

Cabin in the Woods 2012-2013

The Anthology

Writers' Retreat

Spring 2012

The Rules:

1. Stories must begin with an incoming call from a wrong number;
2. Stories must contain a twist in the spirit of M. Night Shyamalan; and
3. Stories could contain a character by the name of Diane Linden.

The Stories:

Not a Hexagon by Sam Segal;

The Sea Monster by Jean Thrift; and

Alarms by Shannon MacDonald

Not a Hexagon

The phone rang, but it was for the Country Store.

“Who is it?” Sally called from the small entryway.

“Another wrong number,” Todd answered. He put the cordless phone back in its cheap plastic charging stand. The place they’d rented was nice, but it wasn’t as luxurious as he was used to. His townhome in Boston was about the same size, but its dark hardwood furniture and accenting artwork practically screamed “old money.” Here, in the rented New Hampshire vacation home, he looked around with a dissatisfied air at the tawdry accouterments of the working class. Simply put, Todd Bettington III didn’t like settling for less than his due.

“Are you coming?” Sally asked. “The kids are almost ready.”

He could hear the scrambling of the children in the entryway. They were Sally’s by a previous marriage, a girl and boy of 10 and 12 years, respectively. He didn’t need to see them to know that they were fumbling clumsily with the new hiking boots he’d gotten them especially for this trip. They’d manage, he decided, and he took his time tying the laces of his own boots. They were thick and difficult to knot. The old couch he was sitting on made it harder still, since it sagged under his weight, making him bend at a deep angle to reach his laces comfortably. He also couldn’t help but wrinkle his nose at the faint musty odor his struggle was releasing from somewhere deep in the sofa’s guts.

By the time he was finished, the kids were done and ready to be unleashed on the natural world. Todd shook his head at their limitless energy; the world would subdue them eventually, like it did him. He wished he could pinpoint the exact moment when the wall between childlike wonderment and adult apathy had come down for him, but

there were too many significant small moments to find the keystone. There was his first clumsy kiss with Patricia LeBlanc inside the theater in downtown Boston (they were seeing a passable *Les Miserables*).

There was also the time his parents (Todd Jr. and Marie Bettington) made him stay at his boarding school over Christmas vacation when he was 14. His mother had explained to him over the telephone that the comparatively short length of his break would interfere with their three-week trip to the French Alps for skiing. He remembered watching his friends go home with their smiling families, reunited for the second time in a month (the Thanksgiving holiday being the first). One of his friends would've surely taken him home as a guest if he'd asked, but he'd been too proud.

Instead, he reveled in his parents' neglect, letting it fill him like gasoline. He smiled as he recalled the righteous anger that burned in him over those two weeks. At night, when he was lying in his bed in the deserted dormitory deep in shadow, he felt invincible in his pain, like nothing could ever hurt him again. He knew that he could stand toe-to-toe with any of his peers and trump any whispered complaint they might dare to utter. He was superior to them all, at least in this one thing, and that unquestioning self confidence was a precious thing to have. It helped shaped him as a man.

Now, he sighed as he hefted himself from the worn sofa, noting the discolored patches where past renters had carelessly deposited one fluid or another.

"Anything wrong?" Sally asked, poking her head back in through the doorway.

"No," Todd said, forcing a smile to his face. Except, he might've added, that I'm in love with another woman.

They marched single-file along the narrow forest path. Sally had the map, and it was supposed to lead them along a stream and then up onto the summit of the small mountain. It was one of the easier trails, for the sake of the kids. However, seeing the two youngsters bounce along the path in front of them, Todd was sure they could've handled something a bit harder.

Sally was in her element outdoors. He loved that about her; the way she seemed to absorb the essence of the natural world, distil it, and radiate it back out in her shining smile and bouncing step. On an equally carnal level, he stared at her lower back, recalling the warmth at the base of her spine where he rested his hand at night. He wanted to do so now as well, but it would've been impractical on the climbing path. The physical contact, however slight, always brought him comfort. Even being in the shadow of her light, he reasoned, was better than being alone in the dark.

This is not to say that their love was flawless, for no love is. For instance, it annoyed him when she would refuse to set her own dish at the table and instead pick from his. It also irritated him when she insisted on leaving the television on in the bedroom when he was trying to sleep. Still, though, he couldn't help but smile when he was this close to her boundless energy, an energy which the children seemed to have inherited and embraced wholeheartedly.

He took a deep breath and let the minutes soften and melt into one another. The green wall of living foliage on either side merged with the brown dirt and detritus until there was only the softest impression of vibrant life and the constant of Sally's lower back, her tight backside bouncing slightly with each step. The children's squeals of

delight reached his ears faintly, as omnipresent as the soft gurgle of the stream they followed.

There was sudden warmth as Sally slowed to take his hand. “Hi there,” she said, looking up at him with mischievous eyes. He smiled back and squeezed her small breast playfully, letting his finger rest momentarily on the subtle firmness of her nipple. She gasped and slapped his hand away in mock horror.

And then the doubt returned, like it always did; the prophetic knowledge of this unsustainable balance. How could he feel the same love for two women as different as truffles and portabellas? Where Sally’s hand was warm, and he gripped it again to be sure, Diane Linden’s was cool.

He’d met Diane at the hospital. The first thing you noticed about her was her fingers, thin and long with large knob-like knuckles. She was a well-respected surgeon, and her fingers were the brushes with which she painted her medical masterpieces. Todd couldn’t help but love her for her strength, her resolve, and, perhaps most importantly, her impenetrable confidence. He admired, nay, *revered*, the tenacity and courage with which she battled incredible odds and bias (even in these so-called “progressive times”) to become a respected and successful woman in an almost-strictly man’s field. Todd himself was a well-respected physician in a long line of well-respected physicians (his father and his grandfather before him were both institutions at Mass General). He and Diane fit together like characters in a storybook.

He had no word for it but destiny when she had approached him, that self-confident sparkle in her eye, and asked him to dinner. He remembered first her hands, clasped tightly in front of her like cannons relieved of combat duty, then her white coat,

hanging open suggestively and revealing the low cut of her shirt and converging lines of her deep cleavage.

Of course he had accepted the invitation, strictly one professional to another. At their dinner over low candlelight in one of Boston's oldest and most-respected restaurants, it became clear that Diane wanted more than a professional relationship with him. And Diane was experienced at fighting to get what she wanted. Todd's own floundering nervousness quickly yielded to her persistence, and soon they were involved.

Could a man have more than one destiny? Every love story that he'd ever read, heard, or seen depicted one man and one woman who, for reasons perfectly obvious to the audience and perfectly incomprehensible to the couple (at least until the final act), were destined for one another. Their love was meant to be; it would overcome all obstacles and all outsiders' interference. It was a story that had been retold in a multitude of ways over the millennia.

Todd squeezed Sally's hand again, enjoying the spark of reassurance it gave him. When he'd said his marriage vows, he'd meant them. He hadn't been lying. But when he'd said of his wife, "my partner in life and my one true love," he didn't know it was possible for him to love another. The promise had been so easy to make when he thought it would be easy to do. But when two people both fulfilled him so completely, he felt like the luckiest man in the world, and also like a fraud, a cheat. He was somehow cheating the system.

He wasn't sure what Sally would say when she found out, or Diane for that matter. Sex was one thing, but love was another, and love, he felt, was the greater betrayal. But he couldn't stop himself from loving them both, and, he rationalized, it

wasn't like he loved each of them with half of his heart; he wasn't reserving some piece of himself for each of them, neither having the whole. Wasn't that the definition of cheating: withholding a piece of your love for another? That would've been worse, he'd decided a long time ago; then he would've *had* to choose one. Instead, he knew he loved them both with *all* his heart. The three of them felt, to Todd, like pieces of the same jigsaw puzzle. Both Sally and Diane fit one side of his personality and matched him completely. He was a man with two destinies.

Sally began swinging their linked arms to some silent tempo, and Todd smiled down at her. Just at that moment, the sun reached through the trees and illuminated her face, which was flushed with the exertion of the late spring stroll. He loved that smile and wanted to protect it with every fiber of his being. But, at the same time, he didn't know how he could do that without also ignoring the reality of the situation. He was both destroyer and protector, a mantle he wore reluctantly, though seemingly unable to shake off.

Maybe she would understand, he thought. But even if Sally understood his position, he was sure Diane would have the opposite reaction. Their temperaments were so opposing, he thought darkly, that even if one sympathized with him the other would object, and rightfully so.

Todd thought about telling Sally. Right there in the middle of the woods. But then the comfortable and crippling doubt sank back into his shoulders, drowning his meager courage. Everything he'd ever seen of modern society reinforced the idea that one man and one woman were meant for each other, and he knew that, almost

unanimously, others would see it as selfish and morally wrong for him to be in love with two women at the same time.

Ironically, it was not just tolerated but *accepted* for a widower or divorcee to fall in love with another person, but it was never supposed to happen contemporaneously. Society understood that people could love more than one person, and even accepted that familial love could exist between members of the same extended family (in-laws included), but somehow it was *intolerable* for a man to be in love with two non-family members while both loved him in return. The draconian logic of it made him wince.

The children had passed beyond view around a tight twist in the path and Todd could sense Sally's restlessness in her stiff fingers. He squeezed her hand reassuringly and they jogged ahead, making soft crunching sounds in the packed earth as they struggled to regain sight of the children.

As they rounded the turn, Todd saw that the youngsters had strayed from the path, surveying a seemingly-abandoned beehive that was attached to a fallen tree limb. He snuck up on the children and poked the abandoned hive violently with a stick. They shrieked in anticipation of an insect-driven assault, though they only backed up two steps. After a minute, they accepted that no insects would emerge to defend the useless hive. They demanded that Todd give up the stick, which he did. The children then took turns stabbing and dismembering the abandoned hive, cracking it open to reveal the symmetrical hexagons that made up the waxy comb structure. Todd marveled with them at the simplicity of bee society, and he caught himself wishing he could be a hexagon, but feeling, like usual, more like some unacceptable polygonal aberration.

In the spirit of the family hike, he decided to quit his selfish musings and devote his attentions to Sally and the children completely. It was a rewarding endeavor.

Back at the rented vacation home, Todd sank once again into the musty sofa and attempted to pull off his boots. They were stubborn coming off, his feet having swollen with the duration and difficulty of the hike. The children were upstairs playing or napping quietly, their seemingly-infinite reserve of energy at least temporarily expended. Sally was in the kitchen preparing to cook the family a hearty and satisfying meal.

Now that he was by himself, Todd found himself once again prisoner to his thoughts. He wondered what Diane would say when she found out. Would she curse him for a lecherous brute? Or would she understand his honest, albeit unconventional, feelings? He even considered that she might already know. He'd been getting worse at concealing Sally and the children from her as time went on. His excuses were growing lamer and his absences longer. The opposite held equally true. On some level, he wondered if he didn't secretly desire to be caught, forcing the situation to its inevitable climax. But, he knew, the arrangement, once uncovered, could not be re-covered, and he greatly suspected that he would lose one or both women in the fallout, his life forever diminished.

So, although the situation was untenable, a fact he never denied, he concluded, as he always did, that things were better left alone. Just because he was sitting on a stack of dynamite, he mused, didn't mean a spark would come along to ignite it. Perhaps this arrangement could persist indefinitely. This cowardly conclusion gave him comfort, as it always did, and he resolved not to think on it again for awhile.

The Sea Monster

“It was for the country store again.” Mari returned to her seat at the table. The six of us were engrossed in a cozy game of cards while an evening rainstorm pelted down outside.

“We’re getting that number changed,” Mr. Watson grouched.

Mrs. Watson rolled her eyes. “He’s been saying that for thirty years. It’s your turn, Mari.”

Mari picked up her cards and frowned. “My hand is terrible.” Bill leaned over and whispered something in her ear.

Carl narrowed his eyes. “No helping!” he complained.

Mari pouted at him. “We make an exception for twins here.”

The phone rang again and Mr. Watson sighed. I stood and caught it on the third ring as I rounded the corner into the kitchen. “Watson residence.” There was a crackly silence on the line. “Hello?”

“You’re not from around here,” someone hissed in a gravelly whisper.

I started and almost dropped the receiver. “What?”

“Why don’t you stay here with me,” the voice continued, “at the bottom of the sssssssea!” I slammed the phone down and stood for a moment, my heart beating in my throat.

Bill came into the kitchen and looked at me. “Who was it?”

I laughed a little shakily. “Just a prank call. It kind of freaked me out though.”

He nodded. “There’s a group of kids on the island who’ve been getting up to pranks this summer...calling around and messing with the businesses. Too much time on their hands.”

“The voice didn’t sound like a kid.”

Bill shrugged. The phone rang again and embarrassingly, I jumped a mile. He brushed past me to grab it. “Hello?” he barked sharply. There was a pause and he rolled his eyes. “The country store is four-FIVE-nine-seven, Mrs. Lyndon.” Another pause. “Yeah, I think they do carry that non-hydrogenated margarine.”

We returned to the game, and Bill announced that the island kids were up to prank calls again. Mr. Watson shook his head in disgust. “Delinquents.”

Mrs. Watson asked me what the caller said, and I told her. She smiled and nodded. “The sea monster...the kids now are just as hung up on it as we were.”

The Watsons’ summer house was actually an “ancestral” home of sorts. The original owners were Mr. Watson’s parents. Mrs. Watson had been visiting there during summers ever since she and Mr. Watson were high school sweethearts.

Wednesday had been overcast when we rode in on the ferry, and I stared blankly out into the fog, my thoughts filled with the imminent reunion with Bill.

Mari poked me. “Are you seasick? You were making a face.”

“No, I’m fine. I just can’t believe I’m going through with this.”

“To be frank,” Mari giggled, “I was really surprised you agreed to it.” I rubbed a hand over my face and groaned. “I’m kidding! It’ll be fine. Bill is excited to see you—he always asks about you.”

“I just wish Stephanie hadn’t cancelled. Having her along would have taken the edge off at little.” Stephanie, the other member in our trio of “oldest and dearest friends,” had enough personality and pep to make up for both of us. She was living in a college town in the middle of nowhere, West Virginia now and teaching a class on gender politics in basket weaving or something. She was missing the trip due to breaking her ankle three days earlier while trying out for the local roller derby team.

“Well, looks like I can cross that right off the list,” she had said over the phone.

Without Stephanie in the equation, what had originally been intended as a reunion of old friends now felt more like me just weirdly crashing a family vacation. We were headed to stay with Mari’s parents at their summer home on Bennington Island in Maine, accompanied by her fiancée Carl. The sixth person was Mari’s twin brother Bill, who was currently living in the Bennington Island house on a full-time basis, while he was “between things,” as Mari put it. Bill was also my first boyfriend. I hadn’t seen him since I was eighteen years old. That was ten years ago.

“You were going to have to meet Bill again next year at the wedding anyway,” Mari pointed out helpfully. “Would you rather have said the first, ‘Hey, ten years huh, how are things?’ while he’s escorting you up the aisle?”

“Fair enough,” I conceded.

Mari’s father picked us up at the dock and shook my hand warmly. “Still as beautiful as you were in high school. You haven’t aged a day, dear.”

“Oh, stop it some more,” I smiled.

Everything seemed to have been stuck in time for the past decade. Mr. Watson drove us to the house in the same ancient sedan, and when we piled out into the

driveway, Bill was lounging on the front steps looking the same as ever and cleaning a bucket of mussels with deft knife strokes. He winked as I approached. "Hope you like these as much as you used to. I picked them up at the beach this morning."

Before I could answer, Mrs. Watson came squealing through the front door and tackled me in a hug. An enormous cat with a smashed-in face stalked through the doorway after her. "Is that Ringo?" I gaped. "He's still alive? Is he still as mean as he used to be?"

"Meaner," Bill said.

We ate a fantastic dinner at the house that night, including the fresh mussels that Bill had gathered. The next day we biked around the island a little and got sunburns at the beach before the rain started. On Friday morning, we needed some more breakfast supplies, so Bill and I took the car over to the country store to pick up a few things. There was a garish cartoony representation of a sea monster graffitied onto the side of the store building. "Same kids as the prank callers," Bill said, gesturing to it. "They think any reference to the sea monster is hilarious."

On Friday night, Mari decided we should have a girls' night out at the Bennington Inn bar. We changed into our cotton dresses and rambled over to the other side of the island in the Watsons' car, after Mari called a jovial "Don't wait up!" out the window.

Carl and Mr. Watson frowned, and Bill and Mrs. Watson smiled.

Mari whirled along the two-lane road with happy abandon. "Isn't this fun?" she grinned over at me, nearly sideswiping a raccoon on the right shoulder. She reached over and squeezed my hand. "I'm really glad you came."

The Bennington Inn was the most upper-scale establishment on the island—the only place that really catered to older touristy types and couples on romantic weekend getaways. A few samples of each were scattered around the well-polished oak interior when we slid onto stools at the bar. We ordered sidecars and made small talk with the bartender, who Mari knew. When he was summoned away by a gentleman at the end of the bar, Mari turned to me with her “now we’re going to have serious girl talk” face.

“So how was it?” she asked.

“How was what?”

Mari sighed with impatience. “Seeing Bill again!”

I took a sip of my cocktail and thought. “Anti-climatic,” I answered truthfully. “It’s funny. So much time has passed...but in a lot of ways it feels like nothing’s changed here.”

Mari nodded. “I get that.”

The conversation drifted around through Mari’s wedding plans and gossip about Stephanie’s life in West Virginia, which Mari claimed included a “female companion.” She raised her eyebrows significantly every time she said the phrase. At some point we both switched from sidecars to straight whiskey, then Mari switched to water and bar nuts to start sobering up for the drive home, while I finished her whiskey for her and ordered another.

“You know,” she said thoughtfully, “That story about the sea monster here. I sort of...saw something once, myself.”

I encouraged her to go on.

“The first time I brought Carl here, three years ago, Bill was still in South America and my parents were, I don’t know, doing something else that weekend. Carl and I were both still living with roommates back then, and we came up here mostly to, you know, have a place to ourselves. One night I got this idea in my head that I wanted us to go down to the beach and have sex in the ocean. I thought it would be like so erotic. Carl went along with it, but he was complaining the whole time about how the water was so cold and it was so dark and he hated the way the seaweed felt slimy under his feet. We were trying to, you know, get into position, but Carl was being such a limp noodle about the whole thing, and I was getting ready to just say forget it, when this thing brushed under my foot. Not just a fish—something *big*. Solid. In the water behind Carl. And I felt something wrap around my leg for just a second, kind of like when a jellyfish slides its tentacles around you, but it didn’t sting, and it was a lot thicker and stronger than a jellyfish. Then it let go and the water rippled away from us, sort of like the wake behind a boat, but we couldn’t see anything above the surface. Then suddenly there was this big suffusion of warmth all around us in the water.”

I leaned forward, barely breathing. “What was it? Blood?”

“No, just urine,” Mari said, munching a bar nut. “Carl had gotten so scared that he pissed accidentally.”

As we continued our card game Thursday evening, Mrs. Watson had asked if Bill and Mari remembered the story of the time Mr. Watson took her out sailing in the bay as teenagers and ended up getting lost for hours in pea-soup fog. The twins said no and pressed her to tell it.

“Well, it was the summer after your father finished high school, and I had one more year left. He had just gotten permission to start taking the sailboat out on his own, so you know, he was all excited to impress me. We made a plan to sail to the restaurant on the other island by ourselves for lunch one afternoon. When we were about halfway there, we started hitting some wisps of fog, but your father thought he could pass through it. Pretty soon we couldn’t see five feet in front of us and had lost all track of where we were going. I had to keep blowing the fog whistle over and over while your father tried to steer. I thought it was funny at first, but he didn’t. At some point we drifted near a bell buoy—we couldn’t see it, but we could hear it tolling over and over, invisible in the fog. We kept looking all around for it, but we couldn’t make it out anywhere. We couldn’t even tell which direction the sound was coming from. And it seemed like no matter which way we went, the sound stayed the same, not getting louder or softer. After a while it started driving us crazy. It felt like the fog was never going to dissipate, and we were never going to reach shore, and that damn buoy was never going to stop ringing that ominous warning tone. Then the sound just stopped—not faded away—it just cut off all of the sudden, like someone had reached out and grabbed the clapper.

“Obviously by that age we were much too old to believe in the sea monster. Your father had grown up hearing spooky stories about what it did to children who didn’t behave and whatnot—you know parenting methods back then—and of course there were the blurry photos pinned on the tack board at the country store, and the personal close encounter every man, woman and child claimed to have had at some point while swimming or boating. The Casco Bay sea monster was just silly local legend to us. But

for some reason when that bell went silent, we looked at each other across the boat, and it was the first thing in both of our eyes.

“I stopped blowing the whistle, and I remember my heart was pounding so loudly that I wondered if your father could hear it. We stayed completely still for more than a minute, staring into the fog and waiting for the bell to start tolling again. Then a dark shape materialized practically right in front of us. It was the bell buoy, but...larger. There was something...on it. Perched on top of it, sitting. Bigger than a seagull. Much bigger. As big as a man. We only saw it for a second before it jumped off into the water. When it jumped, something—*long*—trailed after it...like a tail.

“We never did make it to the restaurant. Once we had found the buoy as a reference point, your father was able to navigate back to the house, and we sailed back as fast as we could, jumping out of our skins with fright. Neither of us were sure of what we’d seen, but your father thought it had met his eyes just before it jumped into the water. He said those eyes looked...”

“Old,” Mr. Watson finished, rubbing a hand down his face. “Older than God.”

After Mari told me her own sea monster story at the bar on Friday night, there followed a blurry period that began to dissipate as we pulled into the Watsons’ driveway. Mari shut off the engine and leaned up against the steering wheel, peering into my face. I had a vague awareness of being unable to keep my head steadily upright on my neck. Mari dissolved into giggles. “Iris, you are *so* drunk right now. Stay right here, okay?” She scurried off into the house. I closed my eyes, sunk back against the seat, and focused on maintaining my sense of balance.

The passenger door swung open and I opened my eyes to see Bill looming over. “Can you walk?” I frowned and stared into the middle distance, as though he had asked if I remembered how to dance the Macarena. He scooped me up like a sack of rags and kicked the car door shut. “Looks like you still know how to have a good time.”

Mari closed the front door behind us and said something briefly to Bill before he carried me up to my room. He dropped me onto the bed and sat down on the edge. “We need to talk.”

My stomach turned over queasily, and I wondered if I might answer him in the form of a brisk whiskey vomit.

“The sea monster,” he said. “I think it...means something. When we saw it ten years ago. I know you remember too.”

It was true. The last time I had visited the island with Bill and Mari, we were eighteen, and it was the summer before we all went off to college. On the last day of our visit, Bill and I got up extra early in the morning and went down to a pier where kids liked to jump for fun. We joined hands and leapt off together. When we opened our eyes under the water, both of us saw it at the same time, coiling in the shadows beneath the pier.

“I have this theory,” Bill continued. “That it creates some kind of...bond. Or maybe a curse. Kind of like a terrifying, sea-dwelling Cupid. I think when it appears to two people, you’re just stuck together after that. Haven’t you wondered why it is that after ten years, neither of us have anything, or anyone, to show for it? What are you *doing* back on this island? I don’t even know what *I’m* doing back on this island.”

I didn't answer. A feeling of inevitability was coming over me, as though my limbs had gone numb and I was slipping underwater.

"Anyway," Bill finished, "I think you should just stay here and live, with me. Don't go back to whatever you came here from. I don't know why, but that's what feels like it has to happen."

I had a sensation of disappearing down into darkness, but also oddly of relief. "Okay," I said.

Alarms

Lara sighed when the phone rang. She was in the middle of making Sunday dinner, wrist deep in a bowl of ground beef that would soon be her famous meatloaf.

“Gene?” she called to her husband. “Can you get that?”

The only response was the continued ringing of the phone. With another sigh, she pulled her hands out of the bowl and quickly ran one under the faucet before grabbing the cordless.

“Hello?”

“Hello? Annie?” The caller was a woman with a southern twang that Lara was still getting used to.

“No, this is Lara Anderson,” she said. “I think you might have the wrong number.”

“Oh!” the caller said, surprised. “Shoot sugar, I’m sorry. I was tryin’ to reach Annie down at the Country Store. I think we met a few days ago though, at PTA. I’m Diane Linden, Timmy’s momma. Your boy is Ben, right?”

“That’s right,” Lara said, remembering the woman she’d met at Ben’s school the Tuesday before. Fake blonde hair, a big friendly smile. Lara couldn’t help but smirk as she realized she’d just mentally described half the women in this Kentucky town. “How are you?”

“I’m just fine, sugar, thank you for askin’. I’m glad I got you on the line though, even though it was an accident,” Diane said. “I know you’re fairly new to town, so I don’t want you to think this is common or nothin’, but I just found out the William’s were robbed.”

Lara remembered the Williams' home, a big white farmhouse a few miles away from their house. "Really?" she said. "You're kidding."

"No ma'am, it's the God's honest truth," Diane confirmed. "Stole all kinds of things while they were visitin' their boy and his family up in Maryland. The TV, computer, her jewelry, all gone. It's just awful ain't it?"

Having moved to the town only about six months prior, Lara hadn't met a ton of people so far. She had, however, discovered fairly early on that Kentucky women loved to gossip. In fact, she'd even been aware that the Williams' were going out of town because the new hairdresser she'd gone to had spent most of her haircut talking about how she used to date the son that they were going to visit, but it didn't work out for all kinds of reasons that Lara hadn't really asked about, but learned anyway. This phone call was yet another example of that. In New York, no wrong number would have ever led to the current conversation.

"That's terrible," Lara said, figuring that was the kind of answer Diane was looking for.

The woman chattered on for a while longer and Lara looked longingly at her meatloaf ingredients, still in the bowl, waiting to be mixed.

"Well, I've got to give Annie a call," the southern woman eventually said. "She sees lots of folks at that store of hers, figure she can get the word out so people'll be aware. Who knows if it'll happen again, right?"

"I sure hope not," Lara said, looking around their house at all of the things they'd worked hard to get.

"I'm sure it won't," Diane said. "But be careful anyways."

“You too.”

Lara was pulling the meatloaf out of the oven when her husband finally appeared, coming in from the backyard with their ten year old son Ben in tow.

Ben had inherited Lara’s natural red hair, but that was essentially where their similarities ended. Everything else he’d gotten from Gene, including his nose and his height. Gene towered over most at six feet four, and Ben was easily the tallest boy in his class, and he was already nearly as tall as Lara.

“Mom, look what we found down by the lake!” Ben said, holding up an orange water gun for her to see.

“Wow,” she said with a smile. “Very cool. Does it work?”

“Yeah! Look at dad.” Ben laughed, and it was then that Lara noticed the big wet stain on the crotch of her husband’s jeans.

She laughed too. “Nice shooting, kid.”

Ben grinned and Gene shook his head with a smile.

“Go get washed up,” Lara told her son. “It’s almost time for dinner.”

“Okay,” Ben said, running off.

Gene crossed the room to kiss her hello. “Smells great.”

“It should,” Lara replied. “I slaved over it.”

Gene laughed. “I need to change out of these pants. It looks like I pissed myself.”

“He’s got good aim,” Lara said.

“Definitely.”

When dinner was over, Ben asked to go play outside. Coming from a New York suburb with a tiny backyard to a place with several acres of land had been a dream come true for the ten year old. He'd been spending every moment he could outside. The sun would be out for a couple more hours, so Lara gave him permission as she and Gene began to clear the table.

"Another person called for the Country Store today," she said as she rinsed off a dish.

"We should start selling live bait and lunch meat," Gene said with a grin.

Their phone number was only one digit different than the Country Store's, so wrong numbers had become fairly common.

Lara smiled. "Think of all that extra income," she said, then added, "It was actually someone I knew. Diane Linden. She's the mom of one of Ben's school friends."

"See? I told you it wouldn't be long before we knew people in this town," Gene said, taking the dish from her and drying it with a towel.

"She told me there was a robbery in that big white house up the road."

"Really?" Gene said, stopping what he was doing as he looked at her.

"Yeah."

The Andersons had made the move from New York to Kentucky closely following a rash of burglaries in their previous town. The peace of mind that had been so appealing when they'd originally moved there had become a thing of the past. No one wanted to leave their homes for an extended period of time, lest they come back to find their possessions gone. Most of their neighbors had had alarm systems installed.

Everyone was nervous and the Andersons didn't want to live in a neighborhood where no one felt safe.

So they'd packed up their things and moved to Kentucky. It was a decent sized, beautiful town, with neighbors who smiled and waved, and children who biked and ran around outside, and would go down to the lake to swim on nice days. The center of the town was well preserved and quaint, and Lara thought it probably looked just like it had sixty years prior.

The house they had bought wasn't large, but it had a lot of land, surrounded by woods that Ben was under strict instructions that he wasn't to go into without one of his parents. All of the houses nearby were similar, set far back in large areas of land, private and secluded.

They'd begun to feel at home in their new town, despite some of the differences that had taken a little bit of getting used to. Lara truly hoped this town wouldn't quickly become a copy of problems they'd seen in the last one.

Lara read about the second burglary a couple of months later, as the seasons began the shift from fall to winter. Police were saying they believed the two to be connected, but warned people not to worry and stated that they believed the perpetrator would be caught soon.

Nearly six months went by with no word of any new evidence regarding the burglaries. As Lara rounded an aisle in the grocery store with Ben walking next to her,

she nearly collided into Diane Linden, who was pushing her own cart, her two year old daughter Dani sitting in the built in child seat.

“Oh! Lara!” Diane said as they both pulled their carts to an abrupt stop. They’d become friends as their sons did, and Diane was constantly calling her on purpose now to give her the latest news. Before Lara could even apologize for the near crash, Diane continued in a rush, “Did you hear?”

Lara shook her head. “What?”

“There was another burglary – the Jenkin’s this time!” Diane said. “It’s got me so nervous, sugar, let me tell you. ‘Course, Andy has his shotgun, but still.”

Shotgun? Lara thought. Jesus. There were days she questioned their choice to move to this quaint little town. This was one of them.

“Gene own a gun?” Diane asked.

“Oh no,” Lara said. “Definitely not.”

“You Yanks are so funny,” Diane said with a smile and a shake of her head. “You might want to look into gettin’ one. My brother works for the Sherriff’s department and he says they might have a lead, but it could happen again before they catch the culprit. Least that’s what I think!”

“Wow. Well, I’ll tell Gene,” she said. “Maybe he’ll consider getting one.”

She watched Ben grab a box of Cap’n Crunch and did what any mother would do. Worried. Maybe they should move again, she thought. Find a safer neighborhood where alarm systems weren’t necessary and no one felt the need to defend their homes and families with shotguns.

Several evenings later Lara was sitting alone on the screened in porch to their house. The weather had warmed and was beautiful even after the sun had set.

Gene had called earlier, telling her he would be late; he was finishing up a project at work.

Ben was asleep, and she had the porch light on, reading, when she thought she heard a noise. The hairs on the back of her neck rose and she stilled, staring at the book in her hands but not taking in any of the words. She got up, trying not to seem as if she'd noticed anything and turned off the light. Then she quietly stood on the porch, listening and straining to see into the dark outside their home. Slowly, her eyes adjusted, and for a moment she was sure she could see two figures crouched near the edge of the woods that surrounded their property.

"Honey?" she heard from inside the house, startling her so badly she nearly screamed. She quickly went inside.

"Gene!" she hissed. "Someone's outside, near the woods."

Gene straightened. Lara had been sure to keep him informed about the information she'd learned from Diane and the papers.

"I'll start a fire," he said.

Lara nodded, expecting that.

Soon they were burning all of the stolen items they hadn't been able to sell.

Since Lara had told Gene the police might have had a lead on them Gene had fenced as much of their hauls as he could, then had taken anything that wouldn't burn, like jewelry and electronics, and dumped them in the lake.

They watched the rest of the evidence go up in smoke.

When the police that Lara was positive had been staking out their home knocked on their door the next morning after Ben had gone to school, bearing a warrant and asking questions, there was nothing to find but the remains of an evening's fire.

A month or so later the Andersons packed up their things and moved again. Their new home was in a safe little town where alarm systems weren't necessary and no one felt the need to defend their homes and families with shotguns.

Fall 2012

The Rules:

1. Stories must contain a covered bridge;
2. Containing a body of water was encourage; and
3. Stories may contain a party phone line.

The Stories:

Midnight at the Loon River Bridge by Jean Thrift;

The Party Line by Heather Frizzell;

Nothing but the Water by Shannon MacDonald; and

The Weight of the Dead Man by Sam Segal.

Midnight at the Loon River Bridge

“Good news is the bridge is covered, so it’ll be hard for anyone to see us.”

“What are you talking about? How are we supposed to dump it over the side of a *covered* bridge?”

“I thought of that, smartass! One section of the bridge is just a grate. We lift it up and drop the body through the bottom.”

“Can you not say ‘the body,’ please?” Valentine hissed. “I’m on a fucking party line, remember? Hello?!” she barked abruptly. Silence filled the line.

Linda huffed a sigh. “Look, just meet me tonight, okay? You know the time and place.”

“Yeah, see you then.” Valentine dropped the headset and stared over at the garbage bag on the floor. She wrinkled her nose. Was it her imagination, or was she starting to be able to smell Mrs. Gravel’s cat? Should she store it in the freezer until tonight? “I don’t want a dead cat in my fucking freezer,” she muttered aloud, belligerent, to the empty cabin.

The Party Line

When they finally installed the telephone in Skye's house, she nearly burst with the thrill. She was the last in her class in Portsdowne, New Hampshire to get one, and she did strive to be fashionable. But there was a hitch. Her mother tried to explain the way telephones worked, around here, was not how she had seen them in movies and television. They were on a party line, and so the phone rang to a series of houses around them, not just theirs.

Skye did not see a problem with this at first. But every time the telephone spit out its ring in the kitchen, she bounded through the house to reach it first. She didn't know who might be calling to speak to her, although her hopes were always high. And always disappointed.

There were calls for the Jacksons, and the Ashbys, and her mother and father. Skye gave her number out at school as much as she could, but this never changed.

She could have grown to resent the telephone, but instead her resolve grew stronger. Today, when the phone rang, she could will the caller to seek her out. Maybe the sound of her voice would entice the stranger on the other end of the line. Maybe if she practiced her greetings in the mirror. Maybe.

After a month or two of practicing, the phone rang and Skye answered it in her sweetest tone.

"Amy?" said a man's voice, deep and smooth.

Amy was the Ashbys' daughter, a year older than Skye, a senior. She had long silky blond hair that reached her waist and listened to her Doors records so loudly Skye could often hear it across the street.

“No,” she said, all her polished grace dying with her surprise. “This is Skye.”

“My mistake,” said the stranger. “You sound just like her. I’ll call back.”

Skye hung up and watched the phone ring again. Once it halted, she glanced out the window above the sink, trying to catch a glimpse of the Ashbys’ house. She could only see the shingles, but she wondered what Amy and the man could be talking about. He did not sound like a high school boy. He sounded older, sophisticated. Handsome, even. Of course he would be calling for Amy and not Skye.

Sometimes, on the party line, someone would try to make a call and find a conversation already in progress in one of the other houses. Skye’s mother had told her to apologize and hang up quickly if that happened. It was just polite. But Skye wondered what would happen if no one knew someone else had picked up.

She wondered, and then she frowned, and slunk from the kitchen to do her homework.

That autumn, the children began to go missing from Portsdowne, New Hampshire. In a town so quiet and small, at first it was a trifle. Kids wandered off playing and almost always turned up at the country store, trying to buy cotton candy with the ten cents in their pocket.

But little Kyle Stokes did not turn up at the country store. He did not turn up at Swelter Lake or its surrounding campgrounds. He did not even turn up at Uncle Pete’s Drive-In. He did turn up, the day before Halloween, in Swelter Creek, under the covered

bridge. Weighed down by a cinderblock tied to his ankle, the news report said. He had almost slipped free of the rope, and that was when a pedestrian had spotted the small white hand just below the surface, as if he was waving. Skye's mother cried over dinner, and she had not seen her mother do that since her brother Benny had been drafted to Vietnam.

Kyle Stokes was the first. The day before Thanksgiving, Melody Ludman was found in the same fashion, a waterlogged daisy chain tangled in her hair. Christmas Eve, another girl. The cinderblock punched right through the ice, they said.

Portsmouth went from a quaint, moderately friendly town to a bastion of secrecy and paranoia. Parents no longer let their children wander. Teachers vigilantly counted the numbers of their classes on the playground. Warnings were issued. The FBI came to town, ate pie at Plain Jane's Diner, and left without doing a damn thing, so it seemed. And yet, on February 13th, just as Skye lamented her lack of any sweetheart for Valentine's Day, they found another body under the bridge.

Skye had no stake in the Drowned Child cases. She preferred not to dwell on terrible things. She did, however, have a stake in the party line. At school, she followed Amy Ashby, but never saw her meet up with anyone from UNH or one of the teachers at Portsmouth High. But every so often the stranger called, and Skye picked up first, and he thought she was Amy.

Each time, Skye was honest. No, this was not Amy, this is Skye. And he apologized, and even chuckled a bit when he repeated the mistake again and again. His laugh, like the rest of his voice, was velvety and warm. Skye never asked for his name, but invented herself: Henry LeMont. He had dark hair, blue eyes, a thunderbird. He was a

professor of English – or Philosophy – at Dartmouth, and for whatever reason, had fallen head over heels for seventeen-year-old Amy. Perhaps they were planning to run away together to a love commune. Skye had heard about such things, although her father had threatened to get out the belt if she spoke about the goddamned hippies in his presence.

Once, when the not knowing became too great, Skye picked up again once she knew Amy and Henry were speaking. Their conversation was brief, but telling: they were setting up a time to meet late at night. Skye could hardly contain her gasp, and so put the phone down again before she could find out where. She felt guilty, but only a little.

To her credit, Amy did not appear to be swept up in a passionate, clandestine romance. She glowed as she always had, the way pretty girls do, but she ducked into the girls' bathroom often to dab powder on her under eye circles and smoke several cigarettes before returning to class. She lost weight, which made her hips jut out through the fabric of her broom skirts. Maybe the secret affair was eating her alive. Skye felt sorry for her. But also, secretly, she thought that if she had love of that kind from a man she would not take it for granted. Amy was a wasteful sort of girl, Skye's mother had said once. Skye wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but decided she could see it.

In April, the phone rang. Of course Skye picked up, hoping for another taste of Henry LeMont. He hadn't called in a month. But it was not Henry. A gruff but careful voice asked for Mr. or Mrs. Holliday. He was from the U.S. Army and he had some bad news. And Skye understood why she always beat her parents to answering the telephone.

After Benny's funeral, Skye did not think she would use the phone anymore. There had been too many calls of sympathy, and answering became painful and draining. But a few days before Easter, the phone rang, and Skye, home alone with a cup of tea growing cold beside her, picked up.

"Amy?" asked Henry LeMont.

And Skye, without hesitating, said, "Yes, it's me."

"Tonight," he said. "Midnight. Swelter Bridge."

His voice could melt inside her mouth like chocolate. Skye felt a warmth spreading across her chest. She leaned forward in her seat, summoning whatever force fueled Amy's allure. She bat her eyelashes at the refrigerator and licked her lips. "I'll be there."

"Good girl. See you soon." He hung up without a goodbye.

Skye replaced the phone in its cradle, hugged it for a moment, and drank her lukewarm tea.

Skye could get to Swelter Bridge easily; it was only a mile up the road, and the main traffic artery of Portsdowne, linking the residential area to downtown. They had wanted to close the bridge when the murders began, but doing so would strand most of the town's population, and Portsdowne had no money to build an alternate route. So the bridge and the road remained open.

She had never snuck out of the house before. She was excruciatingly obedient. She got good grades. She did not have many friends, and outside school they never called. She had loved Benny and honestly believed he would come home unscathed, given the magical protection given to all big brothers. In a world where bullets and shrapnel could turn him inside out within seconds, Skye no longer cared to play it safe. She wanted to meet Henry LeMont. She hoped he could look at her the same way he must look at Amy.

She left out the window and climbed down the tree that scraped her roof during thunder storms. She wore her best dress, using less than stellar foresight, and so was disheveled and bleeding from the knee by the time she reached the ground. But she had been practicing her makeup and ironed her hair, so she hoped that would offset a small tumble from a tree. It was cold and the wind whooshed past her ears as she walked, but her heart pounded with excitement and kept her warm.

Midnight approached and so did Swelter Bridge. In daylight it stood in picturesque majesty, painted a deep pine green. So long after dark it loomed like a fortress, barely visible in the darkness, surrounded by the rushing sound of water. When she exhaled she could see her breath.

“I’m here,” she called, trying to retain the sophistication of her telephone tone. But instead she warbled. She sounded young and scared.

A shadow departed from the others, man-shaped and tall. He approached, and Skye waited. He was difficult to see, but just his silhouette did not look like a Henry LeMont. He was wide, and his hair long. But his voice was the same, and she knew she had the right one. “You’re not Amy,” he said, although he did not sound disappointed.

“No,” she said. “I’m Skye.”

He laughed, and the warmth filled her again. “I wondered when you might try this, Skye. Amy said you’ve been following her.”

She gaped. She thought she’d been careful. She almost apologized, but realized she was not sorry. “I want to know what you do together.”

His arm wrapped around her waist, very suddenly. “I was counting on that, too.”

The little girl was scared, but Skye brushed her hair and put her to bed, the way her mother used to do for her. The girl ceased weeping and slept, and did not wake up. Henry – although she was to call him Jared – put something in her after-dinner tea.

“Why?” Skye asked, when she discovered what he had done, the bottle shaking in her hand.

“We’re setting them free,” he said. He had a limp; he had been to Vietnam himself. “They’re too precious for this world. You must know how it is.”

Skye did. Benny’s death still tore at her like a razor blade in her chest if she breathed too deeply. If every child must grow up to feel this way, maybe Jared was right.

“Amy’s helped me so much. The first one was sloppy. We’ve been perfecting it. I don’t want them to suffer, do you? You’ll help me, won’t you? Amy doesn’t understand sometimes, I fear.”

“I understand,” Skye said, sitting in the basement folding chair. She had been given something here, something beautiful and terrible, and she wanted him to know she appreciated it. “I’m not Amy.”

He came closer, and took a strand of hair in his fingers. “You’re not, no. You’re deeper. It was pure luck to find you. Pure, glorious luck.”

Jared did not look much like Henry LeMont; the long hair was red and one eye didn’t focus very well, but he was still the handsomest man who had ever come to Portstowne, in her opinion. And his voice. And his voice.

Still shivering, she kissed him.

Skye stumbled back at dawn. Her parents grounded her, but she did not care.

The day before Easter, they found the little girl under the covered bridge. The news did not say so, but Skye knew the knots tied to the cinderblock were the very strongest. Benny had been a boy scout and taught her all about them.

Skye did not see Amy Ashby until school following Easter break. She was white as a piece of paper. Her hair was not brushed. She came right up to Skye in the hallway, eyes full of accusation. Skye smiled and tried to sidestep her, but Amy caught her arm.

“Tell me you didn’t,” she said. There was more desperation to her tone than anger. But Skye knew; there was jealousy all over her face. It oozed from her pores, and Skye felt proud.

“Don’t worry,” she said, in her most saccharine Amy-tone, “we can share him.”

Amy lashed out and slapped her across the face. Skye stumbled, shocked more than pained. “You’re a fool,” she spat, and walked away.

Hand cupping her cheek, Skye watched her retreat and laughed. “Fine. We don’t need you, anyway. He likes me better.”

He did, as a matter of fact. The loss of Amy was regretful, but no obstacle that couldn’t be overcome. Skye was all too eager to pick up the slack. She rekindled her love for answering the telephone, although they still pretended he was looking for Amy, so as not to arouse any suspicion. Skye’s mother rarely left the bedroom anyway, and her father remained at work longer and longer each day. Summer approached, and there were so many holidays to prepare for. Independence Day, for example. Barbecues. Fireworks. Family time.

Skye traded one family for another, and did not look back.

Nothing but the Water

They'd gotten separated as they had run. Kat was faster than he was, and when she finally chanced a glance over her shoulder, she realized that not only had she lost the bandits, she'd also lost her husband. She pulled to an abrupt stop, listening hard for the sounds of either her pursuers or Damon, but all she heard was the call of birds and a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of the trees that surrounded her.

She couldn't call for him, not without risking letting the bandits know where she was, and honestly, without Damon and his giant axe to protect her, that was as good as suicide. As it was, they'd been grossly outnumbered, and even though he wasn't always the brightest, even Damon had realized that taking on twelve armed men with just his axe and her bow wasn't going to end well for either of them. So they'd decided to make a run for it, disappearing together into the woods.

Kat had never seen forests before very recently. Trees like these couldn't survive in the harsh desert climate she'd grown up in for her first seventeen years. In fact, it wasn't until she and Damon had made it past the Endless Plains, Kat having just had her eighteenth birthday, that she finally caught her first glimpse of a forest.

She continued to listen for several moments. Nothing. She knew she'd hear Damon if he was nearby; he clomped through forests louder than a bear, never failing to miss any twigs, logs or dead leaves that would make snapping, popping, and crunching noises with every step he took. If there was one thing she was learning about her new husband, it was

that their skill sets were polar opposites.

Kat let out a small sigh, pushed her long brown hair from her face, and looked up at the trees surrounding her.

She slid off her pack, setting it on the ground near a nice tall tree with plenty of low branches, adjusted the longbow on her back, and carefully started to climb.

Heights had never bothered her. She'd hiked up a mountain or two with her father when she was younger, looking for roadrunners or mountain lions to hunt. She didn't stop her upward trek until she was a good twenty feet up, and the forest stretched out around her on all sides.

The trees were starting to lose their leaves, so the ones that still had them were bright oranges, yellows, and reds. To Kat, it looked like the forest was on fire. A passing traveler had informed her and Damon that the trees began to do this as winter approached. Neither of them had ever experienced a winter, but they both had noticed it had begun to get colder as they'd moved further east, and they were planning to trade for warmer clothing as soon as they hit the next town or way station.

The wind picked up and she shivered as she strained her eyes for any sign of Damon. She slowly turned and started as she caught sight of something else she'd never seen before leaving the desert.

A large body of water.

It was a lake, water rippling as the breeze disturbed the surface. Then she saw smoke rising a short distance away, near the shore. She still saw no sign of Damon, but maybe he'd gotten to that lake and started a fire to signal her. Of course it would signal the bandits too if they were still hunting them, but from her vantage point it looked like they'd made it quite a ways into the forest, so maybe they would get lucky and their pursuers had already given up and headed back to the road. It wasn't like she and Damon had much to steal anyway. A few days worth of rations their weapons and some herbs that Kat had manage to forage in the hopes they could trade them for something later.

Kat took note of the direction of the smoke and began to climb back down.

The singing caught her by surprise. Her foot missed the branch she was aiming for, her fingers lost purchase, and she fell.

~*~*~

Kat awoke to singing. It took a few minutes before the lyrics began to make sense.

"I have seen what man can do, when the evil lives inside of you."

It sounded like several women, which she supposed might be a good sign. All the bandits had been men.

With a groan she opened her eyes. She was lying on her back, but also moving, and the world felt off balance until she realized that she was in the back of a wooden wagon, being pulled along by a horse. Kat tried to sit up but white hot pain shot through her left side, and she fell back down with a gasp.

That was when she realized her hands were bound in front of her.

"Many are the weak, and the strong are few, but with the water, we'll start anew."

"Hey," Kat said.

Her only response was more singing. *"Take me down to the lake, take me down to the stream. Take me down to the water, we're gonna wash our souls clean."*

"Hey!" she tried again, louder. They ignored her.

The back of the wagon was open, and if Kat leaned her head back she could see a muddy path behind her, the wagon wheels leaving twin indentations, and several footprints on each side. She tried unsuccessfully to get her wrists free of the rope tied around them, then shifted her weight, planning to turn herself around. The pain in her side came back,

but she was expecting it, so she grit her teeth and attempted to power through it. It was her leg that surprised her this time, and she actually let out a shocked scream as she went to move it, panting heavily as she waited for the pain to subside. It was definitely broken.

A woman suddenly appeared in her vision, looking upside-down from Kat's vantage point.

She was wearing a long white dress that covered her from the neck down. Her hair and face were under a lacy white veil, but it was sheer enough for Kat to see the dark skin beneath it. Her mouth moved as she continued to sing.

Kat had heard songs like these before. They reminded her of the hymnals sung by the Reborn, begging God Reborn to forgive the sins of the people from the past, who had become so full of evil that he'd had to wipe the planet clean and start new. Kat always thought that was bullshit, despite growing up in a town run by Reborn. She didn't buy that this shitty world, full of disease, pain, murderers, thieves and gangs was somehow better than whatever it had been hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Kat knew very little about the Forth Age, but she had run into remnants of it on their journey east, weird metal contraptions, and huge structures that were probably once buildings that could have been lived in. She usually managed to scavenge usable parts from these ruins, but always found herself wondering just what they had been for.

There was something a little off about this song though. The reborn never sang about

cleansing their souls and starting over. They were more about asking forgiveness and preventing further sin. And this woman was definitely no Reborn. They always wore the color red, and she was in nothing but white.

The song seemed to hit a crescendo, the women's voices grew louder and more desperate.

"I tried my hand at the bible, tried my hand at prayer, but now nothing but the water is gonna bring my soul to bare."

"Who are you?" Kat said to the woman when the song thankfully ended.

The woman opened her mouth to speak, but the voice Kat heard actually came from somewhere to the right. "Jesselina." It was another woman, speaking sharply, and with authority. Jesselina looked up, eyes widening. "Come away from there, child."

And the woman hurried out of sight.

"Hey!" Kat said again. "Who the hell are you people?"

No answer.

"Let me go!"

They began to sign a new song.

She looked around the wagon as best she could. Her bow was gone, along with her arrows, and she didn't see her pack anywhere either. She tried once more to get out of her bindings, but whoever had tied the rope seemed to know what they were doing, and honestly, she wasn't sure what she would have done if she had gotten free anyway. She wasn't going to be making a run for it on her leg, that was for sure. She watched the clouds as the wagon rolled, and only once was it obscured, when they rolled over a covered bridge.

It was another ten minutes before the wagon finally pulled to a stop.

As Kat watched, two women, now singing about going down to the river to pray, appeared behind the wagon. They both were dressed as Jesselina had been, in full length white dresses and veils. Two of them took hold of Kat under her arms and started to drag her out of the wagon. She was small, only a few inches over five feet, and they had no trouble tugging her out. Unfortunately, they weren't exactly gentle, and the jarring of her ribs and leg caused her to let out another scream of pain. The women held her up, otherwise she wouldn't have been able to support her own weight.

She almost missed the echo of her scream, but when she did notice it, she lifted her head, looking through a curtain of her long hair, which was now hanging in front of her eyes. They had stopped at the shore of the lake that she'd seen earlier, though, she realized she had no idea how long ago it had been now. The echo finally died out.

It took Kat a minute while her confusion and pain slowly disappeared to realize that she was being held up in front of a woman. The song ended and an eerie quiet fell, and then the woman spoke.

"Sisters," she said, and Kat knew she was addressing the ten women now surrounding her, all of them dressed in the same white uniform. "Let us pray." She was dressed slightly differently than the others. She was still in a white dress, but it was cinched with a purple cloth belt, and she had purple beads hanging from her neck. She didn't wear a veil, her pale wrinkled face and gray hair in easy view.

"Yes, mother," the women chorused. Kat looked around, doubting very much that these women were actually her daughters. Jesselina was dark skinned, as were a couple others, and a few were tan like Kat, while others still were pale, all with different colored hair.

"We come here today to cleanse the sins of our souls," Mother said, holding her arms wide as she spoke.

"The water cleanses!" the woman on Kat's left cried, and several of the others nodded their heads, murmuring agreements.

"That's right, my child," Mother said. "The water cleanses us, all of us. Our souls will be brought to God clean and pure. Sister, do you wish to be cleansed?"

It took Kat a long moment before she realized the question was being addressed at her.

"...What?"

"Let the lake cleanse you, sister," Jesselina suddenly said. "Then you can join us, and devote your soul to purity."

Kat couldn't help it. She snorted out a laugh. "Uh, no, thanks."

"You do not wish to cleanse yourself of the evil inside you?" Mother asked, features stern and lips thin.

Kat looked at her then around at the women, who all seemed to be disapproving, except for maybe Jesselina, whose expression was borderline horrified. She had had enough religion to last her a lifetime, however. From the time her mother had been killed, as far as Kat was concerned God either didn't exist or he was too big of a dick for her to bother caring about what he thought.

"Any evil inside me is my own business, thanks," Kat said.

"I see," Mother said with a grim nod. "Then you cannot be allowed to join us."

"Damn," Kat replied dryly.

There were more murmurs, and Jesselina suddenly stepped in front of her to plead, "Please, sister, reconsider. You'll lead a happy life with us--"

"Enough, Jesselina," Mother snapped. "She does not wish to join us."

"Mother, please--"

"Enough."

Jesselina bowed her head and backed away.

"Let the cleansing begin," Mother said.

Kat frowned, confused. "I thought I just said I'm not looking to join your freaky cult."

"I understand," Mother replied. "Those who do not join us must still be cleansed, so when your soul is sent to God it will be pure enough to be in his presence."

"Yeah well I'm not going to God anytime soon, so I'll hold off on the cleansing, if you don't mind."

Mother stepped aside and the women began to drag Kat forward, causing her to hiss in pain as her leg was forced to move. "Those who choose not to join us to do God's work here on earth, choose to meet God. We cannot allow the uncleansed to walk around with evil in their souls. It's our job to show everyone the path of purity."

"What?" Kat said as the women took her closer to the water.

They began to sing again. *"Take me down to the river, take me down to the lake. Yes we'll all go together, we're gonna do it for the good Lord's sake."*

She tried to struggle, but she was still bound and could barely even twist without cause searing pain in her side or leg. They had her into the water before she could do anything about it, and she opened her mouth to protest, which was a mistake, because when they shoved her under the surface, she swallowed a mouthful of lake water.

Kat grabbed at the many arms that were holding her under, but she couldn't find any purchase on the slippery bottom of the lake with only one good leg, so try as she did to fight them off, she couldn't get back above the surface. She could feel herself choking as the water filled her lungs, her chest aching from both her earlier injury and her inability to breathe. These crazy bitches were going to drown her. She was going to die in this lake alone, and maybe her body would wash to shore one day and get eaten by a bear. Damon would never know what even happened to her.

Her vision had begun to darken and her struggling slowed.

~*~*~

Kat awoke to singing. It took a few minutes before the lyrics began to make sense.

"Took her down to the river, took her down to the lake, but then I kicked your asses, and you realized that was a big mistake."

Her eyes snapped open. She was in the back of another wagon. Or was it the same one? She was no longer tied up, and someone had splinted her leg. She looked up and saw there was a man riding the horse. He looked over his shoulder at her and grinned stupidly, bright blue eyes framed with dark curly hair. Damn, he was good looking.

"Hey there sleepy head," Damon said.

"What the fuck happened?" Kat asked her husband, who was still just a kid himself, only about ten months older than she was.

"Got into a fight with some of those bandits who caught up to me - you're fucking fast as hell, you know that? - and once I kicked their asses, I couldn't find you anywhere. I was walking around the woods calling for you - " Stupid, Kat thought, since there could have been more bandits out there. "But you'd disappeared. Then I came to that lake and heard

you scream. Had to run halfway around the damn thing, but I got there as those crazy bitches were singing and trying to drown you. So I made them stop."

Kat almost asked how he'd made them stop, then thought better of it. Probably best not to know.

"I lost all my shit," she said instead.

"They had your pack," Damon said, and she realized that both of their packs were next to her in the wagon.

"You stole their horse and wagon?" she said, as if she was proud of him.

"Seemed like the least they could do after trying to kill you," Damon replied.

Kat smirked. "Where are we headed?"

"Next big town on the map is Ombus," Damon said. "Figure we can find a healer there to take care of you. Plus, I hear they've got a party line there."

"The hell's a party line?" Kat asked.

"A whole line of taverns down one street," Damon said with another dumb grin. "One

stop shopping for all your drinking needs."

"Party line first, healer second," Kat said. She needed to get drunk.

The Weight of the Dead Man

The weight of the dead man's body surprised Greg. He heaved upwards on the legs, which had stiffened in death. The dead man was nude- Charlie's idea- so Greg had no choice but to grasp him around his bare knees as Charlie lifted the torso. The man's skin was icy to the touch, and his cold knobbed knees greedily leeched the heat from Greg's gloved hands. He shivered and looked out over the dark river into which the body would soon plunge out of his hands and out of his life.

"What's wrong with you?" Charlie asked breathlessly, his mouth contorted from the effort of lifting the body. The only light they had to go by was the wavering reflection of a sliver of moon on the river's surface. It seemed offensively non-committal.

"Nothing," Greg said. He tried to keep down the surge of bile that was burning the base of his throat.

Charlie counted out to three and they heaved together, launching the body out over the stumpy railing of the covered bridge into what they hoped was the deepest and fastest moving part of the river: the mid-point of the narrow span. Neither of them knew this rural section of New Hampshire very well, a fact they'd hoped would distance them from the body if it was ever found.

Their task completed, Greg flexed his fingers, trying to coax blood back into his frozen digits so closely and recently connected with death that they seemed to forget they were still alive.

Charlie watched as the body fell. "Christopher Columbus," he moaned, clearly distraught by what he saw.

Anxiety covered Greg in another layer of chilly sweat (what's three in one evening?). Had they already screwed this up so badly that they'd be caught right away?

Greg primarily knew Charlie through business, so he had no idea how good he was at disposing of bodies, though he'd seemed alright at calling the shots up until now.

Greg had been at home when Charlie called. It was their usual time. They'd quickly exchanged the usual disinterested pleasantries and got down to business.

"Ten kilos," Charlie said.

"Ten kilos!?" Greg was thunderstruck. That was ten times the monthly amount he normally sold to the students in his tiny college town.

"Ten times the profit," Charlie said matter-of-factly.

"Only if I can sell it," Greg reminded him.

There was a pause in the conversation in which Greg thought he heard Charlie biting his nails, a bad habit he remembered from their time dishwashing together at the restaurant.

"Look," Charlie said, "it's how much I got and it's how much we got to sell."

"Well why did you get so much?" Greg asked. "It'll take me months to unload all that pot."

There was another pause.

"It's not all pot," Charlie admitted.

Greg groaned. "Oh Jesus, what do you mean?"

“Nine kilos of pot; one of coke.”

“You got me selling coke now?” Greg asked, incredulous. “I don’t even know how to sell coke.”

“It’s the fuzzy-fur-balling same thing,” Charlie said, exasperated. “Instead of ‘Hi, you kids want some pot?’ you say ‘Hi, you kids want some pot and/or coke?’”

“How much do I even charge for that?” Greg asked, still not sure how to handle this new development.

“Three times what we pay, same as usual,” Charlie said.

“Well how much did we pay for a kilo of coke?” Greg scratched his head. “I’m trying to pay my rent here, not become the Greater North County Narcotics Emporium.”

“I’ll tell you when I deliver the stuff,” Charlie said bluntly. “Tomorrow at three good?”

“Sure,” Greg said, “my shift at the restaurant starts at five.”

There was another pause, during which Greg heard a distinct clicking sound over the line. His blood curdled with implications.

“What the high-flying-Santa was that?” Charlie demanded.

“Nothing,” Greg said somewhere in the range of a falsetto.

“Are we being bugged!?” Charlie screamed into the phone.

“No no no,” Greg tried to reassure him. “It’s just... that might’ve been the other line hanging up.”

“*What* other line,” Charlie shot back, the venom in his voice dripping through the phone straight into Greg’s ear.

Greg groaned, sensing that the earthquake had already struck and that now it was only a matter of time before the tsunami smashed down on his head. “The neighbor’s phone is connected to the same line, but he knows I use it from three to four on Thursdays. He’s usually at work anyway.”

“First of all,” Charlie said, “what the fall-foliage is your neighboring doing on the same phone line as you, and second,” he spat, “why are we conducting *business* on a shared line!?”

“It’s all I got; I told you that!” Greg shouted back, Charlie’s panic infecting him like a contagion. “Since I moved out here there’s no cell service on this side of the mountain. *You’re* the one who insisted we keep doing business!”

That seemed to do the trick. “Okay, you’re right,” Charlie said neutrally. “Too late to change it now, anyway.” He paused again, allowing Greg to breath a sigh of relief.

“So,” Charlie asked a moment later, “what kind of neighbor you got?”

“What do you mean?” Greg asked, his relief disintegrating rapidly.

“Does he live alone?” Charlie asked sweetly.

“Christopher crime-solving Columbus,” Charlie moaned again, his upper body pushed way out over the railing to look down where the body had fallen into the river.

“What?” Greg asked, too scared to look himself.

“It got stuck,” Charlie huffed.

“Stuck on what?” Greg asked, rubbing his hands together in a futile bid for warmth.

“There’s a support pylon down there,” Charlie said. “The current’s got him stuck on it.”

Greg worked up the courage to look down. Sure enough, there was his neighbor’s naked body wedged up against a wooden beam, legs swaying with the current.

“Great, free-falling-flights-of-farting-fairies *great*.” Charlie pounded on the thick wooden railing.

“What do we do?” Greg asked.

Charlie stood upright and looked off over the river. “We go down there and push him off.”

The two men picked their way down the steep slope on the nearer side of the bridge, using roots and saplings for balance. At the bottom, practically under the narrow man-made expanse, they found two large sticks and started poking at the body. After a fair bit of cajoling, it finally came free and floated serenely downstream. Greg’s neighbor was floating on his back, and, if it weren’t for his nudity or the late-October chill, you could almost imagine him enjoying a placid drift along the river; the moon playing in his eyes gave them a life he sorely lacked under the cover of the bridge.

“Well that was unpleasant,” Charlie said.

“Yeah,” Greg agreed, “now what?”

“Now,” Charlie stated, “you go sell us some drugs.”

“I don’t know,” Greg hesitated, “shouldn’t we, like, take a break for a little bit?”

Charlie raised an eyebrow at him.

“You know,” he continued, “to keep the heat off.”

Charlie laughed harshly, “You think my suppliers are going to appreciate us taking a little sabbatical? They’d do to us what we did to that guy.” He pointed downstream where the body was continuing to float at its own pace on its own private and- hopefully- final journey.

Greg felt sick. This business had become a lot more complicated- and dangerous- than he’d anticipated. “I only got into this as a side thing while we were stuck washing dishes. Isn’t there some way we can, like, get out? You know, an exit strategy?”

“Exit strategy?” Charlie said, mocking him. “There’s no four-filtered exit strategy. You and me,” he pointed a damning finger at them, “we’re stuck; stuck together like super glue by that thing.” He pointed again at the body, which was now nearly out of sight. “Even when we can’t see that anymore. Even when *that’s* long gone.” He pointed at it again for emphasis. “You and me, we’re in this together now, whether we like it or not. *Forever*. So you’re going to sell that stuff, because, if you don’t, I’m going down. And,” he added with a healthy dash of menace, “if I’m going down, you’re going down with me.”

Greg stood dumbstruck as Charlie slammed a gloved paw on his shoulder in faux-camaraderie and began clambering back up the slope. Lost for words, Greg looked up at the shining blade of the moon. In the cloudless night sky, it didn’t look uncertain, as it had reflected in the moving water. In the sky it looked like the edge of a scythe so sharp it could sever the past from the present or the present from the future. Greg made a decision.

He turned and grabbed Charlie around the ankles. Charlie started, undoubtedly alarmed by the aggressive contact. As you should be, Greg thought.

He pulled his startled former co-worker, present business partner/black-mailer, and soon-to-be non-issue back down to the base of the slope. He drew his five inch pocket knife and threw himself onto Charlie's back, pinning him against the roots and dirt of the slope.

“What the fruit-farming-fly-filly are you doing!?” Charlie screamed.

Greg pounded Charlie's head into a particularly thick root. “Why won't you fucking say fuck!?” Greg screamed. That had always bothered him, even when they were washing dishes together. No one as slimy as Charlie-the-fucking-drug-dealer-now-murderer could pretend to be so dainty and innocent through a meaningless and fucking annoying use of the English language.

Charlie went limp, and Greg pressed in closer, pulling his partner up by the hair to examine the blood trickling down his dirt-spackled yet still milky forehead. He pressed the knife against Charlie's throat, relishing the soft yield of the skin against his blade. The intimacy of the action surprised Greg as the gentle steel separated layers of skin to reveal soft, vulnerable flesh underneath. He pressed deeper, aroused by the act of penetration. Allowing the knife to probe deeper, finding its own way, he savored the feeling of power and violation so like sex, or maybe more like rape.

And then, in a moment, it was over. Greg was spent, and he came to his senses soon enough to pull Charlie's still form from the side of the slope and heave him backwards into the river. With some prodding from one of the sticks they'd used earlier, he was able to put Charlie on the same course as his extinct neighbor.

He hardly thought of the difficulty of removing the steaming blood from the little embankment as he scraped mud and leaves around to cover most of the damage.

Charlie's car, parked back at his home, was another problem, but one that could wait.

For now, Greg just stood awash in the ephemeral light of the serrated moon, cut off from his past and future, a being purely in the present, and free.

Spring 2013

The Rules:

1. Stories must contain an error in a map;
2. Stories must contain an obvious deduction; and
3. Stories could contain Erotica.

The Stories:

Bitter by Shannon MacDonald;

A Hike With Romance by Sam Segal; and

Untitled YA\$ Project by Jean Thrift.

Bitter

She came first, arching up off the bed. Her legs were wrapped around his waist, squeezing him so tightly he had to stop his movements. Every muscle in her body felt like it had tensed, and she raked her fingernails along his back. There was a groan as Damon couldn't hold on any longer. Spent, he collapsed on top her bonelessly, burying his face against her neck. They lay together a moment, catching their breath in a sweaty tangle of limbs.

"Damn, babe," Damon finally said, pushing himself up so he could look down at her, bracing his weight with one hand on either side of her head. "I think my back's bleeding."

"Oops," Kat said, brown eyes staring up at him unapologetically. Her long dark hair was splayed out on the pillow.

"Oh, come on." Damon moved, flopping onto his stomach next to her. The mattress bounced.

Kat could see that he did indeed have several bleeding cuts on his back. Good.

"I thought that was makeup sex," Damon said, cheek against the pillow as he blinked over at her, blue eyes still glossy from all the alcohol he'd had earlier.

"It was," Kat said, rolling out of bed and starting the search for her underwear. It had

been thrown somewhere in their frantic attempts to undress each other and she'd been too busy trying to get the shirt off of his much taller body to see what he'd done with them. She paused, standing in the middle of the room, rewinding through their earlier movements. She'd slapped him over by the bedroom door, which he'd shoved her against as they'd started kissing. They'd started fucking against the wall, which meant the clothes had come off near the desk. Bending down and reaching under the chair, her fingers closed around cloth. She straightened, victorious, and pulled on her panties.

"Then why do I feel like you're still pissed at me?" Damon asked.

"I'm not. Sex magically fixes everything," Kat replied as she yanked on her shirt, which she had just located behind the dresser. "You know that."

For a moment there was a pause, and Kat began to hunt for her pants. "That was sarcasm," Damon finally said, and Kat knew it had taken him that long to realize it. He sat up, watching her comb the room.

She glanced up at the ceiling in exasperation, as if it could save her from the stupidity of her husband. "Yes, Damon. That was sarcasm."

There were her pants, hanging off the edge of the bed. She went to grab them and Damon's hand reached out and took hold of her wrist. She tried to pull away but he held firm, tugging her closer to him. "Seriously, you're still mad?" he said. She found herself

standing between his legs. She kept her gaze on his face, trying to avoid drinking in the sight of his toned naked body. She wasn't going to let him distract her again. "I said I was sorry."

He was actually pouting, Kat realized. If she didn't know he was twenty five, she'd have sworn he was just some dumb kid. With a scoff she tried again to break away from his grip. His fingers loosened and let her go. She quickly got her pants on, and made for the door, leaving him alone in the dim room.

~*~*~

Damon wasn't bright enough to know what it meant, but Kat was. All Damon knew was that they'd gone two months without any interruption in their sex life. Kat was sure he thought that he was the luckiest guy in the world. She'd spent those couple of months ignoring the problem, as if pretending it wasn't happening would be enough to make it go away.

Finally though, she'd reached the conclusion that this was happening whether she wanted it to or not. That night, she'd planned to tell him. He'd been on a job all day - body guard duty for someone who needed to go conduct business a town away. He was supposed to be home by dinner, which she'd actually made, and then they would sit down and she'd tell him and hope he'd be more excited about it than she currently was.

Dinner time came and went. The sun set and she'd lit a lamp and a couple of candles and waited. And waited. For a brief while she was worried. What if he'd gotten hurt on his job?

When the moon was fully up and he still wasn't home, she pulled on her shoes and made her way to the house of the merchant who had hired him. He was home. Had been all day. In fact, he hadn't spoken to Damon in weeks, nor needed a body guard for any business recently.

Kat knew where to go from there.

When she'd entered the tavern he was sitting at the bar, red faced drunk with some blonde bitch in his lap. His hand was slowly making its way up her skirt.

So Kat reacted as any woman in her situation would have. She drew her bow and tried to shoot him with an arrow.

She wasn't actually trying to hit him, but it did make her feel better.

Now, having left her husband naked in their bedroom, she trudged through the muddy streets of New Pittsburgh, boots sloshing through puddles as she made her way to her destination. It had been raining for the last three days, only stopping in short reprieves -

one of which had been when Kat had stormed home from the tavern with Damon following her, slurring at her how it wasn't what it looked like. He'd just read the map wrong and ended up in the tavern instead of at the job, and it would have been rude not to have a drink, and that woman had thrown herself at him, he was just about to tell her to get away when Kat had walked in.

The rain had started up again, pouring down, soaking her clothing and plastering her hair to her face. She came to a stop in front of the small one story home of the local healer, Jago Fergus, sitting dark and quiet. The knocking was loud, even to her own ears. After several long moments the door opened and a young brunette woman, no older than Kat, was glowering at her. "Do you have any idea what time it is?" she asked.

Kat realized she didn't. It had already been late when she'd found Damon, and then they'd gone home and fought some more before they'd fallen into bed together. And that was probably hours ago. She didn't care.

"Is Jago here?" she asked.

The woman looked ready to turn her away, when a voice from behind her interrupted.

"Who is it?" Jago appeared behind his wife fastening a robe around himself. He was in his late 30's, pudgy and starting to go grey around the temples, but a decent enough healer from what she had seen.

"Kat?" he said, recognizing her from her trips to him with her husband. Damon tended to get banged up on his mercenary jobs, and was on pretty familiar terms with Jago at this point. "Is everything all right?"

~*~*~

"Are you certain?" Jago asked her, eyebrows raised after Kat explained what she wanted.

"Yeah."

"And you've talked to Damon about it?" he said.

"Yeah," she lied. "Look, he's not father material. And what the hell would I do with a kid? And it's not like we're rich. It's better this way. We both think so." So what if those were all of Kat's reasons. She honestly had no idea what Damon would think about having a baby.

Jago studied her a moment, like he was trying to sense if she was being honest. Whatever conclusion he came to he said, "All right," and stood.

She was sitting on a wooden chair in his kitchen, hair dripping water onto his floor. His wife had gone back to bed, or she surely would have been complaining. Jago stood and started rifling through several cabinets, pulling out containers of herbs.

"Drink these twice a day for the next week," he told her. "That should do the trick."

"Thanks," Kat replied, taking the herbs and pocketing them.

"If you add sugar or milk it'll ruin the effects," Jago advised. He then added, "You might want to think on it a little longer, Kat. It's a big decision."

Kat stood. "Yeah. I should get going. Sorry to bother you so late."

~*~*~

Damon approached her the next morning as she sat at the kitchen table. "Hey," he said, looking like an abashed child.

Kat nodded a greeting.

"Look, babe," he said with a sigh, taking a seat across from her. "It didn't mean anything, okay? I was drunk, she just was sitting there, nothing actually happened."

"I'm over it," Kat said.

"Seriously?" Damon asked.

"Yeah," Kat said. "Just don't let it happen again. I won't miss next time."

Damon grinned at her. "Never again. Wouldn't want an arrow in my dick."

"Or up your ass."

"Definitely not," he said with a laugh. "So we're good? Seriously?"

"Seriously," she said, offering him a small smile.

"Great," he replied. He clapped his hands together once. "So what's for breakfast?"

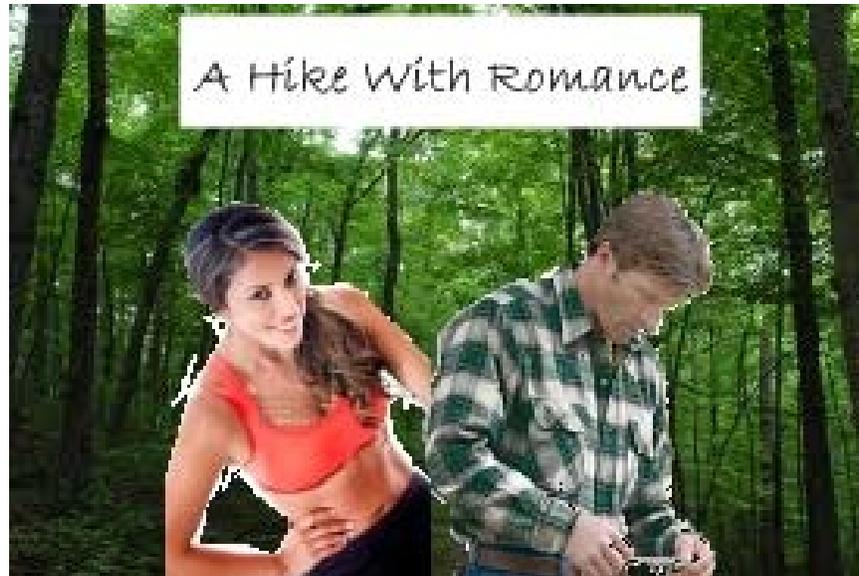
"Whatever you make yourself," Kat told him.

"You can't make me something?" he asked. "I thought you forgave me?"

"I said I'm over it, not that I'm your slave," Kat said.

"Fine, fine," he stood and went to look for something to eat.

Kat took a sip of tea. It was bitter.



A Hike With Romance

“Quit staring at my tits.”

“I’m not staring *at* your tits, lovely though they are. I’m staring at the huge spider crawling *up* your tits.”

“Nice try,” Kate says.

“No,” Derek insists, “there actually is a huge spider crawling up your tits. It’s brown, has long hair, sharp mouth-parts, eight legs, kind of like you, actually,” he finishes with a grin.

Kate looks down and sees the probing front legs of the spider tapping her sweat-resistant shirt. They look each other in the eyes: a multitude of the spider’s boring curiously into her soul.

“Double crap,” she says, not able to tear her eyes away. “Do you think it’s poisonous?”

“Probably not,” Derek muses, rubbing his stubbly chin with a rough palm.

“Do you think it’ll bite?”

He nods. “Probably, if you piss it off.”

The arachnid seizes this opportunity to advance two giant spider-sized steps towards her chin; it is now firmly planted on the small plateau of her chest, poised for its next move.

“How should we deal with this?” she asks, still locked in thousand-eye contact with the cautious invader.

Derek holds a single finger up, signaling for her to wait a moment, and searches the woods just off the path. He returns brandishing a large branch like a club.

“You going to beat me with that?” she asks skeptically. The spider rears up defiantly, challenging Derek to try it.

And he does. With the tip of the branch, he sweeps the spider from her chest in a fluid motion. In the process, he also rends a small hole in her shirt and leaves a dark smudge on the white fabric where the wet bark grazed her.

“Thanks, asshole,” she says, wiping at the stain and poking her fifth finger through the small hole. “I just bought this.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, throwing the stick back into the woods. “You wanted it dealt with and I dealt with it.” He steps towards her and sticks his large index finger through the hole in her shirt, forcing it open a little wider and playfully grazing her bra underneath. He smiles wickedly, turns, and continues hiking up the forest path towards their camp site, his heavy pack and bedroll clinging snugly to his broad flannelled shoulders.

Kate looks around, hoping the spider is okay. Maybe one day it will find the right girl; she just isn’t it. She sticks her finger back through the hole, which is now big

enough to easily make out the soft cottony curve of her padded sports bra. She isn't sure whether Derek knows her 'lovely tits' are more illusion than reality, but hopefully in the dark clumsy fumbling of their tent he won't care.

They hike another twenty minutes before stopping for a drink. The late-season air is cooling the further up the mountain they go, though Derek can still feel sweat beading down his chest and under his arms. He loves hiking, and he loves getting out of the city. He hates the rat race of it all, even though he is getting closer to the cheese every day. At 33, he is already a junior manager at his accounting firm. He can smell senior management and then junior partner just a few turns ahead, if only he can stick it out. As long as he can escape once in awhile, he probably can. The money is good, and that has presented plenty of opportunities to help his 'game' with the ladies. Kate is a perfect example of one of his 'camp the tramps.'

He met her at a bar after work. She was wearing a frilly blouse and tight dark skirt. He'd liked her athletic look the moment he saw her. When she confessed to him that she didn't get out of the city often (over the several drinks he had ordered for them), he suggested they go camping together, and here they were two weeks later.

"You sure you know where this place is?" Kate asks, her dark hair sticking to her head from perspiration.

"Yeah," he says, "I got the map right here." He takes the folded paper from the side pocket of his hiking pack and holds it up for her.

“Okay,” she replies, sliding her water bottle back into the mesh of her brand new hiking bag.

It’s cute, Derek thinks, that she’s gone out and bought all her gear just for this weekend. She didn’t even freak out about the spider (something he could not have guarantee for himself).

He unfolds the map and checks to make sure they are on the right trail to their campsite: number 65. Yep, there it is about one mile down the trail and off a smaller path. He gives Kate a thumbs-up and they continue their hike.

Twenty minutes later, they come to a small dirt path leading off to the left of the main trail.

“This is us,” Derek says.

“Great,” Kate nods, taking a large gulp of water from her bottle. She is starting to chafe from her tight-fitting pants and is glad to almost be there.

Derek starts off down the side path. “Should just be a little bit down here. We should see a sign.”

Kate follows him, and they walk another ten minutes seeing neither a sign nor a campsite. The trees and dense brush close in around them, cutting off the late-day sun. The dirt path continues snaking through the woods seemingly without end.

Derek grumbles and takes out the map again. “We should’ve seen it by now.”

Kate shrugs. “We’ll find it eventually if we keep going, right?”

“I don’t know,” Derek murmurs.

“Well we’ll find something!” Kate declares. “This path isn’t being kept clear for nothing.” She steps gracefully around him, their shoulders touching and completing the circuit for a moment, sending an electric charge through her. With that she takes the lead.

They walk another fifteen minutes down the endless path in artificial darkness as the thick canopy of trees overhead mutes the sun. Finally they come to a small clearing with two logs placed at an obtuse angle around a disused fire pit.

“This must be us,” Kate says, unclipping her heavy pack, leaning it against one of the logs, and stretching her grateful shoulder muscles.

“I don’t know,” Derek muses, “I don’t see a sign or anything.”

“Well then it’s ours now,” she states simply, wrapping her arms around Derek’s neck and standing on her tiptoes to kiss him lightly on the mouth.

His lips part, and she slides her tongue gently between his teeth. She can feel him lean into her, his heavy pack adding to his already-considerable weight advantage.

She pulls back and feels herself flush. “Maybe we should setup the tent first,” she teases.

Derek begins the process of setting up their small tent, though Kate proves a quick learner, and, with her help, they have the wire and canvas structure up and their bedrolls laid out in less than twenty minutes. The day is dying, the greenery dulling into

grey quickly, and Derek tells Kate to look for kindling while he gathers some larger logs for a fire.

Many of the logs he finds are damp and coated with moss. He uses his small hand axe to shave off the wet bark and growth while Kate gets the kindling burning. He hopes the fire will be hot enough to dry out and burn the bigger logs.

Kate's fire is robust and she stands over it warming her hands. Derek adds one of the larger logs, which sputters and smokes heavily. They both shield their eyes and move away from the smoke, hips colliding lightly. Derek produces a bottle of whiskey and two plastic cups, pouring them each a generous portion. They sip contentedly and watch the burning pyre.

Once the larger log catches, they roast hot dogs on sticks, eating them on buns with organic trail mix as a side dish. This, of course, is the appetizer, and Derek can hardly focus in anticipation of the main course.

Soon true dark settles on the campsite and with it a cool autumn breeze rustles the voyeuristic foliage. Derek suggests they go into their tent for warmth.

Inside, he lies down on his bedroll and starts unbuttoning his flannel shirt. Kate slides in on top of him and helps him finish, rubbing her pointed chest against him as she takes her time making her way down his shirt. He slides his hands up and down her back as she descends. Once the last button comes free, she pulls the two sides of his shirt away from his broad chest, exposing the dark patches of hair thickening towards his naval and groin. He hooks his finger into the hole of her stained shirt and pulls it up over her head. She straddles his things and wiggles out of the shirt, raising his internal temperature several degrees. He cups the soft shell of her bra and squeezes. He is

surprised by the excessive give in the padding of her bra, and she shrinks away from his touch.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs, reaching behind her to undo the thick clasp, “I think they’re beautiful.”

She smiles and leans into him then as he finishes undoing her bindings. He pulls the bra forward and away, revealing two pale orbs illuminated vaguely by the dying embers of the fire outside. He brings his face each in turn, drawing his teeth lightly across her small areole and kissing the tiny buds of her nipples. He can feel them respond to his touch, stiffening into sharp points. She tastes of sweat, baby powder, and a natural musk.

Kate sighs quietly, lowering herself to bury her face in the top of Derek’s head. His bristly copper mouth scrapes across her chest, the exquisite pain sharpening and focusing her senses until she is consumed, aware of nothing but his touch. She trembles with the intensity of the sensation, lifting herself slightly to pull her tight-fitting exercise pants down away from them. Derek leans back, his dark eyes reflecting the soft filtered firelight as she grasps his belt buckle, pulling him up at the waist and then releasing him. She rubs herself against him, feeling his heart beat through his firmness. She slides up and onto him, letting him fill her slowly as she lowers herself to rest on his hips. He groans and closes his eyes, working his pelvis against her as they rise and fall in the ecstasy of sweet resistance.

Her heart beats faster and her blood pounds under her skin, a chain reaction of exquisite dynamite beginning to detonate within her. He responds in kind, his breath coming in rapid bursts like a locomotive blasting steam. Slowly, Kate feels the explosions merge, growing larger and larger inside her until they scream a single body-shattering chorus and her senses drown in electric burning pleasure. At the same time, she feels Derek shudder beneath her, releasing himself with an audible moan and a deep thrust, burying himself forever inside her.

They come back to themselves gradually; their breath slowing in the humid stink of the tent, which coats their bodies in heady dampness.

Derek leans in one final time to kiss her, his lips soft and insistent. His bristly chin scratches her lip, leaving a burning trail of him behind as he rolls over and drifts off into contented sleep.

Kate licks her lips, enjoying the salty granola taste that he leaves behind. She turns over and closes her eyes, smiling contentedly and giving in to the press of sleep closing around her.

Sometime later, Kate jerks awake and looks around. The tent is sunk into inky blackness. Derek is asleep, turned away from her with the rippling curves of his back exposed. What jolted her from sleep? A light? A noise? She feels like they are being watched; her skin prickles with goose bumps.

She shakes Derek awake. He grunts and half-turns over.

“What is it?” he asks sleepily.

“I think someone’s out there,” Kate says.

Derek sits up on an elbow and looks around the blackness.

“I don’t see anything. It’s fine.”

“Go check outside,” Kate insists, jostling him into full alertness.

“Fine, fine,” he grumbles, stretching and pulling his shirt and pants back on. His flannel shirt hangs open as he exits the tent.

Outside, the chilly breath of night brushes past Derek, and he crosses his arms in front of him to preserve the tent’s residual warmth. The fire is completely dead; not even a wisp of smoke remains in the cold pit. He squints into the darkness, turning around to survey the area for intruders. Up the narrow path, he sees what could be the outline of a figure cut out of the darkness.

“Hey,” he calls out. He searches the ground quickly for some sort of object and, finding a sharp stick, grips it tightly and glances back up the path. “Hello?” he calls, but he can’t tell if anything is there now. He curses under his breath and goes back into the tent.

“What is it?” Kate asks, her sleeping bag pulled up over her shoulders for protection.

“Nothing, I’m just going to get a flashlight and look around.”

Kate looks unconvinced, and he grabs the battery-powered flashlight from his bag before going back out.

He flicks on the flashlight and traces the beam of bright yellow light up the path. He doesn't see anything but foliage lining the narrow trail. He takes several hesitant steps forward, dirt and stones digging into his bare feet. He winces at the pain and sweeps the flashlight's beam from side to side.

"There's nothing," he says aloud, for his own benefit as much as Kate's. The wind responds, rustling his flannel shirt. He sweeps the beam back up the trail a final time, catching a glimpse of what could be something darting quickly around a corner. "Hello?" he says, "Is someone there?" He takes a deep breath for courage and steps further into the darkness.

Kate lingers in the tent, ears attuned to the sounds of the forest around her. She hears Derek call out several times and sees the beam of his flashlight glancing up the path. She breathes a sigh of relief and lies back. A few minutes later, Derek returns to the tent. He slides in without a word, the flashlight extinguished.

"I guess it was nothing," she says.

Derek answers by easing himself on top of her, pushing his hands down into the sleeping bag she has pulled up over herself. His hands are cold from being outside, and she lets him slip them over breasts and under her arms, tickling the short hairs that sprout there.

She groans with pleasurable anticipation as he presses down on her. “You ready for more?”

He nods in the darkness, and she holds the sleeping bag open. He slides in sideways against her naked torso, his bare chest cold against her and causing her flesh to quiver. He urges himself into her this time, sliding fast and deep. He is stiff and cold, causing her to contract involuntarily around him and sending icy tendrils of pain and pleasure down her spine. He surges slowly, the tempo different now that he is on top. They rock together for several minutes until Kate loses herself in the growing torrent of his insistence. She feels the wave building again, this time with an icy edge that has her shuddering. As they crest the final peak together, she can feel her breath catch in her lungs, all her senses seizing up at once in a spasm of ecstasy as his icy stinging release sends chills rippling through her.

Derek moves his mouth closer to hers for a final kiss, and a foul breathy torrent smacks her in the face. Reflexively, she reaches up to touch his cheek, and her fingers sink through a layer of soft yielding flesh like overripe melon. A piece of it falls away at her touch and lands with a moldering smack on her neck. She screams.

Derek keeps chasing after the elusive figure, which seems to keep itself just out of sight. He traces it back about 50 yards from the campsite before it disappears. He turns around, pointing the beam in a full 360 degree arc. He catches the figure again off the path about 20 yards away.

“Hey!” Derek calls, brandishing the sharp stick like a spear. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He steps through the dense brush lining the path, slicing his bare feet and causing him to yelp in pain. When he emerges on the other side, he points the light back where the figure was but finds only impartial vegetation.

This game is getting old, he thinks. He walks to where the figure was and stumbles over a hard rock. He grabs his toe, which is surging with sharp pain. After a moment, he throws the beam of his flashlight down on the stone, which appears to be some sort of shrunken grave marker. Several more protrude from the earth at semi-regular distances like filed teeth. Single words adorn each one like a label. He reads the one on the stone beneath him, and what it says does not quell his rising panic as he hears Kate begin to scream.

RAPE

Kate shoves the thing off of her and bolts out of the tent naked. “Derek!” she screams. “Derek!”

Everything is black, and her brand new flashlight is back in the tent. No way is she going back in there. She takes off up the path, desperate to find him.

Derek races back through the thicket, further damaging his feet. He pounds back down the path toward their campsite and Kate's screaming.

"What is it?" he shouts as they run into each other.

"The tent! It's in the tent!" she screams.

She is completely naked, and Derek rips off his flannel shirt to wrap around her. She grasps it like a security blanket, wrapping it tightly around her shoulders. "A... I don't know... a..." she is gasping for breath.

Derek shoots the flashlight's beam past her towards the campsite. He doesn't see anything else coming up the path. "Okay, he says, let's go check it out."

"No!" Kate screams, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Let's just go!"

Derek furrows his eyebrows; he didn't figure her for the hysterical type. "It's okay," he says, "You stay behind me."

She grabs him by the arm and tries to pull him away up the path, but he holds firm and tells her to stay close. As they approach the campsite, the only noise he can hear is the rustling of leaves. The tent's flap waves lazily in the night wind. Derek shines the beam of the flashlight through the thin fabric and then through the yawning gap. There is nothing inside but their bedrolls and packs.

"What did you see?" he asks.

"A... a..." she can't seem to form the words, and her teeth are chattering from the cold.

"Whatever it is, I think it's gone," he says, sweeping the flashlight back across the campsite, confirming they are alone. "We just got a little spooked is all."

"Where did you go?" she asks desperately. "Where were you?"

He shakes his head, "I thought I saw something, but I guess not."

Kate knows he's trying to comfort her. He wraps his bare arm around her and pulls her in close while swinging the flashlight around. His warmth is like a salve, coating her exposed layers of fear. Maybe it had just been her imagination?

"How you doing?" he asks, smiling down at her, though he looks pale and she can see sweat on his brow despite the chilled night air.

"Better," she says, wanting it to be true.

He kisses her tenderly, and she draws strength from it. They examine the tent together, looking at the crumpled bedrolls, clothes, and packs strewn about. There is no evidence of any kind of unwanted visitor. Maybe she had dreamed it?

After their search, Derek turns off the flashlight and curls back up under his sleeping bag. She slides in next to him and he spoons her lightly; his soft warmth comforting her better than any conciliatory words. She is soon fast asleep.

The next morning, Kate awakens to a glowing green forest. It is hard to tell the time from the emerald light filtering through the trees. They eat a breakfast of cold granola and bananas before packing up their bedrolls and tent. Derek also cleans and

applies bandages to his feet, which are crusted with small stones and bloody scrapes. As they re-shoulder their packs, Derek bends down and kisses her on the mouth.

“Thanks for coming out,” he says.

“Thanks for inviting me,” Kate replies, the fear of last night all but extinguished; a nightmare evaporating in the light of day. “I had fun.”

He chuckles and works his way from her mouth around her throat, kissing her tenderly. Then he stops suddenly.

“Woah,” he says, pulling away. “What did you fall in last night?”

“I didn’t fall,” she says. “Why?”

Derek spits onto the ground several times, “You got something funky on your neck. You sure?”

Kate’s heart seizes as she reaches up and touches the greasy stain on the side of her neck. She sniffs the sticky brown residue on her fingers, and its foulness brings her instantly back to the thing from last night that definitely wasn’t Derek. She doubles over and heaves granola and chewed banana onto the forest floor.

Derek laughs, grabs her by the shoulders, and pulls her hair back. “You’re okay. It’s not *that* bad. Just get it out.”

She’s not so sure she can.

Two months later, Kate is huddled in her apartment crying over her bathroom sink. The tiny plastic stick glares back up at her, mocking her with its solid blue plus sign. She picks up her phone and dials Derek.

“Hey,” he says, “I’m at work. What’s up?”

“I’m pregnant,” she says between sobs.

“Oh,” he says through the speaker, “Really?”

“Yes,” she states.

“Wow, huh,” he says, sounding stumped. “Uhh, you sure it’s mine?”

She looks at her phone in disgust. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s just, the doctor said I can’t have kids. Cancer when I was twenty. So, you sure?”

Her tears come harder now and she sobs loudly into the phone.

“Hey, it’ll be okay,” phone-Derek says.

No it won’t, Kate wants to scream at him. If the baby isn’t his, then there’s only one other possibility, one other person she’s been with in the past two months, and with the memory comes the *taste*: the sour sting of dirt marinating in vinegared road-kill. Her vision dims, stars burst in front of her eyes, and she feels eminently nauseas. She knows. She feels it, the stranger’s frosted seed taking root inside her, a swallowed ice cube that won’t melt.

Then her survival instincts kick in and it all stops: the cork slamming down on the leaky bottle of her sanity.

“Yes, it’s yours,” she lies.

Untitled YA\$ Project

They were en route to the final delivery address, and Charlotte flipped to the last page of directions, only to find that there was no last page. Whoever printed out the packet had left off the last sheet. “Shit. We’re missing the rest of the directions.”

Jack glanced over. “Did a page fall on the floor over there? Or are you sitting on it?” He reached across in an absent manner and patted her leg, almost making her jump.

She pawed around for the stray page but came up empty. “No, it’s not here. What should we do?”

“It’s no problem, you have the address, right? Just put it in your phone.”

“I don’t have a smartphone.”

He fished an iPhone out of his pocket and passed it to her. Of course he had an iPhone.

Charlotte stared at the phone in her hand, annoyed with herself for feeling embarrassed. “Sorry, I don’t really know how to use one of these.”

He talked her through plugging the address into the map function. By the time she’d gotten it all set up, they had overshot by a bit. “Whenever you can, we need to turn around.”

Jack pulled a shameless, languid U-turn.

She was staring at that little moving blue line when the phone dinged and a message bubble popped up on screen. The name at the top was “Rebecca.” She averted her eyes as fast as possible, but she had already processed the words. In an admirable and unusual display of swift decision-making on her brain’s part, she thrust the phone at Jack, resolved to pretend she hadn’t seen anything. “You got a text.”

The traffic was heavier now, and he was concentrating on the road, for once. “Can you read it to me?”

Seriously? She drew back her arm and opened her mouth to say, “I’d rather not.” But then she closed it. Now either way, he was going to know she’d seen it. Rebecca must be his girlfriend and send him texts like this all the time. What was he thinking, asking her to read it? The situation was his fault, so why should she care?

She cleared her throat. “It’s from Rebecca. She says, ‘See you tonight? Maybe I’ll let you come in my mouth this time, big boy. You can pinch my...’ That’s all I can see in the preview, so I don’t know what you can pinch. Would you like to find out together?” She looked at the phone again. “Also, we’re here. Turn right and pull out. Over!” She clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle an involuntary giggle.

Jack had frozen at the wheel. He made the turn, eased onto the side of the street, and shut the engine off in silence, not looking at her. She started to feel nervous. Was he really upset? Maybe humor was the wrong approach.

“Charlotte, oh my god.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry you saw that. I wasn’t thinking.” He finally turned to look at her. “She almost never—I didn’t think it was going to be anything like that.”

She shrugged. “It’s no big deal. My virgin eyes can handle it, okay? Let’s never mention this again.” She started to open the door, but he grabbed her elbow.

“Hold on a second. Please,” he added as an afterthought. “In the vein of never mentioning this again: it actually is kind of a big deal. Rebecca is the True Love Waits youth leader at school. If you mentioned this to anyone and it got around, she would be

devastated. Please promise me you'll keep this a secret." He noticed he was still holding her elbow and let go.

Charlotte felt the beginnings of real annoyance creeping up. First he forces her to read his dirty text out loud—not her fault. Then he tries to extract a vow of silence from her because his girlfriend happens to be the school's number one secret hypocrite—last time Charlotte checked, also not her fault. True Love Waits was a student group who swore to be 110% celibate until their respective wedding nights. They probably weren't even supposed to masturbate. Charlotte would speculate that give or take, say, two kids, every single member was a total fake.

"I'm not a gossip," she snapped. "But seeing it wasn't my fault, and I don't think I owe you any promises. I'm not interested in narrating your text porn to anyone, so I hope that's good enough."

"Charlotte, please." The earnestness in his face gave her an unwelcome squishy feeling.

"Look, I'm not planning to tell anyone. I just don't make promises lightly, okay? I know that may seem foreign to you." He blinked, and she winced inside. Why was she being so mean? Until this, they had been getting along pretty well for the past hour. "I'm sorry. I don't know why—I don't mean to act like jerk. I wouldn't do something malicious to mess up your relationship with your girlfriend. I don't do things like that. I have never, and I would not. Can we just drop this?"

Before Jack could respond, someone knocked at Charlotte's window, startling them. It was a tall, ancient gentleman wearing suspenders. She rolled down the window.

“Mr. Owens?” He grinned and nodded. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Owens. How are you today?”

Mr. Owens turned out to be not only their last, but also their most time-consuming stop of the day. He insisted that they come in and visit, so they put in a patient five minutes side-by-side on his living room sofa, smiling and nodding just as though they hadn't been in the middle of a acid argument over teen sexual hypocrisy mere seconds before.

Once they had excused themselves, Mr. Owens walked them back out to the car and waved while Jack pulled away from the curb. The car stopped after only a few yards. “Did you forget something?” Charlotte asked.

“What the fuck?” Jack muttered, ignoring her. He pumped the gas pedal and examined the gearshift in confusion. He jammed the gear into park and shut the engine off. When he turned the ignition again, the engine wouldn't start. He tried again and again with the same result.

“What's going on?” Charlotte knew as she spoke that it was unhelpful, but she felt impelled to say something.

Jack snorted in disbelief and collapsed against his seat. “I don't know what the fuck is going on. The car just stopped moving. And now it won't start.”

Once again, there was light knock at the window. This time Mr. Owens had walked around to Jack's side. Jack rolled down the window. “Havin' some trouble with your vehicle?” Mr. Owens croaked. Jack repeated what he'd just told Charlotte, minus the profanity. Mr. Owens fumbled on the pair of glasses hanging at his collar, leaned in the window and squinted at the dashboard. “Give 'er another crank?”

Jack obeyed, sighing.

Mr. Owens leaned back and removed his glasses, polishing them. “Well, yer ignition’s still turning on, so yer battery ain’t dead. And your fuel gauge reads dang near empty.” He settled his glasses back on his nose. “I expect yer done out of gas, son.”

Fall 2013

The Rules:

1. Stories must have a character show their ass (figuratively or literally);
2. Stories must contain unanswered questions; and
3. Stories could contain a spectral ATM.

The Stories:

Ladies' Night at Doorbells by Michelle Anzavino;

The Spectral ATM by Heather Frizzell;

Disposable by Sam Segal;

Sarah by Shannon MacDonald; and

The Black Ticket Club by Jean Thrift.

Ladies' Night at Doorbells

It was Ladies' Night at Doorbells. Only a few minutes to "Chime Time" and Marina "Ding Ding" DeMatteo was backstage sprinkling edible glitter over a dancer's abs like salt over a bland dish. Around her, men of different desirable physiques were being similarly preened by their female coworkers. This gathering of hot bodies was scored by the hottest dance hits of the '80s, '90s and today, pumping up the biddies sitting patiently on the other side of the curtain. Being a shower curtain, it didn't block out any sound; so while Rex lamented working the night before his daughter's kindergarten graduation, Marina eavesdropped on the chatter happening under his lyrical droning in time to "The Thong Song."

"Andreas could have taken tonight for me," Rex said. "He likes this shit! Being manhandled by grabby grannies."

Marina side-eyed the curtain. Hopefully no one heard that, because the patrons of Doorbells would be none too pleased if the illusion of sincerity was shattered before "Nine-Inch Knocker" could tenderly rub their sensible bobs while thrusting his barely sheathed manhood in their faces. Rex was so good at saying "I care" with his eyes.

Lorene a.k.a. "Jingle Tingle" paused in the middle of strapping fake dynamite to another guy's chest and asked, "Well did you call him?"

"I tried but his phone is disconnected."

"Hm, that's odd," she said.

Marina wasn't really listening to them; she was focusing on the confab in the audience. Behind the plastic partition, three senior citizens were plotting to remove their dentures and throw them onstage in lieu of dollars; a girl who sounded like she was 15

but was probably 32 wept over the abortion she had had that morning while her friend reassured her that the “Doorknobs” show was going to make her forget all her troubles; a bachelorette party wouldn’t stop screaming “We want wang!” like singly-minded genital-gobbling zombies; and an insurance agent was trying to quickly explain to a client why a tractor didn’t count as a car even though it was her primary mode of transportation. Pretty standard crowd.

Save for the dimming of the house lights, these women (and some men) could’ve gone on all night, unable to mark the passage of time in the windowless box that was Doorbells. As soon as the room fell dark, excitement choked the noise out of every throat, and for a moment the only sound was the rustle of Rex’s tulle skirt as he prepared to take the floor. Then the house DJ came over the loudspeaker.

“LLLLLLLADIIIIIEES! Are you ready for some DOORKNOBS?”

The crowd erupted into one earsplitting shriek, and Rex sashayed out onto the other side of the curtain to the melodic overture of Swan Lake. Watching him, Marina remarked to herself how poetically he moved. The way he seamlessly transitioned from a pirouette into a bump-and-grind was pure art. Perhaps if she had not been quite so captivated she would’ve heard the heavy, angry footsteps of someone coming up behind her, but alas it was not until the solid barrel of a gun was jabbed into her lower back that she realized she was in trouble. And not the kind of trouble she usually found herself in after forgetting to feed her fish – *real* trouble.

“I want my fucking money,” a deep voice whispered in her ear.

“Andreas!” she gasped.

No one in the room noticed the weapon in Andreas' hand, and in fact he was on the receiving end of friendly waves and polite questions.

"How was Prom?" asked Frank "Naughty Knob" Vargas.

"It was good," Andreas answered. "I'll bring the pictures next week."

After that everyone's attention was diverted to the minor crisis of a broken zipper on the Sexy Zoologist costume, and Andreas lowered his mouth back to Marina's ear.

"Two grand. In cash. Or you die."

Marina nodded, her facade of calm unwavering. She didn't have two thousand dollars, but it was either the money, or her brains painting a tree trunk. Andreas was already looking antsy, but she had a plan.

"There's an ATM in the bar," she murmured. Andreas responded by urging the gun harder against her spine. She grabbed her beat up purse from the communal vanity and slid through the crack between the wall and the shower curtain.

The two inched out onto the dark corner of the stage, conjoined by the gun, their movements awkward and uncoordinated like people in a three-legged race. But they went unnoticed, because it appeared a patron had already caused a disturbance in the act – a girl was beating Rex with his own pointe shoe while screaming "You made me abort your baby! You told me you loved me!" Some of the other women were urging her on, while others were pulling down Rex's G-string and slapping his exposed ass.

Emboldened by their undetected presence, Andreas took a step back and waved the gun in the direction of the cash machine. Security ran right past them – Marina thought for a split second to grab someone and scream for help, but they were already

across the room before she could open her mouth. Andreas was staring at her intensely with blazing purple eyes.

Slower than necessary, Marina slid her card into the slot. She was intensely conscious of her own mortality as she entered her pin – 1996, the year she lost her virginity against a cotton candy machine to the hot rodeo clown at the county fair. To this day the smell of burnt sugar brought back memories of sticky fingers and being hog-tied.

“I don't have all night,” Andreas growled.

“I'm going as fast as I can,” she snapped.

“No, I mean seriously I only have twenty minutes, I'm supposed to be babysitting tonight.”

On the screen an animated graphic of a tap dancing penguin indicated the ATM was trying to connect to her bank. Andreas laughed. “That penguin gets me every time.” After thirty seconds he started mimicking the penguin's soft shoe. After sixty, he was starting to look impatient again. Finally a message popped up on screen. “Connection has failed. We apologize for any inconvenience. Please try again later.”

“Unacceptable! Fuck you, penguin!” Andreas cried, and slammed his fist against the top of the machine.

“And the bank's closed,” Marina said. “Just let me get you the money tomorrow.”

“And give you a chance to skip town? No way, sweetheart. We're taking this to the streets.”

Marina was prodded with the pistol into the parking lot, then into the cab of her truck. The relative safety of the floodlit area was left behind for the darkness of the rural country road. Just before the pinprick of Doorbells disappeared entirely in her rearview

mirror, Marina saw a burst of red and blue police lights rush to the spot. Then they rounded the curve, and all hope evaporated.

“You better know where we’re going,” Andreas said. “Remember, I’m the one holding the gun.”

Admittedly, Marina’s options were limited. She could drive aimlessly, praying for rescue, but although it wasn’t very late it *was* very dark and it didn’t appear anyone else was driving around out here. She could drive off a cliff and kill them both, but then she thought of her goldfish and knew she had something to live for. Her only other option was to try and make a run for it.

“Pull over up here,” Andreas commanded. Marina didn’t see anything in front of them, and hesitated to hit the brakes. Andreas pinched her. “Pull over!”

“Ouch, okay!” With more force than necessary she stomped on the break pedal, and they slid across the gravelly dirt until they were stopped at the mouth of another road.

“I have to pee,” he informed her. “Leave the headlights on and get out on my side.”

They both shimmied across the leather seat and hopped onto the ground outside the passenger door. The muscles in Marina’s legs tensed, preparing to take flight, but something on this new road caught her eye. A few hundred feet up a small incline, a spectral light beckoned her. Andreas followed her line of sight, and after a moment’s consideration pointed his gun at her head. “You first.”

Now it was too late to flee. Begrudgingly she moved up the hill, her captor making pained noises over his full bladder behind her. “Hurry up,” he whined. “This place better have a bathroom.”

As they trudged upward, the illuminated area grew, and soon they could see that the light was coming from a lone streetlamp looming over a chest-high metal box.

“Is it a port-a-john?” Andreas asked.

“No,” Marina replied. “It’s an ATM.”

Intense disappointment took all the fight out of her body. It could’ve been some heroic recluse’s shanty, or at the very least a conveniently placed deus-ex-machina. But no, it was a spectral ATM. She had no choice but to pull out her bank card. Her hand shook as she slid it in and entered her 4-digit code, visions of oversized red cowboy boots superimposed over the penguin’s wingtips. God only knew what Andreas was going to do when he saw her request for \$2000 dollars get denied.

The penguin bopped back and forth, mocking her with his cheery twirling cane from under the banner of text: Connecting...

The Spectral ATM

They called it the Spectral ATM. He thought it should be a band name. She just thought it was creepy.

Regardless, they met there night after night, she in her pink peacoat, he in the sweatshirt that never kept him warm enough, so that he would hug himself and shiver. They stood in the wan streetlight and smoked cigarettes. It had been a gas station once, but with the pumps removed and the doors boarded up, only the Spectral ATM remained.

There was no money inside. They pried it open once and checked.

Mostly, they talked. About high school, which they both agreed was lame; about their sleepy, tree-laden town, which was lamer. They talked about escaping, to a city like Boston or New York. Or why stop at the east coast? There was Chicago, there was Seattle, there was LA. They talked about getting in a car and going. Whose car was never decided upon; they both drove hand-me-downs from their parents. They knew, without speaking, that wasn't a real option. It was just talk.

They had concrete plans, though. Senior year was looming. They'd both go to a state school to save money, maybe the same one. She had a couple practical possibilities: business management, or perhaps dental hygiene. He had more specific goals; he wanted to be an architect. He was good with the requisite math skills, and was competent, if pragmatic, at drawing. Besides, he'd heard architects made a lot of money. He wanted financial stability. She encouraged this. She wanted him to succeed. She wanted to kiss him sometimes, too, but didn't. They were just friends, who met in the dead of night in an abandoned gas station parking lot, surrounded by woods, when their adolescent lives seemed too much to bear.

One day at school he wore eyeliner and she didn't think anything of it. Well, she thought one thing: it brought out the blue in his eyes. Lots of kids were trying alternative looks. Some wore gold chains and baggy pants to look like rappers, although the school banned wearing pants too low when one guy tripped and showed his ass to the entire student body during a school assembly. Others gravitated toward black, chains and piercings, although it made the administration nervous. Too many reports of Gothic Gunslingers in the news, preying on impressionable teenage minds. But they couldn't ban such a basic color as black, so they simply stood by, apprehensive, hoping it was only a fad. Danger had an allure to adolescents; it would pass.

His sweatshirt also happened to be black. She thought nothing of that, too.

Once he said he wondered what it would be like to shoot a gun. A real one, not the plastic ones in the arcade, or super soakers, or nerf guns. She tried to picture it, and the power it would bring.

“What would you shoot?” she asked.

He shrugged. “That's not the point.”

She wondered what the point was, but didn't ask.

One night she showed up to the Spectral ATM at their usual time and he wasn't there. She waited for over an hour, until finally slinking home, lips blue and hands numb, stinging with hurt. He never stood her up. The next day was a Saturday, so she couldn't even ask him why at school the next day. It was too late to call.

Questions were asked the next day, but not by her. The police showed up at about eleven am and wanted to speak with her. She learned he had robbed the town RiteAid at gunpoint the night before; in fact, it was while she stood waiting for him in the dim circle of light by the Spectral ATM. No one was hurt, but he'd made off with sixty-two dollars in cash and disappeared into the woods. Textbook Gunslinger MO, the policeman whispered to her mother. Gateway crimes were common, especially after exhibiting pro-gothic attitudes and fashion. They sat down at the kitchen table across from her, hands folded solemnly, and the inquiry began.

Had he ever spoken of the Gothic Gunslingers? Did he profess to supporting anarchy? Where might he have obtained a firearm? Did he make any indication he had a desire to escape from his life?

No. No. She didn't know. And yes.

"Yes?" The policeman leaned forward. "What did he say, exactly, about escaping?"

She didn't remember the details. The world was so big and this town so small. They both wanted to escape it. They talked about that a lot.

Standing in the doorway, her mother started to cry.

"But I didn't. I wouldn't," she protested. "He wouldn't either. I know him. It's sixty-two dollars. He made a mistake."

The policemen frowned their disapproving frowns. The Gothic Gunslingers are very dangerous, they warned. Joining them deemed him a threat to national security. If he returned and surrendered, as they hoped he would, he would go to jail forever.

After the officers left, she was grounded. Still, she snuck out to the Spectral ATM for weeks afterward, hoping he would emerge from the woods with a smile and an apology. He didn't. She persisted, with only the glowing red light from the ATM to keep her company.

She imagined what she would do if he ever showed. She would hug him, the way she had wanted to every time he had shivered against the wind. She would slap him. She would shake him. And she would ask why. But not why did you do this?

Why didn't you take me with you?

Winter melted into spring. The abandoned gas station was knocked down so a Dunkin Donuts could be erected in its place. The Spectral ATM went with it. By then she was thinking of college applications. She decided to apply out of state, some as far as California. She had her own getaway to make.

Disposable

Red1 was impressed with the high turnout. Usually Cabinet meetings were dull and tedious, with only *pro forma* business conducted before everyone succumbed to the temptations of gossip and socialization. This evening, however, the Cabinet was abuzz with energetic whispering. The news must've leaked.

"We heard there's going to be a party," Plate10 shouted at the assembled leaders, confirming Red1's suspicions of a leak.

Plate1's brow furrowed, and he whispered a quick apology to the other leaders before calling out to his constituent: "Please do not speak out of turn." Plate10 blanched an even whiter shade of white, his leafy patterns twisting in distress, and he was silent.

The Forks(3-8) were engaged in a vigorous debate with the Spoons(3-6) over who was more versatile, a battle the two sides fought and re-fought on a regular basis. "We can, of course, do both noodle salads *and* meats," said Fork3. Spoon3 was not to be outdone in front his number 2, "Noodle salads are not beyond us, and soups, dare I say, are squarely within our domain and outside of yours."

"Come on, everyone, this is going to be our big day, can't we stop fighting?" Spoon4 begged.

Spoon2 shook his head. Spoon4 was always trying to find the middle ground, no matter how intractable the parties' positions. If he should ascend to the first rank, Spoon2 did not know how the sacrosanct divisions between Spoon and Fork might be altered, though he was about to find out.

“What about Sporks?” Spoon4 pled. “Aren’t they the perfect symbol of peace between our people?” There was a collective gasp among the Forks and Spoons.

“Blasphemy!” shouted Fork2, lowering herself to enter the debate for the first time. “Spoon2, can’t you control your people without them advocating for a mongrel race?”

Spoon2 turned his head away from the assembled leaders, whom he had been watching intently. “I’m sorry,” he apologized, “I didn’t hear what was said, because I don’t attend to hysteria or irrelevancies.”

Fork2 reddened. The other Forks renewed their attack on the Spoons, calling the Spoons’ stance on Sporks an obvious sign of their ignorance and impurity. The Spoons, less in number due to the recent Chili Cook Off, tried in vain to distance themselves from Spoon4’s radical ideas, but were drowned out by the fiery rhetoric of the Forks. Fork1 and Spoon1, gathered with the other leaders at the front, took noticeably different stances on their rowdy caucuses. Spoon1, ever sensitive about his group’s reputation for capitulation and weakness, spoke louder to Blue1 in an effort to avoid the squabble, while Fork1 turned his sharpened tongs as if to listen closer, appearing to revel in the dissent. Red1 seemed aloof to the matter, as usual. Blue1 focused on Spoon1’s comments so as to avoid taking a position, and Plate1 pretended to review his notes.

“Order!” called Red1 finally, banging his bottom against the wood floor after the noise had risen to a fever pitch. The other Reds silenced quickly, their military discipline and respect for their leader immediately obvious. The Blues followed soon after. Plate2,

Fork2, and Spoon2, the vice-leaders of their respective delegations, had to use visible effort to restrain their caucuses.

Red1 banged his bottom against the wood floor again, and the Cabinet finally settled into something like quiet. “The rumors... are true,” he began solemnly, “there will be a party tonight. It is called Thanksgiving, we are told.” There was a sudden increase in speculative murmuring from the assembled delegations on what this ‘Thanksgiving’ could mean. Red1 shared what he could. “We believe this event to be a feast.” The volume coming from the Forks, Spoons, and Plates doubled; this was their specialty. “There will also be many beverages, we believe.” At this, the Reds and Blues clapped their bottoms on the floor enthusiastically. Their age and wisdom show, Red1 thought, and not just in their chips and dents.

Reds and Blues were well-known to outlast both Forks and Spoons, who all outlasted Plates. Most Plates were turned over in a single event, while Forks and Spoons sometimes saw re-use. Red1 had so far enjoyed three events (Sally’s Surprise Birthday Party, the Chili Cook Off, and Halloween Horror), rising to Red1 for both the Chili Cook Off and Halloween Horror and serving as Chairperson of the Cabinet for both.

He understood the uniqueness of his position amongst the other leaders. Blue1, shiny and practically unblemished sitting atop her stack, had served late in Halloween Horror and had only contained water. Fork1, Spoon1, and Plate1 had never served in an event before; they were untested.

Red1, to his pride, had been used for warm soup, a fizzy cocktail that tickled his insides, and, most recently, beer that was never fully-washed out and continued to give him an air of stale yeasty authority.

“I know this is the first time for most of you,” Red1 continued, eyeing the assembled masses. “And I know most of you must be excited, but remember, we do not yet have confirmation on either food or beverages, so there are no guarantees of who will see action tonight.”

The word of doubt served its purpose, quieting the groups to a point where Red1 could explain the preparations that needed to be made without having to strain his voice further. “Plate1 has a report on the status of the Plates,” he said formally.

With that, Plate1 stepped reluctantly to the fore and explained that number of Plates had swelled to over 50 with recent recruits from Bob’s Corner Grocery. Most of the new recruits, he explained, were not in attendance, as they were unable to get away from their plastic packaging. He reiterated to the 12 Plates in attendance that he wasn’t sure tonight would be the night for any below 5 in the stack. At this, there were despondent wails and desolate spins. “But, well...” Plate1 back-pedaled, “we could be wrong in our estimates.”

Red1 shook his head as the expected confusion erupted, Plates shouting down the heckles of Forks and the consolations of Spoons. “Maybe you could make Splates, then you’d be more useful!” Fork3 cried derisively, at which the Forks erupted into laughter at both the objecting Spoons and Plates. Spoon4 lowered his head miserably.

“Oh wait, wouldn’t that be a Bowl?” Fork4 asked rhetorically, knowing this to be a sore point for the Plates. The ranks of the Bowls had been eliminated after the Chili Cook Off, when not a single Plate was used (much to their shame). Since then, the Bowls had been unrepresented in the Cabinet. All knew, however, that it was probably only a matter of time before they returned.

“Order! Order!” cried Red1, knowing they needed to get through a lot of important business if expectations were to be properly set and injured feelings minimized. He recalled the Spoon sit-in that had followed Sally’s Surprise Birthday Party, when only one spoon was used despite early reports of ice cream. Ending the strike had taken several meetings and promises (empty at the time) of future use. Thankfully, the Chili Cook Off had come next and saw heavy spoon usage, otherwise Red1 wasn’t sure what they could’ve done to calm the depressive Spoon hysteria that almost certainly would’ve followed. The Forks wouldn’t have made things easier, that’s for sure. Their hatred of the Spoons, born from their natural competition, would’ve led one of them to make some barbed remark (“The only thing a Spoon is good for is curving around to look at its own ass”), which would’ve likely lead to riots.

Why not get it over with, Red1 thought, and called out, “Fork1, please present your report.”

Fork1 sauntered casually to Red1’s side, flaunting his position by dipping his tongs to several Forks and a Plate or two in the crowd as though he were unaware of the randomness of his appointment, a function not of seniority (no Forks returned after the Halloween Horror) but of the mere serendipity of his physical position on top of the pile.

After working with Fork1, Red1 was certain ability and intellect had played no part in his ascension.

“It is my greatest and top honor to say,” he began, “that the Forks have never been as prepared for an event as they are today under my leadership.” A great cheer erupted from the Forks. Red1 tried not to grimace at the clumsy pandering, it was below the dignity of the Chairmanship, but that didn’t stop Blue1 (the only other veteran at the front) from rolling her eyes. “At this meeting we total 8,” Fork1 continued, “and anyone can see that we are the sharpest of the bunch.” The Forks cheered again, bumping tongs as the other delegations grumbled at the lazy jibe. “It is also my highest distinction and privilege and treat to inform the Cabinet that there are another 50 Forks sealed in a box on the Counter ready for deployment. And they, I assure and promise and warrant to you,” he added with a sneer directed at Red1, “are unblemished, pristine, and *new*.”

Red1 was proud of his scars: the dent on his side where he was gripped too tightly, the smudge where a greasy hand once lie after eating some potato chips, the streaks of white showing through his red exterior, and, of course, the beery residue which was especially important to him. He believed these imperfections showed not just his age, but the collection of wisdom and experience that he alone held and could offer as Chairman.

Red1 banged his bottom on the floor to make a point of order. “The Chairperson requests that the speaker limit his comments to the business at hand.” Blue1 seconded the request automatically, the alliance between Red and Blue having existed for

generations. Plate1 and Spoon1, not forgetting the Splate incident earlier in the evening, also voted aye, and their respective delegations chuckled at Fork1's procedural defeat.

Fork1 continued tersely. "As I was trying to say before the wise and aged and noble Chairperson stopped me, the Forks are well-prepared for this 'Thanksgiving.'" When he finished. He turned his back on Red1 and stalked back to stand between Plate1 and Spoon1.

Red1 breathed a sigh of relief; the worst was surely over. "Spoon1 will now present the report of the Spoons."

The Spoons had always been the softest of the Cabinet. Overly empathetic and quick to bend to whatever the prevailing mood happened to be. Spoon1 began his report by giving a heartfelt, though lengthy, introduction honoring the 22 Spoons that had served in both the Chili Cook Off and Halloween Horror and not returned (none had). He then reported sadly that the Spoons, lowest in number present at the meeting with only 6 in total, had no known reinforcements but would, if called upon, serve proudly at this Thanksgiving event. Fork3, ever the trouble-maker, piped in, "Don't worry, Spoonsy, we can pick up your slack." The Forks chuckled as Red1 again banged his bottom and called for order.

Blue1 was next. She was capable and determined, and Red1 had learned to count on her in several crises that had arisen between and during the events, such as the Great Ant Invasion and the Underbaked Potato Fiasco (which occurred during the Halloween Horror and was the last time anyone had seen the Knives, all 15 of which were lost). Red1 and Blue1 held each other in mutual respect, though he knew Blue1 coveted the

Chairmanship. Perhaps her time would come soon, Red1 thought with a mixture of sadness and pride, if he did not return from Thanksgiving.

Blue1 gave a pragmatic report that did her and her cohort of Blues credit. Red1 was confident they would perform ably at the event. As Blue1 returned to her position just to the right of Red1, he took the center stage for the Chairman's Report.

Just as he was about to speak, however, Fork1 cut in. "I would like to take this opportunity and time to make a motion and, you know, point of, uh, order."

Red1 turned around, suspicious of the Fork leader sneering back at him. "Perhaps your motion can wait until after the Chairman's Report," Red1 said, knowing that once the Chairman's Report was concluded the Cabinet meeting would quickly adjourn and the group would dissolve into its respective cliques for gossip and chatter. At that point, whatever Fork1 said, no matter how hurtful or idiotic, could do minimal damage.

Instead, Fork1 stepped forward. "I think we desire to have our motion heard now."

'We?' Red1 thought. Who is 'We?' Fork1, not apparently able to help himself, glanced over at Blue1. Red1's heart sank as his mind raced with possibilities.

"I, Fork1, honorable and great leader of the Fork delegation," and here his words began to sound rehearsed, "move for a roll call vote to select our Chairman."

A roll call vote, Red1 thought? How asinine was that? The longest-serving had always been elected Chairperson, and the Cabinet was an institution built on tradition as

much as manufactured quality (of which all were touted to be the best). If this was some sort of scheme, Red1 thought, it wasn't a very good one. Forks' numbers were nothing compared to the Reds and Blues, and Blue1 wouldn't toss aside the tradition that propelled her faction to the Chairmanship as often as it had the Reds. Further, the Spoons and Plates were openly hostile to the Forks. In fact, since the loss of the Knives, the Forks had not had a single ally in the Cabinet.

"Do we have a second for that motion?" Red1 asked, trying not to sound exasperated in front of the assembled delegations.

"Aye," Plate1 called. Red1's head whipped around again. What had the Forks promised them? But then his fears were relieved. "We'll second your motion," Plate1 continued, "but only to prove how lame your attempt at a coup is." Even though Plate1's words were reassuring, Red1 was still wary; the Plates could put up a good front, but getting a look at the side they didn't want you to see was always tricky.

"Then we shall call the vote," Red1 declared. "Do we have nominees?"

"I nominate Red1," Spoon4 shouted happily. He was given a menacing glare from Spoon2, who was supposed to be the one controlling the caucus while Spoon1 was up front. "Sorry!" Spoon4 whispered loud enough so that all could hear. Spoon2 sighed.

"I second the nomination," said Spoon1, showing his support for the Chairman. Red1 returned the courtesy with a nod.

"And I nominate Blue1," Fork1 cried out, smiling hugely at Red1.

“Seconded,” Plate1 called out.

Red1 had little time to think; this maneuver had never been tried before, at least as far as he could recall, which was as far back as three events, so pretty far. Thinking on his feet, he said, “I humbly acknowledge the support of the Spoons, who have shown their confidence and faith in the system of our Cabinet and its traditions on this day. I only hope that, before votes are cast, or indeed before *a nomination is accepted*, the delegations consider the ramifications that any rash or impertinent action would have on the integrity of our time-honored system.” This last part was meant for Blue1, who could still refuse the nomination and avert the crisis.

Blue1 stared straight ahead, and then began to speak in a low, calm voice. “In our noble history, we have a time-honored tradition of upholding leadership through both wisdom and custom. However, we must also acknowledge that our ability to lead is limited by our personal flaws, whatever they may be. If the system were inflexible, then it would fail to adapt to changing conditions and would inevitably crumble under the weight of crisis. The fable of the Beer Pong Tournament comes to mind, where our ranks of both Blues and Reds were so critically reduced that the few surviving members, none left with their full faculties after repeated blows to the head by ping pong Balls (not a member of this Cabinet, I remind you),” Blue1 paused as the delegations hissed and booed at the foreigner Balls.

Red1 had never heard this tale himself, so he was unsure of its accuracy, though he did admire Blue1’s use of xenophobia to stir the feelings of the masses. Blue1 waited for the hissing and booing to finish before continuing in the same soft tone. “The Blues

and Reds who returned were wise enough to acknowledge that one of the younger factions, Spoons, I believe, who were untouched by the tragedy, were more prepared to ascend to the hallowed rank of Chairman and lead us into the next event.”

The Spoons, on hearing the reference to a powerful ancestor none of them knew they had, cheered Blue1 loudly. Red1 swallowed, hard.

“Therefore,” Blue1 continued, “let this vote not be a judgment passed upon Red1, who has served with dignity, honor, and wisdom for two of his three events as our leader, and, in much more recent history, as my friend. In fact, I say we thank Red1 right now with an enthusiastic round of applause.” At this, all factions cheered, though the Reds were subdued, sensing the trap that was being laid.

Blue1 continued after a moment, silencing the cheers. “We must acknowledge our own limitations and frailties: the cracks, the dents, the bends, the chips, and the stains that each of us who are lucky enough to serve more than once, not to mention *three times*, will undoubtedly suffer.” Blue1 stopped and looked at Red1 with a well-practiced smile, “Therefore, I would accept your nomination for the Chairmanship, but only if we properly honor our friend who has served us for so long.”

Red1 was speechless as the enthusiastic roar of his demise swept over him. His wretchedness was made worse by the fact that, as Chairman, he would still be expected to call a procedural end to the speeches and a time to vote. First though, he would have his turn to speak, and he could at least guarantee that his word would also be the last.

He stretched himself out, straightening the many divots that bent his frame, and spoke in a commanding voice, trying his hardest not to show his ass. “Gentle Spoons, Plates, Forks, Blues, and Reds, I speak to you now not as your leader, but, as my dear colleague described me earlier, your friend. While the passions of the young are to be lauded, the wisdom that can only come with survival and age is not to be forgotten. If you are to cast me aside like some relic of another age I ask only that you heed my counsel while I am fit to offer it. Our time in this world is short. We are born to be used and to be discarded. Some of us are lucky enough to serve for a longer period than others, as I have served in three events and am now heading into my fourth, a longer time I know than many can fathom,” the delegations chuckled politely, “but whether we serve once or, if we are truly blessed, an unthinkable five times, know that we have always done so to the very best of our ability, and that we have truly made a difference in the world.” He paused to look at the crowds, who were beginning to idle away and chat amongst themselves. “And know,” he said loudly, grabbing for their attention once more, “that though I may be old, I have and will continue to serve proudly.” He paused to take a breath and added, almost to himself, “even if you perceive my usefulness is coming to an end.”

Red1 received an indifferent but courteous smattering of applause, and he called the vote in which the Plates, Forks, Blues, and Spoons voted him out of the Chairmanship that he had held for as long as anyone could remember. After a short victory speech in which Blue1 ensured everyone that Thanksgiving would be the best event in recorded memory, the meeting was adjourned.

On his way out, Red1 wished Blue1 good luck in her new position, and as he passed groups of others they said some consoling word; even several Forks were passably civil to him, thanking him for his service before resuming their vibrant fantasies of twirling long noodles dripping with marinara sauce.

Red1, as leader of the Reds, was still expected to manage his delegation, and he resolved to do so with all of the remaining energy and enthusiasm he could muster. He knew, though, that this unprecedented defeat had taken something from him, some vital energy that the others would interpret as hesitation. After the vote, Red1 gave in more to his dents, not holding himself as straight as he once had, and he moved with exaggerated caution as if one of those dents would become a fatal leak at the slightest provocation.

As the delegations made their final preparations for Thanksgiving later that evening, Spoon4 came up and wrapped his curved head around Red1's side, crying into his shoulder. "What is it, little Spoon?" Red1 asked.

"I just don't know why they would do that to you," Spoon4 said in between sobs. "It was awful."

"Don't waste your sympathy on an old man," Red1 chided the young Spoon, though he was moved by his compassion.

"Why not?" the Spoon asked. "Why does everyone always tell me I'm wrong for wanting everyone to get along?"

Red1 smiled sadly and told the young Spoon he better run back and get ready, because intelligence was reporting that there would be a spiced butternut soup, and no

one would want it watered down by their utensil. Once the Spoon was gone, Red1 heaved a weary sigh and set his mind to the task ahead, keenly aware that he would almost certainly not be returning after tonight. Whatever lie ahead, he hoped it would be as rewarding as his time in the Cabinet had been.

Sarah

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"No."

"No?" Officer Jimmy Benson repeated, dark bushy eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"No."

The kid stared at him, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. It was a defensive position generally, but somehow, the smug tilt of his lips served to make him look almost aggressive.

Ian Anderson. Twenty one year old caucasian male. Blonde hair, brown eyes. Five feet, nine inches of uncooperative.

"And why is that?" Jimmy tried again.

"Because I know my rights," Ian replied. "I'm not speaking without a lawyer present."

"You haven't been arrested," Jimmy said. "You're not even currently a suspect. We're just trying to get to the bottom of what lead to the events of two nights ago."

"Law. Yer."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

A nod and a snuffle. "What do you want to know?"

"Why not start from the beginning?" Jimmy said.

"Okay. I met Ian and Gary when I was twelve--"

"Uh," Jimmy interrupted. "The beginning of two nights ago."

"Oh. Yeah."

Melanie Foster. Nineteen year old caucasian female. Dyed red hair, brown eyes. Five feet, four inches of not all that bright.

"Well, we decided to drive to Ian and Gary's dad's house." She paused, dabbing at her eyes, which had started to well up with tears. She'd essentially been crying since the three kids had been picked up on the side of the road, lost, dirty, and panicked. "He's on vacation in like Boca Boca or something with their step mom. So we'd have the house to ourselves, you know?"

Jimmy nodded and Melanie began nervously twisting the tissue she was holding. "Go on," he encouraged.

She took a breath and continued. "We were listening to the radio and talking and laughing. Um. Then suddenly this truck - I think it was a truck - started tailgating us with his high beams on. It was really pissing off Ian - he was driving. So he slowed down."

"And then I showed him my ass!"

Gary Anderson. Nineteen year old caucasian male. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Five feet, eleven inches of frat boy.

"You exposed yourself to the tailgater?" Jimmy asked.

"I sure did. He passed us right after that - can't imagine why." The kid was wearing a shit eating grin and looking pretty pleased with himself.

"And then what happened?" Jimmy said, less than impressed. He realized that twenty years ago he probably had done something similar and thought it was hilarious. Jesus, he was getting old.

"Ian said he wanted to stop and get gas." The grin was starting to fade a little as Gary continued. "We got to the station we always use on the way to dad's, but it was already closed for the night. We decided just to go. We really weren't that far. Maybe half an hour away."

"We ran out of gas," Melanie sniffed. "Gary started to laugh, but Ian was really pissed. I took out my phone to call someone to help us, but we were in the middle of bumblefuck nowhere, and I didn't have any signal. Gary said something like, 'At least we've got food!' and offered us all the bag of Goldfish crackers he'd brought with him."

"My client won't be answering any questions," Ian's lawyer stated. She was a tall, thin woman with a severe expression and a nose that was just a bit off center. Her brunette hair was chopped into a bob that hung limply around her face.

"Fine, then we'll arrest him for hindering a police investigation." Jimmy's partner, Rob Shepherd, had apparently had enough. He'd been sitting next to Jimmy during the interrogations, growing more and more aggravated as they still managed to learn nothing to explain just what had happened two nights before. Rob was about ten years older than Jimmy and closing in on retirement. He hated lawyers, dumb kids, and well, just about

everyone, really.

"We're just trying to get to the bottom of this, Mrs. Porter," Jimmy chimed in, seeing the way the lawyer's jaw had set, and hoping to prevent this from turning into another one of Rob's temper control incidents.

"You're saying Cheez-its. She's saying Goldfish crackers," Rob said to Gary. "Why the discrepancy?"

Jimmy had to fold his hands together in order to restrain himself from slapping his palm to his forehead.

"I don't know," Gary replied. "It was definitely Cheez-its. They're so much better than Goldfish."

"Getting back to the events in question," Jimmy said. "What happened after you ran out of gas?"

"We waited a while, hoping another car would come by, but after about half an hour we decided that we should just walk and look for a house or a gas station or something. I think we walked for maybe twenty minutes before we finally spotted it."

"It looked like a gas station," Melanie said, before blowing her nose. Jimmy pushed the whole box of tissues over to her, and she gave him a grateful watery smile and pulled several out. "But um. When we got closer? It was - there was something weird about it."

"Weird in what way?"

"Um. There were no gas pumps. At first we thought we saw at least one, but when we got there, we realized that it was actually an ATM."

"And what does this have to do with you all winding up in the woods?" Rob asked.

"Oh, nothing. It was just really weird and creepy."

"What happened to your friend, Sarah?" Jimmy said. "She was with you for all of this, right? At what point did you lose her?"

"You don't have to answer that," Ian's lawyer said.

"Aliens," Gary exclaimed, eyes wild and wide. "I know, I know, it sounds crazy. But hear me out." He paused, and Jimmy was preparing to hear some crazy offering of proof. "It

was totally aliens. They beamed her up."

"Kid, I really hope you're kidding," Rob growled.

"No, no way. It was fucking crazy man. There were all these noises and lights. I saw a figure - one of the aliens. We took off running. Melanie and me were together. We lost Ian and Sarah, but the lights suddenly got brighter - they were blinding - and we heard her scream."

"It was a ghost," Melanie said through her tears. "While we were walking I heard whispers. 'Get out' they were saying. 'Get out.' Everything got bright and something appeared out of nowhere and started to chase us. I fell. Gary helped me up and we ran. Then everything got brighter and Sarah screamed. It got her. It must have. I was so scared." She was sobbing now.

"You don't have to answer that," Ian's lawyer said.

Jimmy sighed and closed the folder he'd had in front of him. He looked at Rob, whose jaw was clenched so tightly that Jimmy half expected his teeth to pop out of his mouth.

The door opened and another officer poked his head in.

"Benson. Shepherd. I think you're going to want to come see this."

They exchanged looks and stood, leaving Ian and his lawyer sitting in the interrogation room.

They followed the other officer to the lobby of the police station, where they were surprised to see a girl with long dark hair, covered in mud and what looked an awful lot like blood.

Sarah Jennings. Twenty one year old caucasian female. Black hair, hazel eyes. Five feet, nine inches of missing for almost two days.

She was standing in the middle of the lobby. Her long dark hair was full of twigs and leaves and was hanging in her face.

"Miss Jennings," Jimmy said, slowly approaching the girl. "Come here, why don't you take a seat?"

Through the curtain of hair he suddenly caught sight of her eyes. Instead of the hazel he'd seen in the pictures offered by her mother, they were black. All black. The whites were missing entirely. He made a noise of shocked horror and took a step backwards.

Sarah's head lifted with a wicked smile, right as all of the lights suddenly began to grow brighter. Jimmy covered his eyes with his arm, blinded. Then the screaming started.

The Black Ticket Club

One fateful spring, a notorious rash of student pranks beset Beaufort High School. It began with a few elegant, high-visibility practical jokes: from tampering with the overhead announcements system and the letter-board beneath the school sign, to surprising and delightful relocations of such items as the Biology classroom skeleton, the Bulldog mascot costume, and the Sparkling Ice vending machine. The mischief spread like a contagion from there. Copycat pranks grew sloppier, less inspired, and often simply mean-spirited. School days degenerated into little more than a terror sequence of never-ending bomb threats, fire alarms, and anthrax scares. The bathrooms became nigh unusable between the constant smoke bombs and overflowing sinks and toilets.

The boneheaded culprits behind many of this later ilk were caught and punished, but the masterminds of the original, more innocent pranks remained a mystery. The school administration kept one cryptic detail a secret. A single blank, black calling card was found at several of the more whimsical-spirited prank sites. No perpetrators in connection with these in particular had ever been apprehended.

When the parents began threatening to yank their kids out of an institution that couldn't maintain a bare minimum of order and discipline, the principal finally put his foot down. Zero tolerance for practical jokes. Anyone caught attempting such activities on school grounds would be recommended for expulsion.

The effect was immediate. Practical jokes began spreading like a wave of nuclear impact into the neighboring community. Businesses, road signs, the library, the post office, nearby houses and apartment complexes, even churches. It was a lawless land.

The town was in an uproar. Could no one control this crop of teenagers? What the hell was going on? Was something in the water? Mass possession?

With the arrival of summer came an abrupt calm. Parents and teachers dared to breathe a cautious sigh of relief. Was the lull due only to the students not being trapped together in a breeding ground of trouble every day? Or had they finally tired of their efforts, and the reign of terror was at an end?

To the relief of local business owners, but the renewed anxiety of teachers and school staff, the county school board overturned Principal Choplin's zero-tolerance policy over the summer, ruling that administering the same punishment for a joke balloon delivery and a bomb threat was not reasonable application of discipline. As the days of August crept toward the school doors reopening, many waited with baited breath to see what the new school year would bring.

As Margaret Rosemont and her cousin Evelyn Duncan pulled into the front parking lot on the first day of school, Evelyn rolled her eyes and huffed.

"What?" Margaret asked.

Evelyn pointed up at the letter-board under the school sign. The message proclaimed in proud capitals, WELCOME BLACK STUDENTS. "They're at it again," she said, parking and bundling herself out of the car. "It's immature, is what it is."

Margaret continued marveling up at the sign. "How did they get all the way up there?" The sign was easily twenty feet from the ground. "And where did they get the extra L?"

“Just wait,” Evelyn muttered darkly. “You’ll see plenty more food for thought today.”

It was Margaret’s first day as a new student at Beaufort High. She and her mother had moved into town earlier that summer, following the death of Margaret’s father. Mrs. Rosemont now wanted to be closer to her sister’s family, with whom they had been living over the summer while Margaret’s mother searched for their new house. The Duncan family comprised Margaret’s aunt and uncle, their six-year-old identical twins, Sally and Susan, and their eldest daughter, Evelyn, who was starting her junior year of high school like Margaret.

The first descriptor that came to mind when Margaret thought of Evelyn was “no-nonsense.” Evelyn was a hefty, serious young woman whose interests revolved around chorus and the Catholic Church. The only jewelry she owned consisted of one pair of tiny stud earrings and a small St. Maria Goretti medal on a plain metal chain. Her Facebook profile was devoted to pro-life groups and quotes from Mother Theresa. She had never dated or expressed the least interest in the idea. Her singing voice was like an angel’s. Her circle of school friends was made up entirely of fellow girls from chorus and St. Mary’s youth group, and Evelyn fit with them like a hand in glove. She was someone, Margaret thought enviously, who knew who she was.

True to Evelyn’s word, the first day of school proved anything but short of surprises. The principal’s morning assembly was disrupted by an old-fashioned mooning on-stage, conducted by a group of boys in Halloween masks who ran howling into the wings to thunderous applause. Evelyn pursed her lips grimly and touched her saint medal, perhaps

in protection against the spiritual abomination of bare male asses. She caught Margaret's eye and shook her head in disgust.

The 300-wing hallway had been waxed over with some slippery solution that made walking more than fifteen feet impossible. Students inched along down the sides, clutching at the banks of lockers like nervous children at a skating rink, while the custodian grumbled to himself about being lucky if he lived to see retirement thanks to these little shits.

Lunch period was a veritable smorgasbord of mysteries. The mashed potatoes served had been inexplicably dyed bright blue, and somehow all of the cafeteria chairs had gone missing. They were later discovered stacked in the girls' locker room showers. In perhaps the strangest circumstance of all, a spectral, generic ATM had been installed next to the milk cooler. Its dingy sign flickered menacingly until one of the lunch ladies managed to crawl back to the outlet and unplug it.

Margaret and Evelyn ate the lunches Mrs. Duncan had packed for them at a picnic table outside that seemed to be under longstanding territory domination by Evelyn's chorus friends, a burly defensive lineup of neat cardigans. They all greeted Margaret with impeccable politeness. Some she had already met over the summer, which was embarrassing because she still had trouble remembering their names. They looked so much alike to her in their conservative necklines, each one accessorized with a single religious necklace in cross, holy spirit, or saint medal flavor. Variety is the spice of life, Margaret thought vaguely to herself.

She made it halfway through the day avoiding any personal disaster, until she arrived early at her fifth-period Chemistry classroom. It was her next class after lunch

period, and she wanted to give herself plenty of time to find it. She peeked through the classroom door left ajar and found the room dim and empty, but decided to go in ahead and wait.

She next found herself lying on the floor, disoriented and sopping wet, while the Chemistry teacher urgently asked how many fingers she was holding up. It transpired that someone had set a classic bucket-over-the-door trap, but they hadn't quite gotten the angle right and had also filled the bucket much too full of water. It had dropped down straight and heavy onto Margaret's head like an anvil.

A kind girl with purple hair and tortoiseshell glasses named Opal walked her to the nurse's office. Margaret noted her lack of religious jewelry and frankly rather daring V-neck with interest. She told Margaret that the nurse wouldn't be allowed to give her any pain medication if she didn't have permission from her parents on file, and asked if she wanted some of the Motrin in her backpack. Margaret gratefully accepted two pills and tucked them away.

The nurse appeared frazzled and distracted. Margaret very much doubted she was the first injury to arrive that day. She was ushered into a dark little room with a cot and bathroom, told that she could hang up her wet clothes in the bathroom to dry and lie down on the cot, and the nurse would be in shortly to make sure she didn't have a concussion. She pulled off her jeans and blouse, draped them in the tiny bathroom, used some water from the tap to swallow the illicit Motrin, and approached the cot. As she drew closer, she made out a shape in the darkness and jumped, startled. Another student was already lying under the blanket.

Margaret darted back toward the bathroom for her clothes, but paused when she realized that something hadn't looked quite right. She edged back over to the cot, peering at the head on the pillow. It wasn't a student. It was the skeleton from the Biology classroom.

She considered pulling her wet clothes back on and going to tell the nurse. She was cold, damp, exhausted, and her head hurt. After a brief deliberation, she just shoved the skeleton over and crawled in next to it. Less than two minutes had passed when the supply closet door creaked open. Margaret only stared in silent resignation at the boy who emerged. He grimaced an apologetic smile, shrugged and climbed out the ground-floor window, shutting it thoughtfully behind him.

As Margaret lay in the darkness, she realized that by pure coincidence, she had in fact met the same boy once before. A few weeks before school began, she was with her family at the graveyard after Mass, paying their respects to Grandma and Grandpa, as they did every week. The cemetery was only a five-minute walk from St. Mary's, so they usually left the cars in the church parking lot. The sun had been beating down heavy and bright on the sidewalk that morning, and Margaret welcomed the cool shade of the old graveyard. It was a holdover from the high-maintenance times when graveyards had trees and upright tombstones. A stagnant pond lay near the center, and an ominously silent gaggle of gray geese wandered the grounds like specters.

The family encountered the Lyndons en route, who likewise visited their own family site every Sunday. The usual round of interminable talking began among the adults. They happened to have stopped in a clearing where the sun continued beating down unencumbered. Margaret broke a light sweat. She could feel the top of her hair

warming like a stove burner. After five minutes of shuffling, she told her mother she would go on ahead and meet them at the grave site.

Once out of sight, she took the long route. It could easily be another half hour before the others reached their destination. It could be another hour for that matter. She approached a particularly old and overgrown corner of the cemetery, where the shade was deepest. No one else was in view now. Maybe these graves were too old for anyone to still visit. Margaret eyed a cluster of weathered tombstones with 19th-century dates. After spending the past month living in a house with six other people, it felt peaceful and free to be completely alone.

Well, not completely alone, she amended, spotting a flash of movement around the corner of a large pyramid-shaped monument. At the same moment she caught the skunky scent. She might have simply turned around, or continued on her way, but he had already spotted her too. Their eyes met across a few yards. He didn't appear worried at being discovered. He stayed in the same position reclined on the stone bench, joint quietly burning in one hand. "Hey." He smiled.

Margaret felt compelled to pause on the path, though she didn't really want to. He didn't look dangerous or anything, though. He just looked like a typical teenage boy, out getting high and chasing skirt. All alone. In a graveyard. "Hey," she returned.

He gestured with the joint. She would describe his entire body language as languid. "Care for a refreshment?"

"No, thank you." She answered as primly as if he had offered her a stick of gum. She reminded herself of Evelyn.

He smiled again and shrugged. "Suit yourself."

It felt like the conversation was at an end, so she walked away in the direction of Grandma and Grandpa.