

1996

Expressions 1995-1996

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EXPRESSIONS

VOLUME XVIII

1995 • 1996



FEATURING:
MacKinlay Kantor
"Forever Walking Free"

*The eighteenth volume of Expressions is dedicated to Chris Bening,
a long time sponsor, and Sheriff E.R. "RAP" Lear, her father.*

Cover photograph courtesy of Layne Shroder and Tim Kantor.

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Special Mention:

The following students merit mention for their literary works entered in the 1994-1995 DMACC Creative Writing Contest

- ◆ Julia Bardwell won the award of best overall writer; her contributions include *Forever Liddy*, *Captive*, and *Incantation*.
- ◆ Glenda Mathes won best poem for *Fried Amethysts*; and honorable mention for *After the Rain*.
- ◆ Angela Dunston Johnson won runner-up best poem for, *Gene's Scrapbook*.
- ◆ Ron Jones won best story with *Shooting Crows in Minnesota*.
- ◆ Evelyn Anderson received honorable mention for her contribution *Softest L'I Thing*.



PHOTO BY: KATHY CAHALAN

Forever Liddy

By: Julia Bardwell

For years afterward, Alicia would remember the exact day that she decided to become a Famous Writer. It was hot that day, and her hair had not grown back enough to pull back into a ponytail, so it stuck to her neck and forehead. She regretted her rash experiment and burned the teen magazine that described in detail "how to get the perfect haircut at home." No one quite believed that she had actually put a bowl on her head. But it had worked so well on the magazine model, rendering her long straight hair into a perfect pageboy. Even though Alicia had been careful to trim exactly at the edges of the bowl, it kept slipping on her sweaty scalp, and she had ended up looking dreadfully like Prince Valiant. Luckily, she had also read an article in the same magazine about keeping a positive attitude, and told herself that it would be better after she washed it. It wasn't.

A month later, the shock had worn off somewhat. Alicia hoped desperately that by the beginning of her eighth grade year, still five weeks away, her hair would be long enough at least to be camouflaged by headbands and barrettes. She looked into the three-way mirror on her dressing table, yanked hard at the limp locks as if to make them grow faster, and turned back to her book.

Alicia ran her hand over the crumbling leather cover, wishing that she could be returned to yesterday, wrapped in the magic of the story. She had raced toward the ending, dreading it all the while. The book was *Forever Amber*, written over twenty years before, and she had discovered it in the attic of this farm house her father had rented. It was without a doubt the best book she had ever read. Except maybe for *Joan of Arc*, which she had read at age-nine, curled up in the gazebo behind a California tract house under the Los Angeles freeway, and had lost long ago during one of the family's moves. How anyone could have willingly abandoned this book was beyond her, but she was glad for the former owner's carelessness.

For days she had read, her back to the trunk of the weeping willow in the front yard, knees to her chest in a corner of the moldy attic, cross-legged on a kitchen chair, belly down on the cool planks of the living room floor, mesmerized by the adventures of Amber St. Clair. Young, beautiful and wicked, she did not even know that she was highborn, climbing from her status as village wench to mistress of the King of England; in various chapters, a highway robber, captive wife of a rich but evil old man, an inmate of Newcastle Prison, survivor of both the Black Plague and the Great Fire of London.

The story was intertwined with that of King Charles II

and the Restoration of England, a much drier story by far, but one that made Alicia sure that it was *all* true. She was certain that if she searched the set of encyclopedias her father had bought last winter, moving his family across seven states before the encyclopedia company could repossess the beautifully bound 28 volume set, she would discover that Amber had truly existed.

There also had broken over Alicia the realization that behind this story, and every other Great Story, was a Great Writer. A special being who could take a true story, or an imaginary one, and bring it magically to life through words on a paper. And surely, if she could *conceive* of such a being, she could *become* one. So Alicia decided to become a Great and Famous Writer. What this would entail seemed unimportant.

Before presenting her new incarnation as Great Writer to the outside world, Alicia realized that she must have some proof of her genius beyond a declaration of her intention. She was smart enough to know that such a wild statement would only bring ridicule showering down on her. She would have to produce at least one piece of writing to evidence the Great Talent that lay within her. She dreamed entire novels and stories and poems. They would flow from within her, Alicia Lynn Ludlow, onto paper and into exquisite golden-edged volumes that would be cherished by generations of adoring readers. She squirmed now on the faded pink coverlet on her bed, anxious to begin. She mentally noted the things she would need; paper, pens, something hard to write on.

"Liddy!"

Alicia stiffened in irritation.

"Liddy Lynn! Get in here. Front and center!"

Alicia climbed to her feet. She realized that she was still wearing her nightgown. She had found it in the same trunk as the book, barely worn though old, a shimmering lavender satiny number that had once fitted tightly to some woman's breasts and hips. On Alicia's 12-year-old protruding hipbones and shoulders the gown was not so much provocative as silly. Still she wore it every night, its many layers of sheer nylon skirt slipping cool against her skin. Each evening before bed she would sit at her dressing table with its three-way mirror, brushing her hair and imagining the curves that would soon emerge.

Carol Ann would be annoyed to see that she hadn't dressed all morning, let alone done her chores. But there was no time now to change into the dirty cotton shorts and tee-shirt that lay bunched in the corner.

She stuck her head out from behind her bedroom door. Carol Ann stood in the arch between dining and living rooms, meaty arms folded over her heavy breasts. She wore a nurse's uniform and shoes and thick support stockings, but was a secretary in a doctor's office. Alicia tried to believe that this was to inspire confidence in the doctor's patients. She suspected that it was merely pretentious.

"Liddy, just what are you doing?," Carol Ann said. "It's almost two o'clock in the afternoon, for crying out loud. Where's your brothers?" She sighed, lowered her wide rump into a chair. Alicia noticed that her step mother's thin brown hair had been freshly teased into stiff petals which rose at least six inches from the crown of her head. Carol Ann would sleep carefully tonight on a powder blue satin pillowcase designed to preserve this hair style, but by morning it would be riddled with holes and matted flat on the sides. Alicia snickered to herself. *At least I mutilated myself by accident*, she thought, and only once. *She goes back every week for more, on purpose.*

"Answer me, Liddy. Where are your brothers?" The weight of her lacquered hair must be making her cross. "Why are you still in your pajamas, and why hasn't anybody touched this pig sty? I'm sick and tired of coming home to this, every single solitary day. I work my butt off, you know."

Liddy did know. "I don't know where they are for sure. In the timber with Daddy somewhere, picking gooseberries, I think. We were going to make a pie." She heard the placating tone of her own voice. She moved toward the heavy mahogany dining table, began to stack bowls sticky with sugary cereal, spoons, glasses rimmed with milk. Suddenly, she felt irritated, aware that she was sticky with sweat, her mouth still stale from sleep. Her elation at finding her life's work ebbed, pushed back by her stepmother's displeasure. Carol Ann lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, snapped the top of her Zippo sharply shut, and rose heavily to her feet.

"Your father. Off in the woods, picking gooseberries, while I work. It figures," Carol Ann said. "Next thing you know, he'll come up with some idiot plan for a gooseberry farm."

Alicia knew better than to argue. Her father had involved the entire family in ventures varying from the raising of show dogs, a Christmas tree farm, a gas station, and a restaurant specializing in barbecued ribs, among others. In her twelve years, Alicia had attended over 16 schools, none for a full school year. The schemes always sounded good at first; her father's enthusiasm could be great and was usually infectious, but his plans usually involved more work for others than himself and always lasted less time than it took him to get into deep trouble. Alicia could not remember how many times they had packed and moved in the early morning hours before the light of day or the bill collectors could catch up with them.

She could see that it would be a long afternoon.

Polishing furniture chipped and scratched by her family's countless moves across country, sweeping threadbare wool carpets with an old corn broom left by former tenants, Alicia planned her first masterpiece. Ideas for stories coursed into her head from some unknown source; the possibilities were countless. Tales of kidnapped heiresses, reclusive old women branded as witches, and runaway orphans rushed at her. She watched Carol Ann for signs that her appetite for housework had been appeased. The day was slipping away, while her heroines, gypsies dressed in bright-colored skirts and blouses slung low over heaving bosoms, and fragile exiled princesses with amnesia wandering the world, tugged relentlessly at her, aching to be made real by ballpoint pen and paper.

Alicia's hopes were flattened when Carol Ann opened the pantry door and drug out the creaking ironing board. She set it up in the living room, and assembled her supplies. Rusty folding clothes rack, metal hangers, water bottle for sprinkling; and from the refrigerator, a large plastic bag of damp clothes. She turned on the television set, rolled up her sleeves, and set to work. First came the blue cotton work shirts that Alicia's father wore his night job at the service station. She worked her way through cotton dresses and pillowcases embroidered with tiny yellow flowers and blue hearts, always saving for last the cotton tea towels cross-stitched with days of the week. Alicia knew that each piece meant another slice of time out of her day, for the one thing everyone knew about Carol Ann was that she could not tolerate people "laying around" while she worked.

"Anybody home?" A tall woman stepped over the kitchen threshold. Alicia turned from her position at the sink, where she halfheartedly rubbed at ancient rust stains. "Hey, Alicia. Where's your mom?"

"I'm in here," Carol Ann called. "Come in if you can get in!"

Peggy brushed past Alicia, reaching out to tousle her bangs on the way. "Great haircut, kiddo."

Alicia bristled in irritation. There was a time when she had adored this woman, this sort-of aunt by virtue of the fact that she was the sister of Carol Ann's first husband, whom Alicia had never heard referred to by any name other than "that drunken womanizer." Peggy had adored Alicia as a small child, bringing her gifts of pillow dolls and handmade gingerbread men, and Alicia had been fascinated in return by this giant of a woman so unlike any of her own blood relatives. While the grown women she knew as aunts and cousins were all short plump creatures, Peggy was tall enough to hold up the little girl high enough to touch ceilings.

Her back and arms were thick and muscular like a man's, and she dressed in men's dungarees anchored to her narrow hips by a thick brown leather belt worn with age and western style shirts, a red kerchief always poking out from her back pocket. The only homage she paid to her gender were the gold hoops that hung heavily from her ear-



PHOTO BY: KATHY CAHALAN

lobes and glossy dark hair braided down her back. Alicia had heard it said that she was "no beauty," and it was true that Peggy's features were craggy and sharp, her eyes too close together. But she had the most beautiful hands Alicia had ever seen.

With long, tapering fingers and white veinless skin that refused to be marred by all the rough work she did for a living, her hands did not seem to fit the rest of her. Alicia remembered that Peggy used to stroke her small head with those hands, tucking fine brown strands of hair back, petting her cheeks. She also endeared herself by using Alicia's true christian name, the only adult who did not use the despised nickname of "Liddy." Alicia had labored to be close to Peggy during her visits, emptying ashtrays, carefully filling coffee cups, lingering close by in anticipation of her caresses.

On a humid morning late last summer, Alicia's father had declared that it was time to dress out the chickens. She had been vaguely aware of this game plan ever since early spring when her father had unpacked the crates of madly chirping yellow chicks, packing them into the pantry under heat lamps. Even though her adoring fascination has passed months ago as the chicks evolved from yellow balls of down to feathered birds, she was nonetheless appalled as her father, stepmother and brothers set up a production line for their intended victims. Plastic and metal buckets filled the kitchen, some filled with hot water, some empty waiting to be filled. She and her brothers were instructed to dress in their oldest and most disposable clothes. Alicia stood at attention beside the hot water buckets.

Minutes before the appointed hour, the squawking chickens gathered into a small makeshift pen, Peggy pulled into the driveway. Relief rushed over Alicia. She was sure that Peggy's arrival would somehow interrupt, put an end to, this horrible scheme. She relaxed, and her pulse began so slow.

Peggy stopped nothing. Instead, she gleefully rolled up the sleeves of her blue plaid shirt, wrapped her kerchief around her forehead, and yelled out, "Let's get to it!" She reached confidently into the pen and gathered up one flapping white hen. With one sure twist of her wrist, she pulled the bird's head from its neck. Blood spurted from the wound, covering Peggy's shirt, pouring over her lovely white hands. The chicken's body ran wildly about the yard, while Peggy laughed along with Alicia's brothers and parents. Alicia felt her arms and legs go numb. Sour bile bit at the back of her throat. And when she vomited at the touch of the first bird handed to her for plucking, she was dismissed from duty. Peggy sneered along with the others.

That night Alicia dreamed that she walked into the kitchen and found Peggy in a sleeveless dress, gleaming red scars at her wrists. Alicia knew in the dream that Peggy was not human, but that she had been pieced together from parts of other poor women.

Alicia had avoided Peggy's touch since then. Peggy was

at first hurt and confused by Alicia's barely disguised revulsion, but now only addressed her occasionally and off-handedly. This suited Alicia fine.

"Hey, Peggy," said Carol Ann. She sighed, pointedly pushing the heavy iron back and forth across one of her size 16 permanent-press polyester uniforms. *See how hard I work, see what I go through.*

Peggy responded to her former sister-in-law's sigh as if on cue. "You poor thing. I swear, you never let down, do you girl?" She slouched into the chair. "Alicia, would you get your poor old decrepit aunt some ice tea? It's hotter than Hades out there, I swear. And get your mama some, too, girl. I swear, you people take her for granted. Not even her own kids, and she works her ass off for you all."

Carol Ann glowed with appreciation for the sympathy. As Alicia stirred the powdered tea into tall glasses of water, adding ice at last to the foamy brown mix, she listened to her stepmother's accounts of coming home day after day to endless piles of dishes and laundry and ungrateful lazy children. Another woman's children, no less.

Alicia took her opportunity. Setting a slippery tea glass down beside each woman, she was careful not to interrupt the flow of complaints. She slipped into her room, gathered up her pen and notebook paper, and tiptoed up the back stairs to the attic. Finally, she thought.

The attic had at one time been finished as a bedroom by one of its many former tenants or owners, the walls papered with hideous flowers that may at one time had been colored but now were only one more shade of brown blending with the beige background. It was once again used only for storage, and was packed with the leavings of many families. There were crusted plastic flower arrangements poking from green foam, rotted prom dresses, brittle photographs of couples and families and graduates, books so old that they crumbled to dust when opened. Alicia had sorted through most of it at one time or another, claiming some of the treasures as her own and leaving others in fear of being too greedy, taking too much. She loved the stale smells, the dark, even the heat up there where the windows had not been opened in decades.

She settled in a corner where she had made a pallet of old blankets and pillows. She often came here to read. And now she was going to write. She would join the ranks of the authors whose books she loved. Margaret Mitchell, Holden Caulfield, Louisa May Alcott. Alicia Lynn Ludlow. The only thing that made her hesitate was which story to write first. She began writing out pieces of stories, descriptions of heroines, hopeful that one or another would fight its way to the forefront.

Alicia was vaguely aware of the sound of a car door, heard more voices downstairs. She thought once that she heard her name called, but hoped she was far enough from the danger zone to claim ignorance if need be, and scrib-

bled on. The energy she poured forth seemed to double and triple itself, and she felt sure that she could stay here forever, emerging with volumes of finished novels. She would be like King Midas, every word turning to gold at her touch.

Footsteps hurried loudly up the stairs. Alicia looked up to see her brother Jack in the doorway. His pink face glowed from heat and from exertion. His crew cut had grown out this summer, and sweaty black locks clung to his forehead.

"What?" she said, annoyed.

"Liddy, come down. You gotta see this!" He turned and clambered back down. Halfway, he called back, "Hurry up, Liddy. C'mon!"

Liddy delayed for a moment, hoping that she would be able to contain her curiosity, to ignore the tease. She couldn't. *This better be good, she thought. Damn good. If I get down there and he's got some coon penned up, or some dead rat he found, I'll kill him. I'll kill him dead.*

Carol Ann still stood at the ironing board. Her right hand was folded tightly around the handle of the iron, but she did not move. Peggy sat forward in her chair, the knuckles of her hands as white as her face. Alicia's father was there, too, and her brothers. Her father leaned against the arch of the doorway. He looked ill. His face was ashen, in deep contrast to the khaki of his day uniform, his jaw tensed. Of the five people in the room, only Alicia's younger brother Wesley did not stare at the green glow of the television screen. He brightened when Alicia entered the room. "Liddy, I'm hungry. Make me a peanut butter sandwich, Liddy?" Wesley tugged at Alicia's shirt. "Please, Liddy, please."

The scene on television was of chaos, people milling around in a room somewhere. The announcer droned steadily that "the scene here is of total confusion. No one seems to know exactly what has happened, how serious the situation might be."

"What's going on!" Liddy asked. No one answered.

"A man has been taken into custody. It is almost certain that he is the gunman."

"What's going on?" Liddy asked again. Apprehension tickled at her stomach.

"Senator Kennedy's condition is not known at this time. We hope to have word soon."

"What is going on!" Her voice was too loud now, Liddy knew. Someone would surely smack her, or at least tell her to pipe down.

"Robert Kennedy, Liddy. He's been shot," Carol Ann said softly. "President Kennedy's brother." She was crying now, tears slipping down her face. She didn't bother to brush them away. "Just like his brother."

"They're going to kill them all, you know," said Peggy. "They won't be happy 'til every last one is gone."

The announcer said that Mr. Kennedy was being taken to some hospital, that he was still alive. But at the same time, they played the scene of the shooting. First there was

just a crowd, moving about, making room for Mr. Kennedy, campaign music playing in the background. He was going through some kind of big kitchen, and then there was a crack and everything fell into chaos. They showed him laying on the floor of the kitchen, blood pouring from his head. The scene was played again, and again still. Alicia watched it four times before she moved.

She knew. No matter what the announcer said, she knew, from the spurting blood, from the blank look on Mr. Kennedy's face. The memory of the headless chickens hopping around the yard, trying too late to escape the slaughter, flashed in Alicia's head, and she knew that Mr. Kennedy was dead. It didn't matter what the announcer said, or if the people in this room, and probably in all the rooms all over the world right now, clutched at his futile words of hope. She felt sick now, worse than the day of the chickens. She looked at Carol Ann, sobbing soundlessly at her ironing board; at her father, his broad shoulders stiff with tension; at Peggy, chewing her manicured nails now. Alicia watched her older brother, who sat on the floor, less horrified than fascinated.

Alicia knew that it was not the death of this man that made her feel weak with nausea. It wasn't even the brutal means of his death, but the sureness of it, and the sureness of the deaths of these people. Her people. Herself.

"Liddeeee," Wesley pleaded.

"Come on," Liddy said. She took Wesley by the hand, the grubby sticky little hand that she suddenly wanted to kiss. She led him to the kitchen, made his peanut butter sandwich, to his delight spreading grape jelly thickly to the edges of the bread.

Liddy walked back through the living room. No one had changed position. The television flickered in the growing twilight, the same scenes playing over and over, the same voices droning out words less reassuring by the minute.

In the attic, Liddy picked up her papers, read over what she had written before. She stacked them in a neat pile, and smoothed a blank sheet on the floor before her. Settling onto her stomach, Liddy touched her pen to the page.

The story that flowed now was inhabited by no gypsies or heiresses, no lost princesses. There was, however, one very ordinary young girl, nobody you'd really find special. The thing was, she was surrounded by all these interesting people. People who didn't understand her, or much of anything most of the time, people who could be very irritating and sometimes even mean and petty. These people weren't famous or rich or really anybody, but they were people who were important anyway, at least to the ordinary girl in the story.

Liddy wasn't all sure that this was going to be a Great Story, or even a good story. She only hoped that it was a story that Liddy Lynn Ludlow could write, a real and true story.



PHOTO BY: KATHY CAHALAN

Fried Amethysts

The summer heat
Split the grape popsicle
Into pieces
That plopped to the pavement
And lay melting,
Edges crisped black with dirt,
Like amethysts
Frying in the street.

By: Glenda Mathes



PHOTO BY: MICHAEL BLAIR

Captive

By: Julia Bardwell

Mark
whose shoulders
carved by DC Comix
squared at my approach
said come
dance with me
I will dip you in stardust
and spin you in moonlight

But I lay with you
on my old Toronado
grey metal simmered in June sky
and you reached out
furtive in the dark
Your one slight touch
held me
willing in the night

Dan
whose soft cow eyes
gazed at me
steady and sweet
said come
play with me
I will bathe you in laughter
we will skip in the streets

And Ian
forever losing his glasses
hair pulled back with twist ties
from bread wrappers and
fingers stained black with ink
said come
be my muse
we will make verse
to inflame the gods

But you crept into my bed
uninvited
slid against me
your arm slipped around me
and gently, gently held me
powerless in the night



PHOTO BY: MICHAEL BLAIR

Incantation

By: Julia Bardwell

This is my spell

*With each touch
of moist palm
flesh or sinew
you will burn
with my dry heat*

I will afflict your nights

*Lying in darkness
you will feel my specter
flaming beside you
you will pray for my retreat
and curse my leavetaking*

I will lay out my charms

*You will reel with want
you will find neither sanctuary
nor solace
in virgin or whore
no act will slake your thirst*

I will kindle my fires

*Sorceress
witch
you will call me
I will glory in your suffering
until it meets mine*



MACKINLAY KANTOR 1904-1977

Feature Author

By: Mary Biesk

MacKinlay Kantor had the power to write every story for every one. He could take a situation well known to the reader, and retell it faithfully, but better; without glazing, the river smells cleaner, the cloud sculptures clearer. He told the stories he wanted to tell, but in a way to ensure that it was not relegated to some file on some editor's desk. His uncanny ability to judge his audience made him, and his short stories, marketable for over forty years. The story was the story he wanted told, the style was what the editor wanted; length, language, genre. Despite writing what the editor would buy, he made the story his own. He wrote detective fiction, gangster fiction, down-home folksy fiction, and many stories with surprising, twisting, "snapper" endings, but they were never simply genre pieces. The stories were peppered with characters that were reminiscent of individuals from his formative years in Webster City, Iowa, and elsewhere in his life in the Midwest.

Kantor was the only son of John and Effie Kantor. John and Effie had met when they both attended Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. John, a Swedish immigrant, was a seminary student and Effie was a journalism student. After they married, they moved throughout the Midwest from one pastorate to another; leaving when the congregation discovered that John was impersonating an ordained minister. In spite of this, he remained a charismatic and inspirational sermonist. After being chased from yet another community, Effie left and went to live with her parents in Webster City and with their help, raised her young son MacKinlay, and her daughter Virginia. She would return to her husband briefly, but eventually recognized her husband as a con-artist and divorced him. They joined him briefly in Chicago when MacKinlay was twelve; after that trip, he never saw his father again.

Effie Kantor was the one person who was instrumental in the development of the future writer. She continued her career in journalism, and as editor of the *Webster City Daily News* had her son work with her. At seventeen, he wrote column after column in the *Webster City Daily News*, articles, and editorials, and Park Board Reports. His mother convinced him to enter a creative writing contest sponsored by the *Des Moines Register*. He entered two stories; one he considered a guaranteed winner, the other to conform to the entrance requirement. The guar-

anteed winner, entitled *Pipes*, was a melodrama about a girl who played bagpipes in a vaudeville troupe, and about a Scotsman named John Ross who would not allow his son to marry the beautiful girl he loved. "Purple," the second piece he entered, was an ironic reminder that beauty is often in our own backyard.

"People would read it not only there in Webster City, but all over: forty miles away, in towns like Ames and Boone, and farther across hundreds of miles of old cornstalks and sodden snowbanks, beyond muddy roads that traced past barren windbreaks and big red barns, in Cedar Rapids, in Dubuque, in Sioux City, and Council Bluffs, people would be reading my story." This was his reaction upon learning that the story he had entered as an afterthought had won the fifty dollar first prize in the *Des Moines Register's* creative writing contest.

Kantor wrote short stories to pay his bills and feed his family, but used his novels to truly showcase his craft. His first novel, *Diversey*, was pure Chicago gangsterism. His second, *El Goes South* had all the grit of a late twenties gangster story, but was instead about the life and loves of a man and his children in Chicago, with the serenade of the elevated train creating the background. This novel, and many subsequent others, were laden with dialect. This affectation was not the basis of his characterization; remove it and the characters remain at once vibrant and familiar. In 1935, he made a conscious effort to avoid dialect in dialogue.

Drawing from his longtime fascination with American history, Kantor began writing well-researched, well-documented historical fiction. The first of these, *Long Remember*, was about the Battle of Gettysburg. This was not from the perspective of a frothing Confederate, or a staunch Unionist. The main character was an objective observer, who happened to at the battlefield of Gettysburg to defend the honor of a friend.

His further study of the Civil War, *Andersonville*, was published in 1955. Its research was begun in 1930, four years prior to the publication of *Long Remember*. This compelling, true story told of the Union prisoners, staff and neighbors of the notorious Civil War prison camp in Georgia; the superintendent of which was arrested for the cruel management and maltreatment of the prisoners at the conclusion of the Civil War. This



Kantor as a young boy (age 12) with his sister Virginia and his mother Effie; taken in 1916.



Gravestone located in Webster City Cemetery. Photo taken by Kantor's nephew, James Sour, in 1995.

work earned McKinley Kantor the Pulitzer prize in 1956, and was the third best-selling novel in 1955 and also 1956.

Spirit Lake, his next major historical novel, chronicled the events leading up to the massacre of the settlers of Spirit Lake and Lake Okoboji. Kantor takes the reader into the life of each of the participants; victim and perpetrator alike. When the actual event occurs, it is as if a neighbor is killing a friend. The effect is thoroughly chilling. Added to this are the volumes of research, some original, that verifies every fact.

His last major historical novel was *Valley Forge*. This also was a very well documented chronicle of a pivotal point in American history. Kantor's focus on American history was a natural extension of his lifelong interests; he had long been a fife player, a member of the sons of Union veterans of the Civil War, and of the National Association of Civil War Musicians.

His passions flavored his writing; the Midwest (particularly Iowa), American History, and all things Scottish. Many of his stories were set in the Midwest, many were historical in nature, some were peopled with Scotsmen, and some were historical fiction, set in the Midwest, with Scottish characters.

Kantor did not consider his short stories to be his best writing, but several were extremely powerful. One of these, "Silent Grow The Guns," described the scene witnessed by two small children as they hide behind furniture to unwittingly watch the agreement by Generals Lee and Sheridan to end the Civil War. This short story earned Kantor the O. Henry award in 1935.

While working as a war correspondent for the Royal Air Force and the U.S. Air Force during World War II, Kantor was inspired by an incident that did not occur while he was flying. He had planned to ride along on a particular mission, but the authorization was not transmitted on time. The plane went down and all ten young men on that B-17 died. Kantor survived due to tangled red tape at the Bomber Command and Wing Headquarters.

The event haunted him. He visited Brookwood, the cemetery where the American soldiers who died in England were buried. He began to imagine a play in which the men of Brookwood visit London. After he returned to New York, on a commission from *Redbook*, using a different focus: he wrote the story in four and a half hours. When he spoke of "Forever Walking Free," he described it as the fastest, and best story he had ever written.

Forever Walking Free

By: MacKinlay Kantor

THEN the lights twisted across the clouds, fighting to find something and hold it, and guns started up in the nearest park: resentful bright flashes reflected behind cardboard buildings across the way. Joan felt bereft and vulnerable, there in the Wycombe Road--the roadway itself was so wide it seemed like a moorland, unroofed and exposed.

Ahead of her the little witch-lights of pocket torches carried in other people's hands began to blink and bob more rapidly; other people were running, and Joan thought she'd better run, too.

She left the bus stop where she had been waiting vainly, and sought the shelter of shops and boarded-up, bombed-out hotels in her flight. She held close to the shadow of buildings; already, as the defiant battery in the park barked and slammed, flak was raining on roofs and in the street itself. Joan wondered about a shelter--she'd better find the nearest shelter, though she hated being down there in darkness with frightened children and heavy-breathing old ladies.

When the sirens mourned later of nights, when she was at home and in her own bed, she never thought about a bomb-shelter except with scorn. It was funny, the way her own bed always seemed like a safe place to be in. But this was earlier in the night, the earliest that Jerry had come to town in several weeks.

Between the crash of guns and the remoter, hollower *pak-pak-pak* of shell-bursts in the sky, she heard people laughing nervously across the road. A boy and a girl, both laughing and fleeing as the artillery banged more rapidly and defiantly. That distant girl was crying, "Oooh, Billy--Billy, Billy, *Billy!*" and Joan heard the rush of other frightened feet above the scuffle of her own running.

She heard someone else cry, "Next turning--it's in *there,*" and they must mean that there was a shelter nearby, and so she should bend her path across that open road, though she feared to leave the comfort of the buildings.

It started squealing in the wet clouds, a piercing whistle like someone simulating a bomb sound in a crowded cinema . . . Joan Warrock had heard that only a day or two earlier: a cinema over by Marble Arch; bombs dropped out of airplanes--it was a kind of documentary war news-reel--and every time the bombs dropped and vanished some of the young soldiers in the audience would start whistling. *Fooooo* they'd whistle in swelling crescendo, louder and louder, with more of them taking it up at every breath until she'd covered her ears at the veracity of the sound.

Fooooo the squealing was now heard, aiming right at her,

and she felt one of her cheap stockings jerk below the garter--oh, another garter-run--and the next stockings she bought would necessarily be of that awful utility, non-rationed kind . . . because she didn't have any more clothing coupons--wouldn't have, until September.

She was worrying more about her stockings than about anything else in the world--more than she worried about the whistle sound that stung her ears.

Everything became bright. She couldn't believe there was such brightness anywhere; it was like a thousand lighting flashes rolled into one. Joan imagined that she was away off somewhere, as upon a balcony in a stage set, and from that high post of observation she saw her thin little figure in Wycombe Road still running stubbornly, throwing out her legs in that funny way that all women ran, skipping and sliding . . . why couldn't women run like men? Was it because of their different construction? Surely the legs were attached in just the same way, despite all physical variation . . . she saw herself running.

In the next second she knew, "That was a bomb. It fell. It went off right *here,*" and in wide-awake understanding she recognized the enormous noise that had smothered her, smothered all of Bloomsbury and all of London. She thought again, "Never touched me. It never did! All you have to do is not be frightened; then you'll be all right, you see," and she nodded at her own wisdom as she kept rushing on.

An avenging flash from the park batteries showed her a turning at the left. She remembered this--sometimes she had crossed along that narrow roadway, but always in broad daylight, when she was on her way to her job at the M.O.I. There was an archway--a very old archway, part of an ancient building, curving and protecting. The lane went underneath like a tunnel twisting through a mountain, and below that arch anyone could find safety from flak.

She skated into the alley; the blackness of the tunnel loomed ahead. Flak came down; in the last look she had at Wycombe Road, she saw dazzled little fragments coasting and spattering amid the metal sparks of their impact on the pavement. Bombs couldn't hurt her--Joan Warrock had demonstrated that; but flak was something else.

She tripped over a curb just under the archway, and went down on her knee, and certainly that fall must have finished the other stocking.

Voice said to her, "Hey, sister. What gives?" and a man was there. Through the winking, gasping exhaustion which claimed her, Joan looked up and saw him bending down--she

saw the orange dot of a cigarette in his mouth.

"I'm alright, thank you."

"Here. Let me help you."

He drew her to her feet; he could have hauled her away and mauled her, this strange young man. He could have done anything to her right then, and she would have been unable to resist. "Sorry," she mumbled, and that sounded silly.

"Quite a show, sister! I've been here watching it."

She realized that the nearest batteries had ceased firing; faintly the realm beneath the heavy old archway showed in greenish-white; she knew what that meant. A giant flare hung in the sky somewhere at hand. Night-fighters--RAF night-fighters--were up. When they got close in on the enemy bombers, sometimes they would drop flares (the colour changed every time, naturally, so that Jerry wouldn't be able to discover their code) and in this way they would signal to the ack-ack batteries to stop their chatter so that they, the RAF, could have a whack at Jerry.

Joan saw a gleam of brass on the dark coat beside her. "What are you--RAF?" she asked, and that was foolish, too, because already he had called her "sister" in a good shrill American voice.

"Hell, no. U.S.A."

"I should have known," she said, then giggled.

"Why?" He was laughing, too. "I mean--how come you should have known I was an American? It's dark in here."

"Well, naturally. Your voice."

"Bet you can't tell what part of the States I'm from." And in that moment she felt a cigarette pressed between her fingers. "Well," she thought, "here I go again!" It was a pick-up; she knew that well enough. Woman's intuition or whatever you wanted to call it--

"Let me see, now. You're not--"she hesitated. "You're not from below the Mason and Dixie Line, are you?"

He chuckled. She liked his chuckle. It sounded light and merry and childish; he might be a lot of fun, this chap. Though probably soon he'd want to begin pawing. That was the way it always ended up. They were nice chaps, but invariably they started pawing-- Then you had to be angry, and go home. Then they'd say, "Well, nuts to *you*, babe!" And sulk for a while; then they'd escort you home, usually, like perfect gentlemen, and talk about other things; but they wouldn't come back again. There were so many girls on the loose in London, these days.

"Mason and Dixon line? Say, where'd you ever pick that up?"

"You're not the first American I've met," said Joan flip-pantly . . . See what his face was like, now. In the gloom she thrust the cigarette between her lips and lifted her head questioningly.

His lighter flared. In the bright wash of rosy flame, before her exploring cigarette half poked it out, she saw his

face. He was young--not much older than she--he couldn't be more than twenty or twenty-one.

He was staring at Joan seriously, examining her face just as attentively as she had looked at his, and she wondered if he liked it.

"Well,well! A blonde." The lighter snapped shut.

Joan drew in the smoke eagerly. "Thank you. I like American cigarettes ever so well!"

"I like you--ever so well," he said boldly.

Guns in the park started up again; for a few minutes it was so noisy you could scarcely hear yourself think. The American had his hand around Joan's arm, drawing her back against the heavy stone wall.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Do what?"

The batteries fell silent; there was the thump of exploding bombs over east in Clerkenwell or St. Luke's. "Pull me back here."

"Just to comfort you," he said simply. "I was afraid you'd be scared at all the shooting."

"Oh, I've heard ever so much shooting. You should have been here," she told him pityingly, "during the blitz."

"I'll bet that was something." He still held her arm. She didn't mind, really. Something about his slim, quiet, ruddy-browed face . . . maybe he wouldn't start pawing--not right away at least.

"What's your name, honey?"

"Joan. Joan Warrock. What's yours?"

"Menton--Staff Sergeant J.A. Buster to you."

"Buster? I say, that's your nick-name, isn't it?"

"Everybody always calls me that. But you know how it is, in the Army. In the Air Force everybody always calls you by your last name. They just say Smith or Johnson or Klingburger or Riley or Levinsky or whatever it is."

Now all the firing, bombs and shell explosions alike, seemed moving fatefully away to the east--east and south, down the Thames. "There goes Jerry," said Joan. "Hope he doesn't come back. What a noisy night!"

"There was a couple fell close to here," said S/Sgt. Menton.

"Quite so. That big one nearly got me."

He took out a fresh cigarette for himself and lighted it deliberately. Again she saw his ruddy face: the jaunty, humorous eyebrows, the well-moulded mouth . . . "Oh, not half bad," she thought, and wanted to giggle again. Suddenly, she was selfishly glad that Jerry had come over early this night, while she was on her way home.

"On leave?"

"Well," he told her, "you can say I'm off ops, at least."

"What does that mean--off ops?"

"Off operations. Not flying missions--not now."

"Are you Eighth Air Force?"

"Twelve Sixty-sixth Bomb Group, Heavy."

"How many missions have you done?"

"Eleven."

"What do you do? Are you a pilot?"

He explained. "Look here, I'm not British; I'm not RAF! We don't have Sergeant-pilots in the American heavy bombers. I'm just a waist-gunner."

"Waist-gunner . . . Just what does that mean?"

"Means I'm good with waists." said S/Sgt. Menton, and he put his arm firmly around her waist.

Joan turned her face hurriedly away, though he hadn't struggled to reach it--not yet, anyway. "Come, now," she cried, severely, and she let her body stiffen. "You're really quite nice, you know."

Immediately, he relaxed his arm. "The lady," he said, "is always the doctor--or ought to be. Where I come from."

"And where's that?"

"Call me Buster," he said softly. "I haven't heard anyone call me Buster for a long time."

"O.K., Buster. Where do you come from, Buster?"

"Quincy, Illinois. Gee," he said, "that sure sounds swell. Your calling me Buster." He took a deep breath. "Look. You in a hurry? I mean--were you going anywhere, or anything?"

Joan said, "Going home, Buster."

"Well, look. How about our stopping and maybe having a drink and something to eat?"

She cried in amazement, "Why, this must be the very first time you've been up to London!"

"Oh, I've been here scads of times."

"I say, then. You should know that it's past closing. All the pubs were closed two hours ago; and supper clubs can't serve drink after eleven."

He sighed. "Sister, I know your town better than you do."

"Then--you know a place?"

"I'll say so. Swell place. It's run just for folks like us."

"Why," she declared with false disapproval, "that's regular Black Market. I mean to say, a blind tiger or something like that."

"Look," said Buster, "I don't care what you call it. They're still open; they're open all night. The liquor's swell, the food's A-1, and they've got a swell band."

She was weakening. Swell liquor, swell food--and doubtless he had plenty more of those peppery American cigarettes in his pockets . . . When you live on wartime London rations, you are eager to go to a luxurious supper club, even though there may be more than a hint of the illicit about it, even though you don't go with a boy half so attractive as Buster . . .

"I say, is it far?"

"Over here in Stokemore Place. The Blue Polly, they call it."

In faint-echoing darkness, Joan felt her forehead wrinkle as she attempted recollection. Seemed as if she--"The Blue Polly," she whispered. "I've heard of it."

He was tall and slender and demanding, hung beside her in the midnight. "Come on, Joan. Let's go. You'll like it, I promise you. You haven't had such food in a long time. I'll bet you ten bucks nobody ever took you to the Blue Polly before."

"No. Not took me, exactly. But I rather think--Well," she concluded feebly, "I've heard of it, all right."

"What did you hear? Bad or good?"

She could hear his steady breathing as he waited for her answer. Joan laughed at last, and sank her arm through his. "Good, I guess. I can't remember. But--O.K. As you say, Buster, let's go!"

"Roger!" cried Menton. He swung her around and marched her rapidly away. His feet seemed very certain and assured in hunting their path; it was as if he had traveled this twisty little Effley Court many times, and always in the blackout.

The court swung right toward Black Bush Square and something must have fallen here, too--or else maybe it was only the impact of the great bomb which had dropped in Wycombe Road, the bomb which sought to blot Joan Warrock into nothingness. Glass was thick under-foot: long silver slivers, fine dust and cornered fragments, and all of it catching blue reflection from those angry searchlights that poked and coned across the sky.

"Go easy," the girl kept saying to Buster Menton. "I shan't have a shoe to wear if I cut these pumps! Really, you soldiers have the best of us, you know--issued clothing and P-Xes and all!"

"You'll be all right," Buster assured her. He gave her arm a little squeeze, and Joan didn't really mind.

Air raid wardens and policemen and other people were poking all around and over a big mound of rubble that half blocked the road opposite one corner of Black Bush Square. Men called orders and directions to one another; they didn't pay any attention to Buster and Joan as they went past, though Joan kept turning to look back at that wreckage through the torch-spotted darkness.

"Flats!" she gasped to Buster Menton. "Remember? You should, if you know this district so well. That big block of flats, right there--and the whole corner's gone. A lot of people must have been killed!"

"I know," said Buster. "Folks do get killed, in a war."

It might have seemed callous, the way he marshalled her past. Still, what could the two of them have done? Nothing. The Defense Services had people especially trained for jobs like that.

A short, squat man wavered on the sidewalk ahead of them. He didn't seem to want to move . . . a man in a dressing gown or something like that, and he was bare-headed. "I was inside," he said coolly, to Buster and Joan. "In that flat. Second storey up." He pointed. "Inside there . . ."

Buster halted, and dragged Joan to a stop beside him.



PHOTO BY: KATHY CAHALAN

"Anything we can do for you, Mister?"

"Sorry," said the other. "Not a thing. I'm waiting around for a while. That's all, thank you--waiting around--" He drifted behind them, a squat gray shape rapidly becoming a part of the night as they went on and left him.

"Poor fellow," said Joan. "A bit balmy, maybe."

"Flak happy, I guess," Buster muttered. "That's what they call it in the Eighth Air Force. Well, come on. Here's Stokemore Place, over across. What's yours going to be? I'm drinking bourbon-and-soda," he said, loving the prospect.

"Gin-and-lime," cried Joan, shrill with excitement. "A double!" she added explosively. Buster broke into a bright peal of laughter. He turned quickly, as if delighted beyond words at her enthusiasm, and bending down, he kissed her full on the mouth. Then, before she could protest through the immediate astonishment of it all, he had pulled her along to the door of the Blue Polly. Faintly, they could hear the beat of jazz.

The thinnest possible streak of light shone from within a blast wall. Buster led Joan around an angle of the structure; her shoulder touched bricks, then a door opened and they pushed past a curtain . . . "Buster boy!" Joan Warrock heard herself exclaiming. "I've never seen the like. Really! And I thought Stokemore Place was practically all bombed out!"

A long room beyond the vestibule was choked with people, and others were lined up three-deep in front of the Blue Polly's bar. Such a bar Joan had not seen in years--not since early in the war, before the liquor supply ran so low. Bottles shimmered; believe it or not, there was a gigantic pyramid of champagne bottles. They seemed to be filled with real champagne, too; not just cardboard stooges pretending to be gay, pretending that they were sheerest luxury.

There was a preponderance of RAF and other British Services at the tables; very few Americans. Still, the beaming waiter who came toward them seemed to know Buster Menton; he smiled and nodded, and bowed an extra time or two. Through the din and smoke, Joan heard Buster asking for a table against the wall--one of those little ones, where he and Joan could talk--and she looked down at the old waiter's crisp silver hair all the way to the corner . . . A lot of girls in this place were beautifully dressed--Joan brushed past fur capes and something that might have been honest-and-truly mink--and she was acutely conscious of her shabby green suit, and she recalled that one of her stockings had an unholy run in it by this time.

Stowed behind their little table, she turned to look quizzically at Buster. She saw that he was as neat as a charm; just from his face and his voice, she had known he would look like that. His blouse was well pressed and well fitting; he had an Eighth Air Force patch and his combat wings on their familiar blue oblong, and the inevitable row of medal ribbons which all these American fliers wore.

"Like it, Joan?"

"It's heaven," she said. "I didn't know there was a place like this in all London."

"I'm glad you like it. Remember--I prophesied you would?"

"Righto. And won't you call that darling old waiter back? I'm famished. Dry, too."

Menton ordered their drinks--bourbon and gin-and-lime, as they had planned--and the waiter gave them a neat-typed menu which they studied amid Joan's raptures. No jugged hare or Spam--not an ounce of such stuff listed. There was ham and salad, and cold sliced lamb, and shrimps--actually a shrimp salad. "In season," said Joan Warrock, completely awed, "they'd have oysters, too, now wouldn't they?"

"Absolutely. But I wouldn't eat them on a bet."

"I thought," said she, with a few slivers of precious ice clinking miraculously in her pale gin-and-lime, "I thought that all Americans loved oysters."

"Not me. I'm from the Middle West. We don't have them out there. But"--he spoke as if with all assurance-- "one of the very next meals I have, it's going to be roasting ears!"

"What's that?"

He explained about sweet corn, and insisted that she should not refer to it as Indian corn.

"But you can't get any here, can you?"

"Certainly not. They just have here--well, what they've always had. Even before the Blitz, they must have had stuff like this. But I can get roasting ears; don't worry about that."

Joan persisted in wonderment. "Where? At your base? Where are you stationed?"

He looked at her for a moment. "Brookwood," he said.

Somehow the word placed a chill on her heart; she didn't know quite why. "I guess," she said, "I shouldn't have asked that, should I? 'A slip of the lip may sink a ship.'"

"Ever hear of my place?"

"Oh, yes. Brookwood. I must have known someone stationed there before. It's down south--" she frowned a little. "In Surrey, isn't it?"

"That's right." He grew more expansive. "Lots of Eighth Air Force fellows down there. RAFs, too; not only British RAFs--we've got all kinds. RCAF and Australians--some Poles and Czechs, too."

Politely she put her slender finger against his mouth. "Now, now, darling. Mustn't talk about your Base."

He grinned; he kissed her fingers before she took them away. "Let's talk about you, Joan Warrock. Where do you work?"

"M.O.I."

"What's that?"

"British Ministry of Information. I'm on the telephones. Switchboard, you know."

He asked, "Night Shift?"

"Oh, no. I was at a party tonight. A girl-friend's flat. A

great lot of boys there--from the services, you know. But they-- Well, I'll be perfectly honest; the chap I was supposed to be with--he got to pawing, you see. He wouldn't stop; and I didn't care much for the party anyway. It was a bit dull and more than a bit noisy. So I just slipped out to catch a bus, and then the sirens went . . . Then I met you."

Buster Menton asked, "Sorry?"

"Not a bit of it. I like you."

"I love you," he said, calmly.

She threw him a quick glance, and opened her mouth to say something pert and cynical. But-- Somehow, the way he was looking at her--

"Buster," she whispered. "You shouldn't say things like that, now should you?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's--"

"I do love you, Joan. I've been looking for you, I guess."

"Where?" she whispered; and the coloured orchestra was making a great deal of noise with its trumpets, yet somehow her whisper reached his ears.

He said, "All over Britain. All over London, too. Of course I can go practically any place I want to--I told you I was off ops, didn't I? Well, I have left Brookwood time after time, and come up to London; I've walked around in the blackout and daylight, all over hell, and yet I didn't ever find anyone like you before."

She wanted to know what he liked especially about her. The orchestra was playing *The Lady Is a Tramp*--same tune they'd been playing all over London, ever since the war began; but she liked this better than the way Carol Gibbons and his band played it down at the Savoy. She'd been to the Savoy, too; twice . . . She thought she liked the Blue Polly better . . . Buster was holding her hand, openly, right there on the tabletop. He wasn't the knee-pushing kind of boy that kept trying to work under the table.

"Well, first it was the way you came toward me--there in that alley, kind of--and then your voice. I've always liked blondes. And you've got a kind of funny little cute way; your voice is sort of warm and--I guess I could talk baby-talk to you without much trouble. I like your legs," he added, and then stopped speaking immediately.

The way he said it all--she was very near to tears, and still only on her second gin-and-lime. "Buster, I swear, you've never really seen my legs."

"Yes, I have. On the way over here to this table. I walked behind you, and I liked everything about you. That suit is sort of worn out, but I liked the way the skirt hung--and-- Well, the way it sort of swung when you walked." His face was red, but he seemed determined to tell her how much she was attracting him.

Joan waited a minute; then, feeling as if she had made one of the greatest decisions of her existence (yes, they talked in

stories about love like this, but in spite of all doubt and jeering it could be--*it could be*--) she reached over with her left hand and let him kiss her lightly on the fingers again.

"I'll eat them," he said. "Your fingers."

"No," she giggled, and seeming to feel that she actually loved him, too, just as he declared that he loved her. "Don't eat my poor little hand. Here comes out food . . . ham, Buster; honestly-- I couldn't have believed it!" She spoke quite loudly; the orchestra had stopped playing for a second, and people at the nearer tables were smiling at her, but not unkindly.

"O.K.," said S/Sgt. Menton. "We eat!"

"Buster," she asked, in the barest whisper this time, "you said that the Blue Polly was open practically all night. Well, does the orchestra stay on and play--till dawn, maybe?"

He said, with his mouth full of cold ham, "Absolutely!" and nodded his head violently.

"Well,--let's actually stay all night, shall we? And eat--and drink--and be merry?"

"O.K. for baby." quoted Buster, and later the orchestra played that very song.

It was close to dawn indeed, when they crept past the thick blast wall into Stokemore Place, and moved contentedly east to Marston Street. The damp sky was gray above--long hours had passed since the sirens had shrilled out the All Clear--and from dull, cloudy cross streets the only sound was the occasional footfall of early pedestrians, or the clink of glass and scrape of wood as men tried to clear up the mess of the night's bombing.

Buster walked close against Joan Warrock, his hip tight to hers, her hands snuggled in the angle of his arm, as he told her about his last mission with the U.S. bombers. It was over the Ruhr, he said, and the flak was bad that day. They got a burst right alongside the waist of his B-17 before they crossed the Dutch coastline, coming back, and that was why the other fellows had to lift Buster out of the Fortress when they came back to their Base. And that was why he was off ops, still.

"But you look all right, darling. You don't look like you were wounded, or anything."

He said, honestly, "I feel swell too, I really never felt so well before. Not ever. And now, especially, having found you--"

They turned up Marston Street, and saw a faraway cluster of fire-engines and dark-bodied workers, toiling around wreckage through the first colour of a smoky sunrise. "Now, especially," he said, "I want to keep you with me, just like this, and keep walking. Always."

"I'd like to," she said, happily and sleepily. "But I can still catch a bit of shut-eye before work, if I hurry back to my room. Work's got to be done, you know. War's got to be won!"

Buster said, "Sure. But not by us."

Even through the indolent dream that possessed her, his

words had a certain angry impact. She drew her yellow head away and looked up seriously. "Why so? I mean, why not? We're all in it, you know."

"Look," he said, with the dawn growing paler and pinker on his lean face, "I want to take you everywhere. Didn't you ever feel like that--like you wanted to get up and wander? I remember sometimes when I was a kid--I mean, a little kid back in Quincy--I'd see the sunrise on the old Mississippi, all pink and blue and kind of colored like soft candy or precious stones or something. And then I'd turn my back on the river and look over east above those tall cottonwoods by Doctor Cleverhouse's place, and see the sunrise itself in the sky, and I'd want to go places."

She cried, in misty delight, "Oh, say some more, Buster dear--say some more things like that! It's like poetry rather. Where would you like to wander?"

"I'll take you," he said, "side by side with me . . . we will wander. Just over rooftops--we could start right now, and forget about the war and everything, and just keep walking. Go right on east--go out there in all that pink and mist--and we could walk on the ocean-- You know," he looked down at her blissfully, "like Jesus in the Bible? I remember that, in Sunday School, how He walked on water . . . Then we could turn around again, and go wherever we took a notion. Quincy: I'd sure like to show you Quincy. I bet ten bucks you never saw anything that remotely resembled the Mississippi River! We could have picnics in the brush over on the Missouri side, and then just keep on going . . . Yellowstone Park, and geysers and painted rocks and things--I always did want to go there--"

She muttered, "It would be ever so wonderful. Just like you say--if we could go off and wander everywhere--Buster, you'd really want to take me? Ah, you've known me such a little time!"

"Baby," he said, "I'm a good picker. Ask the guys down at Brookwood. They'll tell you," and he laughed, and pressed her hands tighter than before.

A man was coming toward them: a dark man with a tall hat or cap--yes, he was a police constable--he came right toward them; he lifted through the dawn, he didn't step out of their way or anything; he seemed to go right between them, and yet his body never brushed Joan Warrock's.

She felt dizzy. "Buster," she cried softly, after the policeman was past, "that bobby--he didn't even see you!"

"Didn't see you, either," said Buster. "How's about it, babe? Are you coming with me to Quincy and Yellowstone National?"

She stopped abruptly. She didn't know why, quite . . . that mention of Brookwood was haunting her memory; now it began to come clearer--she had gone there, she had been there once, Sylvia Williams had taken her.

She saw in her mind a wide place of grass and rhododendrons, with the train running on a Surrey hillside up above that valley--

"Where--?" The words were hard for her; she fought them out of her mouth; the question came as a faint scream. "Where did you say you were--stationed?"

The same kind face, the same jaunty eyebrows; he was there; he hadn't faded, he was still adoring her with all his youth and strength. "Brookwood. It's down in Surrey."

"Yes. I know." She managed to say the rest: "*Let go my arm. Let go --my--*"

He said, "Darling. Don't be afraid! There's nothing to be afraid of. I mean that--honestly."

"Brookwood's a--a--" She couldn't look at him anymore. "A cemetery. It's--a military cemetery. There aren't any B-17's there."

"I never said there were," said Buster Menton, pityingly.

She began to whisper her accusation--the discovery, the incredible mystery of it all--her tongue was running on and on, and later he told her that people often found it like that. "Oh, God," she said, "it's a cemetery! I remember, now; I was there with Sylvia Williams--her lover was killed in the RAF, he's buried there--"

Don't tell me *you know him*, Buster--for God's sake *don't say you know him*-- And all she could do was to roll up her gray eyes at him, as if pleading to suggest that he should have warned her; in some way he might have made it easier.

The short, squat man who murmured that he had been in the wrecked flat building: how well, how terribly she knew what manner of man he must have been . . . the Blue Polly itself; now she remembered that, too. It went when most of Stokemore Place went, in May of 1941. All those people in it, scores of boys and girls and other folks, when the bomb came down . . . And that other bomb--this night in Wycombe Road--she kept running, she ran and ran, she said it never touched her, and then she sped into the turning under the archway, and Buster helped her to her feet after she had fallen.

Oh, heaven and earth, oh, oh, oh (she said), I can't believe it; that man, that policeman never saw you, he never saw me either--now here are more people coming toward us; ah, they don't see us; they will never see us, they will walk through us as if we were air--

"Joan," he whispered, "you're frightened, aren't you, hon? Hold tight to me. You'll soon be-- You won't be scared any longer. And then--we start wandering off, just anywhere in God's green world that you want to go. It doesn't matter. Anywhere."

Presently he asked, "Feel better now?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Buster, put your arms around me."

"Always," he said, "always," and they stopped a moment on the sidewalk before they started on again.



PHOTO COURTESY OF: DMACC PHOTO DEPT.

Shooting Crows In Minnesota

By: Ron Jones

Fresh snow clung wet and heavy to the branches, saplings bending under the weight forming an arch like the white frosted arch on a wedding cake, an arch that extended up the hill to Murphy's cabin.

It was near winter's end and his wife had thrown in the towel. Murphy moved into the cabin on a Friday evening.

He looked around. Everything needed doing. A diagonal crack in one of the tall windows ran like a jagged streak of lightning from floor to ceiling. Intruders, he thought. A soiled bra and two used condoms lay in the middle of the room. There were mouse droppings on the coffee table. Bits of shredded paper towel were scattered about like confetti. Murphy climbed the stairs to the loft and shone his flashlight around, in the corners, at the ceiling, under the bed, everywhere. There were no droppings, no sign of pests. The coyote skin hung undisturbed on the wall above the old iron bed. The patchwork quilt looked all right. He threw his pack and sleeping bag down and descended the stairs to the room below. He should've spent more time here, come out on weekends--if only to check on the place. Instead, he'd stayed in town, at home with Annie, working to patch up their differences. No, he shouldn't have let things slide here, Murphy thought.

Stove length pieces of tamarac, maple, poplar, and oak were stacked neatly outside. Enough for a week, maybe. He would have to cut and haul, get the wood in soon. There was water to carry, the Coleman cookstove, and his McCulloch chainsaw to see to. There were windows to caulk and oil lamps to fill. God knew the place needed cleaning if he were to make it livable.

Then there was the rifle. He doubted it would be needed, but it should be kept ready. Murphy picked it up. The gun was old, how old he did not know. It had been handed down to him by his father. The single shot .22 with blued hexagonal barrel and dark birdseye walnut stock was a fine piece of work with a rolling block action and intricate patterns of scrollwork engraved on the receiver. Murphy ran his hand along its length as if contemplating a piece of art. He pictured the world the rifle came from, a world where men lived silent and whole in what they knew, a world where values were unyielding, where a thing made was made to endure.

He stood the .22 in the corner, walked outside to the woodpile, grabbed hold of the canvas tarp, shook the snow, and pulled the tarp away from the stacked wood. He selected two large chunks of oak, balanced them in the crook of his

arm, then stacked smaller pieces for kindling on top.

Inside he dropped the wood into the copper wash tub next to the cast iron Round Oak stove in the corner. He ran his fingers over the smooth nickel trim. Remembering how the previous summer he spent the better part of a week grinding, cleaning, and polishing that stove, working with meticulous care until every speck of rust and corrosion was gone, until the stove looked as if it had just been shipped from Sears Roebuck out of Chicago. Another thing from a time when a man's work counted for something. Another thing made to last.

He opened the heavy iron door and shook out the grate. Gathering up the shredded paper towel and then old newspapers from a drawer, he dropped them into the firebox. He made a teepee of kindling on the paper, layered larger pieces on top, then liberally doused the wood with kerosene, threw in a match and closed the door. The stove crackled and hissed as the metal expanded with heat from the flames. Murphy adjusted the damper on the flue and the draft at the bottom of the stove.

This is the life, he thought, sitting down at the table and lighting a hurricane lamp.

Above him flecks of red paint still clung to the wind and rain-etched surface of shelving made of weathered siding scavenged from an old barn. *Mother Earth* magazines, *Foxfire* and *Audubon* books lined the shelves.

He looked around at the cabin made of tamarac pine. Hand hewn logs, tongue and groove walls cut and milled by hand. A place he had built from the inside out, over time, from inside himself.

"So she tossed me out like a pair of worn out shoes," Murphy said aloud. "So what? I have all I need."

He lit his pipe and laughed at the sound of his voice, how it filled the room the way a single thought sometimes filled his mind. He smelled the sharp, fresh smell of woodsmoke from the stove and the sweet cherry aroma of his tobacco. He watched the smoke from his pipe slowly rise and fall in the cool air, forming patterns in the soft yellow light of the oil lamp. The waves of smoke reminded him of ballet dancers, sensual women who moved effortlessly, like birds. Murphy smiled and spread his arms.

"Sure, talk to yourself. A fitting pastime for a teacher, a guy who does nothing but lecture in class all day," he said.

He thought again of his wife, Annie. She came from a place much like this one, from a rural area where people

were poor in material things but rich in the things that mattered. When he bought the land and told her of his plans to build a cabin where the two of them could get away, where they could live a simple self-sufficient life together, he was certain she would be pleased. She was not. She laughed and called him a fool.

"What do you know of living in the woods, going to the outhouse in winter, waking cold, breaking the skim of ice in a pitcher to get freezing water to wash your face? What do you know of living with no phone, no electricity, of living with endless chores. What do you know? You were raised in the city. You know nothing," she told him.

"Bitch," he said aloud. His words hung in the air like the smoke from his pipe. The walls listened, he thought. And outside the woods, too.

Annie hated the cabin. And she hated him, Murphy thought. But there was more to it than this. He knew there were things impossible for either of them to talk about. Things each of them had done that added over time and became set and solid like bricks mortared into place. Things which went far beyond the realm of words.

Perhaps he should go to his friend Odel. He was a therapist and marriage counselor. But Odel was a friend, and Murphy did not believe in therapy. He knew Annie believed. She went to counseling sessions weekly. Therapy was a religion with her. What did she do there, talk about him? Did she complain about their life together? Did she talk about sex?

Well, fuck her, Murphy thought.

In the morning he awoke early to the sounds of birds and set his feet on the cold wood floor. Shivering, he figured the temperature at about forty-five degrees. Good, there should still be coals in the stove. He would make a difference. And there were many other things to do.

Out the window he saw two chickadees fighting a crow, slowly driving it from branch to branch, up and up and up. Like P-38's from World War II, they dove, swerved, pulled up at the last second, one in front, the other flitting over the crow's head, turning, then attacking from the rear. The crow, beak open wide, screeched--ha-yaww, ha-yaww--puffed its dark iridescent feathers, twisted and turned this way and that. It beat its wings and slowly retreated. Murphy watched as the pair of small birds maneuvered the crow away from their nest in a perfect display of teamwork.

Throwing on sweatshirt and pants, he went downstairs and fired up the stove. He pumped the handle on the Coleman, then lighted the burner, poured coffee in the pot and set it on. He warmed his hands. A great day, he thought, a really great day. Time enough to square things away. Duct tape the crack in the broken window,

caulk the rest. Sweep the place out now before the coffee boils. Keep warm. Gas the McCulloch, check the tension on the chain, don't forget the oil. Start the saw. Do this right from the git-go.

Outside, he stamped his toboggan up and down on the ground to remove the snow, then scraped ice from the bottom with a wedge of split wood, grabbed the rope and walked the half mile out to where his truck was parked on the side of the road. He unloaded plastic milk jugs full of ice and two sacks of groceries from the truck's bed. He grabbed his guitar and some personal belongings from behind the front seat and tied all of this onto the toboggan. Like a mule in traces, he began hauling the load back to the cabin. Taking long strides pacing himself but moving quickly, Murphy looked over his shoulder and saw the sled rode high and easy on the snow.

Suddenly, out of the slate gray sky a crow dove straight for him. The damned thing nearly hit him on the head. Yawing and screaming, the crow wheeled and dove again, wings spread and thick black tail feathers fanned out in an inverted V. Murphy jumped, waved his hat back and forth above his head and yelled. The bird veered away but not before letting go a stream of shit. The stuff landed on Murphy's shoulder and dripped down the front of his leather jacket like raw egg. Although he was surprised, he knew this was not an uncommon occurrence. Recently at the college where he taught, a group of students were attacked by several crows while walking to their dorm. A biology professor theorized in an article in the college paper that perhaps they had been throwing rocks at the birds. Or, it was a territorial thing. The students were warned to take alternate routes, to stay away from the area where the incident had occurred.

Ahead, along the narrow farm lane that separated the woods from the field that sloped gently down to the river, Murphy noticed more crows perched in the trees.

Filthy birds. Scavengers, he thought.

"The crow looks rusty as he rises up. Bright is the malice in his eye. One joins him there for company. But at a distance, in another tree," Murphy said aloud, then bent down, found a piece of ice, and hurled it at the birds.

"Wallace Stevens. Take that you bastards," he yelled.

The crows remained silhouetted against the blank gray sky. They flapped their wings, raised a chorus of shrill mocking caws, but did not move from the branches of the trees.

Murphy spent the rest of the day cleaning, organizing, getting things ship shape. Late that afternoon he walked in the woods, stopping from time to time to spray red paint around the trunks of dead trees he wanted to fell. He would cut no live wood, just as he would disturb nothing

within view of the cabin. When he looked out his window or sat on his deck he wanted to see his land as it had always been, as it had been before civilization arrived.

Next to a dead maple, he saw in the snow at his feet the frozen carcass of an owl. Picking it up and brushing the snow from it, he held the bird in front of him, turning it around, looking closely at it. No animals, coyotes, foxes, raccoons, or any of the carrion birds had gotten the thing yet. He wondered how the owl had come to be here. The feathers were plentiful, golden brown, striped across with black and mottled with tiny splashes of white. The chest was thick with down. He set the dead bird back in the snow, pulled a pliers from his pocket and began plucking the longer wing feathers. These he put in his pack. He did not know why he wanted them, only that he did. Taking his knife from the sheath at his belt, he started sawing at one of the legs. He wanted the talons. They were razor sharp, smooth and black. Maybe he would string them on a necklace, like bear claws, he thought. Maybe he would give the necklace to Annie.

A joke. Those talons as sharp and vicious as her tongue.

When he had both of the feet, he shoved them in his pocket, wedged the carcass in the crotch of a nearby poplar tree and started for the cabin. *I'll come this summer for the skull, he thought, after the bones are white and clean.*



That night he dreamed. First, he dreamed he was lying awake in the old iron bed. The muffled voices of a man and a woman rose to the loft. A rocking chair creaked rhythmically below. He heard the sharp strike of a wooden match and smelled East Indian Tobacco. The man said something about a damned fool girl and how some women were flighty as some birds. The woman was sobbing, talking in a jerky voice about a wedding feast, about a young couple and about a young mother's shame. The man spoke a name--Annie.

Then Murphy was at the window of their modern split-level house in town. Annie was outside, her figure in stark relief against the barren backdrop of snow-covered lawn. She danced, under a full moon, whirling round and round, her wide red mouth open, laughing. She wore a black silk cape unbuttoned, exposing pale breasts with dark, erect nipples. Feathery black lace trailed winglike behind her outstretched arms. Long rich hair flowed around her shoulders reflecting the moonlight as if each strand was made of obsidian. She stared at him, spread her legs, and flapped her arms. Then she stood very still, face raised to the stars. From somewhere deep in her

breast came the harsh and primal Ha-yaww of a crow. A sound as cold and ancient as the emptiness that existed before time. A sound which echoed and reverberated on and on into the night.

Murphy saw himself lying on the frozen ground. He heard the saw sputter and die. Raising himself up, twisting around to look over a fallen tree which pinned his hips to the snow and leaf covered earth, he was surprised to see a long thick branch like a spear sticking out of his leg. Blood welled up and flowed onto the snow where it spread out like ink blotting a clean white page. He felt no pain. He guessed he was in shock. He guessed that the pain would come later. Leaning back on his elbows looking up in the last gray light of day, he saw far above him crows beginning to settle one by one in the high branches of the trees.



Murphy woke, rubbed his eyes and shivered in the dark. He went downstairs, lit a lamp, poured a glass of whiskey, and threw pieces of maple into the stove.

"Christ," he said. Taking the glass in both hands, he drank. Tears came to his eyes; he coughed, breathed deeply, shook his head and went upstairs to the loft to sleep.

Sunday. Murphy cut wood under a clear blue sky. He cut branches and limbs from a fallen tree for kindling, holding the bright yellow saw high above his head. Then he cut the trunk into twelve inch lengths, careful not to let the chain touch the frozen ground. Aware of the crows above him in the trees, he kept his mind on his work. He thought only of the wood. He cut and stacked, then hauled it on his toboggan. Thinking was a great danger to a man alone in the woods. And he wanted to be tired when night came, bone weary, too tired to dream. So he worked using the saw as if it were a part of him, extending himself, feeling the hard bite of the hot chain chew at the frozen wood, loving the weight and inertia of the toboggan as he began to pull against the rope, moving slowly up the ridge and over to where the cabin stood halfway up the hill. The cedar-shingled roof, half-covered with ice and snow, reflected and splintered the winter sun like stained glass windows in a church. He worked that day like the russet-colored squirrels that lived in the woods around him laying in supplies, savoring the moments, exhausting himself completely.

At school Murphy gave his students in-class writing assignments, assignments he gave a cursory glance. He spent as much time as he was able in his office. Going to and from classes appalled him. In the halls he walked by young women--children really--who tittered and giggled as he passed. He heard them talking about boys, and cars,



PHOTO BY: MINDY JO MEYERS

and clothes, and money. The culture was falling apart, fragmenting, imploding. Everyone knew this. Every one of his colleagues talked about it. They talked incessantly. Only he did anything.

Murphy feared one of these young girls turning toward him, blocking his path. He pictured the girl in a black motorcycle jacket and dirty white T-shirt, picking at her teeth with a switchblade, pointing at him with a finger like a claw, a long bony finger with a blood-red nail at the end. He heard the girl speak rapidly in a foreign language he did not know. This was how he imagined things to be as he sat in his office waiting for the telephone to ring, waiting for a call from Annie, a call that did not come. He stared at the telephone and thought about calling her, thinking how their conversation might go, thinking of all the things they might say to one another. In the end, he did not lift the receiver from its cradle.

At the library Murphy read everything he could find on crows. The one that shit on him was a Common American Crow, eighteen to twenty inches in length with a three-foot wingspread. A fearless thief, a carrion eater. But from what he read, a bird that would eat damned near anything including crops. A loud voracious intelligent bird that congregated in flocks. A good bird to kill. He added this to his list of things to do at the cabin.

Shoot crows, he wrote.

One day, in the middle of his lecture, a boy walked into class, asked Murphy his name and laid a manila envelope on the desk. "These are for you", the boy said. Later, he opened the envelope. Divorce papers from Annie's lawyer. He stared for what seemed a very long time at her signature on the bottom of the page.

The weather turned. Rain came and the snow melted into the ground. In the evenings Murphy sat in the cabin smoking, listening to public radio on his boom box, or sometimes playing guitar. He drank. And he had no dreams.

On weekends, he cut wood and shot crows. He became stronger from the work, younger from the killing. An excellent marksman, he could drop a bird at forty yards.

When Murphy went into the woods, familiar landmarks seemed to slip away. Spring growth swallowed everything. He looked for the owl, but it was gone, carried off by a coyote or raccoon, he thought. He lost his bearings in the underbrush that sprang from the dark earth as if instantaneously. New green foliage eclipsed the cabin. Everything was alive and it rained every day. A dull film of moisture covered everything. And each day Murphy hunted.

At first he left the dead crows where they lay. Then he thought, *why not save the talons--dark and razor sharp*

as those of the owl--as a means of keeping score. He liked that, the idea of keeping score. He began to carry a green Hefty lawn and leaf bag to drag the bodies back in. He used a tin snips to cut the legs. He strung the claws on a wire and left them hanging from a nail on the deck. The bodies he hung in a chokecherry tree twenty yards downwind of the cabin.

Let the hunted come to the hunter, he thought.

He said nothing of this to his colleagues.

At school Murphy answered his friends' questions about Annie. He told them she had changed the locks on the doors, and how she managed to wangle a no-contact order, as if he were a dangerous psychopath. He said she was flipped out. He told them she wouldn't return his calls.

He said he thought things would work out--in the long run. He said he was doing fine. He was okay. He said what he thought he was expected to say. About the crows he said only that they were pests, that occasionally he took his rifle into the woods and shot the bastards.

But at the cabin, as the days began to lengthen, Murphy worked hard, pruning, shooting, thinning their ranks. He watched them, the crows, learning their habits, their calls, their lives. He read and he learned things. He knew that crows mated throughout the year. He knew they were most aggressive in spring and early summer. He hit the crows in their nest, at sundown. Relentlessly, one by one, he picked them off.

Murphy sat in his office the second morning of finals week working at his computer, grading tests. He looked at the telephone, sighed, reached for the receiver and called his friend Odel. Murphy told Odel how disappointed he was that an intelligent woman like Annie was unable to show the smallest modicum of civility. He asked Odel to meet him. They checked their schedules and arranged to get together later that afternoon at a watering hole Murphy knew, The Swinging Inn. He hung up and began working quickly, grading without interest. When he was finished, he leaned back in his chair, ran his calloused hands through his long curly hair, smiled at the red and blue screen and waited.

Murphy remembered the coyote he found when he was building the cabin. He had been driving when he saw the light gray-brown body lying on the shoulder of the road. He slowed and pulled over, got out of his truck and kicked at the thing. At first, he thought it was a dog. Then he reached down to touch it. He felt beneath the hair. The body was still warm. He turned it over. A coyote. He cradled the body in both arms and brought it to the pick-up where he stretched it out carefully in back. He thought how great the skin would look hanging on the wall of his cabin. He brought it home, shoved the body in a black

garbage bag and put it in the freezer in the basement. He made a mental note to go to the library to find out how to skin the thing and cure the hide.

Then Annie went to the basement, opened the freezer and found the frozen carcass. She raised holy hell. He explained that he forgot to tell her. It slipped his mind, he said. Over time the incident became the kind of intimate joke that married couples tell on each other at parties. He laughed to himself, looked at his watch and saw that it was time to go.

Murphy let his eyes adjust to the dim light in the small bar. It took some time before he spotted Odel. Then, he saw only the Cheshire cat grin and the sleepy eyes of his friend. Against the dark wall in black tour jacket and beret, his face the color of a moonless night in the timber, Odel was all but invisible.

Murphy slid into a chair. "I wasn't sure you'd show," he said. Rock music played loudly from corner speakers hung near the ceiling, but not so loud he had to yell.

"I wanted to see if what I've been hearing is true," Odel said.

"Yeah, I'm sure you've heard things," Murphy nodded.

Odel leaned back in his chair, sighed, and looked at his friend. "I see you still wear the same tweed jacket and loafers. You don't look like a nature boy to me," he said.

"Standard issue. I'll change at the cabin. Later." Murphy smiled. "The beret is a nice touch, Odel. Ominous, but nice."

Odel shrugged. He grinned his Cheshire cat grin.

A heavy-set gum-chewing woman in a Budweiser sweatshirt and black fishnet stockings walked up with a drink tray in her hand. She stood over them. "What can I get you guys?" she said. Odel said he'd have a beer.

"A double. Gin and tonic," Murphy said. "Only just pass the tonic near the glass. Oh, and a wedge of lime." The woman gave him a look, turned and moved to the bar.

"Some joint," Odel said. "Your colleagues come here?"

"I hope not." Murphy turned and looked at the tiny raised runway several feet away. A woman, head thrown back, legs spread, was sliding her torso rhythmically up and down a brass pole at the center. Under the blacklight, her rouged nipples glowed Christmas green. She wore spiked heels and ruby-red G-string. The look on her face said she was somewhere far away.

The waitress came with their drinks and set them on the table. Staring off somewhere above the two men, she held one hand palm up in front of Murphy and ran the other through her dirty blonde hair while she worked her jaw up and down on the gum. Murphy paid. The woman left without a word.

"Erotic walkers," Odel said. "The question is, why am I here? Months go by and I don't see you. Months." Odel leaned his head on his hand and looked with sleepy eyes at Murphy.

"Listen, Odel. Annie filed. She cleaned out the bank account and slapped on a restraining order. I can't see her . . . I want to see her." Murphy picked up his drink. He shook his head. "Things are not good."

He took a drink of gin and looked again at the dancer. She perched on the edge of the runway, her legs wrapped around an elderly man's shoulders. She thrust her crotch at him, watching intently, like a bird watching its prey. A number of dollar bills folded lengthwise were tucked under the string at her hip. Murphy emptied his glass, spun it around in his hands, motioned to the waitress, and ordered another drink.

"You can do this for me Odel. You must do this sort of thing every day. Marriage counselling and all that," he said.

"First, let's have this business about the crows," Odel said.

"The usual gossip in the faculty lounge. You already know I'm called 'nature boy' behind my back. I see Annie's hand in some of this. Look around, Odel." Murphy's blue eyes darted back and forth. He took a dark red briar pipe from his jacket and held an old silver Ronson lighter above it. He puffed and smacked his lips. The smoke swirled and rose around his head like bubbles rising from a deep pool. Murphy took his pipe from his mouth, extended his arm and made a wave that took in the room. "Surrealism wasn't a movement. It was prophecy. I built that cabin by hand. A place we could get away . . . an honest life. Maybe the only tolerable life." He took a long slow drink, set the glass down, looked at the table, and stirred the ice with his finger.

"The crows. It's nothing. There's really not much to tell." He looked up. "I'm shooting all the crows in Minnesota," he said. "They're scavengers, they rip through refuse like lawyers, pick up shiny things, tear into dead things, and scatter the remains. They drive away the songbirds. I wake at dawn to a chorus of raucous screams. They go through a garden like shit through a goose. They mock and they . . ." He stopped, took a drink and went on. "So I shoot the bastards and hang their bodies in the chokecherry down the hill from the deck, so I can shoot more when they come to feed on their relatives." He looked down at his drink, at his friend, then over at the dancer who was out on the floor working the tables. "It's not the crows I'm worried about. I can take care of that. They're wising up, getting smart. Some days I see hardly any. It's the other stuff. You know."

"I always knew you'd be a hard guy to live with."

Murphy laughed. "Thanks for your support," he said.

The dancer was at the next table. Both men watched while she straddled the guy there, buried his bald head in her breasts then shook them back and forth.

"Listen, I'll see what I can do about Annie," Odel said. "My advice, don't get your hopes up. Divorce is the fucking you get for the fucking you got." He leaned his long athletic body back in the chair and grinned.

Murphy drained his glass. "I need a Harvard man to tell me that," he said.

The dancer was at their table now. She was smiling, undulating slowly, pushing her breasts out at them with her hands. Odel waved her off. She pulled the G-string out in front of her so that they could see the curled wisps of pubic hair, like smoke, where darkness met thigh.

"Not interested," Odel said. He moved forward, spreading his large ebony hands wide on the table. He turned to face the woman and nodding at Murphy said, "My friend has nothing to put in there. He spent it on crows and now it's time he got home."



Days later, Murphy walked up the muddy path to his cabin. He was thinking about Odel and thinking about Annie when he noticed there were no crows around. Not a one. As he walked, shafts of sunlight broke through the clouds and ran across the field sown to the river below which labored to break free of its banks. The land seemed as ripe and swollen as the body of a woman about to give birth.

That night he sat silently at the table smoking his pipe, watching the hurricane lamps drive the dark from the rough pine walls. Breathing the chill damp air, he stood listening to Bach and looked out the window to where the river streaming south lay bathed in moonlight. He put wood on the fire. He drank gin straight and seriously as a lone drinker will.

A night unfit for anything else, he thought. Murphy reached up to the bookshelves and brought down a photograph album. He began taking pictures from it, pictures of Annie, pictures he had taken. In one of them, she stood at the kitchen sink half-turned and smiling, dark hair down to her ass. Behind her posted on the fridge was a part of a poem he'd written. The last two lines read, "You sense the curve of her lips remembering all you have done together and all that you have not."

Murphy took the photos of his wife and he burned them, feeding them into the wood stove one by one.

"Each picture a walk in the past with strangers," he said aloud. The room seemed hot. He opened a window, then a door. Taking a drink from the bottle he removed his



PHOTO BY: KATHY CAHALAN

shirt, then shoes, then jeans, socks, underwear.

"Maybe I put too much wood on the fire," he said. He turned the music up loud and began dancing naked around the room, arms extended in the yellow light like a deranged marionette.

Yes, this is the life, he thought, upending the bottle. He walked onto the deck and took a leak, aiming carefully, watching the clear arc of piss falling through the cold night air, hearing his water splash on the stones below. He looked at the long stringer of black, arthritic crows' feet hanging on the wire in the corner. Murphy threw his head back and laughed. "Dead soldiers," he said aloud. "Look at all of the dead soldiers."



ILLUSTRATION BY: MICHAEL BLAIR

Gene's Scrapbook

By: Angela Dunston Johnson

Here's the hate letter
he sent to everyone.
He'll call anytime
for money.
He almost shot
Raleigh during
deer season.
That's Trudy--she was
his first wife.
They had two boys.
We seldom see her.
No, he was never in Nam!
His father got him
a hardship discharge.
Here's Sharen.
She thought Trudy
was a witch.
Sharen was wife
number two.
He gave up all rights
to their daughter.
We still see Sharen
every year at the
Rock 'N' Roll reunion.
She still loves him.
He invited Tammy to
play cards with Sharen
and him.
Tammy? Oh she's his
current wife.
He asked his great niece
to baby-sit their
daughter and son.
Never! Him alone
in a car
with a 13 year old child?!
No one calls
him uncle.
Doctors thought his mother
had a menopausal tumor.--
She gave birth to Gene
instead.



PHOTO BY: TARA SICKLE

Softest I'll thing

By: Evelyn Anderson

"Mom, where's the photo album?" Ann knew right away it was a mistake to ask. Her mother's answer confirmed her thought. A lecture!

"It's where it always is. You always ask before you think. I don't know why you can't think before you ask where something is." Her mom slammed the cupboard door shut and left the house bound for the Woman's Community Club meeting.

"How come you can't just answer my question? Why do you always have to lecture me?" Ann yelled in the empty house, as her mother's car raised a cloud of dust leaving the driveway. Escaping the kitchen, she flew into the living room with all the indignation her fourteen year-old mind and body could muster, flopped down on the hardwood floor and pulled the photo album from the low shelf.

The hot, sticky Iowa summer clung to the walls and furniture. The room, cool in the morning, steamed in the afternoon as the sun shone through the west windows and no breeze moved the curtains. Ann ignored the heat and the musty smell as she opened the album looking for the pictures taken two years ago at the State Fair. She found the pictures of her Dad and his Berkshire boar which took the Grand Championship ribbon. "Damn fine boar you got there," the onlookers said with envy, the camera recording their smiles, as they stood around the pavilion pen gazing at the boar after the judging.

The boar, a beautiful animal with prize-winning conformation, proved a reliable breeder. When he caught scent of a sow in heat, nothing could hold him back. The week before the fair, he broke down the fence into the neighbor's hog lot and bred the whole bunch before anyone could stop him. The neighbor did not raise a fuss. Breeding by this pork patriarch made folks happy, no matter what the circumstances.

"I'm going to win a Grand Champion ribbon at the State Fair this year," Ann thought as she stroked the page of slightly yellowed photos. "My sow will be the best of class and I'll have a ribbon just like Dad's. I'll hang it with his on the coat rack by the kitchen door."

Ann smiled as she remembered the night two years ago when Dad won. After the judging, Dad, who seldom drank, celebrated with well-wishers at the beer tents, wearing the purple ribbon pinned to his bib overalls. At midnight, Mom, Ann and Raymond, her younger brother, finally gave in to exhaustion and trudged back to the car. An hour later, Dad came singing up the hill among the

scattered cars and pickups, clearly lost and filled with cotton candy, pride and beer. The ribbon repeatedly flopped up and across his face in the humid August night as Dad waved both hands in front of his eyes in a futile attempt to see beyond the purple blur and find his way. Ann turned away from the scene when Dad fell to his knees but his curses found her ears. Raymond giggled. "You hush up", Mom said, turning around from the front seat and menacing him with her raised hand. Raymond crunched down into the seat and didn't make another sound. Mom rushed out the car door and down the hill.

"I don't need any of your goddamned help, Veda. Get your hands off me. Shit, ya'll tear my ribbon. Can't a man celebrate without his woman falling all over him. Get back in the car with the kids." No one spoke a word on the two hour trip back home.

"There will be two champions in this family". Ann thought and turned her attention back to a picture that showed Dad draping the huge crisp ribbon across the boars back. She glanced into the kitchen and saw the same ribbon, now faded by the sun, hanging limply on the coat rack. It still held magic and Ann wanted one just like it.

Ann turned the page, looking for more fair pictures, but found instead photos of the family gathered at the Fourth of July picnic the summer of her sixth birthday. There, in the middle of the picture, surrounded by her mom, dad, brother, and all the aunts, uncles and cousins, sat Grandpa.

Seated on the floor with the album propped on her knees, Ann remembered the hot day, like this one. Her body tensed and became stone quiet. She no longer heard the flies buzz against the window screen, the squeal of the hogs fighting over food in the trough down by the barn, or the sound of the ornate oak clock, ticking on the shelf above her head. She did not smell the tassel corn across the road, the roast in the oven or her own sweat which beaded up across her brow and upper lip. Ann remembered a day when she was six and the family Fourth of July picnic.

The yearly Johnson gathering, with fried chicken, potato salad, the first sliced garden tomatoes, cole slaw, cakes and pies took place at the park in town where tall oak trees shaded sturdy, brown picnic tables. The community knew the rules and no one took the spot under the trees where the Johnsons gathered for the fifty-second year. That day, Grandpa set in place another set of rules

about Ann.

Although the photo captured the moment, no one saw what started between Grandpa and Ann. The photographer from the local newspaper arrived with his camera, set up the tripod, and promptly at 3:00 pm, as the babies wakened on the blankets spread under the trees, the family gathered around Grandpa, seated on a folding chair. Funny thing about this family, even the folks who married into it came to look like Johnsons after a few years.

Grandpa called to the group of little kids playing "chase." "Come on over here now," he boomed. "Stop that running around. Get over here so we can send this guy home. I'm paying good money for this picture taking." Then said, "Ann, you come sit on Grandpa's lap."

Ann ran for the honored spot before any of her sixteen little cousins could get there first, because Grandpa wanted her. She scrambled up and nestled on his lap. "You are the softest little thing," Grandpa whispered into her ear.

"All you Johnsons look this way and say cheese on the count of three," the photographer yelled above the chorus of laughing voices. Everyone but Ann smiled at the camera. The photo caught her profile the instant she smiled up into Grandpa's face.

Ann slammed the album shut. The boar and the fair were forgotten. The often heard words, "You are the softest little thing," filled her head.

On the night of the picnic, Grandpa had entered her room and sat beside her, talking softly and stroking her long blond hair. "Did you have a good time at the picnic, little Annie?"

"Umhum, I liked playing with everyone. But not Raymond. He's mean to us." Grandpa held her close and tucked her hair behind her ear. "You're my favorite. Just like your Momma was my favorite."

When Grandpa entered her room, Ann smiled and scooted her small, slim body over in bed, making room for him to sit beside her. He rubbed her back and stroked her arms as he cooed, "You are the softest little thing."

When the leaves began to fall and the wind turned cool, Grandpa folded back the covers and crawled in beside her. Ann wanted him to keep her warm and he obliged, willingly, without hesitation. He rubbed Ann's body and she did feel warmer and comforted by his presence. Before the first snow, his calloused fingers squeezed her nipples, "You're growing up. Grandpa loves you even more." After that night, when Ann heard the click of the opening door, she pressed her eyelids shut and pretended sleep, never looked at Grandpa, made a sound or talked back when he spoke to her.

Each night, when Mom mentioned bedtime, Ann hid under the round oak table, only to be pulled out by Dad.

"Off to bed with you girlie-girl," followed by a swat. "mind your mother."

"I don't want to go to bed in that room. I hate the flowers. They're ugly, ugly, ugly."

The wall paper, hung by mom before Ann was born, had tiny pink flowers, resembling a multi-flora rose, set on columns of green ivy leaves running from ceiling to floor. Every night since she could remember, Ann's eyes followed one long twining row of roses from ceiling to floor and then floor to ceiling, with the pattern repeated up and down the wall, until she fell asleep before completing the journey down the wall opposite her bed. She never reached the corner where the wall turned back to commence the journey toward her bed.

As a small child, she loved the rhythm of following the flowers. It guided and lulled her from wakefulness, to twilight, to sleep. After the picnic, Grandpa's visits took away the nighttime peacefulness.

But in the daytime, Ann could always be found with Grandpa. "Grandpa, can I help you today," Ann begged.

"Sure, Little Annie. Grandpa loves having you help. Finish your breakfast and we'll be taking the pickup into town for feed." He stood, leaving the dirty dishes and spilled coffee on the table.

Veda entered the kitchen, laden with tomatoes from the garden, just in time to hear the exchange about leaving for town. "Damn you, Dad. Ann needs to spend more time here, not with you. I've told you that and now here you are doing it again. Leave her alone. Leave her here." Veda spun around to the sink, dumping the tomatoes which burst open as they smacked against the bottom and sides of the porcelain bowl.

The red juice splashed onto the wall paper and loosened seeds slid down freshly washed dishes in the old yellow drainer. Veda whirled around to face her father and hissed, "Leave her alone. Do you hear me? Just leave her ALONE."

"Momma, don't yell at Grandpa!", Ann screamed, running to him and wrapping herself around his leg with the fierceness and helplessness of a tiny kitten. Veda crossed the room, grabbed Ann's arm, and with a scalding look at her father, yanked her from Grandpa's leg with such force that Ann yelped in pain. That night Ann felt pain once again as Grandpa broke her hymen.

After the morning in the kitchen, Ann's activity with her grandfather was never again a topic of discussion between Veda and her father. As Ann grew into adolescence, they talked about the weather, who would take the broken hitch to the welder in town, and requested the mashed potatoes to be passed at the dinner table, but Ann no longer existed in their conversation and their eyes rarely met.

Veda was not naturally given to conversation and

even less to personal contemplation. Only occasionally, while she ironed the mounds of blue work shirt and overalls in the evening, did she allow herself to wonder about her life. Once, she had a fleeting thought that if she understood the hunger in her soul, she could lose the hunger in her belly. Veda pushed that thought aside and never let it enter her head again.

Veda's taciturn nature and Ann's belligerence brought increasing tension to their relationship. "Get in here and help me with these dishes".

"I'm studying. Can't you see? So which do you want me to do, help you or pass the test tomorrow?"

"Don't you smartmouth me young woman. I expect you to do both and the dishes are first. Get in here!"

Dad, Raymond and Grandpa drew closer to the radio, as if the circle formed by their male heads would protect them from the venom spitting from the mouths of the females in the household. "Shut up you two, we can't hear a thing," Dad said, ignoring the conflict in their battle and attending to the volume knob.

"You're always looking at me, Mom. Leave me alone. You are so spooky".

"You mind your mouth. Calling your mom 'spooky!' I want a little respect out of you. And I'll watch you all I please. Especially since you don't seem to have any sense. That boy down the road, Jerry, I don't want him hanging around here and you are not to spend time with him at school".

"Just like that, you tell me who I can be with, who I can't. I'm fourteen and I'll be with who I please. You can't do anything about it," Ann said with a snarl in her voice, a defiant smile and snapping eyes. "I'll do anything I please with Jerry and you can't stop me." The screen door slammed as she ran from the house toward the barn.

Still furious with her mother and alone in the hay loft, Ann remembered the details of Grandpa's time in her bed during the last eight years; the touches, the mixture of pleasure and pain, the love and the hatred. The confusion. "Why? Why me? Why does he do that to me? I'm special. He says so. It's just that I don't want him to touch me. Not any more. Maybe, just not so often." The thoughts rumbled in her head, mixing, turning back on one another. "I hate him hate him hate him," Ann shouted to the rafters and then fell sobbing into the sweet alfalfa hay which muffled her screams, silenced her sobs, and drowned out the words, "Grandpa, I love you. It must be right if I like it. It must be. Isn't it--isn't it right?," she wailed.

That night, Jerry was on her mind when the door opened and Grandpa entered. Ann closed her eyes, pulled the covers up under her chin and held them in place, as though they would protect her from Grandpa's

touch. Grandpa stopped close beside the bed and removed his overalls. The room shone with moonlight, as he lifted his leg to crawl into bed.

Another click broke the silence. The door knob turned and Mom entered the room, hesitating only long enough to take a deep breath to let out a roar. She lunged at her father, ripping at the flesh on his nude body. "God damn you! God damn you bastard!" How could you ruin her? You promised Mom you would never touch anyone again. I hate you. Leave. Leave. Get out of here!" Grandpa pulled on his overalls and left silently.

Ann's mother stopped, as if suddenly recognizing Ann's presence in the room for the first time. Horror crossed her face. Her eyes did not meet Ann's, she turned and left without a word, closing the door behind her.

Alone, Ann began to follow the rows of flowers on the wall, up and down, reaching the corner of the first wall and starting down the wall beside her bed.

Ann left her bed early the next morning, dressed and headed for the barn, anxious about Dad's sick prize boar, which refused water and groaned from low in its belly. The vet came four times and Dad spent nights in the barn, watching warily as the hog took shallow breaths.

Ann saw her father leaning on the boar's pen, the top board worn smooth and shiny by years of reaching over to dump feed and water into the troughs below. Her father had never looked so short or so thin, with shoulders hunched, elbows resting on the board and his hands clasped in space above the straw bedding. His eyes fixed on the slack body of the prize winning boar. Ann knew it was dead. Death was common on the farm; cats ate baby birds fallen from trees, Dad unceremoniously dropped sick cats into a gunny sack to throw into the river, Mom chopped off chicken's heads, and the neighbors shot rogue dogs.

But this death was her father's lost claim to fame, the talisman which gave him status among his peers. The genetic markings passed on by this boar would be nowhere within sight as Dad walked next spring through the brood sows and their piglets.

Ann turned to the dead hog. The boar's tongue, once pink and rough, rolled lifelessly from it's mouth, a horrid mass of bloody flesh, gnawed on during the last hours of death throes. The boar's lips pulled back in a grin over the teeth and the flesh beneath the black and white bristles looked ashen and grey.

Ann's eyes slide along the boar's body and came to rest on the flaccid penis, unsheathed and lying on a pile of drying manure in the bed of straw. It was a soft little thing.



PHOTO BY: KATHY CAHALAN

After the Rain

After the wind and rain
in the dark before dawn
The electric fence wire
flashes white at each post
Like a squad of fireflies
frozen in formation.

By: Glenda Mathes

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MACKINLAY KANTOR
SINGER OF SONGS
TELLER OF TALES
"FOREVER WALKING FREE"
1904 - 1977