

5-1-1988

Aurora, 1988

Eastern Kentucky University, English Department

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AUROORA

AURORA

1988

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FAMILY REUNION

Amy Caudill

It was Thursday. As the sun tumbled through the kitchen window onto our newly waxed linoleum floor, Mom and I finally relaxed. The sheets were changed, the showers scrubbed and the freezer stocked with homemade ham and biscuits for Saturday morning's breakfast.

Every inch of grass and weeds on the farm had been mowed, and the little building across the creek, once a chicken house and curing house, swept and soap-and-watered. Everything was ready.

In a few hours, Uncle Russ and Aunt Frankie would come chugging in in their tiny tan Toyota pickup with five or six young'uns on the back (a different combination every year) and we'd all hug and kiss and exchange "you're getting prettier every year"s and "look how you've grown"s until Mom remembered herself and fixed them some supper. And the reunion would be underway.

I looked at Mom. She was leaning on the table with one hand on her forehead, staring at the floor. Her brows were knitted, and she was chewing her lower lip. I knew exactly how she felt.

"Just grin and bear it," I said. "Parts of it will be fun."

"Oh, I know," she said guiltily. "It would just be more fun if it wasn't at our house every single year."

"This is your family. Just think how Dad feels," I said and we both giggled.

The Bateses were indeed a rare lot. None over five foot eight, they loved to talk, loved to drink and loved to outdo each other. Uncle Russ would talk for three days and get offended if anyone tried to cut in. Russ's brother Bill, my papaw, would drift from group to group, spit

cup in hand, other hand on his hip, pretending he was part of the conversation while actually listening carefully for any remarks that might offend and mediating to keep his brothers from going home mad.

I always felt for Papaw. Having volunteered ten or fifteen years ago to host the reunion on his farm, Papaw was saddled with bringing his relatives to his home community and suffering the grievances the affair produced.

Mom, Granny and cousin Anna Lou would nag about the cooking and cleaning and the drinking. The drinkers would gripe about the disapproving looks they got from the nagers. And everyone would happily come back next year and do it all again.

So it had gone since the beginning. Mom and Anna Lou, who planned the reunion and sent the letters, had threatened every year never to have it again, and Papaw had protested that this was his family and he loved them and he would have this reunion. Things had proceeded as usual.

I heard the hum of a car that sounded like it was having trouble conquering the mud holes in our poorly-kept dirt road.

I peered out the window almost reluctantly and saw the the tan top of the Toyota through the forsythia bushes at the end of our yard. The truck jolted to a halt beside the porch, and we poured out to greet the first arrivals.

"Oh, chilern, it's so good to see you all," Aunt Frankie moaned.

"Bill," Uncle Russ said, shaking Dad's hand (my father was another of the many Bills in our family).

Russ had a red face with a mostly gray mustache flecked with strawberry blond hairs. One of his legs was shorter than the other, and he wore shoes with different-sized heels. He had tattoos on his arms and always acted like he had something to prove. In groups he dominated the conversation and told of personal escapades he

talked about for years, like the time he walked ten miles to work because it was the end of the month and the cabinets were bare. I guess he wanted us to think he was noble. Mostly we just thought he was windy. Wanting badly to be educated, he droned relentlessly about books and magazines he had read. National Geographic was his favorite and he always quoted recent articles, usually confusing the facts. Aunt Frankie once said he acted like he was the only person who knew how to read.

Frankie was different, and the family had puzzled for years over how the two came together. Born and raised in Mississippi, Frankie was as uncouth as one can be and still manage what she had. As tall as Russ and round as a barrel, she had short, thin brown hair she combed straight back, and her polyester stretch pants and pullover shirts were the same from year to year. She had a crude way of talking about things that had many times brought a blush to my dignified, almost genteel Granny, who had long ago become her loyal friend and confidant. Frankie had raised five children and one illegitimate grandchild and now worked as a bus driver in Mississippi.

It wasn't that we didn't like them. We loved them, in fact. They were just so different from us. They passed each day as best they could, while we planned and persevered and strove to become more enlightened. We lived in the present and the future, and one weekend each year they gave us the past, the one thing we all shared. Past relatives, past milestones, past crises. The problem was meshing the time frames and the two worlds we lived in the rest of the year.

I guess we did it for Papaw, although I couldn't figure out why he still wanted it. He was the one who had to compare the family of the past with that of the present and see how everyone's achievements and failures had changed

their lives. It had to be tough on Papaw, wondering how he could've helped.

* * * *

The fire crackled and shone hotly on our faces as we gathered around it for warmth and mosquito relief. Though it was the Fourth of July, the night was chilly. We'd spent every waking hour since the reunion began talking, laughing and singing. So far, everyone seemed to be getting along. I looked at Papaw. He was smiling widely and bouncing his knee to the fiddle music. I knew he was happy.

The music stopped and someone said, "Anna Lou, tell the tale about Bud falling in the toilet hole."

These gatherings were accompanied by a round of mountain tales, handed down and modified during the trip, usually about members of our family. Each story would lead to another and disputes would sometimes erupt over what actually happened.

"Now, Russ, you're not a-tellin' it right," Papaw would say with a scowl.

"Hush, Bill, I'll tell it however I want to..."

Anna Lou was everybody's favorite storyteller. Having a quick sense of humor and a contagious laugh, she captivated her audience. Her squat little body was covered with freckles, and when she told a story, she squinted and surveyed each face to see just what phrase or tone would make us laugh.

Now she evoked appreciative giggles and claps from her listeners as she described in vivid detail how her brother Bud visited the preacher's house after dragging himself out of the toilet hole to ask the preacher if he could come in out of the cold January night.

"And herevent Bud, stinkin' and freezin' to death, up to Dave's door. Poor Dave, bless his heart, he's too polite to say anything..."

Papaw and Russ sat together, listening and laughing. Russ's youngest son, Randy, emerged from the crowd of drinkers on the other side of the pasture and walked over.

"There's a party at Allan's. I need to take your truck, Dad," he said.

Russ reached in his pocket and pulled out his truck keys. Poking his finger in Randy's face, he said, "It'd better be back her tonight, son."

"It will, I promise," Randy said.

Randy was 25 and still drifting through life. He'd had at least a dozen jobs since high school and had been unemployed most of the time. He tried to make everyone think he had good intentions, and maybe he did starting out. He'd look in your eyes and tell you he was doing better, and then he'd mess up again and lose his job or get thrown in jail. He had freckles and a shifty smile. His nickname was Porky. Fitting since he'd gained about fifty pounds since last year. Six or seven years ago, Randy had spent about six months living with Papaw and Granny, determined to hold a job and try life in Kentucky. He'd been a nuisance to Papaw, who bailed him out of trouble regularly and finally sent him home. The general opinion in our part of the family was that Randy tried but he was trouble. I knew he wouldn't bring the truck back tonight.

* * * *

The line was long, and we were hungry. Shucky beans, corn bread, ham, apple pie and other mountain specialties covered three tables in the little building. The steamy afternoon humidity surrounded those in line outside the building.

Today was the primary day of the reunion, and attendance would be the highest of the weekend. The family had brought food and lawn chairs and plans to make a day of it. Hearty food, nostalgic conversation and volleyball would

carry us through the day. Children who had brought their bathing suits with no care for food or conversation were already splashing in the creek.

Standing at the back of the line, I listened to bits of conversations drifting in front of me.

"Did anybody remember the volleyball net?"

"That's the trouble with the Democrats..."

"Well, what about the Republicans..."

"Can't wait to get my hands on that red velvet cake."

"We played 18 holes yesterday."

"Lord, honey, my arthritis hurts so bad sometimes I think I can't live and stand it..."

The chatter quieted as someone announced that Uncle Don was about to ask the blessing.

"Our Father in Heaven, we thank You for allowing us to come together as a family to share this food and fellowship. We so seldom see each other, Lord, that we are so grateful to You for giving us this time once a year to remember our heritage and to make up for lost time. Please bless us and keep us, Lord and see to it that we all make it safely to our respective homes and that we try to remember this day for a long time. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

Chatter resumed and we scattered to find seats. I spotted one near the creek and sat down, plate in lap.

A few feet away sat Granny and Frankie, eating chicken and dumplings and talking quietly.

"Lord, Russ is so keyed up he's liable to be unbearable the next few weeks," Frankie said.

"Bill is, too," Granny empathized.

"They love to get together, don't they?" Frankie said.

"Yeah, they sure do. Bill looks forward to this for weeks. And it takes him weeks to get over it."

"Russ worries about what Bill thinks of him," Frankie said cautiously.

"He shouldn't," Granny said quietly. "Bill loves all his brothers."

"Russ thinks Bill would've handled the children different. Maybe if Russ had been more like Bill we wouldn't have had five divorces and a bunch of grandkids with nobody to care about 'em but us."

"Bill and I haven't been perfect, either. We've done too much for our last two. We've paid for their homes and their schooling and they're still dependent on us."

Granny looked wistful for a moment.

"There's no sense in worrying about those things now, Frankie. We all just do the best we can."

Granny seemed to know everything.

* * * *

As the evening sun fell behind our house, Frankie, Russ, Papaw, Granny, Mom, Dad, Anna and I sat in a circle, exhausted.

"Where's your truck, Russ?" Papaw asked.

"Randy still has it from Friday night. I reckon he thinks it's his now."

Papaw looked away with a scowl.

The next few minutes passed in discussion of who was going to keep all the leftover food.

"Make sure everything's packed, Frankie. We'll leave as soon as Randy gets back with the truck," Russ said.

"Has anybody tried to call him or track him down?" Papaw said.

"Aw, you can't do that with Randy. You just have to let him come to you," Russ said.

Randy had been in and out since Friday, usually drunk and taking the truck whenever he pleased. He and Russ had quarreled a few times, much to everyone's embarrassment, but Randy had sweet-talked Russ into letting him off the hook. Now the reunion was over and Russ and Frankie were stranded. I could tell the whole situation was making Papaw nervous.

He was impatient and hated any kind of crisis. He wanted everyone to be happy and satisfied.

"Russ, won't you ever learn?" Papaw said, consternation distorting his face.

"Now, what the hell do you mean by that?" Russ said, clenching his fists.

"I mean that you've let Randy run wild so long he'll never amount to nothing. He's lazy and irresponsible and a hell of a lot of trouble." Papaw was shouting now and biting his tongue the way Bateses did when they were mad.

Granny looked like she might say something and then didn't. I think she knew like we all did that Papaw and Russ had a lifetime of disagreements and frustrations they needed to vent on one another.

"Why can't you just once mind your own damn business and be a gracious host?" Russ said. "All I want is to come and spend a few days with my family, but I end up dreading it because I know our two worlds will clash."

"Russ, that don't have to happend. I'm just trying to make you see where you've messed up," Papaw said.

"Don't you think I can see where I've messed up? I'm 65 years old and it's too late for advice. I've done what I've done, and now I have to live with it. Whatever mistakes I've made, they're my mistakes."

"You're my brother, Russ, I can't help but look at you and wish you'd done better. I'm 70 years old and I've got six kids and 13 grandbabies. I can look back on a lot of mistakes, but at least I can say I've done more good than bad and I don't know if you can," Papaw said sadly.

"Well, Bill, if it bothers you that much to be around me then maybe I won't come back next year," Russ said and walked away.

"Russ, come back...you know better than that," Papaw begged.

I knew he must be crying inside.

* * * *

Papaw sat in a lawn chair by the creek, staring at the water. Granny and Frankie chatted nearby. Mom, Anna and I walked around picking up garbage. Dad and Russ sat in the little building, talking about national defense. We could hear them through the screens.

Frankie and Russ had been waiting two hours for Randy to come back with the truck. We kept them company and tried to cover the awkward silence that loomed between Papaw and Russ. Just when it seemed that we couldn't possibly endure another moment, the hum of Russ's Toyota bouncing across the pasture provided relief. Aunt Frankie stood up and started picking up bundles to put in the truck. Uncle Russ and Dad emerged from the little building and Russ went to help Frankie with the luggage.

"Well, I guess this is it," Frankie said.

"We sure enjoyed having you," Mom said.

"When are you coming to Mississippi? We'd like to see you more than once a year, cause there's nothing like family, honey, nothing like family," Frankie said.

Frankie and her grandson climbed into the truck, after hugging everyone. Russ looked toward the creek.

"Well, I reckon Bill's going to let me leave mad," he said.

Papaw must have heard because he turned around and looked at Russ as if he were trying hard to see him. As Russ climbed in the truck, Papaw got up and walked over.

Russ started the truck. Papaw walked up to the truck window.

"Turn the truck off, Russ."

Russ looked Papaw in the eye and turned the truck off.

"You're my brother," Papaw said in a controlled voice, "and I'm not going to let you leave mad. I won't take back what I said, but I

will ask you to think about it and know that I just want the best for you."

"Okay," Russ said calmly. "I guess I can take a year to stew over it," he said with a faint smile.

"Good or bad, we'll always be brothers, and it's an honor to have you in my home each year."

Papaw and Uncle Russ shook hands and Russ started the truck. The little tan ensemble sputtered once and rolled down the drive.

"Another reunion come and gone. I always enjoy it so much....Whew, what a relief."

What a relief indeed.

LOVE: A MODERN MEDITATION

Mike Thomas

It takes but little taking, leaving
more of what you'd rather give --
your soul -- and stands you disbelieving
how much remains. Still, one must live,

forgetting how historically
blind lovers rushed their flesh to ruin --
saw other lives so lucidly,
not seeing where their own began.

The idea of a vanishment,
or sudden melting, shouldn't hold
with modern suckers; sentiment
needs more of guilt and less of gold.

The trick is giving up that part
of you that needs attention. Keep
your name, your appetite, your heart,
and separate your dreams from sleep.

Fate's too tied up in years to mind
self-mercied men. And where's the sense
believing love is best when blind?
Such loving leads to accidents.

So, love, if you should find yourself
in love, and wanting to proclaim
that love, yet cannot find yourself
for love, you've missed it just the same.

ONCE, BECAUSE SHE SMILED AT HIM

Mike Thomas

Once, because she smiled at him, he wrote
a poem for her. But he did not give it
to her; that would have been too fragile an act.
Instead, he folded it and hid it deep
inside a drawer which closed like a season.
Now, with the return of familiar sun,
he takes out the poem, reads it, and feels an ache
of affection smite him in his soul's shut
corner. What could it mean, this coaxing out
of feeling? Nightly he wonders. Her house, he
recalls,
lies in the moonlight on the other side
of town. Journeying there, he cannot help

but marvel at the stillness, the still falling
of love's distant echoes on the lawn.

FLIGHT

Mike Thomas

Unclasping hands with none around
is too like leaving, hastening
to nowhere. Details blur, the found
goes in a rush of happening,

and when, with suddenly-shifting weight,
all men must once more understand
that all their longing and their faith
is less than water, less than land,

then lives unfasten. Down in fields
the blank world turns unreal and cold
as people part, as what they feel
is ever claimed by what they know.

TWO SONNETS ON LOSS AND DISTANCE

Mike Thomas

1

Blurred and somber, anonymous and wet
go streams of umbrellas down below, and rain
that mixes easily with secret hearts,
and catches everyone without a name,
and makes desire grow. That such a brooding
morning had uncovered someone new, or
yielded purpose; that cars passed by without
the darkened windows that inspire doubt;
or that this timeless scene, for once, released
its stiffening grip, and strove instead to ease
the catching recognition it conveys.
For there are many ways in which time heals;
yet each falls short of rain, here none can reach
beneath the coat, where loneliness congeals.

2

The fact of distance must not be presumed
to carry with it grace. There is no bridge
elaborate enough to reach between us,
nor intricate enough to warrant words.
There is no mercy in the flights of birds,
no subtle message in the sea's image
which rises like belief to call us home.
There is no majesty inherent in
the moon's pale rise, or the ringing of the wind;
but only cognizance of loss and due,
the dark and distant callings which descend
to take away our dreams and add them to
the all-engrossing, encompassing Sum.
What's closest to is always farthest from.

JIM
DAN

William Dozier

He stood by the road, thumbing for a ride. He was an old man, had a beard. I didn't know him. We both spotted him at the same time. Dad told me not to stop, to just keep on going. But I stopped, anyway, and picked him up. As he slid into the back, he said, " -- I'm Jim Dan Hoover! I've shot and killed six men and never spent a day in jail for it -- " He was lying. Not about the killing part. He'd done that, alright. He was lying about jail. I knew better (and Dad knew better) because Dad's uncle had help put him there. His name: Sylvester.

Back in the old days, there used to be some real bad men. Jim Dan Hoover was one. He'd gotten himself into a fracas with three boys from Station Camp over them beating up his little brother. In his younger days Jim Dan had been a great big man, and he'd only meant to whip those three with a club. But they pulled their guns on him and he drew his revolver. Jim Dan dropped all three. He never got hit once. Sylvester was the county's coroner. When he got word of the shootings, he saddled his mule and rode over to Station Camp where the bodies were laid out. Two of the boys had been shot in the chest, but the other one had been shot in the back three times. At the trial, Sylvester spread three fingers of his left hand to show the pattern made by those three bullet holes. They'd been that close together. Jim Dan went to prison. Years later he was out again. And there was talk going around that Jim Dan Hoover was carrying a grudge against Sylvester. One evening, at suppertime, Jim Dan showed up outside Sylvester's cabin and called for him to come on out. He went out, with his pistol drawn. Sylvester asked Jim Dan if he had any hard feelings. Jim Dan shrugged, "No."

Then Sylvester invited Jim Dan to sit down to supper with him and his family. But only if Jim Dan would first give him his pistol to keep while they ate. Jim Dan fingered his holstered pistol, and then handed it over. And so, Jim Dan ended up spending the whole night at Sylvester's cabin.

I kept peeping in my rear-view mirror. Jim Dan sat as still as stone. Dad and I never said nothing and neither did Jim Dan, not until we reached the mountain top, and Jim Dan said, "Here." I stopped the car. There wasn't a house or barn or nothing around except trees. He got out, said, "Thanks," and Jim Dan Hoover disappeared into the woods. Dad said, "I thought I knew him," I pulled away, breathed, "Goodbye," into the mirror.

ESSENTIAL ESSENCE

Gene Gabbard

Make-up, lipstick, foundational base
It makes no difference what you put on your face!
What are you trying to cover up?
I see too much, but I don't see enough!
A Halloween costume, a theatrical aire,
A pseudo mask with electric hair.

Come out from your Avonic effervescence,
The real beauty always lies within,
Reveal your essential essence,
It's found beyond the skin!

DATING A DEAD END STREET

Gene Gabbard

Open the window and close the door
Would you like to have a seat
or sit on the floor?
Do you really love me or just infatuated
about this exterior me: The outer shell.
Remove your blinders
let me expose my real self
Take off your mask and
place it on the shelf.
Pull out your wire cutters
Cut down your fence
Come a little closer but
what's the sense?
Open your mouth and out comes the soot,
Take off your shoe and insert your foot!!
You're barking up a tree that's bearing no fruit,
It's hard to see a knight in an armored suit!

THE SCATTERING

Bruce Buchanan

Lightning!
Flames alight on shattered limbs.
Winds rip leaves from their branches.
Rivers roar with such new found force
That even the fish wonder if there is a God.
Thunder!
The air vibrates with passion,
No Eagle shall launch from his aerie.
No Wolf shall stray from his den.
For this is a time when life gets battered:
Yes! This is a time when seeds are scattered...

THE BOX CULTURE

Bruce Buchanan

I stand in a place called here
In a time called now.
I gaze through a box
Called me,
Which is hammered and forged
By those I see.
Ever I stand and shake the door.
My feet feel stuck as in a moor.
And here I'll stand until I see,
That the key of Love can set me free.

REQUIEM FOR THE CAVER

Bruce Buchanan

Though the echo of your end
Resound in foolishness,
To the ears of those
Not yet born to live,
I proclaim the beauty of
The adventure which claimed
Your young life.
For how many could have said never death,
That they still lived?
One has not time to fear
When quickly and into the
Darkness he disappears.
But how else shall the
Darkness change, unless one
Illuminate it with adventure?
You did not fall into darkness,
But you leaped into darkness
And with such pounding heart
And dilated pupils you made
The Devil cringe.
For what does the Devil hate more
Than muddy fingers?
Like the comet you lived.
You returned to the Sun only
To receive enough energy to
Plunge back into infinite night.

OBSERVATIONS OF A BIKER

Bruce Buchanan

Beautifully a grasshopper
Jumps onto the warm pavement
And soaks in the warmth of life
For one bliss filled moment,
Before it is smashed by the
Tire of a teenager's speeding car,
Which drives on, screaming angry rebellion.
Yet the grasshopper is no less blissful...

ETERNITY'S DEMISE

Bruce Buchanan

There is a picture,
Which we paint each day
Which hangs then
On the wall of time.
It tells the others of our way
And becomes a backdrop
Of fragmented rhyme.
But still a water flows on by,
Patiently waiting
For the wall to die...

HOW TO HAVE A LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP
(AND LIVE TO TELL YOUR FRIENDS ABOUT IT)

Kimberly Nedrow

Somehow, somewhere, it happens. You meet this incredible human being who is the incarnation of sensitivity and sex appeal all rolled into one. You find your knees turning to Jell-o when you're around him, and you walk around with a permanent daffy grin on your face. The sky seems to be bluer, the grass greener, and all the clouds have sterling silver linings. You can't see the rain--just the rainbows.

Then, KABLAMM! He's on his way out of your zip code. Out of your life.

So, being an intelligent, reasonable, desperate person, you get his address, and he copies down yours. You have a nice little farewell, just the two of you . . . immediately followed by a rock bottom depression, alone. Within two hours of his departure, you've written him a letter. Within three, you've unearthed that Tony's pizza from the back of the freezer and eaten the whole thing. Somehow, you manage to put on a smile as you turn out the lights and hit the pillow, picturing a glowing Technicolor reunion. You'll survive this, you vow. And the song, "Someday We'll Be Together" by the Supremes runs through your head. And, nodding in agreement, you fall asleep.

In the days following, you find yourself haunting the mailbox, greedily eyeing the contents in hopes of finding a small envelope with a friendly seashell stamp on it that distinguishes it from the bills and the sundry pieces of junk mail. No letter; you're crushed.

Then a thought occurs to you--why not "reach out and touch someone"? Thus begins your passionate (not to mention expensive) relationship with AT&T.

The sound of your pal's voice is enough to make all the memories of your encounter come flooding back. The weak knees and idiot grin return. You have so much fun talking, you don't even notice the minutes, hours slipping by. So when the bill arrives for three hundred twenty-four dollars and eighty-five cents, you say to yourself, in your dazed state, I think maybe next time I'll use a little restraint." And after a few more bills like the first one, you actually do.

But eventually, happy as you are, the blissful unawareness wears off. You begin to notice that while you once received letters every three days, you're now lucky to get one every two weeks. The hushed, thrilling phone calls at 11 pm are a bit one-sided--you're making all of them--and as you hang up, a little niggling feeling of doubt pokes at you for a while.

Finally, the ax falls. He utters the three cruelest words any person in love can hear: "Let's be friends." You refuse to believe it. "He doesn't mean it," you tell yourself. "He just needs a little more time/love/attention/TLC." You begin to scheme ways of getting his love back, wondering if you could send heart-shaped peanut butter cookies with chocolate kisses in the centers through United Postal Service and expect them to arrive in one piece.

To make matters worse, all the sloppy, unrequited love songs are suddenly blaring at you on the radio and you are powerless to stop them. Each station has its own little heartbreaker to make you contemplate suicide: the Top 40 stations are playing a recent Whitney Houston ballad; the easy listening station is playing Linda Ronstadt's version of "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You"; the soul music station is spinning Michael Jackson's, "She's Out of My Life"; and the oldies-but-goodies station, which was always good for some rowdy beach music, has opted for the softer sounds of "Since I Don't

Have You," by the Skyliners. You buy two Tony's pizzas this time, and a Sara Lee German chocolate cake, sniffle your way through them, and spend the night believing that you now know the true meaning of the word "lovesick".

Then somehow, somewhere, it happens. Maybe you're in the car, listening to one of those songs, or watching "Casablanca" at three o'clock in the morning, waiting for the now-familiar feeling of tears stinging the backs of your eyelids, when it hits you:

You don't feel like crying anymore.

You're over it.

It's all behind you now.

That night you sleep soundly for the first time in weeks, and when you wake up, instead of the mourning clothes you've been living in, you put on your bright red rugby shirt and your old jeans, and life seems pretty good.

Maybe you head for the grocery store to do that shopping, because you actually feel like doing something constructive for a change. And as you stroll past the frozen foods, you see a Tony's pizza. And you stare at it for a few minutes, thinking. And you head for the dairy section, and pick up some yogurt instead.

CARRION CAPTIVE

Kim Hogue

All presence has subsided, one world lies ahead
The mighty anchor cranks aboard the steamboat of
the dead
The nets have all retreated, the prisoner has
been caught
The waves had pounded every shore that beauty
ever sought
The captive won't be tortured, just quietly
subdued
Another soul aboard the ship of endless solitude
The captain strolls the quarterdeck--the Prince
of Death prevails
A vicious wind sweeps from the sky to fill this
vessel's sails
A plunge into the darkness, the legacy restored
An oar is taken over by the newest soul aboard

MOON LAKE

Kim Hogue

Waves that gently brush the shore
Glisten softly in the night
To and fro for ever more
This melody a tender sight

With no surrender, no retreat
The fragrance drifts to every heart
Until the water starts to heat
And peace is not the only part

Thunder cracks to lightening's spite
Frozen air begins to loom
Hot, red eyes glow hard in fright
And tranquil waters seep to gloom

PEGASUS

Kim Hogue

This dotting revelation extends its wings to fly
A magical elation, now gliding through the sky
To carry all the world's dreams
and sweep away the fear
This warm, enchanting creature beams
while passing in the air

It captures every being's heart
--embraces every soul
The two worlds seem quite far apart
and yet, become a whole

Fly my precious Pegasus
fly unto the sea
steal the mourning from the earth
and set these beings free...

THE BEAUTY OF THE PRETENDER

Kim Hogue

The beauty of
the pretender
lies in quiet admiration
unspoken contemplation
and gentle warmth, alone

Behold the revelation
once around and
back again
the never ending saga
forged among
the tired feelings
left to roll away, alone

Sense--it does not matter
for, beneath the wicked eyes
lies the bold, deceptive
innocence
of life.

.

J.K.B.

A coming of age.

Paul F. Daniel

She had meant so much,
But all that's left
Is a tightrope walk.
The understanding is gone,
And I don't even have
An empty container
Left to me as a reminder.
I can't even scrape
Around inside for
Something to nibble on.

THE SAVAGE SWING

Connie Sue Baker

Blackness covered up the sky
when I heard the news.
Ellen had just killed herself
in her own backyard.

The swing we once did play on
did the dirty deed.
Hanging down like a wild snake
blowing in the wind.

I saw the once old time friend,
toy of my youth.
Through my tears, the swing lunged forth
wrapping 'round my neck.

Tearing at the savage rope
I set my own self free.
There is no hope for Ellen,
life squeezed out of her.

They say it was suicide,
but I know better.
For her death, not by her hand,
was by the savage swing.

ELIZABETH'S MUSIC BOX

Priscilla Chansler

A brisk October wind swept the paper refuse along the sidewalk with the vehemence of an angry housewife venting her frustration with a broom on the incessant trash on a kitchen floor. A little girl of eight traipsed alongside her mother as the papers fluttered past.

The child watched out of the corner of her eye as the mother pulled her shabby coat closer to her chest, as she frowned and purposefully turned her head from the Jenkins Jewelry circular amongst the McDonald's hamburger wrappers. Her daughter, Elizabeth, wanted an item advertised in that circular--a music box adorned with a little ballerina figure that danced to the tune of "The Impossible Dream." Ever since Jenkins' had, in a remarkably successful business move, promoted little girls' jewelry and accessories in their display window, Elizabeth and her little peers had yearned for many of the trappings.

Elizabeth was a large child for her age, overweight, and seldom knew the pleasure of buying anything new, toys or otherwise. But her small green eyes very strikingly complemented her pale complexion and curly auburn hair. Her mother had long ago despaired in raising her daughter in stylish clothing and hairstyles, but Elizabeth's disposition was untouched by such deprivations, she blissfully unaware that life had preordained that she and her mother do without. She had always been content with her mother's vague promises of "Soon" or "When we can afford it" on the rare occasions when she really wanted something.

Just as it seemed they were escaping the apparently unnoticed paper, Elizabeth's step paused and she leapt upon the advertisement as if she literally hungered for it.

"Mommy! Look, it's my music box!" she cried. "Can we just go and see it? Look, Mommy, it's on sale this week, too. It's just \$19.97 now. It was almost \$30.00, you said. Can we go home by Adams Street where Jenkins' is, so we can look at it?"

"Elizabeth..." her mother began to protest, but stopped, a victim of her child's pleading eyes. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to do that, would it? Pull your jacket to and button it, Liz. Have you lost another button? I'm going to have to teach you to sew your own buttons on, child. You keep me busy just sewing them back on."

Elizabeth smiled, knowing she had won her mother over. She always found some little triviality to fuss over when she had been cajoled into something by her daughter. Still, Elizabeth hunched her shoulders and sank her chapped, pudgy little hands with their eternally grubby fingernails deeper into her jacket pockets and attempted to keep warmer. She worried the unraveled seam in the front part of her left pocket, absent-mindedly enlarging the hole as they walked along.

Turning left at the next corner, Elizabeth spied the bright blonde hair of her friend, Nancy, accompanied by her mother and brother.

Nancy, the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Daniels, the local optometrist, broke away from her mother and raced up to Elizabeth and her mother.

"Hi, Lizzy. Whatcha' doin' today?" Nancy asked. "Is your Mommy gonna' take you to see "101 Dalmations" at the cinema?" Without pausing for an answer she rattled on, "That's where we're gonna' go if we're good while our Mommy takes care of her shopping."

While Nancy chattered on to her unlikely but apparently close friend, Elizabeth's quick eye detected the mutual distaste and exchange of hostile glances passing between their mothers.

"No...but Mommy and I are headed for the jewelry store," answered Elizabeth, "and she might even buy me one of the ballerina music boxes," she added with a sidelong glance at her mother, wondering if she'd play along with her ploy to draw admiration from Nancy.

Elizabeth expected a curt reply of "We'll see," but she suspected it was something in Nancy's mother's disdainful sniff and her little brother's snicker that made her mother just say, "Come along, Liz, we'll need to be going now." Still the two girls managed to exchange a smile of camaraderie and a little wave over their shoulders despite the barriers of caste their mothers abided by.

The slowing revolving figure in the music box held Elizabeth transfixed. Even through the plate glass window of the storefront and across the ten feet that separated the ballerina music box from the young girl and her mother, Elizabeth felt even more strongly her burning desire for it. She glanced down at the tired and threadbare clothing she wore, conscious for the first time she could recall of her appearance. Her dull-red jacket contrasted awkwardly with the carnation pink blouse and rumpled bluejeans. The rolled up cuffs of her jeans were dirty on the bottoms and frayed on the edges where she had walked on them with her worn-out Nikes. She frowned in a conscious effort to drive away the uncomfortable feeling she experienced at remembering Nancy's immaculate attire--from her real leather boots lined with white rabbit fur to her matching Garanimals top and slacks.

Elizabeth turned quickly, startling her mother, who appeared to have been as deeply involved in her own thoughts as her daughter. "Mommy, can we go in for a closer look?" she pled. "Can you buy me one?"

"Liz, honey, you know we can't afford it," her mother replied. "You said you only wanted to come and look at it. That's the only reason I agreed to bring you." But at the injured look in her daughter's eyes, she finished with, "Come on. Let's go in."

"Yes, ma'am. This is the last ballerina music box we have. That's why we moved it out of the window display," said the salesclerk. "Since the sale went on earlier this week we've sold out. Can't order any more for an indefinite period, either."

"We'll look at these gold chains for a while and let you know if we want it," said Elizabeth's mother.

At just this moment Nancy, her mother and brother in tow, blustered through the door.

"See, Mommy, I told you they'd be here! Hiya', Lizzy!" Nancy bubbled. "I talked Mommy into buying me one of the music boxes, too, so we'll both have one!"

With that Nancy whirled away and danced over to her mother and the salesclerk. Elizabeth looked up at her mother, who stood stockstill, looking at no one. Elizabeth was suddenly and uncomfortably aware of her mother's tousled brown hair, her cheap, flower-print dress, and her face, devoid of any makeup. She watched pensively as Nancy's mother's blue, well-mascared eyes met her own mother's plain-brown yet defiantly hostile stare. It was almost like a physical blow to Elizabeth when a condescending smile flickered across the well-groomed woman's face while she confidently shifted her Liz Clairborne purse from her right arm to her left, as if in preparation to wield a checkbook.

"Oh, ma'am?" said the salesclerk. "Are you interested in purchasing the music box? This lady is inquiring..." Then, sensing the

awkwardness of the moment he added, "That is, if you'll not be wanting it..."

"Oh, yes, we've decided to take it," she replied. "Could you wrap it up for us?"

Elizabeth puzzled at the sense of warmth mingled with sadness she felt toward her mother. After all, she should be immensely happy, shouldn't she? She was getting her dream music box.

As the Daniels family left Jenkins Jewelry Elizabeth was saddened but not really surprised to hear Nancy remark to her brother, "I'll bet Tommy can find me a prettier one at Shelbyville anyway, don't you think?" Elizabeth softly slipped her hand into her mother's workworn palm. The salesclerk's quick fingers rustled the white issue paper much like the cold wind outside in its play with the debris on the sidewalk as he rapped Elizabeth's music box.

FOR THOSE WHO ARE NOT

Priscilla Chansler

For those who are not
the innocent virgins
yielding up their white linen thighs
to lustful society--
that lumbering behemoth that goes
ravaging, trampling,
fraying beyond repair

For those who are not
roiling blue-white corpses
with too-wise eyes,
fish food now.
religious fanatics bewailing--
--that lost soul
that mislead unbeliever--
Now no gameshow host shall play savior;
No heaven permits suicide (does it?)

For
the butcher, the baker,
the candle sticker maker
lovers and users
Children abusers

The phoenix has risen
the dove taken flight
Quarry for hunters
In a smokey twilight.

THE FREEDOM STAGE

Priscilla Chansler

Freedom awoke me this evening
With a cool, soothing touch.
Pulling me from Misery's too-warm embrace,
She said, "Come, ride with me awhile."
I climbed aboard eagerly,
Assisted by her gracious coachmen,
Courage and Endurance.
Surprisingly, I found two old friends already
there.
"You remember Self-assurance and Pride," said
Freedom,
"It's time for a long overdue reunion."
And so I felt only a small pang
At leaving behind my long-time companion;
My dust, his veil.

THE MALE ANIMAL

Priscilla Chansler

With feline grace he strides 'cross the floor
And demands the attention of those who'd ignore.
With magnetic eyes and long silken hair
His love, it's inevitable, we'll all have a share.

Picking and choosing whom to grace most with his
favors

It's very apparent, this little game he well
savors.

Typically male, building ego and using
We, who have learned, find it all quite amusing.

Of dogs, I have heard and know it is true
They'll love and accept, despite what you do.
But I'll take my cat, Leo, and be quite content
And you other cat lovers know just what I meant.

HATRED'S IMP

Priscilla Chansler

At the fragile ego's edge;
Here is where you can find IT.
Gnawing away,
Trying to cause an implosion,
Scarcely leaving a steppingstone;
Or more excitingly,
An explosion,
Complete with dazzling brilliance
And colors cascading down--
It's beautiful,
Except to the closest one.

SYNOPSIS ON AGE

Donna L. Brockman

Rain falls on the roof.
She doesn't hear;
the shades are down.
Sometimes she forgets
the war of no tears
that rages inside her.
But most of the time
it's the war that guides her.

The shades are lifted-
a wrinkled face peers out.
But the world doesn't see,
and the world doesn't care.
Because this war isn't fought
on what is or not fair.

So she stumbles back
to the darkness of time-
Oblivious to her own sounds
of dying.
She's listening to the rain.

SENTIMENTALITY

Donna L. Brockman

The rocking horse still stands
in the haze of the looking glass.
Its green glass eyes frozen forever
inside its wooden head.

My penny at the bottom of a
wishing well - long ago desires-
it doesn't realize that the
times have changed.

An old photograph, yellowed
by time- the edges curled
by sentimental handling.

Turn your head and I am gone forever
across a bridge and down
a road of yellow to find
a great wizard of time.

MOTHER

Jodi Lynn Smith

My mind is a kaleidoscope of unforgotten episodes in my life. As I gaze through its multitude of tinted glass, reflections ricochet off the mirrored moments of my life. My eyes savor each collected momento, but, by far, the greatest showcase in my gallery of recollections is that which portrays my mother.

Closing my eyes, I can almost project her image into my company. First her eyes appear, their blueness illuminating the darkness they have come from. Quickly, her face follows; it is marked with slightly camouflaged tell-tale wrinkles, especially the laugh lines around her eyes that crinkle when she breaks into laughter. Her skin appears to be the color of walnut shells and it looks smooth and full like the skin of a ripe peach. Her nose lies slender between her eyes until it fills out at the tip. From the side, it looks thin and delicate--like a Victorian mistress', perhaps. Long hair envelops her face as it cascades down the length of her small nape to a point below her narrow shoulders. Its golden splendor disguises her age and gives the impression of energetic youth, but her frame is hollowed and fragile, as if a slight breeze could easily carry her away. In vain, my mind works furiously to reproduce her voice, but just as a likeness of it echos throughout my head, it tauntingly disappears. My illusion always shatters when I try to create her warmth. Her eyes fade and her body withers into the recesses of my mind. The dispirited tears that flood my eyes wash away the last remnants of my mother and I cry for an encore of her prescence. Too often, it is easy for me to mourn for the company of my mother. To keep myself from doing so, I try to recapture the treasured moments of time that we once shared together.

I can remember days that I was swollen with anticipation to see my mother. I would clamber down the rubber-ribbed steps of my school bus onto the bleached pavement of my street. Home was less than one-fourth of a mile away, but my legs never seemed to carry me as quickly as I would have like to the chipped and crooked eagle keeping watch above my doorstep. After fumbling for the key in my bookbag, I would hurriedly unlock the door. Once inside the house, I would hurry down the steps of the foyer into my room. There, I would wait for the sound of mom's car as it crawled into the driveway. Tense with anticipation, I would crouch behind the door as she walked through the laundry room into the hallway. She would always cock her head and listen for a sound or movement in the house. "Is anyone home?" she would call. When no reply came, disappointment clouded her face. That is when I would leap out from my hiding place. She always acted surprised and relieved that I was home, and she would hug me for being such a tease. I miss times like that so much now. It was so comforting to bury my face in the warm, sweet smelling hollow of her neck. She would stroke my hair and tell me how much she had missed me during the day. Then, I would follow her upstairs to her room where she would undress from her work clothes into a pair of old tattered jeans and a thin, faded, paisley shirt. She had owned them before I was born, and seventeen years later she still wore them with favoritism. As she was dressing, she would tell me how her day had gone and then ask me about my own. After we had filled each other in on our day's activities, we would go to the kitchen to fix ourselves something for dinner. Mom would peer into the magnet-laden refrigerator trying to think of something new for us to eat, but most often we would fix tuna-salad sandwiches and glasses of Pepsi on ice. With food in hand we would go downstairs and position ourselves on the couch or

the thick, green carpet on the den floor. We would turn off the lights, turn on our favorite television program, and share a big, warm quilted blanket. For an hour or two we would laugh and enjoy the time we spent together. After a few shows, we would reluctantly force ourselves to tear away from the television. Mom would spend the rest of her night working on church books, bills, or housework. I would do homework or talk on the phone.

At bedtime, I would get into my flannel pajamas and climb into the cold, slippery sheets of my twin bed. I would curl up into a tight little ball and wait for mom to come tuck me in. Sometimes I would fall asleep waiting, and I would awake to tiny kisses all over my cheeks and forehead. I would sit up and wrap my arms around her neck and hug her close to me. She would tell me how much she loved me and that I would always be her little girl. Many times she would cry because she felt like she wasn't a perfect mother to my sister and I. I would protest and remember the days that she had tried to keep herself in one piece when it seemed that all that held her life together was unraveling in uncontrollable fashion. I cannot remember specific days because they were all so similar to one another. Mom would come home from work as if it pained her to enter the house. She would cook us supper in an automated way and then retreat to her bedroom. It wouldn't be long before low, heart-wrenching sobs would seep through the walls of the house into the kitchen where my sister and I sat listlessly staring into our plates. I would run to the bedroom and cry, "Oh, Mommy, it will be alright." She would hug me and cry on my shoulder as we rocked back and forth on the bed. Sometimes she would cry for nearly an hour and the whole time I would condemn the circumstance that had turned her from a cheerful, optimistic person into the self-criticising, inconsolable one that she had become. Divorce had broken my

mom's world apart. It seemed unfair that someone who gave so freely of herself had had one of her prized possessions taken away from her. Mom's wounds healed gradually, but they left deep scars that reminded her of the past she craved for so desperately. She learned to live and laugh again beneath makeup and forced amusement. A lot of the time she seemed as if the divorce had never fazed her, but she was never again willing to trust or love anyone except those who had already gained her favor.

The last time that I saw mom was a day of both joy and sadness. On the day of my graduation, as I was saying goodbye to a portion of my life, mom was leaving hers also. She was going home to live near her family, away from the memories that plagued her in Radcliff. I was happy for mom that she would have the chance to be happy again with those who would lavish her with the love and companionship that she needed. Another part of me cried for the loss of a mother and the security of a "real" home. As I hugged her frail body, I could still sense the insecurity beneath her trembling excitement. She was risking everything for one last chance to find a new meaning in life, even if it meant quitting her stable job, leaving her friends and community, and me behind.

I didn't want to let her go; I was afraid that she would get hurt too easily on her own--without me to hug her when she cried. I didn't want to see her cry anymore or read long-ago written love letters alone on her bed. I wanted to go with her to ensure that someone would be there with her to share tuna-salad sandwiches and laughter, but I let her go. Her childlike anticipation thwarted my doubts for the moment. I kissed her one last time through the car window and then stepped away as she backed out of the driveway. With a honk and a lingering wave she was gone. Hot tears fell on my face and drained into the corners of my mouth. I stood

there crying long after her car had disappeared from sight. I cried not because I felt I could not live without her, but because I knew that it would hurt us to live without each other.

BLUE OCEANS SALTED WITH TEARS

Angela D. Phillips

To see with those eyes
That see only
As eyes with the wisdom of time
Can see.

Blue oceans of experience,
Salted with knowledge.
The waves have lapped against
The sands of time and
The gentle creases worn from
Erosion of disappointment
Tell a story of pain.
A few times the rain fell and
Flooded my heart.

As a seashell lifted to my ear,
I listen to your utterances of knowledge.
I realize that pain is a part of Life-
You cannot live it for me.
You only relay what you know to be true.
I live it and make mistakes
And always return to the shores called
Home.

The oceans depth
 --fathoms of knowledge.
A breeze of familiarity wafts,
Carrying bits and pieces
Of this ocean's livelihood to another,
From your mind to mine.
I hold them dearly
-Clinging tightly, holding desperately
One last grasp to hold onto childhood
Before the ship goes down.

FINAL CURTAIN

Angela D. Phillips

Take a bow.
You have played your role well.
In fact, no one could have played
your character better.
Now a bouquet of roses is placed
upon your bosom,
although not one thorn
can prick one rich-red drop of
your life's blood.
Gossamer gown and red-rouged cheeks
hide the reality
-suggesting the drama isn't over.
But the organist's music winds down
around the brain of the audience
shocked and stunned by
your ultimate performance.
I catch a whiff of the wilting carnations
that were part of the set.
It is pungently painful.
Alas, the lights fade.
The final black curtain
of rich velvet earth
falls.
You rest embraced in memories
and satin sheets.

ODE TO STUDENT

Pete Gemmer

Surrounded by walls
Brick, colored cream
Long long lectures
Minutes, like hours seem

Monotone voices
Over and over heard
Students lulled-
By every word

No matter the weather
No matter your state
Don't miss more than twice
And don't be late

THE TRUTH

Kimberly J. Maddox

Love me tomorrow
No questions to ask
Take off your costume
Put down your mask
To myself be true
Not to live in my lies
Sorrow clouds my face
Bringing tears to my eyes
Too tired to escape
Don't want to run
No more darkness
Need warmth of the sun
Hurt shadows my soul
Words became sharp
Throw away committment
Rip open my heart
Shed false, gain true
Clear sight to see
There was always a person
Living in me

THE WIND FOR A FRIEND

Jennifer S. Haddix

One stormy night I spoke with the Wind
and told him to dry out your tears
and to blow out your fears.....
If you walk out he will give you a sign
and cross your mind.
the Wind will take your worries,
fly them away and bury.....
He will come back to me and give me
the smell of your hair,
the soft of your voice
and the
taste of your lips...

THE GREAT ONE

Sterling Smith

A deep blue sunset was beginning, painting streaks of red, orange and violet across the sky. In the forest, the nightingale awoke and poured forth its lonesome melody into the air. Its high and sweet song stirred the silence, creating thoughts of loneliness with a touch of hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Sara stood on the open parapet looking out over her homeland thinking of love and nature, things of beauty and happiness. Her love would someday come and join her as ruler of this beautiful land. From over the sea he would emerge, out of the distant lands, unknown countries that existed only in legend and song. In a vision the Great One had shown her a likeness of her prince from the kingdom over the sea. Even if no one else believed her, she knew that someday her prince would come.

From the castle, the music of pipe, lyre and flute celebrated the end of a good year. It was a time for everyone in the kingdom to enjoy, to celebrate, and to be thankful for another year of peace and prosperity. Lavish was the feast, bountiful with the fruit of the new harvest as well as freshly aged malt and hops. All was given freely from The Great One as everyone knew; peasant, serf, noble, and royalty alike.

Sara, the Princess, did not celebrate the good fortune as did the others. Her father, in his wickedness, had locked her in the highest tower, as punishment for her rebellion of his marital wishes for her. The king had arranged for her to marry a prince from a neighboring kingdom. This prince was a bumbling fool, one whom all the women in the kingdom laughed about. When her father told her to marry him, she refused him. He was unable to punish her in any

other way, so he deprived her the celebration of the new harvest.

Sara retreated back into the tiny room at the top of the tower. A light in the corner played lambent upon the bare features of the dungeon-like room. A wooden framed mirror was the only adornment, standing like a silent watchman, its frame ornately carved with scenes of chivalry and heroic deeds. One was of a handsome rugged prince rescuing a beautiful princess from the jaws of a huge slavering dragon. Another was one of the same couple riding a unicorn next to a deep blue sea. Still another showed the prince stepping out of the sea into the arms of the waiting princess. The others were similar with the same prince and princess in each. She didn't understand the story but the engravings captured her attention.

She studied her image in the mirror. She was lithe and supple, a beautiful image in her favorite dress. A purple bodice with a long flowing white tress which dragged behind her when she walked. At seventeen, she was well into the marriage age, her body ripe, lithe and supple. She had never been with a man, remaining pure for when her prince came.

A prince was what she needed now, one to rescue her from her evil father and to carry her off into the sunset on a velvet unicorn. She wanted a prince as handsome as the one in the mirror. She began to imagine that this was her prince and the deeds were showing his love for her. Then she knew for certain that this was her prince and that these deeds were for her, for she could feel the presence of The Great One.

The Great One sat up in bed, suddenly realizing what would happen next.

Tag Winslow awoke in high spirits from a nightmare which he couldn't fully remember, and didn't really want to. Slowly ascending into

consciousness, he recalled small bits and pieces of the dream, which only made the dream more elusive. He groped on the bedside stand, found his glasses and shoved them onto his face. He swung his feet over the edge, arose, stretched, then made his way toward the mirror to examine his princely features.

"You good-looking handsome, devil," he said to the reflection, "you look Maaahvelous this morning, and somewhere out there is a princess waiting for you to come to her rescue."

"Yes, definitely," he imagined she would say, "a true specimen of masculine perfection. The absolute desire of everything female upon this, or any other world."

That is what she would say, the princess of his mirror. The one depicted in the engraved mirror. The mirror was ornately carved with scenes of a beautiful princess being rescued by a handsome prince. That handsome prince was him. He was so good-looking, it had to be.

Tag chuckled to himself, stepping into his shower and letting the warm water rush over his body. He wished that the princess could be real, then prayed silently, hoping that someone would hear his wish. She spoke to him, but only in his mind. If she could only be real.

A fresh morning sea breeze brushed across Tag's face as he stepped out onto the hedge lined patio and joined his already seated mother, who sat reading the newspaper, still unaware of his presence.

"Good morning, Mother," he said taking a seat, "isn't it a lovely day. I feel wonderful."

"Well, that's a change," said his mother looking up from her paper, "What brought this on?"

"Well," said Tag slowly, the guys -- you know Ralph and Brian -- well, they've fixed me up with this blind date tonight, and from what they say, she's a real doll."

"Oh," said his mother, her eyes brightening, "you're going out with a girl. I'm so happy for you. When are you going? You'll need new clothes to wear." His mother's eyes teared as she smiled, and bent across the table to grab Tag's hand. "Oh, I'm so happy for you."

"You don't have to get me new clothes, Mom," said Tag in a superior tone, "any girl would be privileged to be in my presence, it doesn't matter what I'm wearing."

"Yes, dear," said his mother, "I understand."

Her ability to melt his anxiety was one of the things he liked about his princess. He would imagine himself in the role of the handsome prince rescuing her from the fangs of the evil dragon, or from the dungeon of the cruel king. After his father's death, he thought about the princess more and more. Much to his mother's chagrin, he abandoned most of his friends and retreated into his own world where he was prince to a lovely princess. His mother had given up trying to get Tag to date other girls, and he was glad; other girls were far from the perfection of his princess.

The Great One was getting slightly pretentious with this, and a tad bit tired, so he decided to take the weekend off and spend some time in New England with relatives.

Sara awoke with a start as the door to her tower prison was violently thrust open. Her father stood in the doorway holding a large doorbolt in his arms.

"Princess Sara," spoke the king showing his quality by the tone of his voice, "your punishment is over. I've decided to find your prince by a contest. The man who remains alive at the end of the day will be your new husband."

Sara remained silent. The deadly news had distressed her so much that she began to cry. Her father, the cruel and vicious man that he was, dropped the bolt with a loud clatter and stormed down the towers steps nearly tripping over his robes.

The Great One was still enjoying the crisp winter air of New England. He was unaware of the turn of events.

Humming to himself, Tag checked his watch and skipped down the stairs. It was seven thirty, and he had to be at Brian's apartment at eight to meet his blind date. He was a little apprehensive about going out, but his fears were calmed by thinking about his princess waiting for him. This blind date would fade in comparison to his princess. Chuckling to himself, he stepped into his mother's Coupe de'Ville and drove off for Brian's.

At the Newark airport, The Great One stood in line waiting to board for the flight home.

The day of the contest had arrived in the kingdom. Sara wasn't happy, but she had no choice but to attend, being a princess and all. All of the arrogant, conceited men from the surrounding kingdoms were present, each to try to win her hand from the fifty or so others. She groaned as she noticed the bumbling fool prince from the next kingdom ride in on a spotted mare. No sign of her prince, but she still had hope, if very little.

She hung her head and sobbed shortly, until her father poked her in the back with his scepter. "Are all ready to begin the contest?" he yelled to the field. Heads nodded.

"Then let the game begin!" he shouted.

The Great One was enjoying a complimentary drink on the plane, admiring the stewardess' lovely posterior.

Brian and Ralph were waiting in their apartment when Tag arrived.

"Hey, Tag," said Brian patting him on the back, "are you ready for the night of your life?"

"The question is," gloated Tag, "is she ready for me?"

Ralph and Brian both suppressed a giggle.

"Brian," said Ralph, "show her in so Tag here can meet the girl."

Brian left the room. Tag waited in anticipation thinking that the girl must be very shy and probably a bit on the fat side, not at all like his princess.

From the other room came a high pitched squeal. Brian entered the room holding a pig dressed in doll clothing. He thrust the pig into Tag's arms. "Here, Tag," he said, "your dream girl."

Tag's mouth hung open for an instant before he recovered. He then had time to be embarrassed, then shocked. Holding back tears, Tag ran out to the car, forgetting that he still had the pig in his arms.

The Great One's plane had landed at home. He went into his house to find things a little different than he had left them.

Wait a minute, I'm gonna quit referring to The Great One in the third person and refer to myself as "I." I had just arrived home to find things in a terrible mess.

First things first. Sara was at a contest with men fighting to the death to get her hand in marriage. Second, Tag was just embarrassed to near death by his only friends. The thing I was mad about was that I had had nothing to do with it.

I decided to do something that I promised I would never do as a writer: Interfere with my characters. There was no choice now, though. I had to do something or the evil characters would win and then the story wouldn't sell. Or worse, my publisher would cancel his contract.

I decided to talk to Tag first.

"What the . . . ?", gasped Tag, "Where the hell am I?"

"Shut up," I said, "I just had to write you outside of the story for a minute."

Tag looked around, but was still unable to determine where my voice was coming from.

"Look, Tag," I said, "I'm sorry, but I had to do something, they were ruining my story."

"Are you God?" he managed to gasp.

I then realized that Tag didn't know what the heck was going on. I had never been in my character's shoes before, but I guessed that he must think of me as a god. After all, I was his creator. It took me about an hour of good solid writing to finally explain to Tag what was going on.

"Let me get this straight," he said, "You're my author, I'm just a character in a story of yours. I don't believe it."

It took me another hour to try to convince him I was telling the truth. I finally resorted to writing in a hideous beast next to him, full of flowing and disgusting adjectives. He finally believed.

"So," I began, "I decided to give you a choice in your destiny now. It's the first time I ever did that for a character."

Tag was thrilled. At first he thought of me as a sort of Genie in a bottle and wished for lots of money and junk. But then later, as I guessed he would he wished to be with Sara alone on their own little world, with their own little kingdom. I just simply erased everyone else out of the picture. Tag wanted to write Brian's and

Ralph's deaths, so I let him. It was disgusting and I was shocked that it came from a character created. But I couldn't have made a more fitting death (erasure) myself.

I mostly leave them alone now. Every Christmas I drop in and create them a wonderful gift or a new castle. I did help out once when Tag was impotent by creating him a new set of testicles. I didn't know the first ones I created were bad. They named their first child after me. He is a gorgeous little boy just like his namesake. I've been tutoring him myself, and someday he may grow up to be a great writer just like the Great One.

