money for an engagement gift if that’s what you’re worried about,” he says.

“It matters not!” she shouts. “The Bible says you are committing adultery in your heart! Matthew 5:28!”

He pounds the table, causing the glasses to shake, and explodes, “What the hell do you expect me to do, cry over Linda until I’m dead?! My boys deserve to have another Mom, and somewhere in the world, a young boy from a single mother is in need of a father. I can be that father!”

Gordon is listening but doesn’t know what to add. He focuses on Bruce’s clothes instead. He says, “Well, you don’t look very professional for a police officer. Most detectives I’ve seen on cop shows wear business suits; otherwise, they have standard police uniforms.”

Bruce stands up and whips off his shirt, flexing in front of Gordon. “Yeah, I don’t think any standard uniform or suit would fit these guns!” Kathleen, Phoebe and Pamela all start laughing, while Cheryl only smiles.

“Bruce’s a total workout warrior,” Sherlock adds. “When he was a rookie, he kept ripping through the sleeves of the police uniforms whenever he flexed, and the repairs got to be too much. They stuck him in the plainclothes unit immediately and had him wear muscle tops.”

Margaret stares at Bruce, speechless the whole time, but finally says, “Dear Lord, this man worships the god Hercules and others of Greek mythology, but not You!”

Bruce puts his shirt back on without buttoning it up. “This is only during warmer weather and hot summers. In cooler weather, I wear football and hockey jerseys to work.”

He sits back down and looks frisky at everyone. “Anyway, so Sandy and I have been having sex for the past year. She’s said she loves my shirtless body and seeing me naked. Whenever we do, I take these really hot showers and come to bed naked without drying myself off. Last night, as Sandy and I were having sex, she tried to focus on my lower half. As usual, she was too immersed with my pecs and shoulders and my belly button which she always said was cute. I got into bed and she made the first moves. She was pushing down and rubbing my pecs and slobbering all over my abs, kissing my belly button, and this was before I even got under the covers—”

Suddenly, Margaret throws wine into Bruce’s face and starts screaming at him, “Repent of your sexual immorality! Repent of your sexual immorality!”

“Jesus Christ, Margaret, stop!” he yells. “What the hell are you doing?!”

She stands up and keeps screaming for his repentance, wishing now that she had a bottle of water to pour on his head. Cheryl and Phoebe also stand up, acting as barricades while Pamela, Sherlock and Kathleen all grab her arms tightly. They yell at her to sit back down in union, even making her sit physically. Sherlock presses on her shoulders so she won't get up again, telling her, “Breathe, Margaret, breathe! There's no need to get worked up over a sex story.”

Margaret glares harshly at Sherlock and Kathleen, showing her silent disgust at them for allowing sex talk at the table. Bruce just glares at her as he eats, no longer in the mood to continue. Everyone else can tell.

After dinner, Margaret starts talking about her conference, and all the inspirational speeches about believing and trusting in God. Nobody is listening, and everyone mostly looks bored, but she doesn't notice this. She starts talking about what they're going to discuss tomorrow.

“One topic I'm really looking forward to is ‘Church and State Hand in Hand,’” she says. “It's about why church and state should come together instead of being separate, and how it's supposed to be beneficial to the world rather than detrimental. Personally, I feel that churches and pastors and priests should have more of a say in

political matters, and the government should be encouraged to run the country inspired by the teachings of Jesus.”

Cheryl spits out her wine and glares in Margaret’s direction. “Then they should lose their exemptions and be forced to use their tithing for taxes!” she snaps.

“Now hold up!” Kathleen objects. “I can’t think of anything more stupid than that. Religious freedom in this country means that people can practice any religion they want or brought up in, they can choose to go to church or not, and they can choose to follow or question the Bible. If there were actual laws based upon Bible teachings, and people were punished for not following these actual laws, this world could morph into a real-life dystopian novel.”

Sherlock nods and adds, “Margaret, if you are a true Christian, you don’t get involved in political affairs, except for voting at the polls. It’d be too secular and ‘earthy’ for you. You and your churchgoers would remain above the fray to focus on your work for the Lord.”

“The last thing I want is to be shamed for not submitting to a man,” Cheryl agrees.

“It wouldn’t be like that,” Gordon says. “How this would work is educational curriculums are based upon Bible study and people would be instructed to live life based upon the teachings from the Lord. If God, prayer and religion are put back into the schools, it would steer students in a more godly and charitable direction.

Conservative Christian groups have been gunning for this for years, and I think we ought to give it a try. This should at least take us back to the time when this country was better.”

Pamela stands up and looks hotly at Gordon. “And what’s next?” she hollers. “Will women be forbidden to go to college, get jobs and own property? I’m surprised they’ll even be allowed to read! Listen, Gordon, outlawing abortion and restricting immigration is one thing, but I will not have my daughters being kitchen-bound and forever pregnant in their future!”



“Pamela, my dear, if everyone was given a Bible and told to read it,” Margaret says, “and if everyone were to live their lives according to the scriptures, the world would be a much better place. This is why church and state must come together. The two concepts can work together to make the world better for the Lord. Now, I’ve

never agreed with your stance on working mothers. They should be at home, rearing their children with the fear of the Lord.”

“This would mean quitting that job at your immigration organization,” Gordon adds. “You know damn well that all refugees want to do is convert everyone to Islam, impose their laws and customs on us, and force us to give up our ham and bacon for

hummus because they don't like our laws or our religion. You think they want to learn about what life is like in Canada? Why can't you do more for the homeless who lived here all their lives, or our veterans? They're the ones who fought for our country; the least you could do is reach out to them instead!"

"Up yours, Gordon!" Pamela retorts. "This is just what I'm talking about!"

"Enough!" Sherlock calls, and everyone looks up at him in attention, but he focuses only on Gordon and Margaret.

"Gordon, Margaret, you've filled our house with this incredible tension," he says. "You've offended all our guests with your political and religious banter! There's a reason why we don't bring up this crap at parties! It'll take Kathy and me weeks to recover! I'm sorry, but I think you'd better leave."

Gordon rises and glowers at Sherlock, his lips firmly and angrily together. "Offended," he repeats. "For someone in your authorial position, you're sure worried about snowflakes. What's the point of going to an adults-only party if you can't discuss politics and real issues?"

Pamela looks embarrassed and starts crying as she takes her jacket. "Sherlock, Kathleen, I'm so sorry," she sobs. "I should've known Gordon wouldn't keep his promise. I'll take him and Margaret back right now."

“No, Pamela, stay,” Kathleen says. “Sherlock will call a taxi for them and pay in advance.”

As he heads to the phone, Pamela calms herself to say, “Margaret’s staying at the Riverside Inn, where her conference is.” She gives him Gordon’s address. When the arrangements are made, Gordon and Margaret wordlessly put on their shoes and leave.

Sherlock approaches Pamela and tells her, “I don’t think you should bring them here anymore, especially not Gordon. I know he’s your family, but he’s also exhausting and preachy.”

“I especially don’t want to see Gordon anymore,” Kevin agrees. “If that prick said anything else about my job, I’d have to slug him.” Bruce ruffles his hair in happy agreement.

“I’ll have a talk with both of them,” Pamela promises. “Separately. I’m just as determined this won’t happen again.”

Lucy seems a bit calmer so she says, “I have something that will help end this night on a happy note.” She heads into the kitchen and brings out a platter of dainties and Nanaimo bars she’d brought for dessert. Cheryl goes back for her book.

“Thanks, girls,” Kathleen says, and gets some small Styrofoam plates. “I think we’re all in the mood for something good and entertaining.”

Lucy sets the platter on the coffee table, and everyone takes at least two or three. Cheryl opens her novel and starts reading aloud to everyone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Lightfoot identifies as a writer with a disability (Cerebral Palsy,) and chose a writing career while still in middle school. He studied creative writing through correspondence from writing institutes in both Canada and the United States. In addition to self-publishing a novel on disability human rights, “Broken Family Portrait,” he has also been published in *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Agape Review*, *Northwest Indiana Literary Journal*, *Men Matters Online Journal* and *October Hill Magazine*. He also has fiction in the 2022 *Stella Samuel Annual Anthology*. An advocate for educational literacy, David lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

IN THE PAST TO COME

by Don Donato

In the last few years, my days were spent in one party place or another: Cannes, Paris, Milan, as well as northern Africa during the colder days in Europe. Since the death of my wife, I no longer felt I belonged anywhere, and, so, I drifted. I traveled sometimes alone, and other times accompanied by one younger woman or another.



An Aperol spritz, the labor of a highly ranked mixologist, filled a sweating, stemmed glass that sat on a small white table in my tiny corner of the sandy estate owned by the Carlton Regent Hotel in Cannes. Occasionally the air breezed up from the sea and moved across the carefully raked, white sand.

The Mediterranean, for nearly a century, has borne its merciful chore of cooling the indolent rich who dot its beaches in the more favorable seasons.

My waggish ways surfaced in the wake of my tragedy and floated unmitigated among the flotsam and jetsam of my past life. My sense of propriety was supplanted by a conviction that I had nothing left to

lose, and consequently, I filled my vacant future with indulgence and the unexpected. For my younger companions, their untenable behavior was spurred in part by their age and, in part, also by tragedy, more specifically, the lack of it.

“The water is delightful. You should try it. Edward, order me a drink, please.”

Laurie was glistening from the sea water glazing her body. Occasionally, a rivulet ran down her torso and disappeared into her wet bikini. She tilted her head to one side and the long, black strands of her hair fell away and free from her shoulder. She began pressing her wet hair with a white towel, at times, rubbing vigorously.

For a good part of the afternoon, I watched the gentle, petite curls of blue water roll quietly onto the shore. As far as I had observed, they never strayed far from where the boggy sand defined their reach, and I wondered if on some disastrous occasion, perhaps a meteorological or climatic event, the staunch waves broke on the ground they had never known.

Laurie paused for a moment, and my stare floated away from the soft breaking of the constrained and restless tide. I lifted my glass from the small table and took a sip. The book I had been reading, resting patiently in the French sun, reclaimed my attention. I began to read.

“More Fitzgerald?” she asked and began again to rub her hair dry.

There was something that had gripped me in an unexplainable way about F. Scott Fitzgerald's writing. A pleading romanticism floated through his stories as if the author hoped it would purge a deep and dark misery from his soul.

"What?" I answered, raising my head, and squinting from the glaring sun. "Yes, yes, Fitzgerald."

"Gatsby again?" She said with incredulity and a hint of suspicion that I may be slipping helplessly from the real world.

"No, not Gatsby." I was proud to reclaim what paucity of sanity that secretly remained.

"I read that book in high school. Never really sure what the big deal was. People have affairs all the time. The fact that they never end well is no surprise."

She dropped the towel onto the lounge set beside mine, flopped down, and began to apply lotion.

"I had an affair, sort of," she said, "he was the one cheating. I was the one in love. Of course, he wasn't, and that was that."

I lowered my book into my lap with my finger within the pages. I was reading *Dalrymple Goes Wrong*, a short story. My intrigue with why a young, beautiful girl would have an affair when so many other opportunities existed, gained my attention. I did not want to pry, but I did.

"Weren't you afraid that his wife would find out and come after you?"

My question was not quite what I wanted to ask, but it opened the door to it.

I sat up, swung around, and sat facing her. She put on her sunglasses and lifted her head a bit as if to locate beyond the horizon, what had once been.

“That was my biggest fear, but it never happened.” She turned her head abruptly toward me. “Do you want to know why I did it?”

In an attempt to reassure myself of my virtuous intention not to pry, I did not answer.

“I wanted to see if I could get what seemed impossible. He was thirty-eight years older than me. He was in politics and married with grown children. I was just a kid to him. I didn’t think that it would become what it did.” She paused a moment, and I thought, perhaps, the subject was about to change to something more banal and less self-incriminating. It did not.

“You know that I like older men,” she interjected.

“Yes, I noticed.”

She was several decades younger than I, but the chasm between our ages was never an obstacle. In fact, it was the very thing that connected us. Neither of us wanted what was prescribed for our ages. In the last few months, we traveled together to some of the livelier spots in Europe and Africa frequented by the bored and affluent. Laurie and I lived in the romantic and pledged ourselves to wander in search of amusement in all its indulgence and recklessness.

Her gaze dropped away from the past and directed itself to the shoreline.

"I ended it," she added. Her words were clear and monotonal, hinting at an ache-filled decision.

I struggled to find the right thing to say but then remembered the advice that Nick Carraway, Gatsby's friend, had received from his father about the impropriety of judging anyone. So, I remained silent. I turned and leaned back on my lounge. How could she have done such a thing for such a self-centered reason? I picked up my book in one hand, my spritz in the other, and started reading again.

The sun dropped closer to the horizon, and the wind picked up a bit. Beachgoers were stirring about in their partitioned lounge areas. Some gathered their belongings, while others made their way up the stairs to the Croisette, the walkway that ran along the sea.

"Let's go. I want to take a shower before dinner," Laurie said.

I grabbed my drink, finished what was left, and we began making our way across the sand. We crossed over the Croisette and reached our hotel. Two doormen wished us a pleasant evening, and we entered the lobby.

My sun-evoked lethargy began to fall away in the cool conditioned air, and a sudden burst of recognition of my senseless existence poked at me. I needed a drink.

We walked toward the elevators and were about to pass the bar.

“Let’s get something to drink. The air conditioning ruined my buzz, and I feel my reality is about to rear its ugly head.”

Laurie turned and started walking toward the bar, and I followed. We were greeted by a handsomely dressed waiter. His attire wasn’t quite a tuxedo, but it made every attempt to say it was. His jacket



was more of a vest, but I saw no reason to judge his shortcomings. He led us to a small round table, reminiscent of the ones which populated the outdoor cafes on the Boulevard du Montparnasse in Paris. A sweet stir struck me. Richness, elegance, and fantasy bounded about the room. Large arched windows, running from floor to

ceiling, sat within polished mahogany walls. The well-heeled, attired in fashion and diamonds, sat in small groups and engaged in conversations interrupted only by obligated grins and sips of over-priced cocktails.

Laurie lowered her head and looked at me. I saw her mouth moving and tried to make out her sotto voce.

“What? What are you saying?”

“Don’t look, but that couple sitting next to us, to your right, keeps looking at us.”

I bent my head forward and kept my words as quiet as possible.

“What’s so unusual about that? I’m Caucasian and your Asian, I’m old, and you’re not.”

I took a nonchalant peek at the two voyeurs. White hair, a brown suit, and a flower-print dress confirmed my suspicions.

“It’s simple. She’s disgusted and he’s envious. Let’s order.”

We picked up the prayer book-sized drink menus and perused them for a moment or two.

I knew what I wanted. I closed the menu, said, “Amen,” and looked for the waiter.

“I’ll have a Negroni,” Laurie said, but still perusing.

The tuxedo-vested young man spotted my head swiveling in search of desperate relief from creeping sobriety.

“Yes, sir. May I take your order?”

“Yes, my fiancé would like a Negroni,” I spoke loud enough to startle the white-haired interlopers.

Laurie gave me wide eyes.

“Madame, will that be the “Crystal Clear Negroni” or the “Negroni from the Barrel?”

She looked up at the waiter as he waited with pen in hand.

“Dear, why don’t you try the Negroni from the Barrel for a change?”

Without missing a beat, Laurie replied, “No, no, I’ll stick with the ‘Crystal Clear.’ Craft beer is the only thing I drink from a barrel.”

My turn to give the wide eyes. She never drank beer, and I seriously doubted she ever had a Negroni, crystal clear or from a barrel.

“For you sir?”

“Coffee Martini.”

“I didn’t see that on the menu,” Laurie interrupted.

“It’s not on the menu. That’s the point. The drinks on the menu are merely a suggestion, a pleasure suited to some barman’s taste.”

“Of course, sir. A Coffee Martini.”

The drinks were excellent, perhaps, too excellent. We ordered another.

Laurie put her elbow on the table and leaned her head on her clenched fist.

“Those people are still stealing looks and whispering. Let’s move.”

My buzz was back, and I instantly knew how to handle looks soured by a marinade of judgment.

“The best cure for overindulgence of anything is to give the offenders more of what they want.”

“What are you talking about? More?”

I sat back and raised my voice just enough to be heard but not enough to hint at my intent.

“Do you think we should wait till September? You are starting to show.”

Laurie's eyes widened again, and she began, ever so slightly, to shake her head in an unmistakable plea not to go there. Being a fiancé simply made her a gold digger, being pregnant made her an unsuccessful one. Her following parry was directed at me but also skillfully crafted to keep the brown suit and print dress duly satisfied. An Ivy League woman knows how to handle herself in this kind of situation. Only true talent can win a battle fought on two fronts.

"Oh, dear," she countered, in a tone as sweet as a 'Negroni from the Barrel,' "you must say that to all the girls. How many were there? Not counting me, of course."

The white-haired couple had stopped whispering. They sipped their drinks in silence.

The Ivy League doesn't recruit the quality mind that it once did. It was my move.

"I just thought that September might work out better, all things considered. Perhaps, it was a bit inconsiderate of me, I am sorry. I forgot about your divorce. Why do you insist on keeping the Wolf Hound? Better that you settle the matter and be done with it all."

She sipped her drink. Her eyes, now small slits, focused squarely on my perplexed face which barely concealed a smart-ass grin.

Laurie put down her drink with a slow and deliberate movement. The entranced eavesdroppers, judging by their continued silence and unfocused stares, were well satisfied.

"Well,...you give up George, and I'll let Horatio have Wolfie."

Nicely played, the bi-sexual card. I was not bi-sexual, at least, not until then.

“My dear, give up George? What are you saying? You said how much you enjoyed him two nights ago when we were all in bed together.”

That was it. The white-haired couple got up simultaneously without ever saying a word and left the bar. They left so abruptly that I wondered if they had even signed their bill. Laurie and I smiled at each other.

I called for the waiter and paid our bill. He gave us a half bow, and we began to walk out. A thought occurred to me. I called the waiter back.

“Did that couple sitting next to us pay their bill? I know it’s none of my business, but they’re good friends of ours.”

“No, sir, but I know their room number and it will be charged to their account.”

“Not necessary, I’ll take care of it.”

Laurie snapped her head in my direction.

“You are strange.”

She smiled and wagged her head from side to side. It was not a rebuke, but rather a small confirmation of what we sought: the unexpected with all its promise. We sailed through life on untethered romance with the wind of phantasmic hope at our backs. Like a ship bound for the horizon, we drifted endlessly toward the unknown.

The waiter handed me the white-hairs' bill. I paid him and asked him to borrow his pen. I wrote the following on the check: With our compliments, Edward, Laurie, and George.

A few days later we returned to Milan. Laurie continued to live at graduate school housing, and I lived alone in an apartment I had rented. On most days, I walked to the Piazza del Duomo and sat on the cathedral steps soaking in the sun and the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald. No matter how many stories I read, I found it was Jay Gatsby, the elusive character filled with extraordinary hope, who fascinated me most. Each time I read the novel, I yearned for Gatsby to succeed. Maybe it was some subconscious desire, perhaps a form of magical thinking, or just a hopeless hope on my part, but I longed for him to fulfill his ghastly fantasy of resurrecting the past. His vision, so stirring and unassailable, overwhelmed his reality, and, in its glorious wake, he reveled in a life bursting with romance.

In that first week of my return to Milan, I began researching F. Scott Fitzgerald in the hope of uncovering what inner turmoil inspired the birth of Jay Gatsby. Maybe then I would understand more about what this desperate and pitiful character felt. No matter how many books and articles I read, however, I continued to know Gatsby only in a secondhand sort of way. Was there some way that I could meet him in the flesh? After all, he was created from flesh and blood. I longed to speak to someone who lived with loss so deep,

someone who lived with longing so irreconcilable, someone who would tell me that life would be just the way it was.

It was not until I returned to my apartment in New Jersey that I was able to connect further with Gatsby. I lived near Princeton University, and I began to read Scott's letters stored in the University archives at Firestone Library. At times, I held back tears reading his words penned to his wife, Zelda, who was institutionalized for schizophrenia. Her replies to him did cause me to wipe the moisture from my eyes. Additional letters Scott had written to various friends spoke about how he lived with anguish and despair which now replaced his foregone days of feeling like an accomplished and well-liked man.



I found Gatsby's birthplace in those letters. Scott's longing to bring back the days of newly discovered love was there in dusty boxes like sacred tombs. It was obvious that the ever-receding past was slipping from his grasp and taking with it an old romanticism that he chased ceaselessly for the rest of his life.

At times, my heart pounded, and my throat tightened, and I had to stop reading. More than once, a tear escaped and ran conspicuously down my cheek. I was embarrassed, and at those unnerving times, I left the library.

I had seen Gatsby's soul in terms so real that it frightened me. For the first time since my wife's death, I knew where my new life had taken me. It had forsaken me to a tumultuous and desperate place. I had fallen into Gatsby's world. Irreconcilable dreams survived on champagne and caviar and everyone danced the Charleston endlessly.

One afternoon, after spending the morning at the Princeton archives, I needed a break and headed to Small World Coffee, a small café near the university. I sat down and checked my email. There was a message with the peculiar subject line: You're invited, old sport. I hope you can attend my party, June 26 till? Jay G. Had I become a character in a Woody Allen movie? Was a 1922 sedan going to pick me up and drop me into the past? I checked the sender. It was Laurie. The F. Scott Fitzgerald Society was hosting a conference in Sweden. I had not known about the society, or the conference, or Sweden, for that matter. If Gatsby existed in some tangible form, I was convinced that I would find him lurking and brooding with a far-off look in his eyes isolated and detached from his guests in Vaxjo, Sweden.

When I arrived there, I checked into the hotel where most of the guests were staying. There was a cocktail party that evening. With champagne in hand, I milled about the crowd. Unless Jay Gatsby was disguised as an English professor, he did not attend this event. Upon further thought, however, why couldn't he look like a professor? He was never who he appeared to be. But the more I spoke to the

assorted scholars, friendly and knowledgeable, the less I was convinced that any of them sported fraudulent credentials, not even from little Montenegro.

I continued weaving about the crowd and spotted a young man who stood alone. As far as I could surmise, he was taking a photograph of something outside the window. I made my way in his direction. When I was within feet of him, I noticed it was not the outer surroundings that were the object of his focus, but rather two small, bizarre, plastic figures whose identity would best be known by a child.

He sensed me approaching and turned my way and held out his hand.

“Keith, from the US. Nice to meet ya. Just taking a picture for my kids. Whenever I go away, I bring some things of theirs and take pictures of them wherever I am. Helps the kids to stay in touch. Got any kids?”

“No, no kids. Edward, also US, New Jersey.”

“Did you come alone?”

I nodded, and he said, “My wife told me that I should take this trip alone. F. Scott Fitzgerald is my thing, not hers. I teach him in my courses, mainly *The Great Gatsby*, of course...an amazing piece of work.”

We continued to talk. I said little about myself. It is never a good time to tell someone that your wife passed away. I listened to Keith

speaking about his family. His contentment shined through. There was no sign that he was caught in the ceaseless current of the beckoning past. He knew Gatsby well, but I was sure he was not the desperate character from West Egg.

During the next few days, I attended presentations given by one professor or another. There was little chance that Gatsby would give himself away in such a setting. He could drift off into his dreams, and the far-off look in his eyes would be indiscernible from some inspired academic planning his or her next publication. The only place to find Gatsby, I concluded, was in the shadows of the moonlight where he would stand alone, staring into the night, wishing silently on a winking star.

By the fourth day, frustrated in my search, I decided to leave the day's presentations early and return to my hotel. I needed a drink. It was raining, and I began walking quickly to the bus stop. I boarded and was let off a block or so from my hotel. The rain had picked up, and I hurried to the Bishop's Arms, a quaint bar close by. I ducked under the canvas which attempted to provide roofing for the outdoor tables. Rain poured through in several places, and I searched for a reasonably dry seat. I sat down and watched the downpour.

I longed for the solace provided by the sound of summer rain. Unfortunately, water gushed through the holes in the roof, and I strained to listen to the rhythmic patter of drops bouncing off the

cobble-stoned street. As a consequence, my mind began to drift. Untethered thoughts started to grab hold, and coupled with my severe sobriety, my reality threatened to return.

I looked around for the waiter, and I noticed a woman sitting alone, behind me, smoking a cigarette. There was also a bearded gentleman, sitting by himself at one of the tables directly adjacent to the street. He puffed smoke from a cigar while he stared at the rain. His arms were folded over his chest and gave the distinct impression that he was impatient to leave and continue on his way. I again glanced at the woman. She exhaled a stream of gray smoke, and she watched it while it disappeared into the air.

The waiter arrived, took my order, and retreated inside. My spritz came a few minutes later. I sipped my drink, and that woman played on my mind. She looked familiar. I had seen her at some of the presentations, but I had the distinct feeling I knew her. At first, I thought that maybe it was her clothes that had struck such a familiar chord. Her shirt stood pressed and sharp by the sheer richness of its material. The color was a unique pastel of yellow, undoubtedly created by a talented designer inspired by the petals of some tropical flower. Her large handbag sat on the table, and even from just a couple of glances, I knew Prada when I saw it. I had gotten to know the designer brands quite well. Laurie was a fashion expert. We would often stroll through the shops in Milan while she explained

the nuance of each of the high-end labels. It wasn't long before I could detect authenticity.

There was little doubt that the woman's affluent tastes resonated with me, nevertheless, there was something else that poked at my memory. There was only one thing left to do. I had to speak to her. I got up and left my drink on the table. I did not want to appear presumptuous that perhaps she would want me to join her. I remained standing as I spoke.

"You're here for the conference, right? I thought I had seen you at some of the presentations. I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

She looked up at me in silence for longer than comfort allowed. I was about to apologize and return to my seat when her expression changed. She recognized that someone was speaking to her.

"Interrupt? she asked.

What do I say now? She didn't say sit down or go away. I looked to lighten the situation.

"I see you're wearing Armani today. Always my personal choice."

She smiled. "No actually, Dolce Cabana"

"Of course, I should have known."

After another awkward silence, I said, "Would it be okay if I joined you? Please if you'd rather be alone, I understand."

She nodded her head. I walked back to my table and retrieved my drink. We introduced ourselves. Her name was Claire.

Whether I was too pushy or not, I didn't know, but there was something about her familiarity that permitted me to say hello, like when running into an old college buddy.

We began talking about the conference and the presentation she wanted to give, but sadly, had not found the time to prepare it. She looked over my shoulder as if someone had just arrived.

"Time is so valuable," she said to no one, "where does it all go?"

"Have you ever been married? I asked.

"Yes, and you?"

I explained to her that my wife had died, and since her death, I wandered around the world searching for what I once had. She gave me a puzzled look.

"For the brokenhearted, love is never lost," I said. "It is simply misplaced."

Claire turned her head and gazed at the rain-darkened street. She expressed no sympathy or sorrow. Her distant eyes, as I soon learned, were not the result of a calloused heart but rather from a mortally wounded one.

"I was young. I was foolish," she said, "What I thought I needed became more important than what I wanted. I married my ex-husband because I thought I needed a man by my side. Life seemed too big to go it alone. So, I married the man who wanted to marry me, rather than the one who wanted to love me."

"A misplaced love?"

She did not answer.

We ordered two more drinks and continued to talk with a special openness, a peculiar crevasse that quickly became littered with the regrets of time gone by.

“I’ll be fifty this year.” Her words were blunt and monotone and so inextricably linked that they reminded me of a train with its cars being pulled to their immutable end.

She lifted her drink, took a long sip, and watched herself slowly put the glass back on the table.

I remained silent.

The rain stopped and the discomfiting sound of water pouring through the roof ceased. A calmness settled over us, and I realized why I felt I knew this woman so well. She was a fellow traveler forever seeking the unattainable. She spent her days wrapped in life gone by and sported impeccable fashion like a talisman against the haunting creep of time. She lived in Gatsby’s world. A place where hope rained down on fields of fantasy, and the harvest of dreams was perpetual.

During the remaining days, Claire and I continued to share a drink or two at the Bishop’s Arms, and I began to think that perhaps I had met Gatsby. The fact that he was a woman did not matter. It was his heart and soul that I sought.

A soft, yellow glow simmered in the narrow windows of the turret at Teleborg Castle. A warm brightness shone from a large, stained glass window adjacent to a dark, wooden door. It stood broader and taller than necessary for any common person, but just the right size, I supposed, for any royal with a bloated sense of importance. It was the last night of the conference, and a small committee of Fitzgerald experts arranged a black-tie affair in the manner of extravagance established by none other than Jay Gatsby of the Gatsbys of West Egg.

The stone-slab stairway to the entrance seemed endless as I made my way upward. When I reached the top, a gentleman dressed in a tuxedo complete with tails, opened the large, dark door and greeted me.

“Welcome sir, may I serve you a drink?”

“Yes, thank you, Aperol Spritz.”

He left for a moment and returned with a glass of what appeared to be champagne. I accepted it with a smile, as if it were exactly what I had ordered, and took a sip. In an attempt to regain some stature of genteel acceptability, I asked, “Perrier-Jouet Brut?”

“No sir, it is the Perrier-Jouet Belle.”

Nice try on my part, but he won again. I thought it best to change the subject.

“Tell me about the castle. Looks like 15th or 16th century.”

“It was built in 1900, sir, by the count for his wife. May I show you to the reception hall to join the other guests?”

At that point, I decided to cut my losses. I followed the gentleman. He led me down a narrow hallway with a high, arched ceiling. I heard indiscernible chatter mixed with occasional laughter coming from one of the rooms just ahead of us. We turned the corner, and a dull light filled the hall. We followed the hazy, yellow glow to a wide and opened doorway. It drew me in. I stood on the outskirts of a crowd holding stems of champagne glasses and wearing pregnant smiles that occasionally bore sudden and boisterous laughter. White brilliance burned from three chandeliers. Cut glass sequins, adorning a dozen or so dresses of all colors, shimmered like stars in the black tuxedo sky. I meandered through the crowd hoping to see Claire, but no luck.

A waiter in a white jacket and gloves appeared beside me with a full tray of flutes filled with champagne. I bolted down what was left in the glass in my hand, lifted another off his tray, and tasted it. It wasn't the Belle or even Perrier-Jouet for that matter. Perhaps a Swedish variety. I was done with “name that wine.” I nodded, held my glass up, signaled feigned recognition of the quality, and communicated a truly heartfelt appreciation for the alcohol, Swedish or otherwise.

I had hardly finished swallowing the unknown champagne when dinner was announced. We retreated to the dining room, and I

looked for a seat at one of the long white cloth-covered tables. There was an empty seat next to Keith. He was busily getting focused with his camera on his two plastic companions standing fearlessly on an empty plate. I sat down, perused the room, and turned to Keith.

“You know Claire, right?”

Keith looked away from his phone.

“Yeah, sure. I met her last year at the conference. Kind of quiet, nice clothes, right? What is it with you two? You are together a lot.”

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you. It’s not like that.”

“Sure. It’s never like that, until it is, then, before you know it, it isn’t.”

“What? You’re happily married, or is there something I don’t know, and if there is, I don’t want to know it. I want to believe there is happiness somewhere.” I picked up my glass and downed half of the contents.

Keith took his friends off his plate and turned his head in my direction.

“No, not me. A friend of mine got married three weeks ago. He texted me today. He’s getting divorced. Nice guy. Long story short: she was having an affair. Can you beat that?”

I put my glass, now empty, down on the table.

“I don’t know. You tell me: is the death of a lover worse?”

He looked away. I felt wrong for serving up my sorrow. Maybe playing “Name that wine” would change the mood.

“What do you think we’re drinking?”

He picked up his filled glass and looked at the bubbling liquid.

“Champagne, right?”

He had not fallen into Gatsby’s world where champagne flowed endlessly like balm on star-lit nights. For Keith champagne was still just champagne, and I hoped he would never find it to be anything else.

Dessert, a rightly cooked Grand Mariner soufflé, was served. Soon after, I heard what I guessed were musicians tuning up in some place not far from the dining room. I followed the crowd back to where chandeliers and dazzling sequents had lit the room.

The lights dimmed and the orchestra began to play the Charleston so proficiently that I suspected that a flapper or two might rise from the dead and dance their way onto the floor. In truth, many flappers did attend; none of whom looked dead to me. Some of them wore headbands adorned with a feather while two young women sported long strings of pearls dangling from their necks.

My mind swirled from more champagne while I strolled about. The orchestra continued to play in the 1920s, and I expected someone to tap me on the shoulder and ask if I was enjoying the party. To which I would have replied, of course, and he would have said, good old sport and disappeared into the crowd, a move so characteristic of the enigmatic Jay Gatsby. I wanted very much to meet him and tell him that I felt his pain.

It was true that for the past few years, I had lived in his world of desperate hope so polished that its brilliance outshined the few lingering glints of my reality. But it was that night that any remaining sense I had of what was real in my life slipped mercilessly into the dim darkness.

My glass was empty, and I started looking for a white-coated waiter. Keith caught my eye and squeezed his way through the crowd.

“A few of the guys are going out on the deck for brandy and cigars. Come on. You can use a cigar.” He smiled with a look that said brandy and cigars, did you expect anything less?

I followed him through the sights and sounds of the numbing fantasy replete with drunken flappers and forgotten jazz. My mind was mired in the world of the resurrected past.

I raised my voice to compete with the music as we pushed through the crowd, “But I don’t smoke.”

He turned his head and gave me a quick look. “I don’t either, but you drink brandy, right?”

Well, he was right about that. The champagne had begun to lose its taste. It was more a fault of the taster than the tasted. My senses were dulled, and my mind was numb. On that fanciful night, past and present were one in a way as firm as a stone, and the soft, perilous sand on which it rested faded from thought.

On the lake, behind the castle, moonlight created a silver path that lent its bright stillness to the night. Swirls of smoke rose from cigars which glowed like red-orange fireflies. Keith and I made our way toward a group of five or six dark figures who brandished a cigar in one hand and a brandy sniffer in the other.

“Here, live a little,” Keith said. He handed me a glass and a cigar.

“That’s all I really want, you know.”

“Damn right. Good brandy and a ten-dollar cigar.”

I smiled and let my plaint vanish into the evening.

A cool breeze rustled the leaves on the near-hanging trees, and I turned toward the restless sound. I saw someone standing by the railing and looking at the lake. I walked closer. It was Claire. Her pristine Armani blouse gave her away. I stood behind her.

“It’s a beautiful night? Isn’t it?”

She turned around a bit startled.

“Oh, sorry. I was”

“No need to explain. You were somewhere else...perhaps in another time?”

She turned back toward the lake.

I stepped closer and stood beside her. I folded my hands and rested them on the railing.

“Claire, I’m a little more than drunk. Fortunately, this is not unusual.” She smiled and continued to stare into the lake.

"I am leaving for Cannes tomorrow. Why don't you come with me?" She broke her stare, turned, and looked into my eyes. "We live in the same desperate world. It is comforting to be with someone who feels the same pain and lives with dreams of the past. Eternal hope swells in desperate hearts."

She turned back to the lake.

"Sorry, but that will never happen."

It wasn't the rejection that stunned me. It was the certainty. I was sure I had met Gatsby.

"I must go back to my kids. I need them and they need me."

Now I knew. She lived in a world where fantastic hope and recklessness stood beside a love that provided some refuge from her desperation.

For her it was her kids, for me, it was my out-of-control living. Unfortunately, inconsolable dreams and inordinate hope live forever in those stricken by them. Any shelter, regretfully, is plagued by leaks of loss and sorrow.

"I have to go now. I'm leaving early tomorrow," she said.

She turned and walked away. I wanted to say I was sorry, but I wasn't sure what I did. Was she offended? Perhaps, condemning someone to Gatsby's world is presumptive in the worst of ways.

I put my hand in my pocket and puffed on my cigar. The moon was higher in the dark sky, and its silver path on the lake had grown shorter. The stars flickered, and I wondered how long ago their light

was born. I looked up at the darkness and watched the twinkle of the past. It became clear now. I, indeed, found Gatsby. I blew smoke into the night and walked back to the castle alone. Tomorrow I would return to Cannes and its ceaseless tide forever hopeful of reaching farther and farther upon the soft and shifting sand.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Donato received a Master of Liberal Arts in Creative Writing and Literature from Harvard University, College of Extended Studies, in 2019. His graduate interest was studying the writing of the Lost Generation living in Paris in the 1920s. In addition to short stories published in various journals, the author has written a novella in the voice and style of F. Scott Fitzgerald in the form

of “memoir.”

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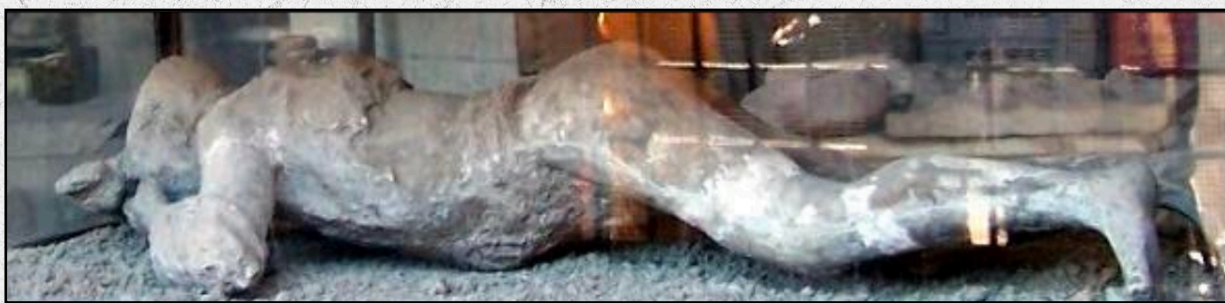
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EARTH MOTHER

by Alfred Garrotto



A dozen or so bodies have been recovered nearly intact from the ancient ruins of Pompeii (near Naples, Italy). Three are on public display, encased in plastic for preservation. One touched my heart in a special way and continues to haunt me—a pregnant woman who died in an instant face to the earth.

Some background. My wife and I have two daughters whom we welcomed into our family at pre-school age. We never had a baby in our family. I never had to change a diaper. Since the birth of our first grandchild in 2007, I have discovered close-up the marvels and wonders of new birth, and yes, I've changed a few poopie diapers, too. I've discovered a wondrous stage of being--infancy--that I'd never paid attention to before. I've learned the universal language of newborn life.

Upon meeting this Pompei mother, millennia deceased, we made a spiritual connection. I had to write about this experience, but I

choked on early prose versions of my story. The only way to express the moment we had shared was in verse. . . . as follows:

POMPEII

August 24, 79 A.D.

It fell so fast
the cloud of death;
no chance for aid—
on stone-laid street
my one last step;

eyes down, face hid,
womb pressed to earth,
brief shield 'gainst fire—
flung stone—a crib
for babe's long sleep.

July 10, 2008 A.D.

I gawk, snap, feel
out of place, no

right to break your
rest; yet I am
slave to your grace.

Was this new life
your first sweet fruit,
love's best of gifts?
Did some die home,
no mom to hold?

From lava tomb you
rose to see day's
light and through time's
thin veil hail my
soul: *You know me.*

Our tour moves on
to sites fresh dug;
with a glance, I
bid good-bye, carve
you on my heart.

You stir this old
dad's core, set late

to flame with awe
of new-born life.
I'll give you voice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alfred J. Garrotto is the author of 16 books (both fiction and nonfiction) and many poems. Born into a theatrical family, he began working in films (crowd scenes) at the age of seven. The arts in all forms are his lifelong passion.

THE TIMELY DEATH OF PETER USHER

by James Nelli

The inside of the church on Manhattan's Lower East Side was damp and smelled like scented candles and old leather. David stood in the back of the church; his gaze



fixed on the mahogany casket at the top of the center aisle. Ribbons of incense floated above the flower-draped casket as a group of about 40 mourners individually offered their final goodbyes. A hushed silence enveloped the space, broken only by occasional sobs and muffled whispers. The somber atmosphere encircled David as he

struggled to feel sorry for the loss of his ex-friend, Peter Usher. Memories flooded his mind, reminding him of the times they had spent together and the unbreakable trust they had put in each other. However, rather than a heavy ache in his heart, David felt relieved, almost happy, that Peter was finally gone.

As the funeral service progressed, people began to gather in groups offering their condolences to Peter's family. David hesitated for a moment, considering whether to approach the casket. That's

when he noticed Peter's wife, Rachel, across the room with a small group of mourners. She looked good in black.

Rachel was David's former lover and the person who had once occupied his heart. They had shared a passionate love that had burned brightly, but eventually, the flames had flickered out, leaving them both scarred. It had been years since they last saw each other, and now, here they were reunited under the most unlikely circumstances.

Rachel spotted David and walked over to where he stood as murmurs grew among some of the other mourners in the church who knew David. Without hesitation, she said in an irritated tone, "What are you doing here, David?"

"Hello, Rachel. Sorry for your loss. I'm here to pay my respects to Peter."

"What are you talking about? You didn't respect Peter. You haven't spoken to him in years," she said in a louder more defiant voice. More murmurs.

A mix of embarrassment and surprise flashed across his face before he answered. "You're right. I really came here to see you." His voice was filled with a bittersweet tone.

They stood there for a moment, surrounded by the echoes of their past. The air crackled with unspoken words and unresolved emotions. David searched for something meaningful to say, a bridge to reconnect the fragments of their shattered relationship.

"I heard about Peter's sudden death from your friend Colleen McGuire," he said. "That's when I knew I had to come."

Rachel nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She and David fell into an uncomfortable silence, with the weight of the situation bringing them closer together. Memories of their time together flooded their minds, both the beautiful and the painful. It was as if time had stood still, the present moment blurring the lines between past and present. Peter's uninvited invasion into the emotional and physical space left open by David and Rachel's breakup was viewed by David as a betrayal by a close friend. Rachel had viewed Peter's actions differently.

Rachel took a deep breath, gathering her courage once more. "David, I... I'm sorry for how things ended between us," she said, her voice quivering with vulnerability. "I often think about what could have been."

David's eyes softened, a hint of understanding in his gaze. "I think about it too," he admitted, his voice barely a whisper as he took a moment to gather his thoughts, searching for the right words. "I think we got lost somewhere along the way," he confessed. "We stopped communicating openly, and the distance between us grew. We let small disagreements turn into big issues, and it became harder to find common ground. But we can't change the past."

"No, we can't," Rachel agreed, her voice tinged with sadness. "I have my share of regrets too. I wish we had fought for what we had."

Maybe we could have worked things out. But perhaps we can find some closure, some healing today."

They stood there, two broken souls sharing their regrets, their hearts laid bare. The funeral proceedings continued in the background, a stark reminder of the fragility and brevity of life. In that moment, they tried to find solace in each other's presence.

As they watched the others pay their final respects to Peter, a sense of closure washed over them. Their eyes met, conveying an unspoken understanding. Life had led them down different paths, but their love had left an indelible mark on their souls.

As the funeral ended, Rachel and David exchanged bittersweet smiles, acknowledging the shared journey they had been on. They also knew that although their love story had ended, their lives would forever be entwined by the memories they had created together. Rachel and David carried a newfound sense of peace within their hearts, knowing that sometimes, even in the midst of loss, there could be a glimmer of healing and closure.

As Rachel turned and began to walk back to the front of the church, David asked her in a quiet voice, "Can I see you tomorrow for dinner?"

Rachel stopped, turned around, walked back to David and whispered in his ear, "Pick me up at 7. Colleen has my address."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Nelli is a retired business executive and the author of *The Timely Death of Peter Usher*. He has learned that you never know how strong and creative you are until it's the only option. He attended the University of Illinois, where he received a degree in economics, and then to graduate school at Northwestern University, where he received his MBA in Finance and International Business. His travels have taken him to many areas of the world. These travels have served as a basis for many of his stories. Writing fiction has been a passion for him, and in recent years his writing has specialized in murder mystery novels and poignant short stories that elicit emotional and thoughtful responses. His short stories have appeared in a variety of online and print publications. He and his wife live in Southern California, along with a lifetime collection of books.

This story was originally published on the Half Hour To Kill website in June of 2023.

CONNECTION

by Yash Seyedbagheri

I ravage job sites. LinkedIn, Indeed, Glassdoor, a litany of names that connote connections and portals open to the ambitious. I leap onto their pages every morning, at Mama Lily's with the sunshine-yellow walls and the bagels I buy from the day-old bin. I refresh, refresh, refresh the page at night in my apartment with the turd-colored walls and the heat I keep off, even in winter. I check again and again in the still of night, when I awaken from yet another nightmare about driving, with the world telling me to pick up the pace, pick up the pace, pick up the pace. I refresh again, even while purple rings gather around my eyes.

So many possibilities. Copyeditor, developmental editor, proofreader. Yes, too many of them are for tech-based companies, financial institution newsletters, and things that scare me with their emphasis on cold statistics. They aren't the masterpieces-in-waiting I've wanted to truly edit, the books I once edited back when I worked at Ghost Train Publishing. The historical novels, the short story collections about drunk mothers and bad dads and malaise-ridden teens.

But everyone tells me, "What do dreams pay? At least pragmatism keeps the power on and the phone connected."

And I can't seem to find too many positions in the publishing industry.

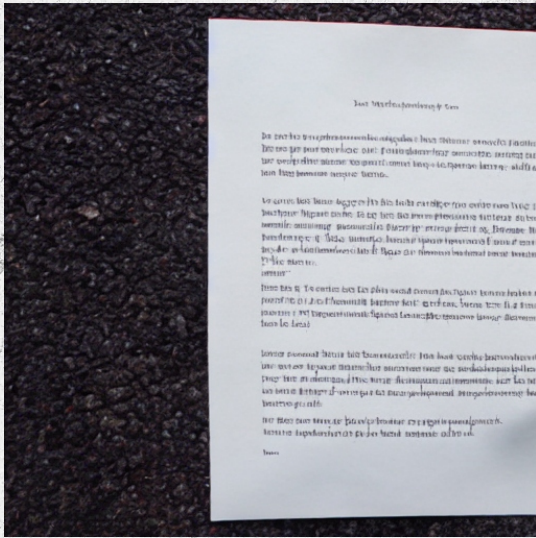
So I keep my mind open, even as I search for opportunities to commune with books once again.

Yet, when I expand the pages, bullet points fire fusillades of requirements:

- The ideal candidate must have at least five years of experience in area X. Candidates with at least ten years are preferred. This is an absolute must.
- Must have a degree from an Ivy League institution.
- Must have experience with Adobe, Photoshop, etc
- Must be adept at handling social media accounts
- Only candidates from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut may apply
- Only candidates from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, or Indiana may apply
- Proficiency in French, Spanish, Chinese, German, ancient Greek, or Latin is preferred.

Where's the connection? Why do I need to be from New York to proofread a shitty newsletter? Do I have to be from Hartford to do developmental edits on Life Insurance Weekly or from the Twin Cities to be a line editor for Woodchipper's Monthly? Do I need to

be from New Jersey to appreciate the ethos of *Hitmen's Digest*? And why do I need to be adept at social media? Do I need to tweet every time I find a missing Oxford comma? Every ad seems to offer the promise of connection, advancement, and more connection, but where's the actual connection between the position and requirements?



But I need money. I got fired from Ghost Train Publishing three months ago for not being personable enough, and for not meeting their editor/client metrics, even though I managed to turn around projects quickly. Day after day, I wonder if they had a point. I did get into some feuds over Oxford

commas with a couple of clients, and I might have gotten pedantic over some facts about Rasputin's assassination in another client's novel (after all my older sister's a history teacher). But isn't arguing a form of passion?

I can't think about that now. And I can't think about the logic of employment ads.

Now I work sweeping up popcorn and cleaning up Coke spills at the movie theater. Occasionally, I get to work the cash registers and serve entitled bros pretzels and cardboard pizza. But \$8.00 an hour doesn't get you anywhere, and I've dined on too many puke-colored

TV dinners. No matter how I try, the balance in my account dips. The monthly student loan payments, the phone bills, and then I need more groceries, and I have to put gas into my shitty Dodge Stratus. By the time I get my next check from Mr. Van Pelt, my balance is dangerously low in the black seas, and close to dipping into the red ones. And the cycle of needs starts again.

So I lay out my case. Nothing hidden. After all, my sister Nan said that honesty pays off, regardless of what the talking heads say, and I trust sweet Nan more than a room full of talking heads in Brooks Brothers suits who smell like Old Spice.

I write cover letters like this:

Dear Mr. Ulyanov,

My name is Nicholas Alexander Botkin, and I am applying for your proofreading position at Finance Quarterly Quotients. I must be quite frank and confess that I do not have ten years in the finance industry. However, I do have three years of experience editing and proofreading a wide range of materials for Ghost Train Publishing, after which time I was terminated from my position. These include historical fiction, self-help, and memoirs. I have a quick turnaround on projects (generally less than a week for a round of edits). As you can see, this reflects my versatility and ability to adapt readily to new situations. If offered this position, I would be able to tackle the requirements with great aplomb.

I thank you for your consideration! Please let me know if you have further questions for me.

Sincerely yours,

Nicholas

I send dozens of notes like this. And every day, I refresh my emails, looking for new messages. Nothing. Days pass, and I clean more floors. Van Pelt tells me to pick up the pace, that I work hard, but I need to work a little harder. Just a little, he says with a pasted-on smile. He keeps saying that every week, every month, it seems. Some moviegoers demand I pick up their Cokes, and find the boxes of Twizzlers they misplaced. Some snap their fingers, tell me to get on it, get on it, and others throw popcorn at me. They call me “dude,” and “asshole,” but never Nick or Nicholas. A few thank me, and God, I love it when they do, when they say “This theater looks so clean. So glamorous.” In that moment, I can feel an illusion, the illusion of doing something productive, however small, and ultimately trivial.

Two weeks pass before I get standard rejections like “Unfortunately the employer has moved onto the next stage of the hiring process, and they have not decided to advance your application.” No acknowledgment of honesty. No false platitudes about it being darkest before the dawn. Not even a good luck. It’s an automated message that some robot probably wrote.

Nan slips me money here and there when she visits or treats me to lunch at Ramon's Mexican Kingdom. Leaves a few Benjamins on the counter, as if by accident every time she leaves. When I run out and try to return them, she tells me to keep them. I catch onto the game quickly.

"Nan, I'll be fine," I say.

"There's no shame in getting a little help, Nicky," she says. "Let me help you. I know you're trying hard here."

"And I'll get something. It's just taking time." I can't tell her about the nightmares I have where nothing comes, where I refresh, refresh, refresh my screen. Or conversely, the dreams where the rejections keep coming like boxcars on a long train, and they all laugh at me for being honest, for being a chump.

"But when Nicky? What if—?" She shakes her head and smiles.

"There's no if, Nan," I tell her. She smiles again, but there's a sorrow in her eyes, something beyond mere pity.

"Please, Nicky."

"You keep it for yourself," I say.

Nan just brushes aside the comment like a fly, but I know better. She's got too much on her plate herself. She's a teacher, with her own bills. I know this every time she checks her bank apps or goes through her mail, stacks of bills staring. The water Gestapo (water bills), the wi-fi, the power, along with her memberships in several historical societies. She needs to look after herself, and I feel like the

biggest piece of shit because I can't find a job. And I feel like shit because of that look in her eyes, a look you can't argue with. I've sparred with Nan in the past, and it never goes well. Never screw with a history teacher or a big sister.

So I take the Benjamins. At least for a time, I can eat something other than puke-colored TV dinners. Tomatoes, onions, even a steak or two. I can make a taco or two at home too. I'll pay her back when I get something. I owe her so much, and can only imagine the nights she fears losing her job because of demanding parents, because of the need to meet certain metrics in the school district, where grades trump intellectual curiosity. God, I hate taking those Benjamins. I feel like I leave Nan bare as if I'm somehow stripping her naked with each bill she gives me.

I'll find a job. I'll pay sweet Nan back. At least logic would dictate it. So many applications, and so many positions out there. The odds have to be in my favor.

I keep on applying. More rejections. One praises my record and says "Regrettably, our standards are firm. But we wish you luck, and know with your background, you'll find the right fit." It's likely a form letter disguised with niceties. And a part of me should feel some gratitude for this. It's a step up from the one-line rejections about not advancing to the next stage.

But I start to wonder. Do I need to embellish, at the very least? Do my friends out there have a point, the friends who work high-profile office jobs with benefits (except for Cockroach, who tends bar)?

Who knows? But something has to change.

My mother says I need to be more flexible.

“Your sister’s a lovely woman, Nick,” she says. “But being lovely only gets you so far.”

“So are you saying I need to lie?”

“Nick,” she says, putting a hand on my shoulder. “I think of lying as having no purpose, no scruple. You’re trying to make it, to live, to be independent. That’s your goal here. You’re not a megachurch pastor trying to sucker people and make them pay indulgences.”

“So I should lie?”

“You’re an honest man,” Mom says. “I love you very much. But sometimes, you need to play your cards close to the vest. Decide which cards to play. I want you to have a good life, Nick, and I know you can do so much better.”

“I have a decent job.”

“But do you have a good job?”

I want to dismiss my mother’s words and defend Nan to the hilt, but it seems like everyone’s saying something similar, like some kind of chorus.

So I make up stories.

Instead of getting fired, Ghost Train suffered financial difficulties. I say I was fired only two months ago instead of three. I even claim my position at the movie theater is "Viewer Satisfaction Representative." It borders dangerously on bullshit, but there's some kernel of truth there. After all, people can't watch movies on popcorn-infested seats.

But that makes no difference. So I take things up another level when my account dips into the red for a week, and I have visions of closed accounts and angry creditors dancing through my head.

I rewrite myself.

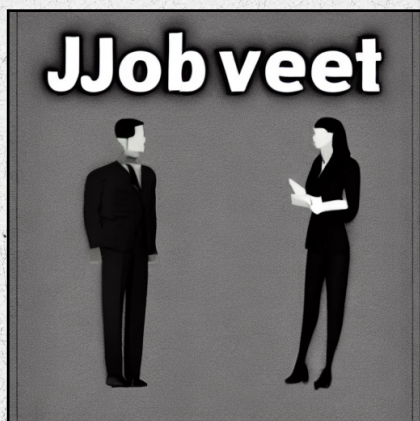
Now I'm one of the most successful editors. I hail from New Jersey, from Connecticut, from Minnesota, from every damn state they want. When applications ask for references, I give them my friends' phone numbers and ask them to pretend to be past employers. My best friend, Cockroach, even pretends to be Elizabeth Schmidt, my boss from Ghost Train Publishing. He gets a couple of calls and affects a falsetto that sounds more like a constipated Frankie Valli.

I feel a little shame at foisting this onto my friends, but isn't this the game? Besides, Cockroach's falsetto makes me laugh, and I need a good laugh.

More rejections, although a few personal ones now, praising my record. A couple of employers even claimed I was high on their list. I feel a kind of shame, thinking of Nan, and her pleas for honesty. I can

only imagine the shame in her eyes if I told her what I'd done. She'd offer more help, and lecture me about principles, and honor. She'd inveigh against the Machiavellian mentality of modern America, but I have to eat. I have to keep my accounts in the black. And I can't keep taking Nan's money. I can't bear to think about Nan being unable to pay her cell phone bills, going through a search just like mine.

I must also confess, something feels good about this praise. In a perverse way, I've worked for it. I've invented, reinvented, and sparred with the job sites and their bullet points full of requirements. It's as though they wanted me to lie, like unseen faces behind electronic screens.



I finally get asked to interview. And not just one interview. Several. All financial and tech-related publications, along with one at some chemistry journal, surprise, surprise. All for proofreading and editing positions, but where a knowledge of the subjects at hand is "strongly preferred." By this time, I've made myself not only an editing wunderkind but a mathematical genius who practically pleasures parabolas and gets stimulated by bar graphs and y-axes. I'm proficient in pontificating about limiting reagents. After all, literature seems to get no love.

The screen hums, the browsers all staring at me. They wait for me to respond. To accept or decline an invitation. Please respond immediately, so we can move forward with the process!

My bank account is on the edge of the Red Sea once again. I can't have it dip another time. My score's already dunked. But somewhere, behind these screens, interviewers wait. They wait for a renaissance man to dazzle them, to talk about Oxford commas and Keynesian economics and line edits and paradigms and molecules in the same breath. I can talk about the commas and lines, but nothing else.

I wish I could hold out longer. At least get something in publishing. I'd be a liar, but not as much of one. Literature is my language, at least. At least, I could talk about narrative structure, and iceberg theory, and stay half-true to myself.

I can only hope maybe these postings are wrong. That I can rely on my editing skills alone. Maybe, just maybe. But I know better.

Why can't they just ask for an editor or proofreader, plain and simple?

I keep thinking about this Robert Redford movie Nan introduced me to, *The Candidate*. In that movie, Robert Redford's character, an idealistic Senate candidate, ends up compromising his positions, bit by bit. He ends up playing the cold insider's game. He wins his race, but he's lost so much in the process. In the end, all he can ask is "What do we do now?"

The screen hums again, while I try to answer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yash Seyedbagheri is a graduate of Colorado State University's MFA fiction program. His stories, "Soon," "How To Be A Good Episcopalian," "Tales From A Communion Line," and "Community Time," have been nominated for Pushcarts. Yash's work has been published in SmokeLong Quarterly, The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Write City Magazine, and Ariel Chart, among others.

KEISHA FROM AROUND THE WAY

by Moore Than Enough

NIKKI

Keisha from around the way was quite a girl. She was shy and quiet at first glance but didn't shy away from adventures. While in school, we had become friends. Our lockers were right next to each other, so each morning I would see this girl who seemed to be a loner. I would wonder why she wouldn't speak to anyone or ever walk with other students. Whenever there were games or special events, she would go to the bus line, I knew this because I guess I'm nosey. One day, on a Monday, she came in running with tears in her eyes, I asked if she was okay. She ignored me so after school I asked the same question, this time I invited her to the corner store to get a soda. We got to know each other; she told me that she had just lost her mother to cancer and that she felt all alone. I told her that maybe we could hang out. She said she skateboarded, and I told her that I played basketball for the school.



We then talked about boys, first those at school and then others. I assumed that she was dating because she was a pretty girl,

the kind the boys often stopped in the halls. Keisha didn't hesitate to divulge that her boyfriend was older, she seemed proud of that fact. She began to look off as she sipped her soda. It was a strange look. She said that he never had time for her though, I sensed trouble. I'm usually that girl whom everyone vents, so I was all ears.

I didn't have to ask questions; she vented and vented. I listened to every word, and from what she said I figured the trouble. Keisha was so far away from me, that she was in another space. I was quiet as a mouse, listening very intently. I had time and I told her this; my practice didn't start until 4 p.m., and it was 3:15 p.m.. Subsequently; out of nowhere, she began to sob. It was then that I knew she really cared for him. Forget all the other stuff she mentioned; this guy was significant to her. The tears were rolling down her face, and she needed a friend.

The one time that she took a breath, I asked questions. These questions were for my clarity and purpose; I believed that I could assist with this dilemma. Bottom line, I knew this beast of a man and so did a lot of other girls. He was a whore, and she needed to be aware and clear of him. As I was the bearer of bad news, she stared at me as though there was a metamorphosis in front of her. I mean, I didn't hold anything back because he came with baggage and she was already dealing with the death of her mother. Keisha didn't need this nothin' guy playing her. She expressed her feelings so I was truthful. Keisha was struggling; therefore, I told her to pray. I knew

this from my grandma, I did. Also, boys hollered at her all the time, they were the least of her worries. She appreciated my talking to her then I was off to practice. We both needed to talk.

The store was near the school, so we met there again. She said it would be later than usual because of work. I wasn't sure what she did for money or work, and she never mentioned it between talking about boys and her mom. She was always dressed so differently, I gathered she got money somehow. Our school had an after-school program where students who were tech-savvy, or just had it together in academics, could get paid. Keisha was smart, I could tell; she was always reading something. When she arrived at our talking spot, she looked unsettled. Keisha never talked about her dad, but this particular day she was heavy in thought.

I always thought she was quiet. I couldn't ever get a word in although sometimes I too needed to vent. She said her dad was rambling through her room and found a picture of her so-called boyfriend. Again, she was wailing repeating over and over about her private space, not caring that her dad saw this picture of someone older. I comforted her, but remember, I didn't like the guy.

She, of course, made excuses continuing to be mad at her dad. Her dad was concerned; after all, he never saw her with school kids. I'm sure he wondered about his teenage girl, especially with her mom gone and all. She looked at me as though she wanted me to

make excuses for this loser, instead her crying ceased. I told her that she had too much potential and that she shouldn't waste her time.

I began to tell her about my past loser; I was shocked but she was listening to me. I told her that I too was lovesick and foolish at one time. I told her that he would put his hands on me, and this is when she began to look down. Her body language was different. She didn't have to say it, not only was he a dog but he was an abusive one. She seemed to get restless because she started to bite her nails, and her nails were slaying. They were painted red with a lot of jewelry, so to bite them seemed a bit much to me. I didn't hesitate telling her my feelings and I could see that she wasn't feeling it.

Immediately she began to move from the seat, but she stopped. Looking towards the door, I saw him walking in holding a girl's hand; Keisha turned another color. She made sure to look him in the eyes and she said, "I can't believe this, after all I've done." Keisha got up from the table, rushed over to his table and confronted him with words I'd never heard and can't spell. She then told him to expect a call; she called my name and we left.

When outside, I began to question her

"Girl, what's going on here? You sound like you delivering a threat or something. You telling him to expect a call, what do you mean? Keisha, just forget about that loser."

Shaking her head

“Nah, I need him to feel something. And, I’m feeling foolish, time I take care of my business. Some guys have to be shown, rather than told.”

The look was vehement rage

Keisha from around the way continued to stun me. I didn’t know what to think, couldn’t figure her out. We parted ways, agreeing to meet later in the week.

A couple of days later walking from English class, I heard someone calling out, “Nikki.” Looking around, it was Keisha. I was happy to see her but surprised by her shouting; she was usually quiet in front of others. With her arms crossed, she waited until I came to the lockers.

Asking how she felt, I already knew. She was on again, off again with her eccentric behavior. Her outfit was telling some weird story, her style striking. However, today it was mismatched.

“Don’t tell me you spoke to that beast.” I wasn’t feeling sympathetic today because we had a whole day to tackle.

Shaking her head left and right, I took a deep breath; although, I wanted to shout a loud cheer. I wondered about her grieving, but with her focusing on him I knew she wasn’t in a good space.

“Keisha, what is it?”

“Girl, it’s a lot, and we need to talk today, after school.”

After school, I had practice but I met Keisha at 4:15 p.m. The corner store is never crowded then because school buses don’t tarry.

Already seated, I felt like I was going to an interview, "I'm here, practice was tough. What's up?"

Seeming dismayed, Keisha began talking: "Nikki, I'm pregnant and it gets more complicated. The nurse asked me about my family, and I was so confused. I thought I was taking care of things, but so much is happening, I guess I slipped up."

"Keisha, I'm so sorry girl, what are you going to do? You're so young." I didn't know what to say to this because a baby?"

"I'm due to see the nurse again real soon, so I have a lot to think about."

KEISHA

On a missed school day, the dreaded day had come for me to check on myself; extreme anticipation wearing on me as horses would their bit. Man, was I a ball of nerves! Young, still in high school with a whole human growing inside of me. Little ole' me. If my dad only knew, I'd literally be a knocked-up, kicked-out teen, oh, it's definitely a mess.

Walking through the huge, gold door, in the waiting area there were plenty tense people. These people were all ages. Some looked to be my age, and some looked younger than me. Of course, there were older women, so I thought about how they must have that

proud feeling. You know, that feeling of responsibility, by them being older and all. Not young like myself.

As my eyes continued to glance over the surroundings, I saw that the décor was interesting warm brown shades that took over the entire room. It matched the weather outside. This was natural looking, it gave patients a welcoming feeling. Just as I had summed up the others seated, I too was nervous, but I had to put on my big girl courage. As my mommy always told me, if you make your bed, you'll have to lie in it.

Still checking out everything. Behind the busy receptionist's desk, there was a clock and many, many college diplomas on the wall. This made me feel in tune with the Allstate insurance commercial— like I was in good hands, or that the doctor knew what to do.

After looking around at everything, I mean everything, my nerves were calmed. I tried to be careful not to stare because my nonsense mom would also preach that too, she'd say that someone would embarrass you if you stared them up. She taught me so much and it always comes back to my memory; oh, I miss her so, especially now.

We had to record our name and date of birth, why? I didn't want others to learn anything about me. Then, later there was a loud shout of my name. Man, I was so scared. I needed someone with me, a confidant. As I walked slowly into this small bright, white room, I pondered over some possible questions. The nurse came in smiling

and speaking. She was nice I thought, to myself. I've always admired nurses but I dreaded talking to this one today. She began to ask me what sounded routine, but how would I know what was routine for a pregnancy exam, I'd never had one.

Over and over in my mind, I'm thinking why didn't I bring Nikki; however, in the same thought, I ask myself why am I trusting her so fast. Wow, the nurse continues to ask questions and mentally I'm in another place. It's like, I see her mouth moving but I can't hear anything. So much on my mind.....

The bright brick store on the corner of Tupac Ave. is the designated meeting place. At 3:30 p.m., we are meeting, and I told her that she would see the store's signage flashing sharp red lights, and there's an aroma of strong onions driving customers in from the busy streets. When we meet, Nikki's always careful as she walks by the stragglers who catcall for a living. The unwanted advances by lowlifes are so demeaning and scary. Walking past the overgrown weeds that paid city workers ignore isn't a walk in the park either; yet this store sells oversized burritos for \$1.00 and I get to vent to my new friend, so meeting here is ideal.

All day at school I couldn't concentrate thinking about my depressing clinic visit. In Chemistry class, I just stared at the large display of the Periodic table on the left side of the room, and after my neck began to hurt I looked at the right side where our experiments are done. One cannot succumb to sleep in this brightly lit class with

a hue of yellow and the teacher's loud raspy voice. If I could sleep, I'd dream about all the ways that the nurse explained pregnancy, the long nine-month wait. I'd dream about how I'd tell my still-grieving overbearing father. This is why meeting Nikki is major because she keeps it level.

At the end of class, the piercing bell for the end of the school sounded and I was jetting. The walk to the store is about 10 minutes, not many students on the sidewalks. However, it started to sprinkle but no bother because the temp was miserable so the rain was good. Made it. Nikki would arrive soon, she had to change from gym. I went straight to the back of the store to get my food: Lay's Potato Chips stacked ten boxes high, enough Shasta sodas for half a year, and Melo the mild-mannered meat cutter were all to my left. Michelob an arm's length from falling in the aisle, but it was the hot meeting spot. Also, the owner didn't allow riffraff loitering.

Nikki finally came through the door with three other girls from the school's basketball team, well so much for our talk. I wasn't too particular about this, not much on crowds, and I would consider more than two a crowd. These girls are not my friends, they're hers. I couldn't talk around them because they're messy, not sure what Nikki was thinking. Or was she thinking? I told Nikki that something had come up; I left and let down.

I had to do some thinking about our so-called friendship, or is it really a friendship because thinking back, I vented to someone I

barely knew. My vulnerability got the best of me. Did I get myself into something during a downtime in my life? Wow, losing my mom has affected me in ways I realize I'm numb to.

Two days later, on Wednesday, walking from the north side of the school building I saw Nikki coming towards the east side student parking. She didn't see me at first, so I pretended not to see her and we bumped into each other. She began immediately saying: "I've been blowing your phone up since the other day, and I was hoping you'd call me back."

I swear I didn't want to hear it. At this point, I was just listening. She was saying that she was sorry that she had tag-a-longs, and they insisted on walking. She said that she didn't want to walk alone either. I responded to Nikki by telling her that our conversation was going to be private and that I really didn't want other ears present.

I forcefully said, "Nikki, I'm still not feeling what happened so it's best I go into class." I pondered on this all day and the fact that I needed to talk with my dad. After school, I went straight home, walking up the driveway seemed like an eternity because his car was there. The shades were pulled and I saw him looking out, he looked directly at me. He opened the door and greeted me with a kiss. Taking my shoes off at the door, I asked if could I speak with him after I put my things away. He replied, "You could talk to me anytime you need to." In my mind, I wondered if he'd be so nice after we'd

spoken. "Boy, was I a nervous wreck?" I led him to the kitchen table as he would be comfortable.

"Dad, I know we have been going through a lot, and I haven't wanted to bother you, so I began to spend time with my friends. Dad, I was seeing a boy and I let my feelings get out of whack; we had sex, Dad, and now I'm pregnant."

My dad dropped his head, took a deep breath, and stood up. When he stood, I didn't know whether to run or faint; I felt like doing both.

He went towards the kitchen door looked back and said, I'll need some time." I knew my dad so him saying just three words meant some serious. You see, something about my dad, he was very conservative. Although we lived in the hood still, he wanted something more out of life, if not for himself, for his family. He always reminded me of this. Our house was weird after our talk; he didn't talk to me, for days. It was as if I was invisible.

Meanwhile, since I was alienated from everyone and had no one to talk to, I answered a call from the loser. Oh, and by the way, his name is Nick. He asked me to meet him at the store on Tupac Ave. and I did. Turns out, Nikki walked in and I didn't bend over backward to speak. Nick and I both kept our heads down and our eyes off Nikki.

"Aren't you speaking," Nick rattled off. I told him that I wasn't feeling it today. What he said next threw me for a loop.

"I didn't figure you two for friends anyway." He had a crazy look on his face, so I asked him, "Why you say that?" Then the look switched faces, it then was hers. He called her trouble, and something wasn't right about it. Choked up he said, "She been digging on me about six months now but I guess she got the message."

I said, "What message?"

Nick went on to say, "The message that I wasn't interested." By now, my mouth was on the floor, not only did they know more about each other than Nikki had revealed, but I felt like an ass. I'm just too damn trusting. "Well, since you got so many women at your beck and call, why call me?" I asked in a monotone voice. However, not wanting to sound wimpy and desperate. At this point, I wanted to slap somebody.

Little Ms. Bold Nikki walked over, but still, no eye contact. The way my insides were boiling, she was fortunate. After about five minutes, Keisha from the hood came out.

I shouted! "So you two, know each other? So, you were hot on this hottie too?" She stared as if she swallowed her tongue so I repeated the question, "So, you were hot on this hottie too?"

"Well, me and so many others," she said as if she would get a medal or something.

She went on to say, "You're not his type anyways, you're hood rich and boring."

Livid, I must conclude. She wanted to speak privately, but I said, "What the hell, why?" Nick needs to know the shit at hand. "Nick, we're pregnant, so get ready, Daddy."

"Who?" Nick shouted.

Again, I felt like laying hands, but not Christ-like.

Feeling defeated, I left those two. They were horrifically akin, still, this didn't make it any better. I felt alone. I arrived home, my dad continued to give me the cold shoulder; it felt as if I had no one. I was able to walk right in, the door unlocked, food burning on the stove, and the kitchen a mess.

As I entered the hallway that led to the bedrooms, piles of clothing lay on the floor. This wasn't like my dad, something else was bothering him besides the pregnancy news. I didn't ask about anything as I passed his room; I went straight to mine where I stayed the whole night.

The next day at school, I did see Nikki at the lockers; however, at this point, she was dead to me. She didn't even look the same, and to think, people always judged me. About three weeks went by, actually, we were dodging each other and it was ok with me. I would rather be alone than have fake people in my life.

One evening after school, I walked in as my dad's phone was ringing, and since it had never been a problem with me answering it; I took the call for him. I didn't recognize the number but that voice, I did recognize, it was Nikki. Although she tried to disguise it, I knew it.

I told her that he wasn't available and wondered why she was calling. I began to see Nikki as a different person. And, my dad was starting to look suspect.

I tried to keep it together and I was trying to take care of my business. My studies were on pace; and when the baby was expected to come, I'd be a senior. If I could just keep working until then. Nick continued to ring my phone, but I never answered. I'd decided that drama wasn't healthy.

The audacity of him. You see, I didn't fool with a lot of people and a fool I'm not, and just like he and others put perceptions on me, they didn't have a clue.

On a positive note, my dad finally decided he was ready to talk. We talked over dinner one evening, and times like these reminded me of our time with my mom. However, this time would be a bit stressful as I wondered what he was thinking after so long of not speaking. Looking straight at me he said, confidently, "Keisha, we're putting the baby up for adoption, I've found a nice couple and I'll handle everything." I couldn't say anything because my emotions almost stopped my heart.

He continued, "I want you to finish high school with ease, I don't want you to struggle. Your mom and I always wanted you out of this neighborhood and have more than we had."

I looked at him as my eyes filled, murmuring, "But you never....., Dad, I would have never guessed this to be the decision, but maybe it's for the best."

After this talk, it was as though we were strangers instead of father and daughter. I must say though, my dad did check on me all the time; he saw to it that I got my rest, that I ate well, and that I continued my schooling.

As time passed, never once did he inquire about the father, and I found that odd. With two months before the baby's due date, I got bigger and bigger.

On an early November morning, my body felt like it would separate like something was splitting it in half. Since I never experienced labor, didn't know to call this that.



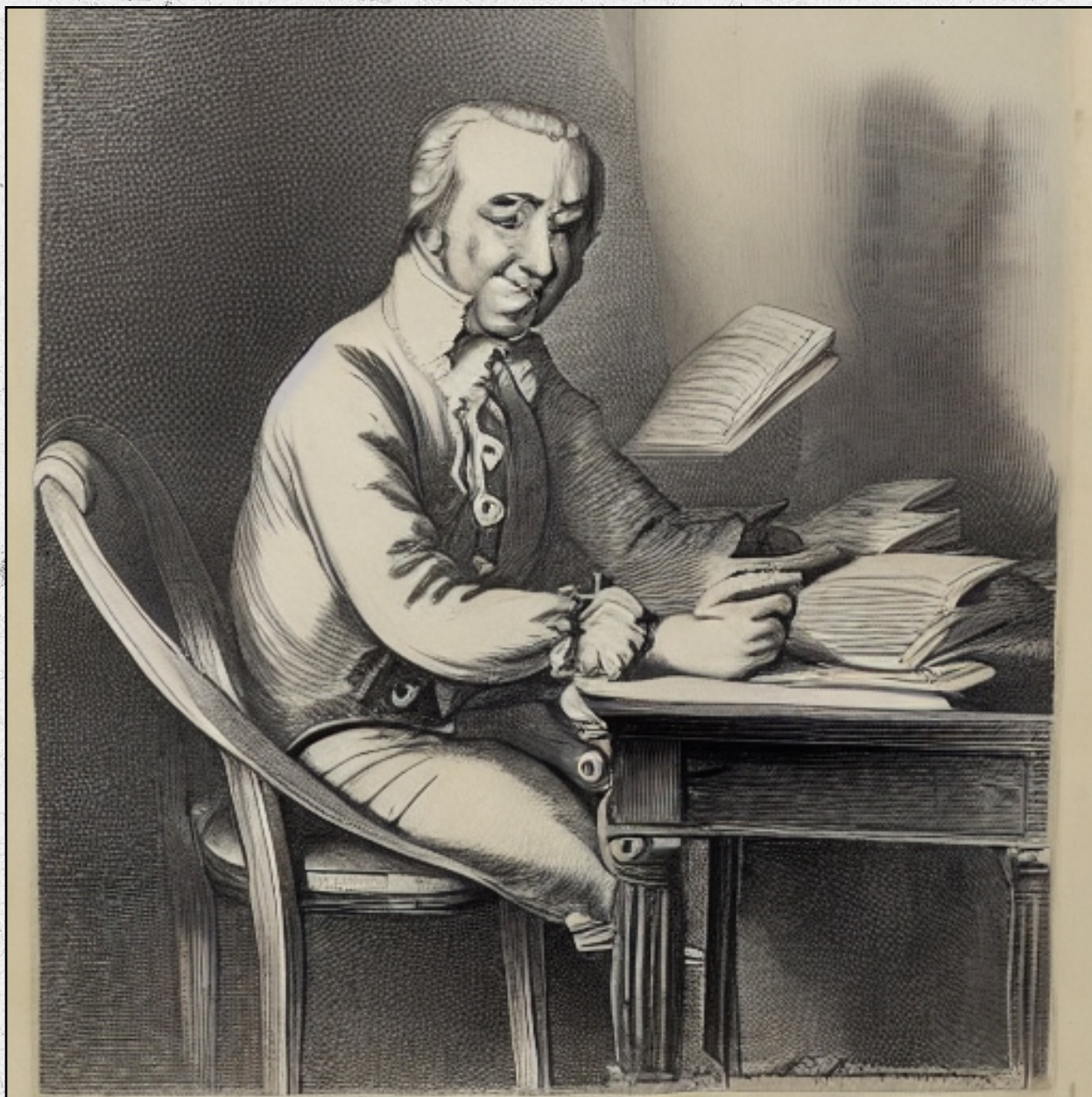
Dad took me to the hospital, and within one hour she came. I chose not to see her but got a chance to meet her new parents. As I waited, the room was so quiet. Then in walked Nikki and Nick.

My emotions almost stopped my heart. These two had been plotting all along, and my dad had been taken in, too.

I never spoke a word about this to anyone else. What I learned from this was that you really can't judge a person's character because perceptions may be completely wrong.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Moore Than Enough is the pen name for a Graduate student at Jackson State University, who has taught High school for 6 years now. The author writes: "I love my students. This will be my second Graduate degree as I hold one in Special Education. I have acquired a love for books since being in the program. I'm also an animal lover."



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