Conjur\textsuperscript{R}ings

12\textsuperscript{th} Annual Literary Magazine
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To call or
bring to mind.
To Evoke
To imagine
To Picture

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Tom Mengwasser
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>STLCOP Syndrome</td>
<td>Tom Mengwasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Everyday I Sink Deeper Into This</td>
<td>Jenna Brinkman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ADDICTED</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>To My Wife</td>
<td>Tom Mengwasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sam the Dog</td>
<td>Lindsey Joyce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Limerick</td>
<td>Krista Crump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>OTC Limericks</td>
<td>Jenna Brinkman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Die</td>
<td>Tom Mengwasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Silence</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Spring Morning</td>
<td>Macey Murphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Seasons</td>
<td>Stephanie Pieszchalski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Untitled Poem</td>
<td>Jennifer Southern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Inside Looking Out</td>
<td>Jenna Brinkman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sestina</td>
<td>Brian Morris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Win or Lose?</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I Don’t Know</td>
<td>Erica Tenholder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Roommates</td>
<td>Macey Murphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tribute to the Fab Five</td>
<td>Krista Crump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Steel</td>
<td>Matt Korobey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Failure- When Your Best Just Isn’t Good Enough</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dramatic Monologue</td>
<td>Krista Crump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>List Poem</td>
<td>Macey Murphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Choose LIFE</td>
<td>Tom Mengwasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Light</td>
<td>Roya Rezaie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Formula</td>
<td>Krista Crump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Countdown</td>
<td>Allison Harvey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The MI of Love</td>
<td>Tom Mengwasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>She’s So Perfect</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The Beginning</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>View</td>
<td>Roya Rezaie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Fall Down</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Longing For Your Love</td>
<td>Tom Mengwasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>Bob Nguyen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Town Festival</td>
<td>Krista Crump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Recipe/Halloween</td>
<td>Macey Murphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The Thoughts</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Higher Ground</td>
<td>Tom Mengwasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Misunderstood</td>
<td>Tom Mengwasser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Haiku</td>
<td>Krista Crump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Beautiful Creation</td>
<td>Krista Crump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAGE</td>
<td>TITLE</td>
<td>AUTHOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Haiku Couplet</td>
<td>Melissa O’Neill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Haiku</td>
<td>Frankie Hamlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Haiku</td>
<td>Matt Korobey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Haiku 17</td>
<td>Joe DeMattei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Strike</td>
<td>Lindsey Joyce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Haikus</td>
<td>Jennifer Southern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Mirror Me</td>
<td>Allison Harvey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I’m So Scared</td>
<td>Brandon Eldridge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Snowflake</td>
<td>Erica Russell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Stars</td>
<td>Lindsey Joyce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Color Wheel</td>
<td>Allison Harvey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Allegro</td>
<td>McKenna Mezera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>The Inheritance</td>
<td>Jenna Brinkman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>The Extravagant Ring</td>
<td>Melissa O’Neill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Ice</td>
<td>Jenna Brinkman, Joseph DeMattei, Melissa O’Neill, Stephanie Pieszchalski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Glasses</td>
<td>Allison Harvey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>Stephanie Pieszchalski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Family Story</td>
<td>Allison Harvey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Untitled Story</td>
<td>Nick Bruggeman, Joe Buchanan, Christina Curtis, Brian Morris, Ethan Wilson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>American Idols</td>
<td>Kendrick Warna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Untitled Story</td>
<td>Schuyler Gerard, Allison Harvey, Eboni Jones, Rene Thomas, Bianca Vance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>Underpants Gnomes</td>
<td>Joe DeMattei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>Dead?</td>
<td>Jenna Brinkman, Joseph DeMattei, Melissa O’Neill, Stephani Pieszchalski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>The Missing Sorceress</td>
<td>Christina Curtis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Tilt</td>
<td>Shannon Gergen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Stacey Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>Sestina</td>
<td>Erica Tenholder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>Uncertain</td>
<td>Alan Seaton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>The Call</td>
<td>Erica Tenholder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>Halloween</td>
<td>Stacey Phillips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>Brian Morris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>Winter’s Great Mistake</td>
<td>Erica Tenholder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>Haiku</td>
<td>Stacey Phillips</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STLCOP SYNDROME

Sitting here at my window I wonder: am I alone?
Am I truly unique or are there others,
Others who ponder their uniqueness, thus making us less unique?
Then I look out the window,
Extending my wonderment to the man across the street.
Is he alone? Does he know why, why I am here?
Does he know why he is here?
Shit, does he know anything?
I feel like I have much to contribute;
However, it will have to wait, probably die;
The water in this bath has just covered me;
People come with buckets, but not to help, only to add more;
All I want is someone to pull the plug, so I can breathe again.
Why would it matter? Does it? Does anything?

*Tom Mengwasser*

Everyday I Sink Deeper Into this City

Everyday I sink deeper into this city,
Parkview Place has stolen my identity;
I’ve forgotten the meaning of sociability,
And miss the feeling of tranquility.

As matured flowers blow in the wind,
I wonder when new weeds will grow;
Complexity is the word of the day,
Achieved by giving simplicity away.

My ambitions have become mere traditions,
My soul popped out of a mold;
Follow me little sheep, I’ll show you the way,
Deeper and deeper we go everyday.

*Jenna Brinkman*
ADDICTED

She’s like a drug; I can’t get enough;
Like a smoker holding a cigarette, taking another puff;
I’m addicted to her smell, like roses in the breeze;
I could be with her forever with very simple ease;
I just can’t get enough.

I’d drive two lonely hours at the crack of early dawn
To be with her at dinnertime, my own pleasures all foregone.
Spending the day in her presence,
Drawing in from her very essence;
I just can’t get enough.

It’s like a beautiful mess that I’m in;
All I want to do is run my fingers on her skin;
I want to hold her in my arms, and ease her fears;
I can’t believe it, I haven’t been so crushed in years.
I just can’t get enough.

Will our addiction last? Only time will tell;
I’ll use my time wisely and live my life well;
For now it’s back to point one, the start, the beginning;
So I’ll sit back, live it up, and pray there is no ending;
I just can’t get enough.

Brandon Eldridge

To My Wife

The sun could shine with all its might;
It would still not equal the brightness you’ve shone forth.

Nature with all of its greatness,
Could not dare to match your beauty.

The calmness and serenity felt after the rain,
Hold no worth when my heart is near yours.

Nullified is the sweet fragrance of the most beautiful red rose,
When your precious scent is drifting on the air.

I long to feel thee next to me,
Soon, very soon, my dear that day will be.

Tom Mengwasser
Sam the Dog

There once was a dog named Sam,
Who ate everything in the land;
He ate chocolate, beans, and peas,
Carrots, cheese, and greens,
But hated the sight of ham.

Lindsey Joyce

Limerick

I'm supposed to be writing a limerick,
But it's hard to find words that stick
To the rhyme scheme;
I think I could scream;
It is not easy to write in anapestic.

Krista Crump

OTC Limericks

Loratadine is fine with me,
As long as it cures my sneeze;
But more flowers bloom,
And I know I'm doomed.
Someone pass me a tissue please.

O Die

I close my eyes and try to sleep,
But something wakes me, just a peep;
I toss and turn
Calories I burn
Melatonin my friend, put me in deep.

Jenna Brinkman

The Silence

Silence can sometimes become so loud it deafens;
It can become the foe of one and the friend of another,
Losing the privilege of occasional silence can whither away the biggest of all men;
Even the most solitary people require silence to think clearly;
Never has there been a person who hated silence;
Can you remember your first request for silence;
Even now, you are still hearing it...

Brandon Eldridge

Limerick

Die

When I go to get my lunch,
I start to have a funny hunch;
The meat is queer
And soon I fear
I'll be chugging Pepto a bunch.
Spring Morning

I could smell the dew on the green grass as I walked outside;
I could see the warms rays of sun.
I could hear the wind as I felt the leaves shake.

Macey Murphy

The Seasons

It seems like I can never decide what is my favorite season;
Flowers blooming in the spring,
The warming sun in the summer,
The trees have beautiful colors in the fall,
Snow falls from the heavens in the winter;
How can I pick just one?

Which of these has the most wonderful characteristics for a season?
Crisp cold air comes with the winter
But is followed by the refreshing air of spring
And is preceded by the dampening air of the fall,
But how does the winter compare to the summer?

The warm, school-free days of summer
Are usually enjoyed by everyone;
There are no leaves or snowflakes falling in this warmest season;
Around every corner you can see children springing into a pool; you would never see this in the winter.

But then there are the holidays that come during the winter;
There aren’t as many big holidays during the summer;
Instead of into a pool, the children are now springing to open a gift from a special someone;
Winter can be a very joyous and entertaining season,
But I can’t forget about the fall.

There are so many great things in the fall,
Even though some things from the fall can run into the winter,
Such as the chilling airs and football season;
The cool fall air provides relief after a long hot summer;
The beautiful colors in the fall are also wondrous to me. But how do these colors compare to those of the spring?
Colorful flowers and green trees come to mind about the spring;
Due to all of the rainfall
That comes in the springtime these plants can be enjoyed by everyone;
You can thaw out from the icy winter
And prepare for the hot days of summer;
How could I ever pick just one season?

There are the two extremes of summer and winter;
Out of the four, spring seems to be the wettest one
I suppose if I had to pick, fall would be my favorite season.

Stephanie Pieszchalski

Untitled Poem

When the clock on the wall rang one,
The couple went to
See the show by Bill Guthrey;
On a day in nineteen thirty-three,
Their son Tom saw his day one,
Then on the same day next year he got a tooth;
When their son turned twenty-two,
On day three
Of the year, he married the perfect one.

Jennifer Southern

Inside Looking Out

The mirrored windows of my soul are owned.
   The chocolate covered strawberries know my pane.
   Neons, Bricks, Flags, Baby I’m lost again...
Piles beyond my depth, I fall and never come back.
White coats, black fingers, sunglasses, and poodles.
My left side is killing my right.
Little joy in my pain...

Jenna Brinkman
Sestina

I got ready to go to the party;
I would meet the guys soon,
Up behind the high school;
We'll go get some beer
And meet the ladies with-
Out any further delays, I hope.

Oh, how I hope
That I will have fun at the party
With
All of my friends and that it doesn't end soon,
Because I want to drink lots of beer
And never go back to school.

Oh, how I hate school
And hope
To never go back, but I want to drink beer
And party
Without worrying about the test coming up soon
And what I will do with

The rest of my life with
No education from an accredited school,
And how I will soon
Lose all hope
Of ever attending a college party
With free keg beer.

I will soon be in AA meetings if I keep drinking beer,
Sitting at the meetings with
A bunch of alcoholics who like to party
And received a GED from the local high school;
All of them with hope
Of recovering soon.

The party is almost over and I come back to reality soon
When I sober up from the beer
And regain hope
Of graduating high school with
Plans of attending a school
Of higher learning, where all I focus on is the next party.
At college I hope to go on dates with
Hot chicks to all the beer chugging parties,
But that will all come soon enough after high school.

Brian Morris

Win or Lose?

Swinging a bat, catching a fly,
Both seem rather simple to an untrained eye;
Some will work for years for a shot in the big game,
A lot of hard work snubbed is more than a cryin’ shame;
With character so strong it’s harder to get licked,
Than get back in the long line and hope to get picked;
One must be defiant and give it their all,
To hope to one day get the chance to swing or catch the ball;
When your time comes I hope you succeed,
To show all who snubbed you, you were a flower in the weeds;
So pick up your bat and give it a hack,
Cause time on the pine is time you can’t get back.

Brandon Eldridge

I Don’t Know

Where are you going?
-I don’t know.
When are you coming home?
-I don’t know.
Who’s going with you?
-I don’t know.
Well, who was that on the phone?
-I don’t know.

What are you going to do?
-I don’t know.
Why don’t you stay home tonight?
-I don’t know.
Who’s going to be at the party?
-I don’t know.
Her parents are home, right?
-I don’t know.

-Daddy, I’m in trouble now. Can you come help?

Will his answer be:
“T don’t know?”

Erica Tenholder
Roommates

Stacey's hair is blonde and her eyes are blue.
Where some people say "why," she says "how's come?"
She owns a red car, but wants one that's new.
When she cooks food, she is sure to make me some.

Macey's hair is blonde and her eyes are brown.
Being a clutz, she'll trip over anything.
When looking for her, don't look up, look down.
She can't be woken with a simple ding!

Cara's hair and eyes are both very dark.
She is sometimes quiet, and very smart.
On her pens she'll leave her own special mark.
Trips for Diet Coke to the mini mart.

These girls, once strangers, now live together.
They each know they will be friends forever.

Macey Murphy

Tribute to the Fab Five

They call us "Trouble" with a capital "T"
And we just laugh, because we find it rather funny.

Where there is one, you will most likely find another.
And the leader of our pack is known to some as "Mother".

Our inside secrets set our friendship apart from the rest
And if you decide to mess with one, the remaining four will protest.

We've seen each other laugh and we've seen each other cry
We've seen each other through the stress that was caused by school or some guy.

Although some call us "Trouble" we prefer the" Fab Five,"
And no matter where our journey's lead, our friendship will remain alive.

Krista Crump
Steel

Back in the corner where the big men roam,
The warrior is silent, in his mind alone;
Steel trees around to torture and tease,
Enough weight on the bar to crush Hercules;
He approaches the rack through a haze of chalk,
His mind is set, no one dares to talk;
Broad shoulders stretch, wings of an eagle;
In this place no one else, and no, no equal;
Explosions surround, painful pleas;
Men test their desire and the strength of their knees.

The moment is now. Doubt sets in......
Am I strong enough?
How can I do this?
Is this safe?

Adrenaline pumps, muscles squeeze;
A fire, this rage, is all he sees.

1...2...3......

Like a shuttle he slowly rises;
The bar bends with weights of different sizes;
The giant exhales and he slowly drops,
When his legs are parallel he finally stops;
Fibers tear, tendons shift,
With a thunderous roar he begins to lift;
Thighs like redwoods, veins like snakes,
A horror film made from the faces he makes;
Time drags slowly, the load now bearable,
Inches creep past as the top now obtainable;
One more push and a burst to the finish....

The warrior rests, a job complete,
With himself daily he dares to compete;
The envelope is bent each and every day,
His desire for greatness is tested this way.

Another battle with gravity is about to begin;
Is this you? Do you fit in?

Matt Korobey
Failure - When Your Best Just Isn't Good Enough

It's nearing the end of the game, and I'm up to bat;  
I've sweat pouring down from my brow to my chin;  
Here comes the pitch, and then there's a clamorous crack;  
It appears that the Dawgs will get the dramatic win.

We've overtaken the Indians and spoon-fed them district defeat;  
15 seconds later the ball is still in the air;  
Looks like their cocky words they will finally get to eat;  
It's awfully close to the line; the Dawgs hope it stays fair!

Along comes a breeze that blows the ball foul;  
Then the ump yells, "STRIKE TWO" so I take aim for another hack,  
And now it's time for a line drive, so I give the pitcher a scary scowl;  
I rare back and swing like a mirror image of Big Mac.

Much like the Mac did at the pinnacle of his career,  
I whiffed at strike three and landed on my rear.

Brandon Eldridge

Dramatic Monologue

Oh, so you think this is easy.  
I just go around yelling "Cold beer."  
Yeah, I could see how you would think it's a know-nothing job.  
You sit in your box seat and look down upon me, but have you ever thought I like what I do?  
Sure, the hazard of the job includes vocal strain, but at least I do not have to worry about choking in my stuffy, button-collar tailor suit.  
My work atmosphere is far superior to yours, if you ask for my opinion.

And you, I see you waiving your hand.  
There's no need to fall from your seat.  
I'll serve you in a minute.  
What, you have a problem with me?

Okay, Mr. Armani.  
Why don't you just sit back, enjoy the game, and leave the "beer"stuff to me.

Krista Crump
List Poem

She wakes up at 5:30 in the morning,
    Brushes her teeth
    Takes a shower
    Puts on jeans and a sweater
    And does her hair
She packs her book bag for the day, which includes her
    Organic notes
    Anatomy binder
    IPP book
    Cultural Heritage folder
    And bottled water
She drives to school and sees many things
    The restaurants waiting to open
    The homeless man at the bus stop
    And the morning traffic
She goes to classes all day and heads for home feeling
    Lonely
    Hopeless
    Tired
    And stupid.
She finishes her day with her daily routine
    Eating dinner
    Watching a little TV
    Doing homework for the rest of the night
She lays in bed
    Feeling exhausted
    Overwhelmed
    And thinks of the day to come

Macey Murphy

Choose LIFE

Please remove the dagger from my chest;
The prolonged pain is too intense;
I would rather bleed to death than deal with it any longer;
The hope exists that possibly upon removal the wound will heal;
However, the longer it persists, the more I doubt it;
You have to withdraw your weapon before all hope is gone;
If you choose death for me, please make it swift;
If you choose life, please do it with extreme haste.

Tom Mengwasser
Light

It's so dark,
Where's the light?
Behind the dark clouds
Of the midnight sky
Lies the moon;
It's soft glow like a rose,
Tender and fragile,
Hidden beneath the darkness;
Wait for the night;
It will come when you least expect it
And the surprise you feel is
So wonderful;
Open your heart and you'll see it;
The hidden beauty that lies inside.

Roya Rezaie

Countdown

TEN times the love
NINE not with me
EIGHT o'clock sharp
SEVEN hundred three
SIX pack of beer
FIVE times I call
FOUR children fear
THREE in the chamber
TWO eyes on the man
ONE pull of the trigger
ZERO snags in the plan

Allison Harvey

Formula

The mall today is partly cloudy
With a fifty percent chance of sales;
The tax rate is rising
And the crowd is leveling off
To the low seventies;
Expect high crowds again tomorrow
With clearance prices causing the
Average shopper to break into a smile.

Krista Crump

The MI of Love

My heart is hurt;
This day has forsaken me;
All the toil and labor produces
nothing;
My heart hurts;
I see their joy,
Yet I have none and am not allowed
any;
I know of your love,
But it is felt not of late;
My heart will hurt
Until your deep brown eyes are
opened,
My love you will never know;
I constantly give,
But what I have is futile;
Why, my dear, why should I try?

Tom Mengwasser
She’s So Perfect

How many times must I let her know?
How many times should I have to show?
That she’s so perfect; She’s so perfect;
How much longer until we are together?
Being with her makes me float like a feather;
For she’s so perfect; She’s so perfect;
She treats me like a king, and she is my queen;
But underneath it all I’m still too mean.
I take her for granted and screw it all up;
A weekend apart and I’ve emptied my cup;
I call up her heart for I need a fill;
My drink is her love, and for that I would kill,
Because she’s so perfect; So simply perfect;
I’ve done my best, yet her heart I test;
I’ve already confessed she’s not like the rest;
She’s so perfect; So perfectly perfect;
For another chance I pray that we may stay,
Because together we’re perfect; So irresistibly perfect.

Brandon Eldridge

The Beginning

It started with hello; it was a simple little word;
Now the ball is rolling, my world is completely blurred.
We’ve started something marvelous; the journey has begun;
I foresee complete happiness for both of us in the longer run;
We promise we will visit, and e-mail every night;
The connection we have made is burning very bright;
Our spark started faintly, like a vague and weary flicker;
I see that she’s near perfect, now the flame grows even thicker;
Time is on our side; it’s written in the stars;
The next chapter’s being penned in a story that is ours.

Brandon Eldridge
View

It looks so peaceful from far away;
A raving beauty you might say,
But when you get close,
You'll see the truth.
Nothing's the same, the way it should look;
It might be better or maybe worse,
But you'll never know till you get close;
And if you choose to take the chance,
Depending on the way you glance,
You'll know the answer, but don't expect a lot;
Disappointment is always taken hard;
It takes courage to face the truth;
But again it depends on how you look
Into the near life that makes you you.

Roya Rezaie

FallDown

Hey girl, you're looking kinda down,
    I guess it's me again, turnin' your life around.
And you just soak up all the pain,
    While my words fall like hell and stormy rain.

You know I never meant to be,
    The one who's leanin' on, instead of you on me.

That just shows me what I've found,
    Someone who's gonna hold me up no matter, how far, I fall down.

Hurts so much to see you go,
    We both said some things that we never had before.

And you came back again,
    We can't be lovers, but we sure are real good friends.

I bet you never thought I'd lead,
    Standin' up and lettin' you lean down on me.

Guess it all comes back around,
    So don't you ever worry, cause I'll catch you, no matter how far you fall down.

Brandon Eldridge
Longing For Your Love

My heart is frail my dear,
Each raindrop only brings forth another tear;
The agony I feel only starts the downward spiral;
Sitting here I may until I receive my crown;
All the minutes separated develop into hours of longing;
Time wasted not being in those precious arms;
My soul yearns for the comfort of yours;
Each day I am here seems to only build that sensation;
The day our hearts beat side by side;
Yes, that is the light at the end of this dark chasm;
Not a physical chasm, but one my soul experiences when I am gone.

That day, oh precious day,
Reaching your light may be the death of me, moreover the life of me;
Remember, my heart is frail my dear.

Tom Mengwasser

Lost

The truth
Is hard to find.
No one knows
Where it hides.

So precious and pure,
This could be the cure.

Dig and search.
But the truth is,
No one knows
Where it lurks.

Bob Nguyen
Town Festival

The town festival comes but once a year;
The cobblestone streets fill with laughter and cheer;
Golden-haired tots skip merrily by
Carrying bright red balloons that consume the azure sky.
As the kettle corn pops and the hot dogs sizzle,
The children drink their Cokes and watch the bubbles fizzle.

The festival ends with a spectacular sight;
Bursts of red and blue fill the sky on this night;
Like a rocket the screaming crackers go off with a blast
Making the children’s hearts beat swift and fast;
Out of the darkness comes light bright and clear
To the children’s dismay the festival only comes once a year!

Krista Crump

Recipe/ Halloween

Take two children.
Cover them in costumes until scary.
Send one parent out with them for two hours.
Hand out one bowl of candy to other children.

Macey Murphy

The Thoughts

The thoughts visit daily; the memory's a year old;
Left to remember the time with pictures and our lives to unfold;
I long to be with her, merely touch her once again;
Now she's coming to visit, portraying a dear friend;
I must forsake another to find my true love;
I'm ready for her return like my sweet turtledove;
Lost in the afterthoughts of the good time and pain;
It's true love coming full circle, speeding ahead like a train;
I've broken one that I cared for to be with my heart;
Now that she's here, Dear God never let us part.

Brandon Eldridge
Higher Ground

Friends should be a set of stairs to take you higher;
Not one to be pushed down continually,
Over and over until our relationship bleeds;
These are my own and they long to be yours;
Take the first step towards higher ground;
I will not throw you down them like you have me;
They will lift you, especially when that is all you have left-
Friends that will lift you towards higher ground.

*Tom Mengwasser*

Misunderstood

Misunderstand me once more;
That’s all I ask, for a little more confusion.

Misunderstand me once more;
Turn away, turn me off in your mind.

Misunderstand me once more;
It’s not just you, it’s Her.

Misunderstand me once more;
Why do I speak, it is all wrong.

Misunderstand me, please that is all I ask –
Simply misunderstand me once more.

*Tom Mengwasser*
Haiku

The laptop crashes;
I lose my research paper;
I begin to cry.

*Krista Crump*

Haiku Couplet

Racing down the road
Lights flashing in my rear view
Quickly catching me

Waiting on the side
Officer what have I done
Ninety is not fast

*Melissa O’Neill*

Haiku

A father leaves home
A family is broken
A child grows alone

*Matt Korobey*

Strike

The pins crash loudly
The bowler flashes a smile
Another good strike

*Lindsey Joyce*

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Beautiful Creation

The swan in the pond
Dips its head in the water
A wonder to see.

*Krista Crump*

Haiku

So what next success
Or shall fear overcome us
Living faith I am

*Frankie Hamlin*

Haiku 17

Irish immigrants
Watch out for the gnomes, they will
Steal your underpants.

*Joe DeMattei*

Haikus

The breeze on my face
Grass growing under my feet
These feelings are sweet

The sweet Spring grows near
The Winter days are closing
Birds will sing their songs

The Winter snowfall
Children playing with snowmen
Christmas time is near.

*Jennifer Southern*
mirror me

two similar faces separated by glass
two lives separated by evil
one life lost in the past
one life clings to be legal

two curtains part
two minutes to twelve
one face will see light
one face will see hell

two arms strapped to metal
two feet bound by hide
one soul in the balance
one innocent inside

two alternate roads
too different to name
one drop of blood
one match of the same

two eyes slowly close
two eyes remain gray
one sigh of relief
one confounded day

Allison Harvey
I'm So Scared

I lie awake at night sometimes because I'm too scared to go to sleep. I'm scared to wake up to the reality that is my life. I'm scared to go to work because I fear I might do something or say something to get myself fired or in trouble. I'm scared to go to class because I might not understand what the teacher is saying. I'm scared to ask a question because I might be seen as stupid for not understanding. I'm scared of not passing the test and making the grade. I'm scared of failure. I'm scared of having my whole life ahead of me and not having a college education behind me. I'm scared that I'm going to fail out of school. I'm scared I'm going to be 21 years old and have half an education because the second half was too much for me to handle. I'm scared of only having this half education and being nearly fifty thousand dollars in debt with no clear path in sight. I'm scared of dying. I'm scared of dying and not knowing what's going to happen afterwards. I'm scared of the fact that I really do not know whether there is a Heaven and a Hell. I'm scared of the fact that I do not have a personal relationship with an entity that is supposedly greater than anything on this planet. I'm scared that everyone else has this relationship and when they find out I do not have it, I will be ostracized. I'm scared that this fact disappoints my mother. I'm scared that one day I might lose everything that means something. I'm scared that someday I'm going to wake up and come to the realization that mommey is no longer there. I'm scared that the pain will eventually outweigh the pleasure of most of the things I do. I'm scared that I'm growing apart from my friends. I'm scared that the last summer is going to be the best summer of my life. I'm scared that someday I might end up like my father. I'm scared that someday I might not end up like my father. I'm scared that I won't be able to provide for my family as my father has for mine. I'm scared that I will never be able to meet the goals I have set for myself. I'm scared that I will never be able to meet the goals others have set for me. I'm scared that someday I'm going to wake up and having nothing to show for the life I've lived. I'm scared that someday the best I can do won't be good enough to do what needs to be done. I'm scared that someday I'm going to hurt someone emotionally. I'm scared that someday I'm going to hurt someone physically. I'm scared that they are going to be the same person. I'm scared that someday I'm going to get so enraged at someone that I'm going to do something that I will regret for the rest of my life. I'm scared that someday I'm going to hurt someone because of the lifestyle I want to live. I'm scared that I'm never going to get to do the things I truly love. I'm scared that someday I'm going to wake up and be too old to play baseball. I'm scared that someday I'm going to not have the love for the game that I once had. I'm scared that I've peaked in what I can accomplish in athletics. I'm scared that the pains in my chest may be more than a simple pulled muscle. I'm scared I'm going to screw things up for everybody because of my own wishes and desires. I'm scared that people don't like me. I'm scared that when I want to get close to somebody all I can do is push them away. I'm scared that someone's going to get close to me and see me for what I am. I'm scared that I don't know what that is. I'm scared that my courage won't always outweigh my fears. I'm scared that my courage will outweigh my fears when it shouldn't. I'm scared that someday I'm going to get in trouble and there will be no one there to lean on for support. I'm scared that someday I'm going to get in trouble and there will be no going back. I'm scared that someday I'm going have to acknowledge my faults and make an attempt to correct them. I'm scared that this
attempt is going to change me more than I want to be changed. I’m scared that someday I’m going to overstep my bounds. I’m scared that I’m stretching myself too thinly. I’m scared that I’m going to find the girl who I am destined to be with but let her slip through my fingers because of my lust for other things. I’m scared that losing this one will hurt me to the core of my being. I’m scared that this pain will be so great I won’t be able to live through it. I’m scared that there will be nothing to do to fix that situation. I’m scared that no one will hear me. I’m scared that I’m stressed and I don’t realize it. I’m scared that I’m stressed and things are only going to get worse. I’m scared that when things get worse I’m only going to look for consolation in the bottom of a bottle. I’m scared that the answers to my problems aren’t going to be there. I’m scared that I’m whirling into spiraling descent only to hit rock bottom before I can make my way back up. I’m scared that I won’t be able to mend the bonds I’ve broken in the past. I’m scared that I’ve hurt someone in the past and it’s going to come back to me in the end. I’m scared that I want to be alone more than I want to be around people. I’m scared that I’m going to disappoint more people in life than I’m going to please. I’m scared that if I can’t be with the one I love that I won’t be able to love the one I’m with. I’m scared that I can’t be happy with just one love. I’m scared of forgetting. I’m scared of forgetting answers to questions, people’s birthdays, memories, experiences that should be remembered, and the names and faces of the people who have shaped my life. I’m scared that I’m too immature. I’m scared that I’m too rough. I’m scared that sometimes I’d rather fight than lie around and be lazy. I’m scared that releasing aggression in accepted ways won’t be good enough so I’m going to have to resort to unacceptable ways. I’m scared that I can’t sleep. I’m scared that I can’t sleep because I’m too scared to sleep. I’m scared that I’m going to hurt my mother. I’m scared that I’ve hurt my mother. I’m scared that no matter what I do this hurt cannot be mended. I’m scared that I’m too quick to judge. I’m scared that I’m too slow to forgive. I’m scared that I assign blame too easily. I’m scared that I punish too quickly and harshly. I’m scared that someday I’m going to be a father. I’m scared that it may be sooner than later. I’m scared that I’m not going to be able to do half the job for my kids as was done for me. I’m scared that I’m going to be independently responsible for teaching the ways of the world to another living, breathing soul. I’m scared that my past may ruin my future.

Brandon Eldridge
Snowflake

No two snowflakes are alike, they say. I found that to be true on this wintry day. As I watched the flakes fall from the heavens, I counted them; there were sixty-seven. One of the flakes landed on my nose, and it gave me chills because it was oh so cold, but when I turned my face from the heavens to the ground I realized that not one single snowflake could be found!

Erica Russell

Stars

A shining light shines over us, wait and pray for it to come true. A shining light shows so brightly in the velvet sky. We see

Lindsey Joyce
The Inheritance
By Jenna Brinkman

In the hustle and bustle of everyday life in New York City, there is one place that is always guaranteed silence: the very last stack of books of NYU’s student library. Here too, you are also guaranteed to find Jesse Bowman. Jesse is a young attractive man, with dark chocolate brown hair, grown out till it curls around his ears, and warm brown eyes. He could warm an igloo with his smile and power a blender with his charm. Not your typical Library Science major. Jesse had been in college for six years, and dipped his toes in several different majors. When he first signed on at NYU, he thought law was going to be his forte, but Jesse found it too self-destructive. After law he decided to join a few of his friends in glass blowing. Though Jesse loved the artistic freedom of the trade, he never actually showed any real talent. So finally, his advisor mentioned Library Science. Jesse didn’t even care anymore what he did as long as he had a degree soon. Thankfully, Library Science seemed to fit him. He enjoyed the peace of the library and looked forward to his graduation in May.

Jesse grew up in rural Georgia. He spent his childhood playing soccer and building forts with his friends. When he was old enough, he was sent to live with his Uncle Tom in the summer and work on his farm. The time he spent on the farm was some of the most important days of Jesse’s adolescent years. His uncle taught him everything about farming and had asked Jesse to stay and work on the farm. Though Jesse loved his uncle, he had to go; he had needed to see the world, but now longed for the simple life on the farm.

It was a particularly regular Monday afternoon when Jesse heard a knock on the door; through his peephole he could see the attractive mail lady he had been eyeing for some time. Opening the door with an air of confidence, Jesse began to lay it on thick. After about five minutes and three or four subtle pickup lines, Jesse returned inside his apartment with her name, phone number, and his registered letter, the only thing he was meant to receive. He shut the door feeling pretty good and examined the letter. It came from a small town law office not far from where he grew up. He had lost his uncle a few weeks earlier and was just now receiving word of his inheritance. Jesse expected to get something from Uncle Tom, maybe some money or a random nick-knack he’d admired over the years. Jesse slowly opened the letter and proceeded to read word for word, “To my nephew Jesse Bowman, I leave half my estate, under the condition he lives in Oakville, keeps the farm in its current condition, and shares the wealth and responsibility with one Derek Jansen.”

Jesse was so close to graduation, only three months left, but he found himself packing the very next day. Once again he was bailing out, but this time it felt right. Jesse arrived in Georgia less than a week after receiving the news of his inheritance.

Derek Jansen, your typical middle-aged man, lived in the suburbs with 2.5 children (two daughters, Laura 17 and Ashley 14, and their dog Meg), a two-car garage on a quiet street and a job behind a desk. Derek wasn’t always this dull. Growing up he was the star football player on the Oakville High football team. His skills and devotion to football paid off when he received a full ride to Georgia Tech. He spent his first two years in college messing around till he finally picked a major in business, with an
emphasis on management. Senior year he met a girl named Jamie, and she made him a happy man when she agreed to marry him later that year. The wedding was a huge event held on Thomas Frank’s farm. Tom Frank stood right next to Derek that day when the minister led Jamie and Derek to their I do’s. Derek grew up on the Frank farm, Tom more a father figure to his young neighbor than a friend. After a few years of marriage and living in the suburbs, Derek’s visits to the farm and helping during harvest season grew less and less frequent. Eventually, the only contact between Derek and Tom became the annual Christmas cards both of their wives signed, addressed and mailed to the other. Despite the space that came between the two men, they shared a special bond. Some would explain them as kindred spirits, but if you asked either man, they’d just agree the other was a fine man to know, no need to label what they had. Derek had been at Tom’s funeral, but the rest of his family did not attend. He sat alone in the back pew, embarrassed that he hadn’t been there the last 15 years, for harvest, long winters and especially when June, Tom’s wife, died a few months earlier.

Derek was surprised when he received a letter from Tom’s attorney explaining the inheritance and conditions under which it came. He thought only once about his decision to take over the farm, and after that day he knew it was his responsibility. Taking over the farm was by no means a financial burden. Thomas Frank had built an empire worth more than everything Derek had earned over the course of his entire life. Convincing Jamie and the girls to move to rural Georgia was the biggest obstacle Derek faced. After finally putting his foot down, and resigning from his job, he gave the girls one week to say their goodbyes, and off to Oakville Georgia, about four hours south of Atlanta, they went.

When Derek and the entire Jansen family, dog in tote, arrived at the farm, they were surprised to see things up and running. Derek and Jesse had not spoken about when they were going to arrive; as a matter of fact, they’d never spoken before at all. Jesse hadn’t started going to the farm until after Derek married and moved to the suburbs. Excitement came over Jesse at the sight of someone pulling up. Jesse assumed Derek would be along anytime soon. What Jesse had not thought about was Derek bringing a family.

Jesse introduced himself with a charming smile first directed to Laura then quickly to Derek. Derek introduced the girls then himself. With that out of the way, Jesse showed the Jansen family into the house. The Frank house is large, a plantation home from the civil war era. Even with five people living in the house, there is still an empty bedroom. Jesse, not expecting an entire family of teenage girls, had moved into the room on the second floor he used to stay in during his summers on the farm, leaving the master bedroom on the first floor, two other bedrooms on the second floor and the entire third floor one large room. Derek and Jamie took the first floor bedroom and started unloading their lives into their new home. Laura took the room next to Jesse’s and Ashley took the room on the third floor; she needed her independence.

By six o’clock, Jamie had dinner on the table; being a farmer’s wife fit her well. She set the table for five. Jesse gratefully accepted the invite; he had been living off T.V. dinners and ham sandwiches for quite some time. The Jansen family and their new friend told stories of their lives and laughed throughout the entire meal. With dinner over, coffee and desert served, Derek and Jesse retired to the den to start plans for their new
lives. Meanwhile, Jamie cleaned up dinner and the girls went to their rooms to complain about this new sleepy life they were forced to live.

The two men talked for hours; they told stories of their time on the farm, shared memories of Tom and came to agreements on how the farm would be run. The two men decided that they would both get up in the morning and go through the day the same way Tom had in the past. In the barn by six each morning, the two men would start the day by feeding all of the livestock. They continued the chores till noon, when Jamie would have lunch waiting for the men on the table. As soon as lunch was over, the two men were back out doors tending to various chores. Things went much like this everyday.

The Jansen family and Jesse grew close over the next few months. It was summertime now and the girls were out of school. Laura and Ashley found themselves overcome with boredom, so much that they had finally offered to help Jesse and their father. Jesse was taking a load of hogs to the market and asked Laura if she wanted to come along. Having nothing better to do, she decided to go; besides, she thought Jesse was cute, so it wasn’t a total waste of an afternoon.

Jesse and Laura got along well; they enjoyed the same music and movies. They always found something to talk about. Jesse didn’t mind spending time with her either. She was a beautiful girl, and honestly, most 24-year-old boys enjoy flirting with 17-year-old girls. The two didn’t return home until well past nine, and the rest of the family was already in bed. Jesse had enjoyed the day with Laura so much he didn’t want it to end; neither did Laura. Jesse casually mentioned perhaps she would like stay up and watch a movie together.

The two settled onto the couch and began to watch the movie, but neither one was concerned with what was on the screen. Jesse shifted positions on the couch and his foot touched Laura’s leg. She wondered if he had done this on purpose. Every little movement and breath became amplified; they both knew what they wanted, but both knew it would be frowned upon. The movie ended, the two of them were exhausted and decided to turn in for the night. They walked up the steps to the second floor together in silence. They were both contemplating a move, and hoping the other would have the guts to make it. They approached Laura’s door first; Jesse paused and told her goodnight. As he turned to walk away, Laura grabbed his hand and pulled gently, just enough to encourage him to lean in for their highly anticipated kiss. The moment was pure, but exhilarating. Laura, with a slight blush in her cheeks, smiled softly and went to bed. Jesse, dumbfounded by the event, strolled to bed with a sly smirk smeared across his face. This had by far been the most profitable trip to the hog market yet.

Jesse and Laura began to spend more and more time together. Jamie was happy to see the two getting along; Laura needed a friend. Derek thought very little of their time spent together and hadn’t thought twice about leaving the two alone. At night the two would turn in separately but wake up together, before everyone else, and sneak back to their respective rooms. The relationship went on like this until one afternoon Jesse and Laura found themselves alone on the farm. Derek and Jamie had gone to town to get feed and no one had seen Ashley all day. Jesse started to tease Laura; the way boys do when they are trying to flirt, and chasing her around the house. When he finally caught up with her in the living room, the two fell on the couch in giggles. Jesse stared into Laura’s eyes.
They had fallen in love over the last month. He pressed his lips against hers, prolonging the standard length of a kiss. He pulled away, and before opening his eyes said, “I love you,” to Laura. Upon the opening of his eyes, he realized they were no longer alone in the room. Derek and Jamie had returned sometime during their playful chase and neither one of them had noticed. Both of their stomachs dropped at the sight. Derek calmly asked Laura to leave the room. With no more than the protest of an eye roll she obeyed his request.

Being the timid man Derek was, the magnitude of his rage did not show. He explained to Jesse that he and Laura were not to see each other any longer. His behavior had been completely disrespectful and he was out of line. Laura, overhearing the entire conversation, spared no time in developing a response. Without even having time to respond to Jesse’s “I love you,” she pleaded with her mother, and explained that he had not taken advantage of her in any way and that they were in love. Neither Derek nor Jamie would listen. So that night, Laura decided that she was old enough to make her own decisions, packed a small bag of clothes, smashed her piggy bank, and left without a note to anyone.

Jesse was of course to blame for this event. While Derek and Jamie called family members and friends looking for Laura, Jesse left. He knew exactly where to find her. She had been talking about visiting an old friend in Atlanta. Before he left, he took Laura’s address book and looked up Marlo King. 2314 Peach Tree Lane was his destination, a sunny little house in the suburbs. Laura had been telling Jesse about the trouble Marlo was in with drugs; she had told him she wanted to get her help. When he knocked on the door, a little girl answered. She told him that Laura had indeed been there the night before, but wasn’t there now. When he asked the little girl if her parents were home, she said no, just her babysitter, and that her parents were at the hospital with Laura and Marlo. Jesse quickly tapped the babysitter for information and found out that Laura had over dosed the night before. Marlo, in fear of being found out and having a bad trip herself, didn’t know what to do when Laura started to puke up blood. They found her this morning in the bathtub.

Derek, Jamie and Ashley had already been notified and were on their way to the Atlanta by the time Jesse arrived at the hospital. Laura hadn’t made it through the morning. She had spent too much time in the tub before she was discovered. Since Jesse wasn’t family, he didn’t get to see her before she was sent her off for an autopsy. When Derek and Jamie arrived, Jesse was hysterical, apologized profusely and assured them he had no worldly idea this would have happened.

The four of them returned to Oakville as soon as Jamie was buried. She had grown up in Atlanta; she deserved to be buried there. Her funeral was packed with friends and family she had been close to growing up. Jesse’s heart was broke and he was shamed beyond belief. Jesse decided that working on the farm with Derek everyday would be impossible. So he gave his half to Derek, in an effort to fill some of the void that Laura’s absence created.

Once again, Jesse found his life without direction. College again, back to library science? Who knew what his life had in store. Despite all of the misdirection, one thing was for sure in Jesse’s heart: he loved Laura and would no longer feel empty.
The Extravagant Ring
By Melissa O’Neill

The exciting day was quickly approaching; John Carter was turning the big 50. His family wanted to do something special to celebrate. After much deliberation, they decided on a trip to New Orleans. The catch was they weren’t going to tell him. His wife, June, was in charge of making sure he didn’t have any other plans for the weekend. His son Mark rented the conversion van for the ride, and John’s sister Rose made the hotel reservations. They needed three rooms: one for John and June, one for their children, Mark, Chrissy, Brad and Mark’s girlfriend Becky, and one for John’s sister Rose, her husband Jack and their children Kelly and Brian.

Thursday night arrived and the family pulled up in the big van. Much to John’s bewilderment, they forced him into the van as they all yelled, “Happy Birthday! We’re going to New Orleans!” It was a long ten-hour trip, especially with ten people crammed in such a tiny space. They sang songs the whole way to pass the time. The family had many things planned for the weekend. They had to see the St. Louis Cemetery and the Pharmacy Museum. Since the two boys were not 21, the group could not frequent most of the popular drinking establishments. Instead, they went to restaurants that also served alcohol and, of course, walked the wild streets of New Orleans.

Their first location was Howl at the Moon, a kareoke bar on Bourbon Street that allowed minors. Becky immediately bonded with the family when she sang “Family Tradition” with the birthday boy. She didn’t stop there; she was soon singing “Hit me with your best shot” with Chrissy. She fit right in. The laughter went on for hours as everyone took their turn embarrassing themselves with the microphone. Soon they moved on to the mechanical bull, and one by one the boys were being thrown off.

The next day was more laid back as they wandered the streets of New Orleans. After numerous margaritas, Rose and June found an antique margarita machine in a shop window. Neither had ever seen such a magnificent diamond. It was worth $30,000 and was three carats. Since they both already had their rings, they called over Mark to show him the ring he should buy for his girlfriend Becky. The two ladies soon had Mark agreeing to buy an equivalent ring for Miss Becky if she rode the mechanical bull and stayed on for a full eight seconds.

The mischievous mothers immediately herded the group into Howl at the Moon. As Becky saddled up on the big bull, the whole crowd was rooting her on for her eight seconds of glory. Even Mark hadn’t lasted the entire eight seconds, but with the crowd behind her, Becky did. As she climbed out of the ring, she was bombarded with hugs. Her only response was, “If he has to buy me a ring that big, it will be 20 years before I get one.” With that, Rose quickly assured her there was a one-year stipulation on the agreement, since Mark had shook on the deal.

Though skeptical, Becky went along with the humorous joke. Little did she know how soon it would really come true. The next evening they all went to The Four Seasons for their final meal of the trip. As they waited for their entrees, Mark stood and said he had an
announcement to make. He grandly hit one knee and presented Becky with a ring made of three baby carrots in the shape of a diamond.

Ice

By Jenna Brinkman, Joseph DeMattei, Melissa O’Neill, Stephanie Pieszchalski

Six in the morning on a nasty, icy February day was a horrible time to arrive on campus. It was still dark; the sidewalks were not yet cleared; it was freezing; no one was around. What misery! Trying to find something decent to think about the day, Professor David Jorgenson sighed. “Well, I made the long commute safely. Granted I got up at 4:30 to do so, but leaving before rush hour traffic was imperative with roads like they were this morning.” Jorgenson was not about to admit to anyone that he was unsure of his own ability to handle his car on ice, but the ubiquitous “other guy” was his (and everyone else’s) scapegoat. And here he was. Two hours to get ready for his eight o’clock class.

The door to his office building wouldn’t open, so Dr. Jorgenson had to search for his I.D. card. This meant taking his coat off in the cold, and by this time he was in an even less pleasant mood. Finally in the building, he stopped by the reception area to check his mail and see if any of his students had placed any last minute papers in his box.

Using his I.D. card to buzz himself in, the light flashed, but the door wouldn’t budge. It didn’t feel as if it were stuck, but as if something was placed next to it. The tiny window slit didn’t reveal anything. No one else was yet around. So he decided to try the door behind the reception desk. It worked. He went in, turned on the light and stared. Lying next to the other door was a body—a human body—a lifeless human body. Dead? Asleep? Drunk? Who could it be?

Fearfully Dr. Jorgenson walked closer. Loudly he said, “Hey there.” No response. He nudged it with his foot. No response. Was that black stain on the carpet blood? Dr. Jorgenson was still shivering, but not with cold. He ran back to the reception area and phoned the campus security. Not wanting to appear stupid, he tried to explain the situation carefully and calmly.

“Yeah sure, I’ll send someone over as soon as I can,” the voice drawled back.

“Now!” screamed Dr. Jorgenson.

“Okay, okay, I’ll come.” The receiver clicked off, and Dr. Jorgenson tiptoed back to the door to glance (from a distance) at the still motionless body. The spot on the floor did appear to be getting larger—or was it his imagination? He stepped back into the reception area for just a moment. He just knew that the person was dead. He needed to calm himself and be able to think clearly before he did anything else. He was hoping that security would show up soon. While he was trying to calm down, his mind kept racing. What happened? Who was that lying there? He couldn’t really tell because the person was face down and his parka had the hood nearly covering his head. Dr. Jorgenson then decided he should go back into the mail room. He took one step into the room. To his surprise, the body had disappeared! Once inside he looked closer at the spots on the floor. This time he knew for sure that they had gotten much larger. But where was the body?
It looked as though something, or someone, had been dragged through the wet stains on the carpet. Lines from the liquid led out the other door. Who had taken the body? Then it hit him; he didn’t hear the other door open, and he was standing just outside the door by the reception area. There was no way the other door could have been opened from the outside. He knew this because the door wouldn’t budge earlier when he had tried it because the body was in front of the door. Did this mean the attacker was still in the room when he had found the body? Did the attacker see that he saw the body?

Dr. Jorgenson’s one simple fear of being with a dead body had changed to fear he himself might become a dead body. A security officer finally showed up. It had been what, 15 minutes. This campus was no bigger than a Wal-Mart parking lot. Dr. Jorgenson put his annoyance behind him and tried to calmly explain what had happened. The officer could see the stains and the trail of blood going out the door, but he seemed in no hurry to put Dr Jorgenson’s mind at ease. The actual police were called almost an hour after the body’s discovery. Dr. Jorgenson would be sure to bring this up at the next faculty meeting, but for now his major concern was still his own life.

The police took a statement from Dr. Jorgenson and assured him “justice would be done.” He rolled his eyes at the heartless trite remark and went to his first class.

The body was the buzz; there wasn’t a student who didn’t know the story by 8:05. Dr. Jorgenson needed peace of mind, so he cancelled his class by 8:10 and went to lock himself in his office. His secretary was late as usual and the other offices were empty, or at least he thought so.

The automatic coffee pot had a cup of coffee ready when he sat down at his desk. After taking a sip, he closed his eyes and put his head down to rest. Suddenly he was disturbed by his office door opening. “No, I’m not available now,” Dr. Jorgenson barked to who he thought was a student. Instead, when he brought his head up, he was looking eye to eye with the Dean of the College. “Oh, hey Simon; sorry I cancelled class. I couldn’t concentrate.”

“I understand, Jorgenson; a dead body is a pretty intense thing to see first thing in the morning,” Dean Simon replied. “You didn’t happen to see who the person was, did you?”

“I didn’t see his face; he was laying on his stomach. He was wearing a big cross country parka with the hood over the back of his head. I suspect it must have been one of our students. Who else would wear one of our jackets?”

“Perhaps, but we shouldn’t let that slip until we know for sure. As a matter of fact, perhaps you shouldn’t be able to say anything ever again.” The look the Dean gave Dr. Jorgenson sent chills down his back. The Dean closed the door, and now Jorgenson was fearing for his life. He knew without a doubt the Dean had done it. But how could he be sure? Did he see the Dean’s shoes? The killer had dragged the body off and left bloody footprints, so if the Dean had done it, his shoes would be bloody. Then Dr. Jorgenson remembered the Dean always wore red leather shoes. He wouldn’t have been able to tell if there was blood on them even if he had looked.

Dr. Jorgenson couldn’t stop thinking about the look the Dean gave him. Every time he closed his eyes to relax, he would hear the Dean’s final remark and see that look on his face. He went through with the rest of his classes to make sure he was alone as little as possible; this would give the Dean less opportunity to strike at him. Why had the Dean come out and said, “Perhaps you shouldn’t be able to say anything about it ever
again?” This didn’t make any sense. It made it apparent that the Dean had committed the murder. Why would the Dean make it so obvious? He would have been one of the last people questioned about it. No one would have ever suspected the Dean in this killing; had he not said anything, it most likely would have been assumed that someone mugged the student, took his ID card and murdered him in the mail room.

Did the Dean have ties with the police? Was it possible that he would never get in trouble for this murder? Dr. Jorgenson didn’t know what to do, so he called the police. He said he would come down to the station after his last class. He was very careful to make sure no one was around to hear the conversation. After his last class, he raced to the police station. He quickly told the officer about his conversation with the Dean. The officer just started laughing. “Ya mean to tell me that you think the Dean committed the murder and is now threatening you?”

Dr. Jorgenson quickly replied, “Yes, that’s exactly what I think. And I don’t appreciate you laughing at me.”

The officer took a few steps toward Dr. Jorgenson and said, “Ya mean my brother, the Dean of the college?”

Dr. Jorgenson gulped and he hastily tried to back out of the office. As he neared the door, a set of hands grabbed his shoulders. He jumped around to see Dean Simon inches from him. He started to scream only to have Officer Simon cover his mouth so tightly he passed out.

When Dr. Jorgenson awoke he was lying on a cot in the basement of the police department. To his surprise, he was still alive and wasn’t locked up or guarded. When he looked around, he saw Dean Simon and his brother locked up. As he tried to sort everything out, a jolly officer came bouncing down the stairs. “I see you’re awake.”

“Yes. What happened?”

“Well, I saw how quickly Officer Simon jumped to help you when you came in to the office, so I kept my eye on his office. When I saw the Dean sneaking around to the office I knew something was up. Then when I saw the Officer put his hands over your face, I took action. I snuck up behind the Dean and put him in cuffs. I had my gun drawn and had yelled for back up, so he wouldn’t try anything. After some investigation, we discovered the student’s body. She wasn’t quite dead, just locked in the Dean’s office closet. He had hit her over the head and she’d suffered a concussion, but will be fine. She’s in the hospital now for observation. It turns out the Dean was having an affair with her. She had been trying to end it, but he wouldn’t accept that. He’d been harassing her for weeks. She had threatened to tell everything if he wouldn’t leave her alone. That put him over the top and he lost it. He didn’t even know she wasn’t dead. You were lucky. It’s a good thing you decided to come to the station instead of telling the story over the phone. Who knows what might have happened if you’d been at school.”

Dr. Jorgenson let out a heavy sigh as he thanked the officer and thought back to that morning when all he’d been concerned with was making it to school safely over the ice.
Glasses

By Allison Harvey

Howard Smith was a plain man. He was as plain as his name. Growing up in the bustling city that never sleeps, it was easy for Howard to blend in. He was a man of average build with a thick salt and pepper beard. He seemed to own a wardrobe of one style with only mute colors. He did not want to stand out.

Howard was employed at a major hospital down the street from his one bedroom, shotgun apartment. He was given some “politically correct,” fancy name for his not so fancy job collecting trash. To most, this job would rank somewhere down below, but not for Howard. This paid the bills while once again allowing him to slip through life unnoticed.

His only human interaction came from people bossing him around in their time of need. As they barked their orders out, Howard would drop his head and work as fast as he could. He tried to avoid any eye contact through his pop bottle thick glasses. He worked mostly through the week, and sometimes on the weekend. Once in a while he would run into one of his only breathing companions. Well, at least he would call her his only friend. As far as what she thought, he would never know. She worked in the pharmacy, and she was the only one who ever asked him how he was doing. She was the only one who ever noticed him.

As Howard came close to wrapping up each day, he would eagerly check his watch. He wanted to make sure that he wasted no time in getting to his favorite place. It was his refuge. It was a place where he could immerse himself in the center of it all. He could be the most popular, he could be the hero, and he could be powerful. Lucky for Howard this place was right next to the hospital and a couple blocks down from his apartment.

Howard spent every waking moment at this place. The library offered Howard a chance to slip into another life. He floated in and out of imaginary places being swept through life with each turn of the page. His eyes danced from book to book protected by his only tool to happiness. His glasses were a key that unlocked any door before him. They had been there through thick and thin. They had protected him from a fourth grader's flying fist. They had been the punch line to most jokes. They had been only once to get fixed. They had been Howard’s savior, and they still were.

This day was like no other. Howard punched in and went straight to work. He followed his cart up and down from hallway to hallway. It was Saturday. Howard was on his way to the pharmacy when he felt a small butterfly in the pit of his stomach. Maybe his friend would be there today. As he poked around replacing trash can after trash can, he saw no sign of her. His anticipation quickly turned to disappointment as he pushed his cart out the door. He headed down the hallway without turning back, only to miss her rounding the corner and slipping through the door. He would have loved to see her smile.

At the end of the day, Howard grabbed his coat and headed to his wonderland. This library was the biggest library Howard had ever seen. He was longing for a good story. As he
headed up the stairs to the third floor, he noticed that the library was strikingly empty. It was a Saturday though. Howard made his way over to the fiction section. After twenty years, Howard owned the storyline to most of the books here. As Howard scanned the books, he found himself wondering what life would be like if he were popular, if he were handsome, if he had the heart of the only person who brightened his day.

Sadness overtook him as he reached for a collection of short stories. Howard hardly ever felt his own emotions. His highs and lows were always guided chapter by chapter. His feelings for each day were outlined and stamped with a number. The hours passed and Howard grew a bit older. It was time to head back home and start a new day.

Howard managed to meet the doors of the library head on without passing a soul. As he stepped out of the building, he held his breath. He shut his eyes and then opened them again. He slowly walked away from the building to take in the surroundings. The place was barren. There was nothing except Howard, the library, and vacant land. Howard couldn’t believe it. It was like a page right out of a sci-fi book. How could millions of people have vanished without a trace? Howard seemed unmoved. His life revolved around nothing but books. The library was still standing. His life was still whole.

Howard turned around to head back into the arms of his life. As he approached the doors, his eyes widened. His heart pounded. His clogged slowed. Howard had caught his shoe on his pant leg. He was on his way down. He stretched out his arms, but the ground rushed toward him faster than he expected. He felt a large blow to his face and body. Howard caught his breath and rose to his feet. He wiped the dirt from his cheek only to find himself in a state of panic. Something was missing. He dropped to his knees. Blindly, he searched and searched until his hands came upon a life-shattering truth. Howard’s life had come to an end.

Perfect
By Stephanie Pieszchalski

Sherri was a young woman from a small town. She was a beautiful young lady with long, glistening brown hair and mysterious brown eyes. At school, she was the girl that everyone knew and that all of the other girls envied. Sherri had it all; she was the president of almost every organization. She was very active in the community. She made the best grades and everyone liked her. To top it all off, she dated the school’s heartthrob, Jake. Jake was the cutest guy in school. He had the car, the hair, the personality, but most of all he had the girl. Everyone around Jake and Sherri were very envious of their relationship. The entire school thought they were the perfect match for each other and that nothing could ever stand in their way to happiness. The night before graduation, on Sherri’s 18th birthday, Jake asked Sherri one of the most important questions in a girl’s life. He got down on one knee in front of her in their favorite restaurant and he asked Sherri to marry him. Everything was perfect and of course Sherri’s answer was yes. The two were elated and they could hardly wait to make all of the plans for their amazing wedding. They decided though that it would be best to have a
long engagement so that both of them could make it through school before settling down to start their new life and family.

Four years had passed and the big day had finally come; the two high school sweethearts finally had their day. It was a beautiful day outside. The sun warmed the faces of all of the guests. It was a rather large wedding with friends and family everywhere to be seen. The wedding went so smoothly. They laughed, danced, and everyone had so much fun. The next day the happy newlywed couple left for their honeymoon. Their destination was for Florida because they both loved the Gulf of Mexico, with its white sand and beautiful blue waters.

Upon their return home they couldn’t have been happier. They were able to find a tiny little house just outside of town that had a huge yard and a beautiful view. They were overjoyed and felt like nothing in the world could stop them. Everyday Jake would head off to his new architecture site, while Sherri stayed at home and worked on new designs for her interior design company. Five months had passed since their amazing wedding. It was another normal day; Jake was off to work again like any other day. But today was a little different. Since today Jake was working with his brother George at the site, Sherri had invited George, as well as Jake’s parents, over for dinner that evening. Sherri loved to cook so she took the entire day to plan the meal. It was almost five o’clock, which meant that George and Jake would be home any minute. Jake’s parents had come a little early so that Jake’s mom Elaine could help Sherri with the dinner.

By 5:30 there was no sign of Jake or George. All of a sudden, an eerie silence came over the small house. This silence was then shattered by the sound of sirens flying by their house. Sherri ran outside; she had a gut feeling that something had happened to Jake. Sherri jumped in her in-laws’ car and took off on the path that Jake would have taken to get home. She was driving like a maniac, flying around any cars that were in her way. After five minutes of driving, Sherri came up on the emergency vehicles, but she couldn’t see what was going on because the road was blocked. Then she saw George’s car pulled off to the side of the road and then it hit her. It really was Jake. She scrambled out of her car and began screaming his name, hoping to hear his voice answer back. Instead, George came running out of the crowd of people and said, “Sherri, it’s Jake and he’s hurt really bad.” They both sobbed as they ran together to Jake. By the time Sherri was by Jake’s side, they had already cut him out of the car and had him on the stretcher. Sherri shrieked upon looking at him. She couldn’t even recognize her own husband. His face and body were so mangled that she just collapsed in the middle of the road.

She woke up a few minutes later in George’s car to the sound of George fighting back the tears of worry for his brother. They were following the ambulance to the hospital. After arriving at the local hospital and filling out all of the necessary paperwork, the family sat and waited for any news on Jake’s condition. Four hours had passed and still no news. Finally, after 8 hours of working on Jake, the doctor came out to talk to Sherri and the rest of Jake’s family. The doctor had a grim look on his face. The team of doctors that worked on Jake were able to get him stabilized for the time being, but they didn’t know for how long they would be able to keep him stabilized. The doctor continued by saying that even if Jake made it through the next day that he would most likely be in a coma and might never come out of it. The family sat in the waiting room praying, and hoping that Jake would come through this. Sherri was just in absolute shock and could not believe how her life had changed so drastically in the past few hours. But
she never gave up hope. She knew Jake was strong and that he would pull through. He had to. Morning came and by some form of luck, Jake made it through the next day. He was in a coma and unresponsive, but at least he was still alive. Sherri was grateful for this and even though the doctors didn’t give her much hope for Jake’s recovery, Sherri stayed by his side day and night.

A little more than six months passed since the tragic accident and there was yet no change in Jake’s condition. Sherri was very worn down, but she kept her faith in Jake because she knew he’d come out of the coma and come back to her. One day as Sherri sat by Jake’s bed holding his hand like she had everyday for the past six months, she all of a sudden felt a tiny movement in Jake’s hand. At first she thought she was imagining things until she looked at Jake and his eyes were open. Sherri was elated. She yelled for the doctors and nurses. They came running in and all of them were in awe just as Sherri was. Jake had finally come out of his coma. Weeks and weeks went by and Jake slowly made progress. Jake and Sherri had to come to the terms that Jake was never going to be able to walk again. Although this was very tough to handle, both Jake and Sherri were just happy to be together. Finally it was time for Jake to go home with his wife. Many of Sherri’s family and friends told her that she should just put him in a nursing home because taking care of all his needs would be too much for her. However, Sherri refused. She loved her husband with all of her heart and nothing was going to keep her from taking care of him. Their love for each other had started so long ago back in high school, back when their lives were perfect and they never thought anything could happen to them. Now that it had happened to them and their perfect world was turned upside down, they were even more grateful for each other. After twenty-five years and one child, their love for each other continues to grow more and more perfect.

Family Story
By Allison Harvey

Every summer, our family loads up the car and heads to the nearby airport hangar. It is the home of our very own eight-passenger jet. Decorated in cherry wood and with accents of green, it awaits to take us to our summer home, located in the jungles of Bali. The place is quite nice. The six-bedroom bungalow features private baths, walk-out balconies, and fireplaces, though I am not quite sure why they would install a fireplace, let alone many. The weather there never sees any sort of solid water fragment, unless it is directly from a freezer.

My favorite room of the house is the photo gallery. I can see portraits of my ancestors dating back way before my time. As a child, I would curl up to take a nap in front of my favorite portrait. The painting is so old that the colors seem to run together. I can still make the outline of a face of a beautiful young woman. Our relationship consists of so many greats that I can’t remember them all. So, I shortened her name to Many. I guess that was all I could spit out when I was younger.

Many was the founder of our family’s wealth. She and her father had started their own business when she was very
young. Living along the coast, Many had developed a love for swimming. Each day, she would become stronger as a swimmer, diving deeper and deeper. Soon she started collecting odd artifacts from the ocean floor. She would take them home to her father and he would design them into jewelry. His creations were fascinating. His love for the work kept him from being a stonewall businessman. He would sell a piece for a homemade pie or a batch of eggs from the local farmer.

As Many grew older, she began to help her father design, as well as collect. One day, as she went out to make her routine dive, she was not alone. A young man stood there, eagerly waiting to join her. He spoke of how he had watched her many times. She agreed to take him, and from then, their love bloomed. She also introduced him to her father. Quickly, they noticed his ability to create beautiful pieces of jewelry. He was a shoe-in with her father.

The day before the small wedding, they set out to do one more dive. Amazingly, they found something extraordinary. It took both of them to raise the large chest to the surface. When they opened it, they were taken aback. Inside of the chest were stones that had never been seen up close: huge diamonds, emeralds, and rubies. Also in the chest were enormous amounts of gold and pearls. What a great wedding gift. They took the chest back to her dad’s shop. In honor of her wedding, her father created a special necklace for her. The next day, Many became Mrs. Harry Winston. That necklace still remains in our family. Someday, I hope to wear it on my wedding day.

Untitled Story

By Nick Bruggeman, Joe Buchanan, Christina Curtis, Brian Morris, and Ethan Wilson

Derek ran as fast as his legs would carry him, though he could barely see where he was going. He had lost all track of time when he fell earlier and his watch came off. The best he could figure, it was two in the morning. Tonight was a new moon, so he had no light to guide him. Had it even been a blue moon, he wouldn’t have known. The storm had started about an hour ago and gave no indication it would ever let up. As he tripped over another tree root, a large thorn from a bush ripped across his left eyebrow, all the way to his hairline. As he landed, his soaked body lay motionless for a moment. He quickly righted himself and continued at his break-neck pace. The storm drove even harder on him, but his mind was numb to all but one thing. He didn’t feel the cold of the rain, didn’t notice the dripping blood blocking the already limited vision in his left eye.

As he kept running through the woods, he decided to stop for a second to catch his breath. When he did look out of his right eye, he noticed a light. It appeared to be coming from a farmhouse. He started dashing towards the house. He ran and ran and ran, then all of a sudden, he stopped. Right in front of him, about fifty yards away, he saw what seemed to be a pack of wolves eating their prey. He stood there motionless and just stared at the wolves. He then slowly started walking to his left, trying not to distract them. After he thought he was clear, he took off again.

After running about two miles, he came to another house. He went up to the house and knocked on the door, but no one answered. He then started going around the house,
looking in through the windows. All of a sudden, a shot rang out and he heard someone say, "What the hell are you doing over there?" Derek looked around and saw an old man with a white beard and a rifle in his hands next door. Scared, Derek ran again. When he did, he heard shots go off and bullets hit trees as he was running.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t quite as fast as he was before running such a long way. He felt a slug rip into his leg, tearing clothes and flesh as if it were onion skin. Falling to the ground and grasping his arm, he wished there was a full moon so he could give this man who hurt him just what he deserved.

Feeling the pain of the hot metal deep in his flesh soon changed his thinking as the initial scare faded away. Now all he felt was pain. Strong immobilizing pain. The arm started bleeding more. He took off his soaked shirt and tied a tourniquet around it. Realizing that he needed help, Derek wanted to press on, but what was the use in that darkness? Waiting for the morning may have been a better idea.

Derek crawled as silently as a hoot owl to some cover in a small bush. Hopefully the crazy maniac wouldn’t find him before Derek could get away. Curled up like a little baby, Derek passed into his sleeping state.

Opening his eyes and still a little tired, Derek stood up to a bright new day. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and the old man was right behind him with the rifle. "Please don’t shoot," Derek said.

"What business do you have out in these parts, boy?" asked the old man. "I got lost last night and was trying to find some shelter from the storm."

"Then why did you run last night when I saw you?"

"I don’t know. Maybe I was just scared of what you might do to me."

"Well come on back to the house with me and we’ll get you cleaned up and ready to go."

The old man and Derek began to walk back to the house. Derek still couldn’t see out of his left eye and he had bullet wounds in his leg and arm. He came to find out the old man used to be a doctor and still kept medical supplies at his home. As the old man stitched Derek up, they began to talk.

"Where am I, exactly?" asked Derek.

"You’re in a small town a little outside of Springfield, Illinois," the man answered.

Derek was stunned, since the last place he remembered being was on a road twenty miles away. As Derek and the old man kept talking, Derek slowly realized what happened. All he could remember was crawling out of a ditch and running as fast as he could away from something he could not quite remember.

The old man explained that he used to be an emergency room doctor twenty years ago and had lived out in the county ever since. He was a quite avid hunter, which would explain why he was such a good shot. As they kept talking, the darkness crept up on them and the old man suggested Derek crash there for the night, saying he’d give Derek a ride to where he needed to go the next day.

The next morning, the old man awoke to a gunshot. As he rushed to see what it was, he found Derek face down on the front porch with the gun and newspaper right next to him. After calling the police, the old man went back to Derek’s dead body to see if he could find any reason why this young man, who seemed so outgoing, would kill himself. When he got to Derek, he realized the paper had a picture of a car crash on the front page.
As the old man read the paper, it became apparent why Derek had chosen to end his life. The story in the paper described two cars colliding on a back road two nights ago, killing the passenger of one car, Derek’s wife, and all three passengers of the other car: a mom, dad, and infant son. The police were still looking for the driver of one car, who had apparently been thrown from the vehicle.

American Idols
By Kendrick Warnat

I: Greetings, fellow news-watchers! Today I have something special to share with you. During the next thirty minutes, I am going to be interviewing a kid who went to school with Billie Joe. I believe his name is Brad.

Brad: My name is Bob.

I: Sure it is. Now tell us something about Billy. What did he like to wear? How many girlfriends did he have?

Bob: He wore clothes, kind of like the stuff I have on, except with brighter colors; and how would I know how many girlfriends he had? I thought you would be interviewing me.

I: So you didn’t know him very well? That’s unfortunate. How does it feel to be an outcast?

Bob: Outcast? What are you talking about? I have friends. People like me, or at least they don’t dislike me.

I: That’s nice. Did you have any classes with Billy?

Bob: Yes, but I’d rather talk about something interesting.


Bob: Actually, he only came to class half the time. He would have failed if he hadn’t sat next to the smartest person in the school.

I: What a smart boy. Tell us something we don’t know about him. We want to know his secrets.

Bob: I don’t know what he was trying to hide, but I can tell you about the things that are normally overlooked.

I: That will have to work.
Bob: Well, there was a kid named Alex. He wasn’t a very lucky person, he didn’t have a very high opinion of himself, and he had very few friends, if any.

I: Yes, yes, we all know about that type of person. Not everyone can be as gifted as Billy, you know.

Bob: Anyway, during gym class, Billy and two of his friends amused themselves by harassing this kid as much as possible. It’s a wonder he didn’t commit suicide.

I: I don’t like that story. Don’t you have any with a happy ending?

Bob: Ummmm….sure. One time, Billy gave a bunch of people some Little Debbie snacks. Everyone lived happily ever after. And by “ever after,” I mean the ride home.

I: That was nice of him. However, that story could use some work.

Bob: Okay, up until that point, Billy had been annoying most of the people around him. At one point, he was even punching a kid for no particular reason. That reminds me of all the times Dennis was hitting girls.

I: Dennis Hathelhop? The best NFL quarterback of all time?

Bob: Yep, that’s the one. He would constantly annoy certain girls, and when they retaliated by smacking him in the arm, he’d punch them in the same spot, only a lot harder.

I: Well, I suppose nobody’s perfect.

Bob: Most of the people in the spotlight are self-absorbed, stuck-up little jerks. The exceptions to that are the philosophers and religious teachers. I don’t really see too many girls going around beating people up, either.

I: So why do so many people look up to these popular guys? They seem to be a bunch of jerks.

Bob: Because they are talented, young individuals who accomplish nearly everything that they want to accomplish. Another reason is that they usually look better than the average person. When they don’t, they at least act like they do.

I: Well, that’s all the time we have for today. See you next time on America’s Best News.
Untitled Story

By Schuyler Gerard, Allison Harvey, Eboni Jones, Rene Thomas, and Bianca Vance

The room was full of boxes. Everything was neatly packed away, waiting for the big road trip. California seemed to be a million miles away. At first, the thought of traveling halfway across the nation to attend college sounded amazing. However, the closer the day to go came, the more I dreaded it. I didn’t want to leave the small town in New Hampshire. Everything there seemed to run like a well-oiled machine. Even when I was younger, I knew this place had a certain aura about it. Everyone knew you by name and knew some sort of story about your family. It kind of reminded me of Mayberry, a fictional wonderland. But the next day, that would change.

I don’t remember what provoked me to pick California. I had never even been there. I could’ve chosen any school I wanted, pretty much. I know my parents wanted me to attend a school closer to home. Something deep down told me to venture ahead, though.

I woke up bright and early, ready to head out into the unknown. As I approached my mom, I could tell that the night had not been good to her. Being her only child, I could see how this change was going to age her. My father, on the other hand, was a different story. Our relationship was far different than that of my mother and me. He was a strong man with a stern face. He valued discipline and hard work. Those values were the key to his giant success. His work had allowed my mother to stay home and raise me. My father and I had always had a sort of a business relationship. He never showed emotion and could barely get through a hug.

My mom was in the kitchen, and like always, she had breakfast ready for me. As I entered, I gave my mom a big smile and said good morning. My mom did the same, but I noticed she was about to cry. And then I second-guessed my choice. Should I really leave my mom alone? But then my dad walked in and stopped my thoughts altogether. Every time I second-guessed my decision, I just had to see my dad and every doubt in me faded.

Breakfast went by in silence like it always did. I went back to my room to look around to see if I had forgotten anything. When I didn’t notice anything that really needed packed, I stood at the doorway to say goodbye to the room I had since I was a child. I went downstairs and said goodbye to my parents. I then started to walk to my old car in the driveway. I got in and looked at my parents. My mom was crying and she yelled, in a sob, “Don’t forget to call.” With that, I started the car and didn’t look back. I just told myself that I wasn’t going to have any regrets.

So I started my car and headed for the highway. It took me forever to get to California. I practically cried the whole way there. Once I reached my destination, I decided to perk up and seize the day. Upon entering the university, I was amazed by the fact that no one welcomed me. That was the first thing I missed about small town life. I picked up my room assignment at the front desk. When I got to my room, my “dorm buddy,” “partner,” or whatever had already moved in. She told me I had to sleep by the window because excessive sunlight and heat would fade her blonde hair color and melt her silicone boobs. I was so freaked out, so I called my mom. She assured me everything would work out.

Later that day, the same girl asked me if I wanted to go to a Rave. I did not know what a Rave was, so I said sure. We met on the quad at nine at night. There were two
other girls with her, and they both had candy necklaces around their necks. One of them
even had a candy pacifier. Come on, even I knew those were lame. However, when we
got to the Rave, everyone on the outside had on funny sunglasses with lights, but they
also had the same candy necklaces. One of the girls with us passed out in the middle of
the street. It was scary and weird. She kept muttering something about the letter X.
Why would somebody mumble the alphabet before passing out?

My dorm buddy saw me admiring everybody’s candy necklaces. She asked me if I
wanted one, so I said sure. I didn’t want to be the only lame person there without one.
She reached into her purse and got me one. I put it around my neck. When we went
inside, my eardrums almost burst. The music was so loud! There were sweaty people
dancing everywhere. The air smelled like sweaty people and cigarette smoke. There was
no place to move. I wanted to leave. I turned to find my roommate, but she was nowhere
to be seen. I didn’t know what to do, so I decided to find a corner and wait until the
crowd died down some. While I was standing in the corner, this guy a few feet away
kept looking at me. When our eyes met, he began walking towards me.

He came up to me and tried to talk, but the music was so loud that I could not
understand what he was saying. Then he started trying to bite the candy necklace I had
on. I pushed him away and ran off. That’s when I saw my roommate. She was dancing
and making out with some guy. I tried to tell her that I wanted to leave, but she couldn’t
understand me. She gave me this really spaced out look. I just stood there. I guessed I
would just have to wait. I decided to make my way back outside so I could get some
fresh air until she was ready to go.

Finding the door was easier said than done! As I fumbled through the crowd, I
nibbled on my candy necklace nervously. I didn’t know how I’d ever make my way back
to the door. My nervousness started to fade as I approached the door. I began to feel
really happy.

By the time I made it to the door I decided not to leave. I was so happy. The music
was blaring and I just wanted to dance. This guy came up and started dancing with me.
He ate some of my candy necklace, so I ate some of his. A few minutes later I began to
feel dizzy. The room began to spin. My head was pounding. Then I blacked out. When
I woke up, I saw my roommate and the two other girls we came with standing over me.
They told me that I passed out. They were glad I was okay and decided that we should
go home.

By this time, I was no longer dizzy, no longer “feeling” the music, and no longer
wanted to be there. I pulled myself up to my feet and immediately realized what had
happened. My roommate had drugged me with the poisoned candy necklace. How could
the little bitch do that to me? I slapped her and said I was ready to go home, but not with
her and not to the dorm. After all, something like this would never happen in New
Hampshire. My roommate and her two friends decided to stay and party. I quickly left
the building. As I walked outside, I saw a small girl about my age crying on the curb. I
immediately went over to her and asked her what was wrong. She replied that a boy had
brought her here and left her. So many people had come out of the party, but no one
would take her home. I told her my similar situation and we discovered we were both
freshman at the same college. We decided together we could safely manage getting to
the dorm.
Along the way, we found that our backgrounds were extremely similar. Her name was Katie and she was from a small town in Texas. She had arrived at school this morning to find that admissions did not place her with a roommate and she was lonely. That's why when a cute boy asked her to the Rave, she didn't think twice. In no time, we made it back to the dorm and the next morning we talked to admissions to see if we could room together. Within twelve hours, we were new best friend roommates! My mom called that evening and asked if everything was going okay. I assured her it was, and as I hung up the phone, I was filled with the promise of the four most wonderful years ahead of me.

**Underpants Gnomes**  
*By Joe DeMattei*

It's 3:00 A.M. and you're asleep, but do you know where your underpants are? Probably not, because the underpants gnomes are probably stealing them.

The underpants gnomes are a semi-nomadic tribe that were originally indigenous to Old South Park in Southern France. Their lineage can be traced back to Jean-Michel Bonaparte, who was an illegitimate son of Napoleon. Jean-Michel was abnormally short (about three feet tall); due to this and the fact that his mother would not change his last name from Bonaparte, Napoleon had them exiled.

Upon Napoleon's death, Jean-Michel moved back to France where he married a woman who was equally lacking in height. They had a girl named Chloe, who was only about eighteen inches tall. Chloe was so ashamed of her height deficiency that she ran away from home and sought others of equal height.

Chloe was amazed at how many she found who were like herself; they formed a tribe and began to call themselves gnomes. Ashamed of her genealogy, Chloe encouraged the gnomes to move to Ireland. She died on the voyage, but the rest of the gnomes made it. They enjoyed their new home of Ireland so much that they started St. Patrick's Day to celebrate Chloe and her vision of a great new home.

Since gnomes have a predominantly starchy diet, the potato famine in Ireland struck them harder than anyone. They decided to move to America because they had heard it was the land of beef and cheese. Since the gnomes were very small, they couldn't build or sail a ship large enough to make it across the Atlantic Ocean. To remedy this, they decided to sneak on a British ship, which wasn't hard since the British were always drunk anyway.

Upon arrival in Massachusetts, the gnomes decided it was too cold, so they moved south to Virginia. They weren't happy in Virginia since the gnomes didn't like Quakers or Puritans, and Virginia was full of them. From Virginia they moved across the Appalachian Mountains to Louisiana. Here it was warm and there were no Puritans or Quakers. There were only Cajuns, and this didn't bother the gnomes since they were originally from France.

The gnomes decided to make Louisiana their new home since they disliked nothing about it, and it was in Louisiana that they discovered the magic
of hot wings. In Louisiana, the gnomes became master blacksmiths. They found that in America there were many more gnomes than they could have ever imagined; their numbers grew very rapidly.

As the years went by, blacksmithing became less and less popular; it was replaced by more popular trades, such as drawing unemployment. There wasn’t enough business to support all the gnomes so they decided to spread out. In their new homes, the gnomes learned trades such as lumberjacking and mining, among many other things.

They lived many years in this unorganized state until the mid-1900s. At this point one of the gnomes still living in New South Park in Louisiana came up with an idea and called a national gnome meeting. He had noticed that the clothing industry had really taken off recently and none of the gnomes had any knowledge in this field. He said the gnomes should have a three phase process; phase one- steal underpants, phase three- profit. Most of the gnomes laughed at this idea, but some believed in its true potential.

The gnomes who believed began stealing underpants between 3:00 and 4:00 A.M. since 85% of the population was asleep at this time. The operation was hugely successful and the gnomes acquired a hoard of underpants. Even the gnomes who originally didn’t believe in the cause were now willing to join because with that many underpants you had to make a profit.

Today, all the gnomes are united in stealing underpants. In the morning, they steal underpants between 3:00 and 4:30 A.M., and all day they try to figure out what to do for phase two.

Dead?

By Jenna Brinkman, Joseph DeMattei, Melissa O’Neill, Stephanie Pieszchalski

Dr. Kay Mathews quietly ate her dinner in front of the evening news. She was waiting for word of an execution scheduled for midnight. She never knew if the governor was going to intervene at the last minute. From what she could tell, there was not going to be an intervention tonight. She quickly cleaned up her dinner and headed to the morgue.

When she arrived, her crew was ready and waiting. The execution had gone as scheduled, and Henry Haneke would be there any minute for his autopsy. Police were guarding the building from the rioters against the death penalty that were surrounding the premise. Personally, Kay didn’t mind the death penalty; someone like Haneke deserved to die for the torture he put that poor girl through. If he hadn’t gotten the death penalty, he would have eventually come up for parole and maybe been on the street to hurt someone else. Kay didn’t even want to think about those possibilities.

When Haneke arrived, there was blood on the sheet covering him. The paramedic explained that he’d had a nose bleed on the ride over. As Kay slowly pulled the cover off his head, his eyes popped open, blinked twice and then closed again. Kay couldn’t help standing there in shock. No one else seemed to have noticed the bizarre eye movement. She quickly checked for a pulse. When she did not find one, she decided the job was starting to get to her. She went about her business of preparing the body when she noticed something under his nails. Closer examination revealed what seemed to be skin. There weren’t any parts of his body that had nail marks or missing skin. What possibly
could have happened for him to have skin under his nails? She would have heard if he'd been a problem for one of the guards. The paramedic was already gone so she couldn’t ask him. She noted the finding and carefully took a sample from under the nails. Concentrating, she put the cells under a microscope for closer examination. She turned to look back at the corpse. It appeared as if there was an involuntary knee jerk.

“What is happening to me? How many autopsies have I performed?” He was certainly a monster, but Henry Haneke was not the worst criminal she had ever worked on. Why this uncertainty? She examined the reasons. Most dead bodies don’t have nosebleeds, most do not wink at you, most don’t collect skin under their fingernails unless they have scratched someone, and most don’t have twitching leg muscles. With a solid list in front of her, she felt better about her mental health. The oddity was the corpse, not her. What would cause these phenomena? Until she knew, she was reluctant to begin. What if by some miracle he had found some way to beat the system? What if he was alive?

But he was supposed to die; he was condemned to die. If she “killed” him during the autopsy, he should have been dead anyway. Taking scapula in hand she headed back to the corpse. She carefully made the first incision and examined it critically. The blood was flowing from the wound as it would from a live body, not a corpse. She put down the knife and called the assistant coroner.

“John, I know this sounds ridiculous, but I have some serious questions about this corpse and I would like confirmation as I go along.”

“All right Kay. Let me wake up and get dressed. I’ll be right there.”

Kay knew it would be at least 20 minutes before John would arrive. She was almost too frightened to walk back into the autopsy room; she still questioned herself. Why did this autopsy feel so different? When John finally arrived, Kay couldn’t help but feel relieved. They walked in together and Kay showed John how the blood was flowing. “What do you think this means?” Kay questioned. After a moment of silence, Kay turned to John to find him white as a ghost. Kay was immediately alarmed by the disturbing look on his face. “What’s wrong, John?”

“What happened to Doug? I thought you wanted me to confirm Haneke’s death.”

“What are you talking about? This is Haneke. The paramedic just dropped him off.”

“No, this is Doug Johnson, one of the paramedics.”

Stunned, Kay turned to John, confused and frightened. “What does this mean?”

“It means Haneke is still alive and loose somewhere in the city! I’ll call 9-1-1.”

Kay suddenly remembered the incision she had made in what she had thought was Haneke’s chest and quickly attempted to close the skin, as well as revive the body. She soon had stopped the bleeding and detected a faint pulse. She examined the complete exterior of the body and observed no signs of trauma; he must have been drugged.

The paramedics soon arrived, along with two police officers. The EMTs were shocked to see their partner there. The taller of the two men said, “Doug radioed in over two hours ago. He said he’d dropped Haneke off; this doesn’t add up.”

The paramedics tended to Doug with the care and love you would give a child, but knew his only chance of survival was getting him to the hospital. Meanwhile, the police were questioning Kay and John. Kay explained how she found skin, but no blood under the nails, as well as the lack of pulse when she first received Doug. The officer told Kay and John not to worry and that he would contact them with any developments. In the
meantime, they should go home and get some rest. The police quickly began trying to track the ambulance Hanke had been in earlier.

At home alone was the last place Kay wanted to be. Who knew what Hanke might do next? Having been her co-worker for six years, John sensed Kay’s apprehension. He offered to let Kay stay the night at his house and she thankfully accepted.

Kay laid in bed for hours trying to fall asleep, but it was to no avail. She was scared to death. Hanke had to have been the “paramedic” who dropped Doug off. Any other paramedic would have known Doug. This made her realize she was the last one who had seen Hanke. Would he be back for her? She had never been more grateful to have John as a friend. She decided she must call in sick to work the next few days. They would understand. It was the last place she felt safe.

Two days later, the police called John’s house. Doug was going to make it, but he was still in critical condition. Kay felt horrible that she had cut him open, but at least she hadn’t gone through with her plan to kill him. How horrible would that have been; instead of being a hero for stopping Hanke, she would have been shunned for killing a paramedic.

It was another three days before Kay heard from the police again. This time it was to tell her that Doug was doing better and that they had captured Hanke. She sighed in relief as she hung up the phone. Suddenly, a chill ran down her back. She could feel someone’s warm breath on the back of her neck.

The Missing Sorceress
by Christina Curtis

"Where is she!" he screamed as he pounded his fists against the table. All present in the palace council room went silent at this outburst, as they stared at the old wizard. He rarely lost his temper, much less to such an extent.

"We’re doing our best Zagar, you know that," said Ryan. "Everyone has been working non-stop trying to find her since she vanished. And you know that well."

"Forgive me," the Wizard implored. "It’s alright. We all know you were her closest friend. But you’ll do her no good unless you try to get some sleep, old friend," Ryan said, rising from his seat and putting a hand on the wizard’s shoulder. Of all of them, he had suffered the worst since the empress had disappeared. His eyes were bloodshot and the circles under them seemed to get darker with every passing hour. His face was thin and haggard since he’d deprived himself of food almost as much as sleep. He tried to shake Ryan’s hand off, but he was too weak.

"Have we looked in the swamplands west of Mount Chardak?" he inquired running his hand over the map that covered the table.

"Don’t bother." All turned to the large open window to see Darian fly up and land gracefully on his feet, just before he slumped down on his behind, his birdlike wings relaxing after a long flight.

"She’s not there," he said, rubbing his back where his right wing was attached. Zagar likewise slumped into a chair, allowing his fatigue to overpower him.

"You’re all dismissed. Continue searching in your designated area. We’ll
meet back here in one week." The members silently left the council room. Only Zagar, Ryan, and Darian remained.
"Could she be dead, wizard?" Darian asked.
"No," he said emotionless. "I'd be able to sense that. We all would. No, it's like she just vanished. I can't sense even the slightest trace of her.
"Perhaps the Mage has her, Zagar," Ryan said.
"He's the last one who could have taken her. Not one week before she vanished, she utterly defeated him in a duel. He barely escaped with his life. There's no way he could have healed himself that quickly. You know that." He sighed. "It's been over a month. Where could she be?"
"Could the Elves have her?" Ryan asked.
"No, they want nothing to do with our kingdom, much less our leader." Zagar coughed. It was a dry, harsh sound.
"That's it. Old man, you're eating a proper dinner, then going straight to bed. You're not fighting me anymore on this. You'll do no good to anyone, least of all Sharla, if you're dead when we find her."
"Ok, you win," Zagar said getting up, but he was unable to support himself. Ryan quickly caught him and helped him to his room. Darian turned his gaze to the mid-afternoon sky, which was beginning to cloud up. Even nature itself seemed to be mourning the loss they had suffered.
"Oh, Sharla. Where are you?"

Late that night, with clouds covering the night sky, a lone figure emerged silently from the forest into a large clearing. The wind fluttered his cloak as he made his way to the cave, just as he had every night for the past month. Entering the cave, he walked several yards in total darkness without tripping once. As the cave twisted here and turned there, a small light could be seen in the distance. He passed a large cavern on his left, where not even a year ago, his own blood was spilt. He wondered if it still stained the cavern floor as the light grew. The cave took a sharp turn to the right and he was finally there; a small cavern about the size of a classroom, only dome shaped. Unlit torches circled the wall of the room. In the very center, stood a large, glass cylinder case, emitting a green light. And in the case was the Empress Sharla. The man flung his hands out in opposite directions, which caused a chain reaction that lit each torch, one after the other, until the room was fully lit by the blue light each torch emitted. The figure removed his hood and stared with emotionless eyes at the unconscious form. He walked around her tiny prison, noting any change or detail he could. After he had circled her 2 or 3 times, he seemed content and made his was to the entrance, which was also the only way out. He turned for one final gaze at her and let out a sigh. As he exited, he flung his hands out again which caused the torches to go out, one by one, until the only light left in the cave was a soft green glow.

The next morning, Zagar's eyes fluttered open. He had never slept so deeply in his life. As he stretched, he was unaware of the fact he was being watched.
"Sleep well?" a voice asked. Zagar sat up and turned to the speaker, who was lounging on his open windowsill. There before him was an elf. He was slightly taller than the wizard, with fair skin and a radiant complexion. He had long silver hair, pointed ears, and wore
an attractive light green tunic. "Did you dream?"

"What do you want?" Zagar asked, getting up and quickly changing.

"I heard you lost something. Is this true?"

"Since when did the Elves care about our state of affairs?"

"Oh, we couldn't care less really." He got up and looked seriously at the wizard. "It's your sorceress we're concerned about. We're a private people, but we're not stupid. I know full well the only thing standing between the Mage and our world's total destruction, is your ruler. Should she fall, all would be lost." There was a moment of silence. "I have information that may be of use to you. Come, I'll explain as we fly." The Elf jumped out the window and began flying away. Zagar followed, and soon caught up with the Elf. Darian saw them leave, and joined them as well.

"I'm sure you're aware of the legend of Lesser Lake."

"Of course," Zagar said. "Its waters are said to absorb the power of any magical creature that touches them."

"Yes. The more powerful you are, the greater the harm it can cause. Quite literally, it's poison to any such as us."

"But no one knows where the lake is," Darian said.

"We do. Recently, our scouts have noticed some strange activity around Lesser Lake. Several humans have been seen carrying buckets of water to and from the lake. I didn't give this much thought since the water can't hurt humans, until I realized how much they had taken. It was that time Sharla's disappearance became known to me, and I feared the worst."

"But hardly anyone knows about Lesser Lake," Darian said.

"Apparently someone does," Zagar said.

"Down there." The elf noted a hill covered with trees and shrubs. Quietly, the three landed and at the bottom of the hill, they could see Lesser Lake. An occasional human could be seen carrying buckets of water here or there, when the Elf's eyes caught something on his right. Further down the hill, hiding just as they were, was the master of illusions himself, Mallen. The Elf got the others' attention and pointed down to where Mallen was. Zagar's eyes went wide and he was instantly gone, running down the hill.

"He moves fast for an old guy," the Elf said as the two ran after. Before Mallen could react, the Wizard had him pinned against a tree, with his staff against Mallen's neck.

"Where is she!?" he said. Mallen choked and gagged as he tried to free himself. The Elf and Darian joined their friend in time to hear Mallen croak out an answer.

"Come again?" Zagar asked.

"Safe," Darian interpreted. Zagar released Mallen, who fell to the ground, gasping for oxygen.

"Who is she safe from, Mallen?" Zagar asked.

"The Mage," he coughed, finally recovering from Zagar's attack.

"If you don't already know," Mallen began, "he's planning on using the Lesser Lake waters against her. How, I don't know. That's what I've been trying to figure out these past few weeks. When he first told me this, I couldn't believe even he would do such a thing."

"So you are working for him," the Elf said.

"Until I realized his true intentions. Not even a parlor trick magician deserves to be exposed to Lesser Lake. I
told him I would have nothing to do with those waters, and left that same day."
"So he's recovered?" Darian asked.
"Oh no. He's still bedridden. His Drake and a few hired hands are doing his dirty work for him."
"Is that so?" the Elf said, staring down toward the lake. The others followed his gaze to a man who seemed to be supervising the workers. It was the Mage, fully healed, without a scratch on his face.
"It's him," breathed Darian.
"If he lied about his health to me, then...Sharla!" Mallen was gone in a flash, flying as fast as he could. The others were barely able to catch up.
"By the time I realized the Mage's plan to use Lesser Lake, I had already captured Sharla. He didn't know this, so instead of setting her free for the Drake to capture, I hid her in the last place she'd ever go." They flew out of the woods and into a clearing. At the end Zagar saw a cave.
"Isn't this where the four of you captured her before?"
"The very place," Mallen said landing at the cave's entrance and walking swiftly in.
"Clever, Mallen. Very clever," the Elf said as they all followed him in.
Mallen quickly lit the torches and sighed a breath of relief as he saw she'd been undisturbed. The three slowly walked toward her suspended figure encased in crystal.
"What is that?" the Elf asked, placing his hand on the cylinder case.
"The Mage's own magic used against him. The substance that surrounds her is solid, liquid, gas and light all in one." Zagar stared at his Empress. She was wearing a simple white evening gown that waved slowly in the green suspension, as did her long, dark hair.
Her eyes were shut, as was her mouth.
Her right hand was holding onto her left hip and her left hand was holding her right shoulder. Her head was tilted slightly to the left.
"You might say she's hibernating. The liquid keeps her suspended, the light keeps her body temperature constant, the gas keeps her breathing only when she needs to and the solid keeps her safe.
Encased in that crystal, you wouldn't be able to sense her at the mouth of the cave."
"That explains a lot." said the Elf.
"Now what?"
"Release her, Mallen," Zagar said.
"What? But it's not safe. The Mage's plan..."
"We know enough. She's the only one who can help us fight him." Mallen reluctantly agreed and walked over to a torch. He removed it and on the wall behind it was a large pearl that looked to be encased in the cave wall. He placed his right hand on it, it began to glow, and a large sound was heard.
"It'll take a while for her body to adjust back to normal. But she should be fine in a few days." They all watched to see what would happen next.
"I owe you, Mallen," Zagar said.
"And so do I." All 4 turned to see the Mage standing at the entrance of the cave. "Now stand aside; she belongs to me."
"You'll have to get through us first, Mage." Zagar said as they all posed for attacked.
"Is that all. This will be easier then I thought." He flung his arms at Darian, and he was crashed against the cave wall. He immediately fell unconscious on the floor, along with a few torches. Zagar swung his staff at him, but the Mage easily caught it with his left hand. The staff blazed into a fire which
jumped on the Mage. As he quickly tried to put himself out, Zagar turned to see if Sharla was free yet. The liquid was slowly starting to drain out of the case.

"Zagar!" Mallen screamed too late. The Mage had returned the staff to normal and bashed it against Zagar's back, sending him sprawling on the ground. Mallen was next. As the Mage went to attack him, Mallen suddenly became 5 Mallens.

"Well," they all said. "Which one of us is it?" The Mage glared at each man who surrounded him. Then, he gave an evil smile. He threw a cloud of dust into the real Mallen's face, which instantly began to burn. The illusion disappeared and Mallen fell to the ground trying to wipe off his face.

"Maybe it's the only one who has a reflection in the crystal case," the Mage said. The Elf screamed his war cry and attacked the Mage with his long sword. His target dodged just in time, which allowed him to conjure up his own sword. They were a blur moving across the floor, trading blow for blow, when the Elf spotted an opening and slashed across the Mage's lower stomach. The wounded man backed up and clutched his bleeding belly. He chanted a few words none knew and then his wound quickly began to heal.

"Impossible!" the Elf said. Mallen just smiled, and with his eyes glowing, sent lasers that struck the Elf right in the chest. The Mage turned in time to see all the liquid drain out of the case, leaving Sharla leaning against its walls.

"That was too easy," the Mage said, as he approached the case and reached his hand toward it. Mallen grabbed his arm and struck him across the face with his right fist. The Mage fell to the floor, on his knees.

"Some people just don't learn," the Mage said. One glance from him and Mallen was knocked off his feet. He tried to get up, but found he couldn't move. The monster unsheathed a dagger and drove it deep into Mallen's left shoulder. He screamed in agony, for the weapon had been dipped into the Lesser Lake waters.

"I'm going to enjoy your slow and painful demise, Mallen. No one betrays me." He quickly removed his dagger, and just as he was about to strike again, his hand froze in midair.

"What!" he said. He turned around to see Sharla still in the case, quite conscious, and silently furious. Her magic had stopped his attack and now he was being dragged by an invisible arm to the mouth of the cave.

"Sharla! Let me go! I'll kill them all, I swear!" he threatened. The others were just beginning to come to. Giant bubbles seemed to encircle each one of them, save the Mage. Sharla glowed with a tremendous light that none had ever seen before. The case began to quiver and the Mage struggled madly to free himself. He screamed in fear and agony as the case burst into thousands of deadly pieces. The bubbles that surrounded her friends protected them from the deadly shards of crystal. But the Mage was not so fortunate. Just as the case shattered, a massive stream of energy and light emitted from Sharla and landed directly on the Mage, driving him out of the cave and sending him flying hundreds of yards away. He would not be healing himself quite so easily after this onslaught.

Sharla stopped glowing and looked around.

"Is everyone alright?" she asked.

"No," Mallen moaned, and he could feel his energy being drained from him.
She quickly ran to him and, using the same magic she had before, but in a different way, began to heal Mallen. Her right hand was placed over his wound as she concentrated all her energy to flushing out the deadly drops of Lesser that were flowing in his veins. She began to glow again, as did Mallen. Finding every drop, she searched his body again, and once more to be sure. When she was finally satisfied, the glowing ceased. Mallen opened his eyes and stared up at the girl he’d risked his life for. He sighed deeply.

"Thank you," she said quietly, for she knew he had saved her.

"Well, don’t expect me to help you again," he said curtly, rising from the floor.

"Sharla, are you alright?" Zagar asked.

"Yes, I’m fine, wizard," she said happily.

"Apparently, my powers had been building up inside me ever since I was inside that thing. That’s how I was able to defeat the Mage so easily and cure Mallen." Darian wiped debris off his wings and the Elf fixed his messy hair.

"So who’s hungry?" Sharla asked.

"I’m starving."

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**Tilt**

*By Shannon Gergen*

*As odd as it sounds, this story was written in memory of NBC’s “Ed.”(2000-2004)*

*“Without the world of possibility, what do we have left?” –Ed Stevens*

Lester Fibes awoke to a sound unlike any he had heard in his twenty-four years of life. He responded as he always did in such circumstances, thanks to defense mechanisms so engraved into his mind during his junior high school years that over time they had become as natural as blinking. His body in a fetal position, Lester covered his face with his hands, hoping to avoid any blows or any other potential causes of damage. While he certainly didn’t consider his face a valuable national treasure, it was his nonetheless, and if he had anything to say about it, it would continue to be his face for quite some time to come.

Realizing that there seemed to be no immediate danger to his person, other than the possibility of losing some dignity should anyone walk in to find him quietly sobbing under his blankets, Lester looked around his apartment to determine the cause of the ungodly noise, which had at some point changed from sounding like a manatee in its death throes to sounding like Andy Rooney gargling water after getting his foot caught in a bear trap. Upon some thorough inspection, or at least as thorough as can be expected when suddenly shocked into consciousness by such turmoil, Lester identified the source of the noise to be his alarm clock. This revelation stirred mixed emotions: joy at knowing that he’d live to see another day, and despair at figuring out that the clock must have been broken yesterday during the incident involving himself, a mouse, and a frozen dinner. Today would have to be better than yesterday. This thought worried Lester however, since in his experience, it suggested that today would almost undoubtedly be worse.
Getting out of bed was a difficult process for Lester, until he remembered that he was sleeping on the floor and that all he really needed to do was stand up. Though the clock was making a ghastly sound, it was doing so at the proper time, meaning Lester would not be late to work. It would be his second day on the job since moving to New York City from his hometown in Ohio. As he stumbled from his “bedroom” to his “kitchen,” two areas of the same room which were distinguished merely by the presence or absence of a refrigerator, Lester had to wonder if moving had been such a great idea. Sure, it was a major step towards realizing one of his long-held dreams, but that dream hadn’t included living in a rundown apartment next door to a group of guys trying to form a Motley Crue cover band. Thanks to the practice that lasted well into the previous night, Lester would have “Dr. FeelGood” stuck in his head for the commute to work.

After a shower and his traditional breakfast consisting of toast and jam, Lester prepared to leave. What made the toast “traditional” was how cheap bread was, and the fact that it was easy to swipe a few extra jam packets at a local coffee shop each time he visited. Until the paychecks from the new job started coming in, things were stretched pretty thin financially. Soon, he could afford a mousetrap. As if on cue, a rustling sound came from somewhere in a cabinet. Lester squinted his eyes a little at the thought of the rodent. “As God is my witness, your days are numbered, my hairy little friend,” he said. Some part of him truly believed that the mouse understood, though doubted the creature put much stock into his apparently empty threats.

The subway was as crowded as usual for the morning rush to work. People pushed and shoved as they forced themselves into the subway cars, and it seemed to be by luck more than effort that Lester managed to get onto his ride. Looking around the car, he saw a colorful variety of individuals, though many were dressed as he was. One woman in particular drew his attention. She was a beautiful blond with eyes that seemed to peer directly into Lester’s soul, though that was not what grabbed his attention. Rather, it was the fact that she was attempting to pick his pocket. He forced her hand away from his wallet and gave her a stern look. She looked surprisingly unconcerned for having just been caught in the act, but she did choose to maneuver herself away from him. He considered reporting her to someone, but just didn’t feel like worrying about it. Besides, the brief encounter was the closest thing to a date that he had experienced in a long time. With the proper exaggeration, he could impress his friends down at the bar. Or he would be able to, if he had any friends in this town, or if he had even ever stepped one foot into a bar.

About a half-hour later, Lester found himself standing at the doorway to his workplace. Sometimes, he liked to think back on life and piece together which moments were key to leading to later events. Upon some reflection, he understood that his lifelong goal began in the same way many such goals begin: an addiction to breath mints. His grandmother had always been paranoid that her breath smelled like rotten fish, so she was constantly popping mints. Lester thought this paranoia was ridiculous, since her breath clearly reeked of used kitty litter, not fish, but he didn’t feel that it was his place to explain that to her. One day when he was thirteen, she nearly choked on a mint. This caused some concern amongst his family, so an intervention was held. At first she was defensive, saying she could stop whenever she wanted to while violently shaking a rolling pin. Eventually, she accepted that she had a problem.
For the first two weeks of the rehab, family members stayed with her to be sure she didn’t succumb to urges and go on a minting binge. Lester spent every evening during this period at his grandmother’s house. While there, he was forced to watch the nightly news, something his grandmother insisted on watching. As he watched it each day, his goals began to take form. He enjoyed watching the prestigious anchorman, listening to the articulated reporting of the events that were shaping the world. As he absorbed this, he decided what it was he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to become a camera operator.

Though he could have spent hours thinking back to those days, Lester decided he better get moving. This decision was prompted by several curses thrown in his direction due to his blocking the sidewalk traffic in front of the building for the last five minutes as he stood thoughtfully.

Unfortunately for Lester, one could not simply walk into a major network and become a camera operator. Instead, he had to work his way up to it. For this reason, he took a job in the network’s mail room. It didn’t have the glamour of working behind the scenes on a set, but it was a start. It would give Lester the opportunity to network with people at the network, assuming he could work up the courage to actually start any conversations.

As Lester entered the mail room, he heard “Hey Les, how’s life treating you?” It was the mail room supervisor, Paul, who made weak attempts at being friendly to his subordinates, but was always willing to pull rank. Lester cringed at the use of “Les” instead of his full name. He didn’t like being called Les because it made him think that others considered him “less” than themselves. Of course, he considered himself less than others, but he didn’t need others to confirm this sense of inadequacy. Instead of correcting the name usage, he decided he would have to accept it.

It occurred to Lester at this point that he had not answered Paul, so he quickly thought of a response. “Like it caught me in bed with its wife.” It was a line from Cheers, but he doubted Paul would know that.

The supervisor chuckled. “I hear you, man.” This cleared up any confusion Lester had regarding Paul’s auditory senses, which was none. “Hey, while I have you here, do me a favor. We’ve been getting a ton of mail from fans wanting that arcade show to be renewed. Today we got a bunch of joysticks sent to us addressed to Kerzeu. I need you take them up to his office and see what he wants to do with them.”

Reginald Kerzeu was the president of the network. Lester was thrilled to be given the chance to meet him. If things went well, perhaps he’d get a step closer to some camera work, he thought. Maybe something good would happen today after all. “Sure Paul. Where are they?”

Paul pointed to a large cart covered in packages. “Thanks a lot, Les. The last time I took a load of this stuff up to him, he threatened to push me down an elevator shaft.” With that, the supervisor patted Lester on the back and walked away. Suddenly, Lester’s hopes of climbing up the network ladder sunk to an all new low.

Like a king looking over his land from atop his castle, Reginald Kerzeu looked down on the city from the window of his office. He sometimes liked to think of the city as his. Sure, the governor may have certain legal authorities, but he had the power of the media at his disposal, a weapon that could overcome most enemies when wielded properly. Or improperly, depending on how one looked at it.
“Reggie, the deal stands,” said a voice on the other end of a phone call in which Reginald was involved. The voice belonged to Brent Harris, one of the biggest names in Hollywood, or anywhere else for that matter. He had a particular talent that had gotten him far in the world: the ability to use his good looks to make others think he actually had other talent. He didn’t, of course, but most people had trouble seeing that.

“You have nothing to worry about, Brent. It’s going to happen, but I have to wait until the right time. You wouldn’t believe the feedback I’m getting on this. These people are crazy, and I have no idea where they are getting the funding for this kind of campaign.” Reginald was referring to the fans of one of the network’s shows, *Tilt*. It was a dramatic comedy about the owner of an arcade who chose to stop practicing psychiatry after one of his patients killed herself. Every week, the storyline revolved around the character or one of his friends, but the overall story was about the character getting his life back together and falling in love with the sister of one of his employees. The show was up for renewal, though Reginald intended on canceling it, which was eliciting a surprisingly huge response from the show’s incredibly vocal fans.

“I don’t understand why you can’t just announce the cancellation now. What does it matter if some losers want the show to come back? You’re the boss!” Brent had his own motivations for wanting the show to be canceled, even though he had nothing to do with its production.

“I’m hoping that by waiting a couple months the frenzy will die down. These people will surely lose some of their initiative by then. I’d rather avoid a complete boycott of the network by a group of obsessive people who obviously have disposable income. These are the type of people the network’s sponsors fantasize about. Besides, considering the money we’ll be paying you with this deal, don’t you think waiting a couple months will be worth it?”

The deal he was referring to was a new reality show that would be hosted by Brent. Reginald expected it to be one of the highest rated successes in recent memory. It also helped that making such a show was incredibly cheap for the network, meaning more profit. It wouldn’t have the quality and acclaim that *Tilt* had, but who cared about that when examining the quarterly earnings? Reginald sure didn’t, nor did most of the stockholders. Unfortunately, Brent wouldn’t agree to host the show unless *Tilt* was cancelled. Reginald still couldn’t determine why, but Brent had some sort of agenda, which surprised Reginald, since the well-known actor seemed to spend less time thinking about anything than he did on womanizing. Nearly every major actress in the business had been linked to Brent Harris at some point or another.

“Fine Reggie, but I’m not going to wait forever. I’ve got Universal, Paramount, and a bunch of others begging me to be in some major projects, but I can’t schedule anything until I know for sure what we’re doing with your show. Brent Harris is a household name, and I plan to keep it that way. I’ll be in touch.” With that, a click sounded from the speakerphone.

Reginald was furious. He hated having terms dictated to him by some lousy star. As president of the network, it was he who usually dictated such terms. It was he who decided what the public wanted, and then convinced them that they actually did want it. None of this would even be a problem if it wasn’t for those fanatics of *Tilt*. They had organized through a website dedicated to the show, and now they were pulling strings all over. They had even done some charity work in the name of the show and ended up
saving some kid who needed a bone marrow transplant. Between that and the amazing amount of press they had been getting due to newspapers and call-ins to radio shows, canceling the show was going to give Reginald a terrible public image. He would have spent more time mulling over these thoughts, but Reginald noticed for the first time that someone was standing at the doorway to his office.

“Excuse me, sir, but I was told to bring this stuff up to you.” It was some guy from the mailroom with a bunch of packages.

“Why didn’t my secretary let me know you were waiting?” Reginald didn’t like dealing with lowly mailroom staff. Knowing how much mail they went through each day, he had trouble accepting that they were any more than ninety percent disease-free.

“She wasn’t at her desk, sir. In fact, there are some officers waiting out there to talk to you about her.”

Reginald sighed heavily. Tessa had probably been caught picking someone’s pocket on the subway again. He’d have to hire another downtrodden model to replace her. Maybe a brunette this time. “What do you have for me? Are those seashells I ordered? Because if so, send them back. I changed my mind about the beach theme at the advertisers’ dinner.”

“No sir, they appear to be joysticks. I think it has something to with one of the shows. Paul told me to bring them to you and ask what you want to do with them.”

It took Reginald a moment to figure out who Paul was. Wasn’t that the guy from accounting who he bribed the other day? No, that was Earl. Wait, it was that weasel from the mailroom! That meant these joysticks had to do with... “No! Absolutely not! This is going too far! What in the world do they hope to accomplish by sending me joysticks?”

The mail guy seemed to shrink at the outburst, which gave Reginald some satisfaction. At least someone around here acknowledged him as the boss. “Mr. Kerzcu, sir, I think they sent them because the show takes place in an arcade, so it’s some way of showing their support. It’s kind of creative, I think.”

“Creative?” Reginald yelled. “If I wanted creative, I wouldn’t be canceling the show to begin with! Get rid of those things! I don’t care how, but get rid of them! Now!”

The terrified man stumbled out of the office, pushing the cart with him. It was a sight Reginald never tired of seeing. He would have spent some time enjoying the feeling, but he suddenly recalled the officers waiting in the other room. Maybe he could offer them cameos on a police show just to get them to go away.

As the elevator slowly dropped to the lower levels, Lester remembered to start breathing again. His first encounter with Mr. Kerzcu had proven to be somewhat less than successful. It made him glad that he had never given his name. Perhaps Mr. Kerzcu was having a rough day and all this would blow over. Besides, from what Lester had heard while standing at the door, Mr. Kerzcu was already unhappy due to some deal with Brent Harris. It had all just been bad timing. That thought didn’t do much to make Lester feel any better.

Uncertain of what to do with the joysticks, Lester rolled the cart outside. There was a dumpster in a nearby alley where some of the bigger trash from the mailroom was sometimes deposited, so he figured it would be a good place to discard the unwanted packages. As he finished throwing the last one into the garbage, a red 1987 Caprice
Sedan with tinted windows pulled up beside him. The front passenger window rolled
down just a bit, revealing part of a face and sunglasses. “Get in the car,” a voice said.
“Um, what?” was Lester’s response.
“You heard me. Get in the car. We have things to discuss. You have valuable
information.”
“Uh, unless you want to know the lyrics to Dr. FeelGood, I really don’t think I have
much information, valuable or otherwise.”
A fifty dollar bill was slipped through the gap in the window. “Does that refresh your
memory any? Now get in.”
Having no idea what was going on, Lester mindlessly took the fifty dollars. Every
logical fiber of his being said to not get in the car, but he couldn’t resist. He had to know
what was going on. He opened the back door and got in. The car pulled away from the
dumpster.
Lester looked at the man driving and the man in the passenger seat. Each of them
appeared to be in their thirties. Both were dressed in dark clothing and had black
sunglasses. “My good man, there is a difference between reality and fiction. We
understand this, but we need your assistance.” The passenger seat occupant turned
around and stared at Lester while speaking.
“Oh no. I saw these movies, and while the first one was pretty good, those last two
were so bad it was inhumane. I’m getting out of here.” Lester reached for the door.
The driver laughed. “No, I’m afraid you misunderstand. Steve, cut it out with the
cloak and dagger routine. It’s stupid. Just ask him what we need to know.”
“Stupid? You didn’t think it was so stupid when I told you to get the windows tinted.
Besides Burt, I’m not the only one wearing these outfits.”
“I wanted the windows tinted because it makes the Caprice an even sweeter ride, not
just because of this. And it’s not my fault we happened to wear similar outfits today.
You have a problem with it? I can easily stop this car at the nearest department store and
you can buy something else.”
“Excuse me,” Lester interrupted. “Can I take a rain check on your little spat and be
told what I am doing in this car? I’m on the clock right now.”
Steve looked back at Lester. “Like I said, you have valuable information. You were
throwing away the joysticks, right?”
Lester didn’t see how the joysticks made him knowledgeable about anything, but at
this point he didn’t want to anger these two, since they both seemed somewhat unstable.
“Yes, I threw them away. My boss told me to do it.”
Steve and Burt exchanged glances. “Which boss would that be?” Steve questioned, as
if suddenly hopeful for some reason.
“Reginald Kerzcu, the president of the network.”
The car came to a sudden stop and the two unusual men looked as giddy as children
on Christmas morning. After a brief period of joyous squealing, the two men calmed
down. “He saw them, then? And talked to you about them? What did he say?” Steve
had dropped the whole secret spy thing altogether at this point.
“He didn’t say too much. Yelled, mostly. He told me to throw them away. He said
they had gone too far, whatever that means.”
“That’s it? Nothing about surrendering or anything like that?”
“I don’t think the notion of surrendering is one he spends too much time pondering.”
Burt looked thoughtful. “This might be a good sign. We’re obviously getting under his skin. Even if we can’t convince him to see things our way, maybe we can frustrate him into renewing the show.”

As odd as it seemed, Lester began to make a little sense of the situation in which he now found himself. “Do you mean Tilt? That show? Because, if so, I heard him tell Brent Harris that he was already canceling it. They’ve got some sort of deal between the two of them.”

The two men’s expressions instantly changed into those of sheer terror. “What? Brent Harris? That drooling lump of maggot slime? What does he have to do with it?” Steve was obviously rattled. Lester tried to determine what maggot slime was. A couple of possibilities entered his mind, neither of which would be a positive assessment of Brent Harris’s existence.

“I don’t know all the details. All I know is Brent Harris wants the show canceled before he’ll agree to do a show for the network. Mr. Kerzcu told him he was canceling it but wouldn’t announce it for a couple of months. I overheard their phone conversation.”

A moment of silence passed, followed by tense hesitation. Finally, Steve made a decision. “Punch it, Burt.” The car shot forward and drove even farther away from Lester’s work.

“Should I be getting out now? I appreciate the money, but I really do need to get back to work.”

Steve shook his head. “Trust me, it’s taken care of. We have friends at the network. You’re needed elsewhere. We need you to talk to some people.”

Lester considered arguing the point, but between the meeting with Mr. Kerzcu and this whole car discussion, all energy for resistance seemed to have left him. On the bright side of things, he had fifty dollars now, so he could take care of his mouse infestation. Also, he finally met two people who were noticeably more neurotic than himself. Besides, Burt was right. The Caprice really was a sweet ride.

Italian food was by no means Lester’s favorite, which made it all the more worrisome when the Caprice finally came to a stop outside of an Italian restaurant. Realizing that some might classify his current position in life as “kidnap victim,” he decided he shouldn’t complain about the choice of menu for lunch. He hadn’t had much of an appetite, but the smell of parmesan quickly changed that.

The restaurant was fairly busy, which made Lester a bit more comfortable. He didn’t normally like large crowds, but he hoped the presence of other people would prevent anything from being done to him by Burt and Steve.

“Hey, we never got your name, anyway.” Steve paused from eating his spaghetti long enough to make this observation.

“Lester. My name is Lester.”

“Ahh. Well, nice to meet you, Les. I’m Steve Edwards, and this is Burt Michaels.”

Normally, Lester would have ignored the use of “Les,” but he had trouble accepting it from someone whose first and last names were reversible. Such names made Lester worry that he would get them confused. “Actually, I prefer Lester, not Les.”

“Really?” asked Burt. “That seems so, I don’t know, dorky. Les makes you sound more hip.”
“Yeah, Lester is a guy that would get pounded with a hammer in shop class,” Steve added. “But Les, that’s a guy who knows what he wants and has the confidence to get it.”

“Based on your criteria, I think you just made my point,” Lester responded. The thought of shop class still made his head sore.

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, you’re Les. You’ve already helped us out a great deal.” Steve then returned to a meatball.

A waiter stopped at the table, then looked suspiciously around the room. “The others are ready for you. They’re in the back.” He then walked away.

“Finish up your pizza, Les. We have a meeting to attend.” Burt finished his breadstick and wiped his mouth.

The three men soon walked down a hallway to a room in the back. The doorway was blocked by a curtain. Inside the room sat four men and five women. All eyes turned towards Lester, which reminded him of the talent show he had participated in back in grade school. At the time, he excelled at singing, so he entered the show to perform “Dancing in the Dark” by Bruce Springsteen. Halfway through, the sound equipment malfunctioned and started a small fire in the cafeteria. The irony of the incident seemed to be lost on the school principal.

Feeling a need to lighten the situation a little, and afraid that he was in a room needing to be monitored by the Feds, Lester stated, “Anyone catch last week’s Sopranos? Wow, what an episode.” His comment was met with blank stares. “Please don’t kill me.”

“Les, this isn’t the Mafia, they are other fans of the show. We brought you here to tell them what you told us.” Burt looked at his companions. “He’s a bit jumpy. I find it endearing.”

One woman sitting at the center of the table offered him a seat. “Tell us everything. Spare no details.”

Lester explained what he had overheard on the phone, then described his own conversation with Mr. Kerzec, such as it were. Panic seemed to dance in the eyes of each of the fans.

The woman who seemed to be in charge, who Lester determined was named Donna, looked at her friends. “We are reaching the endgame. Something must be done now, or all hope is lost.” There were murmurs of agreement.

A little confused by the tone of the room, Lester said, “You do realize it is just a show, right? I mean, I’m sorry if you liked it so much, but is all this conspiracy stuff really necessary?” This comment was met with gasps.

Donna looked accusingly at Lester. “Have you seen the show? Do you understand what it is we are trying to save? It is no ordinary show; it’s a way of life. Look at all of the trash on television these days. Tilt is a diamond in the rough, and that diamond is about to be pawned! Just a show, you say? I think not!”

The room had suddenly turned against Lester, who had previously been something of a hero to them for having inside information. He needed to fix the situation, and fast. “You may be right. I haven’t seen the show. I’ve been pretty busy lately.”

Donna smiled. “Then you are in luck.” She stood and opened a nearby closet. Inside was a television on a rolling stand. She turned it on and pressed “play” on the attached VCR. Over the next twelve hours, Lester was made familiar with the world of Tilt. More
importantly, he was made aware of Rachel Owens, the actress who played the love interest in the show.

As the last credits rolled, Lester made a decision. “I’m in.”

Burt and Steve dropped Lester off at his apartment. As he entered, he was greeted by the image of a tail scurrying away from the door. He had forgotten to pick up a mouse trap. “You shall live to see another day, my hairy little friend. But mark my words, once I get a trap, Heaven help you.” He ate a light snack and lay down to sleep. He drifted into unconsciousness to the tune of “Smokin’ in the Boys Room.”

“Hey Les, how’s life treating you?” Paul was his usual self this morning. Lester chose to follow through with the routine.

“Like I ran over its puppy.” God bless Norm Peterson, he thought.

“I hear you, buddy. Hey, listen. I heard Kerzu was in a bad mood yesterday. Did he give you any trouble?”

Afraid this was some sort or trap, Lester gave an obscure answer. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

“Great. I’m glad to hear that. Then you won’t have any problems with taking him today’s mail. It’s over there in the usual spot.”

A quick inspection of himself ruled out the possibility Lester had thought of that he was wearing some sort of target. “Are you sure, Paul? I mean, I don’t want to hog the job if someone else wants to take it.”

“Nonsense! You’re good at it. That, and everyone down here is terrified of him. If you do this two days in a row, some people around here are going to consider you a hero.”

Lester found this hard to believe, since he was certain that most of his coworkers already despised him due to a mishap on his first day. At lunch time that day, he was sent out to get lunch at a local deli. The deli messed the order up, and all blame was placed squarely on Lester’s shoulders. The rest of the day, no one was willing to hold elevators for him. Since then, the only thing any of the others had said to him was “Don’t screw it up.” He had never washed his hands so thoroughly as he did that moment in the restroom.

“Okay, I’ll take it. But before I do, could you remind me what kind of health benefits we get?” Paul chuckled, patted his back, and walked away.

Reginald Kerzeu liked to think of himself as a lion. He was king of the jungle, only his jungle was an urban one. He had the final say in all matters, and if he didn’t like something, it ceased to be. One way or another. That said, it drove him crazy having to deal with sponsors. They always liked to remind him who it was that paid for the programming on his network. Instead of telling them where they could stick their advertisements, he had to agree that they were the lifeblood of the network. It made him sick. Fortunately, he had an entire department to deal with it, but occasionally he had to talk with them himself. He had just finished a conversation with one regarding an ad in that day’s trade magazine. The anger was just starting to fade when his new secretary’s voice interrupted him. “We got today’s mail, Reggie.” Reginald charged out the door.
Lester was on his way to the elevator after giving the secretary the mail. Her name was Lila and she was quite attractive, but he had spent five minutes watching her try to figure out how to operate the intercom, leading him to believe it was not her secretarial skills that convinced Mr. Kerzcu to hire her. Just as he pressed the elevator button, he heard a yell. “Hey, you! Stop!” He quickly turned around to see Mr. Kerzcu running, waving a magazine all the way.

“What can I help you, sir?” Lester doubted the yelling and running was due to a sudden need for a camera operator, so he prepared for the worst.

“I want you to gather each copy of this magazine that came in today and burn them.” He threw it at Lester, causing well-trained mechanisms to kick in. Not to catch it, but to cover his face and head. The magazine fell to the floor, so he picked it up. Without even looking, he knew what had caused this outburst. Steve had explained to him yesterday that today’s issue would have an ad promoting the show that was paid for by the fans. Steve had been proud of it since he came up with the line used, which was “Don’t Let This Be GAME OVER For Tilt!” Steve thought he was incredibly clever for coming up with it. Lester only mildly agreed.

Lester collected all the copies as he was told to do, but rather than burn them, he kept them. He knew a lot of the fans were wanting copies of it because of the ad, so he figured he could post these on eBay and make a few bucks. Of course, now that he found himself in love with the show, he would keep a couple for himself.

At lunch time, instead of eating with the rest of the mailroom workers, he went outside and stood there. He was told the previous night that he could help Steve and Burt on a mission, though he was unaware of what that mission would be. They assured him that he would not get in trouble for leaving work early, since it would be “taken care of,” so Lester tried to not worry about it.

The Caprice soon pulled up and Lester got in. It only took a moment to notice something was different with Steve and Burt. They both had handlebar moustaches. Not only handlebar moustaches, but ones that were very clearly fake, since the black colors did not match up with the light hair the two of them had. “Um, maybe this is a stupid question, but what’s the deal with the moustaches?”

The two men grinned. “You like them? It was my idea.” Another brilliant Steve innovation. “We have to be in disguise for this one. Can’t let anyone recognize us. I don’t want us to draw too much attention to ourselves. I brought an extra. Want it?”

“I think I’ll pass. A moustache like that, it that killed my brother.” Lester really began to question what it was about these two that made them the best candidates for any sort of mission. “What are we doing, anyway? No one explained it to me.”

Burt answered. “Tilt is filming its last episode this week. Thanks to our sponsors, we are going to the set under the pretense of being interviewers from an arcade magazine to talk to some of the cast and crew. We’re going to try to find out if they know the show is being cancelled and perhaps why Brent Harris wants it gone so badly.”

This all seemed completely insane to Lester, but it was getting him out of work, so he didn’t mind. Besides, maybe the lovely Rachel Owens would be there. “Wait a minute, what sponsors? Who set this up?”

Burt and Steve looked at each other. “Go ahead,” Steve said. “We can trust him.”

Burt explained. “As you know, the fans’ campaign to save the show has been quite costly. A lot of the money has come from the various fans on a website, but that hasn’t
been enough to cover it all. The rest of the money has come from a group of people who have business-related interests in whether or not the show stays on the air. They have helped support our cause, but prefer to do it behind the scenes. In fact, the two of us work for some of them and that’s how we’ve been able to take all this time working on the project.”

“I was wondering why you two never seemed to work.” For some reason, Lester had just assumed that they were street mimes. That wasn’t surprising however, since he always assumed that strangers were street mimes. It had lead to several uncomfortable situations in his past. “So who are these secret sponsors, anyway?”

“You’ll meet them later. They want to know what we find out. If we dig up any information on Brent Harris, they might be able to take him out of the picture.”

Thoughts of the Mafia again surfaced in Lester’s mind. Whoever these sponsors were, they sure seemed to have some influence in the world. His imagination ran rampant, and before long he was picturing a secret government agency that was using the show to send messages to undercover agents throughout the world. It was possible that if this mission went well, he’d be offered a job as an agent, with a badge and everything. It was no camera-operating job, but it still sounded cool.

Not too much time passed and a familiar site came into view. It was the set of The Grinning Yak, the arcade in the show. Lester felt like he had been transported into a different world. He saw some of the crew carrying things around. He thought he even saw one of the actors eating a bagel. The Caprice parked and reality struck him. They were about to go undercover.

“Here’s the plan,” Steve said. “Burt will stay in the car in case we need to make a quick getaway. If our cover is blown, I don’t know how they will react. Les—”

“Lester.”

“I’m telling you, if you ever want anyone to respect you, it’s gotta be Les. Les, you’ll be on recorder duty, and I’ll be the interviewer. I’ll be going by the name Niles Corey. Any questions?”

Lester thought of something. “Yeah, if Burt is just going to sit here in the Caprice the whole time with the tinted windows, why did he need to wear a handlebar moustache?”


This didn’t adequately explain it, but Lester was pretty sure he wasn’t going to get a straight answer, so he dropped the subject. “Let’s do this.”

“Thank you for your time. We really appreciate it.” The stage hand nodded and walked away. He was the sixth person Lester and Steve had interviewed, and the sixth who knew nothing useful other than expecting the show to be cancelled. They all seemed to have accepted it already. It was quite disheartening.

“Les, I think we’re not going to get anywhere here. You’d think the people involved in making this show would be even more passionate about it than ourselves.”

Lester was about to agree when something caught his attention. Across the room, in all of her splendid glory, was Rachel Owens. Lester felt lightheaded. “Um, uh, Steve, I, that’s a, I mean, look over there.” He pointed to what he could only describe as an angelic figure placed on this green earth so that others could believe in a higher power.
“Great!” exclaimed Steve. “We can interview her! If anyone knows or cares about
the show, it’d have to be one of the two main stars.”

“Wait! We’re actually going to talk to her? Are you sure we should bug her? She’s
probably too busy.” In truth, Lester was just too terrified to move, much less initiate a
conversation with the actress.

“Don’t worry, I’ll do the talking. You just remember to record it.”

The two walked over to Rachel and waited until she made eye contact. “Excuse me,
Ms. Owens, but I am Niles Corey from the Arcade Gazette and I was hoping we could
interview you for a few minutes.”

The actress smiled, melting any sort of thought processes Lester had managed to
retain up to this point in her close proximity. “Sure! I’ve got a little bit of time before
we start shooting.”

“Thanks a lot. There has been a lot of discussion about whether or not the show will
be renewed for next season. I hear that the fans of the show have really been supportive.
Just today they even placed an ad in a popular trade magazine. A very clever one, if I do
say so.” Steve couldn’t resist promoting his brainchild.

“Well, the fans have been great. It’s wonderful to know that we’ve managed to touch
so many people’s lives with our show. The writers are always so…” An odd look spread
across Rachel’s face. “There seems to be a little problem with, um, your…” She pointed
at Steve’s face.

Steve reached up to feel his moustache dangling from his lip. His eyes shot wide open
and he panicked. “Abort! Abort! We’ve been compromised!” He ran towards the exit
without looking back, leaving a very nervous and flustered Lester alone with the actress.

“Is your friend alright? He doesn’t seem too well.”

Eternity passed before Lester realized she was speaking to him. “Oh, him? He’s,
well, he’s very weird.”

“You said it, not I. Was that a fake moustache?”

“Um, yes. He was recently involved in a tragic shaving accident. It’s his way of
coping.”

Music sounded in Lester’s ears, which he soon identified as Rachel’s laughing.

“Well, I hope he recovers soon. I don’t like moustaches anyway.”

Lester was suddenly incredibly glad that he had not accepted the offer to wear one
himself. “Yeah, me neither.”

“What is your name, anyway? I didn’t catch it.”

A moment of uncertainty passed. Recent conversations weighed heavily upon
Lester’s mind, and he was forced to make a decision. “Les. My name is Les Fibes.”

“Les. I like that. It’s not a name you hear everyday. Les Fibes makes me think of an
FBI agent or something.”

Lester, or rather Les, laughed at this nervously. “Yeah, that’s me. Don’t tell anyone,
but I’m working undercover. My usual job is working in a mailroom.”

Rachel laughed, and Les smiled. He realized that he was digging his grave a little
deeper, but he just didn’t care anymore.

“Then I’ll know who to talk to next time I’ve got a letter to mail.” A ring tone
sounded. Rachel pulled a cell phone out of her pocket. She looked at the caller ID and
frowned. “Excuse me for just a moment.”
Les tried to avoid looking like he was eavesdropping on her conversation, which was made more difficult by the fact that he was listening quite intently.

"Hello? Yes, I know who this is. Do you think my mind has changed since last time we talked? Come to my senses?!? My senses would have to take a complete leave of absence for me to—what? I don’t care what you think, I told you how I feel about it.” There was a long pause as Rachel listened to the caller. Apparently the call ended, because she hung up and looked frustrated.

“Wrong number?” joked Les. He was hoping he could get her to explain the call.

“Ooh, that jerk. How many times do I have to tell him no.”

“Ah, your agent then. They never learn.”

Rachel calmed down a little. “No, I wish. That was that human waste, Brent Harris.”

Les’s heart skipped a beat. Brent Harris? The mission objectives suddenly came to mind. “That guy? What did he want, if you don’t mind my asking. You didn’t seem to be on friendly terms.”

“Well, do you promise to not put it in the magazine?

Lester stopped the recorder. “I promise. It’s between you and me.”

“He’s been driving me crazy lately. Ever since we met at a charity event a few months ago he keeps calling me, asking to date him sometime. As you probably know, he doesn’t have a great reputation with relationships. I told him I didn’t feel like being his flavor of the month, but he is persistent. Just now when I told him no, he went off on me, saying that soon I won’t have a choice. He says that the show will be canceled, and that when it is, I’ll be begging to date him just so my career doesn’t die with the series.”

Time stood still. In a few sentences, Rachel had just answered nearly every question he had regarding the show, Brent Harris, and everything. This was it. The mission was complete.

“Wow, that’s harsh. What kind of ego must he have to think you would date him just because the show is canceled?”

Rachel frowned. “The talk around here is that it will be canceled. The few movies I have done were less than successful. If I don’t have this show, I’m not sure what I’ll do. I’d hate to have to rely on commercials. That wouldn’t last long anyway.”

Deciding to continue with his newfound courage, Les decided to go all out. “Are you kidding? You’re talented, friendly, and let us not forget beautiful. I’m no director, but the world would have to be crazy if you aren’t offered parts in other projects.”

Rachel smiled. “That’s sweet. I hope others see it your way.” She paused and looked down for a moment. “I noticed you don’t have a ring. Single?”

Back in junior high, in gym class, Les had been minding his own business when a bully “accidentally” hit him in the gut with a metal bat. Three times. Then, as Les fell to the ground, another kid “accidentally” mistook his limp body as home plate. All the sensations that those experiences instigated paled in comparison to the overwhelming hodgepodge of emotions raging through Les’s body now. Had he somehow slipped through a portal to a parallel universe? Or maybe the mouse in his apartment gave him rabies and he was now in a hospital somewhere, undergoing some severe drug-induced illusions. Either way, Rachel Owens was staring at him, expecting some sort of indication that he was still living.

“Single? Oh yeah. I am. We can’t all be Brent Harris, after all.”

“Thank God for that.”
Someone in the room yelled “Five minutes!”
Rachel looked at Les. “I’m going to have to get going, but let me give you this.” She grabbed a pen and some paper that were sitting on a nearby table. “Give me a call sometime. Maybe we can continue the interview over dinner.”
She handed Les a paper with her phone number on it and walked away. Les clutched the paper like it was his still-beating heart trying to escape his body. He mindlessly made it to the exit and found the Caprice parked outside. He got inside and tried to not pass out.
“We were worried about you,” Burt said. “James Bond here said the mission was doomed. We were afraid they were questioning you.”
Les looked at the two men at first with an expression of wonderment, then with a smile. “I got it. Everything. And then some.”
Burt grinned. “Excellent! You can fill us in on the way to our sponsors.” The Caprice’s engines roared to life.

A sense of déjà vu struck Les as the Caprice pulled into another parking lot, at another arcade. This one was not a set, but a regular, fully functional gaming location. “We’re meeting the sponsors here? These people must really love the show.”
Burt shook his head. “Some of them do, but it isn’t the show itself that makes them interested. It’s the effects of the show. They’ll explain, I’m sure. They always love talking about themselves.”
It was like the Italian restaurant all over again. The three of them went to a room in the back of the arcade, filled with a group of people. Les recognized some of them from the restaurant, including Donna. At the table in the front of the room sat several men in suits. In front of the table stood three chairs, in which Les, Steve, and Burt soon found themselves sitting.
The man at the center of the table spoke. “Les, we’ve heard much about you. We thank you for your efforts these last couple of days. We will repay you in some way, if we can.”
“Thanks. Glad I could help.” Les was surprised at how calm he felt with all these eyes on him. His usual flashback to the talent show fire came and went without any anxiety.
“I should start out by introducing myself. My name is Jason Salonga, and I run a chain of arcades. In fact, all the people at this table own arcades. We united some time ago so that we could work together to strengthen the arcade industry. Together, we can accomplish much, and thanks to the dedication of some of our people, we have spread widely. Nearly every facet of society is in some way associated with us. We can’t always influence events the way we like, but we can try. And we have ears everywhere.”
Doesn’t look like I’ll be getting a badge after all, thought Les. He had been working for a secret society of arcade owners. Somehow, that really didn’t seem anywhere near as cool as the CIA.
“While we have become a force to be reckoned with, we are not all-powerful. We still have to deal with costs of running the arcades. With the internet and all the home gaming systems, people have plenty of options. Many adults don’t see arcades as establishments for all ages, but rather for kids only. We have made some progress in changing those thoughts, but we’ve had help. You see, when Tilt began to air, many of us watched it just
to see how the arcade was portrayed. To our surprise, not only was the arcade respected in the show, but the stories were fantastic and amusing, even when they didn’t have anything to do with the arcade itself. The show didn’t become a major hit, but it had a fan base that watched it religiously.” Jason took a sip of water. Les felt like he was in a class or something.

“Then, something happened we did not expect. The show caused many of its viewers to start visiting arcades more. Even adults without kids were coming in to see if the arcade could be as quaint and quirky a place as the Grinning Yak on the show. Business was good. The show did in a short time what we had been spending years attempting to do."

Things were finally coming together for Les. The craziness from the last two days actually had reason behind it.

“When we heard the show was likely going to be canceled, we were concerned. We still are. We don’t know if business and public image will drop, or if the effects of the show will linger. That’s why we decided to become involved. Fans of the show had already begun a letter-writing campaign to save it, but their funds were limited. That’s where we came in. We pooled our resources together and helped the campaign financially. Ads, radio spots, billboards, and whatever else we could think of were used to promote it. We have been cautiously optimistic, but then we found out that you overheard that snake Kerzcu planning to cancel it. We don’t know what to do now. So tell us, what did you learn at the set?”

It took a moment for Les to realize it was his turn to talk. He explained everything that happened at the set. Well, almost everything. He chose to leave out Steve’s moustache difficulties, as well as the less relevant aspects of this discussion with Rachel. Everyone in the room seemed shocked.

Jason sighed. “Brent Harris wants the show canceled just so he has a better chance at dating Rachel Owens because he thinks he’ll save her career? That’s ridiculous! What should we do? What can we do?”

Everyone seemed to expect Les to have an answer. He thought about what to say, but didn’t like it. “I think, and I know you won’t like this, but I think that there is nothing that can be done. I think we’re going to have to accept the cancellation.”

This answer was met with gasps. Jason was the first to speak. “You can’t be serious! After all we’ve done, we can’t just give up now.”

“That’s my point,” Les said. “You’ve done everything possible. Unless you have some way of rewriting Kerzcu’s mind, the show is over and Brent Harris will be hosting a reality show next season.”

There was nothing to say. Reality was sinking into everyone’s mind. Game over, after all.

“That’s it, then,” Donna said. “Our weekly escape is over. No more visits to the Grinning Yak, no more anything.”

The room was silent. Some people left. Soon, Les was in the Caprice again, with Steve and Burt. They dropped him off at his apartment, where he sat and contemplated the previous two days while enjoying the sounds of “Sticky Sweet.”

“Hey Les, how’s life treating you?”
“Not too badly, Paul. Yourself?” Les seemed to have taken Paul by surprise by answering positively.

“Oh, well, okay I guess. Can’t complain. Hey, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Mr. Kerzcu’s office, right? What is it this time?”

“Just the usual. No crazy fan stuff today.”

Les took the mail and went to the elevator. At least the network president shouldn’t be mad anymore. Maybe today he could avoid being yelled at. Even if he did get yelled at, it wouldn’t matter. He planned to call Rachel that night. Things were going great. It was a shame about the show, but it would have ended eventually anyway. Nothing would go wrong today.

The elevator doors opened to reveal Reginald Kerzcu and Brent Harris standing side by side. Les nearly screamed. “Sir, I, uh, have your mail.”

Reginald took it without even paying much attention to the person who gave it to him. He and Brent stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the ground floor. “Just wait, Brent. You’ll be glad you did this. The show is going to be big. Bigger than big. Monstrously huge.”

“Of course it will be. I’ll be in it. That alone should at least get women to watch it.”

The two chuckled. Les felt sick.

“I can’t wait to get this over with. The wrap party for Tilt is today. I’ll go there and tell them personally that the show is over. I don’t even care if the network loses some viewers over it. They’ll get over it. I’ve had enough of those crazy fanatics.”

“Great,” said Brent. “I’ll go with you. You never know, a certain Ms. Owens may need a shoulder to cry on.”

The doors opened and the two men got out, leaving a startled Les. Now, it was personal. He needed to do something, but what? It was at times like these that he asked himself what his personal heroes would do. Unfortunately, he doubted either Sanford or his son had been trying to do something like this. All he had at his disposal was an army of fans and a wish to be a camera operator.

Then it hit him. It may not accomplish much, but at least it would be a fitting end to this whole debacle. He had some calls to make.

The Caprice came to a sudden stop. Les threw open the door. “Did you bring it?”

“Yeah, we got it,” said Steve.

“Good.” Les jumped into the back seat. “Gentlemen, we ride.” Burt stomped on the accelerator.

They made it to the set to find that the others had beat them. Hundreds of fans were there. The word had spread quickly. All of the fans were holding signs. Some thanked the cast for the show, some congratulated them on a great job, and others said that they would be missed. Les turned on the camcorder he had Steve and Burt bring and started filming. At least for today, he would be a camera operator.

Much of the cast and crew came out to see the fans. Some signed autographs. In the crowd, Les saw Mr. Kerzcu. If he was mad, he wasn’t showing it. He even seemed cordial. Les tried to locate Rachel, and eventually did. She noticed him and waved. He waved back. Then his heart sank as Brent Harris stepped close to her began talking. Soon, neither of them could be seen.
Les spent hours filming the fans and cast. He had fans tell him about their love for the show and how it had affected them. A couple cast members even talked at length about making the show. Everyone was enjoying themselves, even if this was the end of the show. Many of the people from the restaurant and arcade were there, as well as many Les had never seen. Les was glad just to be part of it.

Les Fibes awoke to a light buzzing sound. His new alarm clock was working as expected. He slowly got out of bed. He didn’t miss sleeping on the floor at all. As he prepared to take a shower, he saw a furry shape run across the kitchen floor. “Good morning, Harry, how are you today?” He had decided to drop his vendetta against the mouse. Live and let live, he figured.

After eating, he went downstairs and waited for a ride to work. He soon saw a familiar Caprice coming down the road. He no longer worked for the network. A better offer had come along, so he took it. Burt stopped the car and Les got into the passenger seat. It was Steve’s day off, so he wasn’t present.

They pulled into work and got out of the car. Les looked at the building, amazed at how much his life had changed in the past month. After the wrap party for Tilt, the arcade union had pressured the network into selling the set used for the Grinning Yak so that it could be converted into an actual arcade for the public. Many fans loved going to the place they admired on television. Steve and Burt were appointed as co-managers for their work on trying to save the show. They then offered Les the position of assistant manager, which he took.

While opening the place and turning on games, Les listened to the radio that played overhead. The host of the show was doing her daily celebrity news.

“Actress Rachel Owens was signed on yesterday to play the female starring role in a new Brent Harris movie. This will be the first movie the two lovebirds have been in together. This also comes after rumors spread that Brent spent a night with a prostitute in Las Vegas and sold drugs to a group of fourteen year-olds in San Diego.”

Les sighed. After the wrap party, Rachel and Brent began dating. He never bothered to call her, since it seemed pretty pointless now. Each day he listened to the news in hopes of hearing that the two broke up, but so far they had stuck together. At least he could take some comfort in all the bad press Harris had been getting lately. Tilt may be over, but the arcade union was going to make Harris suffer for it, even if most of the “evidence” they used was fabricated.

“Hey Les, there’s a note back here from yesterday. Apparently some woman wants to hire you for a wedding. I’ll leave it on your desk.”

“Thanks, Burt.” The footage Les had filmed at the wrap party lead to a few things. The network paid Les for the rights to use some of it on an upcoming DVD collection of Tilt as a special feature. He used this money to buy some video and audio equipment, which he was now using as part of his new business. He was a camera operator for hire, doing such events as weddings, birthdays, and any other special occasion. Between the money coming in from that and the arcade job, he was in a good place financially. Soon, he’d move to a better apartment, or maybe even rent a house with Steve and Burt.

“Hey Les, put these tickets in the bowling game, will you?” Burt threw a roll of tickets to Les, who caught it instead of ducking for cover.

“No problem, Burt.”
Red

Oh, my dear red friend. I wish you would go,
go steady but quiet.
For five years you have been true.
Only three days and I miss you.
For seven days a week we were close.

To see you from afar would be close enough. You’re always waiting and ready to carry me home when I need to go somewhere else where happiness is true.
You don’t say anything, usually quiet.

I never understand your quietness when others get close.
Yet you get upset, I know it’s true.
Your insides turn red
and you’re reluctant to go.
I have to plead and beg you.

Your friend before left you
alone, scared, and abandoned in the quiet world. But I found out and had to go
save you. It was not close
but the signs that are red
didn’t stop me from being true.

You looked pretty bad and the stories were true.
You had a rough life and you
needed some love. Makeup of red
made you new and a new wardrobe made you quiet.
I like to hold you close
and what a rush when we go.

I’m not sure where the next road will go.
We’re growing distant and your not so true.
We’ll be together Friday, a chance to be close,
to see how things happen with me and you.
If we separate, I’m sure you’ll keep quiet
about all our secrets that make us turn red.

We’ve had lots of fun, so if it’s true that it’s time to go,
I’ll always remember you as my first, and always hold you close
to my heart as my very special quiet little car of red.

Stacey Phillips
Sestina

“Could I ask you on a date?
Are you busy on the night
Of our school’s last dance?”
I shyly look at him and laugh
“Of course I would love
to go. Here is my address.”
With friends I go to buy a dress.
We are all anticipating our big dates
and hoping to find love
on our prom night.
We find our outfits and start to laugh
as we jokingly practice our dance.
On the day of the dance
I am nervous as I dress.
My mother begins to laugh.
Obviously, she has not seen my date.
Of course the night
is now approaching. Am I pretty enough to love?
You look lovely,”
he says on the way to the dance.
“What a perfect night!”
I thought, before I dropped sauce on my dress.
In horror, I looked to my date.
“Yum!” he said with a laugh.
We arrive and are laughing.
“You are definitely falling in love,”
says my friend, already hiding from her date.
“Would you like to dance?”
he asks with a smile. I gather my dress
and we waltz into the night.
As the hour approaches midnight,
we can hardly contain our giggles or laughter.
“You are beautiful in your dress.”
he says. “And I would love
To see you again.” We pack our things to leave the dance.
I will forever remember the date.
As we say goodnight, we know our love
is true. We address each other with a laugh.
We dance under the moonlight, never wanting to end the date.

*Erica Tenholder*
Uncertain

Glasses, side by side, and I am the balance,
to keep order from becoming disorder as I walk across,
the terrain, rocky and unfaithful, trembling loud,
but still I stride—left, then right—until it becomes
apparent that gravity is bolder than I, as order,
once contained on an opened hand, exists no more.

The spectators’ gaze, first quick, then once more,
was hardly enough to keep the glasses in balance.
Like fallen soldiers on the battlefield, they fell in order.
A crash, than shatter, welcomed the guests across
the way, just in case they weren’t aware that their drinks had become
ice for the floor. No spectators allowed.

I serve you a meal. Why so loud?
Laughing at my jokes, still wanting more?
A nervous wreck is what I have become.
Your approval and my job in the balance,
has formed the battle lines—an unyielding border,
that in this situation, we dare not walk across.

A group of animals spanning the room all the way across,
they can’t wait for the remedy. No mistakes allowed.
Hundreds of pairs of eyes fixing on me for their order.
What do you want, what more?
How do I blame the ground for losing our balance?
Not even they knew what the situation would become.

Remedy is given. You want more to come?
Would you give me a gesture, a sign, something that reaches across?
Of this matter, what would create balance?
Please be grateful for clean shoes & floor. Am I allowed
your conclusion: a voice, a gesture, a quarter, more?
In regard to what happens, what I become, what order.

You will decide the order.
Are you an easy person letting balance come,
Or one uptight causing me to loiter more?
I’m looking at you all the way across,
Is forgetfulness such a chore, is it allowed?
Or unemployed will I become. Is that the balance?

Alan Seaton
The Call

He dials the common numbers.
He listens to the same ring.
Waiting for the usual voice, he wonders,
Whatever happened to their happy ending?

She says hello and he does the same.
With the very word, she senses heartbreak.
Choking back the tears, she whispers his name.
With the same terror in his voice, he begins to shake.

The familiarity is suddenly gone.
He doesn’t even know where to begin.
But he pushes himself, he must go on.
It’s time to start to make the end.

She listens silently for the worst.
He tells the story that now its over.
She is struck down by his evil curse.
There goes her luck, her four-leaf clover.

He hangs up and starts to cry.
Why doesn’t love last forever?
She will be better with their goodbye.
He will never get it together.

Erica Tenholder
Halloween

Billy Candycorn was all dressed up,
with his spider man suit
and his face painted too.

He helped his sister, Candy get her leotards on
for she was a princess
with a golden crown.

They both ran down the stairs
and yelled for their mom,
“We’re ready for Halloween!”

Their mom gave them each a pumpkin bucket.
They jumped in the car
and fastened their seatbelts.

Their first stop was their neighbors, the Almonds.
They ran to the door and yelled, “Trick or Treat!”
Old granny smiled and gave them each a toothbrush.

With confused looks, they ran to the car
and drove to Aunt Starburst’s.
They rang the door bell and yelled, “Trick or Treat!”

Aunt Starburst first put pink kisses on each cheek,
then she gave them each an orange and banana.
They walked back to the car and sighed.

“We want candy, not fruit.”
“Maybe the next house will be better,” said mom.
The last house was their bus driver, Mr. Goodbar.

They skipped to the door and yelled, “Trick or Treat!”
He opened the door and grinned great big.
He handed them each a bag full of candy.

They jumped with joy and ran to the car.
“We got candy from Mr. Goodbar,”
Their mother warned them to just eat a little.

By the time they got home,
they had each finished their bag
and were both so full they could hardly move.
They were tucked into bed
and said their prayers,
but within a few hours, it all happened.

Billy was first, then Candy.
They woke up their mom because of their tummy aches.
They each began to cry.

Mom gave them medicine
and let them sleep with her and dad.
She told them they were sick because of all the candy they ate.

The next morning, Billy got out his pumpkin
and all that was left was fruit and a toothbrush.
He told his mom, “Now, I understand.

The treat is the candy, but it’s also a trick because
you get sick if you eat too much. And the fruit and toothbrush are tricks
because they end up being the treats.”

*Stacey Phillips*

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**Baseball**

**AS THE KIDS ARRIVED AT THE BALLPARK**

**THEY BEGAN TO UNLOAD THEIR BATS AND BALLS**

**FANS WERE BUYING POPCORN AND FILLING THE STANDS**

**BY THE END OF THE GAME THE KIDS WERE TIRED AND COVERED WITH DIRT**

**THEY COULDN’T WAIT TO GET HOME AND REST**

**UNTIL THE NEXT DAY AT THE BALLPARK**

*Brian Morris*
Winter’s Great Mistake

Winter’s fury has settled in to stay.  
As cold winds blow, people merely become  
Bundles of their clothes, wondering each day  
If ever again they will be blessed with sun.

But inside as they all huddle so close  
And warm by the fire, gloom melts away.  
Laughter spreads through the room. They raise a toast.  
“We wish much happiness this Christmas Day!”

Families remember their luck and love.  
Enemies forget their woes and worries.  
The gentle snow that falls from up above  
Is accidently more than just flurries.

It warms winter hearts of those together  
Peacefully making it through worse weather.

_Erica Tenholder_

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Haiku

Waking up early  
To study for organic.  
The joy of Stlcop.

_Stacey Phillips_