

2001

Des Moines Area Community College Creative Writing Contest 1976-2001

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Des Moines Area Community College

Creative Writing Contest

1976-2001



Award-Winning Works
For the Academic Year
2000-2001

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Hide and Seek

She came to wake me
with butterfly kisses, only
she knows that makes

me smile. I follow her
laughter and chase her bare feet,
leaving a path through emerald

grass and bluebells. Around
her head rests a ring of white
clovers, the sun catches auburn

in her hair. She wears
a pink slip, so thin it
chases her in the soft

afternoon wind. I follow
her until suddenly she
stops, turns and stares

back at me. I know
these eyes of sapphire
well; the dimples that

no longer come easily. But
she turns again, and
escapes me, hiding behind

a tree. I run to the
trunk and walk a slow
circle and looking up find

her laughing down
at me. Dark curls and
tiny toes dangling over a

branch. I smile and
reach up to hold her
hand and she reaches

down to mine. One more inch,
my eyes flash open and I
desperately wish I could reach

the little girl who
lives inside me and play
hide-and-seek again.

Free

I am Beauty—
With hips too large for society
Hips that sway when I dream of dancing

I am Beauty—
With curly hair the color of dark chocolate
Wayward hair that does what it wants

I am Beauty—
With small breasts that once swelled full with milk
Small breasts that have fed three children

I am Beauty—
With almond eyes and olive skin
Skin etched with lines that measure my memory

I am Beauty—
With narrow palms and long, graceful fingers
Fingers that refuse to wipe one more tear

I am Beauty—
With a two-inch scar that runs over my shoulder
Immeasurable scars that lay under my skin

I am Beauty—
With a pale line circling my left ring finger
A voice so strong it left my ring finger bare

I am Beauty—
Strong and determined, wild and free
Free from all burdens you once put on me

The Masterpiece

She bent over the wheel and was at once lost in the depth of her work. Her hands were gloves made of the Earth, the clay as natural on her fingers as the day it was dug from the moist ground. Her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows, and her hair was pulled back in a rubber band, small ringlets escaping to frame her face. Finding them bothersome, she would periodically raise her wrist and swipe it across her forehead, leaving behind small smudges of dry clay. She kept the wheel at a quick pace while she worked to center the clay, gently pressing down against it with the pad of her palm. Firmly pushing both palms against the mound, fingertips overlapping in the back, she raised the clay to a volcanic shape, and once again applied pressure to the top and the clay became a round clump upon the wheel.

He watched her from the doorway, smiling at the image he had come home to so many times. Her brows were furrowed in concentration; her dark eyes squinted in focus as her small sturdy hands began the creation of yet another masterpiece. A slow grin tugged at his lips as he wondered if the gallery would receive this one. The sunlight slipping through the window caught her hair and made it glow like fire against her pale skin. He knew she was unaware of him, of any of her surroundings at the moment. He watched as she started to slow the wheel, crossing his ankles as he prepared to wait.

She wiped her fingers against the rim to rid her hands of excess clay, and then rubbed her palms over the thighs of her worn jeans. She placed the thumb of her right hand into the top of the mound and curved her fingers along the outside, guiding the

shape with her left hand. She wasn't thinking, it was a different state that enveloped her. Emotions were guiding her hands, she no longer made the decisions of what would be created, and yet she already knew what the outcome would be. Cursing under her breath she pushed out her bottom lip and blew air up to her forehead in an effort to move the ringlets that were falling into her eyes, but succeeded only in having the curls fall into a different place on her forehead. She lightly squeezed the clay between her thumb and fingers and the shape was changed into a short cylinder with a shallow center.

He remembered the first time he'd seen her there. Confused and frustrated about his feelings, he'd stormed into the studio, and when he saw her bent over the wheel, fingers seemingly one with the clay, he had stopped and marveled at the love he felt for her at that moment. He ran a hand through his dark hair and thought of how many times he'd fallen in love again, with this same woman, standing in this same spot.

Lifting the sponge, she dipped it into the bucket, and squeezed it over her hand, watched the water trickle down over the crevices of her fingers and run into the bottom of the piece, squeezing up any excess that remained in a puddle at the center. She bent further over the wheel and put her left hand down inside the shallow hole she'd created. Slowly she pushed the wall out against the center, resisting the pressure from the outside with her right hand. Her heart was beating hard against her chest but her hands were steady and controlled. She worked on the top edge, light fingertips slowly thinning the clay to define the rim. This was the one place she could let emotions rule out her thoughts; break the shell that was covering her heart. She didn't know how much longer

she could wake up in the morning and fight the urge to stay asleep forever; she couldn't stand another day of missing him like she missed him now. She placed the flat of her thumb at the base of the center and defined the inside curve. Picking up the sponge she thinned the inside one last time, giving the clay its final shape.

He knew she was almost finished, and suddenly had to fight the urge to throw more clay on the wheel head, to continue watching her create forever, to never have to approach the moment that he inevitably had to face.

She dipped her hand in a bucket of water and splashed the wheelhead. Slowing the wheel down once more she twisted the cutting wire in her hands, eased her thumbs down onto the wheel, and in one swift pull released her work from the wheel head. She placed the wheel head onto the flat palm of her right hand and set the piece onto a dry bat. Taking a step back, she studied her work and realized she'd been making it for him all along. It was an exquisite bowl, thick walls, and a deep wide base. She could picture it, the color of the ocean before a storm, the color of his eyes. She switched the wheel off and put her hand in the small of her back as she stretched. Thoughts of him filled her head and she grabbed her bucket of water, tossed the tools in, and walked over to the sink.

He ached for her. He hated himself for every ounce of pain he saw in her eyes, knowing he was responsible for her sadness. He watched her stand over the sink, wearing one of his old shirts, her feet bare against the cool concrete, he wanted nothing more than

to walk up behind her, wrap his arms around her waist and brush her hair behind her ears. He wanted to take her upstairs, lay her head on the pillow and run his hands through her fiery hair, tell her how much he missed her. More than anything, though, he wanted to turn back time.

It was suddenly vitally important for each tool to be immaculately clean. She grabbed at her sponge and squeezed it until every ounce of liquid clay was drained from its fibers. She scrubbed at her turning tool, the steel kidney, and when she finished running her fingers along the wire she grasped for something, anything else to clean. When she found nothing she turned the water off, dried her hands on her shirt, and sat back down, exhausted at the wheel. She dropped her head in her hands, closed her eyes, and fought the oncoming tears, the despair that was clogging her throat. She wanted desperately to be angry with him, to blame him for everything. She wanted to scream at him for leaving her this way, scared, alone and so completely empty. She wanted to curl up into a little ball and hide from everything and everyone she knew. Instead she slowly lifted her head and prepared to leave her studio, her haven, and caught her breath when she saw him standing in the doorway.

“Jack?” Her brows furrowed and the confusion she felt fought her instinct to run up and touch him, hold him.

“I’m so sorry Maddie. I’m so sorry.” He crossed the room and succumbed to his urges, brushing the tears from her cheeks and tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Jack? How? What are you doing here?” She didn’t fight his movements; they were so familiar, so comfortable that she didn’t even think of it. She could smell him and she longed to bury her face in his shirt, to smell nothing but the familiar scent of soap and spice. She reached to put a hand over the one that covered her cheek. Could he be real? No. She had to be dreaming, she just had to be. Jack was gone, wasn’t he?

“I’ve come to say goodbye. I can’t tell you how much this hurts, to stand here and watch you, touch you, and know that it’s the last time. If I could, I would never do this.” He traced her lips with his thumb and followed the line of her jawbone. “I was so stupid. I just want you to be happy again. I want to see that smile again so badly I can’t catch my breath sometimes.”

“I don’t know how much longer I can wake up without you, Jack. I roll over in the night and you’re supposed to be there. Dammit Jack, why did you go? I told you not to go.” She took a step back and searched his eyes--the eyes that she had fallen in love with so many years before.

“Maddie you know I wouldn’t have gone had I imagined anything like this. If only I had listened to you, but I didn’t. I thought I could make it, and I missed you so badly I convinced myself it was only a small storm. Do you think it doesn’t torture me to see you in bed alone at night? To watch you toss and turn and cry in your dreams?” They both stood staring into the other’s eyes, tears rolling over the edge, standing between past and future. “You have to let me go Maddie. And somehow, I have to let you go, too.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Her head fell and he crossed over to her once more.

“I know you can. You’re dying now too Maddie, and if you don’t let me go we’re both just going to be stuck in desperation for one another. I’ll see you again, love. And until then, I’ll watch over you every minute, and I’ll wait for you every hour, cross my heart.” He kissed her lips and she threw her arms around his neck, hated how real he was at that moment, knowing how empty she would be the next.

She reached inside for some deep strength she wasn’t sure she had, but looking in his eyes she knew, for both of them, she had to find it. “I’ll see you again. Cross my heart. Goodbye Jack.” She kissed his cheek and watched as he smiled her favorite smile, and suddenly she was standing alone.

She ran her fingertips over the bowl that lay on her nightstand next to the bed. The glaze had been a difficult mix, but the result had been her desire. She reached to turn the light out and laid her head down on the pillow, and running her hand over the empty pillow beside her, she whispered into the dark, “Goodnight, Jack.”

Mistletoe

“You’re under the mistletoe.” My husband grinned and wrapped his arms around my waist. “I’m afraid that means I’ll have to kiss you.”

“I’m afraid your mother would probably kill you, what with us being in the ‘public eye’ and all.” We both glanced over at the room full of people. Aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and all of the greats, steps, and significant others currently involved in the holiday season that was being celebrated in our family room. I looked down to see two-year-old Michael blinking up at us. With a guilty look, I stopped my fingers that were currently crawling up the back of my husband’s neck.

“Um, well. I think I’ll head into the kitchen to make sure everything’s under control.” I kissed James on the cheek and practically laughed when I saw his mother watching us. She threw me her best smile, and I wondered how hard it was for her, but she wasn’t the only Academy Award nominee; I threw my best smile across the room and hoped to God the dazzle of white would blind her.

The kitchen had never been my forte, I was a lawyer, not Julia Child. But the fact that I saw James’ mom, Cathy, following my footsteps to the kitchen had me wishing the famous chef were at least waiting to hand me a glass of wine. I opened the stove to check on the ham and as soon as I stood up, Cathy was right there, throwing an apron over her head and washing her hands at the sink. “I thought I could help you Christine. After all, sometimes it’s nice to have someone with experience helping in the kitchen.”

It was Christmas Eve. I wasn’t about to let her kill my mood, but God was it difficult.

She was wearing a black velvet dress, her gray hair pinned up in a bun, and the thick blush on her cheekbones was sucked into the wrinkles that lined her face.

“That was sweet of you, Cathy. You could start spreading the cheese on the crackers if you don’t mind.” I watched as she bent into the refrigerator, listened to her hum “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” and hoped the newborn King didn’t know what I was thinking at the moment.

“You know Christine, I’ve always added a little bacon to this spread. Just to spice things up a bit. Do you have any? She made an effort to sweetly flutter her lashes, but instead her eyes blinked owlshly at me.

“There are some bacon bits in the cupboard above your head.” I began kneading the dough for the biscuits.

“Oh. Well, don’t you think it would be nicer to have real bacon?” She bustled over to the fridge and bent to look into the meat bin.

I thought briefly about my husband. I’m sure he thought he was motherless by now. Some tragic murder—Christine Harper, in the kitchen, with the butcher knife. I tried not to smile at the thought. “It was sweet of you to spend Christmas with us, Cathy. I know how busy you are with your traveling.” Her traveling, as she liked to call it, consisted of two trips a year, but she liked to pretend it kept her schedule packed full. I liked to pretend it did, too.

“You know, I find that no matter how busy I am, I can always make time for family.” Somehow, Cathy had this talent for simultaneously making herself look very good, and making me look like the Grinch.

James’ father died before I ever got the chance to meet him, and from what he told me, and all I can gather, he is one hundred percent his father.

There was Christmas music playing throughout the house, and two of my nieces, Ellie and Maggie were playing on the carpet in the living room. They were desperately trying to help

each other pull the bows out of their hair and each one grimaced as more hair than bow was pulled from their scalp. I ran to the rescue before my four-year-old nieces were helping Mr. Clean do commercials for mop cleaner. "Here sweetie." I grabbed Maggie's arm just before Ellie lost a significant chunk of hair. "You guys don't like these much, huh?"

"Mommy says they're pretty but they poke in our head." Ellie stuck her bottom lip out and I couldn't help but sympathize. I glanced down at my high heels and wished someone would pull them off for me.

"Christine, where are you girl?" My grandpa came into the room holding a glass full of egg nog. "I've been lookin' all over for you. James just told me you're not sure if you want children. What kind of gobbeldy gook is that?"

"I, uh. Um hmmm. Well, Grandpa, I think I'd better go fill your egg nog."

"Don't you walk away from me young woman. That glass was full, and I'm not some senile old man who's going to forget what we were just talking about."

I turned with his glass in my hand and bumped smack into my husband and barely saved his sweater from receiving a spill. "Hello sweetie. So in the midst of holiday celebration how about you share with me how many children you want to have. One, two, or maybe seven. I've always liked the number seven. As a matter of fact, the ham won't be done for at least another half an hour."

He kissed my forehead and laughed. I wished I felt as light hearted at the moment, but with an evil mother-in-law hovering over my kitchen, children running all over the house, and a Grandpa who was arguing with me about my bedroom activities, I was beginning to feel a little on edge. "Honey, it's Christmas," James told me, and then bending to whisper in my ear, "but

we could practice if you want.” I elbowed him in the ribs and moved to toss the biscuits in the oven.

Luckily, James’ mother had left the kitchen for a little while and I found my aunt Bea sitting at one of the stools humming along with Johnny Mathis, *I’ll Be Home for Christmas*, and rattling the ice in a glass of Scotch. She wore three long strands of pearls that she would twirl around her index finger, and then let the twist loose, twirl, let loose. “Darling Christine. Have I told you how lovely you look tonight?”

I knew from experience that by now my dark curls were probably springing out of my head at odd angles, and glancing down, I noticed my dress already had one stain, and I thought it might be the cheese sauce. “Thank you Bea. You look lovely, too. If Uncle Louis were here, he would have been blown away.”

“Oh yes, dear. He was always quite taken aback with my beauty,” and raising her eyebrows, “not that anyone could blame him.” I laughed as she turned a circle and tossed her shawl over one shoulder on her way out of the kitchen.

Dinner was quite an adventure. Maggie showed her mom just what she thought of her bow, tossing it into the cranberries while Ellie laughed and slipped hers into her mother’s glass of wine. Grandpa told a joke about how much mistletoe a Mormon needs and caused my grandma to laugh while Cathy choked on her water. Michael ran away from the table and managed to open up three of his Christmas gifts before he was caught, and Bea left the table twice, each time coming back with a glass full of Scotch. I almost passed my glass down to her to get a little fill myself.

An hour later we all slowly piled into the family room and James put more wood on the fire. The children tore the paper to pieces and sometimes they even remembered to say thank-

you, while the lucky ones got a kiss and a hug. Later on, the adults helped the children change into their pajamas before they ran off to play in the living room with all of their new toys. With the new found quiet and extra room, I crawled into the recliner and James sat on the arm of the chair while we watched the adults begin to open their gifts. Grandpa loved peanuts, and ended up with about eight pounds of them at the end of the night. Grandma was adorned with books of various genres; she is an emphatic reader so she couldn't have been more pleased. From Grandpa she received a beautiful topaz ring and in return, he received her looks of unconditional love all night long. James and I gave Cathy season tickets to the Opera House and she was so thrilled that she even smiled at me once during the night.

After a while, the paper on the floor started to pile up, and the fire started dying down to orange embers, and the children's voices fell from 6, to 5, to 3, and then no sounds at all from the living room play area. We told some people goodbye while we helped others get tucked into their various bedrooms. I helped James and some of the parents carry the children into the family room to sleep under the Christmas tree. The two of us watched as the parents gathered candy and gifts and stuffed stockings to be placed on the fireplace next to the cookies for Santa that James had so generously volunteered to eat bites out of. Needless to say, I ate the bites out of Rudolph's carrots. When all was said and done, the lights on the Christmas tree blinked across the living room, stockings were full of enough candy to rot the children's teeth for weeks to come, and James and I were the only ones left awake.

"Look at you. You're standing under the mistletoe again." He threw me his grin and I raised an eyebrow. "Looks like I might just get that kiss after all." He walked over to me and linked his arms behind my neck.

“You know, as much as Christmas wears me out. This part has always been one of my favorites. “The children all tucked in, your mother all tucked in.” He laughed and kissed my lips. “But that right there.....” He smiled and leaned closer to my lips.

“What? You mean this?” He kissed my lips again, but this time lingered for a moment longer.

“Yes, this has always been my favorite part.” I held his hand and he followed me back into the bedroom where we could finally enjoy a quiet Christmas alone.

Painting Memories

"Daddy. Come here for a minute. I think I'm done."

"Another masterpiece in the making?" He left his easel and came over to her canvas, standing behind her he laid a light hand on her shoulder. The silent pause had her glancing back, searching his eyes for a response. "Laurie. It's beautiful. She's beautiful. It feels like she's standing right here." His eyes glistened with fresh tears as he turned her around and kissed her forehead. "You've her smile you know, that smile that brightens the world. God how she loved you Laurie." The slight crack in his voice had her reaching back to squeeze his hand. "She loves you still, you and Matthew both. Just as strongly as the day you were born. Just as strongly as I love you."

The words echoed in her head as Laurie sat in the middle of the living room. Boxes surrounded her as a single tear escaped down her cheek. How long would she hear his voice? Or worse, how long would it be until she could no longer remember what his voice sounded like?

Matthew came over and bent to kiss her forehead. He was long and lean, and dark as a result of long hours he spent working land. He looked over the room, the open boxes, the empty boxes--every small thing that held a memory. There was so much to do. So many loose ends that needed tying up, he just wished she didn't have to be a part of any of it. A blind fool could see this was tearing her apart. "I have to go pick up the kids, but I can come right back here if you need me."

“No, really. I’m fine.” She tried to put some emotion into her words, but her voice sounded fake even to her own ears.

“Get out of here Laurie. Take a walk, get some fresh air.”

She nodded and glanced out the window. “A walk does sound good.” She stood to kiss his cheek, and wished she had the strength that always seemed to envelop Matthew. Reaching for a little of her own, she smiled and held his hands. “I’ll see you tonight for supper. Tell Tammy and the kids ‘hi’ for me.”

He watched as she grabbed her fleece coat, poured a cup of coffee, and headed outside. He had always been there for her. In elementary school he had punched Bobby Jensen in the nose because he’d tried to kiss Lauren on the swings. In high school, with her midnight hair and sapphire eyes he’d had to keep his own friends from chasing her down. But this was different. This was so much harder. There was no way he could protect her this time.

The spring air was brisk and she hugged the warmth of her jacket closer. The March sun was bright, but did little to warm her body. *It’s not your body that’s cold Laurie-- it’s your heart.* She glanced back at the house and wanted to cry for how lonely it seemed now. It had been her father’s dream to one day own a house like this, to reap the rewards of hard work and build a home for his family. He’d wanted a cabin, and a magnificent one at that, she thought. Wheat fields surrounded the backside of the house, light and rich, and waving in the wind. Her father’s home was there, amidst the soil, and the satisfaction of knowing every inch of his land and what it had to offer. On one side of the cabin stood an old oak tree, a worn tire swing secure on one of its branches. The hint

of a smile tugged at her lips as she remembered the nights when her mother and father would sit on the porch, laughing together while Matthew would push her higher and higher into the air. On the other side of the house was the garden. Soon the flowers that framed the house would be in full bloom, their vibrant colors adding more life to the land. Lauren could easily picture her mother there, planting the flowers. She had on old jeans; knees dirty with soil, absentmindedly tucking her black hair back under her bandana. Her father had said he always thought flowers the most beautiful thing in the world until he'd met her mother. Somewhere in the distance a bird started to sing, and Laurie wondered how anything could be cheerful on such a day. She closed her eyes to ward off the tears that were threatening to pour over, and taking a deep breath turned to go inside.

She desperately needed to get all of these thoughts racing around in her head to stop for just one minute. She needed to keep her hands busy. All but running through the living room, past the mess of memories, she raced down the steps to the studio. When she reached the bottom of the stairs and walked into the room the absolute emptiness overwhelmed her. The brushes were still there, the once strong smell of turpentine now faint on the air. She walked over to the canvas on his easel and felt the tug at her heart. He hadn't been a master of paints by any means, but the beauty of emotion was never lost in his work. She studied the last painting he'd been working on. It was of the fields at dusk. The sun was a fire, brazen red, seeping into the sky, it's gold reaching to touch the tips of the wheat field. The familiar oak tree stood to one side, its limbs twisting and turning, reaching to the sky, the spring and summer leaves rusting into fall.

She turned a slow circle and looked around the room. Her easel was still there. For as long as she could remember he had made a place for her in this room. He'd given

her her first paints and easel. He'd given her her first lesson and grinned when she painted more of herself than the canvas. Laughing and leaning over her shoulder he'd guided the brush over the canvas by keeping a light hold of her wrist. So light, but enough that she knew he was there to support her.

She didn't notice her cheeks were wet. She didn't hear the crash of her mug as it shattered on the floor. All she could do was fall to the ground and wrap her knees to her chest. She sobbed, hard, wracking sobs, until finally, she lay spent on the floor, the afternoon sun shining through the windows, warming her while she slept.

God she was cold. She pulled the edges of her coat together and reached up for her pillow, but there was no pillow. Lauren slowly opened her eyes and grasped for knowledge of where she was. The studio? Why in God's name was she laying in the studio? It all came flooding back in a crashing wave, the walk, the need to clean, the need to cry. The violet haze slipping through the windowpanes told her it was almost dark out, several hours since she had run down the steps. She stood up to stretch, and a groan escaped her lips. Some evil man had snuck into her dreams and tightly squeezed every muscle she had into a knot. She walked into the bathroom off the studio and tried not to notice the scattered paintbrushes as she splashed cold water on her face. She flicked on the light and squinted through swollen eyes at the reflection in the mirror. *Well Lauren, it doesn't get much worse than this.* A quick glance at her watch told her she only had a half an hour before she was supposed to be at her brother's for dinner.

She walked upstairs to her childhood bedroom and opened her suitcase. The room hadn't changed since the day she'd left for college. The teddy bear she'd received

from her first boyfriend still sat comfortably amongst the pillows on her bed. The light yellow paint with tulip border her mother had insisted on added cheerfulness even at night. She pulled out an old NYU sweatshirt and a pair of worn jeans. She walked into the bathroom and stepped out of her clothes. Just the sound of the water had her muscles relaxing. After ten minutes under the hot water the bathroom filled with steam and the smell of lavender. She turned the water off, wrapped herself in a terry cloth towel and headed for her room.

She dried off and slipped on her sweatshirt and jeans, but when she reached for the doorknob to leave her room she saw the painting her father had given her for her sixteenth birthday. It was of her mother and her, gardening at the side of the house when she had been little. She smiled at the memory and walked over to the picture, lightly running her fingertips around the frame. "I miss you so much. Both of you." Dropping her hand she walked over to the telephone and dialed Matthew's.

"Hello."

"Tammy. Hey, it's Laurie."

"Hey sweetie. Are you on your way over? The boys are really excited to see you."

"I'm sorry. I can't make it. Something's come up and I'm going to have to call off tonight."

"Are you sure?" Tammy's voice was strained with worry across the line. "We can come over there if you want. It's not a problem."

"Thanks anyway, but no. Tell Matt I'm sorry. I'll call you tomorrow, 'kay?"

"Okay. You're sure?"

“Yes. I love you. Bye.”

Laurie hung up the telephone and ran out to her car to grab her oils and brushes. With all that had happened in the past week she'd had no time to paint, no desire to paint, but all of a sudden it was burning in her. Running back inside she went straight down to the studio and pushed up the sleeves of her sweatshirt. She went over to the drawer where her father kept the canvas, and within a half an hour she had stretched a piece of canvas over a frame and set it on her easel. She didn't even think about her movements, what colors she was choosing, it was unconscious. Until she reached up and laid her first stroke across the canvas and memories of her father teaching her to paint filled her mind. Tears sprang to her eyes and frustration swelled in her heart.

Don't think about it. Just let your heart lead your hand. Can you feel it?

She could, she could feel it; his breath behind her ear, his hand on hers, guiding her first strokes of paint over the canvas. She didn't think about the colors or the thickness of her brush, at least not consciously. She just listened to her father's voice, let the memories slowly invade her mind.

You have the ability to paint onto the canvas all of the feelings you can never put into words. Everything you've never been able to tell people, you can say tell them through your art.

Laurie continued to squeeze oils onto her palette, thinning them with turpentine, mixing them with her brushes and spreading colors onto the once blank canvas. It happened so fast, but so slow. At some point rain started to patter on the windows and she thought she heard thunder in the distance. She could see it finished before she'd started. Just right, just the way it was supposed to be. No hard lines, no bold colors, light

and smooth. Hours passed and the dark brought out stars, and the stars brought out sun, and it was in the magical moment when the sun and moon hung in perfect balance with one another that she finally set her brushes down.

In the end it was Matthew who saw the painting first. He came over scared to death after he'd tried to call all morning, and found her curled up sleeping on the couch in the studio. He reached down to wake her up but out of the corner of his eye caught a familiar face, and turned to find the painting. It was their father and mother sitting on the porch swing, a blanket draped over their legs, her mouth turned up to his for a kiss. Funny, it didn't look like a painting at all. It looked real, just like the moments they would watch him and Laurie swing out back, the silent looks they would exchange that meant everything in the world. He didn't wake Laurie up, he just moved back to the couch, brushed back her hair and whispered, "thank you", in her ear. She stirred slightly, but only enough to lay her head on his shoulder while she dreamed about her father and mother, laughing on the porch swing while Matthew pushed her higher and higher and higher, up into the clouds.

Phases

We are the waxing moon.

We are the beginning of all.

We are the spring.

We are the little princesses,

We are the scruffy tomboys.

We are the Maiden, the innocence.

We are the full moon.

We are the creators of all.

We are the summer.

We are the artists,

We are the caregivers.

We are the Mother, the source.

We are the waning moon.

We are the end of all.

We are the winter.

We are the teachers,

We are the guides.

We are the Crone, the wisdom.

The Goddess

I am the beginning,

And I am the End.

I am the womb,

And I am the tomb.

I am in your mind,

Your heart,

I am in your soul.

Search for me,

Find me,

And learn to fly.

I am the Goddess.

Idises

From the shadows of the candle light steps a short, round woman, white-haired and wrinkled. The sleeves of her silvery white robe fall back as her callused hands reach for the chalice of wine. Her journey across the veil has left her throat parched and she downs half the wine in one swallow. Licking her lips she turns to her left and hands the chalice to another woman stepping from the shadows.

This woman is an opposite of the first. She is tall and thin, long faced and small of breast. She looks down upon the world with a judging eye and holds her pointed chin up high. The chalice is emptied when placed to her thin cracked lips and her white robe swirls as she takes a piece of bread from my altar.

These two women are my great-grandmothers, dead for several years. On this night of traveling souls I am once again in their presence, and once again a small child upon their laps. Silently, they reach for my hands and take a single step forward into the North. My living room dissolves, giving way to a wooded hill. The trees sway with the chill of the wind, dropping dead leaves with every movement. The clouds cover a starless night leaving only the light of the moon to illuminate the landscape. My senses take every movement, smell, and taste into my being as I swell with the power of the land and the power of my great-grandmothers.

The sound of nine upon nine horses reaches my ears, growing steadier until all is drowned out but their beat. The hands of my great-grandmothers turn me to face the racing herd of glimmering horses. Each white horse holds a wild,

white-robed woman. One woman is old and hunched with silver hair and thin, wrinkled skin. Another has bright red hair lined with white, stubby hands and rounded hips. Another is tall and thin, with slender long fingers gripping the reins. Each woman is different, but each is the same. And leading them all is another of my deceased great-grandmothers, bringing my ancestors to my side.

They gather round me in a circle, their robes reflecting the light of the moon and I look upon their faces. I see the face and life of my great-grandmother's mother, understand the trials of her mother's grandmother. I witness the day my grandmother was born and watch as these women give strength to my grandmother when she labors to bring my mother into the world. Their power fills me and I know then that they have always been with me, that they have always been a part of me. Not only has their blood given me hazel eyes, thin lips, and round hips, but it has also given me my stubbornness, my pessimism, my love of nature, and my sense of honor. These women are of my line and they are the shapers of my life. Each lesson they have learned has been passed down from one woman to the next. Each trial they have faced has created the woman now standing in the center of the circle. From the wisdom of their eyes, I learn that one day I too will be riding a white horses through a wooded hill to give my lessons to the daughters of my daughter and that my life will shape the lives to come.

As the light of the moon fades with the rising sun, the women nod their heads in parting and turn their horses from the circle. They leave with the knowledge that one of their children has taken another step in her life and will

take strength and comfort in their presence. As the rhythm of the hooves fade my great-grandmothers slip their fingers from mine, kiss me on each cheek, and follow the women of my blood across the boundary of the realms.

The Raven's Call

"Odhinn, Valfodur, Grimnir, All-father, I call upon you! The Roman eagle is spreading throughout the land. The Rhine no longer holds their approach, the forest no longer strikes fear in their hearts, and the moors no longer slow their journey. All-father, Father of the Slain, God of War, show us a way to defeat the eagle!" cried Bathilda from the center of a circle of maidens.

Each maiden was deep in concentration, focusing their energy on the god of war and poetry. These women were his Valkyrie, his instruments of death. Soon they would join the men in battle, taking down Romans and the men of their tribes. Sides were not suppose to matter to them, all that mattered was having the best warriors at Odhinn's side. These men would fight with him at Ragnorak, the Twilight of the Gods. But these women were born to the northern tribes, and the Romans must not take their land.

The clearing in which they stood came alive with the sound of ravens. Each woman raised her head to see two large black silhouettes fill the sky. The ravens began their descent, circling lower and lower, calling to their lord. These ravens were Huginn and Muninn, the Thought and Memory of Odhinn. Each raven wore about its neck the valknut, symbol of the All-father.

In their focus on the ravens, the Valkyrie did not notice the old, gray bearded man enter the circle. He sat down on the rune-covered stone before Bathilda and tapped her on the shoulder with his walking stick. Startled, Bathilda immediately drew her spear, aiming it at the old man's heart.

"Bathilda, I see your age has not slowed your instincts," said the old man as he chuckled and pulled his large hat over one-eye.

In embarrassment, Bathilda quickly removed the spear and kneeled before the man.

"All-father, I am sorry. I should have known it was you! Please forgive me."

"Don't be silly, Bathilda. You have served me well over the years. Now stand up, you look rather silly down there." Odhinn shifted his weight, pulling his cloak closer to his body. He stood up, towering over the women, and examined Bathilda.

"Bathilda, you have served me longer than any Valkyrie. You should know that you cannot choose sides. It does not matter if the Romans win or lose. What matters is having enough warriors to defend the Gods at Ragnorak."

"That may be All-father, but if the Romans win, your worshippers will be destroyed and there will be no one left to believe in you."

"Do you think that matters to me? But if it concerns you so much let me put your heart to rest. Bathilda, you are getting old, you are the oldest Valkyrie to ever live."

"But Odhinn..."

"Bathilda, please, you know that you will not live forever. You are mortal, and some day you will die," he said.

"But there must be one to replace me. We must always be nine."

"Yes, yes. Do not worry silver-haired beauty. She has just entered your world. She is the daughter of Alaric and Fereng. They have named her Raina, strength. Her strength is even greater than yours, Bathilda. She will have the strength to lead the Valkyrie and ride against the Romans. She will not want this, though. She will fight her destiny and win a few battles. But her strength will cost her everything and she will be my Valkyrie."

At that, Odhinn turned his back on the Valkyrie. The two large ravens flew to his shoulders and began to whisper in his ears as he disappeared from the clearing.

Bathilda leaned on her spear, depleted from her experience but comforted that there would be a woman strong enough to lead the Valkyrie in the battles to come.

"Raina, where have you been? You are filthy and not a single one of your chores have been finished? Explain yourself!" Fereng stomped her feet in frustration as she saw her daughter slink out of the woods. She had told Alaric many times that the name they had chosen for this daughter would only bring them trouble. It didn't help that he encouraged Raina's love of the hunt and practiced throwing spears with her. When would she ever become a proper wife?

"I'm sorry mother, but I saw this beautiful raven fly into the woods and I just wanted to follow it."

"Raina, that is all well and good, but you have chores to complete. Now if you would," Fereng's reproach was suddenly interrupted by the sounds of horses pounding on the earth. She sighed and gave up, knowing that her daughter would never listen when her curiosity was peaked.

Raina dashed and darted around the holds, leaping over fences and pigs, grabbing hold of her younger brother Notker as she went. They reached the outer fence, kneeling down low to stay out of sight.

Nine women rode up on beautiful white mares, with silver shields, slender spears, and wolf-hide cloaks. Each woman held her head high, shoulders back, and looked upon the stead with warrior eyes. At first their beauty mesmerized the man at guard, their power radiating throughout the hold. Then his voice rang out as he composed himself.

"Be welcome to the stead of Alaric, noble women. Enter in peace and give us your names."

"I am Bathilda and I am here to speak with Alaric and Fereng."

Little Notker squeezed his sister's hand and looked at her with frightened eyes.

"Raina, who are these women and why are they here?"

"I'm not sure Notker, but I think they are the Valkyrie. Look, they are wearing breastplates and the hides of wolves. Women don't wear such things, not unless they are Valkyrie."

"But what could the Valkyrie want with Father and Mother?"

"I don't know, Notker, but if we are quiet, I'm sure we can find out."

Taking his hand once more, Raina led Notker through the stead, silently tracking the warrior women from hold to hold. The two children weaved in and out of fences, hid behind working adults, acting as though they hunted the giant stag. When the warrior women had reached their parents' home, they found Alaric and Fereng waiting to welcome them.

"Bathilda, leader of the Valkyrie, it is an honor to welcome you to my hold," said Alaric as he approached Bathilda. He reached out a hand to help her from her horse, but the weathered woman ignored it and leapt to the ground with ease.

"Be welcome, Bathilda," said Fereng as she held out the drinking horn.

Bathilda took the drink, savoring the sweet taste of mead on her parched throat. As the adults entered the hold, Raina grabbed Notker and slid around the outside of the building, looking for a place between the logs where they would be able to see and hear all that went on inside. They found such a place low to the ground and they slithered up tight, each trying to win the best view.

"Bathilda, can you share with us any news of the Romans? We have not seen them in many moons but I am sure that they have not given up the fight," said Alaric as he seated himself at the head of the large table.

"The Romans have crossed the Rhine south of here. They have set up a camp and intend to press on."

"Why do they want our land?" asked Fereng as she walked about filling drinks and bringing the guest meat and cheese. "Our ancestors worked many moons to learn to live on this land. It is rough and difficult."

"The more land, the more captives and slaves they have under their fists, the more power they think they have. But the northern tribes are not as weak as the Romans think and we will not give up our hard earned land," replied Bathilda as she began to tear at the strips of dried meat.

"Very true, brave one. But forgive us, Bathilda. I am sure you did not come to be bombarded with questions of the Romans. What is it that you need from us?" asked Alaric.

"Odhinn has reminded me that I am getting old and will not be able to lead the Valkyrie much longer. I am here to retrieve the one who will lead after me."

Raina stiffened beside her brother, fear beginning to creep into her bones. She knew the legends of the Valkyrie; she knew they only took girls who had just entered womanhood. If they were any younger or older than this their bodies and minds may not be able to withstand the training.

"Raina, who could they mean? They can't be here for mother?" asked Notker, trembling and grabbing for his sister's hand.

Ignoring her brother's silly questions, Raina focused on the conversation inside. She tried desperately to block out the voice in her head that kept whispering, "Raina, they are here for you."

Raina had received her initiation into womanhood just half a moon ago. She was the first to do this in over two years. She was the only female in the stead that was the right age for the Valkyrie.

Her attention was brought back to the hold by the power of Bathilda's gaze. The warrior had known of Raina's presence during the course of the conversation and now her eyes held the young girl.

"I am here for your daughter of strength. I am here for Raina."

The words beat upon Raina's heart, no one would ever tell her what she would become. Her future was her decision alone and she would not stay here and be forced into the Valkyrie life. Raina took one last look at her younger brother and kissed him on the cheek. With a grunt of anger, Raina caught up her skirts in her hands and ran for the forest.

The trees reached for her as she entered the outer edge of the forest. Limbs twisted in her hair, slashed at her legs. Raina's heart raced as she tumbled over fallen logs, stumbled over large rocks, and crashed into young trees. She continued her flight as her legs bled from the gashes and her hands stung from scrapes and cuts. She must escape the Valkyrie.

From nowhere an enormous boulder appeared and Raina's body slammed into its mass. She screamed in pain and surprise and gulped for the air that had been knocked out of her body. Her chest ached as frigid air filled her lungs and her body cried out in pain. Her legs were red and stripped of much of their flesh. Her hair was a tangle of twigs and leaves and her heart threatened to beat right out of my chest.

Raina panted and cried and curled into a tiny ball. Her head spun and her stomach turned over. She must escape the Valkyrie, but she could only crawl, and only for a short distance. Raina lifted her head to examine her surroundings. Before her sat the enormous stone, its top-half flattened. Symbols were carved into the surface, some

she recognized as runes and others were unknown to her. The stone stood in the center of a ring of ash trees, their limbs and trunks standing erect as if they stood as protectors.

This area of the forest was silent, no tiny furry creatures scrambling over the forest floor, no birds singing from the treetops. The trees were the only life the clearing held. The sun shone down from the bright sky, but saplings did not cover the exposed forest floor. Beneath her was a floor of bare earth and fallen leaves. It was as if many feet had trampled and compacted the ground.

Suddenly from above came the sounds of many beating wings and cawing voices. Raina jerked her sore head to the sky to see it filled with many black ravens. They circled the clearing, calling to each other, calling to the Valkyrie. She scrambled closer to the boulder, gripping it for comfort and support. They would come now, come to take Raina from her family and turn her into one of them. The ravens had led the way. She closed her eyes and prayed to be sucked into the stone and disappear into the earth.

The sounds of the ravens came closer, their beating wings stirring a breeze in the clearing. Raina opened one eye and saw a ring of black-feathered bodies. She squished her eyes closed again, and began a chant for protection.

"Raina, your prayers will do you no good. The gods can hear you but they cannot act. You know this."

It was the voice of Bathilda, a voice that held a power and strength unknown to most women. It was the voice of a Valkyrie.

Raina sighed, knowing she spoke the truth, but hating it all the same. She opened her eyes and looked at her. Bathilda kneeled some distance from Raina, leaning on her spear. Her wolf-hide cloak covered most of her, but her silver breastplate reflected the light of the sun. Her long silver hair was plaited in braids, with raven

feathers twisted into each. Her breath swirled about her head, coming in quick sudden gasps.

"I will not go with you," Raina spoke with as much strength as she could muster. "I do not want to be one of you. I want to love and marry and have children."

"But we do love and we do marry, Raina. We marry the All-father, Odhinn," Bathilda said as she shifted her weight.

"You do not love and marry. You give up your freedom to Him, as he takes your brothers and fathers. You ride out on the battlefield and see nothing but death. Those who have died and those that you must chose to die! I will not live a life full of death. I want a life full of love!"

"Everyone dies, Raina. I choose those that have the honor of standing by His side. Would you rather watch your loved ones die of old age and disease?" she asked.

"Of course not, but I want to have children, sons and daughters. I want a husband!"

"How can you know this? You have only just had your first blood. You have many years before you will start a family. Many things can change before then."

"Give me the chance to decide. If those years pass and I decide not to have a family come for me then. But not now, not when I am unwilling."

"Raina, you know that our training must start now, before womanhood takes full hold. If you do not begin your training now, the road before you will be much more difficult than you can imagine," she said.

"I will not go with you today. And you know as well as I, a Valkyrie must go willingly to Him. I will not." Raina said. She stood facing the older woman now. Her young body was straight and tall; her jaw was set; she held her hands in fists. Her body was full of rage, power, and the strength that made her Raina. In her eyes, Bathilda caught a glimpse of Odhinn and knew that this young girl already had the power to

defeat the seasoned warrior. Bathilda would concede this one battle, for she knew that Odhinn would not let this child wander far from his grasp.

"If that is your decision, I cannot force you. But you will become a Valkyrie, Raina. You may not feel the calling now, but someday you will not be able to ignore it."

Bathilda stood up and walked out of the forest. The ravens cawed and flew up into the air, circled once and left. Raina stood alone.

"Mother watch this, watch this," shouted Emric as he threw his tiny spear toward the target. His four-year-old frame did not have the strength to plant the spear, but his daily practices were improving his accuracy.

"That's wonderful, Emric," called Raina as she watched her son with pride. He spent every morning out here with his father, Derwin. When he had turned three he had insisted that he be allowed to join his father in the hunts. Derwin had told him that he must first learn to throw the spear, only men who would be of help were allowed to join the hunt. Emric then insisted that he be taught, so Derwin made a spear especially for his size and they began their practices. Each day, Raina would sit and watch from her bench, wishing that the thread in her hands was a spear, and that she could take the time to join them.

Derwin picked up his son and tossed him about. "Son, you are improving much. Soon you will be able to join the hunt. But for now, we have worked up a mighty appetite. Shall we see what your beautiful mother has cooked for supper?"

As the family headed into the hold Raina could not help reflecting back on the past six years. Derwin had caught Raina's eye as a young woman. He was the best warrior among her father's men, tall and red as the sun. His hands were massive, his

shoulders powerful. He was an expert at the spear, the sword, and the axe. His acclaim and skill had won Raina's heart and the right to marry her.

The two had chosen nine of Alaric's men and moved a half days journey from Raina's parents. Derwin would remain loyal to Alaric, but his fame as a warrior allowed him the right to form his own stead. While they built the stead, they built a family. Two years after they married, Emric joined them, a mirror image of his father since the moment of birth. He was the little prince; all the women doted over him, every man encouraged his inner warrior.

Two years later, Aria joined the family. This child looked just like her mother, small and dark for one of the tribes, and mischievous as any male child. When Emric was not looking, Aria would drag his tiny spear about the hold pretending to be a great warrior. When the other women of the stead would scold her for this, Raina would only laugh, knowing she had started out this way and still managed to grow to be a fine wife. But she did wish she had the freedom to still carry about a spear, imagining herself on the wild hunt.

Raina and Derwin sat at the table with their children, watching young Emric scold his sister for throwing her bread at him, and laughing with Aria at his stern face.

"That is the way of women, Emric. They laugh and tease you, causing more problems than they're worth," Derwin said as he winked at his son. "In fact your mother spent most her childhood throwing mud at my friends and I. Just ignore them, they will usually go away."

Raina laughed, throwing her own bread at her husband. She stood and began to gather the food from the table, the ring of keys jiggling at her waist. A shadow passed across her as she walked past the door. She turned her head to see her younger brother Notker standing in the frame.

"Notker, what a surprise! What are you doing here?"

“Quite the welcome you have there sister. Where is the drinking horn, where is the bench for me to rest my weary bones?” asked Notker as he scooped Aria into his arms. The young girl immediately reached for his sword, giggling with wide-eyed wonder.

“No young one, this is not for you. Swords are for men, or crazy women like your mother.” Notker removed Aria’s hands from the sword hilt and began to tickle her chubby body.

“Forgive me brother, please sit and I will grab the mead. But you must tell me why you are here if you want a single sip,” Raina said as she refilled the horn and approached her brother. He was no longer the young boy that followed her about, but a grown man with a wife of his own. In fact the last Raina had heard, his young wife was expecting.

“Farika should be giving birth in another moon. Mother has asked for you to come home and help. Farika is very nervous and mother thinks your presence will help.” Notker said, quickly grabbing for the horn and drinking it dry.

“I have never met Farika, why would I be of any help?”

“Farika has grown weak and scared. Mother hopes that you may be able to lend her some of your strength; you have plenty to spare. Besides, you have given birth not too long ago and Farika may find this a comfort.”

“Well its settled then. Raina will go with you to Alaric’s stead. But stay with us this night. We have many stories to share, brother,” said Derwin.

“Well, thank you for making my decision for me, husband. Who will take care of the children while I am away? I cannot take them with me.”

“Oh hush. There are plenty of women here who would love to watch over them. Besides, you have been wanting to visit your family ever since Aria was born. Quit acting so stubborn and just consent to go.”

"Fine. I had intended to go, but I would have liked to have been able to make that decision for myself. You do this much too often, Derwin. I know you think that you act in my best interest." Raina said, her fists on her hips and her foot tapping on the dirt floor. She then noticed that both men were covering their faces, trying hard not to laugh.

"And now you laugh at me. Isn't it enough that you do all my thinking?"

"Oh, mother always did wish that they had not named you Raina. She said that you were born with enough courage and mettle that they did not need to call more to you. Get off the poor man, Raina, he was only trying to help," said Notker as he finally exploded into laughter.

Looking at the two men, red in the face and chuckling, Raina could not help but smile at her own expense. Her outbursts at Derwin usually ended in this way, but it still frustrated her that he assumed this role over her.

The merriment and laughter continued throughout the day and well into the night. Before she knew it, it was time for Raina to say good-bye to her husband and children. Derwin had been right; she looked forward to seeing her family again and finally meeting Farika. In her thoughts of home, she did not pay too much mind on saying her good-byes and she would learn to regret that.

Farika's labor went well, she bore a strong and healthy boy. Another warrior would join Alaric's ranks. On the night of the birth the stead celebrated with drinks, dance, and songs. The men grew rowdy and obnoxious, but the women continued to pour the drinks knowing that soon the men would all be flat on their faces and out for the night.

"Mother, I don't understand why we must always pour their drinks for them. Most of them still have two legs and two hands and are perfectly capable of pouring their own drinks," complained Raina as she followed Fereng around the table.

"You know as well as I that the duty of a wife is to keep the hold running smoothly. We keep the food stores, make the clothes, and pour the drinks."

"I know Mother, but it seems I never have any free time, no time to do what I would like."

"And if you had that free time, what would you be doing?"

"Oh, I don't know. I would like to go out hunting with Derwin some days, or practice throwing the spear. Or maybe just go wandering through the woods."

"So you have not grown out of those ways. As a child you were always running about, always trying to tag along with the boys, always picking fights. I remember watching your father teach you how to throw the spear. All the women of the stead scolded me for allowing this. But it always made you so happy."

"Aria is just like I was, Mother. She is always stealing Emric's spear and teasing him. I wish that you could come visit and see her. She is beautiful and sweet, but quite the little trouble-maker."

"I wish the same thing, but with the Romans about, your father is very cautious about any traveling."

The women found themselves standing still, the alcohol finally beginning its work on the men. They sat on a bench against the wall and listened to the bard's song of Sigurd and Brunhilde. As the song reached the climax of Sigurd's fight with Fenrir one of Alaric's scouts burst into the hold. The song ended immediately, drunken heads lifted and came to life, and every eye was focused on the young man.

"Alaric, sir, it is the Romans! They are just two days west of here! They are burning every hold in sight," the young scout said as he gathered his strength.

The men grumbled, shouted, and pounded on the tables. They would have their war to fight, a chance to prove themselves, and they would destroy the damn Romans before they would give up their land and freedom. Alaric commanded his men to

prepare their arms, say good-bye to their loved ones, and mount their horses. He marched over to Raina and took her arm in his massive hand.

"Raina, I will need Derwin at my side. You must return home and send him on his way. I will send Notker with you to keep you safe," he said.

"Don't be a fool Father. You need Notker at your side as well. I can make it back to my hold alone," she said. Raina jerked her arm from his hand. She was not a silly woman who needed to rely on his strength to keep her courage. If she had been given the choice she would have joined the battle herself.

"Raina, it will be a dangerous journey. Romans may be everywhere. I cannot risk your life," he said, but he knew that his arguments were useless.

"Father, I know the woods better than any man here. I know how to use a spear as well. I can take care of myself."

Alaric had Notker ready Raina's horse, supplied her with a spear and Roman short sword.

She mounted her horse, saying a prayer to Odhinn to guide the hands of her father and brothers. Not looking back, Raina rode out of the hold and began her journey back home. Her thoughts were focused on home and her children, praying that the Romans had not chosen to also come around Alaric's hold from the east. She concentrated so completely that she did not realize that her horse had wandered off the path. Soon she found herself at the rune-covered stone of her youth.

The clearing looked as it had six years ago. The ash trees still stood guard; the earth was still bare. But Raina was not alone. Two ravens stood on the stone, staring at her. The horse whined and danced and the air seemed to hum. She knew who these ravens were, for they wore the valknut, symbol of Odhinn. Their appearance meant that He was still keeping watch over her. As a child this would terrify her. Odhinn was known to drive people mad by his presence. But now Raina felt comfort that the god of

war was at her side. She lashed at her horse and sped back to the path, the ravens following her from high above.

As she approached the moor that marked the beginning of her stead, she noticed a dark smoky cloud billowing across the sky. Her heart thumped loudly in her chest, the hair on her arms reached for the dark sky.

She kicked her horse hard and prayed she would not be too late. The horse raced under her body, skirting around trees, leaping over fallen logs. Its skin became slick as it began to sweat. Raina pressed close to its body, hoping to quicken its speed. Its breath was quick and shallow, and its heart thundered.

The horse raced across the small stream, splashing water and mud. It would not be much farther, only a few moments. And then the horse stopped; stopped so quickly Raina was thrown from its back. It whined and danced and would go no further. Raina smelled the burning wood then, and heard the sound of flames licking at its food. No other sound reached her ears. She hoped to at least hear the sound of metal on metal, the shouting of men, the sounds of a fight. At least then there would be a chance. But the silence, that meant it was too late.

Raina tried to stand up, but her landing had been rougher than she thought. Her left leg ached and she could not support herself with her arms, the left one was broken. She rolled to her side, using her working hand to grab hold of a small sapling. Raina dragged herself to a wobbly stand and limped home.

The smell of burning wood now began to mingle with the smell of burning flesh. Ash rained from the sky. Raina clutched at a tree, emptying her stomach where she stood. Part of her wished to cower here forever, wait until her father was here to hold her in his arms and tell her everything would be okay. But there was a part of her that screamed and shrieked and could barely be contained. This part of Raina knew what lay before her; the ruined bodies of her loved ones. This part of her knew that she must

see. Without venturing further Raina would never know who had destroyed what she held most dear.

Raina steadied herself, taking a long deep breath, choking on the smoke and ash. She stumbled in her first few steps, but gained strength as she saw her burning home. Someone had done this and that someone would pay. Vengeance guided her steps as she saw the burning corpses of the livestock and the crisp, black fields. But vengeance could not uphold her when she glimpsed the tiny bodies.

Raina fell to her knees before them, screamed with hate and anguish. Little Emric, still the picture of his father, lie dead with his tiny spear clutched in his hand. Where his neck should have been was a gaping bloody wound, his head almost severed from his body. His eyes were open staring at the sky. A scream was frozen upon his freckled face.

Emric's free hand reached out to his side, grasping for his small sister. She also lay dead on the ruined ground, her head hanging at an impossible angle. While Emric had died quickly, Aria had a slow and torturous death. Her body was bare and smeared with blood and mud. Her tiny hands were full of the hair she had ripped from the head of her attackers.

Raina picked up the bodies of her young children, holding one in each arm. She buried her face in their hair, tears mingling with blood. She tried desperately to say good-bye but her words choked on her sobs. Over the tortured sounds she made, Raina began to hear male voices, shouting and laughing in an unknown language. The voices were deep and hearty, the voices of men. Men who were enjoying themselves.

These were the voices of the men responsible for her children's deaths and the destruction of her home. The honor of her family required full payment for their actions and she was there to see it done. Raina stood on shaky legs and began to circle around the noise. She was injured and needed the element of surprise. Raina knew that in

her attack she would surely die, but she would take as many of them with her as she could.

Their laughter continued and as Raina snuck closer she began to hear the sounds of flesh meeting with sword. What could they be doing? Were they fighting with each other?

Raina crept around a burning building, what had once been the food storage, there she found her husband. The Romans had gathered around Derwin's broken body and lashed their short swords into his legs, arms, torso, and head. They laughed and cheered and stabbed.

Clutching at the burning building for support, Raina replayed every happy moment she had with Derwin. She watched him as a young boy chasing after the men as they left for the hunt. Then he was older, competing with the men in games of skill, always winning, always with a large grin on his face and a slap on the back for his opponent. And then she saw their wedding day, the love in his green eyes, the tender way he had held her hand as he led her to their bed. He had been a loving man, an honorable man, a great warrior, and now the Romans were picking at him like he was a dead piece of animal meat.

What had happened to her children was a disgrace, but common in the acts of war. What she was seeing before her now was beyond anything she could imagine. As she watched in horror, the flames that ate at the building began burning her flesh and from behind cold metal touched her neck; a rough hand grabbed her broken arm. Raina screamed in pain and tried desperately to fight back. But the man, a Roman, held tight and drug her closer to the appalling scene. He whispered things in her ears, shouted to the other men, and laughed. Raina did not know what he said, but she knew from the way the men looked at her what they intended.

The men stumbled in drunkenness and grabbed her breasts and buttocks. They threw their arms around one another and sang. And Raina stood motionless. Every touch, every sneer sent her further from her body. She no longer felt the pain in her arm, no longer felt the sweaty palms on her skin, no longer felt the grief of loss. Raina rose above the monstrous scene, surveyed the damage brought by the Romans, and smiled as she saw the white mares of Valkyrie ride into the hold.

The sound of pounding hooves filled the air, drowning out the racket of the Romans in celebration. Dust and ash flew about in billowing clouds. Wolf-hide cloaks, silver breastplates, and slender spears surrounded the Romans. Nine warriors, nine choosers of the slain, nine of Odhinn's instruments of death faced the enemy.

The hand that held Raina was surrounded by a golden sheen, the sign that Odhinn had chosen him to die. Each man that glowed this golden color would soon find his death by the Valkyrie spear. Raina looked into the Roman's face. There was fear in his dark eyes. He saw in her his death; he saw in her the power of the All-father. He trembled and dropped his hand from Raina's arm, but it was too late. He was marked.

Raina spun, dipped low, reached for Derwin's' fallen spear, spun once more and met her Roman captor. The spear sliced through his heart before he registered her movement. He clutched at the spear, trying desperately to remove it. With one quick jerk Raina did this for him, watching as he fell dead. She stood over him, watching the golden sheen leave, watching as his spirit left his mortal body.

Power surged up in Raina's chest, straightened her broken arm, and broke through her throat in a horrible war cry. Whirling upon the rest of the Romans, Raina called to the Valkyrie, "Serve them up to Odhinn! Cut them down one by one! They fear our power, use this against them! Use the fear of the Alfater!"

The battle maidens responded to her words with eerie battle cries that shook the very bones and nerves of the Romans. Some men dropped their swords to cover their

ears, others sank to their knees in prayer. The Valkyrie destroyed them one by one, the battle cries growing louder and louder until they drowned out the screams of terror.

Another man, young and handsome, ran toward Raina, swinging sword and screaming. Raina stood her ground, watching his racing approach and lifted her spear. Another Roman fell dead at her feet. Each man before her was covered in a shiny golden sheen, Odhinn had marked each one and the Valkyrie would give them all to him.

The fighting continued, blood covered the women's bodies, spilled upon the ground. Two large ravens flew among them, picking the flesh from the fallen bodies. War cries, painful screams, and raven calls filled Raina's ears. And then they were all dead; each and every Roman lay still on the bloodied dirt, the golden sheen gone. The power surged up in Raina, overwhelmed her, and the pain came rushing back.

She fell to her knees, holding her broken arm against her body, crying for her lost children, crying for the disgrace that was now her husband's body, crying because her life was now full of death. What Raina had run from so long ago had found her.

"Bathilda, over here. She lives still! Bathilda!"

Raina looked up from where she lay, huddled in upon herself. She watched as a young Valkyrie ripped the spear from Bathilda's leg and carried her to Raina's side. Bathilda, weak from the blood she had lost wrapped her arms around Raina, examining her wounds and calming her spirit. Two large ravens landed nearby, focused on the women.

"Bathilda, you are injured. You must rest, there are more Romans to the west," said Raina.

"Raina, this was my last fight. I will die here today and you will lead the Valkyrie in their battles."

"I cannot be a Valkyrie. I had a husband, I had children! I am no longer a maiden!"

"You cannot ignore the raven's call any longer Raina. Nineteen years ago, Odhinn came to us and told of a child of strength who would lead the Valkyrie after my death. That child is you, Raina." Bathilda shifted her weight, reopening her wound. Blood began to flow again, and her grasp on Raina became weak. "Your strength surpasses even mine. You fought me even as a child, and your strength won. But look at where you are now, Raina. Your family is dead and once again you are among the Valkyrie."

Raina cringed, knowing Bathilda spoke the truth. She had denied her destiny because she had known she was strong enough to defy Bathilda. But in the process, she had denied who she really was.

"Raina, only another Valkyrie could have stood up to me at such a young age. You are a Valkyrie, chosen by Odhinn. There is no way to deny it and today you proved that you could lead the Valkyrie against the Romans."

The weight of her words fell upon Raina, but they filled her with strength rather than fear. She would no longer deny her destiny. She was now married to Odhinn, his instrument of death, his chooser of the slain. His Valkyrie forevermore.

Standing Up

Johnny Grant lay in bed on a beautiful summer night in August. There was a thin sheet covering him, and his courage sat hard and silent on the floor below. He thought about the object; thought about the whole day that had brought much and started as fresh as rain. The day started with love. It ended with the object on the floor, the one he didn't really need at all, and the moon beaming down on his family's newly rented house. It ended with the bright stars of promise shining bright and steady.

Johnny began the day falling in love at the front desk of the Merton Public Library on the twentieth of August, 1985. He was thirteen, what he considered to be an unlucky year of life for anyone. There was the numerology of it, of course – the bad luck – but there was also the fact that he was new to this dusty Iowa town.

It had been the year of the move. It was the year his mother and father filed bankruptcy in Los Angeles and decided to make a clean start. Johnny's father, Harold Grant, had also stood up to his mother on the idea of pulling up stakes. It was a year of firsts.

The move was his father's idea. That surprised Johnny, because he believed that his father had closed shut. To his mother, his father had been a wet sponge that had been left outside on a hot summer day. The sun would rain down, and the sponge would shrivel until

there was nothing left but a little crust-ball. His mother's temper had always provided the heat, and his father had closed up to her. To him, he had always been open, and it was one of the many reasons Johnny loved him so much. It was also the reason Johnny felt sorry for him.

Johnny thought the idea must have shocked his mother, too, because Sara Grant didn't protest at all. She didn't get angry. She didn't yell and scream. She just agreed. It was the first and last issue he could remember his parents agreeing on. They decided, and they moved.

One month later, in July, Harold, Sara, and Johnny stood among overstuffed cardboard boxes in an old Merton Victorian house painted gunmetal gray with tired powder blue trim. Johnny's mother told him that they had to cash in his savings bonds to pay the rent deposit, and his father would have to work a lot of odd jobs for a while to make ends meet. Johnny was too busy trying to fit in his new surroundings to think about any of that.

The following month, on this day in a year of firsts, Johnny fell love struck at the library looking up for a copy of Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell. It was a kiddy book; he knew that, and he made sure to wedge a few grown-up books in with it. On the very bottom of his check-out stack was a Hemmingway. Added to that was a book by a guy named Jack Kerouac. He had never heard of Jack before, and he hoped by the last name that the guy wasn't a commie. The cold war was thawing, but Mr. Gorbachev hadn't torn down that wall yet. Johnny definitely didn't want to read any commie books. Maybe he's Chinese, Johnny thought. China was communist, but they were a higher class of commies. Of course, they named their children Ling or Tin-pia, not Jack.

No matter the author's nationality, the title of the book appealed to him.

The title said everything he felt since coming to Iowa: on the road. He was a traveler here, after all. He was a stranger, and he hoped Mr. Kerouac would sympathize with that.

These books were also rather thin, and that was good. He liked thick books, but it took him too long to read most of them and he sometimes lost interest. He stood at the front desk with his trio of selections, and gazed into the bluest eyes he had ever seen. To him they were the color of the sea.

"Did you find everything you were looking for," the voice from just below those eyes asked him. He just stared in silence, locked in a sort of hypnotic state. The woman waited for a second and then frowned in a way that was not unpleasant to Johnny at all. She squinted a bit, and her little nose wrinkled up. It was the most adorable thing he had ever witnessed in his short life.

"Young man?" she inquired. "Have you found the books you were looking for?"

He looked up at the beautiful face, and saw the woman with the dusty blonde hair cascading over the shoulders of her light green blouse smiling a little at him, mysterious and almost playful.

"Yes ma'am," Johnny stammered. He felt stupid and nervous looking up at this woman that could be twice his age. He also felt small, like an ant that expected to draw the attention of an over-flying airplane.

"Do you have your library card with you?"

Did he ever. He had gotten that within the first week of arrival. He had marched downtown with his mother and had gotten a card from Mrs. Emgarten, the old hag librarian with the bullet-proof gray hair pulled into a bun and a disdainful look of contempt

on her face. This new, heavenly librarian was nothing of the sort, and he slapped his card on the desk. He hoped his promptness would impress her, if nothing else.

“Well,” she said with what he hoped wasn’t false admiration as she inspected his books and looked at the name printed on his library card. “These are some very mature titles you have here. Have you ever read a Hemmingway book before, Jonathon?”

She, an adult, had referred to him as Jonathan, and he was now completely smitten. He could picture in his mind their entire future together. He could see her waiting as he withstood the pangs of puberty to emerge as the man of her dreams, him being eighteen or twenty and she on the gentler side of thirty. He could see their children playing in the backyard and him coming home to a nice meatloaf dinner. His brain was progressing to their grandchildren when she interrupted.

“Jonathon? Have you?”

“Yes,” he lied. “I’ve read lots of Hemingway. I like Hemingway a great deal. I’ve read all types of Hemingway.” Please don’t ask me about Hemingway, he prayed. She glanced at him and stamped the inside cover.

“Well then, Jonathan, please return those books on September 10th.” She gave him that little smile again, the kind that he was quite sure Helen of Troy gave to the Greek Navy, and he nodded back. She then returned to her sorting from a black metal cart to the side, and Johnny stood stock still with a dopey grin enveloping half his face.

She sorted books for a minute before she looked up again. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Will you marry me, he thought. “No ma’am,” he said. He could feel his cheeks burning again. “Sorry, ma’am. Thank you.” With that, he turned around quickly and walked toward the door. Let me find a boulder to hide beneath, he thought.

“Jonathan,” she called out after him. He stopped in mid stride and spun around like a ballet dancer on speed. “Calling me ma’am is very polite, but it just won’t do. I’m not that old yet, you see, and I never will be. You can call me Angie if you want.”

“All right,” he said, and the corners of his mouth turned up. “All right, . . . Angie, and you can call me . . .” You can call me what, he wondered. Jonathan was nice to hear out of her mouth, but it wasn’t him. On the other hand, Johnny was a little boy name. His mother had called him John Boy occasionally, and that he detested. “You can call me John.”

“Well John, tell me what you thought of The Old Man and the Sea when you finish it. I’m a little too busy to read as much as I want, and I sometimes like to be filled in on the ones I miss.”

You’re a little too busy doing what, he wanted to ask her, but she returned to her sorting and he thought it best to leave on a high note. He walked out with the books under his arms and a smile to light up the sky.

Johnny hadn’t walked two blocks before his smile fell like a fifty-pound sack of flour. He lost his cheer when he rounded the corner from Main Street, on to Maple, and walked right into the Flannery twins.

His was shrouded in an euphoric fog, and he literally stumbled into Billy Flannery. At least, he was pretty sure it was Billy. Billy was the one with the scar. Brian was the one with the missing front tooth.

In all other respects, the Flannerys were identical, with matching mops of red hair and little black ball-bearing eyes. They were both juniors at Merton High School, and were the punk scourges of town. They both hated Johnny, and neither was bashful about it.

"Hey faggot," Billy said. He spit when he talked, and a small drop of saliva splattered against Johnny's forehead. "Better watch were the fuck you're going. We ain't like them pussies out in L.A. You bump into us, you bump into an ass-kicking."

"Sorry," Johnny muttered, and kept his head lowered. He tried to look remorseful while his eye darted around for a sign of help. Maybe some kindly townsman would stroll over and break this up or the Flannery's mother would drive by and call off her mangy pups. Maybe his father would drive by. This *was* part of his delivery route, after all. Instead, Maple Street was empty.

"You bet your ass you're sorry," Brian Flannery piped in. He also spat when he talked, and the gaping hole in his teeth acted as a sort of spout.

"I'll pay closer attention next time," Johnny said. All he wanted to do was get by before they decided to have a go at him. The twins had beat up the majority of the children in Merton, and they hated outsiders even more than their own.

"You better pray there is a next time," Brian said, his saliva fountain gushing out. "We might just have to teach you how to pat attention." He nudged his brother and they both laughed. They sounded like hyenas barking, and a small drop of spittle ran down Brian's chin.

Johnny's imagination, which usually served him so well, became a cerebral Benedict Arnold. He saw the brothers laughing, both wearing identical white tee shirts, and the image of Baby Hewey and Baby Dewey popped into his mind. They looked like the drooling,

plump siblings, sans diapers and duckbills, and Johnny let out a little laugh. It wasn't a big laugh, no guffaw, but it was enough.

Johnny went to put his hand over his mouth, trying to muffle himself, but Brian's fist beat him to it. In a blur, Johnny felt a crack against the left side of his jaw, and he dropped to the ground. There was no immediate pain, just a sort of shock. Johnny instinctively brought up his arms, and they blocked the kick from Billy. His books fell to the concrete, and he saw the picture on the cover of The Old Man and the Sea gazing back at him. The old man on the cover looked battered, Johnny thought, and then felt another strike at his face. Then, the jaw did hurt. He let out a little cry, and tried to get up.

"Think we're joking, you big city pussy." Billy spit out the words between swings of his feet. Johnny stayed covered up, absorbing the blows and trying to regain his feet. Then he heard one of the brothers scream.

Johnny looked up and saw his father with his massive hands wrapped around Billy Flannery's throat. Beyond that, he could see the family sedan along side the curb, still running, and the driver's-side door hanging wide open.

He had never seen his father angry, and the shock of that hit him harder than any kick or blow. His father, in fact, was beyond angry. Veins stood up on his neck as he squeezed, and he had his teeth barred like some wild animal.

"How is it," Harold growled. Billy just gave out a strained scream, and Brian stood motionless watching his brother being choked. "If you ever touch my son again I will never stop squeezing. Never." With that said he let go.

Billy coughed, and the two brothers scampered across the street. When they had gotten a safe distance away from Harold, who was staring at them and clenching his fists, they slowed and turned around.

"Faggots," Brian yelled back. Johnny could see the spit leave his mouth. "You'll pay for this."

Harold took a step towards them, and they darted around the corner and out of sight. "Good riddance," he said. Then, he turned to Johnny, who was now standing up and staring back at him.

"Are you all right, son?"

"I guess," Johnny muttered. He was not all right. He was ashamed of himself. His father had seen him getting beaten up, cowering on the ground, and Johnny felt like a failure. "I didn't want to get into a fight."

"I know son," Harold said as he put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Those boys go around just looking for trouble."

"I'll try to steer clear next time."

"We'll talk about this later," Harold said, and he leaned forward and spoke into Johnny's ear. "We'll talk about it man-to-man." Then, he stepped back again and put his hands in his dark jean pockets. "I need to be off to run some errand for Murph this afternoon. Don't worry, they won't give you much trouble for a while. Hop in and I'll give you a ride home."

"No thanks," Johnny said. He could feel his jaw beginning to swell, but he thought that having to look his father in the eye for even one more minute would be unbearable. His feet could take him where his courage couldn't.

"All right," Harold said, and patted Johnny on the shoulder. He didn't say another word, and got back in the car and drove towards Murphy Williams General Store. Johnny stood, and watched as the familiar blue fender with the 'Beggin' for Reagan' bumper sticker grew smaller, then disappeared.

When he was certain that his father was out of sight, he let a renegade tear slip out. Others were in there, and they might have come gushing down his cheeks like a geyser. They came close, painfully close, but before they could, Johnny received the most painful blow of the day.

A snarling red Mustang convertible with ash white flames detailed on the doors whipped around the corner from Main Street. A young man with no neck and a long main of black curly hair crawling down to his shoulders was driving. Sitting next to him, looking as beautiful as Johnny had first seen her, was Angie. The two of them were laughing and neither one noticed him standing on the sidewalk as they drove by.

"Too busy indeed," Johnny hissed, remembering her words at the front desk. He turned without looking back, and walked home. His jaw ached, and his pride ached even more.

"My little bookworm has returned," Sara Grant said as Johnny walked into the kitchen with his three new books under his arm. She was slicing green bell peppers, keeping one eye on the cutting board and one eye on him. Johnny thought she looked very old standing there. She looked for an instant like an old grandmother preparing Sunday dinner on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

He said nothing and put the books down on the kitchen table. There was a stack of catalogs resting in the middle. One of his mother's favorite activities was catalog window-shopping. She never bought anything out of them, (she said that his father could never get a good enough job to buy the things she deserved) but she would often sit down and dream

her way through them. She would take one of her legal pads, and she would scribble down a list of each item of value to her. The list was exorbitantly long, with chic women's clothes down one column and furniture down the other. There were other lists on the tablet, of course, but this was the list on top. This was the one she paid most attention to.

He often wondered what else was on that tablet. His mother was a woman of many lists, and he suddenly felt tired thinking about it. When he looked back up at her, she had turned her attention from him and was slicing in earnest. She didn't look like Norman Rockwell had painted her anymore; she looked like a very pretty woman with old eyes. She looked like his mother again.

"More science fiction crap," she asked. That was her usual way of asking what he read. She had told him to stay away from books like Payton Place or Valley of the Dolls, and so he had vowed to read those two during Christmas vacation. He could hide them in his room.

"One's about an old guy that likes to fish," Johnny said, and winced. His jaw still hurt, and he knew that the Flannery brothers would be waiting for him some night to finish their work. He didn't want to tell his mother this, though. His father would speak to him, 'man to man', as he said, and that almost always meant that it was a topic Johnny should not tell his mother about.

Johnny told his mother as little as possible, because telling her things was like using the magic 8 ball in his room. He never knew what answer would emerge from the murk. He didn't tell his father everything either, but he told him a lot.

His mother sliced, and he grabbed his books off the table and headed up the stairs. His father would be home in a few hours from doing his odd jobs, and then they would talk.

They would talk man-to-man. Until then, Johnny would read and simmer over his lost library love.

Johnny had gotten through a quarter of Hemmingway before he heard the sedan pull into the driveway and the engine quit. He looked up from Santiago's little struggle and saw the digital alarm clock sitting on his dresser next to the magic 8 ball. It read 5:30 PM.

He heard the squeak of the driver's door open, followed by the sound of his father clearing his throat and a slam of metal against metal. Johnny got up and went to his window. He peered down and saw that his father had a large brown paper bag the size of a gunnysack, and was walking toward the garage. Johnny trotted down the stairs and out of the house before his mother could say a word.

He met his father at the side door of the garage, and opened it. Harold smiled and the two of them walked inside. They were quiet for a few minutes, and Johnny watched his father straighten up some tools and set the bag down on his workbench. Johnny tried to brace himself for their talk. He knew that his father would not be happy about the fight. His father hated violence of any sort, which made his actions on the corner of Maple and Main even more astounding. Johnny had heard the 'turn the other cheek' speech numerous times.

"How do you feel," his father asked. "Anything still hurt?"

"I'm fine," Johnny replied. His jaw was screaming, and he had envisioned beating the stuffing out of both Flannerys and Mr. Mustang. They were temporary hurts, he knew, and he let them rest with himself.

"You know how I feel about violence?"

"Yes," Johnny replied.

"Good," said Harold, and he reached into the enormous bag on the workbench. "I want you to keep that in mind." Then he pulled out a bat, a Louisville Slugger, and he handed it to Johnny. "I saw the twins down at the park fifteen minutes ago. There was no one else there, and I doubt that there will be for a while. It's a hot day to be out."

Johnny looked at him dumbfounded.

"Always look for an out," Harold continued. He placed his hands on Johnny's shoulders, and looked him straight in the eye. His voice was deep, and steady. "Always try to avoid a fight, because nobody wins if you have to. Sometimes though, you have to stop running and take a stand. If you don't stand, you'll be chased all your life. Do you hear me on this?"

Johnny nodded. He was more frightened than when he was being beaten, but he understood completely. He closed his hand around the bat, feeling the cool hard wood.

"I'm going to go in and wash up. I'll let your mother know that you went out. Of course, she'll want to know where you went, and I'm too tired to sass her. You don't worry about your mom. I'll take care of it. Lord knows her and I have fought about worse."

Johnny's father smiled to himself, like a man who told a joke that only he understood and that was not entirely funny.

"You have a choice," his father said as his face grew somber again. "You always have a choice. No matter what you decide to do, I love you . . . and I'm proud of you." His father stood still for an instant and then walked out of the garage. Johnny stayed behind, hefting the wood, and the weight of his soul.

Johnny lay in bed that night, under the thin sheet, grinning. His bat rested under his bed, and he knew he wouldn't need it anymore. Maybe he didn't need it to begin with, but that was something that was best left unanswered in his mind.

His father was right about things. First off, he was right about the Flannery twins. They were down at the park, just the two of them smoking cigarettes and laughing. They paused when they saw Johnny walking toward them that afternoon, and then they laughed even harder.

"Well," Brian called out, "looks like we got a little score to settle with our little faggot." Then, Johnny brought the bat out from behind his back, and they stopped laughing.

"Until you leave me alone," Johnny said as he gripped the pine with both hands, "I'm going to come after you with this every day, so help me God and sonny Jesus." Johnny's eyes were blue chips of ice as he raised the bat over his head and barred his teeth.

The twins looked at each other, back at Johnny, and ran like hell. They didn't turn around, and never slowed down. Johnny watched them flee, and laughed. Then, for reasons he only partly understood, he cried.

His father was right about standing, too. People need to take a stand. Johnny was glad he never had to swing the wood, didn't know if he even had it in him, but he knew that after he stood up for himself it wasn't necessary.

He also realized that his father was not the shriveled little sponge he had mistaken him for. Harold Grant knew when to stand up, and when to let the trivial things wash away like rain. Johnny realized that his father was a strong man, in every way that mattered. On this day of firsts, all Johnny wanted to be was more like him.

That night, Johnny dreamt about Hemmingway's Santiago and the little boy and the great fish on the sea. He dreamt about his father. He even dreamt about a battle between himself and Mr. Mustang, where he chased the black haired villain away and Angie the Librarian swooned into his waiting arms. And why not, for on this day, Johnny Grant learned how and, more importantly, when to stand up.

The Feminist's Daughter

Rachel Jenkins' earliest memory was attending a protest rally with her mother. Charlotte "Charlie" Jenkins was a feminist, had been since her days at Berkeley in the early seventies. A loudly radical feminist. Charlie had inherited a big sprawling house, along with a big sprawling fortune, when her parents died in a car accident in 1971. Instead of working, her days were filled with planning these rallies, and executing them with noise, style and precision.

The protest rally Rachel dimly recalled had been outside a waste treatment plant in their hometown of Riverton, NY. It was known around town that the men that worked there held all the cushy management and supervisory positions, while the women were always reduced to packaging, bottling and all the other menial, low paying jobs. Rachel had only been four at the time, and really only remembered the screaming and chanting, the big pieces of poster board with bold, black lettering, and her mother whipping the women into a frenzy with her loud, booming voice.

In all actuality, Rachel had been quite frightened at the time, but her childhood thus far had been full of bizarre incidents, usually led by Charlie's booming voice. In the years to come, she would become accustomed to being the odd one out in any group. She had no memories of family gatherings, birthday parties or Easter egg hunts. She had no "traditional" memories of Mom and Dad during holidays. According to Charlie, "Dad" had left immediately upon hearing that Charlie was expecting his child, and Rachel only heard Charlie mutter that the man was a "no good bum" when she once falteringly asked her mother about him. Her mother had her meetings, her rallies, and her pamphlets to tend to; more to the point, holidays were not on her priority list. So no puppies springing out of stockings, no milk and cookies left by the fireplace, no father smiling benignly as his

daughter opens her gifts, just Rachel and Charlie and Charlie's weird friends. Due to the immense wealth of the estate of Charles and Linda Jenkins, Rachel's mother didn't have to work to feed and clothe herself and Rachel. Their home was a retreat of sorts, full of women who came to commiserate and help further the "movement".

"Any woman, whose life has inevitably been ruined by a man," Charlie had decreed, "will always have a place with us."

"A den of freaks and lesbians," Rachel had once overheard a woman at the supermarket whisper to her friend when she and Charlie had walked by. But Rachel always privately referred to their guests as "The Handout Club."

The Handout Club, at any given time, *did* have a few lesbians and some women who could only be thought of as freaks, but it generally consisted of a group of women who ranted and raved about the lot in life they had been dealt at the destructive hands of men. So they stayed in Charlie's house, ate Charlie's food, watched Charlie's television, and made all the various paraphernalia that Charlie's next rally or demonstration required.

Rachel had always wondered what Charlie would have done if she had been born a boy, but she lacked the nerve to ask. Growing up in the hands of such an opinionated, passionate woman, Rachel's nature was a polar opposite. Timid and shy, she rarely engaged in conversation with any of the Handout Club, and she only spoke to her mother when she had to. However, Rachel did have a spark of anger inside her, stemming from being cheated out of any semblance of the normal life she saw her classmates at school enjoying. She felt condemned to a life of being different, that weird kid of that weird lady. Charlie was tall, blade-thin and attractive, with smooth honey-blond hair and gray eyes. Her features were plain and unexciting, but she would never be considered ugly. If Rachel knew the exact way to describe her, she'd call her a handsome woman. Rachel, on the

other hand, grew up to look so different from her mother and the pictures she had seen of her maternal side of the family that no doubt her petite, darkly beautiful features were from No Good Bum. Her hair was black, glossy, and curly, with an extremely prominent widow's peak accenting her heart shaped face. Her dark blue eyes were in direct contrast to Charlie's light gray eyes. Her looks had consequently damned her to be the recipient of countless lectures of the evil of men, and what a man thinks when he sees a pretty girl. Rachel really didn't understand the lectures, and Charlie, in her zeal, never realized she had sheltered Rachel from men to the point of Rachel having absolutely no reference point to be able to understand Charlie's tirades. Rachel knew from Charlie that men, upon seeing a pretty girl, thought only of One Thing, but she didn't know what that one thing was. The One Thing was evil, and Could Get A Girl In Trouble, but Rachel had no idea what trouble it was. In any case, Rachel felt perversely pleased that whenever her mother looked at her, Charlie would be reminded that a man had been in her life, if only to produce Rachel. Never, at any time, had there been a man around. The only men Rachel saw were strangers at the market, or some teachers at school.

Rachel harbored the secret belief that No Good Bum had fled out of self-preservation, not irresponsibility, but she (of course) never voiced *that* thought to Charlie. The shyness and timidity she felt was a reflex action to contrast her mother's radical crusade and booming voice. Rachel had a few friendships here and there, but Charlie always managed to offend the friend's parents, and then the child would be forbidden to play with Rachel anymore. There was a girl named Suzy who had once been Rachel's best friend when the girls were in third grade. She was, that is, until Charlie, during a sleepover, expounded on the legal slavery of housewives and encouraged Suzy to never

fall into the trap. Furthermore, she suggested that Suzy's mother should free her own self from the slavery and join the movement.

The sleepover ended Rachel and Suzy's friendship with a bang, though Rachel did have the guilty pleasure of hearing Suzy's mother tell Charlie what she thought of the movement. "Brainwashed," sniffed Charlie. "She'll change her mind one day, you'll see."

So on it went, throughout Rachel's childhood and teen years, through the sexual harassment explosion in the 80's, through many rallies, pamphlets and members of the Handout Club. The teen years proved to be the toughest for Rachel, largely due to Charlie's increasing intervention into any situation she perceived as offensive. Charlie had (admittently unknowingly) caused the demise of at least twelve potential friendships by the time Rachel began junior high school. Since then, Rachel abandoned any attempts at friend making, being a shy girl anyway, and focused on her academics. She longed for the day that she could go to a college far away from Charlie, the Handout Club and the movement. If Rachel had to single out the most spectacularly embarrassing incident she had dealt with, it would be an episode that occurred in eighth grade. It began when Charlie discovered Rachel's journal.

The slim volume had been a weekly assignment for the first grading period in Rachel's English class, but she had enjoyed it so much she wrote in it daily, even after the grading period was over. Rachel, who had realized long ago that Charlie could perceive any innocent remark or situation as at least "potentially" offensive, had hidden it between the mattress and box spring of her bed, thinking it was safe since she was the only one who cleaned her room and made her bed.

For some reason, Charlie had experienced a pang of guilt for her dismissive attitude toward Rachel (if she wasn't lecturing the girl, she pretty much ignored her, too

busy with her own life). This had happened before, and in fact it was almost a yearly ritual for Charlie. Last year she had bought Rachel a horse (Rachel was terrified of horses, but how could Charlie know?), and the year before she had redone Rachel's private bathroom (which Rachel had loved- a huge bathtub with separate shower, floor and wall tiles with daisies painted on them, it was beautiful). So Charlie decided this year to buy Rachel a new bedroom suite and matching accessories like curtains, bedding etc. The bed she chose for her daughter was an elegantly carved (somewhat imposing) mahogany four-poster she found at an auction. She bought an antique armoire that came close to matching it, along with rose chintz curtains, sheets and bedspread. In the process of moving the old out and the new in, Charlie found the journal. Which she immediately read, being Charlie. Among the observations of school life, who was "in love" with who, (Charlie noted with a huge sigh of relief Rachel had no loves of her own written down), she found an unpleasant incident where Rachel thought she'd begun her period, but wasn't allowed to leave the class to go to the bathroom. Rachel went on to say that she discovered in between classes that it was a false alarm, thank God. She would've died of embarrassment, she added. But what Rachel hadn't written was that the class she attempted to be excused from was a class so boring that many students had left on bathroom passes, never to return. The teacher finally wised up and didn't allow anyone to leave unless it was an emergency. Rachel, being shy, never took the teacher aside to explain.

Immediately upon reading this entry, Charlie was filled with the movement. She stalked out of Rachel's room and tromped downstairs swearing and shouting. Ten minutes later, accompanied by the Handout Club, she descended on Rachel's school. Leaving her cronies outside to form a hasty protest crowd, she strode through the main entrance and

into the principal's office. The secretary was startled by the appearance of this tall, red-faced, agitated woman, and even more so when Charlie began to speak.

"I demand a meeting with Principal Murphy right now!" Charlie hissed to the secretary. The poor woman's name was Louise, and it was her second week on the job, having gotten the position after her predecessor retired. She jumped up with a look of alarm on her chubby face. Louise was in her thirties, divorced, and about 75 pounds overweight. Her appearance was not helped by her tight cotton floral dress and bad perm. She applied her makeup with a heavy hand, and her red lipstick was caked in the wrinkles around her mouth. Her dark roots were showing along her scalp, contracting with the rest of her orangey blond hair. She had no idea who Charlie was or how to handle this intrusion, and her self esteem simply wasn't up to dealing with someone as assured as Charlie seemed to be.

"Wha...what i-is this in regard to?" stammered Louise. Charlie's face was red and her eyes were fierce. With her height and voice, she was quite intimidating.

"This is in REGARD to my daughter being a victim of discrimination in this school!" Charlie thundered.

By this time Mr. Murphy, the principal, had seen the small knot of women outside and heard Charlie's proclamation to Louise. He warily ventured into the outer office and nervously looked Charlie over.

"Hello, Mrs. Jenkins. How can I help you?" Murphy asked with a sickly smile.

"Ms. Jenkins," said Charlie scathingly. She glared at Murphy. Pointing her finger an inch from his face, she added, "You can help me by wiping that stupid grin off your face and explaining to me why a girl who thinks her period started is forced to sit through an

entire class before she's allowed to use the bathroom! Forced into an embarrassing situation that could seriously damage her self esteem!"

Murphy cringed. He knew exactly who Charlie was, and he felt a trickle of sweat slide down his back. He was a slight man, about 5'7" with receding, mousy brown hair and myopic brown eyes. Charlie towered over him, and he knew he that he would lose strategic points if he let her continue towering over him. He also knew that strategy or no, Charlie would exact her pound of flesh from him, regardless. He had read all about her exploits for women's rights and the hot sweat began to freeze, being replaced by an icy finger dragging itself down his spine. He ordered himself to get it together.

"Follow me please, Ms. Jenkins?" he asked, gesturing to his open office door. Charlie stomped into the office and he followed her inside, closing the door.

A thoroughly bewildered Louise sat down again at her desk. A couple of minutes passed and Murphy buzzed her.

"Please find Rachel Jenkins, she's in eighth grade, and send her down," he implored nervously.

Louise looked up the Jenkins girl's chart and saw she was in her fourth period history class. Fascinated by the drama, she personally went down and got an embarrassed Rachel (she had spotted the Handout Club outside) out of class and brought her to the office.

Rachel felt so humiliated. She had no idea what her mother was doing here. Coming into the office, she heard Charlie speaking in her crusade voice and knew it must be something bad. She closed her eyes and wished fleetingly that she could've been magically delivered to No Good Bum. Nothing could be worse than this. Louise showed Rachel to the door and then scurried back to the safety of her desk.

Rachel entered while Murphy was babbling, "...It certainly is not permitted and had I been alerted when the incident occurred, I surely would have investigated it...." He stopped mid-babble and looked pathetically grateful for Rachel's presence.

"Ah, here she is! Maybe she can straighten this matter out?" Murphy said hopefully.

Rachel sat down beside her mother and said, "Mom, what are you doing here?"

Charlie flashed Murphy a look of triumph. "I am here because of this!" She shoved the open journal into Rachel's lap. "How could you not tell me about this awful incident?"

Rachel looked down at her words and suddenly felt light-headed. *Look at yourself, look outside* she thought. *That's why!* She crammed her anger down deep and adopted a careless air. Shrugging she said, "Mom, it wasn't that big of a deal. In fact, I'd forgotten it."

Murphy visibly relaxed.

Charlie flushed a very deep red. "Forgotten it!!" she boomed. "Probably blocked it, not forgotten it, how could you forget such a demeaning occurrence? I want that man FIRED!" she declared.

Rachel began to feel panicky. "No, Mom! Justno, okay? He doesn't let people out of his class because it's so boring," she glanced apologetically at Murphy, "and nobody will come back from their bathroom pass. It's not a big deal...Mom....please...just don't, okay?" Rachel pleaded, hating Charlie for doing this, knowing that she indeed had forgotten the bathroom thing, but would never forget this! She'd get ragged on about this for weeks by her classmates. By now everyone knew that the nutcase mother of Rachel Jenkins was in the office, and they had seen the Handout Club outside.

"But this is discrimination, Rachel! How can you be so blasé about it?" Charlie spoke to Rachel as though she were a very stupid person.

"Mr. Egan didn't know, Mom!!!" Rachel wailed. "It was a false alarm anyway, I am *not* traumatized...can we just go home??"

It went back and forth for forty-five minutes until Charlie was grudgingly aware that Rachel had no inner scars regarding the "trauma". She stood up to leave, grumbling about looking into a lawsuit. Murphy graciously gave Rachel the rest of the day free to go home with her mother. Rachel graciously accepted, knowing that she wasn't able to face anyone or finish the day, even though part of her wanted to stay at school and never go home. She reluctantly trailed her mother out of the school, burning with humiliation and anger. *Why does she frighten me so?* Rachel thought resentfully. *Why can't I rip into her?* Rachel tried to imagine life without her mother. A dart of excited fear shot through her stomach. It seemed like heaven. *No more controlling every move I make, every person I see...* but Charlie would never allow her to go. She had no money or diploma yet. How would she eat? Where would she go? She had no one to turn to. She couldn't just run away without a plan, either. For the first time, Rachel truly contemplated leaving Charlie and the Handout Club behind, and it really wasn't that scary a thought, but the logistics were not there. Not yet. Squaring her shoulders resignedly, feeling relieved and disgusted with herself at the same time for talking herself out of liberation, Rachel lagged behind her mother in the parking lot. She slowly climbed aboard the converted minibus Charlie and company arrived in and went home.

Sunshine

I am called to the heavy old door
That cover the gaping wound in the ground
I've been told to go there when the storm comes
And the storm always comes.
I wonder what's down there
Left to fend for itself.
I've been told
Don't poke around in there
Imagination fills the space with
unspeakable darkness.
Demons fondling children's dreams--
memories, hostage in the damp.
I peek between the weathered cracks
Deep darkness swimming.
Smelling the molding forgetfulness
I bravely swing the door wide--
Staring into the open scar.
Don't go down there--The adult voice whispers
Inside my head, I think--
I imagine a child's whimper
From below
I slam the door shut and run to the safety of
The stormy sunshine.

Arctic Mockery

Fog of my own breath

Falls into my hands

And drops onto the snow as diamonds.

Cloaked in polar skin

My veins of glacier ice

Shift downward to the Bearing.

Voices calling me

Melt in icy echoes

Falling from the sky of memory.

A painless way to live,

I never thaw to freeze

Or die to live and die again.

No friends to hold on to

An empty glass without a lid

And nothing left to lose.

My breath becomes the wind

The North Star is my moon

And I wear a crown of silence.

The force which bends the poles

The queen who never dies

I'll wave the Arctic's wand forever.

Don't Bring Me Flowers

I wake up knowing that I fell asleep on the sofa again. I stumble into the bedroom and prepare for the night. I push my jeans off the end of my feet and yank on my sweatshirt when it gets stuck under my chin. It gives and both it and my bra fall in a pile beside the bed. I throw myself on the cold, flower-strewn comforter and stretch out in the darkness, feeling along the wall for the heater. My hand hits the on button through no skill of my own and by the small orange light I notice the dial is on nine. It should be warm soon.

Shivering, I clutch the pillow under my head and try to arrange myself in a comfortable position. Without trying I follow the plot of the movie invading my solitude from the room below. People screaming, guns blasting, sirens wailing, confusion, destruction, chaos. The predictable end comes quickly, a predictable hero; a predictable woman clinging to his predictable chest. Another happy ending.

I stiffen as I hear footsteps ascending the stairs. I force my knees away from my chest and squirm to one side of the bed. I'm sweating now and wonder how it got so hot in here without any notice. I turn the dial to four. I hear glass bottles clinking together in the kitchen and the unmistakable thwump of the refrigerator door.

"Daddy", my daughter calls. I listen.

"Daddy, daddy, daddy" she calls softly and eagerly.

I hear her call out several more times as the footsteps fade down the stairs. I don't want to hear, but now I must. Throwing off the blanket and grabbing a robe I go to repair the damage. She's still and quiet in the darkness. I turn on the hall light again.

The room appears surreal. Every doll and toy seems content in its place; the pink and white stripes on her bed are sardonically straight.

I look into her eyes expecting to find hurt but see only resigned acceptance. She seems mature for her age. She hides her feelings as if she's lived much longer.

"Who turned out the light?" I ask as if I don't know.

"Daddy"

Were you scared? I ask.

"No"

I smile knowingly.

"A little" she admits.

Back in my nullified bedroom I try lying on my stomach but can't get comfortable.

Lace-kissed panties audaciously scratch my hips and cling to the furrow of my back.

I used to love sleeping nude. I was unencumbered, free, and comfortable being me. Now I hesitate, wondering what message I might send. I leave them on, roll onto my back and stare into another black hole. I remember the flowers he brought me earlier, delicate miniature rosebuds blushing as they opened. The leather-leaf that cost twenty cents extra creates a suitable background for them. He cut the ends off the stems while I retrieved a vase. Side by side we arranged them. Close by proximity only. He smiled and tried giving me loving looks. My sincerity meter didn't twitch. I knew it was a guilt offering. I said my lines. "How sweet, thank you. You know I love fresh flowers." Then, unguarded, "but not as much as I love you."

For one suspended moment there was honesty between us. The first time in many days. I looked him in the eyes silently, knowing he heard what I had asked. I begged

him with my eyes to hear me. His eyes ignored mine and our blank staring faces quickly returned. Words came out of square, unmoving lips and they had no meaning. They stood between us and circled each other like wrestlers vying for position.

He went his way and I mine but our words continued to dance silently for a while until they too were obscure.

I lay on the couch and read the last chapter of Things Fall Apart. An end sweetly realistic. I looked at the flowers he had strategically placed in front of me in the center of the coffee table. A substitute for intimacy. For a while I hated them. Hope grew dim. Then it was gone.

That's where this story began because angst prevails over sleep. He came to bed somewhere during the writing and lay down silently, facing the wall.

Because of his heavy breathing and the number of times I heard the refrigerator open and close tonight I feel it's safe to discard the panties.

Still, I don't feel free, unencumbered or comfortable being me.

A realistic look at what prison life can lead to!

Escapee>> A person who escapes a situation that is unbearable and impossible to live in. . . *See also death.* . .

Written for the World in 2000
By
Mark Muelhaupt

PRISONER: JOE STEWART

CELL>>
A place in which a person festers, sometimes causing serious mind trauma and delusions

. . . a knockout, spellblinding, an instant classic. . .
. must read short story of the year!

-A Paid Reviewer

Prisoner>> A person who is unable to escape from an environment or situation which makes life unbearable and impossible to live.

PRISON>>
An environment or situation that makes life unbearable and impossible to live
-True definition-

There would be no day of peace for Joe. Not as long as he kept bouncing back and forth off these unbreakable walls. This new formed prison was off limits to outsiders. Call it prison. He didn't want to call it that. It was just another lonely place.

Joe Stewart had caused a crime. Involuntary Manslaughter. Most people get a few months and go on with their life. For Joe, it was much worse. Ten lonely years. All Joe wanted was peace. He felt he deserved it. This "peace" strayed from him and left him vulnerable to the echoless eternity of the dark nights.

Life had a new meaning. An ongoing sentence of torture. Eternal nights dampened his dreary mind and flavors of darkness wet his senses until he salivated at the thought of being liberated through death.

It was morning now. Yet the shadows still possessed his diminutive miserable vault of anxiety. An irritating buzz which came from a small box, awakened him. Joe reached his hands towards the ceiling and yawned. He looked around his cell and the invisible became visible as he once again noticed the walls that kept him bound. It usually took minutes for Joe to build the courage to get up, but as the buzz occurred again, his anticipation overcame him as he quickly stood to his feet. Joe crept out of his place and stood at the base of the concrete steps.

Joe reached the top of the steps. He came to a door that was locked on his side. Unlocking it, he stepped into the next area. "Hmm," Joe spoke quietly as he looked around, "Where is Guard?" Joe continued in a quiet manner as he didn't want to alarm Guard. He could've been near or maybe he was just sleeping.

Unlike Joe's vault-like cell, this room was more neutral. Brightly lit fixtures sprawled the length of the ceiling. The room had a similar feel of helplessness and

isolation. It contained a glass, shield-like structure that spanned the entire length of the space.

Joe looked carefully. On the outside, a delicate figure appeared beyond the safety of the interior. Upon raising her head, her eyes met his. Through that old skin, he saw his mother's eyes. His attention became attached to her, suddenly everything around him became blurred. And at the same time, memories of the past danced through his mind. His legs became weak, he became emotionless as he stammered towards the glass, shield-like arrangement, across from where she stood.

Joe sat down across from his mother, who, had short hair, almost all white and a wrinkled face. He noticed the shimmer that she once had in her eyes was now completely gone, almost lifeless. Joe slowly, quietly slid a segment of the glass shield-like barrier slightly to the side. He didn't want to alarm Guard, as the consequences could be uncompromising. The glass pushed aside provided access to a wire screen from which they could communicate through.

That is when she spoke first, in a tone that was extremely soft and hard to hear.

"Hi, Joey," said Helen Stewart. "I'm glad to see you."

Joe said nothing as his thoughts scrambled around for the right words to say.

"Oh Joey, its been so long, I'm so sorry I haven't been by to see you. I've been living in Canada.

Joe put his weight on one foot and crossed his arms. "Canada huh. . . Well, I hope you have been enjoying yourself there. And what brings you to my grave?" Joe raised his voice a little and then retreated from such a tone as he scanned the room.

"Oh, Joey, don't say such things."

"What am I supposed to say? Welcome to my great home."

"Please Joey, calm yourself."

Joe put his finger to his sealed lips before whispering. "Shh, Do you have any idea how long I've been here? Alone. The nights go on forever. . ."

Joe bit his lower lip, ". . .you have no clue. No clue."

"I'm sorry. I know its been tough for you Joey, but I have something to tell you."

"What could you possibly tell me that I don't all ready now. I've had years of thoughts overwhelming me. Do you know what it is like to be stuck here. I wake up in the night, frozen with terror and I can't get out. I can't leave. And no one, not even you, can help me get out."

A long moment of silence seized them. Helen looked long into Joe's ocean blue eyes. She saw the loneliness.

"Look Joey. I have similar problems as you. In a way, I felt like I couldn't escape. . .you know what I am talking about? You know the pain he put us through."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Joe's head turned as he ignored her statement.

"Joe. . .Don't ignore me, don't push me away. We are in the same spot."

Silence stole the air in suitcases.

"Please, listen to me Joey." Helen started to cry. "Joey, please. . ."

She felt the distance from her son who stood forever away, twelve inches from her.

Joe looked at her again, "Tell me mom. . .what do you want?"

Helen pulled a small tape recorder out of her purse. She held it in her hand for a minute, looking down at it. Joe looked at his mother and then at the recorder. He waited

in the uncomfortable silence for her to speak.

"I received this tape in the mail, from your father. . .three days after his death."

A slap to the face, a punch to the ribs, the memory jolted through Joe's mind. Joe couldn't hold back his memories any longer. "You worthless kid, you are worthless like you mother." Joe could hear his father's booming voice. The painful memory echoed through his heart.

Helen pushed the play button on the tape recorder.

"Helen and Joseph," Joe instantly recognized the voice, his father's voice.

"Shut it off." said Joe. "Shut it off. . ."

Helen hesitated as Joe took in a deep breath in which he would scream at the top of his lungs for her to shut it off. She then hit stop before Joe could make another peep.

"What is wrong." said Helen.

"No, I don't want to hear it." Joe's voice boomed like his father's. He shrugged his shoulders and clenched his eyes shut hoping that Guard wouldn't hear. Joe waited in fear as the frightening thought of Guard sent a cold chill down his spine.

"Joey. . ."

Joe leaned on the wall next to the screen. "Mother, I'm sorry. . .I don't want to hear it. I am going to ask you to leave." Joe said calmly.

"What? But, Joey. . .I just, I need you to hear this. Joey?"

Joey's heart was cold as ice. Ms. Stewart couldn't break through. Joe slid the glass shut and looked long into her chestnut eyes.

"No, listen to me Joey," Ms. Stewart was pounding with all of her strength on the glass as she yelled. "JOEY, YOU NEED TO GET OUT OF THERE, I CAN HELP YOU

JOEY!”

“NO, MOM, STOP POUNDING!”

Joe heard footsteps running from behind. Guard had been alarmed. As soon as he saw Ms. Stewart, he jumped towards the Glass with his two front paws. His bark was extremely loud as it made Joe’s ears hurt. Joe grabbed the German Shepard by his collar to get him to shut up but Guard turned around and bit him.

“Ouch you. . .damn dog !” Joe yelled.

Joe grabbed a pan from his nearby kitchen and smacked the dog over the head. A high pitch yelp followed by a thud as Guard dropped to the linoleum floor.

Joe opened the sliding glass door again. “Mom, I’m sorry for getting upset with you. . .I’m just frustrated, you know. Can you come back another time?”

“Yes, I understand.” Ms. Stewart’s lip trembled as she spoke.

“Love you, bye.”

Joe watched her turn around and hurry to her car. As she hurried, the tape recorder fell out of her purse and landed in the grass. She didn’t notice as she continued to the car. Joe was going to yell to her that she had dropped it, but hesitated as she was already through the gate. He slid the door shut and went back downstairs into the basement, locking the door behind him.

Once downstairs, he went back into his room and sat on his bed. His attempt to ignore the past were futile as he began to remember his angered father. He endured much abuse by his father’s hand, mostly by the belt. He use to hit his mother too. Slap her in the face, make fun of her in public. Joe was abused until age twelve when his mother finally divorced his father. Seven long years of abuse. Perhaps longer than that, but Joe

couldn't remember anything before age five.

However, memories of his involuntary manslaughter are totally hazy. He can't remember any details. When the police found him, unconscious, he had a serious concussion. They blame the concussion on the fight that he had been in. Joe had stabbed Thomas just before Thomas hit Joe's head with a piece of wood. Joe spent 2 years in a minimum security prison and was released at age 23.

Joe owns a home and has a small business where he posts jobs on the internet. He orders all of his groceries and supplies from the internet and has them shipped from many different local businesses. He hasn't been outside for 10 years. Afraid of society, he stays away from all people.

That night, Joe searched the internet for the animal rescue league. He wanted to get rid of Guard, the dog. He was tired of fearing him. After a few minutes, the process was complete. The rescue league would be able to pick up the dog sometime this week. Joe could hear its footsteps on the hard tile from his room. It tapped back and forth and every once in a while it barked viciously at shadows that bounced in the night.

A few days later, he heard the loud buzzing of the door bell. It was the league. Joe opened the door and stood back as the rescue league had to use poles with wire clamps to get the dog under control. Joe stood back as he knew that guard might attack him. He could see the evil in the dog's eyes.

After the dog was gone. It was very silent. Joe went back down to the basement and unplugged the wireless, doorbell box that made the annoying buzz. He sat down at his computer and started posting jobs again.

An hour later, Joe stopped typing. He couldn't type anymore. Laying his head

down on the desk, he thought about the tape recorder that his mom had dropped. He was curious to find out what his father wanted to say.

Joe ran up the stairs and into the kitchen. He looked out the window and saw the tape recorder. Joe went up to the sliding glass door and began to open it.

“No, geezus. . . what the hell am I doing.” Joe said.

He closed the door and backed away from it. A memory of his teen years flooded into his head. About the time one of his friends made fun of him for not wanting to play in the woods. Joe wasn't scared of the surroundings, but scared for what he might find. Joe's friend got his leg trapped in a fox trap and now has a permanent limp. Joe has always been afraid of the unknown.

Moments later, a light rain started to fall. Joe had no choice but to retrieve the recorder. If he didn't get it now, it would be broken. He slid the door open, and stared into the rain.

“Why. . . what the fu. . .”

Joe stared at the tape recorder as rain bounced off of it. The hard rain gave him *deja vu*. He remembered segments of the night of the stabbing. He remembered just before he was hit in the face with the wooden plank. After he fell to the ground, he turned his head to the side and saw a body by some trash bags. It had a knife sticking out of its chest. The zapping sound of a florescent bar light echoed in the alley. A red lens filtered the light which saturating the darkness with blood filled raindrops.

Joe's mouth dropped open. He hadn't stabbed anyone. There was no way. He stood up and jolted into the rain faster than a bolt of lightning. He picked up the recorder and turned to face the house. The sliding glass door was wide open. Joe began to motion

to run for the door, then stopped. He looked around at the other houses. He felt so alien.

Joe reached the tape recorder up to his ear and pressed play. He stood in the rain for one long minute, listening to his father's voice. Afterwards, Joe rushed into the house. He couldn't believe what he had just heard. It was impossible. Joe rewound the tape for a few seconds and pressed play.

“... Joe, its been hard on all of us. . .”

Joe fast forwarded the tape a little and played it again.

“... I am going soon, going away for good. I can't stand the guilt anymore. . .”

Joe pressed fast forward for another moment.

“... that night you turned 21. I was there, at that bar. Oh, god damn me, I. . . I am so dead. Joe. . . oh shit Joe, Joe. . . you know I had to live with it for years. I killed him. Joe man, I am so sorry. I hit your face in. . . I am so sorry. Oh, please god, Joe, Joe. Its my fault. Jesus Christ, Joe, I am soooo dead.”

A loud high pitch blast screamed out of the tape recorder. Then silence. Joe pushed the stop button.

All Joe could think about was his father sticking a gun in his mouth and blowing his brains out. Joe felt no sense of sorrow. More of a sense of release. However, Joe wasn't totally convinced that his father was dead. Joe pressed play again on the tape recorder. He heard some loud static for a few seconds, then a voice. Joe rewound the tape a few seconds and turned the volume up. He heard a human voice, his father's voice whispering. “How do you shut if off.”

Joe didn't sleep that night. He couldn't believe that his father would fake his own

death. The next morning he armed himself with one of the hand guns that he kept in his night stand. He was so enraged that his decision was to find his father, if possible, and kill him.

When morning came, Joe went upstairs and made breakfast and polished his silver six shooter. After breakfast, he slipped on some clothes, put on his brown trench coat and stood in front of the sliding glass door. Joe took a deep breath after opening the door. He stepped outside and continued out of the gate and onto the sidewalk.

Joe slowly walked a few blocks, gun in one pocket, tape recorder in the other. He eventually came to a bus stop. Half an hour later, the bus came by and picked up Joe. Joe was unaware that his body odor was awful because he had not taken a shower for a few days. His face was lost in his two day shadow of whiskers. Several of the bus patrons looked at him in disgust as he walked past.

Joe took a seat at the back of the bus. He sat for almost three hours as the bus drove its route. Joe stared out the window as he tried to make sense of everything. After a few more miles, Joe saw a building that had big letters that read, "Stewart and Stewart Law". He stood up immediately.

"DRIVER, STOP THE BUS! STOP IT!"

"The next stop is right up ahead, sir," the Bus driver said.

"STOP THE BUS!" Joe yelled as he reached into his pocket and felt the gun.

The bus driver looked in his rearview mirror and saw Joe reaching for something.

"All right Mr. Here Ya go."

The bus driver pulled to the side of the road and opened the door. Joe got out in a hurry and backtracked to the Stewart and Stewart Law building. He walked into the

building and up to the secretary who was on the phone.

“Is John Stewart in?” asked Joe.

She didn’t reply. The secretary held her finger in the air, signaling for him to wait.

Joe continued past the desk and into a hallway with two doors. He entered the first door, without paying attention to the small words on the door. As soon as he entered, he saw his father sitting at a large oak desk. He was on the phone.

“SIR, You can’t come in here!”

Joe was awestruck as he stood staring at his father. His anger overwhelmed him as he didn’t hesitate to pull his gun out.

“I CAN’T COME IN HERE!” Joe said, as he turned quickly to lock the door.

Mr. Stewart hung up the phone and held his hands outward as if to block the shot.

“WHAT DO YOU WANT! DON’T SHOOT ME!”

Joe held the tape recorder up with the other hand.

“WHY! WHY DID YOU DO IT!”

“DO WHAT? I . . . I DON’T KNOW WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT!”

Joe couldn’t hold back anymore. He cocked the hammer back on the gun. A few angry tears slid down his cheek.

“I think you know.” Joe said calmly.

BLAM, BLAM, BLAM. Joe shot at Mr. Stewart until he slouched down in his chair and blood dripped from his mouth.

Joe turned around, unlocked the door, and opened it. He looked one way and then the other. He started to walk again and then froze. In the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the small words on the door. He turned around and read them.

Jeremy Stewart. For a moment, Joe assumed that his father had changed his name, but he continued down the hall until he came to another door.

The second door read: *John Stewart*. The door was locked, but Joe kicked it open and proceeded inside. On a shelf, Joe saw a picture of his dad and his mom together, it looked like the picture had been taken recently. Joe looked closer and saw the date. It was dated 2 months ago.

Joe looked at the wall where a plaque was placed. It read: "Public Law of Yelm County, would like to welcome newcomers, John Stewart and Jeremy Stewart." Under the plaque was a picture of John and Jeremy, identical twins, shaking hands.

"What the hell! My dad has a brother!"

Joe could hear sirens now. The cops were approaching. He was astonished at his discovery. Instead of trying to escape, he frantically browsed the office for more information. He went to his father's answering machine, a red flash emitted from the phone. Joe pressed play.

"John, this is Helen. I saw Joe the other day and he was very violent towards me. He said that he was going to hurt you. I think we should leave for a few days. Maybe we should notify the police. I just can't trust his temper these days."

Joe heard the police yelling through a loud speaker

"THIS IS THE POLICE, YOU ARE SURROUNDED. GIVE YOURSELF UP!"

Joe quickly opened the tape recorder and pulled the tape out. He exchanged it with the one that was in the answering machine. He stomped on the tape that was in the answering machine and tossed it into the waste paper basket. Maybe this tape could even the score. Perhaps Mr. Stewart could spend a little time in prison. Joe knew there was

no way out. He would just end up in another prison. Even if the police get the tape of his father's testimony, Joe was still guilty for this murder. With that thought in mind, Joe turned the gun on himself. And with the tug of a finger, Joe's prison days were over.

~~Each to His Own~~

(55 Words)

She stood stiffly in the doorway and glared unmercifully at them as they sat happily together around the picnic table, conversing and laughing over beers and potato chips.

“You should all be ashamed of yourselves! Drinking and carousing in the middle of the afternoon!”

“Where you going, Grandma?”

“Inside” she spat “I need a Valium”

