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In our 60th year of production, the winter edition of The Lantern features fiction. The staff extends congratulations to Maureen Farrel whose winning story BACON AND INCENSE appears on page 3. The staff would also like to congratulate Rebecca Heyl, whose winning photograph appears on the cover.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue. We think you’ll be more than satisfied with this fine selection of poetry and prose. I want to thank all of those who submitted their work. We had a difficult time narrowing it down from the original 109 submissions.

Enjoy!

-KNP
JUDGE'S NOTE

The novel is a leisurely form, in which events and characters can unfold across time. The short story, however, is more like classical drama: as well as vividly capturing the present, it must suggest both past and future. "Bacon and Incense," this year's winner of the Lantern fiction competition, does an especially impressive job of evoking the past that has brought Maggie to Tim and to the beach of her childhood. A crucifix, the brush of a hemline, the smells of bacon and incense--such flickering memories sparely and tellingly trace Maggie's journey to guilt and oblivion.
The room was small and smelled of urine. Maggie didn’t mind. She felt at home in the Seabreeze Motel. The shadow was there, as always, and it crouched beside the tattered drapes and swayed haphazardly to the sound of the waves and to the hum of the boardwalk. “Who ever said full moons were romantic?” she thought, denouncing the light that sprayed into the mildew-laced corner. She hated that shadow as much as it hated her, but for some reason, she was no longer afraid. She’s probably just gotten used to it. After all, Tim couldn’t make it go away like Sean had. No one could slay dragons he doesn’t believe in. Sir Tim didn’t know how to make shadows go away, while Sean never even had to try.

Of course this line of thinking was perverse. It was always perverse. Under the circumstances, Sean would have treated her savagely. He’d say, “She’s dead, Mag. Get it through your head.” And then he’d light a cigarette, push back his cascading auburn hair, and smile. Or he wouldn’t smile. Either way, she’d feel awful. But she’d want him to love her–seeking life and forgiveness in the arms of a monster. And now with Tim, who spent his last $57.50 on this cheesy motel, and was genuinely sorry there was no room at The Inn, she hadn’t been able to muster even a modicum of passion. But she could fake it.

Maggie and the shadow watched Tim sleeping and for the first time, she could see the resemblance. Gail and Pam always said she looked just like him. Same dark wavy hair, same long jet-black eyelashes, same bushy eyebrows. The June sun had already begun to outline their noses with those god-awful freckles–those little dot armies marching downward and falling-out carelessly upon their cheeks. Except for the fact that both wore a 36 inseam, they looked much younger than their nineteen years. Maggie wondered if the motel manager might call the Seaside Park police to report them as two gangly, runaway thirteen year-olds, but soon realized if her own father didn’t care, why the hell would some fat, Oreo-munching motel owner?

Shit. Oreos. She could eat a whole box. The store at the corner was probably open. She and Tim could have cookies for breakfast. He would gently twist his open and lick the frosting clean while she would wolf hers down whole and out-eat him five to one. Then she’d get a belly-ache and run next door to Mom and Pepto-Bismol. But there was no more next door and no more Mom and she was stuck in a Pepto-Bismol pink room with puke-green curtains and what appeared to be squashed Fig Newtons buried in the rug. She and Tim were grown-ups anyway, and should eat.
something nutritious. They should get plenty of rest and brush after every meal and stop screwing without condoms. Tim was pure, but God only knew where Sean had been... except in Maggie's parent's room... under the crucifix... where her virginity was sacrificed to the God of Revenge.

The familiar wave of panic returned, and Maggie inhaled deeply to keep her heart from thumping at the back of her throat. She was choking again and retreating inside herself again, and she needed someone to touch her. Although it was barely dawn and she knew she was being selfish, she couldn't be alone. "'Wake up, Tim,'" she said, shaking his shoulder while keeping a watching eye on the corner.

"What time is it?" Tim said, sweeping his index finger across his right eye. "'Did you stay up all night again? You're going to get sick."

"I've got armadillo genes, haven't you noticed? I don't need things like sleep or food like you mere mortals."

"Yeah, baby, but I know what you do need." Tim squeezed her to his chest, trying to act sleazy. As he pushed back a tangled ball of bangs from his forehead, Maggie hoped that the James Dean act was meant to be a parody and not an imitation.

"Who would have ever thought that the boy next door could grow up to be so macho?" Maggie replied, thinking that this time he could save her. She had to escape from something. And she had to do it soon.

As Tim's kisses grew more fervent, Maggie closed her eyes, and the imaginary crucifix, hanging just above the bed, grew larger and brighter. Above Tim's breathing, she could hear voices—ladies' voices—coming to her in near-whispers. She called Tim's name, but the noises continued. It sounded like Sunday morning and the stench of incense and bacon burned Maggie's nostrils. The chatter became clearer and louder, and she felt the brush of a hem-line along her cheeks. She wanted to run home to watch Bullwinkle, but the ladies kept talking. "'Timmy's gonna be a priest. And he's gonna marry Maggie. I told him that priests don't get married, but he doesn't seem to care."

"Oh my. A priest. Wouldn't you be proud? Now I don't want my Maggie ruining him. We better watch how they play from now on. Will we call you Father Doyle in the future, Timmy?"

"Yes. And forgive me Father for I have sinned." Maggie said her three "Hail Marys" and two "Our Fathers" and the voices subsided as Tim collapsed on top of her.

•••

Maggie awoke in time for a quick shower before the twelve
p.m. check-out time, and Tim double-checked the room for stray Genesee cans and her missing pack of Marlboros. Maggie only had thirty dollars, but the beer and cigarettes had been a necessity and, for a change, Tim’s fake I.D. worked like a miracle.

“Want a cold guy, Hon?” Tim asked, grabbing a beer from the cooler and holding it to his face as if making commercial.

“You know what they say about drinking before noon, don’t you?” Maggie said, accepting the beer anyway. “What do you feel like doing today? I don’t want to go home, do you?”

“I’d like to stay here and check out the beach, but we don’t have much money left, do we?”

“Enough for a couple of WaWa hoagies and maybe a couple slices of pizza. We can sleep on Orty beach tonight if we don’t get caught by the police.”

“I can’t believe that your dad meant that we couldn’t stay at your cottage at all. Especially after he invited you. Maybe it was just inconvenient last night. I mean maybe Sharon had guests or something.”

“Tim, he told me that ‘my mother,’ had decided she didn’t ‘want me there.’ That’s all. Plain and simple.”

The more Maggie thought about it, the more resolved she became. If her stepmother didn’t want her there, well, by God, she was going to stay. Maybe she’d sleep in the sand in front of the cottage and maybe she’d knock on the door to borrow a towel and maybe she’d finish the case of beer and tell good ol’ ‘mom’ exactly how she felt. Sharon had ruined Maggie’s senior year by eloping with Maggie’s dad before Maggie’s real mother was even five months dead. And to top it off, Sharon sold the family house to buy a farm in the boonies and said there wasn’t enough room in the new house for Maggie and her own kids, too. “You’ll have to live with Kimmie for a while,” Maggie’s dad had said, not caring that a newlywed with a baby doesn’t want a kid sister hanging about. And of course Sharon was “so sorry.” She was sorry that the improvements on the new house depleted Maggie’s college fund and sorry that Maggie had to fund her own way and so sorry to be such a witch. Yes, maybe Maggie would tell the old dragon lady how she felt. Or maybe she’d just go down to the beach and let the water run over her.

It was good to let the waves knock her down and to struggle against them again and again. Maggie felt alive in the ocean where her body was light and her thoughts turned to sharks and to other dangers. Sinking her feet deep into the velvet bottom, she watched the water swirl around her, bathing her own helplessness yet standing defiant against the one imaginary wave that could cover her up and swallow her whole.

“Hey Mag, check out that little girl’s butt.”
Tim had a way of bringing Maggie back to Earth.

“Where?”

“Over there. On the private beach. Is that a Coppertone commercial or what?”

Maggie looked over as a young mother tried to untangle her little girl’s bathing suit bottom from a loose piece of the fence that separated the public beach from the private one. Maggie had forgotten how white skin could be.

“What are you doing checking out a little girl’s butt? Are you some kind of closet pervert?”

“No. I came out of the closet when I started dating you.”

“You’re such a smart-ass.”

Tim led Maggie back to their blanket which was situated right beside the tattered fence. The girl was free now, but a fragment of yellow bathing suit remained as a monument of her ordeal. Maggie stared at the remnant—remembering how she’d always felt sorry for the people on the other side of the fence. The public beach was never as clean as the one reserved for the chosen few. For as long as she could remember, theirs was the nicest cottage on Seahorse Lane, her parents were the handsomest couple, and she and Kimmie were the luckiest kids. To them the beach meant wide open spaces filled with laughter and parents and the smell of coconut oil. But this side of the beach smelled of tobacco and of wet pampers and the people weren’t as pretty.

By dinner time, the beach was nearly deserted. Except for occasional stragglers and arriving surfers, she and Tim had the place to themselves. Maggie sat on the blanket, looking out to the sea and watching the surfers while being fanned by the air exuding from Tim’s nostrils. “How can anyone sleep so much?” Maggie wondered, both awed by and jealous of his innocence. Maggie lit a cigarette and the budding pangs of hunger subsided. She would wake Tim soon and they would go to the boardwalk to eat, but she didn’t want to do it just yet. The solitude felt good.

The surfers looked silly. The evening was calm and there were hardly any waves, but all twelve surfers were equally diligent in their pursuit to catch the biggest wave. They reminded Maggie of Kimmie’s daughter Megan, who would ride on her styrofoam surfboard in her Fisher Price swimming pool—never going anywhere but not seeming to mind. Except that the surfers looked like seals—slick and black and ready for tricks. And that one of them, from a distance, looked just like Sean.

The Sean surfer was the only one who, when the waves really came, was able to ride them all the way in. He was self-assured and sexy and Maggie could swear he was looking at her.

“You mean we can’t see each other any more?” the Sean surfer seemed to say.
"She’s such a bitch," Maggie thought back. "She says we’re too serious and that I should date other boys for a while. What she really means is that she doesn’t want you boffing me and that I should date Timmy Doyle."

"You mean she wants Timmy Doyle to boff you?"

"No, she doesn’t want anyone to boff me. Not ever. Not even when I get married—which better be to a nice Irish Catholic boy. Preferably one without a sex drive. Or better yet, one without a penis. She’s pathetic and I hate her. I hate her prissy values and her perfect life and I wouldn’t care if she died."

"Come on, Mag. It’s not that bad. We’ll just sneak. She can’t monitor you 24 hours a day."

"I guess with all her phoney PTA meetings and church bullshit she can’t. But why don’t we go upstairs and do it right now? On her bed. On her nice, crisp sheets. I know I said I wasn’t ready, but you’ve heard of a woman’s prerogative, haven’t you? Besides, Dad’s away and she won’t be back for hours so now seems like the perfect time."

Then the surf began to break and it sounded like a car crash—only the retribution and punishment had already come. Had it been two years? The Buick lost control and the guardrail broke and her mom went through the ice. And all the while, Maggie was supposed to be learning the ways of love.

Tim slept until dark and Maggie snuggled next to him—rising now and then to smoke a cigarette or to look out into the sea. The spotlight at the deserted end of the boardwalk illuminated a piece of the private beach where someone had left a blanket. Next to the blanket was a pail or seashell and an intricate sand castle and the light made the spot look warm and sunny. Maggie imagined seagulls waiting patiently for bread and thought about how nothing could harm her there. Not until Sean made her feel so wild. And then the warmth was not enough.

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"Hey, Knucklehead. Why did you let me sleep so long? You must be starving." Tim woke up with his usual concern.

"No. I’m not that hungry. Really. You looked sweet sleeping, and the ocean is so peaceful. I had a nice time sitting here."

"Do you realize we have a whole ten bucks left? Let’s go out on the town."

"No, I’m really beat. Why don’t you go grab some munchies on the boardwalk and I’ll keep the home fires burning. We’ll have a romantic, sea-side, corn-dog dinner."

"Are you sure you’ll be all right? I’ll worry about you here all by yourself."
"I know you will."

Tim got up to leave, brushing the sand from his Jantzens and pulling on the sweat shirt he’d been using as a pillow. "You know what I wish, Mag," he said, turning towards her. "I wish we were about ten years older and I was finished with school and we were married. I think I’d like to take care of you."

"You’re too sweet. You really are. But I’m a big girl now. And a starving big girl. Go get some food. And besides, didn’t anyone ever tell you to be careful what you wish for?"

Tim disappeared past the spotlight, leaving Maggie alone. She felt the same warm melancholy she always did when he left. In another two months, he’d be back at Cornell and she’d still be working at the dress factory and living with her sister. Even if she didn’t lose him in a year... Even if she didn’t lose him in five years, she’d always know he deserved better.

Maggie glanced back towards the spotlight, knowing that Tim wouldn’t be back yet. She hoped to see him anyway. Even if he didn’t keep the shadow away, at least he kept it at bay. But there it was again, crouching at the fringe of the light and making her feel uneasy. "I’m losing my wretched mind," Maggie thought, looking at the shadow as if it were a pit-bull. It was sneering at her and it wanted her to die. But how could it be a dog? It could stand and could walk and smelled of bacon and incense. Maybe it was a bear. Or maybe some primordial beast that lived at the recesses of her imagination. Or maybe it was madness finally coming in for the kill. "Oh dear, God," Maggie thought, "this is it."

There was just enough light that she could watch the shadow encircling her. But then the figure slowly disappeared into the dark perimeter in which she was encased, and Maggie felt afraid. She wanted to run into the sea. Just to run deeper and deeper until there were no shadows and no movement left. But instead she sat upright, while the wind, like a hemline, slapped against her face.

Maggie shivered and looked over at the lifeguard’s stand on the private beach. She didn’t belong there anymore. She didn’t belong anywhere. And as she looked the other way, the shadow came upon her. For the first time in ages, she felt herself let go. She let go of Sean and of Tim and of everything. It was like novocaine. Only better. And she sat there, making plans for the future. Only like so many others, she was already dead.
The Rubix Cube
By Chris Bowers

The blue and green were solid
but the other four were mixed.

I knew how to solve one side
And one day I solved two
Ever since then I left it unchanged.

None of my brothers could solve the cube and
I knew that kids in school were liars.

Eric Mitchell said
I did that.
it’s so easy.
I solved it three times in one night.

He said he was not lying.

Eric also said
I’m a great chess player
I could beat you so easy
But I won when we played.

Say what if your gay

It seemed Eric spit
or choked
As he spoke.

What?

Laughter from everywhere.

Eric was glowing
writhing
I was squinting.
What?

And they all laughed
and I bit my lip
hard
”O yeah?!“
Recovery
By Gar Donecker

I make another note to go home and throttle Dave after I get my stuff back. Jenn, since letting me in, has ignored me. She holds the phone with both hands, telling her boyfriend, Leon, about her back.

No polite ways of interrupting Jenn’s long distance call come to mind, and I sit on her roommate’s bed. Murphy’s Law posters and carefully arranged mosaics of polaroids cover the dorm-room walls, which are painted institution bone. The room is small but neat, and several small ferns line the window sill. I am especially envious of the open, organized closet. Back at the house, I keep my clothes in boxes under my bed because all our closets are filled with power tools, road signs, paint cans, and bowling pins.

Actually, Dave pulled something out of our closets today that I had not seen before--drill bits, one to three feet long. Dave, who is my house mate, explained that he needed to drill through the ceiling for us to get cable, which for some reason reassured me. Last week, Dave cut down the holly tree in our backyard with a chainsaw.

Jenn is being comforted by Leon about her boss at work, who she thinks hates her. Her roommate, Alex, is not here. Alex was Jenn’s third roommate in two years and the only one that has lasted longer than a year. I suspect that Alex has endured here so long simply because she is always out playing or practicing for field hockey. Or, because Alex is big and forceful enough to shut Jenn up when she becomes too annoying. Both girls’ books are stacked beside some heavily doodled notepads under Jenn’s desk. I wonder if somewhere in those piles are my things.

A Walkman and a cookie sheet: sometime last semester, these items have come into Jenn’s possession, and I have decided, with liberal prodding from Dave, to take charge and reclaim them. Of course, Dave loaned her the walkman in the first place--and I think he may be responsible for the cookie sheet, too--which is the reason I would like to punch him.

Jenn is telling Leon about a professor that would not accept a paper late. Her conversation is an endless cycle of complaint and reassurance, with intermittent digressions on his faithfulness. She stops in mid-sentence and looks at me. “Jeff--did you want me?”

“No, I just wanted a chance to bitch at your boyfriend too,” I do not yell, not grabbing the phone from her. Instead, I nod.

Jenn nods back, and continues talking. She has a frizzy ponytail jutting up at a diagonal from the top of her head. That it looks like a Barbie-doll electroshock experiment gone bad may be accidental. On the corner of her desk is a box marked “Pastries.”
Her parents own a bakery. I remember, at the beginning of last year, Jenn used to bring pies or danishes to our Tuesday movie nights. We would have a dozen people over, and we would all share one pie and watch whatever was on late night HBO. Jenn has her less-than-desirable traits, too. After about a semester of being drawn into the petty melodramas of her life—teary 1 A.M. phone calls, and the inevitable 3 A.M. apology for the first late call, all usually on test nights—we stopped visiting her; after about two semesters, she stopped visiting us.

Jenn asks her boyfriend if he thinks she is complaining too much. After several reassurances, she says Goodbye, promising to call him back soon.

She looks at me again. "Hi, Jeff." "Hey. I came to see if you were done with that Walkman that Dave loaned to you last year." I say this like a question. She thinks for a moment. "Done?"

"Um, yeah, I was kind of hoping to get it back?"

"Oh, did yours break?"

"No." She is staring blankly at me. I decide to repeat myself. "I'd just like to have it back, if that's O.K.?"

She says, "Oh." She is looking at me like I ran over her puppy or something. I cannot believe that I am starting to feel bad about taking it back. She rummages through the backpack under her desk, telling me about the "Beatles" tape she was listening to before she lost it, then pulls out the Walkman. She places it on the corner of the desk, saying, "I think there's something wrong with it. It doesn't rewind anymore."

"Thanks," I say.

"You might want to get it fixed."

"Thanks," I say. I remind myself that Jenn is not necessarily trying to be exasperating. She does it naturally and giftedly. "Look, can I also have that cookie sheet back you borrowed too?"

Jenn pauses for a moment. "The black one?" she asks.

"Yes."

She is pouting slightly. "I think it's in the freezer, with my chocolate chip cookie dough."

"Mm hm."

She pauses again and glances slowly around the room. "You never use it."

I scream, "Jesus, Jenn, it's mine!" so loud I think my voice cracks. Jenn jumps back, her eyes wide. I have been flustered into the confrontation I have been dreading. Abashed, I say much more softly, "I'm, I didn't mean to yell. I'd just like to have my stuff back, I'm sorry." I suppress the urge to ask her not to cry.

She doesn't cry. I get the impression that she has been
rehearsing for this. Her posture becomes submissive, and she walks me to the dorm’s communal kitchen. Several unwashed pans and dozens of stolen cafeteria glasses surround the sink, which smells faintly of milk and Dawn. The refrigerator is an ancient white model, the type with moving door handles.

Jenn yanks on the handle several times, and as the door cracks open, a glass on the top of the refrigerator falls to one side. As the glass falls--and I notice that it is not one of the cafeteria glasses--I groan inwardly, wondering if this could get any more complicated. It crunches against the linoleum, shooting bits and chunks of glass across the floor, and we both jump back.

"I don’t know if you’re going to be able to get it out," she says, as the freezer door swings open, "with all the ice." In her voice is a tinge of pity, as if she has been trying to protect me from this. The freezer is two thirds full of solid ice.

A foul puff of fog rolls out, and I can see a bag of frozen peas, an orangish mass, and my cookie sheet embedded inside.

In Jenn’s face I can see a struggle between maintaining a superior air because of my outburst and looking chagrined. She blushes and sniffs. “Maybe you should have told me you wanted it back before.”

“What,” I ask, “because it would take a week to defrost this thing?” I try to find a crack or gap in the ice, but it is fused to all sides of the freezer.

“We can’t defrost it. Water would leak through the floor and set off fire alarms.” She takes a breath and says, “If--” but I cut her off. I want to escape, fast.

“Look, Jenn, I’m going to go see if Dave has something I can get this out with. I’ll be back after supper. At seven.” I leave her staring at the open freezer, standing amidst the broken glass.

At seven, I return to Jenn’s dorm room. Dinner was good, and I feel more relaxed. Alex answers and lets me in. Her hair is wet. “Hi,” she says. Alex is not much taller than I am, but she has a loud voice, and I self-consciously close the door as I enter. “I heard about your fight with Jenn.”

“It wasn’t much of a fight,” I say, looking around the room, hoping that maybe somehow the cookie sheet will be already liberated, and I can leave. The desk is now filled with the clutter of studying, and the closets are closed.

Alex laughs loudly, not smiling. “Oh, right. That’s a new one.” “Dave is going to be here soon,” I say. “He says he can help.” I sit on a bed. Alex is watching me. Suddenly uncomfortable, I ask, “What’s a new one?”

Alex turns away. “When screaming and throwing dishes doesn’t count as a fight.” The phone rings, and Alex moves to
answer.

"What?" I ask, but Alex is on the phone.
She says, to the phone, "Oh, hi, Leon... No, she's a lot better now... Well you know how sensitive she is." I wipe my palms against my jeans and lean forward to listen as she continues, examining her nails as she talks.

"Mm hm... No, I don't blame you... He's right here, actually, he just came back. No, he's not that big."
The voice from the telephone sounds angry. I cannot believe that they are talking about me, but my skin feels hot. "Alex," I say. But she keeps talking, almost boisterously.

"Oh, Jenn would love that, but is it really worth the money to fly up here just for that? And you could get arrested."

Before I can try to interrupt again, the door opens. A voice says, "Alex?" and what looks like half the field hockey team files in. Some of them sit down on the other bed, and some stand. Alex waves to them from the phone. The girl in front says, "We brought Jenn some chicken noodle soup," and someone holds up a steaming bowl. A voice from the crowd says, "Is that the guy that was fighting with Jenn?" and is answered, "Yes." The room fills with the sound of low conversation, and I try to follow Alex's phone call as well as her friends' gossiping, catching only a fraction of both:

"Well Leon, I believe her anyway--"
"Well she was crying before--"
"--Yeah, remember that big dinner platter that was in the sink?--"
"--Remember when Jenn mooched soda from you every day for a month?--"
"--No! Just chill, she'll be back in a minute--"
"--no reason for him to flip out. I would've beat the--"
"--no they never dated or anything--"

I sit, speechless, slowly moving back on the bed. I want to open a window. I want to jump out. Several of the field hockey players glare menacingly in my direction.
The door opens, and Jenn walks in. She has changed into ruffled pajamas. Over her right eye, she is wearing a huge band-aid. All conversations stop, and I find my voice.

"Jenn," I say slowly, "what have you been telling these people?"

Jenn looks at Alex, looks at the impromptu lynch squad, looks at me. "Nothing."
Everyone waits one beat, then starts speaking at once.
"Jenn," I start to say, "why the hell--"
"Leon's on the phone for you, Jenn."
"Do you want some soup?"
"God, what did he do to your eye?"
Some of the girls crowd around Jenn, who smiles sadly, appreciating the attention. Some move to the desk to give Leon their two cents worth. The room is hot. With almost everybody standing, I feel particularly stifled and alone sitting down. Now that Jenn is here, I want to talk to her. I would also like to murder her, but I can’t even get near her.

Over the throng, I see the door open. A screeching noise so hideous it could intimidate hyenas comes from the entrance, and everyone is instantly silenced. The crowd parts, and Dave waves with his free hand. "Heheh. Hey Jeff. Hey guys. I brought my portable." With his other hand he waves a small chainsaw. He is wearing a utility belt with about a dozen small tools that he cannot possibly need. "I also brought a butane torch. We’ll slice and melt the sucker out."

I can’t tell whether I feel safer with Dave here. The crowd has shrunk away from the entrance, though, and the mob mindset has dissipated. Fearing that I will not have another chance to gain any semblance of control of this situation, I stand up and speak to the masses. "Look guys, Jenn and I need to talk. Why don’t you all go help Dave with the refrigerator. We’ll be out in a sec."

To my surprise, everyone assembled moves, though slowly and reluctantly, to the door. As they leave, Alex asks Jenn if she is O.K. While Jenn answers and tries to sound vulnerable yet brave, I move to the phone and hang it up, hoping Jenn does not notice.

Finally, the door is shut.

"Jenn, why do those people think I was screaming at you?"
"You did scream."
"And throwing things at you?"
"Oh you hung up on Leon!" She noticed.

I have an irrational notion that if she manages to change the subject, this frustration will never end; that I will be tagged as an abusive misogynist; that I will get hockey pucks with evil notes attached thrown through my window for the rest of the semester.

"Listen to me. I yelled because I was pissed. You broke my tape player, you lost my tray, I got mad. It was the last thing I wanted to do. Really. And what happened to your eye?"
"I bumped it at supper."
"Then why do people think I’m beating on you or something?"
"You’re yelling at me again," she says.
"I wasn’t yelling." I was. I try to calm down. "Now what did you tell these people?"

Jenn takes a patronizing tone. "Nothing. I guess they just assumed things, didn’t they?"

"Well why didn’t you correct them?" I try to match her tone.
"

"Maybe, you wanted them to just assume that you didn’t cause all this? That’s not fair, Jenn."
Jenn does not answer. Now she looks like she actually may cry. I feel like I am being manipulated. Somewhere outside, I hear another piercing, grating noise, and some scattered screams. I try a different approach.

"I'm not the bad guy, Jenn. I was nice enough to lend you stuff. Right?" I wonder if any of this is getting through.

She nods.

"So can you please tell them that we were not fighting? Or at least that we weren't throwing things? I am sorry I yelled at you."

She considers my apology slowly, which I resent, and accepts. She sniffs and wipes her eyes, in control of the situation again.

We walk to the kitchen, which is a zoo. The entire hall has gathered to watch Junior Archeologist Dave excavate their freezer. Someone has microwaved popcorn. The kitchen smells now include motors. At first, I am not sure if the clear chips on the floor are ice or glass, but someone--another hockey player--tells Jenn that they cleaned up the rest of "his" mess.

Jenn looks my way, and when she sees me watching her, she says to the floor, "It's not anyone's mess, it just kind of fell." A low murmur spreads through the hall. It's not a confession, but I hope that it will thwart any rumors still circulating.

In the kitchen, from the shoulders up, Dave is bent into the freezer, and bits of ice spray onto the floor. A sick grinding noise emanates from within. Emerging, grinning widely, Dave says, "Got it!" He is wearing what look like reinforced racecar goggles, with diameters twice as wide as his eyes. To more gnashing of ice and fiberglass, he slides out a deformed square of ice, at the center of which seems to be a metal cookie sheet.

I have been sweating, and as I enter the kitchen, I shiver. Fatigued but relieved, I take the tray from Dave and walk out, saying, "Goodbye, Jenn."

Dave holds up a lighter. "What, don't you want to take the ice off?"

"No," I say, emphatically, holding the tray away from him. "Let's go." In my sincerest voice, I say, "Jenn, I hope that cut you got at supper feels better. You should put some ice on it." I wave my frozen prize. Some onlookers chuckle and begin to disband.

Jenn says an awkward Goodbye, then remembers that she has to call Leon back and hurries off.

We are almost home. "Dave," I say, "take off those stupid goggles." The ice is slowly melting, dotting the sidewalk as we walk, and I shift the cold sheet from hand to hand.

"You must have really bitched her out back there," says Dave.

Several different responses of various degrees of truth come to mind. I tell him it's none of his business.
Untitled
By Anne Feinsod

ice gulls flying in the sea trapped pink sunbeams in the
chiseled quartz movement floating rushing past the blood
volcanoes. wide yellow sunrings touching down furred frisky
whiteness in the cave. soft murky waters kissing sparkly
orange pinpoints. deep brown shadows coat the flutter of the
wishywashy autumn leaves. Dawn. Pale blue dawn ice white sun
flapping loosely lazy white bids streaky puff of cloud.
tender green hills nursing prim stiff little soldiers of
pine. And all day the burning crisply cleanly sparkle dazzle
white to golden sun to bronze to fiery ultra pink sun climbs
the pale blue and hovers tremulously trembling firmly
burning loses grip and falls gently through the lace
atmosphere to the long flat tan plains and sinks whispering
acquiescing murmuring retreating below the half of the globe
leaving the gulls sunbeams volcanoes creatures leaves clouds
hills pines drained and colorless and waiting under the
shadows for another
pale blue
dawn.
Star Six Nine
By Carolyn Cooper

I knew it was bad timing, but I decided to dial Zachary’s number anyway.

“Hello?” A familiar woman’s voice answered.

Before Karen had finished saying the word, I slammed the receiver down and started frantically straightening the cushions on my sofa. I’ll pay for that mistake, I thought. Hopefully Zachary was asleep when I called and missed the hang-up.

The phone rang a minute later, and I picked it up hesitantly. An awkward silence followed.

“Who is this?” Zachary demanded. “Does the asshole who keeps pranking my girlfriend have a name?”

“You like to call me your sex slave,” I said playfully. I smiled and stroked my hand through my hair.

“Hello?” he continued. “Are you going to answer me for a change, or are you just going to breathe into the phone until I hang up on you?”

“You make me breathe heavily all the time,” I said. “I love fucking you.”

“Okay,” Zachary warned, “just know that if you bother us one more time, I’ll do more than just star-six-nine you.”

“You can do whatever you want to me,” I said. “Just call me tomorrow. Goodnight, my sex master.”

He whispered, “Goodnight, my sex slave.” Then he continued loudly, “I’ll kill you; remember that.”

Click. Star-six-nine. “Just tie me in chains first.”

I started ironing my white uniform for the doctor’s office. The snug-fitting, snow-white uniform that Karen could never fit into. I would wear my hair down for a change—not the easiest style—but the way Zachary had asked me to wear it. He would be at the office tomorrow for the Clozerol drug rep luncheon. Clozerol was the new drug on the market for treating schizophrenia. It was also the drug that brought Zachary by the office every other month. For that reason, I hoped that the drug would be a success.

Dr. Simonds asked me to be at the meeting, as he “would probably be running a couple of minutes late.” The doctor had used that lame excuse before, like the time I finally agreed to grab dinner with him. I sipped daiquiris for over an hour before I considered him a no-show at the local sports bar. The jerk got me drunk on account of “running a couple of minutes late.” And he thinks I’m going to give him another chance? If only Zachary would offer me a weekly check. I know that quitting would make Zachary happy, because then the doctor would stop flirting with me. Zachary wasn’t ready to share me. “I own you sexually,” he would say. I
liked that.

The next day I woke to Madonna’s new “Erotica” tune on the radio. Zachary and I loved Madonna. I had bought *The Immaculate Collection* CD for him on Valentine’s Day. He never acknowledged that holiday with me. I pretended not to care. At least Zachary had something tangible from me that Karen didn’t know about. He said he would blare the song so that I could even hear it in my room across the street from his apartment. Then I would know he was thinking of me. I hummed the song in the shower. The phone rang. I heard through my answering machine, “Stacey... are you there. . . pick up, goddammit.” I walked to the telephone slowly.

“Hi,” I answered. “Has Karen left for the office?”

“Yes,” Zachary said. “Hey, listen, try not to call so often, Princess,” he said. “The hang-ups are raising questions.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just needed to let you know that I was thinking about you.”

“I thought about being with you all night,” Zachary said. 

“Karen was so pissed off, because I didn’t want to touch her. All I thought about was you. You’re giving Karen a real run for the money.”

“Can you please come over? I said. “Come and make me late for work.”

“Yeah, maybe then that doctor jerk, what’s his name, will fire you,” he said. “I only have fifteen minutes, Hon.”

“That’s all it takes,” I said. “I miss you.” Pause. Click.

The phone rang again. “I miss you, too,” he said. “I’ll be there in five minutes, so make sure you’re down in the lobby to let me in.” Click.

Star-six-nine. “Hurry over here,” I said. “I can’t wait another minute.”

No sooner had I put down the receiver and walked downstairs to meet him than he showed up in his dark blue business suit. I acknowledged him, and we walked quite separately as per the rules up to my room. When I opened my door, I immediately grabbed onto Zachary and pulled him in. I couldn’t wait to put my hands all over him. I wanted to attack him the minute I saw his brown eyes, but of course the ground rules got in the way. Zachary didn’t want anyone to get hurt. He wasn’t out to destroy anyone. But God, his sexy eyes—damn the ground rules. Damn getting hurt. I wanted him, so I ripped my clothes off and took him.

Ten minutes later the phone rang again, and although it would interrupt the moment, I knew I had to answer it.

“Hello,” I said while trying to catch my breath.

“Good morning, Stacey. Did you just wake up?” Karen asked.

“You’re going to be really late for work.”

“Uh... I must have overslept,” I said.
"Don't worry, I'll cover for you here at the office," Karen said. "We all have our days."

"Thanks, Sweetheart," I said. "I'll be there before Dr. Simonds strolls in. Give me about twenty minutes."

Twenty minutes to finish fucking your boyfriend and compose myself. I hung up.

"Who was that?" Zachary asked.

I did not answer.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Just your girlfriend," I said.

"Smile and get over here," he said. We finished what we had so anxiously started. He gave me a hug, and I grabbed my hands around him like I would never let go and closed my eyes. All we had was the moment. "Be good," he would always say as he pulled away from me. Then he would take a Twinkie and leave.

I cut off three people on Main St. on the way to work, and the doctor still beat me. "Bastard," I said when I saw his ugly fire engine red Beretta parked next to the door.

"You're looking fine this morning," Dr. Simonds said.

"I'm just not awake yet," I said.

"Oh, I was up at the crack of dawn to go to the health club," he said. "I rode the step machine for fifteen minutes, then..."

I stopped listening. Was I supposed to be impressed? He had his chance. Besides, now I have Zachary. I nodded my head every few minutes and finally said, "Busy morning," and walked into another room.

At 10:00 a.m. every day, Cathy and I dropped anything we were working on and went to the breakroom--our daily fifteen minute break stretched to a half hour. Karen always walked in around ten after. Well, I got the higher raise this past January, because Dr. Simonds liked me more, regardless of her little acts of conscientiousness.

"Tough morning," Karen said.

"Yeah," Cathy agreed. "Two schizos and a bulimic."

"Don't forget about the transexual," I added.

"And a thousand phone calls at the same time he, or rather, it, walked in," Cathy said.

"Speaking of phone calls," Karen said. "I've been getting a lot of strange ones lately."

I studied my coffee.

"This world is full of a lot of sick people," Cathy said. "Only most of them never seek the professional help they need."

Still looking at my coffee, I said, "Yeah, maybe some weirdo from our office is in love with you."

"Yeah, an erotomaniac, maybe," Cathy said. "He's stalking you. He probably has a camera trained to your window."

"Thanks, guys," Karen said. "If I didn't have Zachary, you
would really be freaking me out about now. In fact, someone called just last night and hung up on me. But Zachary star-six-nined the creep and told him what to do.” Karen smiled.

“You’re so lucky to have him,” Cathy said.

“Well, you and Stacey will meet your Prince Charming some­day soon, and of course I want to be the first to know about it,” Karen said. “In the meantime, I’m in love with mine.”

“You’re disgusting,” I said.

“Yeah, you make me sick,” Cathy said. “Let’s all get back to work.”

The rest of the morning went slow, as I counted the minutes until Zachary would arrive. He came at exactly 12:00 p.m. Right on time, I thought, smiling. And he looked great in that suit. I often wondered if I could give him a nice tie to match it. I went as far as to buy one at Bloomingdale’s and keep it in my lingerie drawer until I decided.

“How’s my beautiful girl,” Zachary said. I stopped smiling when I realized he was looking solely at Karen.

“And how do we look?” Cathy asked.

“You both look ravishing,” Zachary said. “Stacey, you look very tan.”

“It’s her hair,” Karen said. “She got it highlighted a month ago. It looks especially nice today.” Karen turned to me. “He doesn’t notice anything, does he?”

I forced a smile on my face. Zachary drove the three of us to Denny’s for lunch, not looking my way once. I couldn’t wait to go home. Why do I always set myself up like this? I vowed it would be different this time, but he acted as if I didn’t exist, and I hated that. I played with my food all throughout lunch, praying for some attention.

“You’re not eating much,” Zachary finally said to me.

“I need to lose a few extra pounds,” I said.

“She must be eyeing up that Dr. What’s His Name,” Zachary said.

“It’s Dr. Simonds, Zachary,” I said. “Excuse me, I need to find the ladies’ room.” I turned around quickly, hoping that no one had caught the tears forming in my eyes. Zachary had never even joked about me seeing another guy. And then to say it in front of HER. I cried for three solid minutes and then figured I had no way out but to go back to that table and act normal.

“Are you okay?” Karen asked. “You were gone a while.”

“Yeah, your eyes look red,” Cathy said.

“Oh, some lady was smoking in the bathroom,” I said. “I’m so allergic to that smoke. That’s why I had to quit.”

“You used to smoke?” Karen asked. “That’s so bad for you.”
"Well, I’m sure we all tried it out one time or another," I said. "Zachary, didn’t you start smoking again?" I glared at him. He’d been smoking for three weeks straight, but he didn’t want anyone to know he had started again. He had said it in bed three hours ago.

"Why don’t we get the check and get out of here," Zachary said. "Smoking again... give me a break!"

"Oh, but I smelled it in your car," I said. He’d been smoking for three weeks straight, but he didn’t want anyone to know he had started again. He had said it in bed three hours ago.

"I gotta take off," Zachary said when we arrived back at the office. He gave Karen a big kiss and said he loved her. I turned my eyes away, pretending I had not seen them.

"Yeah," I said. "I have a lot of things to take care of myself. See you in about three months?"

"Yes," Zachary said. "And let me know if the doctor needs any more Clozerol samples."

That evening I drove home very quickly. I took my uniform off and played the radio full blast. He always thought I was cool about us all doing lunch and him and I fucking. Why should I care that he kissed Karen and touched her long blonde hair. After all, we were just friends.

At 5:30 p.m., there was a bang at my door, I turned the music up louder, hoping that the knocker would just go away. Instead, the knocking became louder. I had to let Zachary in so that the neighbors wouldn’t complain.

"What was that all about at lunch today?" Zachary said. "I told you all that stuff in confidence. Maybe I should go find another girl who can keep a secret."

I didn’t answer him. I sat on my couch and looked up anywhere I figured Zachary’s beautiful brown eyes would not be. "That was a joke," he said laughing. "A joke." He paced compulsively up and back behind where I was sitting.

More silence. I started playing with my fingernails.

"Why are you getting all weird on me?" Zachary said. "I know, all you need is some rough sex. That’s all you need."

Zachary had grabbed my hair from behind and started biting my neck.

"Well, then, maybe you should just rape me now and get it over with," I said. I pushed him away and folded my arms around my neck.

"You’re starting to cry," he said. "Oh, come on, why are you crying? You make me feel like I committed some crime. Don’t cry."

I always felt more in control when I cried, because he would always beg me to stop. But I was the one to decide. I called the
shots, I thought.

Zachary sat down on the couch next to me and held my hand. "Karen is my girlfriend," he said. "I love her." I closed my eyes and he continued, "I can't love you. I can't love two people. It's impossible. Maybe some people can, but I can't."

"But after all this time?" I asked.

"You think you have to love everybody you have sex with," he said. "That way you don't feel like a slut. Are you asking me to leave Karen?"

"I don't know," I said, trying to wipe my eyes.

"Most affairs end that way," he said. "The mistress asks the guy to leave his girlfriend, but he can't leave. He will never leave. Can't two people who are just great friends have outrageous sex and still stay together?"

"I think I love you," I said. I squeezed his hand tightly.

"Don't say that. I've had all of that," he said. "Do you think when I come over here that I want to make love to you and tell you how much I love you, or do you think I come over here because I lust for your body? You're beautiful." Zachary took our joint hands and brought them to his lips.

"You make me feel that way," I said smiling.

"You know," he said, "we can be even better friends than me and Karen because we share something wonderful that is just between you and me. There are things I can't tell Karen. Did you know that?"

"No," I said. He was a master at making me feel good, physically and mentally, inside and out.

"Like how I smoke, you pain in the ass," he said bumping my shoulder.

He finished by saying, "You think that love and commitment and all that mush are the ultimate, but I'm telling you that maybe that's not so."

There was a long period of silence. I sat on that couch like a little girl being scolded for something she didn't know was wrong.

"You like me a lot," he said quietly.

I nodded.

"I like you a lot, too," he said. "Maybe you should give Dr. What's His Name another chance. It's not fair if I cheat on my girlfriend and you don't."

We both laughed.

"Just don't jump him right now. I'll take care of that," he said.

"And don't worry, I won't be giving you up any time soon."

"Is that a promise?" I asked.

"That's a promise," he said. "Can I rape you now?" He started to unbutton his shirt. I grabbed his buckled belt and pulled it close to my body.
"Don’t ask if you can," I said looking into his eyes, inches apart from my own. "That’s not rape. Just do it."

After he had finished violating me, I handed him two Twinkies and kissed him.

"Is this my reward?" he asked.
"Yes," I said. "That’s your reward."
"I get one if I’m okay and two if I’m really good," he added. "I gotta run. I’m late."

"You have a valid excuse," I said.
"Yeah, right," he said. "A valid excuse. I’ll talk to you soon."

Two hours later, he called me.
"Hello," I said.
"Hi, my sex slave," he said. "I just wanted to let you know that I’m obsessed with you. Just remember, when you see Dr. What’s His Name, that I own you sexually. Please tell me that."
"Zachary, you own me," I said.

Click. Star-six-nine. "You own me," I repeated. Click.
Breakfast Talk The Morning After
By Kathrin Phillips

I tried to slit my wrists when I was thirteen.
I’m focusing on your face as I say it,
gauging your reaction.
Your eyes—deep hazel—fly
from the faint, white lines to my face.
You drop my hands.
The new ring glints
in the Hawaiian morning sun.
I look away.
Through the window,
I can see the waves dragging out the sand in long sweeps.
In the silence my heart beats each wave,
counting the time you take to answer.

"When I was little I ran away from home."
You seem relieved by your confession.
"I got lost." You smile crookedly.
I’m noticing an oblong freckle on your chest,
above your left nipple and
almost obscured by dark curly hair.
"Mrs. Clarke down the street brought me home.
My mom hadn’t noticed I was gone yet."
I begin to wonder just who you really are.
You turn, and pour the coffee, asking "Milk, right?"
and sounding proud that you already know.
The welted nail tracks on your back
remind me that this is only the first breakfast.
Life As a Worker Bee  
By Sona Rewari

Trigonometry class was the highlight of my day. For fifty minutes, I was free to study the meticulous details of the back of Kyle Corbett’s head, everything from the little cowlick to the tiny mole at the base of his neck. I had fallen in lust three weeks ago when Kyle turned around and asked me the cosine of pi. Now, I couldn’t look at another radian without thinking of him. Kyle had an adorable way of tilting his head when he talked, making his shiny brown hair hang over his right eye. Those lose-yourself blue eyes haunted me.

Through my extensive research, I learned that Kyle was on the track team. Every morning at 5:30, he ran five miles, and at approximately 6:05 he passed my house. For a week, I watched him jog past daily, his cowlick bobbing up and down. Hoping for an interception, I finally mustered up the courage to go pick up the newspaper. He waved, and I waved back.

I heard that Kyle was kind of a shy guy. My best friend, Liz, said that he was never at any of the big parties and he sat at a small lunch table. Most of his friends were either on the track team, the Math League, or Tutors Club. I had considered failing a Trig test so Kyle could tutor me, but I wasn’t sure just how well he was doing in the class. Besides, I didn’t want him to think I was stupid.

Now, I counted the minutes till Trig. After the bell rang, I sat staring at Kyle’s head, inventing and rejecting my schemes to talk to him.

Kyle turned and faced me, cocking his head and mesmerizing me with those baby-blues. “Hey Nikki, I heard that your best friend, Liz Sullivan, was nominated to the Homecoming Court.”

“That’s great.” He swallowed. “Are you, uh, gonna go to the dance?”

“Sure! I mean, I guess I’ll go if I get asked.”

“Oh, well I was kind of thinking, uh, that maybe you—”

Mr. McGowan cleared his throat to remind us of his presence. “I do believe the bell has rung,” he said, calling everyone’s attention to the formulas on the board. I made a mental note to one day maim him with a dull kitchen utensil. Right now, I was too busy replaying in my head the thirty-five words that Kyle had spoken to me. My joy was such that today I wasn’t even repulsed by Mr. McGowan’s habit of punctuating every thought by opening his mouth and letting his tongue hang out.
The Queen Bee beckoned me to join her swarm of Worker Bees. I felt giddy with pride. The crowded cafeteria couldn't intimidate me anymore because there was a seat reserved for me, a seat I knew people would kill for. After all, I wasn't just any Worker Bee. Best friend to Liz Sullivan was a highly coveted title that meant going to all the right parties and hanging out with all the right people, the Bee-all and end-all of life in high school, as anyone will tell you.

I buzzed over to the hive. "Hi Liz! Hi guys." The Queen Bee must be addressed with her very own personalized greeting.

"Nikki, you're late! How does it make me look when my Head Worker Bee can't even be on time?"

I felt the heat creeping up to my face as I took my place to her right. "I'm sorry. The lunch line was really long today."

"Oh, all right. Let's just get this meeting started." To my relief, Liz dropped the subject. She must have something of vital importance to tell us. I looked around the table and noted that everyone was in uniform. Worker Bees wore yellow and black every Tuesday. I picked the lint off my yellow angora sweater.

"BZZZZZZZ!" Liz called the meeting to order. "My Bees, I've an announcement to make. Since you all are my closest friends, I wanted to tell you personally that I've been nominated for Homecoming Queen." On cue, all eight of us applauded. "You know how passé I think these traditions are, but Mrs. Greely insisted. I'd just hate to let everybody down, especially you guys." She sighed. "So, I suppose I'll have to go."

"What are you going to wear?" asked Maggie, the only freshman Bee. She'd been chosen because she had a flair for fashion and a father who owned the very elite La Boutique. We all got a 10% discount whenever we shopped there.

"Oh. I was thinking of maybe a royal blue to match my eyes. I'm not sure though, because a deep maroon-ish red would really set off the highlights in my hair." She ran her fingers through her shoulder-length hair. Liz told me her hair had been mousy brown like mine before she'd dyed it mahogany. The name reminded me of an old bureau in my grandmother's house that always needed polishing, but the color still looked great on her.

"Well, we just got a new line of Liz Claiborne in. That's where I got this dress." All of us turned to admire Maggie's yellow and black polka-dotted dress.

"Yeah, I had a dress like that a couple of years ago. You know, I'm kind of going for the mature, elegant look now." Maggie obviously had a lot to learn. "Anyway, does anyone else have any other important news to share with us?"

"Nikki, what were you and Kyle Corbett talking about in Trig this morning?" Anne asked, leaning across the table towards me.
Westview High's tribute to the National Enquirer was always hard at work. Like a vulture closing in on her prey, Anne would lean into your face as she talked, her grey eyes widening behind blue-rimmed glasses.

All eyes were on me. "Nothing."

"Who's Kyle?" demanded Liz.

"Oh you know, that really cute and quiet guy on the track team," Anne answered for me.

"Oh, now I remember. Hmm, I guess he is kind of cute, in a geeky sort of way."

"So Nikki, what'd he say?" Anne's eyes were huge behind her glasses.

"We were just talking about Liz being on the Homecoming Court, that's all."

"Really! What'd he say about me?"

"Nothing really. He just heard you were nominated."

"Oh."

Liz gathered up her hair behind her head and let it cascade slowly around her shoulders. "Oh my gosh, did I show you guys the Guess? watch that Drew bought me? You know, I wish he wouldn't keep spending his money on me. But if that's the only way he knows how to show his love, I can't really give it back, can I?"

"Aw, Drew is so sweet and so romantic." Anne got more enjoyment out of Liz's love-life than the Queen Bee herself.

Each Worker Bee took her turn admiring the genuine leather band, the exquisite craftsmanship, and the beautiful gold face of the watch. The rest of the meeting was spent discussing the details of Liz's relationship with Drew the Drone. They had been a Velcro couple for almost two months now, and he was still sending red roses and dedicating sappy love songs on the radio to her. Liz had entered her Preppie phase. Freshman year, Liz had only gone out with varsity soccer players. We called it her Pelé phase. In her Porsche phase, she had only dated guys with sports cars. The President phase was next, and Liz had gone out with the heads of student government, the junior class, National Honor Society, and Future Business Leaders of America. Drew, with his Polo shirts and penny loafers, marked the beginning of a new era.

All of this capriciousness didn't bother Liz in the least. The only hassle about changing boyfriends all the time was that it also meant having to change bookcovers. All the "Liz loves Joe Schmoe" and "Liz and Joe Schmoe forever"'s had to be torn off and replaced with her new drone's name. I was never really sure what everyone saw in Liz. She wasn't drop-dead gorgeous or incredibly intelligent or even exceptionally nice. She just had a way of making people think she was. Liz had taken the initiative to appoint herself Queen Bee a long time ago, and no one had ever
bothered to question it. I don’t think any of the girls really liked Liz. We just wished we could’ve been her.

***

“So what were you and Kyle really talking about yesterday?”
I leaned back, trying to reconstruct my personal bubble of space. “I already told you. Nothing,” I said, unable to keep a smile from spreading across my face. I wanted desperately to confide in someone, but I knew that telling Anne was the equivalent of putting up a flashing pink neon sign.

We were sitting in study hall waiting for Liz, who was late as usual. She knew she didn’t have anything to worry about because Mrs. Greely, the home economics teacher, was our proctor. For the past twenty years, the highlight of Mrs. Greely’s life had been homecoming at Westview. She organized not only the dance but also the pep rally, election, advertisements, and fund-raising drive. She was positively elated when Liz had consented to partake in the festivities.

“Did he ask you to the dance?” Anne’s pupils were dilating behind her glasses.
“No! We just talked about, you know, Liz being in the Court and all.”
“Oh.” She sounded disappointed. “Well, you know, Julie Wagner was telling me that her Algebra II tutor, Jeff Summers, told her that Kyle said you were pretty.”
“Really?” I wanted so badly to believe her, but Anne had all the credibility of a T.V. evangelist. Could Kyle think I was pretty? I mean, with my plain brown hair and dishwater green eyes, pretty?
Anne nodded. “You want me to let him know you’re interested?”
“Hello, my Worker Bees!” Liz sailed in, regally placing herself in the seat in front of me. “What’re we discussing?” Everyone in the room was looking at us. I felt exhilarated about my position.
“Kyle Corbett might ask Nikki to homecoming.”
“Oh you’re talking about that runner again.” Liz examined the ends of her hair. “What is so special about this guy?”
“He’s kind of quiet and mysterious. Oh, and he’s got great eyes.” Anne was the authority on everyone at school.
“Yeah, but he’s such a nobody.” They were talking like I wasn’t even there.
“Well, Kyle thinks Nikki’s pretty.” Anne leaned across the aisle to touch Liz’s arm, invading her bubble.
“Well Nikki, you know you could be. I mean, if you just highlighted your hair and dressed a little more chic, who knows?” Liz smiled generously. “Oh, did I show you guys the bracelet Drew
bought me? I keep telling him not to buy me things, but he just
doesn’t listen.” Liz thrust out her left wrist. It was a gold I.D.
bracelet with “Drew loves Liz” engraved on the inside. I wondered
if the store had a return/exchange policy for when Liz passed out
of this phase.

The rest of the period was devoted to more important matters.
Liz decided on a deep maroon dress because it would look incred­
ible with her hair plus it was a great color for cummerbunds, making
her date a bonus accessory. The big night was less than two
weeks away. I wished Kyle would hurry up and ask me.

***

I sat anxiously in Trig class, waiting for Kyle to walk in. After
getting my hair highlighted the night before, I had resolved to drop
a huge hint about homecoming to him. The dance was only a week
away, and he still hadn’t said anything about it.

Kyle strode in and sat down in front of me. He turned and
peered at me from under the lock of hair that fell over his blue
eyes. “Your hair looks really nice.”

I took a deep breath. “Thanks. I just wanted to try something
different, you know, in time for homecoming.”

“Oh yeah,” he said sheepishly. “Are you going to the dance?”

“No, not yet. Are you?”

“You mean, you don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“I’m Liz’s escort.”

“Liz Sullivan?”

“Yeah, she just asked me yesterday. I couldn’t believe it! I
didn’t think she even knew who I was, but she said that you told
her about me.” He grinned. “Thanks, Nikki.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Do you know what kind of flowers she’d like for her corsage?
I just want to do everything right.” He picked up a book off his
preppies.”

I’ve never been so grateful for Mr. McGowan and his gaping
mouth. As I sat there feeling ridiculous about my hair, I couldn’t
decide whom I hated more, Liz or Kyle. I began to plot my revenge.
I could tell everyone how Liz had started the rumor about Ashly
Taylor’s abortion just to get more votes for Homecoming. Maybe
I’d let everyone know that it was the President of Student Govern­
ment who had dumped Liz and not the other way around. My
favorite idea was to invite her to spend the night at my house and
then to cut her hair and shave off her eyebrows while she slept.

I knew Anne had been watching the scene from the other side
of the room. No doubt, she was on the verge of spontaneous combustion. I avoided her hawk-like gaze and rushed out of the classroom the second the bell rang.

***

"Nikki, where've you been?"
"Liz, can I talk to you alone for a minute?" I ignored the swarm of worker bees that surrounded their Queen.
"Nikki, you've already made us late. You know that we were supposed to start the meeting right at the beginning of lunch. I'm starting to think you don't take your position as Head Worker Bee very seriously."
"I have to talk to you. Now!"
She sighed. "All right. God, don't flip out." She led me out into a deserted hallway. "Make this quick."
I crossed my arms and leaned back against the cold, grey lockers. "How come you didn't tell me that you're taking Kyle Corbett to Homecoming?" I was doing my best to sound collected.
"Oh. I was going to announce it at the meeting." She shrugged nonchalantly.
"So why aren't you going with Drew?"
"I don't know. He's just so materialistic." She tossed her mahogany mane. "Besides, he bores me."
"Well, why Kyle?"
"Why not? You yourself said before that he was really cute."
"Yeah, and you said that he was just a nobody at a nobody lunch table."
"Well, I decided to help him out."
"Oh, you mean by going out with him?" I asked hysterically.
"Well, it does look good to be dating the Queen Bee."
"And he's just another drone to you," I accused.
Her steel-blue eyes narrowed. "Oh, I get it. You were hoping he'd ask you. Well, just because Anne heard that he said you were pretty doesn't mean that all of a sudden he's your personal property." She gazed at me with pity. "Look, you shouldn't believe everything Anne says anyway. She's just a stupid gossip with no life of her own."
"No, I can't believe you!" The tears were too difficult to hold back now. "You just use everybody. You treat everyone like crap and when you get what you want you just toss them away like garbage."
"And like you don't use me?" Her eyes were ice-cold. "How many friends do you think you'd have if it wasn't for me? Face it Nikki, if you weren't my Head Worker Bee, you'd be nobody."
I shook my head. "I wish everyone could see you for what you
really are!"

"Well go ahead and tell them. See what it gets you." She twisted her hair in her hands. "Where are you going to sit at lunch? With the band or maybe with the Future Homemakers of America?"

"I don't need you."

"Oh, do what you want. I can always find another Head Worker Bee. But remember, I'll have Kyle and you'll have nothing."

I was silent. She was right. It was my last year of high school, and Liz was all I had. I continued to sob.

Her face softened. "Look, you're my best friend. Let's not lose that just over some guy. If you want a date for homecoming, I'll get you one. Basketball team, science club, you name it. Let's just forget about this, okay?"

So I did. I was only too aware of the swarm of Worker Bees who sat behind those cafeteria doors, eagerly awaiting the chance to replace me. I know that in the end the heroine is usually supposed to tell off the villainous bitch, but on T.V. they never show what life is like after the showdown. I wasn't willing to brave lunch at some small, obscure table and a year of Friday nights at home just for a little self-respect. I froze Anne out of my personal space during the meeting at lunch. After school, I helped Liz replace all of her bookcovers. I even voted for Liz in the final election. After all, Best Friend to Liz Sullivan, Homecoming Queen sounded like quite an impressive title.
Cabal
By Jim Crowder

I’m trying to keep up but
It’s like lassoing a ghost
like pinning flying butterflies into a display
like weaving a tapestry out of barbed wire
like lacing God’s sneakers because
the thoughts, the fucking thoughts
they’re shooting off my brain
like lemon into iced tea
like sparks off tearing sheet metal
like a snake into the undergrowth
coming around this time
I have no idea how I got here
I only know I’ve been here before.
You don’t get here by meditation
or contemplation
or by airplane
You only find your way by accident
(But “find” isn’t truly the word
And “accident” is just not right.)
All of a sudden, I just am and I am here.

I know all about him.

we both need glasses to read
we wear the same size clothes
I hate his taste in clothing
I HATE looking like a fucking prep

I walk through his apartment (I hate his furniture) unscathed
The pictures on the bureau cast an image
like when you look at your reflection in a car window—
distorted, distended.

I want to incinerate the memories they hold, send their laughter
off to eternal oblivion, watch their eyes grow wide and pleading
as they plummet to their doom, slice their jugular and watch them
slowly bleed to death, choke the life out of them as I stare into
their eyes, put a blade between their ribs as they turn to embrace
me, smiling.

I wonder how he feels waking up
wearing strange clothes
oblivious to where he is
not knowing what time it is
and wondering where the last few days have gone.

Teach you a lesson, you son of a bitch.

You see, I intend to fight tooth and nail.
But I have an advantage.

He doesn’t know about me.
One Cold Sunday Morning With Eggs
By Jeff Swain

I don’t mind that my father brings strange women home. I guess it should bother me, but it doesn’t. He’s been doing it for about a year now—at least that I know of anyway. Initially, he would sneak them in after I went to bed and have them out before I woke up. Then, I guess he got tired of having to get up early after a night of boozing, so he would keep the bedroom door closed and wait until I went to church. Now he just doesn’t give a shit about hiding it anymore and the women come and go at all hours.

Speaking of church—I only used to go because he made me. And he never goes! He makes me go to the Catholic high school too and I hate it. I haven’t made any friends there, and I don’t intend to. The only halfway decent one there is my English teacher, Mr. McVie. He’s out of place there. That’s why I like him. When I told him about my mother, he gave me a copy of Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “The Raven.” He said that what I’m going through is similar to what Poe went through when he lost Lenore: trying to come to grips with the concept of “never more.” To me, Poe sounds deranged. I think Mr. McVie is drinking a little too much. I didn’t think about my mother that way. Poe is writing about his lover for Christ sakes.

I tip-toe past his room so as not to wake him. He’s on his back with his mouth open snoring; buried into the crux of his arm is a face belonging to someone with blond hair. Through the form of the blankets I see that whoever it is is draped down his side like a human cape. I’m not sure what time I finally fell asleep last night, but I do know that he wasn’t home when I did.

Down in the kitchen I put coffee on. I’ve been drinking coffee since the eighth grade, which was only last year so it’s really no big deal. My father started giving it to me in the morning when we were out of milk or juice and now it’s a staple. It’s funny. I know it’s only a little thing, but I know if Mom were here she’d never allow me to drink it.

Getting back to church, my father doesn’t make me go anymore. I don’t believe in God, or organized religion, and I don’t think my father does either. It’s just that after what happened he became determined to raise me in the way he thought my mother would want me to grow up. He doesn’t understand. Mom taught me to think for myself. Yeah, she was Catholic, and had me baptized ’cause I was a baby and she wanted me to get to heaven if I died, but I didn’t have to be a Catholic if I didn’t want to be. Mom understood that. She knew I was different. After she went away, my father took my not going to church as a sign of disrespect, that I was forgetting all she had done for me, so for two
years I had to go to Mass, even though he hasn’t set foot in a church since Mom. He doesn’t understand that by doing what I believe is doing exactly what she would want.

I pull the bacon and eggs from the ‘fridge. There is no cellar below the kitchen floor so the linoleum floor is cold and numbs my toes. Steam pours from the electric coffee maker. It carries the rich aroma of fine Columbian beans. The kind picked only by Juan Valdez. Carried on the back of his tiny burro to a market near you.

The bacon done (I only made enough for myself) I crack two eggs and drop them in the grease, pop the toast down, and fill my mug. Though too hot to drink, I hold it to my lips and breathe it in.

Outside it’s overcast. One huge gray cloud covers the sky. Like a giant opaque mirror it’s smooth as a sheet of ice and reflects the frozen ground below. I feel as if I’m in a giant knick knack. I want someone to pick it up and shake it so it will snow. It’s the first of December and it’s freezing.

The yard is full of birds—two sparrows are trying to drink from the barrel my father used to catch rainwater, but it’s frozen solid. My father used to collect rainwater for his plants, but now only the birds use it. A scavenging mass of blackbirds cover the tundra-like lawn. A squirrel comes through the cyclone fence scattering them. Filling the air are hundreds of onyx silhouettes against the mirrored sky. They are so dark against the December gray that they actually look like tiny peepholes to the heavens. Three blackbirds land on the barrel, chasing the sparrows away. The others sit on the fence surrounding the yard, staring at the squirrel. Their cawing sounds like a plot to get rid of him. And as if on command, a few of them make close fly-bys, others land in different parts of the yard. For his part, the squirrel acts unbothered. As if they aren’t even there. He continues to dig his winter storage, undaunted. The blackbirds, ever the cowards, let out loud, whooping cries of panic, and fly away whenever the squirrel gets too close.

Today I gotta do something I’ve been dreading all week: Tell my old man that I’m quitting the J.V. soccer team. I told the coach after practice Wednesday. I should have told him before to save myself the ball-breaking workout, but... well, I know my father will be pissed. He hasn’t missed a game all season. And nobody can miss him. Or his flask. Or his buddies. Sometimes they don’t make it, but the flask is always there. Tucked away in the breast pocket of his flannel jacket.

I hurry back to the pan, but it’s too late. The eggs have cooked too long and now they are stuck to the pan. The yolks are also hard. I wiggle the spatula prying them loose and creating a horrific mess. The burning eggs begin to smoke so I switch on the exhaust fan.

"Here, let me help you."
Standing in the doorway is the woman my father slept with last night. She is young—at least ten years younger than my father who is thirty-eight. She’s as tall as me, and I’m short for my age, with blond hair that falls to her shoulders in waves. She has on nothing except my father’s Eagles jersey.

Without waiting for me to respond, she takes the spatula from my hand, scrapes the mess I made into the garbage and pulls out the egg carton. She notices how much bacon I’ve made and goes back to the refrigerator. “Eat these before they get cold.” She hands me what I’ve made, “I’ll fry up some more.”

Upstairs I hear the springs creaking on my father’s bed. “It’s cold in here.” Looking at her looking at me I see her lips are the pale blue of the lifeless. I’m ashamed of the bacon in my hand. “Turn me on to some joe, will ya?” When she turns back to the stove her shoulders shiver and she blows into one hand.

I toss the unclean bacon into the trash, that I was supposed to empty last night, and go to the kerosene heater by the kitchen door. The heater was a surprise gift from my father. He bought it because Mom would complain from October through May about how cold the kitchen was. Both my father and I don’t mind the cold, so now it usually doesn’t get run until the middle of winter. Fortunately, there’s still a quarter tank of kerosene left from last year. I pull the heater away from the wall and fire it up.

“Say, where’s the mug?”

“Huh?” I turn from the heater.

“The coffee. . . Oh, I’m sorry.” She smiles when she sees the heater. “Thanks for that. Could you pour me a cup of coffee when you get the chance?”

“Sure.” There’s a sundress in her smile. And a single gold star earring peeking out from her sand colored hair. It’s not a solid piece but rather an outline of a star, and strands of her hair have fallen through it.

“Your father thinks the world of you, you know,” she says as I place a cup of coffee, her cup, beside the stove. She takes cream and two sugars, like me. “All he talked about last night at Schmitty’s was ‘Terrance this. . . and Terrance that. Terrance did well on his first report card in high school. . . second honors. He made the soccer team. . .’”

The rest of the words roll over me, drowned out by the sweet tone coming from her now red lips. The only reason I realize she’s finished is that she tufts my bangs. “If you want some toast you’d better put some on. The eggs are almost done.”

Although she knew I didn’t hear most of what she said, it didn’t phase her. She’s used to it. Guys must lose their place around her all the time and she knows how to handle it. It’s not conceit. It’s more the tricks of the trade.
"Put enough toast on for all of us, 'kay?" As she reaches above the stove for a plate my father's jersey rides up with her. I see her ass. On the bottom of her left cheek is a butterfly. I want to catch it.

I keep my back to her so she can't see I have a hard-on. Aroused, I drop four slices of bread onto the floor, put them aside for the birds, fill the toaster up, and am in my chair before she turns to set the plate in front of me.

"Eat up," she says and sits in the chair next to me, my mom's chair. "I love to watch a man eat." She tufts my hair again and I blush. "You're even more handsome than your father said."

"Aw . . . he's just saying that 'cause he had a few beers in him, that's all." Imagine that. My old man using me to get laid. What a prick. He hates me! I'm nothing but extra baggage keeping him from doing what he really wants.

"No, he talks about you all the time. Just about every day he stops by the Krispy Kreme, where I work, for coffee, and he has a new story about you."

"The one at the bus depot?"
"Yeah, that's the one."
"Sometimes I stop there after school." This is a lie. The Krispy Kreme is at least twenty minutes out of my way.
"Really? Look for me and I'll fix you up with a slice of blue-berry pie . . . on the house."
"Excellent. Blueberry's my favorite."
"Good, 'cause it's the house specialty."

The toaster pops. "Finish eating," she says and gets up to get it. For the first time I notice the faint trace of her perfume. She comes back and butters the toast.
"Aren't you eating?" I ask.
"I'm not really a big breakfast eater. I'll probably just have some toast and coffee with your father."
"Well for someone who doesn't like to eat it, you sure can cook it well."
"Why thank you. That's sweet." She tufts my hair again. Only this time she stops holding the hair up from my face. With her thumb she rubs the faded blue-yellow area around the corner of my left eye. "Whered'ya get the shiner honey?"

The sound of the toilet flushing runs through the pipes. My father's morning cough can be heard from the bathroom.
"Playing ball."
"That's right. You play soccer. What'd ya get hit in the face with the ball or somethin'?"
"Yeah, something like that." Gently I move my head to feel what her caress would be like.

My father comes into the kitchen and she withdraws her hand.
I snap back and focus on my eggs. He crushes out his butt and pours himself some coffee. His eyes are bleeding Saturday night Jack Daniels and beer. A lifetime of laboring in the elements has left him a hard drunk. At thirty-eight you can still see the outline of his stomach muscles, and the veins wrapped around his arms like cords running down to his calloused fingers that shake as he stirs in the sugar.

"Hey sleepy head." She gets up and tufts his hair. "Want some breakfast? I got the eggs all ready to go." She begins massaging his shoulders. When I catch her eye she winks.

"Hmmm." And lights up again. His fractured breaths are hard and loud. He wraps both hands around his mug, and pulls his arms tight to his chest. His ashen skin provides an eerie backdrop for his stubble, and balls of sweat have formed around his temples. Even though he’s next to the kerosene heater, he begins to shake. Without a word I get an afghan from the living room and lay it across his shoulders. A plate of eggs sits in front of him. I push it away so when the long ash on his cigarette finally breaks it won't fall in them.

We wait around my father in silence. The cigarette is burning down like an egg timer. She slips it from between his fingers and slides the plate closer. "Try to eat something."

He looks down at the plate: "I can't eat this shit." And buries his head in his hands. "Boy, get me my bottle and the aspirin."

Without hesitation I get up to do it.

"Wait." She stops me. "You don’t need that. Eat something."

She lifts a forkful of eggs to his covered face. They hover there until she sets the fork back on the plate.

"What are you still standin' there for?" His voice sounds like it's been through a rock cleaner. Without question I get them. When I return they're sitting in silence.

"When is your next game, Terrance?" she asks.

My father goes for another smoke. I pretend not to hear. He drains half a juice glass of Jack washing down four aspirin.

"Tomorrow, right?"

"Uh... I'm not sure."

"Yes you are," he says. "It's tomorrow." He crumples his empty cigarette pack. "Get me my smokes."

"I forgot to get them yesterday, Pop."

He sits there trying to compose himself while his body involuntarily shakes. "You forgot. I see you didn’t empty the trash either."

I get up to do it. "Sit," he says. "Why are you pretending you don’t know when the game is?"

Silence.

"Answer me."
"Look Dad. I didn’t really like the team... I don’t want to play anymore."
"You’ll play."
"No Dad I can’t. You don’t understand. I--quit the team last week."
She got up, collecting the dishes, uncomfortable in our world. I trembled. My father shook, the lip of the bottle clinking off the top of the glass.
He downed his second glass and stood up. I covered my face at the sound of his chair falling back. He retched in the sink, right into her dishwater. She gagged. And he retched again. I bolted for the living room grabbing my coat and sneakers. Out on the porch, I put them on. I could hear her talking to him but I couldn’t make it out. When I returned with the cigarettes he was sitting in the recliner with a wet rag on his head. I put them on the end table.
"She?"
"Gone."
"Listen Pop. I’ll tell the coach I made a mistake. I’ll still play."
"I don’t give a fuck what you do."
"No, I want to play... I thought that it was getting in the way with doing stuff around here, that’s all. You’ll come tomorrow right?"
"We’ll see."
"Please."
"Finish up in the kitchen."
"Sure."
Even asleep he seems to choke on his breath.
I hesitate, thinking about going out to the kitchen. Instead I spread the sports page on the floor.
By the End of February
By Alan McCabe

1/20 wed
something
2/1 fri
sittin on the dock of the bay watchin my blood drain away
wastin time. . . fuck this
2/4 mon
don’t sleep so much she says gotta keep awake blah blah blah
what the hell else is there to do sitting here six hours a day three
days a week write something she says like you used to remember
the one about the very lonely duck who had to drive a truck
(remember like you did when you were little) I DID write something
on wednesday, see?
head hurts so fuckin much someone must whack my head in
my sleep or get inside my head and push my eyes out with their
thumbs
SLEEP!!! Sorry diane I can’t help it
2/6 wed
Goddam Mr. Stupidass Walker failing me in Algebra. Study my
ass off go to class when I can I don’t ask for pity but he knows I
gotta come here mon wed fridays he could gimme just a little bit of
a break. Midterm was just all stupid mistakes anyone could see I
knew all the stuff.
Not like I can concentrate anyway with Nancy sitting behind
me. God what was she doing to that gum yesterday everyone was
looking at my pants. I came so close to askin her to the prom but
christ a guy who looks like me asking a girl who looks like her
that’s a joke. Shouldn’t put her through the discomfort of having to
say no that’s gotta be hard for a girl.
hard. christ. Get like that here too if my blood and hormones
weren’t being pumped outa my body
hey good song title, blood and hormones.
2/8 fri
happy fuckin anniversary, mike. whoopee.
three years ago today. kidney shuts down they rush me here
and give me emergency dialysis. comin here every mon wed friday
since. Just like old times again, like way back in second grade
when the originals shut off. Diane was my nurse back then too. I
was her first patient. We’re like friends. She has a nice voice. I like
when she puts her fingers through my hair. I don’t comb my hair,
what’s left of it.

STORY IDEA: On some other planet some other galaxy they
have this war but it’s not over money land oil religion it’s about
time. Cause the one side is always running around with no time for
any fun and the other side has nothing but leisure time on their hands. They probably just sleep a lot. Yeah that might work.

2/13 wednesday

Mon was such a bad day. Tube came undone somehow, blood was spurting all over the dialysis unit whipping all around like when a fireman loses control of his hose. Kinda cool in a way. So then I had to get transfused and I threw up plus I was real thirsty. I hate fluid limits.

But I feel better today. Better than I have in a while. I go to Doc Graham to ask something and he says like he does, "What the hell do you want, McNee?" but smiling when he says it, and I ask about my hair. He says monoxidyl just might help since I have high blood pressure anyway they could put me on it. Graham's a good guy.

Hey! How about this for a band name: Penis Ennui. Tom my friend his band needs a name, I suggested that, he thought I said Penis on Wheat.

New patient in the unit today. Di says she's my age though she looks younger like thirteen maybe. That's common we all look younger here. Di says her name's Connie that she normally does the Sat Tues Thursday shift but she switched to this shift temporarily cause she wanted to go to some concert in South Carolina of all places. That's pretty cool. Asked Diane what concert, she said some band with a strange name I said Penis Ennui? She thought I said Pain is All We Eat. That's a good name too.

This Connie is using Frankie's old chair. Frankie died of an infection a month ago the poor bastard. He was the smallest of us all. Six years old, I think he looked about three. Used to sit real far down in the chair, bundles of blankets even in August. All you saw was this tiny head with huge eyes, his eyes were open all the time. I think he knew he was going to die, and he wanted to take everything in before he kicked. That day was so weird. I got stuck, and there he was sitting right beside me. Fell asleep like I usually do, woke up and he was gone. I don't think he ever said three words to me, he was so quiet, but I miss him. One day I felt so mad, cause I passed these interns in the hallway. They were talking about Frankie and they said, "Miracle he lived as long as he did." You don't say that.

Still she sleeps. Di says that's not like her but with the trip to Carolina and back and all.

STORY IDEA: Some guy loses his penis in the Viet Nam War. Conflict. Young boy, six or so, finds it and brings it back to his starving village. Buries it. Soon the crops are booming. Years later, crops are bad again, and the boy, now like fourteen remembers the penis from the past. Can't find any lying around so literally whacks off his own. Fellow villagers think he's looney and run him out of town. Next month, another great crop.
2/15

Connie is so cool! Holy shit! The band she went all the way to South Carolina to see, it was They Might Be Giants! I got to talk to her after treatment on Wednesday while we waited for our bleeding to stop. I said why didn’t you see them here in Philly like I did a month ago and she hit me and said she tried to get tickets but couldn’t. Besides she has a cousin in Carolina. Anyway, we started singing all these TMBG songs and it was just so cool. I told her about that live bootleg of theirs I have and she was so jealous but today I brought the portable CD player and we just listened to it. This is so cool.

She likes to write. She’s been published. She saw I have this pen and notebook and I told her how Diane wants me to keep this journal instead. She asked to see it but I said no it’s kinda personal and she said she understood.

She’s banging away on this personal word processor she has. Working on a novel, she says, and she’ll let me read the first draft when she finishes it by the end of February. That’s her deadline, she says. I asked isn’t this just for yourself what does a deadline matter? You can finish it whenever you damn well please. She kinda frowned and said you have to have a deadline, otherwise nothing would make you finish. She writes her deadlines in big black letters on posterboard on her bedroom wall then it’s like fate, she said, you can’t possibly avoid it. It’s incredible to watch her as she writes. Really gets into it. Mouths along as she writes, nods her head when she likes what she writes, bangs on the keyboard and curses when she makes a mistake.

But come on I mean Jesus this is cool! We talked about all the good groups, XTC Pixies Primus Pavement, and everyone! And movies, we had the longest conversation about Eraserhead and then David Lynch. We both started doing the scene where Henry goes to his girlfriend’s house for dinner and they have chicken and the blood spurts out and the mom asks have you been having sex with my daughter? Man we were in stitches. Then of course we traded hospital horror stories like really bad roommates we’ve had. I told her about that kid Dickie or Dinkie or whatever the hell his name was who always screamed about fried chicken and how he thought the nurses were out to kill him which they very well might have been. And she told me about a roommate of hers who had some kind of farting disease and I just could not top that one.

So we were talking so long today my mouth is dry but fluid limits god damn them. She said we have to stop talking now I’ve vowed to write two hours a day. Writers.

Jeeze look at her. Typing away like crazy. Long thick red hair, green eyes. She has this—oops! Caught! My face is red I can feel it.
Diane gives me the thumbs up.

2/18 Monday
Wow, we’re just talking up a storm today. First four hours have flown by. She’s writing now, because of her writing vow and all. “Sorry, Mike,” she said, “Not even you can keep me from my vow.” That’s fine by me. I love to watch her. Christ what is she writing? Can’t wait till . . . what, ten days from now, then I get to see it.

HOLY SHIT!! I gotta ask her to the prom!! I mean, come on, no one at school is this cool! I can’t believe I didn’t think of this before! We’d have the best time the two of us.
Oh man just thinking of it makes my stomach all fucked up. How do I do this? Can’t do it here, we’re all so close everyone would hear and go “Aaaaw!” Plus if Connie had to say no that’d make it doubly worse in front of all these people.
Shit what if she did have to say no. That wouldn’t be fair to her, and it’d be all uncomfortable in here from now on I mean here we sit eight feet away from each other.
Shut up, Mike, you’re trying to talk yourself outta this like always. You’re gonna do this. You’re gonna ask Connie to your senior prom! And you’re gonna do it . . . not just yet.

A deadline! We need a deadline! I’ll plagiarize hers. February 28th. Mike, you’re gonna ask Connie to the prom before the month of February is over. Got it? Got it. Good.

2/22 Friday

STORY IDEA: This one’s about the scaredest fucking pussy in the whole goddamn world. He’s so shit-pants frightened that he hides in his bed all day long life passes him by and he dies. The end.

Wednesday we talked the whole time. It came time for her to write and she said, “Screw it. I’d rather just talk to you.” And you just can’t understand how good that made me feel I was like up on the ceiling. So then treatment is over and my arm won’t stop bleeding. She’s sitting out in the waiting room and she sees my arm is getting tired and she holds my arm for me. It’s just her and me nobody else around. God damn it! The words were right there, right the hell on my tongue! But I didn’t say anything! What the fuck am I afraid of?! Come on, Mike, you sorry piece of . . .

Christ. Look at her there. Eight words. Will you go to the prom with me? I can write ’em. I just can’t say ’em.

Ding! Did you see that lightbulb go on?

2/27 Wed.

Well. Connie’s not here. Back to her usual shift I guess. Wasn’t here on Monday either. That’s good I was so sick that day, throwin’ up glad she didn’t see me like that. Still feel like shit. I’m going to sleep. She finishes her rough draft tomorrow.

3/6 Wed

God I hate you you fucking sadistic shit. My life is like some
kind of series of fucking jokes to you, right? I cannot see why Mom and Dad believe in you, you fuck. Anything cool in my life that comes along you just take away and I’m left worse off than before. I will never get happy or excited about anything else ever again because I know you’ll just eventually take it away like you fucking always do. Oh a new kidney so I won’t have to be on dialysis anymore, fuck it just give it to someone else I’ll be back on dialysis again eventually oh hello! You’re the coolest fucking girl I’ve ever met! I do believe I love you. Stay away from me though, you’re gonna die, cause God hates me for whatever reason and destroys all my happiness. God, I hate you I hate you I hate you. Go to Hell. Fuck off.

3/11 monday

Jeeze I can’t believe I didn’t get struck by lightning on Wed.

Connie. Died on that Sunday, the day before I was really sick, of some kind of infection. Di didn’t even tell me that day, she thought I knew, thought that that was why I was sick. Can’t get Di’s face outta my head when I asked on Wed if Connie was back on her old shift. “We thought you knew,” she whispered.

This sucks so much. Mom, Dad, Doc Graham, Di, they’ve all been trying to talk to me. I mean I appreciate it and all but it’s all bullshit. Mom tells me this story about her first boyfriend who died, she says she still hasn’t gotten over it entirely. Thanks a whole hellofa lot Mom, what’s that supposed to do for me?

Thought it was bad looking at that empty chair after Frankie died. This. This sucks so fucking much. It’s gotta be the fucking chair. They oughta burn that thing.

Keep playing these conversations in my head I would have---

okay I have to stop now.

3/13

Okay now I really don’t get things. Not only do I not get struck by lightning I just find out they have a kidney for me. Good grief, I don’t know how to feel.

This could very well be my last dialysis Di tells me, what with all the great new drugs they have. I don’t know I just can’t feel... anything.

Oh well, my friends will visit me in the hospital probably that’ll be nice. Breakfast in bed. Maybe I’ll get some presents.
Eight Years and Five Minutes Away
By Sarah Starr

“You must know your Daddy loves you, Honey,” pouts my Nonnie as I get up to leave.

“I know.” I smile to cover up the shake in my voice. It bothers me that I can’t be honest with my grandmother. I hate when we talk about my father because I have to gloss things over for the PG version. She’s eighty-six, with a heart condition, sharp as a tack, but a devout Catholic, unable to admit to herself that there is harmful dysfunction in her eldest grandchild’s life, and that it is caused by her son.

“It was the divorce. It ruined him. He’s never recovered. He loved your mother so much.” She always throws that in there, because of the affair my mom had with Jimmy when I was three. I’m not supposed to know about it. My mother said they met at the country club playing tennis.

“That’s not my fault, Nonnie. I never did anything.”

“But you must understand, Dear, he’s stubborn, just like your Papa, rest his soul.” I have to fight the urge to argue this ridiculous attempt to justify my father’s behavior.

I want to ask my Nonnie if she thinks that stubbornness warrants not even sending your first born child a birthday card for the last eight years, but I remember who I am talking to and catch myself. “I’ll see you next Wednesday, Nonnie.” I scrunch down to kiss her on the cheek. It seems like she shrinks another centimeter each week.

“Just promise me one thing, Sweetheart.” She says it in the baby voice that she uses to her dog.

“What, Nonnie?”

“That you and your Daddy will reconcile before I die. It’s all I pray for. Make your Nonnie happy, Honey.”

Reconcile. It hits me like a ton of bricks. How can an eight year old be at fault and need to reconcile after being ignored for adolescence? I agree and say anything just to get the hell out of there before I cry. I sign out at the Homeland front desk. The nurses smile at me like they do every Wednesday evening.

I stop at McDonald’s on the way home because I just moved the nursing home food around on my plate. I should’ve just eaten it. It was free, at least, even if it wasn’t solid.

***

When I get home the back door is wide open. I hear the TV blaring. It’s CNN, as usual. I shut the door and start to clean up the kitchen that is littered with dirty plates, pans and utensils from a
makeshift dinner that I missed.

I turn the corner and find her lying in her usual spot. Her nightgown is twisted around her waist. I turn off the TV and straighten up the room. I don’t even tiptoe. She won’t notice.

“Mom.” I shake her. I want to get her out of the family room and into bed in case Jimmy comes home, which is rare, but a threat.

She doesn’t budge. She is breathing so heavily that she’s snoring. “Come on, Mom. Go to bed.” I move her feet together and twist them awkwardly in an effort to start the chain reaction of becoming upright.

I grab her from behind and try to hoist her upper body by the armpits. It doesn’t work either, but it stirs her up enough to bring her into grogginess.

Her breath smells like sleep and vodka. It hits me square in the face when she wakes up and spits, “Leave me alone.” She summons enough energy to shrug off my arms. I fall to the floor in the sudden scuffle. She gets up and is drawn to the kitchen. She doesn’t even see me.

Ice cracks. It’s a familiar sound that reminds me of home. Some of it drops on the kitchen floor. I get up. Just a scrape on my forearm from the hardwood floor of our living room. I pick up the sweaty rock glass. Although incoherent, she leaves it on a coaster. The precious antique coffee table is a priority.

Limbs thud and glass shatters down the bottom half of the steps. I run around the corner strangely hopeful. But there’s no blood. She’s just tangled and bruised at the bottom of the steps, not even near the broken glass. Fantasies that hinged on needing an ambulance smolder. I could call one, they would test her blood, they would investigate, they would tell my dad. He would take me into his family. Save me.

“Are you okay? Come away from the glass.” I try to get her to sit against the wall.

Panicked, her eyes are open and wild, but still glassy. “Get off me!” she screams.

I am startled. As she flounders to gain footing I still try to help her up.

“Just get off me! Leave me the fuck alone!” She screams so loudly that it gurgles in her throat. Even Franklin, under the table since I got home, scurries further into shelter as his nails slip on the linoleum in pure fear of the volume.

I am soaking wet with sweat and liquor. I crouch at the bottom of the stairs as I watch her second attempt to stumble up the steps, practically on all fours. I clean up the broken glass in the foyer. I have school in five hours.
I am in the shower, running late. I try not to make any noise. It always wakes her up in the morning. It pisses Jimmy off that it takes me more than three minutes to shower. He goes to work whenever he wants. He’s the vice-president. Still, whenever I get in the shower he feels the frantic need to be in there, too. He doesn’t like running on anyone else’s schedule, even for showering. I didn’t think he came home last night, so I’m surprised when I hear him pacing outside the hall and slamming things.

That’s my cue. I get my blood-stained shirt out of the sink and wring it out. It’s ruined because I didn’t notice the cut on my forearm, and I let the stain set over night. I wrap the shirt in a towel and stuff it in a drawer until I can get rid of it. I get dressed in the same outfit that I wore on Monday and hope no one will notice at school or at work tonight.

Each step that I take as I descend gives me the strength to handle any morning interaction. She is downstairs waiting for me, drinking coffee. But I can’t even look at her.

“Good morning, honey,” she smiles. “How was work last night?”

“Fine.”

“What time did you get home?”

“Around eleven.” I can’t stand it when I finally look in her eyes and I realize she really doesn’t remember. “I’m late. Gotta go.” I cannot smile at her.

She throws her arms around me to give me a loving morning send-off and I am stiff.

“Are you coming home for lunch?”

Jimmy is up and dressed, sitting at the butcher block table two feet away from me. Except for heckling me out of the shower, he has not yet acknowledged my presence. He just smokes and reads his paper.

“No.” I have to make up an excuse, “I have a test. Cameron and I are going to study at her house.”

“Okay. Good luck.” She smiles at me. I feel sick.

As I walk out the door I turn around and take one lingering look, a desperate attempt to assess the situation, marred by total confusion. She is watching me leave, looking peaceful and happy. I feel completely insane.

***

In U.S. government I don’t feel much like talking, especially when all anyone asks me is what is wrong. I tell Mr. Rohland that it’s a girl thing, and I need to see the nurse, so that he’ll definitely
let me go. I try to reach the door before tears come to my eyes. Mr. Walton is busy and I have to wait in the office. All the other guidance counselors can see me crying, but they act like nothing is wrong as they pass by me grinning and making goofy faces. The office is plastered with posters that read "Hang in there," and show kittens hanging from tree limbs.

Finally Mr. Walton comes to his door. "Come in, Meredith." I wonder why I had to sit in the waiting room for so long when there wasn't anyone in his office.

I sit down, and he finishes sharpening pencils while I blow my nose. They grind in the electric nineties sharpener and emerge flawlessly pointed, and his face lights up with satisfaction. I realize that my emotional stability is taking a back seat to the Dixon Ticonderogas. I start to cry harder.

"What's the problem today?" he asks. I look at him in amazement. He knows what it is.

"Oh, you know. The usual. I'm just having trouble with that college decision again!" The end of my sarcasm is whiny as I sob some more. He looks like he doesn't get it at first, until like a wave he recognizes the bitterness, drops the pencil at hand, and stares right at me.

"Okay then, why don't you tell me what really happened. Was it something last night?"

Obviously, since I spent yesterday afternoon in this same office, left feeling fine, and am hysterical this morning. "Yes."

"Why don't you tell me about it?" He hands me a tissue. It's a cheap, industrial strength Kleenex and it feels like sandpaper.

"I found my mom again last night. . ." I spew out the details of the night before. The broken glass, the blood, this morning, it all pours out. I can't even see, I am crying so hard.

When I finish, I sob for a few minutes, waiting. No hand on my shoulder, no words of advice, no educated assessment to answer my hysterics. He just looks at me, looks at his notes, pushes the delicate pencil point into his thumbprint.

In the awkwardness I stop crying, but sudden hiccups keep interrupting my forced rhythmic breathing. I twist my Nonnie's signet ring that she gave me for my sixteenth birthday.

"Is anyone home this afternoon?" He picks up the phone.

"No, I. . ."

"Mrs. Whitestone? Tom Walton here. Put Meredith Reed on the absentee list for this afternoon. What? Yes, it's excused." He gets up from his desk, opens the door, and shows me out to the lobby. There he puts his arm around me. "There, now, just relax. Go home and get some rest. I'll send your assignments home with Cameron." He smiles. The other counselors grin and shake their heads. Just another day in the life of a guidance guardian angel. I
turn away. I am numb.

***

I wait at Cameron’s house for her to get home for lunch. Her mom is away on business. It’s quiet. I need that.

When she comes home the first words out of her mouth are how everyone wants to know where I am and what the deal is. She likes the attention she’s getting because she’s the only one who knows the scoop. She sits with me for half an hour. She says she understands, while I sit in the living room full of family portraits, which humors me bitterly.

Craig comes back to spend some time alone with her before afternoon classes. They go upstairs. Sure she understands. I don’t even notice when she’s gone because I have tuned out everything.

For the last eight years I’ve looked at his office out of the corner of my eye when we were in the car on the way to the mall, trying not to show my mom that I knew that was it, so as not to hurt her feelings. Now that I can drive I’ve been there a lot, late at night. I’ve also been to 3861 Old Township Road. I’ve seen his Mercedes, his new wife, my little brother Pete, and a little sister that is too young for me to have ever known. I have hidden in my car at the end of the driveway like a criminal.

I dial the Stuart-Amos Steel number. “May I please speak to Bill Reed?” I stifle my sobs and try to sound professional.

“Hold please,” says the white, middle class, female voice.

“Hello.” It’s him, businesslike. He sounds older, not like I remembered.

“Dad?”

“Who is this?”

“It’s me, Dad. Meredith,” I sniffle.

I wait for him to say something. There is only silence on the other end. And then a dial tone.
Distance
By Dawn Parsons

Just a step,
a small one really.
I stepped back
slightly.
Not enough for him to notice.

Just a step,
but miles really.
But not to
worry;
for it was not enough for him to notice.

For if he saw just one step
he would think I wasn't
ready,
he would think I wasn't
sure.
But it was not enough for him to notice.

And just to think,
the step I took,
countered with
one,
that was not enough for me to notice.
Stuart’s Gift
By Christopher Kakacek

Graham smoked his pipe, a thoughtful expression on his face. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, wrapped in the second-hand smoking jacket I had given him in high school. His horn lay across his lap, tarnished and dented. I lounged across from him in a blue bean-bag chair, wearing my “DIE YUPPIE SCUM” t-shirt and a fez. The tassel tickled my nose. In my hand was a bottle of Dewar’s White Label with a sizable dent in it.

After graduating from high school, Graham moved out of his parents’ house and hadn’t spoken to them since. He spent the next few years bouncing around the city doing odd jobs—short order cook, janitor, gas pump attendant. His current residence was on the fifth floor of Saint Vitus’ Hotel, across the street from the Lusty Life Book Store. It was a cramped, one-room apartment with a kitchenette. The bathroom was six doors down the hall. A mattress lay in one corner, a pile of clothes and a small refrigerator in the other. The television and stereo were stacked in a wooden crate next to Graham.

He blew a smoke-ring and watched it drift lazily up towards the naked light bulb in the cracked plaster ceiling. “What’s in the bag, Stu?” he shouted over the music, gesturing at the plain brown shopping bag that lay at my feet.

I smiled, and pulled a black leather instrument case from the bag. With great relish, I unzipped the case.

Graham’s eyes bugged out like marshmallows. “Damn! That’s a Monette!”

“Observant as usual, Graham. I figured I’d need a new trumpet, since I’m going to... Englewood.”

Graham jumped up and let out a whoop. “Yes! I knew you could do it!” He lowered the stereo. “Stuart, you lucky bastard. I don’t believe it. You’re really going. Congratulations.”

I stared at the floor. “Thanks, man. That means a lot to me.”

“So what are you majoring in? Performance?”

I looked at him closely to see if he was joking. “No. Of course not. Composition.” I met his eyes. “I wish you were coming with me.”

Graham laughed. “Come on, Stu. I’m not cut out for that place. You know the Conservatory had three suicide attempts last year? Three. Christ, I’d be home for Thanksgiving in a body bag.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” I said. “Why don’t you audition, man? Just for the hell of it. Englewood could use a good jazz player like--”

“Sssh!” Graham motioned toward the stereo. “Did you hear that lick? I swear to God, every time I hear Brownie, he just blows
me away. He’d kick Miles’ ass any day.” He knocked the ash from his pipe onto the floor. “So how many times did you apply before they accepted you?”

“Uh... four, I think.”

Graham grabbed the Scotch. “Here’s to determination!” he yelled, and took a long pull. “Play something, Stu. Let’s hear what that new horn can do.” Graham shut off the music and sat down, staring intently at me.

I thought for a second. I picked up my horn and began playing a piece I’d written earlier that week. It didn’t sound right, so I stopped playing.

Graham blinked, as if coming out of a trance. “Why’d you stop?”

“The tune sucks, man. It still needs some work.”

Graham smiled. “No, man. There’s good stuff in there.” He closed his eyes, and brought his beat-up old horn to his lips like it was a familiar lover. Graham had kept that trumpet since we both started playing in grammar school. He blew an amazing riff based on the melody I had just played. It always killed me, the way he could just pick up his horn and play. Not to be outdone, I repeated his phrase, and added a jazzy blues riff at the end. Graham cocked an eyebrow and released a furious, burning run of notes, a variation on the tune I had started playing. We fired phrases back and forth, playing faster, louder, and harder as we went, each pushing the other a little further. One of Graham’s friendly neighbors began pounding on the thin wall, swearing at us. Graham put down his trumpet, yelled “Get bent!” and hurled a Dewar’s bottle at the wall, where it shattered in a spray of glass and tragically wasted alcohol. The pounding stopped.

We both flopped on the floor, laughing. I shook my head. “You still have your chops, Graham. I don’t know how you do it, playing on that piece-of-shit horn.”

“Hey, there’s a lot of personality in this puppy,” Graham said. He blew a bubbly stream of dirty water out of the spit valve, onto the floor. “Last time I cleaned it, there was this green fuzzy shit growing in the lead pipe. It was way cool.”

I made a face. “That’s just great. Shut up and grab me that other bottle, since you insisted on wasting the other one on your neighbors.”

“I love my neighbors. They’re just a little loud, that’s all. What time is it?”

“Five after ten. Why?”

Graham jumped to his feet. “Hurry up! We still might catch them! He grabbed his horn and raced to the window. As I walked over, Graham began playing “Love for Sale” out the window, as loud as he could. On the street below, two girls were walking by in
cocktail outfits. As they passed by, one of them smiled and waved.

Graham winked at me. "Gorgeous, huh?"
"You're a real geek, you know that man?"
"They live down the block and work at Raphael's Silver Cloud Lounge." He pulled me closer to the window, leaned out, and yelled "Irene! Sheri! This is my friend Stu, and he goes to Englewood! He wants to meet you!" Graham snickered as he sat back down next to the stereo. "We'll drop by the Silver Cloud later, eh, Stu?"

Red-faced, I collapsed in the bean-bag chair. "I like the new digs, man. Only had to climb over two winos on the stairs to get up here."

"Why didn't you take the elevator? Wait--don't tell me--broken, right?" Graham looked around the shabby room. "Sorry about the lack of furniture, but I'm sort of cultivating this minimalist vibe, you know?"

I laughed. "Yeah, right. Because of minimalist paychecks, I'll bet. Still working at the Mobil station?"

"You hear that, Stu?" A mischievous grin spread over Graham's face. He tiptoed over the opposite wall, with his horn in hand. The muffled, regular thud of a bedboard could be heard on the other side of the wall. Graham started snapping his fingers in time with the rhythm. "Kind of a shuffle beat, don't you think?" he whispered. Graham turned towards the wall and began blasting "In the Mood" against the amorous counterpoint of his neighbors.

"You're evil, man," I said, as I went over to the fridge for more booze. Graham stepped away from the wall, trying to hold in his laughter. The thumping behind the wall had stopped. "That was hysterical, Graham. You never answered my question. Are you still working at the Mobil station?"

Graham looked at me for a distracted second. His face lit up. "Hey! You got to hear this new Wynton Marsalis album I just picked up. 'Black Codes from the Underground.' It's awesome." He walked over to the stereo, and fumbled with a pile of CD's.

"Maybe later." I switched off the stereo.

"Hey! What's up with that, man?"

"You got fired again, didn't you?"

"I quit." Graham fidgeted with his horn. "In fact, my lease on this place runs out next week. That's why I asked you to stop by tonight." He looked at me. "Sort of a last hurrah, I guess."

"A 'last hurrah?'" I laughed. "What? Is this a joke, or are you actually going somewhere?"

Graham ignored my jibe. He fiddled with the keys on his trumpet. They needed oiling.

I took off the fez and let it drop to the floor. "For Chrissakes,
Graham, when are you going to start doing something substantial with your life?"

He stared hard at me. "Substantial? Like what, Stu? Oh, wait--don't tell me--Englewood, right?"

"Yeah. Why the hell not?" I said. "Shit, man. You have more talent than you know what to do with. But I guess you'd rather piss away your life in gas stations and seedy apartments, huh?"

"Don't try to bait me, Stu. It won't work. I've made up my mind." Graham pulled an envelope out of his pocket and gave it to me. "I'm leaving next Thursday."

I looked at the bus ticket. "You're nuts, you know that? Santa Cruz? What the hell are you going to do in Santa Cruz?"

"Relax, man. I don't know. Hang out I guess. I want to get out and see the country, you know?" Graham put his trumpet in its cracked and peeling case. "There's nothing here for me anyway."

"You're talking shit, Graham," I shouted. "You're just running away from your problems again. I thought you hated California, remember? Your Aunt Joyce is from California, for Chrissakes!" I sat on the floor, trying to calm down. "Come on, Graham. One lousy audition won't kill you."

"Will you give me a break, man?" said Graham. "Maybe I don't want to, did you ever think of that? You took all the theory classes, not me. You're always writing, always practicing. I just played."

"But that's what you do best, Graham," I said. "Why do you want to waste your talent?"

"Just what are you trying to say, Stu? I should go to Englewood and everyone will live happily ever after? I should audition and compete with you? Forget that, man. It's not going to happen."

"Yeah, like Santa Cruz is the answer to all your problems."

"Whatever, Stu." He turned towards the refrigerator. "Is there any booze left?"

I grabbed Graham's shoulder, and spun him around to face me. "I wasn't going to show you this, Graham, but you're being an asshole." I reached for my case on the floor and pulled out a manila folder. I threw it at his feet. "Look at that."

Graham looked confused as he picked up the folder, leafing through the sheets of music. "'Round Four?' What's this?"

"It's the composition that got me into the Englewood Conservatory of Music," I mumbled, staring at my shoes. "Just read it." I looked out the window at the street below. It was washed in the sodium-orange glow of the streetlights. My face was burning.

"I know this song," Graham said softly. "I wrote it." He looked into my eyes. "In high school. For your seventeenth birthday. I called it 'Stuart's Gift.'"
“I found it in the back of my desk drawer at home,” I said. I looked away from Graham’s gaze. “My first three were rejected, so I thought, what the fuck? I changed the title. Just to see what would happen.”

“And it worked? Wow.” Graham rubbed his chin. “I knew it was good, but I didn’t think it was that good. You’re kidding, right? C’mon, Stu.”

I felt like crying. “I’m sorry, man. I really am.”

“Who would have guessed! No shit, Stu, they actually liked that piece?”

“Don’t you get it, man? I wasn’t good enough.” My voice cracked. “I never was. You should be going. Not me.”

Graham gave me the folder. “Don’t say that, man. You’re wrong.” He smiled. “I don’t want to go, okay?” He tapped the folder in my trembling hands. “This song is yours. I gave it to you. When you get there, you’ll show those old professors in thin ties and thick glasses what real music sounds like.” He squeezed my arm. “I don’t know about you, Stuart, but I’m really thirsty. Let’s go to Raphael’s. Irene and Sheri get off work at two, if you know what I mean.” Graham winked at me.

I wiped my eyes, and tried to smile back. “Sure, Graham.”
A Solitary Remembrance
By Dave Billitto

Remembering now, those weekends at Grandmom's
my lips flutter upwards
at the pleasant time spent playing cards
and learning prayers.

Later, long after Carson's curtains fell
we'd head upstairs and talk.
Inhaling cedar fumes and pinned down by an afghan
I'd watch the reflections of the venetian blinds--
the serrated shadows tilted towards the far corner.
And how they'd come alive
as the third shift sped off to work.

The shadows lie still now
seemingly content to reminisce themselves
but I still think they dance,
like the toys in the woodshop
they come alive
as I drag into slumber.
And almost as an excuse for insomnia
I play a game of solitaire
and try to catch another glimpse.
The Gene Thing
By Gretchen Lacey

Sue is the kind of girl who goes to the mall to buy clothes so that the next time she goes to the mall she has something to wear. She spends a lot of time in front of the mirror, mostly working on her hair that for some reason has to be at least four inches puffed up in the front in order to make Sue feel, well, feel pretty I guess, though if anyone ever called her pretty she’d cringe. Sue tries to look cool. How we got to be sisters I don’t know, but Sue likes to deny our connection as much as I do.

Frank is Sue’s boyfriend and her first lover I guess because when our parents are away they spend the evening in her room taking turns coming down to the kitchen for food or fresh air or something. Frank tried to kiss me once. He had come down on one of his breaks and caught me crying over a documentary about earthquakes, and sat next to me with what I thought were sympathetic eyes, but then he went for it, out of the blue, mouth open and all as if I was needing resuscitation. “Get off me you creep!”

I was starting college in the fall and leaving Sue behind. My parents insisted that Sue go with me to the freshman orientation day despite my protests that it was for freshmen, not for freshmen and their younger sisters. Sue didn’t want to go either, at least not with me, but it was obvious that our parents wanted us to spend this time together, probably with hopes of sparking some of that sibling love that never seemed to happen with Sue and I. So she went with me and everything I feared would happen happened. Sue came home from my orientation with a suntan, loads of new friends, and a date for Saturday night (yeah, some guy willing to drive two hours just to go out with a high school girl) “What about Frank?” I asked on the way home. “Won’t he be mad?”

“Frank will be soooo jealous. It’ll be great.” She really knew what she was doing. She always did when it came to guys.

And then I had a miserable thought. “God, I don’t really hate her. I envy her!” No, no I must hate her. I wouldn’t want to be like her. Well, maybe have her confidence, and her blue eyes wouldn’t hurt, and that giggly laugh that makes people turn around and then laugh, too; that might be fun. Sisters are a pain.

“Don’t worry about it,” my mother had said when I was 14 and still waiting to “blossom” (just to bud would have been nice). And there was Sue, barely 12, flopping around in her size C cups before her Barbies made it to the attic. Sisters are a curse.

“So, what did you do all day?” Sue asked as we turned into the driveway. “I didn’t see you at the picnic or at that get-to-know-your-dorm tour. Hey, there are some pretty cute guys on your floor. Mike and Peter at the end of the hall. They’re from New
York. They’re cousins.”
“I was walking around. Trying to find all my classrooms and the library.”
“The library? You went to the library,” she mocked. “You are so weird.”
“Well, I didn’t want to be lost next week.”
“Who cares if you get lost? Nobody knows where they’re going the first day.”
Shit. She was right.

***

Things were going so well at school that I didn’t mind when Mom called to see if I could put Sue up for the weekend. “She’s been moping around the house all week,” my mother explained. “I think it would cheer her up to see you.” I held back my laughter.
“How’s your boyfriend, Honey?”
“He’s not my boyfriend. He’s my lab partner. We study together.”
“Well I’m glad you’re making new friends. Your mid-term grades came, and they couldn’t have been any better. You’re not studying too much are you?”
“Mom!”
“Okay, I just want to make sure you’re having some fun too. Anyway, Sue will drive up Saturday morning, okay? See you soon Honey.”

Peter and I were going over some notes when Sue walked in. “Don’t mind me,” she said, “I’ll just go for a walk while you guys study your anatomy!” We heard her laughing after she closed the door.
“That was my sister. I didn’t think she’d get here so soon. Sorry.”
“That was your sister?”
“Yeah, she’s pretty isn’t she?”
“Well, yeah, she is cute, but you don’t seem much alike. It must be one of those gene things.”
I took it as an extreme compliment, and without a blush I kissed Peter. Twice.
Later that night I was surprised when Sue changed into her pajamas and pulled some books out of her bag.
“You’re staying in?” I asked.
“Yeah.”
“Aren’t there any parties?”
“Yeah.”
“But you’re not going?”
“No.” Then after a pause, “Are you and your lab partner doing
"What?"
"You and Peter--are you sleeping together?"
"No! Why?"
"I don’t know. What would you do if you got pregnant?"
"What? Well, I wouldn’t. I mean I’d be careful. Why? Sue, you’re not."
"Yeah."
Sue was in bed with the lights out when I came back to the room. "Where did you go?" she asked.
"I was taking a shower."
"Pretty long shower."
"Yeah. So what are you going to do?"
"What choice do I have? There’s a place not far from here. I have an appointment two weeks from today." And then she hesitated and added shyly, "Do you think you could go with me?"
"What did Frank say?"
"Nothing. I didn’t tell him."
"Why not? It’s as much his fault as yours. He should at least pay for it."
"Look, Frank doesn’t know, and he’s not going to. If you don’t want to help, just say so and I’ll take care of it myself."
She sounded stubborn and strong as usual, but there was a pitiful weakness in the way she held her breath while she waited for me to answer. I knew I was the only one she could count on, and somehow I liked that. I agreed to help.

Two weeks later, Sue arrived with a plate of brownies. "These are from Mom," she said, "She’s so happy we’re spending so much time together. Are you ready to go?"

***

At the clinic we were put in a group of five other girls, and each had their "Frank" beside them. Except for Sue, who only had me.

I felt like the only virgin within 50 miles, and I tried to make a joke by whispering to Sue, "Now pay attention here," as the counselor was going over birth control options.
"You’re the only one who needs to hear this," Sue fired back. "It’s a little late for the rest of us." And for a moment we both smiled, and I put my arm around Sue, though I couldn’t remember the last time I had done that.

***

My last final was on Thursday, and by the time I drove home
that night I was so exhausted I went to bed and slept most of the weekend. Once Christmas was over with and my parents were on their way out of town, I began to revive. Peter was coming.

"Don't worry, I'll stay out of your way," Sue said, sitting in front of the television.

"I only meant that it was strange that you were home. Don't you have a date or something?"

She didn't answer.

"If I would have known you were going to be here I would have asked Peter to bring his cousin Mike." I was lying of course, but a relationship required that sometimes.

"Yeah, Mike is cute. But I think Pete said he had a girlfriend."

"Pete? You've talked to Peter?"

"Only when he calls for you. You know, chit-chat."

"Right. Well, I'm going up to get ready. Call me when he gets here, okay?"

***

Getting ready for the night I might "do it" for the first time was not easy. I would have rather been back at school, even though we had plenty of missed opportunities there, at least all the mementos from my childhood were not hanging over us like they were here in my parents' house. I brushed my teeth twice. He was late. In the middle of my third outfit there was a tap at the door.

"Christine? Sue sent me up."

"Oh great, you brought champagne."

We barely had our shoes off before I had to get to the bathroom quickly. The champagne had tasted great on the way down, and for a while it was doing wonders for me. We had laughed, even danced, but when I closed my eyes for the kissing, that's when the dizziness started.

"Are you all right?" Peter called through the bathroom door. "I could come in."

"No! Don't come in. And don't listen." He was awfully sweet, but I had always preferred to vomit alone.

I was glad to find my bedroom empty, and I lay on my bed a long time, unable to fall asleep. Relief came, eventually, but it was replaced by embarrassment, and I thought I had better find Peter. Except for the television, the downstairs was dark and quiet. "Peter?" I called softly as I stepped off the bottom step. He jumped up. She didn't bother.

"She was upset about Frank, and I was just trying to..."

"You creep." My head was pounding again.

"No really. I felt bad for her. She was crying."

"He kissed me first," Sue chimed in.
“And you had to kiss him back, right?”
“Wouldn’t you? I mean, I was confused. I’m vulnerable. Frank has a new girlfriend.”

***

I still saw Peter around. Mostly in the lab where he always seemed to be doing his lab partner’s work.
“I see you and Cheryl got the highest grades on the exam,” he said nervously one afternoon when we found we were the last two left in class.
“Yeah. She’s a great lab partner.”
“You know, Christine, I was a real shit over Christmas. It was all my fault. I wish we could still be friends.”
“I guess so.”
“Really? That would be okay?” He was smiling way too big.
“I’ve just said so.”
“So you’re not mad at your sister either?”
“I didn’t say that.”

***

I didn’t go home for spring break, and Sue was different around me for a while, kind of cautiously kind.
It’s not that I didn’t forgive Sue or anything, because eventually I did. I just didn’t tell her that.
Addiction
By Beth Rosenberg

The grasping for me was all too adamant
I want you I want you
Well I don’t think.
I can see the things that make me crawl and shiver

Take the ride I’m the freight train to everything you dreamt about
You fabulous aching boy
Just bend me over and push me out
And I’ll fly out of my head
And I’ll forget the way
Back home
And I’ll forget all the nicer feelings
I’m fun
I’m your roller coaster
Don’t stop you’ll only delay the ride
I don’t care if you’re in my way
And I don’t care what those words were
that drop like nails from your dripping little hole
You are so totally unnecessary
Because I am mass transit
Because I can carry anyone
You’re only here for the ride.

I have not been whole ever and now is not an exception

That bright little room with daddy and cornflakes had grown into that hot little hole that wants more than I give. I’m a big girl now with the world on my shoulders and there is so much more for me to worry about. I can’t listen to you anymore.
I can’t help it because my cigarette is almost over and I savor the flavor of smoke. I’m so out of control.

I know it hurts But it’s time to go and I must PICK UP AND LEAVE YOU now. Your rules are so immoral and your life is so perverse. I ate you up boy
and now I’m shitting you out
Your flavor is so out of style and your cut just isn’t filling the hole.

My stomach hurts more than it did before. I think my body’s trying to get back at me. I just heard a story about me and it hurt to realize that I didn’t grow like I thought I did.
My stomach has been trying to tell me for months what a boy
just did, but I wasn’t paying attention to it. There’s too much tobacco in my lungs and there’s too many stories for me to just drop on someone who doesn’t even want them. I hurt myself on purpose now and I’m finally realizing you’re only as interesting as you look. When it’s all laid out before you, your life doesn’t look like much and you can see what you do what you really do. Never go to a market if you don’t have anything to sell. And never eat something just because it looks good. The purest beam of light is the most dangerous. It shows you more.
PATRONS

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A.C. Allen
Blanche Allen
Delores Arnold
Berman Museum of Art
Nicholas Berry
Chris Bowers
Doug & Nancy Cameron
Mona Chylack
Hugh Clark
Robin Clouser
Paul & Lori Cramer
Robert & Ellen Dawley
Louis DeCatur
Richard & Rachel DiFeliciantonio
Carol Dole
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