

FOUNTAINS

.....

Twenty-ninth Edition



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Introduction

.....

Life is messy. It's sticky and gloppy like pancake syrup and white Elmer's glue; it's rarely smooth and soft. But even though it's bumpy and flawed, you know what we do? We grow up anyway. We find ways to overcome our obstacles. We learn to change perspectives.

No matter what life throws at us—whether it's embarrassment, confusion, change, fear, or loss—we survive. We take another breath, another step forward. There is a strength in humanity: an ability that God has created in us to be buoyant even in the deepest waters. And our strength, our resilience, is made perfect in Him. Through Christ, there is nothing we cannot overcome. We can embrace the messiness of life unafraid, knowing that in Christ we can pick up the pieces and keep building. It is because of Him that, when we are weak, we can be our strongest. Because of Him, we have the ability to overcome—to thrive—amidst the bruises and bumps of life.

In this twenty-ninth edition of *Fountains*, you'll read about mistakes, revelations, forgiveness, victory, highs, and lows. And you'll see this resilience, this ability to survive, that the human race has been granted through Christ. And we hope you see it in yourself. We hope that through these stories, essays, and poems, you are reminded that you, too, can survive. That you, too, are a part of this human strength. And we hope that you are reminded to look to Christ, knowing that in Him is our ultimate victory.

AnaBelle Eidson
Senior Editor

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Section One

GROWING UP







The Magnolia

.....

by Jessica Kabakjian

For two years, the magnolia stood in the back yard as a mockery of my failure.

A staple of any Southern child's life is the barefooted ascent into the perfect climbing tree. For me, this tree was a sturdy magnolia with large white blossoms that resided in our back yard.

I wasn't a very strong or coordinated child. In fact, I don't remember climbing my first tree until I was at least ten years old. At that time, getting down was much harder than getting up, and getting up was hard enough.

So when we moved from our small, treeless property to the larger, forestlike land next door, my goal became to conquer that magnolia with its sturdy widespread branches and dark canopy of fresh green leaves. Unfortunately, after several failed attempts to hoist myself into the monster tree, I counted my losses and put the tree out of my mind. Of course, if at first you don't succeed, you never will, right?

For two years, the magnolia stood in the back yard as a mockery of my failure. As an added laugh in my face, the conquering tree that had denied me the pleasure of ascending to its boughs insisted on dropping its dead leaves with the change of the seasons—forcing me to clean up after a tree I could not climb.

But the tree was oblivious. As the seasons changed—hot, cold, warm—the tree wasn't the only one shedding unsavory characteristics. With time, my clumsy, weak limbs

grew stronger, my body sprouted up, and my determination became less penetrable by the winds of defeat.

So it was that when I was twelve years old, the magnolia fell to my rekindled determination.

Having just witnessed the finale of my favorite cartoon series, I concluded that it was time to embark on my own adventures just as the characters had done. Gathering all my strength, I marched to the tree that had mocked me for too long. I latched onto the lowest limb, planted my foot on a protruding trunk knot, and hoisted myself through the air.

Within minutes, the tree that had conquered my spirit two years before fell to my determination. The boughs became my jungle gym, my resting place, my seat; the canopy, my solemn shelter and sacred shade.

From that day on, the magnolia was my personal haven. When I wanted to read, I went to the tree. When I wanted to be alone, the tree invited me into its solitude. In this wooden piece of the earth—this foe transformed

**“My dreams
for the future
reached out
to touch the
sky.”**

into friend—my first stories were written. In the conquered tree, my dreams for the future reached out to touch the sky.

To this day that tree stands as a testament of my childhood bliss. With roots spread deep into the earth, the tree is a reminder of the strength I discovered there as an uncoordinated child. As long as that old climbing tree stands, I will know I am welcome into its comforting arms; I will know that I can always return to the place that taught me to conquer life’s most complex challenges.

The magnolia.



Please Don't Fog My Glasses

.....

by Bethany Logsdon

That was my adversary as a teenager. Embarrassment.

Every teenager goes through that oh-so-blessed time of life when absolutely every emotion is magnified by at least five billion percent. Your boyfriend dumped you? A monsoon of tears floods the neighborhood. A car cut you off on the freeway? A lava of steaming fury burns through the driver's seat upholstery. Your mom busts out a golden oldie in Walmart's canned vegetable aisle? You melt the polar ice caps with the heat from your face.

That was my adversary as a teenager. Embarrassment. My face would flush, and I would become a shaking, nervous mess with literally any indiscretion. I was so determined to avoid embarrassment that I was practically a hermit between the ages of twelve and sixteen, only leaving the house when absolutely necessary.

My sixteenth birthday was a day of rejoicing. I received two boxes of contacts—one for each eye. This meant that if I got embarrassed, my glasses wouldn't fog up. Yeah, that actually happened—and still does sometimes. Don't ask me why; I don't know. I guess it's the heat from my face that does it.

That summer we started going to a different church in Casper, about an hour away. The church was wonderful, and the people were amazing. But one person

stood out more so than the rest—the pastor’s son, Evan. He was the cutest thing. He had dark hair and dark eyes, and he was smart and funny.

“He was the cutest thing.”

He tried to talk to me a few times, but, as I said, my face would flush and my glasses would fog, so he would just try to end the conversation quickly and walk away. I was sure he thought I was the biggest dork in the world.

That summer I also got my first dog. We’d had dogs before, but this was the first one that was actually mine. He was a miniature dachshund affectionately named Milo—not after the movie, but after a river in West Africa. We had another dog, Maggie, but she was Mom’s. And she was a poodle. I have always thought of the words *poodle* and *annoying* as being synonymous, but she was actually a pretty good dog. She limited herself to being annoying only on Wednesday mornings when the garbage man came to empty our dumpster. She would careen around the house, barking savagely. Being the passive-aggressive person that I am, I began to treat Wednesdays as not only garbage day but also mop-the-floor day. So unsteady was Maggie on slick tile that she would regularly slide right into walls and table legs. She would glare up at me as I wiped the tears of laughter from my eyes. If I had known what she was planning behind those brown eyes, I never would have mopped the floor again. Unfortunately, I didn’t know. I would have to be surprised—and mortified—along with everyone else when the day came for Maggie’s revenge.

Separately, Milo and Maggie were delightful little ruffians who simply had the occasional mishap. Together, they were Lucifer and Beelzebub, always feeding off each other’s bad habits and basically making our lives miserable.

Our lives got crazy busy toward the end of the summer when my sister, Jennifer, and her family of eight descended upon us for a month's vacation. This was still in the era when we paid upwards of \$3.50 for a gallon of gas, and our economic status forced us to drive to church on Sunday mornings, stay the day, and return home at night. The big question was what would we do with the dogs?

The pastor, his wife, and adorable Evan lived across the street from the church and graciously allowed us to keep the two "vermin"—as my step-dad later called them—in their enclosed back yard.

A pause for context. Together, Milo and Maggie were the canine embodiment of Harry Houdini. No cement, steel, or granite could hold them. They would simply laugh at our attempts to keep them confined; then they would skip lightly over, under, or through the blockade to freedom with a pause on the other side to wave a paw or blow a kiss. These two idiots would cross fire or water to annoy their owners and did so with more frequency than you would think possible for their size and athletic dexterity.

On one particular Sunday, our family woke with exuberance. Our church was hosting a summer mission's conference with families from around the globe. I think it's our military background that makes us more excitable than others when it comes to missions conferences. We love to hear about different cultures and learn how we can help missionaries succeed in their field. I, for one, had more reason than anyone else to be excited. I finally had contacts, and there was no way my glasses would fog up if Evan tried to talk to me today.

We arrived at church, unpacked six adults and six children (ages ten to five) from the van, and tossed the two dogs unceremoniously into the pastor's back yard with two Cool Whip bowls full of water.

Skipping gleefully and unwittingly into church, we anticipated a Christ-centered message of inspiration and conviction. After Sunday school, we slid into our pew while the piano invited us to worship. Luckily, I was able to sit on the left side of the pew—the best position for casting meaningful, fog-free glances toward the front row where Evan sat.

I can still see our twelve cherub faces gazing reverently upward at the pastor as he read the announcements. Little did we know that as we were preparing to soak up the Word, tiny paws were at work on the soft ground just a few hundred feet from us.

We finished the opening songs and the offering. Someone dimmed the lights, and the dramatic, soul-aching slideshow music was cued.

“The country of Sudan has 37.96 million people in it. Only 1.5 percent of these claim Christianity.”

“Mom! Milo’s in the church!” I heard Jennifer whisper loudly from the other side of the pew. My face instantly drained of color and my fingers turned cold and sweaty. Surely even my dog wouldn’t be stupid enough to—

Yet there he was, sauntering down the aisle, looking to and fro at his aghast audience and wagging his tail just as if everyone were delighted to see him. Believe me, we weren’t. As he approached our row, we threw plans back and forth at each other, diagramming how we would catch the beast. We couldn’t move too fast because he would run away. And which one of us would be the best one to go after him? Not Mom. He hated her. What about Jocelyn? After all, she was the youngest and least threatening. I certainly wasn’t going to get him. I was already shaking and sweating so much that his tiny dachshund body would slip right out of my hands, I was sure.



We continued to watch as he got closer. He was clearly still holding a grudge about being kept in the yard all day, as he gave us the barest hint of acknowledgment before flicking his head haughtily in the opposite direction.

That was enough for Mom. She was up and hurdling herself down the pew, tripping over what had originally been two nieces and four nephews, but had seemed to grow by at least fifteen children with more limbs than made sense and, honestly, more chaos than the situation called for.

“Grandma, what are you doing?” Joseph called out.

“SHHHH!” Jennifer leaned over and put a hand over his mouth.

“But what is she doing?” Jared asked, louder than his twin brother. Jennifer was running out of hands.

By now, Milo had made his way to the front row of the church and decided he had found a friend in the pastor’s

daughter, who, judging from her scream, did not share his sentiment. My heart stopped. Evan was sitting right next to his sister. Everyone knew Milo was my dog. My face burned. Thank goodness I was wearing contacts, or the fog would've suffocated me.

I watched my mother catapult her way down the aisle toward the altar. I had only seen her move that fast

“My heart stopped.”

one other time in my life—when babysitting a child who thought a slug would be a beneficial nutrient—but such was Mom's motivation at that point that nothing short of a solid barrel down the aisle would suffice.

She snatched Milo up by his red collar and swung him into her arms, clamping them down like a vice. She scorched her way back up the aisle and out to the vestibule, the breeze shuffling papers on the bulletin board.

Mom stopped at the entrance to the church. Maggie was busying herself creating murals on the window with her wet, slimy nose, biding her time until Milo came to open the door for her. When she saw the murder in Mom's eyes, she slowly wet her lips and curved her mouth into a smile—the very picture of innocence. When that didn't work, she added Bambi eyes. Still, Mom wasn't convinced and grabbed Maggie up in her other arm with no small amount of hostility.

Mom didn't come back to the service. My sisters and I passed notes to each other, betting money on the dogs' fate. I was disappointed that my first dog ownership hadn't lasted longer. I also, very keenly, felt a shadow slip over my romance life—cold, and impenetrably thick.

When church was over, we walked slowly out to the van. Well, my family walked slowly. I pretty much ran. I

didn't want to see Evan, and I definitely didn't want him to see me.

No one said a word to Mom who sat steaming in the driver's seat. There was no proof of life from the dog kennel in the back seat.

We buckled up and headed home. Eventually, I had to ask.

"Did you kill them?"

"I thought about it," Mom said.

"Oh."

And that was it. As we drove home, I did hear little scufflings from the back seat every so often, so I knew the dogs were alive—probably just mildly scarred. They would live. I, however, would not. I turned to the window. My life was over. Evan had seen how I raised my dog and knew I would be an unfit mother. On the other hand, I had faced the maximum amount of embarrassment a person could. And I had survived.

Surely nothing else would ever embarrass me again, right?



Leave It Behind

.....

by Abigail Schendel-Conway

Thirty past five, my patience past gone,
I heaved myself into the truck and slammed the door.
“Let it go,” my dad’s thirty working years said to my three—
It wasn’t so easy from the passenger’s seat.
The tires turned from gravel and touched the road.
“Don’t let it eat you up. Work is work, and when we leave,
We leave the trouble behind.”
I watched the waving trees whizz by,
Like a smeared painting brought to life.
I looked to my right and to my left, contemplating.
I took an angry phone call I had been holding
And dangled it out the window into the wind.
I loosened my fingers and dropped
The conversation. It clattered and clanked on the concrete.
Surprised, I looked at my dad.
He smiled, knowing the relief of unclenched fingers.
I grabbed innumerable complaints and threw them with force.

They ruptured and rolled on the road.
Thrilled with my success, I found more.
All my troubles from the day, I dumped on the road.
I looked in the rearview mirror
At all my troubles strewn in the street.
I smiled
And went home without them.







The Treasure's Treasure

.....

by Mariah Neely

The only problem was me—I wasn't invited.

Grandma's. El Paso, Texas.

It doesn't sound like a prison or a paradise, but it could be one or the other.

"I know you don't like this, but give the place a chance, huh?" Dad began. "I loved it here as a kid. I treasure it, and I'm sure you could too if you tried." I didn't know what to make of his advice, but I didn't have time to process it. Grandma Moira, dressed in a hot pink shirt that reached her knees, was coming our way.

I was to spend my summer with this borderline loony old woman.

Dad had told me that I was going to stay with my grandmother for the summer three days before sending me to her house. Now understand, like any twelve-year-old, I had my summer planned out to the second. I was finally old enough to go to the baseball camp in town, but all my plans crumbled with those four words. Grandma's. El Paso, Texas.

Dad said it was because Ada's family was having trouble. Ada, my dad's new wife, was nice, pretty, and she smiled a lot. Dad was happy with her. But "family trouble" really meant Ada's father wanted to see his new son-in-law again, so he paid their way to Boston for a visit.

The only problem was me—I wasn't invited.

Thus, Dad's brilliant idea came up, sending me off to a holding cell in the boondocks so I'd be taken care of, but out of the way.

Grandma and I stood on her porch and waved to my Dad and Ada as they left for Boston. If only Dad had pushed a little harder, I might have been allowed to go with them.

"Well, Bo," Grandma Moira said, "let's get you inside and settled in, huh?"

I nodded, not really sure what to say. Was crazy contagious? I hoped not. The last time I had even seen my grandmother was when I was four. Given any person's memory of themselves at that age, it'd be better to say I'd never seen my grandmother at all. Her voice sounded oddly high, but it somehow fit her. An odd voice for an odd woman, two peas in a pod.

Thankfully the house didn't look as crazy as its owner. In fact, the house was more like a mansion. It was white with black trim and maybe three stories—if you counted the attic I could only hope was there. The oddly large structure of the roof made me wonder how big the attic was if it existed at all.

The house had five windows on the first floor and eight on the second. That seemed promising. Many windows meant many rooms, right? With all that space, I could play hide and seek—by myself of course.

Grandma Moira started moving. She insisted on carrying my suitcase, which really meant dragging it up the steps and on to the porch.

I followed her to the door. Our steps sounded deep and menacing, like a bad omen. I shook my head, trying to get rid of the glum thought.

“Did you design the house, Grandma?” I asked as we walked inside. Grandma Moira smiled and eyed me over her shoulder.

“I didn’t design the house, nor the décor really,” she replied. Her tone was nostalgic, like she was reminiscing. Her eyes glazed over as she turned to look at me again. “Your great-great-grandfather built this house, and I’ve left everything the way he had it as best I could.”

“Did you inherit it?” I asked. The house was practically a museum; I loved museums. She nodded, and I smiled for the first time. “Must be nice,” I said absent-mindedly.

“Like a day without noogies!” she answered. “Follow me now.” She nodded toward the spiraling stairs and practically pranced up them. As we went up, I looked at the walls. They were narrow and made me feel claustrophobic, but the bright light from the chandelier above us helped it feel more open. I started counting the steps and almost ran into Grandma Moira when I reached twenty-six. She glanced behind to me—something she seemed to do a lot.

We stood on the landing, and she turned back to the door she had stopped at.

“Isn’t there a hall?” I asked. I’m sure I couldn’t have hidden my confusion if I’d tried.

“I’m a bit confused about that too,” she said as she swung the door open. Grandma Moira ushered me into the hall beyond the door. “I think the point was to be able to close off the upstairs in the winter,” she shrugged, “not as much surface area to warm. Saves money.”

“Makes sense, I guess.” Despite the narrow hall, the upstairs was huge. Grandma Moira led me down to the end of the hall and opened the door that met us there.

“This’ll be your room. I thought you might like this one best.”

I cocked my head to the side. “Why is that?”

She looked behind to me again, smiling a knowing smile. “Just a hunch really. This room faces east, and the window frames the sunrise better than any other room in the house.”

Grandma’s kindness lightened my mood, but I didn’t say anything.

“I’ll see about supper then. Hope you’re hungry,” she said. She left the room and hummed as she waltzed down the hall.

Trying to get my mind off being deserted here, I looked around the room. It was clean and spacious. Its olive-green walls and dark wood floors grew

“I’d never seen a trunk so big before.”

on me after a minute or two of looking at them. Suddenly, I felt oddly at home. I liked the room. The window Grandma Moira spoke of was about as wide as I was tall, and it had a small bench beneath it. That was cool; I could get used to that. I listened to my steps as I walked about the room, liking the way the floor made my footfalls sound deep and strong.

A full bed rested against the left wall along with an antique wooden desk opposite the bed on the right wall. Flanking the desk sat two deep brown chairs along with two lamps on the desk. I noticed another door to my left—a closet, I could only guess.

I opened the door and was met with a screen of black. Like the mouth of a deep cave, it looked spooky at first. I put my hand on the inside of the left wall and immediately met a light switch. Flicking it on, I saw a walk-in closet.

A wooden trunk sat at the back of the closet, facing the door. I’d never seen a trunk so big before. Curiosity ate at me. Excitement filled me. Smiling, I entered the closet to

look more closely at the trunk. It was a deeper brown wood than the floor it sat on. The border and locks of the trunk glistened a stained greenish hue.

It was unlocked. I felt the smile tugging at my mouth get bigger. I noticed the glossy smooth sound that the trunk made when it opened.

I sat down in front of it, and my eyes narrowed as I saw an off-white sheet over the top of whatever was inside. I removed it and flinched as dust flew up in my face. Waving it away, I looked inside again.

Three books and some folded clothes. That round thing in the far-left corner was probably a compass, nestled behind some papers on the other side of the trunk. Books, I figured, were my best bet.

To my delight, the books were photo albums. *Jackpot!* I'm sure I was grinning like a loon. Maybe crazy *was* contagious. The first page of the album was a family portrait. One person in the picture immediately drew my attention, causing me to do a double take. I blinked a few times to clear my eyes, but the image stayed the same.

The man in the center of the photo looked like Dad. He wore a suit, probably black, since it was a black and white photo, but he looked satisfied. I glanced at the other people in the photo, and I saw a woman beside the tall man in the center. She had big eyes and curly hair. Maybe she was his wife.

"Bo!" Grandma called, "Dinner's on!" I put the album down carefully and stood up. I patted down my pants and watched the small plumes of dust billow off me.

When I reached the parlor, I noticed something I hadn't when I'd first come in.

Pictures littered the walls. They were in wooden frames the same color as the floor. The white borders around the

parlor contrasted sharply with the dark wood, but the look was softened by the light green walls. I would have looked longer, but divine smells distracted me. I followed the savory aroma of meat and some sort of spice into the bright yellow kitchen next to the parlor. A small table meant to seat four was decorated with a modest, but tasty-looking meal.

“Exploring yet?” Grandma asked. I nodded as I sat down.

“A little . . . I found a trunk in my closet with a photo album in it. There was a guy in the first picture that looked just like Dad.” I settled down, trying to appear less excited than I really felt.

“The man was your great-great-grandfather,” Grandma Moira said. She smiled as she set a plate in front of me. “Most people agree that your father looked like him; a few of your great-great-grandfather’s friends mistook your father for him a few times when he was a boy. Old age will do that.” She smirked at whatever memory played behind her eyes.

I chuckled, despite my attempted composure, “Really?” What would it be like to look so much like someone more than one generation removed from you?

“Really.” Grandma nodded. “Though your father and your great-great-grandfather were very different men in character and outlook.” I dug into my food—chicken pot pie, with plum preserve, and a tall glass of milk on the side.

“There were a lot of people in the picture,” I said between bites. “I didn’t look at all of them, but there were about fifteen. Was that his family?” I asked. This house could easily hold fifteen people. I wondered what that was like, living with family so close.

Her face fell a little, and she looked sad. I flinched, hoping I hadn’t said something wrong. It was weird seeing

anything but quirky humor on her face. Before I could ask, she replied, “No, dear, none of those people in that picture were related to your great-great-grandfather except for his wife.”

I nodded, recalling the woman with big eyes and curly hair. She explained more as I polished off the milk in my glass.

“Your great-great-grandfather built this house, yes, and he did build it for his family to live with him, but it never happened that way.” I set my glass down and wiped my mouth with my arm. Grandma didn’t seem to notice. “When your great-great-grandfather was a kid, he lived with his mother. His father left them years earlier.”

I was glad that I had finished my milk, because I would have choked on it otherwise. My great-great-grandfather was so much like me, only in reverse. Mom had left Dad and me three years ago. It was eerie to hear something similar happened to a relative I’d never met.

“His father’s family owned this land, and when his mother was courted by another man, he was sent to live here as a boy.” She paused and looked at me again with that knowing smile.

“If rumor is true, he hated it here more than pickled cow hearts.”

I smiled sheepishly and looked down at my empty plate. I heard her chuckle, “He hated it at first, but then he started making friends, and he met his doll, Julia.” I looked up.

“The lady beside him in the picture?” I asked, though I was sure I was right. Julia—pretty name, it suited her. Grandma nodded.

“My great-great-grandfather was so much like me.”

“She had four brothers, all of which became the best friends of your great-great-grandfather. They went with him everywhere. They’re the four men in front of Julia and your great-great-grandfather in the picture.”

I smiled and spoke without thinking, “You have a good memory. I think that picture’s been in that trunk a long time. All the dust nearly choked me!”

She cocked her head to the side. “Not at all a good memory. My brain is Swiss cheese, I’m afraid. I recall it because I have that same picture hanging in the parlor between the windows.” I felt stupid for not seeing it before.

“Sorry,” I said looking down. I could feel my face burning up, and I held my breath.

She chuckled again, and I looked up at her. She began clearing the table. “Your father may have looked like him, but you act like your great-great-grandfather.”

“In a bad way?” I asked. I’m sure it sounded as painful as it was to say. I felt better when she shook her head. Plates clinked as she stacked them. “I meant how you bow your head when you’re contrite and hold your breath when waiting for a response. Your great-great-grandfather did that too.”

I focused on her face, but I saw the man from the picture in my mind. I was like him. The man who built this house was long gone, but I was like him. I smiled at the thought.

“Why is the house so big when none of his family lived here with him?” I asked.

“He let his friends stay with him; his wife’s brothers all lived in this house. Her brothers still lived here, even after he and Julia finally had the son they always wanted—my father. That’s the family that lived here. Your great-great-grandfather certainly didn’t like it here when he was a boy,

but he found a treasure, a family. And he built this treasure of a house to hold his treasure.”

I didn't know what to say. It sounded cool, really cool. I thought this place was awful at first. Maybe I could—
Grandma Moira sighed, and I blinked to refocus on her.

“Ah, listen to me prattling on like a wind-up toy.” She shook her head fondly and smiled at me. “Sorry, dear, but, a word to the wise—your great-great-grandfather only began to like his life here when he did something with it.” She then stood and gathered empty dishes. A dismissal, I guessed.

**“He found
a treasure,
a family.”**

I meandered back to my room and picked up the album again. I gently took the picture out and turned it over. Sure enough, the names of each person were on the back, written in flowing script. But I didn't read the other names because I got stuck on the first one.

Bo Carson. “No way,” I whispered.

I took the picture with me downstairs to the kitchen where Grandma Moira was wiping off the table.

“Grandma,” I called from the doorway. She looked up. “I'm named after my great-great-grandfather?”

“Does day follow night?” She smirked this time, one of those knowing ones. “You didn't know?” I shook my head.

“I saw my name on one of the pictures, and—” I looked at the picture in my hand. She followed my gaze, still smirking.

“Your father grew up hearing stories about your great-great-grandfather and really hated that he wasn't named after him.” She shrugged. “I suppose he fixed that problem when he named you after him instead. A better fit if you ask me.”

I studied the picture again when I went back to my room. I scanned the names, but my eyes always went back to the name I shared with my great-great—well, with Bo Carson.

Our situations were practically the same. Maybe I could find a treasure here too. My namesake had. Grandma seemed confident that I could, and Dad seemed sure that I would if I tried.

Grandma's. El Paso, Texas. It doesn't sound like a paradise, but it turned out to be an opportunity for me, too, to find a treasure in this treasure of a house.





The Top Step

by Gloria Arnold

*Commencement Contest Winner,
Extemporaneous Essay*

“Can I help you, honey?”

“Sure, if you want to get out the silverware.”

“How many?”

“Only six places; Grace is leaving early tomorrow.”

“What are we having?”

“Just put out spoons; it’s cereal for breakfast.”

I shifted my weight on the beige carpet, trying my best to stay silent. While initially soft to the touch, the carpet had become rough and scratchy, leaving marks on the back of my legs while I sat at the top of the stair. When I shifted, one stair creaked—the top one—and I froze mid-crouch to see if anyone had heard. I was safe. The conversation downstairs between mom and dad still rambled on in easy banter about which cereal was better.

Finally reassured that I was safe, I eased into a more comfortable position, hoping that no more squeaks would come from the top of the staircase. I lifted a limp strand of wet hair to smell the freshly-shampooed wetness. The rest of my hair twisted in stringy strands around my face, the ends dampening my T-shirt.

Finally, the conversation downstairs slowed to a lull, then eventually dropped off altogether. Could I have seen past the twist in the staircase, I would’ve seen six sets of silverware

placed in neat rows on our honey-golden kitchen table and the house sleepy and dark with only the elec tronic clock on the microwave giving a strange green light to the kitchen.

The house was falling asleep and I was too, so I curled my legs up beneath me and slowly stood, careful to not make a sound. My knee

popped and it seemed to echo in the hollow staircase like a gunshot.

“I eavesdropped like a bad habit.”

I scurried to bed,

jumped beneath the covers, and traced the ceiling fan with my eyes until my pulse slowed down; then I finally fell asleep.

I did it often. As ashamed as I am of myself now for admitting it, it doesn't change the truth. I eavesdropped. Some bite their nails, others crack their knuckles, and I eavesdropped like a bad habit. I learned a lot by squatting at the top of our wooden staircase listening to the adults below, living a life that kept laughing after bedtime. I heard whispers, trailing thoughts I yearned to hear the end of. I heard laughter as parties extended past my curfew. I heard familiar voices of family and strange voices of old friends. I heard secrets and game buzzers and plans for breakfast the next morning. But no matter what I heard, I was always listening most intently for the creak of the stairs to warn me of an adult climbing the staircase. That creak was my cue to fly from the top step where I had been making finger puppet shadows on the wall and dive into my bed where I forced myself to look asleep.

I knew if my mom or dad caught me they would've told me that I should've been somewhere else (like in my bed), but the thrill of waiting with baited breath for just one more snippet of adult life to wander up the stairwell was enough to keep me rooted to the top step no matter how late the night became. I loved getting a preview of what it was like to

be all grown up, to play big-people games, to eat ice cream after bedtime, to whisper secrets too old for my ears, even to know what was for breakfast. The stairs were my gateway to adulthood. The stairs gave me a sneak peek at what it looked like to not be a child still perching at the top of the stairs with damp pajamas and skinny bare legs and the taste of Colgate still fresh in my mouth.

Now I'm all grown up (or so they tell me), and now I'm the one downstairs setting the table for breakfast and playing games and laughing over late-night bowls of ice cream. But some days when I crawl back up those stairs after a late night of staying up way past my childhood curfew, I still wish I had a top stair I could pause on to learn more about the life that is waiting for me. I wish I had a staircase to linger at the top of just to get a glimpse of what's ahead. Not just to know what's coming for breakfast, but instead to know what's coming in life. I'd really love to overhear my parents whispering the answers about where I'll live one day, what job I'll get, or where I'll be in two or three years.

Yeah, a staircase would be nice so I could know what's ahead and then dive under my covers every night just a little bit wiser. But on second thought, I'm not



sure I'd be grown up if I still squatted at the top of the stairs hoping for a preview of my life. I think growing up means leaving behind that scratchy patch of beige carpet at the top of my staircase and being brave enough to face the rest of my life without a hint of what's coming.

As a child, I climbed to the top of the stairs and stopped, waiting to listen for what was next. Now I climb to the top of the stairs and keep climbing because I know that's what it means to grow up.



Scattered Stones

.....

by Bethany Logsdon

The stones that we are given at birth are the memories we have been granted.

In Fort Tryon Park on the northern edge of Manhattan, the Cloisters Museum sits regally, and maybe a little pretentiously, on top of the bluff overlooking the Hudson River. While some of this medieval monastery is fairly unimpressive, its crowning glory is located on the south side facing Margaret Corbin Drive. Here lie the remains of the Benedictine monastery of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa, built in the year 878. John D. Rockefeller, known as a passionate historian, commissioned this masterpiece to be disassembled from its original home on Mount Canigou in the northeast French Pyrenees and reassembled at Fort Tryon. The process took months of numbering every stone, documenting its location, and reconstructing the monastery at the new site in New York. Today, the original stones are clearly different from their modern comrades. They are both aged and timeless—a testimony to a former way of life.

As I wandered the grounds one mid-November, I wondered if any of the stones had been missing during the process. If they turned up missing, where were they left behind? What could they tell us about the places and the people they have seen? Are these stones doomed to an existence of a misplaced memory?

During my life, I have misplaced a few memories myself. Actually, I have intentionally left many of them

behind, but a few I have carelessly dropped here and there. Like the Benedictine stones, my memories have been numbered, stacked, tossed, and a few forgotten.

You see, at the beginning of our lives, we are given hundreds of these memory stones—maybe thousands. You might think it's irresponsible not to know the exact number, but they were given to us as babies, so we have no way of knowing how many we started out with. The exact number we are given at the beginning is not the most important thing, though—what matters is what kind of life they make in the end. If we could retrace our steps through life, how would we find them? What structure will we see when our time on earth is complete?

At six months old, I was whisked away from corn-laden Iowa to the land of wooden shoes, bicycles, and tulips. The Netherlands became my home for three years. I don't remember much from these years, except the Gulf War was on and we had to check for explosives under our silver Toyota Corolla every Sunday after church. By the time Dad's tour was done, I had left a few stones at the base of the wobbly old swing set in the back yard of our home in Beek, Holland. I was only three, so these stones were stacked haphazardly with little thought for actual structure.

At four, I was taken to the Arctic. Not really the Arctic, but to a four-year-old, any place that houses a bevy of moose and polar bears might as well be the Arctic. Anchorage was a place where we enjoyed five hours and twenty-eight minutes of sunlight during the winter solstice. On the days that we could see out the window, we would see the moose, nibbling delicately at the four leaves still clinging to the Alaskan yellow cedar tree in the front yard.

I learned a lot in that place. I learned that sun tea is best made in an old pickle jar on a wooden porch. I learned

that you can live through earthquakes—though I was sure I was going to die at the time. I learned that you shouldn't go outside without a mask when a volcano erupts. I learned not to stand too close to a swinging baseball bat, or you might end up with twenty-seven stitches in your left eyebrow. When we left, I scattered a few stones in the front yard, just so the moose wouldn't forget me.

At six, I was taken to a place even wilder than the Arctic had been. While Alaska had been mountains and polar bears, Washington, D.C., was concrete and graffiti. As kids, we were told there were certain places in the city where you just couldn't look people in the eye. Gangs had been known to shoot people on the spot for one wrong glance.

The gangs weren't at the Washington Monument though. I knew that nothing bad could ever happen at the Washington Monument because that's where the cherry trees bloomed. That's where I counted 897 steps to the top. Some of these steps I counted from Dad's shoulders because six-year-old legs need a break every now and then, but those steps were counted just the same.

In Washington, D.C., I learned the magic of history. There is nothing so stable as the past. I grew to love the stories held in the palm of that city, and I left many stones behind. This was the first place I tried to

“There is nothing so stable as the past.”



use my memory stones distinctively, as, say, the Founding Fathers might have. I stacked them sturdy and high, gave them a purpose, and told them to whisper a legacy for me.

At eight, I was swept away to an old farmhouse in South Dakota. Approximate population: twelve. To borrow from Dickens, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” This was the poorest time I have ever known. We lived on powdered milk and spaghetti. But it was also the very best place to be eight years old. Our farmland stretched for eternity, and the means for imagination was endless. My sister and I would shoot out of the house every day after school to go exploring. We swung from the scratchy old



rope in the barn, let go, and glided ungracefully into mounds of pokey hay. We “sculpted” masterpieces from the clay we’d dug up from the driveway. We chased our two pigs, Abigail and Alberta, with a fishing net when they got out. This was the place to be a kid—pure paradise.

When Dad took a job with the Wyoming Highway Patrol a year later, I left a huge pile of memory stones in South Dakota. Some I stacked in the pen to give the cows something to knock over. Some I buried in the driveway to replace the clay we’d dug up. Some I shaped into an unsteady monument on the fallen log next to the pond where Mom would read our literature books to us.

Compared to the bliss of the open, sunshiny fields of South Dakota, Wyoming seemed cold and gray. There were no trees, making it so windy I thought it might carry me away to the West Coast, and then how would I find my way back?

Wyoming took some things away from me. Now that Dad was out of the military, we were settled in one place, meaning we could make friends—and keep them. Now, my sister, my constant playmate, had found new playmates. That was okay though. Dad always needed me. He needed me to weld and tool with him. His days off from the Highway Patrol were wonderful. He taught me how to bait a hook, drive a boat, chop wood, and anything else essential to a ten-year-old education. I would leave stones in the driveway, in the boat, and at the bottom of the lake—anywhere a memory was made.

If I had a choice, I wouldn’t have left stones on the windy sagebrush-covered hill by the side of the highway when I was ten. That’s when Dad was gone—killed in a car accident in the line of duty.

My life up to that point had been so easy: get up, do schoolwork, play Indians or cops and robbers, scatter

a few stones, and go back to sleep. Effortless. Now the stones I carried were so very heavy. For the first time in my life, I was haunted by memories of guilt. If I had just obeyed Dad when he had asked me to, if I hadn't whined about this or that, would the stones weigh less? Be less of a burden? I knew that the stones would bury me eventually, and I tried to relieve myself of them. In anger and frustration, I would hurl them toward the mountains, but for

“He wasn't there because I'd never invited Him.”

every one I threw, it seemed that forty more would take its place. During more tender moments, when I was too exhausted to throw, I would place the stones gently next to the gravestone bearing the inscription: “Chris Steven Logsdon. End of watch: October 13, 1998. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

I spent eight years under the burden of these stones. Day after day, I dragged them along with me. The pleasure I'd once had in scattering them was gone.

I finally collapsed under the weight when I was eighteen. On my way home from work, I shattered. I cried out to Jesus and realized that He wasn't there. He wasn't there because I'd never invited Him. I drove home and fell on my knees before my Savior, begging His everlasting forgiveness. Immediately the stones that had become my anchor to hell lightened to the air that would carry me to heaven after death.

The stones that we are given at birth are the memories we have been granted. We don't always get to choose where we get to leave them, but if you and I were to retrace our

steps, I think we could find them again. And when we do, we'll finally see the reason for them. Like the perfect representation of an antiquated monastery in the middle of Manhattan, my memories are a little imperfect, a little crumbled at the edges, and maybe a little misplaced, but they boast the structure of the person who lived them, and they will endure.



Keep Calm and Dinner On

.....
by Jenneth Dyck

What would he be willing to do to help his mom?

The drone of the blow-dryer whined through the open bedroom door. Bryan groaned once and tossed in his bed, his shoulder crushing a crummy bag of chips as his elbow knocked an empty soda bottle to the floor. The blow-dryer continued from outside his room, heralding seven o'clock as his mother attempted to tame her stubborn hair before she jumped into a suit, grabbed her briefcase, and rushed out the door with a sigh.

Bryan slid to the edge of his bed until his foot reached the open door. He kicked irritably, listening to the slam of the metal "DO NOT ENTER" sign slap once against the door. The noise notified his mother that her diligence was interrupting his sleep.

Bryan managed to return to his sleep just long enough for his mother to finish her hair, get dressed, and break the sign's simple commandment by poking her head into the room.

"Bryan? I'm headed to work," she said in a weary voice. Her words hung in the air like a disregarded handshake.

He could feel her expectant eyes boring into the back of his head, waiting for a response he didn't intend to give her. Instead, Bryan merely folded the comforter over his face, dismissing his mother from his room. He listened for



her sigh of resignation, the quiet click of the door, and the labored steps creaking down the old Brady Bunch staircase that led to the ground floor.

When he was sure she was gone, he lowered the covers so he'd be able to breathe oxygen that didn't smell of artificial cheese dust. His eyes wandered over to his cluttered desk and rested on a neglected calendar. May 6. He guessed he'd be prepping for final exams right now if he'd stayed in college. If he'd never received that devastating phone call from home.

For the next few minutes, Bryan tried to recapture the sleep that had been cruelly denied him. He wrenched in his bed until the comforter was twisted around his lanky body like poorly wrapped mummy gauze. With an angry thrash,

Bryan rolled off the mattress, sprawling on the floor in a pool of blankets. He stood with a resigned snarl, neglecting the sheets on the carpet as if to spite them for their betrayal.

The angle of the morning sun directed light into the house, setting the curtains, counters, and wooden floor ablaze with a fresh white-yellow haze. Bryan loped down the stairs, absent-mindedly counting each creaky protest from the old, carpeted steps.

Patting his way to the kitchen, Bryan shamelessly lifted his dirty sports jersey and scratched his stomach as he stifled a lingering yawn. *Probably should throw this into Mom's laundry*, he thought, dropping the hem of the jersey. *Don't remember the last time it was washed.*

A hearty breakfast of Pop-Tarts and doughnuts preluded competitive gaming in the basement. Bryan sat with enormous headphones clapped over his ears and a can of Pringles at his elbow. Periodically, his phone buzzed on his knee. Each text message was from his mother about things like her trying day at the office, the secretary's negligence, and the staff dinner she somehow had to host at the house. At one point, Bryan picked up his phone to stab in a curt reply—*mom, im busy and i dont rly care*—but hesitated when his eyes caught sight of the wedding pictures on the wall. His mother had moved them downstairs last month after the funeral.

Bryan realized how quickly he'd become the only family member she could text—whether he responded or not. “She doesn't need that,” he muttered, dropping his phone between his legs. “Whatcha say, bro?” a voice crackled from the other side of the gaming headset. Bryan picked up the controls again and returned to the game. “Nothing. Forget it.”

It wasn't until long after the colorless afternoon sun replaced the golden hue of morning when Bryan considered

his mom's fear about the staff dinner she had to host at the house. Turning to slouch over the back of the couch for a better view, Bryan glanced at the time to see the clock hands threatening to complete the latest hour.

She should be back by now,

he thought, frowning at the clock face. Despite his texts to clarify—*mom u coming home 4 the dinner thing rite?*—his mother remained silent, her absence implying heavy meetings. After another hour, Bryan convinced himself that his mother had completely forgotten about the dinner.

Twirling his phone between his thumb and index finger, he knew there was no other option: it was up to him to make the dinner. He knew his mom's boss wouldn't be pleased if the staff showed up at the house for a meal of Cheerios. Bam—termination papers on the desk by Monday.

He stared at the young couple grinning back at him in the wedding pictures. His dad, arm around his new wife, seemed oblivious that his death would cause a dysfunctional spiral in his family's life—a drop-out son who didn't know how to recover and an overworked wife who didn't have the schedule to.

Bryan knew that he'd been cold toward his mom since the accident. He didn't know how to make things normal again—make things right. Cooking dinner tonight wouldn't just save her job—it could save their relationship.

Bryan slapped the couch beside him in grudging determination. "I'll just have to be the one to make dinner and save Mom's job."

“He didn’t know how to make things normal again—make things right.”

He wrenched off the headset and dashed upstairs to the kitchen, desperately trying to conceive a presentable meal for an office staff that didn't involve toasted Pop-Tarts.

Ground beef always seemed to be the first ingredient his mom used whenever she cooked. Bryan dug through the fridge but found the meat frozen like bricks in the freezer.

Okay, okay, he thought, his hands numbing as he held two blocks. *How do I get them to defrost? Doesn't she just put them on the stove, or something?*

He dropped the bricks of meat on the counter and found a pot that looked like it could hold the meat. With a sweep of his arm, he shoved aside the half-empty packages of Oreos and Cheez-Its from the stove to make room for the pot. He peeled the sandwich bag from one of the frozen bricks of meat and dropped it into the pot with a sharp bang.

After ten anxious minutes of prodding the meat with a metal fork, Bryan decided the beef was defrosting much too slowly and transferred it to the microwave. He stood outside the microwave door, punched in thirty seconds, then a minute, and then two. Each time he checked to see if the meat was any softer than it had been.

"You know what?" he told the microwave. "Forget this." He followed up his apathy by punching in the largest number he could think of and resolved to check back later.

Apparently food spontaneously combusts if microwaved for too long.

Bryan skidded back into the kitchen at the sound of an atomic bomb erupting from the kitchen. He yanked open the microwave to stop the incessant popping from within and the hum died immediately. A gooey mess was splattered everywhere inside, and a hissing sound emanated from the now very defrosted lump in the center of the microwave.

He growled as he tried to pick up the meat. It was too hot to touch now after being thoroughly nuked, though still obviously undercooked. Instead, he removed the rotating microwave plate and held it over the stove, letting the meat sag toward the edge of the plate and plop messily into the awaiting pot. “This is *not* how Mom does it,” he grumbled.

Now that the meat was in the pot over the hot stove, he resolved to watch it every moment of the cooking process. If it so much as popped in its own grease, Bryan was ready to drown it with a fire extinguisher.

He doubted two pounds of beef would be enough for the whole staff. He didn’t know how many people his mom would be hosting, but he assumed it would be a decent number.

“I’ll just put in another one,” he said. He unwrapped the third pound, deciding to avoid another nuclear microwave catastrophe and patiently include it in the pot this time.

He dropped the frozen brick into the pot, not realizing what happens when frozen food meets scalding grease. A geyser—no, a fireworks display—blossomed forth from the stove, hot grease spewing everywhere. Bryan leapt back with a yell after just managing to shove the pot off the element. It sputtered and splashed everywhere like a wild animal.

When the fountain stopped, Bryan grabbed the pot’s handle. With a flare of attitude, he swiped it off the stove and tried his best to dump the grease down the drain. He would have to drain it again when the second pound cooked, but at the moment, he just wanted the food to stop hating him. He slammed the pot back on the stove and glared at it.

For the next hour, Bryan tried in vain to make something halfway decent for his mother’s staff. After the

beef burned on the stovetop, the drain got blocked up from the grease he poured down it, and the fire alarm sounded, Bryan was considering how much of a punishment he'd get if he hurled the pot through the kitchen window.

He was going to quit. There wasn't a point in continuing if the house was going to burn to the ground.

He frowned at the pot again. Mom really *needs* this.

There was only one thing left to do. He needed help from a friend.

"Cherith, help me!" he practically screamed into his phone. He shoved the pot off the element, making it crash into the salt and pepper shakers against the back of the stove.

"What was that?" Cherith's voice snapped.

Bryan folded over the counter, deflating from all the day's chaos. "I don't even know," he said. With some coaxing from Cherith, he managed to explain every embarrassing detail of his predicament. "I have no idea how to cook," he muttered.

He expected Cherith to snap back with a sarcastic comment. Instead, she glossed over the obvious and attacked the problem head on. "Go to the fridge."

"Why?"

"Just go. Tell me if you have that microwavable mac and cheese your family loves."

Bryan obeyed, feeling like a toddler obeying his mother. "We have two. And some of that pot roast you can microwave. But microwaving—that's not cooking, Cherith."

"We'll make it work," she said. "Now, look for green beans in the freezer."

"I have no idea how to cook."

Through Cherith's coaching, Bryan managed to successfully fry green beans on a skillet while he microwaved the pot roast and macaroni. Cherith dictated instructions for how long to microwave each one and in what order so they'd stay warm. By seven, a presentable meal awaited to be set on the table. Once finished, Bryan loaded the dishwasher full of all his failed attempts and tried to make the kitchen look as clean as possible. He had trouble finding the dish detergent, but within minutes, the dishwasher was humming happily.

A twist of keys in the lock signaled his arriving mother. He turned, fidgeting with his jersey as he awkwardly waited for her to step into the kitchen and see his work.

Bryan's mom labored through the doorway with a heavy look on her face. She dropped her briefcase and kicked off her shoes, not noticing her son right away. She looked at Bryan with a mixture of surprise and expectancy, probably wondering why he wasn't downstairs gaming.

"Hi, Mom," Bryan said uncomfortably, rubbing his neck. "I—I made supper for the dinner."

She blinked once and glanced at the food waiting on the stove. "You . . . you made dinner? You made us dinner?" She repeated the question, as though she couldn't believe what was coming out of her mouth.

Bryan stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets and shifted his weight. "Well, yeah, you know. For the staff dinner tonight? You were texting me about it this morning. I thought you forgot." Tears sprung into his mother's eyes, contrasting the quivering smile on her lips. Bryan was terrified that he had done something wrong until he was caught up in the fiercest embrace he'd ever received.

"Oh, Bryan," his mother cried. "Thank you so much. You made me dinner. Oh, thank you." For the first time

in a long time, Bryan allowed his mom to hug him. “Hey, you needed help with the staff dinner. And, well, I haven’t been helping you very much since . . . you know,” he said, pulling away from her arms. He approached the dishwasher and moved to unlatch the door to add a plate he had forgotten to include in the dish load.

“Oh, Bryan,” his mother started, “but the dinner isn’t until Friday.”

“What?” he asked as the dishwasher door fell open with a bang.

A cloud of bleachy suds erupted from the mouth of the dishwasher, flooding the entire kitchen floor. One sniff of the odor told Bryan he’d accidentally used laundry detergent instead of dish soap. As he stood defeated in the sudsy cloud swelling up to his knees, his eyes flickered to his mom’s face, still wet with tears. His defensive posture relaxed as he let out a sigh and a small smile. *It was worth it.*

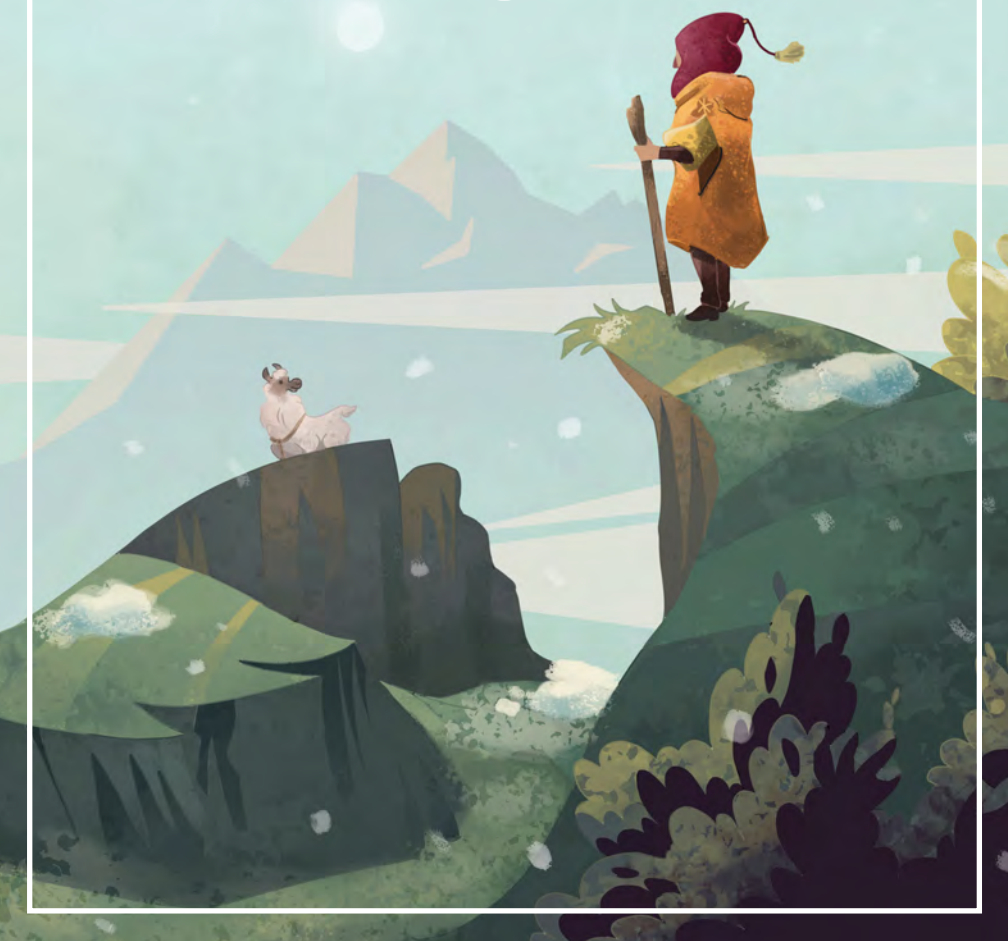
“Well, I’ll clean this up real quick and we can eat alone, then. Just you and me.”





Section Two

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES







Ordinary Genius

.....
by Olivia Thiessen

Everyone deserves kindness.

My mother once said that within every man is a desire to learn that is stifled by his desire to teach. Without dissecting the quote entirely, I will say that I agree up to a point. To better fit my philosophy and to defend my manhood, I would say that within every man is a desire to learn that is stifled by his reluctance to be taught. I became aware of this in the fall of my seventeenth year when I met Marie.

I had no intentions of making any friends that year—not because I was opposed to the idea, but because I hadn't before; and there was nothing about that year that made me think differently. For some reason, Marie took an interest in me, and I her. I was standing in the hallway of my high school when I first saw her through the principal's office window, and I immediately recognized her to be an outsider. I became lost in watching her until she abruptly looked through the window directly at me as if she felt my gaze. I looked down immediately, pretending to be interested in my fingernails. When she came out of the office, she surprised me by walking over and sitting down beside me, carrying the largest instrument I had ever seen.

“You're new here,” I said declaratively.

She nodded.

“You play?”

She smirked and nodded again. Her hand was delicately but tightly wrapped around the case's handle, and she sat with slightly hunched-over posture. Somehow, she still looked confident.

"You any good?"

"Some people think so."

There was a long pause. I tapped on my knees with shaking hands, but she remained still.

"What's—uh, what's your name?" I blurted.

She hesitated for a long moment. I was about to repeat in case she hadn't heard me, but she turned and looked at me with a look that stole all thoughts about myself and my discomfort, saying only a tad above a whisper, "I'm Marie."

During the next few weeks, Marie and I became close friends. Neither of us had made any other friends, but that didn't bother us. I attributed it to our preference for solitude. No one reached out to us either, which I believe was because of how we looked. We were disreputably plain. While we both looked plain, Marie never looked unattractive, but tidy and naturally pretty. I mean, I did notice. Sometimes I forgot, but I seemed to remember whenever other boys took note. But these small, insignificant moments of jealousy—protectiveness really—were only speckled throughout our relationship, even though I clearly remember them to this day.

The most important thing to know about Marie, however, was her unfaltering kindness. There has not, to my knowledge, been a soul who was as consistently kind as she. Even Mother Theresa probably had bad days. Marie didn't. I thought her kindness to be peculiar, suspicious even. She showed kindness to those who I thought didn't deserve it.

Instead, I realized they did because like Marie always said, “Everyone deserves kindness.”

After a few months, we became inseparable—at least when she had time for me. After tuba practice (I did eventually learn what that giant instrument was), maintaining what I assumed must have been a 4.0 GPA, and her part-time job at the bookstore we frequented, she didn’t have much free time, but what time she did have was spent with me.

One early Saturday morning, Marie and I met to work on our math homework (a recurring practice that was maintained for my necessity exclusively). While looking over one of my math problems, she said, “Well, Jack, your answer is right, but the process is wrong. You have to do it like the textbook shows.”

She tilted her head to the side as she thought, and her mousy hair fell in front of her wire glasses. She tucked the eraser end of her chewed pencil back behind her ears.

“But that way takes so long,” I whined.

“Well, you have to do it the right way, even if it’s more difficult.”

“But if it’s the same answer, it shouldn’t matter how I do it.”

She sighed, tired of my complaints.

“You can’t just do whatever you feel like,” she said.

“That’s not how the world works.”

We both were quiet for a moment. I thought we had finished with the topic, but apparently Marie hadn’t.

“Jack, what do you want to do?”

“You mean like today?”

**“You can’t
just do
whatever
you feel like.”**

“No, in a general sense. In life. What do you want to do?”

I hadn't really thought about it. I had loosely planned to work for my father's business, just because I could, but I hadn't considered my future until that moment. My silence answered her question.

“Anyway, I wish you would just do something. You aren't passionate about anything, and you don't work toward anything. What kind of existence is that?” I realized her question was rhetorical when I opened my mouth to defend myself, but she continued. “You need to make decisions, plans, goals. You sit in this massive house, surrounded by opportunities to become anything you wish, and you just waste them. Do you want to be someone, or do you want to be someone's son? I wish you would just . . . I wish you would just *do something*.”

Throughout her lecture, she was never angry or hurtful. Of course, I was a tad hurt but only because she was right. However, I didn't realize how right she was until much later.

After homework, we continued our routine and headed to the used bookstore she worked at, The Bookman. This was where we had met the smartest man we thought we would ever know. His name was Critter. We weren't sure of his purpose there, but I guess it didn't matter. He was a staple in The Bookman scene. Legend has it, Critter was born in the public library archives and learned to read before he could speak. As bizarre as it sounds, I believed it wholly and am not yet convinced of its falsehood. His appearance aided the theory too. He looked wild and intellectual, as if he had been raised by literature itself. His hair was matted and nearly dreadlocked, and his facial hair was patchy, but his attire seemed regal to seventeen-year-

old me. A vest hung loosely over his frail chest, and thick suspenders cinched the extra fabric in layered waves like a bow around a messily-wrapped Christmas gift. Critter belonged to the warmly lit corner of the bookstore with his back resting on the back wall. At any moment, he could be found holding a thick novel written by a Russian writer whose name I couldn't have reproduced with dignity. He often gave us suggestions of books to read, though I can't say I've read many.

But this story is not about Critter (although come to think of it, that would be a great novel itself); this is about Marie. The two of us began to get to know Critter better, who one day uttered a seemingly insignificant prophecy. From among a torrential downpour of jargon, Marie pulled a phrase that she believed was crafted for her. I knew her to be a bit of a dreamer but not so superstitious. Critter had said, "The air will clear, and this place will reject you as it should, and the genius of the world will absorb you, and you it." It seemed like a cheap prophecy if you had asked me. While I dismissed it, Marie pocketed it.

A couple months into our friendship, I began to notice certain peculiarities about Marie. For example, I had never been to her home, nor had I heard about it. She also never partook in normal teenage activities: she put time only into her academics, music, and job. The more I noticed these peculiarities, the harder it was for me to stop noticing. One day I came out and asked her, "Why don't we ever spend time at your home?"

“While I dismissed it, Marie pocketed it.”

She tilted her head to the side and replied, “I didn’t know you wanted to. And anyway, it’s not very tidy like yours.”

“Am I not allowed to?”

“I just don’t want it to change your opinion of me.” Nothing behind those doors would have changed how much I cared for her. “You can come with me tonight if you’re so interested.”

So I did. We walked her usual route home, and I must admit, I was shocked. I was afraid walking around her neighborhood. A scraggly cat that looked as if it had just gotten in a brawl slinked across my path on the cracked sidewalk. That *had* to have been bad luck. The evening light had disappeared enough where the uncertainty of the streetlights matched my own: they flickered on and off as my willingness to learn about Marie’s home flickered.

We arrived at a corner where rows and rows of miniature streets zig-zagged through a neighborhood of cement complexes. Each complex looked to contain around six small residences.

“We’re here,” she said with no hint of humor in her voice (this is notable only because I thought it was some kind of joke).

I made no comment. She led me through the strange world. Nearly every complex was decorated by at least two onlookers slumping in lawn chairs out front, most of whom were staring at me silently. I was noticeably an outsider. As we passed by the onlookers, turning heads, we were approached by an elementary-aged girl. Her midnight black skin shone periwinkle under the florescent street light as she

“I must admit, I was shocked.”

ran toward us. The girl smiled, then shouted something to Marie in a foreign language that sounded guttural, yet sing-songy. Marie shouted back and squatted to engulf the girl in her gangly arms. The banter continued, and I stood confused.

“Since when do you speak . . .”

“French. I took a couple classes a few years ago, and then I filled in the rest talking to strangers. Anika speaks Creole. We kind of meet in the middle.” The girl shyly smiled at me as she swished her dress and pushed her distended belly toward me, then ran away.

We continued on, and Marie chose a door. She threw her bony shoulder against the heavy door and kicked the bottom twice with the side of her loafers. She pushed her way through the crooked door frame; and in the dark she guided me into a cold, echoing room, void of furniture or decorations. Were they moving out? Or worse, were they moving in? Marie sped up when we walked past one particular room. The door was open about a foot, and through the gap I saw an unmade bed—well an old, discolored mattress on the floor—with a lifeless form entangled in a web of ragged sheets. The light could hardly penetrate the haze.

“Mom, I’m home.”

The hand fluttered for a moment, as if it belonged to a sloppy conductor.

We came to the only other room in the apartment, which I correctly assumed to be her room. I clung to the door frame as I stared in. The room was a stark contrast to the rest of the place—immaculate and organized. A stuffed bookcase in the corner drew my attention. Everything on it seemed scholarly; and with closer inspection, I recognized books that Critter had mentioned to us lying between

its shelves. Then it hit me. Her life was dedicated to knowledge. I had understood the benefit before; but until that night, I didn't understand the purpose.

"Which haven't you read?" she asked, giving me more credit than I deserved. I picked up the only one I had heard of, *The Great Gatsby*, but she shook her head. "Not that one," Marie insisted. "I don't like that one."

"Why not?" I questioned, knowing she had an answer prepared.

"Because Gatsby works so hard, and he doesn't even get the girl in the end. He did everything he could and dies, having wasted his whole life chasing an unreachable dream. What's the word? Quixotically. And Nick Carraway is so negative. I don't like to see the world the way he does."

"But that's how real life is though, isn't it?" I argued with no backup prepared. "We can work hard for things and just have plain old bad luck and not get what we want. We could spend our whole lives dreaming like Gatsby, only to have our goals and ambitions and whatnot crushed—"

She looked at me with an immediate brokenness that I hadn't seen in her before. She pushed her shoulders forward and hunched over. With her chin down, she looked up at me and squinted.

And then it hit me. To an extent, she was Gatsby. Born to nothing. Her only hope was to work her way out of this life, and my saying that plain old bad luck could change her

**"A stuffed
bookcase in the
corner drew my
attention."**

course was a detriment to her philosophy, her only hope. She faked shaking it off.

“Well, I think that’s a terrible way to look at it.”

That was the last time I visited her home because a couple weeks later she left town. I never heard the details, nor did I hear the news from Marie face-to-face. She called me a few days after she’d moved and said that she had been accepted to some elite boarding school.

“A school for—for what?” I shouted through the crinkling, fragmented reception, but I clearly heard a sigh.

“For geniuses,” she said reluctantly.

“Are you a genius?”

“I’m not sure exactly. But they allowed me here nevertheless, so maybe I am. They said I’m good at the tuba too. Listen, Jack, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. This is a good thing, I promise. Maybe I’ll see you again sometime, yeah?”

But I didn’t see or hear from Marie again until seven years later, after grad school. I took a year to travel after my graduation, hoping to figure out whether the world was as Carraway’s or Gatsby’s. I still haven’t figured that out, by the way. But on my clichéd truth-search of an expedition, I heard from a former classmate that Marie was living in France, so I made a detour to meet her. She had become some kind of diplomat in Paris for a while, but was now involved in humanitarian aid for refugees in Nice. She was the same, but better dressed, like how I imagined stylish Parisian women to look—hair so short it curled around her ears in one straight, sleek swoop. I imagined she would look nice in a beret. I reminded her of our conversation about Gatsby all those years ago, and she remembered it as clearly as if we were still standing in the dark hallway of her old home.

“You know what I decided?” she began. “You’re like Carraway because you see the world as it is, not as it could be. You see what’s in front of you.”

A decent analysis I supposed. I looked at what was in front of me: a girl who had become something, built something. Looking back, I could have become a miserable, controlling person like Tom Buchanan—a near miss to which I give Marie direct credit. After all, when one works for nothing, all that they have can easily slip away.

About five years after my trip to France, I went back home for the first and last time since college. My parents were moving across the country and kindly, yet passively asked me to retrieve my junk. The town was the same. In *The Bookman*, Critter still propped against the same wall where we had left him. In my old room, amongst untouched collections of my youth on my desk, was a neatly placed letter, which must have been written a short time after my trip. It was from Marie. She wrote about her job, travels, and the insane experiences there is hardly enough time in a day to retell. A significant portion of the letter was about Anika, the little Creole-speaking neighbor of hers. She had become the first person in her family who had gone to college, which was paid for exclusively by Marie and her husband. It seemed I wasn’t the only one changed by Marie’s ruthlessly unrelenting kindness, and I was not surprised.

I stood in my room, regretting my reluctance to be taught by Marie’s kindness earlier. She had cared for people, which had given her a bright outlook on life. But I couldn’t have known then what my kindness could do. After all, there’s no reading ahead in life (although Marie and Critter might disagree). But, what I do know now is that if I give

even a little bit of kindness, I can make a difference in people's lives, just as Marie has.



The Fireman

by Miss Lauri Lou Jones

Stress-related illness and PTSD are common in firefighting—as my family learned first-hand. We found it especially difficult to see our loved ones embrace the smoking habit, which was usually justified as a coping mechanism. In watching the recovery process, I saw very clearly that God’s solutions bring healing, while man’s solutions are often only a temporary fix.

I find him standing on the porch.

His eyes are closed, his jaw is clenched;
I cannot see the blaze of fire,
But I can see the haze of smoke.
With all his dear ones safe in bed,
He’s fighting flames inside his head.

His big hand shakes around a cigarette.

“I’m going to quit,” he says; but then,
He takes a closer taste of death
And stands there with his cigarette—
I wish he’d leave the smoke behind
When fighting fires inside his mind.

He bends to cough, face showing pain.

How could he breathe in smoke from flames
That took the lives of three today,
And, tortured, stand engulfed in smoke,
The small white torch grasped in his hand?
Why should the lick of flame's own tongue
Relieve this suffering, sleepless one?





Introverts Assemble

.....

by Emily Jones

*For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.
For every introvert, there is an equal and opposite extrovert.*

The words sat glaring on my computer screen as I absorbed what they meant. The giant words *introvert*, *sensing*, *thinking*, *judging*, or ISTJ for short, were accompanied by graphs, diagrams, and statistics. Their sole purpose was to detail who I am, how I thought, and how I responded in a given situation. These four letters were supposed to guide how I acted in the workplace, in different relationships, and in various social interactions. These four letters were a result of the Myers-Briggs personality test and—the scariest part about them—the letters were right. I quickly shut my laptop and sat contemplating what I had just learned.

Great, I thought, I'm weird.

Out of all four words that apparently described me, the only one I immediately understood was the term *introvert*. I had heard the word described before: quiet, reserved, loner, and (my personal favorite) socially inept. To me, these definitions just affirmed the idea that I was weird, different, not meant for a life in the social world.

Honestly, though, these definitions are not far from the truth. On any given day, I would rather be sitting alone with a book and a cup of coffee, considering life's meaning and pondering what kind of cat I should buy when I'm old. I

do not find enjoyment in large crowds of bustling people, and I would rather suffer medieval torture than to tell the class three interesting facts about myself. For me, though, this mindset isn't a problem—I have come to live with my introvertedness. But to others, this reserved, quiet nature is strange. As I've matured, I've come to the realization that it's hard for introverts like me to fit in. This is because we live in an extrovert's world.

Before I get ahead of myself, let's first establish what an introvert exactly is in relation to an extrovert. By definition, we introverts are more withdrawn, concentrate on tasks better when alone, and gain energy

“We live in an extrovert's world.”

from being alone.¹ On the other hand, extroverts are more assertive and their “thoughts and problems find ready expression in overt behavior,”² making them more apt to adapt to large groups of people. But the differences between introverts and extroverts go even further than that.

A major difference between introverts and extroverts involves how we interact with the outside world. According to psychologists, “Extroverts . . . are not as sensitive to outer stimuli and need to *seek* them out in order . . . to perform well.”³ For introverts, we can only handle so much of this outer stimuli before we grow fatigued and need to replenish our energy with quiet solitude.⁴ By understanding that we need to be alone, we introverts can learn why we feel overwhelmed in large crowds. It's not that we dislike people or lack the social skills to become acquainted; it's that we tire easily from busy scenes and loud ruckus—an atmosphere extroverts thrive on.

There is even a scientific explanation as to why introverts act the way we do. A special chemical in the

brain, called dopamine, has the purpose of making a person happy. Both extroverts and introverts have the same levels of dopamine in their body, but we react differently to it. For extroverts, dopamine causes them to become more energized, while we introverts begin to feel overstimulated and exhausted.⁵ For introverts, we respond better to the chemical acetylcholine. Like dopamine, acetylcholine is released to make us feel good, but it's a more inward reaction. Acetylcholine "powers our abilities to think deeply, reflect, and focus intensely on just one thing for a long period of time."⁶ These are all things that introverts find relaxing and enjoyable.

Another interesting aspect of this "feel-good" chemical comes from the fact that it activates the parasympathetic side of the nervous system, which calms the body.⁷ When the parasympathetic portion of the nervous system is activated, the body begins to conserve energy, relax muscles, and lower blood pressure—causing a relaxed and contented feeling. In this way, introverts can more easily regain lost energy. While extroverts find their strength in rambunctious clamor, introverts find theirs in quiet solitude. It's not that we dislike an intense atmosphere; we just react differently to it.

Why then do I say that we live in an extrovert's world? Just look at these statistics. According to research, extroverts make up nearly 50-74 percent of the population. That leaves only 26-50 percent for us introverts—not enough manpower to overcome the social butterflies of the world.⁸ As introverts, we must learn to succeed in this ostentatious society. While it may be difficult to put down our coffee cups, tear our eyes away from books, and face the world head on—with a little help and understanding, we can show the world just what kind of power we actually possess.

However, even when we understand the differences between extroverts and introverts, introverts still struggle to make their power known. It seems, to me, that the louder a person is, the more people they influence and the more well-liked they are. A lot of famous politicians and innovators in the world have been extroverts. For instance, extroverts such as George W. Bush, Steve Jobs, and Margaret Thatcher⁹ are credited with doing great things for their country and for technology. And, for the most part, people loved them.

An article in *The Atlantic* entitled “Caring for Your Introvert: The Habits and Needs of a Little-understood Group” even goes as far as implying that introverts are oppressed by these flamboyant extroverts because they



“dominate social life.”¹⁰ Extroverts have an “appetite for talk and attention . . . so they tend to set expectations”¹¹ for social circles and society overall. Therefore, “being outgoing is considered normal . . . desirable, a mark of happiness, confidence, [and] leadership.”¹² Conversely, introverts are “described with words like ‘guarded,’ ‘loner,’ ‘reserved’” and other “narrow, ungenerous words . . . that suggest emotional parsimony and smallness of personality.”¹³ So it is no wonder why introverts struggle. We seem to be outshone, outdriven, and out-thought by the outgoing party of society—the extroverts.

What I came to realize is that more than understanding the differences between extroverts and introverts, we introverts need to understand ourselves. As I’ve matured, I’ve learned to find ways to make the best of my quiet, thought-driven world and methods to shine in the world of extroverts. For me, mimicking the social skills of extroverts helped a great deal when working in society. This involves actions like not making excuses for being shy and speaking out when I had something to say.¹⁴ Of course, these changes didn’t happen overnight, but making slow progress in how I associated myself with the outside world helped me in expressing my thoughts and ideas.

The most important part, however, was accepting my introverted differences. We introverts have our own unique qualities that can enhance the way people think about the world. We have a natural ability to think deeper on given concepts, focus clearly on tasks and goals, and build strong relationships with those we are close to. When we begin to understand why we react to things the way we do and how our strengths can be beneficial, we can then begin to cooperate with the outgoing extroverts. We can use the strengths of one and the weaknesses of the other to come together and to make the world stronger.

Take a look at Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, two highly successful, billion-dollar industry CEOs. What is significant about them is that they classify themselves as introverts. In a world that extroverts rule, these two individuals stand out because of their intellect and how they work with their colleagues despite being labeled introverts. About his introversion, Bill Gates said, “I think introverts can do quite well. If you’re clever, you can learn to

“Introverts are more than just the wallflowers of society.”

get the benefits of being an introvert, which might be, say, being willing to go off for a few days and think about a tough problem, read everything you can, [and] push yourself very hard to think out on the edge of that area.”¹⁵ In this statement, Gates gives interesting insight concerning how introverts can contribute not only to a business, but to any given scenario. He exercises his unique abilities and uses them to help his company grow. Through Gates and Zuckerberg, we see that introverts are more than just the wallflowers of society—we are successful individuals.

Introverts are different from extroverts. There is no denying this. There is no way to get around it. I took a test and thought I was weird, but in reality, I’ve learned that I’m special. Introverts contribute to society in more ways than we know. It’s up to us to keep a calm and peaceful mentality in the world. For us meditative, subdued, and contemplative introverts—it is time to stand up and show the world what we can really do! (But, please, let’s do it from the comfort of our own home. Preferably Facebook Messenger. You can add me later.)

Notes

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Water Glass

by Kathie Herald

*There must've been two dozen more just like it.
But they weren't just like this one anymore.*

Laine stretched out one of her short, stocky legs and used her toes to push off the ground, gently rocking her recliner back and forth, back and forth. She couldn't sit still, but was too exhausted to consider much motion. Her soft, tan hands opened and closed over the soft arms of the deep red recliner as it hugged her plump body comfortably. Her shoulders, sore from sobs, depressed into the cushions.

Vivid memories chasing her eyes, Laine looked over the living room in the house where she and Asher had raised their family: the big sliding door that led to the pool out back, the stack of *Southern Living* magazines that fanned out on the bottom layer of the glass coffee table, the cream walls and wooden furniture with scarlet throw pillows that matched the recliner. Dozens of family pictures were spattered on the walls and end tables. It didn't seem to Laine like the face of her child had changed. Laine's eyes glazed as she looked at one of the newer ones, thinking that this would be the last photo like this. It was a picture of her family from the previous Thanksgiving. Her son, David, towered over them all. He had gotten his mother's tan skin and sea glass eyes, but his father's height and wide build.

Even as she looked at this last photo of all her family together, laughing and holding each other as they could

never do again, Laine found no more strength to cry. Water gathered in her eyes, but her exhausted body made no movement but to continue rocking her recliner back and forth, back and forth. Succumbing to her exhaustion, Laine closed her eyes; but she couldn't escape hearing again the voice of her pastor that morning and replaying the events of the day like a black and white movie projected on the back of her eyelids.

• • •

Her husband, Asher, had the day off work and had driven Laine to Publix to help her pick up groceries. Getting groceries was one of Asher's favorite activities, but the disjointed hours he had to work as a police officer kept him from being able to go with Laine regularly. As Asher shut off the car in the Publix parking lot, he pushed the keys into his pocket. Finding the pocket empty of anything else, he looked quizzically into the cup holder and proceeded to pat all of his pockets down before looking to Laine.

"I must have left my phone at home. I can't find it," he said.

"I saw it sitting on the arm of the couch just before we left. You must not have picked it up," Laine replied, patting his arm as she shuffled through the sizzling hot parking lot.

"Well, do you have yours? Can we call it just to make sure it didn't slip under the chair or something?" Asher asked, turning anxiously back to the green Suburban. He got like this every time he misplaced his phone.

"You know I never bring my phone when we're together because I always assume if David or anyone needs us they can reach us through you. I left mine plugged in at home."

Asher looked at her, frazzled.

"Oh, honey, don't worry. I guarantee you it's sitting right there at home where I saw it. Now don't worry.

Let's just get the groceries." Pushing the buggy around the store and helping Laine pick out snacks and lunch food for the upcoming week, Asher had forgotten the stress of not having his phone by the third aisle. And by the time they were rolling the buggy across the glittering blacktop to load their grocery bags into the car, they had passed over an hour in the store. Asher took his time getting home as his and Laine's favorite classical music station played. Asher made the final turn through their neighborhood onto their street. Before Asher had even straightened the wheel, Laine had reached forward and turned down the music, her shoulders tightening.

"What's going on?" she asked Asher. Police cars lined the street in front of their home. As they got closer, Asher could see men he worked with, men he served on the field with, all watching and waiting for him to pull his car into his driveway. Their faces were red and puffy.

"I don't know," he mumbled as his detective mind took over. As they drove in front of their house, Laine saw their pastor standing on the front porch. Pastor Miles had been a police officer himself, years ago, even serving as captain of the police department. He stood on the porch now with the current captain and another officer Laine recognized as Officer Pete, one of Asher's best work friends.

They sat in the car for only a couple of seconds, but in that time Laine was able to take in the image of her pastor, the lines in his face even visible from the distance, standing like an extra beam on her porch holding the ceiling up. Men in blue uniforms stood all around her white porch with her six hanging ferns and her neat little outdoor pillows on the wooden swing. She messily swallowed up each of these images as she swam in fear and confusion. Laine didn't even wait for Asher to stop the engine before she was out of the car.

“We haven’t been able to get ahold of you. We called several times,” the captain stuttered. Pastor Miles put a strong hand with fingers like the roots of an oak tree down on the captain’s shoulder.

“The captain’s been trying to call you. When he couldn’t find you, he called me; and we’ve been waiting here for you to get home.”

His voice was steady and reasonable, but his face had so reddened that his white mustache stood out like a flag begging for peace. “There’s been an accident.” And standing on the crisp, whitewashed front porch, Pastor Miles and the captain explained to Asher and Laine the circumstances in which their son had passed away in a car accident that morning. He had T-boned a car at an intersection. The impact had broken his neck. At the age of twenty-one, David had been pronounced deceased before the ambulance had even gotten to the hospital.

**“There’s
been an
accident.”**

...

Now, ten hours later, Laine couldn’t keep her eyes closed anymore. The memories from that morning were too haunting, and she was too tired to keep reliving them.

Her eyes skimmed the darkened kitchen. Laine did not mean to dwell long on her well-loved dark cabinet doors and granite countertops where she had spent years preparing meals and treats for her family, but before she looked away, her eyes caught a gleam of an object on one of the countertops. Laine’s chest constricted, thinking she knew what it was. She dragged her aching body out of the recliner and pushed herself into a standing position. Her back and legs yelled out for rest, physically spent. But she shuffled her feet slowly toward the kitchen until she was standing on the cold kitchen tiles. Laine thought she knew

what was on the counter now, but she kept her mouth firmly pressed shut until she flipped on the overhead light and knew for sure. Unable to hold herself up anymore, she went down on her knees as her hand reached to cover the morose wail that came out of her mouth. She had found the strength to cry again.

Streaming tears rolled down her round face as Laine doubled over, clutching her mouth with one hand and hitting the cold tiles with the other. Hearing his wife's cries, Asher came rushing out of his office, his face puffy and red too. His tall body traveled to the floor and pulled her into his arms. He was fixed on comforting his wife in that moment, until she pointed at the object on the counter. It was a glass of water. About a third of the way full. There must have been two dozen more just like it. But they weren't just like this one anymore. Laine felt Asher's strong chest erupt in heaves behind her as his hushes halted. They clung to each other as sloppy sobs came from both of them.

That cup was David's. He had always left his cup in the exact same spot on the counter despite his mother's many attempts to teach him to put it in the dishwasher or, at the very least, the sink. He would constantly drink from it throughout the day while he was at the house; and if he left, he would simply pick back up where he left off when he got home. It had always driven Laine crazy, until the fall he left for boot camp three years before.

It had been an overly warm September afternoon. As she and Asher drove him to the airport, David had been strangely quiet. She couldn't be sure, but she guessed that behind Asher's aviators were a pair of wet eyes and beneath his dark gray polo was a chest swelling with pride above a heart aching with the knowledge that his son was leaving. They pulled their big green Suburban into the terminal side



parking, and Asher went around to the trunk to help David unload his backpack and small carry-on.

“If you think I’m not going to write you every day, you’re crazy,” Laine said as she wrapped her arms around her son’s sturdy body.

“Thanks, Momma. I love you so much,” David whispered into Laine’s ear. As she pulled herself from David’s hug, Laine tugged on his shirt to straighten it and patted his side. After a few awkward seconds, David and Asher shared a hug along with muffled *I love you’s* and *take care’s*.

When they got home that afternoon, Laine saw that David had left a partially full glass of water sitting on the counter by the mixer where he had been leaving glasses for years. Shaking her head, she smiled and left it alone. When Asher helped her clear off the table and do the supper dishes that night, she saw him reach for it out of the corner of her eye.

“Leave it,” Laine said softly.

“Leave it? You hate when he leaves his glass on the counter. You’ve been trying to teach him to quit it for years.”

“I know. So let’s just leave it and make him clean it up himself when he gets home. That’ll teach him, won’t it?” Laine winked at her husband. Twenty something years of marriage will teach you to understand your spouse if it will teach you nothing else. And Asher understood that what Laine was really trying to say was, “If we leave it there, he has to come home.”

So Asher chuckled at his wife and said, “Let’s at least empty it out first. I promise I’ll put it exactly back where he left it.” Asher made a show of carefully picking up the glass, dumping out the last few gulps of water, and replacing it to the perfect spot, even ducking down to eye it at counter level, causing Laine to smack his side with her dish towel as she giggled.

It stayed through Easter, Thanksgiving, one birthday party, and three dinner parties.

Returning home from boot camp four months later, David reacted as well as everyone had expected. Still in his uniform, he paced around the living room and kitchen. He was updating them on his time at boot camp when he picked up the glass that he had left on the counter four months ago. He started in the direction of the faucet, but he never did begin to fill the glass because his parents started laughing.

David's face reddened, "What are y'all laughing at . . ." His voice trailed off as he looked down and saw a green sticky note on the counter that read "DO NOT MOVE." He looked back at the glass, and then at the note again before the situation fell into place in his understanding. He placed the glass in the sink and said, "Okay, y'all. Very funny. Ha ha," his dimples flaring the whole time from the smile he was trying to hide.

"Honey, we couldn't help ourselves! Your father and I have not let anybody touch that glass since the minute you left. You had to come home and clean it up yourself," Laine said. David continued pressing his lips together. But as he dramatically picked up the dishrag and washed out the cup, he made eye contact with them, demanding acknowledgment, approval, and mostly, more laughter. He received it. From then on, every time David had a glass sitting in the kitchen, it would not go unnoticed or uncommented upon by anyone, to which David would blush and say, "Man, I miss the days when it was just Mom on my back about leaving my glass around," feigning his disapproval over all the attention. But he never stopped leaving his glass there.

Curled together in grief on their chilly kitchen floor, Laine remembered all of this with such vivid clarity that it burned in their throats.

“He can’t come home to clean it up this time,” Laine told Asher through choking breaths. Asher ran his fingers through his wife’s tangled hair and pulled her head to his chest, all the while his eyes never leaving the glass of water on the counter.

...

Four days later, after the funeral, Laine walked through the threshold of her house, the screen door slamming behind her. Asher hadn’t come in yet. Laine guessed he was sitting out on his workbench in the garage, still in his black suit with his satin tie pulled loosely from his neck. She could respect his moment alone. There are some opportunities you don’t get after a person dies, and a moment alone is often one of them. Especially on the day of the funeral. Even after the burial when the crowd had been invited back to the church’s fellowship hall to share food, Laine and Asher had been so swarmed with the grieved guests that they had had neither time to eat nor to grieve for themselves.

After pulling the black patent leather dress shoes from her aching feet, she reached behind her and rubbed the back of her neck. Everything in her house was pristine. All week long, some women from work and many women from the church had scampered in and out, cleaning things and placing stacks of covered casseroles in the fridge. Laine’s pantyhosed feet pattered toward the kitchen where she pulled one of the casseroles out and uncovered it. She placed two scoops of the creamy green bean and ham mixture onto her plate and popped it into the microwave. The microwave hummed. She licked a crumb off one of her fingers. Everything was spotless. Not a thing was out of place. Not a single glass. The women had done a thorough job.

**“The women
had done a
thorough job.”**

She began to lean back against the counter when she felt her heart falter, but pulled herself back up onto her feet. Someone had picked up the glass, washed him off of it, and put it away. Someone else had done for her what she couldn't have done for herself. Someone else had had to be strong for her, without even knowing what they were doing. She opened the cabinet door and looked at the glasses. All uniform. All the same. And it was okay.



Duty Bound

.....

by Carolyn Stritzke

Commencement Contest Winner, Fiction Narrative

“Just a little farther.” I gritted through clenching teeth. Sharp pains shot up my left leg as my bad knee buckled and dragged. Even at a light jog, Raider with his loping strides was dragging me forward. Stumbling, I worked to regain my balance. Sweat beaded along my forehead and dribbled down my face and neck in halting tributaries, icy under the onslaught of brisk autumn gusts. Winter was marching steadily forward; Autumn was in full retreat. Anymore, Time, that elusive reminder of man’s fate, was a hard fiend to keep track of. The weather during my daily jog was my only reminder of the passing months. This was my third season since my return from active duty. Strange—I hadn’t realized it had been so long.

A hazy picture floated to the surface of my mind. *A gruff major was bending over my bed. “Son, it looks like you made it, but this is gonna be where you and the army part ways. I sure hope you’ve got a back-up plan.”* I learned later that I had shrapnel in my knee from a roadside bomb. They’d shipped me back home with the rest of the wounded.

The wind pummeled my flushed skin, drawing me back to the present. Raider kept jogging with unflinching diligence, his furry pads bounding through the grassy, leaf-filled ditch, and his pointed ears tucked back against

his head. For a moment I wished I could be a German shepherd rather than a former soldier.

Finally I tugged at Raider's leash, pulling him to a stop. "Enough. Let's take a short break, buddy." I bent over double, trying to draw the frigid air into my lungs. I had no form, no pounding routine cadence. Not even the rookies in boot camp look this bad. My physical therapist said that this is normal—would be my new normal, now—but I can't bear to accept the thought. I don't want to be a cripple.

A car raced past, tires crunching over the rough road. I ignored it. Probably just a carload of kids laughing. *'Look at that man,' they must say, 'doesn't he look funny? Why does he walk like that?'* I had heard the words plenty enough before to hear their unspoken scorn now. I pulled myself back upright and stretched my spine. High above a flock of geese honked as they flew south in their trademark "v" formation. Dead, crumbling leaves rattled in the branches overhead as the cool autumn wind flowed past; green hedge apples with rust-colored spots littered the ground. I frowned. One of those could probably twist an ankle. *Should have seen those sooner, Corporal.* I took another deep breath, held it in, and tried to push away the pain as I let it out.

"Jest get on up there, you stubborn—" muttered an old whiskery, age-roughened voice. Grunts followed this gruff statement.

My gaze flitted around as my muscles tensed. I tried to locate the only other person I'd heard or seen actually out in this weather. The mutterings continued. *Just like Andy used to.* I grimaced, remembering *skin-scorching waves of heat as Andy struggled to load a ponderous box into the back of a Humvee. Laughter had slipped between my lips as he pushed, finagled, and finally shoved the box in.* He had

always been good for a brief laugh . . . until we'd lost him to a landmine. Not much to send home to his mama.

The muffled shouting, mumbling, muttering continued. I finally located the voice. Old Man George was trying to load an almost full bag of mulch into a wheelbarrow. He had it perched haphazardly on his shoulder, trying to push it up along the side of the wheelbarrow and over the rim. Any minute now and the bag would dump back onto the ground. The poor old fellow. His muscles were clearly much too atrophied for that sort of lifting. I sighed. *Duty calls.* Approaching the wooden fence, I carefully picked my steps through the hedge apples and ducked under the tree's low-hanging branches. He didn't seem to see me. Sitting on the fence, I swung my legs over and trod haphazardly through the stinky dried branches of what was probably a bush.

"Get off my land!" Old Man George, having finally seen me, yelled in outrage, shaking his fist as he tried to balance the mulch bag against the wheelbarrow. Already the wheelbarrow was starting to tip.

I would have hurried, but the flowerbed was inches deep in mulch; every step I took threatened to upset my already iffy balance. Raider whined, watching me through the fence.

"Now see here!" the old man protested, moving his hand back to support the bag of mulch as it started to slide back down.

"Where did you want this?" I gestured to the bag.

His mouth opened soundlessly. The bag slumped to the ground. "By the shed, but—"

I hunched down, grabbed it in my arms, and tossed it in the wheelbarrow. He sputtered at me for a minute, his face reddening as his blood pressure rose. His eyes narrowed at

the bag in the wheelbarrow. “The young these days have no respect for their elders.”

I fought a smirk from spreading across my face. “The old these days have no respect for themselves. What else did you need moved?”

He huffed irritably. “Well,” he finally sputtered, “since you’re here, you might as well get my rake and trimmers for me, too.”

“All right.” I bent down to grab them. “Did you want them in the same spot?”

Old Man George nodded tersely. I threw them in the wheelbarrow on top of the bag of mulch. I could feel his sharp eyes watching my precise movements. Gradually he seemed to relax. “Where’d ya serve?”

“Afghanistan.” I grabbed the handles of the wheelbarrow. *Why does everyone ask that?*

“What part?”

I dug my shoes in and pushed the wheelbarrow toward the shed, trying to hide my limp. “Around.” Behind I could hear my dog barking. Dimly, at the back of my mind, a voice reminded me, “You’re not supposed to be separated from him. You still have flashbacks.” I pushed the voice away. *I’m not that broken.*

The old gardener snorted and then started walking to the gate to let Raider in. The dog glared suspiciously at him before darting past. Old Man George didn’t even seem fazed. *Strange, it’s not often I meet someone who isn’t fazed by Raider’s glare.* I committed the observation to memory.

As I pushed the wheelbarrow forward, I glanced around the yard, studying the general lay of the land: the

“The young these days have no respect for their elders.”

gates and the buildings, the beds, and the bushes, and the trees. I needed to know the fastest route out of here: call it my training.

Several mutts were sleeping in a pile on the porch. One of them lifted his head and growled at Raider but didn't bother to actually try to chase him off. *Smart dog.* Beyond I could see two cats with swishing, bottle-brush tails stalking around the corner of the house away from us. I stifled a grin. Other than the obvious motley collection of pets, the place was empty.

It didn't used to be like this. Old memories resurfaced of the old man and his late wife. Their home had been the heart of this neighborhood. *A cider mill oozed under the apple trees while neighbors milled, a tire swing hung from the old oak tree, and somewhere, far in the back of the property, boys fished in the stocked pond with willow branch rods.* I missed those days. The neighborhood felt disconnected now.

Beside me, the old man offered his hand to Raider to sniff. Raider stuck his nose out and sniffed quickly before darting back. The old man smiled. "If you stay and help me finish this bed, my daughter-in-law left me some apple pie. Might be willin' to share a piece."

"That won't be necessary." I shoved the wheelbarrow to a stop in front of the shed.

He chuckled. "Don't matter if it's necessary."

I looked at Old Man George. The lightheartedness faded from his face; deep lines carved by sun and wind tightened around his mouth. The difference felt like the difference between childhood and the real world, and it hurt to watch. It hurt to understand. Finally, I nodded. "Yes, sir."

He nodded. The deal was sealed. "Might as well get this lot in." His hand waved over the wheelbarrow.

I picked up the tools. “Where do you want them?”

He twisted the doorknob on the shed. It squeaked and ground before the door banged open. With a flick of the switch, the light turned on, buzzing and glowing, the light bulb slowly warming up. I stepped onto the threshold. The musty aroma of a dirty, hay-strewn floor, rusty tools, old tractor oil, and stale cat food met my nose. The light didn't reach the far corners of the room, but everywhere that I could see tools, boards, mowers, parts, pieces, spare screws, metal poles, and plywood boards lined the walls and filled the center. At the back, a cat's eyes glared incandescently at me, and then disappeared.

“Just stick ‘em by the mower.”

I hesitated, eyeing the cramped, small, dark room. I didn't want to enter. Panic clawed at the back of my throat like a rat trying to escape its doom. I backed up. *Crumbling walls the color of desert sand hemmed me in. The rat-a-tat of AK47s echoed in the close space. Sweat trickled down my back. I crouched down against the wall, trying to remain hidden and small in the night's shadows. I didn't have my gun. Where was my gun? My breathing shortened. Gasp in; gasp out. Something wet tickled my fingertips. I glanced down. Raider was licking my fingertips. Why is Raider here?* When I looked back up, the city was gone, the fight long over. Old Man George stared down at me, his lips puckered together and moisture in his eyes. I rose from my crouch. “I don't need your pity.” I grabbed the mulch and the tools and threw them into the shed without bothering to watch where they landed. I tugged the door shut with a fierce pull.

“I wasn't pitying you, son.” His eyes were still moist. “Come on and bring the wheelbarrow.” He turned back to his gardens. “We still have one more bed. It's chock full of walnuts. Got to get them out. My daughter-in-law wants 'em for a pie.”

I stared at his retreating back. *What?* The distance between us increased as he kept walking. Raider took one look at me and trotted after him. *Traitor.* I hurried after. The pain in my leg was more intense; the flashback had reminded me of the shrapnel. I grabbed my pant leg and used it to pull my leg forward. *There's no time to lag behind. That's for the weak.*

When I finally caught up, the old man was standing next to the last bed, a large, irregularly shaped slope lined with bricks. It slouched to the left of a sidewalk leading up to the two-story farmhouse. On the right, a thick tree with rough bark towered over the shingled roof. The dogs that had been sleeping on the worn wrap-around porch were gone. Raider lounged against the tree's roots. Walnuts littered the ground.



“Jest take ’em and toss ’em in the wheelbarrow.”

I set to work, focusing on each nut in front of me. I would not have another flash-back—at least not in front of the scrappy, scraggly old man picking up nuts in front of me. The next time I looked up the wheelbarrow was full, the grass and mulch were clear of nuts, and the sun was significantly higher in the sky. Old Man George leaned back against one of the pillars of the porch, a hand on his back and a grimace on his face. “Time for pie,” he grouched. “Leave the walnuts and come on.” He disappeared inside.

Raider stood up, waiting for me, his tail wagging languidly. I stroked a hand down through his bristly fur. The open front door revealed a homey living room—not metal boxes or canvas tents. Comfy sofas, covered with crocheted afghans, lounged on the oak floor. Family photos lined the walls, while several candles and a shadowbox rested on the mantelpiece. You’re home. Remember? I stepped forward, hesitated, and then finally entered, Raider close beside. I could already hear Old Man George at the back of the house. With one swift glance around, I followed. *That was a folded flag on the mantle.* My feet retreated backward as I re-evaluated my observation. *The display case . . . he lost someone in the military.*

“Well? Are ya comin’, or aren’t ya?”

“Coming, sir.” With one last look behind, I left the room. If he didn’t want to bring it up, I wouldn’t either. I knew enough about grief to respect his privacy. I found Old Man George on the back porch lounging in a wooden rocking chair, a plate of pie in his hand. Another piece rested on a plate on the side table. I sat down and dug in. Raider sprawled down on the ground beside me. *This view must be spectacular in summer time.* A flat yard mowed

down stretched back to a heavily forested tree line. *I don't remember Old Man George owning this much land. It's an awful lot for him to take care of.*

"I reckon if you want to come out and shoot sometime, I don't mind."

I tried to hide my slight jump. I had forgotten he was here.

"Might be nice to have some of the vermin cleared off the place," he continued, leaning back into his rocking chair.

I shoved another bite into my mouth and savored the sharp flavor of the cinnamon, mingling with the lighter taste of apple slices and buttery, flaky crust. "Might decide to."

He nodded amiably. "If that's settled, these plates need washed." I turned to look at him. "Really?"

The old man snorted. "You remind me of my son. Always so precise—everything 'cept his humor." His eyes drifted off into the distance, remembering old memories looped together on a reel. "Deployed in Iraq. They gave my daughter-in-law a Purple Heart. Said he'd served well."

The knowledge washed over me, cold and quiet. I had come home, but, like so many others, his boy hadn't. My eyes sought out the tree line again. *He should be here, having pie with his father, yet here I am instead.* The honor of the moment was only outweighed by the duty now settling deep into my heart. I scratched behind Raider's ears. "A worthy recognition." I cleared my throat, trying to rid it of the tightening feeling. "Did you have anything else you wanted to finish today, sir?"

**"The
knowledge
washed over
me, cold and
quiet."**



Brown Skies

.....
by Gloria Arnold

It was the longest thirty-six hours Decatur had ever known.

It was the longest thirty-six hours Decatur had ever known.

“And you tell Mickey ‘Happy Birthday’ from me, ya hear?”

Shirley nodded and squeezed through the bakery door backward as she shoved the glass door open with her elbow. “I will. Have a good evening.”

But it wasn't a good evening. Not for the bakery attendant, not for Shirley, not even for Mickey's birthday.

Shirley was accosted by a fierce wind as soon as the bakery door clanged shut behind her, the little bell ringing ferociously. The wind threatened to snatch the bakery box containing Mickey's crimson and white birthday cake right out of her arms.

Shirley gripped the box with one hand, wrestled a handful of skirt in the other, and scurried to the car. Once in, Shirley instinctively looked at the sky.

She wished she hadn't.

What she saw made her skip the errand she had planned to make before heading home. Mickey would just have cake, no ice cream tonight. She had to get inside before the bottom of those clouds fell out.

It was late afternoon on April 3, 1974. Shirley Johnson, director of nurses at Baugh Wiley Smith Hospital in

Decatur, Alabama, had just finished her shift, dropped off her assistant, Gladys, at her home, and was picking up her son's seventeenth birthday cake before heading home to celebrate. Mickey had wanted the cake to be crimson and white in honor of the University of Alabama football team because all Mickey cared about was the Crimson Tide. The lady at the bakery had done her best to stencil a football shape in brown on top of the cake, but it looked more like a dismally brown Easter egg.

“The wind slammed the car door for her.”

Speaking of dismally brown, it was unusual for the sky to be brown during a storm. Shirley knew that in Alabama, the skies turned from blue to gray to dark gray during a storm. Brown and green skies meant something else—something more than just a spring thunderstorm.

4:30 p.m.

Shirley parked the family Lincoln Statesman in the driveway and got out of the car under a canopy of heavy clouds covering a brown sky. The wind slammed the car door for her.

Just inside the screen door to the kitchen, Mickey met Shirley with the phone in his hand and the cord dangling around his knees. “Mama, it’s Dr. Baugh on the phone. He says he needs you at the hospital right away.”

Shirley snatched the phone from his hands and spoke into the receiver. “Dr. Baugh? Are you there? Dr. Baugh?”

“Shirley, I need you here right away.”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s a storm surge coming our way. The weatherman said a tornado touched down near Birmingham in Concord just a little bit ago. There’s supposed to be several tornadoes hitting one after another. We all need to be at the hospital.”

“How bad is it?”

“I don’t know, Shirley, but pack a change of clothes. It could be several days.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

“Shirley, pick up Gladys and whoever else you can think of on your way here. We need all hands on deck for this one.”

“Okay, Dr. Baugh.”

“And Shirley?”

“Yes?”

“Drive safely. It’s going to be fierce out there in no time.”

Shirley hugged Mickey goodbye, told him to keep his younger brother Dale and younger sister Kristie indoors away from windows, and left the birthday cake sitting on the kitchen counter. She didn’t realize how long it would be before she saw it again.

• • •

5:00 p.m.

Shirley pounded on Gladys’s front screen door. Gladys had bolted it, and the storm door was locked.

“Gladys, it’s Shirley.” The wind snatched Shirley’s words and flung them behind her. She pounded frantically against the rattling screen and solid wood. “I’m here to take you to the hospital.”

“Take me to the hospital?” Gladys appeared around the corner of the house in the side yard. She dropped an overloaded laundry basket on the wooden porch and labored up the stairs to Shirley. Clothespins formed a fringe around the hem of her shirt. Gladys was a heavy black woman who wore oversized flannel shirts almost every day.

“Take me to the hospital? Why? Them clouds fixin’ to drop out of the sky, Shirley.”

“I know. That’s why we’ve got to go. Dr. Baugh said a surge of tornadoes are coming toward Decatur. The hospital will be full.”

Shirley and Gladys stripped the clothespins from her shirt, piled them on the clean laundry, and darted to the car. Gladys looked back at the laundry. It wouldn’t be clean when she saw it again.

6:00 p.m.

Shirley and Gladys pulled into the hospital parking lot under menacing layers of clouds. But even under the lowering clouds, the sky was eerily light, almost hypocritically so—like nothing was really going to happen.

But the pace of the flying clouds was unquestionable. The sky brewed in churning spirals like agitated black coffee. Across Gordon Drive, Verne’s department store awning flipped inside out, and just down the block The Brick Deli and Tavern outdoor umbrellas were flung into the street, but there was no traffic to hit them, and no person brave enough to fetch them. Shutters popped shut as if powered by tight springs. Treetops thrashed the sky, and limbs already littered the sidewalk. Oak leaves turned pale as they flipped upside down in the violent gusts.

After climbing a few steps to reach the hospital, Shirley shut the door behind them. She turned just in time to see the first raindrop smack against the glass door.

So it began.

• • •

Meanwhile ten miles away in Hazel Green, Alabama, a young man undertook protecting his family from the growing angry torrent in the sky. The tornadoes were closing in, and he knew their mobile home was unstable.

With a growing funnel cloud chasing them, he led his wife, son, and two daughters scurrying down the street,

holding hands as they ran. He knew they could find refuge in the Baptist church down the street. The strong bricks and deep cellar were the only viable anchor against the angry tornadoes that threatened them.

“Daddy, I can’t run anymore,” his son called from the grip of his mother.

The father looked at the sky, then at the church still almost a mile away. He knew they wouldn’t make it. They might not even make it to the roadside ditch, but it was their only option.

“Run, son. Everyone, run for the ditch.” He squeezed his son’s hand tighter, willing his family to run faster. Beside the road ran a long, deep gully filled with weeds, vines, kudzu, and briars. The father hoped that lying in the ditch would shield them from the tornado on their heels. It was their only hope. If they could make it to the ditch, perhaps the tornado would blow over them, sparing their lives.

But only he made it.

As the father dove into the mess of briars, tangles, and vines lacing over the ditch, he felt his son’s tiny fingers slip from his strong grip. Unable to stop from crashing downward into the ditch, the father could only glance back with his arm still outstretched toward his family. No longer safe in his grasp, his son, wife, and family screamed as a giant oak, hundreds of years old, careened across the road crushing them. Giant wooden shards flew across the ditch, one penetrating the father’s leg. His moans were muffled by sounds of cracking timber, breaking limbs, and whistling wind.

The wind—it was on him now.

It was the wind that kept the man from scrambling out of the ditch to rescue his family. The tornado was upon him. He had to stay down.

“The wind—
it was on
him now.”

The branch had speared him just above his left knee and exited along the back of his quadriceps, but he didn't feel pain from the nine-inch long splinter as he crouched in the ditch. He didn't feel the wind picking up pieces of the road, pieces of the trees, pieces of cows in the nearby fields, and flinging them at and over his body. All he felt was tears for his family, and the wind.

The wind—it wouldn't go away.

Within a long minute, the storm had passed overhead, and the man clawed his way out of the ditch past overhanging branches, pieces of fence line, coils of barbed wire, sheets of tin siding, and even mangled chickens. Once he emerged, he saw a completely different countryside than when he had seen it last. No tree was left untouched. Treetops were mangled spindles of bare, stripped twigs. The chicken hatchery across the road was no longer just across the road; it was on both sides now. It was in the ditch, in the oak tree that had killed his family, in his hair and speckled across his face. Chicken blood mingled with his own and ran in thick stripes down his leg. The wind had left nothing right side up. Nothing.

• • •

Inside Baugh Wiley Smith Hospital was as much a tornado of action as it was outdoors, and Shirley was the boss.

“Dr. Smith, you take the waiting room.”

“Dr. Baugh, you take your consulting room, and I'll send people in to you.”

“Dr. Danley . . . where's Dr. Danley?”

“Shirley, he's just called.” Gladys arrived breathless from the switchboard. “Dr. Danley's takin' shelter in his house.”

“Well, Dr. Wiley, you take his place in his office. And don't you dare leave your post. The nurses and I will send people to you as soon as there is a vacancy.”

But there were far too few vacancies that night. As soon as the tornadoes touched down, people started pouring into the hospital, bringing the weather in with them. Some arrived mangled by twisted barbed wire; others, like the man from Hazel Green, were impaled by tree branches and fence posts. Some were brought in on detached doors as makeshift gurneys. Many came in so covered in mud their own families couldn't recognize them.

The tornado surge did not show favoritism. People streamed in from everywhere. Rich moaned beside poor, and babies and children beside old.

Every nurse shuttled patients as fast as they arrived, but there was no way they could keep up. The tornadoes were mercilessly plowing through Decatur and the surrounding counties, leaving hundreds of victims in their wakes.

Dr. Baugh tuned the radio to the weather station, but the hectic static was overwhelmed by the people who poured into the hospital. If they could have heard it, they would have known that a tornado entered Limestone County at 7:05 p.m., and that by 7:35 p.m. a second one was tearing along the exact trail left by the first. Both headed straight for Decatur. The tornado tore a twenty-mile-long path and rushed at Decatur like a mad bull snorting in mighty gusts, toppling timber, plowing gorges, and trampling homes.

Many communities were hit twice within only thirty minutes. The first storm ripped up Limestone County and grew even bigger as it trampled Decatur. As rescue teams moved in, they were halted by the second storm trailing even heavier than the first. These two tornadoes alone would account for well over half of Alabama's storm

deaths for that year, killing 55, injuring 408, and destroying over 1,100 buildings and 200 mobile homes.

• • •

Decatur lost power for two days, and surrounding counties and cities lost power for up to two weeks as a result of the Super Outbreak that wrecked Alabama, but Baugh Wiley Smith Hospital was without power for only three hours before the hospital generators kicked in. Shirley didn't leave the hospital for two days. None of the staff did. No one even slept.

When Shirley emerged from the hospital almost thirty-six hours after the tornadoes first touched down, she stepped out into another town. Renasant Bank just across Sixth Avenue had lost its roof. One block down from the bank was a storefront with no front, and just one door down from that wasn't there anymore. Turning slowly, Shirley saw havoc in all directions, not just from wind, but also from flooding. Streets still ran with floodwater, making it hazardous to drive. It took Shirley several minutes to orient herself in the unfamiliar landscape—something she'd known like the back of her hand just hours before.

Glancing back at the hospital, Shirley was reminded of God's goodness and protection. Not one brick or roofing tile was disturbed. The hospital had been preserved as a haven of strength and safety through the deadliest outbreak of tornadoes Alabama had ever seen. The Super Outbreak of 1974 had swept across the region like a giant hand sweeping glasses off a counter in one clean motion killing 86 people, injuring 949, and demolishing property worth over \$50 million. Everything had been touched, but some things stood as stern reminders that although much had been wrecked, some little things had been brave enough to stay the same. The standing walls of Baugh Wiley Smith

Hospital, the untouched birthday cake on Shirley's kitchen counter, the golden retriever waiting on the back stoop of the man's house in Hazel Green when he returned home alone, and the fierce hearts of scarred people everywhere—all stood as testimonies that the storm could not erase. And those little things were that to which Decatur still clung.





Section Three

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES







Louder

.....
by Allie Gray

*He was right because my generation didn't think we mattered,
but he was wrong to say America had no hope.*

“Sketchy” was the word everyone used to describe the neighborhood we were in.

“That house is sketchy.”

“That car is sketchy.”

“That dude is sketchy.”

“That potted plant is sketchy.”

I didn't mind the neighborhood, because it looked exactly like the neighborhood I grew up in. If you took Pensacola, Florida, and dropped it right on top of Durham, North Carolina, nobody would notice. The cities looked like twins to me.

I tried to assure the girls in my group that the neighborhood was fine. Nobody is peeking out their curtains at you, the dog doesn't have rabies, those aren't police sirens you hear, and no, I don't think they're selling drugs. By the end of the day, my voice was hoarse from repeatedly offering comfort and repeatedly being ignored, so I just stopped talking.

The people we surveyed were generally nice old ladies or nice old men. The Susan B. Anthony List pulled information from general voting records in order to determine who we would survey, so there was little danger of us running into serial killers or axe murderers.

Of course, you couldn't determine who were serial killers or axe murderers by the way they voted, but I kept that observation to myself.

Street after street, neighborhood after neighborhood, door after door, house after house. Voters and nonvoters, Republicans and Democrats, Trump supporters and Hillary supporters. There might as well have been a line painted down the middle of every street. It seemed like there were no other options, and we hated it. The names of streets and people began to blur together in my memory, and the survey questions spewed out of my mouth like paper from a fax machine.

“People don't believe the same way.”

“Hi, my name is Allie. I'm with the Susan B. Anthony List, and we are out asking people questions about the upcoming presidential election. Do you have a minute to answer a few questions? Okay, great! You know that abortion has been a big issue in the debates—are you pro-life or pro-choice or undecided? Okay, is a candidate's position on abortion a big determining factor for you when deciding who to vote for? Would you mind telling me who you are going to vote for?” Exactly the same, every time, regardless of the answers they gave.

Responses inevitably varied. I don't care what the news media says: people don't believe the same way about anything. Republicans are not all cut from the same cloth; neither are Democrats. I encountered pro-choice advocates voting for Trump, even though he was pro-life. I encountered pro-life advocates voting for Hillary, even though she was pro-choice. People in their seventies who had voted Republican their whole lives were punching “Better Together” signs into their lawns, and people who

had voted Democratic their whole lives were slapping “Make America Great Again” stickers onto the bumpers of their Volvos.

This election cycle was making people question their beliefs, and I was no exception.

Eventually, the map our group had been given led us into a nice-ish neighborhood, and it was in that neighborhood, in a little white house with an American flag waving in the breeze, that an old man sat in his kitchen, waiting for someone to talk to. It just so happened that I would be that someone—well, nothing happens by accident.

...

I will admit, my knocking had become softer as the day progressed.

“If it’s an old person, they won’t hear that,” my friend Savannah stated from her position a few steps behind me.

I rolled my eyes and sighed and knocked louder this time, hoping whoever was inside still wouldn’t hear me. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a security camera peeping out from the wilting leaves of a hanging plant. *It probably is an old person*, I thought. *A paranoid old person.*

Savannah stepped in front of me to hang a flyer on the brass doorknob when we heard the hum of a garage door opening. I looked over my shoulder at the house next door, expecting to see a kid on a bike or a dog bolting away from the confines of a garage. Instead, I heard Savannah say, “Oh. Hello, sir!”

She was already making her way down the steps by the time I turned around. “We are with the Susan B. Anthony List . . .” the same rehearsed lines we had been delivering all day.

The old man stepped out of the garage and stared at Savannah. His lips pressed together to form a tight line across his wrinkled face, and bushy eyebrows scrunched

low on his forehead. His arms were crossed over his white T-shirt, and he didn't say a word or make a move as Savannah continued to recite her lines. ". . . asking people questions about the upcoming presidential election. Do you have a minute to answer a few questions?"

No response.

"Um, DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE TO ANSWER A FEW QUESTIONS?" I know she was thinking he might be a little deaf, but I was thinking he might be a little senile.

"Who are y'all with?" he barked.

"Um, the Susan B. Anthony—"

"I don't know what that is. What is that?"

"It's . . . it's . . ." Savannah looked flustered by his demanding tone, so I stepped in.

"It's a pro-life organization."

His focus shifted to me. "That means nothing to me. I don't know what that means. Say what you mean, girl!"

Yikes! "It means we're against abortion."

His eyes narrowed into slits, and he shifted his weight from one socks-with-sandals foot to the other. "I ain't for killing babies," he said.

"Well," I began. "Then—"

"I ain't for killing babies, and I ain't for Hillary Clinton, and I ain't no liberal, and I ain't got no patience for people who are!"

Savannah's eyes widened. "We—we aren't liberals. We're conservatives."

"Speak up, girl! You gotta know what you believe. Say it again."

Savannah swallowed and looked at me before standing a little straighter and meeting the scary man's gaze. "We are conservatives, and we are voting for Trump!"

He nodded and adjusted his Air Force hat; then he turned his attention to me. “How ‘bout you, girl? What do you stand for?”

“I’m a conservative too,” I squeaked.

He harrumphed. “You don’t sound too sure about that.”

“I—well, I—I am . . .” I concluded lamely.

“You know what, girls? This world is messed up. I served in the Air Force for thirty years, seen a lot of mess. But what we got goin’ on right now?” He shook his head. “This is the worst it has ever been. Your generation,” he said wagging a wrinkled finger at us, “has seriously dropped the ball.”

I shivered. Did people really think that? I had doubts about my generation sometimes, and I wondered about the direction we were going, but were we the worst ever?

I looked around the inside of the old man’s garage, taking in the Air Force posters and American flags tacked to the white walls.

Was my generation responsible for all the uncertainty?

Savannah continued chatting with the old man about the upcoming election, while my mind wandered to the events of the last few months. It seemed to me that America was a teetering scale. In one bucket, you had the liberals; and in the other bucket, you had the conservatives. Every day, American citizens dropped into one of those buckets, adding weight to either side, with no clear winner.

Yet.

Savannah touched my elbow and nodded toward the garage. The old man was hobbling to the back, still muttering under his breath. I blinked. “Where’s he going? What did you say?”

“He’s going to get us water bottles,” Savannah whispered.

“Oh. That’s . . . nice.”

Savannah nodded. “He’s not that bad once you get to talkin’ to him.”

We waited outside in the cool, fall weather while the old man shuffled into his house and back out again. “Here you go, girls.” He tried to smile as he handed us the cold bottles of water, but it came out more like a grimace. I guess he wasn’t used to smiling.

“I know you girls must be busy, but I want to tell you one more thing.”

We straightened and gave the old man our full attention. I, for one, was hoping for some encouragement. The whole day had been one slammed door and one rude comment after the other, and my faith in humanity was rapidly diminishing.

“There is no more hope for America.”

My shoulders drooped. Subconsciously, I sent up a prayer. *Lord, I cannot deal with any more of this. I get that we have turned from You; I understand that we aren’t doing what we are supposed to do. But no hope? No hope at all?* My heart slipped down into my stomach. I guessed my generation was the worst ever, if we were the generation with no hope to offer.

“This nation will be judged severely by God for the sins we have committed. There is no way to avoid that.” The old man sipped on the water bottle he had grabbed for himself. “But, regardless of the coming judgment on this *nation*, each of us will be judged *individually* by God.”

Savannah looked at me out of the corner of her eye, and I looked at her too, but my mind was fixated on this shriveled old man. This shriveled, angry, incredibly strong old man.

“There is no more hope for America.”

“One day, we will all be called up to Heaven. And God Himself is going to stand in front of you and ask what you did with the time He gave you. What are you gonna say?”

The crisp fall day became colder as his question resonated. I stared at the flyers in my hands. “Have You Ever Thought About What Abortion Really Means?” it said. I knew this was a worthy cause, yet I had been meandering around all day, half-heartedly knocking on doors and encouraging people to vote pro-life. How typical of my generation to “drop the ball” as the old man had put it—to ignore the things that didn’t really matter, to shrink from them.

“I wish I had done more.” He looked at us with sorrow in his eyes. “I didn’t know what to do, I guess. I didn’t think what I did would matter. But it does matter.” The old man finished off his bottle of water and pointed at the pro-life flyers we were carrying. “What you stand for matters.”

As we walked away from the old man’s house, flyers in hand and the address of our next house in mind, I realized that he was right—about some of it. He was right because my generation didn’t think we mattered, but he was wrong to say America had no hope. Maybe we didn’t think our generation could make a difference or should make a difference. Maybe we just didn’t know how, but I refused to believe that we didn’t at least want to.

I refused to be like him. I looked back at the little white house in the sketchy neighborhood. I refused to get to the end of my life and wish I had done more. I would do more now.

So, at the next house we visited, I knocked a little louder.



Part Drifter

.....
by Gloria Arnold

Commencement Contest Winner, Nonfiction Narrative

Next to the buzzing utility pole at the intersection of 6th Avenue and Alabama Highway 67 in Decatur, Alabama, is a single row of motels that don't deserve the name. Four or five shabby buildings teeter next to each other, disgracing the street with crumbling roof tiles, sagging awnings, loose shutters, and empty parking lots. The one nearest 6th Avenue is named Nite Fall Inn, a place my brother-in-law, Will, said he wouldn't be caught dead in any time of the day, much less at nightfall. Just a few crooked parking spaces away is the Village Motel. Here, decrepit doors hang heavy on weak hinges, and only one car is parked slanted in the front drive. Next door is the Extended Stay Inn where neon lights advertise "---ended Stay Inn" and have for at least the last ten or fifteen years I can remember. The few brave lighted letters still clinging to the sign buzz, spit, and sparkle at random intervals, much like the buzzing utility pole near the crosswalk. Scattered haphazardly down the street, even more motels hug alleys between used car lots, gas stations, and the last video rental business in Decatur.

As a child riding past this sketchy strip of road, I often peered from the window of the car hoping to catch a glimpse of someone—anyone—walking in or out of the motels, but I never did. "Who stays there, mom?"

"Drifters."

“Where are they?”

“They don’t stay long, honey.”

And that’s as much as I ever talked to mom about that strip of drifter motels, but I kept thinking about it for several years. Drifters. What did they look like? What did they do? Where did they go?

As I grew up, I slowly understood that drifters are a type closely tied to their choice of motel. Actually, every kind of hotel has a type. And if people who stay at the Nite Fall Inn are drifters, then people who stay at Motel 6 are sixers.

Sixers arrive in sixes, usually four kids with two parents who pile out of their minivan under the covered walkway. The dad goes in to pay for a room (just one, because cots come with the room), and double checks at the desk that breakfast will be ready for them to check out by 6 a.m. the next morning. Sixers want six inches of chenille blanket at the end of the bed, take six-minute showers, surf all six channels on the TV, and typically require six hours of uninterrupted sleep. In the morning, sixers pack up their six, square-edged suitcases and proceed to the lobby by 6 a.m., just as promised. After all, they have six hundred more miles to drive. Before they leave, they grab six boxes of Frosted Flakes lined up for them as they leave the lobby. Six voices echo goodbye to the receptionist.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Then they’re gone, until the next time the sixers go on vacation and need a place to stay. They’ll pick another Motel 6. They always do. They’re sixers.

And even though we may have never stayed one night in a Motel 6, we're all sixers, too. You know why? Because sixers are the classic, the comfortable, the piece that each of us remembers from our childhood. They're the fun, careless things we used to wear (remember the Faded Glory overalls and white crew socks?) They're the snippet of a photograph that takes us back to those times we fell out of a tree on July Fourth, stamped our hands in fresh concrete, cut the hair on our teddy bear, and picked ripe tomatoes in the heat of summer.

So if sixers are the classic pieces of us, then continentals are the idyllic parts of ourselves that are rarely as perfect as we envision. People who stay at Hampton Inns are as continental as the hot breakfast they expect waiting for them in the morning. And that hot breakfast includes waffles with the hotel logo stamped into the dough in the center. What sets Hampton Inn waffles apart from other hotel waffles is the can of spray Cool Whip next to the waffle iron on the buffet counter. Any good continental knows that the spray cream is good for so much more than just topping golden waffles, Swiss Miss hot chocolate, and warm cinnamon oatmeal. Spray cream is the ultimate topping for bagels already smeared with strawberry cream cheese, or as a dollop on top of the cubed honeydew and cantaloupe fruit salad. Continentals have even tried stirring spray cream into Yoplait. Their moms don't mind; they're on vacation.

Hampton Inn checkout is at noon, so continentals take their time. Four free refills of coffee and two versions of the morning news later, the continental family meanders back up to their room to brush their teeth and saunter back down to check out.

No one leaves Hampton Inns in a rush. It smells too good. Every hall smells like lavender vacuum pods (except the hall with the in-ground pool—it smells like chlorine), every



room smells like air-conditioning, and even the ice machine rooms have a distinct fragrance that isn't all that bad. And the smell of waking up in a Hampton Inn? It's like slowly falling out of a dream. Continentals understand that just the smell of Hampton Inn is worth going on vacation for.

Continentals are what we all want to be. The continental dream is what we foresee our vacation looking like before we turn the key in the car and back out of the garage before the sun is up. We envision the room to be climate controlled and have wrinkle-free coverlets and spotless sink faucets, but in reality, our clothes still shrink to the size of dryer sheets after first washings, our hair still frizzes in humidity, our face breaks out on picture days, and our Chinese take-out still arrives cold.

If drifters are at one end of the hotel spectrum and sixers and continentals are somewhere in the middle, then ritzers are at the other. They are glamorous, hard to please, no less than posh. They expect things to be expensive because they always are, and they've never once considered carrying their own bags.

I was once a ritzer. Notice I said once.

We were staying New Years' Eve in Chicago. Trudging from the Navy Pier squinting against the icy wind and rain-sized hail, we stumbled in the doors of our hotel, only to have the receptionist inform my icy-eyebrowed family that we had been double-booked and that another family was cozily enjoying the warmth of our bedroom at that exact moment. The hotel was full, he said, but he promised to help us out in some small way, so he gave us vouchers for a partner hotel just downtown. Turns out "just downtown" meant "just the Ritz-Carlton"—the fanciest hotel in downtown Chicago.

The Ritz-Carlton staircase itself was as large as my house, no joke. The ornate patterns did not end with the velveteen carpet and scrolled chair-rail. They ventured up the stairs on mahogany banisters, spilled out over majestic balconies, and protruded in the shape of lion heads on top of marble figures. The doors were arched, not squared. The floors were mirror-like gloss smeared over dark tile that responded to heels like the click of oiled keys on a busy typewriter. Surrounded by the opulence, we were acutely aware of our wet-smelling wool coats, wind-blasted hair, and red, frozen noses.

We padded up the stairs to our room on crimson carpet that dampened our footsteps, the bell boys somewhere in the invisible rear, and found our door with a little useless knocker on the outside. Everything inside the room was expensive. You could tell. It just had that "don't touch unless you intend to buy" look that scared me as a child. The pillows even had anti-theft devices in the corners to make sure we didn't leave with them, because I'm sure someone has tried.

All the glitz made my dad nervous. Actually, I think it was all his kids in the middle of the glitz that made him nervous. He just knew we were going to touch something,

break something, or open something that would show up on his hotel bill later. Even the innocent-looking water bottles in the kitchenette weren't safe to touch. "They're five dollars!" my mom yelled as my little brother reached for one. "Put it back right now and come sit down before you break something that will cost us our retirement." He sat down. We all did. We weren't even allowed to touch the Jacuzzi.

Honestly, my dad would not have minded being a posh ritzer for the night, but having so many of his children with him made him jumpy about everything. And I guess I adopted his fear back then. I was pretty happy to get back home where the water bottles didn't charge us to touch them and the cheese in the refrigerator was there for eating, not looking at, but now that I'm grown up I think my perspective has shifted and now I realize I'm a little more like ritzers than I thought.

Ritzers are the piece of us that loves the fine things of life. They're the reason we browse fine art galleries but still go home and watch cheap movies and hang thrift store tapestries in the living room. They're the piece of us that goes to fancy Italian restaurants, but inevitably looks down to see spaghetti sauce dribbled on our white shirts. They're our love for culture, finesse, French-sounding menu items, and aesthetic wardrobes. The ritzer inside of me is the reason I pay way too much for coffee just because I like the atmosphere of the shop.

...

Last summer I went home and once again stood next to the buzzing utility pole at the crosswalk of 6th Avenue and Highway 67. While waiting for the light, I risked a childishly curious glance over my shoulder at the crooked row of drifter motels. Nite Fall Inn was still as sketchy as ever. Busted glass had splattered over the asphalt, leaving an odd shimmer to the gloomy scene.

Just as the streetlight changed and I turned to cross the street, I caught a faint glimpse of movement at the Nite Fall Inn. I paused, waiting for a drifter to show himself. A room door opened, and one solitary man drifted across the parking lot, leaving his door ajar, and slanted toward a sign with rotating red lights spelling “Main Office.” He was a drifter all right. Everything about him drifted—his path, his feet, even his eyes.

All my life I had hoped for a glance of a drifter, but now that he was within sight, I was a tiny bit disappointed because he wasn't really that different from anyone else I'd ever seen. In fact, as he moved across the parking lot, I saw in him something I identified with—perhaps a similar driving force—a little bit of drifter inside of me. Drifters don't like to stay in one place for long, and neither do I, neither do most of us. We are drawn by an invisible magnet of wanderlust, eager to travel, see sights, but never stay in one place too long.

And while it's hard to believe that someone who is part ritzer, sixer, and continental can still be part drifter, I know it's possible to be made up of four parts, because I am.

I'm a ritzer, sixer, continental drifter.

And so are you.



The Great Iconoclast

.....
by Kathie Herald

We take what little we know of Christ,
When we've convinced ourselves it's all,
And we put it on our potter wheels
And sit on our stools, straight and tall.

And we begin to shape our Christ
From only what we've seen of Him,
And forget that His fullness is a Tree of Life,
And we've only climbed on one limb.

We mold Him how we think He is,
All the while not knowing His way.
Until the only Jesus we see
Is our little Jesus of clay.

We think that we know Him so well:
We think we know His mind,
When it's really our hands that molded
What we've been believing all this time.

And not in selfishness, or in wrath,
But in loving-kindness Jesus comes
And smashes our graven saviors
So that we may know His living love.

For we don't need something that resembles Christ,
We need the Christ that lives and breathes—
Because our lives are changed by who He is,
And not by who we decide that He should be.





My Own Pistol

by Jon Heath

*I was reminded of Matthew 7:3,
“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye,
but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?”*

I am the fourth of seven children, with two brothers and four sisters. With brothers older and younger than I, boyhood was a special time in my life. We pranked each other, played sports together, fished together, and hunted together. We’re still close today. I am closer in age to my younger brother, Jeremiah, than to my older brother, Josh (two years compared to four), so I spent more time with Jeremiah growing up. We were closer in grade levels, maturity, and interests. Among those interests: guns.

We loved guns. As young boys, we started with the plastic rifles found in dollar stores and then wooden AK-47s that we spray-painted black. Over time, we moved on to BB guns, airsoft weapons, and paintball guns. In high school, we graduated to hunting rifles and pistols.

Of all those times, the airsoft period may have been my favorite. We were around ten and eight years old, and though our enthusiasm for guns was still influenced by war movies and Western stories, we had outgrown mere sound effects and wooden equipment. We wanted to eliminate the enemy and save America, or a western town, depending on our selected time period. We wanted to shoot with the intention of actually hitting a target. Airsoft weapons gave us the ability to shoot—and hit—targets. No more

imaginary bullets—we had pellets now. Because imaginary weapons had been put aside, imaginary targets were also unacceptable. To shoot a wooden AK-47 at air was perfectly acceptable—we could both see the enemy, even if no one else could. But to shoot airsoft pellets at air would be silly and unrealistic—we had moved past unrealistic.

So we shot at each other (with safety glasses on—don't worry).

One of us was the bad guy; one of us was the good guy. Or, sometimes, it didn't have to be one or the other. For Western showdowns, there didn't have to be a bad guy and a good guy. Two cowboys squaring off for the rights to marry the farmer's daughter were both good guys; one of them just had to die. Other times it was the Union vs. the Confederates, and though the Yankees won, they didn't necessarily have to be the "good" guys. In our imaginary world, they didn't even have to win.

I remember one occasion, shortly after we had both acquired airsoft pistols, in which Jeremiah and I decided to have a one-on-one showdown. I don't remember who had the idea for a pistol showdown, but we both agreed that it was a good idea. We didn't specifically say who we were. It wasn't the North against the South or two cowboys facing each other. It was just a showdown between two brothers who each wanted to prove his dominance over the other. Well, I don't know if Jeremiah wanted to prove his dominance, but I certainly wanted to prove mine. At the time, shooting him with an airsoft pellet before he shot me seemed to be the best and most practical way of asserting my dominance over him as an older brother. To make things more interesting, we both agreed to put in only one pellet (we called them bullets at the time). We'd start back to back, count out loud as we walked ten paces away from

each other, then quickly turn, shoot our one bullet, and see who emerged victorious. There was a possibility of us both dying, leaving no victor; but we hadn't considered that.

I had considered loading my pistol with more than one bullet. Not to cheat—I would never cheat—but merely as a safety precaution. We had both agreed to load our guns with only one shot, but what if he put in a few extra? I couldn't risk being shot multiple times and not

being able to defend myself. Just to be safe, I loaded my pistol with half a dozen or so extra shots. You may think less of me for doing that, but I wasn't planning to use them. I'd only shoot one shot as we'd both agreed.

We lined up back to back, and I began envisioning my game plan. We'd walk ten paces, and I'd turn and dive to the right as I shot, eluding his bullet just like someone in an action movie. He'd likely stand still, making himself an easy target. I had him.

We walked ten paces, counting out loud, "One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . seven . . . eeeight . . . NINE . . . TEN!"

I turned around and dove to my right—and he dove too! We both shot—*pop! pop!*—and we both missed. We both got up off the ground and kept shooting.

He cheated!

He had way more than one shot, *and* he dove! We hadn't made a rule against diving, but he wasn't supposed to think of it too. I got over the diving, though; we had just had the same idea. However, I couldn't get past the fact

"I had considered loading my pistol with more than one bullet."

that he had loaded his pistol with multiple shots. We had both agreed to one bullet! As my anger boiled inside me, we started running in a circle around our side yard with our shots zipping past each other. Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

He was cheating, and I was furious.

While we both frantically ran around the side yard, each hoping that the other was about to run out of bullets, one of his shots cut through the air directly toward me as if it had been fired by Chris Kyle himself. I could almost see it coming in slow motion, but I was not quick enough to react.

Smack!

It hit me in the side of the neck—probably one of the most painful places to be shot—and my anger raged. “JEREMIAAAAH!”

I yelled, and we both stopped shooting. In a matter of mere minutes, I had transformed from a boy hoping to assert his dominance to a furious tattletale. I ran inside and told Dad what happened: we had agreed to only load our guns with one shot, but Jeremiah loaded more than that, *and* he shot me in the neck!

I conveniently left out that I had also loaded more than one shot.

When Jeremiah told him that I had also loaded more than one shot, Dad took away our guns for a week or so. I feel rotten about the whole ordeal now, but at the time I didn't realize how ironic it was that I was furious with Jeremiah for doing the same thing I had done. I don't know if I ever apologized to him for that before writing

“I could almost see it coming in slow motion, but I was not quick enough to react.”

this story. I called him a few days ago and asked about his remembrance of the event, and I apologized for being a hypocrite. He remembered the event clearly, and we can both look back on it now and laugh. But there is a lesson that I took away from it.



I've heard it said that the flaws in others that bother us the most are often the flaws that we struggle with ourselves. We don't mean to be, but we're often hypocritical about people's shortcomings. Personally, I can't stand proud people. Few things bother me more than when people brag about themselves and carry themselves in an arrogant manner, as if they are better or more skilled than everyone else. Sometimes they are more skilled than everyone else, but the fact that they showboat it bothers me.

I recently realized that judging people is like having an airsoft pistol loaded with extra shots. I am irritated by proud people, probably because I see my own character flaws exemplified in them. It would be hypocritical for me to look down on someone for something I struggle with myself. That's why I now check my own pistol before examining the pistols of others.



Quit Running

.....
by AnaBelle Eidson

He didn't know that he would've faced more danger than freedom.

My feet hammered the track's pavement, then the scorched grass beyond it. My arms pumped as I ran forward. It was the closest I had come to flight. By the time I reached the edge of the school's property, my momentum allowed me to overtake the fence in what felt like a single leap—the way a track runner clears a hurdle. Then I kept running.

“Stop!” I screamed.

Hearing my breathy, pounding approach, the boy ahead in a gray T-shirt and athletic shorts turned to look over his shoulder. He looked startled; his eyes widened. Then he started to run too. “Stop!” I yelled again.

It was the summer after my sophomore year of high school. I had just turned sixteen, passed my driver's license test, and gotten my braces off. I remember smiling a lot, not because of happiness, but because I wanted to show off my finally straight teeth. I was a coach at Sports Star Camp, a summer day camp I had been a counselor at once before. We were called “coaches” instead of “counselors” to go with the sports theme, though. (We didn't do any counseling, anyway.) I liked going to work because it got me out of the house and paid for my teenage expenses: gas, clothes, and fast food.

Our super-sporty camp was held at Ramblewood Middle School. During bathroom breaks, the campers and

I read lovely notes like “I love tacos” scribbled in Sharpie on the inside of the bathroom stalls.

At camp, each coach was assigned to an age group, and each age group

“That’s when I saw him.”

was separated by color—blue for the youngest campers up through gray for the oldest. I was head coach for the red team, which was made up of around forty kids in second and third grade. Cody, who had been the quarterback for our high school’s football team, was the red team’s other head coach. He had swooshy hair and a defined jawline; he had just finished his first year of college in Indiana.

The camp day was divided into fifty-five minute intervals. At the end of each interval, every group would rotate to a new “station.” The station I remember most is the track and field behind the school. It touched Wiles Road, a high-traffic street separated by a metal fence that ran the distance of the school’s property.

One Tuesday, I was leading my campers outside to play freeze tag, and Cody was bringing up the rear. As we walked in a disjointed line along the track toward the field, I looked down at the track’s white lines. They were barely visible against the faded gray asphalt from the thousands of middle schoolers’ feet that had run on it. I looked up again, and that’s when I saw him.

Someone in athletic shorts and a gray T-shirt was walking along the fence that lined the parking lot and baseball fields. It wasn’t much more than a figure—gender and age still undistinguishable from where I was. Too far away to tell.

Is that one of our kids? I wondered. *Or maybe he’s a kid from a neighborhood nearby.* As I got closer, I could tell he was a boy. I stayed in my place at the head of the line, looking to see if I recognized him.

He stopped walking along the fence and stood facing away from me. I kept walking. He stood still, looking through the silver metal slats. I kept walking. He started to climb the fence that separated him from the road. *Go after him*, was all I could think. I started to run.

They say adrenaline gives you special abilities, like superpowers. I've heard of normal people lifting an entire car to free someone underneath or holding their breath underwater for impossible amounts of time. I know adrenaline was at work in the wires of my brain, because my memory of running after the boy is more like a surreal dream. The solid, earthly lines of the scene are blurred and light-like in my mind.

I know Cody screamed after me in confusion. I know I chased the camper past the baseball fields, climbed the fence, and tackled him on the sidewalk next to Wiles Road. I remember his whimper and choke-cry as I tried to hold him down. I remember him fighting against me. I remember saying "No. Stop." in a harsh, adult tone while he still tried to get away. I remember Coach Hall, my boss, driving up on a golf cart and yanking the boy onto it. I remember crying as we rode back to the school. I remember being scared. It was all so fast. So weird.

I learned later that the boy was autistic. He'd been left alone outside because he had thrown a fit, and that's when he decided to run. He didn't really know what he was doing; he just knew he wanted to get away from his camp leader, who was trying to tell him what to do. He didn't know that in trying to be free he was actually putting himself in danger. He wasn't aware that he could've been taken or hit by a car or gotten lost if he had made it out with no one noticing. He didn't know that he would've faced more danger than freedom as a ten-year-old boy

wandering the streets alone. He didn't know that I was just trying to help.

After everything had settled down, Coach Small, the camp's assistant director, told me in his Irish accent that I'd done a good job—that I'd acted on my feet. Like anything out of the ordinary does, the story spread. By the end of the day, I was hearing “Good job, Annie,” and “Oh my word, what happened?” from the other coaches.

I wanted to be proud of what I'd done (I'd saved his life, as everyone kept telling me), but I couldn't stop thinking about the boy. *He could've been killed*, I thought. *Why would he try to run?* It terrified me. I thought about the look in his eyes. It was like a scared animal. It was too familiar.

A few months earlier, I'd tried to run away too—not from summer camp—but from home. Before seven on a Tuesday morning, my mom and I had gotten into another fight. “I don't trust you,” she'd said. “You're hiding things from me.”

She was right. Very right. I knew it was the end—all my secrets were coming out. I don't remember the exact moment I decided to run, but within a few seconds I lurched off the couch, slammed through the front door, and was pounding the pavement of our neighborhood street. I remember looking back with the same scared animal look in my eyes and hearing my mom's voice scream after me. She sounded scared.

That night, a girl from church saw me wandering near a 7-11 and took me home. I was caught, like the boy that I would catch in just a few short months. And, like him, I had run from my authority, from safety. Like him, I hadn't really run toward freedom, but danger. I had run from the people who loved me. And when it was my turn to catch a



runner a few months later, I was still running inside. But I didn't realize that—and I wouldn't for a long time.

Sometimes, what we're running toward is more dangerous than what we're running from. Sometimes, we're caught and returned, like both the camper and me. Sometimes, we realize our mistake and willingly return, like the prodigal son. Sometimes, in the process of running, we cause damage we didn't see ourselves causing. But we have to make something of the damage because it's all we have now, like building a tall tower out of sludge—so we keep running. Sometimes, we have to make our raggedy bed and sleep in it, so we can remember the bed with its down comforter and feather pillows that we lost when we ran. Sometimes—most of the time—we're running from the

authority that was created out of love with the intention of protecting us.

Sometimes, something forces us to quit running, just as I had forced the camper to quit running that day. And even though I physically quit running when I had been caught at the 7-11, it was only after time helped me grow up that my internal running slowly turned to a jog, then to a fast-paced walk, then to a saunter, then to a slow turn around. My mind and conscience and logic slowly caught up with me.

All I know is that I'm glad I caught that boy. I'm glad people cared enough to go out and catch me. And I'm glad that somewhere along the way, I quit running.



Going for a Ride

.....
by Sean Delaney

*It was time I tried to enjoy Dad's hobbies just
as he had done for me so many times before.*

Some kids want to go to Disney World. Some parents take them. I was no such child, and Dad was certainly no such parent. Aside from being an overpriced rip-off, Disney World would have been a bore to him, unless it was all portions of the animated *Robin Hood*—and even then only the beginning (“Oo-de-lally” and so forth). Fortunately for me, I had only a passing interest in Disney. Unfortunately for him, I did have a passion for another company for which Dad had mostly disdain. So when I was eleven years old, my brother and I sat smiling on an airplane to Carlsbad, California—our ultimate destination: Legoland.

Lego toys had been my hobby since I was in kindergarten. I loved playing with the popular building toy and knew all the correct ways of doing things. I called the pieces “Lego bricks” instead of the tacky and genericized “Legos.” When I built something original, I devoted hours to the process—my work would be as close to a work of art as someone with a poor artistic eye could produce. I subscribed to the Lego *BrickMaster* magazine and archived each issue along with its free Lego Bionicle comic book packaged inside. I was a true “Legohead,” as Dad called me.

Dad was not nearly so fascinated. His experience with Lego bricks was that of the stereotype—the parent accidentally stepping on stray bricks in the dark. Lego bricks

were my hobby. I was to keep them to myself and away from any walkways, stairwells, or other high-traffic intersections in our house. Nor did he understand Legoland. His only interest in going there was to see me happy and to enjoy some amusement park rides. He didn't quite understand that Legoland was less about rides and more about imagination and creativity. In his mind, we were going to a Lego Six Flags.

It was for other reasons that he wanted to go to California. He wanted to show us San Diego, where he had been stationed in the Navy for a while, and also to enjoy some baseball games—the main hobby that he and I shared. But he willed himself through the land of the foot-piercing plastic for our sakes nonetheless.

My brother and I took time for every detail—a habit I carried with me even through museums, but applied more meticulously in this case. We raced fire trucks and solved puzzles and marveled at a demonstration of how Lego bricks were made. It was inside this miniature brick factory that Dad started showing signs of impatience.



To him, watching plastic be molded was just as boring as it may sound. But it fascinated us, so he followed on, albeit with a little more “move it along now, boys.”

It was when I approached a table with baskets full of Lego bricks that he chose to act. Knowing that I could possibly spend the entire day building something if I got started, he said that we should find a roller coaster. My brother and I, having never been on one before and eager to try, led him to one just outside the building.

Dad and I had very different views of fun. I enjoyed outdoor games as much as any kid, but I never invited myself to the neighbors’ ballgames because of a feeling that it would be impolite. Dad had never had that problem. He grew up in a city where every kid knew every other kid, and they always had plenty of boys for a ballgame. I grew up building and playing out adventure stories by myself or with my sister. Dad never saw fun in that. It was too slow, too boring, too indoors.

Growing up that way, I always played it safe, while Dad urged me to take more risks. I was afraid of diving too deeply into water as Dad swam at the end of the diving board, promising me I’d be okay if I’d just hop off the edge. I was afraid of even the friendliest dogs, even as Dad stood by, scratching their ears and telling me to come pet them. And I was also afraid of hanging upside down—which was exactly the kind of thing Dad planned for us to ride.

We led Dad to a roller coaster that looked comfortable to me. It was high enough that we could see much of the park, and it featured at least one big drop—which I’d heard was what roller coasters were for in the first place. And—most importantly—it was completely upright.

Dad wasn’t impressed by the experience. But he wasn’t pushing us to go again, and I had much more on the docket for us. He seemed satisfied for the time being.

We were in the castle-themed area of the park when Dad saw something that caught his eye. Standing in a pool of water like a couple of bright yellow trees were a pair of giant robotic arms with roller coaster seats attached to the tips. Park guests chose one of four intensity settings before being strapped in and spun about by the arms like an unbaked crust tossed by a pizza chef.

“How about we go on that, kids? What’s it called?”

I knew most of the park by heart at this point, not even looking at the map. “It’s called the Knight’s Tournament. They strap you in, and you get swung around like a knight’s sword, but you can choose what level they put you at.” I said warily. I was not so young as to not realize that Dad was growing restless, and with restlessness came a desire for excitement. I also suspected that he had realized my fear. If an eleven-year-old boy was too timid to ride something with a little terror to it at a theme park, then Dad thought it was time for a learning experience.

Truthfully, I did want to ride it. I had already researched the ride in the weeks of anticipation before we had left for California. I wanted level two—not too slow, but not too fast, and no upside-down turns. I wouldn’t have minded three, but I bid low so that I could haggle with Dad for level three when he inevitably would try to persuade me to ride the maximum level four.

My brother and Dad were the first to ride. From what I recall, Dad went for level three, but he insists that he didn’t ask anything of me that he didn’t do himself. Both of us are so far separated from it now that neither can truly remember who was right.

Then my turn came. I can’t remember if I rode with anyone. But I remember clearly insisting that I go on level three—exactly as Dad and I had negotiated. After being

assured by everything but an oath on the Bible from the ride operator, I walked to the seat of the bright yellow arm and allowed the operator to lower the safety restraints. Once I was locked inside, I was betrayed.

“Go ahead and give it level four,” Dad said.

I protested, trying to remind him of our agreement or appeal to the ride operator.

No mercy came from either the ride operator or Dad. The arm stopped still over the water for a calm few seconds before it began, suddenly twisting around and rising toward the California sun. I was disoriented, unable to tell where I was looking or what I was seeing, except for when I saw Dad on the platform, laughing. Unable to find any other response, I simply yelled out pitifully, “This is all your fault, Dad! All your fault!”

I have no idea how long the ride lasted, and I remember little of the sensation of being upside-down that I had feared so much. But I do remember the anger I felt as I got out of the seat. We had a deal! I should have known that he couldn’t resist watching me panic as I was ragdolled above the water. Dad tried to calm me and insisted that it couldn’t have been as bad as I had claimed. As can be expected of an eleven-year-old, I took little comfort.

Eventually, Dad grew tired of trying to persuade me and outright ordered me to calm down, warning that my attitude could lead me back to the hotel and away from Legoland for the rest of the time we had in California. After a few more hours there, I stopped fuming over his betrayal, but I was still bitter about it for a few days after.

Over time, I lost some of those old fears. I dive as easily as any other unskilled diver now, and while I’m still

**“This is all
your fault,
Dad!”**

not overly fond of dogs, I can work around them just fine once they quit sniffing me. I even enjoy more daring rides when I find myself at an amusement or water park. Dad, meanwhile, is growing too old to comfortably come along.

When I invite him to join in a tug-of-war or a pig chase at family camp, he refuses on account of his aging back.

When we play catch in the backyard, I no longer protest for fear of getting bruised by a wayward ball. Instead, he calls it off when he feels too sore to keep throwing. Now that my fear is gone, so is his ability.

Before my senior year of college, my family stopped in Destin, Florida, for a few days of vacation before we parted ways until Christmas. A few weeks before we left, Dad made an offhanded comment that maybe I could play golf with him while we were there. I was not a fan of golf. It was a slow game to watch and an expensive game to play. But I had been home for fewer than three months out of the past year. I decided that it was my turn to join him in his hobby as he had in mine. He forgot about it until I mentioned it to my mom, who then told him. He seemed surprised when we talked—I suppose I hadn't agreed to do something he enjoyed for a while, besides watch a baseball game.

We took a pitching wedge and a handful of golf balls to the backyard, where he started showing me how to grip the club and swing cleanly.

“Let the club rest in your hands,” he said, showing me with his own club. He inspected my grip and instructed me how to correct it. He then tossed eight golf balls on the ground in a line, and we began knocking them back and forth across the backyard, gradually increasing the distance.

“Now that my fear is gone, so is his ability.”

It was hot. I sweated, and everything unpleasant about the outdoors did what it could to deter me. But I had let discomfort get in my way far too often. Dad was here, probably sore in his back and pained in his feet. His body probably wanted to go inside to the air conditioning far more than mine did. But I had offered to learn, if he would teach me.

We spent maybe an hour in the back yard working my swing into something usable. But that wasn't why I was out there. I took to mind what he was teaching me about my swing, but it was more for him that I stood hacking at the little white and yellow balls in the grass. Perhaps I was trying to make up for the times when I treated him like a nuisance, not thinking that he was there for my happiness while he could still keep up.



We walked back inside to get some water. I can't remember what we did after that. I presume that we watched a baseball game.

We probably sat on the couch, the summer wind blowing through open windows as the sounds of a Cubs game came to us by way of WGN's broadcast team. He would analyze the first baseman's stance and explain how the pitcher spun his pitches like bullets through rifling. He would mention how he and my grandpa used to sit and watch games and how his dad would teach him about baseball and golf. And as he talked, I knew that he was having the ride of his life.



God Is in the Room

.....
by Geoff Stemen

This piece is the result of trying to comprehend the immediacy of God. The poem began with the thought that whatever room or space one stands in, God is there just as much as another human is, and perhaps more significantly and intensely. It is intended to help meditate on that fact.

God is in the room.
You can whisper, and His ears catch your words clearly.

He sees your tears fall,
His own eternal heart breaking
For your moment of grief.
He treasures the drops away in a bottle
To wipe them all, all away
A bit later.

God is in the world.
As you stand on a mountain,
Or in a field washed with breezes.
He watches beside you
And takes pleasure as you do—
Takes pleasure both in you as His creation
And in your pleasure at His creation.
We forget at times that God is anywhere,
As if our finite glancing
And ricocheting from task to trial to triviality
Is to be present
In a fraction of the sense that He is present.

He is present in the world
As I would be in this poem,
If I had invented English,
And poetry,
And language,
And you.

He is present in the future,
For His attributes inherent in His creation
Determine its glorious end, even if
The middle seems to be a controlled burn.

He is present in the past,
Such that you can turn to Him
As you two remember together, and ask,
“You knew that would happen, didn’t you?”
And whether with a tear or a laugh,
He says, “Yes.”

God is in the room.
He sees me write this little poem
And sees you read it,
Just as He has made the world
And made us walk it.

He feels our breath
And counts our bones
And watches our minds and hearts whirl
In frantic futility,
And He says,
“Be still and know
I am God,
And I am in the room.”



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