



down in the

revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

065

December '08

dirty

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Scars Cover art of a lava flow at James Bay in Santiago Island, one of the Galapagos Islands, 12/28/07.

## Cuento de Adas

*Justine Suarez  
& Herman Arciniega*

Over my head  
God hears  
My fairy tale  
Sparkling  
In concrete.

# Searching For My Eyes

Kathleen Fitzsimmons

“Do you have more ash trays?”

The question jarred me from my reverie. I had been staring into the same stack of plates for who knows how long. Everything seemed unfamiliar in a house I could have walked blindfolded through yesterday.

“They’re all taken. Here.”

I grabbed a saucer from the cabinet.

The throng of well-intentioned family members and friends threatened to overflow our tiny kitchen. Mom’s friends were discernible from my older relatives mostly by their use of NA coffee mugs. Several of them rivaled my Aunt Ginny with their wizened appearance.

My eyes burned and watered from the stale, gray smoke. I wished with all my heart that one of the Twelve Steps had addressed giving up cigarettes. In the end, it was her unbreakable addiction to nicotine that dragged my mother from this life, skeletal and wheezing.

###

Mom had been a cokehead in the ‘70s, when blow was as ubiquitous as mirror balls. My Aunt Theresa had shown me a Polaroid of Mom with her friends in the day, neon grins and electrified eyes illuminated by the small glass vial on the kitchen table. Two of the friends in the photo were already dead. One got caught in the crossfire of a bad drug deal. The other flipped his Camaro coming home from the shore.

My mother plunged into NA with the same dogged enthusiasm she brought to everything else. In her zeal, she purged all her mementos from 1974 through ‘77. She said that cocaine had blurred those years anyway and she could never get them back. I could understand and respect that. There was just one problem: I was born in January of 1978.

###

Mom claimed she’d met my dad in rehab until I did the math.

“One of us is supposed to be the adult here, damn it! Where do you get off preaching about honesty when I don’t even know who my real father is? Hypocrite!”

My mother fled to her bedroom and locked the door. A sonic assault of Blondie and The Ramones made further communications impossible. I fell asleep at the kitchen table, still clutching the letter from “Dad” confirming my calculations. Mom emerged the next morning, fragile and haggard. She hugged me. Then she looked away and asked me never to bring him up again.

###

A reassuring hand on my shoulder pulled me back into the present:  
Aunt Theresa.

“Hey. How are you holding up?”

“I want to scream,” I hissed.

“There’s stuff I want to show you. Come on.”

“Sure,” I shrugged.

We trudged upstairs. Aunt Theresa paused to look in my mother’s room. A half-packed suitcase for hospice lay open on the bed. We continued our ascent into the attic.

“What are we doing?”

“Something your mother should have done long ago.”

The dusty air was suffocating and hot. A stifled sneeze imploded in my head. Aunt Theresa picked a serpentine path through the clutter, pausing at an old shoebox.

“This is your right. I never told your mother I saved these things.”

She dumped the contents. Yellowed cassette tapes. Backstage passes. Faded, sticky snapshots. A bottle of dried-up black glitter nail polish. An ancient diaphragm crumbled to dust in a vinyl pouch.

A concert bill fluttered out. “*Lipstick Stiletto/April 24, 1977/Durant Theatre, Springfield.*”

The weathered picture had been bathed repeatedly in tears and lovingly brushed smooth again. A leather-clad front man flung his tousled caramel mane in an explosion of ecstatic defiance. I held the truth in my hands at last. I could see it in his eyes.

free

Devin Wayne Davis

unclean  
ravens above ...  
will be  
a blessing ...  
but, wouldn't you  
rather us vacuum up?  
come home,  
walk on bogus rugs ...  
at least the plates,  
once rinsed by hand  
—and set at this table,  
where your own glass is  
poured over half-full—  
should have plenty ...  
i am not sure  
whether the door can remain open.  
... perhaps we won't have enough  
faith ...  
here, eat ...  
what has been dead  
for some time—& frozen  
—let a good wife prepare ...  
then drink. take  
two bottles of wine.

# The Door at the Top of the Stairs

Christopher Frost

At the edge of the driveway on 1408 Lilac Lane a FOR SALE sign swung from the hinges of its wooden post against the Indian summer breeze of early October. The house, which was set back far from the road, was white with windows spaced numerously with black shutter accenting them. From the front of the driveway a young girl looked up at the newly purchased house unable to move. Her skin flushed cold, goose bumps etched her arms and legs, and her bladder felt full threatening to leak. As her eyes drifted from the first floor to the highest level where two slanted windows gazed out over the enormous landscape she felt a prickle of dread run from the base of her neck down her spine. These *window-eyes* were watching her. The house was watching her, peering into her virgin soul.

As a young girl, just barely a teenager – nothing more than a child growing into breasts – there is nothing exciting about moving. Leaving the town you were born in, where you grew up, the place your friends, family, and all that you love resided. There was nothing exciting at all about moving. In fact it wasn't a move as much as a sentence. A sentence in Hell. From the looks of things it was going to be a long stretch.

This move meant starting over somewhere foreign. A new place where your feet never crossed those invisible lines that mark the perimeter of a town on a map. It seems that every town has a Main Street, but no Main Street is ever the same. Back home in Gilford, because that *is* where home was, for Rebecca Strange – pronounced Straw-nge like it was French but wasn't – Main Street was within walking distance of her house. On Saturdays she would ride her pink Huffy down to the Dairy Queen and get a Peanut-Buster-Parfait, sit behind the DQ on the cinder blocks eating her sundae with a white plastic spoon while tossing pieces of her mother's homemade bread, she'd hidden in her backpack, to the flock of ducks that gathered around the parking lot that over looked Lake Winnepesaukee. Here in Nutfield things were different. The town's population almost tripled that of Gilford but somehow remained a town. Nutfield's Main Street was littered with fast food joints and strip malls, everything from Taco Bell, McDonalds, and Burger King, to sub shops – some chains, most independents – there was a USA Sub its sign painted red white and blue of course. The street smelled. Smelled real bad. Not like back home where the air always smelled fresh and rich of oxygen, a cool breeze always blowing up off the lake into the mountains. Here, *here* in Nutfield that is, the air was claustrophobic, nauseating, and there was not a single mountain in sight, the land was as flat as a drag strip and crowded with apartment buildings, multi-family houses, Wal-Mart's, and Stop and Shops, nothing like home.

Rebecca stood at the edge of her driveway alone. She was always alone. A group of four kids stood on the other side of the street at the bus stop, though the bus stop actually was on the side of the street that Rebecca was on, they never stood with her. She kicked at pebbles of gravel with the toe of her shoe, her eyes always

locked on the ground, never looking up at the snickering children across the street, and doing her best to block out the whispering and giggling and pointing fingers that kids so cruelly did to one another. Especially the outcasts. The strange ones.

When the yellow bus crested over the small hill of Adams Pond Road, in her direction, she would immediately move closer to the street. She always made sure she got on first. The first and second day of school, when the four kids – two girls two boys – had stood with her on her side, but never made conversation, they had intentionally shoved her out of the way as they got on the bus. Each one pushing her aside so she stood just to the left of the folding door of the bus. Even the girls were cruel, making snide comments about her glasses, her clothes, and her tangled web of dark hair. Rebecca adjusted quickly, she was a survivalist, made sure she was always first on the bus and always took the seat directly behind the bus driver. At least that way if the kids in the back decided to shoot spit balls into her hair or lob paper airplanes into her seat that read: *Roses are red, violets are too, wish your mother had aborted you too, or close your legs, it smells like rotten tuna*, she would be hiding behind the bus driver which gave her the comfort and security of not being ridiculed and harassed by her peers that wanted nothing more than to humiliate her daily, from the first ride into school, throughout the day, and the early afternoon ride back to the ominous house. The damn house with its lingering darkness and cold feel.

She couldn't cry, though she wanted to. Sitting behind the bus driver she was also in view of the large mirror over the windshield that the bus driver could use to watch over the students. If she let a single tear go, the barrage of insults and mocking laughs would never end. When she was home, or in the school girl's room, she could cry to her self with a wad of paper towels over her mouth to muffle the sound. But not on the bus. Never on the bus.

Classes weren't easy either. She sat in the front row closest to the teacher hoping that the kids in the back wouldn't dare throw things at her for fear of the teacher seeing them and sending them off to the principal to explain their actions. But her fourth period class was different. Her teacher, Miss Angelica, a young girl just out of college with long legs barely hidden by her short skirt, flowing blonde hair, and breasts the size of Pamela Anderson's, had been Miss New Hampshire back when she was a junior in high school. She always seemed to bring this up to her class, and would also talk about her sorority in college with all the other beauty queens. Her husband, who she had married just out of college, was the quarterback for UNH, he had gotten drafted to the Buffalo Bills as a second string quarterback but then snapped his knee in a preseason game, ending his career. Miss Angelica, she had gone back to her maiden name after the glory of her husband was over, had expected to live the life of a celebrity wife, never having to work, hanging out at hotel pools with the other rich wives of star players. Instead, after the career ending injury of her husband, she'd had to find a job, and became a teacher, following her husband back to the town where they had grown up, where he was offered a job as a gym teacher and football coach.

Miss Angelica looked down her nose at Rebecca as much as the other pret-

ty girls in class. She would look the other way when spit balls arced through the air and struck Rebecca on the neck or clung to her tangley hair. Sometimes Rebecca could even hear Miss Angelica laughing under her breath at the comments the other girls would make about her.

When the news would report about a group of kids coming to school with guns and shooting up the school, or killing a few of the jocks who had shoved them too many times into lockers or sent them home weekly with bloody noses, Rebecca didn't feel bad. She should, after all a life had been taken, even a brutalizing bully doesn't deserve to be shot in the head by the water fountain while chumming with their buddies. But she didn't feel bad, not for the victims, she felt bad for the poor kid whose camel back had been broken by that last straw. If you went to the principal or the school counselor it only made things worse. Kids being kids, that was the way the school system viewed it. And if the bullies' folks were brought in they portrayed the same personality traits as their offspring. Nothing changed. Nothing ever changed. Not unless of course you made it change.

Poor Rebecca however could never pick up a gun. Couldn't tuck it into her backpack and wait for the final insult that pushed her over the edge, then bringing the weapon out and squeezing the trigger at one of the kid's head and watching the brain blow out the back. She cringed just thinking about it. Rebecca was a good kid, good grades, creative with a pencil and paper, she could draw just about anything she saw to the quality of a photo.

Everything about Nutfield reminded her of a sewer, the town, the people, even the large house that her parents had got for a bargain, larger than most of the houses the yuppie kids at school had. There was even a BMW and a Mercedes in the driveway. If only she had been beautiful, maybe just cute, she could sit with the other popular girls at the lunch table and joke with them about the awkward ugly kids that ate their lunch in the stairwell by themselves.

More than the town, she hated the house. It was too large. Inauspicious is what she thought. Looking up at it from the foot of the driveway when she got off the bus the windows in the attic seemed to peer down at her with malicious intent. *Come on in*, she would hear the house whisper in her mind with the threatening smile of a pedophile offering a six year old a candy bar and with the promise of seeing the most amazing thing in the world if the child just hopped in the passenger seat. It wasn't the fact that the house was at least two hundred years old, because her house in Gilford had been old too. The basement had been a stone foundation with a damp, dark pantry that always contained a draft, but she hadn't been afraid. In fact, she spent most of her time down there at her desk drawing, in her portfolio, of magical realms where unicorns had wings and beautiful large breasted women with swords were staring down the fiery eyes of dragons that nostrils flared with fire. Sometimes she would even sit in the dreary pantry, with shelves filled with pickled vegetables and jams of all flavors, and read one of her *Three Investigator* books, the low watt bulb that hung from the ceiling with its chain swaying in the draft.

Something was wrong with this new house. She knew it the moment her

parents took the long drive down Interstate 93 from Gilford to show her the house they'd chosen in Nutfield. The house had six bedrooms and Rebecca was allowed to choose any one that she wanted, even the master bedroom if she preferred it. Anything her parents could do to make the transition better. Rebecca was a good kid, loved her parents as much as a child should, never spoke back, never threw temper-tantrums, never cursed, always finished her vegetables even when they were brussel sprouts – and she despised brussel sprouts.

Rebecca had stood in the master bedroom, the one that she immediately knew she wouldn't choose out of respect for her parents. She stood in that room with windows on every side which faced the rear of the house that overlooked the woods, and at the edge of the lawn was a pond with wild flowers, cattails – she called them *punks* though couldn't remember why – and pond lilies that usually had lounging sunbathing bullfrogs. It was picturesque. Because of the view and all that it offered to her imagination, her pencil, and drawing board, she knew that she wanted this room more than any other in the entire house. After all, even out of respect for her parents, didn't she deserve the best room in the house? It hadn't been her choice to move to this sewer smelling town with its vulgar people and degenerate streets.

"Do you like it" her father asked.

Rebecca was silent but her full toothed smile betrayed her.

"You can have it if you wish," her mother said.

"I couldn't," Rebecca retorted, aghast at the thought of taking the room that was obviously meant for her hard working parents. "It wouldn't be fair."

"That's our girl," her father said to her mother with a bright smile. "Completely unselfish."

"Dear," Rebecca's mother said, crouching to one knee and taking her daughters hands into her own. "There are plenty of rooms in this house that your father and I would be content with, happy with even. After all we spend very little time in our own room. If this is the room you want, than it is yours."

"I couldn't possibly," Rebecca said embarrassed that she was even considering to take the master suite.

Her mother looked up at her adoring father. It was evident that they had made up their minds about Rebecca having the master suite.

"We insist," her father said.

"Are you sure? You sure you don't mind?" she asked her folks, who were standing together smiling at her. Her father moved beside his daughter, paced his large hand over her shoulder and gently squeezed it with loving affection. She looked up at him, into those bright blue eyes of his, and couldn't help but smile, even though she loathed the house.

"I was thinking," her father said as he stepped to the window that best overlooked the backyard, "We could get you a new desk, one of those fancy drafting desk, and a nice bookshelf and put it right here so you can sketch by the window. What do you think, Becca?"

"Oh, Daddy." She ran to him and wrapped her arms around his waist and

pressed her head into his chest so she could hear his heartbeat. “I think that would be marvelous, just simply marvelous.” And laughed. He did too.

And suddenly the house didn't seem so foreboding.

Until...

That first night sleeping in a new room is always disorienting and a bit frightening. All of her childhood fears coming to fruition in the darkness of a room that was unrecognizable without light. There was however that small tint of light, pale moonlight, that crept in through the large and many windows that had sold her on the room to begin with, but now through their panes of glass thick shadows of branches were cast on the walls, across the carpet, and over her bedspread, like wretched old crone fingers similar to those of the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. Rebecca pulled the bedspread up to her face, covering her mouth but peering over her nose at the room. She had remembered to close the closet door, check under the bed, and shut the door to the bathroom, where she could see the mirror from her bed. She didn't like mirrors in the dark, if she had to go pee in the night – this scared her in Gilford as well – she would keep her eyes shut and go into the bathroom blind until she found the light switch and chased away any demon that may have been lurking in the blackness. Dark mirrors made her think of the urban legend Bloody Mary, and though she would never stand in front of a dark mirror and speak to the glass, *Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary*, the thought was always in her mind and, in her opinion, thinking it was just as dangerous as saying it. At least to a dark mirror.

This great room, the master bedroom that her parents had been so generous to let her have was now terrifying her to the bone. The room wasn't just large but enormous and open. In the corner was a set of stairs that led up to a loft that overlooked the bedroom. Upstairs in the loft her father had put a TV and hooked up her XBOX, along with her catalog of DVDs. But there was something else up there. Something that frightened her more so than the *window-eyes* that watched her every time she came up the driveway. It was a door.

Not a normal door or a formal door, or even those fancy French doors that lead out to luxury balconies that overlook well tended gardens and rolling fields of perfectly manicured backyard lawns. No this door was different, because it wasn't a door at all, not really anyway. It was a piece of painted plywood attached to hinges with a hook and clasp instead of a door knob. It was no taller than three feet and just as wide, the kind of make-shift door that you would think a gnome would have at the base of a tree trunk that led into their home. Or that goat looking creature from C.S. Lewis' fairy tale.

Rebecca's father said that he couldn't remember noticing the door when he and her mother had done a walk-through with the real estate agent. Nor could her mother remember. But it was a small door, insignificant to the fundamental necessities a person looks for in a house. Certainly a three-by-three door in a loft wasn't necessary, nor even mentionable as an amenity. So, what was it doing there?

Her father went to the door and withdrew the clasp which looked like a meat hook used for impaling large amounts of beef and then hanging them from the ceil-



she was fleeing this room for the safety of her parents and sleeping between them. Where whatever was behind that door at the top of the stairs could not get her.

*Fifty-one*, she thought to herself, *fifty-two*, *fifty-three*, before she could think *fifty-four* another sound came. Not the **crrrrrrrrrrrrr**, of metal on metal, but the rusted creak of hinges spreading open like butterfly wings. And she was sure the door at the top of the stairs was open.

The moon began to disappear, swallowed with it was the moonlight gleaming down from the skylight, as a cloud of oil darkness swept over the room blanketing everything, devouring all the light. It ate its way across the ceiling, down over the walls, the windows, and the shadow of tree branches that once looked like crone hands.

She screamed.

School was getting worse by the day. And to make matters worse the most popular girl in Nutfield Middle School had transferred into her English class.

Lisa Kennedy.

Lisa was tall for her age, wore enough makeup to make her look like a high-schooler, and dressed appropriately for that illusion. She was the only girl in school, best to anyone's knowledge, who had lost their virginity – rumor was to a sophomore at the high school who drove a vintage Mustang. But no one ever saw this boy, not even Lisa Kennedy's inner circle. She told her friends it was because she had lied about her age and couldn't be seen with middle-schoolers. Her boyfriend believed she was a freshman at one of the high schools over in Manchester. It could have all been a lie, but Rebecca didn't believe it. Lisa Kennedy looked like the type of girl who would spread her legs just to say she had made it with a high-schooler.

By late fall, Rebecca had been the butt of the other students jokes for nearly all term and it wasn't getting any better, even when Tristan Foster returned from a stay at a mental hospital. He was far from popular, in fact he had no friends at all, well one, Ian Stone, who was Nutfield Middle School's star athlete. Not a single joke about the loony-bin, either behind Tristan's back or to his face, was ever spoken from a single student's mouth. Even when Ian Stone was nowhere to be seen. It was all about Rebecca, had been since the first day she stood at the bus stop.

The flu had arrived in Nutfield keeping half the student body home in bed. The staff was no exception. Rebecca walked into her English class to find another teacher sitting behind the desk.

Miss Angelica was out with the flu and Mr. McCombs had been generous enough to work double duty, taking some of her classes and sharing the others with another English department teacher. It saved the school the labor of hiring a substitute teacher.

It was a Wednesday when Mr. McCombs had decided to throw a pop quiz on chapters four through seven of *Lord of the Flies*.

William Golding's classic was one of Rebecca's favorite books. She had read it twice on her own before it had ever been assigned as a mandatory reading for class. She didn't mind at all having to read it again. Her father had surprised her one day

by buying her the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition in hardcover that he had picked up at Barnes & Noble one day while looking for a new book for himself. He was always doing things like that, picking up random books that he thought his daughter would enjoy, mostly more adult themed books to try and get her away from the young adult books she enjoyed so much. But he was never upset if she didn't like them or couldn't finish them because the vocabulary was just too much for an eighth grader.

Mr. McCombs was sitting on the edge of Miss Angelica's desk facing the class, his old face etched with lines, a dark beard scattered with bits of gray, his black rimmed spectacles sliding off his the bridge of his nose, which he adjusted often, and in his hand was a stack of the pop quiz.

"I've never been a fan of pop quizzes," he said with a genuine smile and met Rebecca's eyes which made his smile warm and inviting, "In fact, I loathed them in school as much as you must be right now. But as a teacher I've learned the benefit of them, it keeps a student on their toes, makes them do the homework or assigned reading, which in turn makes you smarter young adults.

"So to make things a bit more fair," he went on, "I have given you ten questions all multiple choice, so for those of you who didn't do the reading." He paused, eyes glaring down through his slipping spectacles at Lisa Kennedy, who half smirked in that condescending way pretty girls do. "Maybe luck will be on your side," then added, "or not." With that said he then pushed his spectacles back up the bridge of his nose.

He walked over to the first row of seats, the row that Rebecca sat in, and counted out the number of quizzes equivalent to the number of students, and handed her the stack to pass back. Continuing down the rows he did the same with each student in the front seat. Lisa Kennedy sat to the left of Rebecca in the first row.

When the quizzes had all been handed out Mr. McCombs returned to the seat behind Miss Angelica's desk and added, "You have until the end of class, when you finish turn your quiz over, I'll collect them when the bell rings. If you finish early use the rest of your time appropriately, that means doing homework or reading if you prefer. It does not mean playing Solitaire or Tetris on your cell phones." He then reached into his teacher's bag and pulled out a paperback, *Star Trek*, Rebecca saw, *Star Trek Titan*, she had never heard of it. As far as she knew there was only the Enterprise, and only knew that because her father had the complete series on DVD. Mr. McCombs adjusted his glasses a few more times before he disappeared into the world of the Federation.

Rebecca looked down at the quiz, her number two pencil hovering across the first question, scanning it. The ten questions in total were in fact multiple choice, each question given five different possible answers. But at the bottom of the quiz, the real reason the quiz could take the full thirty-five minutes that were left of the forty-five minute period, was a final question. **EXTRA CREDIT 10%**, were the heavily bolded and largely printed words above the question. This final bit of the test, a part that was not required to be answered by the students, but would greatly help their grade if their answer was written to Mr.

McCombs liking, was this: *In your own words what does the Beast symbolize to you?*

The classroom was quiet except for the occasional yawn, the thumping of a pencil being tapped on the desk, and the scratching of check marks being marked in the boxes before the answers. Some had even gotten as far as the extra credit question at the end. But Rebecca was taking her time, double checking each question as she read it and reliving the moment in the book that each question took place, remembering what Jack, Piggy, Simon and Ralph were going through deserted on that island. She was even day dreaming a bit about how it would be if her classroom of peers were to be shot down over some remote island and made to survive on their own. She could empathize with Piggy, knowing that she would be the Piggy of the group if such dramatic events were to happen. But there was no World War, no planes fighting over the United States, only those jetliners that were used as guided missiles into the Twin Towers, Pentagon, and the one brought down in a Pennsylvania field. But the children of the United States of America had not been evacuated on that day, and certainly not shot down over the ocean.

“Psss.” The soft low whispered sound came from Rebecca’s left side where all her peers sat hunched over their quizzes. It sounded like someone let out a small fart. She didn’t pay it any attention but hoped it would stink and drift her way, so Justin Nolan sitting behind her, would think that it had been her.

“Psss.” The sound came again.

Gross! Rebecca thought.

“Psss, Becca?”

Rebecca turned to her left and saw Lisa Kennedy leaning slightly over in her chair towards her. It hadn’t been a fart at all, but Lisa Kennedy trying to get her attention. Rebecca just looked at her through her large rimmed glasses that magnified her eyes to make her appear even more awkward than she already did. She didn’t say anything, just looked dumbstruck, then looked up at Mr. McCombs who was still engrossed in his *Star Trek* book. Lisa Kennedy looked out the corner of her eye to see if the teacher was looking. He was not.

“Becca?” Lisa’s muffled voice said again.

“What?” Rebecca whispered back.

“What is the answer for number five?”

Rebecca looked down at her paper to see that she had checked the box next to the name Simon. She looked back to Lisa who was still watching her, trying to peer over Rebecca’s arm, that was masking her quiz from prying eyes.

“Well...” It wasn’t a question but a scowled demand. As though implying, *I’m Lisa Kennedy, who the hell are you to not give me the answer?* Rebecca was hesitant, her head was turned towards Lisa but her eyes were sunken and nervous, peering at Lisa’s collarbone instead of her eyes. She noticed her hands had begun to shake and her palms grown clammy, her heart was also racing and the tempo of her breathing was on the verge of hyperventilation though she was doing it quietly, not wanting to draw the teacher’s attention.

“Rebecca...question five?” When Lisa spoke her voice was harsh and bit

louder than a whisper, like in a dream when you try to scream, but the voice only comes out in a faint mouse like cry.

“I, I, I,” Rebecca stuttered.

“I, I, I,” Lisa sarcastically mimicked shaking her head and pouting her lips to mock what a crying child would look like and then she said, “What are you some kind of fucking bible-beater? Just give me the damn answer.” Lisa hadn’t been aware that her voice had slowly risen with her anger and now she had the attention of the students around her. Justin Nolan, a nobody like Rebecca, had put down his pencil and was watching the two, he’d even slumped down in his seat to avoid the eye contact of Lisa Kennedy who shot him a look that asked *what the fuck are you looking at?* Then his eyes looked beyond the two girls toward the chalk board. Lisa had already looked back to Rebecca and was about to say something else when the sound of a throat being loudly cleared of phlegm echoed through the confines of the classroom. Now everyone stopped what they were doing, all eyes to the head of the class.

“Excuse me, Miss Kennedy,” Mr. McCombs said standing behind the desk his paperback lying open to the page he had finished reading.

Rebecca looked up at the teacher with shame and then hung her head like a dog does when he takes a shit in the living room corner.

“What?” Lisa said, with that demanding tone of *how dare you address me like one of these class losers. I am someone who is to be respected, put on a pedestal for all to rapture in my glory.*

“Please turn your quiz over,” he said.

“But I’m not done.” Her voice curt and sharp.

“I have a strict policy against cheating, Miss Kennedy, and you will turn over your quiz, in fact before you do that I want you to mark a large ‘F’ on it,” Mr. McCombs raised his voice to sound authoritative and as if saying, *I’m not going to take your shit, missy.*

“Why are you accusing me?” Lisa lashed back, “Rebecca was the one asking me for the answer. She’s the one cheating!” She yelled pointing her finger at Rebecca who immediately twisted her head to look at Mr. McCombs, her eyes wide with fear.

“I’ve been teaching for twenty-one years, Miss Kennedy, and though I may seem old to you and you think that things get past me because you’re whispering and I’m sitting here reading a book, I can assure you my hearing has never been better. I heard every word you said. Your words, Miss Kennedy, not Miss Strange,” he said pronouncing Rebecca’s name perfectly. “Please leave my classroom. I’ll let Mr. Varney know that you are coming down to see him.”

“You can’t do that!” she hollered, now standing up in her seat. “He could suspend me from field hockey and we’re playing Memorial this weekend. It’s the semi-finals!”

“That’s enough, Miss Kennedy,” he said.

Lisa Kennedy pressed her hands together her fingers steepled like a prayer in Sunday mass. “Please, Mr. McCombs, I’m sorry, I’m really, really, really sorry. I swear it won’t happen again. You can give me the ‘F’ but please don’t send me

to Mr. Varney. The school hasn't been to the semi-finals since my grandmother went here, let alone a championship. This is our year, I can't miss this game," she pleaded and now was pressing out her chest and pushing out her bottom lip trying to look like an innocent martyr.

"Batting those eyes at me isn't going to persuade my decision. I'm too old for that."

"But –"

"This discussion is over, Miss Kennedy, now off you go."

Justin Nolan was muffling a laugh behind the hand clamped over his mouth.

Lisa Kennedy's eyes closed to a malicious slit sending invisible death beams at the teacher. She slammed her hands onto the desk, picked up her pencil and wrote a giant 'F' over the quiz. But she didn't stop there. Instead she continued to write FUCK YOU, with three large dark exclamation points after the YOU. Then walked the quiz over to the teacher's desk and slammed it down all the while staring at the teacher.

As she walked to the door on her way to Mr. Varney's office she paused with her hand on the door knob and looked down at Rebecca who had been watching her leave. Rebecca was still nervous that after Lisa left Mr. McCombs would then send her to the principal's office, along with Lisa, for conspiracy to commit cheating.

"You'll get what's coming to you Bucktooth-Becca. What goes around comes around," Lisa scoffed.

"Out, Miss Kennedy," Mr. McCombs shouted. His voice bellowed so loudly that some of the students jumped in their seats, a few pencils rolled off the desks from knees striking the bottom.

When Lisa was gone Mr. McCombs, still standing above them all, addressed the class before he would have to go over to the intercom and let the disciplinary office know that one of his students was on her way. "Is anyone else thinking about cheating?" he asked.

The entire class shook their heads, even the jocks in their varsity football jackets. Mr. McCombs wasn't a large man; in fact he was barely five feet tall, pudgy, and sweated profusely. He was always taking that hanky – snot-rag is what Rebecca's father called them – from the pocket of his Dockers and wiping his brow. He stood before them like Achilles, his arms tucked over his chest, the man who had just defeated the girl who could have shot a man dead in front of a squad of police officers and been given a pageant ribbon for MISS MURDER, along with a bouquet of flowers and a check for a small sum of money towards a scholarship at the state university.

"Everyone pick up your pencils," he demanded and they did. He sat back in the chair, reached into his teacher's bag, pulled out a piece of paper and began to say, "The answer to question number one is: Ralph." And from there he read off all the answers then instructed the class to mark a large 'A' in the right hand corner with a red pen and if they didn't have a red pen to borrow one from a neighbor. That was how fourth period ended for the day. Everyone passed their 'A' quizzes to the front of the class and the student in the front row brought them up

to the teacher's desk and placed them in a neat pile.

For the rest of class the students sat in silence, some doing homework while others reading, Rebecca sat sketching in her notepad, a picture of a girl her back turned and standing on the edge of a cliff overlooking a vast canyon of sharp, spiked walls and a roaring white capped river below.

At the end of the day, when the final bell rung that school was dismissed, the students filed out of their classrooms, some having just enough time to hit their lockers, and make their way down the stairwells to the basement of the school and out the two sets of double doors to the Pit. The Pit was a large paved decline behind the school where the students gathered in the morning before they were allowed inside, the alternative was the cramped gym which was only used during rainy days and the winter. At the end of the day the busses perched in single file like Twinkies on a confection line at the top of the Pit.

Rebecca came out of the doors; one of the last students. She wasn't more than two feet out the door, her right hand still holding it open for the sixth grader behind her, when suddenly she tripped over something that felt like a log and fell to her knees. Her skirt had lifted on the descent and her knees scraped across the pavement tearing the thin layer of skin away like a cheese grater might do to an Idaho potato. Blood was dribbling from the small gashes and the wounds piercing pain felt like that of a bee's stinger.

"Oww," she cried out.

*Prey for the predators*, she thought as she looked up into the angry eyes of Lisa Kennedy and three of her girlfriends, Jessica Shore, Michelle Kindle, and Keri-Lynn Pratt; the foursome that all other girls in the school feared and envied. They were the ones who made boy's heads turn, and male teachers drop their pencils in front of their desks so they could sneak a peak at white panties beneath their skirts. The girls always wore skirts and always uncrossed their legs when a teacher stood in front of the class. No Velcro on those knees; they were as loose as untied shoe laces.

Rebecca struggled against the sharp pain in her knees that were grinding against the pavement as she tried to rise and fell over on her back in a puddle of water that smelt like piss and sewage. There were things crawling in it too, she felt them on her legs, ants probably, but she couldn't be sure and didn't want to be.

*Don't cry*, she told herself, *whatever you do, don't cry.*

"Oops," Kerri-Lynn said covering her mouth which was open in a wide circle, as if she'd just spilt a glass of milk instead of kicked a girl in the ribcage.

"Are you alright Bucktooth-Becca?" Lisa Kennedy was leaning over her now, her hands on her knees and a great toothy smile.

When Rebecca tried to stand up again Keri-Lynn stepped on her chest holding her down while Michelle giggled in that high pitch tone that belongs to cheerleaders and strippers, teasing old men with wads of cash like tissue paper in their hands.

"Stay down Pubic-head," Kerri-Lynn growled, the smile turning to a sneer.

Then Lisa leaned real close to Rebecca's face, almost so much that they might have touched lips or maybe she would have bit that lip and torn it clean off of

Rebecca's face. She then would have chewed the fleshy piece of skin, while dribbles of blood dribbled from the corners of her mouth and swallowed it with a hungry grin.

"Old man Varney suspended me from this Saturday's game, you filthy cunt. If we lose you'll be going home with more than scraped knees."

She could feel it coming and there was no way to stop it now. Rebecca's vision went blurry, Lisa's features distorted for a brief moment and then went solid again as a warmth of tears ran down her face. She closed her eyes and covered her face but it was too late the foursome had already seen her break down. Then she felt something cold between her legs soaking through her skirt.

"Hahahaha, look everyone!" Lisa Kennedy yelled at the top of her lungs to the students still gathered in the Pit who hadn't climbed on their busses yet. "Bucktooth-Becca, pissed her pants. Poor wittle Becca couldn't make it da bafruum."

"Stop it," Rebecca whispered.

Keri-Lynn: "What's that wittle girl?"

Michelle: "Couldn't hear you, Pubic-head."

"Do you need some toilet paper? Does anyone have any toilet paper?" Lisa Kennedy yelled.

Then there was the cold feeling again, the spreading cold liquid above her crotch. She peeked through the slits of her fingers to see Kerri-Lynn spraying her water bottle between Rebecca's legs. It may have only been water, but it sure as shit looked like piss.

"STOP IT!" Rebecca screamed at the top of her lungs and scrambled on all fours away from the foursome, scraping her knees even more. The crowd of students in the Pit were laughing, some in the busses had the windows down and were hanging out almost to the waist and pointing hysterically.

Then someone, one of the foursome, began chanting: "Becca, Becca pissed her pants ran away to potty-land." It wasn't perfect poetry. Most of it didn't even rhyme, but that didn't matter. It was simple and easy to memorize and soon the entire Pit was chanting as loudly as possible: **BECCA, BECCA PISSED HER PANTS RAN A WAY TO POTTY-LAND!**

Rebecca just ran, covering her ears as the chant continued to play like speakers in a stadium. She ran out of the Pit, past the busses, past her bus that would take her home, across the baseball field, and down to the cross country track that disappeared into the woods. She ran until her thighs burned, her calves as well, her knees were profusely bleeding down her shins but she paid that no mind. It wasn't until a stabbing pain began to grow in her left side that she slowed from a run to a walk. Her lungs were screaming in agony for air and she bent over heaving on the dirt trail. Tears were still running down her cheeks and she felt like screaming or punching something. She had never wanted to punch anything in her life and after only one quarter of school in this *Hell-Mouth* she wanted to hit something.

The sound of gurgling water grasped her attention. Just off the path between a few pines, birch, and some baby maple trees no taller than she, was a babbling brook. Rebecca cautiously skidded down the embankment holding onto tree

branches when she could but mostly just trying to keep her balance so she didn't go tumbling head over heels into the water. She pulled her shoes off, using her left foot to get off the right shoe and then the right to get the left off, she was barefoot and glad for not wearing socks that day, it hurt her knees too much to bend over. Painfully she slunk to the ground and kind of crab walked over to the brook and onto a mostly dry rock.

The water was cold, but tolerable. Doing the best she could she splashed the water up over her knees and rubbed at the scrapes to wash away as much of the blood as she could. Each time the blood washed off another gob would appear. She was still crying when there was a splash in the water just a few yards away and a large black dog with pointed ears stood knee deep in the brook staring directly at her. His head was lowered toward the water as if deciding if he were more thirsty than hungry, and his dark eyes glared directly at her like a warm fresh cut of meat.

No leash was attached to the dog nor a collar, as best she could see. Maybe he was wild, maybe he wasn't even a dog. He was big, that much she was certain, bigger than a coyote which weren't uncommon to Nutfield but tended to stay more out towards the farm areas in East Nutfield. She'd never heard of any coyote in the business district and certainly never heard of a black coyote.

*Was it a wolf?* Big enough, she supposed. But wolves weren't in New Hampshire, not even up in the mountains back in Gilford, and most certainly not here in Nutfield, the sewer of a town she was renting until she turned eighteen and could move back home.

The *dog-wolf-coyote* creature began stalking towards her, its paws splashing in the brook. Rebecca tried to stay as calm as possible but could feel her body shaking all over. Now the *dog-wolf-coyote* creature was only inches away from her and raised his head. *This is it, she thought, I'm gonna die here in the brook with my skirt wet like I pissed myself and eaten to death by some rabid were-thingy.* As the dog opened its mouth to reveal a cave of sharp jagged teeth, rows and rows of them, she opened her mouth to scream. Her words were muted by her sheer fear. As the dog looked up at her, now with a mouthful of water dripping down over his lips, his tongue then lapping over his nose, she saw that in fact there weren't any more teeth in this creature's mouth than a normal household mutt. With their eyes locked the *were-thingy* began trotting through the brook toward her. Rebecca froze. She held her bated breath and tried to imagine her heart stopping so the creature couldn't even hear the faint thump, thump, thump of her heart.

Just as she thought he was going to sink those killing fangs into her, his muzzle pressed against the side of her cheek and he began to lap at the tears still running from her eyes. When all the tears were gone he licked her forehead then nuzzled his large head under her chin. Reluctantly, still shaking a bit, Rebecca reached out and stroked the soft thick black fur of the dog who began wagging his tail in the brook sending streams of water this way and that.

"Pharaoh?" a voice hollered from somewhere in the woods, close by but not close enough.

“Pharaoh? Is that your name boy?” His tail wagged faster now. She knew he was a boy, not by the size of his frame, but because his lipstick was out.

“Pharaoh, you dumb dog, if you found yourself another porcupine to play with I’m not going to feel sorry for you when you’re crying while I pull out the needles with the pliers. Not again, not after the last two times. Damn it, Pharaoh, you’d think you’d have learned your lesson by now.” The voice was closer this time and then Rebecca saw a man come out of the tree line and slide down the embankment without grabbing any tree trunk for balance, he just slid down in his black books like a surfer riding a wave. When he got to the edge of the brook then stepped in it like it was nothing more than a puddle. He saw Pharaoh nuzzled up to Rebecca and smiled. It was a charming smile, one that she supposed grownup girls melted to, like in those romance novels her mother was privy to. He was a handsome man, with shaggy brown hair and a shadow of stubble that seemed to make his blue eyes glow. His jeans were tattered like a construction worker’s but had that allure of expensiveness, and his short sleeve shirt was tight around his muscular body but not tight enough to be egotistical, just fit well.

“I see you’ve met, Pharaoh, hope he didn’t scare you kid,” he said with a friendly smile.

“Maybe just a little.” Pharaoh licked Rebecca’s face again when she stopped petting him as if asking for her to continue. She did.

“Yeah,” he said stroking his hand through the mop of disheveled hair, “he has that effect on people with his size and all.”

“It’s alright,” she said and lowered her eyes away from the man, thinking that she was alone in the woods with a stranger, even a cute one, and a dog. She looked up at the slope leading back to the cross country trail and wondered if she could make it up the embankment before he grabbed her or had the dog grab her and pull her back down where he could rape her and slit her throat, leaving her lifeless body in the brook to color the water red until she ran dry.

“I’ll just stay right here until you’re ready to leave, kiddo,” he said as if reading her mind. “Even call Pharaoh over if it makes you feel better. I know how evil this world can be, it’s on the news every night and in the paper every morning. Not that my word may mean anything to you, but I promise I mean no harm. Pharaoh and I are just out for our daily walk.”

She had no reason to trust him, and he wasn’t promising her anything, even though she was sure that he could see the gashes in her knees and her swollen eyes from crying. There was no alluding to help, no advance, no *come here sweet - ie let me fix those cuts up for you nice and right*, while his hand slid up her skirt and touched her *skin* – that’s what her grandmother called a vagina – he just stood there shin deep in the brook waiting for her to answer whether or not she wanted him to call Pharaoh away.

Before she could tell him that it was okay, that she didn’t mind Pharaoh sitting with her in the middle of the brook while blood continued to stream from her knees down her shins even though it was ebbing a bit, the chanting poem

breached the song of the brook.

“Becca, Becca pissed her pants ran away to potty-land.” The choir sang.

It was the foursome. Rebecca knew that for sure. They had followed her down the path, probably figuring that she had stopped somewhere to sulk and cry. Maybe they wanted more than a little blood, maybe they wanted to teach her a better lesson, a stronger lesson, one that would put her in the hospital for a few days or even a week. Groups of pissed off kids were never a safe bet. If they hadn’t gotten a good taste of blood before, they had definitely come back to quench that thirst.

“Becca, Becca pissed her pants ran away to potty-land.”

More chanting, intermingled with giggling and laughing voices, even a bit of conversation.

“Becca, Becca pissed her pants ran away to potty-land.”

“BUCKTOOTH? Where are you?” One of the girls hollered.

Pharaoh had stepped away from Rebecca and his head was pointed up the embankment toward the cross country trail. There was a low growl in his throat but his mouth remained shut, his lips still limp not revealing a single bladed tooth. But the growl was deep and threatening, it even made Rebecca inch a bit away from the large dog.

The handsome man was also looking in the direction of the chanting poem, his features had turned dark, the smile erased from his lips.

“He won’t bite,” he said. “Not *you* anyway.”

At the crest of the embankment the foursome appeared still chanting their poem. They looked down at Rebecca and the *wolf-dog-coyote* animal named Pharaoh. Then they fell silent. All except Lisa Kennedy whose mouth never seemed to shut.

“Aww, look at dat wittle Becca found herself a pwaymate,” Lisa cooed.

The other three looked scared, even took a step back behind Lisa Kennedy. But not Lisa she wasn’t the least bit afraid.

“That your new boyfriend, Bucktooth?” she asked.

“Leave me alone, Lisa,” Rebecca said.

None of the foursome had seen the handsome man standing down brook. He was masked by the branches and leaves and stood quietly with his hands in his tattered jean pockets.

“Make me bitch!” Lisa growled.

“What did I ever do to you? Just leave me alone!” Rebecca yelled. Pharaoh stood between her and the foursome up the hill.

“Or what Pubic-Head, you gonna send your boyfriend after me? I’ll kick that fucking dog right in the head before he even opens his mouth.”

Pharaoh began to growl again, that guttural growl deep inside his chest and even though it was directed up at Lisa Kennedy it made Rebecca shiver.

“Come on, Lisa, let’s just go,” Kerri-Lynn said and put her hand on Lisa’s elbow to pull her away. But Lisa just shrugged it off and stepped closer to the edge teeter-tottering over the embankment.

“No!” Lisa yelled at Kerri-Lynn. “This bitch is going to pay for what she did to me today.”

“Just have your dad call Varney, he’ll sort it out, he’s a lawyer for Christ sake that’s what they do,” Michelle said.

“It’s the principal of the thing. You start letting these losers get away with making us look like fools and soon no one respects us.”

Lisa Kennedy reached down to pick something up, when she stood erect again there was a large branch in her hand the size of a Louisville Slugger. She began smacking it into the palm of her open hand, her deadly eyes locked on Rebecca.

“I told you I was gonna make you pay, cunt.” Her eyes burned with fire and her voice was dark and unrecognizable. In that moment standing on the embankment with the tree branch Louisville Slugger, she didn’t look like a beautiful young girl but a depraved lunatic that had just escaped the asylum after slaughtering all the inmates with a plastic fork.

“I’m outta here,” Jessica Shore, the quiet tag-along-buddy, said and started back toward the school. Kerri-Lynn and Michelle followed. Only Lisa remained on the trail still batting her hand with the end of the tree branch.

“No one’s going to miss you, Bucktooth, no one will shed a single tear. Your parents will probably be glad that you’re gone, having such and ugly cunt of a daughter. What a disgrace you must be to your parents. Rich, successful people like them. How does a beautiful woman like your mother and a hottie of a father create such a disgusting specimen of filth like you? You were probably adopted,” she said.

“Shut up,” Rebecca whispered.

“Your real mother was a two-dollar-whore, who got dumpster fucked by a nigger junkie in a back alley somewhere, his cum dripping down her leg. That’s what you are, the wet spot of a whore and junkie, a pity-baby that your parents felt bad for.” Lisa was smiling now but it wasn’t a pleasant smile, it was dark, ominous, filled with putrid thoughts of lust and hate and hunger. Her eyes appearing black under the shadow of the tree branches, the white of the cornea void of color.

Like the eyes of her new house.

Those *window-eyes* that bore down into her soul beckoning her to enter.

Lisa reached down with the Slugger still in one hand and picked up a good size stone, about the size of a racquetball, and threw it with lightning speed at Rebecca. She winced and turned away waiting for it to connect with her head. She was waiting for the striking pain that would open a laceration which blood would spew from like a punctured water balloon.

There was no pain, no thud of the rock hitting her anywhere on her body, nor any sound of it plopping into the brook. She thought maybe Lisa hadn’t thrown it but she was sure that she had seen it leave her hand, seen its arc begin in the air coming directly towards her. Opening her eyes just a slit to see where the rock had landed, she instead saw Pharaoh, standing with his tail facing her, the rock was clenched between his jaws. He gnawed on it twice then let it drop. It splattered into the brook and sank to the bed. Then his head cocked back up

at Lisa Kennedy who still didn't appear to be the least bit frightened of the dog that Rebecca had once thought of as a *were-thingy* out of some bad dream.

She didn't think that anymore. In fact she knew one thing more clearly than anything else, that she loved Pharaoh. Did from the moment he caught that stone meant for her head, and would for the rest of the days of her life, though she knew she would never see him again after this day.

"I'm gonna kill that fucking dog," Lisa hissed and started down the embankment wobbling from this side to that but not letting go of that branch-sluggler meant for Rebecca. "When I'm done with him I'm going to smash your head on that rock until there is nothing left of your ugly twat face but teeth and bone. Even your dentist won't be able to identify you. Your body will wash down stream along with any evidence that I was ever here."

"Get away from me," Rebecca screamed getting off the rock that was intended for the bashing of her head. But as she stepped away she slipped on a smooth rock beneath the brook and fell ass first into the cold water, all the while watching Lisa Kennedy advance on her, and all she could think about was Pharaoh being struck in the head with that tree branch the size of a Louisville Slugger, his neck cracking, his teeth flying from his mouth, roots and all, while splatters of blood fell into the brook.

"Pharaoh, come!" Rebecca yelled. He didn't listen, just stood his ground as Lisa stepped into the brook and brought the bat back over her shoulder.

Rebecca had forgotten all about the handsome man until his voice spoke softly in a dark tone, "Pharaoh?"

The dog didn't look to his master but his ears perked a bit and he seemed to press his chest out and straighten his entire body, his tail no longer wagging. "Guard," the handsome man said in almost a whisper and Pharaoh leapt in one large arc out of the brook and at Lisa Kennedy. His claws pressed into her breasts as his teeth came down on her hand that held the branch, he bit deep, blood spewing from her hand and spraying the dog in the face. He continued to bite down until the weapon fell from her hands, then he let go but was barking, a dark, heavy bark, and moving toward her. Pharaoh didn't bite again, just herded Lisa up the embankment until she was back on the cross country trail.

She screamed down at Rebecca and the man that was once again hidden from her line of sight, Pharaoh still barking away at her.

"I'll sue you, you sonofabitch. You hear me? I'll fucking sue you for everything your worth. My daddy's a lawyer and when he's done with you you'll be sleeping on sidewalks and peddling for change. You hear me you fucking fuck-rag!"

She ran.

Ran faster than any eighth grader Rebecca had ever seen run, even the football boys on the field.

When she was out of sight Pharaoh stopped his barking and lumbered down the embankment and back into the brook. This time he didn't go to Rebecca but back to his master, the handsome man. He had turned away from her now, Pharaoh at his side heading in the direction he had come from.

“Kids used to call me Puss-face-Patty,” he said, back turned. His hand reached into the pocket of his jeans and he pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He put one in his mouth and lit it, the smoke streaming around his face and then blowing up into the air. He paused where he was but kept his back to Rebecca, “Cause my names Patrick and I guess the other part you can figure on your own. Kids are just cruel like that, no rhyme or reason to it I guess, just kid stuff. But some of ‘em,” he trailed off a bit as though trying to remember something or trying to forget something that had crept back into his mind. When he spoke again his voice was unrecognizable, “Some of ‘em just need to be put down...like a rabid dog.”

That was all he said as the two of them, master and man’s best friend, splashed down the brook, Pharaoh wagging his tail. That last statement he said, *some of ‘em just need to be put down like a rabid dog*, chilled Rebecca to the bone and she ran the rest of the way home, all ten miles never slowing once not even when the pain in her left side spread to the right and into her lungs.

Rebecca didn’t remember coming through the door of her house, or going up to her bedroom that she now loathed, with the desk by the window and the open drawing pad with an outline of a door and black mist escaping the seal that was drawn with charcoal. Each page beneath that one had the same picture drawn over and over again on each page of the almost filled sketchpad. All in charcoal; all in black.

When she opened her eyes, which too she hadn’t remembered closing, she was standing in front of the small, white door in the corner of the loft. The hook was limply hanging from its clasp and she quickly reached over as fast as she could, like a man who tries to run across hot coals and not get burned, and pushed the hook into the clasp. As fast as she could she ran thundering down the stairs from the loft, out of her bedroom, down another set of stairs to the living room, and into the kitchen.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she gazed from the kitchen into the dining room. Her mother was standing over the table putting a plate of chicken marsala onto a woven piece of fabric to keep the hot plate from burning a mark into the wood table. Rebecca’s father was standing with a man that she didn’t know, sipping wine, and talking about the Bruins chance of a playoff run, while puffing on cigars. Another woman, unrecognizable to her memory, was helping her mother by setting the silverware around the dinner plates. The good plates, her mother called them, the china that was given to her parents as a wedding gift seventeen years ago and was only taken out for special occasions and holidays. Now they were on her dining room table, and sitting at the end of the table, in her mother’s seat of all places, was Lisa Kennedy. Smiling Lisa Kennedy who was telling Rebecca’s mother how the Nutfield Middle School’s field hockey team was going into the semi-finals and most likely the championship. And her mother, her fucking mother that had taken her from her home back in Gilford and away from all the people she loved, and moved her to this Hell-Mouth of a town, that bitch was smiling at Lisa Kennedy. The same goddamn way Miss Angelica did, the same way Kerri-Lynn Pratt and Michelle Kindle and Jessica Shore did, same way that high school boy did when Lisa

was bobbing her head up and down on his cock.

That bitch! That high-school-boy-fucking-bitch was conversing with her mother and she was smiling. A damn genuine smile at that. Her mother's face bright and eager to hear the entertaining story spewing like cum out of Lisa Kennedy's mouth.

"Oh, honey," her mother said with that damn smile, "This is Mister and Misses Kennedy from down the street, Lisa is in your grade, she was just telling us that you two have English together."

Rebecca didn't respond. She stood dumbfounded teetering on the threshold between the kitchen and the dining room. Her father and Mr. Kennedy looking at her with puzzlement while their cigars smoked in a whirling stream, and Lisa Kennedy, pretty faced Lisa Kennedy, captain of the field hockey team on its way to the semi-finals, who only hours ago had tried to bash her head in with a Louisville Slugger of a tree branch, was smiling too. As though nothing had happened.

Maybe it hadn't. Could it have just been a hallucination brought on by the trauma of being laughed at by every middle-schooler? It might have been. Until Lisa put her hand on the table. That hand Pharaoh had sunk his teeth into, bandaged in gauze and wrapped like a hockey glove.

Bucktooth-Becca ran – sprinted – from the kitchen and rounded the stairs from the living room to the second floor. She crashed through the closed door to the bathroom, that also had a door to her bedroom on the opposite side of the wall, and dropped to her knees. The pain didn't even register from the scrapes and cuts that were already there and now reopening under the scraping impact of the floor. Rebecca scurried at the slippery edges of the toilet seat, her bare wet feet slipping across the waxed linoleum floor, her skirt hiking up her leg until it twined around her waist, revealing her cotton, white underwear, unable to push herself across the floor with her feet which felt like they were on a sheet of pond ice, her fingers clenched the toilet bowl towing her body to the head. Her sweaty fingers slid off the rim, she was just barely able to get it away from the toilet seat and plunge her face into the bowl. For the second time that day puke rose from her bowels and splattered the cream, porcelain toilet bowl in a violent eruption.

There was no way she was going to cry, that she knew for sure. Bucktooth-Becca, Pubic-Head, Becca, Becca pissed her pants ran away to potty-land-Strange, was too pissed to cry.

She stood over the sink and turned the hot water on, let it heat until there was a puff of steam rising from the basin and then grabbed her toothbrush. Putting a generous amount of toothpaste on the brush, she placed it under the scalding water then into her mouth and brushed until she was spitting pink into the sink.

*Some of 'em just need to be put down like a rabid dog.* Those were the words of the handsome man but it wasn't his voice she was hearing now. It wasn't a voice at all, at least not a speaking voice. The words were coming from inside her head. A guttural, dark voice calling from...

The hot steam from the faucet was clouding the mirror, making her image dis-

appear in a cloud of fog. She didn't bother to turn off the hot water when she walked out of the bathroom and into her bedroom, over to the staircase leading up to the loft, and looked up the carpeted stairs to the loft that overlooked her room.

And then she began to climb.

Rebecca stood three steps away from the top of the staircase and just feet away from the door at the top of the stairs.

Her heart was racing, beads of sweat had formed on her brow and began to trickle down the outline of her young face. Her bright blue eyes hidden behind those black coke bottle glasses, that no one had come up with a half way decent rhyme to, gave her the distinction of being walnut size.

Past the top step, six feet across to the opposite wall, was the *door*. Just a small door, only three feet by three feet, a perfect square with a simple hook for a lock.

*It's only a stupid door.*

Rebecca tried to reassure herself as she willed her leg to rise to the next step. She couldn't move. Her skinny porcelain hands that were gripped into a fist so tightly that her fingernails were leaving crescent moon-like slices in her palms.

There was nothing to be afraid of. *Nothing to be afraid of.* That voice in her head was only her own, she just had the heebie-jeebies from almost being murdered that afternoon and having her homicidal peer at her dining room table.

Her mother had proven to her that there was nothing to fear just weeks ago. After that first night when she had come screaming out of the bedroom and hid under the covers between her parents. It had been their family's second day in the new house, when her mother had climbed into the small crawlspace shutting the door behind her. Rebecca had been terrified for her mother and unable to do anything to help, if help had been needed. She was frozen then, as she was now. Only moments after entering the crawlspace through the ominous white door it had creaked open. Slowly it pushed across the carpet and Rebecca's mother stepped out. The experiment hadn't reassured Rebecca.

Of course an adult is safe, adults are always safe from *them*. Them being the darkness, thunderstorms, power outages, the thing under the bed, and dark fairies lurking in the in-betweens. Adults were safe from all these things. But Rebecca wasn't an adult. She knew the malevolent space behind the small white door held unspeakable tortures. She had seen that black oil darkness come slithering out of the door and eating the light. It had not been a nightmare as her father had tried to reassure her the morning after and then again the next night.

He was wrong.

No thirteen year old girl was safe. Maybe a pretty one like Lisa Kennedy but certainly not Bucktooth-Becca, certainly not her.

If only her mother could be here right now standing next to her. Rebecca could make her mom feel the presence, even an adult could surely feel the cold space in front of the door at the top of the stairs. After all, Rebecca's room was on the top floor of the old Victorian and the loft to her bedroom, where the white door sealed the chamber of chaos, was higher still. There was no possible

explanation for why the loft should be so cold, heat rose after all. It's physics plain and simple. Heat rises. But it wasn't just the loft, it wasn't the loft at all in fact; just the space around that door. Beyond that door.

She could scream. That was the best solution, scream for her mother and make her feel the *presence* that lurked beyond that piece of board on rusty hinges. Tell her how Lisa Kennedy had tried to kill her that very afternoon with a tree branch.

She didn't.

Couldn't.

Her mouth opened, only a crack, and nothing came out. Not even choked words or a whisper, not even the sound of someone with laryngitis.

Silence.

Deafening silence.

Gobs of blood were now escaping through her clenched fingers and down over her knuckles and dropping like rain drops to the carpet. All she had to do was turn around and run from the room, from that door. Grab her daddy and tell him what that homicidal lunatic Lisa Kennedy had tried to do to her. He would believe her, daddies always believe their little girls. Rule of thumb. He would walk back into the dining room and punch Mr. Kennedy square in the mouth, probably break his nose too, definitely some teeth. Then he would walk over to Lisa, her mother would be screaming, but he would back hand that bitch sending her sprawling against the wall where she would slump to the floor. And then his powerful hands, those hands filled with love for his daughter, would wrap around Lisa Kennedy's throat and he would squeeze with all the strength in his body, watch her gag on her own bile while her face turned red, then blue, and her pupils went void of life.

They would have to kill her mother because that betraying fuck-rag had invited the Kennedy's into the house in the first place. Her father would put a knife in Mr. Kennedy's unconscious hand and together, holding hands father and daughter, they would strike down her mother. Right in the heart. Bitch deserved the kiss of death for her betrayal. They would cut out Lisa's throat so that Daddy's fingerprints weren't on her body. They would shower, change clothes, and call 911 hysterically. Telling the authorities how Mr. Kennedy had gone crazy, how he was having an affair with Rebecca's mother. They would tell the 911 dispatch officer how he couldn't be apart from her anymore so he came over to kill her father and then Rebecca, but her father had overpowered him and in self defense wrestled the knife away and stabbed him in the heart. It had all been accidental. Rebecca would be crying in the background as her daddy explained the story to the 911 officer. It had happened so quick, been so unexpected. How could this happen in such a nice town like Nutfield, Rebecca would tell the police?

Daddy would do all this for Bucktooth-Becca because that's what daddies did for their little princesses. Rule of thumb after all.

Hesitantly her foot lifted and found the next step, her second foot joined the first only a moment later.

The cold chill was stronger on this step; it sent a shiver down her sweating

back and raised the tiny hairs on her arms. She should have her daddy put on a stronger lock, a deadbolt or a padlock like the one she had for her bicycle. Most likely it wouldn't make a difference. If the door could unlock this one it probably could do it to any.

She had taken only two steps forward since the moment of her initial panic. However long ago that was, Rebecca had lost any sense of time, her eyes glimpsed the hook that was supposed to be in its rung. It wasn't. The hook hung from the screw in the door, lazily lying with its curved scythe like end towards the floor. Just between the small white door and the door frame was the dark space creeping out. It was darker than a black cat, a starless night. Darker than death. Whatever was on the other side of that door, the thing that gobbled up scrawny thirteen year old girls with coke bottle glasses and frizzy hair, that ate light was worse than death. Of this she was sure.

On the next step the sun that had filtered through her windows and skylight seemed to fade like an eclipse. Darkness swarmed the light, her white walls lost their sheen as they were eaten by a dark cloud that scurried like thousands of black winged beetles. The *nothingness* was everywhere but at the white door which glowed like a lamp light in a lighthouse. Nothing could harm the perfect square door with its flawless white face and shiny hook.

"What the hell are you doing Bucktooth?" the familiar voice asked from behind her. She didn't turn around, didn't need to.

Bucktooth-Becca, it wasn't that bad of a name, she told herself. After all kids will be kids. Didn't the handsome man say that? The one with the *dog-wolf-coyote*. There has to be someone to tease just like there has to be someone admired.

Pubic-Head.

They didn't mean it though, it was just harmless teasing, harmless fun for thirteen-year-old kids to entertain themselves. There was no harm in words, they were just words. *Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me*. Funny how that rhyme went, considering that sticks and stone can do so much more than break bones, they can cave in thirteen year old girls heads until their brains leak from the shattered skull. Even the foul chanting the foursome had come up with, it was all harmless, it didn't mean anything? Kids were just cruel like that. Maybe that was what the handsome man had said. Fourteen and nine letter words scrambled together to make everyone laugh. Jokes, ridiculous jokes. No harm in jokes, her favorite shows were successful because of their jokes.

"Why's it so fucking cold up here, Bucktooth?" Lisa asked.

Bucktooth-Becca, Pubic-Head, knelt in front of the door. Her pale hand reached with steady fingers for the edge. It creaked on its hinges and an elliptical arc formed in the carpet as the door was opened fully.

*Step inside, the darkness seemed to whisper, come away with me to places of unimaginable happiness. A place for you, the most beautiful girl in the world. Come princess, your kingdom waits.*

From outside the door she turned to face Lisa Kennedy and smiled.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

Bucktooth-Becca reached out and grabbed Lisa by the hair and clasped her other hand over her mouth to muffle her screams. Dragging and tugging she pulled the girl toward the darkness of the door and into the room beyond.

Inside the room Bucktooth-Becca reached back and pulled the door shut. The darkness was full and never-ending. A place to disappear, a place of happiness where she couldn't hear the harmless fourteen and nine letter words. In the darkness the jokes were no more. The chanting, non- rhyming words of Becca, Becca, pissed her pants ran away to potty-land. Here, beyond the door at the top of the stairs, *she* was a princess.

In the dark, Rebecca could see. This world beyond the door at the top of the stairs where she was invited, called to from beyond the threshold by this *nothingness*. In this place she could see like she could not before. The *nothingness* that dwelt in the darkness had given her a new kind of sight, one that she could watch the frightened Lisa Kennedy scrambling across the floor trying to escape, her mouth forming words that were swallowed like the light had been. Bucktooth-Becca grabbed her once again by the hair and slammed her head into the plywood floor, then again, and again, and again, until Lisa Kennedy's body went limp. Bucktooth-Becca propped Lisa against the wall of the room, her head bowed almost completely to one side, her blonde hair sweeping over her face.

The dead light bulb hanging from its electrical cord from a support beam flashed to life, it wasn't bright, not really more than a match in a blackout. The soft glow of the light danced an orange ambiance casting shadows as it swung like a pendulum from its cord. Pink insulation like intestines of a body hung between the beams of the skeletal room. The room no longer felt just cold but damp and marshy.

Bucktooth-Becca crept across the plywood floor like a skittering spider. She reached into the insulation that was throbbing and breathing, pumping like arteries in a body, she pressed her hand through and up to the elbow and then slowly withdrew her arm marked in a pinkish glob of slime that dripped in large goblets on the plywood floor and blistered the wood, hissing sounds emanating from the blisters. Clutched in her bony fingers was a fragment of bone, carved and edged like a knife.

Lisa Kennedy woke to see Bucktooth-Becca with the weapon in her hand, staring at it like a child might a kitten in a pet store window, her head slightly cocked and eyes full with wonder. When Lisa tried to move, tried to escape the orange illumination of the room, the light above her head that wasn't a light at all but a light bulb with fire burning inside it, the insulation swept out and swallowed her arms pulling her almost completely inside of itself.

“Becca, Becca,” she hummed to herself while admiring the bone weapon, “pissed her pants and ran away to...” she paused then looked away from the weapon directly into Lisa Kennedy's eyes. The fire that was inside the light bulb was now inside the eyes of Bucktooth-Becca; hellfire. “How did that last part go, Lisa...Potty-land?” And smiled.

Lisa Kennedy mutely screamed as Bucktooth-Becca drove the knife through

her gut and twisted it. Warm liquid poured over the weapon and over her hand. Lisa struggled for a few seconds and then went limp. The life faded from her eyes and she lolled to her side the puddle of blood on her shirt expanding.

From the corners of the attic, the darkness reached out, its cold touch grazed Bucktooth-Becca's skin but she did not flinch. Like spilling oil, it reached out over Becca and crawled over Lisa Kennedy's white skin. She began to disappear beneath it, like a shroud of latex that had been painted meticulously over her. Once covered in the cool blanket of darkness the attic reached out its dark tentacles for Becca and concealed her as it had Lisa Kennedy. The light above was swallowed as well.

Rebecca Strange opened the door to the attic and stepped out. She ran a hand through her straight hair and then touched her teeth. She was different. Her braces had been lost, gone to the place where darkness lives. The once mangled teeth that had to be fixed through years of orthodontic torture were now perfectly aligned, space-less and shimmering white. Rebecca smiled and headed down the stairs for supper, and singing to herself.

"Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Sticks and stones will break my bones, but you'll never hurt me, sticks and stones will break my bones..."

The latch quivered on its hinge. Then it slowly rose twisting in the air and fell into the clasp. The darkness behind the door at the top of the stairs was silent and full.

# Oversights

*Kelley Jean White MD*

I left in 3 sutures but mumbled  
Something about scabs.

My handwriting made the pharmacist read  
Haldol for albuterol.

I missed the lymphoma, called it:  
'functional abdomincal pain.'

I forget to ask about depression.

I saw the nystagmus and suspected meningitis.  
Correctly.

I found out the mother has low calcium too.  
A patient with pseudopseudohypoparathyroidism!

I got you to talk about your sister's stillbirth.

I showed up. 30 years. I showed up.

But I hated each day.

I thought I was better than my colleagues.  
I thought I was better than my patients.

I listened to a grandmother.  
I listened some more.

I cried.

# Yackety-yak! (Don't talk back!)

Chris Vincent

Old appliances never die. They just grow old.

Well. Maybe. I remember this Hotpoint refrigerator. That baby never stopped, even after taking two in the chest on a hot summer's afternoon. Vintage 1950's. Ice box on top, standard cabin below. Enough to hold two cases of Pabst Blue Ribbon—easy.

It was August. Indiana's summers stink, and August was the worst. Humidity sticks around like a bad fart that won't go away—even if you step outside.

That particular summer, 1968, I was working for old man Schlemer at Schlemer's Auto and Body Repair on Old Decatur Road. A crap job in a crap building with no ventilation. Take this job and shooo-oov-e it! *Pa-lease!*

To be fair, the old man wasn't really that ancient. Fifties, I'd guess. His thin gray hair, always a little greasy, and pouchy eyes, made him look older than he really was. And he had a limp. Bad ankle that never healed proper after the war, I guess.

Schlemer loved cars. Shit ones, any ways. Mostly Dodges, Chevy's, crap like that. He couldn't wait to get his hands on em; pop open the hood, snoop around. If it was something underneath needed fixing, he'd slide under on his creepy crawler, checking fluids, charges, clicking his tongue every so often if something wasn't right. I could care less about cars. But I needed money, i.e. *babes!* and flipping burgers at Mickey D's wasn't gonna cut it. I was sixteen and open for business.

I was a Gomie—your basic, all around go-for, trash hauler, floor sweeper, privy cleaner, Gomer Pyle. Sometimes they'd let me do some sanding in the body shop. But I hated that as much as anything. Especially the sticky, sweet smell of fiber glass and bonding crap that turns it hard. You want a bad headache, sniff some of that shit for eight hours a day. Plop me some fizz-fizz, oh, yes-siree.

*They*, by the way, was Barney Lautenheimer and old Buzzy-Boo. Barney was okay, and a hell of a car painter. Big guy. Strong and straight. There's a few tricks to painting cars and this guy knew them all. Like how to remove a paint run (peel it away after the paint's almost dry with 3/4-inch masking tape). Or how to unclog a paint gun (back flush it with your thumb over the spray nozzle). Buzz, on the other hand, was an A-1, redneck, pisshole grit. He was a few years older than me. Mostly popped dents, plugged fiberglass, sanded, shit like that.

I hated Buzz. His wise-cracking, freckle spotted mouth never stopped flapping. One day it might be the woman he'd just done. Or, a cherry new car he was planning to buy. Nothing but USDA bullshit. Plus, he had a temper and liked to drink. Schlemer was pretty easy-going and as long as you did your work, didn't mind if you drained a couple toward the end of the day. Buzz drained more than his share most days and, by God, never ever, finished his work on time. I remember once he'd started in real early. He'd go to the fridge, pop open a cold one, gulp it down. Belch loudly. Then he'd stand there a few minutes, reading messages taped to the fridge door. Watching him, I often wondered what went on in that Brill Cream soaked head of his. Sipping, burping, moving his lips as

he read the messages. Then the fridge's old compressor would kick on, *ka-chung, ga-chung, ka-chung ga-chung*, and he'd jump back, like he was goosed or something. "Yackety-yak! Don't talk back!" he would shout. Another swig. "Yackety-yak! Don't talk back!" Just like the song. Then a moronic laugh would clatter from his mouth. It didn't take much to entertain old Buzz.

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About the only thing I liked about Schlemer's was all the shit out back. Rusted car and truck parts, tires, broken glass, car radios, twisted metal. The usual crap. Everything mixed nice and easy with overgrown weeds. Cool.

I would head there most every day about lunch time. Clear my head from the gummy smells inside, maybe down a Coke or cookie bar, find a little shade, mess around. There was an old VW van parked by the fence, scorched all to hell. Nothing but charred metal and burnt rubber. You could still smell it. Probably a crash and burn. Maybe a family on their way to a picnic. Kids horsing around in the back seat. Then boom! Fried baby-fingers. Death stinks.

I was thinking this one day, when old Buzzy-Boo sneaked up behind me with his .45.

"Gotcha!" he croaked.

I must have jumped a mile because old Buzzy could barely stop laughing to breathe.

Then he clucked, "Set me up a rack, Junie." 'Junie' was short for Junior, I guess. Buzz's pet name for me. What a guy.

Buzz liked shooting things up. Or should I say blowing things to smithereens with that cannon of his. His 'racks,' as it were, were cans, bottles, anything he could get his hands on, small animals, it didn't matter. I told him to go to hell. "You ass-wipe!" he chortled. "Shit-for-brains mother fucker!" Then the laugh. Always the fucking laugh, obnoxious as all get-out, like those wailing dogs on the National Geographic TV specials. I headed back to the garage, held up my hand and flipped him the bird without turning around. I heard a couple of loud 'pop-pops' as I entered the shop. Buzz never tired of pissing away time.

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A couple weeks before school started, I think it was a Friday, I was buffing the fender of a freshly painted '65 Chevy Impala, a personal favorite of Schlemer's, when the old man called me into his office. His tired, droopy face contrasted nicely with the perky tits on the calendar tacked to the wall. He said he had to go into town to pick up his wife for some doctor's appointment but wanted me to wait until he got back before heading out to the dump. See, most Friday afternoons I made a dump run with all the shit out back. No problemo, I told him. Then he asked me to find old Buzzy-Boo.

I was always glad to make a run because it was easy work and got me outside for a spell. The land fill was ten miles north, so I could milk my time from the shop a good hour, maybe two. As I was throwing some cardboard and shit into the pick-up, Buzz came by to check things out. His face, except for eyes and mouth, was powdery red with fiberglass dust. What a Bozo. I had to laugh.

"I thought you was supposed to be waxing?" he asked.

I could tell he'd been drinking already. "Old man wants to see you," I said, still grinning.

Buzz stretched his mouth opened showing surprisingly good teeth. Then he lit up a smoke. He inhaled deeply.

"Fuck."

Not being one to kill a good conversation, I said, "Yeah, fuck."

He sucked down another lung full, then moseyed over to Schlemer's office.

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About twenty minutes later, I heard the fridge open and the unmistakable clink and pop of another beer. Then the abrupt *slam* of the fridge door.

Buzz returned with an ice cold Blue Ribbon. "Schlemer leave yet?" he wanted to know.

"You tell me."

Buzz shrugged, then gestured with an upraised chin at my junk filled truck. "Fuck, I wouldn't waste my time," he said. He waved his bottle. "You want a roadie?"

I shook my head.

"Old man's such a cheap fuck," he went on. "Pays a hell of a lot better at Earl Sheib."

Earl Sheib. Since 1937. America's sweetheart of auto painters.

"Then why don't you quit? Work there," I said. Buzz was beyond useless, beyond comprehension.

Buzz kind of snarled. He looked a little pissed. I could tell he didn't like thinking too hard, especially when pressed for an answer. "Fuck," he said.

I slammed shut the truck gate. Then slid passed him to get in the cab. There was another pile of trash to load out back.

That's when things started to get a little hairy. About a quarter past shit-faced, Buzz clamped his arm around my neck and slobbered in my ear. "Let's go to a titty bar," he said. "Fuck this place!"

You ever get that feeling like just before you run out of gas your eyes register the needle way below empty and you just know it's too late and the engine's gonna puke? I wasn't exactly alarmed, but something wasn't right here.

He grabbed my arm. "Let-the-fuck-go!" I snapped, but he wouldn't give. His pungent BO stuck to my cheeks like a sticky resin. "I gotta get ready to go to the dump!" I said. His grip was a lot stronger than I expected.

"Fuck that shit! Pussy's calling!" he tittered, like a well-oiled sailor. Then he twirled us around before staggering away. He gulped the last of his beer with one, long swallow, then lit up a fresh smoke.

A flash of lightening got me looking up. Storm coming. It was then I noticed something peculiar about the yard. It was dead calm, just me and Buzz.

A slight shiver ran down the small of my back. This was the first time, *ever*, that it was just me and old Buzz. Schlemer was gone. Barney was va-caing with the family up at Cedar Point. No parts guy hanging around. Or some schlock waiting for his car. This wasn't good.

If I could just get to the truck things would be okay, I thought. What the hell. No big deal. Get to the truck. Drive over to the Dairy Freeze, nurse a Coke

until Schlemer got back. Buzz would go back inside. Pop open another cold one. Maybe watch the weather come through. That's the ticket.

Nonchalantly, I moved toward the driver's side, opened the door. So far, so good. Then Buzz kicked it shut, almost violently. Oh, shit.

"You fuck-head!," he snorted.

"Fuck you!" I shot back. I tried to open the door again, but he stepped in front of me. He glanced inside, then impulsively reached in and took the keys. Double shit.

"You crazy or what!?" I yelled.

Buzz grinned a greasy grin. "I'm just kiddin'. Really," he said. "Here..."

He held out his hand. I studied his sweaty, dust-smearing face, then lunged at the keys. But all I got was air as he filched them away.

Strike one. Buzz dropped a turd and I stepped in it. Like when you pass a growling dog. You see it from the corner of your eye and pray to God, it don't see you. Buzz saw me only too plainly. I swallowed dryly.

"You fuck shit! Fine! You load the truck!" I challenged, hoping not to sound scared. I turned and headed inside. Heart pounding, the only thing going through my mind was getting away from this guy. Fast. Grits can be dangerous, especially when thinking impaired. Since Buzz was always this way—even on a good day—I didn't want to test him any further after midday cocktails.

Inside the garage I started to chill, even though it was hotter than a popcorn fart on the Fifth of July. I grabbed my time card to clock out. It wasn't long before I heard the fridge door open again—a slight clinking of bottles, another slam.

I punched out and headed for the exit. It was exactly three-thirty-five. Schlemer wouldn't be back for another hour.

My Gremlin was parked outside, around the corner of the building. By now the sky was working things up nice and heady. I was about ten paces away when Buzz ran up behind me. He had taken off his shirt, wrapped it around his head like some desert nomad. He looked like a skinny, white snake with a turban.

"Ain't quittin' time yet," he drawled. "Where you think you're goin'?"

I took a deep breath. "Feeling kind of light headed. Must be the heat. Tell Schlemer I left early," I said.

Buzz grinned, tapped a front tooth with his bottle. Then he pushed me, playful like.

This was when I noticed the butt of his .45 sticking up from his belt.

"Nope. You ain't leaving just now," he said. He jerked the beer to his mouth, gulped down another load of suds.

"Fact is, I ain't never liked you, Junie," he informed me. "You're nothing but a chicken shit who thinks he knows everything. Well, I got news for you, buster-fuck, you don't know squat!" He belched loudly. "Hold this." He shoved the bottle against my chest. Then he pissed. At first on the ground next to me, then all over my shoes. I jumped like a goosed weasel. "Oopps! Sorry. Did I do that!? Shit," he mocked.

He played some with his dick. This was making me real uncomfortable. I knew about homos and such, but it never occurred to me I'd ever be in a situation like this. I wanted to throw up. I could feel his hot piss seeping onto my

socks, the skin of my feet. Fuck!

He put it away then, zipped up. I wiped some sweat off my brow, exhaled. My insides were shaking.

"Come on, Buzz. Quit fucking around." This came out like a nervous-Nellie, I know, but hey, I was scared shitless.

He shoved me again. This time a little harder. Then hurled his beer bottle high into the air and pulled out his gun like Billy The Kid or something, except when Buzz did it, he looked more like Grannie on *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Only Grannie was a better shot. He missed badly each time as the bottle plunked to the ground, exploding into pieces.

Then it started to pour. "Beer call!" he said.

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Back inside, Buzz got two fresh beers, popped one open for me.

"No," I said.

"Drink up, cocksucker! Last call for al-key-hall!"

"I don't feel like it," I said.

"Well, tah-dee-tah. Ain't that too damn bad!" He approached me, grabbed my beer, took a swig, then gave it back. I didn't know what the hell that was supposed to mean, but then I never did understand Buzz. I put the beer back in the fridge.

The ceiling lights flickered some. Nice mood lighting as Buzz got philosophical. He pulled out his gun, waved it at me. "Two kinds-a-people in this world," he slurred "Asshoses, like you, and those in charge, like me. Do as I say, not as I do. You remember that."

"I ain't done nothing, Buzz. Why you doing this?"

A sparrow nesting in the rafters flew overhead. Buzz flinched, took aim.

*Bam! Bam!* The noise echoed in my ears like two slamming doors, making me wince. The little guy escaped easily. Buzz grabbed a handful of shells from his pocket, reloaded, started shooting again. First at nothing in particular, the bullets ricocheting like invisible missiles going every which way. Then, like a lunatic, he shot out every window of that '65 Chevy Impala. Schlemer's favorite. This guy was definitely out of control.

I moved a few feet from the fridge, heart pumping so fast, I thought my chest was gonna break wide open. Buzz was staggering bad, he could hardly stand. Outside it was pouring a shitload of cats and dogs.

Buzz stepped closer, giving *in your face*, a whole new meaning. His breath stank of grainy alcohol, all beery and sour. He held up his bottle, about to drink again. Then he spoke.

"Schlemer fired my ass today. Piece a shit told me to clock out, never come back!" he whispered. "Fuck-ass!" Buzz twirled the .45, around his index finger, then pointed the barrel at my face. I was sweating so bad, I could hardly see.

"I like big tits," I stammered. "Why, why don't we go to that place you talked about?" Christ, what a stupid thing to say, I thought.

Buzz's mouth opened, but nothing came out as he rolled this over.

*Peep-peep.* Another visit from Mr. Birdy. *Bam!* Buzz got off a shot so fast I think it surprised him more than me. Even more shocking, the sparrow dropped

dead to the floor, a couple tiny feathers fluttering behind.

He walked over to what was left of the bird, picked it up. “Fuck,” he said, then whistled between his teeth. He carefully set the feathery clump on the polished hood of the Chevy I was buffing, a trickle of blood mixing in with some dried wax.

I gulped, almost choked, my throat so dry it hurt to swallow.

“You like big tits? Really?” he casually remarked. “I got me some magazines. I’ll show you some big titties!” he proudly drooled. Then the look over his face suddenly changed. He locked and loaded his eyes at me. “Fuck you!” he shouted. He raised the gun up again at my face.

I backed away toward the fridge, now about three feet behind me. Except for the rain pounding the roof, it was dead quiet.

*Ka-chung, ga-chung, ka-chung, ga-chung!* The old compressor suddenly kicked in.

Like he was goosed big time, Buzz reflexively fired two shells square into the fridge’s door. How they got past me without first boring through my head, I’ll never know. But my pants had a notion—my warm pee mixing in with old Buzz’s piss. *Christ!*

Buzz started yelping again. Like those wild dogs I talked about. Only this time he was howling more like a carnie on speed. He proudly stepped up to the fridge to inspect his handy-work. Two plugs neatly outlined in the chest. “Yackety yak! Don’t you *ever* talk back!” he crowed. He slowly turned around and looked at me, slapped his beer bottle into my hand.

“You know what? I’m gonna see if I can’t shoot me this out of your hand,” he matter-of-fact said. “Just, jus hold it up a taste.” Another attempt at a swallow froze in my throat. Strike two.

Now I was beyond scared. Beyond shitless. Beyond peeless! Buzz stumbled off as I stretched the bottle away from my body, *what else could I do, it was either the bottle or me.* He turned to face me from about twenty paces away.

“Yeah that’s it. Jus a taste more to the left. Somethin’ to remember ol’ Buzz by. Then when piss-head comes back, I’ll be ready. Only I won’t be aiming at no bottle this time. You get my drift!” He pointed his gun, tripped backwards a step or two, eyes popping out of his head.

At that particular moment of my sincerely miserable life, but one I wouldn’t trade for the world, I thought I was a dead man. I was going to die in some shit-hole *garage*. Buzz might, in all fairness, aim for the bottle, but a slightly, unsteady pull from this sloshed hillbilly, would surely air mail the bullet straight into my brain—or any other part of my body, depending on the shooter’s relative concentration and balance. I didn’t like the odds. And the worst thing about it? This fuckup would wake up the next day, and not remember a thing. “Duh, I was only kiddin’. Really,” he would say, as they led his sorry ass off to jail. Meanwhile, I’d be pushing up the proverbial sod and daisies, never having tasted the sweet innocence of teenaged lust. I held my breath, the bottle shaking like a cup of dice.

Then the *laugh*. He dropped his arm. “Aw, hell, Junie. You know I’m only kiddin’! Fuck that shit! I ain’t gonna shoot ya. Really,” he said. Uh-huh.

He saw the puddle at my feet. “What the fuck!?! What the fuck you do?! You go piss on yourself!?”

I wanted to *scream!* I wanted to tell this piss-hole, fuck head that if things were

straight up between us I would beat the living shit out of him so fast he would puke it up and I would make him eat it, *raw!* I knew this made me bad as him, maybe worse, but what the fuck, I *hated* this guy with every ounce of my guts!

Buzz looked at me, swaying back and forth. I slowly lowered the bottle, moved away from the fridge as he approached. Was this *it?* Was the game finally over, was he going to let me walk away with my head still on?

He wiped his mouth with a clammy arm, spit trailing into the air. His bloodshot eyes narrowed as he raised his gun at me for a third time. “Get-the-fuck-outta-the-way!” he growled. Holy shit! Stee-riike three! You’re *outta* there!

But it wasn’t me he was aiming at. I turned my head and saw old man Schlemmer at the garage entrance holding a shotgun. He had it aimed square at Buzz. I was never so happy to see anybody in my life.

Schlemmer asked me if I was okay, then motioned me to come stand behind him. He glanced sideways at the blown out Impala, calmly told Buzz to put down the gun. Buzz did his best doggie-howl of the day, then cocked the .45. “Fuck you old man! You’re the one goin’ down!”

Right then and there I could tell Schlemmer had been a proper soldier, bad ankle or no. There’s things about killing people and death I’ll never understand, but right then and there, I knew Schlemmer would keep me safe and he was not the one going down.

He lowered his shotgun. I think this surprised Buzz, cause he started stammering again. “Fuckin’ fool! You a dead man! Nobody crosses ol’ Buzz!”

What happened next ain’t exactly clear. Just as Buzz squeezed the trigger of his .45, a crack of thunder rang out, not from Buzz’s cannon, but from the fridge! A huge arc of electricity leapt from the appliance straight into Buzz, paralyzing him like a stunned rat!

His body contorted, then slowly began to sizzle, first with just a little smoke coming out of his mouth, then lots of popping and crackling. You could smell hair burning, I swear.

Buzz’s eyes froze up, went kind of whopper-jawed, but I think he saw me, the look of horror on my face as he convulsed and dropped dead to the floor. By now his skin was turning all black and ashy. A sputtering of bluish sparks poured from the compressor motor and then a loud *poof*, and more smoke. That electricity smell hung heavy in the air. The fridge, I do believe, was singing its last song.

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I quit work after that. Bad nightmares and such kept me away from a lot things, but mostly it was the thinking of death that got to me. I still think about it most days, who it happens to and why, shit like that. I think about that refrigerator, too. Like it was almost human, and knew it had to put down the bad seed. Or maybe it was pissed off at being made fun of? Or just a freak occurrence of nature as a thunderstorm passed by? Hell, I don’t know.

Buzz was a bad seed. I think there are some people who should never have been born. Nature’s way, I guess. To keep the good going you need some bad. And some help from old soldiers and appliances that never quite die.

# Achilles' Decision

William Avett

Achilles gazed upward at the white granite cliffs that towered above him. A narrow path wound back and forth up the precipitous slope to a small temple set high amongst the crags.

Looking down he saw the azure blue Aegean Sea far below, his vessel a small brown spec at anchor in Korinthos Bay. There his men awaited him, awaited his decision on whether to join Agamemnon in his foolhardy plan to sack Troy and return the beautiful Helen to his brother Menelaus.

Achilles knew that only the gods could guide him in this difficult decision, and so he turned with resolve and continued his weary trek up the long path to the glimmering shrine of the Oracle of Delphi.

As he climbed each step, others who also sought the wisdom of the ancient sage move aside and bowed low as he passed. All Greeks knew of Achilles, the greatest hero of the land, perhaps even in the entire world, and they neglected no opportunity to show their respect.

And as he climbed a growing crowd followed behind, for the reason of Achilles' visit now circulated amongst his fellow pilgrims. They wondered what wisdom the oracle would dispense to the great hero, for if Achilles decided to forgo the voyage to Troy, Agamemnon's war with the Trojans might well end in defeat for all of Greece.

Then at last Achilles trod the first step before the great temple, and casting aside his weapons, he strode through the marble vestibule and into the dim interior. About him stood the silent statues of the gods of old, some of which even he knew naught, and to each he gave a nod of respect as he walked past to approach the small, wizened man who waited regally at the end of the hall.

There sat the Oracle of Delphi in robes of white, while nearby stood his four attendants, women selected for beauty that even the gods might envy. About them flickered torches that lined the walls, and before the oracle rested a great copper vessel filled with a fluid in which different things seemed to float and bob, first to appear and then to disappear beneath the placid surface.

"Approach, Achilles," commanded the old man in a high reedy voice.

"You know of me?" he asked, taken aback.

"All Greece knows of the Great Achilles, and the purpose of your visit," laughed the oracle. "For this I do not need the gods to tell me."

"Then you know that I am torn as whether to join Agamemnon in his foolhardy plan, or leave him to his folly."

"Ah, you have indeed given the decision some thought, I see."

"Can you help me?" prompted Achilles.

"Perhaps. You bring an offering?"

Achilles threw down a sack of gold, a few yellow disks spilled onto the floor, shining brightly in the flickering torchlight.

“Very well, Achilles,” said the oracle, the glint of gold reflected in his eyes. “I will seek the wisdom of the gods for you. But beware, for the advice of gods can sometimes cloud a decision, rather than clear it.”

“Proceed,” replied Achilles.

So the old man stretched forth his hand to the great copper vessel and dipped his index finger ever so lightly into the liquid surface. His eyes glazed over, staring forward, as if he saw far into the distance along different paths of what might and might not be.

All was silence within the chamber, no one moved, and the four attendants seemed like statues, only their breathing betraying the flesh and blood of their mortality. Presently the old man groaned and pitched forward, but the women caught him, and pulled him back into his chair. One held a cup of wine to his lips, from which he greedily drank.

In a few minutes the old man had recovered, and now looked down upon Achilles with almost pity. And, when he spoke, a note of sadness carried in his voice.

“The gods have shown me the paths,” he said.

“Yes?”

“If you do not join Agamemnon in his venture, it will surely fail, and the influence of Troy will grow ever greater, perhaps even to one day challenge Greece herself.

“However, if you do accompany him, the other heroes will flock to his call, and the largest force the world has ever seen will fall upon the Trojans. Red shall run upon the sands year after year, but in the end Agamemnon shall be victorious.”

“Then I shall join him,” shouted Achilles with enthusiasm.

“Wait,” said the Oracle of Delphi, “there is more. If you throw your lot with Agamemnon, glory will surely be yours, but defeat as well.”

“I have heard of Hector,” considered Achilles. “So, he will best me.”

“No, he will not,” stated the oracle firmly. “You are the greatest hero in the world, and none can defeat you. Only by chance will you fall, but fall you shall.”

“Then I should not go.”

“As you wish,” replied the oracle. “But know, that if you choose this war your name shall never be forgotten, while if you stay, you will live a long life and fruitful life, but your name shall be forever lost in the annals of time.”

“So I must choose between glory and obscurity?”

“Alas, so have your paths been ordained. I am sorry,” replied the old man.

Achilles nodded, realizing that his time was up. He turned and left the building, pausing again to don his weapons. Stopping at a turn in the path, he looked back one last time at the temple, shining in the late afternoon sun, and decided.

Achilles would not shirk his duty or his fate. Agamemnon would win his war, and the greatest hero of the realm would fight by his side, no matter the task, and no matter the consequences.

Achilles trudged down from the hills, secure in the knowledge that glory and death awaited him.

# Bloom

Ben Mengho Chuang  
for Rye

I used to believe that “Forever”  
was overrated until you slid  
into my life more smoothly than  
the shadow of an arrow.

Here, right here.  
A heavy, sweet weight  
pressed deeply against  
the ventricles and atriums  
of my heart,  
your presence pulsing within  
me even when I’m alone,  
such longing,  
sugared and thirsty.

You feed my mind,  
filling in all my thought (and  
speech) bubbles before  
I even open my mouth; you  
dance in the most intimate  
corners of my mind,  
a razorblade distraction.

And here I am, running  
on thin air, all the  
musky moulds of depression  
bleached and vacuumed  
off my soul until I am  
pure, like an icicle in  
mid February. And from  
here on it begins, a cataclysmic  
nova of multiple bright  
dawns all folded into one and  
exploding into a fresh universe of  
soft shadow and silver pinprick stars.

# Shadows

Santiago del Dardano Turann

What are shadows but the hints  
Of something else  
Echoed vision void of color  
Not unlike our dreams the  
Vague and patchwork background  
Of consciousness.  
Shallow washing all around us  
They whisper of the  
Depths we would not otherwise know.

# Building

Alyson Monaghan

As we sat on the plywood  
and shared a sandwich  
in the room we decided would one day  
be the baby’s,  
someday  
when the roof is finished,  
the walls insulated,  
the windows in,  
I looked at your profile  
and startled, wondering  
who you were  
and how I would know how  
to spend my life with you.

But, later that night,  
both of us on the couch,  
our feet layered on one another’s,  
I couldn’t tell your toes  
from mine.

# Optical Delusions

Adrian Ludens

Merle seethed behind the wheel. Donna was cheating on him and tonight he would catch that nervy tramp in the act. His shaking hands found the door handle and Merle staggered from the pickup. The loaded .38 in his jacket pocket bounced heavily against his side as he staggered up the walk.

At the front door, the keyhole would not hold still for the key. Merle poked at it unsteadily, then gave up and tried the knob. It was unlocked. Donna hadn't even bothered to lock the door. Merle eased inside. If he turned right, he would enter the living room. But he knew that was not where his wife was. He ignored the living room and began to shakily climb the stairs toward their bedroom instead.

The steps twisted under his feet. Merle slumped against the wall until the dizziness abated. The sounds of lovemaking came from inside the bedroom and Merle felt like a stranger inside his own home as he stood outside the door listening. Drunken rage consumed him. He drew the .38 and shoved the door open.

Merle looked into the shocked eyes of Travis O'Connor, his next-door neighbor. Merle sneered and raised his weapon. O'Connor threw his companion off the far side of the bed. She landed on the carpet with a surprised cry and a thud.

Merle squeezed off a shot that shattered the mirror behind O'Connor's head. Travis rolled away and began pawing through the drawer of the night stand. Merle had never seen the mirror before and this made him even angrier. Donna was changing things without his permission.

He aimed at O'Connor's back but paused as a head peeked over the mattress. Merle saw the disheveled hair and frightened eyes of Maggie O'Connor.

Merle's jaw went slack and the logic he had drowned in a sea of drink surfaced long enough for him to realize he was in the wrong house before Travis O'Connor turned and shot him in the heart.

---

## Bare Metal

*C. Gerhard Buehler*

Fresh thunder is on its way over  
Our desolate rail yard,

Dusty full with scents of bare metal  
Laid in rust under our slice of the sun  
In the unprocessed Salt County

The workers are never around  
Though they must be some time  
Why else carve out this smoldering circle?

No more leaf free, grassy lots  
Or green stained jeans  
Near where we farm shiny glare

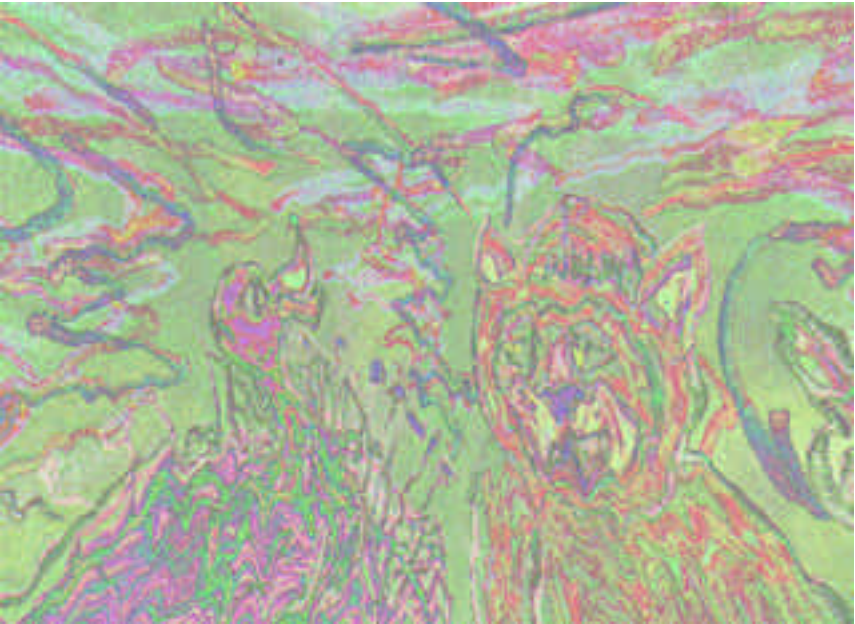
The buzzing comes from empty phones,  
And the many spirits here  
Plenty enough, to get snagged on

I vacationed in the Northern  
part of the Philippines. I watched  
the news, a newscaster assured the viewers  
that the tsunami was not  
going to affect the region where I stayed.  
As I listened, I daydreamed  
about swimming  
or using a fallen door  
to ride the waves.

December  
26, 2004

Neilbee Tayco

Two years later, I watched  
a home video from one of the survivors  
documented by *National Geographic*. The person  
filmed a man running towards  
the hotel. The first wave caught him  
by the feet, as if a whip lashed around his ankles,  
pulled then shoved  
his body forward. His arms  
wailed, fighting the force.  
It carried him,  
slammed his head first against the door.



Peacock and Lion, art by Mark Hudson

# The Swap     Timothy Duncan

One glance across the table  
revealing fake vulnerability.  
Long, wavy, brown hair,  
curious eyes, nervous fidgeting, sweaty palms.  
Twenty years apart, age and experience,  
he is consumed by lustful thoughts,  
desires never realized.

It would be different for her  
firm, tight, curves of obsession.  
His wrinkles speak volumes.  
Opportunity.  
One unpleasant moment.  
Rent, food, whatever she wanted.

Fifty, one hundred, two hundred,  
it all depends on the level of human degradation.  
Devoid of emotion, pleasure or pain,  
numbed.

A simple transaction,  
a trade,  
his needs for hers.

---

(and you could  
hold me)

*Janet Kuypers*

for the first time in my life  
there is someone there for me  
with open arms  
and for once  
i could curl up  
like a little child  
in the fetal position  
and you could hold me

# Exorcism

Christopher Gaskins

Bitter, it isn't, this  
rock-bottom rage, out of nowhere anger neither born  
nor bred, just  
plopped down inside me, kept  
slithering in

place for month after month, dispersing  
like worms and leaving  
the scene of  
origin only to poison the limbs, then  
curdle the conscience.

I love you like this where I sever bare-handed  
air we had breathed,  
your attention which scurried for  
a blonde-haired  
replacement. It took no time at all.

My thrown-up lunch  
was as yet still warm in puddles rippling atop  
the carpet.  
Every light bulb here, now, is either  
loosened

or gone. I'm in a dark more blue  
than black and passing this Marlboro phallus from  
fingers to  
lips, lit red in the glow  
of its cremating tip,

curled on the couch with my feet  
underneath me, inhaling  
smoother,  
ignoring the creeping-in cancerous effect, the  
slackening body.

It all runs over-  
the squishing and squirming of  
festering hatred.  
I've yet to forget your sudden amnesia as I  
stood there in quicksand,

waving and nodding as if I were  
stupid  
and somehow confused. Politely, I smiled, said “hi”  
to your beau  
in the sweetest of drones, bearing my burden:

a remembrance of you  
fully mounted behind me and gasping  
“I love you”  
as your emptying penis convulsed in erection,  
burrowing onward

and past the hipbone, held in place as I alone  
rose up to melt,  
split not  
unlike a passage home, two  
halves divided.

---

## Snow

Ashok Niyogi

everything was meticulously painted white  
fir rock peak valley brook  
abandoned hunter hunted  
homeless pebbles with rucksacks  
half dead in the snow

tires had to have on chains  
to better grip  
we thought “we are beggars  
we have nothing to lose  
in this whiteness we can cry out  
taut with strange words”  
a supplication  
“deliver us from this incredibly beautiful white  
that chokes the breath  
blinds the eyes”  
and whispers “this is it  
sleep sleep  
there is nothing beyond”

and all the while  
beyond the storm line  
the whole of America lies spread

# Noah's Gone Fishing

Joseph DeMarco

It snowed in Baghdad yesterday  
the Whales will have to find  
somewhere else to go  
The Islands are SOLD OUT

The traffic in the sky  
is going to get worse  
As the Earth floods again  
The Lost City of New Orleans comes to mind

Noah looked out his window  
and it was unseasonably warm  
Not a cloud in the sky

He decided to go fishing  
but when he got to the ocean  
They told him it was CLOSED for renovations

The gods looked up from  
their studio apartment in the ghetto  
"He doesn't realize the flood  
will come from below,"  
one of them says, which is not important

"The land named by RED which was inappropriately christened  
for one thing it is not, GREEN  
is the stage it will take place on."

"The people want to know WHEN?" The God of Traffic asks.  
"Tell them, sooner than you think,"  
says the God of Money,  
who knows death is eminent.

The Almighty Dollar goes home,  
and takes a bath with a bread maker,  
as Noah tries to resurrect  
a miniature version of his ark inside a bottle of ABSOLUTE.

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