

A Work in Progress
By Brant Nelson

When we were kids we could always tell how long Dad would be gone by what bag he took. There was that big indigo backpacking bag, and then there was his smaller rucksack the color of Desert Storm from his military days; it was my favorite. He worked for the railroad and would sometimes be gone as long as two weeks at a time. We lived by the tracks and sometimes at night I'd hear that steam whistle blowing and I actually thought it was Dad's way of saying hello to us while away. As if he just rode around in circles for two weeks at a time making nightly runs past our house. Naiveté is a child's best friend, I suppose.

We were 8 and 10 when he died. My brother, Jude, had been in the hospital after breaking his arm falling out of a tree. He had thought it was all a dream and sometimes he still wakes us all up in the dead of night screaming—reliving Dad's death as if he were there with him on the train. He told me once that he's sitting there next to Dad and they're playing thumb war, and then all of a sudden there are these headlights coming their way. Jude said he keeps screaming at Dad to let go of his hand but Dad only laughs it off and squeezes harder, saying that he's just trying to trick him. He told me that he doesn't remember Dad having a face, that it was more like black fuzz, and the voice was more his own than Dad's. He said he mostly remembers the car, a classic sky blue Studebaker Lark. He said he keeps waiting for the collision but the headlights never seem to get any closer. The car just keeps coming, faster, making a horrific path of destruction. It runs over dogs, it hits birds. The car travels past weigh stations, the movie theater, our school, our house; over and over as if on endless loop. He told me this lasts for what seems like forever, when a man jumps out of the car and starts running towards them even faster than the car had been travelling. The man jumps up towards the windshield, and Jude said all he sees before he wakes up are the man's eyes, dark brown with enormous whiteness surrounding the irises.

It would have been Jayber, Dad's best friend and the tower operator for the morning that called the hospital, unable to reach Mom from the home line. It was an orderly, however, that had broken the news to her in the hallway. As we looked on at the scene from Jude's room, I remember Mom had cupped her mouth and her face turned dark red, and we couldn't tell if there was an audible sound that came with her reaction. Jude's room was on the second floor, and as if to break the silence a hummingbird crashed into the window. I had meant to go see if it was lying dead on the ground after we left, but I had forgotten.

Our Popo had died not long after Dad from a stroke, and Eppie came and lived with us for awhile. It was a strange arrangement because Mom and Eppie had always hated each other. Even as kids we knew this. But I guess Eppie felt like it was her duty to take care of Mom after Dad's death, and Mom in turn, felt it was her duty to take care of her old hag mother-in-law.

Eppie smoked like a chimney and that's how Jude and I picked up the habit. We used to sneak into her room while she was on the toilet and steal her cigarettes, until one day she caught us red-handed and from then on started handing them out freely to us the way most grandmas hand out hard candies. Eppie I suppose wasn't the traditional grandmother by any means: she had poker night with the girls, drank her scotch straight, and had an 18x24 poster of the "Duke" hanging up on her wall. She wasn't traditional, but she loved the snot out of us.

In the top left drawer of Eppie's dresser she had all these letters from soldiers of WWII, Korea and Vietnam. They had all been addressed to "Momma Eppie", "Mother Eppie", or just "Mom". I never understood how all these letters had come into her possession. There were hundreds and hundreds of letters from these soldiers talking about war, about their losses, about how thankful they were for her and for her love. Eppie made it perfectly clear of what we were and what we were not allowed to touch in her room,

and she didn't seem to mind us looking through these letters. When asked about them she'd just say that it was all a very long time ago and that she wasn't sure herself how they all came to be.

Mom had mourned Dad's death for about a month or so. That's about how long it took for Dad's pension checks and life insurance to start coming in. After that she started flirting with husbands of her friends and dyed her hair Barbie blonde. When the money ran dry she married Jayber, and a month after that she packed up us kids and we moved from east Texas to Michigan to live closer to Aunt Shelly, and further away from Jayber. Eppie had moved out as soon as Jayber moved in, and after we packed up to head north, she packed her bags as well to head down south towards the Mecca of the Wrinkled: Florida.

Before leaving, Eppie had given us each a pack of Chesterfields, Jude an antique type writer, and me a brand new First Act Guitar from K Mart. Jude definitely felt as if he had received the lesser hand, and I didn't blame him.

~*~

Flint, Michigan was home of the unemployed. Uncle Scott had worked for General Motors before the massive layoffs in the 1980's, and now it was Aunt Shelly that supported the two of them as a manager at Burger King. Mom had found work, but she never told us what. (We later found out she was dancing at a gentlemen's bar). We weren't originally going to live with Aunt Shelly and Uncle Scott this long, just until we found our feet was the plan, and maybe it still is.

While Mom and Aunt Shelly were at work, and we were at school, Uncle Scott would spend his days at *The Wunderground Magic Shop*. Every day when he'd pick us up he'd have a new trick to show us. They were always some cheap slight-of-hand trick, because he couldn't afford anything fancy, but he performed them flawlessly. For the most part they were very generic—metal rings, the never-ending scarves, a two-headed coin, loaded dice—but Jude and I were very impressed nonetheless. One time Uncle Scott came home with these two beautiful white doves and showed us some amazing disappearing tricks, but Aunt Shelly made him take them back. It was a shame too because Uncle Scott had already named them: JuJu and Sky Bomber.

With the First Act guitar I received from Eppie, and the three oldest chords in history, I wrote my very first song:

“JuJu and Sky Bomber”

*Now you see it
Now you don't
Which bird is it?
Which bird is in the coat?*

*JuJu and Sky Bomber
Where did you go?
JuJu and Sky Bomber
Where did you go?*

*You were brought home by my Uncle Scott
And my heart stopped with his slight-of-hand
Now all I have are songs of forget-me-not
And my uncle plays the sleigh bells in my rock-n-roll band*

{Sleigh bell solo}

JuJu and Sky Bomber
Where did you go?
JuJu and Sky Bomber
Where did you go?

JuJu and Sky Bomber
JuJu and Sky Bomber
JuJu and Sky Bomber

Now you see them
Now you don't

Needless to say it was a hit. Aunt Shelly wasn't too much of a fan, but the rest of the household was mesmerized. I guess Aunt Shelly began to feel a tinge of guilt though, because the following week she came home with two new birds: Chip and Chipper. They looked nothing alike, so they weren't all that great for magic tricks. It didn't really matter though because Chip died from a disappearance act gone horribly wrong that afternoon. After this we were left with just Chipper, which didn't make much sense because there was no longer a comparison for what was chipper than Chip. So we renamed the bird Chip 2. I know this is all very confusing.

After the death of Chip Uncle Scott retired from his days as an amateur magician and picked up painting watercolors of naked ladies.

~*~

When Jude and I were in high school he was encouraged to go out for the football team, and I was encouraged to go out for cheerleading. Dad had been a tight end in his days, and Mom had been captain of the squad. We both hated our chosen fields of extracurricular activities equally.

"Seriously, Mattie," Mom had always had a way with words, "you don't even look like you're trying out there. You're not even on the same beat with the other girls."

Mom had taken me aside after the Kearsley game while Jude was still in the locker rooms, probably being molested by Coach Sweat Pants for touching the ball in a real game. It was a total accident of course. Jude would never purposely touch the ball. What had happened was there was a fumble on the 40 yard line by our team. Jude had no idea and ran to pick it up—he really was pretty fast—to give it to the ref out of sheer politeness. As Jude ran after the ref, the ref ran from Jude, and Kearsley blocked our team hard. Kearsley had gained 30 yards by the time Jude finally managed to get the ball to the ref, who had made it all the way up to the stands trying to keep out of the bizarre play. It was Coach Sweat Pant's fault anyway. The only reason he sends Jude out there is, being the freshman team, every player gets to (or in Jude's case, is required to) play at least one ending.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean you don't even look like you know the cheers."

"I know the cheers just as well as the other girls. There's really not all that much to them. As long as you know how to spell and can make letters with your arms. It does get a little tricky, because some letters you very well cannot make with just your arms. Our coach teaches us that using your head or legs as improvisation is perfectly acceptable, though."

"Then what seems to be the problem, Honey?" asked Mom.

"I'm not doing their cheers," I replied.

Mom had taken awhile to process this information. This was usually how all of our conversations went. She'd ask a question, I'd respond, she'd pause as if at a loss for words, and then ask another question.

"Honey, what do you mean you're not doing their cheers?"

"I made my own," I replied.

[She paused. Perhaps she does this for dramatic affect].

"Mattie, I think that's great. I really do. But don't you think you should practice those cheers on your own time and cheer the real cheers with the other girls? Particularly when there's a game? I mean the players depend on you. *Jude depends on you.*"

"My cheers are real cheers. *And don't you think I know the players depend on us?* People don't realize the pressure. The thing though is the only player I want to help is *Jude*. So, all of my cheers are directed specifically toward him and his needs."

Mom was sincerely confused at that point, "How does that work exactly?"

"Well, I suppose it's no secret that Jude isn't all that great. I mean let's face it, the boy sorta blows. The way I see it though, the cheers the other girls are doing aren't fitting his needs."

"Did he tell you this?" asked Mom.

"No, I sensed it. He's my younger brother Mom, I sense these things, and I'm there to take care of him. So, anyways, say the girls are doing that cheer '*1st in 10, do it again...*'"

"Yeah?"

"Jude has no idea what that means, Mom. So I change it up for him: '*Come on Jude don't you sweat it, just a little further and then you'll get it, if you don't that's okay, Coach will bench you anyway!*'"

"Oh Honey, that seems a little harsh."

"Oh no, Jude loves it! It keeps him motivated. You see Mom, *Jude wants to be benched*. It's the only reason he's out there on the field. Here's another one: '*L-A-C-K-A-D-A-I-S-I-C-A-L! What does that spell?*'"

"What does that spell? You know what? It doesn't matter. The thing I'm most concerned about is the dance moves you've created. Some people find them offensive, Mattie."

The irony screamed itself hoarse.

"Mom, don't you get it? My moves are to counterbalance the other girls. I guess I'm a little superstitious. I just don't think the other girls' moves do anything for him, in fact, I think they may even set him back. And I don't see why people are complaining. I'm doing exactly what the other girls are doing, but just with a little bit of added flair. When the other girls do their little pelvis pump thing, what I do is the Crotch Grab 'N Pop. When the other girls balance on one leg, I do the Never-Ending Spin on one leg. Jude loves it. I *thought* the crowd loved it too. Offensive? *Really?*"

Just then Jude was released from his locker room prison; it's obvious, at least to me, that he is fighting back tears, even still he smiles dumbly, and throws an arm around Mom.

"Is everything alright, Judie?" asked Mom.

Coach Sweat Pants exits the locker room and retreats to his car, conveniently in the opposite lot from ours.

"Coach says I need to shave," said Jude, "that I'd better learn how to use a razor like the other boys 'cause he ain't gonna have no hobos playing for him."

"I bet your Uncle Scott would be more than happy to teach you how to shave," Mom said.

"I don't know. I kinda like having a beard."

For Jude, a beard was the thin, long, oily black hair protruding in random patches on his face. Puberty was a beast for him. His acne was clearing up some, but he was starting to get tall, lanky, and weird. I'm not saying weirdness is a bad thing, I mean I'm the cheerleader that does the Crotch Grab 'N

Pop. The difference is my weirdness is controlled, and with purpose. His weirdness is more out of control and awkward, but then all boys are that way at that age.

“You should grow a ‘stache like Uncle Scott. That’d be sure to get you laid,” I said.

“Mattie!” Mom gasped and then smiled.

~*~

After we got back home Jude and I sat out on the roof until late in the evening, just smoking and talking. It had become one of our nightly routines. Since Mom didn’t approve of our smoking we’d wait until she’d gone to bed, or depending on her schedule went to work, and sneak to the roof from Jude’s window with sleeping bags and pillows, and just talk. Occasionally, Uncle Scott would join us, but he’d have to lie to Aunt Shelly and Mom, say he was going to get gas or something really evasive like that, and then be gone for an hour or so. He always made it sound like he was off having an affair or something more sinister than smoking a few joints or cigarettes. I think he did it on purpose, just so Aunt Shelly would have something to sit and steam about. Tonight, it was just Jude and I, probably too cold out for a sensible adult.

“Didn’t you notice the stands,” I lamented to Jude one of my many chaos theories while trying to stay afloat on the steep roof while wiggling into a mummy bag, “there were virtually no men, just moms and daughters. It looked as if there was some kind of horrible viral epidemic that wiped out all the men. Shit!”

I dropped a lit cigarette and watched it roll from the roof and into a dry patch of leaves.

“If you paid any attention to the field you’d see some very strapping young gentlemen,” retorted Jude smugly.

“Boys. Y’all are boys. There were no men present there tonight, except for Coach Sweat Pants, whom I have my concerns about his overall masculinity, if you know what I mean.”

A stray came and started snooping around the pile of leaves, which had a light stream of white smoke emerging from somewhere underneath.

“Dog. Dog. Good dog. Pee Dog,” I said, trying to sound as encouraging as possible, but to no avail.

“Derrick’s Dad was there.”

“I thought Derrick’s Dad was in prison.”

“No, he just got out.”

We sat in silence for awhile. The stray with all his sniffing and digging had managed to put out any potential grass fire.

Truth be told, the epidemic of disappearing men was something that had been on my mind a lot, lately. There had never been any actual male figures in Jude’s life since our dad died. There was the occasional boyfriend of Mom’s back when we lived in Waco, but after Jayber, Mom vowed not to date until we were out of high school. There was our unemployed uncle that would occasionally score us some pot, hung out more with high school kids than adults, and had most recently become obsessed with trying to build a BattleBot in the garage. There was Coach Sweat Pants, who always wore these horrific gray sweat pants with an overly baggy crotch that, to me, looked as if they had something like a turd weighing them down because they swayed like a pendulum every time he moved. Someone that wears such pants should never be put in the position of being a major role model in a young man’s life. It seemed like the entire town of Flint was ran completely by women. I remember learning about the Amazonian women from Greek mythology last year in World History. They were an entire nation of freakishly tall women warriors, who would cut off their right breast in order to better shoot their arrows, and despised all men. Sometimes I think of Flint as the new Amazonian nation when I would look up in the stands in deep day dream. I would imagine the stadium as some sort of Amazonian coliseum in which we’d sit and watch the last remaining slave men battle each other to death.

Most of the men, I'm told, were laid off when the General Motor factories began closing down, but that doesn't explain where the men had gone. It seems to me that all of our friends' Dads either split a long time ago, were bums, in prison, or like our dad, dead. I thought a lot about Jude, and wondered how living in such a fatherless nation was affecting his overall development. Jude was probably my best friend and we have never once talked about girls or anything like that. Mom asked me once if I thought Jude was gay. I said I really didn't think so, but that I didn't know. Jude wasn't into your typical "manly things". He hated football, and wasn't into muscle cars or *Bay Watch*. I don't know if Jude knows how to be a man. I don't know if he could even give you an example. And it's not just Jude. Uncle Scott is certainly not an example of manhood. It's like this entire gender that once had been a necessity in all areas of life is slowly becoming extinct. I remember that my dad had loved to watch Westerns. Sometimes he would make Jude and I watch them with him, say it was for educational purposes. I think it is finally occurring to me what he meant by that. They don't make men like Alan Ladd or John Wayne anymore. And when they do, they usually end up dying. Even in the movies they usually end up dying, or rather, "riding of into the sunset" never to be seen from again. My Dad was a John Wayne. My Popo was a John Wayne also. That old song from the 90's is stuck in my head right now, that *Where Have All the Cowboy's Gone?* song. Maybe this is why Eppie had that 18X24 poster of the "Duke" hanging up on her wall. I wonder if it's in memory of the long lost idea of what a true man was. Or maybe it was all a fairytale. Or worse, maybe it's evolution.

"That's cool," I said to finally break the silence of the cold night air and lit another cigarette.

~*~

The next Tuesday morning the entire world changed. I didn't find out about this until later that afternoon. I had driven Jude to his 7 o'clock football practice, and I wasn't really feeling like Algebra, so I decided to go back to the house and see if maybe Uncle Scott needed any help with his BattleBot. Uncle Scott was still asleep so I watched some *Tom and Jerry* for a couple of hours, took a nap, then got kind of bored and decided to go to my English class after lunch; besides I kind of liked English.

When I got to Ms. Tindal's English class the journal topic written on the board was: *Based on today's horrific events, express your concerns or fears.* I literally had no idea, what the "horrific events" were. So, innocently I asked.

"What do you mean 'what horrific events'?" Ms. Tindal questioned.

"We're at war!" one boy said.

"It's World War III!" added another.

"The planes! The Muslim terrorists! They hate our freedom! The hate America!" cried more students.

The room spun around me, and I had no idea what to make of all these words coming at me from all different directions of the classroom. From what I got there were two or three planes, that had been hijacked by devil worshipping Muslim extremists, who hate our freedom; they flew the planes into and/or bombed the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, Camp David, and possibly the white house; and that it meant that World War III had started, and that they were going to start drafting all of my male classmates for the armed forces. Honestly, the thought of them issuing the draft was the most terrifying bit of news I had received. My thoughts quickly went to Jude.

September 11, 2001

I'm not entirely sure what exactly is going on. Ms. Tindal, who is usually pretty nice, yelled at me in front of the entire class. I felt stupid. They say it is World War III. The whole thought of that terrifies me. I'm not stupid. I know wars still exist, but I guess I thought that America was excluded from all that. We had fought all of our wars. I thought we weren't doing that kind of stuff anymore. I'm scared for Jude that he is going to get drafted and sent to some far away country to die.

It occurred to me that I wasn't even sure what country it was that hated us. How was it that while I was sleeping the entire world turned on its head? How is it that while I was at home watching cartoons my junior English class was preparing for war?

An American Dream
By J. Fairchild

The sun breaks through the fog. It's six. I wasn't warm before and I'm not warm now. The paper rustles as I stir. One eye opens, and then the other one cracks. The fog sits on both sides of the bridge like the love handles on a businessman. A bottle rolls by. I grab it. Nothing. There is nothing left. The cars above rattle the bridge.

"I'm a fisherman today," I think. "Today, I'll be a fisherman."

I dust myself off and walk down the block. The sun peaks over the hills and I shield my eyes.

One hill up, and another down.

One hill up, and another one down.

"They'll bite today," I think. "What if this is my day? What if I catch it and let it get away?"

The sun is up now. I'd better get in my spot and cast my line to the place where I'm sure to catch that marlin. A car swims by – dead fish floating on a tarmac sea, those driving as dead as me. I don't pull. It's best to wait I think. Maybe a flying fish will land in my lap.

Another goes by. Another. Another.

I wish the boy were here.

I put a new bait up.

"Will work for food." Nothing.

"Car out of gas." Nothing.

"Hit me in my anus with your change." Nothing.

The fishing was good here once. Now the fish don't even look at my bait. It's used up, day old, no good bait. If the fishing were better I could replace it. But with each day the bait is worse and the fish are less and less interested.

I wish the boy were here.

The flying fish drive by but they won't feed me. The sun is on the wrong side of the east. Why? I feel my belly roar like a bloody lion.

"Eat," it says.

But the fish swim by and I'm only an old fisherman doing the same thing an old fisherman does every day.

I wish the boy were here.

The sun is down now and I walk home. At night it is ok. No fish swim. I kick rocks and duck into pubs where other fishermen complain and boast. Nada mucho, any luck, play only songs from 1968: all with different apologies, all with uncaught fish.

The fog follows the dying sun. There is nothing left. I'm under the bridge, under the "Times," it reads "Tomorrow, Tomorrow, The Sun'll Come Out Tomorrow."

The bridge rattles as I sleep.

Maybe the fish will be out soon.

Martha Stewart Would Not Be Amused
By Kristi Allen

The table is cold underneath her back and the paper crinkles, too loud in a room that's too quiet. There's a pile of magazines several years old in a plastic magazine rack attached to the wall. The promise of losing ten pounds in two weeks glares at Lucy from the cover of a *Good Housekeeping*. She wants to pull her knees to her chest but she's pretty sure there's some law that says she has to lie here, heels in stirrups even though she's shivering.

"Should have bought the stripey knee socks."

The kind of parodies of Catholic School Girls and Goth angels, the whole image makes her stifle a giggle that comes out like a snort. Really a place like this ought to have more respect for their patients. Customer service, competition driven; it's not as if the doctors and nurses are the ones left half naked in a hospital gown. Lucy looks over at the closed door and tears well in her eyes. She forces them down then sits up abruptly, nearly choking and gagging on all the emotion she won't give into. It's an odd sensation, not giving into her feelings and not voicing her thoughts. She doesn't have much experience in restraint...which is precisely how and why she ended up here. Practice restraint, she thinks. Check. Check. Giving into tears and wailing would seem too much like defeat and while she's never minded falling or finishing last, she's not going to let this—him—beat her. Not this time.

There's a muscle in her calf that's twitching and another in her eyes. She has her hands fisted by her side because they're shaking—what's the cliché? Trembling like a leaf and leaves that tremble get knocked down, pushed along the sidewalk and eventually sucked up in a leaf blower. Lucy doesn't think they've given her enough Xanax for this. Obviously. She should have nabbed some of her mother's before they'd left the house that morning. Her mom's soft, drawling voice cuts through her thoughts of defeat and leaves dumped in a compost pile once they've been sucked up. Maybe the analogy is better than she first thought. Her mother is talking as she tells her Sugar, s'no use cryin' over spilt milk but does this qualify as spilt milk? Because Lucy thinks this falls into the 'leaping before you look' category of phrases and sayings. As she didn't look and she leapt. Me and Alice; falling down, down, down but I'm pretty sure that drink me and getting bigger than a house isn't a safe sex warning.

She looks up to the ceiling and swallows that lump in her throat again. Nearly hysterical laughter erupts from her and fills the room. They have pictures of baby animals and their mothers on the ceiling. There's a gorilla and its baby as well as a lioness and her cubs. She's still laughing, tears trickling down her cheeks, when the door to the room opens and people walk in. She doesn't look over at them because she doesn't want to see his face. She can't help but see the nurse when she comes to her side, a gentle smile on her face. She looks like someone's mother and Lucy thinks it's a theme here. Or a joke. A really bad joke.

"How are you feeling, Sugar?" The nurse's hand flits near her hairline, fingertips touching then flying away. Her expression and her nerves broadcast that already this one seems complicated.

"Don't you think it's inappropriate?" Lucy asks, her eyes meeting the nurse's directly. The laughter is gone and has been replaced with hardness that changes her features. It makes her look older yet more vulnerable.

"What?" The nurse is thoroughly confused; it shows on her face, eyes wide, eyebrows arched toward a widow's peak. She looks to the doctor, lining his equipment up and preparing for the 'procedure' but he doesn't have any answers for her. Those are locked inside Lucy.

"Baby animals and their mothers on the ceiling," Lucy responds, making the decision to put the nurse out of her misery and clarify. "I mean...shouldn't you have pictures of women being doctors and lawyers, strong and independent. Something showing the successful lives they went onto live. Afterwards."

There's weight to that word and she pauses to give it its due. That's why she's here. That's what she's counting on. Afterwards. "I mean...really, this is an abortion clinic. I had to come through a whole crowd of people with signs and pictures of babies and their mothers. People condemning and people pleading. One lady told me I was going to Hell. As if I don't know that already. Southern Baptist baby. All the way." She's not even sure how or why that relates to the stupid pictures of baby animals on the ceiling but it does. Or maybe it doesn't. Maybe it just relates to everything inside her that is twisted and writhing, cramping, protesting and pleading.

"We find our patients do better when they have something to focus on," the nurse responds but her hands are fidgeting, shaking as they brush Lucy's hair back from her face. It is the answer she's been trained to give when the pictures on the ceilings are questioned but it's obvious they've never been questioned in quite this way. It's not an answer that satisfies Lucy's outrage but the nurse isn't certain there is an answer that would satisfy anything about this girl fidgeting and accusing on her table.

"It's incredibly friggin' inappropriate. Get a TV or put a half naked boy up there!" Lucy almost yells, jerking away from the woman's touch. Her reaction pulls the doctor's attention from his preparations. "And you need a rug in here. Some art on the walls, maybe a pillow or two." Because decorating will fix this. It's ridiculous but the décor is something that Lucy can stand to focus on.

"Ms. Locke, if you'd just calm down—" the doctor starts.

"I'm calm but you're inappropriate and I can't do this when there's some doe-eyed baby gorilla looking down at me." The tone of her voice is a thread snapping, everything coming unhinged like the crest of a wave just before it smashes everything beneath it to pieces.

She stands up on the table, oblivious to the doctor and the nurse both clamoring to stop her. Warnings of insurance claims and injuries swirl up around her legs, scarcely reaching her ears. She goes up on her toes—Like ballet class, up, up, up on your toes. Toe Pointe! I was never any good in ballet. Her fingertips hook beneath the edge of the posters stuck to the ceiling, fingernails digging into the acoustic tiles, cramming powdery white dust under her nails. Manicure please and why didn't I get a pedicure yesterday? Her knees shake and a giggle trickles along her throat because she thinks she can hear them knocking over all the other noises in the room. Her pieces are pushing apart like ice floes fleeing as fast as they can, jagged bits bumping and swaying against each other, bobbing beneath frigid water to surface again, colliding. She pulls the pieces back, corralling them into herself with each shred of paper. The sound of the ripping and shredding overwhelms the nurse's pleading and the doctor's quiet warnings. He is on the phone, probably calling the beefy security guard that stands outside the clinic door. At least he's cute. He could be my focus object. Once the posters are down, in pieces around the table, scattered across the floor Lucy sits ridiculously meek and then lies down, feet in the stirrups and hands folded just beneath her breasts. The nurse and the doctor are staring at her, mouths agape.

"Perhaps we should reschedule."

"I'm not rescheduling," Lucy responds. "You do this now or I go find another abortion clinic that doesn't have inappropriate baby animals on their ceilings and you lose my money. I'll also tell everyone I know what horrible Martha Stewarts you make. I'm not changing my mind and I'm not having a crisis of conscience. I'm redecorating your room in a more tasteful manner. Would it kill you to DVR some HGTV and watch it at night?"

There's a minute where she thinks the doctor is having a crisis of conscience but he rolls his table of equipment over and begins the procedure. The nurse, apparently, has no other job outside of stroking Lucy's hair until she reaches up and slaps the nurse's hand away then she's just standing there, all her purpose stripped. Lucy almost feels guilty but she figures if she starts feeling guilt for anything now she's going to drown. She knows she's supposed to focus on something else, anything else; except drowning and

guilt. The beefy security guard never arrived so she picks the reason she's here. Mike Warren, quarterback of the football team and the hottest thing going in college. He's a junior and she's barely eighteen. She thought she was a very lucky girl. She thought she was that pretty, that smart, that much fun. It turned out she was just that naïve.

The doctor is humming and that draws her attention back to the room. Lucy puts her hands over her ears because she thinks she can hear the doctor scraping her insides out and she bites her lip against asking what happens to all those parts of her after this. She's pretty sure they go in a red biohazard bag and get tossed away in a dumpster somewhere then she reminds herself they're parts of Mike too and she doesn't wonder so much. Tyler Durden would have made soap. Her stomach twists, revolting against the pop culture reference burned in her brain; she can feel the bile rise against the back of her teeth. She swallows it down, burning her throat, refusing to throw up. At least nurse-y would have something to do. She knows she should say this is what hurts the most out of everything he did to her. It's what everyone expects; it's what a good Southern Baptist girl would feel but the truth is that this is just the way it feels like it should end. There's so much pain locked away inside of her and there should be some physical sort of ritual for it. She's already burned all the little things left over from a relationship; ticket stubs, notes passed, voicemails saved, that cheap heart pendent that turned her skin green, his letterman's jacket. It's only fitting that she get rid of this too. The callousness of her thoughts make her stomach twist again. It's easier this way, to think this way. To be this way. Daddy would be so disappointed.

When they're done, she's left alone with her clothes on a hard plastic chair alongside a sheet of instructions. She gets dressed, promising herself she'll throw the clothes away when this is all over. As soon as she walks into the waiting room, her best friend is there, her hand tightly squeezing hers. Lucy gives her a weak smile and nods. They've got a hotel room for the night and a lot of ice cream to get through.

“Our secret, Jilly. Right? I don't ever want him to know how he almost ruined my life.”

“Our secret, Luce. I promise.”

Pyromania
By Daniel Mountain

A match is struck, and the dance begins.

Fire. Fire is good for the soul. It's warm, comforting, and bright. Look into it and the most primal edge of your humanity comes to the surface. Without thought or hesitation, you connect to the first of your ancestors who chose to claim fire for themselves. And once you've made that connection, you become one with the flames.

The match is thrown into the tinder, setting it ablaze.

Ignition. Is it any wonder that we appreciate explosions? An explosion is fire in its most condensed form, with the brevity thereof being our only regret of it. Light and sound combine, and in an instant the fire is there. And then, as soon as it lit, it goes out. Fortunately, there's probably another blast coming. Explosions are rarely isolated.

The kindling is burning brightly, and now the main fuel ignites.

Control. We may be drawn to fire, but we are also afraid of it. Pyrophobics tend to survive longer than pyrophilics, after all. An animal that runs from the flames is far more likely to survive than one who runs toward them. We believe ourselves to love fire, but most of us only love fire so long as it's within our safe control.

The wind shifts, and the fire ignites the nearby trees.

Pyromania: The psychological compulsion to light things on fire. A primal love of flame overriding a primal fear of it. You stare into the flames, and before you know it... you can't let go. You're trapped by the fire, and all real control is lost. Explosives, accelerants, combustibles... they become your only friends, and in time they consume you.

The fire burns out of control for several days. The exact number of casualties is never known, but is estimated to be higher than the casualties of any fire in recent history.

Your bones lie among the ashes. Your last thoughts, before the fire took you, were of how beautiful it all was as it spiraled out of control...

A match is struck, and the dance begins.

The Last Dance
By Felicia Ann Hudgeons

I couldn't look at him, afraid that if I did I might kiss him. We continued to dance close. I breathed him in. His smell took me back to all the memories I have tried to forget. As the memories flashed through my mind, tears began to form behind my eyes. I pulled him closer and wrapped my arms around his neck. Once again, the things we left unsaid filled the air, lingering in the atmosphere.

"I miss this, I miss you," he whispered in my ear.

I didn't know what to say. I felt speechless, unable to process his presence let alone his words.

"Me too. It's so hard," is all I could mutter.

We didn't say another word. We just moved our feet slowly to the music, holding each other as to say, "these feelings will never go away" and for those few moments I was his again. He lightly kissed my neck. I wanted to taste his kiss once more.

The song ended and so did our moment. I pulled myself away from him. I had to return to reality. The reality of him and I, which had ended months ago and no longer existed. I left him knowing that I would never see him again. Our last dance was a bittersweet ending to a lost romance.

The Red Line
By Rachel Waterhouse-Currie

At 6:00 a.m. every day of my working existence, I took the Red Line city metro. The Red Line, as opposed to the crowded and abnormally quick Green Line, was my so-called “scenic route;” a sub path that gave me enough time before work to observe a curious breed of metro riders: the “early bird” germophobes. A few doctors, surgeons, practitioners, and nurses always rode the 6am Red Line because it was always the first North side transit to leave in the morning. Plus, it was the first transit to be cleaned in the morning.

Drowned with cleaners, window spray, and a chemical lemon zest, the Red Line was always fairly sanitary at 6m. I couldn't blame the doctors for their decision to take the Red Line. They had to be prompt and punctual. They had to be clean. They had patients to treat and see. No patient wants to see a doctor that smells like the party piss and vomit of last night's late line. Nobody wants a doctor that's just been in a train full of coughing, hacking strangers. No one wants a victim for a doctor. I still wanted to know her and what she was keeping in her purse.

A female doctor; fair, pale, pretty, and in her early thirties, sat near me on the Red Line one morning. Dressed in a white coat; which was strange given most doctors waited to change, she sat on a bench parallel to the doors as she nervously waited to exit. As soon as she combed her fingers through her blonde hair, she immediately checked her wrist watch. Frustrated, annoyed, and irked, she repeated the process as she tapped her shoes in impatience. Was she late for an appointment? Was she late for a triple bypass heart surgery to perform? Was she irritated by the germs like the other doctors who were speckled throughout the metro? The ones who lathered themselves up with globs of anti-bacterial soap? Did she have anti-bacterial soap in that huge cow stomach-of-a-purse she carried with her?

As I watched the doctor, I wondered. What was in that cow stomach-of-a-purse? As I had no other work to finish up while I waited on the metro, I wrote down all the things I imagined she carried in that purse. “Number one: Anti-bacterial soap. All doctors carry that, right? Number two: A pouch of cosmetics and blush and gloss.” The doctor looked like she wore light make-up. Or least she wore a strange-colored foundation given her skin seemed to be slightly yellow. She was pretty nonetheless. I continued “Number three: A keychain with a gym card.” With sweat that leaked at the corner of her eye and on her forehead, it looked like she had just gotten back from a morning work-out. Her thin and model skinny body could have been evidence of a gym membership. Maybe. “Number four: Dr. Eisenstein's Book on How to Prevent Disease and Decay.” I made up a book name. I thought she must have something to read in there even if I made it up. “Number five: A picture of her in Africa.” I imagined her smiling in her white coat as she hugged a group of school children blessed to have her knowledge and care. She must have visited to Africa once before. She must have—

“Excuse me. Hey!,” she suddenly called to me. I woke up from my imaginative writing and I looked around to see if it was me she wanted. But she nodded to me and tapped her watch impatiently, “Do you know what time it is?”

I pulled up my sleeve and revealed my naked wrist, “I'm sorry-I don't-I don't have it. I know it's around 6:00 o'clock though.”

“Yeah, 6:01? 6:02? 6:03? There's a difference!” she had snapped into a high-pitched tone to my surprise. I immediately thought again that she was seriously late for that triple bypass heart surgery she had to perform.

“I-I don't know. I'm sorry. I-“ I shrugged not knowing how I could turn back the clock for her. If I knew, I would have tried for both of us.

As she set her cow stomach-of-a-purse down on the bench, she seemed to cringe in awe of her rudeness and briskly walked to me, “No, I'm sorry,” she feverishly fidgeted with her fingers as she sat down

on a seat in front of me”, That was rude. I’m just-I’m just in a hurry to meet somebody. It’s important. It’s a life or death. It’s a death and life situation.”

I couldn’t help but ask, “Are you late to see a patient?”

“I am the patient,” she snapped again as she crouched on the seat like a child that wasn’t quite sure what to do with her arms. “I am the patient this time,” she pointed to herself as she pierced her white coat with her index finger “Patients are give the title “patients” because we have to have “patience”...with...them. I’m not patient because I am a patient! And I am sick, damn it!” I leaned back. I had only leaned forward because her angry outbursts made her appear more attractive. But at the mention of sick, I inched back into my seat and asked, “You’re sick?”

“Yes and I have a very bad head cold!” she hoarse-whispered even though no other passenger listened.

“Oh, a head cold? Well, I bet you catch those all the time. You’re a doctor, right?” I asked innocently, relieved she wasn’t too sick.

As it halted, screeched, and stopped, the Red Line’s doors opened. As she scrambled, scurried, and ran, the doctor bolted towards the exit doors and yelled out for everyone to hear, “I’m a gynecologist! And just in case you need to know,” she pointed from the doorway, “Vaginas aren’t chalkboards. You can’t erase your mistakes.”

Nobody noticed a word the doctor had said as she left. The doors closed. The Red Line inched to accelerate off to the next station. From the window, I watched her as she ran off into the metropolitan abyss. I wrote “Number Six: Anger Management support group-“ But wait, she left her purse!

Hurriedly I stood up as I subconsciously thought the train would stop in times of stranger-to-stranger kindness but no. The Red Line had sped up as it always did; ignoring all who entered its metallic bloodstream, the crimson line that flowed through the city’s body. It was just me and the doctor’s purse.

Hesitantly, I sat on the metro bench and I looked through the cow stomach-of-a-purse so I could find any identification or any way to return it her. Aha! I could finally see the real contents of her personal life but without being nosy. I wanted to know who she was. I wanted to find her. And as I dug through the purse, I couldn’t see or feel any shape that looked like a wallet. I listed everything in my head. “Number one: A bottle of anti-bacterial soap.” I knew it! “Number two: A picture.” But she wasn’t in Africa. Much happier with a fuller figure, she stood on an aquamarine beach coastline hugging a man, a lover who also looked happy. My fingertips touched a velvet box. “Number three: An engagement ring with a return receipt.” For a split second, as I stopped digging, I knew this was wrong. Something wasn’t right. Where’s her wallet? My fingertips brushed against a zipper. “Number four: A secret compartment. It was a pocket.” It was probably a pocket for extra anti-bacterial soap. My hands reached in. Or maybe it was for book on how to prevent disease and decay disease. My hands slipped in. Or maybe medicine for her head cold.

Prick-prick-prick-prick.

“Number five: a whole freaking sack of used syringes and needles.”

I screamed like a sailor. I screeched like a banshee. I cursed in all cliché. I hollered like a needy patient to a doctor. I bawled the bloodiest known profanities in the presence of all the doctors and surgeons and nurses on the Red Line metro. No one seemed to notice. They all liked being clean. The Red Line sped up, like it always did, ignoring all who had it, and flowed through the city’s body.

Weaponless
By Summer G. Baker

Kyla Davis became enamored of the little café, known in its New York suburb as the Illy Café, the moment she saw it. But she didn't know that walking into the quaint little building could mean the last night of her life.

Snow fell in a soft curtain from the rapidly darkening sky. Christmas lights and decorations adorned lampposts, streetlights, fences, windows, and doorways. There could be no lovelier evening for romance. Perfect for a date with Luke Tanaka.

Kyla met Luke the week before when he bought a book, *The Kite Runner*, from the Barnes & Noble bookstore where she worked. She'd commented on the sad plot and ending, since she had recently read it for college. They immediately struck up a conversation, chatting at length about subjects from books to playing darts. They grabbed coffee at a corner deli after work to continue their discussion. In the end, Luke had asked for her phone number.

Now, walking beside her in the evening light, Luke seemed more handsome than he normally did. He wore a dark blue, long-sleeved shirt under a wool jacket and light-colored denim jeans. Snowflakes speckled his black hair and his blue eyes danced every time she made him laugh. *Nothing less than a dream*, she thought.

The Illy Café held an unobtrusive position wedged in the middle of several small shops that lined the street as far as the eye could see. The buildings huddled together appeared worn at the edges, but the warm light spilling from the front window of the café onto the sidewalk created a welcome atmosphere.

"I've never been here before," Kyla remarked as they approached the café. Traffic forced the couple to dodge nimbly to get through the steady stream of bright yellow taxis. Luke had quick feet and held her hand to help her keep up with him. At the last second, he had to yank her up onto the sidewalk out of the way of a particularly quick taxi.

"There's a first time for everything. You'll just have to trust me when I tell you the soup is delicious," Luke replied with a smile as if nothing had happened.

Kyla chuckled a little breathlessly as she stepped past him into the softly-lit dining area. As she removed her coat and scarf, a waiter opened the kitchen door and approached them. Scents of coffee and roast beef followed him, making her mouth water.

"How many?" he asked Kyla as he neared.

Luke stepped up next to her. "Two, please."

Something, a look of disgust perhaps, crossed the waiter's face when he caught sight of Luke. However, it disappeared in a moment. Kyla glanced at her companion, but clearly he hadn't seen anything. He winked when he noticed her looking at him. She couldn't resist smiling.

Kyla watched the waiter out of the corner of her eye as he seated them at a table next to a window. A white scar, the most startling feature he bore, trailed from the end of his left brow down behind his ear. He seemed to be in his fifties with silver-streaked blonde hair and gray eyes. His black jacket and slacks fit him poorly and his towering height didn't help the awkward effect his clothing created. As he took their drink orders, Kyla wondered at the waiter's earlier hostile expression.

When the waiter left to get their coffees, Kyla returned her attention to Luke. She refused to let some guy creep her out of her evening. After James, she hadn't wanted to date anymore. From what he said, Luke hadn't dated anyone in a while either, saying that his job kept him too occupied to do more than occasionally hanging out with his friends. She understood; trying to finish college kept her busy, too. However, tonight she wanted to forget responsibilities and have fun.

Thinking of Luke's job, Kyla decided that it would be a perfect conversation topic. "So what do you do for a living?" she asked.

Luke leaned forward. "I'm a hitman," he replied with a straight face.

Expecting a joke to follow, Kyla raised an eyebrow and suppressed a smirk. "Oh, really? That seems like a bit of an... unstable job. Does it pay well?"

"Depends on the job. How badly someone wants someone else out of the way, you know. Amazing how much you can make off other people's grudges, but there're always the stingy ones, of course."

Kyla smiled. "So what do you really do?"

A look of injury crossed Luke's face as he sat back in his chair. "You don't believe me?" he asked. "That hurts me. What kind of world do we live in where innocent young ladies don't believe honest men like me?"

Kyla laughed lightly. She loved the mock exchanges they often shared. "The kind of world where innocent ladies and honest men don't exist."

"I wasn't actually looking for an answer," Luke pretended to grumble. "But really I'm a-

The waiter interrupted their conversation when he appeared with steaming mugs of coffee, setting them down carefully on paper napkins. Kyla noted that he studiously avoided looking at Luke, but concentrated on fussing with Kyla's napkin while staring into her eyes. The waiter walked away as she and Luke chorused a "thank you", but he gave Kyla one last glance before entering the kitchen.

"Rude," Luke muttered. "What happened to taking our orders?" he wondered aloud before he took a swallow of his coffee.

"He didn't even bring our menus," Kyla agreed, amazed the liquid didn't scald Luke's throat. She decided to simply sip her coffee, but the napkin stuck to the bottom of the mug as she lifted it. When she pulled the paper off, she saw that something had been written on it.

Her breath froze in her chest when she read it: *Your friend is a known rapist. Just got out of prison. Not safe with him. Get away.*

Startled, Kyla flinched and her gaze shot across the table at her date. Luke? A rapist? Fighting to keep calm, she clenched the napkin in her hand and slowly stood. Her instincts screamed for her to run, but she knew she had to appear normal. "While we're waiting, I'm going to freshen up," she said casually.

Luke raised his eyebrows. "We haven't ordered yet."

Kyla managed to smile. "Just order something you think I'll like if I'm not back in time. Okay?"

Luke shrugged. "Sure."

Kyla grabbed her purse, but realized that she couldn't take her coat or scarf without raising Luke's suspicions. A small sacrifice, she decided. Kyla strode purposefully toward the back of the café and the restrooms sign. She would get her bearings in the ladies' room. Think about her next move. Just as she grasped the bathroom's knob, the adjacent kitchen door swung open just wide enough for her to see the waiter motioning her to join him.

"This way!" he whispered.

Kyla glanced over her shoulder to see if Luke was watching. He had turned to the window and the view beyond, so she ducked into the kitchen behind the waiter. He grabbed her arm and began to pull her swiftly through the small, cramped kitchen, guiding her through the maze of cooking equipment and kitchen staff. Kyla assumed they were heading for a back door.

"How did you know?" she asked the waiter as quietly as she could manage with the noise.

"Luke was my neighbor," the waiter said. "I was at home when the cops came to get him a couple years ago."

He knows Luke's name, Kyla thought as they stepped out of the back door. He must be telling the truth. I can trust him.

She had no time to think anything else, because in the next instant, the back of Kyla's skull exploded with pain and her world went dark.

Luke drummed his fingers on the tabletop, glancing back and forth between the ladies' room and the kitchen. It had been a good twenty minutes since Kyla left the table. He'd ordered the café's special ribs, but neither Kyla nor had the food had arrived. The back of Luke's neck prickled. He felt certain something had gone amiss, but he hadn't noticed what.

He shifted in his seat, bothered by a feeling he couldn't pin down. He tried to focus on it, but it kept escaping him, leaving him only with the image of a badly bleeding head wound and flames. A memory from the past. After another two minutes of trying to figure it out passed, he finally got up and strode to the kitchen entrance.

Luke rapped on the swinging door. Almost immediately, an irritated, white-clad cook poked his head out. "What?"

"I ordered twenty minutes ago and I haven't seen the waiter since," Luke stated, knowing that it would immediately galvanize the cooks into action.

The cook bobbed his head. "We'll have your order out as soon as possible, sir."

"Thank you." Luke almost turned to go, but changed his mind. "Did anyone happen to see a woman go by?" he asked. "Red sweater, brown hair, glasses, comes up to about my shoulder?"

In the room beyond the grumpy cook, Luke noticed a young man holding a broom turn around at his inquiry. "I saw a woman like that go out the back door with Winston," he stated.

"Who's Winston?" Luke demanded.

"The waiter," the man answered, startled.

Why would she do that? Luke wondered. With a sinking feeling, he pushed past the first angry cook and followed the direction the young man pointed. He found the back door standing slightly ajar, obviously to cool the workers from the intense heat of the fires.

Upon opening it fully, Luke found that the evening had faded almost to night and the snow had ceased. His eyes were drawn to the torn up snow and the drag marks beneath the orange glow of a nearby streetlamp, leading away to the left of the doorstep. His cop instincts took over. Luke followed the trail for several feet into the more unbroken snow before squatting down to study the tracks. The evidence suggested that someone had trudged backward while dragging a heavy object obscuring the footprints, blurring the tracks so that he couldn't calculate the exact size of the person.

Luke took a deep breath. *Okay, calm down. It might be one of the cooks had to drag something away recently. Probably nothing's happened to her.*

From the corner of his eye, a glint of silver in the dying light caught his attention. He picked up the object from a nearby pile of snow and held Kyla's silver charm bracelet before his eyes. Luke groaned as he stared at yet more evidence that added to the conclusion that kept growing in his mind. He couldn't be certain yet, but all signs pointed the same direction.

Luke straightened and followed the trail east, using a tiny flashlight clipped to his key ring to see his way.

Had the waiter dragged Kyla away? Or was the strange trail just a coincidence and she had left of her own accord? If the waiter had taken her, he couldn't have gone far. Too easy for someone to catch him dragging a woman through the snow, and his game would be up.

Within minutes, the cop came upon an abandoned building like a small warehouse, one of many hidden from the street by the shops. In need of repair, it fit in perfectly with the rest of the neighborhood. The trail led to a pair of metal doors set in the side and Luke found one slightly ajar. Through the opening,

he could see it was nearly pitch dark inside even though windows lined the back wall near the ceiling. Despite the danger of being seen, he would have to use the flashlight.

Luke reached under his jacket for the gun usually strapped to his belt when he worked in situations like this one. When he realized that he somehow, through a wicked twist of fate, had left it at home, he silently cursed himself for every kind of a fool. After he'd finished berating himself, he shined the light through the door, then immediately threw himself into the darkness and hit the floor in a roll with a grunt.

Two shots hit the concrete behind him as he passed through the entrance. But they ceased once he turned off his light and became motionless next to an empty wooden crate. As he waited to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, his heart pounded wildly. He really disliked being without his own weapon and no way to shoot back. When he could see a little better, Luke found junk littered the room. Large crates and boxes that he could use as cover, but also piles of trash that could trip him up.

He glanced back at the light from a street lamp spilling through door and found the bullets had scraped the concrete when they ricocheted. Upon scrutinizing them from his nearby position, Luke decided the bullets had angled from the direction of a metal balcony beneath the windows he'd noticed earlier.

Suddenly, a scream shattered the air and echoed through the building. Luke smiled ruefully, because it hadn't been a woman's scream, but that of a man. Apparently, Kyla could hold her own. For now. He took advantage of the waiter's distraction and ran as quietly as he could towards the back wall. When he'd nearly made it, another bullet whizzed past his head, definitely coming from the balcony.

"Tanaka! Luke Tanaka, I know you're there!" came the waiter's voice from above Luke's head.

Luke kept silent, but felt inward surprise that the waiter somehow knew his name.

"I bet you're wondering if I've really got your girlfriend..." A feminine yelp of pain followed this remark.

Luke gritted his teeth, hot anger flaring in his chest. "Don't hurt her!" he yelled. "Look, what do you want? She's nothing to you. Let her go. Let's talk."

Another bullet buried itself in the crate behind him. *He's a really bad shot*, Luke thought, disgusted. He feared more that he might be killed by a wild bullet than by a direct hit.

"Oh, I'm gonna hurt her, alright. I'm gonna *kill* her," Winston spat. "Do you wanna know why?"

Luke didn't reply. Instead, he crept silently toward a metal ladder that he had seen off to his right. It would lead him up to the balcony on an alternative route from the stairs at the front.

"It's because of September 6, 2003."

Luke shook his head. The date meant nothing to him.

"That was the day my daughter, Lindsey Morris, committed suicide in jail. Why was she in jail?" The waiter's voice cracked and he paused. Then he blurted, "Because *you* put her there!"

Luke kept moving, fighting the need to freeze, because he'd finally remembered. The girl had been drunk and crashed her car into the front of her house. Her father had been asleep on the couch, waiting for her to get home. The crash set the house and car on fire, but Morris had made it out alive and come away with that odd scar behind his ear. Luke remembered it bleeding profusely as the old man climbed into the back of the ambulance to go to the hospital. The cop realized that upon seeing it back at the café, it had triggered that strange memory of blood and fire.

The girl, Lindsey, hadn't been injured, but since she'd been high off illegal drugs and drinking underage, the policemen on duty sent her off to jail. No one had known she still had a piece of glass embedded in her jacket...

"I remember," Luke called from his position halfway up the ladder.

A scuffling noise sounded above. "Get back here, you little bitch!" Morris yelled. The balcony clanked and swayed as the two ran along it in the opposite direction from Luke.

Luke took the ladder rungs two at a time and made it to the top to find Kyla trapped on a tall pile of crates with Morris circling about at the foot of it. Clearly he didn't intend to kill her yet, because Luke could see that he still had the gun and the cop felt pretty sure that it had a few more rounds in it. Fortunately, he had his back to Luke.

Luke locked eyes with Kyla for a second and she nodded almost imperceptibly, her face grim. In order to distract the waiter, she began to act as if she would try to climb down the back of the crates to escape. Morris circled round in that direction, seeking to cut her off. With no time to think, Luke took advantage of the distraction Kyla had created and set off at a dead run. He had covered nearly the full distance by the time Morris heard the noise and got back around the crates to face him.

The old man raised his handgun, the hand that held it dripping blood from a bite wound, obviously received from Kyla. Luke had no room to dodge, so instead he leapt forward with lightning speed born of desperation and knocked the gun out of the waiter's hand. It flew over the balcony and hit the warehouse floor with a ring of metal on concrete.

The waiter didn't bemoan the loss of the gun, but immediately took advantage of the fact that he had a lot more size than Luke. He drew a pocket knife from his pants pocket. In a trice, the man had Luke pinned on his back with the blade pressed to his throat. Luke got a full look into the blood-shot gray eyes and winced as the sharp steel nicked his skin.

"You stupid cop! I *hate* you and all other police in the world!" The waiter's breath smelled of alcohol and venom dripped from his words. "If you'd just searched her better, if you'd just sent her to the hospital *like I asked you to*, she'd still be alive. I didn't think I'd ever get this chance, but when I saw it, I had to act. I wanted to kill someone you love, see how *you* like it, but I think you'll do just fine."

"I didn't kill her, Morris!" Luke hissed. "She did it to herself!" He braced himself and desperately shoved upward with all of his might to get the waiter off of him, knife or no.

Suddenly, a whistling sound came from behind Morris. Then the waiter flew to the side by the force of the length of metal pipe slamming into his ear. His eyes rolled up into his head and the knife clattered from his hand as he slumped to the floor of the balcony.

Luke sat up slowly. Kyla, who had collapsed to her knees on the other side of the old man, blinked at him. The pipe hung loosely in her hand, her hair and clothes disheveled and her glasses missing. Her eyes looked like saucers with fright, but she didn't appear to be hurt. Luke crawled around the unconscious waiter, who he could see was still breathing, and pulled her into his arms.

"Are you alright?" he whispered into her hair.

"I... I just nearly died!" she stated with a note of hysteria in her voice. She took a deep breath. "But... I'm okay," she replied shakily, pressing against him.

Her pretty green eyes welled with tears, but Luke breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that she was unhurt. "Wanna try again next Friday? Pick you up at seven?" he asked jokingly to cheer her up.

Kyla gave a high-pitched laugh as she did her best to wipe her eyes. "Sure. Just... be sure to bring a gun this time."

Who, Me?
By Linney Holley

Me,huh? First person: I am selfish and self-centered to the max as most human beings are, but working on thinking of others before I speak out or act. I examine my motives for doing things first to see if they are worthwhile or harmful to others. Why am I more considerate today you may ask? Because of my horrid past I created and lived for almost 30 years. It was full of manipulating and lying to get what I wanted for me. Misery loves company and that's a practiced truth in my past and what I then viewed in life. So what do you want to know? Hmmm. I would think usually the obvious good stuff so you will like me, but not so today. Today is based on honesty and feelings.

I am actually very timid and shy but hide it well behind a facade of bubbling gab. Insecurities rule my world, but you'll see this portrayed as a cover of friendliness. Isolating feels safe, but the loneliness draws me out into society and all its risks anyway. Vulnerable and afraid is who I am; I wish others could see that but then they could too easily take advantage of me. So I hide, like a turtle in his shell, only emerging in masks of great deceit to fool you with the hope that you might like me without my getting hurt.

Sometimes I may even remove my mask and begin to let you behind my stone walls so tall, to begin and let you see the real me, but I'll only let you get so close before I "shoo" you away to rejoin the millions of others that simply exist in a world that for me is so forlorn. Who am I? Just a scared little rabbit hiding in my hole hoping it will soon be safe enough to come out and search for food and some companionship. Maybe someday therapy will help and I'll find my inner courage to merge from my shell once and for all, and finally learn about the world and find a life to call my own. Until then, this is me; alone in my own little world, timid, shy, and scared.