From the Founding Editor

It is with a great sense of pride that we present the 16th edition of *Nota Bene*, the literary anthology of Phi Theta Kappa. We delight in the words of these outstanding Phi Theta Kappa members and are honored to showcase their efforts.

In 1994 we embarked on a bold new venture to publish literary works by Phi Theta Kappa members, promoting the ideal of excellence in writing. Our initial efforts were rewarded with a gratifying response, both from our members who flooded our mailboxes with submissions and by the audience who enthusiastically read the printed book. After 16 years we continue to see increased results as the number of manuscripts received escalates.

One of Phi Theta Kappa's oldest traditions is to encourage, promote and reward excellence in writing. We believe the writings contained herein not only showcase the talents of Phi Theta Kappa members, but also affirm the commitment to academic excellence displayed by the community college arena. In more than 1,700 libraries nationwide and abroad, *Nota Bene* carries its banner of literary excellence to an ever-increasing audience. We are also pleased to offer the Citation and Reynolds scholarships to five outstanding *Nota Bene* authors.

Nota Bene takes its name from the Latin expression for "note well." We are hoping you will take note and be inspired to join us in our scholarly obligation to nourish good writing and exceptional authors.

We thank you for your continued support over the past 16 years. Without our members, chapter advisors, college presidents, librarians and friends, *Nota Bene* would not be possible. As we move forward, we encourage your continued patronage.

Sincerely,

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THE SACRED

Citation Scholarship

Jean Foster Akin
Upsilon Epsilon Chapter
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She nestled her hand into the crook of her mother's arm where it was warm, wrapping her flesh, her mind, her soul around the delicate looseness of it; the softness that had come of 78 years of tending and washing, scrubbing and scolding, sewing and baking and mending and fixing.

Fiona felt like a child, for all her 31 years, and allowed her tired head to drop, the heat of salty tears unshed behind scratchy eyelids.

Across the quiet of her mother's belly, Fiona's brother and twin sister stood – he with his arm tense over his sister's narrow shoulders, she, clutching desperately to their mother's pale limp hand and pressing a tissue to her own reddened nose.

The morning was bright, and a too-brilliant sunlight pierced the high windows in the intensive care unit. It lit up the purity of the white sheet which draped the old woman from her armpits to her toes. It glinted off the metal curtain rings on the track above them, and made strange silhouettes of the nurses bending and stooping behind it, as they tended the patient in the bed beyond.

The room was filled with beeps and swishes, clicks and rattles, and with the squeaky-bumping sound that the boxy little heart-and-blood pressure monitors make when wheeled across hospital flooring.

For five days and nights, their mother's lungs filled with air and released air by the will of the strange metal apparatus at the head of her bed. From it snaked a wide corrugated plastic tube that ended somewhere down her throat and which was taped, at the mouthpiece to the old woman's waxen lips. The surgery had gone well, but the patient would not be saved. Complications had arisen, and the days when their mother should have begun breathing on her own had come and gone, with no real progress except her occasional squeezing of their hands, and her unconscious struggle to be free of the blasted, uncomfortable tube.

The skin over her legs had become mottled with purple, her poor feet had grown dry and boney, and her kidneys no longer functioned fully. Her children had held vigil over their mother for several days, having left late the night before. Although he could see they were in need of rest, the doctor felt it was time to call the children back in.

Fiona leaned close to her mother's deaf ear without realizing she'd moved, and from her own parched mouth she began to hum lightly, finding the tune that her mother had sung to them so many times when they were young. So many times since. It had become their lullaby, and their song for celebrations, and their dish-washing song and – when their grandmother died – their grieving song. And in reality it had always been a sorrowful song, but it was the song their Grandmother Murphy had sung to their mother, and which their mother had sung to them.

And so, it was also their sacred song.

"Oh Danny boy, the pipes the pipes are calling … from glen to glen and down the mountainside. The summer's gone and all the roses falling; 'tis you, 'tis you, must go and I must bide …"

Across the bed, her sister mewled softly, like a lost kitten, and although Fiona didn't look up, she could imagine their brother patting his younger sister awkwardly with his long-fingered hand. He was 39, eight years older than his sisters, but Fiona knew he felt a lot younger today.

They were all of them children here in the shadow of their mother's terrible stillness. They were pale and hesitant and disoriented. Their mother had always led them through death: when their grandmother had died, when their father had died, when their older brother had died, their mother had known what to do. How would they do it right without her? Who would "make the arrangements"? Who would stand at the head of the casket and shake the hands of the mourners at the wake and receive condolences? More importantly, who would sing the songs? Who would draw them all close, make them feel safe, with the soothing magic of ritual? Mother kept the rituals, taught the rituals to her children. Who was in charge of them now?

Fiona rested her head against her mother's still chest, knowing it would be the last time. She closed her eyes and images tumbled over the dark screen of her eyelids and she was suddenly back in her mother's bright yellow kitchen at home. It was summer and she and her twin squeezed in together on a kitchen chair, the squishy plastic-covered foam of the seat sticking to their thighs, making them sweaty and warm.

Mommy rolled out a pie crust and sang a song in her best Irish brogue. She'd never possessed one naturally, but being Irish had been a badge of honor for her, connecting her to her mother, her grandmother and her great-grandmother, and she never missed an opportunity to use her brogue when singing an Irish ditty or using an Irish phrase that had been passed down through the generations. She and her mother,

Fiona's Nana Murphy, never tired of telling how Great-Grandmother Glasheen traveled across the sea from County Clare in 1865, after marrying Patrick Glasheen in County Cork one fine soft day in June. It was this woman, Bridget Quinlan Glasheen, who first brought the ancient stories and songs from Ireland to her new home in America. It was said that her rolling, musical, distinctively Irish voice, when singing an Irish ballad around the family piano of an evening, could cause the hardest man to weep for the sheer beauty of it.

But the song Fiona's mother sang that summer day in 1979 was not one to make a man weep. It recounted the embarrassment one Mrs. Murphy suffered when a pair of overalls were discovered floating indecorously in her chowder.

"Tim Nolan he got rippin' mad," their mother sang, rolling the old wooden pin with zest over the smooth pastry on the elderly kitchen table. "His eyes were bulging out! He jumped on the piano and he began to shout …"

Fiona and her twin Eva were 6 years old, and they joined in at this point, hollering, "Who threw the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?" They knew who did it. They'd known a long time now. They'd heard this song sung by their mother and her mother and her mother before her. They knew Mrs. Murphy had forgotten to take the overalls out of the pot she'd used to wash them in, and that the very same washing pot had become the chowder pot!

Giggles burst like popping corn from the two girls in their matching pink short-sets, fading as Fiona's memory shifted and she saw herself curled alone in her mother's lap … another day. Her mother held her, rocking in the creaky old rocking chair that had been in the parlor for as long as Fiona could remember. She was feverish that day, and snow fell outside the bay windows, the sky stuffed with cottony grey clouds. She laid her head against her mother's warm breast, the rhythmic crick-crick-crick of the rocker lulling her through one ear, and the muffled thump of her mother's heart lulling her through the other.

Her mother began to sing.

"Over in Killarney, many years ago, my mother sang a song to me in tones so sweet and low, just a simple little ditty in the good old Irish way, and I'd give the world if I could hear her sing that song today … Toora-loora-loora, toora-loora-lie, toora-loora-loora, hush now, don't you cry …"

Back in the summer warmth of the 1979 kitchen Fiona's narrow legs dangled from the kitchen chair she shared with her sister as they watched their mother fill the pie crust she'd made with sugary cinnamon-scented chunks of apple. Outside the kitchen window the maple tree was lit up in the afternoon sun, and the leaves flashed in the breeze like paper wind chimes, crinkle-fluttering out there. Daddy came through the back door, and in his sun-browned hand he held a plate on which rested seven grilled hamburgers, their steam bringing an aroma that made water squirt excitedly in young Fiona's mouth, and as she looked at her sister, Eva swiped at her own wet lips. Now there would be buns and ketchup and potato salad and cole slaw!

"Chow's on," Daddy said, putting on the Michigan drawl of his forebears.

Two brothers came running from the yard, damp and smelling of bruised grass. The third son, the eldest, emerged from his bedroom where he had been playing his guitar. Their Nana Murphy – who had never once used a chowder pot to wash overalls – was visiting. She finished placing the last fork near the last place-setting on the dining room table.

So long ago!

And too much had been lost. Too many people gone. The old ways dying.

Fiona stirred when she felt someone touch her back lightly. She'd been dreaming and her head was heavy as she lifted it from her mother's body. Behind her stood a somber-faced nurse.

"We'll take good care of her," the woman told Fiona mysteriously, stepping aside, as if expecting Fiona to come away from her mother's bed.

Fiona looked at her siblings and felt confused by what she saw in their eyes. And it was then that she could see clearly, for the first time since she'd entered the room, that the respirator near her mother's bed was dark; the beeps, pings, and susurrations she'd been hearing had not been coming from any machine related to her mother at all, but from elsewhere in the room, from behind the gleaming white curtain. She looked at her mother again and realized the sheet which covered her did not rise and fall with her breathing. She touched the crook of her mother's arm and it was decidedly cool. She'd never noticed when she entered the room that her mother had already gone.

Out in the hallway, her sister walked beside her a few steps and then slipped her hand into Fiona's – Fiona, the older twin. "Older by two whole minutes," their mother had always told them. Their brother came alongside silently, trying not to feel. It was their way, Fiona knew, for never had they seen their father cry, and rarely their mother. Their ancestors had come from a long line of strong men and women; they'd survived the Potato Famine, braved trans-Atlantic crossings – the icy gale of the ocean biting at their faces. The women had gritted their teeth in torment, pushing babies from their wombs. Some delivered these children and died in the effort. Their men fought in war; some never to return.

"The Irish are a fighting people," their mother would say, and not always with bluster. She'd laid her own husband to rest. And her mother. And her second son to cancer. No one said that her eldest son was also as good as dead, for the mention of his name brought such anguished longing to her eyes, no one had the heart to wonder aloud why one day he'd simply stopped calling, stopped visiting, and with a coward's cruelty, never said why.

From the other end of the hallway a child appeared, his soft blonde hair capping his head with ringlets as he ran towards them, grinning. Into his mother's arms he leapt and she caught him and held him tightly to her as he wrapped his warm, plump arms about her neck. She kissed him and he pulled back from her, beaming, his tiny white teeth perfect and new.

And when he saw her tear-stained face, he traced the trails left by her grief, intrigued but still smiling, too young to be touched by the agony of loss.

The boy's father was close behind him, smiling towards the three adult siblings tentatively. He saw in their fallen faces all he needed to know, and he asked no questions. He embraced his wife, pressing their son between them, knowing the sense of stupefaction they all felt. He'd lost his own father not long before.

"Is Nana gone?" the little boy asked.

"Yes," Fiona whispered into the warm satiny cup where his neck and shoulder met.

"It doesn't hurt any more?" the child asked hopefully.

"No," Fiona said, tears falling again unheeded. She sensed her sister and brother shifting nearby. "We can go home now. For a while," she said.

She turned and kissed her brother, and then her sister. "Come," she said to them. "I'll make us some pie."

"Apple?" her son asked, his eyes lighting up as she adjusted him on her hip. "Apple like Nana makes?"

Her brother raised his hand to his face and stepped away, caught up in the emotion he had been trying to quell. It wasn't just the sweet cinnamon-scented kitchen of their

youth he mourned, and Fiona knew it. It was the look of his mother's hand as she dipped it into the flour canister and sprinkled snowy white on the muslin pie cloth.

It was the way her muscles stood out in her arms as she scrubbed a floor for them.

It was the way she poked her pink tongue out absently between her lips while she polished a mirror.

It was the way her eyes caught the light when she helped them find a place on the globe for their geography classes – remembering she had always wanted to be an archaeologist but her family had been too poor to send her to college ("But it was okay").

It was the way she smiled at their father.

It was the way she swallowed hard and her eyes glistened when anyone brought up her poor dead son.

It was the way her voice caught when, at her mother's graveside, she began that first lonely word in a song that had been a part of their family for generations … "Oh, Danny boy … the pipes the pipes are calling …"

It was how she whispered that last sorrowful stanza through her tears, the rest of her family joining in to support her as her mother was lowered into the ground. They lifted their quavering voices as one while a cold drizzle fell on the soft flower petals of their eyes and their upturned faces.

"But when ye come, and all the flowers are dying, if I am dead, as dead I may well be, Ye'll come and find the place where I am lying, and kneel and say an *Ave* there for me … And I shall hear, through soft ye tread above me, and all my grave will warmer, sweeter be, if you will bend and tell me that you love me, and I will sleep in peace until you come to me …"

"Yes, apple. Apple pie," Fiona finally answered her boy. "Just like Nana makes … and I'll sing you her pie-making song."

POINT MAN

Reynolds Scholarship

Kenneth C. Maxwell II
Alpha Xi Eta Chapter
St. Johns River Community College
St. Augustine, Florida

"Alright, this is your first time out so keep your eyes open and don't do anything stupid. The rules of engagement are constantly changing and you need to follow them. You also need to keep in mind that it's better to be tried by twelve men than carried by six," I say.

I continue to stare at the newest member of the team as he looks blankly at me. My right hand comes up fast and quick on the side of his Kevlar and stops with a slap, giving him a quick jolt. He looks up quickly and angrily.

"What the fuck did I just say, shit ass?"

"First time out, follow the ROE, and twelve six thing," he replies.

"What does the twelve six thing mean?"

"It means it is better to be in a courtroom than carried to your grave."

I exhale and look around. The sun is shining, but the wind is chilling and cutting to the bone. I go over my mental checklist of things to tell the new guy. How is it so cold in Iraq? Every time I'm here it's freezing.

"Here's the deal. Here's what you really need to do today. First off, don't give anyone your real name. Secondly, pay attention to everything around you. You'll pull security while the rest of the team raids houses. We will do it like that today until I think you're ready to go in. We rotate the point man so nobody is the first one in the house every time. Smile and wave and be nice to everyone you see. Pass out chocolate and stuffed animals to the kids. When you run out they will yell and curse at you. They will also throw shit at you. You just

need to smile and wave like you're Santa at the fucking Thanksgiving Day Parade. You get all that? Repeat it back."

"No real names, pull security today, be fuckin' Santa Claus."

"Good job, our team is pulling up the rear and you're next to John. Me and Ren will be right in front of you, keep your distance and talk a lot. There's no reason to be quiet, we're not sneaking through the jungle and everyone knows we're here. We're on an intelligence job, and you'll see us talking to a lot of Iraqis, don't let it bother you. Call me David while we are out. Got all that?"

"Yeah."

I turn around to tell Gunny that we are ready and John walks up to the new guy.

"You got a girlfriend back home, Rookie?" John asks.

"Yeah, why?"

"You from a small town?"

"Yeah."

"Awesome. You die and I get to drop by your hometown. They'll put a little memorial up, and I'll stop by and then head to the bar. Then I'll find your girlfriend and cry about what a great guy you were and then I'll fuck her."

"Fuck you, asshole," says Rookie.

"You don't want me to scrog your girlfriend, then you better live."

"All right, Marines, let's get going, staggered column formation, keep your heads down and your ears up. You got all that?"

"Oorah!" echoes loudly outside and my mind fades to black…

There is light again and I'm standing to the left of the door. I don't think it can really be called a door, just a piece of wood put up for privacy. It is something I pass through that changes who I am. I become detached from everything. It has happened dozens of times and will happen dozens more. I just know I passed through a great number of doors this way, with blood on my mind and a frozen heart. There is no room for feeling. Feeling causes your friends to die.

After the first week we stopped using shotguns to open doors. Now we just kick them. A month ago we stopped using flash bang grenades. A kid from Texas stood to the right of a door much like this one and kicked it and through a flash bang in. The poor kid was no more than 19 when the deafening bang followed by a blinding light happened. It was all very routine until what happened next. I was the point man so I was the first one in the door. Every time I step into a room I see everything. It only takes a fraction of a second. I stopped at the door, defying years of training and what had become instinct. I turned around and puked on the Marine behind me. This caused all the Marines in the four-man stack to bundle up and push each other different ways, In the middle of the floor was a wicker basket with a baby girl in it, blood pouring from her ears and her eyes bulging.

Four grown men and even kids can hold up to a flash bang temporarily. Babies cannot. We lied and told the kid from Texas that she was already dead. We never used another flash bang but did come across more babies in the middle of rooms. The enemy got what they wanted, no more flash bangs from Americans in this city. We are ordered to use them but no one will. We'd rather die than kill an innocent kid. Texas kid stayed on radio watch for three weeks so he didn't have to go out and raid houses. Six days ago he put the barrel of his rifle in his mouth and painted the ceiling with his brains.

This is what flashes through my mind when I'm the point man staring at Texas kid's replacement. He is younger than Texas and doesn't even have to shave every day, but his eyes look old and stretched out. He has the eyes of a man who has lived too long and hates himself for it. As he looks at me, making numbers with his fingers, I think about what to do. One finger. *Rifle in my shoulder, stay crouched down, look straight, turn left*. Two

fingers. *Follow the wall and turn with it, if I come to a door wait for the Marine behind me to tap my helmet before I enter the next room*. Three fingers. *Kill anyone with a weapon*.

He kicks backwards, sending the door flying open. As precise and fluid as a bullet, we move into the house. The Marine behind me knees my leg and pushes me forward. My foot falls on the dirt floor inside and time slows. I see everything in the room. No people. A table sits in the middle with a hookah on top. No windows. One doorway to the left covered with a sheet. I look straight and cut left, walking along the wall until I come to the corner and turn right, stopping at the doorway. The Marine behind me cuts right, never checking straight because I did. The one behind him turns left to follow me. The last guy turns right to follow the second guy.

I take a deep breath and position the barrel of my rifle to pass through the side of the sheet instead of it running its full length over my head. The Marine behind me taps my helmet and I slide quickly through the doorway.

My foot crosses into the next room and time slows to a crawl. A bearded man wearing a dishdasha raises an AK-47. Before he gets his AK-47 up I fire three shots. The world freezes. The bullets are in mid-air three feet from him.

He puts down his rifle, leaning it against the wall, and I put down my rifle, leaning it in the doorway. He walks around the bullets and past me into the other room. He sits down at the table and begins preparing the hookah. I take off my flak jacket and Kevlar and sit down. In the other room he had fear in his eyes, but now his eyes are serene. He puts molasses-covered tobacco into the top of the hookah and places a grate over it. He takes an instant coal out of his pocket and places it on the grate.

“Do you have any matches?” he asks. I am amazed he speaks English so well. No one in this town speaks English and most have never seen Americans before.

“Yes, of course.”

I pull out matches, passing them to him. He lights the coal and it flickers and hisses. He hands the matches to me. I put my hands up, indicating he can keep them. A small smile forms on his face.

“And what will I use them for?” he asks.

I take the matches back and take the hookah he offers. I would be rude to refuse. I inhale deeply and blow out slowly. The strong taste of apple attacks my taste buds and the nicotine calms my nerves.

“Apple is really the best flavor,” I say.

“It is quite delicious. I keep it on hand for guests.”

“You didn’t have to die today,” I say as I hand him the hookah.

“Yes I did. You are shooting me right now.”

“Why did you have the gun in your hand? You knew we were in the house.”

“I would rather die than rot in prison. I will pass on to paradise and await my family.” He inhales and exhales, then hands me the hookah.

“You helped kill men. You think you will be allowed in paradise?”

“If not, we can continue to talk in hell. I helped kill men because I had no other choice. If I would have helped Americans, they would have killed my entire family, or worse. You have seen the torture houses. No man deserves that, and I will not put my family in a place like that. My sons are too young to die.”

“I know your youngest son. In a town where no one speaks English, he can pronounce the fake name I give to Iraqis.”

“Really? He never mentioned you to me.”

“He has followed me around on patrol every time he sees me, since I gave him that soccer ball. He protects me. Nothing bad has ever happened when he follows me. I don’t think he will follow me any more.”

“What makes you say that?” I inhale as he talks and exhale as I pass him the hookah.

“His father is dead. Killed by an American.”

“He knows you did it.”

“How?”

My wife, two sons and daughter are in the corner of the room I’m about to die in.”

“No, they’re not. I would have seen them. I see everything when I enter a room.”

“You didn’t see them because you didn’t want to. You couldn’t have knowingly killed me in front of my family. If you didn’t kill me, I would have killed you. What is my oldest to do? He will come after you for this. He will come after all Americans.”

“I won’t kill him,” I say.

“Yes, you will. You can’t help it. It is what you are trained to do. You never ask why. You just do. That is the problem with Americans. They never think.”

“What were you thinking when you started storing explosives behind your house?”

“I was thinking that these men would kill my family if I didn’t. I stayed out of it until they showed up demanding things. I didn’t do anything when my house and my neighbors’ houses were ransacked. I didn’t do anything when old friends of mine were arrested. I didn’t do anything when my uncle was sent to prison and my nephew was killed. Where you live, how long would you have waited to lash out?”

“I would have been fighting from the first day.”

“You kill. It is all you know how to do. It is in your nature to fight. You enjoy it. If you lived a thousand lives every one of them would be a warrior’s. You would fight for any and all causes,” he says.

“Perhaps, but that doesn’t mean I take pleasure in the ending of human lives.”

“You do. I am not a fighter. I was forced into it for my family.”

“You had a choice. I choose to fight and I am here. If I didn’t choose to fight I would be somewhere else without violence.”

“But violence would find you. I’ve lived in peace for more than 50 years and prayed every day. Violence caught up with me today. For the last two months I let strange and violent men place things behind my house, in the ground. They gave me a gun and told me not to tell anyone. They told me my family would be safe if I helped them. Fifty years of good. I never wronged anyone and now my life ends in violence.”

He offers me the hookah again and I put my hand up.

“No more smoking and no more talking,” I say.

“May I pray before we go back?”

“Yes.”

He lays out his prayer rug and faces toward Mecca. He kneels and places his hands palms out by his forehead. He touches down to the rug several times while changing. The chanting I cannot understand; it is guttural and harshly spoken. As he does this I put on my flak jacket and Kelvar. He finishes and we walk into the other room together. We pick up our rifles and get back to our places.

“I prayed for you,” he says.

“Thank you,” I reply.

“In another time and place we could have been friends.”

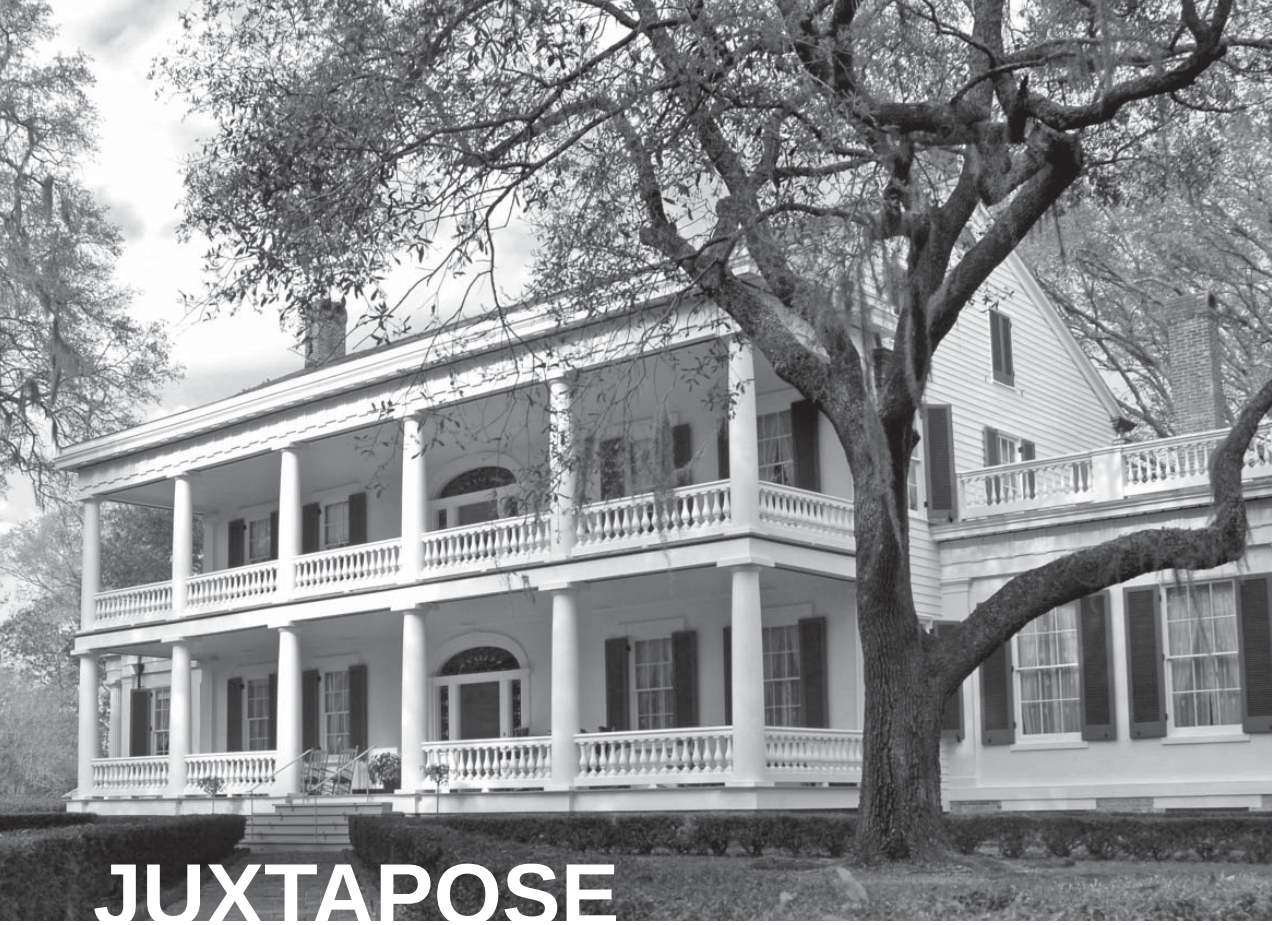
“We are friends.”

Time slowly speeds up and blood spatters toward me as the first bullet enters his head and the second penetrates the upper part of his chest. The third bullet enters just above his right eye. It is not like the movies, and he doesn’t fly backwards when shot. He falls to his left, landing in the dirt and his body twitches. I look into the corner, and his wife and daughter are crying and looking down. His oldest son’s eyes are filled with the hate

that feeds evil. His youngest son stands and walks toward me. He looks up at me and I look away. We are both crying.

“Mees-tur Dee-vad?” the boy chokes out.

His brother crawls toward his father’s corpse. He dives toward the AK-47 and the Marine behind me fires three quick shots. I raise my rifle to my shoulder as he dives and fire three shots in almost perfect unison. He trips over his father’s body and tumbles to the ground. The boy, only 16, filled with rage and wanting to avenge his father, lay dead on the floor with four bullet holes in his chest and two in his head. His brother, only 10, screams and punches me with both tiny fists. I can’t understand what he is screaming but I know the point. There is no sobbing, no regret. Only hate. There is no room for anything else.



JUXTAPOSE

Reynolds Scholarship

David Jackson
Alpha Kappa Zeta Chapter
Montgomery County Community College
Blue Bell, Pennsylvania

The night is hot and sticky. Sweat runs constantly into my eyes, burning them. I pull my shirt onto my head and tie the loose ends, the way I've seen Caesar do many times, coming home late after working all day, his broad shoulders rounded with exhaustion

I walk the gravel path, the symphony of bullfrogs, crickets and dragonflies surrounding me in a cacophony of sound. I approach the pitched roof abode where Caesar lives and stealthily near the open window where a dim light wavers like a hummingbird.

Inside, Caesar stands nude by the basin, running a sponge quickly along his licorice colored chest with nipples like two blackberry kisses. I bet Caesar is the strongest man on Lemon Hill. Heck, maybe the whole world. I once saw him beat a man for money with his bare hands, 'til his face was just a shiny red stain in the ground.

His fat ropes of hair fall forward as he bends to pull on his pants. The pants are too big for him, so he ties them with a leather strap. He puts on his laceless boots, the trouser hem leaving an inch of skin showing.

He must have heard me moving around or something, he has a warrior's survival sense, 'cuz he smiles without looking at me and says in a low rumble, "What you spyin' on people for, little man?"

I hop up, guilty, then pull myself over the shelf at the window ledge, "I ain't spyin',

man, I'm just seein' what you up to."

"Yeah." He pulls on a baggy shirt with a fluid flourish, "and catchin' me ass naket in the bargain."

I laugh, then he does too.

"Man, you know you shouldn't be here, right? You got a curfew and that old witch will string you up by your nuts, she catch you."

"She blind as a bat. She ain't seein' nothin'."

Caesar sits on the Spartan bed with its shabby covering. His green eyes narrow as he sizes me up. He knows why I'm here. I have been begging him to let me be his runner since forever. He always says he don't want nobody in his way, but I just keep on asking. One of these days he gonna break down and say yes.

"Draw the curtain," he says. I quickly grab the muslin cloth and drape it across the window. I grin in anticipation, this must be it …

"Now don't be getting all excited and shit," he tells me, "I'm just runnin' late. I need to get this shit done before Spring gets home. I'm only lettin' you help me this one time, got it?"

"Yeah, I got you, boss."

"You can help me bag it up. And none of that boss shit." Caesar rises from his bed and pushes it to the side. He bends and moves back a rug and lifts a weathered floorboard. I move closer, like I'm approaching a dead body or a bath or something.

Caesar lifts out a small tin box and moves the run and bed back into position. I kneel beside him and watch as he lifts the lid. He removes a short, jagged edge knife, the blade dull and rusted, and slides it into the waist of his pants.

Next, he takes out an ornate gold razor with two words engraved on it. It must be the most beautiful thing I have ever seen! "Where'd you get that?"

Caesar's full lips smirk. "Stole it."

I gasp, "From the Mayor's house?" He just fixes those green eyes on me, saying nothing. "What's it say?"

"Lemon Hill." Caesar reaches back into the box and brings out a long hollow wooden tube, with three holes punched on top. He hands it over to me. "Know what this is?"

I nod. "Bird call. My dad showed me how to use one before he was shot."

"I know." His voice seems a little sad. "This is the whistle he taught you with. Carved it himself. He taught me on this same whistle." Next he takes out a battered old book, its pages yellowed with age. The cover is missing and it is held together with a bit of twine. "I need you to help me cut out the next chapter and distribute. So just shut up and watch."

This turns out to be a lot tougher than I thought it would. I mean, you got to be calm, because a nervous hand shakes and cuts badly, and a bad cut might lose a word. You can't sweat, because you might drip on the product, fucking up the value. The straightness of your lines is very important.

"Caesar?"

"Yeah."

"You read it?"

He is quiet for a minute. "Yeah."

"How'd it feel?"

He looks off in the distance, a small smile dances across his face. "Man … it's great. Such power, such freedom. It tells you things you never even knew were out there. You can see past Lemon Hill to the rest of the world. This woman, she told her story in this book. This Hannah Crafts, she lived as the owner of a great plantation, and she's lived in jail as a criminal. She's lived with politicians in Philadelphia and she's lived on the run as a fugitive. She tells a story that people like the Mayor are trying to keep from us. He don't

want us knowing the things we can do, if only we try. But it's scary too, you're always wondering about what's going to happen to you if you get caught. That's what got me into some trouble with the Mayor." He points to the vivid scar that mars the left side of his face, a long keloidal mass from the tip of his eye down to the cleft of his lip.

"If I ever get caught up in this shit again, I'm dead. That's why everything that I've told you tonight is between you and me only. If you hear or see anything, I mean anything… you blow that fucker like a canary just shit you out, and you haul ass and make sure you ain't seen."

He hands me the sacks, telling me to set them up around Lookout Summit. I'm supposed to hide them inside hollow trees, under rocks, but I must remember every place I put them, because anything we don't sell we have to get back. We cannot leave any evidence.

From the highest point on Lookout Summit I am able to see all of Lemon Hill stretched out below me. Caesar is a jagged shadow in the trees some distance where I lurk under a magnolia tree. Although it is late night, a hint of sun is still visible, winking on the horizon. The moon is full and indigo, casting its light upon the collection of structures that make up Lemon Hill. From the large stately columns of the Mayor's house, to the repair shops, clothier and nursery, to the homes of the hard-wording residents, all is quiet but for the symphony of sound as crickets rub the taut bands of their wings together.

I see a wraith-like figure approach Caesar and speak for a second. The two lock hands for a moment, then Caesar gives me a quick sound just like the hooting owl perched on a limb over my head. As the figure nears me, I recognize Pogo, the locksmith. He hands me a few folded pieces of paper, his hands trembling.

I reach into the hollow of the sycamore and bring out the folded chapter from Hannah's story. Pogo's eyes are huge with fear. He looks furtively in all directions, quickly grabs the package from my hand without even a hello, and disappears as quickly as he came.

Things go on like that for the next 20 minutes or so. I have seen people that I never would have expected to show up and make a deal with Caesar. The Mayor's cook, the butcher, the bricklayer, the nursery leader, the cooper.

How we are working things is like this. Caesar is getting a bit of tobacco, or a few drops of whiskey in a jug; the butcher gave him a scrap of meat he managed to set aside. The cook brings a nabbed piece of silver from the Mayor's collection. All, as payments for the privilege of being able to read the narratives. Then, they bring the chapter they have finished to me, and I hand off the next chapter to them.

Mostly the ones who have key positions throughout Lemon Hill are the only people I see, since they are the only ones who have any reading ability. Some have been taught by the Mayor's daughter, who then taught others.

I know that our time is running out. Our supply is running low and I know that Caesar will not "re-up" because it soon it will be time for bed checks.

Just then I notice the hip-swaying walk of Spring, Caesar's girlfriend. She walks swiftly up to him and begins talking in a urgent whisper. I move closer so that I can hear them.

"You promised me!"

"I know, baby. And I am going to give it up soon. I just have this last bit to give out, then I'm through. I swear."

"How many times have I heard that, Cee? How many? What's it going to take, your death. You know the penalty is death. What happened to the last guy the Mayor caught? They removed two of his fingers."

"I'll be okay, Spring. Promise."

"They say if you get caught again, they gonna take out your tongue …"

“We are about done here tonight, baby. I’m going to have my boy collect the rest and head home. Now you go on home. I’ll be there directly. Go on, now. Don’t miss curfew.”

Caesar then tells me to go collect what’s left and meet him at his place. He then fades into the trees, leaving an echo of silence.

I want to see what everyone else is seeing but I have nothing to trade with Caesar, so with trembling hands, I slip the other papers from their hiding place and turn in the direction opposite Caesar and Spring’s place.

I head back toward the paddock, hoping I make it before the overseer’s bell tolls. I reach into my pocket and loosen the string holding the pages together. I unfold the whispering pieces of paper as I walk behind the towering columns of the Mayor’s house. I sit under the billowing Confederate flag and look in awe at the crisp beige paper with its small wisps of letters on them. I cannot read what is written on the paper, but I know that these are words. I am filled with excitement. I feel lawless and fearless. What I hold in my hand has enough power to get me killed. It is forbidden for me to even hold these few pages in my hand.

As I sit beneath the Confederate flag, I imagine how Caesar feels when he holds these pages and is able to know what these pages say. I wonder what adventures Hannah Craft experienced and imagine the tales she managed to bring back for us. I fold the pages back and run in a mad dash back toward the direction from which I had come.

I will go to Caesar and ask him to teach me what it says on this paper. I know Caesar can read. Even though it is not permitted and Mayor would take his tongue, I know Caesar is not afraid. Caesar can do anything.

SPILLED DRINK

Reynolds Scholarship

Jacqueline Canola
Pi Omicron Chapter
Community College of Rhode Island
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it's inevitable
her cocoa-buttered legs
and his closely shaven face
predict a night
of stars slightly askew

cologne and smoke helix midair
as her half-closed spanish eyes
welcome his subtle invitations
and shot glasses shatter
losing vodka, fingerprints and all
the while
subliminal vibrations dance through the walls
laser beam greens reflect the greed in their eyes

dim light bulbs
persuade the way into waiting bedrooms
where distilled confidence
allows for a night of love on a quiet mattress
until the morning light dries their sweat
and bruises are all that remain
of an already forgotten night

PARENTLESS HOUSE

Reynolds Scholarship

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As I was leaving, I looked back from my seat in the green Chevrolet truck. The big house standing there was getting smaller as I moved farther away, to my next parentless house. I tried to memorize this place and what had happened during my three-year stay; the routine, the sadness and the longing. I remembered it all when I left, but I was too young to remember how I got there.

My parents had to move many times for economic reasons. They moved from Stabat, a small town in the North Sumatra province of Indonesia, to Aceh, a small city on the top of Sumatra Island. My father worked as a lumberjack, clearing woods inside the forest in Aceh. It did not pay enough to support his family. My parents then decided to move to Kruengkeukeuh. They could make a better living there by selling homemade cookies and cakes. They could not take me because they had just started their business and did not know the area very well. They were not sure if it was a safe place for a little girl like me. My parents were too busy working to make ends meet, so they thought I would be better living with my aunt, uncle, cousins and grandmother in Aceh.

My first parentless house was in Aceh, a special territory of Indonesia that is located on the northern tip of Sumatra Island. It was a very big house with many doors on each side of it; there were many rooms with big windows. On the right side of the house there was a huge lawn with an individual flagpole standing and patriotically waving Indonesia's national red and white flag. On the left side were a mango tree and an old guava tree. Every afternoon after a shower – I had to take a shower twice a day because of the humidity –

I always went outside to the “right front” (that was what I called it). I would look at the sky and try to imagine how far it was to my mother’s place. Kruengkeukeuh is a very strange name for a place, but it was where my parents lived at that time. I would sit on the concrete floor for a while and just feel the breeze coming and going until it was time for dinner.

As a routine after dinner, my grandmother, cousins and I would watch the black and white television together. The television was placed at the very end of the dining room. In the middle was a big rectangular wooden table where foods were placed on the center. The foods were everyday-common: rice, soup, fried fish or occasionally fried chicken, and stir-fry vegetables. At the other end of the table was a refrigerator, an appliance I thought was a luxury at that time. Everyone sat along the dining table, leaning against the wall. My grandmother sat on her rattan chair by the open window, cooling herself with her almost-broken hand fan. I always sat in front of her on my small wooden chair, no window and no fan, watching whatever shows were on. There was only one channel that played some Indonesian drama that was repeated many times, or some news. Occasionally I would get some cool air from my grandmother’s fan. Nuraini, Penny and Johnny sat on their seats near my grandmother’s right side. I remembered my cousins and I did not talk that much, although I enjoyed their company and listened to their chattering and teasing of each other. I just smiled. Maybe it was because of the gap in our ages. Penny and Johnny were five years older than me, and Nuraini was four years older.

Nighttime television shows were not interesting for me. I always waited for Sunday morning to come. I would wake up early and brush my teeth, get changed, and then watch Indonesia’s most popular puppet show, “Unyil.” Unyil was a well behaved, respectful and star student male puppet who never got older; he was still 8 years old when I was 25 years old. My grandmother would be back by the time “Unyil” had finished, and I would have my favorite meal. “Nasi Gurih” was an Acehnese traditional rice dish cooked with coconut milk. It was topped with spicy beef cooked with coconut milk, crunchy salty potato with deep fried anchovies, then sprinkled with shredded coconut meat that was toasted in a cast-iron wok. I could get this delicious food once a week, but sometimes only once a month if I did not behave well.

Everyone went to school Monday to Saturday, from seven o’clock in the morning until one o’clock in the afternoon. My cousins and I rode on a tricycle driven by an old man, which, amazingly, could hold four children. The tricycle was big for me then, but later on I realized how small it was. Johnny, since he was bigger, got to sit on the back seat, which was a throne seat – for when you are “old enough.” Penny and I sat on the normal seat, and Nuraini sat on the small chair in from of it. I begged Johnny one morning and he let me try the back seat. I did not like the flat cushion but I got a big-girl feeling and smiled my way to school.

Usually after returning from school I had my lunch and did my homework. (I was in third grade.) The next thing I did was go to the left side of the house from a door in the dining room. After stepping down two steps and walking ten steps, I reached the guava tree. I loved the smell of its leaves when I tore them. I climbed its four-inch diameter branches barefoot, sensing the roughness of the bark. I carefully placed my hands and feet on the right branches, trying to get to the top. I never did but I was content while chewing my half-ripened guava to feel how high I was and how much farther I could see when I was at that height. The guava always gave me a tingling sense on my tongue but always made me want to eat it again. From that height I could see the empty grass field with a small waterless creek on its right side. Across from the field was the street where I could only go when I was an adult. I was always told never to go there alone. I did not know why, as it seemed normal, like the street I was living on with children playing around – only their skin color was different than mine.

“Chinese! Chinese! Go back to your country!” was yelled at me one afternoon when I passed in front of an Acehnese house. I was walking back from getting a snack at a small shop near my aunt’s house. The children in the Acehnese house were all shouting at me. I did nothing but just pass by, but I knew it was because of the hatred they had for my skin color. I thought, “So what if I am a Chinese?” I was angry and stuck my tongue out at them and ran back to my aunt’s house as fast as I could. However, it did not take long for them to get their revenge, and soon enough they left many rattan marks on my buttocks. Those children’s father came and talked to my uncle, making sure that my uncle taught me respectful behavior. My uncle had to agree to this “special request” because he was the minority, and he needed to get along with the natives for the sake of safety. He asked me to scream very loud, so they could hear him doing his “job.” I cried no tears and stood still when my uncle had to give me a lesson not to stick my tongue out when children with skin different from mine yelled cruel words. I remembered what the man was wearing: a blue short-sleeved shirt over a white undershirt, paired with black shorts and slippers.

After I had my life lesson, I stayed in my bedroom, a room I shared with my two female cousins and my grandmother. (My bed was the second from the right.) I could cry by then. My heart cried for my parents. I wanted them to tell me it was all right. I wanted them to stroke my hair and hold me close to them. My aunt came in and held me, telling me that it was all right. I hugged her back in return but my tear-filled eyes could only see my mother.

I did not quite remember when Johnny moved to Medan, the capital of North Sumatra. It was a big city with more people and children with the same skin color. It was a city with better schools that did not teach Arabic like my school in Aceh. I also did not recall when Penny and Nuraini moved back to live with their mothers who were living in a small town in Stabat, also a place where there were more people and children with our skin color. There I was, left alone with my grandmother, my aunt and my uncle. My parents had not called me to join them yet. “Maybe they are just too busy,” I consoled myself. A child’s sadness was easily wiped away with flavored shaved ice. My aunt became my friend. She then asked me more frequently if I wanted to go places with her, whether to her friend’s house or to the only long-distance phone booth to call her son in Medan.

I could not remember how long I was alone with no cousins around, but then one day I was told that we, my grandmother and I, were going to move to Stabat and live with my second aunt. I was happy to know that I would see my cousins again and other cousins whom I had only heard about. But deep inside I asked myself, “Why not to that funny-named place where my parents lived?” I thought I had asked my aunt, but I could not recall what her answer had been. All I knew was that my grandmother and I were moving after I got my report card. I guessed they thought that since that name-calling incident it would be better for me to live near other children that shared the same skin color. The place where my parents lived had only four Chinese families, and they all sent their children out of there.

My eldest aunt’s house was now out of my sight as the car turned right at the red lights, heading to my new place. That green Chevrolet pickup truck had three seats. I sat in the middle with my grandmother on my left and the driver on my right. I looked straightforward and sang my way to my destination. There I went, from one parentless house to another parentless house – but this time it would be better because I would be around other children with the same skin color as mine.

THE COVEN OF BROWNING AVENUE

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Abbigail Sears, 27849 Browning Avenue, Clarksdale, IL. This is what her junk mail always said. This was her “old” name, her maiden name. She guessed she still existed in her old life somewhere out in the world. A scream from the back seat of her minivan shocked Abbigail back into reality. Her oldest, Kateye, who has just hit 10, was yet finding more sophisticated ways to torture her younger sister, Ruthe-Belle. This time it was all about the taking off of the shoes and threatening to throw them out of the window. Abbigail’s way of intervening was to scream herself. Veins bulging, body shaking. With school in sight she began to calm – sort of. “Now I can drop off these monsters,” she said to herself.

As she pulled into the parking lot the calm turned to dread. This was the worst part of Abbigail’s day – drop-off. The second worst was pick-up. It wasn’t the mechanics of it, but more of the parade and catwalk, in which she was an unwilling participant. Her dark navy sweats drooped over her worn tennis shoes as the three exited the car. They did well to hide the 20 pounds Abbigail had gained since giving birth to her girls. Her threadbare jersey hid what was left of her femininity and Abbigail liked that.“So here we are for the ‘perp-walk,’” she grumbled to herself. The Queen Bees stood steady and waiting. Transfixed and mesmerized to those outside their anesthetized realm. Mostly blonde straight hair framed the clear-skinned smiles that held back legions of Leviathans. Abbigail swam round them with her girls in tow like a fish that needed a bath. A fresh breakout had

appeared and descended like a caterpillar from the corner of her mouth. Bubbling and bursting, it served as an entry point for all the wing women to observe, calculate and lend their reports to the “Queenies.”

Their leader, Belinda, would floor her with her steely eyes. Abbigail wasn’t sure how Belinda did it. She was so thin, blonde and perfect. Abbigail thought the only way she’s getting that look is if she’s getting up at four in the morning and ignoring her kids. She rounded the corner and they were finally out of sight. She dropped the girls off at their classrooms and headed for the back field. She did this every morning so she wouldn’t have to face the coven again. She walked nearly half a mile around back to her car each day. “At least I’m getting exercise,” she thought.

The drive home was only blocks. She could have walked for sure but she thought she’d better drive or else they’d have something else to question her about. Her mind wandered as tears streamed down her face. “Why don’t they like me? What’s wrong with me?”

She traveled back to a night not so long ago. Abbigail had hoped her husband would accompany her to the third and fifth grade open house. But as usual Brad had to work late. Seems Brad was always working late these days. Abbigail wasn’t sure if that’s what he was really doing or if it was in fact the new Admin at the office with the breast implants and the long legs he was “working.” His talk of the implants was incessant and seemed to dominate dinner conversations. Nevertheless, she was on her own tonight. She knew that whatever outfit she chose would be completely unacceptable. The “Hens” and the “Bees” would be waiting to pick her clean to the bone.

The past two years at Paul’s Canyon Elementary had seen Abbigail in tears in the parking lot. Last year was particularly brutal as she entered her oldest daughter’s classroom, where most of the “Bees” hid their hives. As she walked by she flinched as the icy suburban stares drilled through hushed tones and evil whispers. As soon as Abbigail had her back to them, she heard them say, “Of God, there she is – the mother of that zombie.” Abbigail remembered dying. “She knows,” thought Abbigail. “She knows my daughter has epilepsy.”

The Coven made a circle that night, a tight one. Abbigail wasn’t sure if they weren’t drawing a pentagram with that circle. All she knew was that she experienced pure evil that night, along with eyes that drilled holes in what remained of her soul. She swallowed a couple of swigs of Johnny Walker Red that she kept locked in her car, and walked toward Hell. Smelling sulfur and listening to the whispering witches on the way to the main quad. Later that night she stepped into her bath.

Lost in the undercurrent, the tepid water surrounded Abbigail’s fleshy thighs. How long had she been lying in the tub? She hadn’t a clue. Her eyes moved across the landscape of her bathroom and the collection of seashells that adorned the counters and the outskirts of the bathtub. Abbigail had grown up at the ocean and it was part of her soul. Each shell was a representation of a fragment of her silent childhood that spoke to the world. Many times she would sit with one of the larger shells, listening to the crashing of the waves and trying to remember the small dreamer who sat clumsily in the tide pools wanting to know life.

She remembered sifting the shells, knowing that each one had a spirit that lined its inside. Abbigail and the shells had had a life once, a struggling life and then they had died. She wondered what that life was for; sometimes she selfishly thought it was for her. What would she do without her shells, she thought. She grabbed a couple off the bathtub ledge and dropped them into the tub, watching them as they sifted to the bottom of the porcelain. Abbigail drew back and crawled into her bed and fell into a deep sleep, slumber taking her through the weekend.

A dreary Monday welcomed Abbigail’s mind. She lay frozen under her covers, partly from fear and partly from exhilaration. As she adjusted her eyes, she glanced around her

bedroom. This was the place that had been her coffin for so many years. She fixated on a hanger that bore a freshly pressed dress shirt from the night before. An adjacent tweed suit accompanied it. It seemed like a new ghost standing by, waiting for her to take its soul.

She got up and roused her girls. Surprisingly, her husband had already made breakfast. Abbigail nibbled at a piece of cold toast. She walked heavily upstairs and into the bathroom. Shower warming, water flowing, she stopped and glanced at herself in the mirror. “Who am I now?” she said to herself. She stepped into the shower and let the water envelope her. She toweled off and began to dress. She was sure her entire outfit was out of date. Her shoes, although polished, were especially old and the wrong color, too. Makeup? A little foundation will do, not too much else because who knows? She grabbed her purse and descended down the stairs. A badge that bore her name was affixed and secure on her jacket.

Her family was lined up at the door like a military procession. “Mommy, please don’t go. Don’t you love us anymore?” were words that fell like soft old dandelions. Little angel tears were streaming down rosy faces.

“Of course I love you, I’ll be back in the early afternoon.” Abbigail chocked. She kissed her husband and girls goodbye and opened the front door. The sun had come out a bit and the bright rays were shooting up from between the neighbors’ homes. Abbigail felt the power and warmth rush through her body. She bounded toward the car and turned around, looking at the place she called “mild prison” for years.

“It’s only a part-time job, but it’s my job,” she said to herself. With that she slid into her car and with a little shakiness pulled out of Browning Avenue into her new life, leaving the witches and their brew behind.

THE CANDY BAR TREES

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Dad turned the car down the gravel road, put a cigar in his mouth and rolled up the window. Once a month, we drove to Grandma and Grandpa's farm for lunch after church. Kelly stood on the front seat between Mom and Dad; I dangled my legs over the back seat. We drove past cornfields on a bumpy road that shook my eyeballs and tummy. Road dust crept in through the floorboards. Dad puffed on his cigar.

"Can't you put that thing out?" asked Mother.

"It's not bothering anybody, honey," said Dad.

Mom crossed her arms and rolled her shoulders. "You're just like your father, him and that damn pipe of his. I don't know how your mother has stood it all these years, that pipe and those silly trees."

"Sally, not in front of the kids."

"Well, it's not right, is all."

We slowed down to turn into Grandpa's driveway. I lowered the window and leaned out my head. A wagon filled with hay was parked outside the big red barn. The barn door was open. It was black inside. I knew Grandpa's tractor must be in there, that's where Grandpa liked to put it. Nestled under the trees opposite the barn was a small white house. Concrete steps with a rod-ironed handrail led up to a screened aluminum door. Under a maple tree near the house laid Sam, Grandpa's old Labrador. We were halfway down the drive before Sam raised his head. He stood without barking and limped his way toward our car. He held his whiskers down and slowly wagged his tail.

Dad tooted the horn before we came to a stop. Grandma opened the screen door, grinned and wiped her hands on her apron. Grandpa stood behind her. His eyes smiled behind his pipe. He stepped outside in his bib overalls and brown leather slippers, put the pipe in his hand and waived. Kelly and I ran over to Sam. I fell on my knees and put my arms around his middle; Kelly hugged his neck and pressed her lips against his nose. Sam raised his head and knocked Kelly down onto the ground. For the first time ever she didn't cry. Mom hugged Grandma, Dad shook Grandpa's hand. Kelly ran over to them.

"Grandma, Grandpa!" she said. "Can we go to the candy bar trees?"

"Not until you've had your lunch," said Mother.

"Oh, it wouldn't hurt any to take them now," said Grandpa.

"Hubert!" said Grandma. "You do as Sally says. I swear, he's as bad as the kids."

We followed Grandma into the house that smelled of damp furniture, pine needles and old people. I looked out the window at the hay wagon parked near the open barn door. Grandpa would lift Kelly and me into the wagon, hook up his tractor and pull us through the woods. I looked down the wooded path toward the magic trees. Sam lay panting in the shade.

After lunch, the grownups picked corn from between their teeth, and Kelly and I washed the watermelon sugar off our ears, the family moved into the living room. Grandpa sank deeply into his overstuffed chair.

"Kelly," I whispered. "Go ask Grandpa now."

"Tommy, just you never mind," Mother said from the couch. "Go outside and let Grandpa alone for a while." The screen door slammed behind me. "And stay out of the barn!"

I jumped off the last two steps, looked at the barn and back at the screen door. I kicked pieces of gravel over to Dad's car, pushed the lock buttons up and down and looked over to the barn door. Sam watched me from under the tree. With my hands in my pockets I skipped over behind the hay wagon and stopped to look at the house through the spokes of the rear wheel. The barn door was there. Barn smells and barn silence poured out the open door. I looked down toward my feet and started over to the barn door. Sam blew air through his nose and sat up; I jumped back behind the wagon. Sam was a snitch, and I knew it. He was one of them, old and cranky. I looked at the house again. No one was at the door. No one was at the window. I looked back at Sam and started moving toward the barn door. He was too old to bark very loud.

I stood in front of the door, looked inside and there it was, Grandpa's big green tractor. He let me sit up there last time and turn the wheel. I could feel Sam's eyes on my back, I could hear what Mother would say if she knew. My feet moved forward unconsciously. I looked up at the shiny grill and raised spread fingers to touch the silver stag. The screen door slammed.

"Tommy, Tommy, c'mon," yelled Kelly. "We get to go now. We get to go to the candy bar trees!" Grandpa followed Kelly out the door with his pipe in his mouth. He slapped his baseball cap in his leg and put the cap on his head. "C'mon, Sammy! Sammy, c'mon!"

Sam stood and walked a few steps into the sunlight, whimpered and sat back down. "C'mon, old-timer," said Grandpa. "You can make it." Grandpa lifted Kelly and me into the hay wagon and turned toward Sam. "Come on, fella," he said. Sam stood and limped toward the wagon. Grandpa lifted Sam into the hay behind us and then disappeared into the barn.

The tractor engine started, a puff of blue smoke came out the door. Grandpa eased the tractor out of the barn and backed it up in front of the wagon. He set the engine to idle, climbed down, hooked us up and then climbed back onto the seat. Smoke blew out of the stack when he goosed the engine. I could see him move the levers: I could feel him turn the giant steering wheel. The hay wagon jerked and squeaked. Dad waved at us through the screen door as we headed down the wooded path.

Grandpa sat on the wide metal seat smoking his pipe. He turned his head to us, smiled and puffed. Sam lay stretched out in the hay, panting. Grandpa drove slowly through the deep ruts; Kelly and I bounced together in the hay. The hay got into my shirt and crept up my pant legs. When I laughed it got in my mouth. The hay smelled as good as Grandma's dinner rolls. Sam lay quietly in the hay.

We rolled and bounced down a small hill to the edge of the woods and turned left along the corn rows. Crows chased an owl through the sky, picking at its tail feathers. We turned left again and headed back into the woods. At the base of a small rise Grandpa stopped the wagon. Kelly rushed to the side of the wagon to see them, the white, peely-barked trees that had candy bars tied to their lower branches and scattered in their fallen leaves.

"I see them! I see them!" squealed Kelly.

I jumped out of the wagon and ran for the trees. Kelly screamed and cried until Grandpa lifted her down. She started running before her feet hit the ground, stumbled and fell. Grandpa helped her to her feet. She started running again before he could brush her off. Grandpa took the pipe out of his mouth and looked back at the wagon.

We scrambled to stuff our pockets with the candy on the ground, and kicked the leaves away to find more of the chocolate bars. We weren't allowed to take them all. We had to leave some so that others would grow, Grandpa would say. We were searching as much for the ones we would leave behind, the ones with coconut and no almonds; the ones with peanut butter and jelly inside. When I jumped up to grab the lower branches the candy bars fell out of my pockets.

"Grandpa!" I yelled. "Come and pull the branches down! Grandpa!"

I turned and saw Grandpa standing there behind us holding Sam in his arms. I never saw Grandpa cry, not even then, but he was about as close to it as maybe he could get. "Sam died, children," is all he said. He laid Sam down on the ground and stroked his neck. Kelly and I stood over Sam's body while Grandpa went and got a shovel out of the wagon. We had never seen anything dead before, let alone someone we knew. Grandpa dug a grave and laid Sam into it. Kelly pointed to a tree.

"Will it grow puppies, Grandpa?" asked Kelly.

Grandpa tapped the pipe in the palm of his hand. The ashes fell to the ground. "Yes, sweetheart, puppies will grow, but not here. When we leave little tiny candy bars, they grow close by. We have to look farther away for puppies."

"All the way to heaven, Grandpa?" asked Kelly.

"Not to find new puppies. But one day, heaven is where you'll find Sammy and me waiting for you."

We wanted to make a cross for Sammy's grave. Grandpa sent me and Kelly to look for sticks. When we brought them back, Grandpa had already filled in the grave. He broke one of our sticks in half and latched it to another with one of his boot laces. He pushed the cross into the ground and tapped it in deeper with the shovel. When he finished, Grandpa stood next to us, removed his cap, and we bowed our heads in prayer.

NEW SHOES

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We were proud and we were poor. I didn't realize that at the time, I was only 5 years old. Every Easter, somehow, I got a new spring coat, hat, gloves and shoes. We walked as a family the three blocks to church, my father's chest puffed out, a big smile on his face.

My coat was a robin's egg blue, my gloves were white. I had a stiff little hat with real fake beads on it. But the important thing was that my red MaryJanes didn't "go with" the outfit, as my mother said. So I wore black patent leather, two sizes too large with "room to grow," and straps that could be swung back over the heels. They could have looked grown up, but my father buckled them over my foot. "You'll scuff your new shoes and bend down the backs. You'll buckle like always," he said.

The chocolate bunny, the marshmallow egg with my name in icing, the pastel colored basket with yellow and purple jelly beans were almost extraneous. The red MaryJanes would now be my school shoes. Finally it would be my turn to be the star of the "New Shoe" song.

At circle time, Miss Totten would ask if anyone had new shoes and I would be the one to skip all around the circle while she played the piano with theatrical flourish and my classmates sung the "New Shoe" song. I practiced skipping with even longer strides, hoping to set a record for the most number of times around the circle before the music stopped and I slid into the vacant place on the carpet and became like everyone else.

My father took the red shoes to the basement and gave them a fresh coat of polish. "Make sure you tell Miss Totten these aren't new – there're just shined up," he said.

I wanted to mean it when I said, "I promise, Daddy."

After nap, after rolling up my sleeping mat and putting it in my cubby, Miss Totten clapped her hands and sat at the piano. It was circle time. We sang “Robin in the Rain,” “Good Morning to You,” and “When You Hold a Rosy Apple.”

My red MaryJanes shone like a traffic light among all the Buster Browns. I knew it was wrong. I had never deliberately lied before, but I had to. Perhaps Miss Totten hesitated when I raised my hand for the “New Shoe” song, but she nodded, turned back to the piano, and waving her hands like Liberace, began to play.

I skipped like a thoroughbred. In my mind, the worn-down heels cracked like tap shoes and the deep grooves in the leather didn’t squeak with each prance. I skipped and skipped until the music stopped and I sat flush with pride and exertion.

Fifty-five years later I still sing every word of “Robin in the Rain,” “Good Morning to You,” and “When You Hold a Rosy Apple.” I can’t remember one note from the “New Shoe” song.

GUIDELINES FOR A FIRST DATE

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The line was short. The girl tapped the shoulder of an older man in front of her and asked if he had the time. He did not look at his wrist, but instead took his cell phone from his pocket and informed her that it was not quite half past five. The girl thanked him and folded her arms into the excess fabric of her sweatshirt. As he turned to say, “You’re welcome,” his tired eyes opened to see a girl whose voice had done her no justice. “Are you alone here?” He quickly felt the pocket where his wallet rested.

“I’m meeting someone for dinner.” She tugged the hood of the sweatshirt closer to the nape of her neck.

“Oh …” The man turned his face back toward the front of the line,

The line progressed slowly but eventually the girl was inside. The line then moved along the buffet; she took a tray and watched it become loaded with different items she would nod at or quietly say “yes” to, and she watched the disappointment on the faces of volunteers who were stuck shoveling unsavory or less gratifying bits of vittles.

The table was clean and she sat there alone. She gently prodded her salad and gradually began to eat it, avoiding the red onions. A moment barely passed; a dark-haired man stood over her with his tray.

“Are you Cher?” He set the tray on the other side of the table.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“In all the pictures Thomas showed me, you had long hair and wore bright dresses.” His legs moved awkwardly to fit over the bench, his fresh-smelling, white-trimmed sneakers bumping the table.

“I still have long hair. I’m incognito.” She pulled a whip of a ponytail around her shoulder. “Obviously, you didn’t realize how ‘down’ you were supposed to dress.”

“What do you mean?” He remembered that he was expected to be eating and cut a square of lasagna with his fork.

“A polo shirt? In a bright color?” She rolled her eyes.

“Even if this is a soup kitchen, we’re still on a date. I feel like I should look nice.” He supinated his palms in a gesture of complete helplessness.

“Looking nice means having a clean face. You don’t need to show me what sort of clothes you can buy.” She scolded him lightly by pointing her fork in his direction.

“Why are we here anyway? Neither of us is poor.” He chewed on a bit of broccoli he had found in the lasagna.

“Neither are most of the people in here, but they all have a purpose for being here. Most of them just want to save money, get a free meal. I think this is the perfect place for a first date.”

“I think you are the only girl who will ever say that to a man.”

“Well, it’s a first date – not an engagement party. We don’t know one another; we don’t know if we want to spend money to spend time together. Plus the atmosphere here is totally different than at a restaurant.” She rotated a lettuce leaf with her fork. “People force themselves to mind their own business, and they don’t want other people to know that they’re here. It’s a non-judgmental environment because people don’t want to be judged. Restaurants are big to-dos with displays of loud laughter, birthday songs and flaming dishes; they’re about showing off.” She pushed a stuffed mushroom cap around the perimeter of her plate.

“You make good points.” He stared down. “Thomas said you’re the sort of girl who likes for the man to pay for dinner, though.”

“That’s assuming he thinks I’m worth it. It would be unfair to expect you to take Tom’s word that I’m worth a $60 plate of Italian food at Bellissima Familia.” She scooted the mushroom onto her fork. “You know, these are from Bellissima. If you buy a tray of them, it’s $60 for five dozen. That’s a dollar apiece. At the end of the night, the leftovers come here and anyone with the nerve can get them for free.”

“Is that true?”

“Of course it is.” She put on her best politician’s voice. “It’s a matter of social responsibility to give leftovers to the soup kitchens.” She scanned the tabletops. “That lasagna is also Bellissima’s, and I think that beef is probably from the hip barbecue place that just opened up on Main, between the grocery and the salon.”

They both ate silently for a few minutes. She began to tap her fork against the plate.

“They’re made with real crabmeat, too.” She sliced through one of the mushrooms.

“You know, even with your ugly sweatpants, you don’t really fit in here.” He smiled lightly.

“Oh? Why not?” Her back straightened.

“You’re too pretty to be poor … or, well, in a position to be eating here.”

“Pretty girls cannot be poor? Interesting theory, I’ll put it in my notes.”

“They really can’t be. There’ll always be some man looking to give your cute face money. They’ll either throw it at you, or … you know.” His face flushed slightly as he rushed to finish the sentence.

“Who’s to say I didn’t enter into that kind of lifestyle and get knocked back down by drug addiction? Cocaine is expensive and the dealers don’t donate their leftovers to anybody.”

“I’m pretty sure that a girl like you … you could get free drugs – if you wanted them, but you’re too pretty to be addicted to anything. Your skin is smooth and well-colored.

Your eyes are bright and clear. You have no nervous habits."

"Maybe I'm just not nervous." She laughed.

"You don't even smoke cigarettes." His nostrils danced indistinctly, weakly grabbing for her clothing.

"No." She looked around. "Perhaps I don't fit the stereotypes associated with a place like this." She took a sip of water and stared at him intently. "If you'd dress down more, you'd fit in."

"What?" He poked the remaining piece of lasagna repeatedly with his fork. "That's really rude. I've got half a mind to get up and leave right now."

"You don't want to entertain my theory? I might be just as correct as you were." Her eyes were wide and her brows drawn high. He sat up and stared at her face.

"You've got horrible bags beneath your eyes; because you're dark-haired, your stubble appears to grow in very quickly; your lips are red with dehydration. If you had worn a t-shirt instead of a polo, you'd look just like an alcoholic. A very sexy one, but still, an alcoholic." She frantically chewed through a round of carrot, watching his face struggle between feelings of flattery, insult and nudity.

"I have a very good job as a –"

"I know. You have a *fantastic* job. And horrible insomnia. And a business and a political position and any number of organizations to help the less fortunate. You've also got hobbies. *Fantastic* hobbies. But I know that by the end of the week, you probably need a bottle of something to put you to bed, and if it weren't for your being a *fantastically* motivated person with lots of dreams, a few nice suits and a penchant for hard work, you probably would be just another alcoholic sitting in this room. Like that guy." She tilted her head toward an unshaven man in the corner who visibly looked as though he smelled.

"That's really awful. He could be a veteran."

"He could be. But he's not." She shrugged innocently.

"How would you know?"

"I had dinner with him a few years ago."

"You dated a homeless man?" His voice raised in volume and pitch,

"No, although that would have made for an interesting story. I used to volunteer here, when I was younger … back in high school. Back when I thought that every single person here had some sort of need beyond getting himself."

He groaned as he polished off the remainder of his plate.

"This is the strangest date I have ever been on."

"Well, normal has never seemed to work for me." Cher smiled.

"Come to think of it, normal has never worked for me either." He laughed. He carefully stood up and took their empty trays to the kitchen where an elderly woman stood by a soapy sink.

"Bless your heart, darling," she said, smiling, as she took the dirty dishes from his hands.

"Thank you." He walked to the door, his chest behind Cher's back, all but holding her arm. "I think I'd like to buy you some dessert."

"Oh, they usually have very good dessert here. I thought I saw some mousse cake. It looked like the sort they have at Café du Soleil." She rambled on as he took her arm and pushed through the door.

"No, Cher." He looked into her amplified, confused eyes. "I want to buy you dessert." He smiled.

"Oh." She blushed and let a little smirk slide up in response.

“Do you want chocolate cake somewhere?”

“Actually …”

“Yes?”

“There’s usually an ice cream truck parked a few blocks from here. I like those plastic cones with the gumball on the bottom. They don’t melt very quickly and then you have the gum once the ice cream is gone.” She smiled. He laughed.

“Sure, Cher. Let’s get some Screwballs.”

“Thank you, Mark.”

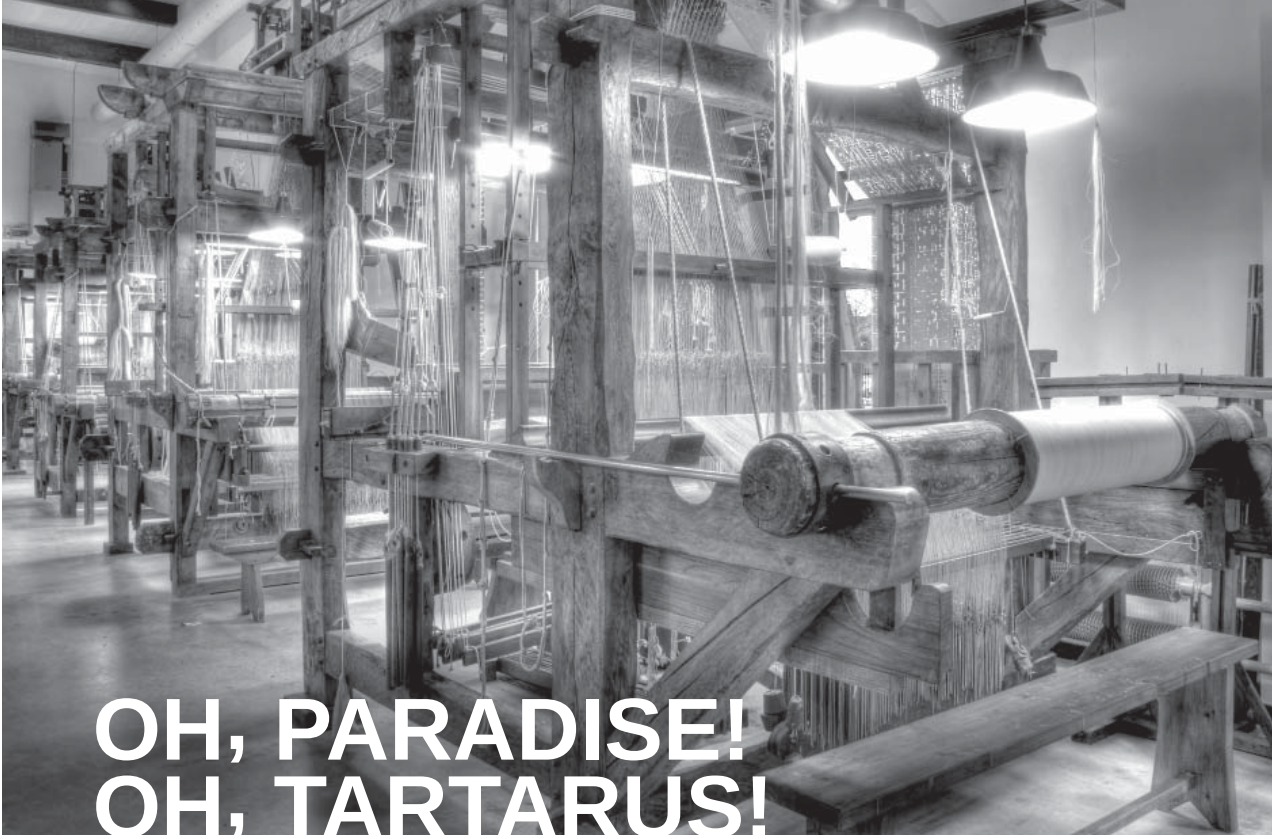
He pulled the elastic from her hair and slid it over his hand, shaking her hair with his fingers.

“If we have a second date, I’d advise that you don’t bring the sweatpants.”

“I’d have to find them a babysitter, then.”

“You could keep them in your purse, if they really must come.” He smiled. She laughed.

And they dated happily ever after.



OH, PARADISE! OH, TARTARUS!

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Economic issues have dominated human culture and history since the beginning of both situations. People who have better skills, better education and technology have a distinct advantage over people who do not. One of the times of greatest change was during the Industrial Revolution, which began in England and then moved to America. At the time, industrialization was considered totally beneficial, without consequences. This was not to remain true. Long hours, poor conditions, and disease were the realities of factories. Social reformers did what they could to improve the lot of workers, and writers used the written word to make the realities of industrial life known. Herman Melville was one of these writers with a social conscience. Melville had his own problems with money and employment and he highlights the issues relating to industrialization in this story, “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids.”

Herman Melville was born in New York City to a successful merchant (Belasco and Johnson 1072). “He attended the New York Male High School until 1830, when his father’s business as an importer and wholesale merchant collapsed” (1072). The family’s prosperity changed suddenly. “The family then moved to Albany, New York, where their fortunes improved” (1072). However, January of 1832 saw the death of Melville’s father, Allan. Melville was then forced to leave school and take an apprenticeship in a bank to help support the family (1072). The struggle for money and finding employment filled Melville’s life. He worked several different jobs and spent a few years on different kinds of ships. His years at sea would provide valuable material for his career as a writer. His first book, *Typee*, offered a look at the life of the Indians Melville had spent time with in the Marquesas Islands. *Typee* and the subsequent books *Omoo, Redburn* and *White-Jacket* were

well-received by readers and critics (1072). “But Melville’s popularity did not last and his finances remained precarious” (1073). Melville continued to write and would produce his most enduring novel, *Moby Dick*, in 1851, but that, along with his subsequent works, would be poorly received (1074). Melville “died in obscurity and relative poverty on September 28, 1891 (1074). Melville’s works did not attract a wider following until later years, requiring him to have employment since he could not support himself with his writing. He was an author well qualified to discuss the hidden hazards of the Industrial Revolution.

The human mind is handicapped by its inability to understand concepts unless they are put into pairs of opposites, and because of this, Melville divides his story into two parts so readers can understand his point. He is describing a community made up of what would be referred to today as white-collar workers, saying “Though to be a Templar, in the one true sense, you must needs be a lawyer, or a student of the law, and be ceremoniously enrolled as a member of the order” (Melville 1105). This is a place made of men, who have the finest things in life because of their education. It affords them the status to occupy Paradise. The narrator even comments about where the bachelors live: “The apartment was well up toward heaven” (1106). The narrator of the story and the bachelors sit down to eat and dinner is in keeping with Paradise:

> After these light skirmishers had vanished, the heavy artillery of the feast marched in, led by that well known English generalissimo roast beef. For aides-de-camp we had a saddle of mutton, a fat turkey, a chicken pie and endless other savory things; while for avant-couriers came nine silver flagons of humming ale (1106).

Because of their wealth they are able to feast in excess. He speaks about their drinking as well: “Thus, I spoke of taking a glass of claret, and a glass of sherry, and a glass of port, and a mug of ale” (1107). The idea of Paradise is shown through the excess of the bachelors. While not all of the bachelors are lawyers, all of them are educated and some are involved in business as well. The narrator explains his own livelihood as: “Having embarked on a large scale in the seedsman’s business” (1110). He and other bachelors are part of this new industry. It is only through their education, gender, and the new Industrial Revolution that these men are able to inhabit their Paradise.

Now that the reader has seen Paradise, Melville is ready to take his audience down to Tartarus. The journey into Tartarus begins out of necessity for the narrator: “The demand for paper at my place became so great, that the expenditure soon amounted to a most important item in the general account” (1110). He is unaware of how his paper is produced and is going to be met with a shock when he arrives. He describes sinister landmarks such as Woedolor Mountain, Devil’s Dungeon, Blood River, and the Mad Maid’s Bellows’-pipe, as he journeys to the paper mill. The reader is immediately ill at ease with such words. Welcome to Tartarus, where the paper is made. He arrives and asks a girl where he may place his horse. The only response he receives is: “Pausing, she turned upon me with a face pale with work, and blue with cold; an eye supernatural with unrelated misery” (1112). The girl runs off before she can speak to the narrator. The first difference has been demonstrated. The bachelors have their Paradise, but the maids have their Tartarus. She is not given the opportunity to speak and would not be able to speak as well as the bachelors in Paradise. The narrator is given a tour of the paper mill and tells what he sees: “At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, with blank, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding paper” (1113). The conditions of workers in the mills were notoriously poor, especially for the women. Melville is showing people how this great Industrial Revolution has sentenced a great deal of women to a hell where they lose everything about them and become blank, tired, and overworked. He contrasts them well

with the bachelors. In Tartarus there is no education, drinking or high spirits. There is only silence, work, and desperation.

The rise of industry gave rise to new ways of life and new feelings. Some people became very wealthy while others became more miserable in a world of factory labor. Melville and other writers began to look critically at the Industrial Revolution in an attempt to change the views people held about it. The Industrial Revolution was largely viewed as entirely beneficial, but works like “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” made people think differently and begin to question the condition of the workers. Melville succeeds in presenting both social criticism and literature. He uses subtle imagery in Paradise, but is at his best when he turns to Tartarus. In Paradise, he describes a real place, but Tartarus is revealed to readers in a more surreal way, which helps the audience realize and appreciate the story as a work of literary merit and a vehicle for social criticism. Melville could have easily set his story in a real mill, but instead makes it fictional. The story parallels today, an age where progress is considered synonymous with technology. The bachelors in Paradise are the people who have benefited the most from this Industrial Revolution and the maids in Tartarus are the people hurt by others’ prosperity. The benefits for the bachelors are completely absent for the maids.

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DANCE

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I want to dance, just once
before I die,
on a moonlit beach
in a satin dress,
with a man in a white dress shirt.

I close my eyes and can see
how the white cotton lays
Next to his tan cheek.
I will inhale the fragrance of the sea,
the heat of him, of the night.

I can feel his hand,
warm, in the small of my back,
his arm close around my waist, as we dance
and dance,
until the world is shut away,
from me, from us.

AN AFTERNOON WITH MOM

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She dozes in her wheelchair, propped up by pillows, wearing a blue and white seersucker hospital robe. She wouldn't like the robe. She never liked blue – but the pink flowered slippers that peek out from under the blanket over her lap reflect a little of her earlier taste. Her head nods and she mumbles a few words of the Lord's Prayer, one of the small pieces of memory remaining. Although now white-haired, her head is still covered with the soft curls I remember from ever since I was a little girl.

… One of my earliest remembrances (which perhaps accounts for my later penchant for henna) was of Mom sitting at a table, curly auburn head bent over her hands, putting red polish on her nails. She was getting ready for a party, I think, because she was very dressed up in this memory. A light green dress, with the oversized shoulder pads of the 1940s. I was 3 or 4, and thought her the most beautiful, soft cuddly woman I had ever seen. I still do.

She looks up, turns her head, and smiles at me. She doesn't know who I am anymore. It has been a long time since she put my face and my name together – but she seems to recognize someone she loves, or knows she is looking at someone who loves her. Her smile always lit up any room. Its genuineness was never in doubt. Now it is especially sweet.

I can remember the sound of her laughter at us kids when we did something particularly stupid or silly (a frequent occurrence), or at herself when she tried something that didn't quite work out as she had planned. She loved to listen to, and tell, funny stories and slightly off-color jokes. I can see and hear, in my mind, her head thrown back and her hearty laughter at those times. Even now when she hears someone laugh, she smiles. I would like to hear her laugh out loud just one more time.

Her hands are always moving these days. There seems to be a need to keep them busy although they can't find a real purpose. Right now she folds the towel on her tray over and over. It makes me think of the thousands of times I have seen her do this before.

… It seemed like she was always doing laundry. She probably was. There were four of us kids. Washing clothes, hanging them out to dry – the clothespins in the pocket of her apron, sometimes one in her mouth – as she tried to get a pair of pants arranged on the line so they would dry unwrinkled. And later, folding a basket of fresh, outdoor-smelling laundry (before the automatic dryer that came much later). I can smell it as I sit here. I will never forget that fragrance. I remembered it too, hugging my own daughters after they had been playing outside on a windy day. Their hair would smell like Mom's basket of wash.

She leaned over and took my writing pad from me. Didn't want the pen – its purpose no longer remembered. She studies my words for a long time, moving her lips, trying to read what I've written. Although never an avid reader (preferring true-life stories to fiction when she did read) she wrote wonderful letters.

… I would give anything if I'd had the foresight to keep the pages she wrote to this daughter who left home to seek her fortune (which in later years I kept coming back home to find). Her letters were newsy – what the family and neighbors were up to. Her interests always remained close to home. She tried not to appear worried at what I was doing and where I was doing it, but the concern and love always came through the recipes, coupons and articles from the local newspaper, that she would enclose.

I push her in the wheelchair from the hospital room to the sunroom, and even this short trip has tired her. She dozes off and on. It is unlikely that the longer trip – back to her home – will happen again. Home was so important to her.

… We had several homes, the earlier ones quite poor, but each spotless and warm. The bedrooms we sisters and my brothers shared were ours to decorate (within reason), but "her" rooms were full of rose decorations and olive-colored chairs, soft patterned curtains and pictures of her favorite flowers. Initially, off on my own, I rebelled with the oranges and purples of the 60s, geometric designs, sterile, utilitarian rooms. Somewhere along the way to maturity I gave in to the coziness of my mother's homes, and now live in the splendid familiarity of pink peony patterned sheets, leaf-green hued chairs and rose-decorated lampshades.

She wakes and stares out the window, watching the cars go up and down the tree-lined streets of this lovely spring day. Maybe she fleetingly remembers other car trips – our family vacations to northern Wisconsin and Canada, her drives with Dad to the different places I moved to, and later, when her memory started troubling her, the many rides Dad would take her on past farmhouses she had lived in as a child, and the tiny apartments they had shared when they were first married.

… Mom and Dad took longer, farther trips over the years. My airline career provided their flights to New York to visit me, Hawaii with my husband and me, Las Vegas with their friends, California and Baltimore to visit relatives. It was the drives, however, the memory drives (with a stop for an ice cream cone or root beer) that Mom enjoyed most toward the end. Eventually the rides kindled no memory.

I mentioned Dad. He won't leave her alone in the hospital room except at night after she has gone to sleep – but for now, with me here to sit with Mom, he is quickly running a few errands and will return shortly with his usual smile and hug for her. Their relationship is an inspiration. Always has been. I've watched it for almost 50 years, and they had more years before I came along that I didn't see or share. So many years together of sharing and loving and giving.

… When Mom's mind and health started deteriorating, she fought against turning basic tasks over to Dad. When it was no longer an option and became a necessity, he made the transition to homemaker and caretaker with love and respect for all the years she had done it so well and willingly for others. In all the good years past, and the difficult present times, I have never seen anything but love from my father's eyes when he looks at my mother. They have passed a beautiful and a difficult legacy on to us kids and our spouses. Beautiful because their marriage was a pleasure to witness through the years. Difficult because we all wanted and expected this same kind of love and devotion from our partners, which wasn't always easy to find or give.

The nurse just came in for a blood pressure check. She woke Mom, and met with some quiet resistance – gentle now, not what I can remember sometimes with Mom.

… I've mentioned that she was loving and caring, and she was most definitely that. Mom was also an incredible spitfire at times. She had definite ideas of right and wrong, and defended and fought for things she had strong feelings about (usually having to do with us kids, her parents or my Dad). I always knew that if she was on my side when there were problems at school, I was in the right. If she wasn't on my side, I thought it over very carefully.

Back in her room, Mom lets me feed her and lets the nurse put her in bed. Dad apologizes, sometimes, for the things we have to do for her now (although he does the same and more with no complaint). I'm not sure he knows how much I love to feed her, wash her, talk to her, rub her hands, comb her hair. These things I know she did for me when I was too young to remember.

… I do vividly remember her cool hand on my forehead when I wasn't feeling well. I remember her making me laugh when I didn't make the cheerleader team. I remember her pride at my career successes. I remember her happy tears when she held my babies. I remember her always being there when I needed her. I am glad there is some opportunity to repay a small part of her many gifts.

She sleeps again, I wonder if she sleeps so much now because her mind works better when she can close her eyes to surroundings no longer familiar, and people she no longer recognizes. Some time ago, when I was trying to get her to talk, I asked her if she knew who I was, who I looked like, who I reminded her of. Mom's simple, quiet answer was "everyone looks the same to me now." My heart ached at her response and I sincerely hope, in her dreams, she sees everything and everybody as they used to be.

Sweet dreams, Mom.

UNTITLED

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As Mother continued to un-Mother,
Stepmother dismissed me.
Bedtime stories arose,
as the sun rested.
Daddy's rib bone sides
arms and armpits
cradled my small crown
Perfumed my braids
With Old Spice and Brut
Our eyes played great games of poker.

-We okayed each other

As mother continued to un-mother,
Stepmother dismissed me.
Our stories told tales
Of dynamic dual,
perfecting the imperfect.

By embracing us,
and depending on only we,
With accurate facial readings,
We bartered emotions,
thoughts and questions.
Together we
Braved nature,
cultivated mutual
eye smiling,
and fruited normalcy.

-We okayed each other

As Mother continued to un-Mother
Stepmother dismissed me.
I recall mornings
When the sun awakenings,
rivaled the sleeping sun.
Dad executed his ideas
To take care of my
Exterior and IQ.

He brushed
my locks
100 strokes,
to unfold
my tight,
curled hair,
we counted.

Daddy also pretended
he could decode
written words
of Dr. Seuss
and others,
as a great poker player,
I pretended he could too.
We Okayed each other

-We Okayed each other

HAPPILY UNMARRIED
HOW PEOPLE ARE CREATING THEIR OWN DEFINITION OF FAMILY

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Over the past few decades views on marriage and cohabitation have changed tremendously from those held by previous generations. “Shacking up” has gone mainstream. People are creating their own personal relationships in place of legal, state-defined marriage. Most don’t bat an eyelash at their cohabiting neighbors. After all, when you take a look back at the history of marriage, marriage licenses and the incentives and validation that comes with them are relatively modern inventions, originating in the eighteenth century. And, while these alternative views on marriage may seem dramatic in comparison to the World War II generation, if you compare them to those of the ancient Egyptians, Native Americans or even modern-day Europe, you will see that the absence of marriage and/or the conscious decision not to marry is not a precursor to moral and familial dysfunction. When the U.S. Census was conducted in 2000, 9.7 million Americans were cohabiting with an unmarried different-sex partner. Fifty-seven percent were people between the ages of 25 and 44, while 18 percent were under 25 and 25 percent were 45 and up (Alternatives to Marriage Project). For these couples, the issue of marriage is intensely personal on many different levels and for many different reasons.

For some it is about fairness and equality. Someone close to them in a same-sex relationship wants to get married but can’t, so they refuse to marry until everyone has that right. Others think that with modern medicine and personal development it is foolish to think that one will find the same partner physically, emotionally and intellectually fulfilling forever. Some hold strong philosophical or religious beliefs, such as love is purer if separated from legal or religious acknowledgment. Some have economic or financial reasons. One of them has insurmountable debt or is receiving benefits that they cannot afford to lose, but would, if they were to marry. [Examples: Federal Employees Compensation Act: Remarriage or

Death: Widows and widowers receive benefits until death, or remarriage, if they are under age 55 (U.S. Code); Federal Employees Health Benefits Program: Spouse Equity: You can keep your coverage indefinitely if you pay your premiums on time, don't remarry before age 55 and don't lose your entitlement to an annuity or survivor annuity. (U.S. Office of Personnel Management)]. And some simply have no desire – legal, religious, cultural or otherwise – to tie the proverbial knot.

Moreover, marriage is never a private contract between two people. As Dorian Solot and Marshall Miller, founders of The Alternatives to Marriage Project state, "Hidden behind the tall wedding cake and the flowers lies a legal contract [and] government requirements specify who is allowed to get married, what it costs, what you have to do first …" (45). What business is it of the state to be so involved in matters as personal as when or whether a person chooses to marry of not? Meanwhile, Solot and Miller point out that the U.S. income tax system is set up to benefit marriages where one spouse earns more than 70 percent of the total household income, so when both spouses work they end up paying more in total income taxes than if they were not married. And, even though recent laws have gradually been reducing the "marriage penalty" over the past few years, it has not been eliminated entirely (149).

In addition to not feeling the need for personal affairs to be wrapped up in state policy, there is also a desire to maintain one's personal identity. In many cultures, there is a stigma attached to becoming a wife (or husband) where one becomes subservient to the other. In today's society, with gender equality (for the most part) fought and won, is it any surprise that more people are deciding they do not want to play into the traditional gender roles that seem to come with the titles of husband and wife?

If a relationship between two unmarried partners comes to an end, since there was never any societal agreement to be viewed as a hermaphrodite unit, there is no messy legal battle to incur. There is a range of somber emotions that comes with the ending of any relationship, but no court battle to determine fault, no legal incentives to claim victim status, no debilitating lawyer fees. Professional and personal identities remain intact.

This is not to suggest that cohabiters enter into their relationships with half-formed commitments and expectations of dissolution. Even with current generations growing up with the tradition of divorce seeming like the logical conclusion to marriage, quite the opposite is true. For a majority there is a deep level of psychological investment involved, as well as the opportunity to allow their commitment to develop organically. It can be hard to contemplate the expectation of feeling more committed to a person one day than the day before, just because a marriage occurred. Also, 95 percent of the 9.7 million cohabiting Americans have the expectation of being monogamous, notes Solot and Miller (A10). After all, it is a lot easier to have sex without commitment if you are not living together. A wedding and certificate are only material and legal symbols. They do not confer or guarantee commitment, nor do they define the relationship. Still, some do choose to do the walk down the aisle and exchange "I dos" in front of family and friends in a commitment ceremony that suits them.

Some still contest the idea of cohabitation. Most emphatic in their denunciation are the churches. The Vatican rebukes anyone who receives Holy Communion while living in mortal sin ("Vatican Criticizes"). The Orthodox Church considers it "tantamount to 'prostitution'" ("Church Against Cohabitation"). Others affirm the benefits of marriage. In her testimony before the U.S. Senate on the benefits of marriage, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Ph.D., said:

> Married people are better off than those who are not married in a number of ways. On average, they are happier, healthier, wealthier, enjoy longer lives, and report greater sexual satisfaction than single, divorced or cohabiting individuals … They have better health habits and receive more regular health care … They are also more likely to enjoy close and supportive relationships with their close relatives

> and to have a wider social support network. They are better equipped to cope with major life crises, such as severe illness, job loss, and extraordinary care needs of sick children or aging parents. Married parents are significantly less likely to be poor (National Marriage Project).

Whitehead explains the benefits of marriage for children:

> Marriage provides for regular paternal involvement and investment in children's family households. Indeed, more than any other family arrangement, marriage reliably connects kids to their dads and fathers to the mothers of their children … Children from married parent families … have fewer behavior or school attendance problems and higher levels of educational attainment. They are better able to withstand pressures to engage in early sexual activity and to avoid unwed teen parenthood, behaviors that can derail educational achievement and attainment. They are significantly more likely to earn four-year college degrees or better and to do better occupationally than children from divorced or single parent families (National Marriage Project).

Finally, there are the rights that come with marriage. Along with the myriad of state and federal-granted legal marriage rights [Defense of Marriage Act: A 2004 update to the 1997 GAO report (1,049 Federal benefits for Married Couples) found that 120 new statutory provisions involving marital status were enacted since the last report, and 31 were repealed or amended to remove marital status as a factor. The new total is 1,138 – From the Human Rights Campaign website, which includes the full 18-page report issued by the General Accounting Office in Washington, D.C. (Human Rights Campaign)], many organizations, companies and programs show preferential treatment to married couples. These include but are not limited to: adoption agencies, bank and loan companies, car rental companies, employers in hiring, promotions, and benefits, hospitals [the passing of Amendment 2 in Florida did not just affect same-sex couples], landlords and housing managers in renting, buying, and student housing [a landlord can legally refuse to rent to an unmarried couple, see Florida's statute Chapter 798.02: Adultery; Cohabitation – Lewd and lascivious behavior, punishable as a misdemeanor of the second degree, and in effect as of 2008], immigration laws, insurance companies, the military, and safety net programs for poor people such as TANF and Medicaid, report Solot and Miller (86-87). This proves that marriage is a program for privilege. Because of this many marriage propagandists believe "any reform that would make it easier for divorced parents, singles, unmarried partners or stepfamilies to function is suspect because it removes "incentives for people to get and stay married," writes historian Stephanie Coontz (78). A handful of states still have laws against cohabiting (Alternatives to Marriage Project). As for common-law marriage, only 16 states in the U.S. today recognize this, with four of those states only recognizing those formed before a certain year (Solot and Miller 147).

While religious texts do make reference to "fornication," many religious leaders and scholars have stated that not all religious teachings are applicable today. Reverend Coletta Eichenberger reasons:

> What makes a relationship holy … is how the two individuals within the relationship honor each other and themselves in their actions and words. Honesty, trust, constancy through difficult and easy times, and giving mutual support are far more the landmarks to commitment, love and intimacy than whether or not a union has religious or legal sanction (qtd. in Solot and Miller 67).

Likewise, Rabbi Gershon Winkler confirms:

> From Bibical times on, Judaism never decreed that you had to marry in order to have sex. Throughout the Jewish scriptures, we read about consensual nonmarital relationships called *philagshut*, or literally, 'half-marriage.' … This form of relationship was prevalent even among the holiest of people … (qtd. in Solot and Miller 69).

Oponents of cohabitation have a propensity to oversimplify social science and "cherry pick" in their research. They attempt to paint the image of unmarried couples as people who don't care about family or the well-being of their partners, aren't monogamous, are unhappy and unsure about their future, and are not educated. However, like married couples, they eat meals together, pay the bills, support each other, and have clear expectations for a long future together.

Equally important is the actuality that ALL parents want the best for their children. Solot and Miller add that in the research of how family structure affects children, no study has ever focused on families where the parents are in committed, unmarried relationships. Meanwhile more than 70 percent of children within these families are not having problems, whether measured by their grades in school, the company they keep, their willingness to help around the house, or the number of fights they get into on the playground (207-208). In reality, it comes down to quality. Dr. Judith Stacey illustrates:

> The quality of any family's relationships and resources readily trumps its formal structure or form. Access to economic, educational and social resources; the quality and consistency of parental nurturance, guidance and responsibility; and the degree of domestic harmony, conflict and hostility affect child development and welfare far more substantially than does the particular number, gender, sexual orientation, and marital status of parents or the family structure in which children are reared (66).

In the end, as law professor and activist Nancy Polikoff points out, "marriage is a bright dividing line between those relationships that legally matter and those that don't" ("The Book"). If a woman marries a man and nine months later he dies, she is entitled to Social Security survivor's benefits. But a woman who is happily unmarried to a man for 19 years receives nothing. Every kind of familial configuration needs recognition and protection to meet the concerns they all share, such as economic and emotional interdependency. Solot and Miller recognize other countries with possible policy approaches. Canada, France and Sweden already give legal recognition to partners who meet certain criteria, in which they can register and gain "marital" rights. Australia, Belgium, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Uganda and the United Kingdom are moving in that direction (251, 254). Australian immigration law includes "interdependency" under the country's visa regulations. The U.S. is the only industrialized country that does not guarantee access to health care for all of its citizens. Yet, in the absence of that system, domestic partner benefits can make health care more accessible for unmarried people and their children. In 1997, San Francisco implemented a law requiring every company that does business with the city to provide the same benefits to its employees' domestic partners as it does to its employees' spouses, note Solot and Miller. Since then, many other cities and towns have adopted similar ordinances, including Broward County, Florida (156).

So, in spite of everything, it is the diversity of this country that gives it its strength, and it is now that we need to decide when and how we will accept the challenge to observe and respect people in all kinds of relationships – married, unmarried, gay, straight, child-free, and stroller-filled. According to a Harris poll, write Solot and Miller, 90 percent of all people

believe society should value all types of families and that supporting this diversity is inherently right. All one needs to do is look around for evidence that the people in this array of different relationships can be happy, healthy and productive (254). History is clear. Cohabitation is not the downfall of family. It is, and has always been, a form of family.

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SOCIAL AMBIGUITY

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Reginald traveled the neighborhood of Thursday, made up of tall wide things called single houses. His territory as of late. The houses loomed up against the sky, and those on the south side of the street effectively blocked out the rays of a cruel July sun, while those on the north side provided protection from the blast of north wind in January.

He knew every tree, bush and garbage bag on Elm Street. It was his business to know, for it meant survival. Survival was a tricky business. He had to know when the red-haired male in the house three from the end on the north side of the street would leave for work. The prospect of being caught unaware while lounging close to the engine on his car on one of the more frigid mornings in winter was not a happy one.

And too, he had to know the details of trash day – who put theirs out ahead of schedule – such as the dutiful family of two big ones, whose house was situated midway down the street. Their trash afforded him with a meal on Wednesday mornings. It mattered not to them if a steak bone ended up in their driveway, compliments of Reginald. They had to be the first on their street to get out their bag.

And then there were those who were harried in their life schedule but still liked to accomplish tasks in advance – those with two big ones and two little ones and by definition the majority of the residents on Elm Street – who carried their bags to the curb the night before. If a sushi container or a tuna can ended up outside their bags, they accepted it, too busy to do otherwise. So Wednesday evenings afforded him a virtual smorgasbord.

But again, there was the problem of four houses from the corner on the south side – two big ones and six little ones – who waited until Thursday morning to roll out their black

monster of a can right before the huge noisy meal-stealer stopped at their house. Reginald never had access to that particular restaurant. All those little ones with little appetites, refusing to clean their overfilled plates. He would love a chance at their can. The male of the house would have to get his act together. Be less dilatory, be more punctual and be less concerned about a certain feline who would make a mess of his trash – as if Reginald could get into that Fort Knox of a trash can!

It was spring now – Reginald's favorite time of year in things called seasons. Not too hot, not too cold, bugs to pounce on, birds to stalk and eat and grass to hide in.

He didn't know how long he'd been on his own – perhaps one summer, one autumn and one winter. Reginald thought back to when he was not alone. He remembered one warm day on Bartram Street, where the rented townhouses were, when his former family had been very busy packing cardboard boxes until their sides bulged, breaking dishes meant to be carefully wrapped in newspaper, and tearing up all the hiding spaces in his house that he had secured in his short time with them.

He remembered they had crammed their goods into their ancient, coughing thing called a station wagon, and into a friend's enormous thing called a van. He'd been on the outside looking in. He hadn't understood what was going on. He only knew it was something big and something scary. And when the last of the boxes had been loaded into the vehicles, when a peek through their open house door revealed a living room bare of occupancy, when the house door had been closed and locked and when his family – the two big ones, a male and a female – had driven away, he was alone.

He meowed.

What else was he supposed to do? He wanted to scream and charge after them, stopping them to say, "What do you think you are doing? I think you have forgotten someone." But he couldn't.

It had been tough on him in those days that had followed. He was hungry; he was thirsty, he was scared. He had kept close to his house, hoping they would come back with all the boxes and everything would be just as it had been before. Before the thing called moving day. Gradually over the next couple of days, he had adjusted to the routine. He would sleep curled in the center of a floppy tire left in the backyard of his house. Unless, of course, it rained. Then he would pass the night under the next-door neighbor's thing called a Chevy Cavalier.

He had discovered trash day on his third day without food. It was a wonderful day, and the air was rank with all sorts of dinner possibilities. But the pickings were slim on his street, for not much food was wasted there. Occasional chicken bones or slices of burnt toast or those colorful bags for the little ones, promising meat by their smell, but only holding half-eaten buns. The little ones never finished their buns. They were natural born carnivores, like him.

So as a result, after spending only a few days at his former home, he was forced to wander the streets in search of other trash days. Eventually he found the trash day called Thursday. That was where the houses stood taller and farther apart, not scrunched together the way they were on his street.

It was on that particular trash day when he had first dined in style. Half-eaten steaks and pork chops, tuna cans with enough tuna left in them to provide a tasty snack, salmon sushi someone ignored in a shallow tray – it was a veritable feast. Of all the trash days, Thursday was his favorite.

But now, as he wandered over the lawns of Elm Street, in the realm of Thursday trash day, he realized he could not live on food alone. Reginald had been lonely without a home and a family. He wanted to sleep curled up on a soft carpet under an end table or snooze the day away on the cushion of a sofa. He wanted to hear the sound of pleasant voices murmuring to him, so he could meow in response. He wanted to be stroked and petted, so he could knead someone's lap in contentment. Those were the things he had always dreamed of having but were the things he had yet to experience.

Reginald decided it was his mission to find a family. He chose a pleasant house with rhododendron bushes and a glorious bird feeder hanging near a maple tree. He waited patiently on the grass until the big one, a thing called a mother, whose household included two little ones, drove onto her driveway in a shiny blue minivan. Doors opened and three pairs of feet hit the driveway. It was now or never. He walked onto the driveway, friendly and alert.

"Meow," he said in his most polite voice.

"Oh, Mommy," the little female said. "Look at the pretty cat."

Pretty? Okay, he'd accept that. "Meow," he said again. He rubbed against the little female's leg.

"Can we take him inside?" asked the little male, who was quite smaller than his sister.

The mother took his hand. "No, Jake, we cannot take it inside. It's someone's cat. You mustn't take in animals that don't belong to you. Their families will think they are lost and will get very sad."

Reginald was discouraged.

The little female then spoke up. "But he doesn't look like he has a home. Tara's mom said she had to put a collar on their cat Bangles, in case he got out. She said cats without collars didn't have a home."

Okay, smart little female. Reginald held his breath, his head cocked to one side as he waited for the mother's reply.

The mother rolled her eyes and took the little female's hand in hers. She clearly was not giving in to her daughter. "Courtney, not everyone puts a collar on their pets. A collar can catch on things and give the animal a booboo."

"But he looks hungry," the little male insisted.

The mother then lost much of her carefully practiced enlightened-parent voice. "Will you stop pestering me? If we feed it, Jake, it'll just hang around. Besides, it would spoil its appetite for when it goes home."

For when it goes home? Oh well, he tried. Determined not to be dissuaded, Reginald bounded away in search of a family farther down the street.

He came upon two little males playing on their front lawn. They looked nice. Reginald walked up to them with tail high and the beginning vibration of a purr audible. He weaved around the little ones, who laughed with delight. Little hands stroked his back and scratched his head, as he rubbed against them. Reginald was in heaven.

"I think he likes me," one male said, kneeling next to Reginald.

"He likes me too," said the other little male, who looked very much like the first male.

"Look, he has a black star on his chest."

"Cool."

"Zachery, Zane, what are you two doing near that thing? It's probably crawling with fleas. Come inside and wash your hands." The voice was hushed and stringent. Their mother stood at the open door to their house, waiting for them to obey.

The one male backed away, now afraid of Reginald, while his brother gave Reginald one last pat and stood up straight. “He doesn’t look too dirty, Mom,” he said.

Reginald watched the big one, her face an angry mask. She worked to keep her voice at a volume that was consistent with Thursday trash day.

“Zane, you come over here this instant. Do you want to have to take your allergy medicine?”

“Aw, Mom.” Zane followed his brother into the house.

Reginald was devastated. He knew his paws were not as white as they once were, and his shoulder bones stuck out against his fur, and he did have fleas, which bothered the heck out of him while he tried to nap, but to hear the big one’s words made him feel worthless.

With head down and tail lowered, he left Elm Street. In fact, he left Thursday trash day altogether. Past the well-manicured lawns and planted flowers. Past the shiny cars with big garages. He kept going until things started to look familiar: the houses that were all stuck together in a long row, the dirty lawn chairs that stood on the stoop of the corner house, the little ones who rode bikes and skateboards in the street. He was again on Bartram Street.

He followed the concrete sidewalk down to his old house. A different car was in the driveway, and there were flowers planted in the front mulch area. It looked a lot cleaner than when he had lived there.

“Hey, there’s Rachel and Bob’s cat, Mom,” a female called a teenager said, two houses up from where he stood.

Her mother turned with her bag of groceries to look at Reginald, who walked closer to them. “Are you sure, Claire? It’s been a long time since they moved away. I don’t know if he would have survived out here all this time.”

“It’s him. Look, there’s the black star on his chest.” The teenager bent over and wriggled her fingers at him to come. “Come on, boy, come on.”

Reginald gave a loud “meow” and trotted over to her.

“Good boy,” she crooned, as she petted his head. “He got skinny, Mom.”

Her mother nodded in agreement. “It’s no wonder. I can’t believe they just left him. When Joyce next door told me, I couldn’t believe it. He must have taken off soon after they left him. God knows where he’s been all this time. We tried looking for him.”

Reginald worked his way over to the mother, purring with gratitude. They tried to find him. He mattered. He smiled a cat smile.

“Can we keep him, Mom?” The teenager’s eyes lit up in wishful anticipation.

Her mother hesitated before answering. “We’re really not supposed to have pets, Claire. It’s in the lease.”

Reginald blinked at the mother; she just couldn’t let him down.

“Mom, the Carsons had him and weren’t supposed to either. The landlord didn’t find out about it.”

He waited, hoping all the big ones were not so gosh darn dutiful.

The mother finally relented with a sigh. “Well, now that we’ve found him, we can’t just send him away. Somebody has to step up and care about the poor cat. People shouldn’t have a pet unless they mean to take care of it. That’s the problem with people nowadays – they think they can just throw away either what they don’t want or what’s a bother to them.” She bent down and scratched behind Reginald’s ear. “Do you want to stay with us, kitty? You must be tired of roaming the streets. We’ll get a flea collar for you. Here, Claire, take my grocery bag. I want to get him inside before he runs away.”

No chance of that, Reginald thought, pleased from the tips of his whiskers to the tip of his tail.

The mother carried him gently into the house, while Reginald purred against her chest. “Do you know what his name is, Claire?”

“No. I can’t remember ever hearing Rachel or Bob call him anything.”

Reginald gave a cat hump over that. Oh, they called him “Cat” sometimes, and the female called him “Stubby” on occasion. Stubby. What kind of name was that? Now, Reginald was a fine name and a name that he had given to himself. But, he realized, that was the problem. It was a name that he had given to himself while he was living on the streets. He wanted a name given to him by a family who loved him.

“I know,” said Claire. “We’ll call him Sebastian. Do you like that?” She reached over and tickled him under the chin.

Sebastian, yes, he liked that. “Meow,” he answered in approval.

At last, he had a thing called a home.

THE PIOUS WIFE

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I don't understand why I cry so much. I know it sets his teeth on edge. My Mama had "nerves" so I guess I come by it honestly.

Sometimes it's hard to know just how to act so he stays nice and calm and happy. It's my fault when he gets excited and cuffs me; after all these years I should be able to fix his meat and potatoes just the way he likes them. Sometimes I'll have a perfect meal just waiting and then he comes home and needs a drink or two and then the food is dried out or cold and then he gets mad. He's an important man in our little town. A man like him has lots of pressures. The girls and I try to stay quiet and keep out of his way.

If he gets so upset there's no pleasing him, I take the brunt of it. That's what a good mother does – she shields her children. Mama took it for me and I take it for my girls. The night he caught Carolyn lying, I thought for sure he was going to kill her. There wasn't anything I could do except pray to Jesus that he'd stop. Carolyn's smart – she never made a sound. She took that belt over and over. When he was done, more tired out than finished, I poured him a drink and coaxed him into his recliner. He thought I was taking care of him, but I was really making time for April to help her sister upstairs and out of the way before her Daddy got his second wind.

Poor April. She's more like me. I see him stiffen when she cries. I tell her to keep quiet and stay out of his way, but I think she's got "nerves" too. It won't be long before he'll be trying to arrange for one of his buddies at the Lodge to take her off his hands. April's pretty and a good cook. She's not clever in school, can't be a big help at the store like her sister.

I'll really miss her. I hope she gets a man who doesn't beat her very much. My Carolyn's another worry. Her Daddy is sure she's going to run off with Michael Foreman – not that that would be so bad. Michael seems to treat her nicely and she's got enough of her Daddy in her to make sure he doesn't take advantage. Michael's got plans to open his own business so Carolyn would work for him, I guess. That won't make her Daddy very happy.

There's no way Carolyn will ever get herself trapped like me. She keeps telling me I should stand up for myself. The more I stand up means the more I get knocked down. It's just easier to do what he expects.

I know he's got a girlfriend. Carolyn's madder than hell over that, but I'm not. I like it when he washes and leaves right after supper. It's the only time I get to watch the programs on TV I like, and of course I don't have to worry about being called on later. He might be a little drunk when he gets home, but he's pretty well tired out in that other way, if you know what I mean. I'd gladly take a beating over that other any day.

I don't leave the house much anymore. I used to go to church every Sunday, as regular as can be, unless I was too beat up to get there. I figured the Lord would understand. We don't like our family business to be public. But then there was that nasty time with Carl Ashton. Imagine white trash like Carl accusing my husband of cheating him.

Reverend Marston actually came to the house to talk about it, but he got sent packing. I don't go to church anymore because I know everybody would talk and whisper as soon as they saw me.

April and I have our own little church service on washday when we hang out the clothes. We sing hymns and pray together, and nobody can hear us but God. I think Jesus appreciates it.

I don't know what April prays for, but I pray for my family – my whole family.

CLASS MATTERS: INEQUALITY IN THE U.S.

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Jeff Martinelli was a man who had been married several times, had been a widower once, and had raised a son. He was a man who knew what it was like to struggle. He remembered from his childhood what it was like to be hungry and on welfare. Martinelli had dreams of reaching the middle class, although he never went to college. Instead he found a good job working for an aluminum plant where he honed his skills as a heavy machine operator, a job that let him work his way into the middle class life he had desired.

When he suddenly lost his job after the plant closed down, he tried to find any type of work he could to keep him in the security he had become accustomed to. Even though Martinelli was ambitious, he soon realized that with no degree, there is no way back to the middle. Through the frustrating job interviews and bills that were marked in red, Martinelli and men like him had realized that a decision made at 18 had consequences that would last a lifetime (Egan). Martinelli's lack of a college education held him back, and even if he had obtained a degree he may not have been any better off.

Martinelli's story is not unique. Life in the lower classes is becoming more difficult to escape. America is experiencing a vast inequality between the classes, which is causing a significant imbalance in the quality and quantity of education, the access to health care and the socio-economic mobility available to Americans. Because of this imbalance in education, health care and mobility, class does matter.

One of the areas that class has a large effect on is education. Education is a product of class status and America has a highly uneven quality of education, depending on what class people fall into (Krugman, "Confronting" 328). Poverty children are being sent to inadequate

schools, while wealthy children are sent to private schools and have tutors ("Inequality" 319). Middle-class and working-class people are falling behind in an effort to get their children into the best school district by buying homes in neighborhoods they cannot afford (Krugman, "Confronting" 325). According to Tamara Draut, the Director of the Economic Opportunity Program at the non-partisan public policy research organization Demos, "Back in the seventies, a professional with a college degree and a blue-collar worker with a high school degree could live in the same community, own similar cars, eat at the same restaurants and send their kids to a good public school. But as the incomes of high school and college grads have diverged, so too has their quality of life." (Draut 379). Still, only three percent of children in the working class will end up going to top colleges ("Inequality" 319). Another statistic that makes this inequality clear is that while 40 percent of students from wealthy families will earn college degrees, only 6 percent of students from low-income families will earn a degree (Draut 385).

A college education has become more essential than ever to compete in the American workplace. According to *New York Times* reporter Timothy Egan, a man with a college degree can expect to earn 81 percent more than a man with only a high school diploma (Egan), but a four-year degree is only considered the first rung of the education that a person needs to compete, and has become equivalent to what a high school diploma used to be (Draut 388). Draut said, "The college-haves and the college-have-nots increasingly live in separate worlds, largely defined by economic differences in earning power" (Draut 379).

Not only is there a demand for a four-year college degree, there is also an increasing demand for graduate degrees by employers (Draut 380). Occupations that once only required a bachelor's degree have upgraded to requiring an advanced degree (Draut 388), but with so few of the working class being able to complete a bachelor's degree it will be even harder for them to move up the economic ladder.

A second area with a class imbalance is health care. Class strongly affects the quality and amount of health care that a person in America receives (Scott). There are many working-class people who are unable to pay for their health insurance although they may work for a highly successful company. Many Wal-Mart employees are examples of this. One angry Wal-Mart employee said "They [Wal-Mart] are on top of the Fortune 500 and I can't get health insurance for my kid." (qtd. in Olsson 344). Not only are some people unable to afford health insurance, once they do there is no guarantee that they will be able to keep the insurance if they fall ill. According to consumerreports.org, "a quarter of businesses that offer health insurance cancel coverage immediately when an employee suffers a disabling illness, and 25 percent more cancel coverage within a year" (McCarthy).

One of the problems associated with class and health care is bankruptcy. Policy analyst Holly Sklar said that middle-class households are only one medical crisis away from bankruptcy (Sklar 309). The correlations between medical bills and bankruptcy was highlighted when National Public Radio reported on a study that said 62 percent of all bankruptcies in 2007 were related to medical bills ("Towering"), which is a 50 percent increase over results from a similar study done in 2001 (McCarthy).

Class also affects how long people live. While overall life expectancy has risen, the life expectancy of the middle class and lower class is below that of the wealthy (Scott and Leonhardt). There is widening inequality in life expectancy from birth through every age level (Pear). Comparing the most extreme examples, a poor minority man versus an affluent white woman, the difference in life span is more than 14 years (Pear). There are several reasons for the disparity in the life expectancy gap between the wealthy and the poor. People with

lower incomes are not as likely to have health insurance, they are more likely to eat food that is not healthy and engage in such unhealthy behavior as smoking; while affluent people are more likely to take advantage of the latest advances in medical care because they have the means to do so (Pear). For example, the Centers for Disease Control have reported that heart attack survivors who were more educated and affluent were more likely to receive rehabilitation care and lower their risk of future heart problems than those persons with less money and education (Pear).

One other area of imbalance is in socio-economic mobility. Upward mobility is how America defines itself ("Inequality" 316). *New York Times* reporters Janny Scott and David Leonhardt said, "Mobility is the promise that lies at the heart of the American dream. It is supposed to take the sting out of the widening gulf between the have-mores and the have-nots." Traversing class through economic opportunity is what the American dream is about; however, research has shown that there is far less mobility in America now than there was after World War II (Scott and Leonhardt).

It appears that the mobility in America is declining in part due to the loss of unions (Krugman, "Great Wealth" 3). Economist Paul Krugman said "fewer than one in eleven workers in the private sector is organized effectively, preventing hundreds of thousands of working Americans from joining the middle class." The attack on unions began in the 1970s and continues today. Businesses like Wal-Mart have gone on the offensive against unionization, including resorting to questionable tactics to prevent unions from infiltrating their businesses. Krugman added, "Once Ronald Reagan took office, the anti-union campaign was aided and abetted by political support at the highest levels" (Krugman, "Great Wealth" 4).

The federal minimum wage is another reason that economic mobility may be declining. The lack of growth of the minimum wage has prevented a move up the economic ladder for people who live in poverty. The minimum wage in this country is currently $7.25 per hour ("Federal"), but according to Tom Weisner of the University of California Los Angeles, this is not enough to support families living in poverty (Weisner). When adjusted for inflation the hourly wage of average workers is actually lower than it was in 1970 (Krugman, "Great Wealth" 3).

The American dream may be mobility, but it seems that mobility in America is lower than in several countries, including France, Canada, and even Great Britain. According to Krugman, "Not only don't Americans have equal opportunity, opportunity is less equal here than elsewhere in the West ("Confronting" 328). It is easier for children living in poverty to rise through the ranks of society in Europe than it is for them to do so in America ("Inequality" 319).

There are critics who have claimed that socio-economic class does not matter. They assert that America is not as class conscious as most other countries, and that social and business changes have made America more meritocratic, deeming class as an archaic institution that has no meaning (O'Reilly). America has gone to great lengths to achieve the appearance of classlessness. It has become hard to read past the socio-economic status of people in America based on the clothes they wear and the cars they drive. Some say that the contours of class have disappeared (Scott and Leonhardt).

There are critics who have also said that while poverty may be an issue, inequality is not and that most Americans do not care about the economic gap between the rich and the poor. These critics have said that Americans are not unhappy with rising inequality because they are not doomed by it, and that America has more opportunities to move up the economic ladder than other countries (Samuelson).

The critics may claim that America is more meritocratic, but according to Harvard Law Professor Lani Guinier, there is a myth of meritocracy in America. Guinier said, “Although the system we call meritocracy is presumed to be more democratic and egalitarian than aristocracy, it is in fact reproducing that which it was intended to dislodge.” (“Meritocracy”). New research also shows that there is far less mobility than most people believe (Scott and Leonhardt).

In answer to the second criticism that poverty is an issue but inequality is not, the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has said that poverty and inequality are intimately linked (“Inequality: Causes”). Countries that have a large economic gap also tend to have more poverty and lower social mobility. Income mobility has a stifling effect on mobility, making it harder for the working class to move out of poverty through hard work (“Income”).

Class does matter in America, and it matters in several areas. Class matters in education. Millions of Americans are unable to attend college because of their socio-economic class. As Tamara Draut said, “Who knows how many scientists, nurses, teachers and doctors we will lose as a result?” (Draut 390). Class matters in health care. Wealthy Americans are living longer and are in better health than middle or working class Americans (Scott and Leonhardt). Class has determined the quality of care people receive and has shaped their odds of recovery after falling ill (Scott). Class also matters in mobility. Americans have less mobility out of poverty than other rich democracies (Sklar 308), and the mobility that America had at one time is gone (Scott and Leonhardt).

Joe Martinelli is only one of the people in America who have found that the disparities between the wealthy and the working class have impacted their lives. After he lost his factory job, Martinelli was able to find a job in pest control, making half of the money he was paid in his factory job. It was not enough to restore him to the middle class he had struggled so hard during his life to reach. Martinelli’s lack of a college education had a cost and he may never make it back to the middle-class status that he once enjoyed (Egan). To Martinelli and the many Americans who are in need of quality health care, who want a college education, and who have a desire to move up the economic ladder, class does matter.

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RELEASE

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Every now and then
My heart becomes full.
Then I have to write
A poem or two
To make enough space
To go on living.