



Spill the Coffee,  
Crappy Desks,  
Dang!

2007 Summer Institute

Fellows

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## Introduction

### Summer's Vacation Lost

*Jason Courtmanche and Kelly Andrews-Babcock*

Icarus fell far into the Sea,  
but like Daedalus, you soar Denise Abercrombie.

The Great White Hope avoids markers on his head  
Barry's presence and sarcasm make us laugh at what he's said.

You amaze all of us, Brina, with your lack of fear  
to have done what you've done not being able to hear.

Deep dark secrets nestled below  
Overcome now that Kristine allows her pen to flow.

Ginny, too, has impressed us all, not just with methodology,  
but with poetry slam and your mastery of new technology.

Red hair, smile, loving arms for kids  
Marcy must have them all flipping their lids.

Liza has opened doors to us all on the reading issue,  
and all of us love you even though you used all the tissue.

I'll never look at hot and cold the same  
Without thinking of Maria's sexy fame.

I keep thinking for Chris this must be a surreal vision  
after drinking and driving and an Iraqi mission.

I knew how much Jane loved to write  
Hard work, compassion, strength all very tight.

Cat drove the farthest to get here each day  
and her mantra became Who needs sleep anyway?

Mike told us how guys like rope  
With him in a classroom there's lots of hope.

Twas twillin and thrillin and all sorts of bestica  
to have learned bout the jabberwock from our new friend Jessica.

Young and so full of passion  
Laura's poems will follow her in fashion.

Joanne clearly wowed us with her wonderful tale  
of impossible love between a naïve girl and a gay male.

McAnna armed with a smile everyday  
Can you imagine how boring it'd be with out her play?

Steve made us laugh and taught us the fact  
that you can reach tough kids if you just know how to act.

Tara's long fluid hands in motion  
The people in Mansfield are happy you don't teach in Goshen

Denise Stemmler's insights in us have lit a fire,  
and she'll never again have to work with someone who signs his names Esquire.

Dang, Kelly, you sure do drop a lot of f-bombs,  
but without you this summer, I couldn't get along.

## A Tribute to Daddy

*Brina Abrahams*

“Rise and shine, time’s a wastin.” Those familiar words came down the hall every morning while I lived at home. It was my dad awakening his brood. Dad was born to somewhat older parents, the youngest of 7 children and the only male. Each of his sisters and their families played an integral part of my life as I grew up. How they loved their baby brother and crooned over him! I though it was absurd to call anyone as old as dad, a baby!

Dad was a short, squat man with a shiny baldhead, which was always covered with a hat worn at an angle, and tilted slightly forward towards his face. In the winter he wore a soft, felt, gangster-type hat, and one of straw in the summer. His tanned hands were calloused from hard work, but they were oh so soft and gentle when he held your hand or dried your tears. He had soft, dreamy, blue eyes that had a watery quality. But his best feature was his heart. Although you couldn’t see it, it was soft as a baby’s skin and as big as all out doors. This heart had an enormous capacity for love. Why I don’t think there was anything or anyone that daddy didn’t love.

I was his first child, born on Father’s Day and named after his mother. I felt I was so favored in daddy’s eyes. Of course my brother was the only boy and had a place of stature in daddy’s female dominated world. He became his sidekick and you could almost see his crown. My sister Trudy had the best personality. She giggled and bubbled effervescence, so easy to please. My sister Harriet, nearly 10 years my junior, was very bright and beautiful, yet willful. She moved to California after her college graduation, and it was her picture that I found under daddy’s pillow after he died. He worked so hard to let each of us know we were unique. I once read, “Any man can be a father, but it takes somebody special to be a daddy.” I had a daddy and I knew it.

Daddy was a dairy farmer, a cattle dealer and a butcher. He drove a big red truck, often accompanied by a large dog of some unknown species. He worked long hard days in the fields

and tending his herd but he always had time for us. In the winter he took us ice-skating at nearby ponds, patiently laced our skates and then built a fire at the edge of the pond so we could stay warm and toasty. When we finished skating he magically produced a package of hotdogs and a bag of marshmallows. We gleefully found roasting sticks and cooked our delicacies. With full bellies, we happily headed home. Snowy days he hitched up our two, big workhorses to a sleigh and took us for a ride through the fields. Summers he filled the back of his truck with hay and took the four of us and other assorted kids to a nearby state park. He never cared how many kids we piled into that truck. Daddy wasn't much for swimming so he parked himself under a tree, fully dressed, patiently watching us. At the end of the afternoon, out came that magical package of hotdogs and the bag of marshmallows. We savored each mouthful and never tired of the magic. And so it went through the seasons with daddy always finding things to do.

Daddy had his "cronies" that he regularly took us to visit. There was Attie Griswold who at 87, lived alone without electricity or running water. Attie showed us how to stand real still and feed the birds peanut butter off a spoon. "Old man Eckburg" lived on a nearby farm. He kept his pond stocked so we could fish. Old Amos lived in Southbury, was deaf and held a large tin horn to his ear, which everyone shouted into. He had a large sap house and every February would tap the trees. We watched the clear bubbling sap turn to sweet sticky maple syrup, which we poured over dishes of cold white snow. Clarence Ambler had a big farm where dad traded cattle. I would talk to his mother while she rocked on the porch, or catch cats in the barn. He told me I could keep all the cats I could catch. I always went for the kittens because they were slower. Mr. and Mrs. Wolff also had a farm and kept horses for us to ride after we left our farm. There were the Webster Boys, (really two old brothers), Willie, Art Fairchild, and on it went. He had a tale to tell about each one. Sundays were for visiting daddy's colorful characters that he collected like stamps in a book.

Although he had but a 10<sup>th</sup> grade education, daddy was a teacher. He taught us responsibility and the value of a hard day's work for a day's pay. We learned respect, for ourselves, for others and

for all of God's creatures. He taught us to value our name and to protect it. He said he worked hard so that it stood for honesty and fairness and we should be sure it was never tainted. Above all, he taught us love. Although I loved him dearly I was not always as proud of my dad as I should have been. In a child's typical fashion I wanted him to look more dressed up. I watched some of my friend's fathers go off to work in suits and ties. My dad only owned one suit, which he wore for weddings, funerals and special occasions. I'm ashamed to admit I was sometimes embarrassed when he came into school in his farmer's pants and plaid shirts. Sometimes I would tell him that he needed to go back to school and get his GED. "No need." He would reply to me. Other times I would tell him that when we grew up he should go to college, and then he just laughed that deep belly laugh of his. I loved the things we did with dad but didn't understand I couldn't have it both ways. As I look back I often wonder what he must of thought at my attempts to change him into something he wasn't.

Daddy wanted us to be self-reliant. He patiently taught each of us to drive, but before we got our license he made us learn to change a tire and adjust the choke in case we flooded the car. Which I did on a regular basis. He wanted us to get a good education, "So you can stand on your own two feet," he would say. Daddy was also a bit of an adventurer. The day before he died he took my oldest daughter and my nephew both aged 9, down the Wickipeeme River on a raft he fashioned out of an old bedspring, kept afloat by empty metal drums he lashed together. Of course he didn't have any life jackets. When I learned of his feat and protested about how dangerous that was, he retorted that he was just reenacting Tom Sawyer and giving the kids a taste of adventure.

While fostering us to become independent, it created conflict within him. As we married or left home to seek our fortunes he asked, "Are you going to leave your dear old daddy?" When we prepared to depart our nest he told us that he loved us, and this was our home if we ever needed to come back for any reason. I knew that he meant it. He was always so proud of our accomplishments, and reveled in the times we came home for family dinners or holidays. "The

more the merrier,” he would say. We didn’t have much as I was growing up but it didn’t matter.

Now as I look back upon my youth I think in many ways I was really rich.

*When daddy died, the doctors told us he had had a massive stroke, but ya know what? I don’t really believe it. Not a word. Ya wanna know what I think really happened? Well I’ll tell ya. Ya know that great big ole heart of his? Well, when we began to leave, it crumbled a little bit with each one of us. I think that each of us took a little piece of his heart with us when we left, and we just used him all up, till there weren’t nothing left. Yup, as I see it that’s how it happened, so help me God!*

## Andy

*Kelly Andrews-Babcock*

I'd like you to meet my asshole brother. I know you're probably thinking this is not a pretty way to introduce my only sibling, but trust me – it's a fitting one. How about I fill you in on some background and you can decide for yourself.

Actually I think it all began when he was able to walk and talk. Well maybe not that early, but close enough. You see the 4 and half years difference put me in a league of my own. I was the one my parents depended on – the good child. He was an attention-seeking, hyperactive, obnoxious brat. Sorry about the name-calling, I should know better. Can you guess what rhymes with Kelly and would be most annoying? Yup, you guessed it, Smelly, Kelly. When said repeatedly in sets of three on a daily basis – it gets old.

On our trips to Cape Cod, Andy would hold onto the middle of the front seat and bounce for the entire four hours. I was usually curled up trying not to puke on these trips so barely paid attention to him. On the few occasions when the Dramamine worked, I would play with my Barbies.

During one trip, we were arguing (that happened often by the way...) and he took my Barbie doll out of my hand and threw it out the window on the hi-way! I immediately burst into tears and my mother was screaming for my dad to stop the car and he's yelling saying he's not stopping the car, and Andy has a big ol' shit-eatin' grin on his face.

So he was in trouble after that one...trouble for him was time out. That was a beautiful thing for me. Time out meant a chair in the middle of the room with nothing within reaching distance, I would be watching to tell on him when he tried to move the chair by picking it up and jumping it across the floor. I was also good for discreetly moving the timer an additional 10 minutes. My mom always knew but enjoyed the quiet so much she never said anything to me.

OK so now you have somewhat of a window into my life as a tortured child. But the torment reached more than me...who actually puts a bowl of hot water out for their dog? Or puts the water just out of her reach? Hello, you know those kids who are cruel to animals are like serial

killers or really messed up? Well that's gotta be him! How he can live with himself is beyond me. Firecrackers in frogs, shooting squirrels with a BB gun, why anyone would let a psycho like him hold any kind of gun is beyond me. Now that he's a big boy, he has real guns, he joined the NRA and is a Republican.

I had many opportunities to baby-sit my brother, which was usually when the shit hit the fan. One time we were arguing, who knows about what, and he took my favorite Raggedy Ann doll – and was dangling her out the second floor window. I was screaming at him to give her back and what do you think he did? Bingo – dropped the doll. I loved that doll and cried as I flew down the stairs to get her, listening to him laugh the whole time. Any ideas why he might have done this?

Because and I'm quoting here, "You loved that doll more than you loved me."

Kate was over and we were in high school...my darling brother had learned a new word on the bus. Slut. Well he didn't know what it meant, but he learned to never call me that again. Now we weren't allowed to hit each other, but I broke all the rules that day. I beat the crap out of him.

Kate pulled me off him, she thought I was going to kill him. You can only imagine how much I wanted to. He never tried new words out on me again.

But then...there was the time that my friend Denise was over, and he blew pepper in her face...who does that? Or better yet why does someone do that? Oh there's an answer for that one too! Because she was pretty.

Don't think that he wasn't smart - he was a frickin genius. We had an intercom system from down stairs to my room and he rigged it so that I couldn't shut it off. That way he could repeatedly say, "Earth to Smelly Kelly, Earth to Smelly Kelly, Earth to Smelly Kelly". My parents always told me to ignore him. Do they really think that it's possible to ignore someone who doesn't give up until you've reached a breaking point? My mom had taught me one trick that worked. It was the only thing that would piss him off. IG-N-O-R-E, IG-N-O-R-E, IG-N-O-R-E, with fingers in my ears.

The funniest story is one he told me about when he was older. We were at the Cape with my grandmother. Andy was the only one at the house and Gramma came over to visit. He was in his room looking at some magazine...pleasuring himself, when she walked in on him. OK so he didn't lock the door. That one still cracks me up to this day. How do you face your grandmother after she catches you waxing the carrot? And... why would you tell people about it, especially your sister?

He didn't always just abuse me – he could do a number on himself as well. My dad always said they could afford to build the new wing on the hospital because of him. Falling out of trees - a broken arm, fingers slammed in the car door – stitches. Oh how about the time he lit a rocket in the back yard and it blew up and burned his hand? Yup, I was baby-sitting then too! Numerous stitches to the head area, skateboarding accidents the list goes on. Then as he got older, you'd think he'd be a bit more mature...not. In college head-butting was always a favorite pastime for him...one night apparently he ran out of heads to butt, and he used a chair! That was 10 stitches to the head but not before he finished his beer with blood pouring down his face. What a man huh?

But the worst thing he ever did to me was one Thanksgiving. It had to be about 15 years ago. Just he, his fiancé (yes, he actually found someone to marry him...), my husband and I sitting around the table talking. He starts in with the well you don't work all year, teachers get all this time off – only work 185 days a year. You only work about a half a day, from 8-3. He dared to say these words in the house where his own mother was a guidance counselor and his fiancé was studying to be a teacher! He kept on needling me and I argued back. I left the room, stormed into the living room and screamed to my parents and grandmother what an asshole he was. My dad's response, "You still let him get to you don't you?" Three years later I got a phone call with an apology late one Friday night. OK...so he was drunk, but at least he could admit that he'd been wrong.

A beautiful thing with Andy is that I'll introduce him to others as "this is my asshole brother..." and he'll shake their hand and smile and say, "yep"...hmmmm there's a certain amount of pride there...So, what do you think?

## The Girl Born on Saint Patrick's Day

*Marcy Rudge*

Is that an angel on your boob?  
He said as his opening line of introduction at  
the Main Street Bar.  
Nooo, You Boob, It is an angel over my heart.  
Is what I wanted to say but I let the Irish side of  
my brain communicate with silence.  
It is Angel.  
It is Angel Granny.

Before she was Madeline Heslin.  
She was the middle daughter, first generation , All Irish  
of a family of 9. Rather a Wee family by Irish standards.  
When Madeline was 11, she confidently and most Catholic politely informed the nuns that she  
would have no need for geography.  
She was where she wanted to live and would marry and raise a family.

Madeline had brown ordinary hair and hazel eyes that winked.  
She had broad shoulders, too broad for her 5'2 frame but  
not too broad for her family to lean on.

When Madeline was 19, she caught the Colchester catch of the town.  
Billy Rudge was tall. Billy Rudge was handsome. Billy Rudge had Old English money.

Madeline saw kindness. Madeline saw stability. Madeline saw work ethic.

The reason I have an angel over my heart is-

She kept everything together.  
She let everyone be more because of her choices.

Madeline chose to marry Billy Rudge of Colchester.  
She chose to live in New Britian in a 3 family home with her brother  
Howard and his family above her and her brother Steve and his family below her.  
She chose to wait for the New York City honeymoon.

Madeline gave life breath to a 10 lb., lupine blue eyed boy who echoed  
the shine of his father.  
Madeline grieved the stillness of a daughter who died at birth.  
Madeline warmed the world when in December she gave birth to a daughter with dark eyes and  
olive skin. A daughter who would surpass Madeline's dreams and who would be her life time  
best friend.

Before she was Angel Granny, she was Mrs. William Rudge.  
She was packing 2 coffee bean brown suitcases and placing them by the door. Madeline was  
calling to Billy Jr. to come inside NOW and eat supper, say good bye to Freddie NOW. Madeline

was looking in on Anne and her white tuft of a dog named Fluffy, Close the book NOW. It is supper Now. We will be leaving as soon as your Paddy comes home.

She kept everything together.

She let everyone be more because of her choices.

Mrs. William Rudge chose to pack those New York City bound suitcases.

Mrs. William Rudge chose to bake the vanilla lightly iced birthday cake to celebrate her husband's 31<sup>st</sup> birthday.

Mrs. William Rudge chose to leave the windows open in the late July evening-

She did not chose on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, with a boy of 5 and a girl of 3, with Honeymoon suitcases by the door, Billy's birthday cake on the rock maple table to be Mrs. William Rudge, widow.

That is why I chose to engrave an angel over my heart.

Mrs. William Rudge in 1930 decided to become an angel on that day.

A fiery, fierce Irish angel who clipped the 7 buttons from her husband's trolley car conductor uniform and placed them in his shaving cup before his burial. An angel who suggested to the New Britian Trolley Car Company that they should go to the intersection of Corbin and Main St. and collect their \$5.00 of missing fare and perhaps while they were there speak to the passengers who all survived and perhaps see if there were any remains left from the body cut in three that she was forced to bury in a closed casket.

“ He needs a head stone.”

Madeline Heslin Rudge replied “My children need food.”

As she took the \$ 50.00 from Mrs. Rudge's English lace covered hand.

Mrs. Madeline Heslin Rudge chose to work at Stanley Tools, to wash floors, and to go on.

She kept everything together.

She let everyone be more because of her choices.

Madeline raised a golden boy who carried his father's name and spirit.

She walked that boy to the train station to serve his duty in WWII.

She walked that boy to the steps of Yale upon his return.

She accepted that boy's choice to leave Yale and become an electrician and own Service Electric.

Madeline raised a bronzen girl who was the dance delight of the New Britian sock hops. She washed floors for that girl to be crowned Prom Queen. She washed floors for that girl to graduate from Teachers' College.

Madeline Heslin

Mrs. William Rudge

Mrs. Madeline Heslin Rudge

Angel Granny

I gave in to a desire that had been in my head and my heart for years on my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. I figured my folks couldn't yell at me too much. Although, I kept the tattoo hidden for 2 years. I wanted an angel.

I wanted it over my heart. I was comforted that the Tatto Artist at Green Man was a former elementary art teacher.

“Please, just keep in mind I want it to look like an angel when I’m 80. I don’t want it to become a droopy gnome.”

How did she really get her name of Angel Granny?

My family tells me it was my response as a 7 year old when asked to describe my grandmothers. I have two grandmothers. Angel Granny and Granny Grump(that’s another story).

Angel Granny is why I keep going.

Angel Granny is why I want to be more.

## Anthem

*Barry L Fargo*

Fatty flesh of the toddler's thigh pinched as he hung,  
caged by steel bars and pinned by cheap brick,  
suspended six stories high, perched outside an open window.

Gazing at the crisp black hats and oversized sports jerseys  
worn by absorbed men of various statures.

Marching to morning prayers or to the bus depot  
by the Williamsburg Bridge, or to cruise on the El train

And women prepare under the ascending sun  
masked by glossy wigs and painted faces  
others wear denim, tight like skin, pushing hollow carriages, unsteady,  
but listening

Street ballads blast dembow beats pounding and carrying  
tales of love, sex and angst down the hot tar avenue

Blocked by wailing horns and rubber screams,  
Tempered with holy sermons in heavy Hebrew,  
Blasted by the rebbe from Chevy pick-up trucks, circling blocks.

But safe he sat, kicking his legs, marveling at the land,  
and its anthem below.

## Untitled

*Anna Christner*

Follow the spidery cracks in and out of alleyways, over a concrete mile and into a sea of asphalt. The only sharks here, though, are metal and harpooned with a menacing call of “CAR!” Trace the lines of bricks up and down a row of houses, heaving with an effort to stay intact. Go between the alleys and under garbage-strewn porches, through secret passageways and over chain link fences.

To me, Warrington Avenue stretched on for an eternity and squeezed a suffocating chokehold at the same time. We were latch-key kids. Ever since my Mom found some one else’s underwear in her bed, a man’s underwear, and my dad moved across the street the his 3<sup>rd</sup> floor apartment in 4817. I remember these things in glorious flashes of emotion and vivid picture. Never too much at once and rarely a steady stream. It is in these flashing moments that I piece together a childhood.

\* \* \*

Reach out your hand. Feel the desperate, pilly fabric. The limp grey and flowered sheet humming a dead offer of hope. Keep going. Pull the lifeless folds of cloth aside until the gaping wounds of hurried necessity become clear. Pipes shuddering, plaster decomposing. Barely there paint staring back. This is where the stove used to be, the sink, the fridge. And now a girl in their place.

When my father moved out, he thought only as a scientist.....be close. He and Tom moved directly across the street from our familial home to the top floor of 4817 Warrington Ave.

Tenants still possessed the lower 2/3 of the hulking house. My mom and my lavender room were a hundred yards across the street, on the even side, 4816. For a while, the 5 of us squeezed into the 3 room apartment.....kitchen, Dad & Tom’s room, and the three of us sandwiched into the front room. As tenants’ leases slowly ran their course, we moved down and expanded. The dilapidated old kitchen became my room. My dad hurriedly yanked out appliances, leaving massive holes in the wall next to where my bed was to be. The holes stayed for years hulking

beneath the thin layer of a retired bed-sheet. Green speckled linoleum broadcasted its presence incessantly. I was instructed to be thankful.

Small hands pounding on painted metal. Pounding small hands on moving metal.

Gears grind ahead while small hands pound out Hope.....Don't go!

Small tears fall

On cracked asphalt

Falling tears while

Gears grind away a life

Enclosed inside painted metal

Hope.....don't go

Mother....don't go

My mother married a Methodist minister 11 years her junior when I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. He was kind and gentle, and all things that my father was not. He used to send us chocolate and watches and we accused him of trying to bribe our acceptance, but we always took the gifts. For one month, Steve lived in the Divine Tracy, a cult like hotel run by true believers. He took us to school, ate dinner with us and stayed up late with my mother and Hanz, our dog. We thought he would move to Philadelphia and help my mother.

On the day they left for North Carolina, we still had hope. We poured out of my father's house and into the street where the U-Haul sat idling with intent. Don't go. We thought we had power, as children of a mother. Don't go.

Hear the clank of metal on painted metal as the accordion door roles shut, bounces and settles with a firm slamming of handled lock. Watch as small fists pound mercy on

A mother's touch is not something I miss or crave, because it was never something I had. My mother's touch came in ferocious bursts. Uncontrollable fits where hand met burning cheek, fingers grabbed fistfuls of streaming hair. Screaming alert.

## Strong Hands

*Kristine Logsdon (McMenemy)*

The crowd herded onto the sidewalk eager to get through the gates to the theater. He reached out and grabbed her hand so that she would not get lost in the stampede. His muscular hand around hers made her feel safe. She had been looking forward to tonight, seeing her favorite band in concert, a surprise from him showing how much he cared. They had only been dating for a few months, but his sparkly blue eyes and perfect smile had captured her. He knew all the things to do to make her heart melt. While studying hard for exams one day he surprised her with a picnic lunch by the water, he told her she needed the break. Now they were here watching her favorite band play live.

It was late when the show ended. They walked with their friends in search for his car in the crowded lot and began their journey home. “What are we going to do now?” she asked. He reached over and placed his hand on her leg. “Stop breaking my balls,” he responded. Then he squeezed her leg with all of his might. She quickly turned and saw something in his eyes. They weren’t the same loving eyes she’d seen before. It reminded her of the time she was called on to break up a fight he was in. He had been in the middle of the courtyard at school with a knife threatening to hurt someone who said something he didn’t want to hear. She was the one who coaxed the knife out of his grasp.

She could hear their friends laughing in the backseat, unaware of what was going on. They arrived at their friend’s house and she felt relieved to know that her car was only a short distance away, sitting in his driveway where they had met earlier in the evening. Exchanging their good byes, she gave her friend a big hug and whispered in her ear softly, “Help, I think he’s going to hurt me.” Her ditsy friend gave a big smile and said, “Call me if you need me.”

“Like that will help me now”, she thought. She went over her options in her mind, but could not come up with a reason not to get back into the car. “Get the fuck in the car,” he demanded. She slowly sunk into the seat and closed the door, locked in a car with the person she now feared.

He sped off fast and turned down dark dirt roads. She had no idea where they were but she knew that they were not going back to her car. Then he quickly stopped the vehicle and reached over, slamming her head against the back of the seat saying, "I'll fucking break your neck." His strong hands were wrapped around her neck, the same hands that made her feel safe not long ago. She wondered what happened to cause this change. What had she done to make him so angry?

The car approached a stop sign. At that point the game began. He told her that she had to answer the questions correctly. If she answered "yes" they would turn right, "no" meant they would turn left. She wondered what his plan was. She knew that he was capable of many horrible things. In the time that she knew him, he did not appear to be afraid of anything and had no respect for authority. She knew in order to survive this game she would have to tell him what he wanted to hear. It would be the only way out of this. "Make him think he has the control," she told herself. Hours later, they approached a gas station and she had an idea. This would give her a bit of time to think of her getaway. She blurted, "I'm thirsty, can we get something to drink?" He pulled in and parked. Her mind raced. Would there be anyone to help her? Could she run fast enough to get away?

He stepped out of the car and warned, "Don't do anything stupid." It was then when she remembered that her bag was in the trunk. Had he planned this ahead of time? She looked around frantically to catch the eye of a passerby. No luck, it was the middle of the night and no one was there.

She noticed his looming dark shadow approaching. Her heart sank again when he came back, handing her a soda, knowing that her chance had passed. She took one sip before he grabbed it and threw it out the window stating, "You don't deserve it."

"Please take me back to my car," she pleaded.

"Take out my knife and show me how bad you want to get out," he threatened.

Remembering that he kept a knife in the console, she reached in, grabbed it, and wedged it between her seat and the door. That way he wouldn't be able to reach it. She knew that if she

took it out he would turn it on her. When would this end? She was exhausted and didn't know how much longer she could play along with this.

They turned down another side road. She began to recognize the street signs. She began to feel hopeful. Before she knew it they pulled up next to her car parked in his driveway. Her car was right there, but it felt like it was out of reach. What would she have to do now to get to her car?

With his strong muscular frame against her petite body she knew she did not stand a chance.

He turned the engine off and sat in silence. She wondered what scheme he was coming up with next. Would she be forced into his house? Would she ever be able to go home?

"I hope you had a good night," he said.

She reached over and opened her door. He got her bag for her from the trunk. So far so good, she thought.

She got into her car and started the engine. As she pulled away she saw him in the rear view mirror standing in the middle of the driveway with a smile waving, calling, "I love you." After she turned the corner her cell phone rang.

## Uncles

*Cat Lathrop*

*I sat in my dusty, cramped dorm room, reading The Perks of Being A Wallflower, intrigued when it talked about the main character's experience with, and role in the Rocky Horror Picture Show. I looked up the music, and couldn't figure out why I already knew all the words to the songs—until I realized I had constantly heard the sound track at Uncle Jimmy and Uncle Michael's house on the idle days my sister and I spent in their attic, pawing through old junk and exciting treasures.*

Uncle Jimmy and Uncle Michael lived across the street when I was growing up. Summer days, my sister and I would slip across the street early in the morning to explore the big Victorian house, to look at their recording equipment and assortment of shiny fenders. The smell of the house and the excitement of spending time with them have stayed with me, even on a subconscious level. Those days I spent with Michael and Jimmy were simple, yet tattooed on my memory; the bright teal-colored walls of their living room were so unlike anything I had seen in anyone else's house; the smell of the experimental recipes they were always trying; the clinking sound of the tin bucket of crayons they used to set me up with as I sat on their sunny wooden porch that too frequently left splinters on the heels of my hands and picks in the seat of my soft cotton jumpers. The cactus on the window sill... Later, the new white cabinets that didn't hold any of Jimmy or Michael's belongings, but the foreign plastic-wrapped gauze and medication bottles for the visiting nurses; the bed full of thermal blankets surrounded by poles that held bulging bags of intravenously fed fluids. The soft feel of Uncle Jimmy's embrace and Michael's rich laughter that started to fade one day...

Michael died when I was about 12. Jimmy used to cry whenever I asked about Michael, as I was still foggy in my understanding of sickness and death.

For the calling hours, my mom and dad were brainstorming on what to bring over for our beloved uncle who treated my sister and I like princesses rather than nieces; food, and flowers seemed

more than inadequate for such a special person in our lives. In addition to the framed pictures of my sister and I with Michael, I came up with an idea. A self-assured kid, I exclaimed, “We have to get him a cactus.”

“Why??!” my parents questioned with an expression of doubt and surprise on their faces.

“Because Uncle Jimmy and Uncle Michael LOVE cactuses; they have *tons* of them!”

My mom was flabbergasted. She couldn’t believe that in all these years, she hadn’t bothered to notice the uncles’ deep appreciation for succulents. She blushed, thanked me for my insight, and the family drove to the garden shop.

We picked out a dozen or so cacti; we combined the assortment of spiked plants into a wide, enormous glass bowl. It was an impressive artillery of thorns. I was thrilled that we came up with the perfect sympathy gift, and that I had played such an important role in putting it together. When we arrived at Uncle Jimmy’s house, many of the people had cleared out, and the remaining sat hunkered in the sofas and chairs arranged around the room. Everyone was drained with overwhelming sadness. Michael was that kind of person. Jimmy was pale and had an expression of emptiness that only the loss of one’s true love can evoke. As a young girl, I knew that this kind of pain, (although one I could not yet empathize with,) was unrivaled to any other. Jimmy lost his soul mate, and a part of himself. He had been there to care for Michael as he deteriorated; when the HIV turned to AIDS, when the battering of medications and treatments seemed to tear Michael’s already-weakened body apart. And yet, the passing didn’t seem like a relief as it sometimes does when a person has suffered so long; no one offered his peaceful resting as a condolence. I hoped the cactus collection would brighten his spirits just a bit...

Jimmy eagerly collected the frame of pictures of him and Michael together when they were both healthy, of my sister and I in photos ranging from playing together to sitting on his sick bed and reading together in his final months. Fresh tears streamed down his cheeks, and I glared at my mother, (still at the age where all I knew was that tears were ONLY a bad thing.) My father slowly produced the enormous bucket of cacti to distract from the beautiful and all the while

painful first gift. Jimmy looked at it. Then looked at my father. Then looked at my mother.

They looked at me, puzzled. I piped up, “I know how much you guys LOVE cactus plants, so we got a BUNCH of them for you!”

Uncle Jimmy looked up and scanned the apartment. My family and I did the same, and I didn’t see a single cactus. I was confused; I had been *sure* that they were wild for cacti, but a creeping feeling of uncertainty crept in.

“Oh. Maybe I got that wrong. I just thought you guys had a bunch of them or something.”

Jimmy chuckled and then laughed. My parents looked at the monstrous bouquet in comparison to the beautiful floral arrangements that covered the rest of the room, and giggled uncomfortably.

My quiet sister jabbed me with her elbow, furious that I messed this one up and didn’t find an ounce of humor in the scenario. I felt hot and stupid and nervous; how could I have possibly screwed up this badly for a wake, especially my favorite uncle’s passing! I was devastated.

I looked up to see Uncle Jimmy silent with convulsions in laughter; tears streaming down his face, but this time they were with joy. My parents broke out laughing, and my sister nervously joined in. I didn’t budge from my mug. What the heck was wrong with them? Jimmy gave me a squeeze and thanked me for being so thoughtful, and regained his composure.

I was still confused and embarrassed, as my parents caught their breath, when suddenly Jimmy snapped to attention and held his finger up to motion us to wait. He disappeared into Michael’s old studio that had been altered into a full- functioning, sanitary, hospital-like room when he got sick. It was the first time the door to that white-washed room had been opened since Michael passed. Door creaking as he nudged the tacky sealed door from its stubborn hold, I almost forgot that Michael wouldn’t be propped up on pillows bathed in the soft sunlight of the shaded windows. Jimmy disappeared and then emerged with a small, sad-looking cactus in a half-pint sized plastic pot. The container had faded on one side, seemingly from sun exposure. My uncle pulled out the frame of photos that had brought tears of sadness to his eyes only moments prior, and pointed to the window in one of the pictures where I sat next to Michael on his bed... (a

classic dirt-lodged-under-the-fingernails kind of girl, I was the only *very* unsanitary exception they made for that room.) Sure enough, on the window sill was the same cactus plant, in a much healthier condition.

“Our little girl came up with the perfect sympathy gift!” Jimmy addressed my family. Then to me, “You must’ve remembered seeing this cactus when you were with Michael, and just thought maybe it was a bit of an... obsession rather than a random gift we received from the carpenters who made the room for us.”

He looked back at the ridiculous container on his kitchen table and laughed again. I had stopped pouting. The day continued, my family helping to receive and organize the stacks of casseroles into the freezer, keeping a fresh supply of tissues and hugs at Jimmy’s side.

*Jimmy stood barefoot by me in his cut-off jean shorts and held my teenaged wrist as we suspended jumbo marshmallows over the electric stovetop burner skewered on chopsticks.*

*Fascinated with fire, and forever hungry in my growth spurt years, I couldn’t get enough. The ghastly glass bowl of cacti stood on the small table by the window in the sun-splotched kitchen, a now-permanent, comforting, fixture of an eye sore.*

## Down the Aisle

*Jessica Orf*

Michael's family wanted a whopping Catholic wedding: a church with cathedral ceilings, walnut stained pews, and a proper organ. My mom was happy to oblige. The guests are milling around church. I wish I could be that relaxed.

I hate churches. I have ever since I was fifteen. It was my confirmation day.

I remember numbly walking next to him. We had to walk boy-girl. He had to have a last name that also began with a P. I wore a white dress—with a row of sequins around the middle that my mother had sewn on—and a bandage on my wrist, hidden by a thick bracelet that had been my grandmother's when she nursed the sick. I tried to imagine an empty suit standing next to me. I bit my lip to hold back the tears that filled my eyes.

I stole a glance at this boy who had stolen from me. He talked excitedly with his buddies, as if nothing had happened. I dug my nails into the palm of my hand. We marched through the front entrance of the church with holy water at each door. The smell of old incense and stale water overwhelmed me.

I was back in his basement. I had been there many times, to hang out with his friends or mess around with him. But that last time was the only memory that remained clear to me. I said I was tired. I didn't want to mess around. Couldn't we just watch a movie? He asked if I wanted a Diet Pepsi. I took a few sips. The room was spinning. Everything was a blur, then black. I woke up without my jeans. My bare thighs stuck to the musty plaid polyester couch that was too outdated for the living room. He looked into my eyes and told me to be quiet.

I kept quiet. I didn't tell my friends why I wouldn't take his phone call. I didn't tell my little sister why I locked my bedroom door at night. I didn't tell my mom.

My mom had wanted me to date him. He came from a rich, Catholic family, and his mother and my mom were bridge partners. He went to a different school, but I saw him at Church, wearing loose white robes and carrying the gold paten that was supposed to save the body of Christ should

some parishioner fumble. I didn't think he was my type. But my mom said he was brilliant and I shouldn't turn him away the next time he asked me out. I honored my mother's wishes. She saw a future for me.

I went to confession. I wanted to be clean. I wanted to tell someone. I wanted the black suit priest to channel God through his white collar. But God was cold. The priest asked what I had done to be in that situation in the first place. The priest said I invited it with my wicked ways.

It took me ten years to feel safe again with a man.

My wedding came with a bigger price tag than I ever wanted to pay: six hours of classes in the Church and meetings with a priest. I would have paid double the cost of the ordeal had I not had to sit in that church basement.

The church basement reminded me of the basement of my youth, where I partook in youthful transgressions that grew to corruption. I wanted to divorce them all: that boy, that basement, my faith.

I went through the motions. I presented certificates documenting what should have been my most special moments in the church. At Pre-Cana, the back row filled up first.

I went to the classes and suffered through the uncomfortable silences when asked about sexuality. I remember a bony woman with little, bird-like glasses and hair that had been auburn, but now had streaks of grey woven through it like a rug cut just above her shoulder. She gripped the podium as if she would blow away on the next strong breeze. Beside her in chairs were several other middle-aged people: men whose creased foreheads trapped beads of sweat and frumpy women who looked like they could have been my mother. The wispy woman told us how glad they were that we came, stunningly oblivious to the fact that I had no choice. I was in it solely for the piece of paper that said I survived it, and which qualified us to get married. Then and only then, precious paper in hand, I would be able to banish them from my memories.

The men and women took turns speaking to us. We all learned that they were allegedly happily married. They spoke about the seriousness of marriage within the church and the promises that we would be making to God and to each other. I already felt guilty.

Then we were provided workbooks and information sheets and statistics and explanations of what makes a good marriage. Open communication. One man and one woman. The contention that birth control causes divorce was especially disturbing. I looked at my watch.

Then they announced a new plan. People turned their chairs around, to the sides, left, right, everywhere. They formed semi-circles, walls, clusters, knots, spirals. I slid back and closer to the exit, facing only my husband-to-be. We were asked to pick one thing that we would change about our partner and tell them what it was. We entered the discussion phase of the torture. The speakers asked the various groups to discuss "inspirational married couples" that we knew of in the church. I shrugged my shoulders.

I said what they wanted to hear, not what they should hear. They should hear all about the silence God's love has created, the emptiness in my heart where my connection with God used to be, the pain of being violated, the hypocrisy. They should hear how I went to confession. They should hear how I prayed for forgiveness, and was told that it was my fault. They should hear how he was absolved, how he had the gall to find the priest who didn't speak English well to wash away his sins. They should hear how priests aren't allowed to report a criminal. They should hear how he stood beside the altar, on Sundays.

I hear the booming melody of the organ and my whole body is cold. The communion wafer will burn my tongue. The icy cup will fall from my hands. People are shuffling in front of me, and I know my turn is approaching fast.

I'm at the door, and I look down the aisle. The pews creak and sigh as people turn. I see our families looking expectantly toward me, the purple banners adorned with doves, the paintings of the Stations of the Cross.

I see the crucifix, Christ's limp body hanging prominently above the altar. I see the priest nod me to come forward. I believe... I'm going to vomit.

## For Sale

*Maria Pelley*

Don't sell the house; it has our growth chart notched into the door jam between the kitchen and the dining room. I remember the year that I thought I grew older than Stephen because he didn't grow at all when he was six and I just turned five. He was sick for months and almost dieing from an unknown ailment. Remember when he came home from the hospital, mom turned the kitchen table into his medical arena and had to change his bandages because he was so weak. She lifted him like a baby, his boney little body hanging onto her. And his body was so weak that had to sit and scoot down the stairs. he was too weak to walk.

Don't sell the house, the fort in the basement below the stairs has been converted into shelving for the canned tomatoes and peaches, but all four of us and our friends fit in that cubby area. We called it a clubhouse and made a secret password that everyone needed to use to get it.

Remember we couldn't agree on the password? And we got that scrap piece rug to hang in our doorway? We could no longer see inside so we needed flashlights.

Don't sell the house my matchbox cars are buried in the sand pile, my favorites the cement mixer and dump truck waiting for their next duties in the sand pile. I made good trades for these trucks. They have moveable parts and I can put real stuff in their compartments.

Don't sell the house, daddy wrote our names with leftover gold and silver spray paint on the basement floor, and the dryer didn't die when I filled it with water from the outside vent using the garden hose, our handprints are in the back steps with the year 1974.

Don't sell the house, where will we hold our trading posts? Stephen would call "Trading Post is OPEN!" and we'd gather up our good stuff bring it to his threshold and make bargain trades for his neat stuff. One rubber bow and arrow for one Duncan yo-yo.

Don't sell the house, we never found the turtles that got away when we left them behind the day daddy came home from work early. We would be right back but forgot about them long enough for them to escape the simple dwellings we built for them.

Don't sell the house we got new beds and don't have to share a big bed anymore. Mommy made Raggedy Ann curtains and accessories to match our bedspreads and there's even a lamp with a nightlight so we won't be scared in our own beds. I miss sleeping next to my little sister. She'd scratch my back until I said ok.

Don't sell the house, the Christmas lights go on the day after Thanksgiving and the whole neighborhood looks beautiful. We drive around looking at the houses, calling out the colors and pretty designs. Mom always liked the blue lights, dad always like the colorful ones.

Don't sell the house; my diary is hiding under the rug in the living room. I named it Anne Frank and pretended that I was hiding in the attic when I wrote about the boys in the neighborhood or skinny-dipping over Donna's house. I wrote that I wanted to escape my family because I had to do Saturday chores like strip my bed and change my sheets, like clean the bathroom and vacuum the living room. I needed to escape the cruelty of my family.

Don't sell the house, the grape vines are delivering plump grapes soon, hopefully we can stop eating the sour grapes to reap enough juicy ones to say we have a vineyard.

Don't sell the house, the garage rooftop is a great place to sneak cigarette smokes, get closer to the sun for a better tan, and have a private conversation on the new cordless phone.

Don't sell the house, who will play the piano? It will stand still; the walls will miss the hours of practice and tears of protest. The bushes are over grown, the Christmas tree we planted is taller than the house, and the paint is fading.

What will happen if you sell the house? Who'll love the house if you sell it? Will they smell the homemade applesauce, hear the noisy Sunday dinners? See the late night sneaks out of the house, slumber parties, camp outs in the back yard? Will the magic beer bush still deliver the 6-pack on Saturday nights just in time before we went out with our friends?

I have my own house now with it's own growth notches on the kitchen door jam. The house has it's own smells, sounds, routines that tell me I'm home. It's getting big and I want to find a smaller place, but the kids all say, "Don't sell the house, we have our growth notches here!"

## Winter in Mikey aka Kissing in the Snow

*Laura Reese*

Sliding my tongue over your snowy teeth  
Feeling the 98 degree internal heat  
Judging the sledding distance I can reach  
Pulsing to the primitive rising and falling beat

Like a shot of hot cocoa  
To my numb frigid senses  
Indulging in the bittersweet mix of  
Comfort and sting  
Relaxing the muscles  
That were perpetually seized

## Lost in the Library

*Jane Cook*

As I sat on the brick wall, staring up at the monumental staircase and columns, the words “Wilbur Cross Library” leapt off the façade. All at once, I was transformed into that timid teenager who walked up those massive granite stairs for the first time during her freshman year. Was it really over 30 years ago? My mind wandered back to how I met Wilbur Cross.

During my very first class, after barely a morning greeting, the professor assigned a research paper. I knew then that college wasn't going to be anything like high school. My initial thought was, “Oh no! A research paper means you have to do research.” That was in the days well before Al Gore proclaimed that he had created the Internet.

My experience with research papers in high school had been less than noteworthy. I thought back to those treks to my tiny high school library, sifting through the little-used card catalog. When I was unsuccessful, I'd go to our not much larger town library to begin my quest again. I'd search through what passed for stacks to find just the right books - not too many but enough so that I'd have an acceptable bibliography.

Actually, doing research in the town library had its “upside”. A parent-approved stop at the library after CYO on Monday nights was always a good excuse to see my boyfriend. Since we were in the same classes and had the same assignments, we could do our research together.

While we ostensibly searched for books, we'd get the chance to spend time with each other without fear of scrutiny by our families though still closely chaperoned by the town librarian.

My first introduction to college meant I had to face the daunting research process once again. I gathered up my courage for my first walk up those formidable Wilbur Cross Library stairs. To my surprise, the foyer was bright and welcoming. I was elated. I stopped first at the Information Desk to ask where I might find resources on my topic. A friendly librarian directed me to the enormous card catalog, which took up nearly the whole room. (Do kids today even know what a card catalog is?) By the look in my eyes, she could tell I was a novice. She patiently explained

how to look up subjects and authors. She showed me where the scraps of paper were stored for writing down the Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress numbers before heading to the stacks. She explained the layout of the library. Then she left me on my own to begin my research. After looking up a number of references related to my topic, I headed off to the stacks armed with piles of paper scraps in search of my Holy Grail. I checked the map to find my starting point since the Wilbur Cross Library was immense. Four floors housed row upon row of neatly shelved books. These were stacks like I'd never seen in all 17 years of my life. I inhaled that familiar library smell of ink and paper with a tinge of mustiness.

That scent always summoned up images of pleasurable trips to the library when I was a small child. Life was simple before the days of research. Back then I could get lost in the library for hours, searching for just the right book. I got to pick out **any** book I wanted. I'd proudly slide my beige library card with its little strip of metal out of its protective sleeve and hand it across the circulation desk. As the librarian ran her machine across my card it would leave the faint imprint of my library number for her records. Then she'd stamp the book with a due date, smile and say, "Happy reading!" I knew I'd see her in a week when my library book was due and we'd do it all over again.

As I threaded my way through the stacks, I hoped my experience with Wilbur Cross would be the same. I managed to find a number of books related to my topic with the help of the patented shelf search. When I found that there was more than one book related to my topic on a particular shelf, I'd explore in either direction finding, to my delight, that there were other pertinent resources that I hadn't even seen in the card catalog. My search was a success!

Finding a nearby table, I set down the pile of books that I'd gathered in my travels, preparing myself for a long afternoon of research. Since there were so many people who needed the books, I believed that I had to use them in the library. I no longer had a library card with the small strip of metal that identified who I was. Little did I know that my ID card was also my library card and that I could actually take the books back to my dorm room for a more leisurely perusal.

After spending hours writing up my index cards, filling them with notes, quotes, citations and page numbers, I tried to retrace my steps so I could put my books back on their proper shelves. That's how we had always done it in the libraries of my childhood. Part-time librarians in small towns don't have the time to shelve books so patrons were expected to put their books back where they found them. I wandered aimlessly around the building, finding a few of the original shelves. I went deeper and deeper into the bowels of the library, trying to do what I thought was my job as a dutiful library patron.

When the last book was shelved, I realized that I was lost, not just misplaced but hopelessly and irreversibly lost. I looked around for Exit signs but saw none. I strolled up and down rows of books trying not to look like a foolish freshman. It didn't matter because there were no other human beings in sight. That's when panic set in. I didn't care how foolish I looked; I desperately wanted to find someone to help me. But no one was there. On a campus with 12,000 people, how could this building be so empty?

I continued to wander and search until I got a glimmer of hope; a bright orange sign shone in the distance. As I got closer, my mood brightened. It was a real live Exit sign. I ran to the door. My elation turned to depression when I read the whole sign – Emergency Exit Only: Alarm Will Sound. For a moment I thought about opening the door. How bad could the alarm be? But instead I turned, walked off in another direction and saw another glowing Exit sign down a long hall. As I raced to the door, I discovered yet another Emergency Exit. Apparently there was no way out.

Would I be doomed to spend the rest of my life in the Wilbur Cross Library, like Charlie on the MTA, the man “who never returned”? Could I survive on crackers from the vending machines I had seen somewhere in my travels? Probably not, since it was unlikely that I would ever find them again. I'd probably just starve to death and someone would find my skeleton amid the stacks in a month or two.

Since I had just arrived on campus I hadn't made any friends yet. I was living with the "roommate from Hell" and I knew that she'd be thrilled if I never returned. There was no way she was going to report me missing. My parents wouldn't know I was lost until I didn't come home for Thanksgiving. I could just see the headlines – *Student Succumbs to Burrowing Bookworms*.

After wandering for what seemed like months, I eventually found my way back to the foyer. Only then did I realize that the main entrance was the only working exit as well. I don't remember ever being so happy to see a card catalog, musty smell and all. I ran out the door without looking back.

There would be many more research papers during my college career. Each assignment filled me with trepidation. And each one drove me back to my tiny hometown library, never to encounter Wilbur Cross again.

## Proactive

*Denise Abercrombie*

The language of the dead  
swirls around us, seeps  
into our psyches  
until we, ourselves  
say ownership,  
accountability  
and mean it.  
We've come to understand  
the meaning  
of exporting grades  
interfacing  
with data  
on spreadsheets. And  
when they ask us to be  
proactive by getting the  
kids to buy in, be active  
learners  
invest  
we nod as if we get it—  
shareholders in the firm  
profiting from  
the don't you get it  
bottom line?  
This is, after all, after all  
is said and done  
about ownership  
capitalizing on the moment  
the moment of time is money  
momentum. We are building trust  
building a trust  
a trust  
fund  
funded by a foundation  
that will support not supplant  
public education. We believe  
we still are teachers  
teachers we dream  
have nightmares  
that our jobs will be taken  
and it will be called vacation  
this new move to on-line courses  
why not call distance learning  
what it is:  
outsourcing.  
It started with free furniture  
from a bank  
cubicles, fake wooden

plank of a conference room  
table. Old school  
became fable.  
New school with a big piggy  
student bank,  
student store  
a cafeteria with a food court  
like a mall.  
Now for rewards  
we give out gift cards  
to Starbucks in a drawing.  
Because this is about things  
things we all understand:  
vente lattes, grande mochas  
whatever frothing  
at the mouth, soaring on caffeine far beyond  
the weighted down backpacks  
book bags, briefcases  
brimming with our business  
our busy-work, busy-ness  
and cashing in  
before we all  
proactively sell out.  
And though  
we vouch for children  
our children may be on vouchers  
and other ouchers of  
the *NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND*  
legislation  
translation: testing one two three  
testing one two three  
testing one... two... three  
teach to the test  
be teacher of the year, be the best  
pass the best portfolio  
keep portfolios  
teach Shakespeare's folios  
is this good literature  
is that good literature  
what is good literature?  
get those numbers up  
while kids turn into data  
and wonder  
what's the matter with that?  
data driven instruction  
feel the suction of  
our brains  
the drain  
sucking out  
sucking up  
to those with their 092's

what's there to lose?  
We could  
get their blessings  
read Herman Hesse's  
*Siddartha*  
go on a rite of passage  
stop fretting that  
the state is going fascist  
relax and watch the teacher bashing  
after all the kids are passing  
they're transcending  
trust they'll all meet  
a happy ending...  
but don't forget to mention  
they, like us, may never  
see their pensions  
whatever happened to keep the promise?  
don't forget your mama  
we can still hear that woman in our heads—  
she'd have no problem telling off the feds  
We should listen to the children  
pose our own questions  
quote Yeats, not Bill Gates  
be proactive, get the state's attention  
when they call another kid  
a number, a piece of data  
we could write them a poem  
send a samizdat email  
go hi tech, what the heck  
out-think Kafka  
break the no-food law--bring in Babka  
we could, we could  
un-drop the bombs  
fight for jobs  
metamorphose with the kids  
into humans.

## Birthdays... Are Better Than Chocolate Cake

*Tara Achane*

Birthdays would come and go without much to remember except for the chocolate cake Mom baked. My sister, Mom, and I would sit around the kitchen table and eat as much cake as we wanted. We would eat and laugh...and drink lots of milk too.

It wasn't until today, my 7<sup>th</sup> birthday, that I realized... birthdays...might be more than chocolate cake and laughter...

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When my sister and I had dressed for school, she was unusually quiet. Did she remember that it was my birthday? After all, my sister didn't yell when I asked her to comb my hair and she didn't yank the zipper on my school uniform like she always does.

Even our dog, Tinker Bell seemed to be calmer---He did exactly what he was told.

We climbed into the car and Mom just reminded us to put our seatbelts on and that was it. No one spoke of the chocolate cake we would eat after school---No one seemed to be laughing either. Did Mom remember that it was my birthday?

I was so lost in my thoughts that I barely noticed when she stopped to pick up our two school friends, Trevor and John who wrestled into the backseat without saying hello. It was okay if they forgot because they were boys---boys never remember when it's someone's birthday.

"I want to talk to Trevor's Mom for a moment," Mom said and quickly raced into their house. My sister, jumped out of the car too. I sunk down in my seat with Trevor and John staring right at me. Before I knew it, Trevor perked up and shouted, "Look!" I sat up from my seat and stared...I couldn't believe my eyes. Their mom and my mom were carrying a big plastic bag with a doll inside.

Could that be for me, I thought. When they reached the car, everyone started to sing, "Happy Birthday!" at the top of their lungs. My sister sung the loudest.

I gently pulled the doll from underneath the clear, plastic bag...It was Raggedy Ann! We all hugged each other even Raggedy Ann---she and I were an instant pair  
Before we left for school, Trevor's mom explained how she sewed the doll together using a tiny needle and thread.

By the time Trevor's mom was done, no one wanted to go to school, but I didn't mind so much because I had a new, best friend---She was even better than chocolate cake!

While everyone hugged goodbye, I took my books out of my backpack and squished them underneath Mom's seat. I wanted to make room for my best friend...All I had to do was tell Sister Ann it was my birthday. I was certain she would understand.

My sister must have known from the look in my eyes that I was up to no good. She just shook her head...John and Trevor closed their eyes and pretended to be sleeping...no one said a word. As soon as I entered the classroom, I put my bag underneath my chair. "Put your school bag in your cubby," I heard Sister Ann say. I pretended that I didn't hear her.

The day droned on as usual: we said our morning prayers and studied our times-tables...we listened to Sister Ann complain about our chatter during morning snack...we read books aloud in our small reading groups...we said our afternoon prayers before lunch....But all the while, I kept an eye on Raggedy Ann who still lay tucked in my book bag. How I wished she could join us.

At lunch time, everyone noticed my bag, which still rested underneath my desk.

"What's up with your book bag?" Kelly asked.

"I'm gonna' tell Sister Ann on you for not putting your bag away," Jacob chimed in.

"Is there a pet inside?" Marcy wondered.

Even Trevor, who secretly knew who was inside my bag, had something to say.

Luckily Sister Ann kept a close watch and I didn't have time to relish in their stories or threaten Jacob for wanting to tell on me.

All the while I kept an eye on my new, best friend.

Soon, Sister Mary called me out of the classroom. At first, I didn't think that she wanted to meet with me because it was Monday----we never meet for our special meetings on Monday. But before I could protest, she stood behind me, tapped her foot against my chair, and told me to march down to room 6, without a word.

There, Sister Mary showed me lots of cards...she helped say the words so I could speak better...chair, chain, chalk...and that's all we did for more than an hour.

By the time I returned to class, everyone---Trevor, and Jacob, and Kelly, and Marcy were racing to their cubbies to grab their coats and bags...it was time to go home.

I was too tired to think about anything else...Pictures of Room 6 clouded my head.

I sat on my desk, collected my homework, and put pencils away. But when I reached for my bag, I noticed that it wasn't there! Suddenly my heart sank. I couldn't breathe.

“Sister Ann, have you seen my bag?”

She just looked at me with her beady little eyes and scolded me for not putting it away in my cubby.

“But there was someone special inside,” I whispered.

She turned off the lights, told me not to worry, and pushed me out the door to Mom who had been waiting in her car.

Mom saw that I had been crying. She could tell from my empty hands that the day had not gone well. I was glad my sister wasn't here to scold me too because I already felt like Tinker Bell when he does something wrong---I held my head down. Tears stained my shirt.

On the drive home, I explained to Mom what had happened. But I don't think she understood because all I could do was mumble my words. That's how much I missed my friend.

“Why don't you lie down for a little while?” Mom suggested. “I am sure she'll turn up eventually.”

But I felt too sad to take a nap...some birthday this turned out to be...

I climbed up the stairs and headed towards my bedroom. Tinker Bell followed right behind me.

As I opened my bedroom door, Tinker Bell raced inside and jumped on my bed---He was back to his usual self.

When I reached my bed, I couldn't believe my eyes...there beneath the covers lay Raggedy Ann waiting for a kiss goodnight.

## Shift

*Denise Stemmler*

The Four O'clock sun melts slowly into dusk  
as she waits by the kitchen window, humming  
an old Peter, Paul and Mary tune she loves.  
Thin threads of music unravel into wisps.

As she waits by the kitchen window humming,  
white chipped platters and dented cups lay idle.  
Thin threads of music unravel into wisps  
that weave a gossamer gown to swathe her soul.

White chipped platters and dented cups lay idle,  
testimony to family, food, and unions  
that weave a gossamer gown to swathe her soul.  
But she tangles noisy threads of now and when.

Testimony to family, food, and unions,  
memories pile up in gently sorted stacks.  
But she tangles noisy threads of now and when  
while straining to understand the whispered truth.

Memories pile up in gently sorted stacks  
so she samples, one by one, to quench her thirst  
while straining to understand the whispered truth  
spoken slyly by a world where she once won.

So, she samples one by one to quench her thirst  
for the taste of yesterday's life." Bitter-sweet,"  
spoken slyly by a world where she once won.  
She hums crookedly her off- key harmony.

For the taste of yesterday's life, bitter-sweet,  
she laments the loss of plump-cheeked toddlers' smiles.  
She hums crookedly her off- key harmony.  
No one to notice. Left blessedly alone.

She laments the loss of plump-cheeked toddlers' smiles,  
wanting to honor life's patent plan. She listens.  
No one to notice. Left blessedly alone,  
then...teeter tottering with the universe,

Wanting to honor life's patent plan, she listens:  
An old Peter, Paul and Mary tune she loves.  
Then, teeter tottering with the universe,  
the Four O'clock sun melts slowly into dusk.

## South Station, 1978

*Joanne Peluso*

The air is yellow with cigarette smoke and grease, the stale smell attaching itself to my clothes. I'm looking for my brother but can't find him in the crowd. He should be easy enough to spot, he's so tall and bulky and none of these people look near as big he is. I brush past a cluster of men in business suits, grazing a couple of them with my suitcase, but they're too wrapped up in their discussion of percentages and profits to hear my weary apology.

"Claire! Over here!" someone calls out, and I turn to look, a natural reaction even though the voice is not my brother's. A skinny, curly-haired man lifts his arms, his fists clenched and his feet tapping in a kind of victory dance. "Claire!" he says again, and I almost walk toward him, but his own Claire gets to him first, and he scoops her up and covers her with kisses, just like in the movies. I stare for too long at her feathered hair, the layers of wings that frame her small, rodent face. She is in her early twenties, not much older than I am, but with her high-heeled shoes and thick gold wedding band, she looks like a grown-up already.

It's warm for April in Boston, the conductor said, and I'm dressed ok for the weather: white blouse, knee-length plaid skirt, my first pair of stockings, and maroon flats. I guess I don't stand out because nobody looks at me; they swarm around me, sprinting for the trains balancing their newspapers and their cardboard cups of coffee; or they meander, like Claire and her husband, relieved at having made their connections.

In a few minutes, the crowd thins out, and still I can't find my brother. I drag my suitcase to a bench and sit, waiting, searching faces, making excuses for his absence.

My mother didn't want me to come here. *Teenage girl traveling alone, that can only lead to trouble*, she said. *What's so great about Boston anyway? I don't understand the attraction.*

*There're perfectly good colleges right here in Oklahoma, but you've got it in your head you've gotta do everything your big brother does, don't you? Always have followed him around like a puppy.* I cried; I threatened not to apply to *any* colleges at all, just to spite her; I played the "I'm-

an-adult” card; finally, it was my brother who won her over. He called last week to say he’d take perfectly good care of me in Boston; he’d meet me at the railroad station and never let me out of his sight. He even arranged for me to stay in a sorority house with one of his girlfriends and take a tour of the college campus, even sit in on some literature classes. *Come on Mama*, I heard his booming voice over the phone. *You can trust me to look out for Claire. Haven’t I always?*

So here I am, after two and a half days of switching trains, not showering, living on peanuts and orange juice from the club cars and watching through grimy windows as the world flew past. I’m tired and my shoulders ache from too many hours without a proper place to sleep. All I want is to see my brother’s careless grin, to hear his laughter as he explains away his lateness with the usual charm.

Forty minutes pass, then fifty, and I wonder if maybe Mama told him the wrong time. Maybe Mama got mixed up because of the time zones. She does stuff like that: worries about silly things that’ll never happen, but forgets entirely about major things like the hour’s difference between Oklahoma and Boston.

After ninety minutes I’m convinced he’s not going to come. In the pocket of my skirt, I’ve tucked a slip of paper with his number and dormitory name on it. I spend twenty minutes at a pay phone, using the same dime over and over, listening to the drone of a busy signal. Finally, someone picks up: a boy with a heavy Boston accent like my brother imitates when he comes home from school.

“Is Tom there?” I ask.

“Which Tawm?” he says.

“Tom Johnson.”

“Haven’t seen him around. Is this Marissa?”

“No, this is Claire---“ I say, but there’s a click, and then a dial tone, and then another twenty minutes of busy signals.

I won’t call Mama and tell her I’ve been abandoned at the railroad station. She’ll just tell me she knew this whole trip was a mistake, and now I’ve got a full-blown sign from Jesus that I’m

supposed to stick to college close to home. I don't think it's a sign from Jesus, though; I think it's a sign from my brother that – no matter what time zone we're in – I'm still nothing more than a nuisance, a tagalong, the clingy little sister he ditches every chance he gets. I don't even know why he *wants* me to go to his stupid college; he used to pretend he didn't even *know* me in high school. Things have actually been much better, now that he's gone; I'm editor of the school poetry magazine and treasurer of the senior class. I was almost starting to believe that maybe he'd treat me like I had a brain, for once, even though my brain's more geared toward poems and his is full of equations and atomic numbers and batting averages. *There are different kinds of being capable*, Mama used to tell me when I'd compare my grades (As in English, Cs in everything else) or my athletic accomplishments (Swim Team, that's it) to his. *You're capable in your own way*. Yeah right. But he's capable in *every* way, and he'd always see me as a copycat, a wannabe, a pest. We would never be close, not back home, not in Boston, nowhere.

"Dorothy, you're not in Kansas anymore," sings a voice over my left shoulder.

I look up, and there's a boy about my age, maybe a little older. He has soft blond hair, and he's wearing plaid flannel over a t-shirt and Levis, like the boys back home wear, but he doesn't seem like any of the boys back home. In a weird way, he's more *familiar* to me than they are, so even though Mama told me not to talk to strangers, I don't feel at all scared when I say, "Not Kansas. Oklahoma." I want to add that my name's Claire, not Dorothy, but I know better than to tell a stranger my name.

"Oh—" he says, tapping his forehead in what seems to be mock confusion, "I had you mixed up with someone else. Must have been the ruby slippers."

We both look down at my maroon shoes, then back at each other. He may seem familiar, but he speaks a language I don't understand.

"Haven't you ever seen *The Wizard of Oz*?" he asks. "Munchkins? Scarecrows? Follow the yellow brick road?"

I shake my head. "Heard of it, never seen it."

“Deprived child,” he says, sitting down right next to me, so close that for a second our hands touch. On his pinky finger he’s wearing a silver ring with a small blue stone. It’s pretty, I think. Maybe boys in Boston wear rings like this and the fashion just hasn’t come to Logan County yet. “*The Wizard of Oz* is *only* the most *wonderful* movie ever made. That is, until *my* movie comes out.”

“You’re in a movie?”

“Not just *in* it, silly girl. I’m writing, producing, directing, *and* starring in a movie. Kind of like Sylvester Stallone did with *Rocky*, but with less *boxing* and...and more *disco*.” He tilts his head and smiles. “You’ve never seen *Rocky*, either, I suppose?”

“I’ve heard of it,” I say. “It’s my brother’s favorite movie.” I almost add that I was supposed to see it when it was in the theaters, but my brother backed out of giving me a ride because he said he didn’t have room in his car. I found out later that he was going with a bunch of his friends and a case of beer. There doesn’t seem any point to mentioning it now, to this soft-voiced boy. Instead I ask him, “What’s the name of your movie?”

“It doesn’t really have a name yet. Or a script. Or anything, if you want to know the truth. But it’ll be ready for screening in three weeks, since that’s when my film professor wants it. I work well under pressure.” He reaches into the brown leather bag that’s slung across his shoulder and pulls out a spiral notebook and a fountain pen. I thought I was the only person alive who still used fountain pen. “Train stations do wonders for my creative juices. I’ve written some of my best pieces right here on this bench.” He opens the notebook and writes a few lines with great flourish, then stops abruptly and regards me with squinting eyes.

“So what is a girl from Oklahoma doing all by herself in a train station in Boston?” he asks.

“That’s what I’ve been wondering myself for the past two hours,” I say, and then – even though I’ve swallowed it back a hundred times already – the rock in my throat rises and explodes into a pathetic choking sob, and the tears gush.

The boy says, "Oh Dorothy." He puts his arm around me and I lean toward him. In between tortured gasps, I think: oh! *this* is what it feels like – and I like how warm he is, and how his skin smells like vanilla and violets mixed together, but I hate what led me to this moment and I especially hate being a crybaby.

"It's ok, whatever it is," he whispers. "Let it out. You'll feel better after a good cry."

"I was supposed to meet my brother here," I tell him. My voice is raspy from the sobbing, but my tone's steady. "I've been living on trains for days now. He promised he'd be here. With his friends. He said he wanted me to meet his friends. He said it'd be neat if I went to college in Boston too. He said he'd look after me. I'm missing the prom for this."

"Missing the prom, my goodness, a complete tragedy!" he says, but for some reason I think he's joking.

"I didn't really have a date," I admit. "There was a rumor that Ray Taylor was going to ask me, but then word got out that I was going to be in Boston this week and he asked Mary Cheryl instead. But I think he would have asked me. And I probably would have said yes, even though I don't like Ray Taylor all that much, because I don't want to graduate high school never having kissed a boy."

"I *absolutely* know how you feel," he says, nodding.

"And the truth is, I don't really have the grades to get into a great college, I kind of wasted time writing really bad poems in my math notebook, and I *did* break 1000 on the SATs but that was because my verbal was 700---but my brother said his school was really good about letting siblings in, and it seemed like a good idea, but I honestly don't think I like Boston all that much. It's so stale and big and scary."

"This is just South Station, hon. It isn't the whole city. The rest of Boston's not so bad. Well, except for the Combat Zone. You want to steer clear of that."

"There's *combat* here?"

“Oh sweetie,” he says. “Not that kind.” He touches my shoulder. “You look frightful. A good cry may do wonders for the soul, but it wreaks havoc on the face. Let’s freshen you up a bit, and then we’ll figure out what to do about your brother.” He takes some tissues from his bag and wipes away what’s left of my tears, then pats my face with something chilly and soothing. “This is what we use in the movies, my darling. Special cream for when you’ve got a close-up in the morning and you’ve been out dancing all night. Takes away that nasty puffy look. Feels good, too. Sometimes I just slather it on my face for no reason.”

“I like it.”

An hour goes by, maybe more, but I stop noticing the time because talking with him is so comfortable that I forget I’m supposed to be miserable. I tell him about my canine cats, who wag their tails when they see me, and my feline dog, who purrs when I pet him, and I recite the only one of my poems that I know by heart – it’s called “Under Water” and that’s a swimming metaphor, I explain to him, and he laughs because he’s a writer too so of course he knows metaphors. He doesn’t say too much about himself except that he wants to make movies and he’s going out to California after graduation. I ask where he’s from and if he misses his family, but he just laughs and changes the subject back to me: “Now what would you be doing if you were home right now?”

“I’d probably be in my room with my best friend Nora, eating homemade brownies and listening to the radio and practicing dance steps for the prom.”

“Close your eyes,” he says. “Don’t open them until I say so. And whatever you do, don’t click your shoes together and say, ‘There’s no place like home,’ or you’ll disappear and my plans will be all for naught.”

I close my eyes and wait. Only a few seconds pass before he says, “*Voilà!*”

He stands before me, offering a package of mint Lifesavers. “They don’t compare to homemade brownies,” he says, “but it’s all I could shake out of the candy machine.”

“You *stole* them?”

“Shhhh,” he says. “It’s the thought that counts. Now, stand up.”

From somewhere – his leather bag, I suppose – he’s found a battered transistor radio and maneuvered the antenna to pick up some horrible station. “Disco,” he says. “I can tell you need to practice your steps. Pretend I’m your best friend Nora.”

He takes my hands---I’m surprised at how tall he is, about the same height as my brother--- and I try to follow his moves. “*I love the night life, I got to boogie...*” he sings along with the radio.

“That’s it, you’re getting it,” he says. “You’re that dancing queen Abba was singing about.”

“I hate Abba,” I say, but I’m laughing because it’s stupid, really, it’s something out of a bad movie, two people dancing in the middle of a railroad station, and if you’d told me a week ago that a college boy, *a boy whose name I don’t even know*, was going to be my first kiss, and that it wouldn’t be scary at all but that in fact I would welcome it, I would have said you were crazy.

Here we are, and this is the moment, and I am certain that he’s going to lean down and touch my lips with his; instead he looks startled and sorry and he says, “This isn’t – “ but he never finishes the sentence because somebody’s hollering way at the front of the station, and it’s my name echoing through the building.

“God fucking damn it, Claire, what the hell is wrong with you? I told you *Back Bay Station!*” It’s my brother’s voice, of course, and it’s getting closer and louder. “Do you know how worried we all were? I was waiting for *hours!* And then you call my dorm and you hang up and you don’t even call back and nobody knows where you are, and Mom is back home calling the National Fucking Guard and here you are, dancing like an idiot and hanging all over some *fairy*---Jesus, Claire, I said *Back Bay Station*, you’re in the wrong fucking place, you always do this, you absolute *moron!*”

“He said *South Station*,” I whisper to the boy. “I asked him three times. I came all the way here without making a mistake.” It is important to me that the boy understands this, that he knows I am not inept. He will remember me – he might even put a character like me in his movie, who knows? – and I want him to get it right.

My brother grabs my suitcase and says, "Come on." His face is red from screaming and he looks like he might have been crying.

"She was scared. And tired. I was trying to cheer her up, make her feel at home," says the boy, not defensively, but more like an adult speaking to a child. His voice isn't soft anymore. He looks *brave*, I think, and suddenly, older, not as playful. I don't recognize him anymore as the discoloving film student who steals from candy machines.

"Yeah, I know, I know nothing happened," says my brother, but he doesn't look at the boy, and I think: *you're nobody, you're weak, you don't scare me*, and I mean it, too.

I follow my brother toward the doors, but I'm in no hurry to leave South Station.

"Claire, come *on*," my brother says again. He isn't yelling anymore, and in a few minutes he'll tell me he's sorry, he'll say he yelled at me because he was scared, he was worried about me, and he feels terrible and he won't do it again.

I glance back at the boy. He's sitting on the bench, uncapping his fountain pen.

With my tongue I press a Lifesaver to the roof of my mouth, sucking all the mint out of it, until nothing's left but a chalky sliver of white.

## The Unfettered

*Chris La Casse*

### Chapter One

On old historic highway 66, now less traveled, but once a speedway for the Kerouacs and Ginsbergs of the world, hopped up on Benzedrine and booze and beating their hands upon the dashboard or wheel in search of what America had always promised its travelers going west, and in searching for IT, they stop to eat and sleep and scour small towns for pig-tailed girls with slow melodious “hey there” in their smiles, but only now the Road Kill Café stands out among a gas station and a small diner in its bright red and yellow paint still looking wet, and as always, offering cold brimming beers to westward travelers traversing hot desert roads salted with sand on the air.

Each generation has its travelers going west, but we chase these ghosts for four different reasons: Jake carrying a tattered edition of On The Road like a bible, pitching tent with nothing but the vast painted desert and lightening around him; Sam, calling girls babies and beautifuls and loving every minute of his new apartment three blocks from the Vegas strip; Mike, quiet over his girlfriend whose text messages and phone calls have stopped; and as for me—long months of sobriety, tossed to the wind. Yet we arrive at one reason, a reason those generations before could not have anticipated: the clearing of the mind is like the catharsis of the confessional booth or that long telephone conversation with the once-estranged. These are times when the soul is burdened with the too-much of today and opposed to finding solace along the Appalachian or bobbing along on fishing boat undulations, we err to further dilute our perceptions with cell phones and text messaging; internet and email; television and radio—blotting out the sacred necessity of silence.

Around the restaurant table, positioned in the corner, far from the hot and occasional but fresh breeze mingling through the screen door to stagnant air, air only gently moving above our heads

by the repetitious beat of a ceiling fan, we smile, grinning when the waitress acknowledges our thank you as she slides thick jars, teeming with the piss yellow but cool reassurance of beer.

“You boys aren’t from around here,” she says, leaning across my lap to reach the menus which Sam has collected; her arm brushes my shoulder, and then, as if to acknowledge the bump, she rests a hand on my back while asking where we hail from.

“Connecticut,” we sing, a bit too eager and in unison. She smiles herself away, along and between the tables, still smiling, until pushing her way through the kitchen’s swing doors. Jake sighs and Sam turns and turns his jar, staring at the dewy patterns.

Sam looks up from his jar and stares at me. “What are you looking at?” he asks with a scoff, joining my eyes which travel across the room as the screen door slaps shut. “No gunshots here, pal,” Mike replies, sipping his beer. I feel their eyes on me as I sip the jar and hear the repeated question once asked as we walked down the Vegas streets.

My eyes trace building-tops, following the skyward path of a police helicopter circling above, and I glance down each alley as we pass. “Relax buddy,” they say to me, laughing and shaking my shoulders. “Here, drink up,” Sam cheers, fitting the champagne bottle into my hand as we all stumble and swerve down sidewalks, passing the bottle between us beneath the neon lights.

“You’re not in Iraq anymore, pal,” Sam shouts against the sound of the speeding cars, and the Nevada night resonates heat from its sidewalks as the blacktop smells of seared asphalt wafted up with each car that passes. I lift two slugs to my lips and grip the bottles neck as Jake hoots about girls who pass in a car, squealing inarticulate offerings from the window. I lift the bottle once more and hear the voice of a pharmacist who had once noticed me swallowing a pill chased with beer.

“Prolonged drinking will enhance the side-effects of that drug,” she mutters in my ear now as she had at that party a month ago. She quietly consults me in the corner while everyone shouts over each other across the room. “You’ll experience sluggishness and an inability to concentrate or get motivated,” she says.

“Well that explains Sundays,” I reply, slugging her away to the back of my mind with the bottle in hand—feeling that beautiful central nervous system depressant that potentiates the activity of serotonin in the brain by blocking reuptake. But before the altered perception of the environment, the in-coordination of self, the combative and destructive behavior that follows—I relish the slow and subtle buzz—the endogenous opiates responsible for euphoria during the beginning stage of alcohol consumption

“Chris...buddy...are you okay?” I hear Mike calling to me—calling me back to the diner: the clink of cutlery, and upon finishing our meals, putting to rest the incessant clink of knife and fork on plate, we swig our last from jars of beer, tack mileage in our minds, and race off toward the Grand Canyon.

## The Call

Steven Pringle

*Bill? It's about Daddy. You know I wouldn't be calling you if it wadn't important.*

Is he...?

*He doesn't know I'm callin', 'cause he dudn't want you to worry.*

I'm worried.

*He's been havin' some problems with his...*

Is it his heart? His legs? What?...

*Ya know he plays golf three times a week?*

Yeah?

*Now he says he's not enjoying it as much as he used to. He's thinkin' about not playin' anymore...*

What?!... You called me at 10:00 at night? On a Wednesday? To tell me that?

*Don't say anything to him about this...*

Then why did you call me?...

*He's 80 years old and if... I'm just afraid if he knew I wuz callin'...*

Yeah?!

*Well, when he plays it gits him out of the house and if he dudn't keep it up I'm likely to go crazy...*

As if...

*You know I cain't git out on my own. I'm blind, cain't hardly walk and I still got to train these service dogs...*

Yeah... All seven of those aging shepards in that tiny house...

*If I had to take care of him, too... well... that would just about do me in...*

From your lips...

*Bill? Could you just talk to him? Just... you know, remind him about how important it is, ya know, to his health and all...*

Sure...

*And don't tell him I called. If he knew, he just might have a heart attack.*

Right.

*Thanks, Bill. Sorry if I worried you. Good night.*

Not a word above a last-dying-breath whisper for three years and all of a sudden she is as big as Dr. Phil.

Who was Dad talking to, Mom?

He was talking to his sister.

My poor dad. The last thing he would ever consider is being homebound with her. She doesn't live without being in the middle of a soap opera.

Bill, honey. Why do you even bother to listen to her?

I hate listening to her, but I'm afraid that some day she is going to call and I'm going to hang up on her the one time it really matters.

Can you call your aunts?

Yeah, but I have to talk to him first, just to get his version. Somewhere between her crazy and his understating is a reality I can't see because I'm not there.

Are you okay, Dad?

Yeah, I'll be all right.

You should go out there, honey.

I should go...soon. Your grandfather's getting old.

I love you, dad.

I love you, too, son.

## Outside the Walls of Tulum

*Ginny Bitting*

Tourists seek what's real in ruins  
That rise and crumple  
Above the turquoise sea. Their eyes  
Widen and sweat for  
The ancient and historic. They  
Thirst to know where does  
the sacred sleep?

A barricade of commerce hums  
Outside the crumbling  
Walls. The foreigners, the gazers  
Cower under the  
gauntlet of lazy dogs nuzzling  
dying garbage stamped  
on new bricks caked in ancient ice  
cream. The tourists whine,  
where is the place the sacred sleeps?

They ignore shadow  
mothers who coach their tiny Mayans  
To rabble at the  
tourists' knees, to wave T-shirts in  
their faces shouting:  
"Only five dollars. Better than  
Walmart!" Some buy, but  
some ask where does the sacred sleep?

They weave through crowds  
Closer to the wall  
In the shadow of two bronzed men,  
pretending not to  
see their rich dark skins black and white  
with ash, each with buttocks  
bulging out from a square of cloth,  
asking silently  
where does the sacred sleep?

Pretending not to see their black  
hungry eyes clearly  
Shout, 'Let the massacre begin!'  
The two young men are  
Patient, will not raise their feathered-  
arms above their heads,  
Nor make the fearsome skeletons  
ash and paint create  
Until they make the tourists pay  
for the privilege of

a picture or ask in earnest, "Where  
does the sacred sleep?"

Before they pay, the tourists turn  
and ask each other,  
Is this real? Is it in my book?  
Is this tradition?  
Why do Mayans smear their bodies  
with ash and paint, dress  
in loincloth and raise their feathered  
arms above their heads?  
Is it here the sacred sleeps?

## Two Words

*Mike Brown*

There are moments in people's lives which they look back upon with pride. Moments involving bravery, wisdom or extraordinary compassion. We *also* have instances that are quite the opposite. Experiences that, with maddening frustration, we kick ourselves for, over and over again. If only we had had some wit, cool grace, or a lightning reflex, the situation would have become one of those shining jewels of a memory.

There is one story from my childhood that manages to fall into *both* categories. I have told it many times, and now I tell it to you. It all begins one Saturday morning in the early 80's in front of a television set on 27 Highwood Drive...

My twin brother, Andy, my sister, Dani, and I had just finished watching one of our regular Saturday morning cartoons, Super Friends. Simply drawn cartoons, basic dialogue and stiff animation, coupled with timeless heroes such as the Green Lantern, Super Man and the Wonder Twins, were enough to inspire even the most apathetic youngsters of that era.

With the grogginess of early Saturday morning well worn off, our heads filled with righteousness and moral might, we erupted from our front door to do battle with the evil-doers materializing among the shrubberies and plants populating our front yard. Before long, our battle had raged across epic distances of time and space, and we found ourselves in the backyard at the pinnacle of the final battle between good and evil.

It was then, in that moment of supreme inspiration, I truly felt the magical powers of the Super Friends coursing through my veins. With the confidence of a blindly charging rhinoceros, I climbed the steps of the jungle gym tower that rose above all other playground equipment in the lands of our backyard. Reaching the top, I continued to scramble up and stand upon the railing. Before me stretched the vast world. With complete faith, and without hesitation, I leaned forward, I stretched my arms... and I leapt.

This is the moment that I look back upon with pride. Yes, I, Mike Brown, really tried it! Not the half-hearted, semi-scared, low elevation test flight. I tried to fly. I climbed as high as I could, stretched my arms, believed in my soul and soared.

It was also at that moment of bravery and total devotion that I burned the memory with an indelible mark of shame. For at the moment I leapt through the sky, I also uttered two words that have forever shattered the dignity of my great deed. Why I didn't yell, "Geronimo!" or "Up, up and away!" or even, "High ho Silver!" I will forever ponder. No...I yelled, "Wonder Woman!!!" As if in response to my scream, gravity kicked in. And the earth rose up, just as surely as my sense of shame has lasted through the years. I hit the sandbox face-first with my mouth open, and had barely finished heaving sand and grit from my throat, when my brother promptly informed me through fits of laughter that Wonder Woman had an invisible jet. Saying it like, had I just shouted Super Man, I would have taken to the skies.

## Visiting Nonna and Bobo

*Liza Escott*

“Now I know we’ve gone over this before, but are you sure you really understand what I’m saying?” My husband to be nodded at me patiently and smiled serenely. I glanced over at him and thought yet again that he really had no idea what we were about to walk into. Well, he’d find out soon enough. Taking a deep breath and kissing him on the cheek, I opened the car door. The intensity of the heat hit me immediately, but I had little time to dwell on it. As I put my now sticky hand into Adrian’s I could hear the house door open.

“Oh, sweetheart, I’ve missed you so much. I haven’t seen you in ages! Cumma here and letta me look at you,” Nonna crooned as she squeezed me tight and began to cry. No surprise there.

“I never thought I’d see you again. I’m getting so old you know. I coulda die at any moment,” she croaked, patting my head with her age-spotted wrinkly hand. Her matching face kissed mine and her tears spilled down my cheeks. Her warmth and love I didn’t doubt, but after a tight hug and planting a quick kiss on her cheek I couldn’t help replying, “But Nonna, you’ve been saying that for as long as I can remember and every time I show up you’re still here - not dead.” Of course I loved the woman, but sometimes she just plain drove me crazy and we’d only just arrived.

I rolled my eyes at Adrian, who was having a bit of trouble of his own, busy getting his hand pumped up and down and his back slapped, both by my Bobo, my smiley-faced balding grandfather who loved me unequivocally. Therefore, anyone I chose to love was in turn accepted by him without question.

“Wella Adrian, so gooda to meet you. Glad you made it outta here to see us because we wanta to getta to know who our baby is planning to spend her life with way over there inna England. It’s godda damn hotta outa here and the air conditioning is so expensive, so cumma onna in and we’ll talka some more. Gilda, goa and getta dinner started. They musta be hungry after their longa drive. Hurry upa so we canna eat.” Here we go again, I thought to myself. Nonna immediately went into the kitchen, obeying as she always did, whatever orders he barked at her. Never arguing, never questioning. Knowing and resignedly accepting her role in their relationship of over forty years. How and why she did it I could never quite understand. Hopefully Adrian wouldn’t get any ideas about his role in our marriage after spending time here. Though I knew it would be in vain, I stood up for Nonna as I always did.

“Bobo, why don’t we all sit down and chat for a while and then I’ll help Nonna get the food ready?” I suggested hopefully.

He waved us both away as he propelled Adrian by the back of his starched shirt into the living room. “You girls goa and getta dinner ready for us. Go on. Adrian and I area gonna sitta here and talk.” And with that we were dismissed. He then turned his attention to his future family member. “Adrian, youa hungry? Of coursa you are. You look likea you canna eat, justa likea your father in law. Sit, sitta down. You smoke? You’ra English, of coursa you smoke.”

As I followed Nonna into the kitchen, a bit nervous to leave Adrian on his own, I could still hear Bobo’s booming voice resonate in the living room - a room with curtains always closed, imposing dark walnut furniture, shiny plastic coverings on the sofa and a brown leather recliner. Both squeaked as the men settled into them. I couldn’t resist a quick peek at Adrian, to see how he was holding up on his own. He sat perched uncomfortably on the edge of the sofa, hands awkwardly resting on his pressed trousers, unsure of what was yet to come.

“Here, hava cigar. Damn Cubans. Hate them, but they sure can make a gooda cigar.” A pause ensued as he lit the two cigars and took a puff.

“Goddamn immigrants,” he continued. This from a man who had come to America over forty years earlier but whose language was still barely intelligible. Though I didn’t laugh out loud, I found the situation both terribly amusing and ironic.

“They shouldea go back to their own countries. They don’ta belong here. There’s not enougha rooma for all ofa them and most ofa them take away our harda earned money to be ona the welfare.”

“Joseph, letta the man speak,” Nonna said calmly as she entered the room, leaned over and patted Adrian sympathetically on the shoulder. She smiled at him and graciously handed him a much needed glass of scotch. I smiled, noting that she had remembered from a previous conversation which spirit was his favorite.

A quick “Thank you” was all Adrian managed to get out before she continued with, “You know you shouldn’ta talk likea you do about people. Some people’s good and honest. Not all, but there’s some.”

My grandfather seemed to forget that she and I were both meant to be in the kitchen, neglecting to notice that we had managed to subtly reenter the room and the conversation. He thoughtfully puffed some more on his cigar, pondering her words. He squinted his eyes at Adrian and then growled through the chewed, wet tobacco end, “But notta the goddamn niggers.”

In immediate reaction, Nonna stood up and I groaned aloud. Poor Adrian choked on his drink then blurted out in his posh English accent, “Excuse me sir. I’m not sure I quite heard you correctly,” hoping his ears had deceived him.

I would have given anything for him to have been right, but he wasn't. I had warned him about my grandfather and he had nodded patiently and smiled serenely then. But not so now. Now, the cold hard truth faced him. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the situation, but was at the same time mortified and hung my head in shame as I stared at the shag rug. There were no excuses, no explanations to justify his actions, his comments, his beliefs.

I sat there in silence, my heart torn between love and hate.