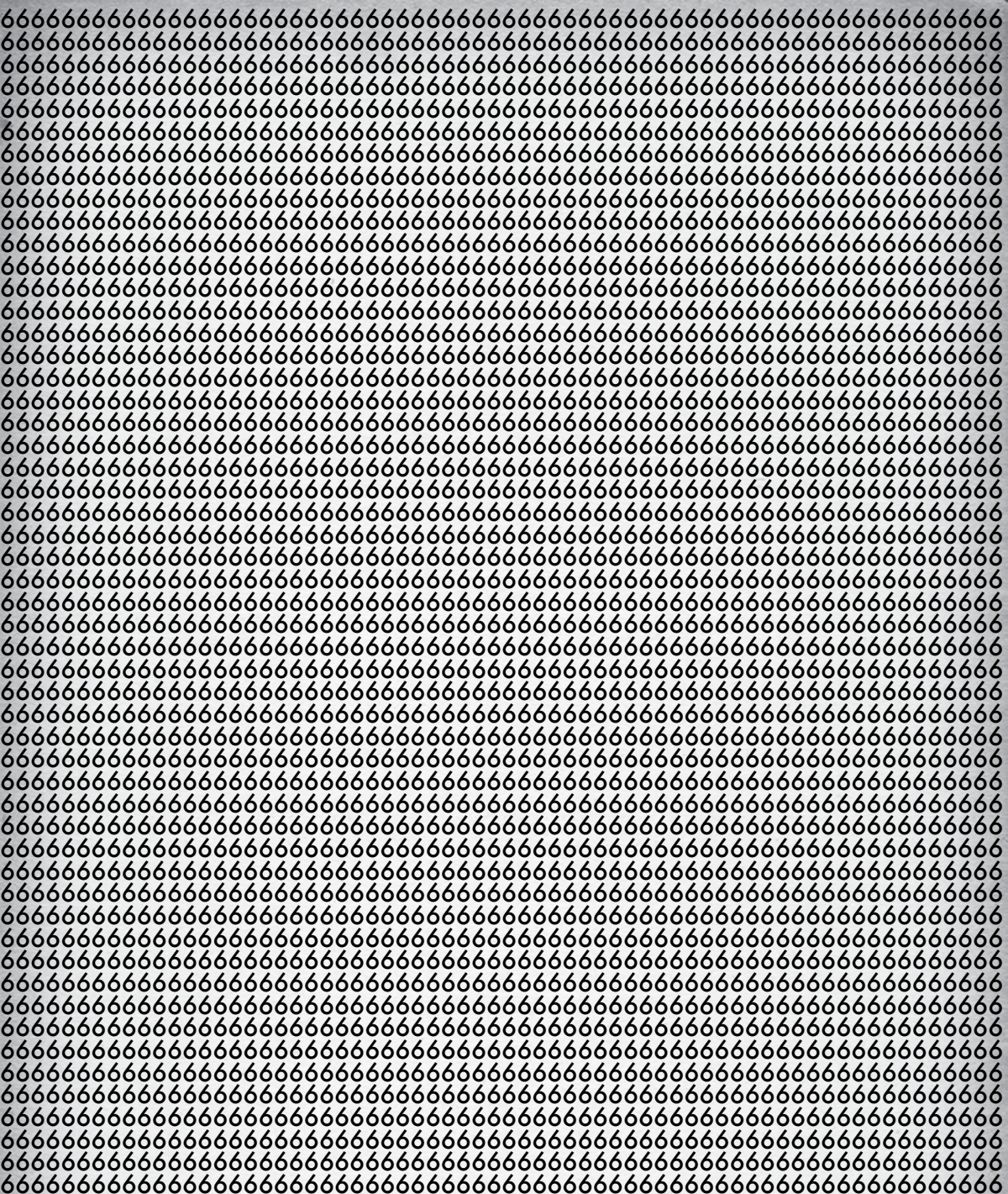


UNHEARD MAGAZINE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 _____ Brother's Keeper
by Thomas Michael McDade

10 _____ Burnt Offering
by Jamie Eyberg

15 _____ Day of Unrest
by Ben Nardolilli

16 _____ Gathering Clouds
by Gary Beck

39 _____ Gloria
by James E. Allman

40 _____ I Do This for You
by Adam J. Whitlatch

41 _____ I, King Kong
by Neil Ellman

42 _____ Joy
by Tammy Keiser

43 _____ Mad Dash
by Janet Jung

45 _____ Not So Young
by Katie Moore

46 _____ Old Bill in the Hospital
by Barry Pomeroy

50 _____ Repair Work
by Howie Good

51 _____ Riding Out
by Thomas Healy

58 _____ Up at the Boat Factory
by Jim Meirose

67 _____ Wallflower
by Luigi Monteferrante

Brother's Keeper

by Thomas Michael McDade

Jack Sizemore sat on a curbing admiring the yellow, two-story house he'd just finished painting. A breeze tossed his hair as he tightened the laces on his paint-splattered boots that looked like kindergarten art.

A red Ford Mustang pulled up and parked. Staring past the pudgy, black-haired woman who stepped out, he lit a cigarette. Her tan jeans were tight. She wore an Atlantic City T-shirt. She leaned against the hood as if it were a tavern bar. Her face was pale except for a mask of makeup around her eyes. After twice clearing her throat, she walked until she stood four feet or so from Jack.

"No need to stand up, it's only Sammy's big sister."

"Hi Mary, how's it going?"

"Where in hell have you been Jack?"

"Virginia Beach."

Jack picked up a pebble, tossed it into the middle of the road while inspecting her sandals. He recalled a house he'd painted the same red as her toenails.

"Want to talk?" asked Mary.

"I suppose."

He stretched one leg until his foot nearly touched one of hers.

"Jack, look at me!" she said as if talking to a misbehaving child.

Jerking his head, he squinted up at her.

"Well, Mary, your hair's a lot longer than it used to be."

"Almost as long as yours... What's with the beard?" asked Mary, thinking it was the scraggiest she'd ever seen.

"Like it?"

"Hell no, are you in disguise?"

"Nope, woman I was with in Virginia Beach liked beards."

"She must have been blind or cross-eyed to like that one."

Jack stared at the toes of his boots, recalling all the spit shining he'd done while in the Navy.

"Did you run out on her Jack?"

"Nah, her old man's Med Cruise was over. High rents forced me back."

"Jesus Christ Jack, your teeth are rotting!"

Mary recalled the photo of Dan Costello's dentist brother in yesterday's Bulletin. He was standing next to some wacky dame with a goofy smile. She was showing off the diamonds he'd implanted in her front teeth.

"They'll be fixed soon," assured Jack.

"Yeah, yanked like all the other barroom trench-mouths?"

"Nice talk. How'd you find me?"

"This is Pawtucket, RI, not friggin Tokyo."

She shook her head and wondered why she was wasting her time.

"I should have stayed in Providence," he said. "I just took this job because I was hard up."

"Yeah, Providence is LA, right?"

Jack lit a cigarette and Mary demanded one. He gave her his and reached for another. She ripped the filter off. Jack's eyes moved to the peak of the yellow house, hands shading his eyes. She took a piece of tobacco from her lip and flicked it to the ground.

"Nice flower arrangement you sent Jack," she said, voice cracking. "Aw shit," she continued, arms dropping to her sides.

Jack studied the house peak then let his eyes move, clapboard row by clapboard row, to the ground.

"That peak was a bitch," he said.

"Jack, do you remember the woods in back of the cemetery where we used to make out?"

"Yup, on the pine needles," he said, recalling her nipples you could hang a coat on and rubbing his eyes as if he'd just awakened.

Mary remembered when she'd thought Jack looked like Clint Eastwood. She glanced at his boots and it struck her they could pass for clown shoes. She smiled to herself.

Jack's mind was still in the cemetery. "God, Mary, the piles of leaves back there: years and years of leaves. I got my fishing worms there. I bet it changed like Virginia Beach did from my Navy days. Might be people buried in that spot."

"Just like you to mention the damned worms Jack."

"The more leaves you pulled up the thicker they got."

"After everyone left the grave, I buried your flowers in the fucking wonderful leaves," said Mary, annunciating every syllable.

"Why the hell did you do that?" asked Jack, hurt in his voice.

"I buried you Jack. You're dead."

"Then let me rest in peace."

"You ain't that lucky, Jack."

Mary tossed her cigarette, just missing his face.

"Three shots for a quarter," he joked, launching his cigarette at her.

She jumped aside and placed her hands on her hips.

"Sammy was my brother Jack, only your "best" friend. If this were a month ago, you might be looking down the barrel of a gun."

Glancing at the sun, she forced a sneeze before taking a Kleenex from her pocket.

"Bless you Mary. Listen, I gotta go pick up my pay."

"Please don't go," said Mary, suddenly smiling.

Jack was relieved to see the smile. Her gun remark had jolted him. Damn, she had a pretty smile at that. Her teeth were perfect. He was

ashamed of his. He had an appointment once but Sammy showed up with a six-pack just as he'd stepped off the ladder. Yeah, it was good to see Mary smile. She knew his heart was at the funeral. She was just letting off steam.

Jack remembered telling her she looked like Liz Taylor. It wasn't that big a lie! Jesus, if he hadn't been on Sammy's leash all those years, Mary might be his wife today. He imagined a steady union painting job, a new pickup truck, quitting drinking. Something might happen yet, thought Jack, she was smiling. Then her mood changed.

"Try to leave before I say so and I'll ram you and your shit-box of a car to kingdom come."

"Calm down, Mary, calm down," urged Jack.

"I could have let you slide for skipping the hospital, even the wake, but not the funeral. You've always been like family. You and Sammy were like brothers. Christ almighty, even a black sheep brother would have paid his respects."

She crossed her arms and stared at him. She pictured Jack with his teeth capped, each tooth with a rhinestone that changed colors to match the ones on his drop cloth looking clown shoes. She dabbed her eyes with her Kleenex until the breeze took it. Jack offered a paint-stained handkerchief that she kicked away stinging one of his fingers. Her eye makeup was a fright.

"Explain Jack. Lie if you have to. You owe me at least a crumb of an excuse."

A woman in a passing car rubbernecked as Jack nervously rubbed his arm then settled a hand over his mouth.

"I didn't want..." he began, but could not continue.

"Take you had from your mouth," Mary barked.

He took a deep breath and looked around as if fearful someone might be listening.

"I didn't want to see him in a hospital bed or coffin. I wanted to remember him in the telephone truck or climbing a pole. I wanted to remember him singing along with Glen Campbell's "Wichita Lineman" at the bar, going on about moving to Colorado.

"Jesus H. Christ Jack, what's the matter with your head? Would seeing Sammy sick or dead have erased all those skuzzy barstool memories? That's county music bullshit, sappy country music bullshit! I'd rather hear you admit you're a coward than that runny crap. Sammy would have stood by you until the last dirt covered your casket. Live with that!"

"I do Mary," he said, wishing there was a way to test how loyal Sammy would have been. Christ, he missed him something fierce yet he'd felt strangely free since his death.

"Yeah, I'd bet a shit-load on that," she said snickering.

“What did he say about me?” questioned Jack.

Ever since the funeral, Mary had been rehearsing a tear-by-tear account of Sammy’s deathbed loneliness; how he’d spent hours phoning bars looking for Jack; how she’d told every lie imaginable to comfort him. She’d considered telling Sammy that Jack died in a fiery car wreck but she hadn’t wanted to tempt fate and risk losing her revenge. Now she could deliver but he looked too pitiful to kick.

“He was always asking for you Jack.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I saved your ass. After a while, he didn’t know squat with all the cancer drugs running through him. I’d tell him you’d just left. I kept up on sports so I could tell him what you guys talked about.”

“Thanks.”

Being so easy on Jack angered her. Goddamn it, she was livid at herself for not missing Sammy. Life was better without him. She only had Mary to worry about. No, there was Jack. Shit, she could have made something of him if it hadn’t been for Sammy. Why hadn’t Jack been able to break away? What a Goddamned coward.

Almost tripping, she lunged down at him, trying to slap his face. His shot up his arm and blocked her. Backing off, she put both hands in her back pocket and looked ready to spit.

“The lies weren’t for your sake, asshole. I was protecting him, protecting me.”

“That’s what I was thanking your for,” said Jack, smiling weakly, holding the toes of his boots.

Jack thought her eye makeup made her face look like a Halloween mask. He wished she’d let him clean it off. He remembered her beautiful teenage complexion. She’d sworn up and down she’d never paint her face.

“Mary, people are on their porches staring like were TV wrestlers.”

“I played ‘Wichita Lineman’ over and over on a tape deck. He died hearing the damned thing,” she said ignoring him.

“That’s what I would...”

“Keep your foot out of your mouth,” interrupted Mary. “Those teeth aren’t fit for chewing.”

Mention of the tape deck reminded him of the one time, as adults, he and Sammy had gone fishing. It was at the Ten Mile River. They’d ended up so drunk they couldn’t thread hooks with the fattest of cemetery worms. Jack had knocked the tape player into the water. When they finally retrieved it, a big catfish was stuck in the handle.

“Did Connie show up?”

“I’ll say, she was the only one of his sluts who did. She wore a red dress up to her ass.”

“She’s a good kid,” said Jack.

"I wouldn't go that far," said Mary.

Three teenagers rode by on bicycles. They circled back, stopping at a chain link fence next to the yellow house they watched Jack and Mary intently.

"I'm shoving off Mary," he said, standing and brushing off the seat of his pants. "I gotta get some money."

"I got a feeling you might not get paid," warned Mary, smiling and biting her bottom lip.

"I busted my ass doing that house. I'll get paid all right," said Jack, at once puzzled and riled.

"That's my house, Jack. Sammy had beaucoup insurance. I own three more."

"You're crazy," muttered Jack, trying to light a jittery cigarette. "Dan Costello owns that house," he continued.

Mary walked up to him and put the balls of her feet on the toes of his boots. Jack was over six-feet. Her head just about reached his chin. He focused on the teenagers. After inhaling deeply, he blew smoke in her hair. She plucked his cigarettes from his pocket. She lit up from his after pulling off the filter like a grenade pin.

"I don't imagine you drink through a filter, why smoke through one?" she asked.

Jack continued to observe the teens, two of whom were mimicking them.

"Jackie isn't mad, is he?" she asked, baby talking.

Walking to her car, she leaned against a headlight. "Dan's my boyfriend, Jack, you were set up. He spotted you leaving that sleazy bar near the bus station and tipped me off."

She laughed herself to tears.

Jack wondered if she were flipping out. Dan Costello went for young, leggy blondes. One was just in the paper modeling silly gem encrusted choppers. Mary had probably seen the "Costello Construction Company" sign in front of the house and built her fantasy from there. He decided against cross-examining her. Who knew what the crazy bitch might do if he tore apart her story? He played her game.

"Mary, I did the work, good, honest work," said Jack sounding like a man swearing on a Bible.

"Bet you cut the hell out of the paint and it will peel in a week," she said.

"I did a good job, even the high spots, not many guys could do a house that size alone."

Jack wished he were still painting the peak. That was the only peaceful place, away from all the bullshit. Sammy used to say the same thing about working atop a telephone pole. They'd been two of a kind.

“Jack, in a couple of years, all you’ll be good for is slopping paint on foundations.”

Jack felt like calling her a stinking mill rat. At least he hadn’t wasted his days in a dirty textile mill. Man, was she pale! Her hands were probably like canvas from working cloth. Her lungs were probably full of lint.

“Mary, I need that money,” he said, calling her bluff.

“You’ve got one more chore to do,” she ordered.

“That house is done, top to bottom. I’m finished. If there’s more to do, I’m going to charge. Jesus, haven’t you punished me enough? Look at these people gawking! I’m a laughing stock!

“No shit, I’ll second that!

The way he and Mary were staring at one another, made him think of gunfighters, shootout at the shit-for-brains corral.

“Get in my car, Jack!”

“Taking me for a “ride, huh?” he asked, smiling and shaking his head.

“Wait a second, I’ve got to get something from my “shit-box,” he added.

“I’m warning you, don’t try to run.”

He opened the door and took a windbreaker off the back seat. There was a pint of whisky with about a half inch left. He gathered enough restraint to keep from sucking it down. She’d love to catch him sucking on a cheap pint.

As they drove off, the teenagers waved. She slipped a cassette into the tape player. Jack was thankful it wasn’t “Wichita Lineman.” God he was tired.

“We’re going to Sammy’s grave,” said Mary.

“No sweat, I’m no stranger to that place,” lied Jack.

“Funny we never crossed paths there,” said Mary although she hadn’t visited since the burial.

Mary had a twinge of misgiving about her Jack harassment. Hadn’t he helped her care for her mother and father when they were shitting and babbling like infants? Every crisis found Sammy running off with Connie or one of the other whores. And Connie Pig’s name was on the insurance policies. She hadn’t kicked in a dime for the funeral. The nery bitch. Old reliable Mary had to hit the credit union again.

She thought about the time she’d been pregnant with Jack’s baby and had an abortion without saying a word. She’d been terrified Sammy would kill them. If only she’d had faith in Jack! He might have shocked her, stood up to Sammy! What had she gained but a booby prize of one-night stands? Well, it wasn’t too late. Women were having children into their late forties nowadays. She was only thirty-nine.

Jack had his eyes closed his eyes, humming along to a Beach Boys tune, “Sloop John B.” Fuck Glen Campbell and his “Wichita Lineman” he mused. All in all, he was happy to be with Mary. Hell, he never would have gone

to the cemetery alone. Maybe praying over the grave with would make up for missing the funeral. He imagined Sammy's ghost dragging him off to a bar or sitting like a bird on a telephone wire. He remembered Sammy saying he'd kill him if he ever fucked Mary. They'd been scared to death the few times they'd done it. Now that they could screw in peace, Mary hated him. Wasn't that life flashing its shitty self again?

She parked near the grave. Jack was sleeping. She studied his face, decided she'd have to get him shaving. She thought about praising the paint job. She wondered if he thought for just a second that she owned the house and handsome Dan Costello was her boyfriend. It didn't matter. Shit, if Jack would have a little patience, she'd pretty him up the way he did houses. Why shouldn't she marry him? Wasn't he her first lover? She'd never scored anyone better. Jesus, marrying him just for the sake of getting him on her dental insurance would get her closer to heaven. She'd get his mouth capped like a leading man. Her plan would pay sixty percent. Hell, maybe they'd hire Diamond Dan to do the work! He could include a tasteful little sparkler so Jack would keep smiling to show it off. Jack deserved something for surviving Sammy. She did too.

Mary nudged him awake. They walked toward Sammy as if in a minefield. Suddenly veering past the headstone like a couple of teens stuck between fishing and fucking they ran to the rotting leaves for guidance.

Burnt Offering

By Jamie Eyberg

I watched it from the corner of my eye. The lightening strike was hard and fast. It drove into the ground blowing flora and earth into the air with a whip snap crack that sizzled in my ears.

It was no more than ten feet away from my truck as I drove by the field. The beans had started to leaf and on the other side of the road corn had started to unfurl.

I pulled my vehicle to the side of the road, still shaken by the surprise of it all and my ears still rang from the roar. The wind got more intense with every passing minute. It rocked my vehicle and battered the plants to the ground. Rain came in white sheets across the road and beat on my windshield. I turned the radio down and listened to the storm as it got louder.

That was when I saw him.

In the corner of my rear view mirror I saw him walking, more of a stagger really. He was making his way to my truck.

He had his right arm outstretched. The rain mashed his torn clothing to him. He shielded his face with his left hand and with every gust he managed to move forward, but at an angle.

Quickly, I unlocked the door and watched as he made his way to the cab, his feet slipped in the ditch with every step and it seemed all he could do to crawl in.

“Thank you,” he said. His voice was quiet and he was out of breath, but the expression on his face meant more to me than the words did.

“You’re welcome,” I replied. It seemed pointless but the words slipped past me. I reached behind the seat and pulled out an old jacket that I had taken off after the last snowstorm and forgotten about until now. I offered it to him and he graciously accepted it with a toothy smile. He leaned forward to wrap himself in it.

I watched him for a few minutes. He stared out the window and watched the storm roll by. The thunder had started to get fainter and the lightening more distant, but the rain continued to pour down. I thought if I hadn’t stopped before this I certainly would have had to stop by now. Even standing still the windshield wipers were having a hard time keeping up with the rain.

“What were you doing out there?” I finally asked as the rain started to subside and didn’t deafen us in the cab.

“Sleeping,” he said without looking at me, his eyes were focused on the storm.

I looked around behind and could see no shelter. "Where?"

He turned around and pointed to the spot that had just been blown apart by the lightning strike.

At first I didn't believe him but chose to humor him. Surely, no one could survive a direct strike by lightning and not one as powerful as the one I had witnessed. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said. His voice was still breathless, like someone who had just run a marathon.

As I looked at him closer, but from arms length, my back against the door and one arm on the steering wheel, I noticed his clothing was blackened, his pants were in tatters toward the cuff and his boots were held together with duct tape that, itself, was worn thin.

"Can I do anything for you?" I asked. I realized from the smell of charred flesh and hair that, at that moment reached my nose, he was telling the truth. "Do you need to see a doctor? Is there anyone that I can contact for you?"

He looked back over his shoulder once again and calmly said, "No." His voice was just over a whisper as he said it and I almost missed it as the storm had picked back up.

He turned back around looked out the front window. A hand came from the coat he was wearing. He brushed his hair from his face and absently turned a well worn wedding band on his finger.

"Are you heading into town?" he asked. His voice was stronger this time and the suddenness of his question threw me back as the constant beating of the storm had lulled me into a quiet submission.

"Yes," I replied.

We waited a few more moments and when the storm seemed to have lost most of its intensity, I shifted the truck into first gear and pulled onto the road toward town, fishtailing around rain slicked corners and hydroplaning across flooded valleys.

When we got to town he opened the door at the first stop sign.

He unwrapped my old coat from himself and folded it in half. He folded it again before he laid it on the seat. "Keep it," I said.

"Thanks," he said as he closed the door leaving the jacket, folded, on the seat. The smoky smell of the stranger still lingered in the cab and on my mind for the rest of the day as I went about my job, framing houses for my father-in-law.

That night I stopped and grabbed a six pack for the drive home. It was a usual routine that I had gotten from years of long drives and bad radio programming. I decided to go back the same way I had come that morning. The sun had come out shortly after ten this morning and the

temperature rose with the humidity.

I hadn't left the outskirts of town before I cracked my first beer, all the while I looked for the stranger that I had dropped off nine hours earlier.

I didn't expect to see him, nor did I as I passed the last house in town and was once again surrounded by the country and the smell of wet earth. As I drove I told myself that I didn't know what route I would take, I would know when I got there, but I guess that, even if I didn't want to know, I knew the truth. I was going back to the spot where I met the stranger.

It was seven miles back to the spot and by then I had cracked open my second beer. The first one had sounded off a road sign with a well-timed, much practiced throw.

I pulled off where I was sure I had found the man. I couldn't be completely sure but I knew I had to be close. My boots were already caked in dried mud from the job site and the beer in my hand was half empty as I got out and started to walk the road looking for the spot where I had seen the beans and earth fly.

It didn't take long before I came across it. A craterous hole in the field, three rows in from the ditch. The beans were taller than I gave them credit for, but I was never much of a judge of size and distance, except when it came to chucking beer bottles at road signs from moving vehicles.

I tripped my way through the ditch, knee deep in water holding my near empty bottle at shoulder height, until I finished it and threw it at a large bullfrog that sat on the bank. I missed and he jumped.

I was at the edge of the field when I saw the sleeping bag. Its zipper was fused shut and the woman inside had already attracted flies. Her eyes were open and opaque.

I walked closer and saw where the lightning had blown through the worn bag.

I went back through the ditch and to my truck and pulled out a shovel I used to take up forms. It was dull and rusty, the handle held together with electrical tape from prying too long on a form that was cemented in place.

I walked back to the woman and started to dig, not in the field but next to it.

Mud stuck to the blade and I kicked it off with my boots with every scoop. I dug until the water from the ditch filled in the bottom of the hole. It was shallow but it would cover her I thought as I pulled the woman in the bag across the three rows of beans, mashing them flat.

Swarms of flies exploded into the air.

I tucked her into the bag as best I could so that only her hair was exposed at the top. I covered her with the thick black mud.

As a marker I found a couple of sticks and taped them together before shoving it into the ground.

I went back to the truck and grabbed what was left of my beer and my old coat.

The bottles were sweating in the humidity and getting warmer by the minute, but I didn't care. I didn't want them at that moment. I left the coat, and the beer, next to the crude wooden cross before wading back across the ditch to my truck.

As I took off down the road, my windows open to draw in the breeze and wick the sweat from my body I caught a faint whiff of smoke, charred flesh and singed hair in the air.

The next morning I slowed down as I passed the grave. The jacket was gone, as was the beer, but the crude cross remained.

I thought of it frequently over the next couple of weeks, but as the months went by the beans grew taller so did the grass in the ditch until, eventually, all signs of that day disappeared. It wasn't until after the seasons had changed, the days got shorter and the nights got cooler that I thought again about that day.

I was driving after work. I had given up my nightly drink in favor of quiet contemplation, for a time, but had gone back to my habits after I thought I had little else to think of.

I was driving down a back road, south of town. I was further from my house than the last job site had been, but I really didn't care. The nearest gas station that sold beer was south and so that was the way I went.

I was into my third beer; the first two struck their targets with the familiar metallic thud that I expected. Up ahead, walking down the road, I saw a man. He was in the undeniably beat up but familiar jacket that had once lay on the shallow grave.

I sped up to meet him, offer him a ride, a beer, five bucks from my pocket. Whatever.

I pulled along side him and was getting ready to roll the window down when he looked at me.

The only thing familiar about the man was the jacket. The face was not the man that I had offered a ride to all those months ago. He looked at me, his grin full of rotting and missing teeth.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else," I said. I offered the man a beer, which he stuffed into the jacket, but not a ride.

When the fall harvest came around they found the shallow grave of the woman I had buried. The media and the police chalked it up murder, or maybe an accidental death. Her name was never mentioned and I never heard about her again. I don't believe they ever knew it, although a small ring of flowers and a better wooden cross than the one that I had constructed popped up shortly after she was discovered.

I couldn't help but notice that beside the cross was an empty beer bottle.

Day of Unrest

by Ben Nardolilli

Sunday morning,
We should be outside,
There are new freedoms,
New worlds to be found.

The cool air gathers
To hold a convention
With the shadows,
Let us go outside
Before the sun begins to bounce.

Fewer wheels turn
And the streets can be crossed
With no aid of lights
Or graven images,
The horn, the screech
Have been banished.

You will not find any lines,
Few eyes to disguise,
And ears to worry about,
Windows and doors are open,
But the yelling has stopped,
The bars remain closed
And broken glass just picked up.

With no crowd, stalked by the diseases
Of curiosity or jealousy,
And barely anyone in a rush,
No one is ready to call us strange,
We can crutch for each other
Between the windows and the street,
This world will take on vapors
If we wait until the afternoon to explore.

Gathering Clouds

by Gary Beck

Nothing dramatic happened when their new computer game, 'Women at Arms', was released on July 1st, to the disappointment of Ted, Lys and Kevin.

"I guess we shouldn't expect too much," Lys remarked. "After all, we didn't do much for the last few months to promote it".

"I'm sorry, guys," Kevin said contritely. "I haven't been much help lately. Ever since Philippe got hurt I've had trouble functioning."

Ted patted him affectionately. "It wasn't just you. It was all of us. Philippe's accident completely disrupted our lives. Now it's up to us to put them back together." He paused for a moment, then smacked his head in exasperation. "I'm so dumb. We should have linked the game to the Fourth of July. We could have used a patriotic theme and referred to notable women of the past. Well, it's too late now."

"If it's any consolation, at least we're functioning again," Lys said.

Sales were respectable for the first two weeks, but the group wasn't particularly satisfied with the results, compared to the smash success of their first game, 'Combat Evolution'. Lys frequently phoned Allen, their distributor, to get sales figures and Kevin kept phoning Max, the production manager, for production counts. Max finally called Ted and asked him to limit Lys and Kevin's calls.

"They're calling all day long and it's distracting us from our jobs."

"I'll talk to them, Max," Ted said soothingly. "We've been a bit unsettled since Philippe's accident and we're just getting back into the work habit."

"I understand, Ted. Just get them to limit their calls to ten a day."

Ted laughed. "I'll take care of it. We're going out of town for a week and I'm sure they'll both have other things to do besides call you. Call me if anything special happens."

When they went downstairs to the lobby Wednesday morning to leave for their combination business trip and vacation, Ted thought ruefully how for the last few years they had come to depend on Philippe for all their travel arrangements. They had three bellboys pushing luggage racks piled high with suitcases, golf and tennis bags. Ted had no idea how much to tip, so he gave them ten dollars each. They seemed mildly pleased, so he guessed it was sufficient. The limo took them to a private hangar at the airport, where the two cabin crew attendants unloaded their luggage, then took it to the plane. Ted gave them fifty dollars each, since they would be serving the group during

the flight and Ted wanted to be sure they would get good service. The attendants were very courteous and efficient, so the amount obviously was ample.

It was raining, hot and steamy when they landed at the Myrtle Beach airport. Their limo driver, Del, was waiting for them at the curb and from the attention they got from people nearby, Ted concluded that they might prefer less ostentatious transportation during the rest of their stay. They got onto highway 17 going north and the driver told them it was the main drag of Myrtle Beach. The highway was crowded and they passed an endless array of shopping centers, restaurants and tourist attractions, as well as signs leading to dozens of golf courses. Ted remarked to the driver as if he had never been there before: "Everything seems so quiet, except for the traffic."

"It's pretty much a family and golf resort. Most of the men play golf during the day, while the wives and kids go to the beach. Things are generally pretty calm around here, except for Black Bike Week. Then this place is really wild."

"When's that?" Ted asked in alarm.

"Don't worry. It was in May."

Del pointed out a shopping center complex. "That's Barefoot Landing. It's the biggest entertainment and dining center around here."

No one responded, so he didn't say anything else for the rest of the ride. By the time they pulled up to the Port of Call Resort on Ocean Boulevard they were, like their last trip, less than impressed with the town. They were even less pleased by the resort. It was big, bland and completely without character. Ted looked up and down the street and saw that all the buildings looked pretty much alike. They were taken to their three bedroom tower suite with a maximum of confusion and a minimum of efficiency. Lys and Kevin were beginning to grumble at his selection, but they forgot complaints when they walked out on their balcony and looked at the ocean.

"What a great view," Lys exclaimed.

"We'll move if you don't like the place," Ted remarked.

"Let's give it a chance," she said.

"Why not?" Kevin added.

Before they even unpacked there was a knock on the door and Leila, the sexy companion of their partner in the golf course, blew in like a whirlwind. She scooped Kevin up and they were gone without saying anything more than Kevin's: "See you later, guys."

"Well I guess we're on our own," Ted said with a laugh.

"Is that so bad?"

“Not at all. What do you feel like doing?”

“Do we have any obligations today?” she asked.

“No. All we have to do while we’re here is inspect the construction site of our golf course investment and meet with Joe. I have a feeling that Kevin will be occupied.”

“Then let’s go for a swim in the ocean and take a long walk on the beach, without worrying about anything.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ted agreed.

“You better put on plenty of sun screen, Lys cautioned him. “And bring something for when you come out of the water, or you’ll burn.”

It had stopped raining and the sky was clear. The sun beat down and the sand was so hot that it burned their bare feet. They put beach towels down and Ted noticed that Lys was being stared at by the men nearby. She was shapely and sexy looking and their women neighbors were less than elated at her presence. He put sun screen on her back and shoulders and thoroughly enjoyed touching her sleek body. When she did his back, he felt an erotic charge from her fingers that left him tingling. She smiled teasingly, well aware of her affect on him. They sat for a few minutes while the sun screen dried and casually observed their fellow beach-goers, mostly mothers with children, a sprinkling of couples and teen groups. The people seemed to be enjoying themselves and were remarkably sedate. The loudest sounds were the waves breaking on the shore and the gleeful voices of children at play.

The water was cool and refreshing. Ted admired the way Lys went in without making a fuss about her hair, also appreciating her temporarily forgetting responsibility. She cut through the waves like a sleek seal and Ted knew it would be difficult to resist his attraction to her, especially since everything she did made her more appealing. It didn’t help him when she suddenly threw herself on him, pulled him underwater and pressed herself tightly against him when they surfaced. He instantly got an erection that poked her.

“Does that mean you’re glad to see me?” she asked in a throaty voice and rubbed her hand lightly over the bulge in his bathing suit.

He pulled away abruptly. “You’re not making this easy for me.”

She grinned wickedly. “I’m glad to hear that.”

They came out of the water and walked north on the beach. Their resort was on Ocean Drive Beach and they walked two miles or so until they reached Cherry Grove Beach. None of the beach areas were crowded and the same type of family groups were everywhere. Ted saw some nubile females and numbers of budding teens, displaying themselves and their tattoos in tight bikinis. He occasionally looked at

Lys from the corner of his eye and saw how favorably she compared to the women they passed. They didn't talk much and just enjoyed the fresh salt air that was beginning to penetrate their smog-clogged sinuses from New York City that prevented normal respiratory function. The combination of hot sun, sea salt drying on their bodies and the cool sand at the edge of the water was delicious.

By the time they got back to the resort it was late afternoon and they were both tired. Lys suggested they shower and nap before dinner and Ted lazily concurred. He was stretched out on the bed, trying to decide whether to read the local newspaper or doze, when Lys came into his room. She was wearing a short, red diaphanous nightgown that revealed more than it concealed.

"That's quite a garment," Ted whispered. "What would you do if Kevin walked in while you were coming in here dressed like that?"

"I'd nod politely and say something saucy in French. Move over." She slid into the bed, pulled the sheet over them and moved against him. "Are you glad to see me now that we're alone?" She ran her hand down his body and felt his growing erection. "It's good to feel welcome," she murmured.

Ted wanted to stop her because he knew they were heading for trouble, but her hand was insistent. She squeezed him harder and moved her hand up and down and his resolve melted away and he ejaculated with a rush.

"Did you like that?" she asked.

He nodded, but lay still, not sure of how to react to her. She pressed her hot body closer.

"Now I want you to do something for me." She took his hand and put it between her legs. "Stroke me there," she said, placing his fingers on her clitoris. She was already moist and as he gently rubbed her she started to moan and undulate. "Harder," she instructed. He obeyed and she came with a groan and clamped her legs tight on his hand. "That was nice. It's been awhile."

"We shouldn't be doing this," he muttered.

She leaned over and kissed him passionately. "Did you like that?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Are we hurting anyone?"

"No."

"Then we'll just be very careful." He looked at her alluring body, the red nightgown bunched sexily above her waist, and knew his resistance was faltering.

Later they went out for dinner. They took one look at the resort

restaurant and decided only to eat there if they were too lazy to go out. They asked the desk clerk to recommend a sea food restaurant and he suggested a restaurant which was only a few minutes away by cab. It was a casual place, with peanut shells on the floor to add to the folksy atmosphere, but the food was acceptable and the sincere chipmunk waitress was amusing. They walked back to the Port of Call along Ocean Boulevard, which was lined with condos and motels, punctuated by arcades, beach shops and various tourist attractions. Dads had rejoined Moms and kids for the evening entertainment and it was obvious from the decibel level of conversation that family diversion had been attained.

When they got back to the resort, Lys asked: "Do you want to do anything tonight?"

"I'd like to sit on the balcony for a while, then go to bed early."

"Sounds good to me. What about tomorrow?"

"If it's alright with you, I want to get into our old exercise routine. An early run on the beach, karate, a swim, breakfast, tennis, lunch, then golf. We can talk about the evenings tomorrow."

"Do you think you'll have any energy left by nighttime?"

"I'm not in bad shape," he protested. "It might take a couple of days to feel really fit, but I'm looking forward to it."

"Well if you can stand it, so can I. Do you really want to play tennis with me?" "Sure. It'll be fun."

"But you're so much better than I am."

"Don't worry about it."

"Anything you say, big boy." She smiled wickedly. "We'll make sure that you get a good nights sleep, so you'll be ready in the morning."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Never you mind. You'll find out."

They went through the same simple sex play that they did earlier and fell asleep in each others arms. When he woke up before dawn, Ted felt rested and ready to go. He gently woke Lys. "Time to get up, girl."

She slowly opened her eyes and smiled sweetly. "I guess you're serious. Give me a minute."

It was still dark when they got to the beach, with the faintest tendrils of light way out to sea hinting of dawn. They stretched carefully, then started a moderate-paced run down the beach.

"Be cautious this morning," Ted reminded her. "In a few days we'll be able to really run, but let's not risk injury the first day out."

"That's fine with me. You're in charge of our bodies this trip," she

added with a wink.

They got back to their starting point, rested for a moment, then Ted led them through their karate forms. The first beat-the-crowd beachgoers, joggers, walkers and treasure hunters paused to watch them for a few moments, then walked on.

By the time they finished their workout, the sun was a molten red-gold glow of overwhelming beauty. They stood quietly for a while and watched the sunrise as it emerged from the pitiless night.

“You really are a strange one, Ted,” she murmured.

“Why?” he asked in surprise.

“Just the way you stand here appreciating everything, without talking it to death.” “I’d rather live this way and enjoy what I do, then party and get trapped in a meaningless night life.”

“You mean like Kevin?”

“He’s not trapped,” Ted protested defensively. “He’s just having a hard time

adjusting to our situation. Maybe Leila will relax him,” he said with a grin.

“If she doesn’t tease him to death first.”

“Why Lys, that sounds awfully cynical.”

“Yeah? Well I know her type.”

They went for a swim, then had breakfast and relaxed for a while on their balcony.

“Ready for tennis?” he asked.

She grinned playfully. “You’re becoming a fitness monster.”

She got up and put on tennis whites, teasing him with glimpses of her body as she dressed. The resort had six courts and the desk clerk had told Ted that there were always some empty courts, so there was no need to reserve one. The courts were in fair condition and only one court was in use, with a mother and three children flailing away without any skills or purpose. Ted took the court furthest from them and began to carefully hit with Lys. He hit controlled forehands and backhands and after a few minutes she began to stroke the ball solidly, keeping a rally going for eight or ten shots.

“Wow,” she exclaimed. “You’re making this so easy. I never hit this well.”

“It’s simple sometimes. Just get into a groove, don’t worry about missing a shot and enjoy the rhythm.”

He gradually worked his way to the net and after a jittery moment or two, she relaxed and hit confidently. He practiced forehand and

backhand volleys, then coaxed her to the net. He fed her soft paced balls until her confidence grew and suddenly she was volleying with authority. She couldn't get over her progress.

"Do you want to play a set," he asked, "or do you want to keep hitting?"

"I can't give you any competition. Let's just hit."

"Sure. But we can play a practice set. Let's work on your serve for a while, then the overhead and lob."

A couple had taken the court next to them and were hitting casually. They weren't very good and Ted hadn't been paying attention to them, until he noticed how intently they were staring at him and Lys. When he and Lys took a break, the woman called cheerfully: "Hi, there. I'm Tammy and this is Bud. Would you like to play doubles?"

Ted had seen Tammy-Bud couples in his parent's country club since he was a child. They were attractive in a hard, forlorn way, a type that were always on the make. They looked out of place to Ted in this family resort and he wanted no part of them, but before he could decline, Lys answered: "Sure."

Ted and Lys beat them six love and it was no contest, but Bud and Tammy didn't seem to care.

"Let's switch partners," Tammy requested. "I'll play with Ted and Bud'll play with Lys."

Before Lys could say anything, Ted said pleasantly: "Perhaps another time. We've got to be going now."

Lys looked at him strangely, but didn't say anything and picked up her tennis bag. "It was fun," Tammy gushed. "We'll be here the same time tomorrow. Maybe we can play again."

"We'll see," Ted said noncommittally and walked away.

Lys rushed after him. "What's the hurry? They were being friendly."

"They're swingers, Lys. They wanted our bodies."

"Oh."

When they got back to their suite they found Kevin on the couch, snoring away. Lys snickered. "What a spectacle. I wonder what he's been doing since yesterday. Should we wake him?"

"Don't bother. He's probably too wasted to do anything. We can wake him up before we leave for golf and see how he's doing."

They ordered from the room service lunch menu, which offered sandwiches and soft drinks. But they ate on the balcony, with a grand view of the ocean. On their way out Ted poked Kevin, who slowly returned to consciousness.

“Ohh. What time is it?”

“It’s after two, Kev. How are you?”

He groaned melodramatically. “I’ll live. What’s happening?”

“Lys and I are going to play golf. We’ll see you later.”

“I’m supposed to play with Leila this afternoon. How about we make a foursome?”

“Sure. If you’re up to it.”

“Just let me take a quick shower.”

Leila arrived a few minutes later and pounded on the door. “Get up, Kev. You lazy dog. You’ve had at least one hours rest.”

Ted opened the door and she greeted him like an old friend, with a casual kiss on the cheek. “Hi, Ted. Hi, Lys.”

She kissed Lys the same way. They had barely had a chance to look at her when they first got there on Wednesday. She was in and out so fast with Kevin that they only caught a glimpse of her. Today she looked relaxed, energetic and attractive, in a clean-cut sort of way, entirely different from the plastic-like sexpot they remembered.

She spoke in rapid staccato phrases. “I’ve got my Porsche downstairs. It’s a two seater convertible. I’d gladly take you guys, but there’s no room. You should rent a car. A convertible. It’s great in this weather.”

A moment later Kevin popped out of his room and they were gone in a flash.

Ted and Lys stopped at the desk and Ted requested a rental car. The clerk hemmed and mumbled that it would take time, until Ted produced a twenty dollar bill, then a Ford convertible quickly appeared. As they drove away, Lys asked: “Why didn’t you rent a snazzy sports car?”

“I don’t think we need extra attention.”

“Speaking of attention, how come you brushed off Bud and Tammy so abruptly? Weren’t you flattered at their interest?”

“I’m flattered at your interest, but not from people like that. There’s a certain mentality about swingers that I never liked. It’s not that I haven’t done some scuzzy things, but I knew who I was doing it with.”

She slid over and put her arms around his shoulders. “I think you’re very sweet to say that about me.”

They took Main street to Highway 17, then headed south for the golf course. Kevin and Leila were waiting for them at the pro shop and Ted noticed how respectfully everyone treated her. When they teed off it became clear why they respected her. She was a top notch player.

“I played for my college team,” she explained. Then I tried a satellite tour for a while. I found I didn’t enjoy the constant pressure to win, so

I dropped out and just play for fun now.”

“You’re way out of our league,” Ted remarked. “Would you rather play with someone else?” He didn’t say anything about her pretending not to know how to play the first time they met.

“No. You don’t interfere with my game and Kevin’s a lot of fun to be with.”

Ted looked at Lys, who shrugged almost imperceptibly. This was a side of Leila that he never expected and it didn’t seem to impose a threat, so he relaxed and tried to enjoy his beginners’ game.

After a pleasant afternoon on the golf course they decided to have dinner together and Leila took them to a seafood restaurant just across the South Carolina state line, in Calabash, North Carolina. The food wasn’t bad, the service was acceptable and the view of the intracoastal waterway was pleasant. They lingered over coffee, chatting casually and Leila suddenly asked: “Would you two like to go shagging with us tonight?”

“What’s that?” Lys asked.

Before Leila could reply, Ted quipped: “That’s what the Irish call doing the wild thing.” Leila slapped him playfully. “You naughty boy. The shag is a swing-like dance that originated in the ‘thirties’. Now it’s a local dance craze and North Myrtle Beach is famous for its shaggers. That’s what we did last night. It’s a lot of fun.”

Lys noticed that Kevin was looking a bit resentful at the attention Leila was paying Ted. “Thanks, Leila,” she said. “Another night. Ted and I are a little tired.”

Lys knew she said the right thing when she saw Kevin relax. Ted took his cue.

“I don’t think I’m up to dancing the shag tonight, but we’ll do it before we leave. Lys and I are planning to run and practice karate each morning at dawn on the beach. We did it this morning and it felt good to work out again. You’re both welcome to join us any morning.”

“We’ll see how we feel,” Kevin said vaguely. “That’s awfully early if we’ve been clubbing all night.”

“We could work out later, if you like,” Lys responded. “Just let us know.”

They said goodnight in the parking lot and Ted and Lys watched Kevin and Leila roar off in the night in her Porsche. Ted drove at a more sedate pace.

“What would you like to do tonight?” he asked.

“If it’s alright with you, I’d like to walk on the beach, then sit on the balcony for a while and watch the ocean, then go to bed early.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Whether it was the sun, the exercise, the ocean, or the change from New York City, Ted got into bed, kissed Lys goodnight and fell asleep instantly. He woke up early, rested and refreshed and once Lys was awake they went through the same morning work out; a run, karate, a swim and breakfast. When they got to the tennis courts, Ted saw Bud and Tammy lurking in ambush, so he told Lys: “Keep walking. We’ll play somewhere else.”

As they drove away, Lys saw Tammy wave forlornly. “Didn’t you want to play with your admirers?”

“If you want them, I’ll arrange it for you,” he said huffily.

“Touchy. Touchy.”

He grinned sheepishly. “Sorry. I just don’t like them.”

“That’s fine with me, as long as you don’t feel that way about me.”

He stopped the car for a red light, leaned over and kissed her head. “You don’t have to worry, as long as you remain your exciting self.”

Impatient motorists stacking up behind them interrupted the tender moment.

Ted drove to a large, nearby condo complex, where he spotted tennis courts. He went into the lobby, gave the desk clerk twenty dollars and promised to leave if the courts filled up. The clerk laughed.

“That’s a funny one, mister. I’ve been working here five or six years and the courts have never been full. People play golf nowadays, not tennis.”

They hit the same way as yesterday, forehands, backhands, volleys, serves, overheads, then they played two practice sets. Ted set up a lot of shots for her so they could keep the ball in play and Lys’ confidence improved rapidly. In their second set she even rushed the net several times and hit some good put-away shots.

“That was fun. I never played that well before, or enjoyed it so much.”

“That’s because we’re playing to improve and enjoy ourselves and not worrying about winning.”

They went back to the Port of Call, changed into bathing suits and went to the pool. They swam casually and the cool water felt delicious. They came out and walked to their beach chairs and found Bud and Tammy swinger perched next to them.

“Hi, there,” Tammy greeted them enthusiastically.

She was wearing a skin colored top and thong that revealed almost everything. Bud had the briefest of bikinis, that barely contained the bulge of his crotch and when he saw them looking, he shifted so his

penis popped out. Lys grinned.

“Lively little feller, aint he?” She turned to Tammy, “You better tie it down, or it’ll get away from you.”

She picked up her towel and walked off, and Ted followed her. Lys noticed that a lot of the mother’s were glaring indignantly at the blatant display of flesh by the swinger couple.

“I’m beginning to see why you don’t like them,” she remarked. “It’s weird, isn’t it? If you didn’t know better and had no taste, they’d be a sexy couple.”

“They’re just meat peddlers,” he said dismissively.

There was a message from Kevin at the desk, inviting them to play golf with him and Leila, same time, same place. They grabbed their clubs and drove to the golf course. Lys told Kevin and Leila about Bud and Tammy while they were waiting to tee off. Leila laughed.

“So you met our local swingers. They’ve been around for three or four years, always cruising for young couples. They get arrested from time to time on nuisance complaints, but they’re more of a joke than a problem.”

“Well they seem to have targeted us,” Lys said.

Leila looked her and Ted up and down. “No wonder.”

Before this could go any further, Kevin said: “We’re on. Let’s play.”

As they picked up their bags, Ted remarked: “I know you may not feel like getting up before dawn for a workout, but how about you and Leila playing doubles with us about ten o’clock tomorrow morning?”

Kevin looked at Leila, who nodded enthusiastically. “Let’s do it, Kev. It’ll be fun.”

“If we’re up,” Kevin hedged.

Both Ted and Lys played better golf that afternoon and they cheerfully agreed to have dinner with Kevin and Leila. They followed Leila’s Porsche south on highway 17 to a Mexican restaurant. Ted lost sight of her car on the way once or twice, but he had no trouble tracking the throbbing roar of her engine. In the parking lot, Leila pointed out the Alabama Theater and the House of Blues across the road.

“The Alabama Theater is a big, modern auditorium that presents country music and the House of Blues features popular, rock and other music.”

Ted wasn’t much interested in either place and just muttered: “That’s nice.”

They drank frozen margaritas and shared different dishes until they had enough. Like the previous night, they sat over coffee. This time their waitress, a nimble college bunny named Ashley, kept asking them

to pay their check, until Ted gave her ten dollars and told her not to come back for a while. Ashley flounced off indignantly, but didn't come back and pester them. She was relieved when they finally left.

It was getting dark when they reached the parking lot and Kevin said: "Me and Leila are going shag dancing at Fat Harold's Beach Club. Why don't you come along?"

Lys shook her head. "I'm still not used to getting up before dawn for our workout. I'm too tired to go dancing. Maybe tomorrow night."

"You're like an old married couple," Leila teased.

Lys flared at that, but before she could say anything, Ted said: "It's my fault. I started us on a strenuous routine, without building up to it first. We should be able to join you tomorrow night, if we're still welcome."

"Of course," Kevin replied. "We'll have a hot Saturday night on the town."

"We'll teach you to shag," Leila added.

Lys was still fuming as they drove away and Ted tried to calm her.

"Take it easy, Lys. I don't think she meant anything by that remark."

"I'm not so sure. She's been nasty to me since we first met."

"Maybe she doesn't know how to deal with you. You can be intimidating to some people."

"Me?"

"Yes. You."

She was pleased by his comment. "I had no idea. I guess I might have overreacted."

"Remember, we wanted her to spend time with Kevin and she's doing it. Let's try to overlook any minor problems.... Now. What do you feel like doing tonight?"

"I wasn't kidding when I said I was tired. If you don't mind, I'd like to do what we did last night, walk on the beach, sit on the balcony and watch the ocean, then go to bed early."

"That's fine with me, as long as you don't feel like an old married woman."

She smacked him playfully. "You'll pay for that."

They both fell asleep that night as soon as their heads hit the pillow. Their workout in the morning was invigorating and they swam in the ocean afterwards, cavorting with carefree abandon. They lay in the sun until they started to get hungry, then went back to their suite, ordered a large room service breakfast, showered and changed into tennis whites. They just finished eating when Kevin and Leila trooped in. Both of them looked a bit bedraggled after a night of dancing and sex. Ted

greeted them cheerfully.

“Good morning, revelers. Are you sure you’re up to the rigors of tennis?”

“Don’t worry about us,” Kevin advised. “We may look a bit ragged on the outside, but inside we’re pure morning-after flab.”

They all laughed and Lys said affectionately: “I’m glad you’re regaining your sense of humor.”

“What humor?” Kevin asked with a straight face. “I was being honest.”

They went to the tennis courts and hit for a while to warm up. Bud and Tammy swinger arrived and stared wistfully at them. Leila waved jauntily at them and they slunk off without even playing. Ted hit with Kevin and Lys hit with Leila. After a few minutes it became clear that Kevin was overhitting to impress Ted, and Lys wasn’t strong enough to control the pace of Leila’s erratic game.

“Let’s switch and I’ll hit with Kevin and Ted’ll hit with Leila,” Lys said.

Kevin grumbled for a minute, but the suggestion worked. Kevin immediately stopped trying to overpower the ball and Leila gained control from Ted’s steady pace. They played two sets, which Ted and Lys won easily, but Kevin declined the offer to change partners for a third set.

They changed into bathing suits and went to the pool and swam. Later they lolled in the sun on deck chairs. Ted couldn’t help comparing Lys and Leila’s bodies, even though they were completely different. Lys was short, sleek, feminine and sensual, while Leila was tall, full bodied, athletic looking and she projected sexiness. Bud and Tammy swinger paraded by in their skimpy bathing suits, but didn’t say hello when they saw Leila. She looked after them and shook her head.

“They wouldn’t be so repulsive if they weren’t so damn stupid. This is a family resort town, yet they strut around mommas and kiddies, displaying their flesh, which offends everyone. I never heard of them scoring around here.”

“Maybe that’s why they do it here,” Lys remarked. “So they don’t have to really do anything.”

They ate lunch at poolside, then went to their suite and changed for golf. When they got to the course, the pro told Leila that, as usual, they were heavily booked for Saturday, but she and her party could start whenever they were ready. Ted noticed as they played that Lys had improved tremendously. She was hitting the ball solidly and accurately and really enjoying herself. He knew that he was playing better, but he still wasn’t enthusiastic about the game. He understood that golf

had replaced tennis in America because it was far less strenuous and provided a diverting ritual with the selection of clubs, but he still preferred the exertion and challenge of tennis. He didn't utter any of these thoughts as his friends concentrated fiercely, each trying to outplay the other. He worried for a moment what game would replace golf, when Americans became too fat even for that. Would bowling rise again?

Leila took them to dinner that evening at a pleasant seafood restaurant on the intracoastal waterway and they sat out on the terrace, until the no-see-ums drove them indoors. Leila didn't seem bothered by them, but Ted and Lys were bitten repeatedly by the virtually invisible insects and so was Kevin, though he tried to conceal it. After dinner, Leila took them to Fat Harold's and introduced them to the shag. They stomped and swung for a while, but when Leila saw that Ted and Lys were losing interest, she took them to another club, the Spanish Galleon, where they played other dance music besides shag. Ted and Lys danced a couple of slow dances, then Leila had them switch partners. She radiated an earthy sexiness and Ted understood why Kevin was obsessed with her. He recognized that he might have trouble resisting her if she was ever interested in him.

They started to switch partners, when one of the local studs cut in on Lys. Ted started for their table, but turned back when he heard Lys voice: "Keep your hands to yourself, creep."

Before he could reach them, two large men materialized and efficiently escorted the offender outside. They danced for an hour or so, without further incident, except that Kevin got a little restless when Ted danced close to Leila. Lys finally said she was tired and they said goodnight. Kevin and Leila decided to go on to another club and they left together. Lys' creep and two of his friends were waiting in the parking lot and the creep greeted them. "There's the little bitch who insulted me. Let's teach her a lesson."

Ted and Kevin prepared to defend her, but Leila reached in her purse and pulled out a very large handgun and pointed it at the creep. "School's out, boys. Go home."

The creep's eyes almost bugged out of his head. "Yes, Ma'am," he muttered extremely respectfully. He and his friends jumped in their car and raced off.

"You can be a useful person to have around," Ted remarked, as she put her pistol away.

"Thanks. T'waren't nothing," she replied jokingly. "You and Kevin didn't seem intimidated by them."

“They’re just barroom punks. We’ve met their kind before. Kevin’s pretty capable, even though he doesn’t work out anymore.”

Kevin raised his hand in surrender. “I get the message. I’ll join you Monday morning.”

Lys turned to Leila gratefully. “That’s quite a cannon you carry. I guess those boys thought you weren’t glad to see them.”

They all laughed.

“Thanks, Leila,” Lys continued. “I’m glad we didn’t have to fight.”

“Anytime, darlin. By the way, Joe wants us to have dinner together tomorrow night at his condo. If we’re playing golf we can go from there.”

“That’s fine with me,” Ted agreed.

“Me too,” Lys added.

“See you tomorrow at ten,” Leila said and she and Kevin jumped into her Porsche and roared off.

The next night, dinner at Joe’s was a bit constrained. Joe was edgy and evaded direct questions about the progress of the golf course, with vague answers like: “It’s coming along,” and “Things are moving nicely.”

Leila was very reserved, which disturbed Kevin and added to the general tension. Joe kept snapping impatiently at his housekeeper, who was serving drinks and hors d’oeuvres while she was preparing dinner. Finally she reached her abuse limit. “Mr. Torrence, if you want me to quit right now, just keep on insulting me.”

Joe immediately switched gears and apologized. “I’m sorry, Azalea. I’m just nervous tonight. You haven’t done anything wrong.” “Thank you, Mister Torrence. I’ll be serving dinner in about ten minutes.”

Ted ventured a question. “Why were you named for a flower?”

She giggled, “Lord. I haven’t been asked that in years. My Momma named all her kids after flowers. There’s Marigold and Gardenia, but my brother always hated his name, Narcissus.”

Joe relaxed a bit during dinner and they finally talked business while they were having coffee on the patio. “Things are going a little slower than I’d like,” Joe admitted. “We got so many golf courses in the area now that we got to provide all kinds of studies for the county and state.”

“What kind of studies?” Ted asked.

“Mostly bureaucratic claptrap, except for the land conversion impact study.” “What’s that?” Ted asked.

“Well we’re converting farmland to business and recreation use. We’ve got to demonstrate that we won’t overwhelm the environment

with construction, waste disposal and new usage.”

“Will that be a problem?” Lys asked.

“No. It’s very simple, but this is an election year and everyone’s moving slower than usual.”

“Will the project go ahead as planned?” Ted asked bluntly.

“Absolutely,” Joe replied.

Kevin had been getting more and more restless and Leila kept pushing his hand away when he tried to surreptitiously touch her. “If we’re finished for tonight, I’m ready to go shag dancing with Leila. Would y’all like to come along?”

“Another time,” Ted answered. “I want to talk to Joe some more.”

“I’ll see you in the morning then for our workout.”

“Five A.M. on the beach,” Ted reminded.

Kevin groaned theatrically.

“Can I join you?” Leila asked.

“Sure,” Ted replied. “Just deliver his slightly warm body.”

Ted waited until Kevin and Leila were gone, then turned to Joe.

“As you know, we’ve had some problems lately and we haven’t been paying enough attention to business. We just want to be sure that our investment is safe.”

Joe put on his most sincere look. “There’s nothing to worry about. We’re building a gold mine. I know you’ve been playing golf every afternoon. How about I show you the site after you play tomorrow?”

“Sounds good to me,” Ted agreed.

They said goodnight a few minutes later and as they drove off, Lys suggested they spend another quiet night.

“Sure. What did you think of Joe?”

“I don’t know what to make of him,” she confessed. “I keep thinking he should be a Texas oil man.”

Ted laughed. “I bet he’d like that.”

They got home soon after and went to sleep early. Kevin and Leila joined them for a workout Monday morning. They started a little later in deference to Kevin and Leila’s late night dancing, so by the time they finished the warm-up stretch and run, people were already gathering on the beach. Leila kept up with them easily on the three mile run and when they started karate, Kevin showed her the basic white belt forms. Ted was leading Lys in brown belt forms and they attracted a growing audience, including a young girl about eleven or twelve, who obviously had some training and was trying to imitate them. Ted gestured to her to move next to Lys and she tried to duplicate her moves.

When they finished, they went for a swim in the ocean and Ted

couldn't help staring at Leila's lush body, until Lys suddenly dunked him. When he came up sputtering water, she said sweetly:

"Keep your eyes in your head, buster. She's supposed to be for Kevin."

"I was only looking. You don't seem to mind when I look at you. And where did you get that buster?"

"Some dumb movie, I guess. I don't want you comparing us, that's all."

"Don't worry, Lys. There's no comparison. She just seems so different then when we first met her. She's having a really positive effect on Kevin. If he could only relax and go with the flow, he'd feel much better."

Lys' attitude changed. "Do you think she's right for him?"

"Who knows. They're very different and I haven't the faintest idea what her relationship with Joe is."

Lys giggled. "Maybe she's his vice-president for sex."

"Very funny," he said, but he couldn't help grinning. "How about we have breakfast, then play tennis?"

She posed provocatively. "Could I be a vice-president for sex?"

"Maybe even president," he replied. "Now let's go."

They met Joe after they played golf and he took them to the construction site of the new golf course. Even to Ted's untrained eye there was little sign of construction, despite the heavy machinery parked around the site.

"There doesn't seem to have been much progress," Ted remarked.

"That's not exactly so," Joe responded. "We've cleared most of the scrub pine, except for some rough spots that'll give the course a more natural look. See those piles of dirt?"

"Yeah."

"They'll be used for hills and other elevations. Once that's done, it'll only take a few weeks to lay sod and fill ponds and watertraps. We could be finished in six weeks to two months."

"Then what's the delay?" Ted demanded.

"I told you about those environmental impact studies the other day. One way or the other they'll be resolved in a few weeks and we'll complete the course. The condo construction will take another few months, but we should be able to start play on the course in October or November. Now how about some dinner?"

Joe took them to a restaurant on Highway 17 made of old railroad cars, where he was greeted like visiting royalty. After they settled in with drinks, Lys asked:

"What's the situation with the golf condos? Have there been any

sales?”

Joe grinned like a wildcatter at the first gush of oil. “I think about a third of them are sold. I don’t remember the exact number, but I’ll look it up in the morning and let you know.”

“Then we’re already making money,” she exclaimed.

“Maybe,” he said casually. “If not, we’ve probably paid for our investment. Now that’s not too bad, considering where we’re at, is it, little lady?”

“Not bad at all. And don’t call me little lady.”

Joe smiled placatingly. “No offense meant. I just admire your compact packaging.”

She couldn’t help smiling back at the rascal. “No offense taken. Just find another phrase to express your admiration.”

In what had become their evening routine, Kevin and Leila went shag dancing and Ted and Lys went for a walk on the beach. Afterwards, they were sitting on the balcony watching the ocean and Lys remarked:

“Here we are, appreciating the wonders of nature, while Kevin and Leila are hopping around like wild in a smoke-filled, sweaty, smelly nightclub.”

“True,” Ted responded softly. “But they’re probably thinking we’re like old fogies, hulking in our rocking chairs and dribbling in our cocoa.”

“I don’t dribble,” she said with a giggle.

“You know what I mean. It’s not that I don’t like the night life, but I’d rather sit and listen to the ocean, which I can’t do in the city. I hope you’re not doing this with me just for my sake.”

“Not at all, Ted. I’ve enjoyed everything we’ve done together, including you know what,” she added suggestively.

When Lys came to bed, she kissed Ted passionately and pressed tightly against him. They stroked each other and came at the same time with a gasp. They lay there panting and sweaty and Lys murmured:

“It’s really exciting making love with you.”

He kissed her, then slowly worked his way down her body, kissing and licking her, until he moved between her legs. She started to moan as he licked her moist clitoris and when he slipped his mouth on it, she came in a spasm that left her shuddering. He moved up next to her and she leaned over and licked his face.

“That was delicious,” she whispered.

Then she moved down his body, licking and kissing him, until she reached his penis, which was fully erect. She ran her tongue over him slowly, then took him in her mouth and gently sucked and he spurted

in her mouth. He was afraid that it would disgust her.

"I couldn't help myself," he explained.

"That was a first for me," she said, "but you tasted good."

They took a shower and as the hot water beat down on their sticky bodies, they began to soap each other. They got aroused again and started stroking each other. Without thinking about it, Ted pulled her against him, lifted her until she wrapped her legs around him and slid his penis into the opening of her wet vagina. She moaned loudly.

"Am I hurting you?"

"I don't know. It's pleasure and pain at the same time."

She shifted and took him a little further inside her and started to move on him. Suddenly she let out a loud "Ohh," and came in a series of shudders. He felt his swollen penis ready to discharge and only remembered at the last moment to pull out of her and he ejaculated on her stomach.

"I almost came inside you."

"That would have been another first. This was the first time I had a penis in me." "This could have been another first, you getting pregnant."

"That would be a problem," she admitted.

"Let's be very careful the rest of this trip," he urged, "and discuss things when we get home."

She yawned widely. "Yes, dear. Can we go to bed now?"

It was raining lightly Tuesday morning when they got up for their workout and the beach was deserted. Kevin and Leila joined them looking slightly bleary-eyed, but functional. Ted extended the run a little further, but there were no complaints. They went through their karate forms and Kevin did them also, leaving Leila to practice what he showed her yesterday. Ted showed Lys a more advanced brown belt form, then practiced the basic black belt form.

"I really miss Philippe at a time like this," he commented.

"Why isn't the mysterious oriental with you?" Leila asked.

Kevin answered curtly: "Let's not talk about him,"

Ted regretted speaking without thinking and completely lost interest in karate. "I'm going for a swim," he announced and took off his warm-up suit and plunged into the ocean. The others followed a few moments later in a subdued mood.

They went back to the suite, ordered breakfast and ate on the balcony.

"It doesn't look like we'll be playing tennis this morning," Lys remarked.

"I know you're leaving tomorrow," Leila said. "If you'd like to do some tourist things today I'd be glad to take you."

"That's very nice of you," Lys responded. "Like what?"

"Well, there's the aquarium, a vineyard that's not too far away, Alligator Adventures...."

"I don't think so," Lys declined politely. "Let's just hang out for a while, then play some golf, even if it's still raining."

The others murmured agreement and they made desultory conversation, but the mood changed suddenly when Leila asked: "Tell me, Lys. Are you and Ted making it?"

Lys was furious, but concealed it well. "We're very special friends; me, Ted and Kevin. And my personal life is none of your business," she added, smiling sweetly.

Ted and Kevin observed the exchange, but didn't say anything. Leila stood up abruptly.

"I'm getting too restless to hang around. Coming, Kev?"

"I'll meet you downstairs. I just want to talk to Ted for a minute."

"You don't have to apologize for me," she declared.

"You're right. I don't," Kevin said pleasantly, as she went out the door. Lys walked into her bedroom, leaving Ted and Kevin alone.

"I've got a problem," Kevin confessed.

"What is it?"

"I'm really into Leila and I don't want to leave her."

"How does she feel about you?"

"I think she feels the same. I'm thinking about staying here for a while, so we can be together."

"I don't know how long you want to go shag dancing, Kev. Why don't you invite her to New York City for a vacation? That way you can see what she's like in your playground?"

Kevin thought it over for a minute.

"That's a good idea, Ted. I'll ask her right away."

"If she's up for it, she can fly back with us tomorrow."

"Cool. I'll let you know what happens."

He dashed out like a retriever on the hunt. Lys came back in dressed for golf. "Well, is the all male conference over?"

"He just wanted to talk about Leila."

"Did he apologize for her?"

"No. He wants to take her to New York. She may go back with us tomorrow." "Uh, oh. I don't know about that, Ted. She means trouble."

"We can't forbid him to see her," he said in exasperation. "We practically threw him at her and it worked. At times he's been like the

old Kevin. Maybe it'll work out."

"I hope so. She could really become a problem."

"We'll deal with whatever happens as best we can. Right now he's infatuated like a school boy and there's nothing we can do about it."

The light rain ended in the early afternoon while they were on the golf course, then a fog rolled in that covered the area like a blanket and reduced visibility to a few feet.

"Should we give it up and head back to the clubhouse?" Ted asked.

"No. We'll play fog rules," Leila announced.

Lys laughed. "What are fog rules?"

"If you can't find your ball, you can use another and you have to kiss anyone you bump into."

"Stay close, Kev," Ted teased.

"I don't see how we can play, if we can't see," Lys grumbled.

"We'll tee off on the fairway," Leila explained, "then work our way down the rest of the hole."

As they walked down the fairway, Ted remarked: "I haven't the faintest idea where my ball landed."

Lys stayed near Ted, bumped into him and leaned over and kissed him. "Fog rules," she announced. Leila did the same to Kevin and the game seemed like fun.

Once they got far enough down the fairway they began to search for their balls. "If you can't find your ball on the green, use another," Leila reminded them. Visibility was still zero and if they moved two or three feet away they disappeared from each other's sight. Someone bumped into Lys and before she could react, Leila's face materialized out of the fog. Lys was expecting a friendly peck, but Leila kissed her full on the mouth and Lys got an erotic jolt. "Fog rules," Leila whispered and was gone. After a futile search for the missing balls, everyone rejoined by calling each other and making playful sounds. When they finally came together, Lys saw Leila deliberately bump into Ted, kiss him, then declare: "Fog rules." Lys felt a stab of jealousy, then a twinge of guilt about her response to Leila's kiss. Before she could say anything, Kevin tugged Leila away.

"This isn't fun anymore. Let's have dinner, then go dancing."

They went back to the resort, showered and changed into casual clothes. Leila took charge of dinner selection and they went to a flamboyant steak house on Highway 17. Ted had noticed that Leila hadn't paid for anything since they spent time together. He was thinking about how to inquire about her financial situation, when Kevin announced:

“Leila will be flying back to New York with us tomorrow.”

Lys was getting a suspicious feeling that Leila might be planning to separate the good friends and she noted that Leila was looking at them intently, as if seeking objections. She turned to Leila and said pleasantly:

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy the flight and I bet Kevin is planning to show you the hot spots in New York City.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Leila gushed. “I’ve never been on a private Lear jet. It must be exciting to be able to afford such luxuries.”

Kevin changed the subject, before a discussion of money could go any further. “Are we all ready for some dancing?”

“Sure,” Ted answered.

“I don’t want to just shag dance,” Lys said. “Do you think we can go back to that

Spanish Galleon club without another confrontation?”

“Of course,” Leila assured her. “Kevin will give the bouncers a tip when we get there and they’ll make sure no one bothers us. You don’t have to worry, honey.”

Lys was really starting to dislike her, but bit back a nasty reply.

“That’s fine, Leila. We just want to have a good time. We don’t need a brawl.” “I’ll take care of things, Lys,” Kevin said. “Besides, Leila’s got her old peacemaker.”

“Do you carry that cannon everywhere?” Ted asked.

“Everywhere.”

“Why?” Lys asked.

“A couple of years ago, some good old boys tried to pick me up in a restaurant parking lot and were insulted when I wouldn’t go with them. They started to drag me off, while describing the nice things they were going to do to me. A police car just happened to go by and they took off, so I lucked out. The next morning I bought the biggest hand gun in the store and learned how to shoot.”

The evening turned out to be fun and fortunately was without unpleasant incidents. Ted and Lys called it a night about one A.M., but Kevin and Leila went on to Fat Harold’s for more shag dancing.

“We’ll catch up on our sleep on the plane,” Kevin yelled, as they zoomed off in Leila’s Porsche.

Ted and Lys went to bed without any conversation or lovemaking. They got up early Wednesday morning and went for a run, then practiced karate and afterwards took a long swim in the ocean. They relaxed for a while after breakfast, then packed for the trip home.

Kevin breezed in, threw his things together and they went downstairs

where their limo driver had just finished loading Leila's bags. The ride to the airport didn't take long and within a few minutes they were aboard the plane and taxiing down the runway. The flight north was uneventful and they landed at La Guardia airport two hours later, all of them uncertain about what came next.

Gloria

by James E. Allman

Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.

—St. Augustine

Fire! eyes blazed with blindness from seeking
after God's veiled face—seeing his glory
only in its passing-by. White-washed
eyes left vacant in his waning. In the morning,
just out of the shower, a rugged
face with whiskers, still flush with fleeting dreams,
gazes back out of glass—reflecting
reverential awe (this is God's glory
passing-by). Now and then I see through the flaming veil
the many fashioned faces
of God. I had forgotten their lineage
and mine; and not enough seen his constant
passing-by. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth wonder
for his passings-by."

I Do This For You

by Adam J. Whitlatch

My armor's growing heavy, the weight bearing down on shoulders already burdened with the stress of this endless war and I can't help but ask myself, "What's it all for anyway?" I look down into the black, expressionless visor of the helmet clutched in my armored hands, but it doesn't offer any answers. A fat, wet raindrop splatters against the visor and streams down the contours of my helmet like a teardrop - tears of God.

I look up and see the first of the mechs - heavily-armed and merciless death machines - rounding the corner and marching toward me, followed by nine more and at least five dozen of the Khan's best storm troopers and I don my helmet with a sigh, the hissing of the airtight seal around my neck covering the sound of my lament. Just another day in the E.R.A., I tell myself as I surge forward to engage the first mech.

I do this for you.

I, King Kong

by Neil Ellman

You don't suppose they think so little
Of my strength that tiny birds with guns can shoot
Me off this perch, this pinnacle of fame atop the world
Free of chains at last, one arm swatting planes
Like gnats , the other holding fast
(A motion picture in the works)
I am the Kong, King of the cinema
The city trembles at my renown
And no power on this earth can bring me down.

Joy

by Tammy Keiser

simcha didn't own anything she couldn't carry
this included furniture
sofas, tables, wardrobes, desks, loveseats
all possessed the ability to be disassembled and packed
in a duffle, trunk or other transportable device

simcha hated fresh fruit
she craved dried

the space between her and the rest of the world
was often filled with the scent of coffee
and desiccated apricots

her earliest memory was of a bus
she was not on the bus
it left without her

simcha desired love but refused to give it
even animals did not survive
they did not adapt well to duffels and trunks

she summed up her life with
i was there and now I am here

simcah did not always know where here was

Mad Dash

by Janet Yung

Friday afternoon, and the usual slackers were quick to shut everything down in their individual cubes and make a mad dash for the elevator. Normally, Brenda would let the dust settle before fleeing the premises, but today Brenda had some place to be.

“Hold the elevator,” she called racing after the pack and someone from Accounting groaned, checking his watch, grudgingly pressing the “open” button.

“Thanks,” Brenda said receiving a grunt in response.

It wasn't until the doors slid closed, Brenda understood how jammed together they were, suddenly causing her to feel like one of the sardines she'd loved so much as a child, packed into the tiny tin, waiting to be liberated with a twist of a key.

She cleared her throat as other claustrophobic images popped into her head. Endless flights where she was sandwiched in the middle seat. The bus on snowy days filled with commuters who normally drove. She closed her eyes and taking a deep breath, tried to calm herself down. It was only eight floors.

The heel of a large foot pressed on her toes as the doors opened on the seventh floor where another crowd anxiously waited to leave the building. “Ouch”, Brenda said to the back of the clod wishing she'd taken the stairs, but wanting to be fresh for her date, opted to ride instead.

“Sorry, we're full,” a voice called and the elevator continued its descent in spite of protests from the left behind.

Saying a silent prayer, Brenda craned her neck watching the steady movement from floor to floor. Their trek was almost over when the car abruptly stopped between floors momentarily and the lights flickered off and on.

“Shit,” someone said and Brenda thought she might pass out at the prospect of being stuck. Before she could completely panic, the lights went back on and the elevator started up with a jolt and then fell three floors amid “Oh my Gods,” from all the passengers. The appeals to a higher power appeared to work when they paused and, then, slowly glided to the lobby of the building.

Before the doors were completely opened, a frantic push swelled from the rear, the anxious mob as eager to exit as they'd been to enter. Caught off balance while trying to get out of the way, the toe of Brenda's shoe stuck on the threshold.

“Oh,” she cried and fell, landing with a thud, aware she was on the verge of being trampled.

“Are you okay?” she heard and looking up to respond, realized the question was directed to the secretary from the ninth floor.

Her arms splayed on the marble floor, Brenda attempted to right herself just as an enormous shoe pressed her flattened hand like a stepping stone to liberty, confirming her most cynical beliefs about mankind’s generosity to others.

“Not the most auspicious start to the weekend,” she muttered to the deserted lobby, cognizant of the fact no one heard, or cared.

Not So Young

by Katie Moore

I am not so young
that I never swam a crick,
throwing my body into
the current, thoughtless,
unchaperoned. Older
cousins, friends, siblings,
sneaking off
to smoke,
or neck, in the tall
grass.

Sadly, crick swimmin'
has fallen out of fashion.
Children drown for foolishness,
make their Mama's cry,
cry so hard, so long.
So-long to kids being kids,
to filling up with memories
for a lifetime of getting older.

It's hard to even find a
proper crick these days,
or a proper child. A snotty
tomboy, sans the butt floss
and pop diva soundtrack, a
boy who tells you
he's a man and doesn't cry
when he skins his knee,
or use hair gel, ever.

I am old enough
to wish for that place
where you can't hear a car,
and for a wide eyed child,
sunbaked and blonded,
to share the wind on the water.

Old Bill in the Hospital

By Barry Pomeroy

The streets were busy with early rush hour and the kids were home from school when I arrived. As soon as I began to unlock my door, I was swamped by both Jamie and Young Bill.

“Do you know Bill’s at the hospital?” Young Bill said breathlessly.

“What happened?” Although I could not confirm the impression, I had a sinking feeling.

“Henry tried to tell you when you left today.” Young Bill seemed to like the role of bearer of bad tidings.

“What happened?” I repeated.

“He was downtown, got his cheque late and was spending some of it,” while Jamie spoke, Young Bill irreverently pantomimed drinking, “and I guess he was drunk, because someone got to him, beat him up.”

“Jesus. Is he ok?” I was really upset, for I blamed myself, however illogically, since I had not taken note of Old Bill’s absence. Young Bill was still giving unnecessarily gory, and, in all likelihood, false, details when Jamie continued.

“He’s down at Mercy. You going to go see him? I know you got to work, but he’d like it. Maybe you can go tomorrow,” she added quickly.

“How far away is that?”

“Just down by where the freeways mix near the shipping and King street.” Young Bill was trying to redeem himself by giving directions, now he had lost our attention.

“That’s not far, I’ll go down now,” and turned to leave before remembering the papers in my hand which I took to my room. I might be at the hospital until late, so I dressed for work. Disconcertingly, both Jamie and Young Bill stood in the doorway while I changed my shirt—good thing it wasn’t my pants—and unnecessarily told me how it was good I was going and itemized who else had already gone.

I was leaving the building when Henry caught up with me and told me about Old Bill. When he found I already knew, he seemed slightly miffed he had not been the first to tell me, for he seemed to feel he owed me. He told me about how he was too old to go himself or he would have been there all day.

“I said to myself, ‘Henry, you’re too old even to go visit a friend in the hospital, you’re soon going to end up there yourself.’”

I left Henry in the midst of his melancholy musing and strode as quickly as I could down the street in the direction of Mercy Care Hospital.

Living in a community is not a simple matter—I thought as I walked—of fixing a stereo. The anthill is dependent upon all the members of its community and feels the loss when one member is hurt. I thought of the hospitals of ancient times, of the Roman skull found with the iron tooth implanted in the upper tooth row, and the skulls some twelve thousand years old with successful trepanning now on display in our museums when they probably should be in the ground with the body. We have found the skeletons of cripples who lived to an old age regardless of complaints that would have made them helpless. We have used that to describe how our ancestors—whom Hollywood would paint as hopelessly barbaric—cared for those members of their community even if their usefulness was questionable.

When I got to the hospital, I told the brisk woman at the front desk I was Old Bill's nephew, in order to avoid possible administrative problems, and she grudgingly gave me his room number and pointed to the elevator. Old Bill was happy that I had come, and was coping well despite deep cuts and scrapes on his face and one bandaged eye. He didn't seem to have any broken bones, and when I asked, he confirmed that suspicion.

"Nope, they didn't break anything, little fuckers. Not like it was when I was a kid." Old Bill seemed gratified to have an audience. "I was saying that to the rest of them. Bill and Jamie and Nick, the rest of them that came in. 'It's not like when I was a kid.'"

Bill was putting a brave face on his condition but was talking non-stop. Although it was not exactly out of character, behind his nattering, I could hear his anxiety.

"I told'em you'd come in, and you did."

"You know I couldn't go to work without dropping by anyway, Bill."

"Happened last night. I was just going out. Can't even do that anymore. I remember . . . Just trying to go to the corner and back. Got to or your legs will seize up. Little bastards, jumped me. Couldn't see them coming, jumping all over. Didn't even know any of them. City's lost its neighbourhoods. Used to know everyone. Didn't know them. All over me, little bastards. Cops won't do nothing either. And here I am, stuck here for a couple of days, they say. Asked Jamie to check the plants. She's good that way . . ."

When Old Bill trailed off I covered him with the flimsy white cover and sat in the low, urine-stained chair in the corner of his room, listening to the gurgling moans of those with whom he shared his room.

I wasn't sure how deeply Old Bill was sleeping, so to comfort him I

told him a story of a man who walked into the bush. I told him how the man sprained his ankle and survived, and I thought Bill perked up at this tale of harm from which one could easily recover. I told him of how the man lived in an abandoned house where he saw the farmer's day, how he walked through the narrow canyons of vision, into a tiny glade where infrequent breezes rippled the water, where peace came dropping slow. I told him of the river and the raft where the man slowly spun under the wheeling stars, and how he worked in an orchard and made money with a man named Dan. I told Bill—as that long day passed and nurses rushed in and out of his room—of the city at night where a long-haired man creeps from his stagnant room to play in the streets for money, and how a woman gives her doughnuts freely, both paying attention to how they live in the world. I told Bill how I had discovered, in the swamp and in the city, that people are living in the way I wished, and how I had hoped—when I had torn into the city on the disintegrating raft—that I might find them there. I told him about Gerry Porter and how he'd saved me from suicide and given me a job, all on one conversation, about Carroll and how he couldn't read and still was willing to risk a trip, and how Donny was quiet about my lack of identification. I told him about his own kindness when he first showed me the alley leading to the thrift store, and even though I wasn't certain it was him I should thank, I told him about how someone had told the household I needed clothes.

Many hours had passed when I woke. I was disoriented for a moment, but when I saw Bill's strangely flimsy face above the cheap coverlet, I remembered. I was alone, and I wasn't surprised, for people like Bill seldom have the hovering relatives who come in hope of an inheritance or because they care. I must have slept at least four hours, for it was getting dark, and I had to go to work. I left Bill a note, so he'd know I had stayed. When I left, I met Jamie smoking outside the door.

"He's looking okay," she said even before she took the cigarette out of her mouth. "I saw you there but didn't want to disturb. Came out for a smoke. You were tired. Going to kill yourself doing that. How'd you end up here with us anyway?"

"What do you mean?" I was taken aback by Jamie's directness.

"You don't belong down here, this side of town. You get that job?"

"I went to Tantramar just as you said, and St. John's. We'll have to see how it goes though."

"Good night at work." Jamie crushed out her cigarette on the hospital wall and I noticed that thousands of others, having come here to visit

their ailing friends and relatives, had done the same.

“Thanks. See you later,” and I walked down the hill to the maze of freeways that would lead me to the warehouse.

I arrived a bit late. Carroll and the others were already inside. I walked past the long truck body, and could hear the thumping of the pallets as Carroll swung them out of the box and onto the warehouse floor. I saw Tom first, for he was eyeing the door when I arrived.

“A friend’s in the Mercy Care Hospital,” I offered and went to work as he nodded his assent.

In a lull in the middle of the night I told the story. They were appropriately disturbed, but I did notice Tom look quickly toward me when I said Old Bill was an alcoholic. I could see him wondering how I ended up associating with people like my housemates, and himself—for that matter.

I could have told Tom the raft story, told him about the temporary mill town, or about picking apples with Dan, or about the lost village, now forever lost in the mists of time, or a tiny glade and lake where I lay in the sun for what felt like years. I could have told him about the high cliff and the person who waits there, seemingly in vain, for the lone wanderer. I could have described the deteriorating dam, the giant stone ruins, and the long creek that led to an abandoned farm. I could have painted a poignant portrait of a windowless house looking blankly on a forgotten orchard. Finally, I could have told him about a decision I made all those days, weeks, months, years ago, and how that decision had led me here with no trace of my passing.

There was no explanation that suited, even for me, so I was unsure how Tom, who didn’t know my situation, would make sense out of my insane story. How do you explain change? Change is not the stem traced upon the trunk, a whirling seed to duplicate the tree, but in the abrupt madness of summer, it is a low bush transformed and bent by an old black crow. Even as I mumbled the lines, I thought of how the snail fools us with their simple pattern of growth. The tree seems to mimic its seedling. Unlike them, we are cast like dust into a wind only partially of our making, and bend and transform into shapes and crevices until the pieces cannot be brought together to match an original design.

Repair Work

by Howie Good

The moon enters in a dark overcoat.
It's possible to see the suicide in people's

faces, the slope of their shoulders,
the way their clothing is worn,

their gait. There are days – many, in fact –
fingers drum impatiently on the roof.

The stairs that lead up also lead down
to an iron bed, rumpled sheets, a photograph

of insomnia. And always the same ending.
I'm hunched over, tightening a screw

with the edge of a dime. It does a bad job.

Riding Out

by Thomas Healy

Steering his lampblack Lincoln Navigator with the heel of his left hand, Wicker picked up his cell phone and called his lieutenant for this evening.

“What’s up, Brad?” Pigott asked, answering after one ring.

“Where are you now, Stan?”

“Just crossed Hazeltine Street.”

“That’s about what I figured,” he said, maneuvering past a vagrant pushing a packed grocery cart. “I’ll be entering the Old City in a couple more blocks so you should be reaching it in about seven or eight minutes.”

“About that, yeah.”

“I just wanted to remind you that things can get a little dicey when we drive through there.”

“You don’t have to tell me, Brad. The last time I was down there someone threw a garbage can lid at my back window.”

“Yeah, I remember,” he replied. “I just want you to pass the word along to the others. And remind them what we agreed to, Stan: no matter what happens no one is stopping. I don’t care if someone throws a garbage can at you, we’re going straight through. Things’ll only get worse if we stop and, besides, we don’t want to be late for the vigil.”

“I know, Brad.”

“Just make sure the others know too.”

Wicker and Pigott belonged to an S.U.V. club known as “The Long Riders,” which comprised nearly forty members. Every couple of months the club organized convoys to the beach to play blackjack at the Indian casinos. Other weekends they rode to carnivals and fairs to show off their decked out rigs. They also did what they could to help out in their community. Just last spring they adopted a shelter for battered women that they helped to support through various fund raising events. Tonight, at the suggestion of a club member, they were attending a vigil for a nine-year-old boy who was reported missing by his parents almost a week ago. They hoped their drive through town would make many more people aware of the youngster’s disappearance.

Members took turns serving as road captain on the ride-outs, and tonight it was Wicker’s turn. He had done it a few times before and always he asked Pigott to be his lieutenant because he knew he would

do what he said. So far, they had made a pretty good team, managing to herd the convoy to its destination without any major interruption.

“Son of a bitch!” Wicker cursed, suddenly, when something banged against the side of his Navigator.

A bottle he assumed, maybe a rock. He started to look in the side mirror when something else struck the hood.

“Son of a bitch!”

He was tempted to pull over and see what damage, if any, was done but remembered what he told Pigott earlier and continued on through the grimy streets of the Old City. Besides, it was so dark out, he doubted if he could make out any dings. And whoever threw the objects at his rig might start throwing at him. All you want to do when you enter the Old City, he reminded himself, is get the hell out.

Up ahead, a white neon cross glowed on top of a charity house and in front of the house a fire burned in a trash can. Around it huddled three figures, their hands poised above the flames. Slowly he drove past the fire and the cross, past other figures huddled in doorways. Then, just as he was about to approach a burnt-out convenience store, something else clanged against the back of his rig.

At once, he reached for his cell phone. “The natives are restless tonight,” he reported to Pigott.

“You get hit?”

“Yeah, three times, so far.”

“That’s par for the course.”

“Remember, now, don’t stop if you get hit.”

“I won’t, captain.”

“You stop, you’ll never get out of here in time to make the vigil.”

*

Thirty-five minutes later, the last rig in the convoy arrived at the small eastside park where the vigil was being held. Wicker was pleased. The convoy was there almost five minutes ahead of schedule.

“You did a top notch job,” Iverson, one of the older club members, said after Wicker handed him a candle. “Maybe you should be road captain on every ride-out.”

He chuckled. “Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“You really have to concentrate when you’re captain,” Pigott chimed in as he lit his candle, “and you were as focused as I’ve ever seen you tonight.”

“Yeah, sometimes you can do that when you don’t want to think about other things.”

“Something bothering you, Brad?”

He shrugged. "Oh, you know, things happen almost every day that can knock you off stride if you let them. But I don't intend to let them."

"That's why you were such an effective captain tonight," Iverson declared.

He nodded and lit his candle, half wishing another convoy was scheduled tomorrow that he could captain.

*

Wicker was twenty-five and had never lived with a woman until three months ago when he moved in with a receptionist at the real estate agency where he worked for an uncle. Gwen was a couple of years older but looked quite a bit younger with her spiky blond hair and oodles of bracelets and rings. Because his apartment was so small he had to move into hers, which was fine with him except that he didn't always know where to find some of the most ordinary things. Just the other day, after searching everywhere for a pair of tweezers, he finally found one in the bottom drawer of the storage bench in her bedroom closet. Beneath it, he noticed, was a plain postcard with an upstate return address and out of curiosity he turned it over and read the brief note.

"Thinking of you always," it said, "and always appreciate what you do." It was signed, "With all my love, Ray."

He assumed the card was from some relative or friend of hers he hadn't met and started to put it away when he noticed a bundle of postcards tucked in the back of the drawer. He thumbed through a couple of them and was surprised by their intimacy then put them back in the back of the drawer. This Ray person talked about Gwen's eyes as if he had looked deeply into them, about the softness of her lips as someone who had kissed them. Who was this guy? he wondered. An old boyfriend perhaps, or maybe even a not so old one? He figured he'd ask her when she got home from work but then decided against it because he didn't want her to think he was snooping through her drawers.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands, he wondered why she had never mentioned this person to him. They were not suppose to keep secrets from one another, that's what she asked him to promise when he moved in with her. One of the cards he looked at was sent more than a year ago but another was postmarked only a few days ago. So whoever Ray was he was still in contact with her.

*

"You remember when we promised not to keep secrets from one another?" Wicker asked Gwen that evening at dinner.

"I do."

"Why was that so important to you?"

"Oh, I just figured two people who are living together should know all they can about one another."

"You think you know all about me?"

She took a sip of wine. "Yeah, pretty much."

"You're sure?"

"Don't tell me you're a cat burglar or something?" she laughed.

He shook his head, spooning some more Brussels sprouts onto his plate.

"So why are you asking me about this now?"

This was his chance to bring up Ray, but he couldn't and lamely said, "I want to tell you something so it doesn't become a secret."

She leaned over her plate. "What's that, Brad?"

"There's a ride-out into the high country on the weekend after next."

"I know. You told me already."

"Yeah, well, I wanted to let you know I might stay over an entire day."

"Why's that?"

"Iverson invited me to go fly fishing with a friend of his who lives up there," he lied.

"Maybe you can catch dinner for us."

"I wouldn't count on it, babe."

"Why not?"

"I'm not that lucky."

"Better to be good than lucky."

"I'm not that, either."

*

Wicker was asked to serve again as road captain on the ride-out to a car show at Crimson Falls but declined. The logging town where Ray lived was only a half hour drive from the upstate Indian casino and he intended to pay him a visit so he would be unable to return with the convoy. He really hadn't planned to go on this ride-out until he came across the postcards and realized how close the logging town was to the casino. He was curious to see this person who had sent Gwen all the cards so he figured he might as well take advantage of the opportunity.

"Now or never," he told himself after he made his decision.

Late Sunday morning he drove from the casino to the logging town, which was so small he suspected everyone knew everyone there. The house where Ray lived was not hard to find since it was only a block

north of the one business street in town. A modest clapboard place badly in need of painting, it looked pretty much like the other houses on the block except for the huge elm tree in the middle of the front yard. From one of the limbs hung a white-walled tire that he assumed was a child's swing.

Not sure what he wanted to do now that he was there, he drove around the block and parked across the street on the corner. He had brought along the most recent card sent to Gwen, thinking he might use it as a ruse to meet Ray. His plan was to knock on the door and say that he found the card lying in the street and wanted to return it. But the card was already postmarked so he doubted if his story would sound credible. So he sat in his Navigator, wondering if he even had the nerve to knock on the door. Maybe if he waited long enough, he thought, Ray would come out and then he wouldn't have to talk to him because all he really wanted was to get a look at him.

Moments later, startled when someone rapped a knuckle against his window, he spun around as if slapped across the face. A scrawny man with a blue bandana tied around his sun-creased neck motioned for him to roll down the window.

"You having car trouble, mister?"

"No."

"I thought maybe you were when I noticed you parked outside my house."

Casually he shook his head, trying to think of a satisfactory explanation. "I was wondering which house belonged to some guy named Ray," he said hurriedly. "I found a postcard sent by him in the street and thought I'd return it but all I can make out on the return address is the street."

"Ray, you say?"

He nodded, fidgeting with the ring of keys hanging from the ignition.

"Well, mister, the only Ray I know on this street is a four-year-old boy," he said, with a slight grin. "He lives in that house with the tire swing in front of it."

"Oh."

"Gracious, I doubt if the youngster can even write his name yet so he's probably not the Ray you're looking for."

"Probably not."

Nodding, the man turned and headed back to his garage while Wicker rolled up his window, smiling so hard his cheeks ached. He was stunned by the revelation, so relieved he felt like pressing his hand down on the car horn. Just a minute ago, he was almost positive Ray

was someone Gwen was seeing, someone he was going to confront this morning. Now he assumed the boy was probably a nephew or a friend, the postcards sent by his grateful mother. He was so happy and excited that all he wanted to do was leave the logging town as quickly as possible and immediately started the engine. He figured if he drove fast enough he might be able to catch up with the convoy and blazed down the shaded macadam street without even glancing at the house with the tire swing.

*

Wicker considered mentioning to Gwen his visit to the logging town but again he didn't want her to think he was spying on her so he kept quiet. Now, as far as he was concerned, Ray was all but forgotten. Or so he thought until a few weeks later when he found another postcard wedged in the back of the mailbox. This, he realized, was his opportunity to bring up the subject to her, and, after going back and forth on whether or not he should, he handed her the card at dinner.

"I found this stuck in the mailbox."

Scarcely looking at the card, she set it beside her salad plate.

"Who's Ray?"

"You read it?" she asked, sounding annoyed

"It was hard not to, babe. There's only a couple of lines."

"I don't read your mail."

"Maybe because no one sends me postcards."

Her shoulders tightening, she picked up a cucumber slice from the relish tray and set it on the edge of her dinner plate.

"So who is he?"

"Not anyone you know," she answered dismissively.

"I know, babe. That's why I asked."

She didn't reply and sprinkled some chives on her baked potato.

Suddenly he became annoyed by her silence, realizing she didn't intend to answer him, and said, "You've received other cards from him. I saw them in the drawer in the storage bench."

"You going through my drawers, Brad?"

"I was looking for some tweezers and came across them."

Angrily she stabbed her fork into the center of the potato.

"I didn't think we were going to keep secrets from one another."

She glared at him. "He's my son. There, are you happy now that you know?"

He was stunned, never for an instant had he considered the possibility.

Sobbing uncontrollably, she told him she had the child shortly after

she got out of high school. The father, a Marine she met through a girlfriend, promised to marry her but after he shipped out to Okinawa she never saw him again. Unable to take care of the child herself, she agreed to let her half sister raise him and sent some money to her at the first of the month when she could.

Wicker, pleased she had confided in him finally, wished now he never saw the postcards in the drawer. And deep in a corner of his heart he wondered if she really had told him the complete truth. Maybe there wasn't any Marine, maybe the father was still in town. The right thing, he knew, was to believe her and, Lord knows, he tried but the presence of Ray continued to trouble him, as well as his concern that she might be keeping other secrets from him.

Another ride-out was scheduled at the end of the month, back up in the high country, and after packing all his belongings, he went on it and did not return to the apartment. He thought maybe he would stay away for a couple of days but then the days stretched into a couple of weeks then months.

Up at the Boat Factory

by Jim Meirose

Julie worked at her machine up at the boat factory stamping out aluminum sheets that would be used to build hulls. Each time she pulled the lever a sheet of aluminum swung into place and was stamped. With each stamp, a deep, hollow, echoing bang rang out.

Bang!

Why did I marry George to begin with? What did I see in him—

Bang!

I wish I was free of him. I wish he didn't love me—

Bang!

What can I do to stop him from loving me—

Bang!

What can I do what can I do—

Bang!

That night, in the kitchen where they sat bone-tired from working in the boat factory all day, Julie spoke softly to George. As she spoke her finger ran around the rim of her coffee cup.

"George—why do you love me?"

George's eyes widened.

"What?" he said. "Why do you think? I just do is all."

"That's not a reason."

George tapped the tabletop with his fingers.

"I can't think of a reason—I just love you. Isn't that good enough?"

She picked up her coffee cup, took a drink, and put it down, eyeing him.

"I suppose," she said. "I suppose that's good enough."

Julie rose and took her cup to the sink and ran steaming water into it.

"I'm going to bed," she said, heading for the door.

"All right Julie. Good night."

"Good night."

After she left the room George sat gripping the edge of the chrome trimmed kitchen table and looked at the dark in the window above the sink.

Lord, he thought how weird. Why is she asking me all that? What's wrong with her? Something's wrong with her—with my Julie.

Rising, he went and switched off the kitchen light as he left the room to go up to bed.

The next day, in the break room at the boat plant, George spoke to

Gene, who worked at the stamping machine next to Julie and who chatted with her all day.

“Gene,” said George, holding his half eaten sandwich before his face.

“What?”

“You talk to Julie a lot don’t you? Out at the stampers?”

“Oh—oh sure. Why?”

George took a bite and spoke with his mouth full.

“Because—she’s been acting funny.”

“Funny? How?”

“It’s hard to describe,” said George, chewing. After swallowing, he added “I just thought you might have noticed some kind of change in her lately. Have you, Gene?”

“No—I don’t think so.”

The bell rang for the workers to go back to their stations. Gene walked out the door feeling George’s eyes boring into his back. He rushed to his station and began stamping aluminum.

Bang!

Why did George ask me all that—

Bang!

It’s funny he should ask me that—wrong somehow—

Bang!

Does he know about me and Julie?

Bang!

Does he suspect something?

Bang!

No, he can’t—he can’t.

Bang!

“Gene, what’s wrong, you’re so quiet this morning,” said Julie, from her stamping machine next to his.

Bang!

I better not talk to her—

“Nothing Julie.”

“You sure? It’s not like you, love—”

“Sure—nothing, I said.”

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

The next day, at break time, Gene walked across the factory floor to talk to his best friend Bruce. Bruce also worked a stamping machine and took his break at his machine, reading a paperback book.

“Bruce,” said Gene.

“Gene. How you doing today?”

“Not bad, not bad. Hey listen.”

“What?”

“Have you spoken to George lately? You and him are tight, right?”

“Sure. I spoke to him just this morning. Why?”

“Do you think he’s acting funny?”

“Funny?”

Bruce wiped his nose with his blue sleeve and closed his book over, after carefully placing a white bookmark between the pages.

“What do you mean, funny?” he asked Gene.

“He said to me did I think Julie was acting different,” said Gene. “I thought maybe he said something to you about it.”

“Well—no,” said Bruce. “Julie you say?”

“Right.”

“No—no, George hasn’t said anything to me about Julie—”

The bell rang signaling the end of break. Bruce reached over and pressed the start button on his stamper.

“I’ll see you Gene—”

“Yup.”

Gene walked away. The aluminum sheets began swinging into place in the stamper, and Bruce began pulling his lever.

Bang!

Why would George be asking Gene about Julie—

Bang!

It seems strange to me—why would this come up—

Bang!

I wonder—does George suspect what’s going on between me and Julie—

Bang!

Have to be careful—

Bang!

Have to be more careful. Have to stay away from her for a while—

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

At lunch, Bruce walked to the glass house office in the middle of the factory floor. Jim, the foreman, sat at his desk with his feet up, eating a cupcake. Bruce knocked on the door and Jim looked up.

“Bruce—what brings you here, buddy?”

Bruce and Jim were tight. They’d worked side by side before Jim was promoted to foreman. Bruce often confided in Jim.

“George,” said Bruce. “What about him?”

“Gene says he’s acting funny—he acting funny to you—has he said anything to you about Julie?”

Gene asked Jim this question, because he knew Jim and George were also tight, having graduated from high school together in this small town.

“Oh, no,” said Jim. “He’s said nothing to me. What’s he been saying to you?”

“Nothing,” said Bruce. “I just heard he’s been talking a lot about his wife.”

“Really?”

“Right—but I guess if he’s said nothing to you, there’s nothing to it.”

“That’s right Bruce.”

Jim swung his feet off the desk onto the floor and sat erect.

“There’s probably nothing to it,” he said. “You know how rumors are.” Bruce chuckled as he spoke.

“Yeah, yeah—I know.”

Jim pulled a folder from the corner of his desktop and opened it before him. “Well Bruce—I got to do these budget numbers now. I’ll see you around.”

“Right,” said Bruce. “See you around.”

Bruce left the office. Jim thumbed the paperwork on the desk before him and chewed lightly at his lip.

Gosh I hope George is okay—

He pulled a page free and held it before his face.

Why would Bruce worry enough to come see me about it—

He pulled a second page free, and scanned it.

I know what I’ll do.

He put down the paperwork.

I’ll talk to Julie.

Jim rose and left his office and walked over to Julie’s machine.

Bang!

Bang!

“Julie,” said Jim.

“Yessir?” she smiled.

“Julie I want to talk to you. Step over here.”

They stepped away from the machine. Gene’s stamping machine banged away nearby as Jim spoke.

“Julie—is George all right?”

Bang!

“Why—why sure,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“Somebody came to me and said he thought George was talking about you a lot.”

“Talking about me?”

Bang!

“Yes.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I just want to make sure everything’s okay. After all, we’re one big happy family here in the plant.”

Bang!

“Well, she said—I think everything’s okay.”

Bang!

“That’s good Julie—that’s good—well, I’ll see you. I need to go work on the budget.”

“Okay—see you Jim.”

Bang!

“Bye.”

Bang!

Jim walked away. Julie went back to her machine. She pressed the power button and clutched the lever.

Bang!

Oh my God, she thought—

Bang!

George is talking to people about me—

Bang!

Does he know about me and Gene and Bruce—

Bang!

That’s it. He knows about us—or he suspects—

Bang!

Gene called over from his machine.

“Julie!”

Bang!

“What?”

“What’s wrong honey—you look as white as a sheet.”

Bang!

“Oh—I’m okay.”

Bang!

I am.

Bang!

Bang!

That night Julie sat across from George at dinner.

“George,” she said—

“What?” he answered, chewing.

“Know that I love you George—whatever happens, I love you.”

“What’s going to happen—”

“Oh, I don’t know. I feel funny George.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. Never mind it—I’ll be okay.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.” Julie brought her dish to the sink, before leaving the room.

George sat alone gnawing at a chicken leg, thinking. What the hell is wrong with her? He swallowed. She’s acting awful funny. What’s up with her?

“Julie!” He called out through the door to the other room. “Julie!”

She came in.

“What?” she said.

“What’s going on with you? Why have you been acting so odd?”

“Odd?”

“Yes. You never used to talk to me that way. What’s going on with you?”

His look pierced her. The chicken bone hung in his hand.

He knows, she thought.

He’s trying to get me to confess.

I have to face it—I don’t love him.

Should I tell him—should I?

“Why are you sitting there so quiet Julie? Something’s up. Tell me.”

“I’ll be honest George. It has to come out sooner or later.”

“What?”

“I’m having an affair. And I want a divorce.”

“But you’ve been telling me how much you love me—”

“Just words George.”

“I’m stunned, he said—who are you having the affair with?”

She spoke as if in a daze. “Gene,” she said. “Gene—and Bruce.”

“What? Two men at once? Those bastards—”

“I want a divorce George. I want one now. I don’t love you.”

George fisted the table and rose and rushed from the room.

She sat there, wringing her hands on the tabletop.

Lord God, I must be crazy.

Why did I tell him?

But he had to know. He had to be told sometime.

At least I’m honest.

At least I should get credit for that.

The next day at the plant, George went to see Jim in his office.

“George,” he said. “What can I do for you?”

“Julie is having affairs with Gene and Bruce. How do you like that?”

“What? How do you know?”

“She told me last night.”

“Geez—I’m sorry, George—but why are you telling me this?”

“We all work together. There might be trouble.”

“What kind of trouble George—don’t get any ideas about doing anything foolish in my factory—”

“Oh I’ll try not to Jim. I’ll try real hard—”

“God George. This is trouble—”

“I know. I thought you should know.”

“Okay George—I’ve got work to do now—”

“Okay Jim. See you.”

“Right.” George left the office.

Jim sat tapping the desktop with his pen.

God, why did he tell me this? I’ve got to warn Bruce. He’s my friend Rising, he tossed the pen on the desktop and went out to Bruce’s machine.

Bang!

“Bruce!”

Bang!

“What Jim?”

Bang!

“George told me Julie’s having affairs with you and Gene. This has to stop, because George is liable to do something—”

Bruce turned white as a sheet. “What? George told you this? George knows? And Gene—that bastard Gene I’m going to see him right now.”

“No, Bruce. Like I told George—no trouble in my plant. Got it?”

“Right Jim.”

“Good.” Bruce waited until he saw Gene walking to the men’s room. He went there. Gene was standing at a urinal.

“Gene—you bastard. You’re seeing Julie—she’s my Girl Gene—oh and guess what else—George knows about it all.”

“What?” said Gene, turning, zipping up. “Your girl—George knows? What do you mean George knows?”

“What I said. Jim told me. There’s going to be trouble for you now, Gene.”

“What do you mean, for me. For you too.”

“Damn you Gene! You better watch your back!” Bruce dashed from the men’s room. Gene washed his hands and thoughts came up from

the rushing water.

George knows—that's the worst part—and that God-damned whore, seeing Bruce too—but George knows. That's the worst part. I've got to head that off.

After leaving the men's room, Gene went to see George at his stamping station.

"George—"

Bang!

"What do you want you bastard?"

Bang!

"George—I'm sorry. I won't see her again. I promise."

Bang!

"Why did you see her to begin with?"

"I—I don't know. It was wrong. I'm sorry."

"I should beat the shit out of you Gene."

"I know. I'm sorry—"

"Get out of my sight!"

Gene left and went back toward his machine. George stood pulling the levers on the stamping machine savagely.

Damn that Gene and Bruce.

Bang!

God damn that Gene and Bruce!

Bang!

God damn that Julie!

Bang!

Bastards, all of them.

Bastards.

Bang!

Bang!

I'll get them.

Bang!

I'll get them all.

Bang!

Bang!

George spoke to Julie that night.

"Julie, I forgive you. You're allowed mistakes. Nobody's perfect. I don't want a divorce. You were honest with me. You told me the truth. To hell with that damned Gene and Bruce."

"Neither do I want a divorce—you're right, to hell with them—oh I love you George."

"I love you too."

"How will we face them back at the plant?"

"Ignore them. That's all. It's over Julie."

"Yes, it's over."

They went to bed.

And late that night—

Bang!

George started banging away, toward the next day, up at the boat factory.

Wallflower

by Luigi Monteferrante

She was a wallflower
In her little pink skirt
And army boots
Sipping her milk plus
And popping those uppers
With a bow in her hair
Black eye and bruise
She was a wallflower
I was a brute.

Neptune
by Jim Fuess

