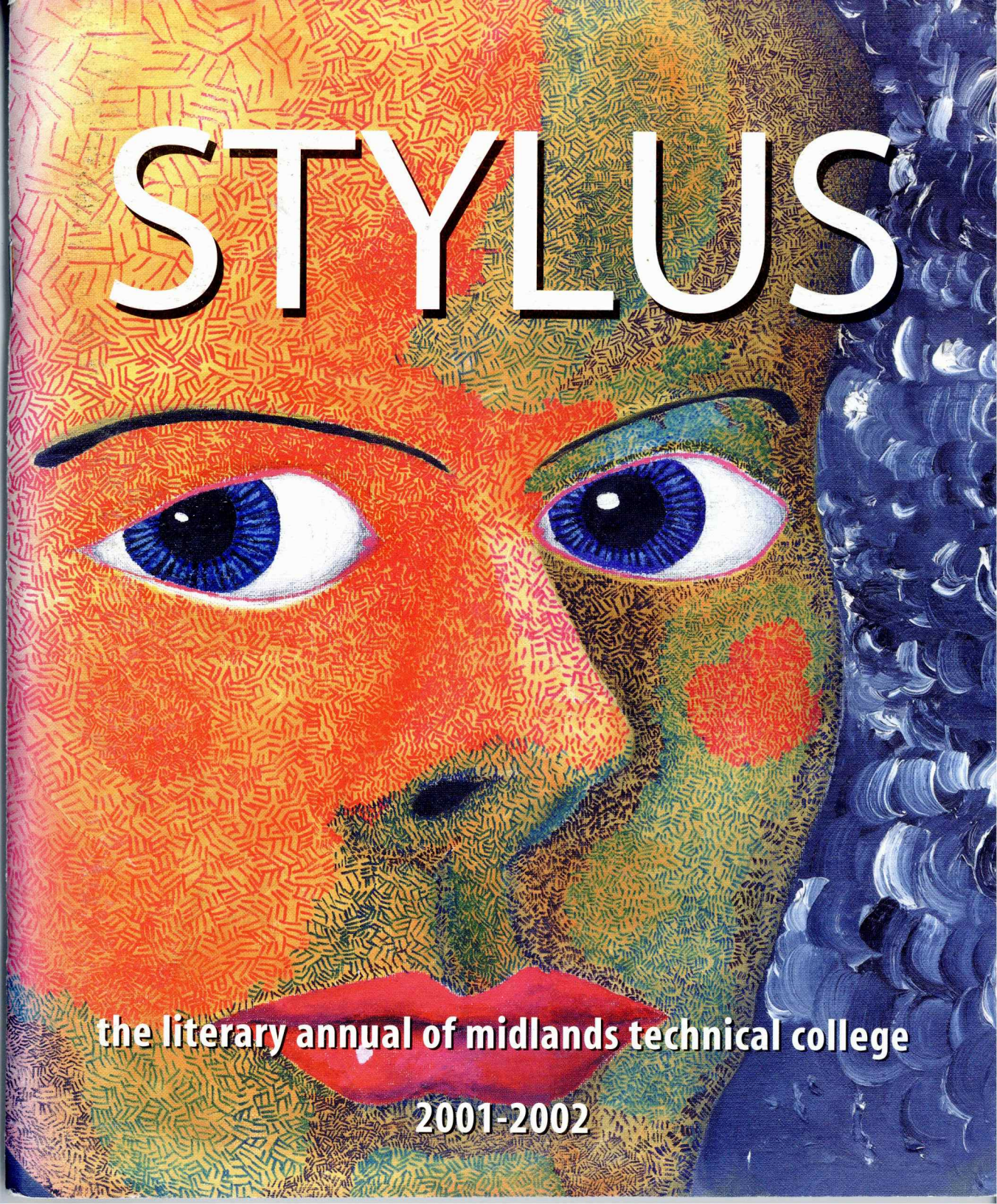


STYLUS

An abstract, colorful face painting. The face is composed of various colors: orange for the forehead and nose, green for the cheeks and chin, and blue for the hair on the right side. The eyes are large and blue with black pupils. The lips are red. The background of the face is a dense, textured pattern of small, overlapping lines in various colors.

the literary annual of midlands technical college

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The *Stylus* editorial staff reads and judges all submissions anonymously (without authors' or artists' names), ensuring objectivity throughout the selection process. Each published work is chosen according to the creative and artistic merit of the individual piece. Only works received by the deadline were eligible for awards.

*For their assistance, support, and advice, the **Stylus** staff wishes to thank*

Barry Russell, President; Ron Drayton, Vice President for Arts and Sciences; Dianne Carr, Interim Chair, English Department; Colin Dodd, Humanities Department; Helen Kingkade, Humanities Department; Dianne Luce, English Department; Lisa Checks, Administrative Specialist, Humanities; Minnie Thompson, Administrative Specialist, English

Cover art: Christian Price



Stylus is printed on recycled paper.

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Columbia, South Carolina

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CONTENTS

FICTION

Another Woman's House	TENILLE BROWN	5
Eternal Holocaust	THOMAS SCHMITT	12
Better	TENILLE BROWN	32
For Love of Honor	ABRAHAM PERNICKA	45

POETRY

Purged	MICAH CURRIER	53
To You	CAROLINE SIGMON	54
Untitled	CAROLINE SIGMON	55
A Viewing of Street Night Alley	CAROLINE SIGMON	56
Verbal Lullaby	CAROLINE SIGMON	57
Missing: Myself	CARMEN GOFF	58
I want to walk to the cafe	CAROLINE SIGMON	60
A Tourniquet of Thorns	JASON WOLFE	63
Peace	SHANNON W. WOOTEN	64

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Happily Ever After: The Marriage Club	TENILLE BROWN	65
Nothing but a Good Time	THOMAS SCHMITT	68
The Dating Game	JENNIFER LARSON	72

ART

CHRISTIAN PRICE	37, 71
TONY FLING	42–43

PHOTOGRAPHY

MARY L. STEVENSON	36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 44, 80
-------------------	----------------------------

WEB SITE

CHASI DAVID, TERRY HULL, SHANE SELBY	79
--------------------------------------	----

Stylus Awards

<i>Creative Nonfiction:</i>	Tenille Brown
<i>Fiction:</i>	Abraham Pernicka Thomas Schmitt
<i>Poetry:</i>	Caroline Sigmon
<i>Photography:</i>	Mary L. Stevenson
<i>Web Design:</i>	Chasi David, Terry Hull, and Shane Selby
<i>William C. Goodwin IV Memorial Art Award:</i>	Christian Price

Another Woman's House

TENILLE BROWN

SO FAR, THE ONLY GOOD THING I see about moving into Bess's house is that she lives way out, away from town and neighborhoods full of noisy children. It is peaceful out here, a far cry from where I came from where you could hardly hear your own self think. It will be a nice change, and besides, she needs me now.

I will miss that old house of mine, though. It has everything in it that I like, and I know where everything is. Most people don't know how old I really am, but I will admit that I'm too old to be learning things in somebody else's house when I don't plan to stay that long.

I'm glad that Bess finally broke down and decided to bring me here, though. That girl always had a proud streak in her, even when her folks were my neighbors and John Thomas first brought her home in pigtails for dinner. Back then they used to beat each other up and then turn right around and play tag. I liked her and I didn't do a thing but smile eleven years later when he told me he was going to marry her.

I knew it wouldn't be long before she came around, the way she carried on at John Thomas's funeral. And they had the nerve to escort me out of there! They said it wasn't good for my heart, but they let Bess sit up in the front row, wailing like nobody's business. My heart was just fine, but that girl was going just plain crazy in there.

The house sure looks smaller than I remember. I do not know how all my things will ever fit in one of those rooms, and the yard is hardly anything to work

with. I don't see John Thomas's truck anywhere. I guess she got rid of it all when he died. I can't say I blame her, though. I was like that when my old man died, too. I could not even keep a picture of him up because it brought back memories, far too many memories.

It was sweet of her to take the day off just to move my things in even though I could do it myself. I had just enough to fit in the back of this young man's truck—had to put my furniture up in storage—but like I said, the house is small and I don't know where I'll ever put my trinkets and things—and of course my crocheting needles. I figure while I'm here I'll fix Bess up a throw to go on the back of that horrible looking couch she refused to get rid of when she and John Thomas got married.

I don't like the way this young man is handling these curves on this dirt road, but at least we are almost there. I can see her standing on the porch from here, and she sure looks skinny. She's probably not eating half the time. Some ladies from the church told me they came by and dropped food off at the door. They said they came back a week later and found their Tupperware dishes still full, or turned over and torn into by all the strays that hang around.

She was pretty skinny back when John Thomas was still living, and I kept telling her that if she ever planned to give me any grandchildren, she would have to get some meat on them bones. There she goes biting her nails; Lord knows I have been getting onto her about *that* forever.

There she goes stuffing her hands in her pockets like I hadn't been watching her gnaw on her nails the whole time. She sure is a sneaky little thing, just like a cat.

"Thank you, young man," I tell the driver. "Just let me dig here in my purse a minute and I'll get you something for your troubles." I stretch my eyes toward the center of the seat. "You never did turn the meter on, did you? Ain't you just a sweetheart!"

Now he is looking at me funny, like it's something out of the ordinary for a passenger to offer the driver money. "Mrs. Greene," he says in that soft little voice of his, "Bess had me bring you. You don't owe me anything." He reaches for the handle on the door. "Now, if you'll just let me help you out, me and Bess can start unloading your things off the back."

"Young man, I don't need any help," I tell him, but he doesn't look too convinced, so I just go ahead and show him. I push that door right open and push

my leg out so that it is hanging near that runner thing they're putting on all the big fancy cars these days.

I see Bess has had the driveway done since I was here last, and she is hitting it with her sneakers now like some crazy woman. I know she is happy to see me, but she sure don't have to run.

"Mama!" she calls to me. "Don't try to step down from there like that. You might hurt yourself."

And protective too, she is. You wouldn't think I'm nearly forty years her elder. "I'm not going to hurt myself, child," I tell her, one hand on the door, the other holding on to hers because she seems afraid to let me go. "I can make it out of this truck and up those steps just fine," I say, trying once more to make a move.

This time the driver is around on my side, and he and Bess both are grabbing at me, and I feel like the first lady or something with the fuss they're making.

"Just let us help you, Mrs. Greene, okay?" he asks. He looks so hopeful with his big eyes that I just give in and let them usher me out of the truck and up the steps. They lead me to a wooden rocker that has a burgundy shawl thrown across the back and I sit in it and rock back and forth. It is right comfortable.

"Young man!" I try to get his attention. "Isn't there someone you can call, a friend or something to help you get those things down from there?" He passes Bess my box of pictures. "Bess sure don't need to be lifting those heavy things."

"I've got it, Mama. You just relax." She talks through her teeth, like somebody has gone and made her mad today. I don't say anything, though. I know how to deal with ornery women. I just sit in that chair, rocking and rocking. I think I'll make this my special chair; it's so comfortable and fits me just right.

I don't know how many trips they make in and out of that house because after the third or forth go round, I close my eyes and listen to the crickets mating or whatever they're doing back up in those woods.

When my eyes are open again, Bess is at the truck, and she and the driver are wrapped in an embrace. He kisses her on the forehead real tender like, but it's nothing romantic about it, not like her and John Thomas used to be.

After he has pulled away, she bolts up the fence like someone is going to come in here and steal me or something. Poor thing, she needs me around here so much she doesn't want to take any chances.

"I guess that's it, Mama." She didn't always call me that. She preferred Mrs. Greene at first, but I told her that she was more than just some woman my son married; she was my daughter now.

"I just can't wait to see what you've done with the place since I've been here last," I say to her after she is back on the porch, leaning her thin body over my chair. "I don't know why it seems so small, now. Has it been that long, Bess?"

"You haven't been back here since I built this new house after the fire, Mama. But that's not your fault." She is smiling, but I am pretty sure I see the smallest hint of tears in her eyes.

She grew up to be a lovely young woman, and so stubborn she doesn't want me to know how much she needs me here with John Thomas gone now and all.

"Come on, Mama, let's go on inside. It's supposed to get cool out pretty soon." She reaches for my hand as if I might need some help getting up. I take it though, just so she'll feel good.

"Yes, I do want to get started on supper," I tell her, but she shakes her head in protest, those little twisty things shaking all over her head.

She walks with me close at her side, her skin-tight jeans making a swish-swishing sound. I bet she wouldn't be wearing those britches so tight if John Thomas were still here. She looks right cute in them though, kind of like I used to be when I was young, tall and thin as a rail.

I'm gonna take good care of Bess, I am. I'm going to let her wear herself out trying to impress me my first day here. I know she wants me to think I don't know why I'm here, but I do. I wouldn't even let the driver stop and get me anything because I was ready to get here and get to cooking those yams Bess told me she had in the cabinet. I know they are her favorite, but she never could cook them worth nothing.

"I was thinking I could fry us up some chicken for dinner," I say to her from the chair she has ushered me to in the living room. "How about that, Bess? Don't that sound good?"

"You know you can't have fried foods on your diet, Mama," she says from the kitchen, a cordless phone right up to her ear.

"You listen to them folks if you want to. A little chicken ain't gonna do nothing to me."

She holds her finger up at me, letting me know that she is busy on the phone now.

"I know, Estelle," she says, and not even in a semi-low voice. "She was like that even before John Thomas died. I told him that."

She peeks around the corner and I look up at the ceiling just like I don't hear a thing.

"I told him we need to see about getting her help, but he wouldn't hear of it." I know she must be on the line with my sister Estelle. She told me she would call after I got here.

"I take her for an evaluation tomorrow. I don't know how she'll react when they ask her about what happened in the house." She switches the phone from her left ear to her right and lifts the lid off a pot on the stove.

I can't believe she's standing there talking about me like I'm not even in this house, and loud, too, not even trying to whisper. I ought to go in there and give her a piece of my mind, but who am I to tell a woman off in her own house? I'll just sit right here in this chair and act like she's got the upper hand.

I bet she wants Estelle to think I'm here because of my accident. Sure, sometimes I forget things, but I'm old and it's my right. I raised four children and saw every last one of them dead in my lifetime. So what if I fall sometimes and break a few things? Nobody was perfect last time I checked. Wasn't nothing terrible gonna happen to me in that house.

Now, I'm sure I'll be right comfortable staying here with Bess, but I don't care what she and Estelle have to say, I ain't going nowhere tomorrow.

She peeks inside the oven after she hangs up. "Anyway," she says, "I baked some chicken and I have some fresh vegetables for us. And then, if you want something later, I have plenty of fruit."

I wish she had waited until I got here to start cooking so she could fix at least something that I like, but I know she was probably restless. I hope she is sleeping better. I know she had a hard time living here alone after the fire. She was gone that night to choir practice and John Thomas died in here alone. I know it must be hell living with that on her conscience.

"Well then fine, I'll just fix our plates," she says. "You just sit right down and I'll bring yours out to you."

I brace my arms on the chair so that I can lift myself up. "Don't worry about it," I tell Bess, "I can come and get it."

But she is at my side, coaxing me back down in the chair again. I sure wish she would stop treating me like some invalid.

"I'll get it, Mama."

And she has such a gentle look on her face. "Well, if you must do something, Bess."

So I let her get the chicken out of the oven. It smells good, but from where I'm sitting, it looks a lot lighter than anything I would have come up with. I sure hope she has it seasoned right. It's one thing to have it baked, but quite another to have it baked and dry as a chip.

I figure since I'm just sitting, I'll go ahead and set the table for us both. She has some pretty looking dinnerware up on this glass shelf. Humph, if this were my house, I would keep the plates right in here near the sink. But then, it's not my house.

It is a good thing she and John never had children, I am thinking as I finally get myself on my feet and shuffle over to the cabinet. She can't hear me because she is messing in the pots again, and I am walking barefoot on the thick blue carpet. Yep, she wouldn't have a dish in the house if she had kids running around here. Children are sneaky like that, grabbing at dishes way up top that they can hardly reach and then sending everything crashing down to the—oh, oh my!

"Mama!"

I am wishing I could stand up again when I hear her calling out to me, running to me like some mad woman, that whole chicken going flying across the room.

"Mama!" she screams. "Don't move."

Like I *would* move even if I could in all this glass. I am groggy now from all the sharpness in my back and I wonder if this is what acupuncture feels like. I want to lick the dryness from my lips but there is glass all over my face, in my eyes even and where I can't see glass, I see red, so much red.

Bess is on her knees in all this glass, and I want to tell her to be careful or she'll cut her knees all up, but I swear I can't say nothing.

"God, Mama, why did I leave you in here alone?" She is asking someone other than me because her hands are clenched together real tight and she is looking up at the ceiling.

I know she is just crying because I scared her so bad. She sure has become mighty protective of folks since John Thomas died. I would show her that I'm all right but I can't move right this minute.

Now she has both hands on my chest, and she is pressing real hard and when that doesn't satisfy her she starts shaking me, and I hear my brains rattling all over the place. This sure is no way to treat a guest. Matter of fact, Bess has been giving me trouble since I been here and I only came to help. But I know when I'm not wanted, and I'll leave just as soon as she lets me alone and I can get up from here.

She has let me go and she is sitting there, the knees of her jeans dark red and soaking wet and is shaking, her mouth open letting out sounds I've never heard before. Those mood swings, boy I tell you. I wonder if she is going through the change on top of everything else?

I am mad and I am still set on leaving here when I can, but I can't help it. She is a funny sight to me now even though she made me mad as all get out in here today. I open my mouth as wide as I can and laugh.

And laugh.

I laugh like the world is my playground and I'm feeling fine.

Eternal Holocaust

THOMAS SCHMITT

The world is all the richer for having a Devil in it, so long as we keep our foot on his neck.

— William James, *The Variety of Religious Experience*

THE DREAM CAME AGAIN last night. The dream was always the same. And yet, at the same time, it was always starkly different. He could never quite decide on who would have more interest in the dream—his history teacher for the impossible amount of detail, or his psychology teacher for whatever it was hidden deep inside its meaning. The colors of the dream were always the same...the same taste...the same smell. Only the actors within the dream were different. It was like watching a different *Friday the 13th* movie every night—same violence, same killer, different victims.

This time the victim was himself.

The rancid smell of charred flesh and burnt gunpowder was enough to make a grown man shiver, or a small boy cry. And that was exactly what he did, as he walked among the lifeless corpses that clung to the ground like scarecrows in a farmer's field. He cried like the child he was, lost in a time and place he knew only from history textbooks—Nazi Germany. Fires blazed all around him, but he couldn't tell what exactly it was that was burning. It was as if the ground itself were on fire. German *Grenatenwerfers*—spigot-type mortars—sporadically hit the ground and sent men flying—usually minus a limb or two. He could re-

member seeing such overwhelming destruction in movies like *The Terminator* or *Apocalypse Now*, but this was *reality*. There was no movie projector behind him, no bag of heavily buttered popcorn in his lap, and no director screaming at a special effects agent to make the explosions bigger. There was no way to stop this movie, this reality. He was in it until the fat bitch sang and the credits rolled.

Suddenly, a loud cracking noise shot by his ear, and he realized that now was definitely *not* the time to be discussing movies with himself. Thirty yards ahead of him, a squad of *Panzerkampfwagen*—German tanks—began rolling his way, sounding like not so distant thunder. Another cracking sound burst by his right ear, and then a *pfft* sound flew overhead. He swung around to follow the noise and saw an Allied soldier's skull crack open like the stereotypical egg in a frying pan. He almost started to laugh as he pictured the director yelling at the special effects agent to make the sound "louder damn it, louder!" That laugh, however, never made it past his lips. Instead, he shrieked as a tuft of skull and hair fell from Humpty Dumpty, who somehow managed to remain upright, while huge crimson spurts erupted from what used to be his scalp.

Still screaming, he ran as fast as he could from the scene, consciously trying to avert his eyes from the hundreds of men who continued to spray blood and spill guts around him. He "ran like Zurvan," as his grandfather used to say, although the expression never made much sense to him. As he reached the top of a nearby hill, he saw the sun setting in the distance, and even then he found his mind admiring its simplistic beauty. His mind's eye was always daydreaming. Before he reached the bottom slope of the hill, an explosion behind him sent him soaring into a shallow trench. His left shoulder slammed into the muddy embankment, and an ominous snap rang between his ears. His clavicle was broken in two. One side of the jagged bone poked through his leather bomber jacket. Grimacing in pain, he pushed himself up on one elbow and looked skyward. There, standing over him, was an SS officer with his P38 Luger pistol pointed straight at the boy's head.

"Coming up on the 12 o'clock news, yet another suicide among World War II veterans. What's the connection? We'll have that story, and more, right after *Donahue*." The young boy rubbed sleep from his droopy eyes as he walked into the living room and found his grandfather sitting on the champagne colored

leather couch, sipping his coffee and watching TV. He saw his grandfather's hands trembling slightly as he lifted the cup to his lips and drank. His hands seemed to tremble more and more these past three years, living in this house with the boy and his parents. Perhaps it was just the weather his grandfather wasn't used to. That ever-persistent Cherokee Falls heat was enough to drive a native to the brink of insanity; he could imagine what it would do to a man who had spent over half a century in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The grandfather heard the floor squeak behind him and turned around to look. "Johnny," his voice seemed to tremble as much as his hands, "I didn't hear you get out of bed." He fumbled for the remote and turned off the TV, as if he were just caught watching an X-rated movie as opposed to afternoon talk shows. "Come on over here and sit down with me." He patted the couch as if calling a puppy.

"Did you know this one too, Grandpa J. T.?" Johnny asked, although he already sensed the answer. He had entered into the cruel world of puberty last year, and his voice still portrayed the crackling sounds of a manhood yet to come.

"Know what one?" Grandpa J. T. tried hard to look confused.

"You know," Johnny replied while pointing towards the television that was now turned off, "the soldier on TV. The one who just killed himself? You knew all the other soldiers."

"Yes, yes. I did know him." His voice stopped trembling now and was replaced with the one Johnny knew and loved. That voice that always seemed to be struggling for its own special identity—it was part New York City, part South Carolina. "And I didn't know *all* of the other men, only some of them." The look on Johnny's face told him he didn't believe it. To the young boy, Grandpa J. T. must have known *everyone* who served in the war. "His name was Ray Gilliam. He was there for Normandy and God only knows how many other battles, and he was a really good friend once upon a time."

Johnny thought of all the times he had heard that expression from Grandpa J. T. *Once upon a time we were friends. Once upon a time I had loved that girl. Once upon a time....* He walked over and sat next to his grandfather, and looked up at him in anticipation of the rest of the story, even though by now he knew it would never come. Grandpa J. T. had never been the kind for telling stories. Once, when he had to do a report for history class on someone who had been

in a war, he was lucky to pry just the bare facts from the man. And he never talked about the end of the war. The events leading up to it and the war itself, sure, but never the end. It was like we had lost the war, and the Nazis had won.

"Well, Johnny, I'm going out for a walk now." Grandpa J. T. finally said as he stood up, shattering the boy's dream of a story on *The Life and Times of Ray Gilliam and John Thomas Campbell*. "If you'd like, you can come with me to the funeral Wednesday. Maybe we can go get ice cream after." Even to a 13-year-old, the idea of eating ice cream after a friend's funeral was abnormal and tasteless. As Grandpa J. T. reached the door, he stopped for the briefest moment to look back at Johnny, and then opened the door and walked out. A fervid gust of that humid South Carolina air smacked Johnny on the face, but he didn't notice. He was too busy thinking of the look on Grandpa J. T.'s face as he walked through the door. It was a look of pure terror.

Two days later at the funeral, Johnny was standing by the gravesite in his already-too-small gray pinstriped suit, looking at the people around him. As the Baptist minister droned on about ashes to ashes, dust to dust, Johnny's gaze moved along the line of veterans that had come here for their friend's funeral. He had been to more than his share of funerals already by this young age—it seemed that no one besides Grandpa J. T. lived past sixty in his family. At funerals, Johnny had discovered, most of the people there have the same look—grief. Overwhelming grief. Looking around on this completely overcast day, though, he noticed very little of that particular emotion. What he did notice, or *thought* he noticed at least, was fear. Fear of what, he wasn't sure. But it looked to him like almost everyone who had gathered here was deathly afraid of something. When the funeral ended, a group of about ten veterans lingered by the gravesite while everyone else walked off to their cars. Goose flesh trickled its way down Johnny's back as he stood there, and he silently prayed for Grandpa J. T. to take him home.

When they finally got in the Buick to head home, Johnny asked his grandfather if something was wrong. "No, nothing's wrong. Why do you ask, Johnny?" Grandpa J. T. replied.

"I don't know, Grandpa J. T. It just seems like there's something bothering you. You look that way a lot lately. And the other soldiers had the same look

just now.” Johnny had always called them soldiers, regardless of the fact that some of them hadn’t seen battle in over 30 years. “It’s like they’re terrified of something, something really bad, like God’s mad at them...I guess.”

“God...” Grandpa J. T. sighed, “God is a number you cannot count to.” When he said it, it came out as *Gahd*.

“Huh? What’s that mean?” Grandpa J. T. had a thousand and one sayings that made little or no sense to Johnny.

“It means,” he let out another long sigh and paused before continuing, “it means your Grandpa is a silly old man with silly old sayings. Now, how about that ice cream I promised you?” Once again, Johnny was denied access to the inner world of Grandpa J. T.’s psyche, and they drove in silence to the Cherokee Falls Dairy Queen.

This time it was closer, a small town maybe. It was impossible to tell what the town used to look like, because most of its buildings now lay in rubble on the ground. Nazi Grumman Bearcats and Allied B-17 “Flying Fortresses” were soaring overhead and attacking everything in sight, destined to bring every last structure down in this vastly growing wasteland. Everyone seemed to be either dead or dying.

An Allied soldier ran up to Johnny and grabbed onto his wrists. “Help me, please, God, help me!” He screamed as he tugged on the boy’s wrists like a child begging his mother to go to a toy store. Johnny could see nothing wrong with the man; he didn’t appear to be injured, but he continued to bellow and beg for help as if his soul itself were on fire.

“What’s wrong?” Johnny asked, as he pulled free of the man’s grasp. “Where are you hurt?”

“Oh God oh God oh God help...” the man pleaded in agony. Tears began to stream from his eyes. Johnny reached forward to grab the man’s elbows and his fingers sank knuckle-deep into his flesh. Pulling downward to free his fingers, the entire flesh on the man’s arms peeled back from his muscle like the wrapper on a Popsicle and then flopped on the ground like a pair of blood soaked gloves.

Sometimes when you first wake from a nightmare, your leg throbs in excruciating pain where the snake bit you, even *after* you realize it was only a dream. This was the case for Johnny, whose stomach was still turning from the

sight of the man’s fleshless arms. He rolled out of bed screaming and in a cold sweat and could not force the sight from his eyes. He blinked and blinked, trying to focus on an object in his room, but all he could see was that grotesque pair of gloves made of human flesh.

He hated it when his mom and dad went on these long trips, leaving him alone in the house with Grandpa J. T. They were both schoolteachers with the entire summer off, and they would usually take a month-long trip overseas somewhere. Whenever he had these horrible nightmares, he could go into his mom and dad’s room when they were here and sleep with them (even though at age 13 he was getting kind of old for such behavior), but he shuttered at the thought of trying to do the same with Grandpa J. T. Never an overly loving man to begin with, he didn’t believe Grandpa J. T. would understand or allow a 13-year-old to sleep in the bed with him. Nevertheless, the nightmare had him so shaken he had to at least try.

He opened the door to his bedroom and walked down the narrow hallway to Grandpa J. T.’s room. The sweat on the bottom of his feet felt cool against the hardwood floor. He stopped just before reaching the last room on the left. Was this really such a good idea after all? Grandpa J. T. was never in the best of moods in the first place; he could only imagine his reaction after being wakened at 3:00 in the morning by a frightened child.

Still, he had to try. He slowly turned the brass-plated knob on the door and opened it, peering inside. “Grandpa J. T.? Are you awake?” No answer. He quietly tiptoed inside, as if his goal were to *not* wake up his grandfather. “Hello, Grandpa?” Still no answer. By the faint light from the moon that softly illuminated the room, he could tell that Grandpa J. T. was not in his bed, so he turned on the light.

After his eyes adjusted to the bright light, he peered around and saw that it was empty. He walked back out into the hallway and checked in his parents’ room. No one there either. He followed the hallway to the end where it split off into the living room and kitchen. He checked the living room first, even looking in the closet (his was the only house he knew of that had a closet in the living room) and out onto the front porch. The last room was the kitchen, and it too was empty—even the adjoining laundry room.

"Maybe he went outside for something," he said aloud, trying to reassure himself that he was not caught in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. It didn't work. His mind replayed every episode of the show that involved disappearing families and towns, and he couldn't help but feel that maybe he was somehow stuck in one of those episodes.

Just then the back door opened, and Grandpa J. T. walked in. No, he didn't walk, he *fell* in, as if the door were attached to the floor and he was dropped in by Rod Serling himself. Johnny jerked and then ran over to his grandfather, who was on the floor panting like a dog in the middle of a Cherokee Hills summer. "Grandpa J. T.! What happened?"

Grandpa J. T. looked more shocked to see *him* than the boy was at seeing his grandfather fall in from the door. "What are you doing up, Johnny?" He asked the question as if the boy were in trouble. "I just went out for some fresh air, now get to bed."

"It's 3:00 in the morning, Grandpa J. T." Johnny realized he now sounded like his mother when she scolded him.

"I told you I just needed some fresh air. Why are you looking for me in the first place?"

"I had a bad dream and wanted to see if I could sleep with you." He was now embarrassed to admit it. "That's all. I got even more scared when I couldn't find you. I'm all right now though. Are you okay, Grandpa J. T.?"

"I'm fine," he said as he slowly raised himself up off the floor. "I just got a little dizzy when I walked in, and I fell down. It happens to people my age, you know. Now go on and get to bed. No more bad dreams, either." He shooed the boy away like an annoying fly. Johnny turned around and walked back to his bedroom, closing the door behind him. He stood there at the door for what seemed like an eternity before he finally heard his grandfather's footsteps walking down the hallway. He waited for the familiar click of his door closing, then crawled in bed and ventured into a dreamless sleep.

When he was 6, he could remember the feeling he got when he was told his Grandma Carrie had died. She had been diagnosed with level-three malignant melanoma just six months earlier, a term that meant nothing to him but apparently everything to his parents and grandfather. She had spent the majority of

the next six months in Botsford General Hospital, where she finally passed away on the eleventh floor cancer ward. He could remember the feeling in his stomach; it was as if everything in it had been emptied, and a cold breeze blew across the surface of its walls. The world itself had taken on a funny round shape, like he was watching everything through a trick mirror. It had only taken a day for the feeling in his stomach to disappear, but the rounded view of the world stayed with him for weeks afterward.

He couldn't explain why, but that same distorted view of the world returned to him now, as he watched Grandpa J. T. flip through a copy of *The Occult Roots of Nazism*. He oftentimes thought that his dreams were derived from the simple fact that there was always something Nazi-related lying around his house. As for the books, Grandpa J. T. was always reading about the Nazis; it made little sense to Johnny why anyone would want to relive those horrible experiences after already going through it once. Then again, there was little that Grandpa J. T. did or said that he understood. The man was an enigma.

"Why do you read that stuff, Grandpa J. T.?" he finally asked.

"I find it interesting is all." He didn't look up from the book to answer. On the glass coffee table next to him sat the day's newspaper. It was folded to the bottom of the front page—a report on yet another suicide from a World War II veteran. "I spent four years of my life fighting these sumbitches, and I have yet to figure out why they did it."

Johnny thought he knew the answer, even at his age. Still, there was little use in trying to convince Grandpa J. T. of anything. He never accepted what people told him; he was always one to search for the truth himself. Johnny remembered his dad telling him that it took *months* to convince Grandpa J. T. that a man had actually walked on the moon.

"What's occult mean, Grandpa J. T.?" It was always difficult to maintain a conversation with Grandpa J. T., and he figured this was as good a question as any.

"You know what a cult is, Johnny?"

"Sure I do. It's like a group of people that follow something, right? Kinda like *Star Wars* or *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*?"

"Ha. *Rocky Horror*, now *that's* a cult of freaks. But you're absolutely right. The *occult*, on the other hand, is a group of people who follow something too,

only they keep it a secret.” Grandpa J. T. finally put the book down and looked at the boy. “It’s usually because they’re into something mysterious or supernatural, like witchcraft.”

“These people don’t believe in God?” The idea seemed baffling to little Johnny, who was raised strict Roman Catholic, even in this Southern Baptist town.

“God doesn’t always mean the same thing to different people, Johnny. To some, God is Allah, or the Buddha, or even Chang Fei or Siva. To Christians he is just ‘God,’ but...” His voice trailed off.

“But what? Do you not believe in God, Grandpa J. T.?”

“Of course I do, I’m just...I’m just searching to see where my God lives is all.” He stroked the thin gray hairs on his chin for several moments before continuing. “I was raised Catholic like you, Johnny. But now I’m an old man with little time left on this world. I would hate to die one day only to find out I’ve been worshipping the wrong God.”

He picked his book back up and started reading.

That same night, Johnny sat awake in his bed, thinking about what his grandfather had said. *God doesn’t always mean the same thing to different people.* Why not? He did everything he could to figure it out, but couldn’t come up with an answer. Maybe he just had to wait on that glorious wisdom that his parents always told him comes with age alone.

He stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars on his ceiling. His aunt Diane had given them to him last Christmas, and now every constellation he knew of watched him sleep. His favorite was Orion, who always stood guard with his bow and arrow, ready to chase away the demons and devils that he might encounter in the night.

His eyes had finally started to feel heavy when he heard footsteps outside his door. *Grandpa J. T. is going outside again,* he thought to himself. He waited until he could no longer hear the footsteps and then quietly crawled out of bed and walked to the door. He listened with his ear pressed against the door like a gossiping woman, and he heard the door in the laundry room open and then shut. He opened his door and then walked down the long hallway to the laundry room door.

From the window, he could not see Grandpa J. T., so he opened the door and walked down the three stone steps to the backyard. There was approximately twelve feet of grass in his backyard, and then the woods started. There was a trail in the woods that led just over a half-mile to the back shore of Dunham lake. He used to walk that trail a lot with Grandpa J. T., who would always stay at the lake longer than Johnny wanted. Johnny would wander bored in the woods while Grandpa J. T. would sit on the edge of the lake with his feet sunk in the dirt and just stare at the water for hours on end.

From the edge of that path now came a faint green light that bathed the surrounding trees in its odd color. It was not quite rich enough to be emerald, or playful enough to be aquamarine. It was that strange shade of green that somehow seemed possible only in a Stephen King novel. The way the trees blew in the wind made shadows dance warily across the ground in front of him, and he knew right then he was too afraid to go any farther.

Before he could even try to muster the courage to go into the woods, he heard a hacking cough come from the trail. Grandpa J. T. was coming back. He turned around to open the door but the knob didn’t turn. He had locked the door behind himself. “Shit!” he muttered under his breath while sprinting around to the front door. His parents had hidden a key under a rock in their garden a few years ago. His only hope was that the key was still there—and that he remembered which rock it was under.

When he got to the front, *none* of the rocks looked familiar, so he just started tossing every one aside in hope of finding the key. He heard another hacking cough, closer this time. He had to get the key and get in the house and try to unlock the back door before Grandpa J. T. got back and found it locked. He finally found the key and ran to the front door, rubbing the dirt off the key with his pajama pant leg. The front door unlocked, opened, shut, locked. Taking strides like a gazelle, he bounded through the living room to the back door. Grandpa J. T. was at the edge of the path now. He unlocked the door and then ran to his bedroom.

The door made an eerie creaking noise just seconds later as his grandfather entered the house. Footsteps echoed down the hallway, and then a second door creaked open. When he heard the door close, he let out a long breath that he hadn’t realized he’d been holding in since entering his room.

An hour later, he sneaked back outside and put the rocks back in place.

His eyes were a color neither red nor black nor gray could describe, but a vicious fusion of the three. *He's dying*, Johnny thought to himself, *and there's nothing I can do to stop it*. He had come upon the wounded man after walking—no, after *running* more than a mile through the war-torn city streets. From a sign on one of the buildings (one of the few that remained standing) he could tell he was now in Berlin. And by the look of things, he could tell he was now wandering in the latter part of the war, when the Germans were finally facing defeat.

What had drawn him here was a gurgling sound, the sound a baby makes as it spits up its food. The sound had started over a mile away, and he believed beyond a shadow of a doubt it was calling him. The sound never became stronger or weaker, but on several occasions he had to stop running and try to listen over the roar of *tanks* and gunfire. When he finally reached the source of the sound, he had a feeling of disappointment, as if the fun was in the quest itself—not the goal.

The goal was yet another Allied soldier, lying in a puddle of his own insides. His left leg had been severed just above the kneecap and had a makeshift tourniquet applied from a torn scrap of clothing. In the center of both of his hands were gaping wounds that made him look like a twentieth-century Jesus Christ. His stomach was torn open and sporadically spilled forth both blood and intestine. It was a miracle he was still alive.

“Fi...find him.” Blood bubbles spat from his lips as he spoke. Every time he inhaled air, his stomach exhaled blood. “Find him today...in his bunker.”

“Find who?” Johnny asked hesitantly, not wanting the man to waste any more energy.

“Hitler.” The soldier’s eyes grew wide in astonishment. “*Always* Hitler. Today is April 29th. He must be stop....” His voice trailed off and his gaze grew distant. Johnny didn’t even try to respond; he knew right away the man was dead.

Find Hitler?

Those words kept playing through Johnny’s head as he awoke from yet another dream. What did those words mean, besides the obvious? What was the

point of finding him anyway? Hitler committed suicide and the Allies won the war after dropping the bomb on Japan.

He rolled over and looked at the clock—2:56 a.m. From outside, rain was beating mercilessly against the house. It had been the beginning of summer the last time they had any rain; now here she was in all her glory. What about Grandpa J. T.? Johnny had a funny feeling he was outside in the woods again. Only this time, he might have a hard time making it back through the trail in the thunderstorm. He decided to go look for him.

After checking the house, his thoughts proved to be correct. Grandpa J. T. was missing again. As he opened the back door, rain poured in. It was the hard pellet rain that stung when it hit you, the only kind of rain it seemed this town ever had. He closed the door and walked down the steps to the lawn. *A smart kid would go back in and get an umbrella*, he thought. Still, there was a sudden sense of urgency in finding his grandfather. His stomach told him something bad was about to happen.

As he neared the path in the woods, that eerie green light suddenly appeared, lighting his way. He tried to tell where the light was coming from but couldn’t; it was as if the entire woods themselves emitted the glow. He stuck his hand in the clearing and watched it glow a mysterious shade of green. Once again, that feeling of being in a *Twilight Zone* episode overcame him. He turned and scanned the entire yard, just to make sure Rod Serling wasn’t there to narrate his adventure.

When he was certain there was to be no narration, he took that first legendary step into the woods. Once that first step was over, the rest came easily. After awhile, he found himself moving at a brisk pace, being careful not to trip over any branches that may have fallen in the storm. The green light remained constant throughout the woods, never waxing or waning.

About halfway down the trail, he heard a branch snap to his right. He stopped and turned to look. The thick trees in the woods made great cover from rain, but also made it difficult to see very far. There was nothing he could see, but he heard a voice. No, he heard *two* voices. They were yelling at each other.

He followed the sound of the two voices off the path and deeper into the woods. From where he was at he could no longer see the original path, but he could follow this new hidden one. Branches and wildflowers were trampled

down rather heavily on this path, telling him that Grandpa J. T. made more than just the occasional trip out here at night.

"I can't do it any longer, John. I'm tired." Johnny stopped dead in his tracks at the sound of the voice. It was close. He knelt down and could see a small circular clearing in the woods, the one place where the green light seemed to be glowing brighter. Looking between the trees, he could make out the shape of two men. One he knew was his grandfather; the other man he had never seen before but could tell he was elderly as well. His gut told him it was another veteran.

"Just let me end it." The man pleaded with Johnny's grandfather. Whatever they were yelling about earlier had been replaced with calm conversation. "I don't see how you have the will to live anymore."

"It's what we have to do." Grandpa J. T. walked closer to the man, who took a step back. "I'm not going to try anything, I promise." He took another slow step towards the man, who stayed where he was. "You can't do this, I tell you. They *need* us. We're all that's left."

"How long is it going to go on, John?" The man grew angry. "How long are we going to spend our miserable fucking lives like this? I am too old to do this anymore." His shoulders slumped as he began to cry. The wind blew the trees back and forth, causing the shadow behind him to grow longer and shorter, longer and shorter. "I'm tired, John. I'm just so tired." His shoulders jerked up and down as he sobbed.

"It's all right; we'll get through this." Grandpa J. T. walked all the way up to the crying man now, and put his arms around him. It looked to Johnny as if Grandpa J. T. had started crying now as well. The two men hugged each other tightly, whispering words that Johnny could not hear. Everything was under control.

A loud crack rang throughout the forest making Johnny jump in fright. At first he thought it was thunder, but then realized there hadn't been any lightning to make a sound this close.

The sound was a gunshot. He looked back at Grandpa J. T. and the other man, and saw the man's head fall back and spill forth blood. "No, no, not again." Grandpa J. T. trembled. He let go of the man, and his body slumped to the ground.

"Goddamn you!" Grandpa J. T. cursed at the sky. He wasn't sure, but Johnny could have sworn he *did* see lightning just then, illuminating the forest bright white. "Why? Why us?" Grandpa J. T. picked up a rock and threw it skyward, as if aiming for God Himself. "I'm finished! You can do it your damn self!" He continued to scream and curse at the heavens for several minutes before stopping and kneeling down by the body of his dead friend.

Johnny had seen enough and was ready to be back home in the relative safety of his own bed. He turned around and ran back down the hidden path. He ran so hard and carelessly that he was certain Grandpa J. T. heard him. It didn't matter, however. Only one thought kept running through his mind while he ran through the woods.

The man he just saw die didn't even have a name.

He didn't sleep at all that night, and the following morning he stayed in bed until almost noon. Finally, he somehow found the courage to leave his room and face Grandpa J. T. Conversations about trivial things like school and football were practically impossible; he could only imagine how this one would turn out. As he opened the door, he heard the familiar sound of daytime talk shows coming from the living room. His dad had told him once that women and old people love talk shows, and by God he was right. Grandpa J. T. would sit in front of the TV all day long and watch those shows. *Donahue* was his favorite.

As he walked from his room to the living room, one question was poised on the tip of his lips. *What happened to the dead man's body?* He had heard Grandpa J. T. come in only twenty minutes after he had made it back himself. Certainly that wasn't enough time for him to dump the body somewhere. It would have taken him close to that amount of time just to *walk* back from the spot in the woods. He hadn't left again in the night either, nor had he called the police that Johnny could tell. His mind ached in search of an answer, but he decided he wouldn't ask the question at all. Sad as it may have been, there were more important issues at hand. Namely, the green light in the woods and Grandpa J. T.'s disappearing act every night.

Sure enough, Grandpa J. T. was sitting on the couch watching TV. When he saw Johnny walk in the room, he looked at him nonchalantly and asked if he slept well last night.

"I think you know I didn't," Johnny responded. "You had to have heard me in the woods. And I saw you, and the guy that shot himself, and the green light."

"Ah yes, the green light. It's a lovely shade of green, isn't it?" Johnny couldn't believe he was making jokes at something so serious. A man had just *shot* himself in front of both of them, and he's already making jokes about it? "I've watched that same shade of green now for over forty years. The color makes me sick now. Why do you think I threw such a fit when your mother brought home that green recliner? I did everything I could to make her take it back, and she finally did replace it with a blue one." Johnny remembered the recliner; it wasn't an exact match of green, but close enough, he supposed.

"What *is* that light, Grandpa J. T.?"

"That light," he began, "is the light of death and salvation, all wrapped in one nightmare ride." Johnny tilted his head slightly at this, like a dog unsure of a command. "It's a long story, Johnny; why don't you sit down next to old Grandpa first?" Again, he patted the couch like a man would for a dog.

Johnny sat down next to Grandpa J. T., who started to run his fingers through the boy's cascading chestnut hair. He couldn't remember the last time he had done this, but it brought back fond memories of a childhood innocence already lost. From the corner of his eye, a single tear traveled its way down Grandpa J. T.'s face.

"I've been doing this for so long, Johnny, I don't even know where to begin."

"Start with God." Johnny said plainly. "That's what they taught us in Sunday school. Whenever you're confused or lost as to what to do, start with God."

"Well, I suppose that's as good a place to start as any." He laughed that heavy jovial laugh that Johnny used to love as a small child. Once again, he found his grandfather doing something he hadn't done in years. "I would have to say I've hated God for the better part of thirty years. At first, what happened to us strengthened my faith in Him. But after a decade of losing *every* time we went in there, I distanced myself from him. Soon that distance became distaste. Distaste became anger. Anger became hatred."

Johnny was confused by most of this, but he thought he had a grasp on enough to keep the story going without getting completely lost. "You know

what I said earlier about God meaning different things to different people?" Grandpa J. T. looked at him with deep, wandering eyes.

"Yeah. You said that some people have a different person in mind when they say the word God."

"Pretty close. Anyway, I have tried to convince myself of that over the past ten years. That God was not *Him*." He pointed up to the ceiling and winked at Johnny. "That, just maybe, there was another God I could turn to. Well, the truth is, Johnny, I know there isn't. There is only one God, and that is the God you worship in church every Sunday."

A voice in Johnny's head told him to say, *Jeez Grandpa J. T., I could have told you that*, but he decided it was to his benefit to keep his mouth shut. He couldn't remember the last time Grandpa J. T. opened up like this. Probably never.

"So now," he continued, "I have to accept that I was wrong and make amends. I guess in the deepest part of my mind I always knew it to be true. Part of me just *wanted* it to be untrue, to find an escape, another way out. I think we all felt that way at one point or another, I just happened to dwell on it."

"Does this have to do with the veterans killing themselves?" Johnny finally interrupted. "The ones that have been in the paper so often?"

"It has *everything* to do with it." Johnny could see more tears well up in Grandpa J. T.'s face. "What do you know about the end of World War II, Johnny? As far as the Nazis are concerned, anyway."

"They gave up after Hitler committed suicide, right?" Johnny answered.

"On the contrary, nothing could be farther from the truth." He sighed deeply. Johnny looked at him with a look of utter confusion. "Hitler committed suicide, yes. But it was *because* of his death we've been fighting the Nazis ever since."

"Grandpa J. T., you're not making any sense." His voice cracked on every syllable.

"Sounds crazy doesn't it? Hell, you should try living it for a year...or forty. You're right about Hitler killing himself—it was in a bunker in Berlin on April 30th, 1945. I can guarantee you no veteran alive today has forgotten that date. It's the magic date, the date we try to stop most nights from ever happening again."

"Hitler made a pact with the Devil, Johnny. His suicide sealed the deal. I guess the Devil got himself one hell of a deal. It makes sense if you think about it. What darker soul has walked among us this century than Adolph Hitler?"

"What do you mean, he made a pact with the Devil?" Johnny *demanded* this rather than ask it.

"For his death- his *soul*- the Nazi party became eternal. Their power and influence will never die, which is why we have to keep going back." He could see the question on Johnny's face, and answered it before he had the chance to ask. "Back to the war, Johnny. Back to Nazi Germany, 1945. If we can stop him from committing suicide to seal the pact..."

"But why does it matter? You haven't stopped him in four decades, and nothing has changed." Johnny was astonished at the fact that he *believed* what he was being told.

"No, to *you* nothing appears changed, because *you* only live in the world's current time configuration. Only us veterans can tell what's changed. And trust me, things have gotten much worse. Here, look at these." By his side was a small cedar box, from which he pulled out a stack of newspaper clippings and handed them to Johnny. They were mostly small articles about Neo-Nazi movements and Anti-Semitism.

"Those articles keep growing, Johnny. Every time we lose this war, they gain more power. When we fail to stop him from committing suicide their influence grows. And we can tell the difference. There are more Neo-Nazi groups in 1986 *now* than there were in the 1986 of three years ago."

"What?" Johnny was completely frustrated. "I don't understand. Are you saying that the future changes every time you fail to stop him in the past?"

"That is *exactly* what I'm saying. When it is 1980, 1986 looks a certain way. However, after failing to stop him for another five years, 1986 looks completely different. Somehow, we can *see* that difference. It's as if we know how things are *supposed* to look, as opposed to what they actually look like. The Nazis continue to grow stronger every day, Johnny, and their influence has been growing even quicker lately. I think a major part of it is the sudden losses we've had, from those vets committing suicide."

"How did all the vets find out about this in the first place? And what's the green light? Some sort of time travel?" The sense of frustration had now been replaced by an urgent need for information.

"Time travel, sure. Space travel, event travel, whatever. I can't explain all the details, Johnny; I'm not Isaac Asimov. What I *do* know is that we are all *called*

to the light most nights. And it doesn't always appear every night; there are times when the light won't appear for months at a time. To be honest, those are the loneliest nights of my life. The light has become a companion to many of us; it's like becoming institutionalized while in jail. The system becomes part of your life, part of *you*.

"We first found the light shortly after the war had ended. It came to us at first in our dreams. Then our dreams spilled over into our waking hours, and soon we were consumed by it. We searched for it like pirates hunting treasure; we were driven by a primal desire to find it. I think the first time we actually entered the light was a year after the war. From then on... well, I suppose I've told you the rest."

Without warning, Grandpa J. T. burst into tears. They came like a great flood, spilling down his cheeks. He grabbed Johnny and hugged him tighter than he ever had before. Strange as it seemed, Johnny was more shocked at the sudden burst of tears than his tale of time travel and pacts with the Devil.

"I am sorry. I am *so* sorry." He sobbed with his head pressed tight against Johnny's. "Please forgive me." Somehow, Johnny knew Grandpa J. T. wasn't talking to him.

This time the dream was different.

He was still in Germany, and from what he could tell it was still during the war, although the once collapsed buildings now stood tall again. The biggest change was the absence of the Nazi Party. SS insignias and swastikas were nowhere to be found. It was as if they never existed.

As he walked along the narrow strip of buildings, he noticed that the missing Nazis were not the only things different about his dream. To begin with, he now *realized* it was just a dream, whereas before he always thought it was real until he woke up screaming (and wet on one occasion). Aside from that, time seemed to be running backward. Buildings slowly began to look new again. Dirty roads cleaned themselves. Somehow the entire landscape seemed to be growing younger.

He started to run through the streets, desperate to find something concrete that helped prove his theory. A river, a rain cloud, *anything*. He ran up three blocks, and then turned left and ran another two before finally stopping. What he needed was a clock.

As if in answer to his prayer, just then a clock rang once, twice, three times and then stopped. He looked down the street to his right. There, in the center of an oblong shaped brick building, was a five-foot tall clock running in reverse.

When he was awake, he *knew* he had to tell Grandpa J. T. about the dream. He rolled over and looked at the clock—3:00 a.m. It didn't matter; he had to tell him. Maybe his dream was an omen; maybe the war was finally over and all the soldiers could live the rest of their lives in peace. The idea made Johnny think of another seemingly unanswerable question: what happened when all the vets were gone? He didn't want to imagine the answer.

He knocked lightly on his grandfather's door. "Grandpa J. T.? Are you awake? I've got something to tell you." No answer. For the briefest moment he thought that maybe he was back in the woods, back in the green, but he knew that was wrong. His grandfather was in there; he could sense it.

He turned the knob and opened the door, sticking his head through first. The silhouette of his grandfather was there in bed. He walked over to his side. "Grandpa J. T., wake up. I've got good news." Still no answer.

He leaned closer to his grandfather and whispered again. Then he noticed something—the sheets covering his grandfather weren't moving. He wasn't breathing. "Grandpa J. T.? Grandpa J. T., don't die, please don't die on me." It was only three days before his parents returned from their trip in Scotland. The body never moved.

He put his head against his grandfather's chest and listened for a heartbeat that wasn't there. His tears came briefly, and then his resolve. Wrapped around Grandpa J. T.'s neck were his Army dog tags. Using his right hand, he lifted Grandpa J. T.'s head up and slid the dog tags out with his left, wrapping them in his hand. He knew what had to be done.

From there he left the house for what might have been the last time, never bothering to look back. He walked down the path in the woods, the path that was now illuminated by that Stephen King green, and followed the hidden trail his grandfather had used all these years. Along the way (he had walked farther than he had been that first stormy night) he found his grandfather's old bayonet rifle propped against a pine tree and covered with brush. He grabbed it and kept walking.

When he reached the small clearing, he could see the portal that emanated the arcane green light. It was nearly eight feet tall and wide, and was completely square; totally different from the circular type portals he had seen in so many Hollywood movies. A cool breeze blew from within it, blowing his hair back as he walked closer.

He walked all the way up to it and then stopped. He turned around to look behind him, as if expecting to see someone watching him like he had watched his grandfather and the man-without-a-name last night. Seeing no one, he turned back around and faced the portal. Hands shaking, he lifted Grandpa J. T.'s dog tags up to his lips and kissed them like a holy relic. He then slid them over his neck and grabbed the old rifle with both hands.

"I love you, Grandpa J. T.," he said, and walked into the green light.

Better

TENILLE BROWN

RUTHIE CALLS TO ME FROM HER BEDROOM upstairs as I am standing in the kitchen over a sink of dishes. The sound of her voice causes me to drop the heavy kitchen knife I have been pulling carefully through the washcloth and splash soapy water all over my yellow top.

"Bernie!"

I want to let her calls go unanswered and show her, finally, that Bernice is not here. It is not Bernice who brings her banana custard breakfast every morning in a compact baby food jar. It is not Bernice who holds her and talks her into her elastic-waisted trousers. I toss the washcloth down on the counter instead and move to the door.

"Bernie!" she beckons in her unsteady voice. "I did it again."

I give myself three guesses as to what "it" is and take the beige carpeted stairs two at a time. I am secretly hoping that fate has performed some miracle and Ruthie will be sitting there fully dressed, underwear on her bottom instead of tossed into a corner and she will not fight me when I tried to buckle her shoes.

When I arrive, I am out of breath and she is standing gripping the rail with one hand and pulling at her soiled underpants with the other.

"Ruthie," I say, "It took me less than thirty seconds to get up here. You mean to tell me you couldn't sit in it another second when you've gone hours before and not even said a word to me about it?"

She looks at me with the gray flecks of unfamiliarity in her eyes and I touch her shoulder. "It's me, Ruthie," I say. "Claudette. Bernice is on her way."

I walk with her until we are closer to the mattress and I reach for the moist cloth on the nightstand and wipe her softly and swiftly.

"Remember," I whisper, "She's coming to give us a ride over." I do not mention that her precious Bernice is over an hour late and has not even called.

"Bernie," she breathes, and lays back on the powder blue comforter. "I sure missed you, Bernie, baby."

She touches my hair, then proceeds to run her thin fingers through it and pat the top of my head like I am Bernice, the one born first with careful planning, not the one who snuck up on her smack dab in the middle of menopause.

I am about to tell her that Bernice misses her, too, that she cares about us even though she comes around only every other month to pick up the important mail or meet the yardman.

Bernice does not hear my bare feet on the carpet behind her as she is sifting through a stack of mail. She is wearing the same navy skirt suit I last saw her in. Her cellular phone sits firmly attached to her matching leather handbag, and she pats it subconsciously as if making sure it has not fallen off somewhere.

I inhale her perfume the way I did when Ruthie and Daddy first bought it for her as a special surprise for her birthday. I would sneak it off of her white vanity and squirt it onto my skin when she wasn't looking and then make up far fetched stories about where the rash came from when anybody asked. My skin was not made for wearing perfume, they told me. I could not smell as good as Bernice; I could not be as good as her, ever.

"It's not there," I say. "The bill doesn't come until next month."

Bernice is scanning the house and I am thankful I took the extra hour to scrub the kitchen floor. Then she glares at my hips a second longer than I'm comfortable with, and I suddenly feel as if I can't take another breath.

"I need help getting her stuff down." I bend down and concentrate on making the double loop in my sneakers perfect as I wait for her to speak.

She shifts in those navy pumps and says, "No, Claudette. Mama's stuff can stay right where it is." She moves over to the couch and I follow her.

I lick my lips. "I told you all of this on the phone last night. I told you that we have to take Ruth down there and let her stay a while or else my job won't be there when I get back." My hands are fists in my pockets.

"That's right," she says, "you did. You wait until the last damned minute

to break the news to me that *you've* given up on our mother as if what I have to say about it doesn't count for shit."

"I have stuff to take care of, too, you know," I say. I notice the higher pitch in my voice and clear my throat. I will not cry in front of Bernice.

"No, I don't know about the *stuff* you have to take care of," Bernice says. "All I know is that you're acting like it's your signature on the Power of Attorney and you have some say so in the matter. I don't know what's your hurry to get back to that dead end job, anyway, and I certainly don't know what's your hurry to get rid of your own damned mother."

Her hands are shaking and I know she wants to pull out one of those mile long cigarettes she loves to puff on, but she fusses with her hair tightly knotted at the nape of her neck instead.

"She's not going," she says. "This is her house and this is where she will stay and recover." Her voice has a sense of finality that makes me turn away from her.

"Recover, Bernice?" I ask, surprised that I can speak after that blow of words hit me in the stomach like a fist. "You don't recover from Alzheimer's. You don't get better."

I am standing before her now, and I sense her discomfort in the quivering of her burgundy lips. "You know what you do when you have Alzheimer's, Bernice?" I ask, but do not wait for her to answer. "You wait," I continue. "You wake up every morning disappointed that last night was not your lucky night. You lie for hours in your own piss and shit because you are too scared that when you call for someone to help you, no one will answer." I cross my arms over my meager chest.

Bernice is holding onto the sofa now, but I continue. "And you know what else? You call on your oldest daughter when you have Alzheimer's because that's the one you remember even though your youngest daughter, the one that's there taking care of you every day, would rather not take another breath than see you in pain."

The tears flow from my eyes, down my cheeks and into the corners of my mouth. I hear the distant bell of the neighborhood ice cream truck and think about how Bernice and I used to race to the end of the street to catch it. Bernice's hands move to her face in a gesture of shock as she turns towards the stairs.

"Mama!" she cries, and I spin around to see Ruthie shuffling down the steps and to the front door moving past both Bernice and myself in a blur.

"Mickey Mouse!" Ruthie screams in delight. She has detected the sound of the vehicle that carries her favorite ice cream bar from upstairs. She fumbles with the doorknob only a second before it is wide open. Then she is out the door, and I am pushing Bernice so hard that her legs move out from under her and she lands face first on the sofa.

"Ruthie!" I scream as I reach the door and run to my mother who has landed spread eagle on the wet grass, having lost her balance somewhere between the first and the second step.

I do not take a breath until I see her eyelids flutter open and her ashen lips move to speak.

"Claudette," she says so low that I lean in closer to hear her.

"Say that again, Mama" I ask.

"Claudette," she says again, "I wanna go home. Can we go home?" Her hand is soft as it touches my face and rubs the wetness like an elixir onto my flushed cheeks.

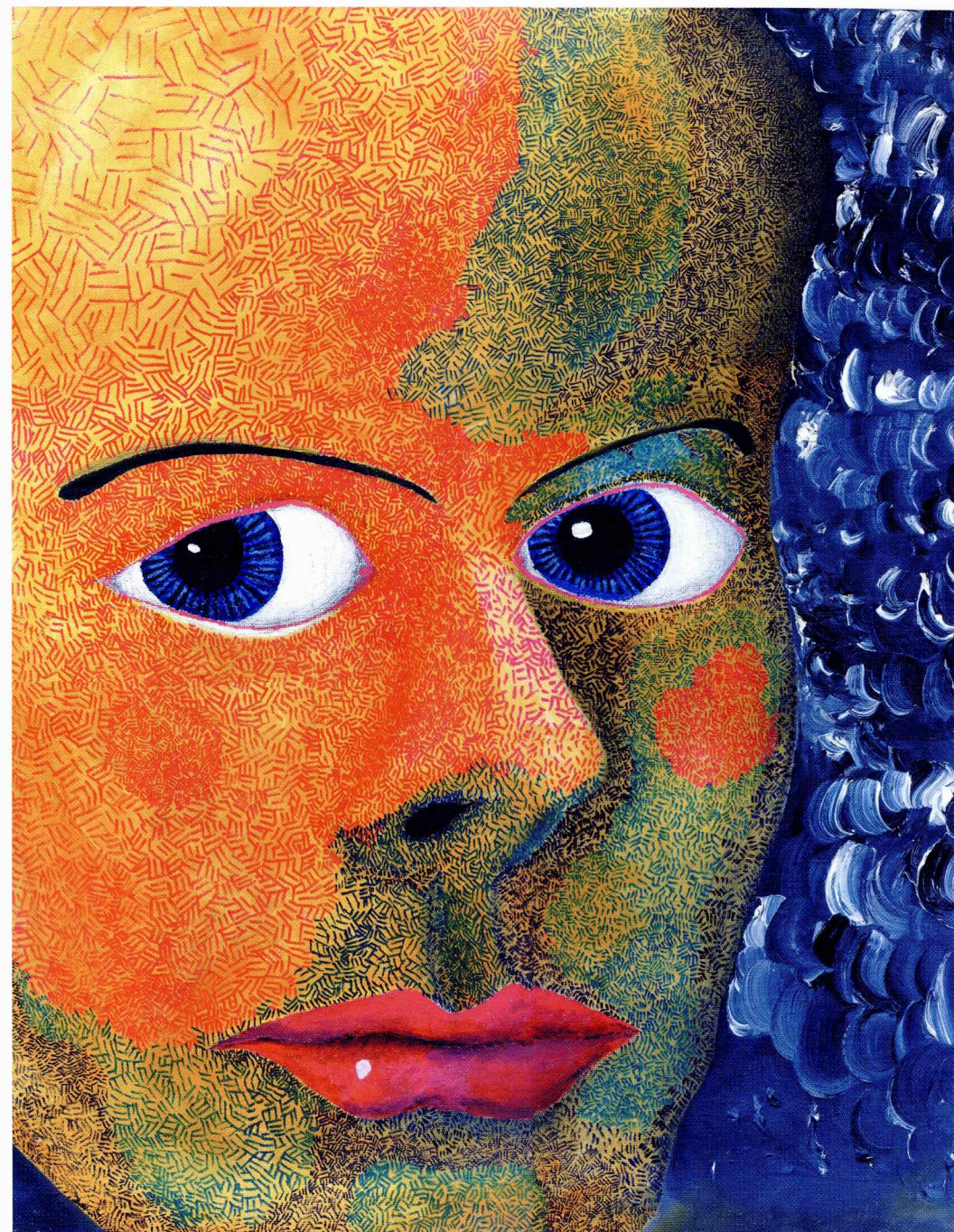
"Yes," I say, making brief eye contact with Bernice, who has finally come to the door. "We can go home, Mama."

I lift Ruthie and brush past my sister, guiding her inside the home she prayed for, that my father died in. I tell my sister, "Go home, Bernice. We'll be fine. I think Mama is feeling much better now."

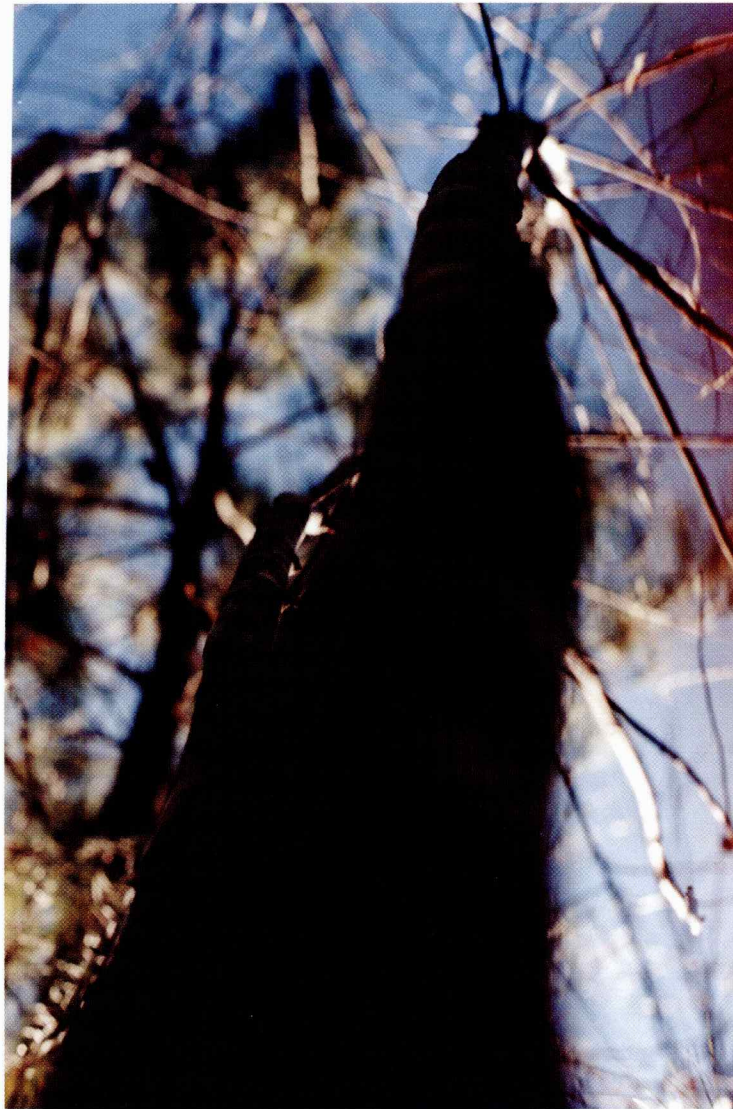
I do not watch her walk away.



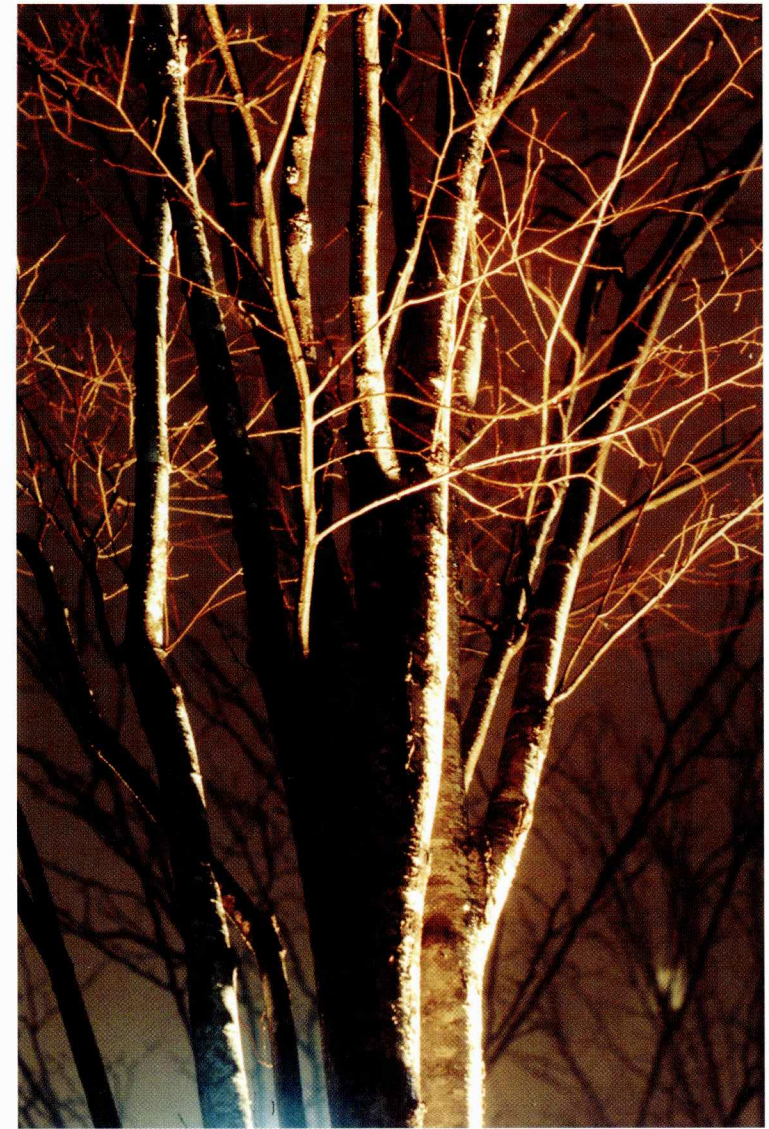
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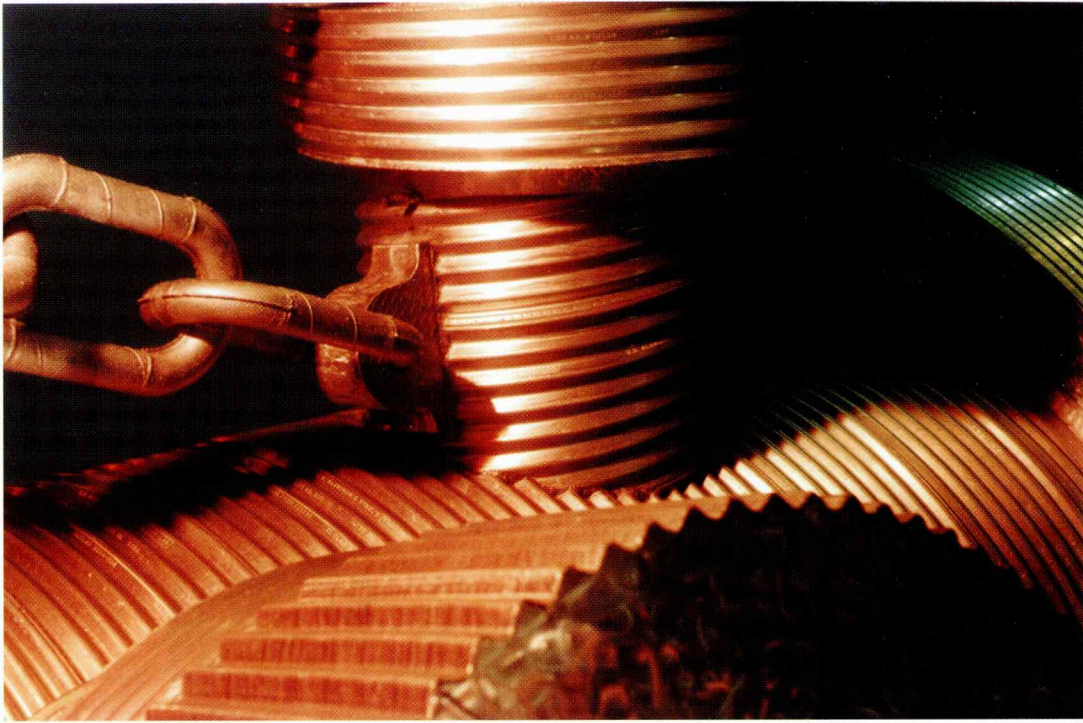
CHRISTIAN PRICE



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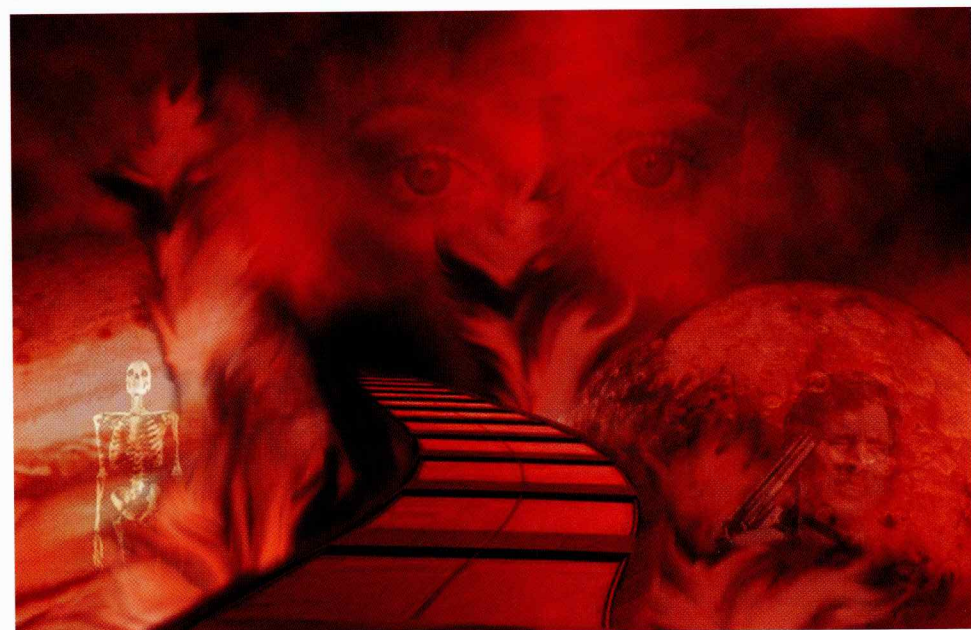
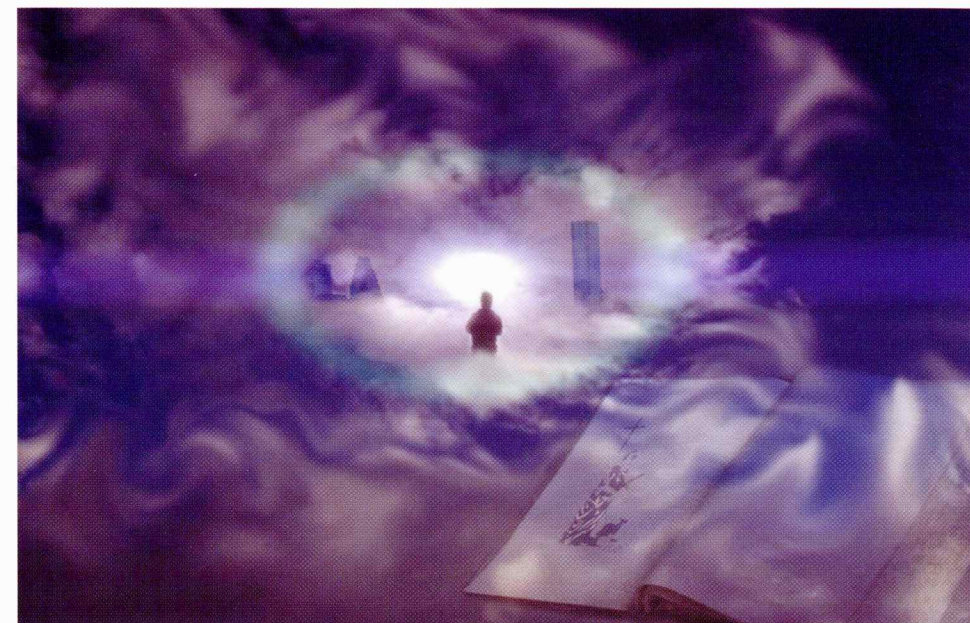
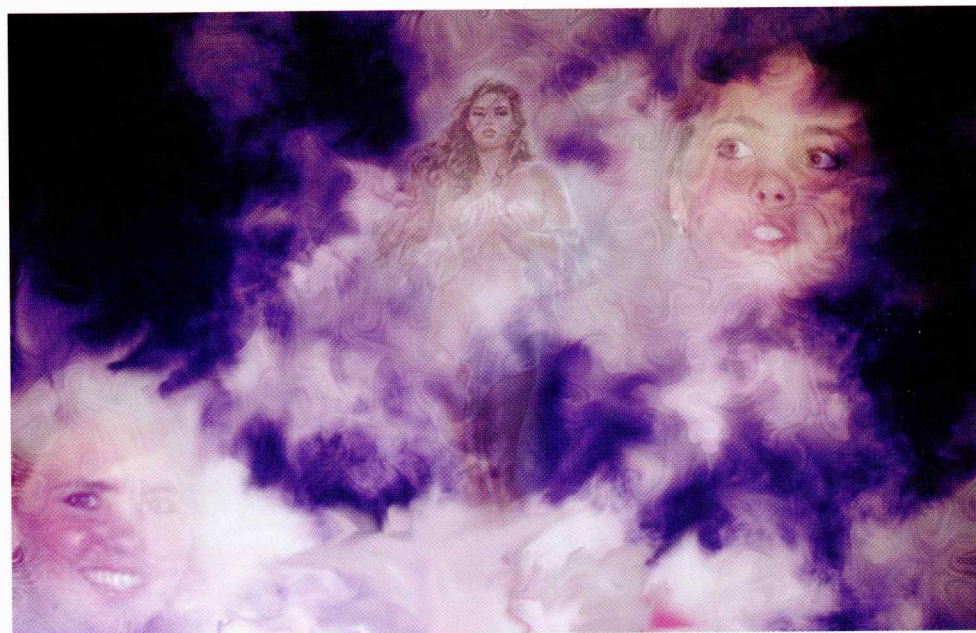
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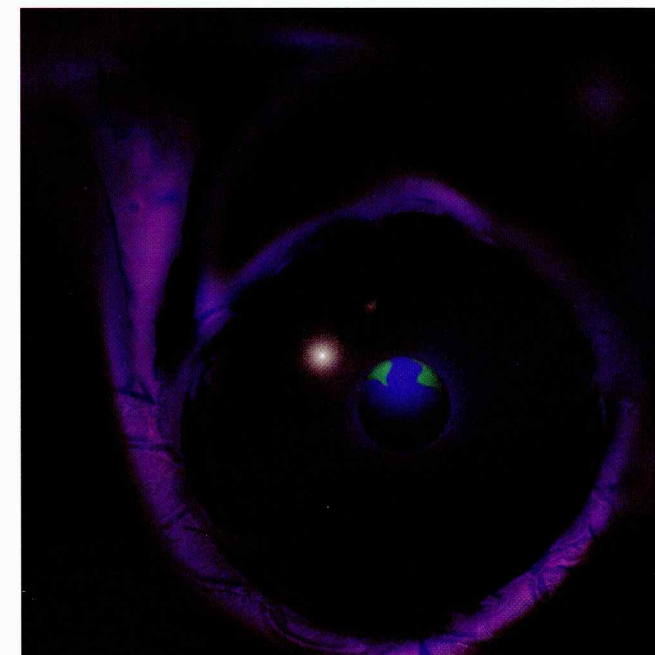
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MARY L. STEVENSON



COMPUTER ART
BY
TONY FLING





MARY L. STEVENSON

For Love of Honor

ABRAHAM PERNICKA

THE SKY HUNG CLOSE AND HEAVY, an inverted landscape of deep valleys and jutting mountains, all painted in shades of angry gray. A stiff wind swept tall grasses, yellowing with the season, into gentle waves and subtle patterns. The same wind grabbed each puff of dust tossed up by Teiji's feet and whipped it into invisibility. The weather promised storms, filling each breath Teiji took with the scent of distant but approaching rain.

It had been some time since Teiji last walked that road. Then, he had been in the company of other warriors, marching to display the loyalty of the Fujiwara clan to Emperor Go-Ichijo against his enemies. That time it was *sohei*, the warrior monks of Mount Hiei, but there had been others before. Whomever the enemy, Sakata Teiji had always marched with his fellow soldiers, departing with them toward the fields of battle and returning with those who had survived. This time, however, Teiji walked the road alone. He wore simple clothes of gray, cut of the same cloth and in the same style as those he wore every day to work the fields of his small farm or to walk the other road leading away from his home.

Teiji adjusted the straps of his small backpack, shifting the weight on his back. The little sack held a few days' food and water, a change of clothes, and a leather pouch with what money he had not given Kaeko. It bumped gently against the small of his back with each step, providing counterpoint to the swaying rhythm of the two swords belted at his sides. He had not taken much

away from the place he had called home for the past six years, but felt that traveling light would be best since he had no particular destination in mind. Where, after all, did one go when one's life had lost all meaning?

With a sigh, Teiji adjusted his pack again and resisted the urge to look back. He had not walked so long that the plume of smoke from the remains of his house would be invisible, and he had no wish to look upon it again. Burning his home had been one of the most difficult acts of Teiji's thirty years of life, and it, like so many other things in recent memory, was something he wanted to put behind him as a part of the life he had so recently given up.

It started twenty days before, but Teiji remembered it as clearly as if it had been but the previous night, coming home the day after festival, bearing a heavy load of dry goods that concealed the bolt of emerald green silk he had purchased in town that day for Kaeko. He had spent the day in town, sharing bottles of sake with friends, all of whom bore scars from surviving the same battles Teiji himself had weathered.

Closing his eyes, Teiji let his feet carry him onward. The road was straight and he had a sufficiently keen sense of balance and direction to avoid wandering off it. Teiji breathed deeply of the storm-scented air and remembered, intending to look at the last days of his life once more before consigning them to the hidden vaults of things best forgotten.

"Kaeko?" Teiji asked, frowning in puzzlement as he stepped into the house, doffing his sandals with no more thought than that expended in breathing. "Kaeko?" He called, louder. "Where are you?"

"Here," came her reply from deeper within the house. "I'm in the bedroom, Tei-chan."

Teiji followed the sound of her voice, smiling at the casual endearment. They had not been married long enough for him to begin taking such things for granted, and every little display of affection brought a lightness to his step and a quirk to his lips. The sensation faded quickly, however, as the weighty puzzle in his hand drew Teiji's attention back to concrete matters of the world. "Kaeko," he asked, stepping through the bedroom doorway, "what is this?"

Kaeko turned from where she knelt at the low bedroom table, a half-painted fan resting on the varnished wood beside a row of colored inks. She frowned and

held the flowing sleeve of her *tomesode* carefully while setting her brush down on its stand. "It's a sword," Kaeko observed, rising from her pillow to stand before her husband.

"I know it's a sword," Teiji said wearily, holding the sheathed weapon up for inspection. "I mean, where did it come from? Who does it belong to? I was putting away the rice and salt when I found it stashed away behind the firewood."

"I'm sure I don't know, dear," Kaeko said, smiling sweetly. "Perhaps some passing scoundrel hid it away?"

Teiji frowned, drawing the *katana* partway from its sheath. He supposed Kaeko's explanation was possible, but it seemed unlikely that someone would be passing their house while in need of a place to hide their weapon. "It was not there two days ago," Teiji mused, turning the weapon in his hands. "I brought wood in from the pile and would have seen it. And this," he pointed to a small metal medallion held against the sword's handle by leather wrappings, "this looks familiar."

Kaeko laid her hand gently atop her husband's and asked, "Why not just put it back, Tei-chan? Forget that you found it, and perhaps whoever owns it will take it away."

Teiji nodded thoughtfully, turning to leave the bedroom. "You're probably right. Better to just forget it than invite trouble." But even as he carried the sword back to its hiding place, something nagged at Teiji's mind. He pried the little medallion free before replacing the blade behind the piled cords of wood, pocketing the metal disc and intending to ask around town as to its providence on his next trip.

"I want to know what's going on here, Kaeko."

Kaeko turned away from preparing dinner to look at Teiji curiously. He stood in the kitchen doorway, one hand on his hip and anger writ plain across his face. "Going on where, Teiji?"

"This," Teiji explained, holding out an open palm with the little medallion he had prized from his discovery ten days before. "I took it from that sword I found out in the shed and showed it to some people in town. They say it's a symbol related to a group calling itself Amaterasu's Sons."

Kaeko smiled and shook her head, "I'm sorry, should I recognize the name?"

"I'm not sure," Teiji said cautiously. He desperately wanted to believe that the conclusions he had come to on his journey home from town that morning were incorrect. "They say in town that these men are trying to assassinate the emperor."

"How awful!" Kaeko frowned and turned back to her dinner preparations. "Do you think it was one of them that left his sword here?"

"Yes," Teiji agreed, "but I think there's more than that."

"What do you mean?" Kaeko asked curiously and, Teiji thought, nervously.

"I've found other things since then," he explained. "A blanket wadded up in the corner of the shed with some scraps of food. A man's hair thong near the well. Food and supplies missing."

"What—what are you suggesting?" Kaeko asked, now clearly nervous.

"Someone from this group has been staying here," Teiji said flatly, crossing the distance between him and his wife. "An old peddler in town said he even saw someone in the fields the other day while I was in town. I want to know what you know about this."

Kaeko did not respond; she only continued stirring the mix of vegetables in her pan.

"Kaeko," Teiji asked again, touching her arm, "what is going on here? What do you know about these people?"

Still, it was a long moment before Kaeko responded. When she did, it was with a whisper: "I did it for you, Tei-chan."

Teiji frowned and gripped her shoulder gently, turning her to face him. "What do you mean? What did you do for me?"

Kaeko looked away from his eyes, casting her gaze down toward the floor and shifting nervously. "I—one of—one of those men," she explained hesitantly, "those men from the Sons. He came a month ago, while you were away with Fuji-san, and asked to stay overnight in our shed. It—I know you said not to allow anyone in while you are away, but it was raining so hard and—and I—" Kaeko's voice cracked and she half-collapsed against her husband, sobbing.

"Shh," Teiji whispered, smoothing Kaeko's hair and wrapping one arm comfortingly around her shoulders. "Calm down, Kaeko. Just tell me what happened so that I can fix it."

"He told me about Amaterasu's Sons," Kaeko continued a sniffing moment later. "He didn't say anything about killing anyone at first. He just said that they were trying to change the emperor's mind. He said that the *sohei* would attack again soon if Ichijo-sama did not relent to the temple's tax requests. I thought it was a good idea, trying to prevent another war." She looked up desperately at Teiji's face and pleaded for his understanding. "Please, Teiji, please understand.... I did not know at first what they were doing, and then, when he finally told me, he made it sound like it was the only way to stop the war."

"But why, Kaeko?" Teiji asked, implications of his wife's confession swirling darkly through his mind. "Why do anything? If they would challenge the emperor, they must be taught their place."

"Because you would have to go away again," Kaeko murmured sadly. "You'd have to go fight them again, and—and you might not come back. Last time you had that horrible wound on your back that took so long to heal. What if you were not so lucky next time?"

"Then I would die in battle, protecting the will of my lord," Teiji said sternly. That was the way a man should die. He had learned that as a child and known it all his life. Given his choice, he would gladly die on the field of battle rather than and old man in bed.

"And leave me behind," Kaeko sighed. "I would be all alone, Tei-chan. What would I do without you? How could I live?"

"So you would jeopardize the entire empire?"

Kaeko was silent for seconds that stretched like hours in Teiji's mind, then she nodded and whispered, "Yes. If that is what it takes to keep you, then yes."

Teiji opened his eyes and sighed again. That had been the beginning of the end. He tried, at first, to hide Kaeko's treachery both from himself and from his friends, but he knew it could not last. Kaeko's words haunted his dreams, and he had told his best and oldest friend Musashi all of his discoveries as he made them. When word came from town that men from the Sons had been captured, Teiji knew it was merely a matter of time. They would draw confessions from the traitors and hunt down their compatriots and benefactors, and Sakata Kaeko would be among them.

For five days Teiji debated his choice. To do as honor demanded and turn

Kaeko in for abetting a traitor to the empire, or to send her away where she could not be found? He knew which was the right choice, but his heart would not let him take that path. He could not bear the thought of Kaeko being put to death for her crime, especially not when he knew that she had done it only out of concern for his own life.

So on the fifth day, when Teiji doubted they could wait any longer before men from the village arrived with blades drawn demanding his wife's head, he made his decision. He packed two bags and gave most of their money to Kaeko, telling her to go into the woods and stay there as long as she could, then flee the area. Find a new town and start a new life and perhaps, someday, he would find her again. She did not wish to leave him, but Teiji made it clear that if she did not take the out he presented, he would take her head himself. She believed him.

Teiji took his own bag and burned his home, hoping it might slow their pursuers, then set off down the winding dirt road he had so seldom traveled.

"Sakata-san."

The sound of Musashi's voice drew Teiji back to the present and brought a curse to his lips for his foolishness. So absorbed in the past had he been that the sound of his friend's horse had not registered in his mind. Teiji turned slowly, looking up at Fuji Musashi where he sat atop a proud brown stallion. His friend was in clothes much like Teiji's and wore similar swords at his hips.

"Fuji-san," Teiji replied politely, executing a short bow.

"What are you doing?" Musashi asked, and Teiji knew that any pretense was as good as wasted.

"Leaving," Teiji said shortly.

"To go where?" Musashi asked, his face as blank of emotion as his voice.

"I don't know," Teiji sighed. "Wherever the road takes me."

"You would run away from your problems?" Musashi asked, a hint of anger entering his tone. "You would slink away like a thief in the night? We found your wife."

"No," Teiji gasped. He had suspected she would not get away, but it had been only hours. Surely they could not have found her so quickly?

"Your house had barely begun to burn when we arrived. We looked inside, and when we found it empty searched the woods."

"And you—"

Musashi frowned and opened the whicker basket hanging behind his saddle to draw forth a leather sack. He opened it and spilled the contents on the ground before saying, "She has paid the price for her crimes."

Teiji looked down at his wife's face in horror, then back up at the man he had called friend. Shame, honor, loyalty—all vanished beneath a consuming wave of sorrow and fury. She had acted only out of love. "You bastard," Teiji hissed, glaring up at the mounted man.

"Me?" Musashi asked, seeming genuinely shocked. "You would malign me? You who hid your wife's treachery? In your actions you are as guilty as any of the would-be assassins. And now you sneak away, intending to slip the repercussions of your acts?" He spat angrily, wetting the dirt inches away from Kaeko's severed head. "You have no honor."

Teiji grimaced and drew his *katana*, more out of reflex than any intent to use it. He held the blade down, tip inches off the ground, and stared at the shifting hooves of Musashi's horse.

"And what will you do with that?" Musashi asked, drawing his own sword. It hummed slightly in the still air, promising as much violence as the coming storm. "Add murder to the list of your crimes? If you have any shred of memory left of what it was to be a man, you will fall on your blade and spare me from tainting my own with your honorless blood."

Teiji looked down at his wife's face, serenely calm in death, and asked, "Has there not been enough death already? Death lead to this, and now it will lead to further killing."

"Death defines life," Musashi countered. "Without death, life is meaningless. You would deny that? More empty words from an empty man. End your existence now, Sakata-san. I will do your memory the favor of not telling the others of your cowardly actions here. There is no room in this world for men like you have become."

Sinking slowly to his knees, Teiji nodded. "You're right, Musashi," he sighed, staring down at his wife's face. "There is no room in this world for those who do not seek death." He turned his *katana* in his hands and grasped the blade just above the *tsuba*, holding the tip against his abdomen.

“Then go,” Musashi said, some of his anger faded. “You were an honorable man once. Find some of yourself again.”

Impaling himself hurt less than Teiji expected it to. He fell forward what seemed, to him, very slowly. A raindrop fell with him, and Teiji watched its descent, tracing the glittering gemstone until it struck his wife’s pale cheek. Dust lifted when his face struck the ground, but Teiji did not notice. He reached out and stroked the streak of moisture away from Kaeko’s face, leaving a red one in its place. He smiled then and, remembering the last time he had been happy, murmured, “Don’t cry Kae-chan. We’re going to the shrine tomorrow for carnival.”

Purged

Purged from her mouth
 The words came crashing
 Like slivers of glass
 Straying from the broken pieces
 She slices through me unknowingly
 Keeping oblivious
 Her state of mind
 Suffocated by the thick
 Encompassing air
 Like a soft, linen sheet
 Smoldering a carcass
 She leaves me breathless
 My shock paralyzes me
 While the pain
 Thickens internally
 Like a blood clot waiting to burst
 And I am left to bleed
 To wonder, helpless to any form of action
 Isolated from realizing the truth
 Crushed by its reality.

MICAH CURRIER

To You

There is something stuck to you,
 following you,
 A strip of torn off blue
 and white wallpaper from the wall of my new bathroom.
 You leave bits and pieces of it behind you,
 as you walk.
 When you stand in one place too long
 you get stuck,
 frozen, glued to the floor,
 a test question,
 knowledge that slipped away two seconds too soon,
 pretending to be lost,
 a kid in the toy isle at Wal-Mart,
 Letting go of your mother's hand on purpose,
 just to stay that ten minutes longer,
 just to hear your name on the loud speaker.
 Justification of time and place is won,
 in dilated green pigment.
 Fear is lost in plump fatty red,
 the taste of safety,
 the smell of home.

CAROLINE SIGMON

Untitled

Start of sleet hollow beating face hot iron red
 Gypsy rose chimney blurs vision
 Of comets against the somber night sky
 Shadow mosaic snowdrops
 Picasso blue moment melts into old cold rain
 Leftover food coloring
 Streetlights and food signs dilute in low freezing puddles
 Clouds mope murky monster
 Partaking in the meal of the moon

CAROLINE SIGMON

A Viewing of Street Night Alley

Laugh whispers of rain fallen drops of snow.
 I look to the floor to find a way to the ground,
 Dirt to lie in.
 The sun sets in my eyes.
 I only wish I could find hunger.
 The pictures of my life cover the wall—
 The child, the lover, the dancing spirits, love, lust, anger, all aliens.
 People are everything.
 They create every emotion and aspect of life,
 Every ounce of hope.
 Fear of loneliness is the only thing that keeps most together.
 A sad smack will send you running, the cold sky will bring you back.
 The smoke and coughing of a bum in the corner makes me ashamed to be so sad,
 Angry over such little things.
 When he finds a half-eaten burger in a dumpster and calls it dinner,
 Eats each bit like a Thanksgiving feast.

CAROLINE SIGMON

Verbal Lullaby

the sleep pulls my eyes to a slow close
 as the clanging of cats' bells jingle in the corner
 of the half lit room
 in the distance I hear the noise of cars
 and lonely street people walking their dogs in the cold
 it has been long since the last bird chirped
 and long since the crickets took their cue
 fly children, said mother moon
 float away on a river of milk
 as your mind illustrates your dreams
 the rustling of the cat quiets
 and the wheezing of a little squeaky noise can be heard
 a cat's paw lies at rest on a mother's face
 sleep child run away with the stars

CAROLINE SIGMON

Missing: Myself

My ad in Sunday's paper will read: "Missing: myself—
Reward to be issued—please call."

What if no one gives my plea a second glance?

If I don't get a reply, I will cease to exist!

But what do I really have to lose?

Placing an ad is free.

Last week, I attempted to free
my mind by immersing myself
in Shakespeare where I could lose
all sense of reality before a call
beckoned me to exist,
instead, in the land of the living where I could glance

no further for true happiness, but my active glance
cannot find where I last placed my free
will, intellect, or emotions, which only exist
in the location where I originally lost myself.
My friend Despair told me I have no one to call,
nothing to gain, and everything to lose!

Tracing my steps back to Shakespeare, where to lose
is a misfortune, I stole a glance
through the tiny print, but a musky Shakespeare did not call
my name and therefore could not free
my guilt-laden mind from the pangs of misplacing myself,
all because I took for granted the privilege to exist.

To no longer exist
is quite foreboding, to lose
that small piece of my soul, referred to as myself,
hastens me to glance
into the crooks and crannies of society whose free
will often tempts itself to call

me by no name or to call
me by one that does not exist.
Such vile blasphemy does not free
me from the desire to lose
my temper and kill this thief with one glance
before reclaiming the stolen treasure of myself.

I call in earnest to myself
out there as I glance around the free
world who is determined not to lose sight of where I now exist.

CARMEN GOFF

I want to walk to the cafe

I want to walk to the café
 on Mars
 the restaurant at the end
 of the universe
 I want to kiss
 a penguin, a saber tooth tiger
 and a lullaby goodnight
 I want to see my mother again
 as I did when I was five
 after I cut myself bangs
 I want to clean up the mess I made of my life
 the mess I made of my hair
 the mess on the side of the highway
 I want to know everything without even trying
 see things that are not there
 hold things that are not mine
 I want to walk in all of your shoes
 six or seven times back and forth
 in my bedroom
 I want to shake an armless hand
 a faceless finger
 and a nameless dreamer
 I want to live underwater in human form
 away from human things
 I want to take a piece of everyone I meet
 and make someone new
 I want to make logic senseless and senseless blunders
 into ruby wonders

I want to run loose in Willy's chocolate factory
 ride the smellivator
 burp blue bubbles and fly
 I want to blow it on purpose
 by making it too perfect
 I want to see America be America
 when there is no danger at hand
 I want to see a bum with a fat gold diamond ring
 a foul stench
 and some fruit punch
 I want to push pause long enough
 to remember what just happened
 I want to find a purple frog
 that eats lions
 and spits orange ants
 I want to rake solid ground
 make square things round
 I want to laugh at things
 that are not in the least bit funny
 I want to pay dirt
 for money
 I want to jump to Texas stop the death machine
 make thicker prison walls
 I want to see what I look like
 through your eyes
 I want to feel every good emotion
 all at once for a split second
 I want to throw a ball

to an ornery koala without his claws popping it
 I want to remember my birth
 if it hurt
 I want to find some weebol people
 that won't topple over
 I want a room full of childhood toys
 instead of boys
 I want to imprison an idea
 that did not work

 I want to end this here

CAROLINE SIGMON

A Tourniquet of Thorns

One day we loved in laughter.
 Now those days are shaded gray.
 For every day thereafter,
 You slowly walked away.
 A tourniquet of thorns
 To help me through the days.
 A halo made of horns
 To leave her in a haze.
 Thus hanging by a moment
 For a bleeding sun to rise,
 I can only write this lament
 For the tears beneath your lies.
 I still feel the days of laughter
 And my hate for those thereafter.

JASON WOLFE

Peace

I long for simple days and often journey to a world within.
 I am before my time in these travels and am overwhelmed with peace.
 I imagine riding the trail to a world unknown.
 The spirit is with me, and I feel his wise presence beside me.
 He leads me to the rivers and guides me alongside waterfalls.
 He offers light through the fireflies and guides me by the light of the moon.
 He holds my hand when darkness sneaks upon me,
 and he comforts me through the flames of the fire.
 He plays a tune with the voices of the whippoorwills and bullfrogs.
 He wakes me in the morning with the bright rays of the sun,
 and he washes me with a sweet shower of rain.
 I travel alone on this journey and seemingly am unafraid.
 The spirit captures my heart and owns my soul.
 He is everything that I will ever be and everything that I am.

SHANNON W. WOOTEN

Happily Ever After: The Marriage Club

TENILLE BROWN

ON THE WAY DOWN THE AISLE, I felt a wave of relief and a great weight lifted from my shoulders. I was leaving behind the frenzy and frustration of single womanhood and walking toward a life of love, monogamy, and consistency. It wasn't that I had grown tired of the party scene, the endless dates with the brainless brutes. Heck, some of these adventures had made good little tales to tell all my friends. The truth was, I had fallen for it. I had finally handed in my singles card to the eagerly awaiting hands of all my married girlfriends. Walking that infamous walk in my beautiful white gown with my best friend nodding her approval and my mother wiping tears of joy, I was sure I had made the right decision. I was standing beside my Prince Charming reciting the words that would bind us forever. I had made the smartest move of my life. Then I woke up.

It was the worst case of peer pressure I had ever experienced. I remember huddling as an anxious woman in my early twenties to listen to girlfriends with fancy and colorful fantasies talk about the day they had accidentally on purpose bumped into Prince Charming, married him, and gave him lots of babies, all named in some way, after him. I listened in awe. They were smiling; they flashed beautiful diamonds on their manicured hands. They were members of important organizations like The Women's Auxiliary and the PTA. I had to join this club.

I concocted the perfect plan modeled after their seemingly fairy tale lives. I would be married by the age of twenty-four, pregnant by twenty-five. I would leave my full time job and devote my days to raising the baby, keeping our home immaculate and having dinner ready by six, when my loving husband would glide through the door and cover me with kisses. But, at the age of twenty-four and having not even been one year into my marriage, even the thought of doing what it took to make a baby exhausted me. I wondered how my girlfriends had done this more than once, and I wanted to know just what made them think I was capable of doing it as well.

My married girlfriends told me that getting married was the best decision I would ever make. They had somehow convinced me that a husband was exactly what was missing in my life. I could not possibly find fulfillment in living the life of a single woman. What they failed to mention at the first meeting, however, was the pre-ceremonial vomiting, the post honeymoon awkwardness and the spilled coffee that provoked the first argument and the first tear of many in a marriage that I foolishly thought would bring me joy every single day of my life. They did not tell me that Prince Charming had this habit of leaving his discarded clothes in a pile on the floor by the bed until he tripped over them one morning while stumbling out of bed. They did not give warning that he would then have the nerve to ask why I hadn't picked them up.

Prince Charming was supposed to sweep me off my feet, not keep me on my knees scrubbing scuff marks off the kitchen floor. I was supposed to have gifts showered upon me and walk upon rose pedals, not find new and creative ways to mention that he had missed one of our special anniversaries—again. I soon began to wonder if, by getting married, I had let myself off the hook, or if I had subconsciously hanged myself.

I immediately wanted to hunt down those married girlfriends of mine who had led me to believe that marriage was the new in-crowd. They had made me feel guilty about being single and having a date every Friday night. They had made me feel like it was unsafe to live alone. They had made me feel that if I did not get married and start a family right away, I would shrivel and die before anyone would have a second look at me. I had fallen for it and I was confused as to how the women who claimed to be my friends could do this to me? How could they lead me to believe that matrimony was the key to the kingdom of

happily ever after? Then I realized what they were up to: they were jealous of my single womanhood. Generations of married friends before them had duped them, and now that they were stuck in their unhappily ever after, they wanted me to join them. I finally got it—misery loves company.

Shortly after my wedding day, I began to see the faces of my married girlfriends who were not flashing smiles and giggling about the cute things their husbands or their children had done. They finally revealed the real tales of married life in hushed conversations over the phone with our respective husbands in the next room watching football. They cried across the table from me over coffee on Saturday mornings and wondered aloud what they had gotten themselves into. They told me horror stories of finding month old socks under the bed, the bad snoring habits. Our conversations had taken totally different turns. I reminded them that not only had they gotten themselves into it, they had dragged me unknowingly into it as well.

I am a member of the club I had been dying to get into all of my life, and while there are times when I feel misled, there are times when I feel I am the luckiest woman on earth. Those are the times when Prince Charming smiles as I walk into a room. Those are the occasions when he holds the door for me. I can think of more than one time when we actually did something fun together. Is the Marriage Club all that I thought it would be? Not really. Would I ever consider turning in my membership? Not even for a second.

Nothing but a Good Time

THOMAS SCHMITT

AT THE DRIVE-IN...in the old man's Ford...behind the bushes...till I'm screaming for more...down the basement...lock the cellar door...and baby, Talk Dirty To Me."

A barrel-chested, steroid dependent security guard finally walked on stage and dragged the man off. Minutes earlier, C. C. Deville, the childish hyper guitarist for Poison, had run back onstage after the show had ended and started playing his guitar with such ferocity you could smell the smoke rising off his lightning quick fingertips. His body writhed all over the floor a la James Brown as he tore into a beautiful solo. Of course it was a solo—the show was over. Then, after nearly five minutes of unadulterated electric guitar ecstasy, he was dragged off by the security guard. But he still continued to play, even riding atop the guard's shoulders.

Staged? Most definitely. But the message still rang loud and clear, the same way my ears did for the next several hours. C. C. Deville—and metal—were here to stay.

"They call us problem child, we spend our lives on trial, we walk an endless mile, we are the Youth Gone Wild!"

Before Curt "buckshot" Cobain and his depraved horde of lamenting grunge boys raped and pillaged the music scene in the early 1990s, America was blessed

with the single greatest musical genre of all time—Glam Metal. That's right, I said it. Glam Metal, that musical supernova born in the 1980s out of a bastard mix of spandex, leather, and colossal amounts of Aqua Net hair spray. Say what you will about their looks, but the music itself can't be touched. There's not a musician alive today who can touch the blistering guitar licks of Eddie Van Halen, the double bass fueled beats of Tommy Lee on drums, or the beautifully heartfelt lyrics of a Bon Jovi love song.

I'll be there for you

These five words I swear to you.

When you breathe, I wanna be the air for you-

I'll be there for you.

I live and I'd die for you.

I'd steal the sun from the sky for you.

Words can't say what love can do.

I'll be there for you.

Regardless of who our President decides to share a stogie with next, we still live in what is by far the greatest nation in the free world. As such, we are endowed with certain Inalienable Rights. Among these rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of music that rocks. Music is by design a vehicle of escape. It is supposed to take you away from the sometimes-bitter harshness of reality, not draw you closer to it. Even Mozart knew that.

When I listen to music, I don't want to hear the latest political bullshit, and that goes to you, Sarah McLaughlin and Rage Against The Machine. If I want depressing politics, I'll listen to the news, with its oftentimes conflicting and paranoid stories of anthrax and future terrorist attacks. If, on the other hand, I want to kick back, make the best of the situation I'm in, and listen to the finer points of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, then I'll pop in a CD from Poison...or Motley Crue...or Lita Ford, that quintessential '80s rock goddess.

"I went to a party last Saturday night, I didn't get laid, I got in a fight. Uh-huh. It ain't no big thing."

That's right, Lita, it ain't no big thing. (Now *please* Kiss Me Deadly.)

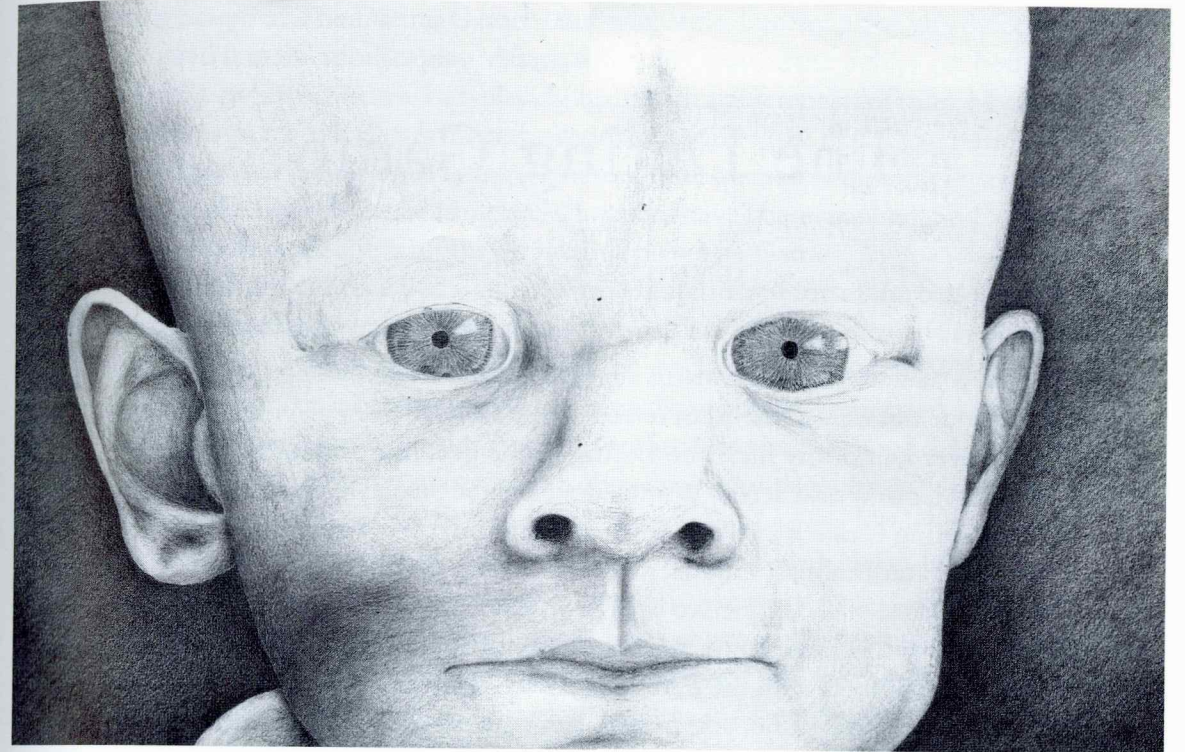
Well, at least I can say it wasn't a big thing back in the '80s. Love, loss, and

heartache came and went as often as the setting sun back then. But today...hell, today there's no telling what Limp Bizkit or Kid Rock would have to say on the topic. Nevertheless, I'd be willing to give you an unconditional, money-back guarantee that their answer won't be nearly as enlightening as the answer given to us from the boys in Firehouse back in that most excellent decade.

"I never thought you'd hurt me, I guess you live and learn, that when you're playing with fire you're bound to get burned...Baby, don't treat me bad...this could be the best thing that you ever had."

Perhaps in the not so distant future when us twenty-somethings are going through our requisite midlife crisis, our therapist will have the wisdom to prescribe large doses of Glam Metal, as opposed to the Prozac that will be necessary for the Nirvana Generation. I know the music honestly helps me when I'm down on life. After all, how can anyone possibly remain in a depressed state when listening to Warrant sing about the joys of that sweet cherry pie, or Cinderella crooning about their Gypsy Road?

Say what you will about their spandex, I'm going back to 1986.



CHRISTIAN PRICE

The Dating Game

JENNIFER LARSON

I AM A SEASONED VETERAN in a sport known as The Dating Game. I can provide not only a vast list of references, but I have been playing this game for over half of my life. The Dating Game gets more attention than the Super Bowl, the World Series, Wimbledon, and the Stanley Cup all put together. The Dating Game is a billion dollar industry, involving cosmetics, fashion, restaurants, automobiles, movies, self-help books, dating services, personals, and the Internet—all designed to help people at least get up to bat. Most of the money is spent in these industries in an attempt to win the grand prize—a lifetime of happiness with the person you played the game with. However, if you miss playing the game, you may always trade in your prize in the hopes of finding a better one. Although it is unethical to hang on to one prize while searching for another prize, some people will do just that. This is known as cheating, and if a foul play is called, the player may lose both prizes and be stuck with heavy penalties. People may play The Dating Game on either side of the field against their opponent. However, if you are playing on the same side of the field as your opponent, it is recommended you use more protective gear and safety measures. As the game is played through the years, rules are often changed or updated.

I have always played games with intentions of winning. I have always had a strategy planned out. When playing Monopoly I try to own the red, green, and yellow properties. Statistically, there is a higher probability of an opponent landing on that dreaded corner of the board rather than Boardwalk or Park Place.

The key to chess is to make a few silly moves to catch your opponent off guard. There is only one way to win at Scrabble and that is by working the words into double and triple value squares. I am a board game champion, but I can't seem to triumph at The Dating Game. I did win once, but my prize was defective. I traded it in for another play. After a few times around the field, I got benched for nine months. So now I am playing again with a different set of rules. My rules. My new playbook allows me to be more aloof and I like that. I can remember my first time playing The Dating Game and I was horrible. I thought I was doing well at the time, but reflecting back, I should have been coached. So I am also going to debunk a few myths on how to play The Game.

My first love was a boy named John. He reminded me of the bass player in the band Duran Duran. He wore a brown leather cap (yes, those were popular back then). My only goal in life was to get my hands on that hat. Whenever a girl wore an article of clothing that belonged to a boy, it symbolized a relationship. I would have been the envy of Griffin Memorial School. I never said anything to him or any of my friends about my intentions. I was very content writing endless pages about him in my diary and admiring him in the school hallways. One day that all changed. Panic had settled in. John had become friends with my older brother and he was going to sleep over. John slept over a lot. I loved it, I hated it, and I thought I was going to die. My brother had the incredible talent of pointing out each and every flaw I had. My brother had taken John on as his Grasshopper. Chris was the master and John his apprentice. It took no time for John to learn the art of teasing me ruthlessly. John became my bother.

Rule number 1: never fall in love with someone who has the ability of becoming like your brother. To the women who think it must be great to have a brother with cute friends; you are wrong. It is a myth. Not only will a brother have all of his friends tease you, but also he will want to kick the butt of any guy you want to bring home. However, it is sort of comical to watch the expressions of guys who think they are about to die at the hands of my wimpy brother. I have repressed anxiety from my adolescent years and now as an adult, and with my new rules, if a guy reminds me of my brother, he is out the door.

If psychotics were steel, then I am a magnet. I seem to attract them and have a unique blindness that gives me the ability to overlook any signs of their special

qualities. My new set of rules to The Game has supplied me with a mental checklist to be able to determine any unordinary idiosyncrasies. I only wish I had the checklist while dating Matt. I met him when I was working my first job at a department store in New Hampshire. Matt became my entire world.

Rule number 2: never let a guy become your entire world. Matt was a year older and attended a different high school. I only saw him when I was at work but we would take our breaks together. Matt was all I would talk about at my school, and I know I irritated my friends by constantly talking about him. Matt and I would meet at the park, a quiet secluded booth in Pizza Hut, or just hanging out in his car. Matt opened my eyes to the world for the first time and eventually became my first lover. Matt also taught me that men can be real jerks. Because I made him my focal point of the universe, he was able to control me like a puppeteer. He would pull the strings and I would dance. When he left for college, he took my world with him. It was New Year's Eve 1997 when he came to my house. I was having a huge party since my parents were out of town. I had the night all planned for him and me. It was all I could think about since Thanksgiving. He came to the door. All my friends were there. He had a date. My brother and about four of my male friends chased Matt and his date to the end of the block. I chased a fifth of Smirnoff. To the women who think getting drunk is the answer in a break-up: you are right; that is not a myth. However, the hangover and the cleanup are not worth it. I never saw Matt. My new set of rules does not allow me to give up my life and my goals. With Matt I had given up everything.

Dating Matt also brought another set of rules. Rule number 3: Do not date men from work. Sure, you get a thrill from the chase, and it makes time on the clock go by quickly, but I have to stand my ground that it is not worth it. George is another man I met at work. He was not someone I would pick out of a crowd, but he had an incredible personality. Every morning he came over to smell my perfume. I couldn't wait to be sniffed in the morning. We eventually started going out with a group of other coworkers. We had a blast. I never told him I had fallen for him. One night after one of our escapades through Five Points, we went back to his apartment since I had left my car there. I asked to use his bathroom, so I went inside. I came out of the bathroom and whispered to George that his toilet flushed very loudly. He grabbed me, pushed me up against

the wall and kissed me. I wrapped my legs around his waist and he carried me to the bedroom. I woke up in love. I will never forget the magic words, "Your toilet is so loud." Hello, get real! I was vulnerable. To the women who think men like drunken women, you are right. However, it is best to make sure they like sober women before you go to bed with them. George treated me differently at work and when we went out. He said it was a mistake and I had accepted that. George eventually ran from me as I chased him down with my car. I never planned on hitting him; I just liked watching him run. I will throw in a bonus rule for the men reading this. When you have taken a girl to bed with you for the second time and she asks why, do not reply with, "I thought, what the hell?" The girl behind the wheel of the car may not be as nice as I was. My new rules do not allow me to get drunk with men, just controllably buzzed.

The night I met my prize in The Game I was out with my customers. No, I am not a call girl; I was working at a bar. The customers were two guys that I would frequently wait on. My shift was ending and we all decided to go out. My choices of where I could go were limited since I was not quite twenty-one yet. If a bar did not card at the door, I was fine because I looked much older. We were sitting at a table when I saw him. His smile sparkled like a toothpaste commercial. I pointed him out to my friends, and they dared me to pick him up and make out with him by the end of the night. In a nutshell, I got my bill paid by my friends and married that same Colgate man. His name was Rich. After I "picked him up," we talked until the sun came up. We went out for breakfast and I knew he was the one. We were inseparable. At least until he joined the military. I didn't want to wait for him. Then I got his letters. It started all over again. I found myself in a car driving from South Carolina to Chicago to attend his boot camp graduation. We were engaged four months later. I had won The Game.

After a wedding and a honeymoon to Jamaica, we moved to Virginia Beach. I was a Navy wife. They say it never lasts. It didn't. I made it through many deployments, patiently waiting for him to come home, sometimes six months at a time. When Rich would come home from a long cruise, he was a little different. The last time he came home he was a lot different. We were living in Houston by then, since I had gotten transferred for my job. He hated Texas and left on the anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I don't know which was

worse, losing The Game or losing my stereo. I sure do miss my stereo. I cried that night. The next day I was ready to play The Game again. I admit I was rusty, but I knew it had to be like riding a bicycle. The only advice I can give here is the old cliché: there are other fish in the sea. I will elaborate, though—some are sharks, some are octopi, some are guppies, and there are a few gold fish, too. Rule number 4: A woman needs a man like a fish needs the desert. Life is too short to be upset over a man—and that is not a myth.

Time to move on. Time to play. Time to meet the freaks. During the time following the break-up, I was introduced to a vast array of some of the most interesting male specimens that Houston had to offer. It was awful. I had one date who wanted to show me how fast his car could go. Nothing like impressing a girl by letting her face death. Then there was the date who, throughout dinner, talked about how broke he was. I felt guilty when the check came and left the tip. I also met one who told me it was best I didn't know why he was incarcerated. Home by 8 p.m. I can never forget my favorite one to talk about. We met and played darts; we were having a great time. He seemed so normal. He asked if I was hungry and suggested we go to his apartment with pizza and watch a movie. Sounded great to me. He even set up a picnic. He pressed play. The music gave it away. Nothing like impressing a girl by letting her look at porn. It was hopeless. I was about to give up at The Game.

Then I met Scott, the one true love of my life. He made me feel like a princess. I thought I had won again. I did get a prize, my son William. Scott was not ready to be a father. We tried to make it work, but things did not work out between us. That was when I got my new set of rules. Things are different when you are a mom. Things are different when you have been scorned. Things don't matter as much when you build a wall around yourself, playing it cool, playing without getting attached. Playing The Game is fun when you are not trying to win. I moved back to South Carolina, and it is here where I continue to play. The only advice I can give with this is don't be afraid to play by your own rules.

Have you ever had a temporary moment of insanity? I have. Twice. I wanted to prove I was not superficial. I am, to a certain extent anyways. To women who think you don't need to have a physical attraction to be in love, that is a myth. Rule number 5: be attracted, very attracted. A man doesn't need to be perfect and beauty is skin deep, but there also has to be a physical attraction.

The biggest mistake I have ever made at playing The Game was settling with someone I was not happy to be with. More advice is don't settle; don't be with someone for the sake of being with someone. After my son was born, I hibernated. Once I decided to start dating again, I settled because I was afraid of playing, afraid of rejection. Like being sent to jail in Monopoly, rejection is just one of the cards dealt to you while playing The Game. Be ready for many cards.

Rule number 6: rejection is okay.

Did I shave my legs for this? Some of my best advice is don't ever get set up with a man who has lost some spare change. Translation: If a man gets dumped by a girl named Penny, just say no. In the summer of 2000, I stuck it out. Big time loss in The Game. My coworker had been wanting me to meet his friend Tim for a long time, but he was dating a girl named Penny. Eventually my coworker gave me his friend's Internet screen name. I found him playing in the cyber playground. We connected. Really connected. I had never met anyone so witty. I couldn't wait to talk to him. I almost passed out when he announced he would be coming into town to meet me. I was floating on air. First step childcare, second step shave legs, third step new bra. Finally, Friday night was upon me. I tried to remain calm. The doorbell rang. Deep breath. I opened the door to my version of Mr. Wonderful. We went out to a dueling piano bar and had dinner in a basket with a few beers. We got back to my place and sat on the couch, a couch I could imagine using a lot with him. He put his arms around me and held me tight. I rubbed his back. Content. But wait, a lot of time had passed; was he sleeping? Was I a crutch? I pushed him back, unable to tell what he had been doing. He started to kiss me. His tongue entered my mouth; he stopped. He looked away. "Damn her!" He sat up, looked at me and walked out. I wanted to chase after him: "Wait, you didn't see my new bra!" Instead, I swallowed my pride, and stared at the door, waiting for it to open. Headlights shined through the blinds then disappeared. Ten o'clock. Ten o'clock; it couldn't be. I went to my bed. Alone. I should have been crying, but I wasn't. I refused to cry over a jerk. I sat up, brushed myself off, and went out. When I arrived at work on Monday, my coworker asked me how my date went. I replied, "Which one?" I felt strong, but I was still mad. I had shaved my legs, although I do love my new bra.

So, here I am, writing about The Game while playing it. There are a few

prospects I am playing with, but no one I can consider victory. The hardest part of dating at thirty-one is not only finding a partner who isn't gay or married, but finding someone who does not have issues. Issues are defined as someone who can't take care of himself, someone who is emotionally handicapped, someone who has no world outside college football, and someone who has Norman Bates Syndrome. I try not to let anyone introduce me to anyone, and I prefer playing the game without any assistance. My favorite places to play the game are very different from one another. The bookstore is a great place to meet someone on an intellectual level. Banana Joe's is a great place to meet someone on a non-intellectual level. The best way to play is to remember it is only a game. When you do win, hopefully you will never have to play again, but enjoy playing while you can. Enjoy the eye contact, body language, and playful smiles. Enjoy being single, enjoy being safe, but don't be afraid of getting hurt. That is my best advice and my own personal rule.

World Trade Center Urban Legends

<http://www.midlandstech.com/classes/eng214/webprojects/WTC-UL/>

The winning web site for the *Stylus* competition this year is *World Trade Center Urban Legends*, created by Chasi David, Terry Hull, and Shane Selby as a group term project for English 214 in the fall of 2001. The site explores the function of urban legends in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, creatively blending traditional print resources with audio and visual elements to explore the cultural uses of narrative in coming to terms with the national nightmare.



MARY L. STEVENSON