

The Mosaic



Fall 2012 Edition

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**Student Literary and Creative Journal of
Motlow State Community College**

Fall 2012 Edition

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Jay Stringfield

A special thank you goes to all of the students talented enough to create the work within and brave enough to share it with us.

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Thomas Rutenkroger, a good man, skillful teacher, and loyal friend.

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“Foot Prints in the Dust”

By: Jamin Wilkinson

A cryptic message found in the dust
Reading the phrase of those we do not know
Brings a disaster to the world
When the old one leaves its foot prints in our dust.



“Dedicated to Those We Miss and Love”

By: Jamin Wilkinson

“Fly to the sky and sit upon the clouds, for your mortal toil is through.
Climb the mountains that could not be reached, walk the golden fields
Of gold and let the South West wind guide you on your travel,
But remember that the ones on Earth still love you.”

“A Curse Upon Our Love (She's a Keeper)”

By: Brandon Davis

Child of lies, point your sword up to starry skies. Yeah. Yeah.
And if you ever need a gun to shoot the fixed constellations...
Don't hesitate. Don-Don't hesitate.
Red moon fill thy eyes black with hate.
Don't hesitate. Don-Don't hesitate.
The lover inside shall hibernate (in a primal, animal, sedated stage.)

She's a keeper. My little, bitty creeper. Had her life for sacrifice, but now I wanna keep her.
She's a keeper. My little, bitty creeper. Had her life for sacrifice, but now I wanna keep her.

In the chill of winter's night, I sit alone on a jagged mountainside.
On her back, I shall ride as my sight adjusts to her nocturnal way of life.
Through the thicket, through the marsh of flies, creatures of the full moon shall arise.
Hunters seek the witch that they despise, behind the burning lust of her monstrous disguise.

Run baby, run. Daylight has died. The townsmen want you, dead or alive.
Run baby, run. Darkness arrived. Will their children be safe, and will you survive?

Every time my beauty transmutes into a beast, I fall out of her arms and our love grows weak.
I don't know what the demon inside of her seeks, but I let her take more than she will eat.

Every time my beauty transmutes into a beast, I fall out of her arms and our love grows weak.
And while my hairy lady feeds, I beat her prey to silence their murderous screams.

Run baby, run. It's not too late, to reverse this spell-bound, cursed state.
In my dreams, I always see your face, but your howls over town make me awake!

She's MY little, bitty creeper. Had her life for sacrifice, but now I wanna keep her.
She's MY little, bitty creeper. Had her life for sacrifice, but now I wanna keep her.

I cannot help that my heart is tied to a beast that is my bloodthirsty bride.
Child of lies, I shall forever be your mortal knight. Yeah. Yeah.
And if I ever need a gun to shoot this rabid abomination...
I won't hesitate. Won- Won't hesitate.
She is my bestial doll, and I'm just werewolf bait.
I won't hesitate. Won-Won't hesitate.

Move the finger, pull the trigger. (I keep telling myself) I love you. I love you.
Sweet sacrifices at low sins and prices. I love you. I love you, earthborn monster.
Heart-attack maniac. Deviant, moon demon. Lustful, wildebeest goddess.
I surrender and present my bare body to thee. The only witnesses shall be the evil
trees.
Take me! Bite me! But don't forget, this pistol is loaded with a silver bullet.

"Insects & Robot Brains"

By: Brandon Davis

There're spiders in the galaxy. One, Two, Three. Their cobwebs catch the dreams of the uninspired earthlings. Starving their bodies while they are deep asleep, humans are conformist who just need to eat...something original, something motivational, something inspirational...something unique.

Smear makeup over the cut places. Cover up what life did to all of your faces. It's so magnificent how the human skin will repair the tears etched far within. Well, if you're not pretty, then you are ugly, get plastic surgery because society will judge thee. It's all about how your face developed since you were a baby. So, come out as a movie star if you ever wanna feel complete.

Look at the prestigious checking out the prey- beneath florescent lights and authority. Delicious works of God are prone to cavities. His tools will fill their voids with silvery mercury.

The dentist will spread you open. He'll spread you open wide. Part those curious lips and let the doctor inside. Surrender the locked mouth to the latex hand. You were born as the sex to be harnessed as a slave to man.

A journey to find yourself. Quit trying to be somebody else. Because the lower that you go, you descend into a labyrinth- that only you know. Savoring the sweet absinthe. A black sky made of crows. Your conscience is absent. The rivers of poison overflow. The earth is dead. The clock is ticking. You're wasting your chances to be anything aspiring. Quit being silent, There're so many things worth saying. Will the world know who you are before you start decaying?

I've been smothering on a planet. I've already picked out my casket, but something tells me that I'm worthy to be something permanent. My life is not immortal. I'm swimming out of a gravitational pull with floating, dead astronauts and their abandoned space shuttles. Swirling into a whirling, unending oblivion. The life forms on this planet are as distant as aliens.

The satellite signals are warping our embryos' minds. The gun-vermin-t are wasps gathering dirt to secure their hives. We are six-legged insects that are programmed to consume- anything that the mindless flowers produce. Hanging from silk threads, wriggling in our cocoons. I feel the gentle crawling of the starving, brown recluse. How could the situation get any worse? I finally broke loose, and fell toward the blinking lights

of the technological universe. Just don't comply with the robots' computerized brains. We don't need a remote control to move. We don't need to be maintained.

"Winter Frost"

By: Brandon Davis

As winter creeps among us as quiet as a plague.
The last leaf decomposing sets the final stage.
The frost outlining the trees paints a beautiful portrait.
The last season of Winter that you will never forget.

You see her there, blinded by the glistening snow.
Her swaying hair, Your cold blood starts to flow.
Even though she is a princess, you think you have a chance
to spark a conversation that will lead to romance.

You follow her many footsteps into the thicket of the cold.
Her dress was stitched from the threads of ice produced from the snow.
You must have been brave to walk across the frozen river.
Because she knows her dazzling beauty will lead you to her.

She sings a harmonious melody, which every note is precise.
That's something you would expect from a princess born of ice.
No one knows where she came from, but some predict the skies.
Her voice echoes in your head and bounces off the mountainside.

The Winter moon reflects upon the glassy frozen pond,
Which draws them from their flock, those lovesick swans.
You gaze deeply into the frost to see your current complexion.
While the winged ones have found true love only in their own reflections.

Your feet outweigh the unstable ice, you slip into a Winter-made grave.
Your eyelids open to a moonlit ceiling crafted stronger than a caves.
You begin to sink into a necropolis of lost souls of humans and animals,
But you see a silhouette standing above you that's more promising than the icicles.

A fearless hand dips into freezing waters, it holds the limb of a barbed plant.
While being gripped by piercing thorns, you pull yourself back upon dry land.
She says, "Peter, I've been watching you through the reflection of falling snowflakes.
Will you follow me to your world's bitter end before Spring awakes?
We shall travel North with the wolves until we have departed from the night.
Follow me until the end of your days, in this foggy snow globe of your life."



Picture by Brandon Davis

“A Walk in His Shoes...”

By: LaDonna Harris

Just for one day I would like to walk in his shoes.

To look down

And see everything wrong.

To hear the name he has been called all his life

And know that, that name isn't right.

I want to know the thoughts he has,

I want to feel the pain.

I need to feel the stares on me,

To guard the ultimate secret.

"Will today be the day that they find out?"

"What will they do to me?"

A day, a week, a month in his life.

I need to know that pain.

I want to feel the needle as it slides into my skin,

To know the tingle of the Testosterone as it slithers in my veins,

entwining with my blood.

I want to know how it feels to have the changes that have been made.

I have read what it feels like,

Heard what they have said.

You can never really know what it feels like,

Until you walk in their shoes.

“Greatest Achievement”

By: Robbie Shipley

Are we not all of “one blood?”¹

Are we not all judged the same in heaven?

Do we not all cry to the same Father?

Do we not all pray in the name of the same Lord?

In times past, ignorant people professed greatness,

All by their skin and status,

But that is our dark past,

Why do we still feed the flames of time?

With revenge, deceit, selfishness, and violence,

A great man once cried, “I have a dream!”²

But by what method did he use?

Was it revenge? Deceit? Selfishness? Violence?

No! His followers presented non-violence and won!

So why do we call out his name,

And mock him in our ways?

Are we living that “dream?”

Or creating a nightmare,

I cry this as a child of our Father,

Not as a bigot or racist,

That word “race” is a veil that blurs the vision,³

And the letter that condemns the bearer,³

We are all of “one blood!”¹
We cry to one Father!
We pray in the name one Lord!
We are all judged by one God!
So what works in heaven,
So let it be here on earth!
For if we don’t,
We shall destroy ourselves!
We shall not do one thing for one skin,
And do better for another,
Equal we are before God!
Equal we shall be here on earth!
Listen not to the adversary,
You are better than skin!
You are God’s creation!
His greatest achievement!

¹ Acts 17:26

² Title of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s most famous speech.

³ Alluding to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s two works: “The Minister’s Black Veil” and *The Scarlet Letter*

“The Park”
By: Robbie Shipley

This is dedicated to all who have helped me on my long journey in “The Park.”

Massive trees stand before its opening scene,
On an isolated corner of the educated world,
Teachers and students walk upon its concrete slabs,
Leisurely striding through its beautiful sights,
Of tenderly cared landscaped lawns,
With a peculiar essence of an old forested park,

Sounds of chatter echo through its long halls,
Indeed great activity fills within its walls,
Multitudes of leaders have grown here,
Only to revisit to reminisce their past,
Never to forget the times long past within the park,

In the front it stands to greet,
Necessity for those to meet,
Granting its permission for those to pass,
Reveals its purpose that is in the past,
Always to remain the home of its leaders,
Maintaining the keys to the park’s future,

Easy to see its odd shape and name,
Often mispronounced by those in passing,
For all the fanfare and the plays within,
Fascinating faces adorn its halls within the park,

“Never forget the healthy way,”
It beckons to all within,
Sports of play carry its day,
Before fans and fellows filled within,
Eager to see the antler backed team,
Top off another fanatical day,
The talents triumph in the park,

Filled with food and laughter,
Overshadows the work of the day,
Resting the feet and minds of those,
Refreshing then preparing for the future,
Effectively finishing their heavy load,
Success is to be their long awaited goal,
To begin all must enter these halls,
Either to buy a book or pay a fee,
Readying themselves for the journey within the park,

Created to hold the volumes of books,
Renewed to hold the volumes of students,
Olden times are now long past,
Under a new vision and purpose,
Clearly made for the convenience,
Helping all to begin their journey within the park,

Continuing through the park,
Leads to its newest addition,
Advertised by its magnificent architecture,
Yearning to be noticed and entered,
Tomes fill its two-story walls,
Opening to grandeur and beauty,
No one can miss its grandest feature of all,
Glass pane walls open to the sky,
Lending the light of the sun to fill within,
Artistic pictures of times long past,
Sensing the essence of local history,
Saving the park's past for the present,

Moving on through the park,
Advances to its technical side,
Readying would-be nurses for the future,
Carries the critical importance of its halls,
Underestimate nothing within the park,
Made to bring "Education for Life!"

“Under The Full Moon”

By: Kristen Pedigo

Dusk is here,
I must make haste,
To hide in the wood,
to escape terrified eyes, and mistaken fear,
Under The Full Moon

Hidden Away,
Deep in the Woods,
As shreds of clothing fall from my shoulders,
I feel the change from moral being,
To this creature,
This Monster of pure damnation,
I am forced to suffer,
Under The Full Moon

I carry such a heavy burden,
Behind this ferocious grin,
Is a tortured soul,
Who hates this hideous form,
That draws me into a cruel madness,
Which I'll never escape...
Under The Full Moon

“Little World Of Mine “

By: Kristen Pedigo

I sat at my window
to watch the children play
remembering my past
of my childish ways
I played through those days
those imagined games
of brave, fearless, knights
of witches casting powerful spells
of dragons flying great heights
making my own world of tall tales
in that world of mine, I had no fears
so peaceful was my world
that I never shed any tears
years passed, seasons come and went
I grew older, wiser, then
I found myself looking at my hourglass of time
I'm older now, but
I am still a child in that little world of mine
dancing in fields of gold
in reality, I am just sitting here
by the window, as you listen to my many stories
that need to be told.

“One Night in the House on Cherry Street”

By: Nicholas Gore

It was summer in Tennessee on the Night. Tennessee summer evenings are not pleasant, no matter what you may have read about cool glasses of iced tea and rocking chairs on porches. A dank, thick humidity hangs in the air, pressing down upon you, stealing the breath right from your chest if you are not careful. It sticks to your clothes and your clothes stick to you.

Muggy, hot and mostly boring.

Evan Hopkins never spent much time outside, especially in summer. A loner at the age of seven, he never played around with other children outside often. He preferred sitting inside the air conditioning compared to running around with the other kids from his neighborhood. When the heat became too unbearable, he would take the blanket from his bed, drape it over the floor vents and hide under the blanket. His mother often scolded him for doing this, citing that he was stealing the cool air from her, but he would often do it when she was not around. He hated the weather in Tennessee.

The Night started out just like any other, as most auspicious nights are wont to do. After a dinner of corndogs and Kraft macaroni and cheese, Evan went about playing with his action figures on the cool linoleum of the kitchen floor. He-Man and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles figures littered the area. The kitchen had been turned into Battlefield: Kitchen, caught between worlds where heroes and villains meet. Skeletor had just delivered a devastating strike to Master Splinter and was moving in for the final blow when there came the familiar, yet jarring call from the laundry room: “Evan!”

His mother called out to him in a sing-song tone from the laundry room, “time to go to bed!”

The prospect of stopping such an epic battle only to sleep did not sound appealing to Evan, but he reluctantly began to gather his figurines and place them in the clothes basket that he used as a toy box. “Okay, mom!” he shouted back as he hoisted the basket in his arms and moved through the living room towards the staircase.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, before he could climb the first stair, something caught his gaze from the corner of his eye. Out the window at the base of the staircase, he thought he saw a dark figure standing under the streetlight. When he turned to look directly at it, there was nothing. Confused and slightly unsettled, Evan sped up the stairs. The hallway ceiling fixture at the top of the stairs provided very little light to the stairway. Halfway up the narrow corridor, the pale light source flickered for a moment and then extinguished, filling the stairwell with darkness. Evan went rigid as his eyes tried to adjust to the darkness. He began to sweat as his heart beat doubled in pace. In a surge of energy, he bolted up the stairs, letting out a shout of confidence and cowardice. His feet hit the second story landing and the light clicked back on, bathing the area in a pale, dim light. Evan breathed a sigh of relief. As he turned to his door, he heard quick, approaching footfalls from down the staircase. Turning towards the sound, he froze; a look of horror fell across his face.

“Is everything okay, honey?” he heard his mother’s voice call from the hallway. His heart beating fast, Evan took a deep breath and replied, “Just fine mom!” He turned

to the right, starting at the doorway to his room. The door was slightly ajar. With a gentle kick, it swung open with ease.

The room was pitch black.

Setting his basket of toys on the ground, Evan looked hard into his room, trying to see anything beyond the doorway shaped light on the ground cast from the hallway fixture. His mind suddenly went to the figure he saw next to the streetlight. Nervously, he shifted his weight from side to side trying to decide what to do. He knew his lamp was across the room, but what he didn't know was what else lurked in the darkness. He wanted to run to his mother, he wanted her to turn on the lights and make everything better. Thinking back to when they moved back to Tennessee, Evan knew he could not rely on this mother. He had made a promise to be the man of the house.

Steeling his resolve, he set one foot in the room, then another, then another. With a sudden burst of energy, he broke into a sprint across his room. He fumbled with the switch on the lamp at first, but with a sharp turn and a click, the lamp filled the room with a yellowed, hard light that banished the darkness.

Evan let out a sigh and gave the room a quick inspection, lifting up pillows and stuffed animals, even opening the closet, but nothing sinister revealed itself. He retrieved his toy basket from the hall and set it next to his dresser, changed into his pajamas and readied himself for bed.

Evan awoke with a lurch, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. The details of his dream faded with each waking moment, but not the shadowy figure. He looked around his room as if to make sure it had not followed him from his nightmare. Finding nothing with the help of his night-light, he threw off his blanket, swung his legs off the bed and walked over to his window. His blanket trailed behind him as he clenched one of the corners in his right hand. He inspected the area around the streetlight, but saw nothing out of place. The pale, greenish light illuminated the street and sidewalk, giving the familiar half-block a spooky glow. With each blink, he could see the thing that had woken him from slumber. All he could make out was a face, or perhaps the absent of one. No eyes, no nose, not even definition; it was more of a void: the face of a shadow.

The face slowly faded from his memory, as the rest of the nightmare had, but he could not shake the feeling he had experienced when looking into the shadow's not-eyes. Trying to shake it from his mind, Evan opened his door and peered around the corner down the steps. His eyes focused as they became accustomed to the low light. He stared hard into the blackness of the hallway. Upon finding nothing, Evan gathered his courage and stepped out onto the landing. His left hand traced the wall as he descended the stairs. The rough wallpaper scrapped against the fleshy sides of his fingertips. All the lights in the house were out. He thought about turning them on and banishing the darkness, but he did not want to disturb his mother. Besides, he was the man of the house. Reaching the bottom of the staircase, he draped his blanket over the vent under the window. Climbing under the blanket he felt the cool air rush over his skin; it relaxed him and sent goosebumps cascading across his body.

Feeling refreshed and comfortable, Evan poked his head out from underneath the blanket. There he laid for what seemed a long time. He tried counting Mississippi-seconds but soon became bored and his mind wandered. He thought of days past and futures not yet had. He wondered what the next day's lunch held for him. He fantasized about battles yet to be fought. While thoughts of a supreme battle royale drifted through, his mind snapped to the dark figure from his nightmare. He pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders as the shadowy form invaded his thoughts. He shut his eyes and tried to push the silhouette from his head, but it was still there gazing back at him emptily. Evan squirmed under the comforter, wriggling his body closer to the wall until he was firmly pressed against it under the window.

The window.

Evan eyed the window out of the corner of his vision, never daring to look directly at it. Could the shadow under the light be the same from his dream? His eyes darted back to the shag carpet of the living room. The musty smell of feet and dirty laundry filled his nostrils as he watched the four squares of greenish light that shone on the floor from outside. Suddenly he heard a loud click and the gentle breeze from the vent stopped. Other than the gentle hum of the power transformer outside, the house was silent. "Just a few more minutes," he thought to himself, "I'll stay here for just a few more minutes. Then I'll go right back to bed." Evan heard the whining creak of the rusted, wrought-iron gate in front of the house opening. The hairs on the back of his neck rose as he tried to keep as still as he possibly could. He bit his bottom lip gently to keep it from trembling. His gaze never left the window light on the carpet.

He waited, holding his eyes wide open, desperate not to blink. He slowly began to shrink under the blanket.

Then he saw it.

He saw a small, dark shape in the light cast from streetlight. His body tensed up as the shadow grew larger on the carpet. He grabbed his chest, trembling and pulsing from the beating of his frantic heart. The dark form kept growing in size until it was the size of the torso and head of a human. Evan held his breath, terrified to move at the risk of being noticed. He could not pull his eyes away from the shadow on the floor. It stayed there, moving slightly as though it were breathing. The flat, wet thump of a hand being pressed against glass rang out from above Evan and for an instant he thought he heard a gruff, low voice whisper his name.

At 3:23am, a scream pierced the warm, muggy summer evening from 1409 Cherry Street; a sobbing, violent scream that woke most of the neighborhood and would be remembered by all who heard it.

“The Betrayal of Sir Godfrey Besson”

By: Nicholas Gore

After six days of constant thunder and the violent jarring of the ship against the churning waves, the tempest calmed. The ominous, black clouds that had plagued our voyage since we had left from Rome parted in the sky like a pathway to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. I praised God for my safe arrival. At the sight of the safety of land, my squire Phillip fell to his knees, no doubt praying for the souls of those in my retinue who had been lost to the storm. As I looked upon him, with hands clasped, silent words falling from his lips, I pitied him. If it had been God’s will to take them and not me, so be it. As a pious warrior, I could not be sacrificed to drown in some puddle. I had been guided to the Holy Land to dispatch the Lord’s justice to the heathens, or that is what my father had told me when he forced me to journey here. The warm sun felt heavenly on my drenched skin. The rain from the storm had soaked me to the bone over the seven days, and perhaps my brain. An idea had taken root that I could not purge from the back of my mind. I thought that the storm was a warning, a sign from God to turn around and leave the Holy Land. I pushed these thoughts down, for they were truly the work of Satan. Doubt had no place in my mind.

The remnants of my servants and I disembarked at a port near Antioch, gathered our belongings that were not swallowed by the sea and set out to find a caravan to Tiberias, the great fortress and my future home on the Sea of Galilee. The dock was a filthy pit of animals, growling and screaming at each other, carrying boxes and baskets off of ships of varying sizes further into town, or what I assumed as a town. The low,

pale yellow building seemed to be made of pure earth. People of many different shades of brown zipped from building to building, yelling at each other. They appeared to be wearing only large rugs for clothes, almost always accompanied by head-dressings.

Simple clothes for simple people, I thought.

As my subordinates marched through the streets, I rode Écouter, my war stallion, wearing my most lavish outfit of purple velvet and gold stitching adorned with the crest of my family upon the tunic. In the heavy clothes, the heat affected me in a most severe way. The sun beat down unrelenting and the very air hung heavy with water from the sea. My servants seemed to also be afflicted by the searing weather as one of them, a young girl whose name I did not know, passed out in the street. Her mother began to cry out for help, but the people of the town just ignored her. Her screaming quickly became grating to my ears. Phillip ran to them, kneeled next to the girl and gave her some of the liquid from his waterskin. Tired of the scene and in need of finding shade, I spurred Écouter and rode ahead toward the northern gate of the city. After what seemed like an eternity of asking civilians about caravans only to be responded to by a guttural, flemmy grunts and shouts, I found a guide who understood me. I secured a placement in his caravan that would eventually take us to Tiberias. The guide told me that they would set out in only a few hours so I climbed upon Écouter and waded through the squalid masses of commoners back to where I had left my servants. The girl and her mother were sitting on a trunk in the shade of a nearby vendor's awning. The woman hugged her daughter tightly. I could see her tears had formed streams on the dusty waste that was her face. Phillip knelt in front of them, comforting them with his gilded tongue. He had a true gift with words, especially with the common-folk. I spurred

Écouter towards them and told them of the caravan. Some of them looked at me with sweat-laden faces and tired eyes, but they knew better than to question my command. I was their liege and they were bound to obey me.

It was a two week journey from Antioch to Tiberias filled with stops at trading towns and oases. It was in these two weeks that I grew to hate everything about the area. The people of this land did not recognize a knight in the street and never made way for me. Most of them yelled at me in their ugly language about buying baubles and trinkets I had no use for. All of the water was warm and crunchy from the sand. The food was made from all sort of vile beasts which had no place on a table, but the worst was the weather. The oppressive heat would bear down upon our caravan as if the sun were mere inches away from our heads. The sweat would pour off my brow if I did not wipe it clean every few minutes and my clothes became befouled after only an hour in the saddle. Instead of a cool breeze sweeping down the valley to relieve my suffering, I was instead hit with blasts of sand-riddled, hot wind, which stung my eyes. Bile rose in my throat with each foul gust. I kept praying for a rain to come and parch our sun-dried skin, but no clouds were to be found. There was nothing holy about this land and I was to start a family here? I longed for the cool nights at our villa in Beaune, sipping the region's wine in autumn and the friskiness of the house maidens on summer's evenings. I would never consider this dirty desert home.

Phillip looked miserable, in his padded tunic and thick pants, as he plodded along with my servants day after day. I tried to remind him that he was a squire, well above those whose company he kept and that he should have been riding in one of the wagons. Every time he would smile at me and decline respectfully. I never understood

him and his fascination with the servants. He would always talk with them at meals and while trudging across dunes. I believe he even gave from his own water supply to some of them. I suspected he had a yearning for one of the laundry maidens, so I thought nothing of it. I remembered what it was to be a squire on my way towards knighthood. Oh how the fillies loved the intimate touch of a man with strength and power.

Along the ride to Tiberias, the caravan leader, Behe ad-Din, informed me of the politics of the region, the climate of the people and all other matters of importance. Despite the filthy clothes of a commoner and jagged, rotten teeth, Behe ad-Din impressed me with his knowledge about the goings on of what passed for high society in the region. He also spoke near perfect French, which was comforting; I could barely stand to listen to native tongue much longer. I could see why his family had been spared in the cleansing and converted to Christianity. Of the tales he told me, the most interesting was the recent unification of the army of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Guy of Lusignan had been named King of Jerusalem when his wife's son, the rightful heir, had died. The former regent, Raymond III of Tripoli and Lord of Tiberias, had opposed the crowning and left with his troops for his fortress. There had been talk of a civil war within Jerusalem between Guy and Raymond, but it never came to be. He informed me that recently Raymond had taken his forces, formed a truce between himself and the King, leaving his wife Eschiva to run Tiberias. The whole army stood reunited at Jerusalem. When I inquired as to why the army was at attention at all, Behe explained about the uneasy peace between Sultan Saladin and King Guy. There had been rumors of caravans and transports being ambushed, on both sides. He made it seem as if war would erupt at any moment.

War. That would have been a welcome distraction from the Hell I had been cast in to. At least I would be doing God's work of destroying the Muslim blight in His land. I prayed every night along the sojourn for guidance from God. I believed that he was testing me. Testing my conviction. In the end, I knew it would strengthen me and make my faith like that of steel.

We arrived at the fortress of Tiberias on the thirteenth day since we had left Antioch. The fortress reminded me of home, a monolith of civilized culture stranded in the wastes, it reminded me of myself. I truly was a beacon of sophistication in this vile wilderness that masqueraded as a cultured nation. It was a welcome sight after two weeks of dirty clothes, horrible food and incomparable heat. As we neared the fortress, we saw the makeshift streets, tent vendors and other caravans.

While it was only a few more minutes of travel, the château seemed so far away. Beyond the gates Eschiva waited for my arrival, for my pledge of loyalty and service. Further beyond rested my suite, a soft bed, perhaps even fresh, cool water and some sort of normal cuisine. The idea sounded like heaven. I knew my salvation lay behind the tall, strong walls of Tiberias.

A strange feeling washed over me as I gazed at my haven in the wastes. As I looked to my right where Phillip was, searching for someone to reassure me, I saw a hail of arrows strike the area around me. Phillip had been skewered by some half dozen arrows and lay on the ground choking on his own blood, his eyes skyward, searching for the same reassurance I looked for not moments ago. His arms dropped as his eyes became glassy and his chest shuddered a few more times as he desperately sucked in

air and then he became still. The screams of my other servants and members of the caravan shook me from my stupor. Looking to the southern horizon, I saw a massive force of what looked to be Muslim horsemen armed with bows and strange curved swords.

Instinctively, I drew my sword and readied myself for battle when I realized that all that surrounded me were terrified or dying civilians, armed with trunks filled with clothes and walking sticks. I spurred Écouter onward towards the safety of the great gate of Tiberias. I pushed him harder than I had since we entered kingdom, I had to reach the gate and muster the troops of the fortress. Écouter gave a loud whinny and crumpled into the dune, throwing me over his head. I landed in the sand, my mouth filled with earth and sand, my eyes blurry from the shock of the fall. I picked myself up, leaning on my sword for balance, trying to blink the grit from my eyes. Spinning around I began to search for the rock that had tripped Écouter. It had to be a rock, Écouter had never thrown me. As I turned, I saw his massive black form lying motionless on the ground, his body perforated with arrows. *The bastards did not hit me, a blessing from God*, I thought to myself. I dizzily spun back around to judge the distance that remained between myself and the fortress. I cursed; it may as well have been a thousand miles. I could never close the gap before the Muslims caught up to me. Turning back around to face the heathens, I readied my sword for the attack. As I brought my blade to bear, I felt a burning, sharp pain in my left arm and stomach. A pair of wooden shafts shifted in my body with every slight movement.

Agony rushed into my brain as I saw the damage. Planting my weapon in the ground, I tried in vain to hold my form aloft, but my knees buckled and I slumped to the

ground. The coppery, sweet smell of my lifesblood overpowered my senses. I choked and spat out more of the precious substance and the world began to unfocus. My eyes drifted skyward, and I searched. "Dear God..." I breathed out, "save me." A scowl formed across my face as I began to scream: "SAVE ME, GOD! I HAVE SURVIVED EVERYTHING YOU HAVE PUT BEFORE ME BUT NOW I AM HUMBLING MYSELF BEFORE YOU! SAVE ME! SAVE M-!" my cries were silenced by an arrow driving itself through the flesh of my neck. Relinquishing my grasp on my sword, I clutched at the gaping wound and dropped to the earth. The bleeding would not stop. In the distance blue of the sky, dark clouds were forming. I felt a splash of water on my cheek. It was boiling. *Even the rain is hot here*, I thought to myself as the edges of my vision began to blur and darken. *Save me... Save... me...*

I waited as the darkness took over. I no longer felt the sun on my skin, the blood on my hands, sticky and sweet smelling, I no longer felt. I waited for the light to appear in front of me. I waited for the stairs to rise in front of me, guiding me up and into a loving embrace, but there was nothing. I was in the blackness and I became nothing.

“The Ticking”

By: Kelsi Grace Hard

I once lived a very normal life, but that was before my occurrence.

I had been married to Dick then. We were very happy, and we lived in a small cottage-like house with a meager but fertile garden with all the proper flowers as is customary for a Southern home. The house itself was furnished with a wrap-around porch which was painted white and complemented the blue wooden sides of the house. There were two doors leading inside: one on the east side that went into the spare room which was meant for a nursery, and one on the west side that lead into our bedroom.

The house was, as I said, small, but it was quite large and empty considering that only Dick and I resided there. Our bedroom was dim and aged and hardly any light was allowed in because Dick kept thick velvet curtains draped over the double doors paned with glass. Directly across from the bedroom and through an abnormally wide hallway was the spare room which, as I stated before, was made to be and furnished for a nursery, but Dick and I had no use for one. So it had been utilized as an office space for Dick and as a lounging room for myself, and we used it as there was need or want.

Down the hall from the spare room on the north side there was the kitchen, and it was quite spacious and lovely and adequately equipped with a stove and a freezer and pots and knives and such. Beyond the kitchen was the foyer, and in the foyer were the stairs, and upstairs there was a bedroom with all necessities provided and a minuscule bathroom. Down the hall from the spare room on the South side was the living room which was where Dick and I spent our time together and I spent most of the time that I had to myself.

We were in possession of the house for many years, and it was well endowed except that there were no clocks. I would rise with Dick's watch and fix a befitting meal as he prepared himself for the daily allotment of duty. I nourished myself well enough and would assemble an adequate banquet for the both of us in the evening when Dick came inside. And so, I had no need or want of any ticking clocks in our house. And so, we did not, for thirteen years of marriage and seven years in the house.

One afternoon Dick arrived early from his employment bearing an extravagant wooden grandfather clock in his truck, and he and a gentlemanly young man brought the individual into the living room and placed it dead across from the sofa. It reached within inches of the ceiling, its span that of a healthy aging fellow. It owned a rotund painted face overlaid in silver that was protected by a glass shield. Its crown and legs were esoteric and incomparable in composition and design. The mechanisms were easily accessible via a small door behind its face and a long and narrow door in the front just below the face, and it was breathtaking.

For the first week or so the clock and its chatters eluded my regard and I continued as usual with my activities of cooking and watering the flowers and polishing the inner house and all the tasks that were to be expected of a suitable companion. But the second week it rained. I had no need of watering the blossoms outdoors, and I had time to myself to do what I wished. So I assembled a meager lunch and sat on the sofa to eat and to indulge in some minor readings. The room was taciturn enough until I had consumed my snack and had begun to read silently.

Betwixt the ticks of the old clock were what sounded to be whisperings of the eerie breed which migrated directly from the face to my ear. The face seemed to stare

me down. It was a very depressed and stagnant audible of an inimitable tongue with ample object and motive and the message came in broken fragments that correlated to the rhythm of the ticking clock. But I gave no great attention to this and persevered in accomplishing the early portion of the fifth chapter of St. Mark.

After another week had ensued my endurance began to dwindle and I cordially implored Dick to have it away; but he would have nothing of it and berated me for having called it a “damned grandfather” because it was not proper. So I resolved to overlook it when traveling in the living room, and I refrained from passing through there unless induced by Dick or necessitated by obligation to journey farther than the doorway.

But, after a short time the whispers grew louder and more intense and they entered our bedroom and I obtained a humble measure of insomnia. So Dick was agitated by my constant moving about at night and sent for my physician and when he arrived he allotted me an elixir and Dick was satisfied. But still the whispers grew and multiplied in my dreams and gave me headaches and again my physician prescribed a drug and it dulled the pain. But the murmurs never ceased to intensify and sharpen.

Over a period of what I believe to be a few days, what I had perceived to be broken words in whispers became full embodied sentences spoken aloud with the voice of an antique aristocrat. The voice began to reverberate down the hall and into the spare room, which as of late had been disguised as a lounging room for me although I seldom used it. But Dick insisted that I be confined to the room in the evening when he would unwind himself in the living room until he needed that or wanted this or wished to know what sort of state I was in at the moment. I abided in his will even though it was so

that when I entered the living room the voice became so loud and piercing that I thought my ears would burst from the ringing and yelling, but I did not allow myself reaction because if I did Dick would treat me with utter burlesque and mockery and I wanted to kill him.

Again a few more days and the ticking voice reached the kitchen and foyer and I was forced upstairs to escape the magnitude of it. But it discovered me there the next day and attempted to convince me to stay downstairs; it said it would not speak so loudly and so I consented. It did decrease in potency but not in resolution; it told me that it would give me friendship and never abandon me for more than a short time, and so I surrendered and listened to the voice.

A few evenings passed while we planned and sorted and prepared and did not neglect any detail. Dick came in and said that he had found a prosperous gentleman to pay a goodly sum for the clock and he would be arriving the following day at noon to inspect it and presumably carry it off and he would not be late. I had confidence that noon would give me sufficient time, so I agreed, and the next morning was very busy until approximately ten minutes before noon.

The gentleman arrived, well dressed and very kind and courteous, and I was polite. I told him that the plastic was placed because I had recently painted the ceiling and he graciously offered his hand in removing the thing but I convinced him to leave it for now. When he knelt to examine him more closely I cut off his head. Unfortunately his costly hat fell off and I had to polish it until the blood was no longer visible. I wrapped the body and head and blood and such very carefully into the plastic and took Dick's truck (he had traveled with a companion to work). I dumped the body into a ditch by the

river and stayed a while to watch the water carry it away.

After returning to the house I opened the door behind his face to silence him, but he was hesitant. I told him that we must else our plan would fail and reassured him, and though he still disapproved I stopped his talking so that Dick would not hear it. After Dick returned he inquired of the afternoon and I told him well of it, and that I had spent some of the acquired money on food and deposited the remaining into the bank, and he scolded me harshly. I told him of the loose railing on the West side of the porch and led him to the intended section, and when he leaned over the rail to gain a clearer view, I stabbed him with my largest knife. Once he had completely fallen to the porch, I cut open his abdomen and chest and cut open his heart, and its pulsing ceased.

After the proper authorities had been summoned by a neighbor and the body was examined and the apprehension made, I asked of him and was reassured that he would be cared for and cautiously handled. After the body was removed and most things were taken from the premises as evidence, two young men carried him out the West door, and one stumbled and he hit the bloody railing. An indentation with red scrapes was left on him and I reprimanded the men for their carelessness.

Then there was the business of the trial and of finding the wealthy gentleman's remains and of which institution to place me into and of my belongings and of the estate and of finances and so forth, and it was decided that I should go to the asylum on the hill. They are very nice here except for some of my fellow patients, because they are very cruel to me on account of my *peccadillo*, but the rest are not so insufferable. My health and mood have greatly improved since yesterday, because in the community room (which is made to look as a house room instead of an observational room) they

have added a new feature and no one in the entirety of the estate, with the exception of myself, knew to open the little door behind his face and twist this and turn that and open the narrow door in the front and commence the swinging of the pendulum, and listen to him complain and talk of the bloody and bruised tattoo on his right frontal corner.

“Knives and Nursing Homes:

Daydreams of Death”

By: Ben Fryer

Within the last few years, I’ve often found myself fantasizing about my own life ending. I’ll actually sit there and daydream about some fantastic scenario that ends in my death.

Now, I know the thought of doing such a thing would strike most people as odd. But it is not out of morbidity that I do this. Nor is out of any suicidal feelings or because I have a death wish. I just really would like to die in an exciting way. A death I could be proud of -- a death that would resonate like the last bit of dialogue in a movie, or like the last sentence in a great novel. Something that would encapsulate what my life was about.

I’m not entirely sure why I think about something like this. I have been called a bit of a sensationalist before, as well as an idealist. Those sound like two possible reasons. I do tend to have a wandering imagination. I’ve also played out in my mind the scenarios and my reactions to the following: I lost an eye or went blind (I’d just get an eye patch or cool shades and focus on music), found the love of my life only to have her die in a fiery explosion (the only reasonable time to become a rouge-ish alcoholic), and lost a limb (I’d move near a major river and become a crazy tour boat captain who sells knick-knacks).

This way of thinking could also be due to all those stories I read and movies I watched as a child. Perhaps I subjected myself one-too-many times to tales of heroes, romances, and adventures. Now, in my adulthood, I've fallen prey to delusions of grandeur. I yearn for the unusual in my life. Still, I'm no fool. I don't expect life to ever be easy. I just want the difficulties to be interesting. Being chased by a hungry mountain lion would sound more like living than dealing with three different managers at a mind-numbing, soul-crushing, part-time job. There's just something to it.

Or maybe the reason I've been thinking about the whole how-to-die thing specifically is simply because of all the immense changes I've had in my life. I've gotten old and wise enough that now I see how quickly and chaotic changes can come into our lives. I've had to suffer through the trials of a chronic pain condition, watched family members walk out of my life without any clear rhyme or reason, and right now I stand at the crossroads of life, wondering which way to go next. You have to learn how to deal with problems you can't possibly see coming. I realize all this, and I guess my mind wanders to the ultimate change: death.

So on those lonely days and nights where life's anxieties have filled my head and the world seems off-center, I daydream of some perfect way my life could end.

I think I've got it narrowed down to two favorites.

The first takes place in Africa where I meet a violent end...

I am nearing my mid-fifties. Maybe I've managed to make a career out of my writing and photography and have become something of a correspondent. I've learned plenty in my twenty years of doing this, one truth being that it's not an easy career. You

have to be careful with whom you know and whom you expose. Right now, I am stuck in some country in the middle of Africa. The government here is in another state of upheaval, and I have neither the money nor the required permission to get out.

One evening, after a long day of making phone calls, I grow bored and anxious. I decide to visit a bar nearby the airport. It's one I've passed on my way to and from flights for years. I never was compelled to go in until now.

So, I go in. I order a whiskey and take it outside to sit in the fading heat underneath the veranda. The only other people there are a couple -- a young man and his girl, and a tired-looking man in coveralls. The young man and the girl annoy me. They both speak angrily, breathing their words rather than speaking them. I notice the man's neck and shoulders are tense like steel cables. I don't like it, but I try to ignore them. Maybe they'll go away soon. I watch the sun go down and think of things back home in the States.

Then it happens. Fast. The young man raises his voice. The girl slaps him. He growls and lurches upward knocking the table over. Beer bottles clink to the ground and glass shatters. The young man reaches down and backhands the girl.

The tired man in coveralls moves to cower in the corner. The bar owner steps out and yells, "Stop it! Get out!" But the young man is oblivious and he draws back for another blow. So I step in.

I twist him around by the shoulder and deck him. He responds by pulling out a knife.

I've been in a few fights and managed well enough to come out of them, but this man is younger, faster, and he really seems to know how to hold that knife. However, when you have to fight, you fight.

I manage to do fairly well. I think I break some of his ribs, and I block his swings several times over. The fight soon turns, the man's red face near mine as we grapple. I hear the girl screaming. I'm getting tired, and as we struggle against the railing, I can't help but see the blade draw closer to my body. Suddenly, a gunshot rings out, and I feel an odd sensation travel through my torso.

The young man slumps side-ways, a bullet hole from the bar owner's ancient Webley revolver marking the guy's collarbone. Meanwhile, I look down to see a knife sticking out of my chest; the odd sensation I felt.

I slide down and rest my head on the railing. The girl stands crying in the corner with the tired old man. The bar owner says he'll get help, but I know it's too late. I can feel it.

As I lay there, I wonder about the girl's life -- who she was and who she could be in the future. I look down at the knife again. With the way things are, there's a good chance that nobody will know how I died here, because they might try to cover it up. She will be the only one who will remember.

I think of my parents, the good friends I've had, and the woman I loved who got away.

Then I say, "It's been fun" to no one in particular. Or maybe I just smile before letting out one last sigh.

That sounded fantastic enough, didn't it? I could only hope for a death half as interesting.

The second way I'd like to die is a bit more realistic. In this one, I'd live out my final days in a lackluster retirement home...

Thanks to medical advances, I've lived to the age of one hundred and two and only just recently has my body stopped cooperating with my mind. With my wife gone for nearly a decade and my only son that still lives on Earth not knowing what to do with me, I am put into a retirement home. Well, it's more like I let him put me in. I don't like to bother those who can't be bothered. He's a good man, don't get me wrong, but he and his family are caught up in the mess that is modern life -- they don't have time for anything that takes longer than five minutes.

It's a pretty crappy home. With all the expensive outfittings it would be state of the art if it weren't run so incompetently. There's not much room for freedom, either. Really, the place is in such a sad state of affairs because of the staff.

My God, the staff is terrible. They treat us like children who've been kicked in the head. They can't be bothered, either. Like that time they left Mrs. Richardson naked and alone for two whole hours. Of course, when I inform them of their stupidity, I get a scolding.

So, I decide to make it my mission to give the establishment hell until I croak. "Mr. Fryer! Get back inside, it's not time for that!" a tech will say. Who do they think they are?

"No!" I'll yell, "I'm enjoying myself out here! Go worry about your own crap."

The tech makes up some feeble reasoning as to why I can't be outside. She throws in an insult too, but I know better. "No I said! Go eff yourself!" (except I'll say the whole word -- there is no time for formalities at my age)!

Other times I'll give the nurses a hard time about my pills. "Mr. Fryer, for the last time, take your meds." But I look into their sheep-like eyes and exclaim, "No! Eff you! If you want me to take my pills you'll have catch me and shove 'em up my ass!" With that, I take off in my hover chair laughing hysterically.

The company here isn't much fun to be with. They are all dull and whiney, and never do much of anything besides watch the holovids all day or talk about how good the potatoes were on Tuesday. My only real companions are Joe Kitt and Sandra. Joe doesn't say much besides "Oh, you know" when you ask him how things are. As for Sandra, well, she's just a witch. Seriously. I've known her in this community for nearly forty years, and she has always been like that. Now, you can just add crazy and old to the title. It's a wonder her husband didn't die sooner, the poor man. It was probably the only way he could get away from her (a fact that I tell her whenever she gets on my last nerve at dinnertime).

There are some people I drop the crotchety old man for, however. People like young Will who works in the kitchen as a dishwasher. He's a little shy, but very smart and kindhearted. It's an honor to talk to people like him.

I carry on for some time like this. But the time comes where the days grow dimmer. I feel I am ready. It's time for me to leave.

So the next evening, while the old folks are entranced by the holovids and the nurses are too busy discussing how hard their spoiled lives are, I make my escape. No one notices a thing.

Once outside, I hover out to the back of the property. I admire the green trees and listen to the birds and look up at purple clouds. Soon, I reach the rocky hill that rolls down into the woods.

I think of the wonderful tapestry my life has shaped up to be; a series of joyous highs and depressing lows. It has truly been something else. I thank God.

I make my way down. It's a little steep, but my hover chair manages it well enough. At the bottom, I look for a good tree. I spot one, and if I have enough energy, I climb up its lowest branch. Otherwise, I just lay down, resting my back against it.

I laugh when I imagine how everyone will act when they find me here.

I think of my beautiful wife; I couldn't ask for anyone better. For my kids, I wish them the best. Soon I'll see Mother, Father, and Sister, too.

It takes them forever to find me sitting there in the dawn light, a look of contentment on my face.

Brilliant, if I could only be so lucky.

We fear death so much. But, I think I'm more afraid of living. I suspect most people would feel the same way if they gave themselves the chance to think about it. Life throws at you all those changes, and sometimes they can be too much to handle. Sometimes it means you'll lose. Sometimes it means life will be dull and boring. I know that's my fear. That is why I have to dream of something like my own death. I fear that my life won't be exciting in the way I would like it to be, so the least I could hope is for the end to be amazing. Because life can be seen as a journey and death its destination, and perhaps we can take that as a way to ease our minds. No matter how your life turns out, I see the potential in death. It is a chance for one last great adventure in some form or another, and the beginning of the next.

“In the Jungle”

By: Cassie Sons

It was time for bed as Dylan made his way to the room of doom. He forcefully pushed open the barricaded door which seemed to be impossible. Once inside, he had a look of motivation rather than horror of what he saw. The mess of the bedroom was not a problem. Getting to bed was the issue.

He started through a pile of dirty laundry that he assumed had been there for weeks since they reeked of mildew and body odor. His baseball uniform hung halfway out of the basket with grass stains and mud from last week's game. A sock with a hole in the heel hung from the doorknob, while dust flew from the ceiling fan. He then crawled under the brown, hardwood desk that had mold-colored gum stuck to the bottom of it, and a half eaten grilled cheese lay next to the computer chair. Distracted by the grilled cheese, debating on whether to taste it or not, Dylan continued on through the jungle. He stood up from under the desk and accidentally knocked over the dirty fish bowl and what used to be a swimming clown fish. The water soaked a nearby lime green pillow with the words “Go Green” on the front. He did not worry about the fish being out of water; it was dead anyway.

He left the mess he had made and paced through more clothes while passing the hard, plastic closet. The closet had marker written on the right door that read “Dylan Rocks” and “I love Erika.” He ignored the closet doors being halfway nailed on, because his bed was all that was on his mind. Pressing on, he realized he placed his hand on something squishy. Looking down, he realized there was a slug in the middle of the floor. It had slithered through the air vent from the floor which wasn't covered with

anything but his blue striped underwear slightly floating from the air pushing through the vent. Disgusted, he wiped his hand on the closest thing, which happened to be his sisters' red velvet dress for Prom. He smeared it on the silk shawl hanging from the sleeves.

Suddenly, excitement crossed his mind, for he could see the bed just inches away. As he got closer and closer, he tripped over the cords to an Xbox and Play Station. It ripped the plugs out of the wall causing Dylan to crash into the jungle of mess. He was covered in old food and dirty clothes. He pulled himself back up by a rainbow ribbon hanging from the light bulb string.

Dylan dug himself through the madness of mess and hoarding and finally made it to his bed. The bed was unmade and the sheets had stains from where he had a coloring contest with his younger sister. Pencil shavings lay on the mattress, but he swept them off behind the bed with one hand. "Finally time for bed," cried Dylan. He climbed up into the metal bottom bunk of a twin size bunk bed set and looked at the bed above. There was a Dr. Seuss book and a few dollars wedged into the bar of the top bunk. Dylan covered up with The Toy Story blanket of Buzz and Woody and, "ZING!" It hit him. He had forgotten to brush his teeth. He then got back out of bed for another messy adventure through the room of doom.

“My Not-So-Happily Ever After”

By: Emily Cortez

With my silver hair brush in my hand, I stroke my grey-highlighted hair that falls slightly lower than my shoulders. I trace my finger over my jaw line after placing my hair brush back on my dresser. Gazing at the old, life-drained face staring back at me, I remember the days when youth was on my side. Age has certainly beaten my fragile body, and it descends deeper than just my appearance. My eyes had a soft sparkle in them when I was a young woman that made everyone want to be around me, and my smile used to spread to those who simply glanced in my direction. But that person has vanished and is now replaced with an old, bitter woman who was damaged by life. Turning away with shame, I breathe deeply and wipe the tears that stained my face. I make a promise to myself. My daughters are never to end up like me: heartbroken and alone.

Pinning my hair back up into its original bun on the top of my head, I wrap my shawl snugly around me and glide down the stairs. I stroll into the kitchen where my two daughters are eating their breakfast. “Good morning, my daughters,” I say.

“Good morning, mother,” they both said simultaneously.

“Good morning, stepmother,” said Cinderella.

“Good morning,” I replied with a simple nod. Glaring at her with my lips pursed, I sat down with my breakfast waiting for me on my usual spot at the table. Of course, if it wasn't there, I would make sure that Cinderella's next meal would be dinner.

Scanning her from head to toe, a feeling I've become quite familiar with crept its way into my stomach. Her hair thrown up on top of her head with just a rag to hold it in place, the way she moved with such ease, and even the way she wore her raggedy cloths, still made me want to vomit. Although I made her do her chores everyday and she wore no makeup, her cheeks were always glowing with a pink hue and her sweat would just enhance her radiance. I want to rub her face in dirt, but she'd probably still look beautiful. I try my best every day to make her life miserable and she still finds some way to be happy. One time I even asked her why she was so happy, and she replied with an innocent voice, "Well, why not? I have no reason not to be happy. The sun is shining, I have a roof over my head, and I'm in good health. I have every reason to be happy." I'm still trying my best to make her life miserable because she's just too happy, but that's not my goal anymore.

Sitting at the table, I glower at my food. Why is she happy with practically nothing while I have everything and can't seem to smile a genuine smile even for a second? The door bell jingles and, with her dainty little feet prancing across the floor like she's dancing on a cloud, Cinderella hastens to answer the door. She slowly trudges back in, looking down at a piece of paper in her hands. A flash of something crosses her expression and lands in her eyes. It looks something like hope.

Swiftly getting up, I yank the paper out of her grimy paws. It is an ivory colored invitation addressed to our household from the prince. He was throwing a ball tonight for all the maidens in the land in hopes of finding a suitable wife. What a wonderful opportunity to ensure that one of my daughters will have a better life than mine. I know only one daughter can marry the prince, but he may have a rich friend to marry my other

daughter. I just want the best for both of them, and I will do whatever it takes for them to be secure and happy.

My daughters rush over to me once they see my excitement. As they read the invitation over my shoulders, they start bouncing up and down and galloping around the entire house. “Grab your purses, girls. We’re going shopping for new gowns!” A dark shadow of disappointment crossed Cinderella’s brow. Maybe this event will finally crush her spirits.

During our shopping trip, we buy jewelry, hand bags, a ball gown for each of my girls and, of course, stilettos to match each dress. I know we can’t really afford it, but it’s a special occasion.

When we finish, my girls walk into our house with giggles on their lips. We begin getting ready for the ball that could change our lives. Putting on our dresses and make-up takes a significant amount of time. We want to look our best.

Tip-toeing down to the kitchen, I catch Cinderella sweeping the floor with a sparkling drip falling down her cheek. I think I finally broke her.

“Cinderella,” I say.

“Yes, step-mother?” she responds.

“You are welcome to come with us if you want,” I say with a laugh.

“Can I?” she says with excitement filling her voice. “The invitation does say for every maiden!”

“Yes. But you have to wear something nice. Do you have anything nice to wear?” I say as I raise an eyebrow.

“No,” she says as the excitement trickles away.

“Hmm. In that case, you are not to leave this house. You are to stay here and do your chores. If I find out you left you will no longer have a place to stay. And don’t go anywhere near that ball. Do you understand, Cinderella?”

“Yes, stepmother,” she said in a strained voice. Sticking my chin up and out, I make my exit. That should take care of everything. If the prince saw her in these rags, he would probably ignore her anyway.

I rent us an expensive carriage because we cannot show up to the ball without style. The prince would think we’re poor, and he wouldn’t want to marry someone who is poor. We slip into the carriage with grace and ease. Well, I did, but my daughters are getting better at it. As they get older, they become more mature and less clumsy. I am very proud of them.

“Stop pushing, Anastasia!”

“Well then move over, Drizella!”

“Girls! Please act like proper young ladies.” It’s a work in progress.

As we pull up to the elegant castle, our jaws drop in astonishment. It’s so beautiful and big. One of my daughters would be so secure financially. We step out of the carriage and suck in the scene with our eyes. Slowly, we climb up the stairs to the

front door where seas of people are making their way into the castle. Each lady has the desire to dance with the prince, hoping that he will choose one of them to be his wife.

As the guards open the doors, everyone floods in, making their way to the dance floor so they can impress the prince with their beauty and grace. I know that I am not going to marry the prince, but I will make sure he marries one of my daughters. I glance at him through the crowds of stuck up girls. Twirling and crouching, I finally am able to get close enough to him to say, "Keep your eyes on my beautiful daughters over there." I point in their direction, and they are hitting and kicking each other. I look at them and snap my fingers, trying to get their attention, but they don't notice. He looks at me with his eyebrows raised and says, "I'll make sure and look out for them." Fuming with fury, I march straight up to my daughters and shoot imaginary darts at their heads with my eyes.

Suddenly, the music stops. At the top of the stairs stands the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She also looks so familiar. But I can't seem to put my finger on it. Her blond hair flows down her back with every strand neatly in place. Her long white gloves enhance the beauty of her petite hands and her long light blue gown cascades down her body, making her tall with a bottle-like figure. Her skin sparkles in the chandelier light as she breathes deeply. When she pulls back her lips to reveal her smile, it spreads to everyone's faces.

The prince's expression is no different from all the others: astonished and hypnotized by her magnificent beauty. It is obvious no one has a chance with the prince now. He walks over to her in a trance and grabs her hand. He whisks her onto the

dance floor, and they sweep the room with poise. Little by little, everyone starts to go home, but I want to know who this little twerp is, though I never get to find out. When the clock strikes twelve, she picks up her dress and dashes out. She is gone.

This is the worst ball I've ever been too. The prince didn't even dance with my gorgeous daughters. They didn't even get a chance to prove to him how wonderful they are.

As we pull up to the house, we slide out of our expensive carriage and trek into our house. I take off my shoes and begin to take off my dress when I wonder where Cinderella is. I storm into the kitchen with the hope that she isn't going to be there so I can kick her out of our home. But there she is sitting in her chair watching the fire flicker.

"How was your night at the ball, stepmother?" she says with an innocent smile.

"Fine," I puff and stomp out, slamming the door behind me.

The next morning, we go through our usual routine when we receive another letter. This time it is not an invitation, but a letter of declaration. It reads, "Your Highness, the prince, will be visiting every house in the land in hopes of finding the one he danced and fell in love with at the ball last night."

We all go up stairs with giggles in our hearts and butterflies in our bellies. As we get ready for our second chance, Cinderella disappears. I pause and listen. She's in her room. I rush up stairs and stop outside of her door. Bending down to peek through the key hole, I spot Cinderella dancing around the room, twirling with something shiny in her hands. Moving closer to the hole to get a better view, I recognize what she is

holding. She is cradling a glass slipper. All of a sudden, it all comes back to me. I gasp as I remember that the young girl last night that the prince is searching for had those exact slippers on. Trying to cover up my astonishment, I cover my mouth, and before I can regain composure, I pull out a key and lock her in her room. She is not ruining this for us again!

“No! Please let me out!”

I ignore her cries. I knew she would disobey me!

Just as I hurry downstairs, the door bell rings. I gather myself together and straighten my dress. I reach for the handle and paste a fake smile on my face.

“Come in, Sire.”

The prince whips out a shiny crystal shoe and asks if he can put it on each foot in the house.

My daughters tumble down the stairs and seat themselves on the sofa. The prince’s assistant pulls out a glass slipper. So, that’s how they’re going to find the girl the prince danced with last night. That’s Cinderella’s other shoe. How did he get it? The assistant pokes and prods the shoe onto each of my daughters, but their feet just won’t go in. The prince asks me if there is anyone else in the house, and I slowly shake my head no.

“If you’re lying to me, you know I can have you arrested.”

I gulp when all of a sudden, Cinderella descends down the steps. I vowed I would make sure that my daughters would have a better life than I did and I tend to

keep that promise. I stick my foot out and trip the assistant, causing the shoe to sail through the air and come crashing down to the ground, shattering into a million pieces. I can't help but grin a little.

Both the prince and Cinderella gasp in shock. The prince's face turns red and has a slight frown on the corners of his mouth as he stares at the broken pieces. Right when I think I have won, Cinderella pulls out the other glass slipper.

"I have the other one!" she says in a sing song voice.

I long to wrap my hands around her neck until her face turns blue, but I am being restrained by the prince's trusty guards. Cinderella sits her dirty body down on my clean couch and peaks her foot out from under her rags.

The prince gently slips the shoe onto her dainty, little foot. The shoe looks like it is detailed and crafted especially for her foot. The prince, with Cinderella on his arm, and his assistant, walk out of our house and down to the gigantic, expensive carriage awaiting them. They stare deep into each other's eyes like they are communicating without words. As they ride away into their happily ever after, all I can wonder is how I let this happen.

“Death and His Friends”

By: Stephanie Norton

It was a beautiful day outside. The air was crisp, the warm sun was shining, and the delicate scent of spring was wafting through the air. Death decided to take a walk to his next appointment and enjoy the perfection on earth as it wasn't often that he could take pleasure in an afternoon stroll. As he walked along, he came across three goats dancing and singing and playing their fiddles in the middle of a field. He stopped. They smiled and called to him, “Death! Join us!” He pondered for a moment before slowly walking toward them.

As he drew near he asked the goats, “Why do you not fear me? How do you know I'm not here for one of you?”

The goats continued to dance and laughed at the question. “Silly Death,” said the first goat, “So what if you are here for me? I am alive for now and shall continue to dance and sing until you take me and I am no longer able.”

Watching the dancing and fiddling and singing was so much fun for Death that he forgot the time until the whisper of the crickets and the moans of the bullfrogs drew his attention to the moon that was now brightly suspended overhead. “Oh no,” thought Death, for he had missed many appointments by this time. The goats had also lost track of time and realized how hungry they were, so they put down their fiddles and began to drift about munching on tufts of spring grass, still bright under the pale moon.

Death began to pace under a tree muttering to himself. "How could I be so careless?" he silently screamed. The second goat was the first to notice the distraught look upon Death's face and, with a mouth full of grass, ventured to ask him about it.

"There were important engagements I was meant to attend, but I was having such a lovely time, I lost track of the hour and now have missed them, a great many of them in fact."

"So what?" replied the third goat, "What happens now?"

Death thought for a moment, unsure himself of the consequences. "I don't know," he finally answered slowly, "I've never missed an appointment before."

The second goat had completely forgotten about his supper at this point, excited at the prospect of Death being put on hold, so he said, "Why don't you just stay here with us?" All he could think about was being the greatest and oldest goat who ever lived. He would have many kids, and grandkids and great grandkids and he could teach them all how to dance and fiddle! But before the second goat could complete his thought, or even before Death himself could entertain the question, the Wise Owl hooted from above.

"Death," he warned, "You *must* be on your way now. You have much to attend to and are behind on your duties."

But Death wasn't listening because he was too busy thinking. He had never thought about not being Death anymore and he was tired of being feared and hated. Also, he had never had a friend before these three goats, and they wanted him to stay.

Slowly, Death began to speak. "I think..." he stammered, "That I would like to stay here... with my... friends..."

The Wise Owl's eyes grew bigger than anyone had ever seen before. "DEATH!" the Wise Owl bellowed, "You MUST go! For everything there is a season and balance among the earth must be maintained. No one can know what disaster will occur if you do not perform the tasks that have been assigned to only you."

But Death was still not listening. He was talking off his cloak and gingerly plucking at the strings of one of the violins. For the first time, he was smiling because this Grim Reaper was no longer grim, nor was he reaping. The Wise Owl could only shake his head, with his silver feathers ruffling as he flew away, knowing that dark days were sure to come.

Many years went by with one generation rolling into another and Death stayed with his three goat friends. As the three old goats had families that grew and grew in number, one day you could no longer see the forest or the field. All the eye could see was barren land, a grey sky and goats of all ages. The three old goats consulted with Death on that day. "What is there to do?" they asked him, "We cannot eat or feed our families."

Death pondered the question, as he wasn't sure himself and answered, "We shall walk to find more grass, for the earth is covered with it."

So they herded all the kids and adults and began to walk. They walked for days and days finding nothing. The creeks had dried up, the grass had been eaten or trampled by the vast number of animals, and even the trees had been chewed to

stumps. As they grew weary of walking to nowhere and nothing the three oldest goats finally stopped walking. "Death!" they cried, "Just take us now! There is nowhere soft to sleep, no food to eat and no water to drink for we ate it all and drank it all. If we all live forever, there isn't enough for all to be happy. We are too old to dance and too old to fiddle. We are too old to sleep well and too tired to be happy." It was only then that Death had realized his mistake. Because he was a supernatural creature, he did not need sleep, food, water, or comfort. He wasn't made to be happy or to have friends or learn to dance and fiddle. He looked sadly at his friends and nodded. He knew that it was time to restore the balance, but he also knew he would never again have friends, for they too would all die.

The oldest kid from each of the three goats was put in charge of the herd and then Death and his three friends began to walk away from the group. When they were a good ways apart from the rest of the giant goat family, they all sat down to talk for the final time. Years ago when Death had met his friends he had looked like a Greek God with a cherubic face and golden curls. But on this day his features grew hard, and his heart was full of sorrow. As they reminisced of all the great years they had shared together, Death picked up his fiddle the goats had made for him. He began to play them all a last lullaby. The three old goats, with their long white beards, knobby knees and worn hooves gingerly kneeled down to the dusty ground and fell into their final rest.

With a heavy heart, Death once again remembered what it was like to be all alone. He looked around for a stick or sharp stone to dig a hole and bury his friends, but instead he managed to find an abandoned scythe. As he dug the hole, he found a forgotten stash of acorns, probably left by squirrels that had also gone to find greener

pastures. Once he laid his friends inside and buried them, he placed an acorn on the surface of the earth, his only way to mark his friends' graves, then sat upon the soil and wept.

By nightfall, with a full moon staring ominously at him and once again marking the time, Death realized there was no more time left to weep. A biting wind was blowing him away, urging his departure. Death knew his old friends had led long and wonderfully full lives, but that did not fill the hole that was inside him because they were forever gone now. As he gathered his ancient and tattered cloak, the face under the hood was no longer that of an angel, but a pale and hollow figure filled with a silent and immobile pain. As he began to leave the happiest place of his existence, he decided to take the scythe with him as a walking stick, for each step taken further from this place was a heavy burden to him.

Death had much to make up for, and as he bitterly roamed the earth the world was filled with war, famine and disease. Some souls were long past due while others had barely begun to breathe, but the balance had been disturbed and the order of things could no longer work the way it had in the past. Eventually the numbers dwindled to an amount that Mother Nature could take care of and the red of the flower and berry began to overrun the red of the blood that had covered the earth.

And one day, another beautiful spring day had once again come to pass, and Death was once again walking through a green pasture. He came across an oak tree, the oldest he had ever seen and realized the place he had come to. As he sat under

the tree he spoke aloud to his old friends buried beneath him, telling them of what the world had come to, but that all seemed to be as right as it could be now.

Suddenly, and with rude interruption, he heard, "Who, WHO?" He looked around and saw no one.

"Who am I? I am Death," he said sadly.

"Hoo," came again the soft coo.

Death looked up this time and saw an owl with eyes so wide, Death was sure he must have known everything about the world. "I am Death," he spoke again, with much more certainty in his voice. "I know who I am, and I will never forget my place on this earth." The owl nodded in agreement with him and flew away, probably to remind others of their place in the world as well, Death thought.

Death rose once again and walked away from the very old oak tree with a mixture of happiness and grief. He knew he had a job to do and there wasn't time for resting. To this day Death roams, day and night, not for pleasure or pain but to keep the balance. So remember to live for happiness, dancing, fiddles and friends, and, of course, to spare and save the moments to lie down and roll around in fragrant blades of soft, green grass. For if you wish to live forever, you'll end up losing the best of what life has to offer, and praying for Death to come anyway.

“A Fox’s Tail: What Really Happened to the Gingerbread Man”

By: Allison Beck

I’m sure you have heard the story of “The Gingerbread Man”-- you know, the one about the cookie that becomes real and taunts everyone he meets then runs away? Well, you are about to hear that story again, only you’ll hear my side. My name is Jack Cooper. I am the fox that “tricks” the gingerbread man and “eats” him. That is what you’ve heard, I’m sure, but it’s simply not true!

For some reason or another that is unclear to me, foxes seem to have a bad reputation in tales such as this. We are not bad; we are fantastic creatures, if I do say so myself, and should therefore be written as such! So, without further ado, here is my side.

I had just eaten a rancid piece of cheese that a crow had so rudely given me, followed by a bunch of sour grapes I found lying in a nearby vineyard. I simply had to get those revolting tastes from my mouth, so I decided to go to a cottage I knew of where a kind old couple lived. The old woman was an excellent cook and was always leaving little treats out for me. I figured I should stop by to say hello since I was in the neighborhood.

As I got closer, I could smell something heavenly coming from the kitchen. It smelled like gingerbread which I, personally, think smells better than it tastes.

I then heard a tiny voice yelling, “Let me out! Let me out!” I wondered, “What on earth is going on in there?” when all of a sudden, a little man ran from the house! I couldn’t believe my eyes! “Was that a gingerbread cookie?” I thought. “What recipe did she use?!?”

The old couple then burst from the doorway and began to chase the little cookie man, but that little guy was quick, and the old man and woman could not keep up with him.

As he ran, he kept repeating a rhyme that I found to be rather annoying. It went something like *“Run, run, as fast as you can, you can’t catch me, I’m the gingerbread man!”* I guess you could say it was his “catch phrase that couldn’t be caught,” or so he thought.

I wanted to talk to him. This was the first cookie, or any kind of food for that matter, that I had seen that was alive. He intrigued me, so I decided to follow him. It wasn’t hard to track him; I could smell him from miles away. We foxes have an excellent sense of smell.

The gingerbread man soon came across a cow grazing in a nearby pasture. When the cow saw the gingerbread man, she said, “Stop! Stop, little man! You look very good to eat.” But, of course, the gingerbread man didn’t stop because he didn’t want to be eaten. What a stupid thing for that cow to say! Did she honestly expect him to stop? Why would a cow want to eat a gingerbread man anyway? But I digress. The cookie said his taunting rhyme while the cow ran after him. It was rather amusing to watch, actually. But she failed to catch him just as the old man and woman had. I, however, continued to follow him, determined to meet this odd, but extraordinary, little man.

After a while, he came upon a horse. The horse made the same mistake the cow had made, by telling the gingerbread man to stop running because he wanted to eat him. How dumb can you get? I mean would *you* stop running for someone who told

you they would like to *eat* you? Of course not! At least, I hope you wouldn't. Anyway, as I was saying, the horse ran after the cookie while the cookie chanted that "run, run as fast as you can" rhyme. But the horse exhausted himself, soon giving up on his chase, just as the old couple and the cow had done.

I could tell that the cookie was feeling proud of himself, and if I dare say so, a bit cocky, for he cried out "No one catch me!" I needed to talk with him soon, before he became unbearably hot headed. So I called out to him. "Good Sir," I said, for we foxes are very polite creatures. "Might you stop and rest a while? I most desire to speak with you." But the poor little cookie thought that I was just another dumb animal wanting to eat him and kept on running.

I ran after him. He then began to taunt ME! He chanted that ridiculous rhyme over and over. It was obnoxious! I kept trying to tell him that I didn't want to catch him; I only wished to speak with him, but he wouldn't listen. I was getting quite tired, but I had come this far and was not about to quit.

It wasn't long before we came to a river. The gingerbread man stopped at the riverbank, and I did the same. "Oh! What shall I do?" the little man cried. "I can't cross this river." Indeed he could not for he would surely crumble and fall apart as soon as he touched the water. I saw this as an opportunity to gain his trust, so I offered my services. "Jump on my tail," I said. "I will take you across the river." The gingerbread man seemed hesitant at first, but realized that I was there to help him. He jumped up on my tail, and off we went.

But as I swam, the water got deeper. The little fellow was clinging to my tail for dear life. To tell you the truth, he was weighing down my tail. Well, I didn't want the poor guy to get soggy, so I told him to jump on my back so he wouldn't get wet. Thankfully, he did, so I swam on. But as I swam further out into the river, the water became deeper still. I could feel the cool water begin to trickle over my back, so I told the gingerbread man to quickly jump onto my nose. Luckily, he did, and I continued swimming.

We were almost to the opposite end of the river when I felt a sneeze coming on. Some of the powdered sugar from the gingerbread man's vest had gotten into my nose. I swam as fast as I could to the other side so that I wouldn't fling the little cookie into the water with my violent sneeze. When my feet finally touched the riverbank, I tried to tell the gingerbread man to jump off quickly, but it was too late. I flung my head back in a terribly violent sneezing fit, and in the process, tossed the poor chap into the air. He landed on a rock and broke into seven pieces.

He was crying out in pain; I didn't know what to do. I couldn't just leave him there; that would be inhuman. The only thing I could do was put him out of his misery, so I ate him. I felt horrible, of course, but what else could I do? What would you have done in my position?

So, you see, I had no choice in the matter. It was never my intention to cause any harm to that miraculous creation, but life has cruel twists of fate sometimes. I don't know how I became the so-called "villain" of this tale. I suppose every story needs its antagonist, and for some reason or another, I looked the part. I don't even like

gingerbread. Now if he had been a chocolate chip cookie man, it would have been a completely different story.

“Little Red Riding Brat: Scarlett’s Tale”

By: LaDonna Harris

Once upon a time there was a girl; she was a beautiful little girl who wore a lovely hooded cape that her Grandmother had given to her as a child. This girl wore her cape so often that she was called Little Red Riding Hood by all the people in her small village. Little Red was loved by everyone who lived there. Well, that is what she thought. There was only one person in the village that hated Little Red.

Scarlett stood in the kitchen chopping vegetables and watching her only daughter through the tiny window. Red skipped along humming to herself and playing in the yard.

You little brat, always skipping and smiling and being so perky! And that humming! Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Why can't you just go to...?

Scarlett's thoughts were interrupted when her daughter came into the house. She dropped the hood of her bright red cape and let her golden locks flow free, "Mother, I am ready to go to grand-mama's house."

Scarlett swallowed the loathing for her daughter. "Of course, dear. The basket for your poor ill grandmother is just there on the counter. It is the cake and tea you made and the honey you got."

Red smiled her perfect smile and picked up the basket. "I know this and a visit are sure to make her day brighter."

Scarlett scoffed while her back was to her daughter, *I'm sure these blah blah blah... I'm so perfect nah nah nah... just die you little brat!*

"Of course they will, darling. Your grandmother loves visits from her Little Red Riding Hood."

Little Red's big, blue eyes twinkled as she hugged her mother tight, "Oh, mother, I do love you."

Scarlett patted Red's back uneasily. "Yes, uhh you too, d-dear."

The beautiful little girl released her mother and pulled the hood back over her hair. "Tata mother."

Her mother crossed her arms. "Yeah, bye."

Red walked out the door and began on the path; Scarlett began chopping again and called out the window, "Red! Stay on the path, dear! Do not stray from the path, I beg of you!"

Red turned and smiled, then continued to walk. Scarlett watched Red until she couldn't see her anymore.

"Thank God!" She dropped her knife and went to Red's room. "You won't be needing any of this stuff where you're going, you little brat!" Her laugh radiated throughout the house.

Scarlett began gathering Red's things and throwing them out the window. She pulled the covers off the bed and wadded them up. "I'll get the stench of her out of those later. She should be at the bridge now."

Scarlett was humming and gathering things when she sat at Red's desk. She opened the drawer of the desk and pulled out a stack of pictures that Red had drawn.

"Oh, how sweet! She drew the house and mommy." She set it aside, "Blah blah blah!" She crumpled the pictures up and threw them to the floor. She turned in her chair and looked at the mess that used to be Red's room. Scarlett thought back to the day that she knew her life would change.

Three Months Earlier:

Scarlett walked through the Market with Red skipping in front of her. *Go little one, go skip through the market. Soon enough you won't be able to, brat.* Scarlett smiled as Red skipped ahead.

"Red, dear, come to mother."

Little Red turned and skipped to her mother while her cape flowed behind her, her hair spread in the wind, and her eyes sparkled, "Yes, Mother?"

Scarlett pulled a coin out of the purse on her hip, "This is for you. You may buy a sweet and a small toy. Meet me here at noon."

Red took the coin with wide eyes and hugged her mother, "Oh, Mother! Thank you!"

Scarlett patted Red's back and pointed down the street. Red skipped her way into the heart of the market. *"If I'm lucky you'll get kidnapped."*

Scarlett pulled her wrap over her head, turned, and went into the pub just down the street from where she stood.

Scarlett entered the pub and shivered. The pub was full of grotesque, withered looking men and women from town. One of the men smiled at her with dirty, ragged teeth. The women were haggard and looked used; they scowled at her as she walked up to the bar.

"Is-is he here?"

"In dah back but he don't lyke bein' des-torbed."

Scarlett turned and walked toward the door he pointed to; she walked though and saw a small, poorly lit room. A low growl came from the shadows in the back of the room.

"Who are you and why do you disturb me?"

"My name is Scarlett. I have a proposition for you." She pulled the purse from her hip and threw it toward the shadow.

"Open it."

Scarlett reached for the bag and opened it, pouring the ham bones and gold pieces on the floor. A big brown paw appeared from the shadows and played with the loot.

"This seems double my normal salary. You have a big job, do you?"

Scarlett swallowed and threw the picture of Red down on top of the pile.

"Ahhh, a child; it will be done. You must wait for my signal. Now leave my sight before I take you, too." Another growl came from the shadows as Scarlett ran through the door and out of the Pub.

* * *

That had been three months ago, and Scarlett was worried her dream would not come true. Then, the night before when Scarlett went to get water from the well, she saw the package on the wall. The red bow on top made her know what it meant. When she opened it and found a cow heart, she smiled. That morning a messenger brought a letter from Scarlett's mother saying that she was ill and wanted Little Red to come for a visit. Scarlett told Red the news. Red was pleased with the thought of visiting her grandmother.

Scarlett smiled thinking that the Wolf had most likely eaten Red by now. She got up and walked through the house. Scarlett threw on her cloak and went out the front door; she was confronted with Red and a large man.

"Hello, Mother."

"Is this her, Red?"

"Indeed."

Scarlett was shocked, "Red, d-dear, you're home. An-And you brought a friend."

"Mother, The wolf, you-you sent him after me?" Red's blue eyes were filled with pain.

"Scarlett, ma'am," the man stepped forward, "I am the Woodsman of the Village to the North of yours. I was walking in the woods when..."

"Yeah, I don't care. Yes, Red, I sent the wolf to kill you. And?" Scarlett crossed her arms over her chest and scowled.

A tear slid down Red's cheek, "But why, mother, why would you do that?"

"Oh, please! Red, I was 17 when I had you! You ruined my life! I was exiled from the village, your grandmother wouldn't look at me without crying, and I was destined to live alone all because I had you out of wed lock." Scarlett lunged at Red. The woodsman pushed Red aside and grabbed Scarlett, "I loved you at first! Then, every time I looked at you I saw him! You are your father's child! And he was an evil Devil! A temptation!"

Scarlett screamed as Red cried into her arm, "Oh Mother! Mother, why? Why!"

"How did you find out?" Scarlett fought against the strength of the woodsman's arms.

"I can answer that ma'am. You must calm yourself first." The Woodsman held tighter onto Scarlett.

"Fine! Fine!" Scarlett stopped kicking and screaming. She began to cry and shake, "But how? It was perfect, the perfect plan!"

"I was walking in the woods when I heard the wolf snoring. I have been looking for this wolf for many years now, and when I heard it, I went quickly. I had not planned on it being in human clothing. I knew as soon as I went in the house that something was wrong. I pulled my knife, ready to slit the throat of the wolf. When I heard the voices in his stomach; I woke him. When you put a wolf's life on the line they will howl like it is a full moon. He told me about you, the money, the plan, and how he had eaten your mother out of spite. I killed him swiftly, opened his stomach, and let the women go."

"No! It should have worked!"

* * *

Scarlett awoke screaming and sat up in bed; she had the same dream every night since she went into the institute. She walked up to the door and screamed.

"She should have been dead! He was supposed to eat her! She should have been dead!"

The nurse called to the attendants that were dozing down the hall. They opened the door, fought Scarlett to the ground, and help the chlorophorm covered cloth over her mouth and nose. Her screaming became muffled, began to die down and she went to sleep. The group walked out of the room and locked the door behind them. The nurse looked down the hall and saw the young woman standing at her desk; the woman's long blond hair flowed down her shoulder and her big blue eyes glowed with sorrow as she

gathered the hooded red cape she wore tight around her. Before the nurse could walk down the hall to her, she turned and walked away crying.

The End

“Love Can Hear”

By: Tabitha Burns

What is love? I had a habit of questioning that a lot to myself before ever crossing paths with Andrew. I would always be down on my luck when it came to that field. I could give advice, but life never seemed to give me the chance to be loved. I would run down what love was by saying love is blind, isn't real, and is kryptonite. Whenever I had these “views” on love, I voiced my opinions on paper, pointing out any new epiphanies from these faults. Each of these setbacks was part of the maturing process. That's what life journeys are about. It doesn't matter how old we are. It is the setbacks we experience that give us our wisdom.

When I say love is blind, I mean it clouds our vision. We're only in daydream mode. Nothing can hurt us in that mode. Well, that's what we think. Reality hurts us more than we can see. We're just blinded by what we thought was love, but it isn't. Once you become blinded by love and hurt by reality, it's harder to get over trust issues. But, you're more cautious of your surroundings. I was cautious a lot until Andrew came into my life and I learned to trust again. How could that have been possible? Putting complete trust in a stranger? It's hard to explain. I don't have weird feelings, second thoughts, or negative gut instincts about him. If I am around any person who makes me feel that way, I keep my distance. Love became a clear sky when Andrew came into the picture. When I see sunsets, mountains, or anything beautiful, it calms me, and I have a true smile. That's how it is when I am with Andrew. Our love isn't blind. It's clear and beautiful.

How would you symbolize love in your eyes? Love, to me, is a mirror. You look at yourself in the mirror aware of your flaws. But, others around you see the beauty of you inside and out. Sometimes. Whenever a person is rejected, the person didn't see the beauty. They only saw the physical attributes, and that disallowed the emotions to evolve. Because of that, love was nonexistent among those two people. Since Andrew came into my life, he sees me, with his heart, not with his eyes. The heart is what allows him to see me, as it allows me to see him. He's my mirror in my life. I've been able to see life differently because of him. I've become closer to God. And, most importantly, I can see something that is abstract. Love.

Love is only an abstract thing, which means it isn't real. Yeah, it's not real until the right people come along. The connection. How can love exist if there is no emotional connection? The reason why love doesn't seem real is because it's not found yet by the right people. So, for the people who get heartbroken, their "love" wasn't real. It was just the so-called blind love. Love becomes real when you start to become a better or happier person than before. When I first started talking to Andrew, I was still in classes at my college. People tend to say that having another person in your life when you're in school will interfere with your grades. I didn't see that with my case. I made Dean's list. I was always motivated when it came to school, but when Andrew came into the picture, I noticed myself able to focus more in class. After meeting Andrew, I could tell that his love was real just as it was in the messages. Our connection is real because of our emotions. We developed emotional feelings towards each other before the physical attraction, which allowed our love to become existent in the world.

Love is like kryptonite. When you're with the wrong person, it's your weakness. The person who is the one will allow the "kryptonite" love to fade into something beautiful. Andrew and I had been hurt by love before, prior to talking to each other. Love became something that I told myself not to accept anymore because of the pain. But, when we started talking, the way we approached each other allowed us to open up in a way we never have before. The kryptonite that was grasping our hearts faded. Love created motivation, compassion, sincerity, and happiness that the kryptonite had dominated before. Andrew and I are soul mates, and our hearts filled with pure love for each other, not tainted kryptonite love from the past.

I was reading a Judy Garland quote, and I had a newfound realization.

"For it was not in my ears you whispered, but into my heart. It was not my lips you kissed, but my soul."

I am hard of hearing. I hear with a hearing aid, but without, I am deaf. A while ago, I wrote a paper on my journey in a hearing world. And, the question I presented was "What is it like to hear?" I used to ask people that question when I was younger to see what their responses are. It is hard to describe; it's like when a person who is blind asks "what does the color red look like?" I was never looking for a physical quality response. Hearing is an abstract aspect. What it is like to hear is knowing the world exists through your heart. How is hearing related to love and Andrew? It's everything. It's one of the many things I love about him. I may never hear on my own for as long as I live, but being with Andrew is the closest thing to hearing I've ever gotten. I hear through my heart from the love he has for me. That's why I am the happiest woman in

the world because Andrew gives me love and the ability to hear. Love is a powerful thing, and when it's with the right person, everything makes sense.

-I love you, Andrew

“Behind the Scenes of Read Across America”

By: Sheila Watkins

Teaching children to read is one of the most important skills we, as teachers and volunteers, teach. Getting children to read is at the top of our priority list. Once we have taught the basic reading skills, finding ways to promote independent reading becomes the challenge. Through Read Across America Day, we provide an opportunity for children to experience reading as an adventure, filled with imagination and enjoyment. Our goal is to help children develop independent reading habits, read for pure enjoyment and acquire a life-long love for reading. Dr. Seuss said it best, “The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.” How true are his words.

Over the years, teachers and volunteers across the country have brainstormed of ways to promote reading in hopes that children would read more and view reading as exciting and fun. These promotions have ranged from interactive bulletin boards to school-wide reading contests with spectacular kick-offs. Principals, teachers, and volunteers have had pies thrown in their faces, shaved their heads or sat in dunking booths to encourage and celebrate reading achievements by their students. We also encouraged parents to get involved and help promote reading at home. However, we felt as if there seemed to be an element still missing.

In 1997, the National Education Association, (NEA), provided the missing element: a small reading task force organized to come up with an idea that would promote reading as well as get kids excited about reading. The NEA decided to use the element of enthusiasm produced at pep rallies and the excitement generated at football

games to create Read Across America Day. Dr. Seuss's birthday, March 2, was the date chosen for the celebration ("Background on Read Across America" Para. 4). The NEA hoped that the excitement and enthusiasm generated through a national celebration would encourage children to read more and instill a life-long love for reading. Teachers and volunteers across the country were relieved and excited about the celebration. Thanks to the NEA, we now had a clear focus and platform to use in promoting reading as fun and adventurous. We agreed that the celebration Read Across America Day promoted was the missing element.

Read Across America is an annual event that promotes and encourages children and parents across the country to celebrate Dr. Seuss's birthday by reading. That first celebration was thirteen years ago. Within two years, Read Across America Day had 25 million participants nationwide ("Going Places With Dr. Seuss." Para. 1). Each year Read Across America Day gets bigger and better with last year's participation having over 45 million educators, parents and children ("Seuss Celebration: Read Across America Activities Draw 45 Million Participants" Para. 1). These numbers alone attest to the impact we have on putting fun back into reading.

Although Read Across America Day is just one day, most elementary schools have a weeklong celebration. To get things going, some schools have classroom birthday parties in honor of Dr. Seuss. Some schools have assemblies that kick off the celebration. It is common to see students wearing the Cat's red and white hat, making Cat in the Hat birthday cakes or hear them singing Happy Birthday to Dr. Seuss. If you are lucky, you may even spot the Cat going from class to class.

The excitement overflows from every classroom as this monumental week of adventure and fun gets underway. In local elementary schools, many different activities take place during the Read Across America celebration. Many teachers will dress wacky to add fun and imagination to the event. I have worn mismatched shoes, my shirt inside out and pants with one leg rolled, the other leg down. Others will dress up like a favorite character in a book (Smith). Many teachers will bring to life certain aspects of a favorite book by recreating an event or making a recipe in a book to put the fun and adventure back into reading. I have made and served green eggs to students so they could share in Sam's experience in *Green Eggs and Ham*. Librarians visit neighborhood schools to read to the students. The public library uses this opportunity to promote activities and events held at the public library. Some of the events include special story times and book clubs for children. The main goal in the activities is to provide a positive and successful reading experience, no matter what level a child is reading on (Wilson).

This reading celebration has influenced our nation to such a degree that in March 2011, it captured the attention of two United States Senators, Susan Collins and Jack Reed. They authored a resolution that proclaimed March 2 as Read Across America Day and the resolution was unanimously passed by the Senate ("Senate Passes Senator Collins' Resolution Designating Today" Para. 1). Read Across America has become a celebration that is a highlight of the year filled with excitement. Across the country, people from all lifestyles are getting involved with NEA to promote, develop and present activities that will put excitement into reading for children of all ages. As teachers and volunteers dedicated to the promotion of reading, this resolution was music to our ears. Finally, we felt our efforts received the acknowledgment and

recognition of importance that we knew existed in our dedication to children and reading.

Governors, mayors, and all types of state officials read to classes in their states. Actors and athletes get in on the action by making public service announcements about the adventures that one can take through reading (“Background on Read Across America” Para. 3). Over fifty organizations and associations across the nation have joined the NEA to support and help promote Read Across America (“Background on Read Across America” Para. 7). The organizations and associations involved range from sport organizations to fraternities to department stores. From the wide range of organization involved, we are able to promote reading as fun through specific interests children have.

Two prominent organizations involved in Read Across America Day are Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. and Random House Children’s Books. Random House initiated the beginning reader genre when it launched the Beginner Book Series. (“Partners and Supporters” Para. 42). Random House published the majority of Dr. Seuss books that we use to celebrate Read Across America. These books allowed children to read independently at a younger age. Dr. Seuss Enterprises provide a website with reading resources to engage children in reading events and activities ranging from age birth to 104 (“Partners and Supporters” Para.15). We use these resources during Read Across America and throughout the year to provide a meaningful connection between reading and having fun. The desire for reading to be fun was the common ground Random House and Dr. Seuss stood on.

The foundation of the relationship between Random House and Dr. Seuss arose from a magazine article Dr. Seuss read in *Life Magazine* in the early 1950's. John Hersey had written the article about children's illiteracy and the books used to teach reading to first graders. Hersey criticized the books as being boring, and lacking imagination and excitement. Jokingly, Hersey challenged Dr. Seuss to write a book that would be fun and exciting to read. Dr. Seuss took the challenge seriously (Weidt 43). He presented the idea he had had about writing children's books to Random House Publishing Company. Random House liked his ideas but gave him a list of 223 basic vocabulary words and asked him to use those words in his books. Dr. Seuss initially thought that writing a children's book would be a piece of cake. However, it took him nine months of writing and re-writing to write his first book, *The Cat In The Hat*. This book would be the first in the Beginning Book Series Dr. Seuss would write for Random House. (Weidt 43).

The Cat In The Hat became an icon of Children's Literature (Nel 188) and the figurehead of the NEA's Read Across America Campaign (Nel 183). While the personality of the Cat brought a sense of adventure and excitement to reading, it was the fun of being carried along from one page to the next by the rhythm and pattern of the language Dr. Seuss used in his books (Nel 17). The playfulness of the seemingly nonsensical use of words encourages children to learn how language works by experimenting with language rules. However, Dr. Seuss wanted to send one message to his readers: words are fun (Nel 25).

Every year children are encouraged to read more through the excitement and enjoyment created by the celebration of Read Across America Day. This year will mark

the fourteenth year of celebrating Read Across America Day. Principals, librarians and teachers have begun making plans for the next celebration. Without a doubt, Dr. Seuss and NEA began the initiative to put the fun back into reading for young children. As teachers and volunteers, we love this celebration as much, if not more so, than the children. Even though some children dislike Dr. Seuss's books, they cannot escape the excitement and enjoyment they bring to the world of books. There is nothing more wonderful to see than a child totally engrossed in reading a book. This is something we celebrate on Read across America Day.

The importance of children's literacy continues to move to the front of the line on local, state and national levels. We show children that reading is not laborious and boring. Through reading, children can explore every avenue of interest their imagination takes them. Helping children become independent readers is an investment into their lives that has a life-long return for the child, their community, and society as a whole. Read Across America Day makes this investment each year through its celebration.

“Big Bad Don’t Take No Mess”

By :Mike McDonald

Monday morning. 8:00 a.m. to the second. His confident eyes snap open and focus on the ceiling. There’s a gorgeous wolf on his left. There’s a beautiful wolf on his right. He gets wolf booty all day. He gets wolf booty all night. He springs to his back paws and stands on the mattress with the confidence of a military general examining his troops. He puts his arms high in the air like a Muhammad Ali victory taunt, stretches them behind his head, and let’s out a soul scream from the depths of his powerful diaphragm. “Heeeeeeeey!” His ladies jerk out of sleep, and the gorgeous one asks, “Big Bad! What the h*** now?” Big Bad hops 180 degrees to face them, “Paaay Day! Hey Hey! Ugh!” The gorgeous one flings her arm over her eyes and lets out a long sigh. Big Bad leaps off the mattress and, entering the bathroom, he does a series of super funky foot moves in front of the mirror. He lights a fresh Newport and starts perfecting his Jheri curl.

The beautiful wolf calls out, “Whatchu getting’ all souped up fo Bad?”

“Woman! What is it any of your biznass? I done said it was payday anyhow. Where’s my jacket baby?”

“It’s hanging behind the door, Bad.”

He grabs his green jacket from the hinge on the bathroom door and slips into to it like a snake through grass.

He leans over his girls. “Be back with the bacon!”

Bad struts out into the sun and throws his cigarette to the pavement.

He grazes the side of his hair with his right hand, "Last time I'm gonna tell em."

He crosses the empty street and picks up his pace when he hits the sidewalk.

"These motha f****s. All three of em late on they payments!"

He walks down three blocks to his first stop and sees a group of four pigs playing dominos on the sidewalk leading up to the house. The pigs scramble to move their game to the grass as Bad approaches them without hesitation.

"Well scuuuuse me boys. Rocko in there?"

The pigs fall silent and quickly nod their heads.

"Give me dat."

One of the pigs twitches and hands Bad his forty ounce. Bad drinks over half of what's left and pours the rest in the grass.

"S**t is hot."

He walks up the steps of the porch and beats on the door with the palm of his hand,

"Rocko! Open this door homeboy!"

A series of locks slowly begin cricking, and Rocko gradually opens the door to greet Bad.

"Bad! Hey uhh...come in. Come on in."

Bad enters the house scratching his chin, and Rocko shuts the door behind them. “Bad say, where was you yesterday? Man I came by your house, and man you’ll never believe this but, brother, you was gone!”

Bad twists to face Rocko like a rattle snake snapping at a threat, “Why wouldn’t I believe that!? ‘Cause that’s some porks***! I’s home all day yestaday!”

Rocko’s mouth drops wide open and he struggles and stutters to speak.

“Shut ya mouf Rocko!”

Rocko stops babbling, and Bad grabs him by his shirt collar, “I said shut yo mouf!” Rocko realizes his mouth is still wide open and snaps his jaws shut.

“Now you know why Big Bad came to see you Rocko. Where’s it at?”

Rocko gasps for the air to speak, “Well Bad, I had it. I mean I had it yesterday ya know, but last night my baby momma dropped by, and the baby he was cryin’ and sick, needed some milk, oh and he had on a dirty diaper for two days, and I got stung by a wasp, and...”

Bad reaches over and grips the hairs of Rocko’s chinny-chin-chin with his left hand and raises his right hand high in the air. Rocko flinches and looks away but his eyes slowly move to Bad’s bright, glowing right hand.

Bad’s eyes are wide, and he is huffing and puffing, “A dangerous funk machine! If ya don’t pay Big Bad, he’s gonna get mean!”

Bad's palm comes crashing down onto Rocko's cheek with the soul power of the black ancient gods. Rocko's cheeks jiggle violently and his knees buckle as he falls to the floor. Bad stands tall, shadowing Rocko's body, "If you ain't got my money by tomorrow, I'm gone make sausage out yo a** Rocko!"

Bad flings the front door open and looks out into the deserted yard. He walks along the sidewalk past the scattered dominos, half empty forty ounces, and six crinkled one-dollar bills. He snatches up the money and keeps walking, all in one super-fly motion.

Bad continues to walk past two blocks of houses. He comes to the second house and steps through the yard over patches of mowed grass. He stands in the middle of the front lawn with his hands on his hips and keeps his eye on the pig mowing the lawn. "Hey! Hey cut that motha f**** off! Can't hear a thang!"

The pig puts his hoof on the brake and sits idling in neutral.

"Hey Bad, I had a heck of a time gettin' this thing started, I best not turn her off or she might not start back up!"

Bad nods, "Aight, What you know Jeff?"

Jeff wipes the sweat from his brow and scratches his neck violently, "Ahh, not too much, Bad. Just out here mowin' this ol' yard. Trying to keep it up ya know. Man I tell ya, hot out today ain't it? Shooooo."

Bad looks Jeff in the eye, "Why you scratchin' that neck Jeff? You antsy bout somethin'?"

Jeff looks down at the steering wheel, "Nah Bad. Nah the grass makes me itch a little bit you know. I been.."

Bad interrupts him, "You higher than a giraffe's a** Jeff! You all on that meff again! You best still have my money!"

Jeff nods his head and speaks rapidly, "Oh yeah. Oh yeah Bad. I got it. I got it right here brother."

Jeff reaches into his jean pocket and pulls out a crinkled wad of cash and hands it to Bad, "There it is man. I mean, well, that's most of it Bad. Let me tell you what happened. See yesterday.."

Bad's brow furrows, and he clinches Jeff by the hair on his chinny-chin-chin, "You got half the money, huh!? And you higher than eagle balls, huh!? Well let's put two and two together, shall we? A little math lesson! I'm a take that a** back to school!"

Bad raises his right hand to the heavens. Jeff looks up with terror at a hand that is glowing brighter than the sun shining next to it.

"Where do I begin!? You got half my money. And you higher than a Georgia pine. Where'd that money go Jeff!? You playin' Big Bad for some type of fool boy!?"

As Bad looks up at the sky, Jeff reaches back and jabs Bad under the ribs. Jeff shifts into top gear and takes off towards the street. Bad's eyes are furious as he runs up beside Jeff's lawnmower holding his left side. Bad extends his arm out in front of Jeff and swings his arm back with fury. The back of his pimp hand pops Jeff right in the mouth and lifts him from his seat and onto the grass. The lawnmower continues to roll

and stalls in front of a mail box across the street. Jeff's wifebeater is covered with green blades as he wallows in agony.

Bad hunches over Jeff and spits in his face, "You thought you's gonna get away by shifting from hare to tortoise motha f****!? You must believe in them fairy tales to think that! Forget the tortoise and the hare. I got a new story for ya. It's called the wolf and the pig. And the wolf always gets his money. If he don't, then he has a fat helping of bacon for breakfast!"

Bad does some funky footwork while kicking grass onto Jeff's red face before strutting out to the sidewalk.

Bad lights up a Newport, "Got two of em in check. One to go. Bad is packin' the soul."

Bad crosses October St. to the last house and peaks into the open door, "Yo Pebbles! My man!"

After entering, Bad and Pebbles shake hands for twenty seconds.

Pebbles grins, "Bad have a seat brother. Let me get that payment for ya."

Pebbles reaches into the end table drawer next to the couch where Bad is sitting and pulls out a white envelope, "It's all there baby. Threw an extra hundred in there since it's been creamy lately, my man."

Bad grins, "Pebbles you always in check. I know you had that trouble this week, but you always straight wit it. Not like the others. Say brotha, let's smoke this. Put on that James Brown record. Yeah, that one. 'Papa Don't Take No Mess.'"

Pebbles nods, "D*** right. Don't take no mess."

Pebbles places the record on the turntable and puts the needle down. Bad lights a joint, inhales, and tilts his head back on the couch. He coughs as he passes it to Pebbles and watches the cloud of smoke begin to swirl.

"Brotha this is some thunda! You know that cat down on...yo my man, what the f*** is this?"

The cloud begins twisting and flashing, and they both sit up straight with open mouths, wondering what they're witnessing. As the intro of the record escalates to a super funky groove, the beat drops, lightning flashes, and thunder roars in the house. As the smoke fades away, they both see a figure pulling out all of his funky fresh dance moves.

Bad looks at Pebbles with fright, "Is that? Nooooo!"

The figure shows his dark, confident face, "Heeeeeey! Ugh! Bad let me tell ya somethin'! I look good! I smell good! I feel good!"

A resurrected James Brown reaches his hand high into the air and looks into Bad's dread filled eyes, "James Brown never forgets a thing Big Bad! Hand it to me! Ugh!"

Bad's hand trembles as he tries to pull the money from his pocket, SMACK! James Brown's palm smashes into the side of Big Bad's hairy cheek with a devastating blow. "Too slow Mr.Bad! About twelve years too slow! UGH! You borrow money from Mr. Dynamite and gone pay up regardless!"

Bad lies unconscious over the arm of the couch.

Pebbles tries to get up from his chair, and James Brown snaps his fingers, “Hey now! You ain’t getting’ on the move. But you is on the good foot. I seen what you did. Heard what you said. You worked hard. Treated the man right. Even though he was a d*** hypocrite from the beginning. Owed me money for years. But as you see, hard work pays. I’m the hardest workin’ man in show business. So I know! I know ‘bout business. I know ‘bout money. And I know...” James throws his hands up and does a 360 degree spin as the carpet catches fire, he tilts his head back and screams, “I got soooooou!” He does the splits and vanishes in a cloud of smoke and a flash of lightning.

“The Gas Mask”

By: Douglas Ford

I had just bought an estate sale. It was this old rickety house in the middle of nowhere. It was said that this man had once lived there, but one day he just disappeared. When I got to the house, it was covered in dust and cobwebs. I think there were multiple families of mice that were living there at one time or another due to all the holes in the crown molding at the floor. Then I saw something nonchalantly sitting in the chair at the corner of the living room. It was as pristine as the day it was made. It was a gas mask. At first I thought that it was left there by the man who owned the house, but it had been sixty years since he's been seen. So, I went over to the chair, picked it up, sat down, and looked at the gas mask in my hands. Why was it in such nice shape? Was it left here on purpose? Most of all, the question I was asking myself was, should I put it on?

Weeks passed, and I started renovating the house room by room. First came the bedrooms. I had to get all of them fitted with the newest technology. The paint and furniture came next. After the bedrooms came the kitchen, bathrooms, and other small rooms. I left the living room for last. When I finally approached the living room, I again picked up the mask, sat down, and stared at it in my hands. Again those questions came up, but this time I brought it up to my face before wimping out.

More weeks passed, and the living room went unchanged. I finally worked up enough courage to put the mask on. Through the hazy fog of the mask's glass eyes, something seemed off. The walls of the room were painted this cream yellow where

before they were just some old colorless mess. The dust was gone, and everything looked fairly new. I got up out of the chair and looked around the room. Where I had been sitting was this kid looking right at me. I didn't know if he really saw me or not, so I moved over. His eyes did not follow, but remained looking straight ahead. I turned to look in the same direction he was and realized that he was looking at another man. In reading the man's lips, he was speaking to the boy in the chair about the boy's father. He had just told the boy that his father was murdered. By reading the boy's emotion, I could tell that he was distraught. I freaked out after seeing the news being delivered and tore off the gas mask.

I got my bearings after a moment and realized I was back in the living room with the messily painted walls and dust covered surfaces. That must have been a flashback to a day many years ago. I wonder what happened to that boy's father. Who murdered him? Maybe it had something to do with the man who disappeared from here sixty years ago. Was the boy I saw actually the missing man? Ok, tomorrow I'm going to see if I can get some answers. I'm going to put the gas mask back on...

“The Sorcerer's Apprentice: The Mop's Point of View”

By: Douglas Ford

In the corner of the room, in the darkness of the sorcerer's great castle, he sits there quietly enjoying the stillness. He lies there dreading the next time he is needed. The mop overhears the sorcerer leave the castle and give the apprentice a list of chores to do. After hearing the list that the boy reads aloud to himself, the mop droops down further into his little corner trying his hardest to hide from the boy. He knows that today is Thursday, and every Thursday the boy must wash the floor. The mop, of course, hates this weekly task. It wouldn't be so bad if the sorcerer wouldn't leave all the remnants from previous spells and the ingredients from different concoctions scattered all over the floor. The mop thinks to himself, “Every time I am used, I end up with some kind of appendage or I am glowing for weeks. This is all because the boy doesn't even care about what he mops off the floor with me.” The boy goes over to the corner and grabs the handle of the mop. The mop holds on for dear life to the spot in the corner where he lay, but the boy pulls him right up anyway. This time the mop could feel the aggravation in the apprentice's grip, and he knew that he was in for a treat!

After grabbing the unwilling mop, the boy props it up against the table across from him. The boy sits at the table with the spell book and flips through the pages. He sifts through spell after spell, but nothing grabs his attention. The mop can hear the boy whispering many different mop cleaning spells to himself, but the boy thankfully keeps passing them over. The mop's fear of a crazy Thursday grows larger. Alas, the boy finds

what he searches for. A devious smile creeps over his face as he speaks the incantation, and as he does, the mop grows arms out of the handle. The bristle strands separate into two leg-like bundles. The mop doesn't know what to do. He has never been able to stand alone or grab things like a human before. He wriggles his fingers and wrings out his legs. Before the mop is given any second of a chance to test out these new human-like appendages, he is swept away by the unbreakable grip of the boy and whisked down the cold concrete stairs of the castle.

The young and seemingly inventive apprentice develops an idea. The boy leads the mop to a well outside the castle and hands him a bucket. The boy tells the mop to take the water out of the well with the bucket and fill up the tub inside the castle. This is the first step to clean the messy floor in the sorcerer's spell room. As the boy leaves, the mop thinks to himself, "This the perfect time to get that lazy boy back for all the trouble he has caused me." So, the mop fills the bucket and takes it inside, sloshing water all over the place. He moves down the winding stairs and across the room to the empty tub in the castle. He does this repeatedly. As the mop works diligently filling the bucket and filling the tub, the boy falls asleep in his chair. Taking notice, the mop keeps filling up the tub with water, all the while thinking of the trouble that the boy will be in when the sorcerer gets back. "Hopefully the sorcerer can get rid of the apprentice for good, and I can get some peace and quiet around here," the mop thinks.

Soon, however, the flooding water from the tub splashes on the boy's face and wakes him up. The apprentice sees the mess, and his eyes widen and mouth drops. The overflow of water from the tub fills up the entire castle. The boy looks for a spell to stop all this nonsense, but for the life of him, he cannot find one. Since the sorcerer will

be home soon, the apprentice knows he must clean up this mess. The boy runs to the utility closet, pulls out an ax, and wildly flails it over his head hitting the mop and chopping him in two. After a quick thought, he continues to hack at the cleaning tool and chops the mop into tiny chunks of wood and little strands of string.

As the mop lay there in pieces, he thinks, "It's all over for me. But wait, what's that tingling feeling? YES, YES! I am growing. Now there are twenty-seven of me." He then commands, "All of you get back up, grab two buckets a piece, and get the water out of the well. We are going to soak this place!"

All twenty-seven of the newly created mops get water in their buckets from the well and haul them two by two into the castle to fill up the tub. The water is now flowing out of the tub so bad that it is traveling across the room in waves. The boy sits in the chair astounded as the chair is lifted up by the water and crashes into the front door of the castle. He bursts through the door and lands on the ground, wet and disheveled, at the sorcerer's feet. By the look on his face, the mop can tell that the sorcerer is not happy with this situation. "I did it; the boy is finally gone! We have succeeded in getting him fired," the mops think collectively.

The sorcerer wades through the flooded mess of a spell room and unhappily speaks from his deep and penetrating voice, "Gobbledegook!" These are the magic words to stop the nonsense that the boy hurriedly looked for but a moment ago.

As this phrase is spoken, all of the mops stop instantly in their tracks. After a few seconds the water stops as well. The waves slow and dissipate and the water in the tub stops flowing. The sorcerer then walks over to the sopping wet apprentice and tells him

that he needs to leave immediately and can never come back. The sorcerer is finished trying to teach him since he was unable to control the mess that he created. "Yes, yes we did it," the mop thinks. "We got rid of him for good." Yet, to the mop's dismay, the boy drops on his knees and begs the sorcerer to take him back. The apprentice swears he will not mess up again and can still be taught to become a great sorcerer. The sorcerer, being the kind soul that he is, agrees to teach the boy again. Suddenly, the mop begins twisting and hitting the floor as if he is throwing a fit. "Why? Why?"

As the boy, with a thankful smile on his face, walks towards the back of the room, he grabs the mop off the floor and takes it back to the corner where it belongs. As it is being carried by the boy, the mop thinks, "There is always next Thursday."

“ADVENTURES OF THE SURREAL: STARRING VICTORY!”

By: James Cooper

In the style of Stan Lee

Huzzah! All suspenders of disbelief!

It is I yet again, “My only claim to fame is being border line insane!” James Cooper bringing you another surrealistic story of absolute adventure and suspense. Today, we are going to find ourselves looking back on what has easily become one of the most important moments in the Complexiverse as we know it. The birth of none other than the valiant, villain crushing, skull busting son of the south himself – but before we go there we find ourselves in the small suburban city of Brentboro, located just south of metropolitan Nashville and north of the dreaded backwoods we have come to stereotype. As we come closer and closer to the city, our eyes lock on one building: Brentboro High school, home of the Versatile Vultures.

For, you see, the Versatile Vultures were the all county division champs for their football league, with their leader Skip Daniels as the first string quarterback. He was wanted by the cheerleaders, admired by his teammates, but unfortunately – he was despised by one Victor Vale.

Victor stood just a little over five feet tall, with a few inches to spare. He had dark slicked hair pushed to the side. He always hated when his bangs hung just over his glasses. He never quite dressed right, even while wearing tighter than normal pants, they always found a way to sag off to a side – just enough to expose his bare backside and leave him vulnerable to most villainous attacks of atomic wedgies, credit carding,

and the dreaded foot-to-waist-bang-catch-as-catch-can-fandango. All of which Skip had perfected time and time again by practicing on poor Victor. Victor had his hobbies, though; he was fascinated by the simple pleasures – he enjoyed reading, writing, sciences, and chemistry. There was one class that Victor loved more than all the others. He loved human Psychology. He excelled beyond normal expectations and was even allowed to take one specialized class for students like him at the community college located on the outskirts of Nashville. He maintained a fairly good GPA, but that wasn't going to win him the praise of his fellow classmates, or the kiss of the head cheerleader, Catrina Carbone – the on again off again girlfriend to Skip Daniels and daughter to his college psychology instructor and world re-known psychiatrist AND psychologist Dr. Carbone.

Little did we know what strange and unique role the Good Doctor and the Carbone family would play in Victor's life. One day, after barely passing a final exam, Dr. Carbone pulled Victor aside – placing an arm around his shoulder and quickly inquiring “Victor! My boy, Victor!” His thick northern accent oozed from his gullet, “Why are you struggling so hard on this test? I know how you talk in class. You could have aced this thing with flying colors if you chose to! Why struggle?”

Victor looked to the floor, disgusted with himself, and he responded “I... I knew the answers, but when it came time to take the test, I just froze. I couldn't commit one way or the other.”

“Ahhhh Vic...Vic! You don't need to doubt yourself anymore. What if I told you I had been working on an experiment that would release your true potential. It would

release you from the ties that bind. Would you like to partake in my hypothesis?"

Carbone now clasped his fists together.

"Well... What would I have to do?" Victor asked, puzzled.

"You leave that to me my boy -- Leave that to me."

Three hours later we have found ourselves in the heart of what appears to be a science lab, funded by what could only be questionable resources. Some machines read "USA" on the side, while others read Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, China, and more.

"Have a seat boy, this won't be worse than any eye test you've had before."

"Oh... okay" Victor said. He sure had never seen any eye test in a laboratory like this before. "What exactly are we going to do here?"

The doctor stood behind a shielded control panel. He flipped a switch and metal clasps snapped and cuffed the young man in place! In this cornucopia of mismatched science machinery we find a look of panic on Victor's face. Chemicals suddenly pour from beakers into what looks to be some form of super-heater, and on the other end is nothing else than a giant laser beam! Carbone flipped more switches, and the buzzing of power filled the room. It was so loud Victor could only scream to communicate. "What is this blasted device? I thought I was going to look as Rorschach drawings and eye charts! Not play lab-rat!"

"Oh my dear boy, Lab-rat is such a harsh word to describe your role in my hypothesis. Martyr is a much greater description. You are going to be my greatest experiment! You should be overjoyed!"

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT CARBONE, THIS THING LOOKS LIKE A DEATHTRAP! WHERE DID YOU GET THIS THING?! YOU MUST HAVE A SCREW LOOSE LIKE THESE BACKWOODS CONTRACTIONS AND MISMATCHED MACHINERY AROUND ME. WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU? WHAT COULD POSSIBLY BE WRONG WITH YOU?!” Vic struggled, but it was useless.

“Be still boy! This will only take a few moments,” the newly revealed evil mastermind commanded. “Just think! If this works you will prove to me my life’s work was all worth it, and once I dispose of you, I will use the process on myself to become the world’s strongest man. Doctor and Dictator all at once! I will be the greatest man to ever live!” and with that the beam blasted towards Victor.

In a blinding light and a sonic boom, every atom and blood cell started to pulse with chemically enhanced radiation. The words of the doctor were drowned out by the overpowering pain the laser inflicted on the poor boy. Victor could only think “If only I could find strength enough to get free myself, I could run away.”

The next thing he knew, his muscles pulsed and his heart pounded. The strong clasps broke in half as if he were snapping twigs. He leaped up as his oculars focused on the Doctor with the forked tongue. “Boy what are you doing?! The experiment isn't over. You only got a tiny dose of it!! URFFFF!” Before Dr. Carbone could finish his sentence Victor had socked him in the stomach with a vicious right hook. He tried to quickly turn switches off so the laser beam would deactivate, but alas -- it was too late. The Doctor had flung himself into the ray hoping that what was left would pour through

his pores – unbeknownst to him Victor has already altered the illuminated dash board, pushing buttons and moving switches.

Victor panicked. “If I could just break through this wall, I could run home. Maybe if I ran as fast as I could – I could be home by sundown!” The next thing we knew, CRASH, Victor had played human cannonball, leaving behind only cackling and screams from the Doc.

While running home, Victor noticed something: his muscles weren’t getting tired. He found he was running with a new found ease. For a split second, he imagined himself running as fast as an American muscle car. The next thing he knew, he was running parallel with a Mustang convertible! Shocked for a split second, he was scared that the car would hit him, and just like that – Victor fell to his side, tumbling. “What’s happening to me? I must be some kind of freak!” Tears ran down his rosy, exhausted face. How could he ever fit in now knowing he was some kind of experiment that turned him into an abomination?

He couldn't run at those speeds again. It took all his strength to walk at a snail's pace. It would end up taking him another forty minutes in the dark as he navigated his way home from Music City to the suburbs he called home. When walking inside his house, his father Vincent Vale, decorated war hero, looked at him. Not amused by the look of his son, he belted out “Son, What happened to you?! You look like the bad side of a fight involving a one legged man in a butt kicking contest! Mud-hole doesn't begin to describe.”

“You wouldn't understand Dad! You never understand!” Victor screamed. His body was already hurt; he didn't need his pride to take any damage after this emotional day. He ran up stairs and slammed the door. Vincent wasn't amused to see his son in tears. He just couldn't come to terms with the fact that the two were so different. Victor buried his head into his pillow, crying to sleep. He chanted a mantra over and over again “If only I could truly believe, I could become better than average. If I could only believe... If I could only beli.. If I...” and soon sleep fell upon our strained teenage hero.

He dreamed for what seemed like hours. The night in question played like a DVD player on chapter repeat. In his mind, millions of scenarios played over and over again. Why did he have to go with that blasted professor? What could have made all of this go away? What was it going to take to make sure no one found out – epically Catrina and Skip? He could hear it now... “Vile Victor, Vile Victor, don't scare him he'll pop like a blister!” Let alone, how would Catrina ever look at him again. If only he knew what her Father was saying about him – about that night.

Then it came to him. All these nightmares and fears would part, and Victor saw himself – not as he was, but as he wanted to be. Strong and tall, his muscles curved with fine definition. His limbs had become the size of tree trunks. His hair pushed from the side had now become long, blonde locks. Then, the improved image of Victor would walk slightly away and turn into a circle, and just when he reached the apex of the twist he was wearing a skin tight black outfit. The only highlight was a slight white trim over his boots and matching gloves. 13 Stars could be seen running down his spine. His mask was the color of crimson, and his eyes would fade from blue to a pure white.

BUZZ! BUZZ! BUZZ!

His alarm for school rang in his ears. Victor's eyes had opened, and he looked to his side, slamming his hand on the alarm. CRUNCH! He shot up and looked over to see he broke his nightstand clean in half! A thundering was heard as Victor's father clambered from the downstairs kitchen – “SON, WHAT IN THE RED, WHITE, AND BLUE HELL ARE YOU DOING UP THERE?!”

This was not going to be good. Victor sped out of bed at the speed of light. He looked for his clothes, but he had seen that his garments had ripped apart during his uncomfortable sleep. This was going to be difficult. He got a glimpse of his reflection in his bedroom window. The man he saw was not the scared boy he grew up to be from years of torment at school, but he was the man of his own imagination. He was the stylized version of himself. Footsteps drew closer, and Victor ran to the door to try and lock it shut. He only managed to rip the handle clean off the door. Vincent had made his way to the stairs and he was as heated as a tea kettle ready to bubble over. “BOY OPEN THAT DOOR AND YOU OPEN IT NOW!” He commanded with a piercing voice. He kicked open the door, and to his amazement he saw a strange man at nearly seven feet tall in front of him. “WHERE IS MY SON YOU DIP- DRINKING SCUM DOG!”

Victor scrambled “If only he would believe this was still me in here! If only I could become the real me again as he knows me, I know I can do this! I just need to BELIEVE!” and that’s when Victor noticed a flash of light. Vincent’s jaw dropped to the ground in amazement; Victor cried, not knowing what was going on in his body and not

knowing what to say to his father. He fell to his knees. Vincent walked over and placed his arms over his son. "It'll be okay, boy. It'll be okay."

"You don't understand, Dad. I don't understand! This can't be real!" Victor sobbed, "I'm some kind of disgrace to God." He wept hard into his father's shoulder.

Vincent looked at his son and made sure his words fell soft and from the heart, "Son – I think you need to take a break from school. I have a few friends who were Gulf War buddies of mine. They work with a district of the government that not many people know about. We have summer break coming up in a few weeks. Let's just figure out what happened today, get some stuff packed up and we will head to D.C. Just try to start from the beginning."

And Victor told his father the story.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE: The Birth of Victory! Don't miss it!

“An Unpleasant Ride”

By: Chelsie Moore

One sunny and humid Saturday afternoon, my energetic dad and I decided to go for a ride on our bright red Honda four-wheeler. We wanted to go for a ride in the green pasture fields, where Black Angus cattle grazed, down the road from where we lived. We lived in Smithville, Tennessee, of Dekalb County, in a small, white vinyl house with red shutters. Our house was located in Hawkins subdivision off Short Mountain Highway, a road made of black asphalt and potholes that added excitement to anyone's ride. Although the pasture fields were not far, we still had to cross a busy, two lane highway. My overly cautious mother did not like this idea, but we went anyway, with endless hopes of sliding around corners, quickly changing speeds, and trying to dodge cow manure piles.

My dad and I hopped on the four-wheeler, without wearing helmets, and took off. As we got to the end of our subdivision, my dad carefully looked both ways and didn't notice any vehicles such as cars, trucks, or tractors. Once we got to the other side of the paved highway, Dad and I realized that he was wrong and his efforts to be cautious proved to be quite dangerous. A lady in a green Ford Ranger pickup truck was speeding down the highway, over the posted limit of 45 mph, and swerved to miss us. My heart was racing as fast as lightning, and I could taste my tears because I was crying so much. I desperately held on to my agonized dad and buried my horrified face into his leaned over back because I was scared to death of what might happen next. I could hear the truck tires squealing, leaving black marks on the highway, and the metal of

bumpers and doors crunching on her truck. I could also smell burnt rubber and the stench of the gasoline odors from her truck. Finally, I peeped up from my dad's back to see what had happened. She had flipped her truck several times and landed in a muddy, water filled ditch with grass and weeds galore.

Dad and I abandoned the scene and rushed home to call 911. We were ecstatic to finally see the red lights of the ambulance coming towards us down the highway with its rhythmic sirens screeching, and we were thrilled that help had finally arrived. The paramedics rushed over to the lady to take her vital signs and prepare her for the stretcher. The ambulance transported the lady to the Dekalb County Hospital to see if she had any spinal, back, or neck injuries. While I was watching the ambulance speed towards the hospital, a chubby black-haired policeman, with his badge shining brightly in the sun, gave my dad a citation for driving a four-wheeler on the highway. My dad felt awful and sick at his stomach about what had happened and was concerned about the lady's potential injuries. He immediately went to the hospital and waited for three long hours in the lobby. Luckily, the lady had no injuries, broken bones, or concussions.

My dad had to appear in traffic court a month later for the citation. Before he went to court, he sold the four-wheeler, so that he wouldn't be tempted to ride it on the highway again and take me on another unpleasant ride. The perturbed judge, with a gavel in his hand and a very stern look, wanted to hear my dad's case last. He crossed his arms and tilted his head to one side and asked my dad to explain what had happened and if anyone had been injured or killed. My dad, about to throw up, answered, "No one was hurt; I sold the four-wheeler, and I'll never own another one."

With the pounding of the gavel, the judge solemnly replied, "Case dismissed."

“The Book of Lore”

By: Alex Rymer

Long ago before the sea covered the island of Atlantis and gripped it unto its watery chasms, a massive library was built in order to improve society and increase knowledge of the earth. It had every book you could imagine from around the world: books on seafaring, books on cooking in the early world, books on how to be a merchant and how to become a politician, and even books about the system of aqueducts and canals around the city. But the most peculiar book of all was the Book of Lore. No one knew who wrote this book or how it came to be there, but ever since the library opened, the librarian, Floria, found the book lying on a pedestal on the far end of the library on the fifth floor. There it remained hidden, until one day...

Strolling along down each aisle picking random books he thought that were not going to be used, Aiden carried and stacked several of those books together making a stepping stool to reach books that were higher than his height. Once he was finished with his “stepping stool” he stepped upon his man-made device and looked at the books that were directly in front of him. He caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eye, a thick book. The big book he eyed was placed on the fourth shelf, out of reach.

“With this big book I’d say only forty or more books left to go before I can make a decent fort,” thought Aiden. “This will take *forever!* If only I knew which books mother wanted to keep on hold then I would feel better about selecting them,” he thought for a split second before deciding not to contemplate on whether or not his mother would care about what he is doing this very instant and reaching for the book.

While trying to reach the big book, his weight transferred to the bookshelf he was leaning against.

Thump! Thump! Thump-Thump! Thump! Thud!

Once Aiden regained his balance still standing on the books, the bookshelf fell onto another bookshelf and to another, and then another. The cacophony of the collapsing bookshelf and scattered books – now on the floor – began to echo down the staircase to the other floors of the library.

“I hope mother did not hear that,” worried Aiden. For there were indeed many books scattered across the entire floor, and it would take an entire work day just to clean up the mess.

“Aiden, was that you?!” came the voice Aiden feared the most.

Aiden wanted to hide, so he frantically went towards the wall from where the last bookshelf fell. Luckily, the bookshelf left some room between it and the wall for him to squeeze through. He squirmed and crawled over books that have accumulated on the floor until he found his way to the middle of the bookshelf. He squatted himself down with piles of books on both sides of him, still able to see in-between the shelves. It was then when he realized that there was a book that looked odd and out of place. Aiden cocked his head to the side quizzically, staring at the lone book. It should have fallen, yet there it rested, upright, unmoved. After he puzzled about the book for a moment, he pulled it towards him and then the strangest thing happened. The book stayed in the tipped position, and he heard a *click*. A secret door latched opened on the bookshelf against the wall. As Aiden heard his mother’s footsteps approaching, he quickly crawled

through to the room beyond the secret door. There he hoped to hide from his mother's unrelenting and furious gaze upon seeing the destruction he caused. He then closed the door all the way to completely avoid her. He turned around and found a book lying on a pedestal clothed in light from the window above it.

Aiden walked closer and looked upon the opened page:

“...consumed by greed, the central trading island will be flooded and brought to the depths of the sea.”

