

THE GOLD MINE



Cameron University

Lawton, Oklahoma

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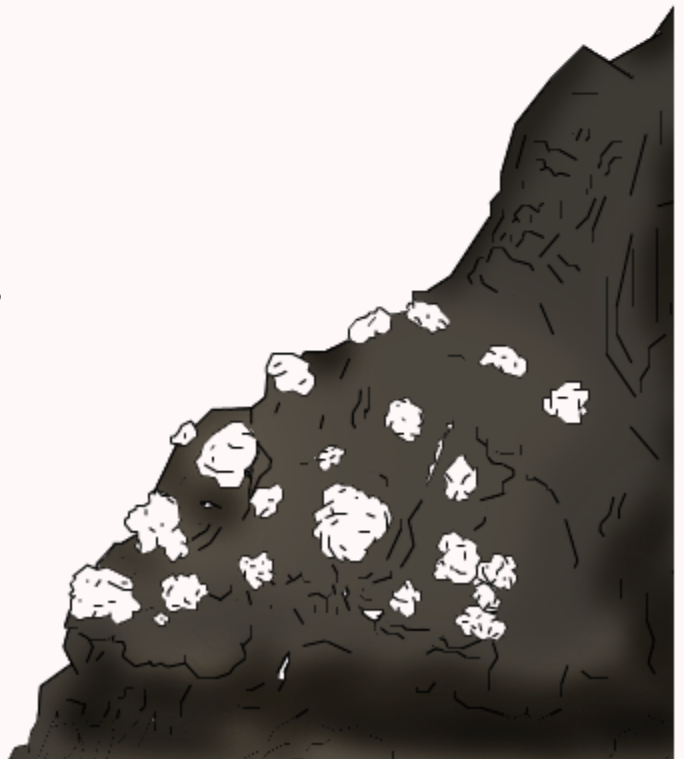


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George Edward Stanley

Tara Delonias

In Loving Memory



Brilliant and Vibrant
Admiration Without Words
An Inspiration





The Gold Mine

Vol. 2



Poetry

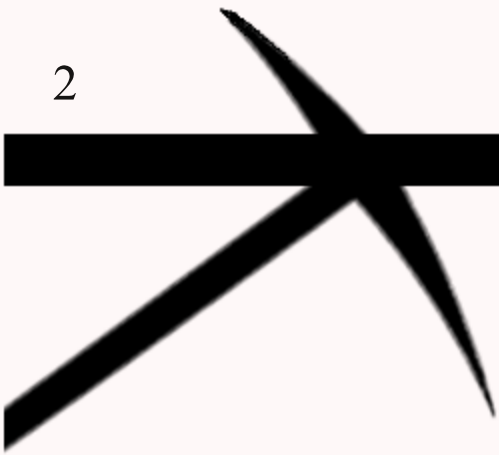
John G. Morris Poetry Prize Winner

The Derelict
A painted ship off a painted ocean.

By Seth Copeland

Burnt love:
ashy, weatherbeaten rowboat
skeleton,
on a hill far away
with an old rusted cross,
some kind of disaster,
romantic,
perverse,
natural comedy
adorned with shedding paint,
white flecks littering
not-so-white sand,
beachside
gulls sing
a faraway dirge
to Poor Jack
and Poorer Jill,
still wearing her
old rusted cross,
reclining indefinitely
in a jumbled,
ugly embrace,
as gutted as their craft,
as pointless
as their sunset.





WHAAAAM!!!!

For Roy Lichtenstein

By Seth Copeland

...Screeeeeeeech...

"Look out!"

CRASH!

"Oh dear God!"

"Is everyone alright?"

SWING

...CLICK...

"ALRIGHT! EVERYONE ON THE GROUND!"

GASP

"Back off, man!"

"A hero, eh?"

BLAAAM!!

"U
h
h
n..."

"That poor boy.."

"SHUT UP!"

CRASH!!!!

"Who the-"

WHACK!

"Agh!"

SMEK!

THWAK!

POW!

WHAAAAM!!!!

THUD

"He saved us!"

"He's gone!"

"Who..."

"Who was that?"



Rosalia

*"Did you see Rosalia? Bella."
-Palermo cab driver-*

By Seth Copeland

Have you seen her?
She lies just down the hall;
the nymph with the
darkened face,
like a bronze cast
of innocent slumber.

For a time & time,
she's been there,
sleeping nonchalant
among her grim forbears.
With hollow, abrupt smiles
they guard their spawn.
Their jagged, hanging faces
do not disturb her rest.
She sleeps on.

There's a tinge of sorrow
in that face.
The sad truth of her sleep
may well be the cause.
She has left us
a precious shell,
a statue of eerie closeness.

Wake up! Live!
Poor dear angelica!
You fell asleep a child.
You awoke a symbol.

Somewhere, she
plays and laughs again.



Cocaine Vedas

By Seth Copeland

Cocaine Vedas,
undulating, serpentine in morality,
mocking
their zodiac awnings
with sacred triplet Geminis and
moaning whore Virgos,

running naked and
pseudophallic on white blow beaches
with white blow sands,

broken calligraphy
of a post-modern sect of human,
loudly bleeding.



Lakeland, FL

By Andrew Osborne

In a few square miles
where i calloused my fingers
i talked to coyotes
rolled in the dirt
made it permanent
the window unit
woke me up
started in my dreams
as a child screaming

one bright morning
i took the freeway to your place
to a tiny town built by fire
we named after water
to that room
in the back
of the record shop

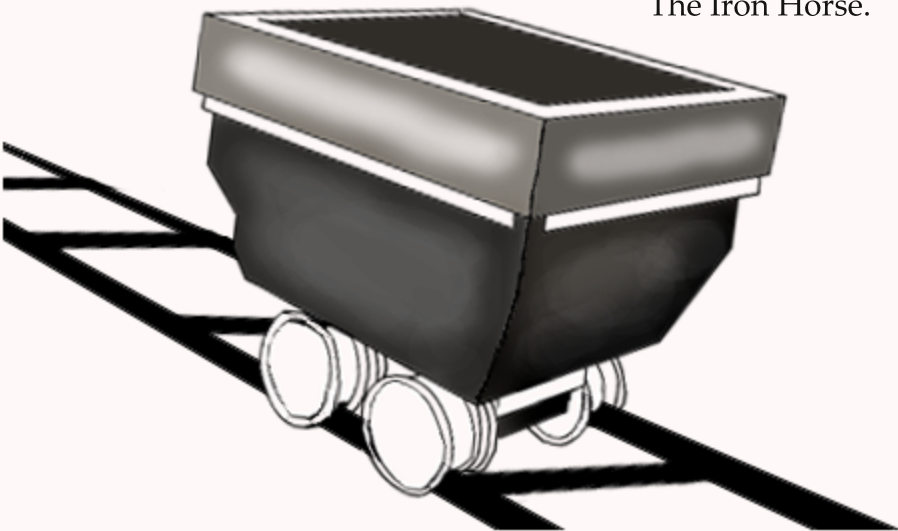


The Iron Horse

By Jacob Jardel

"Lou Gehrig was a guy who could really hit the ball was dependable and seemed so durable that many of us thought he could play forever." -George Selkirk

The perfect thoroughbred
Ran not on an oval,
But on a diamond.
His eyes focused
Not on the finish line
But on the baseball.
He had no jockey
But controlled the reigns
Of a wooden bat.
He was not a good horse,
Nor a great horse,
But a Triple Crown legend.
His career came to an abrupt halt
Not because of
Younger, talented steeds;
But because of
An eponymous disease
That withered his race legs.
But of 2,130,
He missed not one,
And raced like a champion
In them all,
Which is why
He is called
The Iron Horse.



Paradise?

By Jacob Jardel

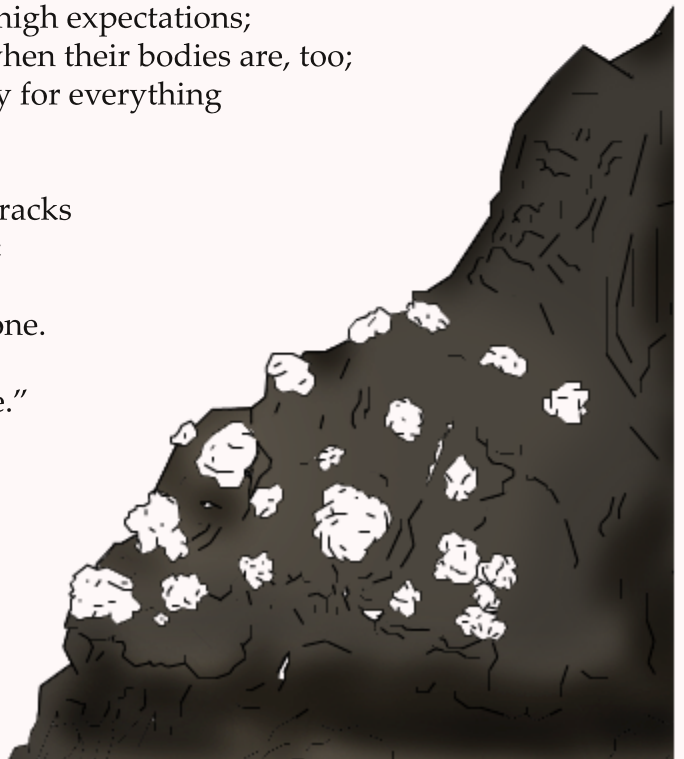
In Gated communities,
The roads are as smooth
As summer ale.
The hedges are well kept,
Contained behind the picket fence
That provides the boundaries between
The Smiths and the Joneses.
The life is high, the spirits are higher
And the quality of everything
Makes the sky a mere stepping stone.

Everyone here is content.
Everyone here loves it.
Everyone here never wants to leave.
Except for me.

The smooth roads, like the people,
Are filled with cracks and potholes.
All hope is lost when staring
At the jungle lawns and wilted roses
Of gentrified plantation homes.
The life is filled with high expectations;
The spirits are high when their bodies are, too;
And the price you pay for everything
Is sky high.

The right side of the tracks
Is wrong in my mind;
But I, the pariah,
Fester in my room alone.

"Welcome to Paradise."
--Green Day



Poetry in Motion

By Michelle Lewis

Aware only of the solitude of the rustling leaves and the rhythmic beating of her heart, she's wrapped in her deepest thoughts. Nearby a spider weaves its elaborate web as if to capture her desires one by one.

In her rearview mirror a runner approaches, steady gait keeping rhythm with her heart. He is here every day just like she is, two runners by two very different definitions, drawn to this place of strength and renewal.

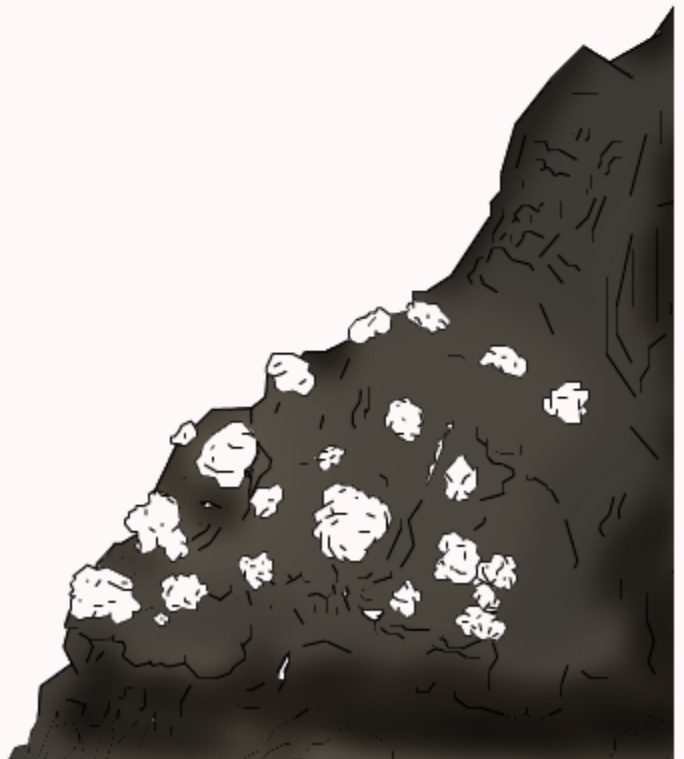
His toned tanned legs glisten with sweat as he runs by, muscles flexing with every cautious step over this broken path. He casts a curious glance in her direction-- She's invaded his space once again.



She sits silently watching in wonder, same place,
same woman, resting peacefully within
the soothing winds of the same swaying willow trees.
But she has come only to collect her tattered thoughts,
and hope for a chance of poetic inspiration.

Quickly she begins - heart to hand, pen to paper,
thoughts racing against the swirling whirlwind of
whispered words to describe this poetry in
motion before the words desert her and
sink slowly into a watery grave
of poetry lost one moment too soon.

Ahead the runner never breaks his stride
and runs on oblivious to her admiration.
She creates as he becomes but a moment
shrinking slowly onto the horizon.
His footsteps fade softly in the distance—
like the memory of her last, real kiss.



Homeless -- Where Her Heart Lives

By Michelle Lewis

Don't be fooled by her disheveled appearance. In her prime, she was quite the looker with twinkling brown eyes and a contagious smile. Life has been hard on her, but she has been harder on herself. Her once flawless complexion now serves as affirmation of her many broken dreams. A tattered stogie stolen from an ashtray at a sidewalk cafe hangs limply between her withered lips. Sixty years ago she would have traded her prized stogie for a hash pipe, or a carefully rolled joint, but that was years ago. She has nothing, and no one, to answer to now. That was half the fun of it. Society abandoned her years ago, but she wouldn't have it any other way. She spends her long days in the park watching the people who are watching her, and talking to people who never seem to listen. Clipping along in the sloppy shoes she proudly saved from a dumpster, she makes her way to a rickety park bench. Here she'll sit dancing to old show tunes in her head and await+ nightfall.

At night, the park harbors a strange mix of people. Her best friend sleeps in the park - no walls, no boundaries, no restrictions, and no home. Many nights they've made their bed under the stars. They prefer it to the moans and groans of the homeless shelter. Except for the dim fire of the lit stogie, there is no proof they are even there. In the darkness, the fire dances twelve inches this way, and twelve inches back looking like an inebriated firefly. The friends lay on the grass, share the old stogie, and reminisce of the good old days; days when they smoked grass instead of laying on it.

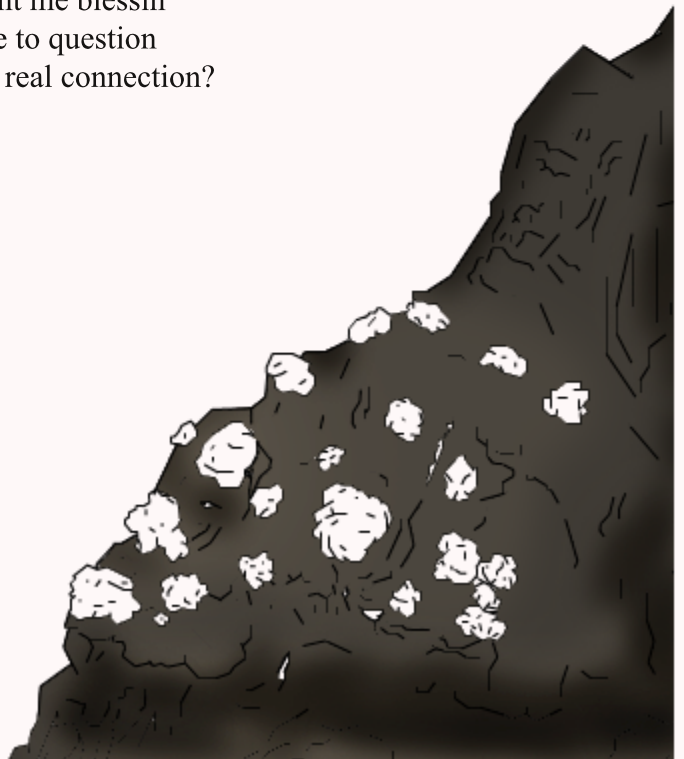


Huili's Unfinished Toast

By Steven Arter

Well sit back an let me tell ya 'bout this girl I know
She's the one who inspires all me flow
Her sense of style has a tendency to break the mold
An when she smiles she sets the whole room aglow
While we smoke we snack on almonds and Calpico
She the one that makes me try to be something more
Well I be a fish hooked on her line she got the greatest lure
She brightens my day whenever she walks through me door
Canna find notha girl like her in da world
Ask me what I want for Christmas the answers always her

She be completely honest with her there's no deception
An when she come 'round I gotta make a good impression
I always try to dress stylin' an keep me face clean shaven
No matter where a party her job or my smoking session
An jus like me she hates the third dimension
An sweater in her teeth be an unbearable sensation
Now I know that this song mus sound like a confession
But every time we interact man I count me blessin
An whenever we hang out man I have to question
Between me and she could there be a real connection?





time in a pendulum passes in gold

By Linda Powell

the supreme sacrifice, selfish lust for mortality
taste it, it is sweet
(chocolate in champagne bathed)
consumes
and Samson's shorn of his strength
swimming through the blood of unholy sacrifices
death shrouded in darkness
impassions bitter hearts
(conceived in light, existing in the magic of life)
time in a pendulum passes in gold
with the dusk comes the dew
as a tear falls, crystal
the breath of life
of youth
of unfulfilled desires
draws inward to the stillness of eternity
sand in a glass ceases to flow



Entwined

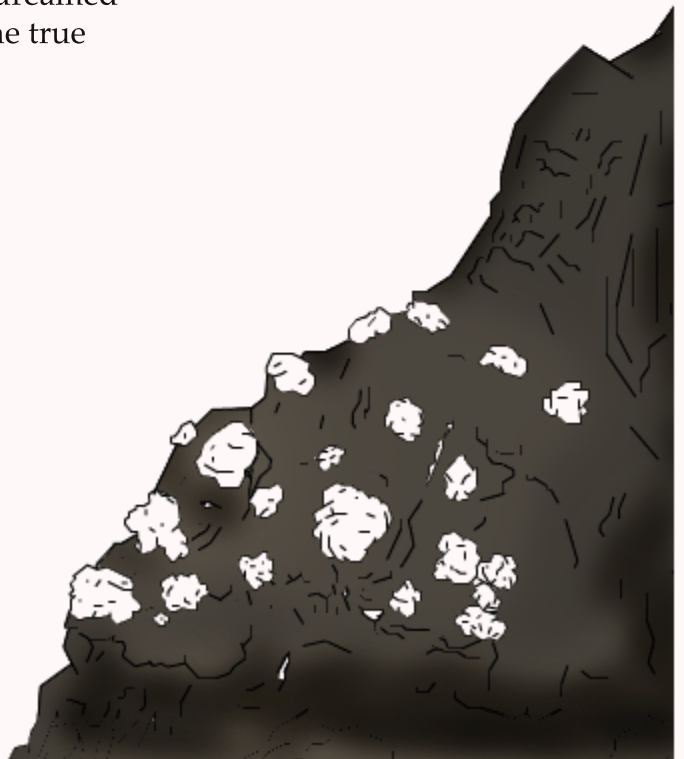
By Ann Rolf

Equal exchange
Whispered prayers
Two lives forever rearranged
With only a tear

No more hiding
No more fears
No more loneliness
No more tears

To feel completed
Completely desired
Emptiness defeated
By a raging fire

Enter me
As I enter you
What once was dreamed
Now has come true



Nonfiction

Leigh Holmes Creative Nonfiction Contest Winner

Move

By Morgan Ward

I chose to sit in the section where all the disabled people were. I wanted to see and experience what they see and experience every Sunday morning. It is a section consisting of three rows or so, somewhat hidden toward the front-left side of the sanctuary. There is this invisible barrier, thick and coarse, that stands between the worlds of “normal” and “disabled.” The risk is choosing to cross it. What is the risk? Well, it is realizing the barrier is invisible; that it is destroyed by choice.

I crossed it. I embraced risk. The reason? I do not really know. I felt this tug somewhere deep within that was relentless; it just kept tugging. Every Sunday—the same thing. I would sing all the hymns and listen intently to each sermon from the same spot, feeling moved by the Spirit and such, but...I just became aware of this section of people. They had always been there, but for some reason, they were suddenly new beings to me. They were different. I felt drawn to them. I caught myself constantly fixing my gaze on them during the service, observing how they moved, how they laughed, and the faces they made. Everything was awkward, but it was captivating. I lost myself in watching their interaction with one another.

They worshiped in a separate realm it seemed; it was beautiful. It was rich in something. Something was riveting. Something ebbed within them. I began to crave it, this energy.



So I crossed it. I crossed over this barrier. One Sunday I just could not take it anymore. I got up from my normal spot and walked over to where they were. I felt lots of eyes on me as I crossed the first row of pews and made my way over to that section in the front. It felt kind of weird to feel the eyes, but then at the same time, I felt something else within. I felt something deep. It was greater what I felt inside. I mean bigger. It was stronger. I don't know what it was, but it was a feeling that seemed to giggle at the feeling of the eyes. I felt like I did when I was a little girl kind of... like as if I had been told a special secret by my best friend.

Sometimes in church I catch myself lost in thought. A lot of the time, I am challenged by something I hear and this is what sparks my mind. As of recent, I often feel like I lose all connection with this world, even with my own living body. Sometimes, I gaze at the morning sun that pierces this atmosphere, pierces through things called "clouds" that never maintain shape or size—through space it pierces, and sometimes I just lose it. I lose all desire to consider what is not this magnificent source of energy, what is not existing in a separate world that moves and flows outside of time. Sometimes I feel like there is another world that lives beyond this one. I catch myself examining things like blades of grass, the human ear, or an ocean wave crashing into this stuff called "land", and I just wonder about this source of energy that permits things like growth, function, and motion to be. They are. These things just are. They continue, even. This baffles my mind, and sometimes I just want to exist in this other world. I want to be consumed by the energy that operates it; an energy that I think would consider the concept of time to be absolutely irrelevant.

And so sometimes, either in church or anywhere else, I find myself asking all of these questions. What if the same energy that fascinates me so much permitted something like unconditional love to be? This source would have to be massive, really. It would have to be a similar energy to that of the sun; one that does not consider other limited sources of energies, such as time, as a hindrance to its flow or deliberate movement.



I would hope that the source of energy residing within something like unconditional love would not even recognize a concept like status or physical ability.

When I reached where all the disabled were sitting that Sunday, the caretaker of the group greeted me and immediately started introducing me to everyone. She told me their names and told me little bits about each person as I moved through the pews and shook all their hands. I could not stop smiling, they were so lovely. It was brief, my getting to know them; the service was soon to begin any moment. Just before I sat down, I was introduced to a lady named Mary.

“Mary, I want you to meet Morgan.”

Mary turned around and looked at me. Her face lit up within seconds of seeing my face, and nearly five seconds later she leaned over the pew and pulled me to her. She hugged me as if I were a long lost friend she had not seen for twenty years.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Mary,” I said.
She kept smiling real big and sat down in front of me.

Worship was incredible. I watched these handicapped people sway with the music playing and sing like no one but God Himself was watching and hearing them. I just melted within. They would exclaim things; nonsense, gibberish. One lady had this curious smile on her face the whole time and would rock back and forth in her seat, flipping pages in one of the hymnals while staring out in space.

She kept shouting out noises when the music got louder. I was standing and singing near her, and when my voice got stronger, she would turn her ear to me and pause... and then she would laugh like someone had just told her a hilarious joke. But she knew!



They all knew! These people knew what it was that tickled their spirits inside and conjured up some type of goodness that in turn escaped through their mouths. They were so aware of this energy. What energy? I could not trace it; it was invisible, yet, I saw it move in them. I felt it dance all around them. I watched them all respond to it so easily, without hindrance, and then I felt it grab a hold of... me. It always starts in the throat; this burning when one tries to prevent tears from falling. Eventually, I gave up trying to hold them back. My face was soaking wet by the time the last song finished. All I could do was just stand there in silence and listen to these random expressions as the disabled worshiped. I was not aware of time anymore. I did not care about barriers. I was not alone.

The pastor said his final prayer, and the last songs were played. It was time to go.

"Hey ma'am," she said, kind of wobbling up to me after the service.

"Yes, Mary. What is it?"

"Do you have any gum?" she said, inches away from my face now. I thought for a moment she was going to kiss me she was so close. But I did not move. I did not feel it was necessary to run from her invasion of the space.

"I'm sorry, Mary. I do not have any gum for you. I wish I did."

"Ah man!" She paused...And then exclaimed it once more after pondering my answer. "Man!" She said. "I need gum."

She was deeply upset about my lack of gum. It was as if I had denied her something precious.

"I'm sorry, Mary. Don't you have to catch the van, though, soon? You better hurry. Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah... ok."

"I will see you next Sunday, Mary. Ok?" I said enthusiastically, trying to lift her spirits a bit.

And then something happened.



This switch occurred inside of Mary and her entire demeanor altered.

“Ok!” She practically yelled at me, smiling so big and full. Her eyes were dancing.

“See you Sunday...I love you!!”

I like to be hugged so tight I feel the blood pumping in the arms around me. I like to be embraced instantly and loved unconditionally by souls that know nothing of my life and honestly could not care. They just wish to love, because they want and need this love too. “I love you!” Mary said. No—she shouted the message less than a foot away. Her words were deliberate and genuine, loaded with uttermost passion.

It is interesting. It is simple. I felt so alive. I was aware of life—contemplating it as a concept but also as a real process; a progression of events — while surrounded by the very people that society would deem as a group of “vegetable brains” or a clan of “handicaps” that have distorted viewpoints of the breath we all breathe.

I believe unconditional love lives in the same world as the sun’s energy, and often times I find myself hopeful about one day dwelling in this world. Often times I catch myself wondering how I will move—how I will sway with the energy in this magnificent place, and most especially, what it will sound like.



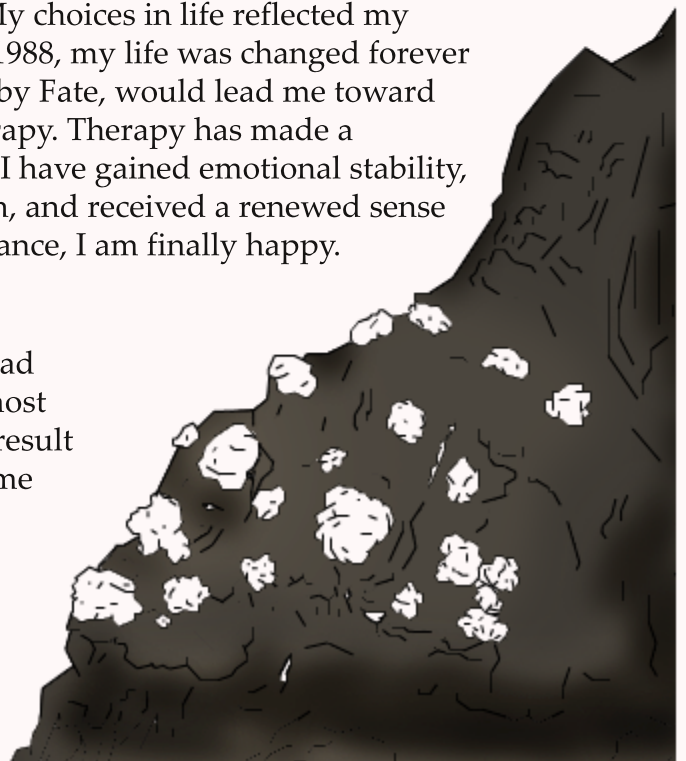
Working Backwards Toward My Future


By Linda Powell

My sisters and I were lined up like four little soldiers. We were forced to watch in horror as our father pulled our mother from her wheelchair, turned her over his knees, and paddled her like a child. Daddy's face was contorted in rage and colored a dark shade of red. His breathing was loud and roared in my ears. Though his words have not remained clear in my mind over the years, I have never forgotten that the paddle that my father chose was our family Bible. As we watched, our mother tried to escape Daddy's grip by attempting to roll off his lap. She was crying loudly and begging him to stop. My sisters and I were likewise crying and begging Daddy not to hurt Mommy. Our tears and pleas were not unheeded by Daddy. In fact, they seemed to spur him to a fevered pitch as he lashed our mother with increasing violence. And then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. Our father pushed our mother off his lap and onto the floor. She lay crumpled like a broken doll as our father stepped over her and walked out the kitchen door.

This memory of my childhood is just one of many such memories that are pieced together like a movie reel. As the movie has played over and over in my mind, I have repeatedly been re-affected by the images. My childhood left me emotionally unstable and spiritually confused. I had low self-esteem and a sense of hopelessness that left me chronically unhappy. My choices in life reflected my psychological condition. However, on October 3, 1988, my life was changed forever by events that, whether brought about by God or by Fate, would lead me toward renewal. This renewal was a result of years of therapy. Therapy has made a significant difference in my life. Through therapy I have gained emotional stability, found spiritual freedom, improved my self-esteem, and received a renewed sense of hopefulness; as a result of this new sense of balance, I am finally happy.

Therapy gave me access to resources that helped me to process and resolve the issues that had robbed me of the ability to cope emotionally for most of my early life. My inability to cope was a direct result of the dynamics of my childhood, which had left me crippled emotionally.



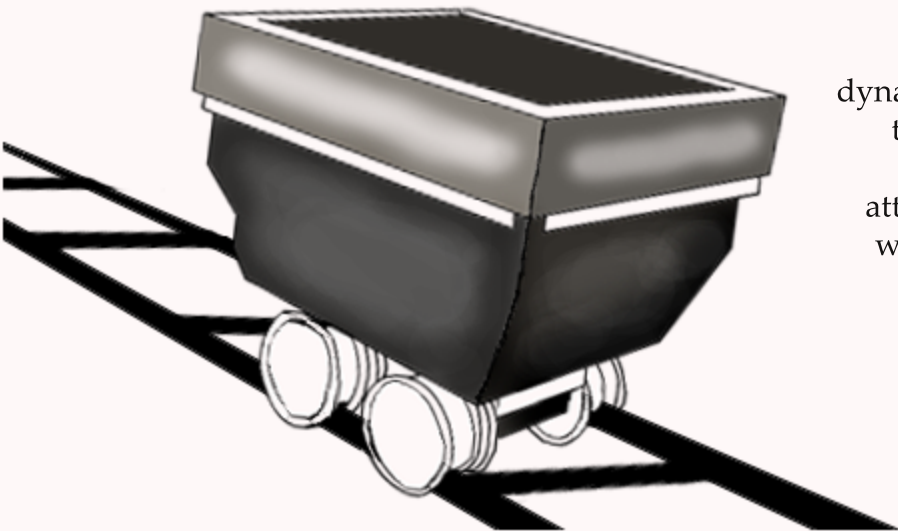


From the time I was a young girl, I blamed myself for the problems between my father and mother. I believed that the violence and screaming were my fault. Consequently, I chose to accept sole responsibility for our problems rather than sharing the blame with my sisters.

Looking back, it seemed that the other families we knew from church and school were normal and happy. Even the families that I watched on television were happy. For example, the Walton family was happy, and they were living through the Depression. Everyone seemed happy except for our family. Even as a young girl, I recognized that the appeal of the television families was the strong father figure. Pa Walton and Mr. Ingalls became the idealized fathers that I yearned for in my life. And while it may be typical for children to blame themselves when there is conflict in the home, not all children come out of such environments so emotionally damaged that they are dysfunctional in their daily lives as adults.

As an adult I found myself struggling with depression and anxiety and to come to terms with how the replaying of the old tapes from my past was continuing my emotional instability. The simple act of talking to a trained therapist helped me to work through issues that had always seemed insurmountable. And while therapy was not easy, nor without its own pain, I am very thankful to have been given the chance to heal. Therapy has provided me with the opportunity to be emotionally whole.

One of the residual effects of therapy was that I was able to find some semblance of spiritual peace.

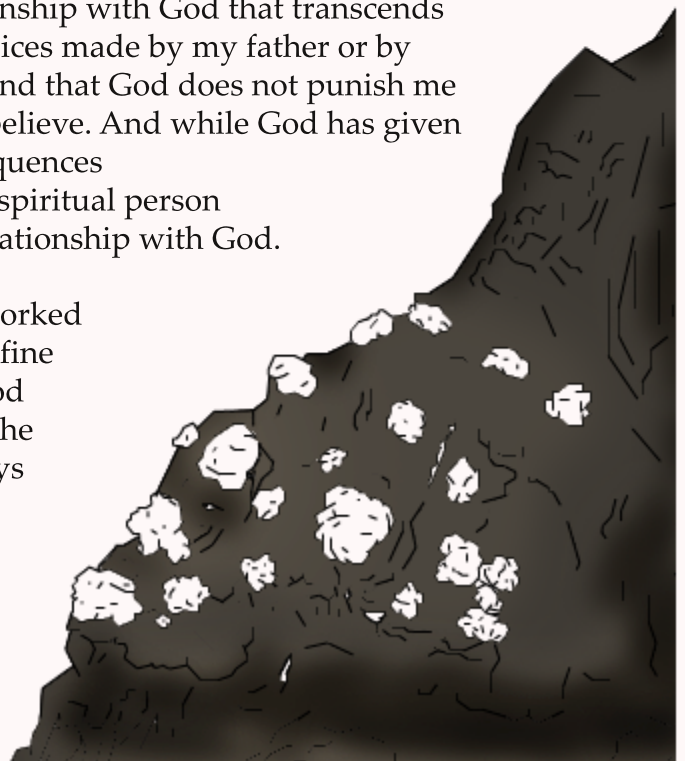


I had struggled most of my life to forgive God for his part in the dynamics of our family. From the time that I was very young, I remember going to church every Sunday, attending Bible studies, and praying with my parents at mealtime and at bedtime. My father raised us as Southern Baptist.

On Sundays, we heard “Hell Fire and Damnation” preached from the pulpit. But, it was the “Hell Fire and Damnation” that my father taught that would leave the spiritual scars for which it would take most of my lifetime to overcome. My mother, sisters, and I were subjected to Daddy’s special version of biblical truth. His Bible was a weapon that he used against us to ensure that we did as we were told. Failure to follow his directives would result in punishment. According to his version of the truth, punishment was necessary and had to be administered because God insisted on our obedience. My father’s God was a God of hatred, anger, and violence. And, indeed, I did learn to hate both God and religion. My earliest memories about my feelings are those of anger and hatred toward my father who had hurt me, toward God who had abandoned me, toward religion for failing to save me, and toward my mother for failing to protect me; but mostly, I was angry at myself and full of self-loathing.

Throughout the years of therapy, I struggled to resolve my anger toward God. I judged God based upon my ideas and beliefs about my father and about his religion. It took a long time for me to separate the image of my father from my impressions about God. However, the truth of the matter is that I found it more difficult to separate God from religion. And yet, it was absolutely imperative for my spiritual recovery that I separate God from religion. Religion is man-made, and, therefore, it is fallible. But, as I have learned, God is not the sum total of my religious experiences. Over time, I have learned to separate God from my father and from religion. Today, due to persistence on the part of my therapist and a dogged determination on my part, I have a spiritual relationship with God that transcends religion. I no longer judge God based upon the choices made by my father or by any religion. Additionally, I have come to understand that God does not punish me in the ways that my father would have had me to believe. And while God has given me free will, the choices are mine, as are the consequences for poor choices. Today, because of therapy, I am a spiritual person who accepts that I am only complete within my relationship with God.

In addition, my self-esteem improved as I worked through my issues with a therapist. I began to redefine myself in more positive terms and to recognize good qualities. Because of the emotional instability and the spiritual voids in my life, my self-esteem had always been extremely low.



At school I was shy and withdrawn from my classmates, and yet, it was the only place that I felt any measure of acceptance, though the acceptance was from the teachers and not from my peers. Even after my father and mother were divorced, I hated going home and would have stayed at school with my teachers forever if it had been an option. I wanted to run away from home, but I was unable to formulate a plan that would help me to escape. When I looked in the mirror, I hated what I saw in front of me. My self-image was based on the concept of myself as dirty and ugly because of my relationship with my father. I avoided contact with other people. Instead, I chose to walk through life with my head down so that I did not have to make eye contact with others. I devalued myself in relationships with other people, especially men. It seemed that I was only whole when I was being abused by someone. Through therapy, I came to recognize my need to be abused as a way of validating my personal self-loathing and by extension validating what I perceived as my father's estimation of my worth. My self-harming behaviors were indicative of my desire to punish myself, much as my father had punished me when I was a small child. Through the intensive therapeutic sessions and daily journaling, I began to identify the patterns in my life that were an outcome of the old tapes in my head. As I became more aware of my behaviors and of how they affected my thinking, I began utilizing cognitive retraining, which allowed me to change the way I looked at myself and to re-evaluate situations without the noise from my past. Even today, it is still necessary for me to stay aware of negative thoughts about myself to ensure that I do not allow self-defeating thoughts to be reasserted. Therapy has allowed me to develop a different sense of who I am; as a result, my self-esteem is higher today than at any other time in my life.

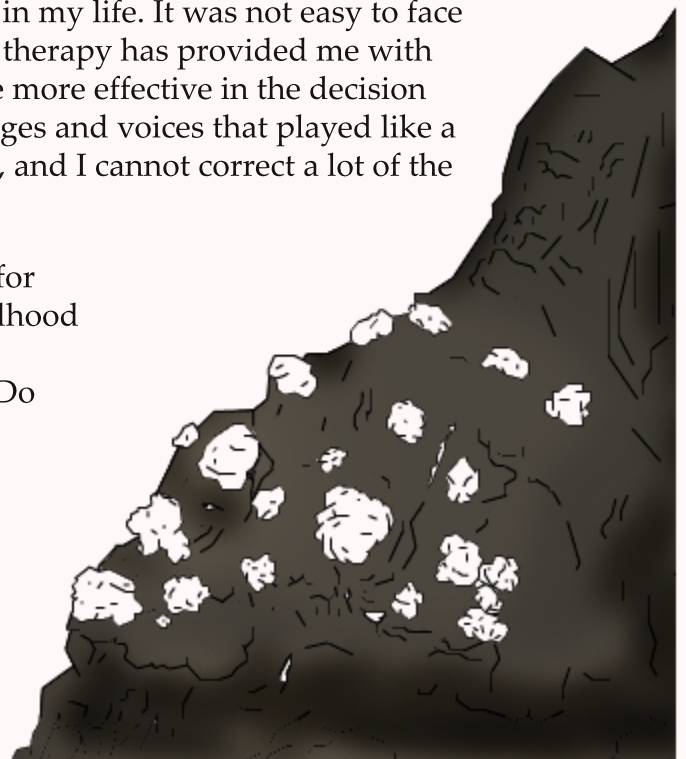


The tools provided in therapy gave me structured steps that I could follow back to emotional, spiritual, and psychological healing, and, in fact, therapy helped me to find hope for my future. This was a new experience for me. My father had taken away all hope from my life.

I went to bed in a state of fear and dread every night. It was guaranteed that at night the monsters were going to grab my ankles and pull me down into the depths of Hell. When darkness came and we were sent to our beds, I would lie very still with the covers pulled over my head and allow myself to believe that if the monsters could not see me, then they could not hurt me. The only prayer that I remember saying for many years was a prayer that God would allow me to stay asleep forever, so that I would never have to be awake in our house again. Throughout my childhood, whenever I would catch Mother watching me, I would allow myself to believe that she loved me. But, when I looked at my mother, I only saw sadness, not love or kindness. The despair in her eyes told me that there was no hope. She never smiled. She had no hope with which to inspire hope. Even after their divorce, when my mother would smile, the smile never touched her eyes. Looking back, I realize it is hard to find the desire to live and the hope for the future when you do not have a frame of reference. My mother did not have a frame of reference, and therefore, she could not help me to find hope. As I worked through my issues in therapy, it became easier to get up each day. Over time, the fear and dread that I had carried for years were replaced by hope. The anxiety I had lived with for years was replaced by calm. I could finally see myself living today and planning for tomorrow. Slowly, I began to let go of the past and to close the door on the control that I had given to my father. Therapy helped me to create a place in my life for hopefulness.

My journey to happiness has been long, and I have taken many detours. For me, therapy was a process that began with my willingness to relive the pain of my childhood and to review the mistakes I had made in my life. It was not easy to face the past or to face myself. But, because I endured, therapy has provided me with the tools to overcome a lifetime of pain, to become more effective in the decision making process, and to live my life free of the images and voices that played like a tape in my head. I will never forget my childhood, and I cannot correct a lot of the mistakes I made in the past.

However, I have forgiven my parents and myself for our individual parts in the destruction of my childhood and my resulting life as an adult. As the Dutch philosopher Benedict Baruch de Spinoza stated, "Do not weep; do not wax indignant. Understand."



Therapy has allowed me to finally understand how my past and my present work together. I no longer regret my life. My nights are no longer filled with nightmares and tears. My emotions are stable. I have a strong spiritual sense of myself and of how I fit into God's plan. I am a confident person today and no longer struggle with self-esteem issues. I am hopeful for the future instead of despairing to wake up. As a result of therapy, I have the chance to live life to the fullest and to be happy.



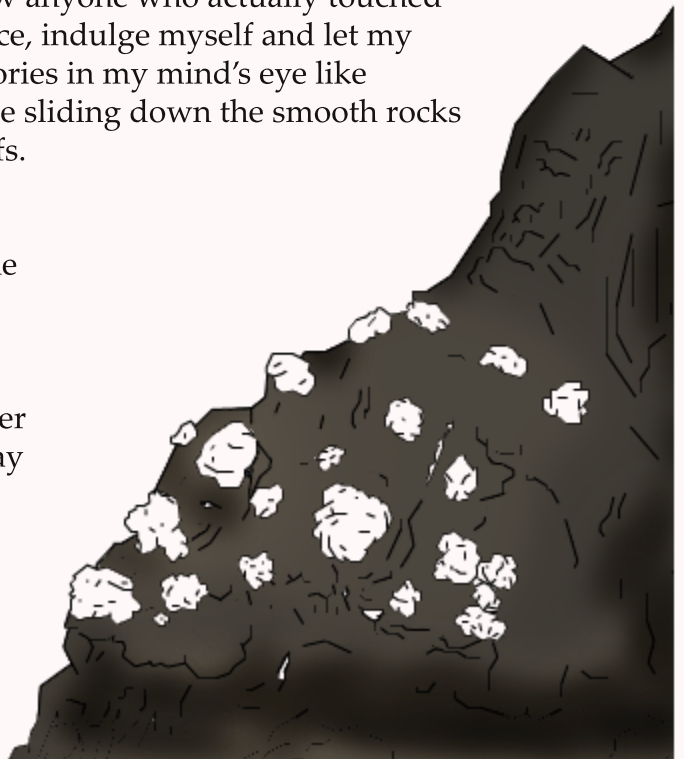
Memories, the Tapestry of My Life

By Dianne Riddles

The backdrop of my adolescent summers in the early 1970's was the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge. In those days, the Refuge was for the most part wide open and accessible to anyone who cared to venture there. The beauty of the Refuge with its vivid and varied colors of nature remains timeless and offers me solace when the burden of the adult pressures in my daily life becomes overbearing. I have many treasured memories of lazy summer days spent there with my friends that fill my heart and soul with peace and tranquility. I had the best friends that a teenager could ever hope to have, and we shared our innermost hopes and dreams for the future with each other while we lingered in the warmth of the sun. Not one of us had a clue about or could possibly have imagined the obstacles and pressures that lie ahead in the adult world that would belong to us soon enough. We were living life by the drop and savoring the taste of each one. To this very day, these memories have sustained me and kept my spirit free.

These days, I return to the Refuge when I am in need of relief that I can only find there. The total serenity that awaits me fills my soul with warmth that can only come from the carefree summer days that I shared with my friends at our favorite place. We knew this place only by the name, Forty-Foot Hole. We never knew why or how this beautiful place got that name, and we never knew how deep the hole actually was, because we never knew anyone who actually touched the bottom. When I hike back to that beautiful place, indulge myself and let my mind escape to that time, I can visualize the memories in my mind's eye like snapshots of days gone by. I see my friends and me sliding down the smooth rocks of the waterfall in our worn and frayed Levi cutoffs.

I can almost hear the music coming from the radio that we carried up the long hike as it echoes off the boulders that surround the waterfall. Sometimes, when the memories flood my spirit, I can actually hear the sounds of my friends' laughter and their voices calling to me as we splash and play in the icy cold water.



I always feel compelled by some unknown impulse to sit on that same old rock where my first love gave me my first kiss and I often wonder if others make this same sojourn searching to find that same inner peace in their soul.

By far, the most serene memory of my time spent at Forty-Foot Hole is one that I can physically relive, and sometimes do. When the weight of life shackles my spirit with chains of anxiety and disappointment, and I feel a sense of urgency with just taking a deep breath, I know that it is time to seek out the solitude that my spirit desperately craves and that only Forty-Foot Hole can satisfy. Not too long ago, I made that long hike and climbed those huge boulders back to that time and place hoping to experience the same solitude that I had felt when I was a teenager. I wanted to dive into that old swimming hole again and I wanted to see that beautiful image of coming back to the surface once more; I wanted to set my spirit free again.

When I reached the boulder that overlooks Forty-Foot Hole, I stood in nature's silence at the top of that boulder and I felt something that I had never felt as a kid; the feeling was bittersweet. I could see myself as I was 35 years ago when I had not a care in the world.

I made my way to the top of the cliff and across the loose rocks and cactus to the boulder where my first love and I spent many idle afternoons learning about love, dreaming about our life together and even naming our future children. The notion that these things might not ever happen did not occur to us. As I sat there, I realized the purity and innocence of that love, and it brought a smile to my face and a tear to my eye.



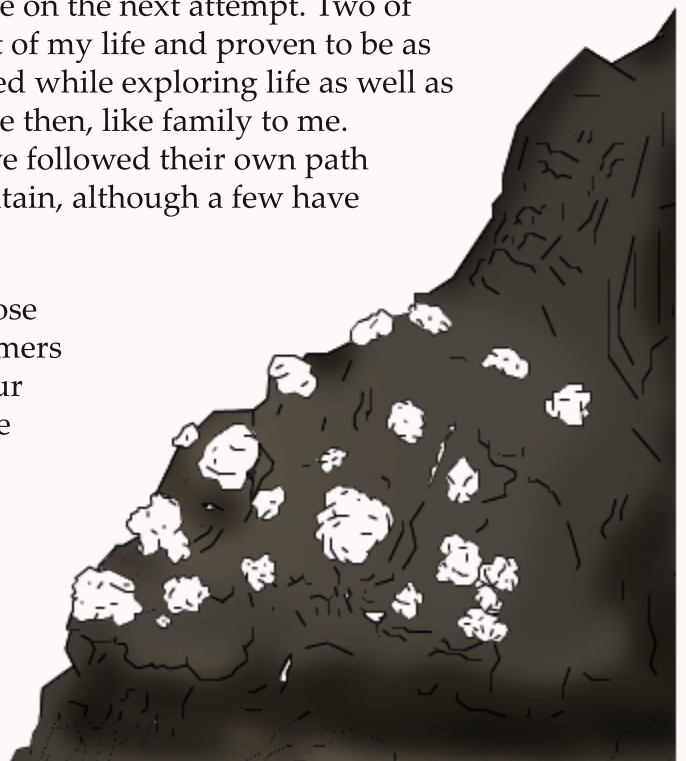
I anxiously moved to the ledge that I had jumped from so many times before and I felt exhilarated as I dove from the top of that huge rock and sliced into the cold water below, hoping to achieve as much depth as possible.

The plunge into the Forty-Foot Hole is exciting but plummeting into an icy cold and chillingly silent void of darkness is not what draws me to this mystical place. The overwhelming enchantment and fascination of this ritual is not for the thrill of the descent, but rather, for the breathtaking beauty of the deliberate and slow float back to the surface. Amazingly, the water is as crystal-clear as it is icy cold, and looking up toward the surface is nothing short of magical and awe inspiring. This wondrous show of nature invokes the desire to linger as long as humanly possible. The pitch-black darkness is interrupted and split by one solitary shaft of light that is created by the sun shining into the Hole between the boulders at the surface. This vivid sight is so beautiful and tranquil that mere words are incapable of describing its hypnotic and breathtaking majesty. Indeed, my spirit is rejuvenated.

The Refuge holds many memories of my teenage summers that are full of reckless abandon and as much fun as I could have possibly endured. In retrospect, I am quite fortunate that I lived through those years without any permanent scars on my physical body or on my moral character. I was not a bad kid, but I did push the limits with every chance that came my way. Although the repercussions of living those years the way I did, made my adult life slightly more difficult than it might have been otherwise, I do not regret even one of the risks or chances that I took. I was full of life, and life was full of my free spirit.

The friends with whom I shared my carefree summers were just as animated and free spirited as I was back then. The most weighing concern in each of our minds was how to dive deeper into the Hole on the next attempt. Two of my friends from those days have been a large part of my life and proven to be as sturdy, strong and true as the rocks that we climbed while exploring life as well as the refuge. These two people are now, as they were then, like family to me. The rest of my closest friends from those days have followed their own path and most have reached the top of their own mountain, although a few have been lost to the world or death.

Regardless which path each of us chose, those precious memories that we made during our summers together along those hiking trails will remain in our spirits and as free as the breeze that blows over the plains of the Refuge forever.



Fiction

Matt P. Haag Scholarship Winner

Caden's Bluff

By Michelle Lewis

A freezing mist stung Annie's face as she bolted out the back door. She gasped in the frigid night air and ran for the field far behind the house. Stumbling across the muddy ground, Annie could hear glass breaking and the deep thuds of furniture hitting the bedroom walls. Every time his thunderous voice shattered the midnight silence, she shook in terror. Trembling uncontrollably, Annie struggled to keep her feet moving. Freezing gusts of wind whipped around her bare arms chilling her to the bone, but Annie focused on the silhouette of the huge pile of boulders on the far side of the field. The boulders looked dark and ominous in the middle of the field. Annie fell on the uneven ground cutting her hands and legs on the sticks and stones jutting out of the soil. She quickly scrambled around to the back of the boulders so the large mass lay between her and the back of her home. She had played this escape route out in her mind many times, but this was the first time she had used it. Annie collapsed scraping her back against the cold rough surface of the rocks. Calm down Annie. Catch your breath, she told herself.

His voice had faded, but she could still feel the terror inside of her as if he towered right in front of her. Closing her eyes, she tried to breathe deep and calm herself. Breathe Annie, just breathe, she sobbed.

Streaks of warm tears rolled down her cheeks as she realized these were the words her mother used to say to calm her when she was afraid as a child.

"Oh, Momma," she cried. "Where are you now?"



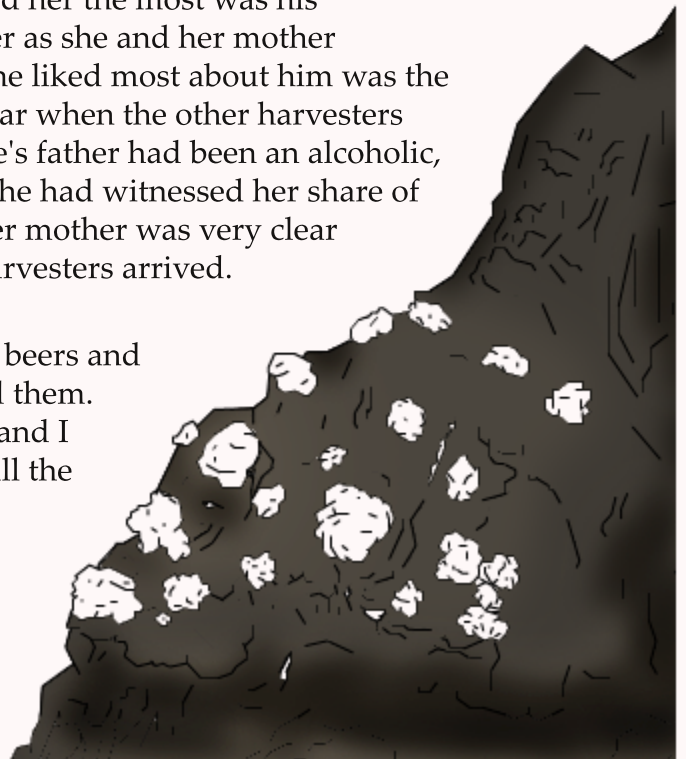
* * *


It was Annie's decision to marry Caden and move away from Texas and everyone she knew and loved. Annie wasn't looking for love when she met Caden. Fresh out of college, she had just finished her first year of teaching, and moved back home to help her mother with the summer harvest. Caden was part of the harvest crew. He won her mother over right from the start. According to her mother, Caden told her he owned a few acres of land and a cabin at the foot of a mountain range in Montana. He called his ranch Caden's Bluff for the treacherous cliffs which dropped into a rocky ravine at the back of his property. His ancestors mined gold in the area in the 1800's, and the land he owned was passed down through the generations. Caden never said he was wealthy, not outright anyway, but he boasted of a good life back home. He made Annie swear to keep his personal information from the rest of the crew. It wouldn't look good to brag about his fortunes when everybody else was struggling to get by, Annie figured. But why he left it all and ended up in Texas working on a harvest crew puzzled Annie a bit. Caden quickly eased her mind by telling her he was helping a buddy out because he didn't have enough men to handle the work lined up.

* * *

Struggling to warm herself, Annie recalled the first time she saw Caden. He stood so tall, broad and handsome. What intrigued her the most was his mysterious dark eyes, and the way he watched her as she and her mother prepared the evening meal for the group. What she liked most about him was the way he stayed in to watch movies or play his guitar when the other harvesters went to the local bar to drink and raise hell. Annie's father had been an alcoholic, and she had a crippling fear of men who drank. She had witnessed her share of domestic abuse before her father passed away. Her mother was very clear about her attitude on drinking the first day the harvesters arrived.

"If you boys want to go into town for a few beers and raise hell, that's up to you and your boss," she told them. "But, don't be bringing it back here. My daughter and I lived through years of that hell. I'd just as soon call the cops on you as look at you, if you're drunk."





While the other boys snickered under their breath and threw out a few, "Well, yes ma'ams!" Caden turned and walked back into his trailer slamming the door behind him. Foolishly, Annie saw this as a sign that he had his own nonsense attitude about drinking. She had no way of knowing Caden's reputation when it came to drinking and violence. But she came to know that whiskey made him a monster. With every drink, his thinking became irrational and jealousy consumed him. Whiskey transformed him into a foul angry shell of a man. Nothing like the man she fell in love with, or rather, the man she thought she fell in love with. Never in her wildest dreams had she foreseen these traits in him. While they were dating, Caden was always so loving and respectful to Annie and her mother.

* * *

One Sunday morning as she and her mother were leaving for church, Caden was up and around early. Annie recalled how handsome he looked leaning back against his trailer in a wooden chair. With his cap pulled down over his eyes, he was attempting to balance himself on the back two legs of the chair while strumming on his guitar at the same time. Annie blushed when Caden whistled and waved to her as she got into the car. When they returned home, Caden quickly came up to the car and opened the door for her.

"Hey, Annie," he said. "Maybe next week I can go with ya'll. Lord knows I need some righteousness in my life." He chuckled under his breath.

As Caden ran his hand through his thick brown hair before setting his cap back on his head, Annie caught a glimpse of his gorgeous eyes and fell in love with his boyish grin. That marked the beginning of their whirlwind summer romance which ended with Caden proposing to her. Although Annie's mother had taken to Caden, she warned her not to marry him so soon after they had met.



"You don't really know anything about him Annie," her mother said. "This is all too soon, don't you think?"

Annie thought she knew all she needed to know. After all, Caden started attending church with them every Sunday morning. He was handsome, well-mannered, and obviously a hard worker because he came to Texas on harvest. Annie knew those men worked hard for their money. It was back-breaking work and long hours in the hot sun. She knew he traveled a lot and had recently spent some time in Oklahoma before joining the crew in Texas his foreman had told her. But, oddly, Caden never wanted to talk about it. When harvest ended, he asked her to marry him and move back home to Montana. She immediately said yes.

* * *

"Annie!! You bitch, where are you?!" Caden's voice startled her back to reality.

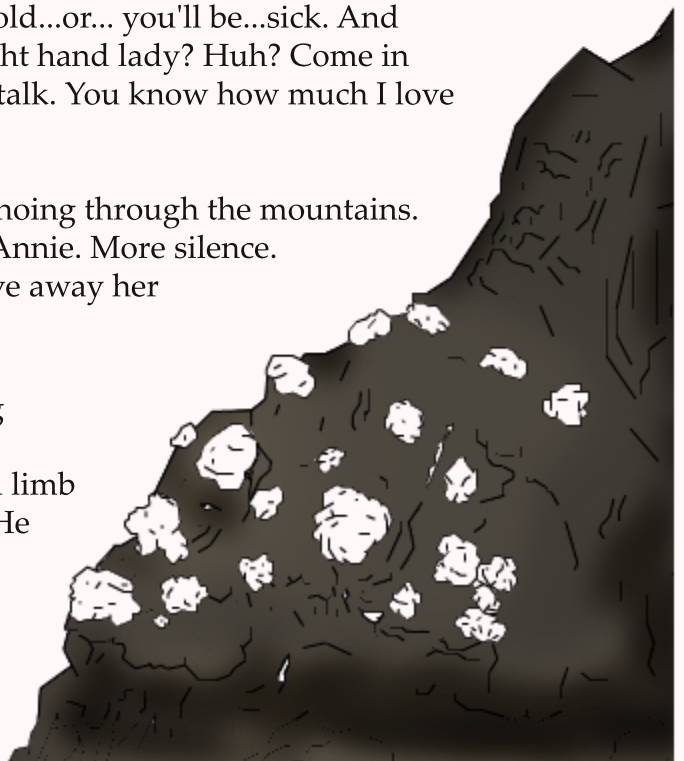
She bolted forward to run, then slammed herself back against the rocks. Be still. Don't be a fool, he'll see you, she told herself. The tightness in her throat was suffocating her, and waves of prickly heat pulsed through her whole body. She felt like she was being hunted by Satan himself.

Silence.

"Honey?" Caden's tone had softened, but there was still a grit of anger in his voice. "Honey, you better come in out of that cold...or... you'll be...sick. And what would your lawyer friend do without his right hand lady? Huh? Come in and we'll have something warm to drink and just talk. You know how much I love you, Annie."

His voice travelled through the night air echoing through the mountains. Hearing it more than once was a slow torture for Annie. More silence. She was not foolish enough to answer him and give away her location.

"Fine! Let the coyotes get you...you stinking whore!" he slurred and then broke out in a fit of hysterical laughter. "I hope they rip you limb from limb and drag your bloody carcass all over Montana!" He slammed the back door shut.



Annie could still hear his maniacal laughter ringing in her ears. Covering her ears with her bloodied hands, she rocked back and forth trying to block out the sound. Why is he doing this? she sobbed. The abuse started after he lost his job because of his temper and his mouth. Once again, her husband's rage had gotten the best of him, and he roughed up his boss's son so bad that Caden put him in the ICU. That's when she found out about the prison time. Caden was still on probation from his prison time in Oklahoma. He had spent four years in jail for beating the hell out of a guy outside a bar, public intoxication, assaulting a police officer, and resisting arrest. He was not supposed to leave the state without reporting his whereabouts, but he did. Distraught, Caden had confided in her and told her the truth about his past. Terrified that his boss would press charges and he'd go back to jail, Caden begged Annie to talk to him. The townspeople liked Annie, including his boss. Caden had heard the murmurs around town about how someone like him could have landed a prize like Annie.

* * *

When they first got to Montana, Caden had a job and times were good. Those times were short lived. Once they arrived in Caden's Bluff, his story began to unravel.. Not only was he not wealthy, he struggled to live like everyone else. The only truth to his story was about the land. His grandfather had left him the cabin, badly in need of repair, and the surrounding acreage. Caden came up with the name Caden's Bluff to feed his own ego. He had led Annie to believe the little town near his home was named that, but the nearby town was Tombstone.



Annie had thought many times how ironic it was that the very place she hoped to find happiness had such a morbid name. As a matter of fact, Annie discovered that Caden's family name wasn't thought highly of in town. Evidently, they were "hell raisers" and liked to drink quite a bit.

Now she was witnessing firsthand what the townspeople were talking about.

* * *

Jobs were scarce in Tombstone, but after Caden lost his job, Annie managed to find a job as a legal secretary for a very respectable lawyer in town. Since she had gone to work at the attorney's office, Caden's drinking had gotten worse. It was then she came to understand that Caden had an extreme hatred for lawyers, or the law in general. When she suggested talking to her boss to see if there was anything he could do to advise Caden about his probation violation, he lost his temper. He began pushing Annie down the hallway pinning her against the wall. Annie could feel his hot breath on her face as he screamed and accused her of messing around with her boss. Pain shot down the back of her head when he grabbed her hair and yanked her backwards.

"I swear on your life woman, if you tell your boss one damned thing about me or my past, I'll kill you," Caden growled in her ear. Then he slammed her head against the wall...everything went black.

When Annie came to, Caden sat drunk on the sofa with a shot glass in his hand. She didn't know what to do. If she came home from working late, Caden accused her and her boss of having an affair. If she wore make-up, fixed her hair too pretty, or dressed in a certain "whorish" way, then a fight would break out. Annie was very careful to not provoke Caden in any way and did everything she could to tone down her looks. She tried not to give him a reason to drink.

"You're going to divorce me someday and run off with that slimy bastard." She remembered him saying that night.

"No, Caden that's not true. I---" was all she got out before he blacked her eye. That was only two days ago. Caden hadn't sobered up since.

* * *

The sound of a motor revving up startled Annie. What is he doing now? she thought and tried to gather her senses. Pain shot through the side of her leg like she had fallen on a bed of red hot coals.



She could feel the warm sticky blood trailing down her shin. Caked in mud and shivering, Annie scrambled to her knees and tried to peer over the top of the rocks. Oh, God! He's coming! she trembled. Frantically, she began looking for somewhere else to go, but the only thing around the boulders was more open field. If she tried to run, he would see her for sure. He's going to kill me, she thought. The sound of the four wheeler rumbled through the freezing night air. She could hear the mud and rocks slinging everywhere as Caden tore up the field looking for a sign of her. He was getting closer. Annie pressed herself up against the unrelenting rocks and prayed. The spotlight flashed on and the blinding light cut through the freezing mist and dense fog. Thank God for the fog, Annie thought as she covered against the rocks, cupping her hands over her mouth so her warm breath in the cold night air wouldn't give her away. The four wheeler stopped short of the rocks. Her whole body shook as the machine idled nearby. Caden scrambled off his seat and stumbled to the ground, so drunk he couldn't even catch his footing or stop his fall.

"Damn women...nothing but trouble...bitches...whores all of them," he stammered. "I don't need this shit from nobody, especially some Texas prima donna whore."

Annie could hear Caden's staggering footsteps crunching across the frozen ground as he moved closer. An empty whiskey bottle whisked wildly by the boulders she was hiding behind. She heard Caden chuckle under his breath

"I know you're out here girl. You can't hide from me." He sounded almost insane. "Either you'll come in, or I'll find your dead frozen body in the morning. Either way is fine with me."

Silence.



Annie held her breath, cringed, and waited, half-way expecting him to grab her by the hair and drag her from behind the rocks. Silence. Deafening silence.

Annie buried her face in her hands trying not to breathe. The four wheeler revved up, turned and headed back to the house. Annie slowly exhaled and began to cry. Letting out a deep sigh, she slumped back against the rocks. Texas seemed so far away, and she wished she was there. Caden frightened and intimidated her.

Annie felt helpless sitting in the freezing night air shivering. She rubbed her frozen skin trying to create heat from the friction. But her sleeveless gown was wet from the freezing mist that was falling, and it chilled her to the bone. Her life was not supposed to turn out this way.

* * *

After college, Annie had returned to the farm after landing a job as a third grade teacher. She loved her students and recalled twenty pair of big, sad eyes staring at her when she told them she was leaving. Caden had been sweet enough to hang around until a replacement could be found for her before they moved.

Annie smiled as she remembered the weekend before they left. She and her best friend stayed out late one night parked on a country road drinking a four dollar bottle of cheap whiskey and laughing hysterically because neither of them could feel their legs. It was her first and last time to drink. She had a good life in Texas, and it was promising. What would Becca think if she saw her now cowering down behind these rocks shivering and crying? Then Annie remembered the look on her mother's face after the wedding as she and Caden headed for the car. It was a mixture of love, pain, and worry, but mostly love. Annie felt her jaw clench as a rage fed only by fear coursed through her body. This would be the last time she would hide from this man. She had watched her mother do it one too many times.

"This will not be my life!" said Annie as she struggled to her feet.

* * *

The door creaked open and Annie stepped onto the carpet. Her bloody mud-caked feet burned as the heat inside the house warmed them. Mud and debris clung to her wet nightgown and her whole body shuddered in the heat of the room, or was it from fear?



Caden lay slouched over the arm of the sofa, and a near empty bottle of Jack Daniels had spilled onto the carpet. On the wall above the sofa hung their wedding picture. The first day of two years of pure hell on earth, Annie thought as she saw the gun and stumbled over to pick it up. She could barely feel her feet they were so cold and bruised. Get the gun Annie, she told herself. Get your things and run like hell. Annie turned to collect her purse and keys from the bar. She knew she would have to get a change of clothes. She couldn't drive straight through to Texas without stopping, and she couldn't stop looking like a bloodied corpse. Terrified, she felt Caden's hand on the back of her neck. Annie screamed as pain shot down her spine. She struggled to get out of his grip. He reeked of whiskey and stale cigarettes.

"Well look here, you finally get tired of creeping around in the mud like an old beat down dog?" Caden slurred as he whirled her around to face him.

He raised his hand to strike her.

"You sorry bastard!" Annie screamed as Caden yanked her violently toward him.

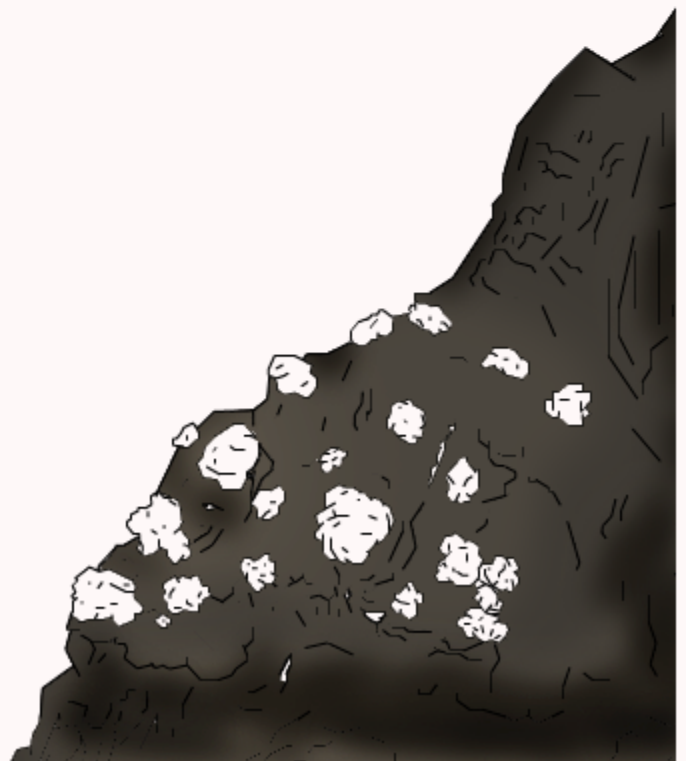
A bright flash, a deafening roar, then silence, eerie silence. Annie hit the floor on her knees. The smell of gunpowder burned her nose. Darkness.

* * *



Every day Annie walks out her back door to the boulders in the field behind the house, climbs on top of them, and lets the sun's warmth cover her body. Silence, how she loves the silence now. After a full day of wrestling second graders, this is her place of refuge.

She admires the gorgeous blanket of Montana wildflowers surrounding the boulders. The ground is so fertile here, Annie smiles. At the base of the boulders on the far side, there is a patch of ground that seems especially green this time of year. Annie knows that spot all too well. At the head of that patch, buried halfway in the dirt hides an empty Jack Daniels' whiskey bottle. It's black and white label, deteriorated from exposure to the elements, is barely visible to the unsuspecting eye. Annie climbs down from her spot on the boulders, leans over and thoughtfully wipes the dirt and debris from the top of the bottle. Nothing could be more appropriate, thinks Annie as she brushes the dirt off her hands. After all, Caden loved his whiskey.



Pearls for Emily

By Michelle Lewis

Her warm breath fogged the glass as Rose leaned against the window casing and watched the snow outside drift against the old weathered barn across the road. Frozen softness, thought Rose, like a white downy blanket stretching as far as the eye can see. It reminded her of the blanket she wrapped Emily in when she was a baby. Rose choked back her tears as she thought of the time that had passed since she last saw her daughter. Emily was a successful business woman, and her job kept her busy and tied down. Rose knew, or at least hoped, that her daughter would visit more often if she could. The path to her door was always undisturbed this time of year. The powdery snowdrifts covering her property shifted only for the howling wind. Only on Sundays, when Sheriff Drew stopped by to check on her did footprints darken her doorway. Rose could always count on Drew to see if she needed anything. She had come to rely on his visits, and always made the most scrumptious pies for him to eat. 'Mama Rose, your pies and hot coffee are the best in Nolan County,' he'd say with the biggest grin across his face. But, he hadn't been by in a couple of weeks, and Rose was growing concerned. She wanted to call the Sheriff's Department and check on him. Oh, he don't need a lonely old lady bothering him when he's probably busy in all this mess, Rose reminded herself. She knew he would be around when he could.

* * *

Sitting in her rocker, Rose watched the snow outside sweep across the window. It reminded her of Emily as a little girl shaking the snow globes at Christmas just to see the tiny white particles swirl around. She stared at the phone on her night stand like she could will it to ring if she tried hard enough, but only silence echoed throughout the whole house. At times like these, she thought of Emily the most. Rose remembered their last conversation several months back when Emily came to visit for a few days.



They were walking in the garden admiring Rose's lovely flowers. When they sat down to watch the butterflies flitting about, Rose took her daughter's hand.

"You look tired, Emily." Rose said, "I think you're working way too hard."

"Oh Mom, you know my job is very stressful and keeps me really busy," responded Emily.

"I know that's what I mean. You need to settle down and marry some nice man and think about having a family." Rose patted her hand. "Enjoy life a little bit more, Emily."

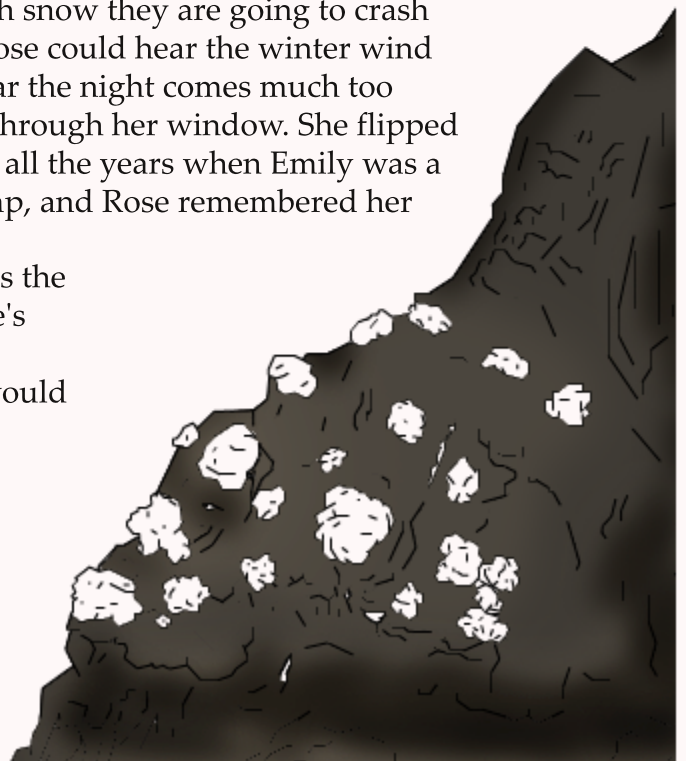
"Mom, I'm 45 years old. I hardly think I'll have children now." Emily chuckled. "Besides, I'd come closer to getting a big old hairy lap-dog these days than finding a good man."

"You're all I have, Emily, and I just want to see you happy," said Rose.

"I know Mom, I know, and you're all I have," replied Emily. "And right now that's all right with me." Emily leaned in and gave Rose a reassuring hug.

* * *

A sudden snap against the window startled Rose in her chair. Oh goodness, she thought, if those branches get any heavier with snow they are going to crash to the ground. It was getting dark out now, and Rose could hear the winter wind whistling and whipping outside. . This time of year the night comes much too quickly, thought Rose as she watched the sun set through her window. She flipped on the walk way light. It was a force of habit from all the years when Emily was a teenager and stayed out late. Emily loved that lamp, and Rose remembered her swinging around and around it when she was a little girl. It cast a warm inviting glow across the icy landscape. But, Rose would trade all of Nature's wintry beauty for the warmth of another human heartbeat if she could. There was little hope she would hear from anyone tonight.

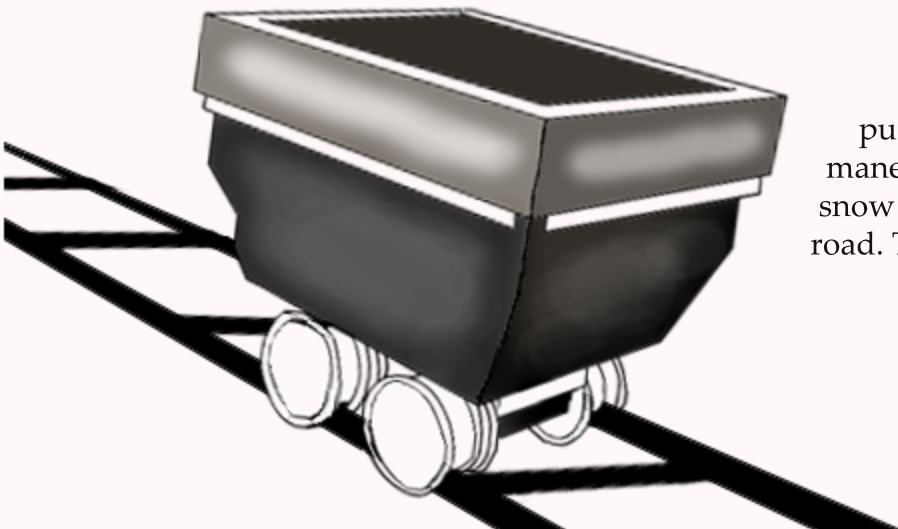


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Rose turned away from the window and walked over to her bedside table. She picked up the matchbox and struck a wooden match against the side. The small flame erupted and Rose leaned in to light the candle like she had done so many nights before. She loved the smell of sulfur and the flickering of the blue and yellow flame. It reminded her of sunshine over a bed of blue bonnets. As she struggled with the clasp of her pearls, she thought of him. The lustrous pearls were a gift from her husband on their wedding day. She remembered how his face lit up with anticipation as she slowly opened the black box. Oh, they were so perfect, so creamy white, and so expensive! 'They remind me of you Ruth, so beautiful and sophisticated.' Robert beamed. Ruth had to chuckle when Robert called her sophisticated. She viewed herself as pretty plain and normal, but what mattered was how he saw her. Rose had worn them almost every day since her wedding day. They were worn in times of happiness and heartache, and more than once washed with her tears. Rose knelt by the bed to pray and held the pearls gently in her hands, lightly rubbing them. Their radiant beauty mirrored the splendor of the moon. When I see Emily again, I'll give them too her, she thought. It's time to pass them down while I still have time to do it. Fighting back the tears, she thought of her daughter and prayed she would come visit her, or call her soon. Gently she blew out the candle, Good night Robert. I love you. Rose whispered. Every night since she had received the telegram that Robert was MIA in Vietnam, she had lit a candle in hopes he might find his way home, and every night she prayed for his return. The winter winds whipped and moaned throughout the night. Outside the window, the heavy branch like Rose's heart was slowly breaking. In her sleep, she took her final moonlit flight.

* * *

The snow was so crystalline and pure it blinded Emily as she tried to maneuver her way through the foot of snow accumulated on the battered dirt road. The ground was packed slick and full of deep ruts.



She had been crying since dawn, and the reflection from the snow hurt her puffy, swollen eyes. She couldn't stop the tears after the phone call this morning. The ring had startled her awake, and she strained to hear the sheriff's voice crackling across the bad connection. Emily couldn't believe what she was hearing. She struggled to remain calm. She struggled just to breathe.

"Emily, this is Sheriff Drew Dawson from the Nolan County Sheriff's Department. I need to talk to you about your mother. This morning Reverend Wilson stopped in to check on Rose and...." His voice trailed off. Emily dropped the phone and collapsed into the chair.

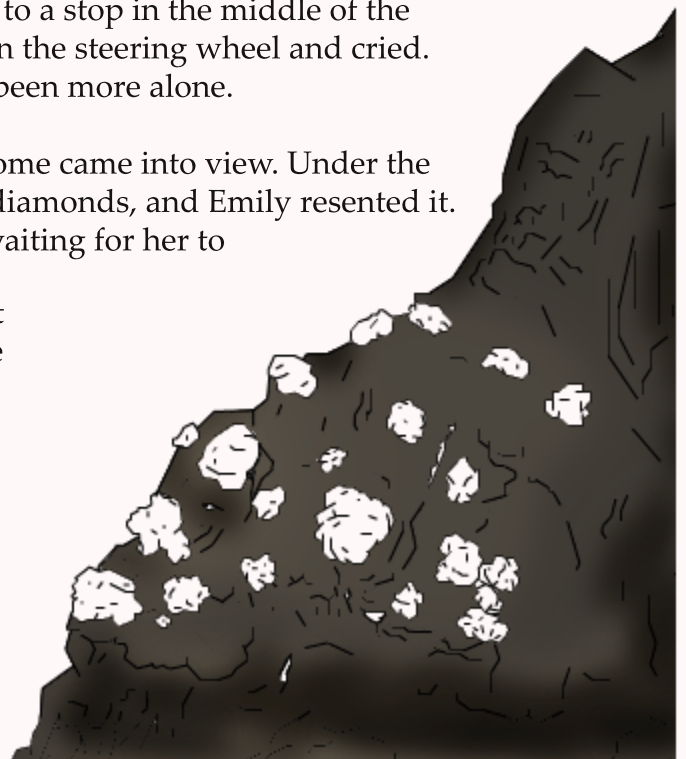
"Momma..."


* * *

While Emily waited at the airport for her rental car, she thought about Rose and how she had given up so much to raise her only child. Even though she never remarried after losing her husband, Rose made sure Emily had a warm and nurturing home. Reluctantly Emily got in the car and started it up. She was dreading the trip home because she knew it would break her heart, but she was forced to face what every child had to at one time or another, the death of a parent. Rose lived so far away from her, and even though Emily missed her terribly, it was near impossible to get time off work to go visit. She tried to call her at least every Sunday... Wait, oh my God, gasped Emily, yesterday was Sunday. Mother I'm so sorry. Emily sobbed, I am so, so sorry. The car slid to a stop in the middle of the snow covered dirt road, and Emily laid her head on the steering wheel and cried. The frozen silence surrounded her. She had never been more alone.

* * *

As she drove over the hill, her childhood home came into view. Under the sun's glare, the snow over the fields sparkled like diamonds, and Emily resented it. The home seemed frozen in time like it had been waiting for her to return. The lamp on the walkway was lit and beckoned to her like a guiding light. She loved that old walkway lamp. She remembered coming home from college for Christmas and seeing her mother standing at the door waving to her.





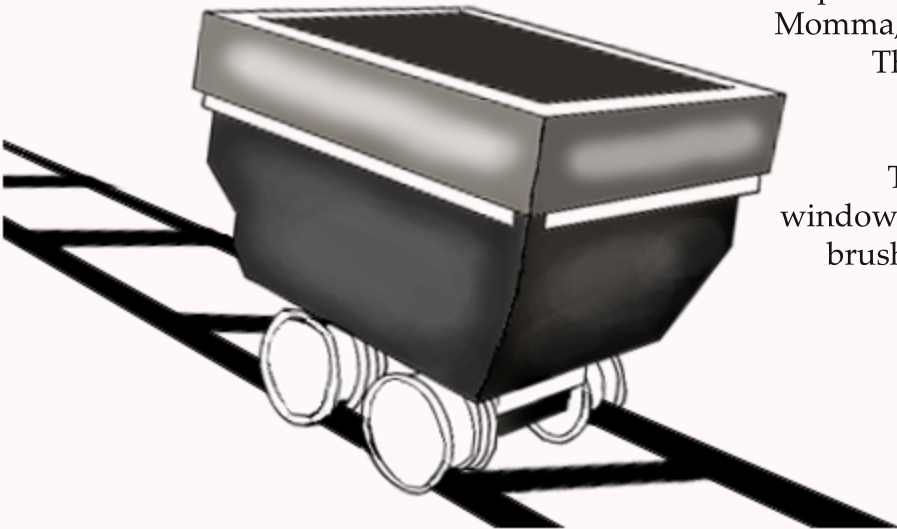
Forgive me Momma, Emily sobbed, I was going to come see you soon, but I let my job get in the way. The last time Emily saw her mother was mid-spring and she recalled how radiant Rose looked as she gave her a tour of the butterfly garden. She remembered how peaceful Rose appeared with the golden sun surrounding her as she bent over to smell the wall of ruby red roses spreading across the white trellis in her flower garden. The strand of white pearls her father had given her mother fell softly forward as Rose leaned in. It was a portrait any artist would want to paint. Emily wept.

* * *

When she entered the bedroom, Emily could smell the scent of Rose's perfume. Her mother's quilt lay over the end of the bed and Emily wrapped herself in it. The house seemed so solemn and lost without Rose. Emily sat in the rocker by her mother's bedside window and drew the quilt tighter around her - it smelled like her mother. The grandfather clock in the living room chimed. The chords sound sad this time, thought Emily, like there is no one to play for anymore. She could feel the sweet spirit of her mother in the room, and somehow it calmed her. Through the blur of her tears she saw the pearls resting on the nightstand next to the hair brush her mother used every night before she went to sleep. She recalled how her dainty mother would sit on the edge of the bed, remove the pearls, and then brush through her silken hair. 'Always use 100 brush strokes, Emily, to keep you hair shiny and pretty,' Rose would say. She recalled as a child sitting on her mother's bed and brushing her hair the same way as they both counted the strokes. Emily rose from the chair and walked toward the night stand. The milky glow of the pearls looked breathtaking laying on the velvet sleeve her mother always kept them in. Emily collapsed on the bed crying. She pulled the quilt up tight under her chin. Momma, I'm so alone now. What will I do? That night she cried herself to sleep.

* * *

The sunlight gleaming through the window woke Emily. She lay clutching the brush in one hand and the pearls in the other.



She sat up on the bed and looked around the room. The afternoon sun brightened the whole house, and the snow was beginning to melt outside. Emily spent the afternoon going through her mother's documents to take into town. At the bottom of her mother's closet, she found a small chest containing the old love letters she and her husband sent daily to each other during the war. Even though it was bittersweet to read them, it gave Emily a sense of strength to see the love her parents had for one another. She knew little of her father because she was so young when he disappeared. Emily remembered Rose lighting a candle for him every night after his disappearance. Rose hoped within her heart that Robert would find his way home to his family. As a child, Emily thought it was silly to continue to hope for his return, but as a woman, she understood, and loved Rose even more for it.

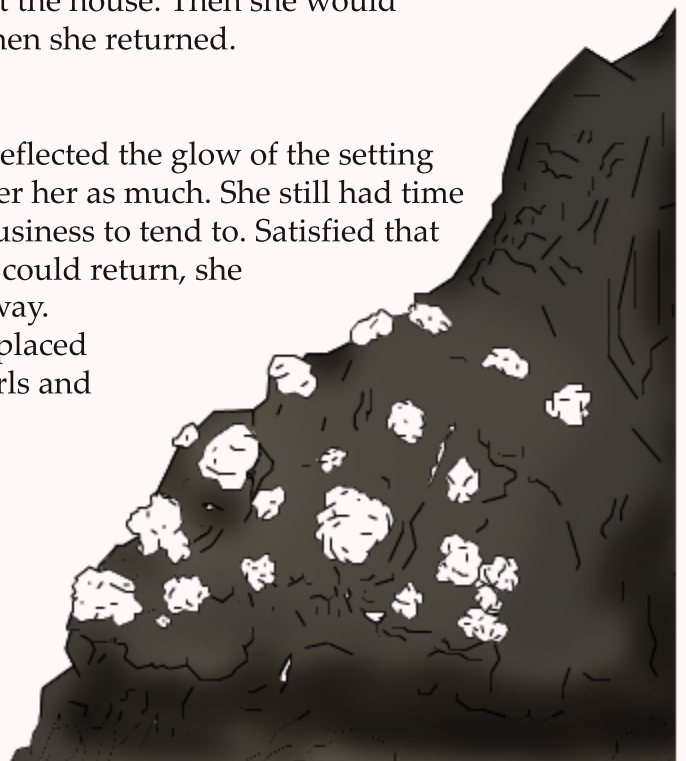
* * *

Emily gathered a few things she wanted to take with her right then: the pearls, her mother's old quilt and the box of love letters. She'd be back for the other things later, but right now she couldn't deal with disturbing any of Rose's belongings. Emily carefully made her mother's bed, smoothing out the wrinkles on the pillowcase where her mother had last laid her head.

"I'll be back in a few days Mom," Emily said aloud, "Leave the light on for me." She smiled to herself as she remembered the old Motel 6 commercial, and how Rose would say that to her every time she left the house. Then she would switch on the walkway lamp to guide Emily in when she returned.

* * *

From the front porch, the glistening snow reflected the glow of the setting sun. This time the beauty of it didn't seem to bother her as much. She still had time to make it into town before nightfall. There was business to tend to. Satisfied that she had secured everything in the house until she could return, she locked the front door and stepped onto the walkway. Emily slid the pearls out of the velvet sleeve, and placed them around her neck. Softly she touched the pearls and a feeling of warmth came over her.



As she passed by the walkway light she reached out and touched it like she had so many times before. As Emily drove off through the snow, the walkway light slowly flickered on.



The Pier

By Seth Copeland

By the time Jacob had made it to the pier, he had gone from anger to fear and then to worry. The initial novelty of justification for his actions was worn, and he began to seriously consider the possibility that it was really over. He couldn't handle that. He had snapped too quickly. Just five more seconds of silence and all this could've been avoided. He had to freak. He had to yell. He had to go and ruin everything. If she was gone when returned to the apartment, he wouldn't blame her. He would miss her, God, he would miss her...so much.

Normally, the pier was pretty empty at this time of day, but Jacob found he would be sharing his space with someone. An older man, fifty-sixtysomething, was staring out at the ocean, watching apparently nothing; a classic gaze into the wondrous sea routine. Clichéd, and not at all what Jacob was in the mood for.

As Jacob passed the stranger, he heard him speak "Big isn't it?"

"Keen observation."

The stranger chuckled a hearty old man chuckle, "What brings you out here?"

I argued with my girlfriend over some kitchenware, yelled at her, prompted her to slap me, which led to my smashing of two dinner plates against the wall and more yelling, calling her an inconsiderate bitch and then I left.

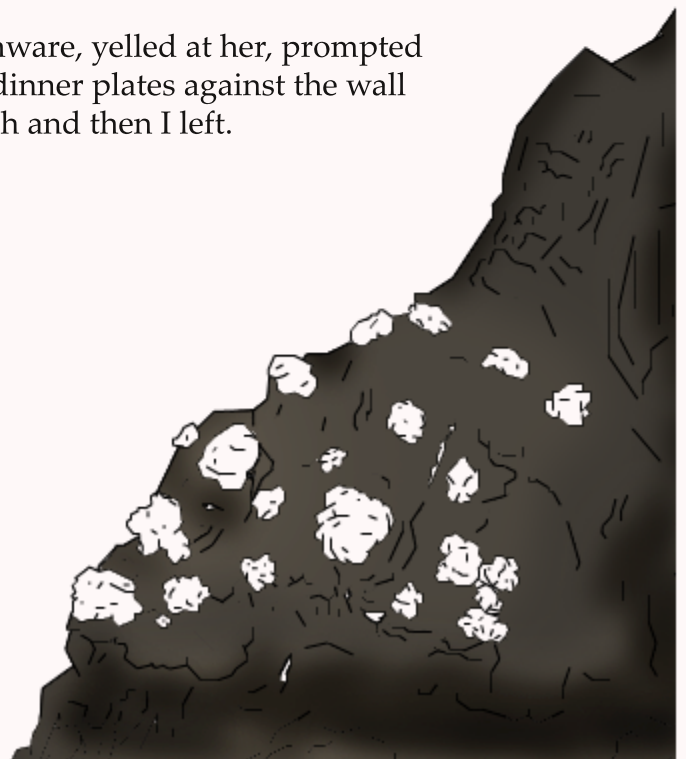
"Just walking."

"A bit cold for a morning walk, I should say."

"You're out here."

"I'm old...I can't feel nothin'."

Jacob couldn't help but laugh, "So you just admiring the ocean?"



"I am. My father was a fisherman. I tried it myself but I never could get my sea legs. I can still admire her...the deep blue, the bumpy waves, the smell...It's architecture, by God."

Jacob realized the old man was offering his mind a distraction from self-reflection/loathing, so he walked closer to him and leaned on the rail, trying out the view from the pier. They stood together in silence for a few seconds; then he offered the old man a query:

"You married?"

"I was. She's gone now."

"I'm sorry. How long?"

"A week."

"Damn."

"Married thirty years. Good years. Happy years. Happy life." — another silent interval — "How about you?"

Jacob shook his head, "I can't keep a woman six months, buddy."

The old man gave him a confident pat on the back, "Ah, you're young. Before Allison, my track record wasn't anything to be proud of either."



"That's just it, though. This girl...she's wonderful, man, she really is. It's me that's all fucked up." Realizing what he said, he fidget-glanced at the old man, "Sorry...I-"

"My pop was a fisherman, son. Ain't the first time I heard that word."

Jacob eased, "Anyway...I'm too stubborn. I always want it my way, and I never give an inch. That's my problem. I'm not always right. No matter how much I feel I am, I'm not. But try getting me to see that in the middle of something. I'll just wig out and smash plates and ruin a day."

"A bit early to be smashing dinner plates, isn't it?"

Jacob snickered humorlessly, "Dishes from last night's dinner were still on the table. That's basically what started the argument. God, makes me sound crazy."

A raised eyebrow response prompted Jacob to rub the back of his neck nervously.

"I guess it's all still pretty fresh. You can probably tell."

The old man pulled a Marlboro pack from his coat "I been there, alright, son. There's a blender in my garage that can testify to that. Smoke?"

"Just quit."

"Good man, nix the shit when you're young."

The old stranger lit up; the smell of tobacco hit Jacob's nose.

"On second thought, I could really use one."

"Thought so. God knows how many of these damned things I've sparked over a woman myself."

Jacob took his first drag, "But you got married. You stayed married. Thirty-something years, man! That's great! You found her, you kept her. I found her and I keep pushing her away."

He looked out at the water, "It'd be so easy to just jump in and be done, you know? I think that's what attracts people to the sea. They can get lost in it. They can disappear."

Narrowing his brow, the old man slid a step closer. Jacob could smell his Old Spice.



“Son,” he said quietly, “You ain’t gonna lose her. You’ve found her, and she ain’t going anywhere. You know it before you marry, before you move in. You know it. Now, that don’t mean you don’t need a little reminding once in a while.”

“Which, I guess, is where you come in.”

Another thick chuckle, “I guess so. In any event, you know she’s the one...right?”

“I...think so.”

“Ah, you know. You feel it, deep. Deep like this broad sea,” he stretched out his hand in a dramatic gesture, “that’s what you wanna dive into, boy. That’s where you get lost.”

Jacob smiled. It was all a little corny, sure, but there was peace in what this guy said. He needed to hear it.

“I’m Jacob.”

“Wesley.”

They shook hands. Even his grip was comforting.

“So...how much longer?”

“How long’s it been?”

“About forty minutes, I guess.”



"You too." And with that, Jacob departed. He felt much more at ease, now. Maybe what they said was true: talking does help. The old man knew where he was coming from, and yet he had had a long and happy marriage. That could be him too; a real man lost in the waves of real love. He wouldn't let her slip away. He'd hold tight. Maybe he'd be giving out advice to young men someday, like a crazy old sage in a movie, or just standing on a pier in the chill of the morning.

It was a little ridiculous, but it felt right for the moment. Jacob spent the rest of his walk home serene.

The old man looked out at the sea again. Closing his eyes, he took in a deep, meaningful breath of the cool salty air, and smiled. He looked left and right, securing his solitude. Climbing the railing, he looked up to the sky for an hour-long second. The gulls were flying overhead. Closing his eyes, he could hear the faint dance of the waves below.

"You'll be fine without me, Allis. You'll be just fine."



Last Caress

By Leah Chaffins

"I've been looking over your file. The only thing I don't understand is why?"

"Nothing is simple, nothing ever," she said as she tried to move her arms. She looked across the table at the doctor. She knew before he had asked what he wanted; they all wanted the same thing. They were all dirty head-men in crisp suits and cheap shoes. If he took off his jacket she would see the nearly-invisible outline of a white t-shirt under his button-up dress shirt. They were all the same. They asked the same questions, took the same notes, and smiled the same smiles.

"I bet you like this...seeing a woman tied up." She shook her hair back over her shoulders and looked seductively at the man. She really wanted to scratch her face, and her inability to move her legs was causing her lower back to ache. Behind her calm face she grimaced at the stale scent of the institution. It smelled like generic pine cleaner and sweaty people. She stared intently at the doctor, occasionally hooding her eyes, and biting at her bottom lip.

"You will find that I am quite immune to your games, Ms. O'Conner. Now, please, tell me why?" The man pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. She could see the glasses needed adjustment, and could tell he kept procrastinating the fix. He had a new passion. She was sure he could actually feel the hunger that ate at his curiosity. She was betting he felt highly doubtful that she would answer his questions as the list of respected psychiatrists that had visited before him was substantial. She had refused to answer their questions so odds were high she wouldn't answer his. He wasn't going to let that stop him from trying. "Just start at the beginning," he said.

The woman chuckled. "Many have asked, but I like you. I think that if I ever get out of this mess, I might like you a lot." The woman looked at the man the way a lioness eyes its dinner. She leaned against the chair stretching her back. She smiled at him smugly when she caught him looking.



She waited until he looked away, down at the floor, and shifted unconsciously in his seat. "My reason is one last caress. Do you have any children?"

"That's a personal question," he said.

"What you are asking me is a personal question," she said.

"No. I do not have children."

"Would you like to have a baby? With me?" she said. Her smile was sinister.

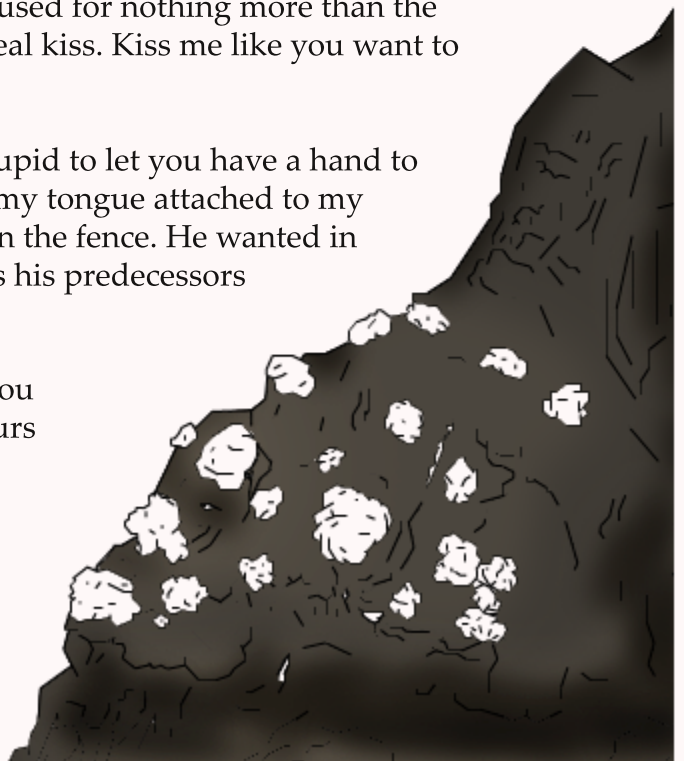
The man again shifted uncomfortably in his chair. She noticed that he had turned a little pink over the course of the last few minutes. She rolled her eyes as she thought about the predictability of these encounters. "Here's what I know, Doc. I know that my case is the big break you are hoping for. I am probably a book deal, and your career is flagging; you're graying at the temple; time has become your enemy. You've convinced yourself that if you can figure me out, then you will become renowned in your field. You started out wanting to be in the big leagues, making the big money, working the high profile patients, and life wouldn't cut you a break. I come along, and you think, 'this is it. This is my shot.'" She paused. "I can make that happen." The lines sounded rehearsed as she had said them so many times before.

She watched as the man sat taller. "You know, the camera in here is broken. I am not supposed to know that, but I do." She paused for nothing more than the dramatic effect. "I want a cigarette, and a kiss--a real kiss. Kiss me like you want to know my secrets."

"That is not going to happen. I would be stupid to let you have a hand to hold a cigarette, and I won't be kissing you. I like my tongue attached to my mouth." He sounded sure, but she knew he was on the fence. He wanted in her head in a bad way, and yet he answered just as his predecessors had.

"You hold the cigarette for me, and when you kiss me, only my tongue will leave my mouth. Yours can stay put."

"I don't think so. I like my job," he said the words spoken to her so many times before.



“No problem. Soon, another one will come along—every week or so a different one tries. Eventually one will do what I want...and he will get the golden ticket.” She rolled her head back and looked up at the ceiling dismissing the doctor with indifference.

“One last caress, what does that mean?” he said. She laughed at the man, who was tenacious by nature, as he tried again. This was neither new, nor common.

The woman continued to stare indifferently at the ceiling, saying nothing. The clock which sat inside a wire cage ticked away at the silence. It hung on the wall behind her and so she had no idea how long he sat waiting. Finally, she heard his chair push back, and shortly after the door buzzer went off, and the click of it locking as it shut echoed through the room.

She sat counting the tick-ticking of the relentless clock. 342, 343, 345. Again, she heard the buzzer and the opening of the door. When she looked over, to her surprise the doctor was lighting a cigarette. He pulled his chair in front of hers and held it to her mouth. She inhaled deeply, savoring the richness of the burning leaf. He held the cigarette for her as she slowly smoked it to the butt. She exhaled, “Now, kiss me.”

He leaned in and placed his mouth over hers. She slid her tongue into his mouth caressing his tongue, his gums, his teeth. He pulled back, and she softly bit his lower lip just to remind him that this was her game. He rubbed his lip and nervously said, “Your turn.” He set a digital voice recorder on the table that had originally been between them pressing the controls to begin their conversation.

“One question first, will you put the kiss in your book?” The doctor turned red at her question, and fiddled with the controls of the machine, restarting it. She sat staring at him long enough to see impatience creep into his face. Almost there. She sat a little longer until she saw him questioning whether she was going to uphold her end of the bargain.



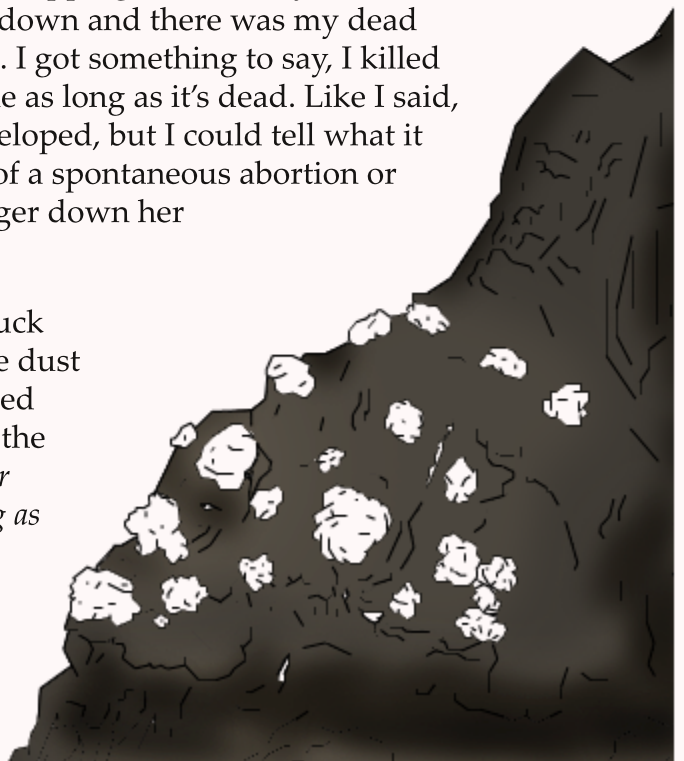
She sighed, and smiled, "Golden ticket time."

"The first one was in Nebraska. I picked him up at an all-night diner. I was already four months pregnant, and needed some cash. It wasn't new to me; I prostituted when my cash ran short. We got in his truck cause he said he knew of a place not far from town that would fit our needs."

The doctor noted a change. Her sophisticated, husky voice had changed into a small town Midwestern drawl. "On the ride out he stuck in a home-burned CD and lit a joint. Being pregnant, I told him no thanks when he offered me a hit. I had to look out for the little one in me. He drove us out to the middle of nowhere, and pulled over on an old dirt road. He sat smoking the weed and watching me as I worked at getting my jeans off in the small cab. He had been all soft and sweet up to this point, but once we began having sex that all changed. He was rough, kept saying he wanted his money's worth. I told him he was hurting me, but he didn't care. He said whores don't hurt. After that he drove into me harder. It seemed he drove as hard as he could. Finally, the pain was just too much, and I began screaming, which made him laugh. I felt something rip inside me, and a lot of wetness coming from down there. I knew he had killed the baby inside me. I really wanted my baby. I'd find a way to make a good life for us. She was gonna be my new beginning." Her face never changed, she just stared at the doctor to see how her story affected him. He sat writing notes on his notepad, smiling.

"It's all real clear. He jumped off me, his maleness dripping with bloody water. He started screaming obscenities at me, and I looked down and there was my dead baby on the truck seat. The Misfits started singing. I got something to say, I killed your baby today. And it doesn't matter much to me as long as it's dead. Like I said, I was only four months, and she wasn't really developed, but I could tell what it was. I was so shocked; I mean, I had never heard of a spontaneous abortion or even conceived of such a happening. I ran one finger down her slick little cheek. *Come sweet death, one last caress.*

"He reached down and tossed my baby out the truck door like she was a piece of trash. I can still see the dust scatter around her as she hits the ground. He looked out the open door and stared at her as if she were the monstrosity. *Well, I got something to say, I raped your mother today, and it doesn't matter much to me as long as she spread.*"



I sat up, grabbing my jeans. He had come around to the other door, driver's side, and climbed back in. All I could think was that he killed my baby. I looked down and saw a pen. You know the kind, plain ol' black stick pen." The woman stopped talking and looked over at the doctor. He was still smiling and writing feverishly on his notepad. Finally, he looked up, "That's horrible. Go on."
She marked his insincerity.

"So, I grabbed the pen, and plunged it as hard as I could in his neck," she said. Her legs pulled against the restraints as she imagined the doctor with a pen stuck in his neck, and she became acutely aware of her wetness.

She shook her head and continued, "He screamed and pulled back. The pen was still in his neck and I pulled it out and swung it again. It went deeper on the other side. Blood was spurting from him. I climbed on top of him and grabbed his hair, pulling his head back. The blood spurted up hitting the roof of the pickup cab, and fell back down like ruby raindrops. *'Sweet lovely death I'm waiting for your breath.'* I sang with the music. He was growing weak real quick like. I was still on top of him, feeling the warm rain fall on my face. I ran my hands over my cheeks and inhaled the heady scent of copper. Leaning forward, intoxicated with rage-like desperation, I licked his cheek, tasting my baby's vengeance. *Come sweet death, one last caress.* When he quit moving and I was sure he was dead, I jumped out of the truck and grabbed my baby off the dirt and ran through the trees that lined the road. I ran a long time. Finally, I came to a wide stream and washed his blood off me and my baby girl. The current was quick and I stood in the cold pushing

water numb from the waist down. I held her in my palm and put her limp body up to my breast. My nipple was too big for her small grey lips to get around, but I tried anyways. I willed her to breath; I prayed to suddenly feel her suckling life into her, but deep down I knew it was hopeless. I sang to her, *'One last caress, sweet death.'* Finally, I just let the current carry her down the stream.



"I tried to sleep by the stream, but I kept seeing my baby and hearing the song. I saw his face, the way he looked as he drove into me... and then the way he looked as the life left his eyes. I liked it. I liked it a lot." She looked over at the doctor.

"So, why did you do it again? Killed, I mean," he said.

"It felt so good, so of course I killed again. That's why I am here. They didn't put that death on me until I told them about it. You've got my file. You know this." She looked over at the man, and he was looking at her. Her voice had changed back to sophisticated, and her eyes were alive, pulsing with that ever-present predatorily gleam.

"Well, that does it for today. I will come back if I have more questions."

"You won't be back. You have your golden ticket. You know, I will get out, or get loose one day. When I do, I will find you. You will wake up in middle of the night with my arms around you, as I softly sing, *Sweet lovely death, I'm waiting for your breath. Come sweet death, one last caress.*" Again she paused. "I will let her refer to you as Daddy."

"You're crazy." The psychiatrist gathered his notes and voice recorder as quickly as possible so he could make for the door.

She laughed softly. "They didn't put me in a straight jacket for nothing." She looked down at the restraint pants she was wearing, and the loops hanging off them that locked her legs to the chair. She regretted not having bitten off his lower lip.

The doctor was buzzed through the door, and slammed it quickly behind him. Once again, she laughed softly. "Sweet dreams."



Stick

By Leah Chaffins

When Stick died, I buried him next to the barn by the oily spot. I remember tossing the shovels full of dirt on the black patch of earth as I dug the hole. When I laid him in the bottom wrapped in the faded blue baby blanket I made sure he was covered completely. When I tossed the shovels of dirt back in the hole, I cried. I was covering the last of something magic.

He'll always be with me in my heart, at least that what people said when they found out. In reflection, I know they were almost right. He's with me in my head. I hear him all the time, like the other day. I was texting a lady I know, and I heard him bark. It sounded so real that I actually jerked around as if he was there.

The bad part is that sometimes at night I hear him crying, whimpering, and howling, the way he did when he died. I miss Stick a lot. Stupid Damn Dog.

It's Connie's fault really. Connie the cunt. We were happy; we dated for a couple of months and took our vows in front of the JP. She had moved out on the farm Grandpa had left me. My house isn't a big house, but it was big enough for Connie and me and the baby she eventually carried. When we found out she was having a boy, she wanted the baby's room painted pale blue. So I painted the room. She bought all kinds of stuff, toys and clothes. I dug around in the attic and found the old box of my baby stuff that mom had packed up when I was still a toddler. Inside the box was my old baby blanket that my mother had made for me back when she was pregnant.

The blanket made everything real for me. I saw myself tucking my son in at night and reading him stories as my dad had done with me before the car accident took him and mom away. Grandma, my dad's mother, had always said the accident was my mom's fault because she was a careless driver. There was a time when that had seemed very important to me, but with the approaching birth of my son, I no longer dwelled on the loss of the parents I barely knew.



I ran the fantasies through my head all the time. I saw my son and me kicking a soccer ball around the backyard as Stick ran with us, and even teaching him how to run the combine and harvesting the fields of wheat on the back ten acres. The tragedy of my youth grew farther and farther away as I felt myself really settling down into something comfortable. At night Connie and I would sit out on the old porch swing and talk about our future, and Stick would lie off to the side by our feet on the wood floor of the porch. Sometimes we would just swing softly and listen to the cicadas buzzing. It was best when we got out there at dusk and the fireflies would light up the thick line of trees around the house just like fairies flickering in the forest. I would think to myself that it was magical how beautiful and calm life was shaping out.

Then it happened. Connie was driving my old truck home, speeding as always. She hauled ass everywhere, just like the devil was chasing her. She took the curve down by the Wilson's place just a little too fast and lost control. The truck flipped and Connie was thrown out. By the time I got to the hospital she had already given birth to my stillborn son. He was just too small. He was just too early. Broke my heart—and Connie's too, but it was her fault.

Then came the months of silence. I couldn't look at her without knowing she had killed my son, and she couldn't look at me without feeling guilty. I saw it in her eyes. She knew what she had done. She would go out at night and sit on the old porch swing and cry. I would sit on the living room couch and watch her through the window. Stick would walk back and forth between us, not knowing where his place was with us not together.

Finally she snapped at me one morning as she was cleaning up breakfast. I was on my way out to work the field, and she said, "It wouldn't kill you to help me clean this up." It was her voice being all shitty-like that did it. I just couldn't take it anymore.

"You stupid baby killin' bitch," I said. "Who the fuck you think you are?"

I paused for a second at the shocked look on her face, and then I just let go.



“You lay up in this house all day eating Coco Puffs and crying while I work this entire farm by myself. All you gotta do is cook and clean. I think I am bein’ pretty damn nice letting you stay on after what you did. Don’t think I am gonna put up with your attitude and keep the house up, too.” I realized I had grabbed her around the neck at some point, and I slowly made myself release my fingers. She had an animalistic, feral fear in her eyes, and it made me happy.

I shoved her back against the counter and turned back towards the door. There was work to be done. The fields wouldn’t wait.

“I won’t be here when you get back,” she said softly as I pulled the door open.

I looked at her disgusted realizing she sickened me. “Gives a fuck.” I slammed the door behind me.

When I got back in from the fields that day, she was gone. She never came back. Even after all the papers where signed and the divorce settled, she never came back for anything. She gave up everything but her personal items. A week after she left Stick died.

I sat out on the porch swing one evening at dusk, and the fireflies were gone. It was too late in the season. I was just swinging thinking of how everything had gone south so quick. I was looking out at the yard where I had envisioned my son kicking ball with Stick and me. I felt like my insides where being torn out. I looked up at where the swing was still attached to the ceiling as it had been for the last fifty years. My grandparents had sat in this swing once upon a time. At just that moment Stick came out dragging that old baby quilt. He dropped it on top of my work boot and then laid his head on top of it. Stick and the old blanket were all that was left of what could have been.



I got up and walked out to the barn carrying the blanket. Stick followed—I knew he would. I took a shovel from the corner and in one fluid motion wacked Stick upside the head. It knocked him silly. He didn't see it coming at all. I hit him again and again. You'd think that he would have growled or fought back, but he didn't. He howled and whimpered, and died.

With each shovel full of dirt I threw on covering Stick's body I hated Connie more. Her actions had taken my son's life, and because of that, now I had lost my dog. Connie had ruined everything.



Stranded

By Steven Arter

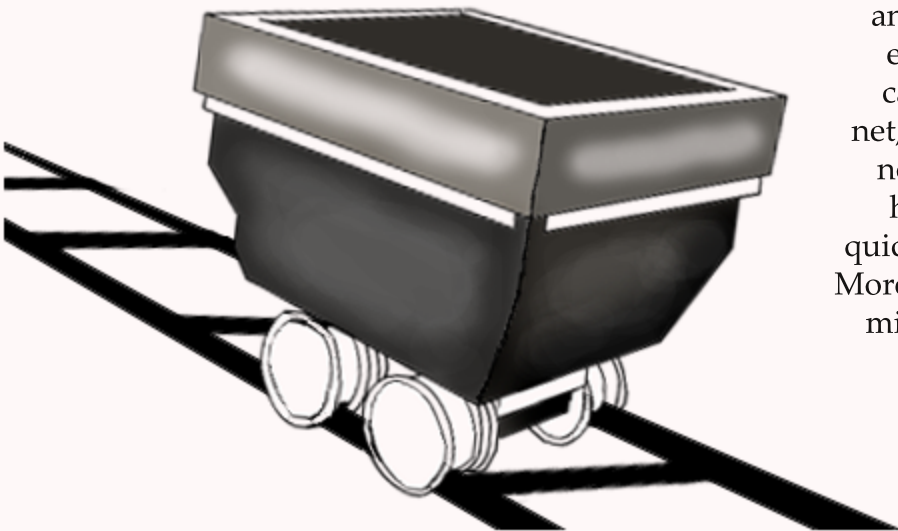
Food has become scarce. The goods that weren't spoiled from the salt water that drifted ashore with me have run out, and I've been having trouble with the fishing nets. Something keeps ripping through it. Some sea turtle or something that has a decent jaw. My water rations are nearly depleted, and it hasn't rained for a month. This is my last notebook, and my last pen is starting to run out of ink. I'm running out of time. I know I've written about it in the past, but now I think it might be my only option left to retain some sense of dignity; I will kill myself soon.

If I wait any longer, I'll die some unpleasant, natural death. Starvation? No. Most likely dehydration first. Unless it rains. But even then, I'm out of food, so it's not like starvation isn't an option. The nights have been getting colder. Exposure is still in the mix as well. No, if I want any say in my death, if I want to go quick, without suffering, without misery, I need to take matters into my own hands. But how?

Day 49

Searched the island. Found vines strong enough to use in a hanging. I had to stand on the fallen, charred coconut tree to reach them. The only coconut tree on the island. Maybe it was hit by lightning during some storm before the crash. Who knows how long it's lain here. I went through the coconuts quickly, but I still use the shells to catch rain water. But I also found a sign that it might not be over yet! Climbed further down the cliff on the Eastern side of the island. There's a pool of water below it. Dark, dark blue, almost black in the

middle. A deeper pool of water than anywhere else on the island. Maybe even an entrance to an underwater cave. Going to attempt to patch the net, then try my luck in the pool. Still no clouds in the sky. Makes the sun hot. I go through my water rations quicker. Not too bad at night, though. More stars out here than HOME. I still miss HOME. I wonder if they're still



searching for me, or for any survivors of the crash. I promised Penny that flying was safe. I told her Daddy would be back in a few days. Just one of many lies parents tell children.

I still need a decent method. Hanging leaves too many variables. A broken neck followed by hours of choking, the vine breaking and the whole thing being a failure. Plus, I don't want my body dangling by a tree, like some hunter's game from Home, with the sun cooking me as I decompose. That's not how I want to be found. If I can't be found alive, I don't want to be found at all.

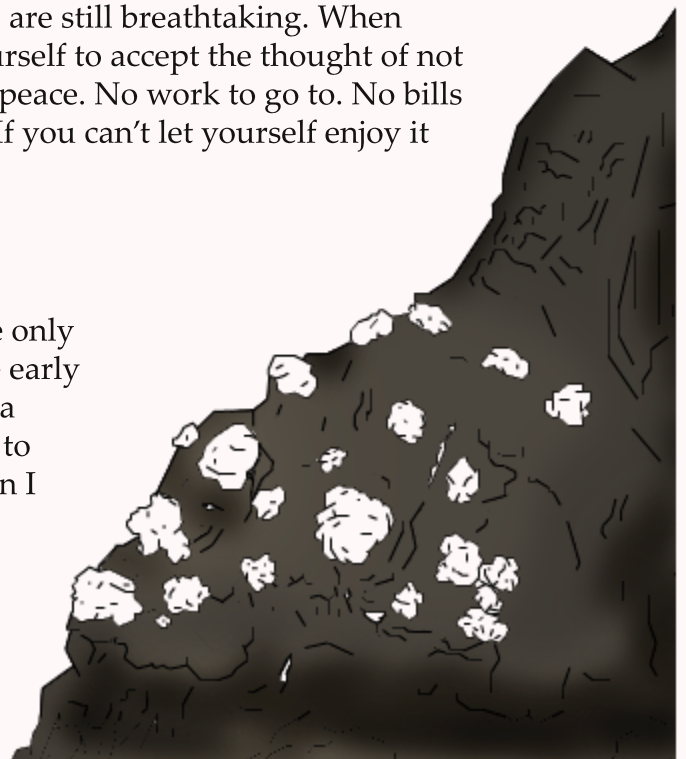
Day 50

I must be going crazy. All this grim talk of killing myself! Reading back on the pages, I see how easy I give up. Viv was right; I give up too quickly, at the first sign of adversity. Just got in the dumps. Understandable. Stranded is stranded.

The net worked! A new personal record, seven fish! Need to keep this rationed, and keep using my lucky spot. And the luck doesn't end. My dinner fire is keeping me warm, and the moon is haloed by a ring of clouds. Grandma Self taught me that that means it will rain soon. Never proved wrong before. Put out the coconuts to catch water. Found a new spot on the cliff to wait out the hottest parts of the day. A good place to think. A rock jutting off the side provides shade to the boulder below it. There's a rock there, smooth and comfortable to sit on. Great view of the deep pool and the ocean. You'd think I'd get tired of seeing the ocean. The tide is still soothing, and sunrises and sunsets are still breathtaking. When you've got the essentials, and if you can allow yourself to accept the thought of not seeing friends and family again, you can feel true peace. No work to go to. No bills to pay. No traffic jams. Just me and my thoughts. If you can't let yourself enjoy it once in a while, you lose your grip quick.

Day 51

Writing from my new thinking spot. It's the only place not completely rain soaked. The storm came early in the morning. Took the closest thing I can get to a shower. My beard is thick, and my hair is starting to dread. My pen is fading faster than I thought. Soon I won't be able to write anymo



Day 83

A body washed ashore; I assume someone else from the crash. He had a pen on him. His wallet said his name was Blake Volkmann. Blake was missing a leg. He's covered in fish bites. I set his body back out to sea. The smell was too strong. I kept his wallet, his pen, and a bundled up Ziploc bag I found on him, holding one cigarette. He must have put it there when the pilot warned us to fasten our seatbelts. I haven't smoked in 27 years. Still couldn't part with it.

There are pictures in his wallet. One of him behind the wheel of a Mustang. Another one with him in a tux next to his bride, both of them glowing under all the lights. Viv and I didn't have a formal wedding. No one was there when we signed the papers at the courthouse. She said she didn't mind, that that was how she wanted it. Small, more personal. She said it was more romantic. I could always tell she was lying. We never had the money. If I get back HOME, I'm making that up to her.

Day 84

No luck with the net today, but I still have enough fish for today and tomorrow. Hopefully the well hasn't run dry. Water rations might soon, though. Went overboard with the rain water I collected, didn't think to pace myself.

I love the rock I sit on to think. Words come to me quicker when I'm here. I can concentrate more. And I can remember things from HOME more clearly. It's like I'm storing my memories in the rock, and can come look at them whenever I want.



Penny was Daddy's girl from the moment she was born. I remember coming HOME for a lunch break one day. Viv was reading on the couch. Penny was lying in the floor, looking at her own reflection, quietly. I started talking to Viv when I got in. Penny heard my voice and turned her head. She started babbling at me. It was the first time she welcomed me HOME. I hope I get another chance to be welcomed HOME.

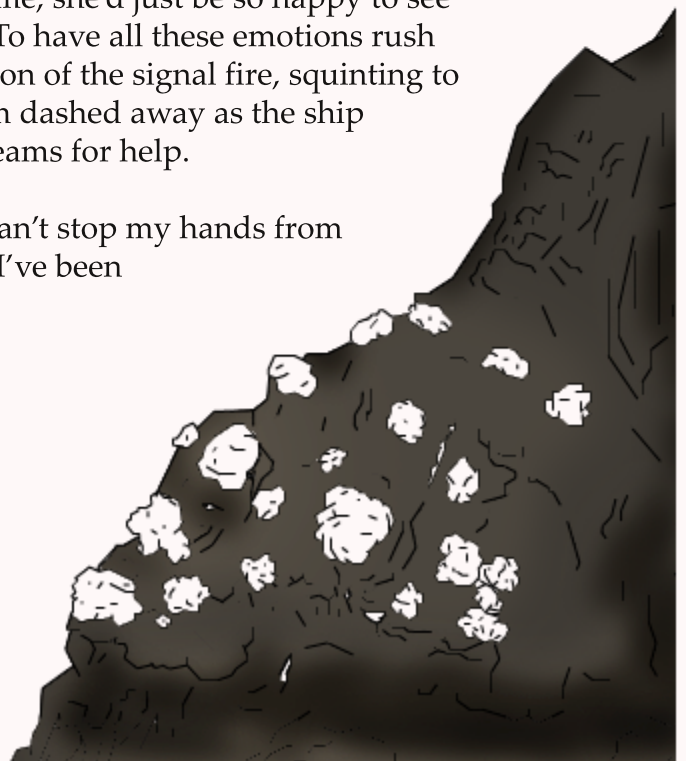
Day 85


The net's gone. Something big enough got caught in it and didn't care. Brought vine from the Western side of the island to my rock to make a new one. Down to a day's worth of water; I tripped and spilled one of my last coconuts. Food gone, but hunger hasn't set in yet. You get used to going without here. I'm going to stop writing daily, try to conserve ink and paper. Don't know how long I could be here.

Day 94

I spotted a boat in the distance. Lit a signal fire to try to draw its attention. Screamed until I couldn't anymore. It looked like it got closer for a bit. I stared out at it until my eyes started to blur. It never came. I got my hopes up. I forgot how crushing that is. To see a light at the end of the tunnel, to think that it might all be over, that soon I'll be walking up the sidewalk to HOME. To open the front door and see Penny smile at me. To hold Viv again. She'd cry. She might even be mad at me, making her worry like this. But she'd forgive me, she'd just be so happy to see me again. But not nearly as happy as I would be. To have all these emotions rush inside of me, my vision blurring from a combination of the signal fire, squinting to see the boat, and my own tears. Then to have them dashed away as the ship disappears in the distance, never aware of my screams for help.

Hungry. Thirsty. The net won't stop unraveling. Can't stop my hands from shaking long enough to tie it. I can't live like this. I've been





thinking again. Suicide is once again becoming the only option I have. My luck has run out. But now things are different. I know how to do it now. I'm going to take the vines and tie them to my memory rock, then around my waist. I need to carry it to the top of the cliff, then jump into the deep pool. I'll cradle my memory rock as I let myself drop off. I'll feel the refreshing air whip over my exhausted body as I fall, still clutching my memory rock. Close to the end of the fall, I'll let go of the rock, so I have a few seconds of falling with my arms free to spread out.

I'll hit the water. It'll hurt, but it'll also be cool and refreshing. I'll feel the salt burn in my eyes as my memory rock drags me down into the deepest part of the ocean around the island. It will take days to carry my rock to the top. But in the end it'll be over soon. No use drawing it out anymore.

Day 95

Started carrying my memory rock up the cliff today. Only fell once. I lost my footing and fell forward, landing on my memory rock. It knocked the breath out of me. I had to lie under the baking sun until I regained my breath. I leaned my head against the side of the rock and let it whisper one of my memories into my thoughts.

For the briefest seconds, I was back HOME. It was shortly after Penny was born. It was late at night, and she was crying. It was my turn. I got out of bed; Viv stirred, but remained asleep. I fed Penny, then watched her as she drifted back to sleep. I looked at her tiny hands as I listened to her breathing. As I stood there in the dark, looking over her asleep in her bassinette, I thought of the future;

Christmas mornings, school plays, her first trip to the movies. I felt a chill run down my spine as another future even crept into my thoughts; she's going to date someday. How would I ever handle that? What will I do? Viv came and stood at Penny's doorway, watching me. She asked if everything is all right. She smiled and kissed me



when I asked her about sending Penny to a convent when she's old enough. She knew about my concerns, and had the same ones. But she could always make it better. She took my hand and led me back to bed.

I'll stop here today. Didn't get too far, but that's okay. My memory rock is heavy, and I'm not in any hurry to die.

Day 96

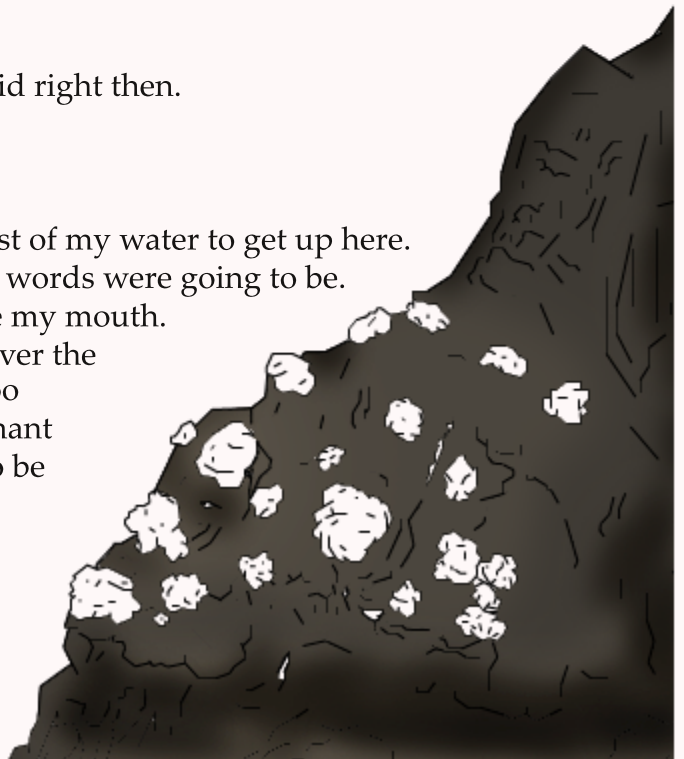
Almost there. Had to drag my memory rock during the last hours of travel today. It's getting heavier. I might have put too many memories in it while I was carrying it. Every time I stop to rest, when I set it down and sit on it, memories leak out and come back to my mind.

I had help winning Viv over. We share a mutual friend, one I told about the crush I had on Viv shortly after meeting her. Our friend always let me know when she was going to be around Viv, and always found a way to invite me. One night, we were playing a board game. We had to be divided on teams. Our mutual friend had it all planned out. She invited her brother to come play with us, to be on her team, leaving Viv and me to form the other team. At one point, one teammate had to hum, and the other had to guess the song. Viv is competitive, and didn't want the other team to listen as she hummed, in case they were going to cheat. So she pulled me away from the kitchen table we were playing at into one of the corners. She leaned forward and hummed in my ear.

Stairway to Heaven never sounded as good as it did right then.

Day 97

Sitting on my rock on top of the cliff. It took the rest of my water to get up here. The whole time I could only think of what my last words were going to be. Not what I write here, but the last words to escape my mouth. Should it be for Viv? Penny? How can I pick one over the other? And I can't just mention my family, that's too vague, open to too many interpretations. No poignant quote will do, either. I don't want my last words to be someone else's.



And beyond the message of the words, the actual right words must be used. This sentence has to be grammatically perfect, it's meaning exact.

What a time to have writer's block.



The Monster Under My Bed

By Rebecca Craft

I close my eyes super tight, snuggle under my princess bedspread, and try to pretend that the monster isn't under my bed. I squeeze my eyes shut so tight that my head starts to hurt, but I still can't go to sleep. I know that the monster is down there, just waiting to make bad things happen. Mommy and Daddy say that a seven year old is too old to be making up stories about the monster. They never believe me, even though everything I tell them is true!

I feel the rails on my bed shake, and I know the monster is coming. Before I can pull the bedspread over my head, I see it's bright yellow fur peek over the bottom part of my bed. Mrs. Spangler, my teacher at school, showed us some pictures of some scary snakes that live in far away places. She said that the snakes have bright colors to warn other animals that they are bad. I wish that my monster lived in a far away place with them, so that they could be bad together.

"Eden..." the monster whispers with its high, scratchy voice. The monster is always careful not to be too loud, so that Mommy and Daddy won't hear it and wake up. Even though I'm tucked tightly under my covers, I know that the monster is sitting on the bottom of my bed, waiting for me to come out. The monster is small, but it has a lot of mean in it. Last week, it put bubble gum in my hair. Daddy said that it was an accident, that stuff like that happens all the time. Mommy had to cut off all of my brown hair so that it's short, like boys' hair.

"Eden... play with me Eden...please!" the monster whispers. I can feel it climb around on my bed, trying to wake me up. "Eden... please! Play with me!"

"Go away!" I roll onto my stomach and shove my face into my fluffy pillow. The monster never plays nice. It always steals my Barbie dolls and pulls all their heads off. Two days ago, I found my favorite tea set in my closet, all broken and smashed to pieces.



The monster rips the covers away from my head and puts its face super close to mine. It has a yucky sweet smell in its mouth. My face goes all frowny when I think about my Easter candy that I hid in my jammie drawer. All of it's probably gone by now.

"Eden, please...we'll have fun." The monster smiles a big, toothy smile. Its eyes are huge and green and make me get all squirmy under the covers. I want to get away, but I can't. I know that I can never get rid of the monster. Tommy Bridges, the boy across the street, has two monsters, just like mine. He says that once they know where you live, they never, ever, ever leave.

The monster holds up something in its claws. "I brought you a present tonight! See!" It shoves a chocolate chip cookie under my nose so that some of the chocolate smears across my top lip. "Bite! It's yummy!"

I bite off an itty-bitty bit and hope that the monster will be happy and go away. Then I take a big bite. Then I finish the cookie.

The monster smiles. "I have more cookies." It climbs down, out of my bed and pulls out a cookie jar from my closet. Suddenly, I'm not tired any more, and my tummy feels hungry. So I climb out of my bed too and take more cookies. After a little bit, me and the monster get thirsty.

"Want milk," the monster growls, and the crumbs fly from its mouth and into my face. "Go to the fridge!" I really want milk, too. So me and the monster leave my room and tiptoe down the hallway to the kitchen. As sneaky as I can, I pull open the refrigerator door and try to take the big jug of milk. Then, it falls on the floor and spills all over.



“Ooops!” The monster giggles and hides underneath the table. I try to clean it up fast with mommy’s new table cover, but Daddy gets here fast and turns on the light.

“What are you... oh, you missy are in big trouble!” He gives me the angry eyes, just like he does to Otis, our dog, whenever he pukes his dinner up all over the carpet.

“But the monster under my bed told me to do it!” I point underneath the table, but the sneaky little monster is gone!

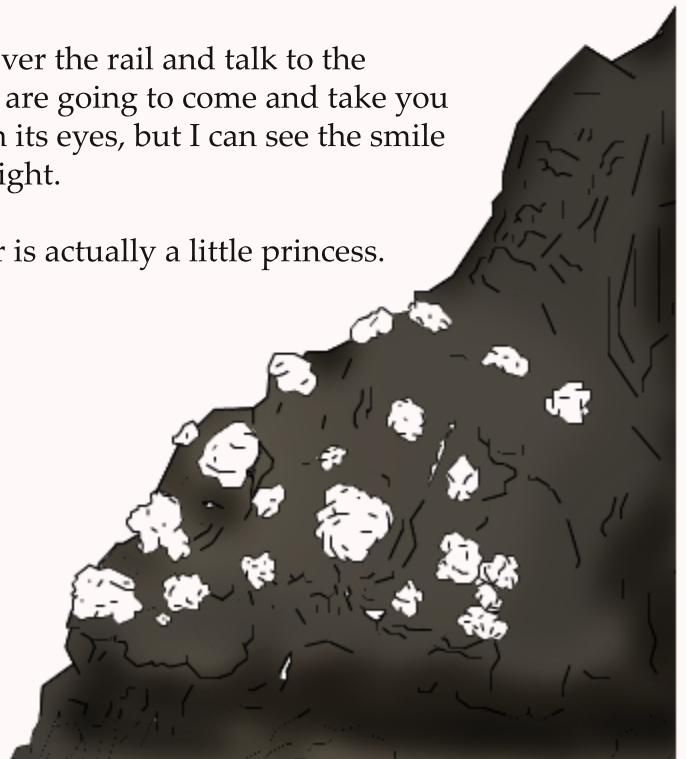
“Eden, how many times have I told you to stop calling your little sister names!” Then he points back down the hallway to my room. “March!” I try to put on my sad face, but Daddy is still mad.

When Daddy opens the door to my room, he sees the cookie jar and gets even madder. When I try to tell him that the monster is the one who stole the cookies, his face gets all scrunched up and red and scary.

“Eden, don’t lie! Meggie is only four. She’s doesn’t know how to get to up into the cabinet.” Daddy opens the door wider, and I see the monster on the bottom bunk with its eyes closed, all super still. “Don’t try to pawn this off on your little sister. You’re too old for that. No TV for the rest of the week.” Then Daddy sends me back to bed.

After I climb up onto my top bunk, I lean over the rail and talk to the monster one last time. “Someday, flying monkeys are going to come and take you away for being so bad!” The monster doesn’t open its eyes, but I can see the smile on its face droop down. I hope it wets the bed tonight.

Mommy and Daddy think that the monster is actually a little princess. But they’ve never seen it in the dark.



Looking Up Sky

By Lucy Tonemah

Many warriors on horseback came into view with several captives walking next to the horses.

The warriors were welcomed as conquering heroes again keeping the tribe from being enslaved by the enemy. Those who sacrificed their lives for the tribe will be honored in a special ceremony. The men held a ceremony of prayer thanking the Creator for their survival in the battle. The captives were separated from one another and their hands were tied behind their backs. They sat on the ground. Their fate would be determined by the chief who had proven to be fair and just. The captives would go to the family or person who needed the most help.

A young captive named Lightfoot was a slave to the chief. She had been given to him when she was young and he raised her as a daughter. She carried a container of water for them to drink. As she scanned the captives, she saw a young girl, one woman, two children, two older men and one young man. Her hand trembled as she placed the containers to their mouths. She saw the fear in their eyes at not knowing what would happen to them. She also saw the thankfulness as they had their fill of water. As her eyes searched each face, one young man was different. He seemed to be the angry one not wanting to accept her offer of water. She frowned at him to show him her displeasure at his angry facial expression. Again she placed the container to his mouth, and he turned his head. As she pondered his action, she threw the water in his face and proceeded to go back to get some food for them. She realized it would be difficult to communicate with the captives as she was also from a different tribe.

As the dutiful daughter of the chief, the slaves would be under her care. She brought a basket of food and another container of water. The basket contained several pieces of dried buffalo meat. She also put some dried fruit in for the children.

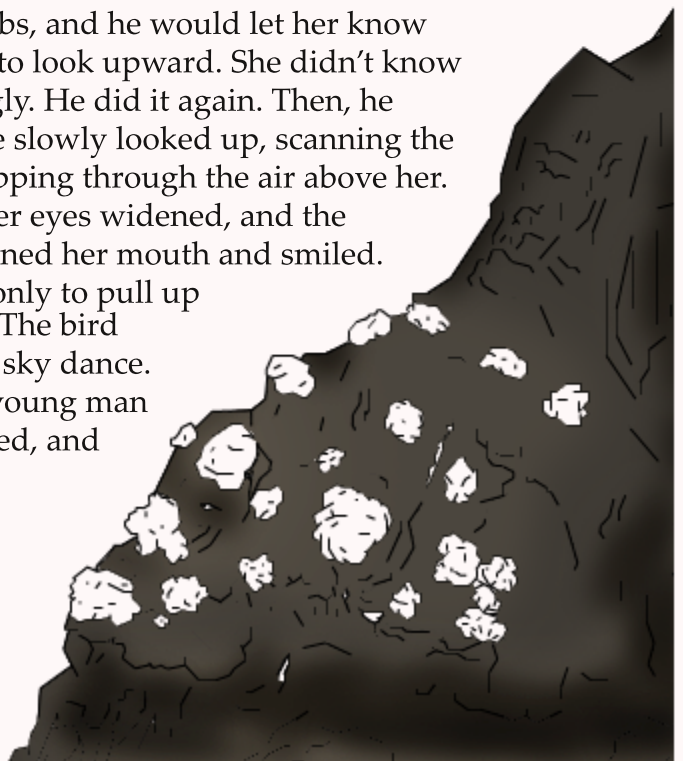


As she placed the meat in their mouths, she realized how much they would have to depend on her to survive. It was a new feeling of authority. She decided she could be mean to them if she chose to be. Or she could have compassion and concern as their new keeper. She wondered why her father had given her this big responsibility. Maybe it was a test.

She continued to take care of the new slaves by helping them as they adjusted to their new owners. The children were placed with a family that had lost their own children, the woman became a grandmother to another family. The young girl was to marry one of the returning warriors. The two older men were put to work helping the younger men in two families. The chief determined the young man to help Lightfoot in the forest to pick berries and nuts, gather medicinal herbs, carry wood, and water .

One day while setting a trap in the forest, the young man saw a bird with long black-gray tail feathers flying above him. As time went on, he listened to the bird's song as it flew between the trees. He began to mock the sound of the bird. After several failed attempts at imitating the bird, he gave up. He felt as though the bird was laughing at his attempts to sound like him. One more time to see if it will answer me, he thought. This time the bird returned his chirp. As he whistled again, he thought, Come here. I will not hurt you. This happened time and time again until the bird flew down to rest on his shoulder. His fellow captives believed the bird to be of the Spirit. Soon, he could no longer keep it a secret from Lightfoot.

She would be with him today to gather herbs, and he would let her know somehow. He looked at her and nodded his head to look upward. She didn't know what he was doing and looked at him questioningly. He did it again. Then, he smiled at her and nodded his head to look up. She slowly looked up, scanning the sky. Then she saw it—the most beautiful bird—zipping through the air above her. The light from the sun seemed to make it glow. Her eyes widened, and the beauty seemed to take her breath away as she opened her mouth and smiled. She watched the bird fly up and dive back down only to pull up again. She had never seen anything like it before. The bird flew between the trees and performed a beautiful sky dance. After what seemed an eternity, she looked at the young man not realizing she was still smiling. Then he whistled, and the bird flew down and landed on his shoulder.



Every morning, she would sit with the young man that she named Looking Up Sky and they would watch the beautiful bird dance in the wind between the trees. Their eyes spoke words that could not be heard. Their hearts beat as one.

One day, as the bird flew down, Lightfoot lifted her hand for the bird to land on her finger. As she gently lifted it to her cheek, the bird rubbed his head on her cheek and made a soft chirping sound. Then it flew away. Soon, it became the secret between Lightfoot and Looking Up Sky.

Late one afternoon, Looking Up Sky heard his friend chirping. He followed the sound and came upon the fragile body of his friend. As Looking Up Sky gently picked up his friend, he seemed to hear the words, Quickly, take my tail feathers. They will protect both of you. Puzzled, he pulled the two tail feathers. With both feathers now in his hand, the bird glowed and disappeared. He looked at his empty hand and let out a piercing howl of agony and fell to his knees.



Lightfoot could see her father and the warriors running to the edge of the woods to see what was going on. Just then, the enemy tribe rushed into the village from the forest.

The chief and his warriors were ready for battle. The cry of Looking Up Sky alerted them in time to grab their weapons.

Just as Looking Up Sky got up from the ground and pushed Lightfoot to run, an arrow pierced him under his arm. As she took one step, she grabbed her heart and turned around only to see Looking Up Sky hit the ground. She turned to go to him and an arrow struck her. On the ground, her hand tried to reach for him as his hand stretched for hers. In his hand were the tail feathers of his friend. When her fingers clasped his hand and touched the feathers, a bright flash appeared.

Early in the morning, the sun's rays reflected the glow of two birds dancing in the wind between the trees.





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