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“Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced.
What was inside it and what was outside it
depended upon which side of it you were on.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*

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Let's Face It

Daniel M. Jaffe

If Albert's gotta watch another episode of Dennis the Menace, he'll lose his freaking mind. They stick a brain mush marathon on TV, then go and hide the remote. Mom doesn't give a damn as long as Albert holds her cold chicken-skin hand.

Least they could do is put on decent TV. Albert didn't shlep across country to visit Mom in her insane asylum—harsh, he thinks, but let's face it, that's what this place is—in order to be treated like a child. He's 70, for God's sake. Or thereabouts.

He's sure that Julie would put on good TV. It'll be only 8:00 PM back home in Santa Barbara when he calls later and catches her after dinner (organic salad with Fairview Farms veggies and that stinky feta he can't abide)—early enough before she settles in to watch some chick flick she knows better than to grab at Blockbuster when he's in the house. Away only... how long?—time's a fuzziness that doesn't matter when you miss someone could be a day a week a month a year a decade. Calendars can't mark love.

Albert won't let Julie dye her hair because he saw the gray coming so it's his. She didn't take to the gray before he said, "More glittery silver than gray." They were strolling down State Street at night with the moon on her curls after some forgettable movie at Paseo Nuevo. Rare for them because they usually settle into their evening cozies by 8:00. She was holding his hand as is her way in public to make him think she thinks some other woman'll up and try to steal him. Nothing says I love you like jealousy, real or pretend. She lifted his hand to her lips when he said that about her silver chalice hairdo. That's the phrase he used, "silver chalice," which must have stuck in his head from some Errol Flynn swash-buckler from long-ago boyhood. A phrase worth remembering. A silver chalice moment.

See that, everybody?—a pretty lady just kissed Albert's hand because she's his lady. Oh, she huffs when he calls her his—holding

onto all that '70's feminist crap the way she does—but he's quick to tell her he's hers goose-for-gander, and if she likes his ass, she can whistle at it all she wants. She just shakes her head at that and tsks, but doesn't let go of his hand. Their pretend-bicker way going on 40 years.

Albert likes that she didn't like her hair turning gray, so that he could make her feel good about something she didn't like about herself.

Their living room at home's more cozy than this one at Mom's, which is oversized but not institutional-looking. Albert's gotta give 'em that much. If he didn't know this was an asylum, he wouldn't know this was an asylum: big flat-screen TV in the corner; light green cloth sofa long enough to seat three including the two stiffies sitting there now, holding hands but with blank expressions on their faces—mummified already? He'd take a brush to the old guy's white dandelion fluff and his lady friend's mussed red curls if anybody asked him, but Albert wouldn't just up and go over and brush hair without an invitation because who knows what might set 'em off? A lunatic is a lunatic is a lunatic. On the matching loveseat catty-cornered to the sofa, the poufy-haired peroxide blond is smothering a doll's plastic face with kisses. "Good baby, good baby." Must've been one hell of a mom in her day, the way she slobbers over that doll.

When Albert calls tonight, he won't tell Julie about Mrs. Poufy Hair because Julie couldn't have children. Not that Albert ever minded. Well, he minded, but not enough to hurt Julie's feelings even though she's the one put the kibosh on adopting, which he'd have been perfectly happy to do because, he figured, they could always buy a video of some other baby's birth—folks'll sell anything nowadays—and call it their own. They'd sit with Baby Albert or Baby Julie and point and watch and listen to the video birth mom scream and pant and breathe while the masked-gowned obstetrician grunted "Push! Push!" the way they do on TV, and Albert'd say, "You sure had a tough time of it, Julie." But Julie wouldn't have it; so—just the two of them night after night, week after

week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade, enjoying coziness on the sofa in front of their TV. Not the end of the goddamn world, just of Albert's family name.

Netty and Salvatore are parked against the wall in their wheelchairs, a few feet from Mrs. Poufy Hair and her baby doll. Netty is small with a gray bun on her head. A variety of warts dot her hooked nose and square jaw. Albert wonders what on earth Salvatore ever saw in her. Salvatore's taller and more broad-shouldered than Albert, with a thicker shock of white hair, gray eyes, and vertical creases from nostrils to chin that make his face look more a muzzle than a face, masculine the way women like—an old John Wayne boxery puss. Albert's is more Cary Grant dapper turned saggy. Both Netty and Salvatore are in black track pants, but Netty's wearing a white turtle neck that reminds Albert of Julie's favorite, and Salvatore's in a blue-striped Oxford shirt like Albert sometimes wears, but Albert keeps both tails tucked in, not one in and the other out. Sloppy. They look up at Dennis, then nod off. Bored as Albert is.

Netty turns and looks at Mrs. Poufy Hair, asks in a raspy voice, "Do you have somewhere to go?"

Mrs. Poufy Hair doesn't turn her head to Netty, just continues kissing her baby doll.

Netty says, "You've been sitting here in my house since 8:00 o'clock this morning. You've got to leave."

No response.

Netty turns to Salvatore, who's asleep. "She's been here all day and won't answer me." Salvatore doesn't wake.

Netty addresses Mrs. Poufy Hair again, "Is there someone I can call to come get you?"

No response.

Mom's asleep in her wheelchair at their table—her soft cheeks sloping lamb-like, her jowly jaw drooping open, her loose silver-gray braid dangling down her back—so Albert figures he might as well amble over and pass the time. He walks to Netty and explains that Mrs. Poufy Hair's "hard of hearing." He doesn't know how

he knows this, but he does. Sometimes he's amazed at his own perceptiveness.

"She's been in my house since 8:00 o'clock this morning," says Netty. "I don't even know her. Why'd they bring her to my house?"

"Maybe because they know you're a kind lady," Albert replies. Once a gentleman, always a gentleman.

"Well, thank you, but she can't stay. I've got three grandchildren. Two are adopted. I can't have strangers in my house."

"Want me to call her daughter to come get her?"

"Oh, would you? Thank you!"

Albert returns to his wood-backed chair beside Mom, and Netty explains to sleeping Salvatore that "this nice man's going to help."

Back at their table, Albert again takes Mom's cold chicken-skin hand. Feels soft. He's got no intention in hell of calling Mrs. Poufy Hair's daughter, especially not from the broken phone in his hotel room. He's not even sure the daughter gave him her number the last time he was here visiting from California. He just wants Netty to stop fussing about Mrs. Poufy Hair's daughter. For her sake. And, okay, maybe a little for Albert's own because Netty gets on his nerves. Each time he visits from California.

Not ten minutes go by when Netty's daughter really does come marching down the hall. Albert covers his mouth so Netty won't see him chuckle—there's no call to be mean.

As the daughter passes their table, she says to Albert, "Are you in from California today?" The first part of the question doesn't phase him, but he wonders about that "today." Like he comes from a different place every day. Where the hell else would he be coming from if not California?

He just nods without making a fuss because, well, she's a pretty one with that long blond hair of hers and cute curves beneath loose yellow blouse and slacks. It's not every day Albert gets to see cute curves except on TV when they show something other than children's shit.

The woman crouches beside Mrs. Poufy Hair and yells directly into her ear, "Hi, Mom, it's me!"

Smiles and cheek kisses.

Netty leans forward in her wheelchair and asks the daughter eagerly, "Is she your relative?"

"Yes, Netty, she's my mother."

"Oh good." Netty looks over at Albert and nods. He's surprised she's holding onto the train of thought. "Your mother's been in my house since 7:00 this morning. She just wandered in. Probably doesn't know where she is. It's very sad. I gave her something to eat, but she can't stay. I've got three grandchildren. Two are adopted."

"That's nice," says the daughter.

"Are you taking your mother home?" asks Netty.

"No, she's staying here."

"Here? What do you mean, here? In my house?"

"Here," replies the daughter, her tone staying don't-mess-with-me flat. "She's staying here."

"For how long?" asks Netty.

"As long as she needs to."

"Mamma mia, that's impossible. She cannot stay in my house."

The daughter looks away from Netty, slips her arm under her mother's and lifts her to standing. She yells into Mrs. Poufy Hair's ear, "Come on, Mom, let's take a walk!" And off they shuffle into the dining room.

"That's better. Thank you," Netty calls after her. "It's very sad," she calls to Albert. "She just wandered into my house."

"Very sad," he replies, forcing his face serious even though this is just too funny. He can't wait to call Julie tonight and tell her.

He'll call after he eats dinner with Mom and says good night. It'll be 11:00 PM here in New Jersey, but 8:00 PM back in California. He'll walk down the block to his hotel that's clearly been designed to resemble Mom's mental institution (let's face it, he thinks—that's what it is): the beige-striped wall paper, generic hanging prints of over-sized pink hydrangea and clusters of purple lilac, the shit-brown indoor-outdoor carpeting. Even the same hallway tableaux between guest-room doors: an old sewing machine here, a roll-top desk there, a couple coat racks with hanging floppy

hats and pink feather boas, even a crib full of dolls and stuffed teddy bears. Makes no sense why a hotel would bother with such nonsense, but maybe it appeals to lady guests on business trips away from their kids.

He can't recall why he chose this particular hotel—damn odd not to have a television in his room. Doesn't look like any Holiday Inn he remembers from vacations he and Julie took to the Grand Canyon and Yosemite. Probably chose it because it's close to Mom's dementia ward (let's face it, he thinks—that's what it is). Maybe there's just one interior design motif here in Cherryvale, NJ: suburban blah. Maybe hotels, asylums, and whatever else here all use the same interior decorator because, let's face it, how many interior decorators can a small suburb support? Sad, actually, because Albert gets kind of mopey in his room with the off-white paint peeling from ceiling corners.

Julie pokes her nose up with an index finger and says "Oink! Oink!" whenever he gets mopey, which he doesn't do so much nowadays, but which he did a lot back after that day mowing the lawn when he couldn't remember the neighbor's name. Neighbors for thirty years and suddenly he couldn't remember Bob's name—there it is: Bob. Albert's certainly tip top now, but that mowing day threw him.

"How are you this fine morning, Albert?" Bob asked that mowing day in that overly cheery way he had.

"Why, I'm fit as a fiddle, uh...uh—" Albert couldn't for the life of him think to say Mark or Sam or maybe Harry. thirty years. He settled on Billy, which was close, considering. "And how you feeling, Billy?" The neighbor squinted like waiting to see if this was some joke, then stammered that he had to dash back inside because he "forgot to tell Maggie something, I'm just so forgetful nowadays." Which excuse flustered him because he obviously didn't mean to talk about forgetfulness but that's clearly what was on his mind, so that's what he said. Must've telephoned Julie because when Albert went back in the house after sweeping up the grass clippings, Julie looked at him all concerned, took both his

hands, sat him down on their yellow sofa with gray flecks—see, he remembers everything now, he's fine—and asked if Albert was feeling all right, which he was except for the neighbor's name that made Albert understand Goldilocks for the first time—searching for something to fit just right. He told Julie he'd been chatting with their neighbor "B...B...Billy," as if he had a stutter.

Ever so softly, she said, "We don't have a neighbor 'Billy,' but we do have a 'Bob.'" And soon as Albert heard it, he knew it fit just right—"that's the one," he said, "Bob." Julie leaned in for a hug, and stroked the back of his neck the way Albert had taught her soothes him like they did roosters when he was a boy—from bottom of the neck to top, ruffling feathers (or hair) against the grain. Something soothing about a gentle feather/hair ruffle up against the grain. Albert loves the touch of her fingertips.

He chuckled and said, "Hey, if this touchy-touchy is what I get for saying 'Bob,' what'll I get for saying 'Bobby' or a full-fledged 'Robert?'" He was just teasing, trying to make light because he was no idiot and knew what had just happened but didn't want her to see him worry because he couldn't stand that watery look of hers.

Which he had to get used to in the years after. First with names that didn't come at all—like looking inside his head at a white smudge on a blackboard fresh after someone erased the chalk letters. Names disappeared first, and then people Julie said he knew but he couldn't for the life of him place, like Bob-from-next-door's son and the grandchildren. "Well, if I don't remember the son, I sure as hell won't remember the grandchildren, right? So, it's forgetting one thing, not two. Anybody can forget one thing now and then." Julie flashed that watery look. But things are okay now. Albert remembers everything just fine: BillyBob next door and his wife...the Mrs.... have a son named Frank who's married to Stella and they've got three kids: Winkin, Blinkin, and Nod.

Just the same, Julie still worries, especially when he travels cross-country to visit Mom. Julie knows he'd rather be in their evening coziness with his feet under the orange-and-green-striped afghan Mom crocheted while recovering from her hysterectomy

when Albert was 10. Julie snuggling on the sofa at his side beneath a fake sheepskin coverlet, munching unsalted pretzel nuggets. He cracking and snacking on shelled peanuts—still got his teeth, thank you very much. The two of them settling on some cooking competition show (for her), or grisly cop show (for him) or courtroom drama, or *Seinfeld* re-run (they both like adult re-runs)—she's the one reminds them which episode of what they've seen over and over because she's good at that, everything blurring for Albert not because of some problem but because—let's face it, he thinks—TV mind candy all tastes pretty much the same regardless of the channel. Sugar is sugar is sugar.

If only Mom could engage in conversation. If only they'd show news or sports or interesting movies on the living room TV instead of Hallmark drivel. If only the temperature wasn't so warm it makes him want to doze off like the inmates. It is what it is. He's gotta make the best of it for the rest of his visit, which is...how much longer is he booked for?

Netty calls out to him, "Sir! Oh, Sir!"

What does she want now? "Yes?" he asks, reminding himself to be polite to old ladies.

"Do I have to cook for all these people? You need to give me notice. I have to make spaghetti sauce a day ahead of time."

Boy, she's really off her rocker, this one. Better humor her or who knows what she'll do? Playing along, he asks, "Do you use oregano in your spaghetti sauce?" (Julie uses oregano.)

Netty rattles off, "Garlic, salt, oregano, tomatoes," ticking the list on her fingertips as she goes. Albert's always amazed how these lunatics remember certain things so well. Netty continues, "My mother always said, 'If you sleep late and miss church—no Sunday dinner.'"

"She was strict," says Albert.

"Italian women are strong." Netty grins broadly.

"Have you met Mom?"

"I haven't had the pleasure."

Mom's still asleep, so Albert checks that her feet in the black

velcro-latch shoes are firmly on the wheelchair peddles, then he unlocks the whole contraption and wheels her over to Netty. He points at Mom, and Netty nods. He drags his wood-backed chair over to sit by them, and forces himself to watch *Dennis the Menace* with Netty.

A few minutes later, Mom opens her eyes and looks in the direction of the TV.

Netty notices and says, "Where are you sleeping tonight?"

"Here." Mom looks at Albert, "right?"

He nods.

"Here?" asks Netty. "What do you mean—here? You can't sleep here."

"Sure she can," Albert says. He pretty much knows what's coming, but he's so damn bored: "Mom lives here."

"What do you mean she lives here?" Netty says. "In my house?"

"For three years now." Not that he actually remembers how long Mom's been living in this so-called Memory Care Neighborhood. But three's as good as two's as good as five.

"Three years in my house?" asks Netty.

"Yep, for sure."

Netty turns to Salvatore, who's awake now and dully watching the conversation. "Sal, this woman says she's been living in our house for three years. Do you know who she is? Is she one of your putanas?"

"What are you yapping about?" asks Salvatore.

"You've been hiding her here, haven't you?" accuses Netty. "In the basement, I bet. You know I won't go down there because of the spiders. How many putanas do you have hidden right under my very nose? And we've got three grandchildren, two of whom are adopted."

Salvatore turns his attention to Dennis.

Netty, eyes on fire, turns to Mom. "How dare you. In my own house!"

Mom stares blankly at Netty.

"I've got three grandchildren! Two are adopted. They come visit. I can't have strangers in my house, especially not a putana."

"Even if," Albert asks, "Mom was in the military?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your husband, Salvatore, was in the navy, right?" Another tidbit Albert doesn't know how he knows.

Salvatore perks up, slurs, "Lieutenant Commander."

"On a battleship," Netty adds with pride. "In the Pacific."

"After the War, Mom worked as a secretary in the Air Force. She's part of your big military family."

"Did she fool around with my husband during the War?" demands Netty.

"I'm sure she didn't. Mom, you didn't know Salvatore during the War, did you?"

"Oh, yes," says Mom. "My whole heart loved him."

"What!" says Netty, stabbing an arthritic finger in the air at Mom. "So, you're the one! All those months on that ship while I was home changing diapers. Lean forward, you hussy, I'll scratch your eyes out!"

Mom, unperturbed, stares at Netty.

Okay, Albert realizes he went too far. "Netty," he says, "Mom wasn't on any ship with Salvatore, but in the Air Force. In an office in Baltimore. Salvatore wasn't stationed in Baltimore, was he?"

"No," says Netty, calming down. "Never in Baltimore. In the Pacific. And then in San Diego."

"So you see—Mom and Salvatore never even met."

"Then why'd she say she loved him?"

"Mom loves everyone."

"Oh, I see," says Netty. "A good Christian." She nods approval.

"No, Mom's Jewish."

"Well, I guess she's one of the decent ones."

Is that an anti-Semitic crack? Should Albert let it slide?

"So," asks Netty, "where are you taking her to sleep?"

"She's staying here. You'll like having her around. She'll help you with the housework."

"I will?" asks Mom, shifting in her wheelchair.

"Oh no," says Netty. "I can't have that."

"Mom's great with children," Albert says.

"I don't know..."

Alicia, one of the health aides in khaki scrub top and beige slacks, enters the living room from the hallway. Albert finds her sexier than Mrs. Poufy Hair's blond daughter: big-busted yet graceful, thick black hair, always looking tanned like from the beach. Makes him think of Southern California. "Hola," he calls out. "Do health aides give sponge baths to visitors?"

Alicia smiles politely and says, "Hi, Mr. Albert, baths are on Sundays. Are you in from California today?"

Again with that "today" business. Where the hell else do these women think he comes from? Doesn't matter—from this one he'll take it.

"And," Alicia adds, looking at Mom, "I see that Miss Julie's looking well."

"Julie? Julie's back in Santa Barbara. This is Mom, don't you recognize her?"

"Of course, my mistake. I see so many people that sometimes I get confused. Hi, Mom!"

"Hello, darling," says Mom. "I love you."

"You're not the only one who gets confused," Albert explains to Alicia. "Netty doesn't want Mom 'in her house'."

"Yes, our Miss Netty's got that notion. Last night's shift people tell me Miss Netty wouldn't go to bed until they got all these strangers out of her house."

"Who can go to sleep with strangers in your living room?" asks Netty. "I've got three grandchildren. The adopted two are little girls. You can't allow strangers in the house when you've got little girls."

"You're a good grandma," says Alicia. "Miss Netty, I came to check if you might need to go to the ladies room."

"Thank you, yes, now that you mention it. Salvatore—" says Netty to her sleeping husband—"I'll be back in a few minutes, so don't you go messing with that one." She jerks a thumb at Mom.

Alicia wheels Netty out.

Albert watches Dennis mess up something or other for his TV neighbor, Mr. Wilson. Meanwhile, Netty's anti-Semitic remark is sticking in Albert's craw. He thinks for a bit, then decides to do her a not-so-nice turn: he wheels Mom's chair into Netty's empty spot beside Salvatore. Then he taps Salvatore's hand until he wakes.

"Why are you poking me?" Salvatore mutters.

"I want to introduce you and Mom. Mom, this is Salvatore."

Mom looks at him and says, "Hello, darling."

"Hello there," says Salvatore, perking up enough to sport a big grin. "Pretty braid you got there." He leans forward, reaches over Mom's shoulder and strokes her single, silvery gray braid.

"What are you doing?" asks Mom.

"Yeah, what are you doing?!" cries Netty as Alicia wheels her back into the living room. "You son of a bitch!" Netty yells. "You cheated on me!"

"What the hell you whining about now?" he asks, yanking back his hand like he was just stroking fire.

"I caught you red-handed! How dare you do that to me! I'll tell the children! I'll have you arrested!"

"Mr. Albert," says Alicia, "maybe you could wheel Mom back to the table?" Her eyes are stern and scolding.

"Why are you calling her 'Mom'?" Albert asks, not wanting to be rude, but Alicia shouldn't go around confusing everybody.

"My mistake, Mr. Albert," says Alicia, her face softening. "Could you please wheel Miss Julie back to the table?"

"Okay," Albert says, feeling a sadness for Alicia, confusing Mom and Julie that way. At least Alicia's in the right place. Probably doesn't even work here. Maybe they let her dress up like she works here. To keep her quiet.

Damn, it's a good thing Albert didn't fall for her flirtiness. Especially in front of Julie. Last thing Albert needs is some demented woman latching onto him.

Neil Loves Felicity

by Steven Ostrowski

One of the owners of The Bean & Leaf, Barb, asks Neil if she can have a word with him before he goes on. They sit side by side near the big bay window that looks out on Broad Street. The wind out there is strong, shaking brown leaves off poplars and pushing around the streetlights so that hazy globes of light slide back and forth over the sidewalk like antsy ghosts.

"You've been terrific for us, honey," Barb says and sips from a tall Starbucks paper cup—she half-owns a café but doesn't like the coffee it serves. "All those sensitive songs of yours. Oh, I just love them, Neil. Sometimes I sit there and think, how does he come up with words like that? That's a real, God-given gift, kiddo." When she inhales, her dense, hefty breasts seem to lift to Neil's eyes. Her shirt's probably got too many buttons opened, and her jeans are probably too tight for a woman her age, but if that's the way she wants the world to see her, who is he to judge? Barb's got a big soul. Her broad, pale face is still pretty, especially her hazel eyes. Probably doesn't need so much mascara and eyeliner, but so what? It must make her feel good to look this way or she wouldn't do it.

"I'm really enjoying this gig," Neil says. He smiles, takes a swallow of ice water.

"I know you are. I know it. But, well, look," and she puts her hand on his back and rubs it, up and down, all the way to the crack of his butt, "Jack and I have talked, and we're going to have to change things up after tonight. We're going to have a jazz combo come in on Tuesdays starting next week. Neil, you've been terrific. We both like you so much. And we'll have you again next summer and fall. We just like to switch things up for the winter months. You know: hot weather, cool music, cold weather, hot music."

He didn't see this coming, but it makes sense. Jazz in the winter just makes sense. Still, deeply ingrained politeness prevents him from asking if there's any other reason. Are his songs maybe too

weird, or sluggish? “No, hey, I understand,” he says. “I appreciate you guys letting me play for these, what, four months. It was more than I ever expected. And nothing lasts forever, right?”

“Nothing,” Barb says emphatically. “But, Jesus, you’re such a goddamned sweetheart, Neil. A hunk and a sweetheart. Even with those crazy dreadlocks or whatever you call them, you’re gorgeous. You don’t get sweetness and hunkeness in the same guy very often, let me tell you.” She shakes her head and stands up. “Come here. Give me a hug, you big dumb stud.” As her fleshy but strong arms envelop him, Barb murmurs into Neil’s ear, “If I was thirty years younger you’d be in trouble, bub. Hell, if I was ten years younger.”

Post-hug, Neil shoves his hands into his pockets. He never knows what to say when an older woman makes a remark like that. If he ever heard his own mother say something like that to some young guy he’d go shoot himself in the head. Luckily where she and his dad live down in southern Florida almost everybody’s old. Anyway, his mother’s not the type to flirt with young guys. She’d think it was undignified.

“So. You’re okay with this? You understand it’s not you, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I totally understand. It’s all good.”

“Okay, good,” Barb says. “So, tell me, Neil, are you still going around with what’s her name? Oh, Jesus, I can’t remember a name to save my life anymore. Do me a favor, don’t get old.”

“I’ll try not to. Her name’s Felicity. And yeah, we’re definitely still together.”

“Felicity. That’s it. I had a girlfriend back in Boston named Felicity. Or Felicia. Pretty name.” Something strong is spiking Barb’s coffee, Neil realizes as a whiff of it escapes the lid. “But, look, let me not bullshit you, okay? Okay Neil? As someone you trust, let me let you in on something. As a woman who’s got some experience under her belt.”

This prelude makes Neil nervous. He finds that most people’s advice is not worth taking; not because it’s insincere but because most people don’t truly understand anybody but themselves. They tell you what they would do, based on their lives

and their experiences, which is irrelevant because your life and your experiences are different from theirs. “You can tell me anything, Barb,” he says.

Barb lowers her voice. “Okay, then. Listen. You can do way better than this Felicity chick. Believe me. Everybody thinks so. It’s not only that she’s kind of a plain Jane, it’s that there’s something a little, you know, off about her. Neil, girls come up to me after your sets all the time; beautiful, sexy girls, and they want to know if the hunky singer’s available. I tell them, ‘Not at the moment.’ I also tell them, ‘Stick around, sooner or later everybody becomes available.’”

He doesn’t want the hurt he feels, the sense of violation, to show. She means well. “I think Felicity’s pretty much perfect for me,” he says with a smile and a shrug. “I guess she’s not, like, conventionally gorgeous or anything, but I think she’s beautiful.”

“Really, Neil?” Barb sounds mystified, which only confirms for Neil how people see things from such different points of view. “That girl’s been hanging around this place a long time. Long before she met you. She was with that thin guy, the cook. I forget his name, too. With him for years. I thought it was strange back then, because he’s a lot older than she is. But at least that was a more appropriate match, if you ask me. Two odd ducks finding each other.”

“Well, she’s found me now.” Neil smiles. Talking about Felicity is building his desire to see her. And he will, soon. And he’ll sing the new song for her. “I appreciate what you’re saying, Barb, but I think we’re a perfect match.”

The look on Barb’s face, like she’s conversing with a two-year old who’s just said something cute, is one he gets a lot. He must come across as naïve or dim. It doesn’t matter. People just don’t get him. That’s life. He accepts it. Felicity gets him, and that’s all that matters.

In the tiny storage room behind the kitchen, he looks over the set list and wonders if he should change it, now that he knows it’s his last night. He could do a couple more of his sad, soulful, goodbye-type songs. But no. He’ll stick to the list. Which includes the new song, “Neil Loves Felicity,” in the second set. He hopes it makes

her swoon, even though she's not the swooning type. Maybe she'll swoon inwardly. And he'll still close the last set with "Deepen the Mystery," his other new song, which he wrote for his old poetry teacher, Professor Kamus, after he started showing up almost every Tuesday night, at first with his wife, but lately alone. Neil suspects something's going wrong with their marriage, which is sad because Professor Kamus is a really good guy. "Go forth, dear students, and deepen the mystery" he used to say at the end of every class. Which, over the years, he's come to realize is solid advice. Advice he's willing to follow. Maybe even the best advice he's ever heard.

Stepping up to the little makeshift stage, Neil turns to read the big poster directly behind him that announces that starting on Tuesday, November 13th, the jazz trio "Fuel, Fuse and Flame" will be performing weekly at The Bean & Leaf. It's a good name. Makes you think something big's going to happen. He'll probably come down and check them out now that his Tuesday nights will be open. He wonders if Felicity likes jazz. He's surprised that he doesn't already know. Then again, it's nice not to know everything about someone. There's always more to be discovered, right? That's part of the mystery, right?

He brings the mic to his mouth. "Hey, hi guys," he greets the crowd of twenty-five or thirty familiar and new faces. Seated at small tables spread out before the stage, they clap politely. Twice as many women as men, but that's always the case. He announces that this will be his last show for a while, and thanks Barb and Jack for a good run. Barb, standing near the counter with DeShawn, the black barista with dreads even longer than Neil's, throws a wave to the crowd and winks at Neil. Jack, Barb's ex, with his wrinkled face and small, sharp eyes, and wearing his customary jeans jacket and tight black pants, stands in the corner talking with his latest wire-thin, black-haired girlfriend. Neil scans for Felicity. Not here. No sign of Professor Kamus either. He feels, under his ribs, a ripple of disappointment.

Blowing out nervous energy through his mouth, he runs a pick over the strings to test the sound system, such as it is. A little

staticky, like always. "So," he says into the mic, "how's everybody doing tonight?"

Some folks nod. A few say "All right" or "Pretty good." Some go on conversing.

"Rhetorical question," Neil says. "Hope you enjoy the music."

Between sets, in the storeroom, he dials Felicity.

The phone purrs and purrs. At last: "Hey."

"Hey, where are you, sweetie pie? I'm between sets already. I have a surprise planned for you for the next set."

"I'm still here. I don't know if I'm going to make it tonight."

"What? No? Why not?"

"Kenny came over. He's all depressed."

Kenny and Felicity went out together for almost five years. When the relationship started, he was twenty-nine and she was seventeen. She finally broke it off last spring. When Neil asked her why she ended it, she said "It got to the point where everything I did either made him pissed off or sad. I couldn't stay on the rollercoaster anymore." Kenny works as a cook at The Olde Fish House, across the street from The Bean & Leaf.

"You okay with him at your apartment, Lis?"

"Yeah, it's okay. He's just really needy, that's all."

"He's not scaring you or anything?"

She makes a slight scoffing sound, and Neil's ribs feel the ripple again.

"I didn't know he still came over there."

"Only once in a while," she says. "When he's depressed. Look, if he leaves soon I'll come to the gig. It's just I don't want him to do anything stupid to himself."

"You think he would?"

"Stupid? Are you kidding me?" Her sigh blows through the line and into the canal of his ear; he's not sure what such a deep sigh could mean. "Just don't make a big deal about it if I don't get there, okay? Okay? Please."

Felicity hates when she thinks Neil's putting pressure on her

to do or say something; telling her that this is his last gig will definitely make her feel like he's putting pressure on her to show up. He decides not even to say that he hopes she makes it, just tells her that he loves her and that if he doesn't see her at the gig maybe he'll come by her apartment when he's done. She lives ten minutes away, above the Indian place on Liberty Street. But whatever she says in reply is drowned out by Kenny's voice telling her to please get the hell off the phone and get back in here.

"Why is he talking to you like that?"

"Because he's Kenny, Neil. Because he's an asshole. I gotta go."

He puts off singing the new song in case she shows up for the last set. He plays the other songs on the list, but something, his mind or his heart, feels wobbly. His guitar sounds slightly out of tune and his voice sounds like a bad imitation of his voice. He thinks the audience looks bored, like they're judging everything he sings as lame; he thinks they're looking at him with pity. When the set ends, he promises to be back for one more, and this one will be special.

It's going to feel like pressure, but he calls her anyway.

It takes a lot of rings before she finally answers. "Neil, I told you I'm not going to make it." She breathes like she's jogging, which isn't something she does. "And I really can't talk right now."

Neil assures himself that it's okay. Felicity doesn't like to show it, and she can come across to people who don't know her as emotionless and harsh, but the truth is she's got a huge heart. Right now she's focused on helping an ex who's in bad shape. Which only makes him want her more.

The way they met is funny. A woman with sort of messy long brown hair was crossing Broad Street with a six pack of Buds in her hand. Ten feet from the curb, she tripped. The six pack flew out of her hand, arced in the air, and exploded in the gutter. Neil happened to be coming out of Remillard Music, where he'd bought a set of Martin acoustic light-gauge strings and a new capo, and saw the bag sail toward the concrete. Slow motion, he

remembers; remembers waiting for the shatter. When it came, the woman looked so upset that he went over to see if he could help. She said there was nothing they could do now. Neil leaned down and began to pick up pieces of glass to throw in the trash, and one of the shards cut him pretty deep on the tip of his left forefinger. Seeing all the blood, the woman asked him if he wanted to come to her place to clean it up. As they walked toward Liberty Street introducing themselves, Neil had two thoughts: that he was not going to be able to play guitar for a few days, and that he wanted to make love to this woman as soon as possible.

They didn't. She cleaned up his finger and put a couple band aides on it, but then she had to go meet somebody. She said they should get together sometime, and she wrote her number on a napkin. Two days later, when he called, she told him she'd just broken up with a boyfriend she'd been with for way too long. That night they made the most passionate love Neil's ever experienced. It's a cliché to talk about finding your soulmate, but that's what he knew had happened. She still is his soulmate.

He doesn't play Felicity's song in the last set; he'll sing it to her in bed tonight, and then they'll make love like they did that first, surreal night. By the time he gets to "Deepen the Mystery" there are only a dozen or so people still in the audience. One of them is Professor Kamus, who'd slipped in just as the last set began and took a seat in the nook in the way back. He looks strange back there, thin, kind of hunched over, completely alone.

Neil fingerpicks an A minor-D minor-C progression and blows an extended, reedy note on the harp.

Lots of things we may never know
 Places in our own homes we're not allowed to go
 So it's throw on a coat and out the back door,
 Past Jack the drunk and Jill the whore.
 Me, I'm stepping right out of history
 On a mission to deepen the mystery

He sings three more verses, all intended to do what the title asks, his voice like a hissing fuse. He finishes with
 Some things you can only see at night.
 Things made of gloom, that repel the light.
 You have to wonder what it means
 To be asked to have faith in things unseen.
 A guy like myself can only feel free
 When he's working on deepening the mystery.
 So I'm working on deepening the mystery.

Set over, gig over, long run at The Bean & Leaf over, feeling mixed pangs of relief and melancholy, Neil thanks the audience for sticking around and waves shyly. He's only three steps off the stage when two women jump up from their table and corral him. Both are pretty, early-to-mid-twenties, one dark-haired and one reddish-brown. In their tight little dresses, high heels and bright lipstick, they look made-for-sex. Neil, though, has come to prefer the peasant look; the long flowing dresses and flats and scarves that Felicity favors. He likes that she doesn't wear make-up. The women begin to ply him with questions: where'd he go to school; where does he live now; what does he do with himself when he's not performing.

He's polite. He tells them he works in a computer store, shares a small apartment with his brother in Waterville, hangs out with his girlfriend a lot. "Sorry I can't talk more, but I have to say hi to someone before he leaves."

"Aww," the women whimper.

Professor Kamus looks wearier, older and thinner than he did even a week ago, but he smiles when Neil takes a seat at his table. "Hello, Mr. Mystery."

"Thanks for coming down again, Professor. Always good to look up and see your face in the crowd."

"It's good to be here," he says. "But I thought we agreed a month ago that you'd call me Evan. It's been a few years since I've been your professor."

"Right. True." Neil doesn't want to stop calling him Professor though; it doesn't seem right. He thinks it fits. "Soon, I promise," he says. "So, how are things going?"

The professor lifts his mug and peers into it. His eye sockets are purple-black. His brown-turning-gray hair looks more gray than brown. "I've been better," he answers. "Rough couple months. But, you know. Still kicking."

Neil waggles his head. The professor's marriage is fucking with his head. He's made vague remarks about it over the last month, when Neil's come to sit with him after shows. "I'd listen if you want to talk about it."

Professor Kamus half-smiles. "I know you would. But I really don't."

"You were the most important teacher I ever had, you know that right? I took it all seriously, everything you said. How much poetry matters. The ways it can save our souls."

"That's flattering. Thank you."

"And I'm with you, you know, that it's all pretty mysterious, like you always said. How much we don't know, but how beautiful the not-knowing can be, if you dive into it. Embrace it." He opens his hands and gestures at the window, at the windy night out there, at the universe of unanswered questions.

"Sometimes that's true," the professor says. "And sometimes it's murder."

A gauzy desire to help this man waves through Neil. "Do you mind if I ask if everything's okay with your wife, Professor? I know she used to come here with you and, I guess lately not so much. And I know you were concerned about some dude she's working with."

The professor emits a small, sad chuckle. "Did I tell you all that? God, I don't think I should have laid that on a former student. How much did I say?"

"Not much. I wish you'd say more. I mean, it's good to get things off your chest, right?"

The professor's shoulders drop a little. Sadness seems to pulse out of him. Sadness, but, weirdly, some kind of power, too, as if

his sorrow, because of who he is and what he believes, sooner or later is going to blow open the doors and there's going to be some amazing, beautiful new experience waiting for him there. "Maybe some other night?"

Neil nods. "Any time."

"So how's Felicity?"

"Great. She's good. She couldn't come tonight, which kind of bummed me out, but, oh well."

"Yeah, too bad. She working?"

"She's actually talking her ex-boyfriend off a ledge, I guess you could say."

The professor lifts his eyes. "Is he suicidal?"

"I don't know if it's quite to that extreme, but he seems to need to talk to her a lot. Rehashing their relationship, you know? He's obsessed with talking and talking and talking about it. Don't ask me what purpose it serves. She says he needs to process what happened between them. I guess I understand that. To a point."

The professor stares hard into Neil's eyes.

"What? What are you thinking?"

"Look, I don't know that I'm qualified anymore, if I ever was, to talk about anything that has to do with women, so just dismiss this if you don't think it has any merit, okay? Are you sure it's the best thing, if they're broken up, for her to keep meeting with him? Wouldn't it be better if she told him to get himself a therapist or a friend to help him 'process' the relationship? The two of them continuing to get together just doesn't seem like a situation that can come to any good."

Neil's open palm slaps his heart. "I definitely trust her."

"Okay," Professor Kamus says, and nods a few times. "You really do love the woman, don't you? Tell me some of the things about her that you love."

He thinks about Felicity constantly so it takes him aback that an answer isn't right there on his tongue. "So many," he says. Somebody's beginning to click off lights. "Maybe the biggest thing is how different she is than everyone else. How she's totally

her own person. Doesn't follow any fucking trends, doesn't care what anybody thinks." With a laugh he adds, "Doesn't even care what I think."

The professor scratches his jaw, peers into his mug again like there's a little man floating around in it. "You feel like she understands you, Neil? When you're with her, do you feel felt by her? Do you feel known by her?"

"I think she understands me better than anyone. Yeah, she knows me. I know she loves me." Neil ventures, "Do you feel like your wife understands you, Professor Kamus?"

The professor's eyes fall to his folded hands. "I think she's allowing herself to be seduced by a man she's working with. A very accomplished guy, a researcher from Yale. He tells her things that make her feel good about herself: how competent she is; how creative; what a great team they make. He seems to know how to push all the buttons. I wouldn't be surprised if by now he's told her how badly he wants to sleep with her. Of course, she hasn't admitted to any of this. It could all be in my head." He looks up and laughs. "That wasn't your question, was it?"

Neil shrugs. "I feel bad that you have to go through this, Professor. But it is possible that it isn't as bad as it seems? Maybe she isn't even falling for his lines? Or maybe there is an attraction but not so strong that they're doing anything about it? Could you live with it if it's that?"

Before Professor Kamus can respond, the two women in the little dresses approach the table. "Sorry to interrupt, guys," the redhead says to Neil, "but we're going over to Mister Tripp's for a drink. Want to join us? Your friend can come if he wants."

"Not me," the professor says. "I'm going home. You go, Neil. Have yourself some fun."

"I've got someone waiting for me," Neil tells the women. "Maybe next time."

They stand frozen in their puppy-dog disappointment. The redhead bends slightly at the knees, asks if he's really really sure. When Neil says he's really sure, they frown and shimmy away.

Professor Kamus stands and shrugs his arms into his corduroy jacket. "I know," he says. "I'm a walking professorial cliché."

"Far from it."

"I'll see you around, Neil." Taking a few steps backward, the professor says, "I hope you hang on to whatever that sweet quality of yours is. It's rare. It's beautiful. Don't let the fuckers rip it out of you."

Neil's body feels watery. "No way," he says. "You take care, too, Professor. And thanks for all the mystery. I'm sure we'll see each other somewhere."

Barb asks Neil if he minds sticking around while she closes; she doesn't like to be alone in the place late at night, which is understandable. Neil's anxious to get over to Felicity's, but he's got to help Barb, especially after all she'd done for him.

As she locks the front door and pulls on it twice, Barb quips, "Jack's so hot to get laid he couldn't even think about helping me close. Ah, hell, I don't hold it against him. Get it when you can, right? Because you never know." On the sidewalk, in the wind, she says, "Hey, kiddo, you want to come over to my place and have a drink? A drink and a good, long chat? What do you say?"

"That'd be fun, Barb, but Felicity's expecting me."

"Jesus H. You and that Felicity."

Neil grins. "Yeah, me and Felicity."

"Well, you know where I live. In case she's asleep or has a headache or something. I'll be up. I don't sleep much anymore. I doze off, wake up. I take naps in the afternoon. Anyway, I want to hear all about your life, kiddo. One of these days, huh?"

"One of these days for sure, Barb."

Barb's big white Buick is parked right in front of the café. "You want a ride over to her place?"

"No thanks. It's just on Liberty. I'll walk. I like walking after a gig. Decompress."

"Okay. Look, Neil, you've been terrific. We love you."

When she hugs him she lets her fingertips brush across his ass.

"I love you guys too," Neil says. "Thanks for letting me sing."

When he knocks and says through the door that it's him, Felicity says, "What are you doing here?"

"I told you I'd come after the gig."

"No you didn't."

No sense in repeating that he did. "Well, anyway, here I am. Can you let me in?"

He hears footsteps rushing, then Kenny's voice saying, "Get the fuck out of here, asshole. You hear me? She's done with you, dude. Sorry about the news, but that's life."

"Jesus Christ, Kenny," Felicity hisses. "Go back inside. I'll speak for myself."

"Well do it, then. I'm not gonna stay hard forever."

"You total jerk. Go back inside." To Neil, through the door, she says, "Don't listen to what he said. He's drunk and stupid."

"What's going on in there, Lis?"

"Look, it's complicated, okay? Don't worry about it. We'll talk later. I have to go."

"No, why don't you let me in now?"

"I'll call you in the morning," she says. "I'm trying to help him."

"I don't think this is the right way to help him, hon."

But when she doesn't reply, Neil lifts his guitar case and turns. He turns back. "We need to have a serious talk, Lis. This isn't right." He doesn't want to leave on a negative note, though, so he leans close to the door and says, "I love you, babe."

They talk about the ups and downs of love. Sometimes, Barb's saying, you just have to take a deep breath and let things roll. Can't try too hard to control a situation or it'll backfire on you. The Beatles said it best: let it be. In the end, you'll wind up with the person you deserve to be with. Neil likes her attitude; she's right. He knows that Felicity is who he's meant to be with, and he knows she knows it, too.

After Barb throws back her head and finishes off her second bourbon, she leans forward on the sofa and, with a big effort, lifts herself to her feet. She waits for her balance, and when it comes, says, “Back in a sec, honey.” Gingerly she walks into the bathroom and closes the door. Neil lifts his own glass of bourbon to his lips—he’s barely touched it—and takes a tiny sip. He’s never had a taste for hard liquor; it feels like it’s burning though the lining of his throat, ruining his vocal chords. He likes wine, but Barb’s out of wine. His guitar case leans against the wall near the front windows. He’s tempted to take out the instrument and play his new song for Barb, see if she thinks Felicity will like it.

Before he can retrieve the guitar, the bathroom door opens. Barb’s standing there, naked, a coy smile on her rouge-painted lips. From her neck to her thighs, her pale, folded flesh reveals moles and blotches, and her big, heavy breasts, with their dimpled nipples the color of prunes, sag proudly toward her belly. Etched into her lower abdomen is a three-inch long pink, slightly raised scar. Her legs, though mapped with purple/blue veins, look strong and toned.

Neil takes in the sight of her, not sure what to think or do. Then, suddenly, he is sure. Beautiful, he thinks. In her way, beautiful. He’s going to make love to Barb. How about that?

As he walks slowly around the sofa toward her, Neil feels like he’s passing through some invisible boundary. It’s easier to do than he imagined.

Barb’s fleshy arms lift to him. “You are one beautiful boy,” she says, and presses her lips hard against his.

The mystery never ends, Neil thinks as he adjusts to the feeling of Barb’s thick, aggressive tongue and not Felicity’s reedy, hesitant one, as it plunges into his mouth. It only goes deeper and deeper.

Liars

Erika Staiger

You knew this was going to happen eventually. Even when he’s just holding you, he’s greedy. But, you’re greedy too and that’s really why you’re here, when neither of you should be. Because you both want things you can’t have and you’re both strong enough and dangerous enough to try and take them anyway.

It’s morning now. You roll over; rays of sunlight come in through the window, the window that he cracked open for you, because you can’t sleep unless it’s cold enough that you can practically see your own breath. He calls you his Ice Queen. The word you always paid the most attention to was his, possessive even though it never had any reason to be. He’s your best friend. You were not dating. You were never dating. You’re still not dating. You have no idea what the two of you are anymore.

You lift your head up and blink. He fell asleep last night before you did, with his arm wrapped around you and his head pressed into your neck. He got a face full of hair the entire night and for some reason never complained. Maybe that’s because you only slept for about two hours. When you try and sit up, you inevitably make his arm slide down your body. Your hair tickles his nose. He stirs next to you. You both sit up.

He looks at the clock and frowns. He had somewhere he was supposed to be fifteen minutes ago, but even though he’s staring straight at the clock you know he can’t see it. His vision is terrible without his glasses. You know he’s waiting for you to tell him what time it is. You don’t want to because you don’t want to have to leave. The second you’re gone from his apartment, you know everything will stop making sense. You look down and run your fingers through your dark red hair. Out of the corner of your eye, watch the way it catches the light from the window..

“What time is it, Liza?” he asks.

“Nine fifteen,” you answer. Your reluctance is palpable.

“Shit,” he says, but he doesn’t move. He doesn’t try to leave. Instead, he lies back down and reaches up to take the piece of hair you’ve been playing with away from you. He weaves it between his fingers and stares at you. You shrink away from him because you know everything about this is wrong. At least, you think it is. You don’t know what wrong is right now.

He asks you if you’re okay.

“Fine,” you say. “You?”

He just nods, but you know you’re both liars.

You walk home. It’s colder than the night before. You pull your sweater tight around you. You feel exposed, both to the cold and to the other pedestrians waiting to cross the streets. You feel like they know where you’ve been—that they can somehow look at you and know what you’ve been doing. You want to turn around. No matter how tightly you grip the sleeves of your sweater, you can’t stop the cold from seeping in. You feel the cold inside you—in an empty space you didn’t know was there before. Whatever used to go in there got left behind and you don’t know if you’ll be able to go back for it.

In your English class later that day, you skim the chapters of *Wuthering Heights* you were supposed to have read last night. Listen to the girls in your class wonder how Heathcliff and Catherine can love each other, when all they do is tear each other apart. Feel compelled for the first time in a long time to raise your hand. Think about what you would say—likely something about how some people don’t know how to love any other way. Put your hand down before the teacher notices you had it up in the first place.

Go home and try to watch TV to relax. Realize with a shiver of something not quite unlike terror that nearly every story you’ve ever been told is about love. Decide to watch the first Harry Potter movie instead. Eleven-year olds may not be that great at acting or wizardry, but they are proficient at not sleeping with their best friends. You could learn a lot from them.

For a while, you let yourself go and believe you are an eleven-year-old wizard.

You did not just have sex with your best friend.

His girlfriend is not your roommate.

Margo comes home from French Club at nine. When you hear her keys in the door, your apartment feels like it’s closing in on you. You turn the TV down and pull your blanket more tightly around you. Maybe if you’re quiet, maybe if you don’t even breathe, you can just fade into the upholstery of your second-hand couch. Maybe you’ll never have to talk to her again.

“Hey, Liza,” she says. She sounds distracted. You can hear the wheels grinding away in her mind. She’s thinking about Miles as she takes off her shoes and hangs up her coat behind you. You wonder how much she knows, how much she suspects. There is a part of you that wants her to figure everything out, but then you think about what Margo is like when she gets angry—how she always finds something to break—how easily she could break you.

You ask her how her day went. At first she doesn’t hear you and you are exhaling before you realize you had been holding your breath. Don’t repeat the question.

She stops on her way into her room. “Hey, you wouldn’t have happened to have heard from Miles today?”

“No,” you say. “Why? Is everything okay?”

She shrugs. “I think so. He hasn’t responded to any of my texts all day. It’s just kind of odd.”

“Maybe he forgot to charge his phone or something?” You are impressed by how genuinely helpful you sound.

“I guess.”

Ask if everything is okay between them. She tells you yes, but you can tell by the way she looks slightly to the left that she’s lying. You tell her you’re sorry. You say you hope he gets back to her soon.

You are both liars.

You think about how long you lied to yourself about what you wanted. You’ve dated three other guys since you met Miles. Miles

was the only one who laughed when you said post-third break-up, that you think you may have only been dating Number 3 for his car. You realize now that you were actually dating Number 3 because he distracted you. He took your mind off of all the times in the last year Miles came over to your apartment and looked right through you when you answered the door.

The clothes you were wearing yesterday—purple jacket, red tee shirt, a bra you never really liked until now—they're in a pile at the foot of your bed. You were supposed to do laundry today, but you can't bring yourself to wash them just yet. They still smell like his pine-scented air freshener and that unnamable, clean smell that clings to all of his clothes, no matter how long it's been since he's washed them. You forbid yourself from looking at them.

You're spending the night alone in your room, pretending to study organic chemistry, when really you're just watching your Facebook page and the little green dot next to his name. You think about sending him a message, but the words hit a wall inside your brain and you just sit there, watching the little green dot.

A day ago, it would have been easy just to send him a message. You never run out of things to talk about. That's why through all the boyfriends and girlfriends that have come and gone over the years, the two of you had been a constant.

You've been friends with him for five years now, since a high school chemistry class you loved and he hated. Remember how you both went to prom with different people and how you agreed—at three in the morning in your parents' basement—that it would have been simpler if you had just gone with each other. How much pain and frustration it would have saved you both. Remember how you used to laugh at the idea of the two of you as a couple. How you used to think he would drive you crazy as a boyfriend. That he would tear your brain apart. Think about how you once told Number 2 that you could never date Miles, because you were too different. You like hard numbers and straight answers. Miles was an artist who thrived off of late nights and missed deadlines. He liked to ask questions. Remember the reason why Number 2 left

you. Because no matter how many times you swore you loved him, Miles always got more answers out of you than he did.

Through the wall your bedrooms share, you can hear Margo laughing. You hear a few muffled words, spoken by a voice on the other end of her phone. This is all it takes for you to recognize Miles.

Remember the first night you heard his voice through your bedroom wall. The first time he came over here, not to see you, when you were supposed to be asleep but you weren't. Remember how you lay in bed, your hands balled into fists under your blankets. Remember how you woke up the next morning and saw him drive away. How you were so angry that it gave you enough energy to clean your entire apartment and still have time for your physics homework.

You met Margo during your first year of college—when Miles was busy trying to have a long distance relationship with a girl from your high school. He would leave every weekend and Margo was there for the moments he missed. She forgave you when you threw up all over her pale blue bathmat the first time you drank too much. Of course, that may have had something to do with the fact that she was also the person who encouraged you drink too much in the first place. Spending too much time with Margo was exhausting in a way that staying up until five AM on Miles's futon somehow never was. She was better at those late nights than you were, though, and one night, six months ago, the two of them stayed up later than you did and then Margo and Miles started calling themselves us and you were just a you.

Remember how stupid you felt when you realized you loved him. Remember how shallow you felt when you realized the thing that drove you over the edge was the way he would sit on your couch and curl her hair around his fingers. Remember how it felt like someone had scooped out all of your insides with a shovel. This is your chance, you realize. To banish all those memories for good and replace them with memories like last night, where things are simple, when you're the only one he's thinking about. You have no idea how possible this is. You're not actually sure you want to know how possible this is.

You're just about to tell him, hey. Because you want to see where you stand now. You can't live in limbo, no matter how preferable limbo is to being without him.

He messages you first.

You feel like you won something when he asks you to meet tomorrow.

You must fight to get to sleep. Your brain refuses to shut down. Think about Miles and how soft the small of his back was. Think about the clothes you've forbidden yourself to touch.

Think about how you've never done anything like this before. You're not all that familiar with breaking the rules. You've never really done much of that before. But, then again, maybe you have.

Realize that you and Miles were always closer than you should have been. Think about how during your late nights on his futon, he would ask to brush your hair while you talked. Think about how eventually he would set the brush down and massage your back. Eventually, he'd get tired and rest his head on your shoulders and his hands on your thighs. You wonder why it's so easy for you to let him touch you.

Maybe it's because he knows more about you than anyone else alive. He was your first call when you found out your Grandpa died your freshman year—not Number 1, not Margo, not even your parents.

You probably shouldn't have let him get that close, but you did—because it felt good. Because it felt safe, even though in retrospect, letting him in was probably the most dangerous thing you have ever done.

You think about all the things the two of you ignored when you were together. All the things you pretended weren't there. Lying should be harder, you think. Right now, it seems so easy. It's automatic, like blinking.

You plan to go over to his apartment as soon as the optometrist you intern for says you can leave. Miles thinks it's gross—that you

like looking at the parts of people's eyes. You don't understand how blood can make people squeamish. We all have it, you would always tell him. You shouldn't be grossed out by you.

That's how you feel though. Grossed out by you. Disgusted, actually. Disgusted by the excitement you feel pulling your favorite red dress over your head and shivering as the soft, cotton fabric makes contact with your bare skin. You have no business wearing that dress—it is too short for work and too thin for the weather. You wear it anyway, though. Because it makes you feel beautiful.

Hold on to that feeling as you put your toothbrush and a fresh set of clothes at the bottom of your backpack so the other students in your classes won't see them.

Margo sees you, though.

"Nice dress," she says, startling you. You are in the kitchen toasting a bagel to eat on the way. "Got a hot date or something?"

Be glad your back is to her, because you know you look like a suspect in a cop show. Feel the heat in your cheeks as your face turns the color of your dress.

"No," you say. Don't turn around yet. Control your expression. From there, it's easy for you to figure out what to say next. "I've got a work thing. They're doing a party for all of the interns so we can mingle and stuff."

"Damn," she says. "And here I was hoping Miles and I would finally have someone to double with."

Laugh at her joke. Decide it's safe to turn around now. Don't look uncomfortable. See your reflection in the microwave door. You look uncomfortable.

Margo, however, does not notice. Her eyes are glued to her phone and the messages Miles is sending her. You want to know every single detail of those messages and you want to rip her phone out of her hands and flush it down the toilet so you'd never have to read them.

"Did you ever get a hold of Miles last night?" you say, even though you know the answer. Instinct tells you that not asking would give yourself away.

She tells you he just forgot to charge his phone. Don't press her for more information. You are going to see Miles today and she isn't. Let that be enough.

Margo leans against the counter as you wrap your bagel in a piece of paper towel for the road. Her thumbs hover over her phone—she's thinking about what to say to Miles. How to respond. She frowns and goes back to typing.

Decide this is a good thing for you.

Miles opens the door for you wearing track pants and a sweatshirt that don't match. For some reason, this makes your heart sink a little bit when you see him. You think about how you got up fifteen minutes early to shave for him, just in case, and he couldn't even be bothered to put on matching clothes for you? Tell yourself that this just means he's comfortable around you. Do not spend your time thinking about all the times he asked you to help pick out outfits for dates with Margo. All the effort he put in for her. Don't do it.

"Hi," he says, and his eyes are alive. Mischievous. That's what this is. Breaking the rules. That's what this is. You smile, too.

"Hi."

"You look really nice today," he tells you, stepping aside so you can cross the threshold.

Your face turns red. This makes him smile wider.

Look away.

"We need to talk about last night," you say.

He nods, but he doesn't say anything. You follow him into the kitchen and he pours you a glass of cherry coke with way too much ice. He does this without asking you if you want one, because he knows you do.

Everything about this circumstance is familiar. You wonder why last night became last night and not just another Sunday where he asked how you were doing and you said fine, even though you weren't. Even though you wanted to tell him that all you wanted was for him to stop texting Margo and just look at you. You wonder what was different. You can't name it, exactly. It was

the last piece of the kind of jigsaw puzzle that takes up an entire kitchen table, falling gently into place. It was the result of months of neglect that made you want him as close to you as possible. It was the flicker of bravery brought on by the second glass of wine what made you tell him—finally—that you loved him. That you were tired of him looking past you. It was the look on his face when you finally realized that he missed you, too.

You kissed him first. Feel a wave of guilt crash over you as you remember this. That you were the spark. Comfort yourself by remembering that you tried to pull away and he wouldn't let you.

His phone is lying face up on the kitchen counter. Watch it move a little bit to the left as it buzzes. You read Margo's name out of the corner of your eye. His body tenses up as he notices it, but he doesn't say anything. Instead, he turns his phone over and smiles at you. You can see in the length of time it takes for the tension in his body to dissipate that he is torn, that he feels more guilt in this than even you do. But, right now, his phone is turned down and he is smiling at you. Take this moment. Right now, you know he is choosing you. Let him.

Change the subject.

"How's your portfolio going?" you ask, because you want to see the way he brightens up when he talks about his art. He only does that for you. When anyone else asks about it, he loses five inches off his height—as though by making himself appear as small as possible he can get out of sharing altogether.

"Good!" he says. The brightness you're used to is present in his eyes, but it's tempered by something. Try not to read too much into this. "You saw most of the new stuff Sunday, but there's one thing that's new."

"What is it?" you ask.

He has you follow him into the living room where his sketchpad is lying open on his futon along with the remains of his dinner. Notice the way the light catches a piece of your hair that's stuck to one of his pillows. Take a moment to berate him as you clear off the trash from his dinner. He will respond (as you expected)

by hitting you in the face with one of the pillows.

When you sit down, he'll place the sketchbook in your lap. Feel your insides melting as you look down and your own face stares back at you. Your features are more angular; more ridged than they are in real life, but otherwise this is black and white you. The sketch is staring off in the distance; the piece of hair you always play with is wrapped around her index finger. You decide the paper you is thinking about something.

You ask him why he did this.

"I don't usually like drawing people I know," he explains. "When you know someone really well, you realize there are all sorts of complexities in the way that they look. I just feel like I can't ever do that justice, you know?"

Your legs are touching and you're close enough to him to smell that unnamable clean smell that clings to all his clothes, even though you can tell by his greasy hair that he hasn't showered yet today. You know where this sort of closeness leads now, but you realize as he places one arm behind your back that you let him get this close long before you ever slept together.

"I know," you say, because even though you can't draw, you can look at Miles and realize how impossible it would be to put everything you know about him on paper. "So, why did you draw me, then?"

Miles sighs. "Because I couldn't sleep and I knew the only way I could do that was if I drew something."

"And I was on your mind?"

"A little bit, yeah."

Whack him with the pillow. Try to stop smiling. Fail. Complain about how warm it is until he agrees to open a window for you. When he is done, he sits back down on the futon sideways and pulls your body against him. Feel his hands massage circles into your shoulders. Feel his hands gently push aside the strap of your bra beneath your dress.

You start to find the pieces you left here two nights ago. You forget about Margo and things start to make sense again. You feel

yourself here. You are a girl wearing her favorite red dress who cannot believe that this is wrong. Or, maybe she does and she doesn't care.

You are selfish and so is he. You do not talk about last night even though you know that when you leave in the morning your entire body will be screaming to know where you stand and what you are to him.

Pull away before he does something you can't come back from. You know you could make things simpler for him. Tell yourself to walk away. Go home, Liza, you think, go home.

Don't.

Don't walk away because things are simpler for you here—where he takes the piece of hair you always play with and weaves it between his fingers. Stay and fight for what you want.

Take one more moment. Because you're both stubborn enough and dangerous enough to take it even though it will hurt in the morning.

When you wake up next to him, he'll ask you if you're okay.

You are. You are and so is he. Because the moment still lives. Because the moments where you are together, where you are liars, are the only moments that feel true.

Catastrophe at Braithwaite

Samuel R. George

Days are like new acquaintances; on rare occasions, you meet someone and seem to know them right away, for better or for worse. The first few moments I encountered of Wednesday, August 29th 2012, guaranteed the entire day would be a horrible nightmare.

The day before, Tuesday, August 28th was warm with rain and wind in the late afternoon, as the very outer bands of **Hurricane Isaac** gently kissed lower **Plaquemines Parish**. Victims of a failed economy, the mostly hard pressed working class citizens of Braithwaite, Louisiana were certainly aware of Isaac, but most had been through so many small category-1 storms, that it seemed like a relatively normal August afternoon with moderately poor weather — breezy and wet. Wind and gusts, several inches of rain, and a few days without power were expected. I went next door to Gus and Ann's place to see if Gus wanted to move his Ford Explorer to the levee. If so, his vehicle, having been laid up, was going to need a jump from me. Well experienced with hurricanes in southern Louisiana, Gus declined, his opinion being that we would not get over a foot of water, and after some discussion I agreed. But for no particular reason I could put my finger on, I decided to place my own '99 Dodge pickup truck on the levee anyway. At that point, there were only two other cars up there, further fostering my notion that the storm wasn't overly threatening and that "all was well." I walked back to my trailer-apartment at 131 Scarsdale Road in the increasingly blustery wind and rain knowing that I would be secure and dry, had a nice dinner ahead of me, and was well stocked with food and water to cover me for the next few days if necessary.

That night it rained and howled. Feeling secure in the knowledge that I was not in any serious danger I sat down to indulge myself reading Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, the original version, which is quite different from the various movies. The beautiful

and invaluable book was a gift from my grandparents, an old American edition published in 1915. Inside the front cover was the inscription "for Samuel from your doting grandparents," written in my grandmother's neat hand, along with her signature and my grandfather's: Elizabeth Rightor George and Sam George. After an evening of occasionally weather-disquieted reading I had only a chapter or two left to finish when I decided to go to bed early. At my last glance at the clock, it had been just after nine. As anyone experienced with tropical events might have predicted, at about 11:00 pm, the electricity went out. Hearing the tempest of the violently blowing wind and the rain beating relentlessly against the outside of my apartment's walls was like listening to Stravinsky; loud, hypnotic, both soothing and shocking with crescendos and the occasional loud shrieking notes.

I woke up about 3:30 am hearing water loudly swirling — as though I were standing in the center of a rigorous rip tide at the beach — something frighteningly and alarmingly different from the sound of water merely flowing by outside. In a state of near disbelief, I discovered that there was water on the floor and the trailer was leaning, so I grabbed pants, shoes and shirt in the dark. In the midst of this surrealistic experience, I quickly dressed. But, it was so dark that it wasn't until much later I noticed I had my shoes on the wrong feet and my shirt inside-out. Realizing the severity of my plight, I tried to open the door, but couldn't; something was blocking it. As the cold salty water covered the floor, pooling ever deeper on the lower end of the room, I made my way rapidly to a window which led to an outdoor utility room, and opened it. The easily recognizable smell of natural gas almost gagged me in a wall of toxic fumes, so I slammed the window shut. Rushing back to the door and pushing with all of my might—really more than I knew that I had in me (125 pounds of solid gristle), it slowly opened. What I saw was beyond my beliefs or expectations. I had somehow pushed the entire front porch away and water trickled in. Looking out across my front yard through the blustering wind and rain, I could make out that my neighbor's van and Gus' truck

were sitting in water up to the windows. For a totally irrational moment, it occurred to me that I might stay there in the doorway and smoke a cigarette while gathering my wits. *Surely the water can't rise much more than this.*

Suddenly the trailer lurched giving me the clear sensation that it had actually been floating for a second. Just as quickly, it seemed to become resettled, now seated differently on its foundation. To my astonishment and dismay, cold water began pouring in rapidly over my shoes alerting me to the sudden undeniable severity of my circumstances. I heard glass breaking and smelled natural gas, thick and offensive. I got the hell out of there as fast as I humanly could and managed to balance myself unsteadily on the hand railing. Standing in the heavy gusts of Isaac's wind, I grasped at an adjacent tree limb hanging over the last remnant of my porch on which I stood, the dark, rushing water flowing just below my feet. My home was now almost halfway underwater. The wooden railing on which I stood began to wobble against the increasing pressure of the rapidly rising tide that continued to roar in. I held steady with my hands on the sharp edge of the tin roof a few inches above my forehead. I was about a foot above the rising water, and remained as motionless as a manikin, wonderstruck at my precarious situation. *It won't rise any more, I thought, I'll stay right here until I can better assess the situation.*

After about 30 seconds the water was at my knees. It was dreamlike, but I wasn't fearful. The feeling was difficult to describe. I was awake and clear in a way I had never been before. There was an absolute thrill to it all. Adrenaline flooded my brain and my body responded. I felt very near to death but absolutely alive — all of my senses at their keenest! I hadn't yet considered Gus and Ann; my own survival mechanism didn't seem to permit any distractions. Struggling against the tide and wind, I found that I couldn't get ahold of the roof well enough to climb up. Eventually through tireless effort I managed to reach some little green branches and with them pulled a sturdier limb of a majestic oak tree. Due to what I would later find out was Adhesive Capsulitis (Frozen

Shoulder Syndrome), my right arm was almost completely useless. Hoisting myself almost entirely with my left arm, I felt like it took centuries to gain five feet. Finally I achieved an elevation sufficient to get a leg up and clambered up onto the roof, the water just a few seconds behind me.

Standing up, I looked about attempting to survey the situation around me. But all was obscured by the heavy rain, strong gusts, and utter darkness resultant from loss of power in the entire area. I gazed across the yard to Gus and Ann's place. I couldn't see it at all. The water was breaching the edges of my roof now. Inundated by a torrent of logical deductions about what must have happened to them — or worse yet might even *still be happening* to them at that moment — I concluded that if they were still inside their house, they were dead or dying. I tried to convince myself to dive into the water, to try to swim over to their house and save them. I tried to make myself feel guilty for not doing so. I knew logically that swimming over to them was pointless; the black filthy water was cold, deep, dark and full of debris, and it was clearly already too late. Regardless of my wishes to believe the opposite, I began to conclude that they were still in their house, and they had surely drowned by now. Against my own inclinations, and with a sense of internal dilemma, I somehow knew that I had absolutely no reason to feel guilty. Yet, I felt as though I was guilt incarnate. My feelings at this uniquely unsettling and horrifying moment of realization will never be adequately described; though I have gone through the image-laden mental narrative countless times. Feeling a sense of overwhelming agony and grief-stricken devastation, I called out their names into the darkness in vain until my voice became hoarse. Sound doesn't travel very far when enveloped in the noisy wind and rain of a full blown hurricane.

Yet, to my extreme surprise, there was a response. From somewhere to my left came a voice calling out, "Who's that?" startling me. I heard footsteps on the tin roof only a few feet away. Then I saw my neighbor Mike, a man I hardly knew at all— although I had been his neighbor for the last month. And, although I will

probably never see him again, having shared such an incredible experience I will not likely ever forget him.

“You made it!” he said to me as we hugged each other, an act two working class men in the deep south would have never engaged in under normal circumstances. Mike wore a near hysterical look on what I could see of his face, it being still very dark. I confessed to him my horrible fear that Ann and Gus were dead. Attempting to relieve my anxiety about my cousin and my best friend, he told me that Paul and Chrissy had awakened him, having just banged on his door only a few minutes before, this having saved his life. Mike said that once awake and having become oriented, through his window he had seen Paul and Chrissy trudging towards the levee just past Gus and Ann’s house in waste deep water. Mike suggested that perhaps they also banged on Gus and Ann’s door, and they had probably gotten out too. This optimistic idea appealed to me, though the argument was less than totally convincing. I wanted to believe that it was so, that they were safe. I continued to envision a range of other positive scenarios in which they had also escaped. My mental turmoil was ongoing. *Maybe they had left in the middle of the night, possibly on foot. But if they’d left on foot, they certainly wouldn’t have left without me. Perhaps they had made it into their attic safely. Being in only moderately good health, both would have been challenged to do so if there even was an available portal. Their little plastic swimming pool might float. Perhaps they had managed somehow to escape in that. Or, they might even now be up on their own roof safe, incommunicado.* Eventually despite my persistent desire to think otherwise, every positive scenario I considered for Gus and Ann seemed unlikely. Overwhelmed by a progressively increasing sense of darkening pessimism, I hoped that at least Paul and Chrissy had made it out. Having become acquainted with her a year before, I knew that this was Chrissy’s first hurricane. The day before, she had been terribly anxious about staying. I heard several people tell her not to worry; it would just be a raging storm. I told her she would probably enjoy it.

As the roof of my trailer began to disappear beneath the steadily rising water, Mike and I both got up into the available

branches of the overhanging oak tree. By now, the cold, dark water was lapping over the vanishing roof. When the swelling tide finally seemed to have stopped rising, only the top ridge of the trailer’s roof was exposed. Hesitantly surrendering our positions within the oak branches, we stepped back down onto the roof. From this moment forward the sobering and irreversible monumental catastrophic reality of it all could no longer be denied. I had finally reached that point in my experience where I was actually seeing my life flash before my eyes. But most of those flashes, it seemed, concerned Ann and Gus’ lives. And behind all the flashing thoughts went a mad circular argument about how I should have saved them, but I couldn’t, but I should have, but I couldn’t... Damnit! Damnit all to hell! In a flood of involuntary images, I remembered my earliest memories of Ann when I was about 3 or 4 and she 9 or 10, my cool and mysterious cousin from the city. I remembered first meeting Gus when we were both teenagers in the 70s. A couple of years younger than I, his hair hung longer and he had already developed a broad and in-depth knowledge of the underground scene that I admired; city kids always seem to be ahead of bayou boys.

The wind howled with ferocious intensity, while intermittent powerful gusts threatened to throw me off of the roof. The horizontal rain fall seemed topsy-turvy to me, as opposed to its usual vertical configuration. By this point I had become thoroughly soaked. I was cold and shivering. I took my shirt off a few times and rang it out but it didn’t help. My body was losing heat quickly and it appeared there was very little I was going to be able to do about it. It was still dark, but, by the grace of good luck, Mike had a little flashlight that allowed us some visual access to our near surroundings. Using his light, we noticed various items of debris washing up to the edge of the roof. Eventually, I found a garbage bag that had floated up to the roof of my trailer just below me. I scooped it up into my hands to find it filled with putrescent refuse. Without regard to the issues of cleanliness or hygiene, I emptied the bag of its foul contents, turned it inside out, and poked a hole in it. Then after taking a deep breath, I pulled the filthy plastic over

my head, then down around my body to form a makeshift poncho. That helped a lot; my body heat began to stabilize. Observing with admiration that my new-found poncho was a Lawn-and-Leaf bag as opposed to a mere garbage bag, Mike nonetheless declined my offer to trade it to him for the hooded rain poncho he was wearing. Working in concert from our perch, Mike and I found some empty bottles with the garbage and began patiently filling them up with rain water that was coming off the oak tree in little rivulets. We'd concluded that we really didn't know how long we would be up there and might need drinking water.

After what had seemed like an eternity in the cold, windy, wet darkness, the sun finally began to break the horizon. Though it was still dark, still cloud covered and raining hard, we could behold the lake of Isaac's flood water from the Gulf of Mexico surrounding us as far as the eye could see. If only my cell phone hadn't gotten soaked, I could have made a video of this unbelievable spectacle; words simply could not describe the scene. There were garbage cans, hot water heaters, porches, toys, furniture; all kinds of things floating about. Some of the nearby houses were completely submerged; others had the very tops of their roofs sticking up, cresting above the tide. The scene was ghostly and dreary and it somehow looked permanent.

After a while I sat down on the top ridge of my trailer's roof pulling my garbage bag tight around me. All the fire-ants in the area were floating in the flood water, crawling about on everything. Both Mike and I had dozens and dozens of bites. The top of the oak tree was filled with squirrels and bullfrogs, and big balls of long, pail white worms were lying here and there. I spied a nutria (a large south American water rat) a few feet away from the trailer trapped on some floating debris. By now I was in a state of mild shock, progressively desperate, and nearing mental exhaustion. I fancied there was a water moccasin at every turn, but I didn't actually see any snakes to validate my paranoia.

Mike, no doubt shocked and numb, much like I was, began rambling about his motorcycle and all the accessories he had added

to it. I wasn't the least bit interested, but I understood that he was attempting anything that would have the remotest semblance to normalcy, so bizarre was our situation. I pulled into my garbage bag by degrees like a turtle and closed the hole to just big enough an opening to breathe. Eventually, Mike slowed his monologue then stopped. There was only the wind and the rain and the on-going annoying and painful ant bites for a good hour.

Then Mike mumbled something. I poked out of my shell a little and said "What?"

"There's a deer right in back of you," he said in a monotone. *He's losing it*, I thought. But I turned to look anyway, and be damned; a baby deer was a few feet from the trailer swimming desperately. The doe reached the trailer, saw the two humans, and instinctively turned and angled away. We both watched in silent awe as it struggled to get away from us. Then it turned and swam back to us, reached the trailer, rotated and retreated again. It changed its mind yet again, circled, pulled toward the trailer, beached on the roof with us and lay there panting and in shock. The doe was so exhausted that when I approached and began to pet it, she didn't so much as flinch. The bewildered and fatigued wild animal sat gasping on the trailer roof with Mike and me. By now the sun was well up in the sky, and no matter how long we stared at our surroundings wishing that we would awaken from this nightmare, the scene could never be dismissed. Normally a person never experiences such dreamlike scenarios, but this was altogether too real. We saw a boat pass, looked at each other, then began screaming and waving our arms like maniacs, as though all the ant bites had finally driven us mad. But the people in the boat either hadn't seen or heard us, or they simply elected to ignore our calls and continued going on their way. Mike and I were stunned for a moment — almost in a state of disbelief. Like Robinson Crusoe stranded on a desert island, we were challenged to consider our survival. We began to discuss exactly what we might be able to do to best deal with our situation. All kinds of materials were floating about as debris in the water near us, and we considered

each as a potential aid to survival. There was a large piece of tin which had covered the porch and was now hanging straight down over the front door, mostly under the water. We tried to raise it up and pry it loose to use as a makeshift shelter somehow (we would figure out exactly how later); but our efforts were in vain, as it wouldn't budge. We were both rewarded with minor lacerations on our hands for our innovative efforts. We went through some garbage for more bottles in which to collect rain water, but didn't find much else of interest. I had begun to notice that Mike was keeping a little bit more than what might have been considered a normal distance away from me, I suspected because my Lawn-and-Leaf bag poncho stunk to high heaven. On the other hand, I couldn't get away from myself, so I had become somewhat numbed to my outerwear's uniquely attractive bouquet.

Time lost meaning as we waited, but before long we were greeted to the sight of what I could only see as a bad omen. We saw Ann and Gus's pool floating by about 50 feet away, held above water by its inflatable ring. I looked at it with deep anxiety. It was nearly full of water; still I was wishing they would pop up from it and wave. We discussed swimming to get it for our rooftop shelter, or to use it as a boat. I'm a great swimmer and Mike claimed to be also, but neither of us really wanted to dive into the muck. We thought we might see if it floated closer, and would keep an eye on it, ultimately making our decision later. At almost the same instant, in the distance another motorboat passed us. It was definitely closer than the last one had been, but our mad gyrations and throat burning screams didn't get any attention; the boat just kept going by. Having now been passed by twice, we sat down dejected and remained still and quiet for a good while.

It must have been about 10 in the morning when Mike and I started talking about all the food we had stocked in our apartments for after the hurricane; all ruined now. The stuff in his pantry seemed almost as appealing as mine. We were making ourselves hungry. He actually had a little food with him, a couple of cans of vegetables and a box of granola. But we agreed we should save it.

We talked about glorious meals we had eaten in the past, Chinese food, greasy burgers, steaks, hog-ass and cabbage, Gumbo, fried shrimp; all the kinds of stuff real Louisianans thrive on. Our discussion about food was enticing. Mostly, though, I just wanted coffee and a cigarette, and to be warm and dry.

As our endless waiting in the surrealistic sea of flood water continued unabated, an armadillo joined us, and many squirrels swarmed in the branches above us. All these animals together brought to mind Al Capone, Ann's little dog, probably drowned just next door. I began thinking about all my ruined possessions just below me — family pictures, several decades' worth of correspondence and a fabulous collection of rare books. Yet, none of it meant anything compared to the increasingly likely realization that I would never see my cousin Ann again, or Gus, my dear friend of nearly 40 years.

Sometime after noon, another boat came by; it was much closer to us this time, but we still couldn't catch their attention, being obscured by the oak tree and drowned out by the noise from the hurricane, as well as the boat's engine. We'd been passed by yet again. But, because the boat was going right down Scarsdale Road which was bordered by trees, they would have to return the same way. This raised our spirits and instilled hope in us that our nightmarish experience might be coming to an end. About a half hour later they reappeared and we hailed them. They were Braithwaite citizens, good Samaritans really, because the authorities would not start patrolling till the next day. If not for this gentleman and his grandson, we may have been stuck on that roof for another night and day. Mike and I placed the frightened doe in the boat, got in, and were away, ducking under power lines. In a few moments we were at the levee. The deer was released. My truck was high and dry. The authorities talked to us for a while, and then allowed us to go sit in the ferry boat where it was dry and warm. There was another survivor there, an old school hippie type named Mack. He gave me some cigarettes and the three of us shared Mike's bag of granola. Despite all our various woes, we felt elated to be alive.

It was a sane, sober, sad, thankful moment, and there seemed to be a glimmer of hope.

Soon, a Port Authority boat came along and tied up onto the ferry. The Mississippi River was so rough that we needed help boarding. We sat there bobbing up and down wondering why we weren't seasick because it was rough; we had to hold on just to remain in one place. Soon a few more people had come on and one lady had brought two cats and a dog. I thought again sadly of Al Capone, the little dog who liked to come over to my house whenever he escaped. He would just show up at my door, his face mischievous and his tail wagging. A little later, Gus or Ann would come and get him.

We made it across the river to Belle Chasse where a van brought us to a nearby YMCA which was to be our temporary shelter. I signed in and was tagged. I was in a truly bedraggled state, soaking wet from head to toe, my clothes were filthy, and I smelled like garbage. One of the kind ladies found me a towel and a clean shirt. That was all she could come up with; they had no food or even bottled water. They simply weren't prepared for this; the magnitude of Hurricane Isaac had taken everyone by surprise. After a long hot rejuvenating shower, I attempted to wash my clothing as best I could. Putting on the clean t-shirt I'd been so kindly provided, I wrapped the towel about my waist and began the laborious task of drying my pants with a hairdryer. To my slight annoyance, a man walked in and started talking to me. I was in one devil of a state of mental turmoil and didn't want to chit chat. He introduced himself as Jim; he was a big friendly fellow, but I wanted to be alone. Jim insisted that we share our experiences beginning with what had happened to me. After I had offered him my account, he recounted his experience. It turned out he was in the same hellish fix, having been separated from his friend while escaping and dreading the man hadn't made it. Jim left for a moment then came back with a pair of dry socks for me. I was starting to like this guy.

I found Mike by the front door. He had managed to call a cab to take him to New Orleans to check on his girlfriend who

hadn't been answering his calls. He lent me \$20 and hit the road. I envied him. I had people I could call too, but my cell phone was dead and I didn't know any of my friends' numbers. A crisis such as this highlights the fundamental shortcoming of cell phones: we never commit important numbers to memory, because we never dial them, merely highlight a name and press the green button.

Leaving my shoes out to dry, I wandered around in my dry socks, damp pants and clean shirt. I found a makeshift medical center. My mind was not calm, not confident, and not peaceful; the adrenaline had long worn off and I was a mess, though feeling clean. I asked the nurse for a Valium, because I felt a fearful panic coming on. She told me that if they had any Valium, they would take it themselves.

It was starting to get dark, and some military personnel came around and set up cots for all of us. I was starving, but food was very short that first night. They served us one hot dog with chili and a small bag of chips. I wolfed it down and went back for more, but they had run out. As I lay in my cot that night listening to 50 new roommates coughing, mumbling, and snoring, I wondered if I would ever know peace and tranquility again. I was a brand new person with nothing but one pair of dirty clothes and \$20. And I still had my truck, though it was no use to me at the moment being across the river.

The next day, Thursday August 31st, we were fed a little better. There were big cold ham sandwiches and you could eat all you wanted to. I gorged. Jim brought me to a grocery store that was open and running with a generator. He bought me a hairbrush, razor blades, a few pair of socks, some toothpaste and a toothbrush. What a fine gentleman he was. And since then I cannot even begin to list much less thank all the friends and strangers who have helped me with clothes, food, money, shelter, and hope.

It was a long warm drizzly day and we sat around and ate, smoked cigarettes, and swapped stories. There wasn't anything else to do. I never once got Gus and Ann out of my mind.

The next morning, Friday, September 1st was hectic. We all were sitting around eating our ham sandwiches when someone

announced that a bus was coming at 2:00 in the afternoon and we would be shipped to Shreveport to another shelter. We were to fold up our cots and take them and all our possessions with us. Shreveport? I didn't want to go. Many people simply grabbed their stuff and went back to their homes in Belle Chasse where they would reside for a few days without electricity. But anyone from **Braithwaite** across the river couldn't possibly go home. Damn. We packed up all our gear and waited. I found someone who lent me a charger. As soon as I plugged my phone in, it started working again. I highlighted "Brian," my lifelong friend, and pressed the button. I told him what happened, and he said he would be there in a few hours and bring me to his house in Lafourche Parish. I was overjoyed. A few minutes later, someone told me about an article they had just seen in the paper. **A couple had been found drowned in their apartment in Braithwaite.** The names were not given, but I knew it was Gus and Ann, two of my best friends and companions. I called the police and told them what I knew. They took my number. A few moments later the coroner's office called me. The gentleman asked me to describe Gus and Ann. I gave vivid descriptions. The man remained silent. "Please tell me they don't match my descriptions," I pleaded.

"They match all too well," he replied. "Stay where you are and I will come by in a few minutes to show you some pictures."

Outside the bus had arrived and all the refugees were lining up to board. I said goodbye to some friends, and then waited outside alone for the coroner as the bus pulled away. I was imagining what inhaling two lungs full of water would be like. I must have been ringing my hands and gnashing my teeth.

John Marie, the Plaquemines parish coroner's investigator, pulled up. We spoke briefly, and then he asked me to get in his car. He pulled out a folder, began to open it, but hesitated. "This is going to be hard," he said looking me right in the eyes. "They were in the water for 36 hours." Then he opened the file. There were two photos face down. He flipped one over: Gus (Augustus P. Saunders). Definitely Gus, not many people have such long hair

and beard, and he was wearing the same shirt he had on when I went to his house Tuesday afternoon. His eyes were closed, but the lids and the area around them were black.

"That's definitely him," I told the man. He put it back face down, and flipped over the other one: Ann (Ann E. George). Gus's corpse had looked horrifying. Ann's was even worse, so bloated, and so absolutely devoid of life. I knew I would never be able to get away from the images in those photos now etched permanently in my memory. "That's Ann," I said staring stupidly at the photo. He put it away.

You won't have to view the bodies," he told me mercifully, "It's a positive ID."

We spoke a bit; he gave me his card and drove away. I sat down in the parking lot of the Belle Chasse YMCA and I now felt the infinite weight of the world on my shoulders. Guilt's cruel mercilessness overwhelmed me. I would have traded places with my deceased friends and felt as though I would have been much better off dead. But I knew it was a childish and self-pitying sentiment, so I emptied my mind and just sat. Soon my friend Brian arrived and I quietly sighed with relief, never having been so glad to see anyone before in my life.

Brian looked a little haggard. He had also been through a hurricane and had spent the last few days with scant luxuries and barely enough necessities. We drove to highway 90 and headed west. The drive was rather tedious because we had to come to a complete halt at every stop light due to the lack of power in the area. Brian told me he too hadn't had a proper hot meal in several days, because Lafourche parish was also without electricity. But he informed me that we would find something good to eat in Boutte, the only town on our way that still had power. We pulled into a Zydeco's restaurant. I ordered a beer and the Soft Shelled Crab Platter. It came with salad, bread, and sweet potato French fries. For a few brief moments I was no longer a refugee, but rather a hungry man enjoying a delectable meal.

Finishing the last quarter of a crunchy spicy crab, I now realized the things I had taken for granted before were precious, and

this included not only the lives of Gus and Ann, but also my own. I had no idea what the future might hold, but I was alive, well fed, and with excellent company. To ask for anything more might anger the universe and I was too well aware of nature's wrath to take such a chance

“What Can I Tell You”

Darryl Graff

The construction unions of New York City are a subculture in themselves—a deeply unique and secular world—with their own language, their own dress code, and their own sense of right and wrong.

I belong, or I should say, belonged to a small, dying union; even with the support of the AFL-CIO and the greater New York City building trades council, my union is going out of business. There's no future there; the writing's on the wall, the ship is going down.

I needed to let go of the past, to move on. It was time to jump into some choppy waters, to non-union construction management. That life ring, the red and white one that says U.S.S. Union, wasn't going to save me; I needed to swim to shore, and that's what I did.

I have been hired as a project manager for a non-union company that does high-end residential construction in Manhattan. I've gone, head-on, into my new career, and, just like my new sobriety, not only have I accepted change, I'm embracing it.

The first thing I needed to change was the way I speak: From now on, when something looks bad, I have to say, “It looks bad,” not, “it looks like cock.” When something is difficult, I have to say, “It's difficult,” not, “it's a pain in the cock.” When I'm right about something, I have to say, “I'm right,” not, “balls on.” Prostate cancer is not “cancer of the cock;” colon cancer is not “ass cancer.” Having a drink in a bar is not “going for the cure.” Being shortchanged is not “getting cock.” A “dick” is now a “jerk”... a “prick” is now a “savvy businessman.” “What can I tell you” is, well, what I can tell you.

Once, after “going for the cure,” I was “busting for a piss,” and a cop caught me. The judge started to lecture me about public urination. “I thought I could make it home, but I couldn't, Your Honor,” I said, followed with “What can I tell you.” As soon as

I said, what can I tell you, the judge stopped talking. He looked afraid, like he knew I was part of a subculture—that I belonged to a family that, if he kept talking, he was going to wake up with a bloody horse head in his bed. I paid the fine and left.

It’s not just my language that’s changing, I’m changing the way I dress. The “Live Better—Work Union” t-shirt has been replaced with a pinstriped, button-down long-sleeved shirt. Baggy work pants are now snug-fitting chinos, and my scuffed, heavy work boots are now black dress shoes. I’d gone fifty-three years without owning a suit—to funerals and weddings, Sure, I own suit jackets, usually vintage, from places like Cheap Jack’s on First Avenue or Alice Underground on Broadway.

But it came time to go shopping for a suit, and I did as I often do, turning to Regina, my wife of twenty-five years, for advice. We got off the subway together at Herald Square and walked up Fifth Avenue to Lord and Taylor, and after a few minutes on the narrow escalator, we reached the 10th floor “Fine Menswear.” I picked out a grey Italian wool suit, one I felt would be worthy of a project manager position, or “PM,” as it’s sometimes called.

I stepped out of the dressing room, and my wife smiled and winked. “Very handsome.”

I may never actually wear my new suit; it’s good just knowing it’s there, hanging in my closet in case I need it. Like the four-inch knife I no longer keep tucked into the small of my back.

When you’re a union man, on the Friday before a major holiday weekend as you’re leaving the job site, the custom is to shake hands with all the guys. A firm double handshake, and then, you say: “Have a healthy and happy holiday weekend. Best to you and your family.” That’s the one union tradition I’m going to miss the most.

My first major holiday weekend as a non-union manager was, ironically, Labor Day weekend.

I went up to a group of guys who were waiting for the elevator, and I held out my hand and began to say, “Have a happy holiday” ... they all looked suspiciously at me and my outstretched hand

as if I was playing a trick or, somehow, trying to fool them. They all stared down at the floor, in silence.

I stood all the way home in the last car of the Lexington Avenue Local.

It’s a whole new world out there. I’ve got a lot to learn and, maybe, some things to forget.

Things are all different now.

You understand.

Don’t you?

Or, as I used to say,

“What can I tell you?”

Bitter Medicine

Eileen McGorry

God only knows what drug she was on. Barbiturates most likely but it could have been heroin. Whatever Rene had taken, she couldn't stand on her own. She came into the clinic, a guy on each side of her, their large hands locked under her arms. They were dragging her more than she was walking. Her eyes were barely open. She tried to talk but her tongue twisted around in her mouth. "I want my methadone" was garbled but I knew what she had said.

Rene was close to six feet tall, with skin as black as night, piercing eyes and long dark curly hair. When she was straight she would strut up to the window like a runway model. Not so today; today she was limp and pitiful.

The clinic was still full of clients and with her entrance the talk stopped and silence descended. When I see methadone clinics today I know they are very different from the clinics we ran in the early seventies. Methadone was new back then and our clinic, a part of a large community center, often looked more like a social gathering than a medical clinic. We did have a small, sectioned-off staff office and a dispensing window, but the rest of the place belonged more to the clients than it did to us.

That morning, similar to many mornings, clients who had already received their medication were lingering in the waiting area. We offered free coffee and lots of Salvation Army couches and they took advantage of both. Until Rene walked in they were paying more attention to each other than to the staff, each besting the person beside them in drug and street stories.

I knew I would refuse Rene her medicine as soon as I spotted her in the doorway, all slumped over and held up by those two guys. And I knew that, with all those clients sitting around, there would be an immediate reaction from the crowd in the room. And there was. Mike, a self-fashioned client advocate was off the couch and standing behind Rene as soon as I said, "I'm sorry. I can't give

you the medicine. You are too sedated."

I had come to this south Texas town from the suburbs of New York City. I was white and solidly middle class. Only three years out of nursing school and already tired of working in hospitals, I had walked into work I knew nothing about. But I wasn't alone; no one really knew much about methadone work back then. And Mike, who really had no official say in the matter, had not wanted me hired. "She is white and she's a Yankee. She doesn't come from here, what does she know about us?"

When I told Rene no medicine, she immediately tried to rally. She shook off the guys who were still holding her, but as soon as she did that, she began to slump and they had to grab at her to keep her from falling. They were tiring of it all, though, and when they got her steady, they walked her over to one of the couches, where the other clients made room for her. They lowered her gently but still she fell against the back of the couch at an odd angle. I watched her for a full minute, counting her breaths which were deep and regular. I knew if I went over and shook her, she would rouse. But if I did that, she would start asking me for her medicine, so I let her sleep.

"You can't do that; you can't refuse her the methadone unless you call someone," Mike said to me as I watched Rene breathe. "You can't deny her the medicine, she was on time. You have to call someone to get permission not to give it to her. If you won't call the doctor, you should at least check with Margaret."

I couldn't call Margaret. She would think I couldn't make decisions on my own. Margaret was the other nurse. She was raised in this town and, like Mike, she was black. And she had stood up for me when I was hired. "We don't need all black staff," she had said in a meeting Mike had insisted on having. "This is a methadone clinic not a black clinic," she had told him.

Turning back to look at Mike, who now filled the dispensing window with his bulk, I was nervous. Not about my decision, I knew not giving her the methadone was the right thing to do. And I wasn't worried that Mike would get out of control. My

nervousness was about my feeling out of place here. It was about maybe Mike being right when he said I didn't belong. His beefy arms were now resting on the sill of the window which was small enough that only his head and arms were visible in the space. I knew I could not back off.

"It isn't safe," I said to him, "She is too drugged. And I'm not going to call anyone." He moved back a bit but he kept his eyes on me. "I told them not to hire you. This is not the end of this." Then he walked away.

Over the next few days Mike stood outside the clinic talking to any methadone client who would listen. "Rene got to the clinic, she was on time, her fees were up to date and still she denied her the methadone. She should not be working here," he told them. Some of our clients came and went quickly and others hung around for hours. I was reassured when I would see a client avoid Mike, move past him quickly, not wanting to be engaged. But others did listen, nodding their head. They all knew each other. Many of the black clients had grown up in the sprawling, low-rise housing projects that surrounded the community center. Most of the white clients grew up closer to the beach, but all of them had spent their drug days down here on the streets I drove each day to work.

Mike had grown up close by and had been on the streets since he was a teen. Addicted to heroin early, he was dealing drugs and running women by his twenties. Everyone knew him. He had served on the client committee as the clinic was being planned and was one of the first people to apply when we opened the doors. He was close to thirty by then and maybe he was not yet ready to give up drugs, but he was ready to slow down. He kept his urine screens clean enough not to get discharged and made excuses when they came back dirty. He was almost gifted at getting by with submitting urine that wasn't his, even with one of the counselors standing by him as he peed.

Determined to have his say about me, he talked the medical director into a meeting. He only managed to get two clients to come with him, so almost everyone in the room was staff. "She

never offered to let her come back later, she never called anyone else to check," he said, looking not at me, but at the doctor.

Dr. Morgan never looked the part of a methadone medical director. While the staff often wore blue jeans and even shorts in the heat of the summer, he was always in a suit and tie. Sometimes seeming distant, always reserved, he still had an uncanny ability to cut through useless talk even as he made people feel that their issues were worthy of his time. He ignored any craziness in the client stories, opting for direct alternatives to each problem presented to him. He told clients that getting off drugs was hard work. He told them we would help the best that we could, but that it was their choice to make.

All the staff knew what he would say in response. He only agreed to the meeting to emphasize that the nurses were hired to make these kinds of decisions. "If you look like you are actively using drugs, if you are sedated in any way, I expect them to refuse to give you the medicine."

When the room finally emptied I cornered the doctor. "I hate this," I said to him. "They are mean and they are personal in their attacks. And those counselors, they push for more authority, even the authority to give out the medicine. But when I said no to Rene, neither one of them said a word to support me, not even after Mike walked away." He listened to every word, maintaining eye contact and nodding his head. Then, his eyes never leaving mine, he said, "Eileen, this is not an easy place to work. Not everyone can do it." The words were blunt, but his tone was caring. For one second I felt like I was his daughter more than his employee.

I came in the next day expecting more trouble from Mike but when he came up to the window his "good morning" was neutral, even friendly. He thanked me after I handed him his medication, then he turned and joined a group in the waiting room. In retrospect I feel like everything changed after that meeting, but in reality the change came slowly as one day slipped into another. At some point I noticed that Mike had stopped arguing with me and started using persuasion. "It is what they are used to, Eileen,

drugs are a game to them, and getting methadone from you is a game as well.”

He was helpful in ways that a textbook could never be. One day he pulled me aside and told me, “Don’t tell these guys that methadone is long acting and if they miss a day the withdrawal will be very mild. They will just think you don’t understand.” But he didn’t stop acting like a drug addict. Confronted with his own positive lab slip, he talked about lab errors or the staff mixing up the specimens. He would plead his case for delaying his fee with stories of money stolen from him or needing just one more week to pay his overdue balance. Overtime he pushed his dose higher than any client, always saying that with just a bit more methadone, he could clean up.

It took me awhile to figure out that trusting or not trusting the clients to tell us the truth was a concept that had little bearing on our work. In reality, they were trying the best they could to get from us what they felt they needed. Telling us rambling stories filled with mixed truths and outrageous falsehoods was simply part of their strategy to get their methadone. To counter that and to give us space in which to work, we created an alternative structure. We built a world made from rules. And every time we learned something new, something that was getting by us, we made a new rule.

We made so many and then adjusted them so quickly that we had to keep a book. We had rules about continued drug use, about supplying urine samples to be tested, about paying fees, about dosing hours and about no yelling, and no threats. And rules that you had to be sober and alert to get your methadone every day and rules about take-home supplies, how to earn them, how to keep them, and how, once they were in your hand, they would not be replaced for any reason. And when we discovered “methadone spit” being sold right outside our doors, we made a rule that you had to talk to the nurse after you drank the liquid medicine.

The clients had their rules too: if you substitute another’s urine make sure it is from a client on the program (they check for methadone, you know), never admit you have some money

in your pocket when trying to get your fee deferred, in fact admit nothing, not drug use, or that you lost your job or you were not in the emergency room when you were late, but home asleep in bed. When they tell you your urine is dirty, tell them about lab errors or staff mislabeling of bottles and when they ask you for money, tell them you had to give your mother money for food. If none of it works get dramatic, don’t yell, but don’t be afraid to tell them, “Y’all are forcing me to go out and steal to pay these fees.”

“You have to pay today, you owe two weeks.”

“Ah come on, y’all said tomorrow, and I’m trying to get to work and I can’t work without my medicine.”

“No, it is today; you agreed to pay today.”

“Alright, just give me my methadone and I will come back after work and pay.”

“You know it doesn’t work that way. You have to pay before I can give you the medicine.”

The clients thought we had all the power and, in reality we did; but we thought they were masters of getting the best of us, and they were. What they most wanted from us was the drug. And their biggest worry was that on any given day, we might say no.

They came in to the clinic friendly and casual or at other times haughty or arrogant, but they always felt vulnerable. For a long time I was oblivious to what they were thinking as they walked up to the window. I thought the rules were straightforward and if you followed them, the medicine could be had. But to the clients this was never true.

“What do you mean I have to give urine today? I just peed Monday.”

“Urine screens are random, random means anytime we ask for one. You know that, we’ve had this discussion before.”

“Man, this is unfair, Roger tells me he hasn’t given urine in a week, what about him, does he have to pee today?”

“You have to give a specimen today, do you want to try now or do you want to drink some water and try in a few minutes?”

“Shit, this is worse than being on the streets. I’d be better off just scoring some dope.”

Still, months after my complaining to the doctor, I realized that I was beginning to like these people. So much so that sometimes I just wanted to forget the urine screen or the few dollars they owed us and give them the medicine. These people lived a life at war with a drug. Everything, their ability to work, take care of a family, even simply get through the day depended on them getting a drug. We hadn't caused their problems, but we claimed that we were there to help them. Now I was saying no just because they couldn't pee on demand or owed us five dollars.

That was one reason I loved to see Walter come in. He was a white guy in his forties, who drove a big truck down to the valley and brought back produce to sell to the local markets. He dressed in black slacks and thin short sleeve shirts and he was always pleasant with us. He never argued about money or urine collections, his drug screens were always clean and he rarely hung out in the clinic. He came in, drank his methadone and left.

He had been with us over a year, when his urine came back positive for opiates. I looked at that slip and my first thought was, this has to be an error. But Walter didn't claim it was an error. Instead he said, "I was down in the valley that week, I was in a club, and at the time I thought someone had put something in my drink." And I believed him. At our next staff meeting, I advocated that we not remove his take-home supplies, the usual action in these circumstances. And we did just that, continued him on these privileges.

A few weeks later he was busted. It was an unusually large bust for that city, serious enough to make the papers in a distant city. He was driving his truck into our parking lot and underneath all those fruits and vegetables was lots of heroin. I never saw Walter after the bust; his charges were sufficient to keep him in the county jail until he made a deal and was sentenced. Different from Mike, Walter looked like me. He was courteous like me and he worked. He didn't sit around the clinic all day and he did not tell endless drug stories. He did what we asked and he was never refused his methadone.

Bernice, Gloria and Joyce looked nothing like me. They were three black women in their twenties who had drugged and tricked since their teens. Each of them had lied to me about fees, urine screens and drug use. Each of them had been angry with me at times, and made hostile or insulting comments when I asked them for money or told them they had to pee to get their dose. And each of them had, at some point, been humbled by life and by drugs and had pleaded with us for help.

Late one afternoon I looked up to see the three of them coming through the door. The sun was bright and warm and they came in search of free coffee and the coolness of air conditioning. They were loud, that day, laughing and stumbling on their high heel sandals. When Bernice saw me, she pulled me to the window. She pointed to a small boy outside, "He asked me if I tricked," she told me. The boy looked twelve but I hoped he was older. She pulled a folded twenty from her pocket and said, "I told him sure, I trick." She would deny it later, say it was a joke, "I was just trying to get Eileen to blush," she would tell her counselor, "I don't trick anymore."

She was dressed like the others in shorts that fit tight across her belly and barely covered the swells of her buttocks. Joyce started making fresh coffee, prancing more than walking around. Her knit top was stretched across her breasts leaving her midriff bare. Gloria and Joyce knew to keep their street-walking stories in the past tense, telling them as if they happened years ago when it might have been the night before. But Bernice was incorrigible. She knew the rules, once on methadone, prostitution was supposed to stop. She also knew that if she kept her urines clean and paid her fees it was unlikely we would discharge her.

Filling her cup halfway with creamer before she added coffee, Gloria told Bernice, "Sometimes those young kids go limp before they even start." As soon as she said it my mind fashioned a picture of the kid, his penis hard, then going flaccid. And the picture in my mind made me blush. Gloria sat down and pulled in hard on her cigarette and crossed her legs which her shorts and heels made

even longer. But nothing left on her was pretty. Her hair was dull, any shine long gone and her once gorgeous legs were marred by reddened bumps and old abrasions.

Soon the room was filled with story after story of “Johns” and sex in sweaty rooms and alleys. Finally Joyce slapped her thigh and cried, “Look how red she is.” She had barely got it out before her laughter caused her to choke on her coffee. As she raised her hand to cover her mouth I could see the scars that lined the inside of her arms.

They were embarrassing me and they were doing it on purpose. But I didn’t leave; because as I sat there, I was getting lost in those women. I was looking at Joyce and remembering her telling me how she practically raised herself; her mother disappeared into alcohol and drugs. And Gloria telling me how her baby had been taken from her, “Snatched by social services,” she said. “They told me in the hospital, they knew I used drugs. You have to come in every week to see us, and bring the baby. I couldn’t get to the hospital every week. I didn’t have any car or taxi money. Did they want me to trick to get the money? And damn it; I was staying clean after that baby. And they took her anyway.” And I thought about another client, a woman who had been working hard to change her life, got herself into GED classes, but then gave up before the test. She quit coming to the clinic after that. I would see her sometimes on the streets around us, stumbling along, her eyes haunted.

I was the same age as most of the women on the program. Looking at Gloria, Bernice and Joyce, I knew that while I was in high school, they were getting started on the streets. While I was pushing my way through nursing school, paid for by my parents, and thinking that my life was hard; they were tricking to buy the heroin that dulled the future they saw in front of them.

Would I ever do it, I asked myself. Could my life ever change in ways that I would prostitute myself? What if my rent was three months late and there was no one to help me? Joyce’s voice broke through my thoughts, “I like the old guys best, they are just grateful they are still doing it,” she said as she wiggled her ass. She was funny sitting there mimicking the movements of sex.

We were cut off when one of the late clients walked in and I got up to get their medicine. The ladies left when he left, all of them still playing and laughing at jokes that no longer poked fun at me. When the door closed, it was again still and I walked to the window and gazed out to the project site. The basketball court was momentarily empty and, for the first time, I saw the extensive cracks in the concrete. In this poor community center the cracks on that court would never be repaired. They would just get worse. I stood looking at the lines snaking across the courtyard, until a new bunch of kids came along, picked up one of the balls and once again, shouting and the noise of shuffling feet filled the clinic.

Mike never again tried to get rid of me. Eventually he stopped saying that I would never understand. Sometimes he even talked to me about his own life and what he wanted. It was probably only six months past that last meeting when he and I sat alone one afternoon on the same couch where the ladies had caused me to wonder if I could ever have sex for money. “I am tired of lying,” he said. “I am tired of stealing, I am hurting my family, I want more than this.”

I listened to him that day. I was empathetic but I had little faith that he could ever make it out of the drug world. But I would be proven wrong. In the years to come, he would stop his spotty heroin use. After more time had passed, he would start a slow, but steady decrease off Methadone. He would get a job, get up every day and do work that he felt was useful. I watched him do some of these things. I even helped him manage that detox. After I left, I heard from others how well he was doing. Still later, I left the city and lost track of him.

But on that day we sat on two Salvation Army couches next to the big coffee urn amidst the noise of the busy project site. I was satisfied. We were not great friends, but we were no longer adversaries. He did most of the talking. Then I noticed that the long afternoon was near its end and the sun was beginning its gradual descent into evening.

Ci

Leah Angstman

Maria Salomea Skłodowska Curie; or, Marie Curie,
November 7, 1867-July 4, 1934.

Aplastic anemia resulted from her years of exposure
to radiation as a physicist and chemist.

The curie (symbol *Ci*) is a unit of measurement of radioactivity.

Caught between a land partitioned amongst three empires
and a land that only claimed what others sought to claim
when others sought to claim it—
elements are born of mind and earth,
are separated when nations are not,
are named in lieu of independence.

Women will fight their way out from under
crushing glass that presses overhead, will prevail despite war,
despite atheism in a time of god, xenophobia to falsely accuse,
man's irrefutable incontrovertible knowledge
that breasts can only wink, not think.

A refusal to patent a discovery
so that science may not be hindered—
perhaps the highest discovery: the greater good.
The firsts would be turned down, gold medals
exchanged for war funds, prize money doled to friends—
while the breath sneaks in radiation.
Cold winters go uninsulated, yet isolated as isotopes;
body collapses from hunger, depression, yet still clutches
test tubes in a shed unventilated, unwaterproofed.

A woman cannot give a speech. A woman cannot
take the chair. A woman cannot get the job.
A woman cannot make the academy list.
But a man's greatest discovery is his wife;
a woman discovers herself.

In tons of ore, she is discovered. In thousands of miles
for one gram of radium. In pitchblende, torbernite,
thorium, in radiography units
injecting infected tissues on the frontlines,
years before cancer knew it needed
a woman's touch. But

curiosity kills more than cats: to learn the unknown
one cannot come back from the knowledge.
It eats through a brain, a body, healthy tissue once its ally;
it endures past the flesh. To touch the glass test tube
that would shatter the glass ceiling, a woman's worth
outlasts the sacrifice—cannot be measured in curies,
disintegrations per minute,
decays per second.

Possibilities

Joseph Buehler

We might crush ‘em, slush ‘em, mush ‘em to the chief’s rest,
lick ‘em, stick ‘em, kick ‘em up the crow’s nest,
Jack ‘em, stack ‘em, slack ‘em down the shark moat,
slick ‘em, stick ‘em, flick ‘em up the gun boat,
gray ‘em, clay ‘em, pay ‘em down the hopper,
horse ‘em, course ‘em, source ‘em through the popper,
seat ‘em, cheat ‘em, beat ‘em out the smoke stack,
mace ‘em, pace ‘em, chase ‘em up the hay rack,
mow ‘em, hoe ‘em, show ‘em through the rye, guy,
flop ‘em, plop ‘em, mop ‘em in the eye, Di,
cloak ‘em, smoke ‘em, poke ‘em with a mean face,
bush ‘em, shush ‘em, push ‘em to the snail race,
hose ‘em, close ‘em, nose ‘em from the butter,
fling ‘em, ring ‘em, ding ‘em till they mutter.

Visceral

Josephine Cariño

In nature, patterns are pervasive:
the tessellated surface of a honeycomb
reeks geometry, while moth wings—
two papery mirrored halves—ogle at birds.
Under the eaves you’ll find the silver mesh
of spider’s web, prised in sunlight.
And, in the depths, sea anemones swell
into being, evenly shaped.

Still, my nerves
tell me something different—
that even in alignment, the world
spins askew. How easy
it is to walk in fields of flowers
that teem symmetry. The golden
mean dictates creation: in time lapse, petals
radiate into perfect circles.

But something about the lopsided way
we swing our arms as we walk
suggests a sloppy carelessness. Something
about the lilted corner of mouths smiling
crooked smiles seems more truthful.

How pleasing, to feel
in the gut a creature—
core of being—feral,
wild, inherent.

Every twitch of the eye
hints at the erratic. Every step,
sporadic, at beautiful failings.

Thresholds

Leonore Hildebrandt

Never pitch your camp on the edge of anything...
—Algernon Blackwood

Put your tent either in the wood, or out of it.
Avoid a river's bank, a canyon's rim—
borderlands stir up the uncanny.

If, oblivious or reckless, you have passed up
a suitable place in the meadow, and must
stay on the edge—gather yourself.

Do not be lured by whirls of dry leaves,
refrain from seeing patterns in the heaps of split shale,
ignore the face weeping behind a cloud-veil.

An air-draft troubles the aspen leaves,
thunder nags from the valley, chokes in the wilted grass.
Then, aghast, silence gapes.

Move close to the fire as night advances.
Anguished, rattle yourself awake.
Uncover the darkness.

As soon as daybreak pales the shadows,
move on—your voice intimate with breath,
the ground fragrant with creeping juniper.

Begin Again

Leonore Hildebrandt

To discern layers
of sound and scent
begin again
to focus sink and strike
begin to rise into the rising
begin in silence.

Begin with a question
the human dilemma
of purpose and failure
your immutable tracks—
begin again
like a woman in childbirth
wailing toward her opening.

Begin again
bent over worksheets
appendices
longhand or shorthand
blurry-eyed
calculating remainders—
begin again in laughter.

Learn mathematics
aerodynamics and flow rates
angles of concrete
fire codes—
rearrange tree-rings
work in plaster or bronze
begin in the flesh.

Begin as a wound
a city in rubbles
cracked like industrial colors—
record your confinement
and mold a black-barren garden
of abraded plaster
torn like the sound
from an open mouth
begin with a trickle of water.

Like a seamstress
assembling pieces
begin again
disrupted disjointed
begin with a whimper
unquestioned.

Begin again calmly
to trim and focus the light
set accents in red
a black panel tone
sustained—
be unconstructed
unconsoled
unstoppable
your hair pulled back
your head close-shaven
begin again naked and wet

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Kyler Street Overpass

Michelle Perez

You walked on top of the thin rail, two policemen following, tiptoeing their car along. The highway sped 20 feet below.

Your breath was concentrated on a steady goal, your arms spanned wide like sun-soaked outrigger spars of a shrimping boat.

At midpoint, the breeze settled. With back straight, worn sneakers hugging the slim steel plank, you proceeded to cross ...

No, it wasn't water you marched over but fast-moving, multiple dangers: the flicker of windshields, a glint of horns as morning streamlined beneath you.

And I bet I must have placed one prayer in front of the other, heel-to-toe, toe-to-heel, trolling a foot-width of pavement behind me.

The cops, too, hanging their elbows out the patrol car window, edging the curb, afraid not to look, waiting to take two truant kids home to a parent.

They would scold us both as soon as you hopped off, brushed the smugness from your knees, safe after landing on that soft berm of dirt.

But I give us credit for what we didn't do, brother, how we harnessed tension and the urge to lunge, for remaining on the ground anchored in hope

While you knew all along where you wanted to go
and took the rest of us, dangling—unwilling partners
in that vicarious passage

As you undid the ordinary ... released slow trappings
of our common ground, with each step forward
leaving fate unhooked.

Finding Melanie

Maggie Rosen

She is sorting forks and spoons.
She throws a spoon at me.
She puts a fork in the spoons and laughs.

“Which stamp says Melanie? Find Melanie.”
She stamps her name on the corner of a page
then on her hand, then on my hand.

It’s 11, time for a break. We walk together in the hall.
Too close and she rips off my necklace.
Too far and she sits, shuts down.

One light finger on her elbow and we can make it three times
around the building, as long as I keep singing.

I have been in love with her forever.
I just didn’t know her until this year.

Back in the room. Almost lunch.
It’s her period, so I change the pad and
replace the diaper while she plays with a buckle,
clip, unclip, slap on the seat, a game
about the joy of noise.

Now she has to lean on me
hand on my hand to pull her pants up, flush.

My job is to find when she needs me
and when I need to let her go.
Do I keep handing her soap? Do I keep saying rinse?
It is the hardest job in the world.

About the Authors

Leah Angstman is the recent winner of the Loudoun Library Foundation Poetry Award and Nantucket Directory Poetry Award and was a finalist in the Bevel Summers Prize for Short Fiction (Washington & Lee University), Pen 2 Paper Writing Competition (Poetry and Fiction), Saluda River Prize for Poetry and Blue Bonnet Review Poetry Contest. She has earned three Pushcart Prize nominations and serves as Editor-in-Chief for Alternating Current Press and a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*. Her writing has appeared in numerous journals, including *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Rumpus*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Electric Literature*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Atticus Review* and *Shenandoah*. She can be found at leahangstman.com.

Joseph Buehler has published over fifty poems in *The Tower Journal*, *ArLiJo*, *Nine Mile Magazine*, *Futures Trading*, *Two Cities Review*, *Common Ground Review*, *Serving House Journal*, *Mad Swirl*, *Bumble Jacket Miscellany* and elsewhere. He is retired and lives in Georgia with his wife Trish.

Josephine Cariño. Pursuing a degree in English with a minor in music, Josephine Cariño is a senior at East Carolina University in Greenville, NC. Her poem “Postlude” was a finalist for the 2015 Jeff Marks Poetry Prize held by *December Magazine* and was subsequently published in its Fall/Winter 2015 issue. Most recently, her short fiction piece “Old as Rain” was a finalist for the 2016 American Fiction Prize at New Rivers Press, and will be published in the fall of 2017. Josephine will be attending North Carolina State University in the fall for her MFA in Creative Writing.

Samuel George is a graduate of CU, Boulder. A native of Louisiana, he resides in Galliano, LA. His stories have been published in *Dirge Magazine*, *Stupefying Stories*, *Gypsy Shadow Publications*, *Growing Strange*, *Sloth Jockey* and *The Short Humour* site. He has a previous

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Darryl Graff is a NYC construction worker and nonfiction writer. His stories have been published in *Akashic Books*, *Empty Sink*, *Gravel*, *Hippocampus*, *Bio Stories*, *Foliage Oak* and elsewhere.

Leonore Hildebrandt is the author of *The Work at Hand* and *The Next Unknown*. A third collection, *Where You Happen to Be*, will be forthcoming in 2018 (Deerbrook Editions). She has published poems and translations in the *Cafe Review*, *Cerise Press*, *the Cimarron Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Drunken Boat*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Poetry Daily* and *Poetry Salzburg Review*, among other journals. Winner of the 2013 Gemini Poetry Contest, she received fellowships from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the Maine Community Foundation, and the Maine Arts Commission. She was nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize. A native of Germany, Leonore lives “off the grid” in Harrington, Maine. She teaches writing at the University of Maine and serves on the editorial board of the *Beloit Poetry Journal*.

Daniel M. Jaffe. Dozens of Daniel M. Jaffe’s short stories have been published in literary journals, and his work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He is the author of the novel-in-stories, *The Genealogy of Understanding* (Lethe Press, 2014), the short story collection, *Jewish Gentle and Other Stories of Gay-Jewish Living* (Lethe Press, 2011), and the novel, *The Limits of Pleasure* (Bear Bones Books, 2010).

Eileen McGorry worked over forty years as a Registered Nurse. Her essay “The Novice” was published in the *Examined Life Journal*. She lives in Olympia Washington with her husband Ron and their two beautiful black cats.

Steven Ostrowski is a fiction writer, poet, and songwriter. His work appears widely in literary journals, magazines, and anthologies. He has published a chapbook of stories as well as three chapbooks of poems. He teaches at Central Connecticut State University.

Michelle Perez has had poems published recently in the *ViêtNow National Magazine*, *The Binnacle*, *The Ilanot Review* and *Slipstream*.

Maggie Rosen lives in Silver Spring, Maryland. Her poems have been published in *Little Patuxent Review*, *Waccamaw*, *Cider Press Review*, *RiverLit*, *Blood Lotus*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Barely South* and *Conclave*, among other publications. Her chapbook, *The Deliberate Speed of Ghosts*, was published in 2016 by Red Bird Chapbooks.

Erika Staiger is a first year MFA student at the University of South Florida, where she teaches freshmen composition. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from Michigan State University. "Liars" is her first story accepted for publication. Shortly after that, two other pieces were accepted and are now available in *COG Literary Magazine* and *Black Fox Literary Magazine*.