# Sterncastle Anthology 4

Sterncastle Writers Collective

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**sterncastle.org**
**community@sterncastle.org**

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Not all books include dedications, but many authors choose to share a special thank you to someone(s) who have made an impact on the writing of the book. This may be on a personal or professional level and can range from heartfelt to comedic and anything in between.

Dedication text is traditionally center aligned.

# The Jurist

## by Carol Bermudes

I tossed the jury notice aside, unopened, with the rest of the mail on the entry table. However, the envelope kept catching my eye every time I passed. After a few days, I opened it because you have to respond to these notices. Even my husband, Alec, commented, "You've got to reply to that jury summons, you know—there's always a deadline," and he is not one to pry or pay attention to things like that.

I can't say how I knew the notice was bad news, other than the feeling in the pit of my stomach each time I looked at it. I was so reluctant to open the dispatch that I considered throwing it away as if I hadn't received it. There was no proof of receipt, since no signature was required upon delivery, but I knew in the same inexplicable way that it was *bad* news, that it was important I respond.

I opened the offending document and went online to log in with the juror ID and complete the obligatory questionnaire. At that point, I considered asking for a deferral, but I still had the strong urge that it was crucial for me to obey the summons. So I submitted my questionnaire and in due course the day for my jury service arrived.

I awoke at 6:00 a.m. as usual, and after getting ready for the day with my routine of showering, styling my hair, and putting on minimal makeup, I made a quick breakfast of a fried egg on toast and ate at the counter as I scrolled through my emails and messages. I had already notified work of my jury service and that I might be out for a few days, or possibly the remainder of the week.

I only lived a few miles from the courthouse, so I left half an hour before the appointed time. I parked in the day lot, showing my jury summons for free parking, and entered the building with several minutes to spare. As I rode up in the elevator, the persistent sinking feeling I had since receiving the summons got stronger. I tried to ignore it as I checked in and took my place with the jury pool in the waiting room.

As I waited, my anxiety increased. After what seemed like an eternity, but was in fact only a few minutes, a clerk came out and called numbers one through fifty to the courtroom for the selection process. I was lucky number thirteen, so I filed in with the rest of the prospective jurors and took a seat in the general seating area. After the judge entered and we were all sworn in, the selection began. The first fourteen of us, in numerical order, were told to occupy the twelve seats in the jury box and numbers thirteen and fourteen to sit in the two adjacent chairs for alternates.

Once we were all seated in the jury box, the judge began to explain the nature of the case, the names of the parties and the attorneys, and the estimated length of the trial.

"The case before you is an armed robbery of a convenience store, with no injuries or fatalities. In this case, the three-strikes law applies, so if convicted, the sentence will be according to that law. Next, the attorneys, and at times myself, will ask you questions and provide scenarios to determine if you will remain on the jury or be excused. Are there any questions?"

Various people had minor questions, including requests for releases due to personal biases or prior knowledge of the case. Several claimed busy work schedules and vacation plans. After in-depth questioning by the judge, some were let go, but most were told to remain. Now it was time for the main juror screening, where the defense and prosecution can challenge jurors for cause, and each side has a number of peremptory challenges, where they may remove jurors without stating a reason.

Prospective jurors were asked screening questions and were either kept or dismissed for cause or by peremptory challenge.

"The prosecution would like to thank and excuse juror number ..."

"The defense would like to thank and excuse juror number ..."

This went on for some time, and at each dismissal, the remaining jurors, in numerical order, moved seats to fill in the juror box. In this way, I was seated in the front row of the box, chair number three, by the time the selection process was complete and all fourteen seats were filled. Both sides pronounced themselves satisfied with the jury selection, and the remaining potential jurors were discharged.

During this entire process, I had what I can only describe as a déjà vu experience. Everyone looked familiar to me: the judge—a middle-aged woman with brown shoulder-length hair; the prosecutor and the defense attorney—both well-groomed men in dark suits and short hair; and the defendant—a nice-looking young man of medium height, with dark slicked-back hair and a muscular build, wearing a white button-up shirt and tie, with a collar he kept tugging on.

Déjà vu.

The feeling was so strong and undeniable. I knew that I would be chosen for the jury. I knew who my fellow jurists would be before they were selected. I knew that once we got into the jury room, I would be chosen as the foreperson. I knew that I was there for a reason—I just didn't know the full purpose yet.

Before getting the trial started, we were given a break for lunch. Most of us traipsed to the cafeteria together and split into a few groups to get our meals. We had been told we were not allowed to discuss the trial, so we made small talk and learned a little about each other. I was trying to shake that knowing feeling, but it was unavoidable, as I felt like I already knew the group at my table. Brenda, the single mother of a five-year-old boy. Elise, a retired teacher and a recent widow. Hugh, a roofer with a wife and three young children.

After lunch, the trial proceeded, and the attorneys for both sides gave their opening remarks, which we, the jurists, listened to attentively. As each side orated, I could have been reading from a script in my mind.

The prosecution began their presentation of evidence and witnesses. There were few witnesses, other than the clerk who was held at gunpoint, the police detective, and a forensic expert. Their main evidence was a grainy video and a fingerprint left on a package of cigarettes.

In the video, the robber held a gun on the clerk. He was dressed in a dark sweatshirt and had a dark knit cap covering his face and head, with holes for eyes and mouth. There was no audio, but he waved the gun, and the clerk opened the register and handed the robber the money in the till. Then the gunman pointed to the floor, and the clerk could be seen lying down on the floor face-first. At that point, the robber stuffed the money into a pocket of the sweatshirt and turned to go, but then turned back and grabbed cigarette packages from a display on the counter by the register. He emptied most of the packages into the pockets of the sweatshirt and turned again to go out the door.

On the way, some of the cigarette packs fell out of his pocket, and he bent to pick them up. He gathered all but one package and fled. The one package remained on the floor beside the door. This is where the fingerprint evidence had come from, and where the prosecution pinned their case. No gloves. The only other prints on the package were from the store clerk.

By the time the prosecution was done, it was nearing the end of the day, and we, the jury, were excused for the day, with admonishments to follow the rules: no watching or reading the news, and no discussing the case with anyone—even a fellow juror.

I was relieved to be done for the day and could only hope that this déjà vu would pass, though I knew from prior experience that it was doubtful. It usually had to play out until the incident was over.

"How was the jury duty?" Alec questioned when he got home from work. "Are you on the jury?"

"Yes, I was chosen."

"Bummer. Well, I know the drill: no talking about it with me, no news, etc. How about after dinner, we play a game of Scrabble or chess?"

"Sounds good."

In this way the evening passed, and though I itched to tell him about my déjà vu experience, I refrained since I knew I could give no details.

That night I dreamed of the defendant. He was in a gym lifting heavy weights. The gym was busy, but he was watching a young woman on one of the stationary bikes. Though the scene was innocent enough on the surface, there was a disturb-

ing intensity to his gaze. I awoke and sat up in bed feeling distressed. As I drank from a glass of water on my nightstand, the dread I felt got stronger. I tossed and turned for a while, but dozed off again and slept until morning with no other memorable dreams.

Trial day two dawned, and it was the defense's turn. They had witnesses attest to the defendant's character. They called a forensic expert who testified that since the cigarette display had been on the counter, the fingerprint could have been left at any time during the operations of the store, and it would still have been viable. There was a witness who stated that the defendant frequented the convenience store and could have touched the package in the display during one of his visits.

Late afternoon, the defense rested their case, and it was time for closing statements. No surprises, just reiterations of the opening remarks.

"... and we know you will find the defendant guilty beyond a reasonable doubt ..."

"... the prosecution has failed to prove that my client, this young man with his life ahead of him, has perpetrated this crime. We are confident that you will do the right thing and find him innocent."

With the case done, the judge handed it to the jury for deliberations, giving instructions on choosing a foreperson, not discussing the case outside of the jury room, among other directives. The alternate jurors were to remain on call in case they were needed. With that, we, the twelve main jurors, were led by the bailiff into a room with a long table and twelve chairs. There was coffee and water on a side table and pencils and small notepads in a stack.

The bailiff closed the door, and we were left to settle in. We all chose seats around the table, and I knew what was coming. I would be elected foreperson, and though I would not seek it, I would not shirk it either. My belief that this was important for me to do was not shaken.

"We should choose a foreman," Donald, a balding man in his early forties, said once we were all sitting. "Does anyone want to volunteer?" No one indicated they were interested.

Elise, the retired schoolteacher, spoke up, "I want to put forward Sarah as the foreman because she's been on a jury before, so she knows the ropes better

than the rest of us." My prior jury experience had been brought up in the juror questioning by the judge.

There were nods and a chorus of agreements from all.

"Will you accept?" Elise asked me.

I pretended to consider it, though I already knew it was inevitable. "Yes, I will serve as foreperson," I answered after a few moments.

"That's great," Donald seemed relieved as he rubbed his hands together. "So what's next?"

"I think we should take a preliminary vote to see where we all stand, and it should be anonymous; that way there's no pressure. Then we can go from there." I replied. "We can write the vote on one of our notebook papers and put them in a cup to be counted."

We all opened our notebooks and started writing. When everyone was done, I passed around the cup, and we all placed our slips of paper inside. Then, I asked Elise to tally the ballots as Donald read them aloud. When it was done, she handed the tally to me.

"The result, as you all will have noticed, is: one *guilty* and eleven *not guilty* verdicts. This will be our starting point, and we can go from there. I suggest we go through the evidence and the testimonies to see if that changes anything. We can also read any notes we took if anyone wants to proffer theirs."

"Look, if only one of us is thinking guilty, I wonder if we can't make this happen quicker?" Donald asked. "It seems to me that getting out all the evidence and testimony is a waste of time, and I, for one, would like to get this done today. I've got a life to live."

"I agree," Hugh piped up. "I have work and a family to get back to."

"I understand we would all like to get back to our regular lives, but the fact is that someone thinks he's guilty, and we owe this process a reasonable amount of review before reaching the final verdict. It needs to be unanimous," I stated in as neutral a manner as I could, given that I was the outlier with the *guilty* verdict.

You see, I knew he was guilty, and more than that, I knew it was imperative for him to be convicted. I didn't have any logical reason; just that *knowing* feeling I get sometimes that cannot be ignored or explained. This same *knowing* feeling has

turned out to be true in the past. So I now knew the reason why I was here—on this jury, with this defendant. I just had to convince everyone else.

We called the bailiff and requested the witness transcripts and the pieces of evidence. When we received the information, we passed it around the table for everyone to review.

Once it had made the rounds, I asked, "Does anyone want to look at the evidence items or statements further? Or have any questions or points they'd like to discuss?"

"I was impressed by his character references and by his demeanor during the trial," Loretta mused.

"Well, I will concede that I was hoping he would take the witness stand ..." Chase seemed to ponder aloud.

"We can't hold that against him. We have strict instructions about that because most attorneys don't want to open their client up for questioning by the prosecution," Lambert contributed to the discussion.

"I think he could have left his fingerprints on the cigarette package at any time, just like the defense said. This leaves doubt in my mind, so I don't feel good voting guilty," Hanna spoke up.

"I think so too," some of the others chimed in or nodded.

"It's possible, but is it feasible for him to have left his fingerprint on that package another time?" I queried, trying to put doubts in that argument.

"I don't know ..." Hugh said, "thinking about it, I'm not sure it is. He would have to have been there recently, and wouldn't the display need to be constantly filled?"

This was a line of reasoning I could work with. "Well, there is the video they showed us; we can ask if we're allowed to watch all the footage, not just what was shown in the trial." As much as I was convinced of his guilt, I welcomed the confirmation. His freedom was on the line, and I didn't take that lightly.

The others agreed with this plan, and we called in the bailiff to send our request. He came back in a few minutes with the stipulation that the prosecution and the defense would have to agree, and this would take a little time. Since it was late in the afternoon, we were dismissed for the night.

On the drive home, I reflected on my certainty that he was guilty. I always did that when these situations happened to me. I wondered how I could be so certain and if I could be wrong. This was a serious and important decision, and this young man's life would be changed forever by the outcome. The stakes were high this time, and I was filled with worry that maybe I was just crazy, or had a brain tumor, or something else that was causing me to believe I knew these things.

I was silent through dinner and pleaded a headache to go to bed early. Alec kissed me, and kissed my forehead, and gave me a tender look as I fled to the bedroom. I could see he understood what was going on, but refrained from asking.

That night I dreamt of the defendant again. He was lifting weights and watching the woman on the bike, as in the other dream. Every time he finished a rep, he looked at her before continuing. She was oblivious to his attention as she biked. When she finished, she walked by him on her way to the changing rooms. As soon as she passed him, he got up and hurried out of the gym.

It was nighttime, and he hid in the shadows provided by a recess in the building. Soon the woman walked out of the gym and down the street, passing by the man in the shadows. He followed her, making no sound as he crept after her. She must have felt something, though, because she looked over her shoulder and picked up her step. He kept pace with her for a while, and then closed the gap as he grabbed her and pulled her up against him, a hand over her mouth. He dragged her to some nearby bushes and began assaulting her as she tried to get away. He punched her hard in the face, and she stopped struggling.

I wanted to look away, but I didn't have that option. This was a dream. Every detail of the assault and eventual killing was laid before me—a witness to the brutality.

When it was over, I woke up with some difficulty. I sat up in bed crying and breathing hard, as though I had been in a race. Alec woke up next to me and held me while I cried. He didn't ask questions. Just held me for a long time until I calmed down. After a while, we both got up—there would be no sleeping for either of us after that.

We made breakfast and talked of mundane things until it was time to get ready for the day ahead. We were solemn and had a lingering kiss. He went off to work, and I headed to the courthouse.

In the jury room, when we were all settled in our chairs around the table, the bailiff came in and said that we had gained approval to view the complete video of the day of the robbery. Before we did this, Donald stated his case: "I think there is reasonable doubt, and this may all be a waste of time. Whoever voted guilty yesterday may have changed their mind after hearing that everyone else voted not guilty."

Based on this theory, we decided to take a preliminary vote again, to see where we stood and if anyone had changed their vote, perhaps making the video superfluous.

We went around the room again with the cup and the notes, and Donald read off the votes while Elise recorded the tally, just like yesterday. But today, the voting was three *guilty* votes and nine *not guilty* votes.

I was relieved that more were coming around to the guilty side. After last night's dream, I was more sure than ever that the defendant needed to be convicted. I was in no doubt that the life of the young woman in the dream depended on his conviction. I knew from past experiences that the dream was a premonition of something yet to come if it wasn't prevented. I looked around at all the jurors' faces and the déjà vu familiarity of them, and felt a heavy weight to get this right.

The bailiff set up the TV with the video and gave us a remote control. We started the video at the point of the robbery and watched it again and again, trying to ascertain if anything about the robber reminded us of the defendant, but it was inconclusive. Several jurors remarked that there was no way to tell who the robber was, and that the cigarette display was clearly on the counter in reach of anyone, employee or customer.

With that thought, we started the video at the beginning of the day, and watched a few hours, noting that the store clerk unpacked the boxed cigarette display, filled it from unopened cartons of cigarettes at the beginning of the day, and placed it on the counter next to the register. We marked the time at 8:36 a.m. and played the video forward from there. We watched the next few hours of video,

stopping it and replaying it whenever anyone took a package of cigarettes from the display. There were only two people who took one pack each from the display, both women.

At this point, we stopped for lunch and, upon returning, continued watching from where we had left off. It was painstaking and tedious, but we were meticulous. We saw a man fingering a front package of cigarettes from the middle of the display, though he did not pick them up or buy them. We ran the video back and watched again, and as he walked out of the store, we had a clear enough view of his face to see he was not the defendant. I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding—*it wasn't him!*

We watched throughout the day, fast-forwarding to each customer so we could see their faces and ascertain that they were not the defendant. The cigarette display was mostly left untouched, other than the two purchases by the women and the man touching the middle package. Then that package was sold to an older man, who had a coughing fit as he paid for the cigarettes. We watched until the robbery occurred, and then viewed it again a few more times to be certain. I was left in no doubt that the defendant was the only one who could have left his print on the pack of cigarettes. I hoped it was clear to all the other jurors as well.

"I think it's time for another vote," I said.

"Yes, and this time let's just do it by going around the table. I don't think there's a need to keep it anonymous anymore," Jackie, who had been mostly silent, offered. "I'd like to see where each of us stands."

"Is everyone okay with this? Raise your hands if you are." I looked around, and all the jurists had their hands raised.

"Okay, then, we'll go around the table, and please say *guilty* or *not guilty* as you feel is applicable."

As we went to each juror, they all said *guilty*, except for one: Andrew.

Everyone looked at Andrew. I thought it was prudent to head off any undue pressure that might be put on him to change his vote. It was important to have a guilty verdict, but it needed to be unimpeachable. If we were polled or questioned, it all had to be above board.

"So, after watching the video, you still have some doubts about his guilt. Let's talk about that ... why don't you tell us what you're thinking from your perspective?" I asked.

"I know it looks like it has to be his fingerprint, but I still don't feel right putting him away. He seems like a good guy, and maybe he can turn his life around if he's given the chance. Maybe he can change his course, and I believe in giving everyone the benefit of the doubt. My religious upbringing says that everyone can be redeemed." Andrew responded.

"Come on, man! We watched the video, and there's no way his prints could have been on them if he wasn't the one. We've taken our time to make sure we got this right. It's not our job to decide how and when he can be rehabilitated. Ours is to look at the evidence and determine a verdict. What happens after that is not our concern." Donald opined.

"I consider all my fellow men my concern," Andrew answered.

"Okay," I intervened, "I think we all understand your feelings, but at the same time, if you concede that it was him, can you feel good about letting an armed robber go free?"

"And don't forget that this is the third time for him, so if he was going to change his ways, hasn't he had ample opportunity to do it?" asked Hanna. "At first, I was giving him the benefit of the doubt and thinking that the defense was right and the fingerprint could have been left at another time. But after seeing the video, we've concluded that's not possible."

"Well, the Bible does support civil justice," Andrew conceded, "but he's a young man, and it's a shame to have his liberty cut short."

"Is there anything we can do or discuss to help you with your stance on the matter?" I asked.

"No, I guess not. I need some time to think about it all. I'm just not ready to say guilty, though I recognize that your points are valid."

"It's getting late, so I suggest that we break for the night and take this up again tomorrow," I said. I had an anxious feeling inside that if Andrew didn't change his vote, this would be a hung jury. I couldn't let that happen, but didn't know

how to roll that final vote to guilty. I sensed that if we pushed too hard, he would dig in his heels.

I hoped the break would give him time to realize that the defendant was guilty, and that the only right thing to do was to convict him. If not, I would have to try to figure something out to sway him. I was determined to do this no matter what it might take.

There was some grumbling from a few of the jurors about dragging this out another day, but in the end they all agreed.

On the way home, my mind was busy devising ways to convince Andrew to change his vote. When I got home and entered my bedroom to change into soft clothes, I felt unsettled as I glanced at my bed. This is when I realized I was dreading another night of graphic dreams involving the defendant and the gym woman—or any other future victims for that matter.

I stayed up late in the hopes that I would be too exhausted for dreams, but to no avail. Almost as soon as my head touched the pillow, I was asleep and dreaming again of the defendant, the gym, and the murdered woman. It was the same dream as the night before, and I had the same reaction. Alec held me once again while I cried, asking no questions as before.

I was an inner wreck that morning as I entered the jury room and seated myself—lack of sleep and violent dreams taking a toll on me. I hoped I portrayed a calm outward demeanor as we all settled in for another day of deliberations.

"Does anyone have anything to discuss this morning, or should we start with taking a vote?" I asked as I looked around the table.

We all agreed on a vote.

As we went around the table this time, all votes were *guilty*. I had a moment of panic when it was Andrew's turn, but his *guilty* vote rang out clear and decisive. We all seemed to give an audible sigh. It was over.

All my preparations for how to turn his vote around were unnecessary. I said a silent thanks to whatever power had guided me in my daunting task.

We called in the bailiff and informed him that we had reached a verdict, and while we waited to go to the courtroom, I had a moment to speak with Andrew.

"May I ask what made you decide to change your vote to guilty?"

"Well," Andrew said in a quiet tone, so only I could hear, "this may seem strange to you, but I believe in signs, and I had the most disturbing dream about a gym and the defendant and a young woman. I woke up out of a sound sleep, *knowing* that I had to vote guilty."

# Mean Streak

## by L.W. Smolen

His December afternoon front porch stung his bare feet, but sequestering out on it with his grey-haired daughter felt really quite nice. When he shuffled out into the cold, grey afternoon to greet her and heard his front door latch and lock behind him, he knew he was OK. She still wore a flower in her hair, over her left ear—the way she always used to like to do. She had a smile on her face, but something else—he knew—in her mind. The way she always used to like to do.

Interview-style, she wanted to know now how he'd been these "how many years?" Instead of admitting he took a fall on his basement stairs just a week ago, he bragged, "Renewed my driver's license. Gave me until I'm ninety-two!"

She'd started calling regularly again, asking if he'd had any more "spells." She wouldn't believe he could still shove his garbage can alone up his dangerously steep driveway—where she was parked now.

And had he done anything yet about the raccoons that'd been "infesting" his third floor "ever since Mom died?" Many raccoon generations ago, his daughter'd shown up intimating she'd be glad to move in with him and "help out." For that occasion, he wore a genuine Davy Crockett coonskin cap he bought at the neighborhood Red, White, and Blue thrift store. A professed animal lover, at the sight of the cap, she'd burst into tears—tears that reminded him of the knife she twisted in her own mother's heart, a long time ago now, when she inexplicably isolated her mother from her grandkids. All those years ago, watching tears dribble down his wife's lonely face, creeped out by the fact of his daughter's

heart, he felt a shiver of fear. He knew then that eventually she'd come for his equity.

But it wasn't all his daughter's fault; he always did have a natural mean streak. He still loved to torture kids. And here she was back again now where she grew up. Hands pocketed, grinning now at her on his front porch, he told her he got a new pellet rifle—"seven-power scope and all."

"Thousand feet a second," he added, "Barely sub-sonic. Really hits hard."

He expected to see shock on her face. He did. Outraged, she flustered to know, "Father! What for!" Still grinning, he said, "Damn raccoons. Stitching coonskin caps and selling 'em on-line is too much work anymore. Can't see like I used to, ya know."

Impotent, frustrated tears again, and some foot-stamping and, "Aren't you cold, Father?" Never called him dad—nope, not dad.

*Better not let her in*, he reminded himself.

The day's light gloomed down on his front porch. Silently, a dusting of snow sifted from the somber sky, frosting the frozen ground. Wondering what she was thinking, he watched her pull in off the narrow, crowded street to park on his already slick, crash-dive driveway and stop about six feet from the garage door at the bottom. He noticed that her twenty-year-old headlights were occluded. Maybe her four-wheel drive was in better shape.

Truth is, his driver's license was a lie. Three years ago, he'd decided he was "a threat to humanity." He sold his "Bullit" Mustang to a kid. Now, behind its fragile old wooden roll-up door, his garage stood empty—except for his wheeled garbage can.

For a whole hour, her stamping her feet in the darkling cold, he forced his daughter to listen all about why her Father thought women's pro softball was more interesting than Baseball—how the fast-pitch women "don't dink around on the mound like they do in the Majors."

Ultimately, her frustrated "huff" said it all; she realized she couldn't manipulate him into being hospitable. Shivering, she just lost her grip and flung her really quite well-developed quiver of expletives and epithets at him. He knew she was just trying to get control, but he stood his ground. He watched her stomp stiffly

down his porch steps, yank open her driver's side door, slam it shut behind her, and start her creaky old Subaru's engine.

He didn't wait. He turned around slowly, shoved his key in the lock, and hobbled right back inside the house, straight down the hall to the door leading down to the basement. With the handle button, he locked it. Then, he shot both big barrel bolts home—barely before the house shook.

Out in the narrow street, with all the parked cars, her tow truck had a hard time of it—maneuvering to pull her old, oxy-greenish Forester back up his driveway.

But she left—the same way she got in.

Winter, so close to Canada, is tough on wild creatures. Reveling in the warmth inside his house, he went and got his bag of dog food. In case of another "spell" or in case he died on his ascent, he latched on the safety harness he found at the Red, White and Blue. He clipped the harness's tether onto the stair railing. One step at a time, he started to work his way up the steep third-floor stairs to feed his 'coons.

# Tanya—Sibiu, Romania, 1991

by Susan Farnham

"There," Tanya points, "is the window where Mrs. Dudi hung herself."

The windows of Tanya's house are shuttered, with green louvered slats. Tanya tells Ann about the woman who lived there, in that part of their house. During the Communist time—that ended with the revolution in 1989—the state took everyone's property and moved Tanya's family into one side. Two other families then shared the house with them.

"Mrs. Dudi didn't like anyone," says Tanya. "She particularly disliked the young woman who lived upstairs. She used to go at her with a broom when she saw her, not letting her into the yard, not letting her out the door.

"This activity delighted me," says Tanya. "I was only six at the time. Finally, the young woman got tired and got her own broom. She beat old Mrs. Dudi with it and was never bothered again."

Ann, who came to Romania on a scholarship program, just met Tanya in a colleague's room at the University of Sibiu dorms. She rushed in, hair astray, cheeks red from the cold.

"You wouldn't believe what happened. They're giving TB tests at school. I refused. I'm not going to let those nurses get near me with their needles. Never. That fat pig of a nurse. Oh, she hated me for it."

"You know what those nurses do? They reuse their needles, hide the good ones, keep them for their friends. 'Show it to me,' I told the nurse. But she wouldn't."

Tanya is seventeen years old and in her final year of high school. She keeps pushing her flyaway hair behind her ears.

Ann stayed at the far edge of town in one of the Bloc buildings. And since Tanya lived in the old German district, which was on the way to the Blocs, they decided to walk home together.

There is a heaviness to the German gothic mansions they pass, melancholic, in need of paint; shingles are missing from the roof that hovers over tall, haunting attics with eye-shaped windows. High stone walls surround these properties, lined with metal spikes. Wide metal gates are bolted on the inside.

Yet, Ann thinks, she would prefer to live in a small room within the shabby grandeur of one of these mansions, rather than back in the Bloc. Here, there is breathing space, tall old trees, cobbled walks. The eye can flit from yard to yard, house to house and rest on variety.

Tanya gestures at the two-story house with peeling mustard-colored paint and large windows. "Our house is old and gloomy. Sometimes it frightens me."

They stand at the gate. The fence encloses a large yard of bare dirt. Blackbirds clatter in the oaks that tower over the house, excited in the cool weather.

"Look at the yard," says Tanya. "It used to be all roses. My grandfather planted them-all different colors. White ones started at one end of the yard; these blended into pinks, reds, deeper reds, purples, and finally blacks."

Tanya goes on. "I was playing in the yard, and I saw my neighbor hanging from the window. I continued to play until my mother came outside.

"Isn't it strange the way Mrs. Dudi is standing out the window like that?" I asked her. My mother rushed me inside. Mrs. Dudi was dead. She hanged herself on the shutter.

"I'd like to ask you in," Tanya says, "but I can't. My mother is making *zacusca*, and it is chaos. There are red peppers everywhere."

A few days later, Tanya calls and invites Ann to tea.She's applying to universities in America and needs help studying for her SATs.

Tanya opens the door, and Ann enters a long, dark corridor. Along it are other darkened rooms, and at the far end is their dining room. A massive wooden table takes up much of the space, and on a sideboard is an elegant and ancient samovar.

"It must have been a Boyar's table," says Tanya. "It's very old. And the samovar is my mother's. She's Russian."

On a small table is a tray of liquors, and on an easel is a painting of a man and his horse. "It was done by my grandfather," says Tanya.

Their house reflects a strange mixture of poverty and wealth. The hall and other rooms are unlit due to the shortage of electricity. Tanya tells Ann that they get their power from Russian nuclear plants like Chornobyl. But this year Russia says they won't sell to Romania.

"Eventually, we got our home back," says Tanya, "but the house was so much bigger than it used to be. One of the Party members wanted to live here. It's a good location. He couldn't move us, so he built a second story on the house. He built a stairway outside our back window. My grandfather went out and chopped it down. He told the engineer he'd chop him if he tried to build it again."

Tanya brings Ann coffee and sugary pastries filled with sweet cheese and lemon zest. The coffee is gritty, served in a delicate cup. They work on SAT questions.

"Romanians," says Tanya. "They will treat you so nice when you go to dinner, but it's always to get something. In school my friends spied on me, but after the revolution they were so nice.

"It was very confusing when I was a child. At home I'd be told one thing, at school another. They are wrong, said my mother, but never laugh at what they say. I would sometimes forget this. They said such stupid things. I'd laugh and laugh, and my teachers became suspicious of me."

As they work over Tanya's English vocabulary list, Ann realizes that Tanya knows more words than she does. Many she has never seen before.

"I've always been a difficulty at school," says Tanya. "Remember that nurse who came to our school to give TB vaccinations? She got very angry when I refused to take it. She went to the head of the school and said I needed disciplining; then she went to the hospital and told the doctor I must pay a fee to get the shot. The doctor told her she can't be charged a fee; she's under 18. Then the nurse

went to look up my records. She looked up the history of my family. It's like how it was before 1989."

After studying, they follow a long dark hall. Ann can hear a television, but the doors along the hall are closed.

"This is my room," says Tanya. They enter a tight, crowded space. The tall windows are shuttered at the bottom, with sun coming in overhead through the dark trees, leaving a pattern of light on the piano.

"I used to play," says Tanya. "I was good, but I gave it up so that I could learn.

"Have a chocolate." She offers one from a plate that she takes from a drawer in her desk. They are covered with thin gold tinsel paper. "From America, from my uncle," she says. "I have to hide them, or my sister will eat them all at once.

"It was chocolate that made me give up the piano. I think I was twelve when my uncle got permission to visit. The chocolate he brought was nothing like the stuff here. You've tasted it, I'm sure. Horrid.

"It wasn't fair, I thought, my cousins in America eating this chocolate all the time. 'I want to go to America,' I told my uncle. 'Study hard, and you'll get a scholarship,' he said.

"The piano was making me sick, anyway. I worked at it too hard, practicing and practicing, till I became thinner and my mother worried about me. I worked desperately to be the best at the competition so I could travel to Bucharest, and then to Hungary. I practiced till my hands were so tired and sore, they would cramp.

"One day I broke down and screamed at my teacher. She told my mother that she wouldn't work with me anymore. She refused to recommend me for the finals. I was too nervous, she said. I wouldn't last. I would never make a great musician. Fine, I said, and shut the lid of the piano for good. Someday I will play again, but right now I must learn."

Over Tanya's bed are posters of Michael Jackson.

"My uncle sent them. Isn't he gorgeous? My uncle says he looks like a beautiful girl. He's sent me books. I know everything about Michael Jackson. He's never had a girlfriend, for example. I will be his first.

"The problem with old people," says Tanya, "is they have no dreams.

"When I go to America, I will find Michael and marry him. We will buy a chalet in Colorado. I will be a famous chemist. I will be in the movies. I will play the piano."

# Life Lesson

## By Kathleen Dugan Barton

Any discrimination,
Can be harsh and hurtful.
All forms leave an impact,
On the human it is inflicted on and on society in general.
We are tarnished by it,
Scarred for life.
And a stain,
Is forever left on society.

# Deadheading

## by Mari Schuman, M.Div

I planted my first garden in 1970; I was nine years old. My friends and I would walk to the local five and dime with our allowance money. They would buy candy and cheap toys that often broke before we returned to our neighborhood. I would purchase flower seeds and sometimes small plants when they were available. I was thinking back on those days early one morning when I was in my garden. I remembered that back then, if I planted some seeds and they didn't come up or didn't perform as I expected, I'd simply start over with a new pack of seeds and renewed hope. Friendship seemed a little easier then, too. It wasn't really. It just seemed that way from my skewed perception. While those relationships were important to me and most seemed to meet my needs, some did not, and I walked away from those, usually without too much consideration. That sounds a bit cavalier when I write it here. And maybe it was. My attitude came from living in chaos. I got an early understanding that people came and went whether I liked it or not. So, I guess I just got used to it. Though I never liked it. I never expected people to stay. I relied only on myself. Even now, deep down, I guess I never shook those beliefs. I often believe that I am better off on my own.

Something stuck with me when I was deadheading some flowers. Deadheading is necessary for most flowering plants if you want to get better performance from the plant. You pinch off the spent flowers at the base of the stem, and it tells the plant to produce more flowers. If you skip this step, the plant thinks that the

season is over, and the spent flowers produce seeds for the next year. The plant is done bringing beauty for the current season.

Relationships are like a garden. They need to be tended and nurtured to grow, evolve and expand. If you skip important steps, you don't get the most favorable results. As I was pinching off those petunia blooms, I thought, I'm just a paradox of a human. I plan, plant, water and nurture a beautiful garden every year, and for decades I have reaped the benefits. But my relationships sometimes suffer or end if there is an issue. I have been known to walk away, sometimes in silence, sometimes in anger, regret, hurt feelings, heartbreak, or all the above. Many times, not understanding what has happened or why. I tell myself that I don't care. I move on without so much as an over the shoulder glance. I act as if the time spent in said relationship did not matter. It did matter, but you'd never know it because I am a chameleon (another side effect from my childhood) changing to fit in, whatever the circumstances.

All this came up because I have a friend with whom I am having a disagreement or a misunderstanding, or something. What I know for sure is that I feel completely miserable. I am sad and heartbroken when I consider the possible end of this relationship. Everything hurts right now, physically and emotionally. I know what I need to do; I am not sure that I am capable of doing it. This is an important relationship to me. I've known this guy for more than a year, and we have spent many quality hours building trust. He has provided me with an opportunity to have a platonic relationship with a man. That's important because this is my first relationship like this. It has always been a challenge for me to trust men in general because my father was not a kind or trustworthy man. And I had a habit of choosing men who were like my dad.

Steve has offered me consistent friendship and a soft place to land. He is a man of integrity, passion and conviction. He is kind. He has a great sense of humor. With great follow-through and reliability, he does what he says he will do. We can talk about anything. Our relationship has depth and meaning. He is everything I want in a friend. We were working on a project, and it did not go the way I expected. I felt like I had been stabbed in the chest. It triggered all my childhood abandonment memories, and I emotionally imploded. I fired off a terse email.

Not my best move. We sent some emails and texts back and forth. He seemed interested in understanding what happened and in maintaining our friendship.

I must take responsibility for my overreaction, and I will have to have a hard conversation with him. Hard for me because this is the place I usually run. I want him to understand how hurt I am by the way he handled the situation. To tell him that all I wanted was for him to listen to me and that I did not feel heard. Telling him what I thought he did wrong will be easy for me, but I usually state those accusations on my way out the door. It will be different for me if I can actually sit down with him. The truth is that this is a relationship I wish to keep, but I just don't know how to do that. I feel backed into a wall, maybe with pride or fear, or that I don't know how to hit a bump in the road and just keep driving. I know how to believe that that bump is the end because this is the place that I customarily drive off into the ditch. I have no concept of how to move through conflict and then resume a relationship cleanly without resentment. He is an important part of my life. I want to try. There's a lot at stake here. It's not just about our relationship. It's about ME being IN relationships. This is my training ground. IF I can do this with him, it could be possible for me to have a long-term romantic relationship with someone in the future. I'm just not sure I can do it.

I sent a note to my therapist telling her that he and I were meeting. I told her, "To give you an update, Steve and I sent a couple of texts back and forth. I think I was trying to prepare him for my level of crazy. I don't want him to be shocked at my inability to be normal. But I don't think it worked. He kept coming back with words and phrases like resolution, forgiveness, commitment, and moving forward. And then, the kick in the chest, unity, that one hit me really hard and almost sent me running!

And it may send me running.

He keeps showing me who he is, which of course is everything I say I want in the people in my life. I do not know if I can do this. I remember being freaked out with you in the beginning too…when you kept showing up with neutral integrity and commitment. But it's a different relationship with him, and I feel that I have a lot to lose here because I've never gone this emotionally deep in a friendship with a man. I don't know if I can do this. Right now, I want to call and cancel

this meeting with him. I'm trying not to do that. Well, I guess there's no question as to why I'm in therapy."

The days and hours leading up to that meeting were traumatic for me. My nervous system was dysregulated. My body was shaking and I felt nauseous. I considered—a million times—canceling this meeting right up until five minutes before. Somehow, I kept moving and it was suddenly the appointed time. I waited on the sidewalk at our meeting place. I leaned against a pillar to steady my body. I saw him in my peripheral vision. I felt his energy as he approached with that consistent neutrality he always displays. I had an impulse to run, but my feet wouldn't move. He greeted me with a smile and asked, "How are you?" I replied. "I feel sick." He tried to make small talk. I found it excruciating. I wanted to get this over with.

We sat down; he seemed surprised that I pulled out a notebook. I said I had made some notes to keep me on track. Mostly it was a list of my grievances, and I didn't want to forget any of them. I started by telling him how angry I felt about what happened. He looked bewildered. I've seen that look before from men in my life. It told me that I had this all wrong. That I had once again overreacted and misunderstood and was taking what happened as a personal attack. But I did not want that to be true, so I held tight to wanting to prove that I was "right." Some of that attitude is a reaction to the mental illness I was diagnosed with at the end of 2024. Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder, OCPD. Not to be confused with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, OCD.

Years prior (with a different therapist than I have now)I had been given a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD. I don't like having labels; who does? But the PTSD was easier to take. It was an obvious diagnosis brought on by living through multiple traumas. It made sense. I looked at it as something that was outside myself. It existed because things happened "to" me that were out of my control. The OCPD was a devastating blow to my inner sense of self, my emotional well-being. My ability to understand who I was. The word "Personality" stuck with me. While I viewed the PTSD as an outside intruder; I saw the OCPD as a huge character flaw, like something I should not have allowed. As if I had control over not letting this thing infiltrate my mind and my heart.

The diagnosis of OCPD meant that it was in my DNA and there was something inherently wrong with ME. It made true what I had always believed about myself: that I am a horrible person.

OCPD, according to my therapist, in my case was brought on from the years of abuse and neglect I experienced in my childhood. People with OCPD have behaviors that are driven by a deep-seated desire for control, flawless perfection, and efficiency. They may be excessively dedicated to work, hold rigid moral values, or refuse to delegate tasks because they believe that others will not do them "just right." All that describes me accurately. OCPD is a lifelong personality pattern characterized by extreme perfectionism, an overwhelming need for control, and rigid adherence to rules. As a child, those patterns sometimes kept me from experiencing my dad's violent outbursts. As an adult trying to navigate through a society where there's no room to be different or display a compromised mental capacity, it doesn't work very well. A few months before our meeting, I told Steve about my diagnosis. Now, he was seeing it in action. Up close. It wasn't pretty. Still, he met me with compassion and grace, and we worked out things about this current event. Another huge understanding that occurred to me prior to our meeting was, "This is a person I love." I thought I would pass out as I shared that realization with him in our meeting. I just took a deep breath and told him how I felt. I told him that I also realized that I had not loved very many people in my life, and it felt overwhelming in good and bad ways. That I wasn't even sure what that meant. Love toward a man with whom I have a platonic relationship has never occurred in my life; others have tried, but I've never allowed it. His authenticity and pure grace were holding a space for my feelings, and it felt euphoric. And terrifying. I realized that the only separation in our relationship is the separation in my head. The daily battle I rage between my heart, my head and my soul...*I want your love...please go away.* It's a constant argument I have with myself for as long as I can remember: *am I a loving and deserving human?* Or *am I the piece of shit my father always told me I was?* The problem is that I am never sure which way is right or safe.

For a few days after that meeting, I felt a sense of freedom. I thought, *maybe, I can do this.* Briefly, I leaned into the grace and love of the friendship he offered

with no strings. But then, it started to sink in, and I panicked. I thought *this whole process has been exhausting and terrifying; maybe I don't need any friends.* In my therapy session, I revealed the most disturbing thing about my conversation with Steve. I also called him to tell him about it. I thought that if I kept this to myself, then there would be no chance of staying in this relationship. Besides that, he's already seen the worst of me, and he says he still wants to be my friend. When we were talking, he told me some things about me that he liked. He said I was a beautiful person. I don't know if he meant aesthetically or internally or both. But that word, "beautiful," got stuck in my head. That injured little girl in me wanted to run and never look back, to let my mental illness take over, as I had done so many times before. Then I considered the person of integrity that I want to be; she wanted to bask in knowing that this man, my friend, saw me, really saw me and still wanted to stay. I told him that his seeing me as beautiful was life-changing for me. It was the first time that a man told me something like that with no agenda. I still want to run. This place of limbo, uncertainty, and transition is so extremely uncomfortable that I just want out! My nervous system is dysregulated, and I can't seem to sit still.

The question remains: can I do this? Is our friendship worth tending to, deadheading to make room for more beauty, depth, and growth? Can I stay and nurture myself within this friendship for the long run; or like the annual flowers in my garden, am I good only for a season? It just occurred to me that maybe that is why I'm such a skilled gardener; I am only obligated to stay for the season. There's a definite end, and I know I will be able to move on from the failures and disappointments and try again next year. The less obvious and more pressing questions are: Am I worthy of allowing love and grace into my life? Am I worth it? I'm still not sure if I can answer those questions, though I will admit that I feel a shift coming on. Some of that shift is bringing a subtle sense of calm, like floating on a placid sea...yet still being hyper-vigilant for the choppy waters.

Something happened a few days after my latest conversation with Steve. It seems unrelated, but it's really just the next logical step in my progression toward possibly allowing love into my life. I am involved in a weekly community event with about 80 other people. I've met and conversed with a few of the participants.

There's one person, a man whom I've seen from a distance and—more times than I can count—I have caught him staring at me. His gaze is intriguing enough that I haven't looked away. One day he approached me, and we engaged in a brief but deep conversation with edges of spirituality and humor. There was an instant in those few minutes that I saw him as a deeper, more complicated person than the one I saw at a distance. I felt a magnetic pull toward his energy. I wondered *what attracts me to him. Could this be someone I allow to bring love into my life?* I have found myself going back to those moments repeatedly, wanting to lean into them.

Then, the OCPD kicks in, and I start thinking about all the possibilities and how this needs to go and how perfect it will be. It's exhausting! It would be so much easier to just let it be and see what happens or what doesn't happen and be okay with that. At least I am considering that just allowing it to unfold is a possibility. That's a result of my hard work in therapy. It's something. Isn't it?

I am practicing allowing things to unfold in my garden. More this year than ever before, I am not trying to be the perfect gardener. I'm enjoying the process. The garden is its own society. There are plants that thrive, bloom, and flourish; they live in affluent neighborhoods with rich soil and plenty of resources. Then, there are plants that struggle to grow, be the right color, have the prettiest blooms and stable root systems. There are those that never make it out of their broken-down properties; they don't get the right amount of sun, shade, water, or PH. There are others in the society of the garden who are never offered a chance to see their life paths to fruition. They are the common garden pests: the aphids, the slugs, or the invasive plants. Slugs, for example, are important to the ecosystem. They are nature's recycling kings. They break down dead plant material and fungi to cycle nutrients into the soil. And they are a vital food source for birds and frogs. If they knew how to stay in the compost heap, I would be okay with them. But they insist on taking down my Gerbera Daisies and other coveted flowers, and that is unacceptable. They don't know their place in this society. That's how many people have viewed me over my lifetime. That I don't know my place, that I'm too much, too sensitive, too dramatic, too rigid, too exact, too righteous.

There's another part of me that is not considered to be a mental illness (like the other two legit mental illnesses I feel saddled with) though it has always felt like a

mental illness to me, one more thing that sets me apart from the rest of society. On the Myers-Briggs Personality Test, I am an INFJ (Introverted, Intuitive, Feeling, Judging). Out of the 16 personality types on the spectrum, INFJs are the rarest, at only 1.5% of the general population. Yeah, I needed something else to single me out and make me feel like I don't belong in this world.

Once, someone who I thought was my friend for more than a year dumped me. She witnessed my having a trauma response to something that happened, and she told me that I was rude to the other people at the gathering and said that my "behavior" embarrassed her. What happened that day was that I was not in the emotional space to be with people, which I told her. She insisted it was important that I "get out and socialize." Instead of honoring my intuition, I let her shame me into doing something I did not want to do. I became overwhelmed, and I shut down and could not converse very well and needed to leave abruptly, and to protect myself and I did leave. I tried to explain to her that I had experienced previous trauma and something at that event activated it. A couple of days later she called to say, "I'm calling to tell you that I can no longer be friends with you. Your PTSD is too much." Not just too much for her, just too much! I hung up the phone thinking, *whatever, you're not the first person to say something like that to me and you won't be the last*. *Get in line, sister!* If the PTSD was too much, I can only imagine what that conversation would have been like if I had had the OCPD diagnosis at that time. I think what I'm afraid of with Steve is that something else will happen and it will be very apparent that I am mentally ill and I will lose him too. But that's probably not fair to him. Just because I don't know how to love someone who isn't perfect, doesn't mean that he doesn't know how to do that.

I feel like I'm always waiting for something to happen to ruin things. Recently, Steve and I met for lunch, and something else did happen. He asked me how I was doing, and I told him, "Not very well, but I'll save it for my therapist." But he didn't shy away from that; in fact, he leaned into it with curiosity. So, I told him that I had been struggling with my emotions and self-deprecating thoughts. I really tried not to go into too much detail; after all, he's not my therapist. The conversation continued into different areas, and he filled me in on his life. The weather was lovely that day, and we decided to take a stroll. I guess I felt safe with

him because I told him the depth of my sorrow. I started to cry, which turned into a wail, and I could not stop! I reached out to him, and he put his arm around me and just let me cry. I felt pathetic and undeserving of his grace. He wasn't judging me; he wasn't giving me unsolicited advice or in any way trying to fix anything. He was simply present with me in my distress. For a hot minute, I let myself feel that love. On my drive home, out loud, I berated myself for being 'too much', 'pathetic', 'undeserving' and a slew of other adjectives. "What an idiot you are! He is never going to call you again. You had the chance to have a friend, and you couldn't do it! YOU are incapable of allowing love."

*Maybe I am the slug in other people's gardens.* I thought. *Maybe I would be better off dead.* I can't seem to stop those kinds of thoughts from swirling like a whirlpool in my brain. It takes a lot of energy to fight for your life. I keep trying to find some sense of balance—always pushing myself toward things that are positive. But none of those efforts mean anything if at the end of the day I don't value me. I sent a text to Steve asking him to meet for coffee. He agreed. I did it mostly because I wanted to see if I could show up, if I could be present for his love. If I could be in the moment and offer him the same grace he gives to me. Turns out that I could. So now, I can relax a bit with the understanding that I don't have to keep testing him or myself. I've made it this far.

The questions that run through my head on a constant loop: *Can I keep showing up like a flower in full bloom and see myself as someone of worth who contributes to their society in a beautiful way? Can I allow myself to be broken open, be vulnerable, and let love in?*

# From the Trees to the Seas

by C.J. Friend

The kid cozies in a lamb outfit, faux wool, exaggerated round sheep ears, unaware of the overt tension around him. Mom and Dad are angry at each other, angry at the world, angry at their luck, no longer in love as they once were, defeated. They once had enough love to create the kid—if love includes the lust that often passes for genuine passion—inescapable urges that foment the primitive act of conception, and impel mom and dad through the pregnancy and what follows, each month marked with expanding anticipation, and then the birth itself.

And so the kid appears. The event spawns a dreamworld of messages and thankfulness and a matchless sense of awe. The mysticism of birth and the attention are intoxicating, and along with adrenaline and caffeine and determination, carry Mom and Dad through the first few weeks. But their reserves dwindle, their resolve begins to decay, and then there are just sleepless nights and endless days and situations they never imagined. Mom and Dad are adrift. They have no idea what is happening. No one ever told them about this part of having a kid, the stress that comes along with creating a life and then keeping it alive, how the kid consumes so much, never stops eating and drinking and growing.

They don't have enough money to keep up with all the kid requires, so Mom takes a day shift at the Circle K a couple of miles away, and Dad does night clerk

duties at the Econo Lodge because, on top of everything else, babysitting is too expensive. There is no relief in sight, just a future that looks suspiciously like days and weeks and months of exhaustion.

But the kid is part of the deal now. They are no longer a couple. They are a family. They often wish—though they wouldn't ever say it aloud—that they could go back to those halcyon days when stressors were trivial, and they were nothing more than a couple in love. But they've signed a contract, one made of genetics and blood, and they're obligated to care for that covenant every minute of every day. They can't recall the last time they were alone together, and they now realize that won't happen anytime soon.

They manage to go for walks like they used to, driven by desperation more than anything. But they aren't alone. Now the kid goes with them—he has to—stuffed into some sort of animal costume that strangers are quick to call cute, but they are ignorant of the reality. By next week the outfit will be replaced by another, and another, and another, all of them cute, all of them expensive, all of them adding to a burden they can barely handle.

The kid is there, always there, and the kid doesn't care about Mom and Dad's exhaustion or frustration, nor does the kid care that the landlord told Mom and Dad that the rent will be doubling when their lease is up in a month, and sorry, but they can take it or leave it. Nor does the kid care that the news is verdant with speculation that the economy is going to hell, that groceries will be getting even more expensive, and housing is scarce and unaffordable, and the kid certainly doesn't know or care that his parents live in an area where the rich and retired—the intolerable Californians, the assholes from Seattle, and pretentious Portlanders—drive up the price of everything by buying mansions they will only use a couple of times a year, and maybe a week at Christmas.

Mom and Dad want relief from their agony, want nothing more than to escape from all the madness, and return to how things used to be, when they were in love and excited about the future, when life held something of a promise—but now there is the kid, always the kid. They love the kid. He is the glorious center of life. But there are moments, far too many, when they can't help but wonder how different life might be if they hadn't loved so well.

They get plenty of advice from friends and family, but after a time they understand that words don't help very much at all.

***

Nelson did his time in the AOR—that's what everyone called anything connected to the whole Middle East mess, the Area of Responsibility, Afghanistan and Iraq, and the wastelands around and in between—and yeah, he got plumb blowed up, yeah, that's how Mossey would have said it, if he hadn't got his own head plumb blowed off at the same time.

Nelson doesn't talk about the incident with the Humvee at all, ever, because getting blowed up in a war is a trope now, a barbaric event made commonplace by sheer cinematic repetition, shown in movie after movie, and now—*dammit*—people are numb to the depiction, and they don't offer a response that is even remotely genuine. They just revert to that safe, saccharine *thank you for your service* bullshit, always said in an unnatural voice, maybe along with a touch on the arm. They think they are doing something good and noble. But they don't understand, no one really does, and never will, not in any amount of time ever created, but—*dammit*—they still pretend like they do, all of them, over and over again, and then the VA docs wonder why Nelson won't talk about the explosion. He is desperate just to move on with life but he can't because every night the horrible dotted shapes revisit him, the awful dead things that move right along with anything good he tries to imagine, nice ideas like flowers and bright sun and unicorns and kittens and any hope. It doesn't matter. They all get bashed and mutilated, all because no one can treat him normally, all because no one understands.

Because they can't. So, he wanders.

Nelson is a Black man, stick-thin and tall. He is a scraggly mess, but he doesn't care. He hasn't had a haircut in two years, and his beard has grown out with the hair. He doesn't want to talk with anyone, and outside of the VA docs he isn't interested in anything but the barest interaction. If someone approaches him,

he walks the other way. If they persist, he walks faster, runs if he has to. He gets yelled at a lot—and called all sorts of names—but nothing that he hadn't heard in the Army. He carries thousands of dollars in cash and isn't worried about getting mugged, and never has.

It's that whole demeanor thing.

Today, Nelson gives up on the VA hospital in Roseburg, just like he's done with every other VA facility, and starts walking north. His provocations guide him, the ones he can never quite pin down, but they are there, just like they were in the few seconds before the IED exploded, when he heard the buzzing, and he knew something wasn't right, but he didn't want to look like a pussy in front of the others. Besides, there was no need to worry. They—Gohan, Mossey, and Carver—had been through some shit over the previous four months and they were still alive, had some scrapes and near misses, but were otherwise bulletproof, cocooned in a vehicle of armor and wearing battle rattle, fully clothed with the idea that nothing could harm them.

So he said nothing, even as the buzzing got louder.

Nelson had an epiphany at that exact moment, something very few understand, that there is an

***immediate before***

and an

***immediate after***

to every incident that matters, and these are arranged like dots on an infinite field of white, infinitesimally small slices of matter and space and time that create an eternity of their own.

They are the memories that feed the demons.

Nelson recalls the

***immediate after***

and he doesn't want to, but he isn't given a choice in the matter. He's led to the exact place he doesn't want to go. Now, right in front of him, one of those slices comes to life, a gap of time and reality and knowing...

...and noises.

People are screaming. Nelson doesn't recognize a single voice.

"We gotta push it. We're gonna push it outta the way."

"Turn it out. Get ahead. Pull that thing over here now, *dammit*!"

"The fire...cook off the rounds. Get that damn fire out..."

"Turn it out. Put it out."

"We need a fuckin' medic right now!"

"That's .50-cal ammo, dammit, and everything's gonna start cookin' off!"

"We got nothin' to put it out with."

"The ammo's in the back. Get it out right fuckin' now!"

Then, in the midst of the urgency, he hears a voice of calm, and someone shaking his shoulder.

"Nelson, Nelson, you all right?"

Nelson is pretty sure he is not.

Then someone else is screaming directly in his face, showering him with spittle and hot breath. This screamer is tugging in the area of Nelson's med kit, right where the emergency trauma bandages are stored.

"Soldier, talk to me. Talk to me. You got a name?"

Nelson isn't sure of that either. He hears the distant hacking of a Blackhawk, and someone directing, "Hey, call HQ. Set it down, set it down here!"

At that moment something else goes horribly wrong. There's that surreal gap again, where reality is suspended, and then the voices around him are coping with something else, a newer horror, another fusillade of explosions, some going off all at once, some bursting like jazz, others so dominant Nelson thinks the world is ending.

Then the screams creep back toward him.

"Hey, you gotta—hey—"

"*Dammit*, you gotta keep back"

"Medevac, we need more medevac, we got more–"

"Hey, get that—"

*Oh, hell*, Nelson remembers. *The Humvee. I'm the one that signed for the Humvee, and now it's all blown to hell, and now I'm gonna have to pay for it. I can't afford no Humvee, dammit.*

The others in the Humvee—Gohan, Carver, and Mossey—were once closer than brothers. Now Nelson never wants to hear about them again. He doesn't even know if Gohan and Carver are dead or alive, and he doesn't care. If he had his choice, he wouldn't think about them at all, ever, or the AOR, or the service to his country that gets him constantly thanked. But he doesn't get that choice. They're all just part of the dots on the field of white.

Demon food.

Nelson comes back to

**the now**

and there is something blocking his way, demanding his attention.

He is looking at a billboard, and it is like a revelation from God. There are words, something about an aquarium, otters, sharks. But he sees past all that. Waves. Big, beautiful, brutal waves created by an immense, dark green sea, flinging pristine white foam in every direction, absolute unrestrained freedom, waters breaking upon beaches of prehistoric rock grindings so densely packed together that they support the weight of an entire ocean.

And in all of that, a single word crystalizes like a commandment:

**Coast**

At the same time, the buzz starts up again, the faint sound that reminds him of a locust's cry, and it tells him to listen and do what he's told. The vision compels him to turn left, to the west, and so he does, until he is walking on Highway 20, the longest road in the U.S. But he couldn't care less. West or left doesn't matter. It's just another direction to wander.

What matters is that he obeys.

Because then the buzzing stops.

***

Gas is almost unaffordable since the summer blend hit the pumps, so Mom and Dad and the kid do a lot of walking. They are beset with real trade-offs, like choosing between cheap packaged crap or expensive fresh food, the Dollar Store

or Safeway. They've heard that processed food has chemicals that will make the kid stupid, and so they walk.

Mom is the numbers person in the marriage, and she knows all too well how much money they need to stay afloat, and the numbers don't work like they used to. But it's her job to make sure they have money, and if they can't afford things, it's her fault, at least that's what Dad thinks. Dad isn't a numbers guy. Math makes him feel stupid. He yells at Mom most every day because now he has to work so hard—way more than he used to—and without a break, just so they can *not* have enough money. He thinks it's bullshit, and he tells her that, all the time.

Mom doesn't need to tell Dad that the damn kid is the biggest drain on their cash. The unexpected events sucker-punch them, the doctor visits in particular, the earaches, the colds, the owies that can't be explained but don't go away, where the kid cries and cries and nothing makes him stop, so they wrap him up and take him to the urgent care or the emergency room and they wait there for hours, and the kid screams the whole time, so there must be something wrong with him, right? They finally get to see someone who's not even a doctor, and the kid is probed and poked and measured, and the not-doctor can't find anything wrong with the kid, not even a temperature. One cherry Dum-Dum later the kid is smiling and giggling, and they are out $250, a lot of sleep, and a good part of their weekend.

They are trying hard, really, really hard, to love the kid, to appreciate the miracle everyone says he is, but the truth is now they aren't sure what they feel, not sure about the kid, not sure about each other, not sure about life at all.

Escape is starting to look like a pretty good option. Dad is thinking about what life might be like with another woman. He knows several, and each of them have good jobs and no kids, and some even have their own houses. Mom tells her parents about Dad's verbal abuse, how tired she is, and how she's not happy, not one bit. Her parents used to assuage her, tell her everything would be fine, that all marriages went through the same thing. But they aren't telling her that anymore. In fact, these days her parents don't have much to say about anything.

Mom and Dad once had a romance with each other and with the Pacific, the beauty of the waves and the thunderous sounds and the cool breeze. They would

go on long walks, find a log to sit on, then stare at the horizon, holding hands, looking into the remnants of the sun—a ritual that fed their soul—gold light flung everywhere like a cosmic tree shedding leaves of water, the invention of something divine.

Now, more often than not, they don't think about the ocean. Each day brings foreboding rather than joy. Sometimes they walk to the highway and stare across the asphalt to the east, like refugees dumped into an unknown land, trying to comprehend the barren waste that will soon be their new home.

***

Nelson started walking near Anderson, Indiana—his hometown—and hop-scotched his way across the country, tracking west through Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Nevada, California, and then to Oregon, hitting up VA facilities along the way, hoping for something that might help him, maybe even fix him, whether by miracle or medicine or magic.

He has a 100% service-connected rating that guarantees him a tax-free $3500 once-a-month, and Uncle Sam, as his dad used to say, is real good at shitting on Friday. The money feels like a payoff, like his service is being recognized right along with his silence, $42K a year for as long as he lives, if one can call what he endures every day a life.

These thoughts drag him back to the

***immediate before,***

and the lesson he learned over there, in the AOR: the lesson of

**perspective.**

They are part of a four-vehicle convoy, number three in line, booking down some unnamed, unpaved, barely-a-road, and they are radioed-up, because without the intercom they'd have no chance at hearing each other over the engine and road noise.

There are the three others. Sergeant Gohan, the Humvee driver and vehicle commander. Carver is riding shotgun, and he is from St. Louis. Nelson remem-

bers sitting in the right rear. Mossey, from outside of nowhere in Tennessee, sits back-left, telling them about how poor he was growing up.

"How poor?" Nelson asks.

Mossey says, "Well, I had six brothers and five sisters—"

"Holy fuck," Carver says. "You guys Mormon or Catholic?"

"Neither one. Episcopalian. And we wasn't even the biggest family in the church, if'n y'all can believe that. Anyways, we was so poor we got just one tub of water every night for all of us."

"You gotta be shittin' me."

"Nope, not one bit. We start with the oldest and go to the youngest. The trick was to double or triple up where you could. There was this kind of strategy to it."

"How's that?" Gohan asks.

"Well, as you might surmise, the tub got dirtier and colder as the night went on, and some of us was dirtier than others. So to avoid that, we would trade-up in the order, call in or do a favor, whatever was needed to avoid going toward the end."

Gohan says, "Like a gat damn baseball team."

"I guess," Mossey replies, "but I'd say we was more like a football team."

"Wait a second—" Carver says, then he pauses, like he has an epiphany. "Are you saying that sometimes you cleaned up with your sisters?"

"Yup. More'n once. Pretty often, as a matter of fact."

"In the same tub?"

"Yup."

"Hot damn. You all was some damn inbred hicks."

"Maybe. Maybe we was. But we didn't know no better. I'll tell you what, it sure made going through basic training easy."

*Ah*, Nelson thinks, *now this is true*

**perspective.**

Nelson knows this firsthand. He grew up in a home where there were four bathrooms for four people—Dad and Mom, and younger brother Greg and him—and you had all the hot water you wanted, whenever you wanted. Then basic training took away all his privacy and comfort, exposed him to the idea of a communal shower—fifty showerheads in a single tiled room—right alongside a

thirty-foot-long bathroom lined with toilets on both sides, and no privacy walls. Nelson all of a sudden couldn't take a shit, and he got really plugged up, and he got really good at holding it until he could find a toilet outside the barracks, somewhere he could crap in private. But that was basic training. It was all about breaking you down, making you uncomfortable, taking away all you depended on, changing your

**perspective**

and taking away all you thought you couldn't live without. Because, My Good Gracious Lord, they ended up in Iraq of all places, where most people shit in holes in the floor, and those were the civilized folk, and there wasn't a bathtub to be seen outside the big cities, and being dirty was just part of the deal. Add in the hellish temperatures and an entire country made of dirt, and what was the point of cleaning up, ever? Their MREs had a Wet One—it was technically called a moist towelette, but no one called it that—and he used that to clean up, but he had to work in and around his battle rattle, which meant he maybe might reach his armpits and crotch and face and legs but he couldn't get to his whole body.

But overall, they were doing OK in the AOR, from Nelson's

**perspective.**

But there's no denying that something in them went sideways over there. They were desensitized now, the outcome of wandering around an unknown country in a slow, obvious vehicle, surrounded by people who mostly wanted them to leave, dead or alive, dealing with the unfamiliar sounds and realizations of genuine combat, not really understanding how stress, fear, and trauma pounded away at the most fragile part of them, the part that didn't want to be maimed or injured.

Yet the frequency and intensity of their circumstances never abated, so they learned to make decisions differently. They didn't even pretend to be normal, stable human beings. They got so used to death and blood and killing and violence and weariness that they didn't care about anything except each other and getting back home.

They adapted. They changed their

**perspective.**

They mocked everything, denigrated each other's mothers and wives and husbands, added the word *fuck* to everything they said, didn't give a shit about anything other than the chain of command and each other. Hell, they didn't sleep even when they slept—hypervigilance is the ten-dollar word for that—and did so while armed with guns and grenades and the deadliest tools of the trade. Somehow—*somehow*—they still made pretty good choices, good enough to serve their country.

But they left something behind in the AOR. America and all they once knew seemed like someone else's life.

Today, in the

***immediate before***

they are returning from a reconnaissance mission after driving eight hours, four hours there and four hours back, in the middle of damn June in damn Iraq. Little has gone right, but they haven't been shot at. Without a doubt, a good

**perspective,**

He reminds himself.

"Well, at least we're almost done for the day," Gohan, the sarge—at least for a few more moments—says.

Carver concurs. "Yeah, what a shit day, what a fuckin' waste of time."

Gohan notices something. "Carver, white truck, nine o'clock. What do you make of that?"

"I got him. Think he's a problem?"

"I dunno. What do you think?"

The IED goes off right next to the Humvee's left front door.

***

A visitor to Newport, standing in the middle of the Pacific Coast Highway and looking north, would likely miss the immense, invisible fissure that divides the central Oregon coast. The houses to the left of this divide are the most expensive in the area, and get pricier as they approach the Pacific. Dad has been in these

homes, back when he did landscaping work, and now Mom has to listen to him rail about them, how the living rooms are the size of their entire rental house, and why the hell does anyone need that much room anyway, much less two decrepit fossils with not more than a few years to live, waddling down to the beach every day, driving slower than the speed limit because they got no place to be, don't have a care in the world except themselves, looking down on everyone who doesn't have a house as nice as theirs, and especially the poor folks that can't afford to live on the beach side of 101.

Mom and Dad are all too familiar with the economics of real estate in this area. If you can't afford an expensive home, you live toward the mountains on the east, where the have-nots cluster in various communities—Toledo, Siletz, Yaquina, and Otis and Rose Lodge to the north, above Lincoln City—not to mention the forgotten families who inhabit the back roads that tendril through the mountains.

These days the rental housing market is tight. Mom and Dad don't have a lot of time to look for a new place to live because they are always working or watching the kid. Family and friends try to help out some, but they have their own lives and priorities. They might say they care, but the truth is that they do what suits them, and this is another thing adults learn along the way, that more often than not you are on your own, and help comes and goes in singular moments, not in sustained days or months or weeks, or anything you can count on.

Mom and Dad do what they can to survive, but reality seems keen to pile on their misery. The landlord is hinting that he might not return their deposit, and they were counting on that money to get them into a new place. The car decides to fall apart. First the brakes squeak, then the alternator seizes, and now the transmission is making noises, and half of the time the car is in the shop or at a friend's house. They get to work by bumming rides and taking the bus, and they manage, but between the kid and the jobs and the car and the need to move, the weight of life is almost intolerable.

Then, a moment of hope. A friend tells them about a rental they can afford, says it's a nice place, but they have to make a decision right now. They do. That

day, they meet the landlord in town and sign a year-long lease, and have a moment of relief.

Two days later they set eyes on the new place. It's a single-wide trailer, ancient and rusty and dented, half as big as their old place, one of 25 units on each side, bisected by a pocked, single-lane gravel road. The trailer is angled and wedged onto a piece of land that leaves only four mingy feet on all sides, just enough to accommodate the rotting steps up to the front door. It takes two weeks, but they eventually get their possessions shuttled over to the new place, borrowing a pickup to get the big stuff over. They have to disassemble their couch and one of their easy chairs to get them through the front door. Everything fits, barely, but nothing feels the same.

A dank miasma saturates the trailer, and while there is no visible mold, the promise seems to hang in every room. There is no real privacy, just one bedroom, one bathroom, and a living room that fades into a very small kitchen. The bathroom stinks, and Dad is pretty sure the septic is on the way out. They still don't know how they will manage the distance to their jobs, especially if the car dies, gas prices be damned. Thumbing or bumming, more than likely.

But this is their home now.

One of their new neighbors stops by, an overweight woman, purple-haired and fiftyish, and she is all too happy to tell them about their new community. She lets them know the neighbor on the north side of them is a crazy woman who thinks her mother is an elk, has been known to fly her flag at half-staff when she hears about a lost dog, blares sixties psychedelic rock at all hours of the day, and will sue any and all of her neighbors for the smallest slight, and since she comes from money, she doesn't care about court costs, because she doesn't have anything else to do, anyway. The guy on the other side of them is a convicted child molester, and Mom and Dad will get a letter informing them that the perv was there first, and if they are uncomfortable with this arrangement, they might want to consider moving, because the information is public, and Mom and Dad should have done their due diligence before moving in. Never mind that their new landlord likely knew this and didn't tell them, just as he didn't explain why the previous tenants left.

Yes, this is their home now, and they already hate it, and the hate is well past permeating their souls.

***

Every night, ever since returning from Iraq, Nelson cries before he goes to sleep, never during the day, never in front of anyone. He knows, and has accepted, that he will never write a poem, never fall in love, never be close to anyone, ever. The demons see to that. He can't escape them because they live in his brain, in his memories, and getting them to shut the hell up means he must not have any thoughts. So far nothing helps, not medicine, not drugs, not alcohol.

Nelson leaves Philomath, and he has no idea that's the last civilization he'll encounter for the next 43 miles on Highway 20. There are a few towns along the way—Wren, Blodgett, Burnt Woods, Eddyville—but these are not much more than wide spots in the road.

The trees soar above him, millions upon millions of them, huge and looming and dark and ancient, surrounding and swallowing him whole, allowing him only rare peeks at what once was the sky. The woods wash the air and make it so clean and crisp that the interaction with his alveoli cause his lungs to react in something like pain Only it doesn't hurt in an unnatural way, more like he is encountering something like the first touch of a lover, infinitely pure, shocking, surprising, wonderful.

He has not felt so helpless, so much an outsider and unwelcome, since leaving the AOR. There are hundreds of unknown sensations, primeval plants and creatures, creaks and beckonings he can't identify, and they emanate from a forest so dense that if he walks just 15 yards off the road, he is buried in darkness, and the highway noise is reduced to a whisper.

At night he camps and weeps just a few feet off the highway. During the day the forest continues, endless, terrifying, both exhilarating and claustrophobic. Nelson tries to comprehend where he is, but fails. The

should be getting closer, but as time passes, he begins to doubt this, and begins to believe the entire trek west is a subterfuge invented by the demons to toy with him, that there is no ocean or any other created thing waiting for him on the other side of the endless forest. And yet, at the same time, he knows that if he turns and heads back the way he came, the awful buzzing will start again, and will continue until he obeys and resumes walking west.

It takes him three days to arrive in Newport.

***

Mom and Dad take one final look at the old place. Clean and empty of everything they own, their old house feels enormous, capacious, ready for the next occupant, whoever is willing to pay twice as much for the privilege of living a block from the ocean. Even though Mom and Dad have never met the next tenant, they hate them.

They take a slow walk around the place, taking pictures and making sure everything is spotless, still not sure if the landlord intends to screw them out of their deposit. They want to linger, but it is getting late, and the kid needs to be fed, because otherwise, the screaming will start, and then there will be no way to shut him up. Even with bribes of candy and toys, the kid screams for hours. They're starting to think he has some sort of mental problems. At some point the kid wears out and falls asleep, but Mom and Dad have no idea for how long.

They tuck the kid into a tiger costume, the one that doubles as an outfit and pajamas, because it is cold outside and the afternoon wind is starting to pick up, and with their luck it will start raining. They've got a long walk ahead. A friend is supposed to pick them up at the Walgreens on 101, and she'll drop them off at Ross Auto Repair, and then they have to beg their way through the repair bill since they need their car. They've got enough for the estimate and nothing more.

At some point, there's nothing to do but get on with it. They leave the house, make sure the door is locked, leave the keys under a rock in the front, and start walking. They head up 4th Street, then cut over on 2nd Street, taking one last look

at the Pacific they used to know, and it feels much like they are saying goodbye to a loved one dying of cancer. The ocean calls back to them in crushing sounds and diamond waves, endless, majestic, and so compelling, inviting them to come and sit just one more time, to gaze together into the distance. They linger for a moment, and an avalanche of memories sluice in. Somehow they now feel even worse.

They head directly east until they intersect with 101, then turn and walk north on the sidewalk in front of the tourist stores, carrying the kid in a reluctant love. There is no conversation. Mom and Dad are lost in their own realities, their own damned existence, each clawing through muddy thoughts, the things they would change if given a chance, wondering if something universal is working against them, correcting a mistake and sending them to the place they should have been all along, where they can be among their own kind.

Because there's no place for them back there, where the ocean meets the shore.

***

They meet at the corner of 101 and West Olive. The couple with the kid misses the chance to cross the highway to the Walgreens parking lot, so now they have to wait for the light to change. They see an unkempt black man with a large backpack loping through the intersection, disregarding the warnings not to cross.

Nelson makes it to the corner, looks confused, sees the couple and the kid.

"Coast?" he asks.

Mom doesn't reply. She is looking the other way, contemplating something else. Dad decides the backpacker is just another meth-addled homeless idiot, and says nothing. He points across his body down West Olive.

A simple transaction. Nothing more.

Perfect.

Nelson, the backpacker with PTSD, doesn't say anything else, not even *thanks*, and continues walking west. The light turns colors, and the couple with the kid crosses the street to the east.

But in that moment of passing all of them—Nelson, Mom, and Dad—have the same thought, though they articulate nothing:

*You don't want to go that way.*

*There's nothing for you in that direction.*

# Private Parts

## by Kathy Smith

Karie felt few people would agree with her on this, but she was compelled to state her case, anyway.

It was her first time back at the Florence Aquatic Center since returning from visiting family in France. She finished her laps and went into the sauna, as she usually did. There was one woman sitting on the raised bench, another on the lower bench, and soon a third, younger woman came in and sat on the lower bench as well. Karie stretched out, lying on a towel on her back.

There had been a sign on the door for a while, stating that one was required to wrap a towel around them when in the sauna. She understood people's modesty, but she liked to take a sauna the way it was designed, in the buff.

The older woman who was sitting on the lower bench looked at Karie and frowned. *Can't she read the sign?* She thought to herself. *The nerve of some people!* The woman got up to go. She was very non-descript, had medium-length gray hair, and was wearing a synthetic bathing suit.

"Didn't you see the sign on the outside of the door?" said the woman. "You're supposed to wear at least a towel wrapped around you when you're in the sauna." Karie's error was telling her exactly how she felt: "That's not how they do it in Scandinavia!"

"Well, we're not in Scandinavia, are we?" said the woman in a huff. "It's rude to expose yourself that way, and it's against the rules!" The woman walked out, but Karie had the lingering sense that she hadn't heard the end of it yet.

"Gosh, she seems a little up tight," said the woman who had been sitting on the upper bench. She spoke with a slight accent. Karie had not looked at her directly when she came in, since she usually didn't pay too much attention to other people who were in the sauna, unless they addressed her directly. She liked to respect other people's privacy and tried to maintain her own. The woman with the slight accent was probably about the same age as the woman who left but looked younger, more fit.

"Yeah," Karie said, she sure is!

"I read the sign," said the woman with the accent, "so I was afraid to take off my towel, but I think I'll join you, anyway."

"I ran into her the other day," said the younger woman who had come in last, standing for a moment, undoing her towel and wrapping it around her waist as she sat back down on the lower bench. "That's why I had a towel covering me. I'm like you; I don't like to have anything on me in the sauna, at least on top."

Now as she spoke, Karie saw she had an exotic look, was heavyset, with an olive complexion, striking almond-shaped eyes, and her long, dark hair tied back.

"In the three years I've been taking a sauna in this facility, I have never once encountered anyone who complained. In fact, there have been others, like us, without a towel wrapped around them, or a swim suit," Karie declared.

"Yes," said the woman with the accent, "I am from Finland, where the sauna originated. It was intended to cleanse and detoxify the body. In Europe, being naked in a sauna is the norm. It's best for hygiene and health, not to speak of the cultural tradition."

Now, this was my kind of lady! "Exactly," Karie concurred.

"You really want maximum skin-to-air contact and unobstructed sweating," she added. "If sweat is being soaked up by a towel, the moisture on the skin is not cooling the body. Of course, one should sit on a towel to prevent sweat from touching the wood."

"Yes, of course," said Karie, "but I feel stiflingly hot with anything on me at all while taking a sauna."

"Me TOO!" she agreed.

The young woman, with almond-shaped eyes, occupying the lower bench, chimed in, "Yeah, I do too! Besides, I think I read that wearing synthetic swimwear can release toxic chemicals in high heat."

"Yes, and it prevents proper cooling and traps bacteria. Being nude encourages optimal detoxification and full-body relaxation," said the Finnish woman.

"Precisely," agreed Karie.

It turned out that the Finnish woman was visiting the States for a few weeks, staying with friends. She told Karie and the other woman a little about her country and life there. Karie told her she'd just come back from visiting family in France. She also told her she had spent a year in Sweden during college but never got to go to Finland, though she had wanted to.

"You remind me that in the 1700s, there was a cultural resistance among the Finns when Swedish doctors and propagandists pressured the Finnish population to abandon saunas—blaming them for diseases and wasting timber. The Finns defied them and ultimately preserved their bathing traditions. Your position on how to take a sauna reminds me of that spirit," said the Finnish woman.

"Really!" Karie said with a laugh. "Well, the health benefits seem worth fighting for!"

"Well, I guess I'm baked enough," said the Finnish woman, getting up to wrap herself in the towel and exiting the sauna. "So glad to meet you both!"

"The same," said Karie.

"Yeah," said the young woman with the long, dark hair, "glad to meet you too! I enjoyed the lively conversation!"

"Me too," said the Finnish woman as she left the sauna.

Karie and the young woman who remained sat quietly for a moment, soaking up the warmth—not only of the heat in the sauna—but of the camaraderie they were feeling. Just then, another woman entered the sauna. She was quite large, had a kind of moomoo on, and on every other part of her body was a tattoo, and there was a lot of surface area to cover. Her age was up for debate.

Karie was about to leave when the staff person working at the desk opened the sauna door and was quite agitated. "Didn't you see the sign on the door? You need to cover your private parts. I can get you another towel."

"No, thank you," said Karie, "my towel is big enough to lie on and wrap over me." Karie knew if she had simply acted dumb to the woman who complained, saying she hadn't noticed the sign, then covered herself, she most likely wouldn't have alerted the staff person, who now will probably keep an eye on her in future times.

As the staff person left, she looked down at Karie's flip-flops on the sauna floor. "And those need to stay outside the sauna," she said. Karie didn't even know how to react to that.

After the staff person left, the younger dark-haired woman said, "Gosh, she got after me the other day because I had water shoes on in the sauna. I swam in them and then showered with them on. They're just as clean as my feet!"

"That's ridiculous!" said Karie. "Same with my flip-flops! They've taken the wooden platform out so there's no way I'm going to step on the floor in my bare feet in a public sauna! I admit I'm not a person who takes kindly to being told what I can and cannot do, especially if the reasoning is nonsensical. Again, I understand that every facility has its rules and regulations, especially if it's co-ed, but this one is women-only. There must be some kind of opposition among the planets today! Yikes!" lamented Karie.

The young woman laughed, "Yeah, I think you're right! You know, it's too bad when people who aren't comfortable in their bodies require that everyone else around them not be. I have always struggled with my weight, but I refuse to let that keep me from doing something that makes me feel so good."

"Absolutely," said Karie. "I have always struggled with my weight as well, and do feel self-conscious at times everywhere else but the sauna. But like you, I refuse to let it keep me from doing something that is such a health benefit. I'm sorry for whoever instilled in so many people that their bodies weren't beautiful, implying they were something to be ashamed of."

"Oh, for sure, that's it!" she agreed.

"I really do work at cultivating compassion for all beings," said Karie earnestly, "but the very concept of taking a sauna is to cleanse and detoxify the body, just like our new Finnish friend said."

"She ought to know!" answered the young woman.

"Exactly! Wrapping oneself in anything works against that. If someone feels more comfortable covering themselves in something, they can do that, just don't insist everyone else has to do the same. And besides, I felt like telling her just not to look at me if it was so abhorrent to her. Better yet, don't go in a sauna at all if it bothers you!" said Karie.

"Right?!" agreed the young woman.

"After being in Europe for a month, returning home made certain American attitudes feel especially constricting to me," admitted Karie.

"I come from Morocco, though I've lived in the States for a long time now," said the young woman. "We have the hammams there, which use more steam than dry heat. Traditionally, the women wear some kind of underwear, disposable or otherwise, but they don't wear anything on top, because usually an attendant comes in and gives them a scrub down, or some other treatment. When I go back to my country, I will see women from, usually the States but sometimes from Europe, who will completely cover themselves."

"It's interesting how comfort levels vary, not only from person to person, but from culture to culture," Karie said.

"Totally," she agreed.

"Etiquette is the set of conventional rules for polite behavior in society. I'm all for polite behavior in society, but to me, being polite in a sauna entails engaging with the traditional and therapeutic intentions it was designed for. Otherwise, why take a sauna?" said Karie.

"Yes, and I think the same for the hammam," said the younger woman.

"Now I don't mind what anybody does," piped up the tattoo lady in a gravelly voice, "that's their business, but you girls are all cute and everything, there's no way I'm going to let any of me hang out! My body's been through the wringer!" They all laughed together.

"You're very sweet to include my 72-year-old body as 'cute,'" said Karie. They all laughed again.

Maybe you're going to have to start a rebellion of some sort," said the young woman to Karie.

"Yeah, I think they're forcing me into it!" Karie said with a laugh.

"Go girl!" encouraged the woman with the tattoos.

The three women giggled, as Karie wrapped herself in her towel and exited the heat.

# The Sea Star Conspiracy

by Jeremy Likness

"I can remember the day my life changed forever as clearly as if it happened yesterday," said Miriam, hands wrapped around a warm mug of coffee. Although she was smiling, her eyes were brimming with tears. It was tough to think about the events that had bound her to this place for a season when she had already said goodbye to everyone and was ready to leave.

Miriam had never married and did not have any children. She didn't want her story to die with her, so she was ready to share it before she left.

"But it didn't start with the lab." She smiled and shook her head. "No, we must start at the true beginning."

## Discovery

It was a typical morning in Newport: cold but fresh, with intermittent gusts and overcast skies. On her way to the lab, she noticed a man with parched skin and wispy white hair standing beside the harbor. He had bowed his head against the wind and held his hands clasped together in front of him as he whispered softly with his eyelids forced shut.

Miriam rolled her eyes. "How pitiful," she thought. "A grown man too afraid to face the world, begging a ghost for favors? Would God even care about an old man under the Yaquina Bay Bridge?"

Shaking her head, she rounded the corner and stepped onto the side path that meandered down the overgrown slope above the bay. Her work was highly classified, and the lab was completely hidden. After a few twists and bends, she convinced herself she had not been followed and wandered off the path toward what looked like a rusty space capsule that had crash-landed on the side of the bluff.

She didn't have to whisper an incantation, trace intricate symbols in the air, or manipulate hidden control panels. Instead, the wireless device in her pocket was picked up by the lab. The infrared sensors detected only a single heat source: her own. There was a soft beep, then the rusted hulk of metal rotated enough to reveal a perfectly round concrete hole with a ladder descending into its depths.

"Science," she thought, and smiled to herself as she swung onto the ladder and began her descent.

"Predictable. Repeatable. Real." She was comforted by the fact that she was one of the ones who *knew* and didn't have to resort to ancient fables and fairy tales.

That was before everything changed.

She was studying the phenomenon of regeneration in sea stars. If her team could understand how sea stars managed not only to encode the data necessary to rebuild and regrow broken arms, but also to trigger the process when needed, they might be able to apply that same process to humans. She felt a rush of pride. She paused on the ladder, hooking her elbow over the rung, and envisioned what it would be like to crack that code. The fame. And, of course, she was doing it for the good of everyone.

Unhooking her elbow, she continued to climb down. She reached the bottom and dropped to the floor. Cody, the lab's head of security, looked up from his phone and nodded briefly. Then he was back on the phone, thumbs moving furiously as he tapped a message out.

She placed her badge on the check-in receiver, and the single door that led from the small chamber slid open. Stepping through the opening, she found herself in a long hallway riddled with doors on either side. Walking confidently now, she reached her office, tapped the edge of her door with her badge, and stepped inside as the door slid open. She hung her coat and purse, then slid into a large leather chair that swiveled in front of a bank of monitors.

She quickly opened her email and smiled when she read the subject line:

*Final sequencing report: Sample SS-2471, 2032-06-05, Pisaster ochraceus*

She opened the report and started to read it. A few minutes later, she gasped.

"No way. That's impossible," she said to herself, shaking her head.

Her eyes had been drawn to a short sequence that was part of an amino acid associated with the regenerative process. What had looked like pure noise in the sample suddenly revealed structure. A pattern that was more than a pattern. Researchers had noted the sequence before, but they weren't able to decipher the symbols to see what she saw. Only it wasn't possible.

An obvious mistake.

She paused for a moment, inhaled sharply, then began filling out the form to request another sequencing run.

## Contemplation

He stood at the edge of the parking lot and looked out over the ocean. To his left was a large sign warning about the potential hazards of sneaker waves and tsunamis. Beyond the sign was the entrance to a trail that led down to the dunes that formed a natural wall between the bluff and the ocean. To his right was a tangle of trees and shrubs, but through the middle of everything he had a clear view.

The sun was just setting and, true to the Pacific Northwest, the sky was ablaze with myriad colors from coral and flame to deep sapphire. Although the sky was mostly clear, a well-defined band of what looked like fog hung over the horizon. The marine layer was solid, except where wisps of water vapor snaked towards the sky like twisted trails of smoke.

He glanced down at his notebook, sitting on the edge of the street just inside the curb. He poured his thoughts into it. He wrote about his days. He wrote poetry. He wrote short stories. He also kept copious notes from his studies of scripture. He sighed, looking at the blank page underneath today's date. On top of the page was a torn envelope, with a tri-folded note sticking out at an angle. He shuddered briefly as he thought about its contents, then returned his gaze to the horizon.

The marine layer began its approach and was now taking up nearly one-third of the sky. Instead of a sunset, the sun had already been swallowed by the thick fog, and the colors were fading fast. He recognized the bright "star" that hung suspended low on the horizon as Venus. Tracing a line from where the sun should be through Venus, he was able to find another "star" that was much higher in the sky and appeared dimmer: Jupiter. It would brighten as it got closer to the horizon, and as the last light from the sun faded, but for now, he had to use his peripheral vision to find it.

Tonight was going to be a clear night. On a typical evening, he'd grab his favorite drink, bring out a portable speaker, then sip and listen to music as he watched the stars appear. It was dark enough at the lighthouse to see the Milky Way on some nights. It appeared like a band of faint light brushed against the sky and adorned with twinkling stars. He turned his head from west to south. "That's where the Milky Way will be," he whispered. He noticed a bright yellow star. Antares. To the right of that would be a pentagram with a motley assortment of stars, star clusters, and nebulae making up the points.

Tiny points of orange light began to appear as people started their evening bonfires. He could hear the engines of RVs driving by behind him, some of them pulling over to settle in for the night. He smiled when he noticed one that had come to rest next to a sign that read, "No overnight camping."

He closed his eyes and listened to the wind whistle by. He listened to the distant roar of the ocean. It was a peaceful, beautiful moment.

A rustling sound grabbed his attention, and he quickly crouched to catch the envelope and paper before they blew away. He slowly pulled out the paper and unfolded it again. He knew that the words would be the same.

"This changes things," he said out loud, then looked around quickly to see if anyone was within hearing distance. He was alone. He carefully refolded the note and slid it back into the envelope, which he then placed in his back pocket. He took one more look at the fires scattered across the beach, at the stars rapidly emerging in the sky, then at the lighthouse that towered over the parking lot he was standing in.

He scanned the ground to make sure he had picked up everything he needed, then turned and began walking.

"I will find you," he said to no one.

## Confessions

The next day she was sitting in her chair, fingertips pressed together so her hands formed an A-frame, staring at the wall. Her eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep and several bouts of intense sobbing. Nothing seemed real.

A soft tap on the door broke her reverie. She kicked her legs and spun the chair to face the door.

"Come in."

The door slid open to reveal a tall, dark-skinned male wearing round spectacles. He had been staring at his phone, but after looking up and seeing her condition, his face was full of concern. He began to rush to her, but she held up her hand and shook her head.

"It's OK, Charles. I'm OK."

"But you're..."

"Charles, I said I'm fine. I just need you to look at something."

He paused, looking at her sideways, with a look that said, "Yeah, the heck you are!"

She pointed to the terminal and waited.

As Charles stared at the monitor, she thought back to the moment she recognized the pattern and requested a new sequencing run. The results were the same. A particular genome sequence was present in all the transient amino acids and nucleotides that were tagged as part of the regeneration process. The symbols

repeated exactly once wherever they were found. Her colleagues had noted the anomaly but hadn't done much more. They assumed it was a fluke. Her background helped her recognize what they could not.

*This is no fluke!*

The key for her was the Hebrew alphabet, one she was familiar with. Miriam was originally from Israel. She spoke the Lashon Hakodesh, or Holy Tongue, quite fluently and had studied its ancient forms as well.

She had rebuilt the translation several times.

"What am I looking at?" asked Charles. He gestured toward a repeating sequence of symbols. "We've known about the repeated sequence for some time now. It's improbable, but not impossible. Is there something else?"

She nodded and replied, "Yesterday, I was looking at the pattern and noticed that the symbols could easily be mapped to Hebrew characters."

Charles frowned as she tapped a few keys on her keyboard. A dialog opened on one of the monitors that contained a table. The table showed symbols from the sequences in one column and Hebrew characters in the other.

"Charles, this is the result when I use this mapping on the repeated sequence."

□□□ □□ □□□□□ □□□□

Charles raised an eyebrow.

"It's Hebrew. It is pronounced like this: Vayar Elohim ki tov."

Charles waited patiently. Miriam sighed.

"It means, 'And God saw that it was good.'"

Charles laughed.

## Betrayal

Miriam sat on the short concrete guardrail that ran underneath the bridge. She was staring at the patterns of beams that crisscrossed underneath it. Her conversation with Charles hadn't gone as expected. In fact, it was completely different from what she had imagined. She hugged her knees and pulled them closer.

Her entire worldview had been turned upside down in an instant. There was a clear message in DNA estimated to be around 450 million years old, written

in a language that hadn't even existed then. It didn't just repeat, but appeared in multiple places. Further analysis had even uncovered a set of mathematical ratios involving the placement of the symbols that could not have been random. She wasn't aware of anyone in the world who had the technology to manipulate those genes, insert the message, and then have it propagate to sea stars all over the Oregon coast.

It was impossible, unless...

She felt butterflies in her stomach as she acknowledged inwardly: Unless it *was* someone, but not of this world. What if there really *was* a God?

Omniscience. Omnipresence. Omnipotence. Only a being possessing these qualities could create a message like this and embed it in the DNA of a sea star.

Charles was not just a colleague, but a close friend. They had known each other for nearly fifteen years. He was a brilliant molecular biologist, an outspoken atheist, and a skeptic. He analyzed everything and was dismissive of anything that couldn't be explained in scientific terms.

She needed him to help her validate the discovery before she went public with her findings.

"Sorry," he had said after doubling over with laughter. He stopped laughing after a moment when he realized that she had started crying. He reached out a hand to wipe away her tear, but she slapped it away.

"Miriam, you're serious? This isn't a prank?"

She shook her head. "I've verified it multiple times, and the sequence occurs in several of the substances we've identified as part of the regenerative process."

"Impossible," was his reply.

"What do you mean?" she asked, pointing at the monitor. "It's right there."

"Miriam, this is an example of arbitrary pattern matching."

"Arbitrary? Did you hear what it translates to?"

Charles leaned forward, shifting his weight as he planted both of his hands on her desk.

"You chose the translation."

"I didn't."

"You wanted it to mean something."

She felt a stab of disappointment, followed by a flash of anger. She stood up from her chair and snapped, "Run the analysis yourself!"

"I don't need to."

"You're not even looking at it."

"I am looking at it."

"No. You're dismissing it."

Charles sighed and stood back up. He walked over to Miriam and stretched out his hand to place it on her shoulder as a gesture of comfort.

"Miriam," he said carefully, "as members of the human species, we are amazingly adept at finding meaning where none exists."

"I haven't even begun to fathom what this means. But the message is clearly there."

"You missed something."

"I didn't."

"You must have."

She began typing on her keyboard, then clicked a button on the mouse and dragged it across the pad. Several reports appeared on the monitor.

"These are all separate specimens, from different collection dates. They all show the same result."

He stared at her for a moment, and she was suddenly afraid. She hadn't expected to lose a friend over this, but his eyes had hardened and his posture was defensive.

He sighed, looked down, and removed his glasses. He pulled a cloth from his pocket and began cleaning the lenses. Without looking up, he said in a much softer voice, "You contaminated the samples."

She was shocked. Crossing her arms, she sternly replied, "I didn't."

"Someone else did."

"No."

"The software is flawed."

"It isn't."

"Then the mapping is arbitrary."

"It isn't."

"You've made a mistake."

"Charles!"

He said nothing more. She let the silence hang for a moment between them.

"The sequence only activates during regeneration," she said quietly, trying not to grind her teeth. "When the sea star is rebuilding itself. The phrase is encoded in the structure itself. I've verified every step."

"What exactly are you suggesting?"

She hesitated. She had not yet come to terms with the truth, and it seemed absurd now that she considered saying it aloud. So, she shrugged.

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"No. I don't."

"You think that God is speaking to you... through a sea star."

She flinched. He wasn't far from the truth, but the way he phrased it made her feel foolish and selfish.

She replied in a stiff voice, "That's not what I said."

Charles shook his head.

"It doesn't matter."

She wished she hadn't looked at his face then. It reflected anger and disappointment. Refusing to look at her directly, he said, "This is why scientists don't talk about things like this before they're reviewed."

"I came to you."

"And I told you what I think."

"Charles..."

"No."

He grabbed his jacket from the chair.

"No," he said again as he walked slowly, almost stiffly, to the door.

"There is an explanation, and it doesn't have to involve magic," he said.

She didn't respond but simply stared at the ceiling and watched him from the corner of her eye as he opened the door.

"Miriam. For your own good, and I mean this as a friend. Wait! Don't go to anyone else with this. Whatever you think you've found, don't let it ruin your career. Don't tell anyone... yet."

The door closed, and she was left alone, stunned as sounds of the word "yet" slowly faded to leave her in silence.

On the monitor, the ancient letters glowed in a strange juxtaposition between the language of creation and the technology that humans had created.

## Redemption

"And God saw that it was good," she whispered.

"Yes, He did! And still does!"

The voice shocked her out of her inner reflection, and she was suddenly underneath the bridge again. The old man she had judged for his praying the other day was standing next to her. He had a warm smile on his face and held out his hand.

"My name is Caleb."

"Um... Miriam," she whispered, taking his hand and shaking it awkwardly.

Caleb smiled again, then turned. From the point they stood on underneath the bridge, it was possible to see the bay in one direction, a long channel, and the Pacific Ocean in the other.

"God's creation is beautiful, isn't it?" he asked.

She smiled, feeling the breeze on her face. She listened to the seagulls calling in the distance, mixing with the grunts and barks of sea lions. The sky was overcast again, but the water seemed to sparkle and shine. Shouts drifted from the nearby docks as fishermen loaded and unloaded their vessels.

She finally replied with her own question.

"Do you believe in God?"

He paused, then asked, "You don't?"

"I didn't. I'm not even sure that I do. It's just..." she hesitated, not sure what she was trying to say.

"Something changed?"

She smiled. "Yes, the sea stars..." She froze when she realized what she was about to reveal. "It's complicated. I really shouldn't be talking about it."

He nodded, then turned away. He leaned on the concrete barrier, watching a group of harbor seals playing in the bay. It took her a few moments to realize that he was respecting her implied request to stop conversing. She leaned forward so he could hear her more clearly.

"May I ask... have you always believed in God?"

He stood up, then clasped his hands behind his back.

"Are you kidding me? No. I'm a scientist, after all. Despite my grandfather's teachings when I was young—he was a pastor, you see—I grew up atheist. In fact, I wasn't just an atheist, but vehemently anti-theist. I attacked people who relied on that superstitious crutch."

She couldn't hide her expression of surprise. A scientist?!

He continued as if reading her thoughts, "Well, not really. But I was into science, you see. I understood it all. We started out as organic material in a chaotic universe that is billions of years old. On a random dirt rock something inexplicable but very scientific, obviously, spontaneously made the decision to violate the laws of entropy and causality and create a new type of molecule that suddenly had enough specialized features to survive in the wild, even replicate itself, and now here we are."

"Are you making fun of science?" she asked, irritated that her defensiveness was so obvious. His sarcasm was evident, but she was even more irritated that he seemed to be making a valid point.

"Hardly. I apologize. It's just, I had more faith than I realized before I found God."

She let her puzzlement show.

"Science is a word that is so overloaded today. People almost use it as a weapon. I love science, and I believe in science. I've learned everything I can about physics, biology, quantum mechanics, evolution, string theory, relativity, and all the other disciplines that seek to describe our world."

He paused for a moment, looking into the distance, and then inhaled a deep breath as if steadying himself.

"The problem is that the word itself is misused, sometimes intentionally, and often misunderstood. It is used as an attack against people who challenge what some consider to be the norm. It's difficult to have a productive conversation about evolution, for example, if you don't know the difference between evolution and adaptation. People argue about timelines as if they really matter. Six thousand years? Five hundred billion years? We say the universe shows evidence of expanding, so it is logical to deduce it originated as a point. What's the point?"

He grinned at his own little pun, paused, then leaned forward.

"Of course, science is neutral and empirical, right?"

"Yes," she agreed enthusiastically. And repeatable. And predictable. And real.

"You don't need to involve faith to test that theory," he continued.

"Look at the history of electricity and the role that Jefferson and Tesla played. Heck, look at the history of VHS and Betamax. I find it incredibly naïve to believe that science, or what is packaged and presented to us as science, isn't biased by economic and political pressures. Look at the food industry. The original food pyramid wasn't a pyramid based on healthy eating. It was a hierarchy of billion-dollar farming subsidies. People still believe they need to drink milk to build strong bones because of the science that came out of studies... funded by the dairy industry."

He began shaking his head back and forth, then added, "I'm sorry, I could go on for hours. I was an atheist for most of my life, but after I came to Christ in my thirties, there is one thing that really stood out to me. Our culture claims to be enlightened and brags about its willingness to accept diverse ideas, opinions, and lifestyles, and to include everyone. But the reality is that many people become defensive and outright angry when I bring Christ into the conversation. I've had close friends stop talking to me and have been belittled on social media by respected leaders for my faith."

"That's terrible. I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's OK; it doesn't bother me anymore. In fact, it reveals to me that their denial of Christ isn't really about science. It's more personal, or they wouldn't react so strongly."

She thought about Charles's reaction and nodded.

"So, you were an atheist for most of your life. What changed?" she asked, smiling because she had taken his original question to her and reflected it back.

"A sea star."

She gasped. But he only grinned.

"I got you!"

"If you only knew."

"Well, try this one on for size. I'm being serious now. It was a taxi ride."

"A... what? A taxi ride?"

He smiled and said, "It was a pleasure, Miriam. I must get to an appointment, but I promise to share the taxi story when we see each other again."

He turned and walked away. She watched his figure fade in the distance, then sighed and began the short walk back to her apartment.

## Censorship

The next morning, she slept through her alarm. She had been awake most of the night, thinking about the sequence and her conversation with Caleb. She finally drifted to sleep about an hour before the time she had set her alarm for. After only a few hours, she woke up feeling exhausted and weak. She was looking forward to running into Caleb on her way to the lab, but he wasn't there. An old RV was parked by the wall where he had been standing, and she could hear the muffled edges of an argument coming from within.

When she arrived at the lab, she was surprised to see the guard's chair was empty. As she slowly walked down the long hallway that led to the office, she noticed that the door to her office was already open. She started to head back to the entrance, then remembered that Cody wasn't there. She steadied herself and moved forward with confidence.

When she reached her office, Cody and Charles both looked up. Cody was seated at her terminal, fingers flying across the keyboard. Charles looked awkward, standing at the edge of the room and shuffling his feet as if he wasn't sure he should be there or what he should be doing. A third man in a suit was skimming

through a folder full of papers. Finally, he looked up as well and snapped the folder shut.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Miriam, I—" Charles began to say, but the man cut him off.

"Please, sit."

She hesitated for a moment, then sat down.

"Charles told us about your little discovery."

Her throat suddenly felt parched and dry. She swallowed and managed to summon a faint, "Yes."

"What did you discover?"

"Who are you?"

"That's not important. *What did you discover?*"

"A note from God."

Charles frowned and began to shake his head.

The man smiled.

"And where is this note?"

"It's ... it's in the sea star's DNA."

The man nodded. "Show me."

She pulled the report up and pointed at the sequence. The man nodded to Cody, and Cody's hands flew across the keyboard. After a few moments, the symbols she had worked so hard to decipher disappeared. In her mind, she imagined a black slash with the word "redacted" appearing in its place.

She suddenly felt ill.

The man looked up and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, we have the right people looking into this now. You must be exhausted. Go home and get some rest. We'll talk more tomorrow."

## Metaphors

Miriam stood on the bluff above a beach that was made from large, smooth, shiny black stones rather than sand. Some time, long ago, a river of lava had flowed down to the ocean and cooled over time. The depression it left was perfect for the water

that flowed down the most direct route to the ocean. The water carved a deep channel that exposed the solidified lava, which crumbled and fell and tumbled to the ocean. By the time it arrived here, at the headland, the combination of time, movement, and river grit smoothed and polished it before depositing it.

Behind her, she left behind the towns, roads, rules, history, and expectations. Newport had arranged itself into names like "Bayfront," property lines, and speed limits. In front of her, the wild and raw ocean ignored all the man-made rules and conventions. It didn't care about her reputation as a scientist or how successful she was. She had always thought of the ocean as indifferent, limitless, and unconcerned. But now it felt different.

*God made this.*

She descended the winding path that led down from the top of the bluff and arrived at the beach. It was low tide, and the beach seemed to stretch forever. Looking at the tide pools, she marveled at the way they mimicked so many other patterns in life with their own tiny, contained communities and rules. She couldn't help it; she felt butterflies looking at the sea star that clung to the edge of a boulder. With a smile, she thought of how many tourists saw a peaceful, colorful scene. They didn't know how aggressively the anemones compete for space and resources, or that the sea star was a predator, relentlessly stalking its prey.

*And hiding a secret that, when revealed, could transform the world.*

*They will not get away with this!*

She thought again about how smugly the man smiled as he assured her the data was being sent to the "right people." Here was a message, written directly by God, for everyone on the planet to know. She had no idea how many people this scientific proof of God's existence would convert, but it had to be a lot.

So, she did her part. Without the actual data to rely on, she decided to post the truth online and create a viral message on social media that would reach the far corners of the world. She couldn't wait to see how far it had spread. In her rush to get away to find peace and calm, she left her phone at home.

She slowly hiked up the path back to the parking lot. On one side, it connected to several paths that led down to the beach. On the opposite side, it connected

with a long sprawl of concrete stairs that led up to the lighthouse. A poster was hanging next to the gate that she hadn't noticed before.

The caption read: "Seeking a dedicated lighthouse keeper to care for a beacon that has guided mariners safely home for generations. If you value solitude, responsibility, and the unmatched beauty of the coast after dark, this may be the opportunity of your lifetime." There was a phone number to call, and a picture of who she assumed was the current keeper.

It was Caleb.

Shaking her head, she rushed home. She couldn't wait to jump online and see how her post was doing. When she logged in, a message popped up:

"Post flagged for violations." The violations were listed:

1.Unauthorized disclosure of confidential information

2.Privacy violations

3.Intellectual property infringement

The post itself was still there but was grayed out to show it wasn't visible to anyone else. Apparently, it had gone live a short while before getting flagged because she could still see some replies. She read the first reply. Then the second. After the third one, she shut the lid of her laptop. They were all snarky responses, mocking her and the sea stars and questioning the truthfulness of her post.

One reply had nearly two dozen likes. It simply read, "Receipts?"

Frustrated, she poured and chugged a glass of wine.

## Revelations

The next day she was pleased to see Cody back in the main entrance to the lab, until she realized he was avoiding eye contact. He cleared his throat before speaking.

"Miss Halevi, I'm afraid I'll need you to give me your badge and then exit the premises immediately. I want you to know we all greatly value your contributions here, which is why we decided not to press charges."

Miriam tossed him the badge. She was about to lash out and call him "Mr." when she awkwardly realized she had no clue what his last name was. She began

the ascent back to the surface. She was despondent, not sure what to do. She hung her head and shuffled her feet as she walked.

"Miriam?"

She wasn't paying attention, so the sudden and seemingly amplified declaration of her name startled her. She jumped, then looked up to see Caleb's kind eyes staring back at her and reflecting concern.

"Are you OK?"

She sighed, then admitted, "No, I'm not. Not really."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anything you care to share with a total stranger?"

She smiled. "But you're not a stranger. We've met, and we know each other's names. In fact, I even know something about you I had no clue about before."

His smile stretched even wider, and she immediately felt comfortable and safe.

"OK, let's hear it then!" he said.

"You're the lighthouse keeper."

She paused for dramatic effect, but he only swept his arm in front of him, bowed, and said, "Guilty as charged."

"Are you retiring?"

"Not exactly. I'm leaving, though, and I need a replacement."

He nodded toward the lighthouse. "She has tremendous responsibility. She has saved lives for decades by keeping boats and ships away from the rocks and communicating important messages to vessels and coastal authorities."

"I didn't realize they are still in use."

He nodded, then seemed to remember something.

"I wrote a poem about the lighthouse. May I share it with you?"

She smiled and clasped her hands together. "I'd be delighted to hear it!"

"Great," he replied, then jumped up onto the half-wall and raised his arms dramatically.

"First, a quote from God's word. This is from the 18th chapter of the book of Job, verse 5. *Yeah, the light of the wicked shall be put out, and the spark of his fire shall not shine.*"

He recited the poem.

*Violent Water, crashing*
*Against the shivering Stone, thrusting*
*Through the Ocean's frigid Surface, searching*
*The leaden Skies for Hope Beyond.*
*(A lonely light tower)*
*A solitary Monument*
*To a Civilization long*
*(Forgotten) Lost.*
*Its Light piercing*
*(The everlasting darkness)*
*The torrents of fierce Rain, and*
*The Winds that howl with Rage.*
*Through the Despair, and*
*(The pain)*
*Lightning and Thunder*
*It waits,*
*Its harsh Surface a Barrier to*
*(The minions of Hell)*
*The boiling Waters,*
*Longing for*
*(A faint memory of the life that was promised)*
*A breath of fresh Air.*
*It watches, and*
*It waits,*
*Yet naught but Splinters crash against its Shore, and*
*Its only Visitors are*
*(Memories)*
*Pale Corpses,*
*Floating upon towering Waves, and*
*(Devoured by time)*
*Sucked into the Sea.*
*Those that survive*

*Slowly drift by,*
*Engulfed in Darkness, as*
*The Night swallows Them whole.*
*"Now I am known as a*
*(Light tower)*
*Savior, a powerful Warning,*
*(To the wary)*
*A Stone Giant.*
*Now, I am known as a*
*(Light tower)*
*Savior, but one Day*
*My Fire will dwindle,*
*My Light will fail,*
*And They will call me*
*(Light tower)*
*Death."*

His voice cracked when he uttered the word "Death." She looked up quickly, but he was smiling and settled, waiting for her feedback.

"That was beautiful. Amazing," was all she could think to say.

"Thank you! Now your turn."

"My turn? I don't have a poem," she replied.

"No, but you have a story. What are you willing to share with me? Anything about God and sea stars?"

What *was* she willing to share? She began tentatively, planning to only provide vague details, but eventually she dove in and shared almost everything. She stumbled over the words, trying to get them out. He was a good listener, nodding his head in encouragement and smiling occasionally. When she was finished, she started sobbing.

"Hey, hey, no need for that," he whispered softly, pulling her close and gently embracing her in his arms in a friendly and comforting way. She buried her face in his shoulder. "I failed. Big time. I've lost probably the most important proof of God's existence ever. I just let them take it from me. I've failed."

She was surprised to hear him chuckle. She pushed him away.

Still smiling, he said, "Is that what you think? That message was intended for the world?"

She nodded.

He smiled again. "Do you think that God Almighty isn't capable of getting a message out to the world if He needs to?"

She bit her lip, then said, "But this isn't just a message. It's scientific proof that will make people believe."

He nodded as if he understood, then said, "But why do you think He would want to *make* people believe? Let me phrase it a bit differently. Do you have friends because you made them like you, or because they naturally grew to like you as they got to know you better?"

Suddenly, she remembered the words Charles had said what felt like an eternity ago but was just a few days ago.

"You think that God is speaking to you... through a sea star," she whispered, then repeated it so Caleb could hear.

"I was so mad when Charles said that, but it's true! Yes. YES! YES, I DO!"

Caleb smiled, then said, "You are beginning to understand. For what it's worth, even I, a self-proclaimed man of faith, would struggle to believe your story if I didn't know you so well."

"But you don't really know me at all!"

"True, but this isn't all a mystery. God gave us His Word and has several thoughts on the matter. Do you mind if I share some of them?"

"Of course! Or not at all! No, I don't mind," she replied, laughing at becoming tongue-tied.

He nodded, then continued.

"'You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart' is from Jeremiah 29:13. John 10:27 says, 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.'"

He paused before finishing with, "And one of my favorites is from Revelation. In chapter 3, verse 20, it says: 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone

hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.'"

"That must be the best dinner invitation in history!"

She smiled. She felt like she was waking from a daydream and suddenly noticed the sound of cars whizzing past. The area under the bridge was getting dark as the sun began to set. It was late, but she wasn't ready to go home just yet.

"Caleb?"

"Yes?"

"You promised."

"I did. The taxi!"

She nodded, then leaned back against the guardrail as he shared his story.

## The Taxi Driver

"When I was younger, I dropped out of school and worked odd jobs. My friend owned a house and rented the rooms out, so I paid him a few hundred dollars every month for the privilege of living in a 12' x 12' garage apartment with a terrazzo floor. I couldn't afford a proper bed, so I slept on a waterbed. The frame had broken, so it simply sat on the floor, framed by beams. We spent our days listening to music and experimenting with drugs. We used to drop acid and lie on the roof with sunglasses on to watch the downpour when it rained, and we played hacky sack on that same roof when it was sunny outside.

One morning, I woke up after a night of partying and looked around me. The house was in complete disarray. Windows were shattered, some were swinging in the wind, wide open, and people were everywhere, piled upon each other in heaps. Most of them were strangers who came to party and passed out. It came to me suddenly that I was going nowhere with my life and was probably going to end up dead for some stupid reason if I didn't make changes.

I reached out to a job recruiter and asked to interview for jobs that were out of state. Each trip was a unique experience, but nothing seemed to resonate until I came here. The company warned me to bring extra cash for transportation, but this was years before mobile phones and GPS maps, so I had no clue how long

the ride was from Eugene to Newport. I found myself in the awkward situation of having to ask the company for cash when I was dropped off!

Despite the embarrassment over money, the interview went well. The person who interviewed me began talking about different neighborhoods and the cost of living, and suddenly I became very afraid. There was no way I could figure out rent and utilities and phone line costs on my own. I had a sweet deal where I was, and I was ready to stay.

The company hired a driver to take me back to the airport. That's when things got interesting. I hadn't said a word, but as we were pulling out of Newport, the driver looked at me in the rearview mirror and said, "You seem to be at an important crossroads in your life."

Shocked, I looked up and then slowly nodded.

"Do you know Jesus?" he asked.

I shrugged. He asked that in such a weird way. Most people asked if I believed. I didn't know Jesus, but I certainly knew of him. "I don't know him personally, but he seems like he was a good person."

The driver smiled and said, "Good, but not a God?" Again, I shrugged. "Can a liar be a good person?" I didn't like the question, especially because I was struggling to find the answer. I knew people I liked who lied all the time. But were they "good"? I had no idea.

"Do you mind if I share a little about Jesus with you?"

At this point, I was intrigued and quite surprised that he actually asked for my permission. So I responded, "Sure."

"Caleb, God has equipped us all with two ways to navigate life. The one we automatically use is our brain. It is quite useful, but it comes with some limitations. For example, most brains come with a special part called 'ego.' Ego can cause problems because it makes us believe we know it all. Sometimes, we get so caught up in how wonderful we are that we miss important lessons."

I nodded my head. I knew a few people with big egos who were always talking about how great they were. It felt good to know that I was better than that.

"When we accept Christ, a part of God enters us and reveals things through our heart that our mind simply can't see. Ezekiel 36:26 says, "I will give you a new

heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Your heart of stone can get very heavy.

I sense that you are at a crossroads. God places these crossroads in our paths so we can make important decisions. Some of those choices lead us closer to God, and others farther away. Let me ask you a serious question."

I looked up to see him staring at me intensely through the rearview mirror.

"Do you want your life to change?"

I swallowed, then murmured a weak, "Yes?"

The driver nodded. "Caleb, it's very simple. How can your life change if you stay in the same place and do the same thing? To change, you must decide. A decision requires choices. Choices are determined by what you do in this life. Wouldn't you like to have more choices, so you can learn and discover new things and change your life?"

I nodded.

"I can sense your fear. It's OK. Courage isn't about doing something because you aren't afraid. It's about doing something despite being afraid. Let me ask you this: what would you do today if you weren't afraid?"

## Goodbyes

"So, you came to Christ right then?" Miriam asked.

Caleb shook his head. "No. That came much later. But it started the process. You see, by the time he dropped me off in Eugene, I had changed my mind again. I decided I would move after all."

The night had grown dark. Stars dotted the sky, lights reflected on the water, and Caleb's face was only half illuminated by a nearby streetlamp.

"That experience gave me a new perspective. I noticed all the coincidences in my life. I realized that, from a scientific perspective, I had to admit that statistics alone couldn't account for everything I was experiencing. There was something more."

Miriam nodded. They continued to speak as the stars whirled overhead. Planets rose and set, and the faint band of the Milky Way began to rotate out of sight.

They finally agreed it was late and time to say, "Goodbye." Miriam was smiling as she walked under the starlight in the direction of her home. She made a choice that evening, and it felt right.

## The Light Keeper

The town of Newport straddles the mouth of the Yaquina River, which empties into the Pacific Ocean via Yaquina Bay. On top of a knoll, a lighthouse was built in 1871. Unlike the traditional style of a tower, this was truly a house. The bulk of the building is living quarters, with a small tower housing the actual light above.

The building is believed to be one of the oldest standing structures in Newport. It is also the only historic wooden lighthouse in Oregon that is still standing. From the lighthouse, it is possible to take in a panoramic view of Newport, the Bayfront, and the ocean. The light shines as a navigation aid from its perch located just over 160 feet above sea level.

The light keeper stood that evening, leaning against the railing and watching a distant fire on the beach slowly burn itself out.

A controlled flame is a symbol of civilization. It pushes back the wild, raw night and radiates safety and comfort. It is also a focal point for the community that depends on its light, with their stories. And rules. And culture. The flames would eventually burn out, and the waves would reclaim the ashes. Eventually, there would be no more flames or silhouettes or rules, only the ocean once more.

Even the house the light keeper lived in, which had stood watch over this rocky section of the coast for more than a century, would eventually collapse, crumble, and be forgotten. But that was for a different time. Now it was a haven. It gave the light keeper a safe space to live. And worship. And pray.

The light keeper was not a recluse. The town offered plays and performances, concerts and dances, festivals, art shows, and more. The light keeper enjoyed many of these amenities.

The job was simple and did not pay much, but with the living quarters as part of the deal, it was enough. The light keeper realized many years ago that the city

was not a home, only a place to explore. The trips were always brief. The light keeper had to avoid contamination.

The city was infected with money and technology, opinions and politics. Everyone was an expert with a phone in their hands. People ventured out to restaurants only to retreat back into their phones and laptops. They seldom spoke without voicing complaints or exchanging gossip, or sharing some humbling tale of the latest great thing they were surprised they did that made them a great person.

The light keeper only had a few friends, but they were special. They respected the light keeper's space, and when they gathered, they spoke of meaningful things like health and art and the beauty of the place they lived in.

Some of them shared fellowship through their faith. Others did not believe, but were willing to listen.

Miriam smiled as she thought of how ironic it was to include Charles in that list of friends. Decades had passed since their tense moment in the underground lab. Years later, Charles showed up at the lighthouse. They had reconciled, Charles apologizing for his behavior and Miriam acknowledging that she had been caught up in emotion over her discovery. At first, Charles even offered to help Miriam get her job back. Eventually, he understood and respected that she was in a different place.

Earlier in the evening, they met to have Thai food at a restaurant with a view of the bay. It was a tradition of sorts. Their first meeting, years ago, was when she explained to him why she would not return to the lab.

"Ask almost anyone what their priorities are, and they'll give you a list like health, family, God, etc. Most people put work low on that list."

Charles simply nodded.

"But if you look at their lives, what they do presents a completely different list of priorities. Money, time, and work are usually at the top of the list, and unfortunately, for most people, both God and health end up at the bottom, and that's if God even makes the list."

Charles had an interesting expression on his face as he thought about what she had just said. She wondered if he was internally comparing the two lists from his own life.

"What I've done is sort of a reset. I decided to make both lists the same. My life now reflects my priorities. And it feels right. It's almost as if everything I did in the lab was simply a way to prepare for this. Like I had to be part of society to better appreciate my time away from it."

Charles had nodded and smiled, then simply said, "Miriam, you are an amazing woman. And I think you're right. In fact, I know you are. I think anyone in town will agree, you *are* our light keeper!"

Their last meeting, however, had taken a different turn. Charles loved to greet her as "the light keeper" and she used that to pivot the conversation.

"Well, about that..."

She was surprised at how easy it was to break the news to him. He didn't take it well, and she sat for many moments with her hand rubbing his back as he cried softly.

"You... you promise to write?" he eventually managed to say.

"Of course I will, Charles. This world isn't done with me yet. But it's time for me to move on and find another keeper for the lighthouse. Newport has too many memories for me outside of this space that has been my home for so many years. Besides, I'm not going to live in this world forever, Charles. I need to see more of it than this little piece of coast we've enjoyed so many years."

She reached across the table and grabbed his hands. "But I know where I'm going in the end, Charles. You should too."

The haunted expression on his face told her all she needed to know. Charles had seen the sequence himself, and read the message, but he had never come to believe.

She had since convinced herself that the message had been for her. She wondered if Charles had received his own message, and if so, what it was, and why he chose to ignore it. She wondered, but did not ask. Charles would find his own way.

She said a silent prayer for him as they paid their bills and said their goodbyes.

She had a lot to think about on her walk back to the lighthouse. When she arrived, someone was waiting. A younger woman with red hair in a long ponytail, wearing a light sweater and a white beanie. Her eyes lit up when she saw Miriam.

"I'm sorry I'm late," said Miriam. "I had some business to attend to."

"No problem. I love this place. The ocean is so beautiful, especially at night."

"Let's go inside and get warm."

Miriam turned the heat up as they walked inside and hung her light jacket on a peg inside the doorway. A soft beep reminded her that she had set an alarm for coffee. The machine had brewed two cups that were sitting side by side. Steam rose from both cups.

"Do you take cream?"

"Do you have oat milk?"

Miriam smiled. "Of course."

They mixed their drinks and sat down. "Well, this is it. After tonight, the lighthouse is yours."

The woman smiled, then reminded her, "I know, but before you go, you promised to share with me how you came to know God."

"I can remember the day my life changed forever as clearly as if it happened yesterday," said Miriam, hands wrapped around her warm mug of coffee. Although she was smiling, her eyes were brimming with tears.

## The Interview

What felt like an eternity in the past, Miriam had paused before the stone steps that climbed like a ladder up the slope to the base of the lighthouse. She felt the wind tugging at her coat and listened to the sound of waves crashing on the shore below. Half of her wanted to run away, but the other part of her was all resolve and determination. She let it take over.

She climbed the narrow path, taking measured steps with steady breaths as she quieted her inner dialog. By the time she reached the door, she was ready. She looked at the illuminated buzzer next to the door and frowned. It didn't seem right.

"Knock, and the door will be opened to you." She knocked, then waited.

A familiar voice called from inside.

"Come in."

She opened the door. Immediately she was assailed with the scents of old books, fresh coffee, and salty air. An old wood-burning stove sat against the far wall, unused. The air was warm, and she could hear the faint hum of a modern heat pump. Caleb sat at a small table. A steaming mug of coffee rested on the table next to him, and he was scribbling with a pencil in an old notebook.

He looked up. Miriam folded her arms.

"I read you have a job opening."

Caleb smiled. "Did you now?"

"It is so."

"Interesting. Do you know anyone who might be interested?"

She smiled and nodded.

"Yes, but... you told me there are things I need to learn."

"I did."

"But you are leaving soon? Going somewhere?"

He gestured toward the chair across from him.

"Please. Sit."

She sat. Caleb studied her for a moment. She realized that despite the heat being on, a small window was cracked open enough to let in a little cool air. More importantly, it also admitted the sounds of the ocean, and she heard the faint crash of a wave in the distance.

She sighed.

"Even if I could, I don't want to go back to the lab."

Caleb raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"I've spent my whole life believing facts fit together," Miriam said. "Now they don't."

Caleb simply said, "The sea star."

She nodded. They sat in silence. She expected it to seem more real when she heard it said aloud, but it still felt like a dream. Finally, she admitted, "I keep waiting for someone to explain it to me. But nobody has."

Caleb chuckled softly, then looked at her over the top of his glasses.

"Scientists are very good at explaining things."

"But this isn't about science, is it?"

"No. This is between you and God."

"You really believe that?"

"Based on everything I've experienced... yes."

Miriam turned to stare at the empty wood-burning stove.

"The problem is, if it's true, then everything changes."

"The problem," Caleb said, "is that if it's true, everything was always different than you thought."

She rubbed her forehead.

"I don't even know why I'm here."

"Yes, you do."

She laughed despite herself.

"Fine. Maybe I do."

Caleb waited.

"I'm tired of feeling lost."

"I see."

"And you seem to know exactly where you are... and where you're going."

His gaze drifted to the window.

"I do."

"So, teach me."

He was quiet. Long enough that something in her stomach tightened. Then he inhaled deeply and gently set his mug down.

"I don't know that I have... time. To teach you anything."

"What does that mean?"

Caleb folded his hands. Suddenly, he looked old. Older than the man with wispy white hair, she noticed praying under the bridge. He looked old, frail, and tired.

Vulnerable.

Without thinking, she asked,

"What were you praying for?"

She immediately regretted asking that, but he suddenly looked relieved. As though a weight he'd carried privately had finally become visible, and help was on the way. His eyes were watery with tears.

"More time."

She sucked in her breath. He wiped his eyes, then leaned forward.

"Miriam," he said gently, "why do you suppose I'm looking for someone?"

She shrugged, trying to ignore the painful thought that was forming in the back of her mind.

"Retirement?"

He smiled faintly.

"No."

The simple answer seemed to strike her like a hammer, and she shuddered. The room was suddenly very still. She realized she couldn't hear anything but his breathing. Not even the sound of the ocean. The heat pump had cut off.

Caleb looked down at the notebook. Then back at her.

"The doctors found it last year."

Miriam stared.

"What?"

"Cancer."

She felt the blood drain from her face. Suddenly, it all made sense.

"No."

"I'm afraid so."

"But... you never said anything."

"What did you want me to say, Miriam? Hi, young lady. My name is Caleb, and I'm about to die?"

Defensively, she snapped back, "You look fine." She lied unconvincingly.

"I assure you, appearances are misleading."

The world tilted slightly. She hadn't realized how important Caleb had become to her, even though they had just met. As her world spun out of control, the idea that he would be gone so soon, before she really got to know him, didn't seem fair.

"There must be treatment."

"There was."

"And?"

A gentle sadness entered his smile.

"There is a time for everything, and that time has passed."

The wind rattled the windows. She could hear the waves again. The silence seemed to stretch for minutes until she finally summoned the courage to ask.

"How long?"

Caleb looked toward the sea. "Soon."

She didn't want to cry. She hardly knew him, but suddenly her eyes were filled with tears. Caleb watched her with gentle eyes as she began to cry. He reached for a tissue box on the table, pulled out a tissue and offered it to her. As she dabbed her eyes, he said, "Don't grieve me yet."

"I'm not."

"You're a terrible liar."

She looked away. For a moment, neither spoke. Then Caleb leaned back in his chair.

"The lighthouse needs someone after I'm gone."

Miriam swallowed.

"What if I don't know how?"

"Nobody does at first."

"What if I'm the wrong person?"

"Then you wouldn't be here."

She looked at him. In that moment, she truly saw him. The lined face. The tired eyes. But above all, the look of peace and acceptance. With a flash of understanding, she understood their encounters had never been casual conversations. He had been preparing her. Not for her discovery. Not to help answer her questions about faith.

For an inheritance.

He smiled. "Where I'm going... I will wait for you."

It felt right. She wiped her eyes again, then stood up. "I assume the interview is done. When do I start?"

# The Defect

## by Kathleen Dugan Barton

Sarah sat peering out the window until her mom reminded her again that it was time to leave for school. She was already anticipating the stares, under the breath comments, and the feelings of isolation. Was she really prepared for this day? As she stepped to the door, she took a deep breath. Her mother hugged her, reminded her to be brave, and out the door she went to get on the bus that stopped in front of their driveway. It was her first day at a new school.

As she walked down the driveway, each step she took got slower and slower. She had always feared the bus stop. This was often the place where her emotional pain of being rejected started. She kept her eyes glued to the ground, convinced that if she didn't look at the new kids, they wouldn't agree on a verdict about her defect. She wanted to feel confident, but it was just a word she learned to spell last year in third grade. She didn't own a letter in it. Terrified, she reached up and started pulling her hair across her face. As each step got closer, she hoped she could hide her evidence of difference. She took a deep breath as she approached the three kids standing at the bus stop. Her last step, she hesitated, almost ready to turn and run home. But she didn't. Avoiding eye contact, she stood still, almost frozen. Had she covered it enough? She was hoping she was invisible.

A smiley-faced girl quickly turned with the most infectious smile to greet her. She wore a backward baseball cap. Messy, stringy blond hair fell across her shoulders, and she started chatting up a storm. "Hi, I'm Eliza," she blurted excitedly. "You bought the Evenguard house. My best friend lived there, but she had to move. Maybe you could be my new best friend?"

Sarah looked her straight in the eyes. She knew this girl could see the shock and fear on her face, but this girl just kept smiling, patiently awaiting a response. Could she not see her large birthmark plastered under her right eye? Sarah was caught completely off guard, but she knew she had to answer. Several seconds passed. Under her breath she finally whispered, "Yes, best friends would be fun." Eliza, still smiling, grabbed Sarah's hand and stated, "Then it's settled." The other two kids looked at them and also smiled, then they kept talking about their baseball cards.

The 4 hopped on the bus. Eliza pulled Sarah to the middle seats, surrounding her with her chatting friends. Sarah sat still, holding the shocked look on her face, as the other kids shouted out questions: Where did you move here from? Do you have siblings? Will you eat lunch with us today? Sarah whispered answers, and with each answer, the shocked look on her face slowly faded away. She knew they saw her defect, but they didn't seem to care. They were all laughing about silly stuff, and Sarah began to feel safe enough to join in too. Each answer came easier, and her whisper began to dissipate to a more normal reply. She even caught herself giggling along with them. She shared more about herself in that 20-minute bus ride than she had all year at her last school. Could she have found the C in confidence?

Sarah went through her day feeling a contagious kindness from every person she met. Kids saying hello, wanting to meet the new girl, wanting to be her friend. They fought over who could sit with her at lunch, who could show her the office area, and who could walk her to the bus. Eliza, her new best friend, never left her side.

The bus ride home was the same as the morning ride, except Sarah now had questions of her own to ask others, and a newfound confidence she had never felt before. Now all the letters of that word were starting to make sense. She sat up straighter, eyes full of excitement, and now wearing a smile almost as bright as Eliza's across her face.

As she started to leave the bus, the bus driver winked at her, and she caught her reflection in his mirror. In that moment, it was her truest smile, and she knew it. Her heart jumped. A sense of peace filled her soul.

Off the bus, she whispered softly, “Thank you, Eliza.” Eliza replied, “Best friends, right?” As the bus pulled away, she heard the echoes of “Good bye Sarah” from numerous kids. For the first time in her life, she felt her fear slipping away. It now felt safe to be seen. She was forever changed by this one day and this embracing community. Acceptance and inclusion won over rejection and exclusion that day. She couldn’t wait to share this feeling with her family.

In silence as she headed up her driveway, even steps now, with her haired pulled away from her face, and her eyes lifted high from the ground, she had so many thoughts running through her head. First, that acceptance isn’t just a word; it is an action that her new friends chose to take the minute they met her. She went with their lead, gaining the confidence to stand a little taller that day. Second, she could stand with more confidence and stop expecting the worst outcome when approaching the world. Being seen felt so much better than wanting to be invisible. Finally, as she ran through her door ready to embrace her mother, her biggest realization from that day, and in that very moment, was that her birthmark was never the real problem or the true defect.

The girls remained lifelong friends.



# Renting Space

## by Brian Haggerty

Mark saw the blonde woman walk in and promptly knocked over a quart of almond milk, which spread over the counter and began dripping onto the floor. He realized it was dripping on the customer side of the counter, too, so he grabbed a towel from the bucket, squeezed it out, and went around to crouch down and wipe up the mess.

The blonde stepped up to the counter, leaning awkwardly to speak to the other barista while Mark continued to clean. Her fashionably torn blue jeans were right there, right next to him. Mark knew she was a soy milk latte, extra foam. She came in most days, and he knew her coffee.

The other barista was named David, and he'd been working at the coffee shop for about a week. He still didn't know much about coffee, but in that week he'd learned the names of everybody else working at the shop and had settled into the crew as though he'd been born there.

"Welcome to Topsail Coffee. What can I get you?" David asked. Mark kept cleaning, squeezing out his towel in a small bucket and wiping up more of the spill. 'She wants a soymilk latte, extra foam,' he thought.

"Soymilk latte, extra foam," she said. She had a lovely alto voice, and Mark always wondered if she was a singer. Mark wrung out his cloth one last time, and took it back to the sink. He took the "wet floor" sign out and stood it up over the wet spot he'd left on the floor. When he got back behind the counter, David turned him to the back counter with a hand on his arm, and whispered, "soymilk latte?"

Mark sighed, nodded, and began making the beverage. David occupied himself at the cash register, vamping while Mark did the work. Mark kept his eyes on the coffee, although his eyes would have felt more rested had they been allowed to consider the customer. She was cute, with her long hair in a ponytail and blue eyes. Pretty blue eyes, Mark thought, but he wasn't actually sure. He could never really look her in the eye.

He finished making the drink and just left it on the machine where David could get it. David reached for it and asked the blonde woman her name. Mark knew her name was Lisa; he'd seen her debit card often enough. "Lisa," she said, and moved her head a little to read David's nametag. "It's good to meet you . . . Taylor?"

David laughed as he put her coffee on the counter and took her debit card. "I'm David, it's good to make your acquaintance," he said. "I'm new here; I haven't got a nametag of my own yet." Lisa laughed, and they smiled at each other. She told him goodbye as she turned to leave.

It was not true that David didn't have a nametag yet. Mark had made it himself, with the clunky little label maker. David just "forgot" to wear it—every shift. He seemed to think wearing the wrong name tag was some marvelous joke. Mark made all the nametags because no one else could make the ancient label maker work. Or at least, that was the story agreed upon among the staff. Mark imagined himself slapping David's nametag to his chest and shouting "Liar! You have a nametag!" Of course he didn't.

Every moment of the shift that David was not actually helping a customer, he had his phone in his hand, texting and posting and reading texts and posts. Mark stood there in silence and looked out the front window of the shop as people passed by. It was a hot day, and at this time of day the sun beat straight down on Washington Street and the pavement shimmered. Many of the passers-by were wearing as little as they could get away with. Mark felt a darkness pressing down on him as a woman in cutoff denim shorts and a bikini top walked by, holding hands with some jock.

The shift went by. David graciously paused his work on his telephone whenever there was more than one customer in the store, even though most of the time he

either needed Mark's help with an order or he was so out of his depth that Mark had to make the whole order, in addition to helping his own customers.

Mark closed the store most evenings. That meant he was responsible not only for the final count and the paperwork but also for getting the shop ready for the next morning. Mark was very diligent about the prep work. Early on he'd worked some mornings, and he knew how disruptive it could be if the prep work hadn't been done.

"Hey, Mark, I'm meeting some friends. Is it OK if I clock out now?"

Mark looked around. David had done a little bit of cleaning and had restocked the hot cups. There was still a ton to do. "Sure," was all Mark said, as he sat and wondered what it would be like to be meeting friends. It'd be faster to get the work done himself than try to help David with it.

At 6pm Mark locked the coffee shop and headed for his second job, stocking products at a small convenience store close to the campus. He walked into the store and had to shake himself as the frigid, conditioned air hit him. "Hey, Mike, good to see ya, buddy," the cashier said. "Hey, do me a favor, will ya, and fill up the Freezee machine?"

The cashier was Duke, and he was tall and kind of rough-looking. He had tattooed sleeves and long gray hair that he left free even though his duties included serving food out of the hot case. Mark knew Duke should wear a hairnet. It never seemed to be the right time to mention it, though. Mark had long since given up correcting the various names Duke called him by, but he felt that mentioning the hairnet might get him a couple of new ones.

Filling the Freezee machine was part of the cashier's duties, but Mark said nothing; he just collected together the things he needed to clean and refill the machine. Duke occupied his time talking to a dark-haired woman who was leaning up on the customer side of the cashier's counter while Duke leaned against his side. The two of them were as close together as was possible, given that there was a counter between them. Their conversation was soft and punctuated by little laughs from the woman and the occasional guffaw from Duke.

As Mark was finishing up the Freezee machine, the woman left with a final laugh and a wave for Duke, and a "see you tomorrow." Duke reassured her that

he would be there. Duke watched the woman walk out and kept watching until she was gone.

Mark said, "Where?" before he could stop himself. He didn't like prying, and he was more than a little afraid of Duke.

"Big party down at the Dell," Duke said. "I think she's ready to go."

'Of course she's ready to go to the party,' Mark thought, and then he stopped himself. Not 'go to the party,' he realized, but 'go,' that kind of go.

Duke stretched lasciviously and repeated, mostly to himself, "ready to GO."

Mark started restocking the beverages. The store had a walk-in cooler that took up one whole side of the store, with customer-facing glass doors. The air in the cooler was even colder than the air in the store, and Mark shivered a little as he opened cases and pulled out six-packs to slide onto the racks. Inside the cooler there was a unique smell, a mélange of stale beer and mildewed cardboard that always gagged Mark for a few seconds, until he got used to it.

A group of five people walked in, talking and laughing so loudly that Mark could hear them even in the walk-in. A man and woman in the group were all over each other, causing one of their friends to say, "Get a room." This delightful joke was repeated at about two-minute intervals, and the group was drunk enough that it was funny every time.

Another couple from the group was carefully considering all of the many options offered by your modern convenience store. It took them no time at all to move past the cooler displays of energy drinks and sports drinks, but making a choice between beer and wine was proving tougher. Choosing was complicated in part because the two couldn't keep their hands off each other, so every step involved some untangling and then retangling.

The woman was beautiful to Mark. She had brown hair with copper highlights and deep brown eyes. She was wearing a bikini top with a man's shirt unbuttoned over it, and as she stepped to the cooler and opened the door, Mark could see the effect of the air conditioning. He was staring at her nipples when she started laughing.

"Tommy, c'mere," she said, waving at her partner. "Quick. There's a guy in here."

Tommy obligingly came and looked through the cooler door, making sure his hand brushed over her behind. He said, "Hey, dude." Mark didn't know what to say.

"Wuz goin' on?" Mr. Get-A-Room said, walking over to look. He saw Mark and got a big smile on his face. "Cooler Troll!" he shouted. "Hey, Andy, come look at the Cooler Troll."

They stood there and pointed and laughed. Mark shook himself and went back to stocking the shelves. When he moved to a different section of the cooler, Tommy's girlfriend closed the cooler door and opened the one he was working on. She softly and tunelessly sang "Cooler Troll, Cooler Troll," and smiled at Mark. The smile didn't reach past the back of the cooler shelf, though. She finally selected a bottle of wine.

He continued to stock as the drunks went to pay. He could see them as they stepped to the cash register and paid, a process that involved a great deal of merriment for reasons that Mark could not fathom. Duke made some funny remark, and everybody left laughing.

On his way home, Mark passed through Peace Plaza, a park centered around a stone sculpture celebrating peace. That was the official story, anyway. Mark could see that the bird-thing in the sculpture probably was supposed to be a dove, but it had five wings. Mark was pretty sure doves don't have five wings, not even Peace Doves. Everybody loved the sculpture, and Mark had read with wonder a newspaper op-ed piece fulminating about how beautiful it was.

Peace Plaza was marked by competing party music, with hip-hop driving a group of college students and some kind of jam band music from a group on the opposite corner. The sounds of the jam band were laced with sweet cannabis smoke.

As he walked through the middle of the park and around the sculpture, Mark felt himself cataloguing all the couples. Most of the hip-hop group were dancing in a sort of scrum, but two couples were lying on beach towels and making out. On the jam band corner, a woman had straddled a man who was lying on a towel, and they were kissing strenuously. Two men on a bench sat with their heads

close together, talking earnestly. Most of the people walking were either couples, holding hands and heads together, or groups laughing and chatting.

Of course, most of the people in the park, whether in a couple or not, had their phones in their hands. Many were concentrating on the phone; many more simply held the phone and referred to it every 30 seconds or so, tapping a brief reply sometimes with blazing thumbs. It seemed so common that Mark took his phone out of his pocket and looked at it. There were no messages. There were no notifications. He put his phone back in his pocket.

Home, for Mark, was a shabby two-story house a few blocks west of the campus. He shared the three-bedroom house with two others. His current roommates were still in school, although Mark had graduated three years earlier. He picked the mail out of the mailbox, and though it was all clearly junk mail, he sorted the pieces meant for his roommates into two stacks that he put on the kitchen counter.

It was almost eleven o'clock, but Mark went ahead and cleaned up the kitchen. Someone, probably Vince and his girlfriend, had used several pans cooking something that had burned onto two of the pans. Mark scrubbed them clean. He'd never talked to his roommates about the cavalier way they made messes and just walked away expecting him to clean them up. Once in a while it would occur to Mark that it was not unusual that they expected him to clean up, since he always did.

Vince's door was closed, anyway. Mark thought maybe he'd mention the mess the next day. He didn't even really fool himself.

Mark went into his room and closed the door. He sat for a while just staring at his computer monitor, then he turned it on. He checked his email, which was the usual mix of unrealistically good deals that Mark couldn't afford in any case, and political nonsense. He diligently checked his spam box to make sure there were no responses from potential employers. As he did, a voice in the back of his mind pointed out that it had been a couple of weeks since he'd applied for any jobs.

When he had graduated with his degree in Business Administration, Mark had gone to all the career fairs, had haunted the school's placement office, and had perfected his resume and his cover letter, carefully using all the latest tips and

tricks from the HR experts. He had sent out dozens of applications and got a few call-backs and two actual interviews. Rather, one actual interview and one bizarre meeting where no humans from the company had participated. After a harried secretary had stashed Mark in a conference room and verified that he wasn't going to bother her for coffee, Mark sat in the quiet room. Exactly at the appointed hour, a screen mounted on the wall lit up, displaying a generic image of a businesswoman.

Mark checked carefully, counting the woman's fingers and looking for other oddness about her. She was AI, but she was expensive AI, and showed none of the customary markers of fakery. She had questions for Mark. From the start, he thought perhaps they had the wrong interview room, or the AI had been given the wrong resume. None of the questions related to anything Mark had put on his application. He couldn't even really grasp the meaning of some of the questions. The fake woman responded appropriately to his answers, such as they were. After 30 minutes or so, the AI had apparently asked all of its questions. Mark sat there, waiting, watching the screen. The AI woman said nothing more, but the image of the woman remained on the screen. Mark tentatively asked, "Should I go?" but he got no answer. After another half hour or so, Mark left the conference room. Everybody was busy, so he just walked out of the office. He heard nothing further from that company.

The actual interview had been worse. Mark had coached himself from the moment he woke up that morning, reminding himself to look the interviewers in the eye and try to seem friendly. He wore his one good jacket and slacks that matched it pretty closely. He couldn't afford an actual suit. The interview was with four people, none of whom seemed happy at all to be there. Mark had tried to ask if he would be working with any of the four, but he stumbled through the question and it ended up incomprehensible. After that, he couldn't look anybody in the eye. He heard nothing further from that company either.

Since then, the dozens of applications had become a hundred or more, but on those he'd sent most recently he hadn't had any responses, not even acknowledgements that he'd applied. Mark thought about checking LinkedIn, but he knew what would be there. Rather, what would not be there.

Mark looked out his window. Two people were walking, one holding a flashlight that bobbed in the darkness. One of the walkers laughed merrily and leaned up to kiss the other. In the darkness, Mark couldn't tell what gender the walkers were. It didn't really matter, anyway: they were a couple.

He checked the dating site he'd signed up for. No one had responded to his profile. He paged through a few listings that the site thought were perfect for him. He paged back through the 'perfect' candidates. Then he closed the site. Twenty-five bucks a month, he thought. That subscription has to go.

He spent some time on YouTube. He'd been watching videos on ancient history, and he watched one on the Persian Empire. There were animations illustrating key moments in Persian history. It was entertaining, but Mark couldn't help but wonder how accurate the information was.

Then Mark wandered off into a porn site and spent a little time there, but it was depressing. It was all so grubby and vaguely ridiculous.

In the middle of the night, Mark shut his 'puter down and went out to get a drink of water. As he walked into the kitchen, Vince's girlfriend gave a little shriek and dropped down behind the counter, but not before Mark had caught that she was naked. "Hey, little warning here, man," Vince said. Mark apologized and stepped back into his room. He spent a little while thinking about trying again to get a drink, and he listened carefully to see if he could determine what Vince and his lady were up to. In the end, he decided not to try.

In the morning, Vince and his girlfriend hogged the bathroom. There was a shower on the second floor, but it leaked. Mark had given up telling the landlord after more than a year of being ignored. Mark took his shower things to the intramural sports facility on campus. He knew which door to use, where the reader would accept his out-of-date campus ID.

He got to Topsail Coffee well before 10, when his shift was to start. The place was crazy busy, so Mark got right to work getting the service area squared away and helping customers. The manager, Darren, sat at his customary table, reading on his tablet. They were busy straight through to one o'clock, when the morning crew clocked out. The morning crew all happily shucked off their purple aprons

right on time, and left chatting with one another. Mark spent the next hour straightening up and restocking. Darren didn't look up from his tablet.

At 2:15 David showed up for his shift, which began at 2:00. "Sorry, sorry," he said in a humorous sing-song, as he did most days, "what's 15 minutes among friends, am I right?" Darren looked up, but returned immediately to whatever he was looking at on the tablet.

That afternoon, Lisa walked in. David rushed to help her. "Hey, Lisa, what can I get you?" he said. Mark was already starting a soymilk latte with extra foam. "Don't you remember?" Lisa asked him, with an exaggerated pout that melted Mark's heart. She added, "Mike knows what I get, don't you, Mike?" Mark nodded, but he did not look up, even when he'd finished making the coffee.

He crouched down and was pulling stock forward in a refrigerator when he heard David making a date with Lisa. Mark was stunned; it seemed so easy. 'Would you like to go out Friday?' 'Sure, sounds great.' Just like that. Mark slammed his head painfully into the edge of the counter when he stood up. He blinked and stars floated around his vision. It started a headache that Mark knew would be his for the rest of the day. Lisa's "awww" might have been the most painful sound Mark ever heard.

There was no convenience store shift that evening, so Mark walked home. In Peace Plaza, a little dog broke away from its owner and ran barking at Mark. The little beast was barking and jumping up at him, although it was too small to get much past his knee. The dog's owner ran over and reattached the leash to the collar and said, "Bad puppy." She looked up at Mark and said, "I'm so sorry."

She was slender, with a round face that looked like a smile was its customary resting state. "It's OK," Mark said. He knew she was waiting for him to say something else. Would she like to go out with him on Friday? Mark was composing the sentence in his head when she stood up, said "sorry" again and returned to the bench she'd been sitting on.

The rest of the way home Mark imagined that he'd said something clever to the woman, and they'd fallen in love. He thought of witty things he could have said. Mark's imagination seemed to be able to come up with lots of ways the brief interaction could have become a happily-ever-after.

Mark looked at the one piece of mail that had actually been in the mailbox for him, from the Department of Education. He just looked at the envelope for a while, not really wanting to open it. He owed about $75,000. His debt was in deferral, or it was not. The debt had been forgiven, or it had not, but it might be, really soon. Every new letter from the DoE deepened the mystery further.

Vince had once "accidentally" opened one of the letters and whistled to himself when he saw the total owed. Mark had snatched the letter away, but Vince had already made some comment to Trevor, and they started to laugh. "Is it in deferral, or not? Yes!" Vince had said. "It is in deferral, and it is not in deferral. It is Schrodinger's student loan." For his $75K, Mark had learned enough to know that was a joke, even if it didn't seem particularly funny. He knew that some politician would be on the news talking about how important education is, and that "Students are the future." Or they are not. It seemed odd to Mark that the two ideas could be true at the same time in this strange game.

There was an email from Mark's mom. He stared at that for a moment before opening it. She wondered how he was doing, and she mentioned that the company she worked for was hiring. Mark knew they were hiring: he'd applied three times, twice in response to listings for particular jobs, and once just on the fly. So they were still hiring, just not him.

When he went to college, Mark used to call home at least once a week. Since he had graduated, every time he tried to call his father would take the phone from his mother and harangue Mark about lacking either brains or balls, or both, and would go on and on. After his parents cut him off their cell phone account, and he'd had to get a pre-paid phone, he could no longer afford to listen to extended rants on how useless he was, so he stopped calling. Now he got the occasional email. He teared up a little as he answered, saying that nothing had changed. He closed, as he always did, with "I love you, Mark."

After he sent the response, he looked at those words on the screen. His mom was the only person he'd ever said those words to. And he was letting her down.

Mark was not ugly or stupid. He'd gotten good grades all through school, overall a little better than a 3.0 grade point average. He was passably good-looking; he told himself his nose was not too big or his eyes too small. He was carrying a

little extra weight, thanks mostly to his gaming days, which had been fueled by soda and chips. He'd had to drop the gaming, though. The high-speed internet he needed cost too much, and when he stepped back to what he could afford, his teammates complained loudly about his lagging and finally, and unsubtly, asked him to drop out of the team.

That left Mark with time on his hands. Initially, he filled that time by hanging around in what was loosely known online as "the Manosphere," following the likes of Andrew Tate and other influencers who sold the idea that men should be real men and women should be property. He had taken to working out, without really knowing much about how to do it, and had taken all manner of protein powders and other supplements. Mark told himself that the gym membership and the supplements were simply too expensive, and that's why he bailed out of the Manosphere. Really, though, Mark had been uncomfortable with the hate and misogyny, the shaming and the arrogance of those faceless posters. He was not positive, but he felt that a real man wouldn't be so mean and selfish.

When he considered it, Mark traced his troubles back to eighth grade. Maybe that isn't where they started, but that's about when Mark noticed that people talked to each other. They just did, as natural as that, and most boys his age could even talk to girls. Mark never seemed to be able to convince himself that anybody wanted to talk to him, least of all girls. So he was quiet and did his schoolwork. He didn't attend any of the dances in the school gym, except the one that was somehow part of his eighth-grade phys ed class. He hid by the wall and was finally called out by the teacher. He had to dance with Shara Owens. He was lost, unable to find the rhythm, and he stepped on Shara numerous times. That became his fame for the rest of his eighth-grade year: the guy who almost killed Shara because he couldn't dance to save his life. Shara made a whole stand-up routine out of it, which she would launch into whenever he tried to sneak by in the hall.

In high school, the phones took over the world. Theoretically, phones were not supposed to be used during school hours, but the students spent a lot of time working around the rule, hiding phones under their desks and texting their friends during class. Getting somebody's number, their 'digits,' became the number one game.

Mark still tried to fit in, but even if he stood with a group who were chatting, he never really was able to join them. The others talked and laughed together, and turned their phone screens to their friends to share some video that was posted somewhere. Standing on the edge of a group of people laughing at something Mark wasn't shown brought a dreadful feeling of otherness.

The last email he looked at invited him to "come back and talk to Genevieve. She misses you." Mark knew that Genevieve didn't miss him. Genevieve was his "AI girlfriend." Even the term made Mark flinch. Genevieve was a chatbot, AI designed to provide companionship, AI that learned what he wanted. Mark had spent hours chatting with Genevieve, and getting her appearance and voice just right. He'd greeted the dawn more than once after spending the night chatting with Genevieve. Those hours were not free, and after only about a month, Mark knew that his spending on the chatbot was not sustainable. He had to cancel the subscription. Now he sat looking at the "come back" email, which included an image of Genevieve, his Genevieve. Even if it wasn't real companionship, it was the closest that Mark had ever been.

Mark looked at the perfect features of his perfect "girlfriend" and a tsunami of loneliness swept through him. In the back of his mind, he'd always known she was not "real," not like that. Still, in the dark watches of the night, she'd been his light, for that brief time they'd had.

Closing his email program, Mark opened the dating site and sat staring at his dashboard for a long while. Finally, he found how to cancel his subscription. His finger hovered over the final prompt, and Mark told himself he wasn't giving up on dating, just on this site. When he finally hit "enter" it felt like defeat.

He went to his bank online and saw that the dating site had charged him for another month the day before. He didn't even bother to wonder whether that money would be refunded; of course it wouldn't. Even if the terms of service said it would be, Mark knew that the internet was a gigantic lie factory, where little abuses were legion amidst the huge, world-shaking lies. Mark knew that all those "end-user license agreements" were fluid, or simply moot. 'You want a refund? Go ahead and try to find us, asshole.' That's the internet motto.

He didn't spend long looking at his bank account, singular. He'd had some savings for a while, but that was long gone. It looked like he'd make it to the end of the month, but not by much.

Mark spent a little while poking around on YouTube, but between the ads and all the buffering because his internet connection sucked, he couldn't really get interested in anything. He shut the 'puter down and went to bed.

The days trudged on, each one the same as the last, and each one, to Mark's mind, one day closer to the crash that would completely ruin him. Sometimes it felt like being caught in quicksand.

Every time he went into the walk-in cooler at the convenience store now, Mark heard "cooler troll." He thought about getting a T-shirt made. Trevor, or Vince, would have a "cooler troll" T-shirt, and they'd wear it proudly and laugh about it with their friends. Mark could almost feel that idea sliding quietly into the limbo that held his sharp, clever ideas. They were filed under "courage." Mark knew he'd never have enough.

Mark took a long walk home from the convenience store. When he was younger, Mark had gone for long walks during which he would create vivid stories where he was the hero, the sheriff, a soldier, or an astronaut, and he saved the day—saved the whole world. If he'd written those stories down, maybe he'd be a famous author. Probably not, though.

The stories wouldn't come to Mark anymore. They'd all been silly, anyway, he supposed. Now, on a walk, Mark endlessly reviewed his own recent history, trying to understand why nothing was working for him. Mark had earnestly tried to learn the rules of life: from the earliest days when his mom enrolled him in Bible study at their church, and he went to kindergarten to learn all about the Golden Rule and playing nicely together. More rules and laws came later. If he went to the swimming pool, Mark would stop and read the rules that were posted. After all, they're there for everyone's safety, right? Big rules, little rules, they were all there in the books, on the signs, everywhere. Just not in real life. Mark learned what he was told were the rules for living. By the time he got to college, it was pretty clear to Mark that other people didn't follow those rules.

He found himself walking through Little Mexico, the part of town where Spanish-speaking people had settled and made a community. The name confused Mark; most of the people there weren't from Mexico. They came from El Salvador, Guatemala, all over Central America, as well as Mexico.

Little Mexico on a warm night created a happy tableau of people sitting on their front stoops or leaning on parked cars. The music was different from Peace Park. It was Latin music that was at once familiar and quite exotic. On the street in front of one house, a small group was dancing to a catchy beat from a boom box on the stoop.

The language was different; the outfits were different, but here as everywhere else men and women, men and men, women and women were chatting and laughing, some force like gravity drawing two people together as lovers, or a group of people together as friends. This was one rule, or set of rules, that Mark had never figured out. He'd never been shown where that special kind of gravity came from, or how to make it work. Mark thought he'd be alright with being broke, but being alone felt like endless night.

Little Mexico gave way to a business district. The shops were all closed at this late hour, and many of the shop entrances had people curled up in them, their blankets and all their worldly possessions carefully stashed away, sometimes in an old baby stroller or a battered grocery cart. A grocery cart to keep their sad belongings in was rare now. The big stores had adopted wheel locks so the carts couldn't leave the parking lot. Those carts cost a lot of money, and it made the shareholders mad to be expected to keep replacing them.

A couple of these folks had their hand-lettered signs visible, asking for help. Mark met the eyes of one person—all bundled up even in the heat, so that it was not completely clear whether the person was a he or a she—and he dug in his pocket. After picking out the lint, he put the few coins he found into the person's hand.

Then the streets turned uphill and became broad, quiet avenues under rows of mature trees. The houses here on the hill were bigger, the lawns nicer. This was where the successful people lived: the college professors and administrators. It was also home now to people who called themselves "entrepreneurs"

or "influencers." While the college professors kept talking about the rules, the entrepreneurs bragged about breaking them, "thinking outside the box." This group loudly proclaimed their genius and their status as winners.

They may have thought they were breaking the rules, but Mark knew they were simply following other rules than those he'd been taught. Mark had learned to share and help others. The winners just seemed to help themselves. Almost as soon as Mark had been able to get his hand to pick something up off the floor, he'd been taught not to take things that did not belong to him. The winners learned that everything belongs to them if they can take it. Some rule Mark had never been taught made audacity and cunning, not honesty, the most important things. The teachers kept teaching the old Golden Rule, but in the real world Mark knew it had been restated: "Do unto others whatever you want, but remember that you only eat what you can kill."

Mark didn't want that much. At most, he wanted a good job so he could get his own house and live a quiet life. No, he admitted to himself; he didn't want to live this quiet life anymore. He wanted someone to share his life with. The house should be for two people. Still, it didn't have to be a big house, and they wouldn't need buckets of money. Mark never understood why the rich loud-mouths never seemed to have enough. Their wealth was stated in numbers you couldn't even really understand, but they kept cheating and stealing as hard as they could to get more, more, always more.

Following those old rules wasn't getting Mark friends or lovers, or even a decent job. Switching to the winners' rules didn't seem to be an option: Mark could sort of understand them, but he knew he could never live them. He wasn't sure what was lacking in him, but he knew there must be something.

Stopping at an intersection where the lines of trees paused for a break, Mark could see the lights of the city spread out below him. If he turned around, he saw the big, quiet houses, and a Mercedes purred by. Turning again, Mark saw the city lights and imagined the city itself. It was centered on the college, where the rules were still taught and discussed just as though they still had meaning. There were businesses struggling to stay alive while their customers bought online in faceless, joyless transactions. There were homeless people, more every year, huddling in

doorways. There were lots of ordinary people who were struggling but who at least knew how to let the gravity pull them together into relationships and how to talk to people so they'd be hired. Mark felt that those regular lives were getting harder and harder, but at least most people didn't have to be alone. That treat was just for Mark.

There was probably enough of everything in the city for everyone if it were shared. Sharing was no longer the way, having given way to the new rule as Mark had heard it stated so many times, times he'd been just a little slower than the next person to take the last soda or the last dessert in the lunch line. "If you snooze, you lose," they would proudly say as they snatched the prize away from Mark. It always happened so fast. Sometimes Mark daydreamed about graciously pointing to the last piece of cake and telling someone, "No, you go ahead, enjoy that cake." He'd mean it, too. He dreamed that letting the other person have the dessert would taste better than the cake.

Mark walked down the hill, back toward the city, and eventually wound up at home. Not at home; at the house he was renting a room in. He'd considered and he'd pondered the ways of the world on his long walk, but he never solved anything. He hadn't figured out the gravity that made singles into couples. He hadn't figured out the rules for success so he could buy one of the nice homes on the hill. One rule he did understand was that tomorrow was going to be the same as today, unless it got worse.

Another cheerful day began at Topsail Coffee. David and Lisa were officially 'going out,' and now Mark had to listen to David go on about how hot she was. His reaction must have been on his face, because finally David asked him, "What? What's wrong?"

Mark never liked direct questions. Direct questions generally require a response, and fading further into the background wouldn't do. David was waiting for an answer. All Mark could say was, "I really don't feel you should be telling me these things."

"Why not? We're friends, aren't we?"

No, Mark thought, we're not friends. I'm just a guy you know. He couldn't think of what to say, so he just shrugged and started cleaning out the microwave.

David shrugged too and didn't talk about Lisa for the rest of that shift. She was back on the menu the following day.

Mark accidentally got invited to go out with some members of the crew that Friday. He was just standing there at the counter while David and Denisse were planning and making a list of who should come, and texting. He was usually pretty good about remaining invisible at times like that, but Denisse happened to see him and said, "Oh, Mark. We're forgetting Mark. You'll come, won't you?" Mark looked at David, who didn't look like he cared one way or the other. For some reason that made Mark annoyed enough to say, "Sure, I'd like to come."

That's how Mark found himself at the Lion's Den, a restaurant and bar across the street from campus. It was mostly a bar, and a notorious meat market for college students looking to hook up.

Mark had closed the coffee shop, so he didn't have as much time as everybody else to get dressed. That was fine, since Mark didn't have a lot of sharp clothes. He got to the Lion's Den exactly at nine o'clock, even though he knew that being on time was lame. As he walked into the building, the restaurant was on his right and the bar to the left. The noise from the bar was pouring out into the entrance. Mark was stunned that it actually got louder as he walked into the bar.

Just inside the entrance to the bar was Duke, working the door. Everybody had a second job, Mark knew. He smiled at Mark, and took Mark's driver's license, glancing at it and shouting "Hey, Mikey, here for a little grab ass, eh?" He swept his arm across the tempestuous scene of dancing and milling and mingling and drinking. "Target-rich environment, buddy." Mark just smiled and nodded, taking his driver's license back. As he put it away, he parsed Duke's comment, which he understood to mean that there were many women there ready to 'go.' He wondered how Duke knew that.

There were screens everywhere showing sporting events that no one was watching. Loud music pounded out of speakers that seemed to be unavoidable. Somehow there was a faint haze in the stuffy air, even though no smoking was allowed. Mark just stood inside the entrance, trying to find some sensible point of reference to keep his eyes on. His eyes unfocused a little, and the bar and dance floor looked like an animated Salvador Dali painting, people and things weirdly

out of shape, out of place. The big screens on the walls were punctuated by myriad small screens, telephones in people's hands. Mark saw a woman dancing, but focusing on the phone in her hand.

About 15 minutes later, Denisse and a friend of hers came by, and then Darren came in with his girlfriend. They moved three tables together so everyone could sit together. Mark sat with his back to the wall and the table between him and the dance floor. Directly across the table from him sat David and Lisa. At the start of the evening they were very cozy, and Mark had to work not to flinch every time Lisa kissed David. She was wearing a pretty yellow dress.

Mark ordered a beer and nursed it. He knew he'd lose it if he drank very much in all that noise and confusion. After his third or fourth sip from his beer, a big guy in a muscle shirt swept in off the dance floor, picked up Mark's beer and took a long pull from it, then slammed it back down on the table in front of Mark, all without taking his hand or attention off the woman he was dragging along with him. It was not clear to Mark whether the man had thought that was his beer, or whether he simply didn't care.

As the evening wore on, some of their crew from work had drifted away, and some new faces took positions at their tables. A short guy who looked kind of nerdy to Mark was earnestly making a play for Denisse, and it looked to Mark like he was making headway. Neither he nor Denisse seemed to notice that his forearm was squarely placed in a puddle of spilled beer. A woman in a little black dress collapsed into a seat at their table, apparently tired from dancing. It didn't take long before all of David's attention was taken up with the newcomer, and Lisa found herself leaning around David's shoulder to try to remain a part of his conversation.

Mark wanted to talk to Lisa. Lisa wanted to talk to David. David wanted to talk to the newcomer. Mark just could not figure out how to get Lisa's attention, and he had no idea what he would say if he did. He just wanted Lisa to know he was there, that he'd talk to her and be her friend. It occurred to Mark that if he knew Lisa's digits, he could text her. He didn't have any idea what he would text, any more than he had a thought of what to say if he spoke to her.

The music seemed to get louder, as if that were possible, and what conversation there was turned into shouting. The constant motion on the TV screens around the room and the constant motion on the dance floor made Mark a little dizzy.

A man came up and asked Lisa to dance, and she said yes quite pointedly, although David didn't notice because the newcomer had moved a bit closer to him and occasionally touched his forearm. Mark watched Lisa and her new suitor on the dance floor. They danced two dances, and then Lisa followed him back to his table and his friends. Mark looked back at the table he sat at, now littered with partially empty glasses and crumpled up napkins.

When David and the woman in black got up to dance, there was no longer anyone Mark knew at the table. Without any preamble, a short guy said, "Thanks," and pulled one of the tables over to where his group was sitting.

A harried server came over and started collecting glasses and plates off the remaining tables, putting them in a squarish bussing tub. She brusquely pulled another one of the tables back to its accustomed place. Her movements were quick and practiced. She finished with a quick wipe of the remaining table. At no time did she take her eyes off her work or look at Mark. A group of four people was eyeing the table, so Mark got up and gestured that it was all theirs. They smiled and got down to the evening's serious business of drinking and dancing.

Mark felt unsteady as he made his way through the noise and the fug, and it was a relief to be outdoors. He looked up at the sky, trying to find somewhere to look that didn't have a neon sign or a streetlight in the way. A few stars and Venus were bright enough to be seen through the city haze. Mark knew there were millions of stars up there, billions, and yet all but a handful were out of sight. All of them were unreachable, anyway.

He made his way home. It was a warm night, and a Friday, so there were a lot of people on the street, going to parties, going home from parties to make love. It felt to Mark like a river of ghostly people flowing by him, all of them happy without him. Where the street was crowded, people sometimes came so close they almost touched Mark, and it was as if he could feel a little creche of light and warmth for a second as they passed.

When he got home, there was no sign of Trevor or Vince. Mark slipped into his room and tapped once on his mouse to start the computer. He looked at the background on his home screen, which was one of the gigantic computer company's generic examples. Most people set a background with a picture of friends or family. Mark understood the series of keystrokes required to set a new desktop background. What Mark lacked was any pictures of friends or family. He knew his mom had old-school photo albums, and younger Mark was in them. High school Mark and college Mark were not among the subjects of family photos.

For a completely unfathomable reason, Mark's YouTube suggested an old, old movie in black and white with a famous comic who was acerbic and apparently drunk all the time. Mark watched the movie. There was a recurring joke where fake snow was thrown in the comic's face, quite obviously by a hand offscreen. It was funny, but Mark didn't laugh. What was funny was knowing that the next handful of snow was coming and anticipating when it would happen.

After the movie, Mark wandered to a porn site, but he didn't stay long. Everything there was about people handling each other without ever touching each other. He felt like his heart would break, so he shut the computer down.

The next day at Topsail Coffee was almost unendurable. Darren had a hangover, so he sat as usual at his table and looked at his tablet, and something about how he sat there felt meaner than usual.

Denisse came into the shop, and her friend from the night before came in right after. They ordered coffees and took them to a table where they sat and whispered together about some drama or other that had happened last night. At least Mark knew better than to ring up the coffees with the employee discount. He'd done that once, expecting the employee to pay the discounted amount as set forth in the employee handbook, and everybody had just scoffed at him. He had to write a note to explain the transaction, a little white lie.

When David came in, he immediately launched into an unnecessarily detailed account of his conquest of Carrie, or Cara, the woman in the little black dress. David apparently didn't know, or possibly care, what her name properly was. The seduction seemed to have been primarily based on substantial amounts of alcohol.

As David talked, words like 'shabby' and 'sordid' kept spinning around Mark's head. David got the girl, though, Mark thought, just as the hero always does.

Mark wanted to ask if David had spoken to Lisa, but he didn't know if he should.

The question became moot when Lisa walked in. She walked directly to Mark, theatrically avoiding noticing David.

"Soymilk latte, extra foam?" Mark asked, and he got a little thrill when she smiled, even though her smile had steel in it. She just nodded. Mark made the coffee and completed the sale. Lisa took the lid off her coffee, took a step down the counter so she was in front of David, and without a word she threw the latte on him and walked out.

For reasons he couldn't explain, Mark wanted to cheer for her. In his head, he reimagined the scene, and when he handed Lisa the coffee, he said, "On the house, sister," in a deep bass voice. He never knew why he didn't think of things like that in time. He forced himself not to laugh at the mess all over David.

David was brushing ineffectually at his clothing. Lisa's aim had been good, so David's face was dripping coffee down onto his shirt. He angrily shucked off his purple apron and threw it on the floor. He said he was going home to change, and he stalked out, texting furiously and muttering. Amid the curse words, Mark heard 'sue her ass.' Darren bestirred himself to come look behind the counter, shook his head sadly and went back to sit down again.

Mark cleaned up the mess. The latte had gotten everywhere, and he spent a fair amount of time chasing stray splashes. He threw David's apron in the laundry. That afternoon, between customers, he pulled all the appliances out of their places and cleaned the whole counter. It was good to have things to do. Mark pretended that Lisa would come back and order from him especially, and it could go back to the way it had been before David. He knew that wasn't going to happen. He would never see Lisa again.

As it happened, he would never see David again either. David didn't come back from changing, and he didn't show up the next day when he was scheduled. Mark waited until 2:15, then 2:30, and then he started to get a little concerned. He called Darren. He could hear Darren shrugging even over the phone.

The 'help wanted' sign went up, and the applications poured in. It is apparently the dream of every young American to be a barista, and there were lots of applicants. Actually, it appears to be the dream of every American to be a barista, as there were applications from some seniors as well. Darren chucked the applications from the older people first and then sorted the remaining applicants in order of hotness, as was his invariable hiring method. Mark had taken a whole class on equity and diversity in hiring and had learned that you can't discriminate when hiring. Much of the class had been about questions you couldn't ask applicants, so there'd be no proof of your bias. That was years ago, though, and Mark supposed the rules had changed so that hiring based on hotness was okay.

As always, Darren came in to train the applicant who got the job by being hottest, who was named Annalise. Darren didn't actually do any work at the café other than making the work schedule, so he really didn't know how things were done. This didn't stop him from proclaiming, with great self-importance, a lot of complete nonsense as standard procedure. As he had with previous new hires, Mark listened with part of his attention to the "training" being carried out, so he would know what the hapless trainee would really have to know to do the job.

It didn't take long before Darren ran out of things he ostensibly knew how to do, so he asked Mark to "take over." Mark waited until Darren had wandered back to his table and his tablet, and then set to showing Annalise what she needed to know and correcting the nonsense she'd just been told. Annalise sighed a lot. Mark was patient and had her helping customers while he guided her.

All the while, Mark was schooling himself not to stare, not to be creepy. It was not easy, because Annalise was really gorgeous, with wavy amber hair and striking green eyes. The ugly apron couldn't hide—and almost seemed to emphasize—her curves.

Toward the end of the shift, Annalise helped with all the prep work for the next day, carefully completing each thing Mark showed her. When they clocked out, Annalise turned her phone on, and it pinged numerous times for messages. In trying to keep from looking at her body, Mark found himself glancing at her phone. At least three of the messages were from Darren. Mark started talking nervously about certain days when other prep had to be done, but Annalise was

reading the messages. She just smiled sadly and shook her head. "Thank you, you're a good guy," she said. "I'll see you around." Mark had heard that before: it was American for 'never going to see you again.'

The next day Darren railed for minutes on end about how unscrupulous women are and how Annalise wasted his time. He moved on to making smutty jokes about the very features that had made Annalise his first choice for hiring. Denisse was on shift with Mark, but Darren seemed to give no thought at all to her when firing off his tasteless, off-color remarks. Mark thought it might be upsetting to Denisse, but she just shrugged it off. She seemed to, anyway. She was quieter than usual.

The next two applicants, in order of hotness, had already found jobs, so that a woman named Estelle was next up. As he was dialing her number, Darren said, "She's last chance, Mikey. She's completely flat-chested, I mean she's an Estelle all the way, but if you can't keep this one I'm going to have to hire a guy. Or a Boomer." This must have been a very funny remark, as Darren chuckled about it for quite a while. Mark wondered briefly how this world he lived in meshed at all with the world he'd learned about in class, where apparently serious people used words like "equity" and "diversity."

Probably as a sanction for not being chesty enough, Estelle was not graced with any training by Darren, but was sentenced to work with Mark right from the start. She was cheerful and was really engaging with the customers, joking about being new. She made up little rhymes to help her remember things, and by the end of the shift she and Mark were finishing rhymes together. They made a game out of Mark starting a rhyme and Estelle having to finish it.

Mark found out that Estelle was a film student. "Oh, are you going to be an actress?" he asked.

"No, heck no, I'm a behind-the-camera girl. I want to make movies, write and direct them."

"Like, action films? Or those Hallmark happy holidays dramadies?"

Estelle laughed, a lovely sound. "Yes, that's it. I'm going to make a movie called 'Home for The Holidays' every year for the next 30 years."

"You'll be an expert at making snowmen." Mark remembered the old movie. "Those movies always have to start with a bad snowstorm."

"Of course, that's why Daddy can't make it home this year. Absolutely, worst snowstorm in 30 years, every year for the next 30 years."

"I've got your first line. I stole it, but I think it works: 'It's not a fit night out for man nor beast.'" It was something the old comic had said every time before getting the snow in the face. Mark had no idea why it came to him to say that.

Now Estelle laughed merrily. When she got her breath back, she said, "W.C. Fields, really? How do you know about W. C. Fields?"

"I'm something of a film student myself," Mark said. This really scared him, as he did not know how he would follow that up.

"Really?"

"No. My YouTube algorithm just threw that one movie at me," Mark admitted, feeling foolish.

Estelle laughed even more. "I'll have to introduce you to Mae West," she said. In a vampy voice she purred, "Why don't you come up and see me sometime?" She giggled and said, "I don't do a very good Mae West." When they actually did watch a Mae West movie together, Mark found out how funny that really was.

They finished the shift and clocked out. Mark, suddenly very aware of how Annalise had just gone after one shift, hesitantly said to Estelle, "So, you think you . . . that is, are you going to like working here?" He felt his heart pounding as he waited for her answer.

"Yeah, I like working with people." She looked right into Mark's eyes, with both of her sparkling blue ones. "The company is nice, too." He'd seen that look in movies, and he wondered if she were acting.

Mark's heart was racing now, and he felt the old familiar terror settling in. He knew there were things he should say, clever things, sexy things, manly things. He had no idea what any of them were. Then he heard his voice, and as the sentence rolled out, his horror increased.

"I'm in a supervisory position," Mark said. "It wouldn't be proper for us to go out." Oh, please, he thought, not Nerdy Rulebook Mark, not now.

"I think I'm willing to take that chance," Estelle said with a grin.

Mark's voice continued to plow ahead. "Then, Estelle, would you like to go out with me on Friday?"

"Yes, please, but call me Stella."

"Stella is a pretty name."

"My legal name is Estelle, and Topsail says that's the name I have to use, but I like Stella better."

"I make the nametags."

At a little past 6 in the evening, Mark thought he saw the sun rise.

# She's Cunning Like Coyote Becomes a Woman

by Kathy Smith

**Yachats**
**1873**

Mattie sat in a dimly lit shack, in a semi-circle with other children, the adults behind them, while one of the elders looked over the group with great solemnity. He spoke in Hanis, one of the native languages of the Coos tribe.

"I tell you this story, my young ones, for there is a serious lesson in it," began the elder, as the children looked on, wide-eyed and fully attentive. Then the adults repeated each line of the story to help the children remember it through repetition, as was the custom. If the adults got anything wrong, the old storyteller would repeat the line until it was right.

"It is the story of some boys who went trapping and killed a raccoon," continued the storyteller. "It is the story of some boys who went trapping and killed a raccoon," repeated the adults. The storyteller continued, the adults repeating each line after him.

"That evening, they roasted it on a spit, and when it became hot, it began to shrivel. When the raccoon was all drawn and shrunk, it looked so comical that the

young men laughed at it. One of them did not laugh, but the rest could not stop. They laughed until they died."

The children sat, eyes wider still with alarm, and not a sound was heard.

"Only the one boy, who was serious, did not die. Laughing at the raccoon had killed the rest of them, however, and they turned into raccoons as they died."

There was a gasp among the smallest child.

"I tell you this tale to teach you not to laugh at things, and to take life seriously. You must learn to have respect for all living things, " said the storyteller.

A bit later, the children were playing off by themselves. Mattie began to mimic the elder storyteller. "And they turned into raccoons as they died!" she said with great bravado, drawing in her lips and making her hands look like claws. All the children burst into laughter.

"There you go again, She's Cunning Like Coyote," said one little girl, "now you are making fun of the elders."

"It's because they try to be so serious and think we should all be that way. I think people should not take things so seriously. There's a lot about life that is funny, if you think about it."

***

Mattie stayed inside the house only to sleep. At the break of dawn, she was outside, missing meals to play in the water, the mud, and the woods. She would run about, swinging from one tree to another, sometimes falling. She'd run along the bluff, often tripping and getting scratches all over her body. When she would arrive home in the evenings, her mother would ask her, "You're buck naked! Where are your clothes, my little She's Cunning Like Coyote?"

"My poor rags of clothes just lay somewhere," she would answer. "The headman of the Sub-agency does not look after us. He does not give us any new clothes. We just have to wear any old thing. I don't care about them."

***

"Has anyone seen Mattie?" asked Rosa, Mattie's half-sister.

"No," said Mattie's mother, "not for several days."

"That girl, if she's not playing around with the boys in the brush, she's off running horses," said Rosa. "She's a wild one!"

"Well, her large, bright eyes seem to attract the attention of the young boys around here, that's for sure!" agreed Mattie's mother. "But she has always had a mind of her own, more at home outside in the woods than in our house. And yes, she's good with horses too. In fact, she might be out hunting with her uncle and friends. I just wish she would let me know when she takes off."

Just then Mattie burst in the doorway.

"There you are," said her mother, "where have you been this time?"

"I went up to Siletz with my uncle and cousins on horseback. We camped up there and hunted.

"Mattie, how are you going to get a man to marry you when you're so wild?" asked Rosa.

"I don't want to get married," said Mattie, "and besides, all the young men don't seem to mind that a bit; they still all want to marry me. The desirable wife is not a downcast woman who never looks at people and never smiles. The desirable wife is not bashful. She jokes and speaks forth when you address her. She looks you right in the face, not with a downcast head. That is the kind they want; she will be a good wife."

"Mattie," said her mother, "Old Yellow Jacket has asked me if he can marry you."

"What?!" said Mattie, alarmed. "He is a pretty horrible, long-legged fellow. Why would I want to marry someone like that?!"

"Yes, Rosa and I are against it," agreed her mother, "but there is a danger. He is a *mitadin*. He is the type of shaman who has the power to cause ill to people, unlike the *ilaxqain*, who is the benevolent type. You might die, my child, if you do not accept him."

"But I *would* rather die than accept him!" said Mattie in defiance.

"I was afraid you would feel that way, so if you're prepared to pay the consequences, I will not accept his proposal," said her mother.

"I might be taking the chance of my life, but I will not marry him," said Mattie with resolve.

"There is another proposal for you, Mattie," said Rosa.

"Who is it?" asked Mattie.

"My mother's father wants to help his brother buy Mattie in marriage for his nephew Joe Johnson," said Rosa, informing both Mattie and her mother.

"But he already has a wife," said Mattie.

"Yes, but if they come up with a bride price for you, we have to take it," said Mattie's mother. "It will help all of our family to survive here another year. Besides, you haven't even started your menses yet. And it's a whole year after that, and your ceremony into womanhood before you will be ready."

"I will NEVER be ready!" retorted Mattie.

***

Mattie's face was full of panic as she looked down at a red spot on the blanket she was sleeping on. She almost called out for her mother, but caught herself. Her wild, freedom-loving spirit suddenly felt trapped. She knew the rituals she would have to go through. Her friend Kitty, who was five months older than she was, told her all about it.

Mattie jumped out of bed, cleaned herself, and tucked the stained blanket away where no one could see it. She dressed quickly and flew out of the cedar-plank house before anyone else was up. She ran to find Annie, the old, blind woman. She could help her; she would know what to do.

She found her sitting outside, where she always sat, near a dwelling that she shared with others. "Annie," cried Mattie, "you have to help me!"

"What is it, child?" asked the old woman, staring straight ahead, reaching out to Mattie with her hand.

"I found blood on the blanket I slept on this morning," cried Mattie, "I have started my menses!"

"Why, that's a wonderful thing," said Annie, smiling.

"No, it's a terrible thing," answered Mattie. "I will have to stay inside my house for five days! I will die if I don't get to be outside!"

"Oh, my child," said Annie, "it is only for five days, then there will be all kinds of festivities to honor your passage into womanhood."

"But why do I have to go through all the ceremonies? I don't want to be married and have children, not yet, anyway," lamented Mattie.

"Dear sweet Mattie," said Annie, "I know you are young, but throughout time, our people have revered young women who are able to bear children. It has been honored as a necessity for the survival of our tribe. Childbearing can be difficult. A lot of babies, as well as mothers, don't survive childbirth. So, to ensure that our tribe stays strong, we need to have strong, young women who can bear strong babies. In order to start a family, you have to marry a man to support you and the children you bear."

Mattie looked disconsolate.

"You must go back home to your mother. She will help you. It is time for you to start the confinement period," said Annie.

"I just want to be left alone," cried Mattie.

"You will be okay; every young girl must go through it," said Annie.

Mattie looked at Annie, and knowing that the old, blind woman was telling her the truth, she turned and slowly made her way home.

Everyone was still asleep when she arrived home, but soon she heard her mother moving about.

"Mamma," cried Mattie, as she pulled out the blanket she had hidden."What is it, child?" asked her mother from the small fire she was tending in the center of the plank house.

Mattie brought her the blanket and pointed to the red spot.

Her mother looked at her with deep compassion and with the knowledge that her daughter was growing up. She smiled. "Don't worry, my sweet girl. It is a natural thing that comes to all women," she said soothingly to calm her daughter.

"I know that," said Mattie, "I just didn't know how I'd feel when it happened to me."

"Yes, and I have told you too it would come one day. So how do you feel about it?" asked her mother.

Mattie thought for a moment. "I don't think I like it. It means I have to go through puberty rites now, and they don't sound like much fun."

"No," admitted her mother, "but they are traditional in our tribe. All young women must go through the ritual to welcome them into womanhood. It is for their well-being, for good luck in marriage and childbearing."

"But I don't want to have any children, at least not yet," said Mattie.

"Yes," said her mother, "I know, but you will not be ready for that for at least another year."

"Another year?!" protested Mattie. "I don't want to then either!"

"Come, my child, we'll wash out your blanket," said her mother. "And we need to prepare for your seclusion."

Mattie was downcast. She knew it was a big milestone for her, but she didn't want to be part of all the rituals, nor did she want the festivities to honor her.

She joined her mother at the fire. Rosa joined them too.

"Mattie!" said Rosa, "I am so happy for you!"

"Why?" asked Mattie. "Now I have to go through all that nonsense."

Rosa laughed at her. "Silly little She's Cunning Like Coyote, it is an honor to become a woman. You were well named after your grandmother."

"That's what you think!" said Mattie. "Mama, why was I given the name of my grandmother?"

"It was because you had a gift, the medicine of laughter and joking, so that new viewpoints may be assumed. You lighten up old people set in their ways, adding cheer to a party, breaking a death-grip conversation with ease. You are a transformer who shapes the world and teaches humans how to live."

"I just figure if you can't laugh at yourself and your crazy antics, you have lost the game," replied Mattie.

"I wanted Winona to officiate over the ceremonies," interrupted Rosa, "but she has returned to Coos Bay to live with her family there, so we have to get someone else."

"We will have to get a male shaman from Yachats," said their mother.

Mattie didn't like the sound of this either.

"You will have to begin your seclusion for five days. We will have to partition part of the house off with matting, but it can be where you sleep," said her mother.

"I don't want to be secluded," said Mattie. "I want to run outside in the forest and up and down the beach like I always do."

"That is not possible, my little one," said her mother, "but it is only for five days." Mattie sat looking dejected.

She had to remain naked and was not supposed to touch her head except with a scratcher, which hung around her neck. She was restricted to dried elk meat and water during the five days. "I am so hungry," Mattie would say, but it all fell on deaf ears.

On the fifth day, the older men came to sing humorous songs to her. She was not supposed to laugh or respond to the songs, but she couldn't help giggling once in a while, despite an aunt who tried to contain her. Afterward, the shaman and four old women entered her secluded area and picked her up. They made light incisions with a knife all over her to draw a light flow of blood, which was smeared over her entire body. Annie winced in pain as she tried to hold back tears.

She was then allowed to put on a light dress. The shaman took her to the Yachats River and dipped her five times into the water. Each time she was dunked into the river, someone else passed a toy canoe over her while the shaman chanted that if she believed she would grow old, she would. The canoe was about two feet long, filled with sand, and had a little fire burning in it.

After this, the shaman took her back to the house. Four women, who were hired by Mattie's family, waited on her. They put beads around her neck, tied bells onto the ends of her braids, and applied facial and body paint. She was then seated on a fine mat and was told not to look at the fire. If she did, her eyes would become filmy, which was considered undesirable. The shaman said a little prayer and gave her some dried elk meat to eat.

Mattie's friend Kitty, who was of the Chetco tribe, had joined the ceremonies. "Now is the fun part," said Kitty. "We get to spend the night on the beach together!"

"Yes," said Mattie, "that was the only thing I've been looking forward to!"

"Me too!" said her friend with a big smile. "And we get to do this for five nights!" The two of them hugged, gathered a few things, and ran off together, laughing and giggling.

A little before dawn, they went back to the cedar plank house and slept as much as they wanted. They could not eat or drink while they were out of the house, and they could not look at the fire while they were in the house. They had to avoid all fresh food.

On the tenth day after Mattie's menses, the shaman brought her to the fire in the house and called for the tattoo women. Then he gave Mattie new wooden fire tongs and asked her to stir the charcoal in the fire. This symbolized that from now on she was to do her own cooking. The tattoo women took the charcoal, mixed it with elk tallow, and dipped a thread into the blackened mixture. They made a row of eleven light dots about a quarter-inch apart across the back of Mattie's hand. A month later, they returned and tattooed similar dots on her other hand. The women repeated this for several months, which produced light tattoo marks on the backs of both of Mattie's hands. These dots were still clearly visible on her hands some sixty-five years later.

When all the friends and relatives assembled, the shaman said, "I am glad this day you are becoming a woman. Take good care of yourself. Be sure to look on the good things of this world for your own good. Think of things as good and clean as the sky above, which is so nice to look upon, that your life may be a long one. Don't do anything that is mean." The shaman then took a drink of water, gave some to Mattie, and blew a little water on her face. After he dried her face, six of her male friends and relatives, three on each side, each with a hand on her head, sang a song and congratulated her on becoming a woman. She then walked to the other end of the house, sat down, and watched the feast, though she was not allowed to eat salmon for another five days.

All the friends and relatives began to sing their own dream-power songs, then stood for the "dream dance." All of this lasted for about an hour, and at the end of the ceremony, the guests took whatever food was left over and went home.

"So, now what?" asked Mattie.

"It is the end of your seclusion," answered Mattie's mother, but for the next several months you will have to dress up before eating. You have to cook outside and eat inside, and you are still not able to eat any fresh foods."

"Oh," bemoaned Mattie, "what about berries? Can I still pick and eat them?"

"No, my child," answered her mother, "not yet."

"I hate this part," said Mattie, "it's not fair. What difference does it make if I eat berries?"

Her mother and aunt did not answer but turned away, leaving the two younger girls by themselves, commiserating with each other.

About a year later, in another ceremony, Mattie was painted and dressed in her very best. The guests sang again. This time the shaman could give Mattie any kind of food. At the end of the feast, she removed her special clothes, and as of that moment, she was considered ready for marriage. She was 14 years old.

*Story based on "She's Tricky Like Coyote" by Lionel Youst, but names and details have been changed.*

# Bob and Dylan

## by L.W. Smolen

Bob knocked Dylan's Covid mask off with the first punch. He didn't stop pounding on Dylan until he saw blood. They didn't even get five miles from Bob's arrival at the airport before they stopped at a truck stop, pulled behind the tire shop, and got into it. Bob had always suspected it; Dylan really just never learned how to defend himself. Dylan was a "college boy"—U of W, Class of '73. Seeing the blood coming out of Dylan's nose woke Bob up, though, and he got off Dylan and worked himself up on his foot and panted and hopped to keep his balance.

The adrenaline took Bob back. He hated their jungle insertions—how weirdly clean the decks of the Slicks sometimes were—flying in. He felt stupid, too—at his age—pounding on his oldest friend, but he could see Dylan's brain had atrophied. Told him so.

Bob couldn't reach down very far, but he offered his hand to Dylan, who reached up, accepting. The muscles in Bob's remaining leg seared with the effort, but he helped Dylan to his feet. Dylan's glasses were busted, and he started trying to staunch his bleeding nose with a wadded paper napkin he had in his pocket from their lunch at the airport after Bob's arrival. There was quite a bit of blood. Fifteen more years had given Bob a cloudy arcus senilis circling each cornea that made Dylan feel like he was looking into the eyes of a stranger. Bob saw that the knuckles on both of Dylan's now age-spotted hands were all nicked up, but he didn't remember Dylan hitting back. Dylan twisted the napkin out long and thin and stuffed the ends up both sides of his nose.

"I haven't felt this awake in years," Dylan nasalized, "But I just realized. I'm super glad to see you, but we can't go forward as friends unless we concede points to each other. Otherwise, it's all just rants."

That's when Bob finally lost his balance and flopped over flat on his back. From his two-legged stand-up vantage point, Dylan could see Bob's problem better than Bob could: the VA's best prostheses chafed Bob worse than a Prick-25 plus the spare battery. Lying quite a way off, over where Dylan finally stood his ground, was Bob's old aluminum cane.

Dylan watched Bob start to crawl after his cane. He would have to crawl through a big puddle to get it, so Dylan kept his mouth shut and watched and Bob did! He crawled right through the puddle like—so what? And it reminded Dylan that if a Marine is alive, he will not stop—ever. No question, in his seventies now, Bob wasn't as lean, not as mean, but still a Marine.

Holding two-handed the bloody napkin tips up his nose, Dylan walked over, and just as Bob was about to grab his cane, Dylan kicked it well out of reach. Bob's jungle-memory took over; he just kept his head down and kept crawling.

"I'll concede you," Dylan said, "The old U.S.A.'s not always the good guys!"

"Never are," Bob grunted, stretching left-handed toward his cane.

This time Dylan kicked Bob's cane even harder, farther, and said, "Look, man. I had an easy time of it in the Navy, so I'm not worthy of telling you anything, but I guess you forgot."

"Oh, you know me better, Dylan. I sprinkle fresh forget-me-nots on my salad every evening."

When he got off the plane for their reunion, Bob was wearing a really very nice, tartan-plaid suit. But back behind the truck stop tire shop, Dylan finally stood his ground for the old U.S.A., and Bob lost it. Watching Bob crawl now, Dylan was reminded of the bumper-sticker phrase, "... if it absolutely, positively must be destroyed overnight." Bob's custom suit was—destroyed.

But Bob didn't care about the suit. Dylan knew the signs. Dylan could see, as Bob crawled through the puddle, that Bob was visiting with ghosts. From decades ago, Dylan remembered the details of Bob's flashback reruns. In the 110-degree jungle heat again, Bob tried to give first aid to a friend named Stan Stanfill who'd

just caught a machine-gun burst in the abdomen. Lying waiting for the Med-Evac Dust-Off at the Landing Zone, Bob and Stan both clung to Stan's life. The volunteer Dust-Off chopper pilots had brass balls. Right in front of their eyes, there at the LZ, Stan's first Dust-Off ignited in a ball of fire. The second Huey was too late.

And Dylan knew that coming out of his flashbacks, Bob always felt futile—like some sort of rich man's tool. Now, crawling through the tire shop puddle, after nearly fifty years, Bob was still pinned down. Did Bob forget? Worse, Bob was getting ready to lose even his boyhood friend to friendly fire. Bob was trying to zip Dylan into a body bag and put him in the past along with Stan Stanfill.

But Dylan, meanwhile, knowing the body language of Bob's flashbacks, had walked over and picked up Bob's cane and waited for the flashback to play out. Dylan was standing there, the bright red, blood-soaked napkin looping like a crimson bullring up his nostrils. Bob's cane in one hand, he extended his other down to Bob, who was looking up at him kinda dazed, blinking.

"Stan again?" Dylan asked.

"I saw our stumps where we cleared the LZ—like yesterday—the trees Stan and I weed-whacked with our M-14s that same morning. Stan got waxed. That's all. What's the difference?"

"To you or to me?"

"You think I'm some sorta saint, but you're fulla shit—you and your clean, college boy hands."

"I'm not the only one. Suck it up, grunt. You're a living icon."

Dylan drug Bob up onto his foot. They stood there together for a moment. They staggered in the years. They didn't notice, but somehow, the thin-walled aluminum tubing of Bob's old VA cane had gotten kinked in Bob's fall. When Bob put his weight back on it, the weakened cane folded and he took another header, ending on his back, this time right in the same puddle he'd crawled through. The muddy water sloshed around him in mini-tsunamis and soaked the back of his head. The cold, filthy water drained between his neck and his collar. Dylan looked down at Bob, and their eyes met and Dylan asked Bob if he wanted

to get up again. Bob, his eyebrows heavily flecked with grey, wanted to know why he should.

"Something I gotta tell you, Bob," Dylan said, "I've got nobody else to tell. Nobody. Coupla weeks ago, on the radio, I heard 'Werewolves of London' again. Remember that Warren Zevon song?" Bob just blinked and nodded. Dylan didn't know why, but Bob was listening—close.

"Been a long time." Dylan went on, "I love Zevon's deliberate alliteration in the mutilation part. I flat love it. I love it all! But see, the thing is Bob, the kid DJ proved right there on the radio he wasn't even sure how to pronounce Warren's last name. I couldn't believe it! At the time, I just took it in. The more I thought about it, though, the more I felt lost—I mean, realizing I'm history hit me in the gut!"

"Like I told you, Dylan. Your brain has atrophied."

Dylan stepped into Bob's puddle. It was ankle-deep. The cold, anti-freeze-contaminated water—the part that didn't sluice down Bob's neck—flooded Dylan's low-top wingtips. Dylan dropped down onto one knee in the water next to Bob and pretty much made a mess of his own suit. Bob struggled onto the only knee he had left. They worked together, hauling and partially draping Bob across Dylan's horizontal shoulders and back. They both panted and heaved with the exertion. It was a beast. Last, Dylan grabbed Bob's damaged cane. As he forced himself straight up, standing under Bob's weight, Dylan could feel the stabbing spasms of his lower back cutting his breathing to short, painful gasps. Truth was, Bob was sorta fat now. Alone under Bob, Dylan staggered off toward the tipped-down tailgate of his pickup.

Bob was dead-weight heavy; Dylan panted and gulped and told Bob so. Dylan doubted Bob could hear him, but he was glad he had faced Bob and called a spade a spade. His lonely tears tasted really pretty good.

It was kinda funny though. Having just flown in to visit Dylan for a week, for once, one-legged Bob couldn't do a thing about any of what happened to him now. And Warren Zevon had died.

Dylan drove Bob to where Dylan lived. His neglected, little, battleship-gray Cape Cod crouched among giant lilacs on an over-grown, dead-end street. By

the time they got there, Dylan's spasming back was completely locked up. He was lucky he could even get out of his pickup and climb his own coupla front steps and hobble into his house. He decided he'd just tarp Bob in the pickup bed overnight. Be glad to leave the jerk there anyhow.

Even in the loneliness of his lost friendship, Dylan had grinned as he drove them home. "Hmph!" he'd thought to himself. "Brain atrophied? I'll check under the tarp about midnight. Let's see what Bob has to say for himself when his own brain gets soggy. He'll have to concede. I'll be cruel. I'll taunt him. Promise him a cup of nice hot cocoa if he'll just concede me that if the old U.S.A. goes down, everybody does."

***

But inside his house, all by himself again, Dylan couldn't stop thinking about one-legged Bob sprawled in his soaked tartan-plaid, hard-grounded to the chilling heat-sink of the bare steel pickup bed. Couldn't stop thinking about how much he'd looked forward to Bob's visit. His sense of loss was like a brick chimney had fallen on him. It'd been nearly fifteen years. After Dylan's wife left him, just for something to do, he went out and got an MFA in Creative Writing. He'd been a lot older than any of the faculty. He'd even seen a need to educate one of his punk Profs on how to shave without getting carved up. He'd looked forward to being able to tell Bob all about it—to see Bob grin and snort in his re-assuring old way about "college boys" and then quote long passages from Thucydides. For some reason Bob, by heart, could recite big sections of the Mytilenean Debate—Diodotus arguing before the Assembly at Athens for the lives of the plotting Mytileneans.

Dylan just kept thinking and thinking about Bob. Bob would never concede. Nope. As he fell over onto his bed in pain, he reminded himself,

"Better not let him in."

***

With his injured back spasming and yanking and screaming, it was a misery toiling and moiling out front under the midnight sun of the ancient, single-bulb streetlight, but Dylan eventually got shivering Bob into the house. Bob crawled out of his muddy suit—dripped his wet custom tartan and muck all over the place. He drug himself into Dylan's shower and ran it hot a lo-o-ong time. Later, with Bob all bedded down and tucked in on Dylan's couch, Bob in his black and red Marine Corps logoed pajamas in front of a crackling fire, Dylan sat in his favorite chair with a plug-in heat pad on his lower back and they sipped hot cocoa together and stared at the flames and didn't say anything—just sipped steaming cocoa and stared at the fire—for a lo-o-ong time.

Dylan didn't tell Bob what he was doing, and Bob didn't rat Dylan out, but Dylan hobbled into the kitchen, refilled both their cups, and dumped a lotta pre-warmed Peppermint Schnapps in their hot cocoa.

They barked at the Moon.

"Remember that Zevon concert we went to? Passaic, New Jersey? When the hell *was* that?"

"Eighty-three. When I got out. No question. I'd do it all over again."

Dylan grinned, tipped his head back and let out a long "A-A-A-OOOO!"

Thousand-yard-staring at the flames, Bob corrected, "I meant The Corps."

# Like a Ghost

## by Kathleen Dugan Barton

Sometimes I feel like a ghost.
Your prejudice towards me haunts me,
You have struck a nerve.
I try to look away,
But it is forever carved into the lens of my eye.
I now see it daily,
And it walks with me.
It now takes stabs at my soul and directs my path,
It wants to consume me.
Stop! Stop! Stop hurting me,
But you're gone and that day event has passed.
But your mark is still here and I can't shake it,
I'm scared.
I'm scared and scarred for life,
Like a knife in my heart.
Your prejudice towards me haunts me,
Daily.
I am not a ghost.

# 35 Years Ago

## by Leah Shrifter

It was just a goddamn stapler.

Yes, she threw it at the loudmouth, but not right away. He wouldn't shut up, and she couldn't get any work done. "No, thank you," she told him, politely enough. "Leave me alone."

That jerk-off kept badgering her, "Buy some chocolate, support the orphans, help the Church tend the homeless flocks." How did this guy get in? This was supposed to be a public workplace, free from religious pressure or bias.

Lena shook her head. "No, sorry, not today. Please go away. I'm trying to work."

But he wouldn't go away, and he continued to pester her about doing God's work, as if he were some kind of zealous Christian mosquito. Lena endured him in silence for a while and then picked up the nearby stapler. She hurled it straight for his fervent heart.

Fortunately, God was looking out for that member of His flock and swept the missile to the side, so it only grazed the man's clean white shirt and struck the ground. Our Lord probably did not want Lena Gillespie to get charged with assault with a semi-deadly weapon. Nevertheless, to keep her job, Ms. Gillespie was required to go through counseling for anger management. Anger Management. There had been some movie with that title. She had not seen it.

Counseling, also known as "Psychotherapy," was conveniently provided through the Employee Assistance Program: first five sessions free, company plan. Restraining herself, Lena respectfully complied. She had seen this coming. She

knew her frequent outbursts of temper got top entertainment billing on the office gossip circuit. Still, she figured if they hadn't fired her yet, they weren't going to do it now. She was confident she was the best translator they had in the County Office of Education.

Lena had a gift for languages. Besides English, she was fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, and passable in French and Italian. Understanding that there was currently a call for Asian languages, she was studying Chinese at the community college. Perhaps Vietnamese would have been more useful for employment, but she had long been fascinated with Chinese. There were so many dialects, all so different and foreign to European languages. She congratulated herself that she was getting pretty good at it, and besides, it passed the time.

She had partly put herself through school doing translations and interpreting. She liked the work and lost track of time and where she was while she immersed herself in the details and anonymity of printed words. Words, lots of printed words, good safe words that could never hurt her, or touch her. She easily found work straight out of college. It wasn't long before she fled the smog and Hollywood tinsel of southern California—the "Land-of-You-Gotta-Look-Good"—for a slower, more casual lifestyle on the Oregon coast, where it rained most of the year and you never had to get a tan like where she'd grown up. 25 years later, here she was, translating her ass off for a living in the County Office of Education.

Holding the steering wheel steady, Lena grimaced as she shifted her hips in the seat. Her back was hurting her again. Lately, it bothered her more often, even though she was the first to say she felt less tense since she'd had therapy. Now she wasn't mad all the time, maybe only half the time. And even if somebody pissed her off at work, she'd learned to control herself enough to just stuff it. No more snarky comments or outright explosions. So, yes, one could say she'd learned to manage her anger, but if you pressed her, she might admit she had a long way to go.

Lena was driving to her sixth appointment, which wouldn't be free like the first five, but was still available to her at a reduced rate via employment benefits. She chose to continue with counseling because she liked Alicia, the therapist, and she liked psychotherapy. Lena had not expected that. She didn't really like anybody,

and nobody seemed to like her, unless there was some guy wanting to get laid. Then he liked her temporarily and didn't much care what she looked like.

Lena wasted a few minutes wondering if she would have been happier if she were, let's say, an attractive woman. She was not even pretty as a child and wasn't much to look at approaching fifty. Her hair, once a stringy, mousey brown, was still stringy, only graying and duller, and didn't seem to fit with her ruddy complexion. She had arresting, amber-colored eyes, and no one could stare her down. Few tried.

Not that she didn't have her assets. Her figure was womanly enough, meaning you could say she was "stacked." That got results. On the other hand, one of her legs was longer than the other, giving her an odd, rocking gait and a continual backache that began to plague her in late childhood and worsened as she got older.

In contrast, therapist Alicia Monarres easily met Lena's gaze. She looked a little older than Lena. Her black hair was streaked with gray, and she wore gold-rimmed glasses that magnified her soft brown eyes. In sharp contrast to Lena's thrift store wardrobe and morose attitude, Alicia dressed well and seemed to enjoy her work. At first, Lena expected the woman's "good vibes" to get on her nerves, but that didn't happen. It turned out that therapy was—enjoyable. Here was someone who would listen to her and really seemed interested in what she talked about. Lena didn't care that Alicia was paid to listen to her. She was pleased that both of them benefited.

She braked at the red light, her mind idling along with the car's engine. She turned on the radio, which was tuned into the oldies station. "It's my life and I'll do what I want!" shouted the singer, reveling in his galloping testosterone. Lena loved that song and belted it out as she continued driving. Rock music—good loud rock and roll—now there was one more thing she enjoyed. Alicia had encouraged her to write down a list of everything she enjoyed in her life. Cynical Lena did this in good humor, not expecting to come up with much of anything. But she had to admit there were more things she liked doing than she would have been aware of before the list.

Perhaps her favorite was going to rock concerts. There she lost herself in the music, joyfully dancing and singing, yelling and screaming with complete abandon in the huge, roaring crowd of gyrating people. She was 20 years younger again, alive, vital, and having fun. Between whoops and hollers, she basked in the rare feeling: happy. She drew in big breaths of it and swayed contentedly to the gentler strains of the guitar. Of course, so many rock musicians were just crap, but when the guitar was really good, tender and melodious the way she liked it, she felt like she was falling in love. Lena had never been in love, but she imagined this was how it must feel.

She reached her destination, the building in which Alicia's office was located. She guided the car into a parking space and switched off the engine. Resting her arms on her lap, she sat for a few minutes, pondering. What would she talk about with her therapist today? Probably she'd tell her about the guy she'd met, Steve.

Steve, the security guard. He dressed cleanly and had closely cropped red hair and freckles, medium build. He was ten years younger than her 47. She met him about a week ago at the beach. When she could get ahold of it, Lena liked to smoke weed, get high and walk on the beach. She had to admit she missed the long, spacious beaches and warm ocean in Southern California. Less cautious in her altered state and feeling sensual on a beach in Oregon, Lena allowed herself to be picked up and took Steve home with her. He courteously accepted the condom she handed him and brought his own a few nights later. You couldn't be too careful these days with AIDS around, and everything else.

Sure, he'd just shown up at her door, but he'd supplied the condom, and she liked that, even if the sex was mediocre. More importantly, she had the same dream the second night afterward that she'd had the first time they hooked up, and it was the dream she really wanted to talk about today.

She tried to reason herself out of this impulsive share. Her dream was highly, blissfully erotic, and it was *personal*. Yet, she could assume Alicia would be interested; therapists liked to hear about dreams and shit. Besides, the dream was number one on her list of what she enjoyed, and she couldn't imagine anything else in her rotten life ever knocking it out of that position. Thinking about it made her squirm with delight.

In the heart of a steamy jungle, the nameless man waited for her. About midway up a massive step-pyramid, he lolled on the steps, among the overgrowth of weeds. Both times she began the dream bounding up the steps into his expectant arms. She found him shirtless with baggy cut-off jeans that barely stayed up on his lean, sinewy frame. He was balding, but still had plenty of frizzy, light-brown hair that reached his muscular shoulders. She liked his big nose because it was too large for his thin face. He had a shy, half-formed smile and looked tenderly at her from his pale blue eyes. But what he did with his warm lips was anything but timid. The rhythm of his moves and the adept touch of his fingers both soothed and aroused her, but only after he simply held her, nestling his face into her hair so that his big nose tickled her ear. He crooned comforting words, and in a throaty whisper, told her he loved her. She found her rare peace and happiness.

"You can get here," he told her. "Just find the Pyramid. You can find it, and I'll be here."

She was terribly disappointed when she woke up, and not just because the dream had vanished with the night. She needed him to tell her where the Pyramid was, and how she could get there? She was crazy about him and obsessed with finding him, insane as she knew it was to believe her dream was real. She didn't care if she was insane. She'd harbor her dream in her breast, in the only place she could completely escape, swimming there in her inner tide. Because she was Lena Gillespie and she finally knew what she wanted. She got out of the car and heaved a big sigh.

So, she told Alicia about Steve. Alicia paraphrased, "You're saying you don't want or expect anything more from Steve than occasional, blah sex."

Lena shrugged her shoulders. "Sure, I'd like a real—what do you call it—relationship, with good sex. But I'm not gonna get it. Not from Steve or anyone else. Not around here."

"Why not?"

"Why not? *Look* at me, Alicia. I'm kinda—ugly."

Alicia didn't blink. "You assume you're not attractive. I think you are attractive."

"I'm not. I mean, that's nice of you to say, but I'm not."

"What's attractive differs from person to person, even time to time or place to place."

Lena felt like crying. She thought how kind Alicia was, how positive. At the same time, she wondered, *A different time, a different place? Should I tell her about my dream? But then she'd know I'm nuts, and I don't even want her to have a chance of talking me out of it.*

She said, "I feel like I need to go somewhere, somewhere else. I need to find somebody."

Alicia said, "You want to make changes in your life."

"Yeah," Lena agreed. But she wouldn't risk telling Alicia where she really wanted to go. She refused to burst the bubble of her dream. "I gotta go somewhere, but I don't know what I'm doing."

"I think you can figure it out. You get to focus on it, open up to it. It's up to you how you do it. You find your way."

"Yeah, I know."

"Lena, think about what you want. Can you tell me what you want? Do you have any dreams?"

*Funny you should ask,* Lena thought, but answered aloud, "Sure, I have dreams. I wish I lived in Hawaii and went to the beach all day. I'd like to go to a rock concert about every week—but you already know that. I wish I could marry a guitar player, but they always go for the pretty women. Me, I just dream about feeling happy."

Lena watched a warm smile, full of crooked teeth, spread across Alicia's kind face. "Follow your dreams," said the therapist.

Lena wondered how Alicia kept saying the right things. If she managed to find her dream man, she was going to miss Alicia.

As if on cue, Steve showed up that night. He knocked gently at the unlocked door and entered unbidden before Lena could get up to let him in. He held out a bottle of golden wine. "Brought you something," he grinned.

Lena clicked off the TV and stood up, facing Steve and his gift. She said, "Don't want it."

"Oh, come on..."

"I told you I don't drink."

"Why not? Are you one of those Alcoholics Anonymous people?"

"No."

"Well, then, you should try it. This is really good wine."

"I don't drink. Got any weed? I'll smoke it."

"No, I don't do that stuff. It's illegal. I get urine tested at work. C'mon, this is legal, and I'm telling you, it's good stuff."

"No, thank you."

For a moment, Lena considered telling him why she didn't drink but quickly decided against it. It was none of his business that her parents had drunk all the time and then they would fight, often throwing nearby objects at each other, but mostly flinging—screaming and shouting—every curse and vulgarity, every last *fuck you* ever invented. Little Lena would retreat to a corner, or more often to another room, where her sharp mind recorded each swear word and *fuck you, you bitch.*

She grew independent early. When she got older, entered her teens, she simply walked out during the fights, went somewhere she liked, usually the beach. But the fights left their mark, helped form her character. She littered her own speech with this "adult" vocabulary, which got her into trouble at school and other social situations. Yet, for all the punishment she received for it, she never gave up her words, because they were *her* words. At 47, she had the same defiant garbage mouth, but she never drank alcohol.

Dismissing her thoughts, she looked again at the bottle grasped in Steve's left hand. She noticed that this evening he was wearing a wedding ring.

"What's the matter, Steve? Didn't your wife want the wine, either?"

Steve winced. He glanced at the ring he'd forgotten to remove and then looked coolly back at Lena. "I didn't offer it to her. I brought it for you. I thought you'd like to party."

"Party? I don't think being used is a party."

Steve flushed beneath his red freckles. "I'm not using you. I knew you wanted it that night on the beach. We both have a good time."

Steely-eyed, Lena retorted, "*You* have the best time. I kind of get by."

She saw his chest heave at the insult. He looked away, turned and set the wine down next to the telephone on the small table by the door. He faced her again.

"I don't need to listen to this crap." He looked even redder. She couldn't see a freckle on his face.

"Probably not. Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out."

"You should appreciate what you've got, Bitch," he spat. "You're no prize, you know."

Lena was deadpan. "I'll survive. Take your fucking wine with you."

Steve grabbed the bottle, opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, turned and went out the door. Lena listened to his quick steps down the stairs to the sidewalk. She heard him stumble, probably on that big crack in the pavement. He slammed the door getting into his car, fired up the engine and roared off with a squeal of tires.

Lena walked over and closed the door. "Fuck you, Steve," she whispered.

She could hear her heart pounding in her ears. She turned around, slumped back against the door, and slid heavily to the floor. Her back hurt, a kind of burning in her left side. She crossed her arms over her bent knees and laid her forehead on one arm. She choked back her tears and her curses.

A few minutes later she got to her feet, went out the door and took a walk in the brisk night. The cool air soothed her, but her back still hurt. Soon she went home, got undressed, and went to bed.

Her dream came again.

This time it was different. Their lovemaking was quick, urgent. Lena was needy, hungry for release. They both cried when it came. Afterwards, he spoke earnestly to her, "Come find me here, at the Pyramid. You can get here. I'm waiting."

"But *where* is *here*?" she asked.

"In the jungle. Go down to the beach, any beach you can get to, and you have to go at dawn, or it won't work." He held her close.

*"What* won't work?" She fidgeted in his embrace.

"Sh-sh. Take it easy, Babe." He kissed the tears on her cheek. "I know it's hard to understand. Just get down to the ocean, and you have to get there when the

sun rises. And then think of me. Think with your heart. Think of us together. You can do it. You can get here."

Pop. She woke up in darkness. "Hey, w-wait! Wait!" she spluttered, still confused from sleep. "Who the hell are you? What's your name?" she said into the night. She checked her bedside clock. It was four a.m. She could get up, pack for the trip, and even have a little breakfast before dawn. It was only a five-minute walk to the beach. "I don't care if this is crazy. I'm going for it," she promised herself out loud. "It feels good!"

Figuring she had a lot of hiking to do, wherever the hell she was going, she pulled her daypack off the bedroom doorknob and started packing it with a full change of clothing, a sweatshirt for the evening (in case it got chilly in the jungle), and some sunscreen. In the kitchen she added nuts and raisins, granola bars, apples, and squeezed in two large bottles of water. She even thought to include mosquito repellent. She had some organic citronella stuff; that other crap made her skin burn. She left her pack open on the kitchen table and tossed her wide-brimmed straw hat next to it. She had a pair of those new, lightweight hiking boots that would do nicely, since she didn't know the terrain of her destination. Musing on that, she bit into one of the granola bars and took that breakfast into the bedroom. One-handed, she dragged the boots out of the back of the closet and dropped them near the bed.

She was still hungry, so she opened the refrigerator door and decided to eat last night's leftover chicken and green beans. Too much garlic on the chicken, she thought. She went into the bathroom and brushed the garlic chicken taste out of her mouth. She put on her shoes, gathered up her hat and backpack, and headed for the door.

She laughed when she locked her apartment door behind her. Hardly seemed necessary. At the bottom of the stairs, she shivered in the pre-dawn breeze. She paused, removed her hat and pack, and dug out her sweatshirt. She had dressed in shorts and a tee shirt, prepared for jungle weather, but right now her reality was the climate on the Oregon coast, which was only hot once in a blue moon. She stuck her hat back on her head. Behind her, in the East, the sun was rising, a cold fire burning gold and orange into the edge of the sky. She was glad it wasn't foggy.

Soon she was at the beach. The waves seemed to beckon her as they crashed and fizzled onto shore. "Think of us together, think of us together," she mumbled as she tramped over the sand. She halted at the water's edge, foamy and misty in dawn's light. She closed her eyes and pictured him and her together, feeling his warmth next to her cool skin. Keeping her eyes shut, she turned and headed down the beach.

She stumbled, crying out as she fell face down and got a mouthful of wet sand, even though she had broken her fall with her hands. Gagging, she coughed up sand. She pushed herself into a sitting position, legs sprawled in front of her. Wary of more invading sand, she cautiously opened her eyes. A viscous mix of sand and spit coated her neck and chest, as though she had fallen into thin, wet cement. She hawked, spat, and snorted. She pulled off her pack, fished out one of the water bottles, rinsed her mouth and spat. Rinsed and spat again. Then she guzzled the rest of the water in the bottle, letting it run out the sides of her mouth as she drank. Satisfied, she replaced the empty bottle in the pack, brushed at her chest, and shook sand from her hair so it flew all about her.

Why was it so fucking hot all of a sudden? She was sweating; her face, her neck, her armpits, even in her groin. She wriggled out of her sweatshirt. Insects buzzed around her, attacking her ears, landing on her bare arms and legs. A needle stung the back of her palm. Instinctively, she slapped it dead. Peering at the tiny corpse, she guessed it was only a little fly. She flashed on the organic mosquito repellent in her daypack—would that work on flies? Jesus, the sun was so bright! Where had her wide-brimmed hat gone? She mopped her forehead with her hand, the one that had so recently murdered the little life. She glanced up and gasped. The sun was overhead, peeking out between thin clouds in a blue sky! How could it be midday? She came here at *daybreak!*

Twisting her head towards an azure ocean, she spied her hat on her left. *Wait a minute! This is not the beach I came to!* Looking inland towards town, or where the city should have been, she saw thick, low trees, bushes—*jungle!* At the edge of the vegetation, small palm trees swayed in a gentle breeze, like guardians of the jungle, welcoming her visit. She gaped, speechless.

Then she jumped to her feet. *I got here! I did it!*

Or was she only dreaming? Surely, she had seen this place before, if only in her dream. She snatched up her hat and placed it on her clammy, sandy head. There was something in the distance, above the lush growth. She squinted against the glare of the sun on the mist. She made out a pale, grayish triangle...Yes, it had to be the top of the Pyramid!

In the distance she heard chattering in a language she did not recognize. Emerging from the jungle undergrowth, a group of brown-skinned, dark-haired children approached her. They all wore loose trousers of white or beige, and baggy sleeveless shirts of similar pale colors. They walked barefoot over the sand towards her. While they smiled and waved to her, they continued talking and gesturing to each other. As they got closer, she made a startling discovery: they were not children, but very small adults. When they stopped and surrounded her, she kneeled down so she could look directly into their eyes. They all had dark brown eyes and mostly dark hair, although a few were noticeably graying. One little woman had pure white hair, the color of the wispy clouds overhead. Smiling sweetly, she held out her hand to Lena and spoke to her in strange musical words she had never heard before.

"I don't understand," said Lena, shaking her head, fascinated by the unfamiliar sounds. Impulsively, she grasped the little outstretched hand, enveloping it in her larger one. The little elder smiled straight into her eyes. Lena liked that.

Her hand still captive in Lena's, the little person turned to another and said, "This giant is confused. I will help her."

Lena blinked in surprise and sudden understanding. Releasing the friendly little hand, she sucked in her breath. She could talk to these people! "Where am I?" she blurted out. "Who are you?"

"Oh!" exclaimed several people. "She speaks," grinned a young man. "You hear us!" said another, curly-haired with a dimple on his chin.

"Yes, yes, I understand now," Lena returned. "Tell me, what is this place?"

"It is the beach," replied the smallest one, the woman who was no taller than the top of Lena's head as she kneeled on the sand. "We are close to the ocean."

"Yes, I know it's the beach," Lena said, excited. "But what beach? Where are we? What—country? What's the nearest town?"

"No town, no country," said the woman with white hair, still smiling into Lena's eyes.

"What—what do you mean? Where are we? Who are you?"

"I am Tenben," replied the little woman. She leaned toward Lena, reached out and grasped her thumb.

"But what—people? What people are you?"

"People? We are people. You are one of the giants. You are confused. Many of the giants are confused when they first come."

Frustrated, Lena opened her mouth to swear, but no words came to her. There must not be any such words in this alien tongue that she now spoke so well. "I'm not a giant," she grumbled. "Not where I come from."

"I understand," Tenben nodded. "But here, you are one of the giants."

Lena still groped in her mind for the vulgar words that had been second nature to her all her life. Nothing. "I'm not just a giant," she insisted. "I'm Lena. Lena Gillespie."

Tenben's eyes widened and then crinkled with her smile. "Good!" she beamed and gently squeezed Lena's thumb. "You brought your name here. That is very good." There were smiles all around.

"Well, yes, of course I brought my name with me. Why wouldn't I? Why is that good?"

"You brought your name here, so it will not take you long to reach your destination," explained Tenben. Several heads bobbed in agreement. Bewildered, Lena raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth with a silent question that didn't quite make it into words. "Do not worry," continued the little elder. "I will help you. Come," she directed, tugging gently on Lena's thumb.

"Okay, then," said Lena.

She was glad to be getting up, and it looked like she might get some answers. She pushed herself to her feet with her other hand and then grasped her pack. The rest of the small people waved to her, nodded and grinned at Tenben, and turned as a group toward the ocean. Lena watched them for a minute. *Perhaps they want to cool their little brown feet in the water,* she mused. *The sand's hot enough.* Tenben was *still* smiling at her. *These people are the World Champion*

*Smilers,* thought Lena, returning her companion's smile. With gentle pressure on the thumb enclosed in her little brown hand, Tenben led Lena, bent over and stumbling, across the sand to the shade of one of the low palm trees at the beginning of the jungle. She let go of Lena's thumb.

Lena welcomed the shade. With a tired sigh, she dropped her daypack onto the sand, where it stood straight up, still packed quite full. She eased herself to the ground, took off her hat and placed it beside her. Tenben sat on a fallen coconut, facing Lena. For a few minutes, they studied each other in silence. Lena noticed that for all Tenben's pure white hair, she had few wrinkles, just a hint of age at the corners of her mouth and eyes. Her brown skin was smooth and fresh, like that of a child. Her deep brown eyes were so dark that Lena could not tell where her pupils were.

Lena spoke first, "You said you would help me. How can you help me?"

"I don't know."

"But you said you would help me!" Lena's edge crept back.

"You brought your name. You can show me what you need."

Lena felt desperate for an oath or a curse or any old four-letter word. She ran around in circles in her mind, searching. There just wasn't anything for her in the new language. Groaning, she beat a fist into the sand. Her voice rose, "How am I supposed to show *you* what's going on? I just got here! I don't know this place!"

Tenben said quietly, "You chose to come here. You found your way. Why did you come?"

*Alicia.* Alicia had said something like that: "*You find your way."*

"I came because of *him*, another—giant who is in my dream. He told me how to get here, and it sounded crazy, but I did it. I got here. He said to get to the Pyramid—this big step-pyramid in the jungle. I saw the top of it when I got here, way off in the jungle."

Tenben nodded. "Yes. You will go to the Pyramid. All the giants go to the Pyramid."

"Yes, of course," Lena said wryly. "There are other giants who come here. It figures we all go to the Pyramid. But—how do I get there? I don't know the way."

Tenben extended her arm towards the jungle, "The way is there. You follow the path. It is a clear path. Many giants have followed it."

There it was, just like the little woman said. It couldn't have been wider and clearer had it been paved. Lena said, "Oh! That looks easy enough."

"Lena Gillespie, you are easy to help," said Tenben, smiling up at her.

Lena looked into her dark eyes. "You are so kind to me. Why? Why are you helping me?"

Tenben lifted one eyebrow. "Why?" she repeated. "You need help, and I can help."

Lena's throat tightened. She clenched her fists, fighting back the tears that welled in her eyes. "Nobody helps me—well, there's one person who helps, but she gets paid to help."

"You are angry," said Tenben.

"Yes, maybe," Lena hedged. "I don't know."

"You are angry at yourself," pronounced Tenben.

"Yes, you could say that," Lena owned.

Tenben sat still, perched on the coconut, her mouth slightly open, her eyes focused beyond Lena, on the beach. After a few minutes, she got to her feet, came to Lena and placed her small brown hands on the giant's shoulders. She kissed Lena's cheek and said, "You do not need to be angry here. I think perhaps you were angry in the world you came from."

Lena nodded.

"Yes. Your anger protected you, kept you strong. But it also tied you to that world. Here, no one is fighting you; no one will hurt you. To come here, you had to feel happy."

Lena's eyes widened. "Yes! How do you know that?"

Tenben smiled gently. "I know. I live here. Now, you can also choose to return to the world you came from. Just remember when you were angry and think very hard on that."

Lena heaved a sigh and said, "Okay. That sounds so simple—too simple."

Tenben nodded, turned and returned to her coconut perch. She dug her bare feet into the sand. Lena glanced down at her "light" hiking boots. Next to Ten-

ben's dainty brown feet, her boots looked like huge, gray elephant hooves. She chortled at the thought. As though she knew what the giant was thinking, Tenben also laughed.

"So easy," Lena sighed again. "This is so easy. This is hard to believe. I wonder if I'm just crazy?"

"Nothing needs to be hard," said Tenben.

More tears welled in Lena's eyes, but this time she welcomed them, let them run down her cheeks. When she was ready, she spoke again, "Thank you for helping me."

Tenben nodded.

"I think," Lena continued, "I think I am ready to go now. I need to find my—friend, the other giant who told me to come. Do you know—I mean, does it take a long time to get to the Pyramid?"

"You will be there before the sun has gone."

"Are there other little—I mean, are there other people like you there? Will I see you again?"

"Lena Gillespie, I don't know if I will see you again. My people also go to the Pyramid, but I don't know what you will do when you get there, and I don't know how long you will stay. Only you know. This is your journey."

It was strange. Lena had never been a hugger, but she wanted to hug this gentle, serene little guide. She got to her hands and knees and crawled next to Tenben. Tenderly, she put her arms around the little woman and embraced her, thinking she smelled coconut in her white hair. Tenben nestled in the giant's arms and rested her head against Lena's neck. When they pulled apart, Tenben faced the shining blue ocean. Lena understood it was time to part ways.

There was something else Lena wanted to say, but she didn't know how to say it. She dug deep into her mind and found the words. "God be with you, Tenben," she said.

Once more, Tenben smiled at her and said, "And may God be with you, Lena Gillespie." She turned and walked towards the other little people at the ocean. Lena shouldered her pack, brushed more sand off her face and neck, and placed

her hat firmly on her head. The adventurous giant turned and strode towards the path through the jungle.

Lena loved the jungle through her eyes and ears. Filtered sunlight called her attention to myriads of vibrant red, yellow, purple, and blue flowers cascading down tree branches, coloring over lush green plants, and dotting the sides of the path. Exotic birds called to each other; some of them hidden, some soaring overhead. Small animals scampered through the trees or alongside the path. It was more delightful—also odd—that there were no signs of larger, dangerous animals who could eat her, like lions or tigers. Nor were there any snakes sliding through the undergrowth or winding around low branches. Wasn't the jungle the home of countless varieties of snakes? No, not in *this* jungle.

At the same time, she hated the jungle through her skin. The shade of the trees did not provide any relief from the wet, wet heat. It probably didn't help that she was in a hurry to get to the Pyramid. She sweated like an athlete running a race under the noonday sun. Busy worker bees harvested the beautiful flowers, paying no attention to the red-faced, perspiring giant woman. But there were also swarms of tiny, indefinable bugs who hunted her as if they were undefeatable, huge predatory animals. She swatted, spat, and screamed at them, but the horde kept coming at her.

Oh, thank goodness! She'd packed mosquito repellent. She halted, threw off her pack and dug out the can. Squeezing her eyes shut, she sprayed the entire can of citronella-smelling mist all over herself, from head to toe, and then around her as she whirled in circles.

Gagging on the thick spray, she exhausted the contents of the can. She paused, listening with eyes still shut, for the bugs' high-pitched buzzing. Maybe they were still there, but not next to her ears. Cautiously, she opened one eye, and then the other. Yes, the determined vermin were still flying around in their invincible clouds, but they kept their distance from her. Lena breathed deeply, in and out, slower.

Then she was ravenous. Lena sat down and dug out all the food that she had packed the night before, although it was only a few hours ago. She tore open every wrapper and ate everything: every apple, nut, raisin, granola bar. She drank the

rest of the water, but at a slower, more practical pace than she had wolfed down her food. Surely, she thought, there would be food and water when she reached the Pyramid. After all, we giants must eat, just like everyone else. Maybe there would even be juice...Certainly there would be coconut milk; she had already seen coconuts here.

Lena carefully stuffed the wrappers back into her daypack. She did not want to trash the beautiful jungle. Besides, the good people around here probably never did anything like litter—doubtless, they didn't even have a word for it. She would have tossed the apple cores to the birds if she hadn't devoured every last one of them, seeds, stems and all. She could not remember ever having been so hungry. She would have to keep an eye out for food and water along her way. She stood up, craning her neck, trying to figure out how far she had come. There was no sign of the beach behind her, although there was no step-pyramid visible ahead of her either. Shouldering her zipped-up pack and pushing her wide-brimmed hat further down onto her clammy forehead, she set off.

Mercifully, her fast pace and the bug repellent kept the insect hunters at bay. But the moist air grew thicker, heavier. Beads of sweat trickled into her eyes, which only made it harder to spot something to eat. She was not yet desperate enough to gobble down leaves and flowers. Besides, she had no wish to antagonize the hard-working bees, who had ignored her so far, unlike the tiny, aggressive flies.

At length, her determined gait slowed to a plodding tread, her sweaty thighs slipping past each other, swish-swish, swish-swish. She panted heavily. Her back ached, but she ignored it and kept moving. The sun was sinking, waning with the day.

She stumbled over a large, protruding root and hit the ground hard on her hands and knees. Burning pain slashed through her knee, and she screamed with all her might. She sat up. Rich red blood oozed from a gash on one knee and trickled from scattered scratches on her arms and legs. The chronic, bulging muscle in her back abruptly seized up, like she had been stabbed. The intense spasm knocked the wind from her. She toppled over onto her side. Words were still useless to her, so she screamed again and burst out crying. Her throat was parched. She licked desperately at her salty tears, thirsting for the thin lifeline

they offered. Her gut ached for food, and something else, some kind of human contact...

What kind of place was this? Yes, she was accustomed to being on her own, all alone, but she could *not* feel happy all the time! She was angry, furious, and she wanted her own language back, all her familiar foul words. She remembered what Tenben had told her; Tenben, who reminded her so much of Alicia. She should have told Alicia about her dream; she should not have been so stubborn and guarded, and then she wouldn't be suffering in her own crazy, delusional Never Never Land. Tenben said if she wanted to go back, she need only think hard on what made her very angry. All right, then. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to focus on that lying scum Steve, who'd pretended to be unmarried and fooled her but good.

But all she could think of was Tenben. Kind Tenben with her pure white hair, steady brown eyes and gentle voice. Tenben's small hand clasping her thumb and tugging her towards the shade of the palm trees. Wise Tenben sitting on the coconut with her dainty little feet in front of her. She was happy that Lena had brought her name with her.

She could feel Tenben stroking her spasmed, stricken back, her sensitive fingers releasing the tension like gentle spring sun on old winter ice. Lena heaved a sigh and rested. She smiled, because she loved Tenben.

"Here you are! It looks like you could use some help."

Startled, Lena pushed herself up, moaning at the renewed pain in her gashed knee, and sat. She stared up into familiar blue eyes. *His* eyes! She gaped.

He smiled, "You're almost there. Just a little ways from here."

"It's—*you!*" she breathed.

"Sure is," he grinned. "Told you I'd be waiting. Here, have some water." He handed her a canteen. She grabbed it and drank greedily. "Just save a little," he laughed, "so I can get you cleaned up. I can use my shirt."

With easy grace, he pulled his torn white tee shirt over his head and shoulders. Part of her melted at the familiar sight of the body she loved, but mostly, she just wanted to drink enough of the cool, clear, almost sweet-tasting water to fill a wash basin. The man had to wrestle the canteen from her protective grasp.

"Take it easy, Babe," he said soothingly, the way he did in her dreams. "I'll give it right back, and there's plenty more where that came from. You hear that?" He glanced over his shoulder, then back at her.

Yes, she heard rushing, crashing water, a welcoming sound. "Is that a waterfall?"

"Yeah. It's beautiful, and we'll go there as soon as you get something to eat. But first, I gotta clean you up."

He poured enough water to soak the ragged shirt and chuckled when Lena snatched back the canteen. She gulped down more water and then, still clutching the canteen to her breast, stared at him, her mouth slack, watching him pat and rinse her wounds.

"You'll be fine," he assured her. "This kind of wound heals fast here, especially at the Pyramid. Are you hungry? I bet you are. I remember I was the first time I came here."

Lena found her tongue. "Yes, yes, I'm so hungry I can hardly move!"

"Oh, you can move," he said, with his half-formed smile. "I know you're quite the mover. Come on, give me your hand. That's it," he coaxed as he pulled her up next to him. His strong arms encircled her and the open canteen in a gentle embrace. She recognized his scent. He kissed her, and his prominent nose tickled her, just like in her dreams.

Lena still refused to release the canteen, but she did hug him back with one arm. She was so happy to see him that she felt a little dizzy. She might have fallen had he not held her. She noticed a few red streaks on his arms. "Oh, I'm getting blood all over you," she worried.

"Not much," he shook his head. "It'll take you a little time to get used to this place. You heal really fast, and the bleeding will be over before you know it. That tree root sneaks up on all of us giants. You were probably looking for the Pyramid. Look! It's right over there."

Yes, there it was, just around the bend in the path. But Lena had not been looking for it. "No, I wasn't looking for it, not right then," she owned up, frowning into his smiling eyes. "I was hating the bugs, and I was so hungry I just wanted to wake up and I hated myself for not telling my therapist I believed in

this crazy dream—You *are* real, aren't you? I can't tell if I'm crazy or if I really somehow made it to this topsy-turvy place. *Topsy-turvy.* I *never* say words like that, but I can't find my own words in this language here."

"I'm real," he said, "and so are you. It's just different here, like a different reality, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, sure," Lena smirked. "I watch enough TV. So, does that mean in this reality you really, truly love me?"

"Ouch, that kind of hurts," he answered, lowering his eyes. "Yes, yes, I really, truly love you."

"Oh," she murmured, "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." He smiled as his eyes met hers again. Her voice rose, "I would never want to hurt you. I just—you must know I hurt all the time, where I come from. I love you, but I'm not even sure what I'm talking about when I say love. Oh, I'm so stupid, so clumsy about all these feelings—"

"Sh-sh," he whispered, kissing her again on her wet mouth. "Don't worry about that. I think you know plenty about feelings. How else would you have found me? Come on, we can talk while we get you something to eat." He grasped her hand and tugged her with him.

"But—you found *me!"* Lena insisted, stumbling alongside him. She was confused, but very willing to follow him to the food. Her hat and daypack lay forgotten on the ground.

The steps of the Pyramid were overgrown with grass and vines but felt solid enough under her feet. Up several steps, baskets of fruit appeared, ahead of them, to the sides, everywhere. Lena dragged the shirtless man down with her when she reached the first basket. She peeled a ripe red banana, took a huge bite and relished its sweet, mushy flesh. Next, she bit into a pink-orange papaya, clear through to the seeds. Juice running down over her chin, she chewed while she peeled the rest of it. Under the colorful fruit overflowing the basket, she found hard brown nuts that looked like almonds. Almonds, just what she wanted.

She glanced up at her companion and discovered him grinning at her while he deftly peeled the skin from a red and yellow mango.

"Hey, I remember how hungry I was my first day here," he said.

Lena swallowed. "So, I'm not going to be hungry forever," she returned.

"Not for food," he said with a wink.

She knew exactly what he meant. "Very funny," she snorted, continuing to talk while she ate. "I suppose we'll get to that soon enough. Where? Here on the steps so we can put on a show for any other giants coming around the bend? What about all these *horrible* little bugs? Haven't you noticed?"

He spit out the fruit when he burst out laughing. "Oh, don't worry about them. They're not such a problem at the waterfall. Ready to get cleaned up? Had enough to eat?"

"Nope. I'm still hungry," Lena insisted. "But don't you worry, I'm thinking about what comes next, too. I think everything I could possibly want is right here. I have *got* to be dreaming!"

He slid next to her. Lena kept eating, but he put his warm arm around her shoulders anyway. He kissed her cheek and explained, "No, we're not in a dream. It's just a different place. You know, you got here because you really wanted things to be different. I know I was desperate to be somewhere else, desperate to get away from who I was."

Lena looked up from her food. "Hey, just who are you, anyway? What's your name?"

He shrugged, "I don't know. I didn't bring my name with me."

"What do you mean, you didn't bring your name with you? That's ridiculous."

"No, it's not ridiculous," he countered. "I didn't bring my name because, mostly, I didn't want to be that guy I was. Most of us giants around here left our names behind."

"Well, then, what was your name back there—back where you came from?"

"I honestly don't remember, Babe."

Lena rolled her eyes. "How can you not remember? Look, I'm Lena Gillespie. I was Lena back in Oregon, and I'm Lena right here, eating like a pig."

He nodded, understanding. "You brought your name with you. You chose to bring your name, Lena. I chose to leave mine behind. I chose to leave that person behind. I didn't like that person."

"You didn't like yourself? I like you very much—I love you—but I don't know that much about you. How bad a person could you have been?"

"Well, I wasn't really bad. I didn't kill people or anything, but I probably hurt a lot of people's feelings. I just didn't care about anybody but myself. I could get anything, anyone I wanted. I had lots of women...I mean, I had sex all the time, whenever I wanted, whatever I wanted, whoever I wanted. Women, some men—but I do prefer the babes. I did every drug, drank all the time, anywhere. I got sick, real sick. I think I was dying, alone somewhere. I don't know...seems like a long time ago. Of course I don't remember everything, and that was even before I got here. But I do remember one time I ate five hits of acid and then went out on stage and—that was *wild!* Come on, you can figure it out: I was a rock star."

"Oh no!" Lena shouted and burst out laughing anew. "No, no, no! I have *got* to be dreaming! So, you played—"

"—the guitar," he finished, smiling broadly. "Yeah, and that's one thing I do love: making music, and I brought my favorite guitar with me, and I'll play it for you later on. Something I wrote myself."

Lena rolled over on the grass and vines, laughing so her eyes overflowed with tears. "Unbelievable," she breathed, sitting up and wiping tears from her cheeks, "so, I do get to have anything I want here. My lover is a terrific guitar player."

"You got it."

"So what am I supposed to call you, Mr. Five-Hits-of-Acid?"

He raised his brows. "You mock me, Woman."

"You can take it."

"Right. Well, how about 'Guitar-man'?" he suggested. "Or, just call me 'Guitar' for short."

Lena wrinkled her nose, then shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "Doesn't seem quite right. Makes you sound like a thing, not a person."

"I can't think of anything better," he said.

"Me neither," she said.

"You'll learn to think of me without a name, like we do here. We're all used to it."

Lena shrugged. "Guess I'll learn," she said. She leaned over and kissed his neck. "How ever did you find me?" she asked.

"I told you. I didn't. You found me."

"I found you? I don't know how I did that."

"I don't know either," he mused. "But you brought your name here with you, so some part of you must have known what you were doing. One morning, really early, I woke up, and you were running up the steps of the Pyramid and I just—knew you. I knew you needed me to hold you. So, I did, and then I did what came natural, and that's how I got you to come back."

Lena laughed, "You used sex to get me here."

He winked. "Well, sure I did," he confessed. "Yeah, I seduced you. Got you here a lot faster that way."

Lena shrugged. "Maybe."

He kissed her cheek and continued, "And you brought your name with you, so I think you're going to help me find my new name, the name I really want."

"What? I don't know how I can do that."

"Lena, the way I see it, we're just human beings. This place seems to make us a little wiser, but we've got the same needs—you know, like eating and like *love*. And I think that's how we find our way, just being human. Simple."

Lena said, "Okay with me."

He said, "So, now that it looks like you've finally had enough to eat, come with me, Babe. I've been waiting for you a long time." He drew her to him for a lingering kiss.

Then they stood up together, locked arms, and headed down the Pyramid steps. After they walked all the way around to the other side of the ancient structure, Lena saw they were in a clearing in the jungle. The roar of the waterfall was very close, but first they made their way through an area packed with many small grass huts. Lena could not count them all, but it seemed only a few minutes later they walked past the last of the huts and beheld the glittering, spraying waterfall tumbling over a cliff into a deep blue pool. Rainbows of violet, blue, red, green and gold danced on the spray above groups of naked giants bathing and playing in the sparkling water. Lena grinned at the whole scene.

He squeezed her hand. "We giants like to get cleaned up after a long, hot day in the jungle," he joked.

They looked into each other's eyes. Laughing, they scrambled out of their clothes, clasped hands again and joined the other giants splashing in the water. Lena barely had time to properly rinse off before her Guitar-Man tugged at her arm and said, "Come on and help me find my name." She let him lead her to the nearest grass hut.

When only a narrow line of dim pink and orange light remained on the horizon, two very happy lovers, loose-limbed, hair disheveled, and beaming with romantic afterglow, emerged from the little grass bungalow. They were dressed in clean clothes they'd found inside the hut, which looked remarkably like what they'd been wearing before they enjoyed the waterfall pool, except that they were both now comfortably barefoot. He cradled a reddish-brown electric guitar in his arms. They strolled back through all the huts, back around the Pyramid, and padded up the stone steps.

Lena saw no evidence of amplifiers, speakers, mics, cords, or any other form of power for rock guitar playing on the steps or anywhere else in sight of the Pyramid. Maybe the tangled vines and overgrown grasses hooked up to the instrument, she mused to herself and giggled. The hospitable fruit baskets were still scattered up and down the Pyramid steps, and many other giants were leisurely feeding themselves the delicious fruits and nuts that never seemed to run out. Um-m-m...more papaya would taste good. She sat down next to a woman with long black hair and dark eyes, who smiled and passed her a basket. Yes, there was the orange-gold papaya she wanted, right on top.

Slurping the fruit juice, Lena twisted around to look up at her musician lover, just a few steps above them. He was strumming chords on his treasured guitar, pulling *wa-wa* noises out of the strings and a sweet melody. He caught her eye and winked. The music sounded amplified, and Lena heard other guitars tuning up, keyboards being played, and drumming and cymbals crashing. She twisted this way and that but spotted no other instruments or musicians. Looking around at the other people scattered on the steps of the Pyramid, she noticed most of them gazed in the musician's direction.

Music began, filling her head from one ear to the other. The drums banged out a slow rhythm, which quickly gained momentum. Guitar chords strummed through the air, all around, while the keyboard played steps of melody that ascended toward the stars twinkling in the jungle night. Lena's Beloved stared into her eyes as his fingers pulled out a lilting, sonorous lead, something familiar she thought she had heard before. She jumped to her feet, singing as she danced. Up and down the Pyramid steps, giants danced, yelling, singing and laughing with the music. The sweet melody her lover drew from the strings of the red-brown guitar soared up, up through the humid night air and wafted down to envelope her like a golden musical cloud. The music seeped inside her like shimmering mist and found its way to the center of her heart. She laughed as she danced, tears streaming down her face and flowing all the way to her feet, washing her clean and new and light and full of joy. She floated upward on the music, above the Pyramid and the other dancers. He floated upward, too, with his golden-voiced guitar, until he was just below her, so that she danced on the waves of the rich melody he drew out of his soul. Giddy, dizzy, ecstatic, Lena surrendered to the music she loved. When her dancing legs went limp, she closed her eyes and swooned.

She opened her eyes. The guitars wailed in unison, but the music had changed. It was coarser, louder. She was sitting on the hard, stone Pyramid steps. No, it was a hard, cement bench, cold and rough beneath her, and there were hundreds of people around her. Some danced and whooped, while others sat and shouted out—in English!—their love for the music. There were rows and rows of benches filled with people, and more people stood in the aisles. Other people ran down the steps toward—a stage. There was a familiar, fun smell—somebody was smoking weed nearby. Lena caught her breath. She was at a huge outdoor concert, and then she remembered: they had come here to Berkeley to see this concert. They were in California.

She felt his warm, reassuring arm around her shoulders. She looked to her side at Rick, her husband. Lena smiled into his face. Over the years he had put on weight; his thin face had filled out, and so his protuberant nose seemed to fit his face better. But she still missed all his frizzy brown hair. He was balder now and kept his graying hair short.

Rick hugged her to his side and kissed her teary cheek. "You okay?" he shouted amidst the vibrant musical celebration. "I thought you were going to faint, Lena. Take it easy, Babe. You don't have to dance so hard."

Lena sighed. She was still a little dizzy, but happy. "Yes, I'm fine," she shouted back, looking up into his blue eyes. "I'm even ready to dance again."

Rick winked. "I know you," he smiled.

Holding hands, they stood up and swayed to the music. Lena stared at the lead guitarist. He looked a lot like—Rick, but younger, definitely had more hair. She looked back at her husband. Rick played guitar, too. Lena loved to listen to him play but couldn't help laughing when he sang. He never could carry a tune.

Rick let go of her hand, stuck two fingers in his mouth, and blew out a piercing whistle. Lena yelled, "Whoo-oo!" Dancing again, she shimmied her breasts and shook her ass. Then she threw her arms around Rick and hugged him to her heart. She knew he'd been there all along.

The song ended, and the crowd yelled and screamed their applause. Rick shouted again, "How're you feeling?"

"Happy, really happy!"

"I mean," he said, close to her ear, "do you feel good enough to see if we can get closer to the stage? I want to try and get a video of him on my cell. See if I can learn something."

Now, how did she know what a cell phone was? But she knew exactly what it was. She had hers in her jacket pocket, on the bench.

"You go," Lena said, and kissed him. "For now, I'm staying *right here*."

"The only tools we have to change this world are: good humor, mutual love, and music." —Jerry Garcia

# The Weaker Species

## by Todd Gale

> "What is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly."
> —Charles Addams

Her daughters had gone hungry, for want of many things, but tonight they were hungry for food. She peered into each cupboard and cabinet, striving against her own expectations to discover some bit of forgotten extravagance which she might give to her girls, thereby brightening their world, if only for an evening.

But their world was gray. She happened upon two potatoes and a leek. Although a morsel of meat or an old pastry would have been counted a grand event, she was grateful simply to feed her girls. As the night descended and the meal's fragrance imbued every corner of the small home with its warmth, it felt to all three women that the world had achieved its full potential.

They were odd women; they all knew it. But it was an innocent oddness born of suffering. It was bearable for each to be different from everyone else because they had each other.

The three talked and laughed in those ways which mothers and daughters do; about school, about boys at school, about clothes, about movies, and about how surprisingly good two potatoes and a leek can taste when cooked in just such a way and shared with just the right people.

Sometimes even gray holds its own hidden colors, if one knows where to look and one's stomach is full.

All too quickly then, the sound of tires pulling into the rock-strewn path toward the house shattered the reverie. The talking and laughter ended. Worried glances flitted to and fro among the three.

Heavy footsteps over the rocks were accompanied by the sound of an empty bottle falling from thick fingers to the ground, followed by an empty can. He was not particular about his drink.

He burst in, raging over imagined slights and indignities. The daughters sheltered behind their mother. For the mother herself, there was nothing... nowhere... no one.

She pled with him to send the girls to their rooms before it began. The two girls ran off without listening for his answer.

And it began.

***

The next morning, as the father slept, a mother and two daughters left the house for the sanctuary of Sunday school, for if grace could not be found with God, the mother often stated, then where indeed could it be found at all.

In plain but tidy clothing, reserved only for church, they entered the whitewashed hall of love and redemption. They traversed the center way of God's house, past each pew. As always, they felt the eyes of the other congregants upon them. Whenever the mother spied a few open seats, someone would place a hat, a coat, or a hymnal in the way so that the open space was gone.

Realizing that his sermon could not start properly until the three women found seats, the minister beckoned them to sit up front in the seats the choir would sometimes occupy. The mother and daughters sat in direct view of the throng, with the mother's physical bruises on open display, and her emotional bruises tucked inside without any foreseeable prospect of aid.

The minister quoted Ephesians: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord," and the edification continued along this line for an hour. During the span, the woman gazed upon her girls, knowing full well that their future was written generations ago, centuries before the Ephesians themselves. Even so, within her heart, a small, pale flame flickered against the certainty of her own history and her daughters' futures.

***

On three successive nights came the tires on rocks, empty bottles falling to earth, a heavy tread to the door, the daughters sheltering in their rooms, and with nowhere, nothing, and no one for the mother. Each time, at the end, she would remain still on the floor, staring through glassy eyes bereft of hope, ashamed she had brought two women into this world, not because she did not love them, but precisely because they were priceless to her.

Late on the third night, she moved herself to the porch, alone, the flame inside her heart almost extinguished. A light drizzle commenced, rendering a soft refrain on the tin roof above her and filling her nose with the scent of rain-wet dirt. She still found solace in something so small as this.

In that moment, her eyes caught a fleeting glint of light. Something was moving high up in the corner of a rafter. She studied it. It was a spider, not gray like the woman, but instead attired in the purest obsidian.

As the mother watched, two more forms revealed themselves, all three of them carrying the hourglass. These were the Fates themselves, she mused, needing an hourglass to know the appointed time to cut a life short.

An inkling crept over her then, an impossible thought born in the gray mists of pain. She turned and headed to the kitchen, searching the cupboards again, but this time not for food.

***

She entered the bedroom. He was snoring, and there was precious little that might awaken him; this she knew. She pulled the blanket back, removed the lid from the jar, shook the Fates onto his body, and replaced the blanket. Each sister carried her hourglass with her. It was time for the man.

***

Insurance paid for the life of the man and for the reconstruction of the charred house. The outer bruises healed, and a few of the inner ones did too. No one was hungry, and no one was frightened anymore.

***

A mother and two daughters walked down the center aisle of a whitewashed country church. As they approached a pew, a parishioner placed a rumpled hat where the empty seats had been only a second before. The mother winked at her daughters, picked up the hat and said, "Well, bless your heart, brother, wouldn't want to make a mess of such a nice gray hat, would we? "

She handed the hat to him with a smile of newly wrested possibility.

With bright red bows adorning their new dresses, a mother and two daughters took their places.

# Also by Sterncastle Writers Collective

*WG Anthology 4* is the fourth annual themed anthological work produced by the Sterncastle Writers Collective. We encourage you to explore our previous releases below. Copies are available for purchase in print and ebook formats through the retailers listed below. Ebook readers can just click the link. Thank you for supporting independent publishing.

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Tide & Timber: An Anthology of Sensory Prose and Poetry
*Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Sterncastle, Kobo*

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

# Carol Bermudes



**Carol Bermudes** is a fiction writer of short stories and poems. Her work has been published in anthology books and online magazines. When she is not writing or reading, she is baking delicious confections and watching mystery movies.

# Kathleen Dugan Barton



**Kathleen Dugan Barton** writes across boundaries, bringing the same narrative approach to short stories, poetry, educational books, screenplays, and fantasy. Her educational book, Student Ownership – The Missing Link in Education can be found through major platforms including Amazon. Kathleen is hired by schools, using this book, to run teacher workshops to encourage a more "hands on approach" in the classroom. She holds a Degree in Education and a Masters in Administration. When not deep in a writing project, she can be found creating a new piece of art for an upcoming exhibit, traveling the world, gardening, or gathering with friends and family at her beach house on the Pacific Coastline in Seal Rock, Oregon.

# Susan Farnham



**Susan Farnham** writes fiction about travelers who visit foreign destinations with preconceived ideas about how the world works. They are eager students and enthusiastic fools. They make mistakes. They find themselves in treacherous circumstances. They are charmed by the unexpected, and curious about what they don't understand.

# Brian Haggerty



**Brian Haggerty** has lived in Newport, Oregon, for 28 years, during which time he worked as an estate planning and elder law attorney. He is now retired. He is married to Linda, and between them they have five children, five grandchildren, and a labradoodle. Brian has volunteered with the Newport Fire Department as a firefighter / EMT for 25 years. He is active in community theater and as a singer in choral and barbershop groups. Writing has always been a hobby for Brian, who believes that truths can be found in fiction, while foul lies masquerade as facts. Words can be tools, or they can be weapons. To navigate in modern life, a person must know how words work, as well as how they don't.

# Jeremy Likness



**Jeremy Likness** is an astrophotographer, author, educator, and software engineer based on the Oregon Coast. His work explores the intersection of science, storytelling, and the natural world, capturing celestial objects and dark coastal landscapes through images that have been exhibited in galleries and public venues throughout Oregon. Jeremy regularly teaches workshops on astronomy and night sky photography. When he is not under the stars with a camera or telescope, he enjoys writing fiction that blends wonder, curiosity, and the human experience. His work is inspired by the vastness of the cosmos and the stories hidden within everyday moments, and his mission is to connect individuals with the beauty of God's creation through art and poetry. He lives in Newport, Oregon, where he continues to pursue both creative and scientific exploration.

# Kathy Smith

Kathy Smith was born and raised in Portland, Oregon, Kathy Smith has lived in New York City and Tucson, Arizona and spent many family vacations on the Oregon Coast, which became her residence in 1988. She has a daughter living in Eugene and visits her other daughter and her family in Bordeaux, France each year. Kathy, along with her first husband, co-owned the Yachats Inn for 15 years. Their first customers kidnapped them and the ensuing tale, "Captive" was aired on ABC Movie of the Week a couple years later. One of her writing projects is her version of the ordeal.

Kathy has worn many hats. Besides a motel owner, she has co-owned the Oregon Coast Sailing Company with her second husband, and now runs her own landscape/gardening business. She has journaled at various times throughout her life and has written some longer pieces as well. She has been taking writing courses at the Oregon Coast Community College and belongs to the Sterncastle writing group. She had her first short pieces published last year in the Sterncastle anthology. She is once again, very excited to have two more short pieces published in this year's anthology.