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NORTH END

By Fred Venturini

Jack Worrell and Ken Gregory were finishing their shift reports at eleven-thirty when the radio crackled with the familiar voice of Deputy Harris from the Carlborough County Sheriff's Office. A woman had called, frantic, reporting her son as missing, but it was far too soon for any report—the kid, Jason, had only been gone a few hours. Harris asked if the rangers could do a courtesy check during their shift before sending out any deputies, adding they were short that evening and any help was much appreciated. The mother said the boy was hunting mushrooms at North End and had not returned.

Ten years working the lake, and Jack Worrell never touched North End. He'd seen it, sure, as all park rangers saw North End—through the glass of their white trucks, the stagnant pockets of lake water, the fallow fields, the layered trees in varied states of death or life, depending on the season. North End was a long drive that killed time on dormant, winter nights when campers and picnickers were home eating leftover Thanksgiving turkey, the gravel parking lots across the lake empty, the campgrounds vacant, the fire rings pocking the snow with black boils of char.

Worrell grabbed his coat. Gregory, two years from retirement, old and plump, with big ears and a meticulous part in his thick, gray hair, didn't move. Worrell found this uncharacteristic of the old man, who never took a shortcut. He was the ranger that didn't hand out slack, making people move their cars if even one tire was on the grass, shutting down games of horseshoes in the rec areas because it was bad for the sod.

“Half hour's left in our shift,” Worrell said.

“Takes forty-five minutes to get to North End,” Gregory said, going back to his shift report.

“I could use the overtime. Maybe make up with Lucy by going out to dinner.”

“Then you take it.” Gregory didn't look up, he kept writing with that same ballpoint pen he'd refilled time and time again during their years together.

“Not to sound too girly, but I'd rather not hit North End alone.”

“I'd rather not hit it at all.”

Worrell stood, silent and outplayed. “We'll leave a note for day shift,” Gregory relented, “They can give things a look and maybe in the morning County will have enough deputies to lend a hand. We shouldn't be running out to North End with sleet in the forecast. We won't find him, and he'll probably pop up at home anyway.”

“And what if he turned his ankle out there and he's screaming for help that no one can hear and we're sitting here being lazy about it?”

Gregory looked up, a weak smile on his face that covered something else Worrell couldn't fully detect, and didn't want to.

“I can assure you his ankle isn't turned and he's not screaming. He's probably off doing dope or meth or something, because he's not mushroom hunting in December. Mom's gullible buying that load of crap, don't you think? Go home. I'm officially giving you a free twenty minutes of administrative leave.”

“I should call the bossman. See what he thinks of the deal.”

Gregory put his pen down, finally tilting his gaze at Worrell. “You don't want to push this.”

“I think I just might.”

“Leave it.”

“It ain't right, not even taking a courtesy gander. Hell, you got two boys yourself.”

“And so do you,” Gregory said, “And that's why we're not going. That kid is gone, gone for good, gone like the rest of them, and North End don't need fed twice tonight.”

“Don't give me that horseshit.” Worrell holstered his radio and flashlight, then zipped up his coat. “I'll sign my overtime when I get back.”

He made it halfway down the hall. “Wait,” Gregory said. “Just to be understood, I ain't leaving the truck. We'll keep the window cracked and the engine running, and we'll listen. If it's quiet we turn back.”

“North End don't eat nobody,” Worrell said. “You're too old to believe that. Anyone disappears around here, blame the big old lake. There's bodies buried out there, bodies clamped to the bottom of the lake, but there's no boogeymen, no ghosties.”

Gregory opened his locker, withdrawing what looked like a handful of oil rags. He unfolded the rust-colored cloth to reveal a .38 special, a hefty upgrade from their pepper spray canisters. “You must still be wet behind the ears if you think I'd believe that shit secondhand. You act like I never been out there looking for a missing person and seen it for myself.”

*

The truck bounced over the potholes of unkept country roads, blacktop strips slathered with tar that bubbles in the summer. No other headlights, not even the distant pole light of a farmhouse, just a long stretch of black, the dark stain of fields, the slots of treelines planted on the horizon.

North End was the undeveloped part of the lake, left alone for wildlife and environmental stewardship according to the doctrine of lake administrators. A swatch of railroad tracks crossed the lake creating a border boats couldn't cross and serving as the dividing line between recreational paradise and no-man's land. With binoculars, one could see the half-trees rising from the shallow waters, jagged, brown teeth jutting up with gulls perched on them most times, ready to stab the water for fish.

For all the environmental stewardship the administration touted, there were few roads on the north end of the lake, no places for boats to launch or trucks to park, no placards with hunting rules and regulations, just a big hunk of untouched woods, of silent coves, of prairie grasses and long neglected farmlands. Worrell had been a park ranger right out of college and had served for over a decade without setting foot on North End. All he heard were rumors that ran rampant through the community, stories stoked by residents who had been displaced as their land and their livelihoods were flooded by the Corps of Engineers, the stewards of the lake. Folks liked to

whisper about lake-related conspiracies, about how divers had discovered catfish big as Buicks that could eat a person, about cougars and bears not native to Illinois stalking empty campgrounds and undeveloped hunting areas, about five-foot long, endangered rattlesnakes dropped in by black helicopters so the tree-huggers could stop developments from being built.

The radio station was set to oldies, Gregory's music of choice. Worrell didn't much like those tunes, but keeping Gregory placated was the key to a smooth shift. If he was in a good mood, the night would glide by, but a bad mood meant a night full of comfort station light bulb inspections, handing out campground surveys, or running license plates at random to look for folks with warrants.

Silver beads of sleet began smacking off the window. Worrell flicked on the wipers which bounced and squeaked over the little frozen spots left by the sleet. He maxed out the defroster, a hot hiss rising from the dash.

Gregory stared out the window, the .38 on his right thigh with his hand resting on top of it, his thumb caressing the cold metal like it was a favorite pet. Half the trip evaporated in silence.

"Almost fifty years out here," Gregory said, finally. "Started when I was cutting grass on the mowing crew when this place was first built. I was here when there wasn't a lake, just bulldozers and bricks, and a town full of pissed off folks until they got their government checks. The faces I remember are the ones I haven't seen. Twenty-two missing, unrecovered. Folks that drown end up floating after two days. They get all bloated up and come up like fish. Buried folks get found by hikers or hunters, but we've never had that treat of a situation. Closest thing is some people dropping dead in the woods from heart attacks or strokes and being found by animals before they're found by people. But twenty-two folks, twenty-two souls, just gone. Since day one, I've tried to be a good ranger. I memorized every face for the search, every one of them. But the one I can't get out of my mind is Shane Smothers."

Worrell turned onto an increasingly rough road, narrow, the surface more sensed than seen, the ice coming down in streaks now. North End was close. Gregory looked down, not out the window, like something heavy settled over him.

“A fellow ranger. We looked for a kid up here. Went into the woods together but I come out alone.”

Felt like more to the story, like he had more to say. Worrell waited, but Gregory turned back toward the window. On the radio, an awkward voice plugged the big values at the local furniture store.

“He never turned up, then?” Worrell said.

“No. And now we just don't go to North End.”

An old Ford was parked on the shoulder of the upcoming road, and Worrell just about hit it. He smacked the brakes and gripped the wheel as the truck fishtailed against the just-slickening road. Both men remained silent as Worrell cut the wheel and backed up, putting the Ford into the glare of the headlights. He flipped open his green memo book, where he'd jotted down in the info on the boy. “That's the truck.”

“Weather's getting worse. No shame in waiting until morning.”

“We're already out here,” Worrell paused, considering turning back. The familiar, sodium lights of the township, the neon glow of the Jumpin' Jimmy's gas station sign, the hum of Ted Becker's plow all felt as inviting as a beach of sun-warmed sand now that they were north of the lake. “We're already out here,” he said again. “I think the lake cuts into a cove just past the woods here. One quick walk, I'll holler for him, see what happens. Ten minutes and I'll be back.”

“I thought we agreed to listen from the truck,” Gregory said.

“We found his vehicle. He's got to be close. We owe him a walk.”

“I told you I'm not getting out—and neither should you.”

“Come on. What if it was one of your boys?”

“I'm not getting out.”

“Okay. I'll go alone. Someone should take a look.”

Gregory looked out the window. “Radio charged?”

“Check.” He put up his hood, snapped on his gloves, and grabbed his MagLite from the charger. “You want to give me a head start with the spotter?”

Gregory rolled down the window. The spotlight hanging from the side of the truck ticked on, sending a hot swath of light onto the ground. He turned it toward the woods and the trees closest to them seemed to spring to life, the knots on the bark staring back at them like so many unblinking eyes as the thin trunks and the lattice of branches cut the spotter into pieces of shadow. Beyond, the deep of the wood swallowed the light.

Once the truck door closed behind him, Worrell tightened the drawstrings of his hood. Ice pattered against the Gore-Tex sheen of his dark green coat, against the road, against the upper hood of the woods, ice pieces bouncing randomly off branches like loose lottery balls.

He listened. There was only the ice and the creak of limbs groaning under the gathering weight. With the trees and hills of North End to eat the brunt of it, the wind was little more than a whisper. He flinched as the truck doors locked with a chunk sound. Worrell withdrew his flashlight, but with the spotlight behind him, didn't turn it on yet. Then he walked into the woods.

His boots crackled against the debris of the forest floor. Sticker bushes lashed at his legs, but couldn't stick against the Gore-Tex shell he wore outside his pants. His head tilted down, the branches brushed against his hood and past him as he pushed through. This was a thin stretch of woods, he was sure of it. Catfish Cove was on the other side somewhere, and he'd get an open sky above him, a better view, and a place where he could yell and listen for the boy.

The spotlight's strength became muted by the depth of the brush. Worrell clicked on the MagLite, a cone opened in front of him. He kept pushing. The brush eased up, giving way to gaps of space among the somber oaks that stood ancient above him, their canopy choking out the brush and leaving a forest floor of fallen trunks and limbs, of leaves and mud.

The walking easier, he headed down a slope until the spotlight was nothing but a dirty beam above him, his footsteps now geared to slow him down instead of propel him, his free hand groping for thin trunks to help him keep steady as he approached the water.

The shoreline was a bar of mud between trees and the lake ice. Despite weeks of freezing temperatures and the lake's shallowness, he heard the lap of water in the distance.

“Jason!” Worrell screamed. Hearing himself, a shame overcame him. Stupid, trudging through the weather, blasting through midnight, pushing through a forgotten slice of woods. All for a piece of overtime, a couple hours for a few extra bucks to take the old lady out for a rare restaurant meal, perhaps snag a little league bat for the oldest. “Jason Watters!” He expected an echo, but none came. Worrell lingered for a moment at the cusp of the lake ice, looking out into the dark oval of the cove, everything feeling slightly askew, as if the North End were knocked off plumb.

Just the old man getting to you, he thought. Gregory had played tricks before. They were friends and partners, even though they’d had their disagreements, their silent nights, but those nights were rare and patched up quickly. He could imagine going back to the truck, listening to Gregory chuckle all the way home, just panting to tell the rest of the staff how Jack Worrell was shitting his pants at North End.

“Hello?” The voice was distant, but audible.

“Jason!” Worrell screamed again.

“Hello?”

He clicked on his radio and called for Gregory. “I think I got him. I hear someone hollering northeast of the cove.”

“Hello?” No echo, the voice faint against falling sleet.

“How far?” Gregory asked.

“Can’t tell, but I’m moving that way. Call it in to County.”

“We’re well out of range for radio contact. Just hustle your ass up.”

He holstered the radio and started walking along the shoreline. Mud sucked at his boots as he trudged along, toward the corner of the cove.

“Jason, are you all right? This is a park ranger, I’m coming to check on you. Where are you?”

No response. Worrell kept walking. Over his shoulder, the spotlight clicked off. He unsheathed his radio, meaning to call Gregory and check in. He didn’t need the spotlight anymore, of course, but they were partners, and he knew the old man was spooked.

“Hello?” A boy's voice, closer now, just up ahead. “Hello?” the voice screamed again.

Worrell moved into the woods, toward the voice, scanning his approach with his flashlight, which looked like a silver dollar against the dark up ahead.

“Hello?” Closer now.

“Jason, I'm a park ranger. Are you hurt? Are you all right?”

“Hello?”

Worrell stopped. The voice was not up ahead anymore, but to his right, as if the source had moved. And after hearing it repeat over and over, the hello was coming again and again in the same tone, delivery, and inflection, as if recorded. He wanted to run. Instead, he backed up two steps, planted, turned, and started to walk back to the truck, withdrawing his radio, quickening his pace as he got closer to the water.

“Gregory, you there? I got something weird out here.”

He expected no response, as if Gregory had disappeared, leaving the truck behind.

“I'm here. What've you got?” Excitement dripped from his voice, as if Worrell could solve all the mysteries that had taken root in Gregory since Shane Smothers disappeared.

“Someone's hollering hello, and it sounds like a boy, but I'm not so sure.” Hearing himself say it made it real. That boy wasn't out here, not anymore. He walked faster. He would get home and shower, the steam pushing the cold from the center of his bones, and he would go into the bedroom. He would roll up beside Lucy, drape his arm over her, kiss her on the neck until she woke up. He would tell her he was sorry and he'd get a second job and they could make a go with another baby if she wanted to try for a daughter, he'd do whatever it took to keep his family afloat and that he loved her and then his foot hit something soft that gave way underneath the weight of his step.

He lowered the beam of the MagLite. He was standing on a pillowcase, fluffed up with whatever soft things it held. With a flick of his steel toe, he flipped it over, and with a gloved hand pinched the bottom, pulling up to dump the contents.

Mushrooms. But not the Morels that grew in the spring, those small delicious mushrooms his grandfather would bread and fry, but thick, black mushrooms with green spots, the canopy narrow and wrinkled up like an old man's skin. He knew mushrooms, but didn't know this one—and didn't know of any that were as big as a size-twelve boot. The sack only held half a dozen, a couple of them broken and mashed by Worrell stepping on them, a pale ooze wet against his foot, steaming, warm, unfrozen.

Mushroom hunting in December, after all. He could decipher the species later. If this was Jason's mushroom bag, he had to be close. Worrell pivoted, shining the light in consistent waves, searching the immediate area. He saw a shoe upturned in the distance, and the hint of silver cloth.

Don't go, Worrell thought. You know damn well those mushrooms ain't in no textbook anywhere. Gregory knows it, now you do, too—this place ain't right.

Still, the shoe. He pushed forward, duty above all else. The boy was face up, eyes wide open and glazed with ice, a blue tint to his face. He wore what looked like an Oakland Raiders sweatshirt but it was ripped unevenly against his ravaged, splayed open midsection, torn bits of cloth twined around intestines dragged out along the ground in blue ropes, ribs sticking from the mess like splintered, white teeth, leaves stuck to scattered organs. Worrell had chased coyotes off a downed deer before, and this is what the mess looked like. Something had been eating Jason Watters, and he had come along and spooked it off. And that something had to be close because the slaughter was fresh—heat came off the open body in waves, like a hot road in summer. The smell of copper mixed with the stink of the opened intestines, a sweet odor stronger than the musk of the rotting matter on the forest floor. Even with his nose runny from the cold, he smelled the boy's body.

Inside Worrell's shirt pocket, the green memo book had the boy's description—brown hair, brown eyes, sixteen, medium build, but nothing was left to match him. The ice and dark had covered the features of his face—he knew only that he was young, and perhaps Gregory would count Worrell as lucky because he couldn't see every edge, every color of the face.

Worrell reached for his radio.

“Hello?” The boy's voice, coming from something or someone right behind him, loud enough to send Worrell whirling, firing the flashlight beam like a gun. He caught movement in the corner of the light's field, something reddish, enjoined ovals scooting into the dark like oversized kidney beans the size of basketballs. Stick-like legs followed by what looked to be a forked tail propelled the pieces into the shadows.

Worrell's legs outran his thoughts—he was already moving, firing through the woods towards the cove. Once at the shoreline, with water at his back, he would feel less surrounded, feel more capable of confronting anything that might come at him. He let the branches bounce off his face and tug at his cheeks, kept his eyes and light down and close in front of him to make sure he could see approaching trees in his path, and watch for fallen limbs.

Centipede. The thought finally caught up with him. The look of the snaking, connected segments, the staccato movement of the long stick-legs, the dragging forked tail. And what about the mushrooms? He had the feeling that they weren't mushrooms at all. But what? Centipede eggs? Eggs for something that should be the size of a finger but is instead the height of a German Shepherd? How long was it and what did the front end look like? He knew centipedes were venomous carnivores, but who the hell cared when you could squash one with the toe of your boot.

He wanted that shower, he wanted to make up with his wife, but perhaps more than anything, he wanted that ranger truck in his sights, Gregory within screaming distance, holding a loaded .38. The ice kept falling, his high and heavy boots felt like anchors. He pushed on.

The shape of the trees gave way to the open cove up ahead. The angle of entry felt different, he was on a different path, a different direction. He slowed, his breath hot in his ribcage, his gait reduced to where he could withdraw the radio and hammer the button.

“Gregory turn on the fucking spotlight! I gotta hit the truck, there's some crazy shit—”

The radio had distracted him. A step found nothing but air, and soon both feet were airborne, as if falling into darkness. A creek slithered through the woods to the cove, carving the small

ravine he stepped into. He hit the layer of ice below at an awkward angle, driving through the surface, twisting his feet and legs, the front of his thigh crashing into the edge of the hole his feet had made, driving a bolt of pain into the front of his leg that intensified as his left leg twisted up behind him, as if kicking himself in the rump with his heel, sending a crackle vibrating through him even louder than the crackle of the ice.

The water was only chest deep, but he was stuck into the creek like a javelin, the ice stopping just underneath his armpits. Cold water had pooled under the ice, and now ran up his pants and down his boots, slowed but not stopped by the layers of weatherproof clothing. The water's numbing cold was almost welcomed by Worrell, he was sure that his right thigh had been punctured or bruised by the edge of the ice, and his left leg had the sharp pain of a break or sprain. The radio was gone in the fall, perhaps already draining away underneath the black and silver ice, but he still had a death grip on his MagLite. Around him, the roots of trees dangled like frazzled hair against the muddy walls.

He heard a skittering against the ice, felt the vibrations in his chest—he was part of the ice now. The cold water wrapped his lower body, and his breath shortened from the numbing chomp of the water and the fear of whatever was on the ice, seeking him. He lazied the MagLite around him in circles, devising a plan to free himself.

Worrell planted his palms onto the ice and tried to push himself out—he withdrew himself up to his waist with his upper body alone, pressing against the light which cast a yellow hue along the surface. He saw nothing but dark and tried to wrest himself from the hole, wanting to jerk from the water onto his back, but his legs wouldn't kick or respond to the effort without a crippling burst of pain. He rested, settling back into the hole. More vibrations—something moving across the surface. This time, he caught the red pieces of the centipede again, but not the face. It ran from the light.

“Help!” Worrell screamed. “Ken, get the gun! Get the light and come help me!”

He panted against the stranglehold of the night air, his breath turning to steam in front of his face. In the distance, he heard the whir of a revving engine, the crunch of tires against gravel as

the ranger truck departed. “No,” he said softly to himself. “No, no, no. You don't ever leave your partner behind.” That was it, then. The warmth of tears against his face was a welcome change to the spreading cold throughout the rest of him. Did Gregory leave Shane so quickly? Or perhaps he knew better now. He knew what a scream like his meant; knew that Worrell wouldn't make it back to take him to task for leaving.

“Help!” he screamed again. He pushed, thrashed against the trap of the ice. If his legs were whole, he could push off the soft underbelly of the creek, perhaps kick his way out of the hole. The ice was too thick to break easily, but he tried anyway, driving the end of the MagLite into the edge, coming away with chips but nothing more. It would take him an hour to smack away the ice far enough to grab a root and help himself out. In an hour, he would be in shock from hypothermia. Or perhaps worse.

From behind him, his own voice screamed “Help!” loud enough, close enough to rattle in his ears. He wheeled around and put the light on the face of the creature. Its mouth was a black suction cup full of layers and layers of teeth arrayed in no particular order, looking as uneven as the edges of Jason's snapped ribs. Yellow eyes, like seamless tennis balls sunk into a dark red orb. Black antennae shot into the air in two bending, swaying strands. He saw the pink throat flex as it screamed at the light, “Help!” in his own voice again, then it scattered.

Over the next ten minutes, he played matador with the centipede. It would patter against the ice and make a run at him, Worrell would hit it with a beam of light and it would scatter back into the darkness. It was like a video game his youngest son might play, shoot the monster with the light and get an extra life. But he never won any points, never got to move to the next level, and all the while, the mimicked sound of his own voice screamed from the throat of his stalker. His elbows were rubbed raw from the ice—he would drive the points of his elbows down to move while shining the light. Once in a while, he would move his toes, but more and more, he could feel them moving, but couldn't really feel them.

He owed this fight to Lucy. He hadn't apologized to her yet, hadn't assured her that he loved her no matter what their future held. And he owed this fight to his boys. He was their hero and

they would expect him to fight. But how long could he last? After a time, the two voices—his own and that of the creature—became one and the same. They screamed “Help!” at each other, first like a duet and then in unison. And he saw nothing but the gleam of the flashlight and the hint of red and yellow and pink when the beam caught the predator coming for him.

The pain and cold of his lower body rose up into his heart, and he turned his thoughts to the boys. Tomorrow, he would get up early enough to make their pee wee basketball practice. He thought of sneakers and the humidity of a small town gym, of coach's whistles, of Lucy holding his hand, but the thing was coming more often now, the thing was wearing him down. It screamed in his own voice, again and again, almost mocking him. He estimated the MagLite would last forty more minutes or so on this charge—forty minutes strong enough to keep him safe. His training told him that he was already becoming hypothermic, that he could last half an hour, maybe as long as an hour before he faded, sinking into the creek.

He concentrated on breathing, on keeping his wits about him. He would fight. He would fight to the end—for Lucy, for the boys. Maybe Gregory would come back with help. He was heading down the road to get into radio range for County; just hold out and the cavalry would arrive any minute to run off the monsters and pluck him out of the ice. Gregory might come through and Worrell damn sure wanted to last long enough to find out. The patter of legs vibrated in front of him, but this time, he felt them behind him as well. He heard his voice scream “Help!” and Jason's voice scream “Hello?” Whatever had killed Jason had joined the party. Was it another centipede? Or something else? The two creatures circled him, screaming in their counterfeit, human voices, one after the other, as if having a coded conversation.

The dual patter rattled the ice again. They were coming. Worrell tightened his grip on his dying MagLite. He would fight them until the end, until they finally overpowered him, but he prayed to God the cold would take him first.

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### ***About Fred Venturini***

Fred grew up in Patoka, IL, where he survived being lit on fire by a bully, a neck-breaking car accident, and being chewed up by a pit bull. His 19 short stories have appeared in places like *River Styx*, *The Death Panel*, *Sick Things*, *Johnny America*, *Morpheus Tales*, and *Necrotic Tissue*, and he is a two-time Chuck Palahniuk anthology finalist. He lives in Southern Illinois with his beautiful wife, Krissy.

### **About THE SAMARITAN (Blank Slate Press, 2011)**

Dale Sampson lives in isolation, hiding a super-human gift that could change the course of human history—a gift he believes he doesn't deserve. He is unemployed and unmotivated, a fractured friendship, love lost, and the tragedies of childhood have locked him in place. Empty days tick away until a chance encounter with a woman from his past sets in motion one last shot at redemption and love and a spiral of small-town violence that will end a thousand miles away with his flesh as the battleground as millions tune in to watch . . .

### **About MY IMMORTAL (Blank Slate Press, 2012)**

Fred served, for a time, as a park ranger at a very big lake in Southern Illinois. The lake setting serves as the inspiration for "North End" and for the landscape of *MY IMMORTAL*, a novel of the Apocalypse, where the four horsemen along with prophets, false prophets, black-winged Seraphim, and the beast that sleeps in the deep awake to fulfill—or confront—their destinies.

When Ben, a junior at an elite Midwestern liberal arts college who writes papers for his classmates for extra cash, is busted and expelled for cheating, he imagines his biggest problem will be telling his parents. And never seeing the girl he's just fallen for. But when a mysterious man, who he's seen pop-up all over the small college town, suddenly arranges for his academic nightmare to disappear and offers him a cushy summer job with a free cabin at a well-known, recreational lake, he imagines his problems are solved and that he's in for a summer of fun with friends. But still...something doesn't seem right. Little does he know that he's about that he's

about to confront a destiny planned for him from the beginning of time—a destiny he has no intention of fulfilling.

## THE DOLL COLLECTION

by Anene Tressler

It is Saturday morning and I am driving to my mother's flat for a day of errands. She lives about three miles from my apartment, and I call her daily. Usually, this call is accompanied on either side by calls from her. My husband bought an answering machine to give me peace from all the conversations, but it hasn't worked out. My mother uses it to send me verbal letters of increasing urgency, beginning the escalating messages with "Dear Baby" and ending with "Love Mama."

Since I have cut my visits to once a week, she has developed a variety of new behaviors. Sometimes there will be no food in her refrigerator. When I ask her about this, she insists she's been too ill to eat. When I ask for specifics, she shakes her head as though I wouldn't understand, or don't care enough to know the truth. If I persist, she offers only vague descriptions of her complaints, then adds that her only real worry is that her dogs not go without their supper. I am not sure if this is meant to reassure me, or make me feel worse.

My mother lives on Social Security Disability and works a full-time job. We both know this is illegal, but it's not a topic we discuss. The only time I ever mentioned it to her, she reassured me, "Don't worry, Baby. I'm working under an assumed name." As if that solved everything. To press the issue would be to make her cry—I've learned this from past experience. Instead, I added the facts of her income to an ever-growing list of topics we don't discuss. They are secrets that we share. But they do not bring us closer.

Our destinations on these errand-running Saturdays are also secret. It is a maddening habit of hers that I have been unable to break. My mother will not tell me all the errands she wants

accomplished. Even though I am our driver, she assures me that our itinerary is not really any of my concern.

At best, these trips require simply that I circle back around, zigzagging across town to go to the grocery, then to the bank five miles away, then back to the grocery, because she forgot she had a coupon. So it continues, every Saturday, for as long as our errands last. At their worst, our trips draw me deeper into her secret dealings.

I remember, once she said, “Our next destination is the HFC.” Household Finance with its ruinous interest. The only place she could get a loan. When I questioned her, she puffed up in indignation, and so I drove. When we arrived at the loan company, she told me that she had requested a loan in my name, and would I go in and get the check? I remember sitting in the seat beside her, trying to grasp the situation as she explained, ever faster, that if I’d just go in and get the check, then we could be on our way. The loan was for five hundred dollars—more than I could have given her. I remember thinking myself a failure for not being able to meet this need myself. I tried to talk her out of the loan, ask why she needed it, but she avoided my questions. Instead, she assured me again that all I had to do was sign. She’d already given all the information over the phone. Her tone was patient, but I could sense her anxiety building. She needed the money. And didn’t I appreciate that she had everything waiting, so I only had to sign? Why was I so unreasonable? She’d pay it back herself. Surely I trusted her. So I went in.

Three hyperactive poodles bark and jump at the kitchen screen when I step onto the porch. All three are overweight. The black one, Candy, now refuses to climb the porch steps. So now, each time that she’s let out, my mother—or I—must go and bring her up.

“The pups are so glad to see you,” she calls from inside the door. The brown poodle, Paris, jumps into my mother’s lap. He’s still growling, baring his teeth.

The kitchen is dark, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. I cross to where she sits and kiss her on her head.

“I’m so glad to see you, Mama,” I say. And it is true. I am always filled with such a sense of possibility and adventure when we are together. I look forward to telling her my stories. Am

always happy if she will let me buy her a sandwich for lunch. These are chances to be good to her. And I hope these gestures can somehow make up for all the sad years that came before.

“I'm so happy we have some time today. Tell me how you feel.”

What I really want to know is our agenda, but this is a subject to be broached slowly. Otherwise, her feelings will be hurt, or she'll get angry, or tell me she's changed her mind, and our day together will be ruined.

“Baby, I made coffee just for you. Our cups are on the stove. We'll have some before we go.”

After pouring the coffee, I return to the table and look around the room.

“The house looks nice.” I say.

“You haven't mentioned the plaque,” she answers, letting her slight disappointment show at my lack of consideration.

Taking a silent inventory, I try very hard to pick out the new addition. She interrupts after a moment's meandering.

“It's here.”

There, among a dozen other plaques and little pictures, is a decoupage piece of paper on a rough-cut board. The message, printed in gold with yellow flowers in the background, reads, “A mother is the heart of the home.”

“It's very nice,” I say.

Each weekly trip reveals new decorations. Of late, she's been focused on the kitchen—she has no dining room in this flat. At my last visit, she'd added a lazy-Susan to her table. She's cluttered it with condiments, powdered coffee creamer, paper napkins and maple syrup—all things she used to keep in her pantry. It's too big for the table, and crowds my cup. I give the lazy Susan a spin. We each take creamer and sugar in our coffees. I offer these to her first. Then I bring a package of Lorna Doone cookies from her pantry. We each take two, and I tell her about my week at work.

Our coffee finished, I take our dishes to the sink.

“So where do you want to go today, Mama?” I try to sound cheerful so she won’t think I am rushing her. “We have the whole day to spend. Do you know what you want to do?” Her eyes are suddenly bright with a surprise she can hardly wait to tell.

“Well, first, I want to go to the Kay Bee Toy Store.” The toy store is in North County, miles from our usual destinations.

“Why there?” I ask, even though I am sure I already know the answer.

“There's a Madam Alexandra doll there. I want you to have her. She's very expensive, but it's something we just have to do.”

My mother began “my” doll collection right after I was married. It has always been in her apartment. I have not had any interest in dolls since I was five. But I don’t say this. Besides, I’m sure my mother knows. I know the doll will be expensive. I secretly tally up my money, knowing that I can’t buy it for her. I am disappointed—and relieved.

“Mama, we don't really need her. Why don't you save your money?”

“I'll never have money,” she says with a tone as old as I am.

“Then let me buy her. I have some extra money. I'd really like to.” We both know this is a lie. But I decide to charge the doll, pay it off over time.

“Of course not. I have it all planned. I figured out all my money last night. Now, can we go?”

She retrieves a fat white envelope, bound with rubber bands. She does not carry a purse. As I watch her unwrap the envelope, check its contents, and bind it up again; I try to remember when this changed. We pass through her bedroom toward the front of her shotgun apartment. Her pace is slow; I follow behind. My mother has recently begun using a cane. Sometimes she leans heavily on it for support. Many times, she carries it before her like a dousing rod. I have no idea how she came into possession of the cane. She says that nothing hurts. That she didn’t fall. But she won’t leave her apartment without it anymore.

I pull open the dark wood pocket door to her front room. The pups race past and yelp at the door. They are always part of these Saturday excursions and will have their own sandwiches later

when we stop to eat. My mother enters the room slowly and I slide the door closed behind us. I cross the living room to open the dead bolts at her door. The pups jump and bark to urge me on.

My mother is not behind me. She is standing in the center of the room, holding her cane. Surveying the dozens of dolls that smile back from pressboard bookcases and chairs. She has named each doll. I know she buys outfits for them. In the last year she has also started buying them toys. Jamie, Anna Mary, Callie, Joe, the twins, and John John, each wrapped in plastic, occupy a red metal wagon, a child's rocker, an infant's highchair, and a blue plastic car.

I watch her, watching them. The dogs have stopped barking. The room is suddenly silent. My mother turns to me and smiles.

"Before we go, I want to tell you something." I remain standing at the open door.

"Anna Mary and Jamie had a fight over the blue car," she says. "Jamie wanted it, but I bought it for Anna Mary." She cuts a glance toward the plastic car and arches her brows as if to emphasize the point. "I tried to explain this, but I think Jamie still feels hurt."

She takes a seat on her flowered couch and pats the place beside her, motioning me to join her.

"Close the door, Baby. Before we go, I want you to have a talk with Jamie."

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About Anene Tressler

Anene is an award-winning writer whose work has appeared in numerous literary journals. She has attended the Oxford American Summit for Ambitious Writers, the University of Iowa's summer program, Wellspring House, Sewanee, Breadloaf, and others and has studied with literary luminaries like Richard Bausch, Nicholas Delbanco, Claire Messud, and Lorrie Moore. Her first novel, *DANCING WITH GRAVITY*, won the Literary Fiction category – 2011 International Book Awards and was a finalist for the Literary Fiction category of the USA Book Awards.

About DANCING WITH GRAVITY (Blank Slate Press, 2011)

Father Whiting is asleep in his own life. As a St. Louis priest and the head of Pastoral Care at a local teaching hospital, he's already on edge wondering if he's up to the job and wondering how far his predecessor's—and now his—secretary will go to sabotage him. He is fatigued by his mother's increasingly erratic behavior, fears he is incapable of ministering to an old friend and fellow priest stricken with cancer, and secretly longs to share everything about his confused, mixed-up life with the very attractive Sarah James, the hospital's head of public relations. When he overhears a heated argument between the Chairman of the Board and the Abbess who runs the hospital, he fears his job will soon be history. Instead, he finds himself tapped to minister to a small Central American circus bequeathed to an order of aging nuns in St. Louis. Through his deepening relationship with Nikolai, the enigmatic trapeze artist, Whiting wakes to his loneliness, realizes he has been living a half-life, and finally finds the courage to be the man he was meant to be. The book paints an unforgettable portrait of the grand and petty motivations of the human heart, and is a poignant exploration of lost, unrecognized and courageous love that will prompt you to consider your own journey toward purpose and fulfillment.

LATE AND SOON

By Steve Wiegenstein

Chester's father had gotten him the job, although no one mentioned it. He had muttered gruffly, the way a person speaks when he is about to embark on an indirection, that he had heard from his golf partner, the property manager, that there was an opening in sales, and Chester was sensitive enough to the rules of gruff mutterings to pick up the overtones.

It was Chester's weekly Sunday dinner with his parents, and they stood in their customary places on the deck, his father at the railing watching the golf carts hum up the valley, Chester against the wall watching his father. It was seven o'clock; the midsummer heat still lingered; but his father liked to stand on the deck in the evening, being manly, ignoring mosquitoes.

From the kitchen his mother cried: "A job right here in Belle Prospect! Wouldn't that be convenient?"

"Oh, convenient, for sure," Chester said. He didn't know why his mother's quivering, hopeful statements always brought out a sarcastic tone. But they did.

"I don't mean convenient for us, I mean convenient for you," she said as a smile rushed across her face on its way somewhere else. "You wouldn't have to move. And—" she wagged her finger at him, this time with a smile that was completely fake—"you could get married to Maryalice, with a steady job."

"She's already got a steady job."

"You know what I mean, young man. She may put up with this living-together business for a while. But take it from me; you can't keep a good woman waiting too long."

A number of different replies, all of them querulous, occurred to Chester, who said nothing.

"Let's not get the cart before the horse," his father said. "He hasn't even gotten the job yet. When he goes for his interview, the thing to avoid most of all is acting sullen. That's the one trait an employer can't stand, and I speak from experience here."

Chester turned away, sullen despite himself, and contemplated his universe. Below, the deep valley, hardly wide enough to hold the winding golf course that ran through it. Between the house and the golf course, a rocky hillside, thickly forested with oaks and hickories. Chester's little house barely visible at the far corner of the acreage, where in the nights he could hear the whir of the treadmill and the clank of the weight machine from his father's basement gym. Then the yard, weirdly bright from fertilizer and constant watering, where his father sought to hold back the disorder of nature with a 48-inch cut, zero turning radius John Deere. At night raccoons came out of the woods and skittered across it onto the deck, looking for scraps. Inside, tidy suburb: fireplace, gleaming wood, many television channels. On the mantel was a brass retirement plaque from the company, some golf trophies, and, in a frame, his father's combat medal.

That night he'd had Maryalice cut his hair. He sat in a kitchen chair, a towel around his neck. She was a big woman, tall and strong, wide in the rear, her arms and face deeply tanned from her job as a flagger for the highway department. Everyone in Belle Prospect had a tan for one reason or another, except Chester, who spent too much of his time in bars.

"You want to keep the ponytail?" she said. The kitchen scissors were dull; they pulled.

He shook his head. "I told him I'd go to the interview. I might as well do the rest." She unwound the rubber band at the back of his head. "It was just a little stub anyway."

"Do you want to go, or do you just want to make your dad happy?"

"I'd rather have him happy than unhappy. And the money would be nice." The scissors creaked. She lifted his chin with her free hand.

"Money," she said. "I thought we had money figured out."

"We do. It's not the money."

"Then what?"

Chester felt his mind going into idle, his nobody-home-here mode, where it stayed most of the time out in the real world but which he usually avoided in the cabin. He knew it annoyed Maryalice, and he didn't want to annoy Maryalice. He forced his mind back.

“Maybe it is my dad. Maybe it's worth it, on the off chance that it will make him happy. I've spent plenty of time making him unhappy. What do you think?”

She wet a comb and pulled it across the top of his head. “Getting thin up here.”

He waited as she snipped and combed, her hip warm against his side. No need to repeat his question; she always answered in time, always in the same way, sympathetic but cutting no corners on the truth. No excuses. She played fair. That was what had drawn him to her in the first place, what had led him to invite her to the cabin he had built in the scruffiest corner of his father's double lot.

“Your dad's thing is pride. He wants a son to be proud of. Pride is not your thing. It's a cheap satisfaction. The question is, can this job at the land company give your dad his thing without taking away your thing. I think probably not.”

She stood back for a moment to check the evenness of the cut. “On the other hand,” she said, “maybe it can and there's only one way to find out. How do you like your new look?”

Chester took the mirror from her hand. Before, he had looked like an aging hippie, soft from too much beer, partly bald, strings of gray in his red beard. Now he looked like an aging hippie with a haircut. They looked at each other, knowing this, and smiled.

Maryalice said, “Somehow I never imagined you in sales.”

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The sales manager said: “Heard you might be coming by. Welcome aboard. My name's Dale Green.” Dale Green grinned cheerfully, but his look said jeez-another-loser.

There was no interview. The job had been wired, golf partner to golf partner: his father, mayor of Belle Prospect, and what's-his-name, the real estate hog. Dale Green handed Chester a three-ring binder stuffed with bullet lists and simple graphs.

“Here's the deal. People come down here for two reasons. A, they want to retire and play golf, like your dad. Those are the easy sales. You show them the course, drive them around for a

couple of hours, bring them back here to the sales room. Half the time you don't even have to put in the DVD and go through the flip book. Just give them a contract and off you go.”

Chester opened the ring binder to its first page, a plat map of the Belle Prospect development. Down the center ran the creek, once upon a time Sulfur Branch but now Belle Prospect Brook, and along the creek was the golf course. It ran the length of the map, the holes laid out end to end so that hundreds of lots could touch or overlook it.

“B, they've gotten our brochure or responded to the cold call. Free weekend at the lodge if they agree to hear the sales pitch. Those are the hard sales. They think they're going to get something for nothing. Your job is to make sure they don't. Come over here.”

Dale Green walked to the back deck of the real estate office, which like everyone's deck overlooked the golf course. They watched the carts navigate in slow procession, up one side of the creek, down the other. “Selling things is an art,” Dale Green said. “It is also a war. How old are you?”

Chester had been lulled by the flow of words. He jumped. “Forty-three.”

“I'm forty. Were you in the military? Desert Storm maybe?”

“No.”

“College?”

“For a while.”

These answers did not appear to satisfy Dale Green. He returned his attention to the bright green swath below, shimmering in the summer heat. “I was in Desert Storm,” he said. “The thing nobody understands about war is how hard you have to think. Out there is your enemy. He wants something from you. You want something from him. You have to think, think, think, all the time. Your life is at stake.”

He smiled, a blissful wide smile. “Here it's just the same, only you count money, not bodies. Every sale is a battle, and don't you forget that. When somebody arrives for their free weekend, you say to yourself: 'Those people are carrying a three-thousand-dollar commission in their

pockets. That is my commission. That is my money. And if they leave without buying a lot, they are taking my three thousand dollars away with them.”

Below, a foursome had stopped their carts in the fairway and gathered in a nervous, foot-shuffling ring. They thrashed with their clubs at something in the middle. Copperheads were still a problem in Belle Prospect.

Dale Green took Chester's elbow. “If I was walking out this door with three thousand dollars of yours, wouldn't you want to stop me?”

“Sure.”

“Wouldn't you find some way to stop me?”

“I guess.”

“Wouldn't you make sure I didn't leave with your money? Grab me by the arm? Take hold of my lapels? Persuade my wife not to let me leave? Wear me down, talk me to death, until the only thing I wanted was for you to let me go, until I would gladly, cheerfully, give you your money, if only you would let me go?”

“Well—”

Dale Green had him by both elbows now. Chester could smell his breath, a mixture of cigarettes and mints. “That's what you have to do, Chester. They may hate you later, as they drive home. They have just bought a vacation lot they will never use. They wish they had been tougher. They wish they had never heard of Belle Prospect. But when they walk in this door, they are carrying your paycheck. You have to make them give it to you. You married?”

“Ah, no.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Sure.”

“Well, just wait till you're like me, a married fellow with three little cuties, and some bastard is heading out of here with my commission still in his pocket. You say to yourself, 'There go my kiddies' Christmas presents,' and brother, you want to let the air out of his tires. Anything to keep

him here for another dose of the sell. You got any nicer shirts than that? Never mind. You will soon. Now settle down in an office and look over the material.”

Chester spent the morning studying the book, which he was supposed to flip through, page by page, as he delivered the pitch. After the plat map came a series of graphs, all heading dramatically upward: real estate values, number of people owning second homes, tax benefits, something called the “comfort living index.” Each page was encased in heavy plastic. There was something reassuring about the laminated pages, so shiny and permanent, with their forceful yet modest messages of hope and prosperity.

Just before noon a maroon SUV pulled into the parking lot. Dale Green watched them stretch their legs, a young couple with a four-year-old girl. “Ugh,” he said. “Hyundai. Only cheapskates drive Hyundais. What the hell, Chester, you gotta learn sometime. They’re yours.”

Chester practiced his salesman’s faces as he walked out to greet them—hearty eagerness, amused hauteur, bluff honesty. He settled on bluff honesty, feeling their suspicion play over him like a steady breeze. Their names were Jack and Deanne, and the little one was Kal. “With a K,” Kal said. He checked them into the lodge, and they arranged the sales tour for five o’clock.

“Well?” Dale Green said. “Where they from?”

“Kansas City.”

“Whereabouts in Kansas City? What do they do for a living?”

“I don’t know.”

“Know your enemy, Chester, it’s the first rule. How many suitcases they bring?”

“Well”

“I know, you didn’t notice. Listen, little things mean a lot. More suitcases, the more they like possessions. Good sign. Whoever fills out the guestbook is the one who had the idea to come here.”

“It was the man.”

“Attaboy, Chester. You'll make a salesman yet. Any bumper stickers? Check for them, you can learn volumes. No bumper stickers, bad sign. Means they don't tell people what they're thinking.” He gave Chester's elbow a squeeze and left for lunch. There were no bumper stickers on his car.

Chester picked them up in the company car, an elephantine white Lincoln. “Money likes money,” Dale Green had said, explaining the extravagance. “Money is like a starling. It likes to congregate with other money. You want to make people feel rich.”

“I want you to know right off the bat that we really don't have any intention of buying a lot down here,” Jack said as soon as they were in the car. His voice was nervous. “You look like the kind of fellow who would understand. I mean, you people send out thousands of those flyers, you've surely got to assume that a certain percentage of the people just won't be interested. If you have something better to do with these two hours than talking to some people who are definitely uninterested—you know, making phone contacts or doing paperwork”

Deanne spoke from the back seat, where she was trying to get Kal involved in a finger game. “I'm sure this gentleman has to take us on the tour regardless. After all, we agreed. It was right there on the form.”

Chester remembered Dale Green's words and found to his surprise that he was already thinking of these people as an enemy. The cash nexus, the money thing, had hold of his brain. He hated them.

“I don't have to take you around Belle Prospect,” he said. He felt a grin wrap itself around the lower half of his face, wider and wider, beatific, maniacal, a Dale Green smile. “It says that in the ads, but no one will check up on us. We could go spend two hours in the movies and no one would be the wiser.”

He started the car.

“The reason I'm taking you on the tour is that I love this place. I think it has all the right elements for a fine young couple such as you. Plus signs all down the list. When you got out of your car this afternoon, I said to my boss, 'There is a Belle Prospect couple.' I specifically asked to

be your sales guide. And once you understand Belle Prospect the way I understand Belle Prospect, you'll love it too.”

His grin would not leave. He put the Lincoln in drive.

Rhapsodies came to him, salesman's poetry. He drove them down the east side of the development, stopping at all six scenic overlooks. He stopped in the Village Square, waved in the direction of the Town Hall, bought Kal a sundae at the Kreem Shoppe. The temperature sign on the Village Bank said ninety-six. He drove back up the west side; five scenic overlooks.

“Next we take a ride in a golf cart – right down the middle of the most beautiful golf course in mid-America. You play golf, Jack?”

“No.” Jack was looking fatigued.

“How about you?”

Deanne met his eyes in the rear view mirror. “Golf?” she said. “Christ.”

“That ice cream was gross,” Kal said.

Once in the cart, Chester tried another tack. “What's your line of work, Jack?”

“I'm in marketing, and Deanne does public relations. She's quite—”

“And neither of you plays golf? A little advice, kids. Where do the real decisions get made? On the golf course! A mid-level manager who can't talk golf might as well say, 'Don't move me up, I'm happy where I am.' And think about saying to your boss, 'Come on down to our woods place this weekend. The house is small, but you won't believe the golf.' What an impression!”

Chester steered the humming cart down the hot asphalt path. Jack and Deanne were silent. They passed his father, whacking savagely from the rough, and Chester waved.

“Village mayor. Lives next door to me. Fine fellow.”

His father straightened and waved, then returned to his practice swings. Was there pride in that wave? Would there be another set of gruff mutterings on the green, indirections made with eyes averted—that your boy up there?—the kind of man-talk that meant so much to the old bastard? And why should it matter to him?

On impulse he swung the cart around. “We've got time!” he cried. “Let's say hello. That's the terrific thing about this development. Your neighbors are your friends. You make friends so fast!”

“Are you sure you know how to drive this thing?” Kal called from the back.

Chester felt burdens lifting from him as he approached. Perhaps he could make his father happy; what would be wrong with that? Who had been expecting too much from whom?

“Jack and Deanne, meet Ben Wilson, our Lord Mayor. And the little one here is Kal.” His father looked the part, tanned and firm, like a model for a line of senior citizens' sportswear. His creased smile, his perpetual squint, looked newly handsome to Chester. They were on the same side at last. Hands were shaken all around.

“Having a good stay?” When his father asked the question, suddenly Chester could see in the couple's grim, polite smiles and tight nods that nothing was right. They saw him for a phony, they hated the tour, they weren't going to buy a lot. His father's squint darted his way: appraisal, judgment, confirmation, disappointment. Chester knew he never should have tried.

“Your name is Wilson too, isn't it?” Jack said.

“That's something, eh?” Chester said. “And we're next-door neighbors.”

“They better rename the town,” Jack said. His father merely looked from one face to another, silent.

The conversation ran on cruise control for another minute, then a foursome arrived at the tee behind them. His father tried to give him a questioning look as they parted, but by then Chester was deep into nobody-home mode.

It had always been that way, Chester thought. The unspoken comment, the dubious look. Success loves success, money loves money—Dale Green was right about that. But he forgot the B-side of the song: money hates no-money, success hates no-success. Or is embarrassed by it, which is worse than hate sometimes.

At least he could punish these Starbucks drinkers. At the end of the golf course was a chair lift that took them back to the lodge. “You'll love this part,” he told the little girl. “You can see for miles.”

“Rides make me sick,” she said.

“How much more of this fucking junk do we have to listen to?” Deanne burst out. “It's hot as hell. I could have been laying out, or better yet home in my air-conditioned house, and here I am riding in a golf cart. I hate golf. This ski-lift thing doesn't even look safe.”

“Your vulgarity surprises me, ma'am,” Chester said. “But to answer your question, you have—” He showed her his watch. “—twenty-two more minutes of me, and then you are free. And if you don't like the lift, the steps are over there. Know what a copperhead looks like? Never mind,” he said, as they all jumped into the lift chairs.

At the office, he gave Kal a lollipop and took them onto the scorching deck with the flip book. The child appropriated the only shady corner, staring moodily into space and sucking loudly on the lollipop. Chester opened the book to the map page, his voice oratorical, pitched to reach Dale Green, who was spying from behind a partition.

“From where we stand, we can see fourteen lots that are still available. These are prime lots, highest value in Belle Prospect, and of the fourteen, twelve directly overlook the golf course. Frankly, I can't understand why they haven't been snatched up already. Looking south down Belle Prospect Brook, we can see two lots remaining on the east side, near Village Square, and on the west side more than—”

At the corner of the deck, Kal began to vomit. The air was filled with the sick sweet smell, ice cream and illness, and Chester had an instant recollection of his own childhood, when he always got carsick from reading comic books and had to be let out on the roadside, his father standing impatiently above him while his mother cleaned his face. Deanne ran to her and carried her inside, followed by the men.

She glared at him. “You got a towel?” Chester looked around wildly, as if a towel might have nestled unnoticed among the framed photos and piles of brochures. He gave her his handkerchief. Deanne wet it in the water fountain and bathed the girl's face.

“Okay. Happy now?” she said. “Well?”

Chester said nothing.

Soon Kal was back to normal, and the family stalked out. Chester watched them return to the lodge, unconsciously folding and refolding his fouled handkerchief in his hand. He became aware of Dale Green behind him.

“I don't think this is my line,” Chester said over his shoulder.

Dale Green's face was averted. “Bring back the goddam Lincoln before you leave.”

In the golf cart once again, Chester passed beneath his parents' house. A thought struck him: it was past six—what the hell, she'd be home. He turned the cart off the path and drove it up the hill on the winding service road, the puny battery straining under the labor. He pulled into the driveway and took the turnoff to his cabin.

Maryalice was sitting on the porch. She cocked her head as he drove up. He didn't get out of the golf cart.

“I forgot to tell you something my mother said the other night.”

“Okay.”

“She thinks we ought to think about starting to talk about maybe getting married.”

Maryalice smiled.

“Oh, she does, does she?”

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*About Steve Wiegenstein*

Steve grew up in the eastern Missouri Ozarks and roams its back roads every chance he gets. The Black River and the Annapolis Branch Library were his two main haunts as a kid, and they remain his Mecca and Medina to this day. He is a longtime scholar of the 19th century Icarian movement in America, which provided the inspiration for *SLANT OF LIGHT*. He particularly enjoyed weaving the real-life story of Sam Hildebrand—the notorious Confederate bushwhacker who murdered one of Steve’s ancestors—into the novel. Steve and his wife, Sharon Buzzard, met while completing their Ph.D.’s in English at University of Missouri-Columbia. The two of them, both English professors, live and teach in Columbia. *SLANT OF LIGHT*, the first installment in his Daybreak series, is his debut novel.

**About *SLANT OF LIGHT* (Blank Slate Press, Spring 2012)**

As the nation moves toward Civil War, Charlotte Turner, the reserved, thoughtful daughter of a West Point instructor follows her new husband, James Turner, a charming, impulsive lyceum lecturer, to southern Missouri where he plans to put his social theories to the test by founding Daybreak, a utopian settlement. Charlotte loses her idealistic innocence as her husband's rash actions put the community—and their marriage—in danger. But, as she assumes leadership of the community and finds herself drawn to one of its leading members, she draws on her inner reserves and develops a deeper sense of herself and of human frailties and possibilities.

With war approaching, the utopians try to remain neutral and friendly to all, but soon find neutrality is no longer an option. In the wake of a deadly bushwhacking, Turner discovers that he too has the capacity for ferocious violence. He and Charlotte must adjust to their new roles and their changed selves as Missouri descends into its uniquely savage brand of warfare, in which guerrilla bands terrorize the countryside while Federal troops control the cities, and in which neither side offers or expects quarter. And all the inhabitants of Daybreak must choose sides in their personal and public lives.

# HOW MY SORRY ASS GOT SAVED

By Blanchard DeMerchant

*(An excerpt from his novel, DRAFTED INTO COMPROMISE,  
to be published under our Treehouse imprint in spring 2012)*

This won't take long. It's not a big story. Except to me.

I'm a clerk in the Headquarters Office of the 182nd Engineer Battalion on Cu Chi Base Camp in South Vietnam.

That's it. That's the end of the story.

If that doesn't sound like an ass-kicking ending, let me tell you something. If I'd read that ending five months ago, I would have danced in circles and waved my hands and lit burnt offerings to every deity I could name. Especially Major Roberts.

And just so you know, in case my luck turns sour and I'm blown away before I leave this friggin' country, I'm writing this in 1969. Why is that important? Because we're still in the jungle and ain't nobody knows how we're getting out unless we're talking about each man's tour when he shouts out the door of the Silver Bird of Paradise, "I'll write you sorry bastards as soon as I get home!"

What I'm saying is this: things aren't going well over here. Don't make no never mind what the Big Brass tell the press back home, because we flat out don't know what the fuck we're doing. And I don't mean the men in this battalion don't know how to pave roads. They do know. All of 'em. All except me.

Hell, I don't know shit about paving roads. That's why Colonel Hackett likes my articles about paving. I'm so ignorant I write only the basics they spoon-feed me, which is what the folks back home like to read when they get their monthly twelve pages of mimeographed propaganda our men—their sons and husbands—mail to them.

Hackett's no dummy. Once he realized I was doing good work as the new awards clerk, and that I asked reasonable questions and could write up reasonable answers, he assigned me as editor of *The Road Paver*, which hadn't been published in six months.

That plum assignment came with another cut to my integrity, what little I had left. Hackett had me standing at his desk in his air-conditioned office when he laid out my options.

"Specialist DeMario, in addition to being awards clerk, you are now the editor and reporter of our battalion newspaper. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Sir, and I consider it a—"

“But if you’d rather do your shitting over a cat hole you’ve dug in the boonies, then publish an article that says one goddamned negative thing about this battalion or any man in this battalion and you’ll be whistling Dixie out in the razor grass with the bloodsuckers faster than you can wipe your ass in one of our a six-hole shitters.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. We understand each other. You’re dismissed.”

He must have scared the shit out of Major Roberts, too. Roberts previews every article I write. I’m always editing something he thinks might be negatively interpreted. We don’t “repair” anything, for example. We “improve” stuff with updated designs, unless the repairs are needed because of damage caused by the VC. Then I lock and load my adjectives on the VC.

But back to what I was talking about before. When I ask seasoned officers and sergeant majors how we can win our ugly little war—I once thought, like a suicide numbskull, that I’d do an article on that—they don’t have a pecker’s mindless nod how to answer except to say we should bomb the fuck out of North Vietnam. “Nuke ‘em” is what always comes out after crap about superior body counts and “winning the hearts and minds of the people” by relocating them in new villages after we burn down or blow up the old ones, along with their ancestral burial grounds.

I want to be clear about one thing, though. I’m proud of what the men in my battalion are doing. These guys are working their asses off.

The 182nd paved the Cu Chi airfield and the roads to Trang Bang and Tay Ninh, and now we’re paving fifty klicks from Lai Khe to An Loc in the midst of sniper fire and land mines and ambushes here and there along that goddamned road all day long. We’re talking quality work these men are doing, sometimes twelve and sixteen hours a day, and it’s dangerous as hell. Maybe not as dangerous as being a grunt in the boonies, but it’s a lot more dangerous than what I do, which is sitting on my ass in the battalion head-quarters office typing memos, articles, and letters. And that brings me back to my story.

When I arrived in country my MOS was Eleven Bravo, meaning I was an infantryman. What a damned farce that was. I wasn’t even good at pretending to be a grunt in Basic and AIT. I’m not joking. I was fully persuaded I wouldn’t return to the States in one piece, if at all. In fact, before I left the States, I almost told my wife to find another guy, because if I wasn’t killed in Nam and I woke up in a hospital without an arm or a leg, I’d blow my brains out. I saw half-bodied men in Madigan Army Medical Center when I got pneumonia in AIT, and I swore I’d never come back like that. So stop loving me, I almost told her, and go ahead and shack-up with somebody who’ll stay around for the long haul.

Now I'm glad I didn't tell her that. 'Course I could still get my nuts blown off from a mortar round in the Base Camp or a land mine on the road when I'm covering a story, but the percentages are a lot better than humping in the boonies.

When I first arrived in country I was assigned, for a couple weeks, to perimeter guard duty on Long Binh Base Camp. That was a holding pattern for me and a bunch of other Eleven Bravos. Then thirty of us got reassigned to the 182nd Engineer Battalion here in Cu Chi. Why? Nobody knows. But not knowing in the Army isn't unique. Nobody in the Army knows squat about shit. But in this case you can do a little figuring once you know a little more about it.

We newbie grunts were parked for several weeks in the 182nd because some brass-assed tidy-butt wanted to wait until enough men were killed and injured in the 101st Airborne Division so he could assign thirty hunks of fresh meat, clean and neat, without overloading the 101st Airborne Division's reserves. We were the fresh meat he didn't want clogging up the books.

Anyway, during our processing into the battalion, a personnel clerk saw in my records that I had a college education. He walked into the processing room where I was sitting with the other don't-wanna-be grunts.

Now this is how it was. We were scared shitless. We didn't know what to expect. We were praying to be guards for truck drivers and asphalt pavers. We'd have been happy being ditch diggers. Anything's better than humping the boonies.

So this clerk walks up to me all crisp and clean and smelling of Old Spice. "You wanna work in the battalion headquarters? You got a college education according to this." He waved my personnel file in my face.

I looked around at the other Eleven Bravos sitting at the tables where we'd filled out all those forms. They looked at me like I was a can of piss they'd been asked to drink.

Their reaction was to hearing I had a college education, not the question of whether I wanted to be a clerk. That question, in the military, is a joke that's played on naïve cocksuckers who think their fancy degrees entitle them to safe clerical jobs.

The ones lucky enough to get those safe jobs are called Rear Echelon Motherfuckers by the grunts. REMFs for short. They're held in high contempt even by men on our road paving crews who are exposed to constant danger. In return, a lot of clerks get mean and cocky with the grunts and any other kind of "field worker."

So, anyway, the other newbie grunts sat there, disgusted by the clerk's privileged smell, and waited for me to lunge for the bait to be like the clerk—but surprise, surprise—I'd be assigned by this mean-assed cocky clerk to clean shit cans every day, even Sundays, and the grunts would laugh themselves silly. So there was only one answer I could give this loud talking, sweet smelling jerk that might save me a place at the table.

"Fuck you, asshole. I'm not grabbing the shit end of a stick."

“No, no, this isn’t a joke.”

The clerk edged me over and sat down beside me, his voice low and confidential. “Our battalion awards clerk in S-1 DEROSSED last week, and the colonel says we gotta fill this position ASAP. So if you can read and type and maybe write a little, you’ve got the job. You want it or not?”

I didn’t know what an awards clerk did or what ‘DEROSSED’ meant or where S-1 was, but I took a chance and whispered, “Yeah, I want it.”

The clerk confirmed his offer by getting me out of the room and taking me down the hall to S-1, the battalion headquarters office. He introduced me to the other S-1 clerks, as well as to Adjutant Harris and the XO, Major Roberts, who happened to be in the clerical office at the time.

Since then, I’ve made myself invaluable to the adjutant, the major, and the colonel by editing and typing award citations, letters, memos, or anything else they give me. At first I typed word-for-word what they wrote in longhand and then I typed an edited version of my own. I submitted both, but it was my edited version they always selected. Now I just submit the edited version.

Understand, I’m not the only clerk in S-1 who does this for the top brass. The legal clerk is a dickhead, but he’s real brainy and a fast typist, and he edits everything he types, too. Apparently there aren’t many of us around, so when the brass find guys like us, they send the other men out to be killed and save us so they don’t have to write and type their own letters, legal briefs, and newspapers.

Four weeks after I started working in S-1, Jerry Maener, my new buddy in Personnel, told me my records no longer stated I was trained as an infantryman. I’m now trained, according to my personnel file, as a clerk. This “correction,” Jerry said, took place by unofficial directive from Major Roberts.

Three weeks later an order came down from higher headquarters assigning all Eleven Bravos in our battalion to the 101st Airborne Division, an outfit that’s famous for its combat operations. Within two days the other twenty-nine Eleven Bravos were humping in the boonies and I was still here. Safe and sound. I even come back to the office late at night and write letters home—typed ones—and write these stories for myself or polish stories for *The Road Paver*.

I’m very, very fortunate.

So far.

Paving roads in a guerrilla war zone is one of the lunacies about Vietnam that can make you smile. Charlie knows where we are and what we're doing, and he knows we're focused on our equipment and not on him. And Charlie can't miss the equipment. It's big.

Asphalt pavers. Bulldozers. Road graders. Earth movers. Oil sprayers and water weighted road rollers. Fuel tankers. Asphalt haulers. And the men operating all that heavy equipment, their shirts off, sweat glinting in the tropical sun, sit high in the cabs of their machines and muscle the wheels and gears of bellowing engines, pushing dirt with their dozers and leveling road with their graders, and hauling asphalt to the pavers while waiting to get slapped in the head by a bullet from a rice-paddy dike four hundred meters out from either side of the road.

One God-awful hot afternoon, while I was checking out new roadway for a story Major Roberts asked me to write for *The Road Paver*, the entire road crew went nuts from the uncertainty and tension. I had hopped a ride out to the site with an asphalt trucker named Mangus and we were in line with other asphalt haulers waiting to hook up and funnel our load into the paver. The air in the cab was thick with the smell of hot tar and high quality reefer.

We'd smoked a ready-roll from a Kools pack Mangus bought from a papa-san at a fruit juice stand on the road several miles back, and it was good shit. Mangus said it was better than any state-side dope he'd ever smoked. It was get-it-on-the-edge, kick-ass grass of the highest Vietnam quality. You could focus on a nit's nose on a bug's ass thirty feet away.

I'd asked Mangus a few questions when I first got in the truck, but he waved them away and shook his head, so I backed off and sat silent for awhile. He didn't say anything until we stopped for the ready-rolls, and then he spoke only to ask if I wanted some reefer. "Sure," I said. I hoped our smoking together would loosen him up. I figured I wouldn't ask any questions until he gave me a sign he was willing to talk.

Now, with our truck lined up with other asphalt haulers, he glanced at me with an appraising look and then turned away. "You be honest with me if I ask you something?"

His black, peat moss chest, muscular shoulders, and thick contoured biceps sparkled with rivulets of perspiration as he leaned against the steering wheel, craning his head back and forth, looking through the windshield and then through the side windows in constant survey of the countryside.

"You a smart man, that right?" He still wasn't looking at me.

"No smarter than you. I'm here, aren't I?"

"Don't mess with me, man. You got a college education and you're working at battalion headquarters, right?"

As he spoke, the trucks in front of us moved one length ahead. Mangus depressed the clutch and throttled the engine two belching roars, yanked down on the gearshift post rising out of the floor, and moved us up the line one more notch.

“I’m not walking down that road, Mangus. We’re doing just fine. You got us some good shit, but now you’re fucking with my mind.”

“I’m not fucking with you, man, I’m asking a question, and you know so much you think you know what I’m gonna ask.”

“God it’s hot. And the smell of that asphalt... whew! What’d you do back in the States, Mangus?”

“Don’t you want to hear my question?”

“Sure. I want to hear your question. What’s your question?”

“Why do you white dudes like pussy licking so much? No, no, I’m serious. Why don’t you just fuck the bitch and not stick your nose up her snatch? All you white dudes be the same. Always smellin’ it. Makes me sick.”

“You’re fucking with me, Mangus.”

“I told you, I’m not fucking with you. I never asked a white college boy this before and I thought you could explain to me why every white boy I meet is a pussy licker or a cocksucker.”

“Mangus, is this shit making you wacko or something? Or maybe there’s something about pussy licking you need to get off your chest? Maybe you tried it and you got the wrong hole? What’s your problem?”

“I got no problem, Office Boy, and any problem I got, I can blow away and toss in the trash.”

“Look, Mangus, I can’t help it I’m not a Brother, okay?”

Mangus gave me one of those you’re-a-piece-of-shit stares, hawked up a gob from the back of his throat, and spit over his left shoulder out the window.

I set my pad of paper on the seat between us and lifted my M16 from where it leaned in the corner between the dashboard and the door, raised it vertically between my legs and clunked the butt on the floor of the cab.

“Is that the problem? Is that it? You want us to go out there in the field and blow each other away? Is that what you want? Okay, let’s do it, if that’s what you want. I don’t have anything against black fuckers, particularly a black fucker who shares good shit with me. But if you want us to blow each other away, then let’s go do it right now. Let’s go. Let’s get it over with.”

Mangus looked at me. Hard. Uncertain.

“But you better know this before you step in that field.” I looked him square in the face. “Before I kill you, I’m gonna blow your nuts off.”

Mangus burst out laughing and I did too. Then we did the handshake thing, which I screwed up, and Mangus said, “You ain’t nothin’ but a piece a Wonderbread.”

But then Mangus froze. He stared past me out my window at the tree line four hundred meters out from the road. I snapped my head around and looked out my window.

“What’d you see?”

“A flash. Those fuckers are sniping us again. Goddamned motherfuckers. Those cocksuckers ...” Mangus grabbed his M16 leaning against the seat between us and opened his door and jumped out. “I’m gonna kill those slant-eyed motherfuckers.”

I tipped my M16’s muzzle to the floor, locked and loaded, and scrunched down as low as I could go while looking over the edge of the window at the wood line. My heart was beating so hard and so fast I was gasping for air.

I was about to crawl across the seat to Mangus’s open door and jump to the safety of the ditch when I looked through the windshield and saw Mangus on the hood of the truck. I stared at him, stunned by his full-body exposure to enemy fire.

He had his right foot on the wheel fender and his left foot up on the hood. I leaned forward so I could see him better through the windshield. He raised his M16 horizontally, high in the air, like a salute to a passing general. He started yelling.

“Come on you motherfuckers. Kill me. You got your chance.” Mangus lowered his M16 and jabbed the air with the middle finger of his left hand. “You cocksuckers! You fucking slope heads!”

Then he looked down and saw me looking at him through the windshield and he locked and loaded and raised his M16 to his shoulder and fired on full automatic toward the woods. The recoil unbalanced him and he fell backward, off the truck, and sprayed M16 rounds in a semicircle from one side of the road, up and over, to the other side. It happened so fast I just stared. I didn’t have the sense to duck.

I jumped out of the cab and ran around to see how he was. He’d landed on his shoulder and his right elbow was bloody, but he seemed okay. I put my hand out and he grabbed it and pulled himself up. We laughed while he picked up and checked out his M16. We got back in the truck.

“So did you see anything or not?” I asked.

“Didn’t see a fucking thing, but I scared your lily white ass, didn’t I?”

But by then the guys in the other asphalt trucks had spooked on Mangus’s joke. They assumed Mangus was returning received fire, and they fired randomly across the fields toward the woods at an increasing rate as more and more men fired their weapons out of the need to shoot at what they feared but couldn’t see.

Then our heavy equipment operators heard the truckers firing and stopped work and everybody got low and fired their weapons. We got real noisy when Tropic Lightning’s half-track, at the rear of the construction site, opened up with its quad-fifties. That’s always a special sight to see: four fifty-caliber machine guns all firing at the same time. Gives a person the feeling of accomplishing something.

I, myself, tried hitting a few nearby trees while Mangus merrily blew off three more magazines of ammo. But then I crouched low in the cab and waited for a bullet to ricochet through the door.

Some of the men were shooting at nearby rocks and tracers were twanging away in every direction. Assholes probably high on dope.

After the firing stopped, a sergeant walked down the line and asked everybody what started all the shooting. Mangus said we saw a couple muzzle flashes along the wood line. "Somebody else must have seen them too," he said. I nodded, eyes all wide and fearful, like the office-clerk-ride-along I really was.

During the trip back to the base camp for another load of asphalt, Mangus and I got along fine. He was funny. And smart. He answered all my questions about the ups and downs, and ins and outs of driving an asphalt truck in a guerrilla war zone.

After I got the road project's big picture from the officer in charge, I wrote the article using Mangus as the lead-in to what I saw the pavers doing on the road. I didn't mention the superior quality of Mangus's weed, of course, but I wrote a few lines about the sniping and our superior fire power response. Then I switched over to the project officer and what he said about the overall road plan and a few details he gave me about the technical stuff. I liked the article and submitted it to Major Roberts for his approval.

Roberts liked it, too.

We printed it in the next edition of *The Road Paver*.

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About Blanchard DeMerchant

Blanchard DeMerchant was drafted into the Army in 1968 at the age of 25 and served in 1969 and 1970 as battalion awards clerk, newspaper editor and reporter, and chopper courier for an engineering unit at Cu Chi and Lai Khe, Vietnam. Upon his return to the States he earned graduate degrees in philosophy and taught at colleges in Michigan until he moved to Missouri where he was offered Chair of the Philosophy Department at St. Charles Community College. He taught there fourteen years. He retired on disability due to leukemia he contracted from exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. Blanchard is married and has two daughters.

About DRAFTED INTO COMPROMISE (Treehouse Publishing, Spring 2012)

Jumping off from his own experiences, Blanchard tells Brandon DeMario's story with the brutal language of the soldier, the black humor of those living on the knife-edge of life and death, and a jaded eye for the ridiculous bureaucracy that underpins every war effort. Think episodes of *The Office* meets *M*A*S*H* meets *Catch-22*.

Blanchard has long sought to understand the changes—the sacrifices—a soldier makes when training for and serving his or her country in wartime. The changes in his own life altered his

way of thinking about the world and, he hopes, *DRAFTED INTO COMPROMISE* will prove to be another glimpse into the inanity of war that speaks to all Americans, but that especially resonates with veterans who have served on battlefields—and in the rear echelon—in every corner of the globe.

LITTLE EGYPT

By Jason Makansi

*("Little Egypt" was originally published in
Big Muddy: A Journal of the Mississippi River Valley)*

Holly propped her chin up on the palm of her hand at the far end of the bar. She was talking to Smitty and Grover, regulars in her establishment, Holly Chicago's, on Commercial Street in downtown Cairo, Illinois, but she was thinking about having the place burned down for the insurance. If she could just save her sign, she thought. She saw a car pull up outside. She heard it, too, but shouldn't have because the air-conditioning wasn't working the way it should. It hadn't for months.

The person walking in wasn't familiar. He was white, as most of her patrons were, but wore a tie. Deliberate, she changed her pose to one of leaning against the wall with her right foot, in a black ankle boot with a three-inch heel, resting on a stack of three cases of beer.

"How do ya suppose he found his way here?" Smitty asked in a very low voice.

"How the hell would I know? First time I've seen him too," Holly snapped.

"He looks Jewish," said Grover.

"Shit, you say that about everyone that walks in here you don't already know."

The guy looked anxious, confused, she thought. She ignored him for a few minutes, standard Holly protocol for someone new. She sensed he wouldn't stay long and spend good money, was probably lost. Few White people made downtown Cairo a destination on a Friday night, unless something was going on down the street at Fort Defiance park.

The new guy took a seat as far away from Grover and Smitty as possible. He looked at her. She wasn't in the mood for the usual questions from lost patrons. Answering them reminded her of how miserable business was. She'd already seen several of Cairo's finest race past her window. The night was depressing enough. She stared back at him. Hell, if he wasn't so damn anxious looking, he'd be worth looking at. He looked away after a second or two. "Made you blink," she thought. He had a nice profile, kind of like what she remembered of her father's in the old photographs.

After the obligatory few minutes, Holly walked over to Stuart Eisenstein's spot.

"So, what're you having?" she asked, nonchalantly.

"How about an amber-style beer?" Stuart responded, as he squirmed in his seat. He really had to pee. "You got any micros around here?"

She looked at him like the comment was a joke.

“We got Amber Bock, that's it.”

“Never heard of it. But that'll do.”

“How 'bout a frosted mug?” she asked, “that's our claim to fame.”

“That'd be great! By the way, where's your restroom?” He was already getting up.

She pointed with disinterest behind him to a wall with a sign, Men's, with the faded face of a smiling, bearded old man.

She walked away to pour his beer. Stuart put a twenty on the table, then hobbled quickly with his full bladder to the rest room.

When he returned, his mug was waiting for him, like an ice cream cone to a ten-year old. He chugged. The beer tasted weak, like it was a regular American beer with dark coloring. But it was frosty, and it felt great going down.

The drive had been boring, and so much longer than he thought. And then the town itself. Everything boarded up. White faces belonging only to police officers. Sirens and red and blue lights reflecting off everywhere, blacks being shaken down or just loitering. Still he had kept going forward because he'd passed nothing inviting to go back to. Holly Chicago's had risen out of the dilapidated block after block like Las Vegas out of the Nevada desert. Not one bulb was burned out of the neon marquis. It was the first place in twenty five blocks—Stuart had started counting—that looked like safe harbor if you were not black.

He began noticing how the very blonde woman behind the bar lit up the place like the sign outside. Everything else was dark, wooden, a relic from decades ago, before America was under attack from Middle Eastern and Muslim terrorists, hell maybe even from before America was under attack from the Japanese.

Stuart could feel the eyes of the two old men at the bar on him. And the two couples having dinner, behind him and to his right, were sneaking their peeks at him, too. Everyone, it seemed, was smoking.

His next order of business was to see if any of these people might recommend a place to stay the night. He felt much more relaxed now that he'd relieved himself and was slaking his thirst. He was still apprehensive about where he was. But it was Friday and he didn't have to get up early the next morning. He didn't think he'd have a problem finding a room somewhere.

After he drained about half of his mug, he tried to catch the bartender's eye. She had returned to her position at the other end of the bar, booted foot at the end of a long creamy leg, knee at the ninety-degree angle, attitude at the “I could give a shit” position, Stuart thought. The coloring of her leg reminded Stuart of a Mocha from Starbucks. The sight reminded him that he needed to call home, but also that maybe this time he didn't want to.

He still couldn't believe what he just drove through. More than urban decay, urban devastation. He thought about the kind of devastation that took less than an hour, like the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Then he thought about the eastern urban decay he was familiar with. This was different. Buildings looked like they'd been empty for a century or more. More like death without burial. Why hadn't anyone razed these buildings and started over?

He hadn't had time before the trip to put together a background dossier on the area. It sucked being between jobs, between agencies, and between offices. Everything was changing because of Homeland Security. His Internet searches were faster at home anyway. He wasn't constrained by silly rules meant to prevent workers from goofing off or viewing porn. A co-worker, from the Chicago area, told him that it was pronounced "kay-row" and that if you picked up Illinois out of the map, Illinois would immediately flip over on its axis, so top heavy was Chicago. After his drive from the airport in St. Louis, he thought he knew what the guy meant. He couldn't even get a good radio station most of the way.

When the bartender came back, he asked her about a place to stay.

"Tell you what. I'll give you a recommendation if you'll tell me what you're in town for. We don't get too many visitors in a pressed shirt and tie in here, and the ones that do venture in, we already know." She turned her head. "Right, Smitty?" Smitty nodded numbly.

Stuart squirmed in his seat again, but this time he didn't have to pee. He had to say something fast.

"I'm looking into the energy characteristics of the area. The government is always looking at new places for federal facilities and they need electricity, water, workers, you know, we call it infrastructure."

Smitty and his friend were listening. The other one piped in: "This here'd be a good place to lock up those Tally-ban prisoners. Hell, why not keep 'em here, instead of in Castro land? That way, Americans could draw wages, make some money."

Stuart was fascinated and dismayed that rounding up prisoners was the first thing Smitty thought of.

"We gotta get those bastards and lock 'em up," Smitty continued.

Stuart agreed with him in principle. He was glad to see the emotion of the attacks galvanize the government into action.

"Well, I gotta tell you, I never know what facilities they have in mind. My job is just to scope out the energy infrastructure." He said infrastructure slowly, as if they'd have trouble digesting the word.

"You think there's a chance the feds are gonna build something here, around Cairo?" the bartender asked him.

“Like I said, I really don't know. My team back in DC has a list of about a dozen places around the country we're supposed to scope out.”

After a long period of silence, Smitty chimed in.

“Hey, bet you passed a lot of black families on the Interstate down this way, didn't you?”

Stuart thought about that one. “I guess so, didn't notice at the time, but now that you bring it up...”

“Know why?” his sidekick said, looking at Smitty, smiling.

“No idea,” Stuart said, troubled at the direction of the conversation.

“They all come down from Chicago, and go to Memphis for the weekend.”

“They got family down there? Seems like a long drive.”

“Kind of like that. They figured out how to get welfare checks from two different states!”

Smitty leaned over, whispering, “I love tellin' that story.”

“Aw, come on. That's just a racist remark.”

The bartender corrected him. “It's true. There's some loophole in the laws. Nothin' racist about it. Just a fact”

Although Stuart didn't feel personally threatened, he felt uncomfortable after that exchange.

“By the way, I'm Holly,” she said, “Holly Chicago, just like the sign says.”

*

Saturday evening, Stuart returned to Holly Chicago's. Holly was ready for him. She asked her regulars, both of them, to leave by ten o'clock, so she could have free reign and find out what the government was up to. She wasn't going to mind. She found him cuter today than yesterday. Or maybe she was just in a mood better than she had been in for a long while.

“So, you're back,” she said, with a smile.

“Yes, I am.”

“And is our fair town suitable for the government's needs?”

“Well, I guess it's suitable for any facility. This town's pretty desperate. Anything that'd employ some folks would be good.

“You got that right. Another Amber Bock?”

“Hey, wow, you've got a good memory.”

Holly chuckled. He was the only who'd ordered Amber Bock in about a year.

She knew he was coming back. He had no choice. There was nowhere else for a white man to go, unless to Cape Girardeau or Sikeston. She kept the conversation going, while he sucked down beer number one. She served him up a double cheeseburger and French fries. She paid attention to him without being obvious. She dressed for the occasion, letting more than the usual show.

She told Smitty and Grover that they'd better not say a damn word, or she'd cut them off, make them pay their real bill.

Beer number two.

"Where'd you get such beautiful hair?" Stuart asked her.

"Ah, this place is so dark and dingy and I've never had the money to redecorate, spent all my money on the damn sign out front, so I just decided one day that I would be the brightest thing in the place."

"Well, it sure does that."

"Yeah, I like to fuss with it. Curlers, blow dry, different gels, the whole bit. Should've been a hair-dresser."

Beer number three.

"So how'd you get the name Holly Chicago?"

"I did some stripping in my younger days and I didn't think my real name would cut it."

"Wow, no kidding? You were a stripper?"

Typical, Holly thought. He's laser-focused on the stripping, ignoring what my real name is.

"Yeah, I needed a quick way to make money and help my mom after my father. Her pension wasn't cutting it"

"Where'd you dance? I sure would've liked to have seen you."

He had a cute smile, Holly thought. "In a club that used to be up the street, called Near Misses."

He thought about the name.

"Get it?"

"No." He looked genuinely puzzled.

"Well, you figure it out."

He contemplated the bar's name for a few minutes. Holly went to wipe down a table.

Beer number four

"So what's your real name?" he asked her.

"Cheryl Haddad."

"Hmm, what kind of a name is Haddad?"

"Oh, you know, 'as in 'had dad?' "

Now he was really confused.

"I don't get it."

"Hell, it's just a joke. My dad left my mom and I. So I 'had a dad,' but don't anymore. But I'm not sensitive or anything. Can't you tell?"

Beer number five

"So what's your story? The abridged version, anyway. Besides the stripping"

“Abridged, huh? Hmm, okay, born in Joliet, Illinois, paradise compared to this junk hole. Mom was one of the early Chicago policewomen recruits, dad was an educated Palestinian who ended up driving a taxi in Chicago. Mom always said she married a taxi driver because that was the only other profession frequenting the donut shops that police found themselves at in the late hours. As for a Palestinian, well, her mom always told her, whatever she did, not to bring home a Jew.”

“I'm Jewish,” Stuart said, abruptly, “just so you know.”

“Just being honest. My grandmother's opinions aren't mine.”

“I know, I know,” Stuart said quickly, not wanting to break the conversational thread.

“Anyway, he disappeared when I was eight. Went back to the homeland or something.”

“Are you bitter about that?” Stuart asked, with seriousness.

“I resent him mostly because mom instructed me to. I don't remember much about him, but from the pictures, I know why she fell for him. Such a contrast to her, white bread middle America, normal, yearbook good looks. I remember his laugh and his eyes, deep and penetrating.”

She seemed to drift off into the next few moments of quiet. Stuart allowed her the moment. Then she snapped out of it and continued.

“You want more? Okay, I'm a product of the feminist movement, with mom as a cop, right? Except I thought being a feminist meant frequent sex, made easier because cops always have the best drugs and so therefore do their kids. Married early to avoid a third abortion, had two daughters and a husband until he got caught up in the tough drug laws and he was sent up for hard time down in the federal pen in Marion, Illinois, not too far up the road from here. I tried to live near the prison so that the kids would be near their dad. But after a year or two of that, I gave it up. Got a nursing degree at Southern Illinois University, enlisted in the Army's nursing Corps, and worked my way up to Major. The army needed women recruits just like the Chicago police force did. Like mother, like daughter.”

“Is that where you learned to stay in such great shape?”

“Nah. My mother and I, we've always been obsessive about our bodies, about strength.”

“That's why you could be a dancer.”

“Yup. danced at that place, Near Misses, I told you about. I saved up my money. When I had enough, I bought this place, and spent most of the extra money on the sign! I just love that sign. If I could figure out how to arson the place and keep the sign, I would.”

After his fifth beer, Stuart ordered a scotch. The brand he asked for, Holly didn't have. Hell, he hadn't a damn thing better to do. Holly doubled up on his shot. He talked about Washington and New York and his family and going to an eastern college that Holly had never heard of but he

claimed was an “Ivy-like school.” That didn't impress Holly, but she still thought him cute. He had mentioned his wife and kids earlier in the conversation but never brought them up again.

“Did you, in your thorough research, get down to our park?”

“No, didn't know you had one.”

“It's really spectacular at night. It sits at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Would you like me to give you a tour? I could close up early.”

That was an understatement, he thought. There hadn't been anyone in the place in an hour. For a moment, he thought that would be a bad idea. But it was a fleeting moment. In his just on the near side of drunk haze, he decided it would be an extension of his research. This thought barely covered up the idea that both thrilled and scared him, that she might just have sex with him, too.

“Would you really? Wow. That would be really nice of you. But you don't have to. I'm a big boy, I can see the park tomorrow. Don't feel obligated.”

“I don't feel obligated about anything,” she said, rather sternly.

“Okay, then.” She sounded a bit angry. He didn't mean to piss her off.

She spent a few minutes closing the place up, then walked with him around the back where there was additional parking. He looked a little foolish doing it, but he walked around to the driver's side of the car and pretended to open the door for her, then swooshed out his arm, and said, “Enter, my dear.” She looked at him kind of cock-eyed, like he was a goofball.

It was only a few minute drive. She was pretty sure the park would be deserted this weekend. They saw a few black families here and there, hanging out, fishing late.

They exited from the car and she pulled an old blanket out from the trunk.

“Is this safe?” he asked.

In response, she took his hand and pulled him along, but after only a few steps, she said she had forgotten something, something in the glove compartment. He looked a little nervous when she said this, but she very calmly told him it was something he'd appreciate very much once they got to the spot she wanted to show him. Of course, then he knew what it was, a prophylactic. She opened the passenger side, put her key in the glove compartment, opened it, pulled out her small pistol, and placed it in her purse. This Stuart was a stranger, and this was still downtown Cairo, she thought.

They sat admiring the water and the moonlight and the headlights of the cars traveling over the bridge. He put his arm around her. She let him. He said some more words about how beautiful the scene was and the moment so perfect (although the mosquitos were pesky and he was a little nervous that they were the only two white people he had seen in the park) and how much he appreciated her kindness to show him this wonderful, hidden jewel of Cairo. She leaned

over and kissed him deeply and his eyes went dark. She let him place one hand in her shirt. Then she gently took it out and gave it back to him.

“Maybe this is going too fast,” she said, “we hardly know each other.”

“I feel like I know you so well, though.”

“I guess I wanted you to know me well. But now, well, now I need to figure out what this means. I need to get out of this town, I've needed to for years. But you get comfortable, you know. Even those two egg-heads, Smitty and Grover, they become almost like family. Just two sots, but I care about them in some dopey way. Stuart, I need to know whether someone's gonna be spending real money in this town. Cause I want to get out. But look at this town. If I sell now, I lose everything. If I wait until someone invests in this place, I get something for doin' my time in this God forsaken place.”

He wanted her to get something from her life. He cared about her. No money had flowed this direction in decades. He thought it only fair that some of the money from the massive Homeland Security budget that would soon reorganize the government's spending priorities be directed to Cairo. It was Saturday night and he was lying on a blanket with a woman like he hadn't since before he was married.

“I have no idea whether the government is gonna build something here or not. But what they're thinking about is some sort of camp, for Middle Easterners, Muslim types, terrorists, or those that support them. Like I said, I'm just researching the energy infrastructure. Personally, I'm opposed to the idea, especially as a Jew. It smacks of McCarthyism, and the Japanese during World War II, but if there are all these cells and sleepers in this country already, once they are rounded up, they've got to go somewhere. And if they're here, they've been aided and abetted by others in this country and they're accomplices. They can't be treated like normal criminals. Our laws aren't configured that way, at least not yet.”

Holly agreed that Cairo would be perfect for such a facility. She was instantly torn by the idea of rounding up people for their religious and political beliefs, but she also thought, what a boon for her decade-long investment in this bar that up to now has returned nothing. It actually took her a few seconds to realize that some of these people might be people just like her, the wrong heritage at the wrong time. She was glad she'd changed her name.

“Well, one thing's for sure,” she said, “they won't have to change the name of the region.”

“What do you mean?”

“This area, southern Illinois, is called Little Egypt. There are all kinds of references to the Middle East around here. A lake about fifty miles up the highway called Lake of Egypt, town called Palestine, mascots for Southern Illinois University called Salukis, which have something to do with the Middle East, don't remember what.

In fact, Stuart had seen some of this in his Internet search, but it hadn't registered.

“What irony, huh?” she commented.

They continued to look out into the darkness. The water looked more sinister than inviting. Cairo couldn't be more perfect. Electrical infrastructure, water treatment facilities, both oversized because of the exodus of the population. Two rivers as natural barriers. A bridge that could be guarded from both sides. A population desperate for investment. And an entire swath of the town waiting to be erased and replaced with something better. He was mentally typing up his notes as the last of his coherent thoughts coalesced, before he popped the top on a sixth can of beer he brought along with him, and brought it to his lips. But what he really wished was that Holly would bring her lips back to his. He didn't think that what he'd told her would cause any damage. Still, loose lips, he thought. This place could be a Mecca for tourists, he thought, a nice park, marina and harbor facilities, quaint shops, mini-museums about Cairo's history as the first free stopping place for slaves on the underground railroad. Or a prison for terrorists. People like Holly, if it all got bad enough. People like his people through the ages.

“Is it hard to imagine this place as an internment camp?” Stuart asked.

“It's hard to imagine it as anything else,” Holly answered.

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### ***About Jason Makansi***

Jason, a co-founder of Blank Slate Press, is hard at work on his first novel based on Holly Chicago and some of the other characters who have drifted in and out of his short stories. The novel, ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE, is about a woman and her father who were separated when she was young and, many years later, almost reunited. He has had eight short stories and three non-fiction books published. In his day job, he works as a consultant in the electricity industry and has written hundreds of articles for industry magazines, been quoted in and interviewed for The New York Times, Forbes, Newsweek, CFO Magazine, and NPR, and has appeared on CNBC and The Street.com. He has a degree in Chemical Engineering from Columbia University.

# SPOKE

By Jamey Stegmaier

Although you've never heard me say her name, you had a mother once. Becca and I didn't want a child; we wanted to drink and bet money we didn't have on horses we didn't own. It was after a rare profitable day at the track that you were conceived.

Becca stopped drinking for you. By then we didn't have enough money for Southern Comfort anyway. We had to foreclose on our house before Becca's belly began to bulge. We had been staying in a motel for three days when a man came to speak with us. Said he got our information from the bank. He represented a private research group that was interested in the roots of human language.

"We want to know your baby's first word," he told us.

It was a strange request, but an innocent one. We agreed to tell him.

He elaborated, "We'd like to pay you not to speak to the child."

Will you ever forgive me for accepting his offer? Heavily in debt, I thirsted for money in those days. The man offered to put us in the black, to buy us a house, and to give us \$50,000 when you spoke your first word. So much money for a single word.

Becca and I, we sacrificed sound. To ensure that we wouldn't speak to each other around the baby, we had to undergo minor surgery to have tiny shunts inserted into our larynxes. I say minor, but the surgery felt extremely invasive, like a metal insect was burrowing into my neck. When the drugs wore off, I opened my mouth to ask Becca if she was okay. I thought I would be able to grunt or at least make an inquisitive chirp, but I was completely mute.

The research group offered to move all of our possessions into the new house, but we had so little by that point that everything fit into our pickup truck. They confiscated anything that might emit words—stereo speakers, iPods, cell phones, the television. Then they led us out into the country, where there was no risk of other people speaking to you.

I wasn't much of a reader back then, but the research group had stocked the house with books. "You'll need something to do while you wait," the man explained.

Becca was still only a few months pregnant by this point. We weren't allowed a telephone, but the house had a computer with Internet access that we could use to e-mail the group for medical services and grocery requests. There were cameras and microphones in the house that made us self-conscious at first, but we soon forgot about them. We also had an emergency button that would bring someone from the group to our door within minutes. You pressed the button out of

curiosity once, but you were so scared by the unfamiliar face that appeared at the window that you never did it again.

When we were settled, the group drove our car away, isolating us. Becca and I, we had never talked much. Television had filled the void between excursions to the track in our old life. This didn't mean that we didn't love each other—we did. We understood each other, even without words. But I wished I had already said all the things I wanted to say.

We never stopped gambling. Dividing our Monopoly money into two piles of \$25,000 and communicating on pads of paper, we bet on small things at first. Who would finish reading the first book, how long the rain would last, how many cans of beans the research group would give us when they delivered our groceries. Then we bet on you. When you would be born, if you'd be a boy or a girl, if you'd have my dark hair or your mother's blonde locks.

One day, I placed \$10,000 on the table and wrote on my pad, "The baby's first word." Becca grinned with confidence and wrote, "Mama."

I had thought that would be her guess. But I had been thinking about your first word since the man made us his unusual offer, and it didn't make sense to me that you would utter a common word like that. You wouldn't have ever heard us say "mama" or "dada," so how would you know those words? My best guess was that you would say something that resembled a sound you would make regardless of being raised without words. No matter what, you were going to get hurt sometime.

I wrote my word and turned the pad for Becca to see. "Ow."

Your mother didn't stick around to see who was right. The silence of our world was too much for her to take. During the last month with you in her womb, she had the mood swings that any pregnant woman has, but she couldn't express them. She'd get angry but couldn't scream. She'd get sad but couldn't wail. She was locked in her silence.

One day she asked me to remove the pin from her voice box with a steak knife. It was then that I knew she'd reached her breaking point. I e-mailed the research group and asked if we could compromise the original contract.

Without Becca knowing, we struck a deal. When the baby was born, Becca would be drugged and moved from the house. The group would provide me with baby formula, and I would raise you on my own until you spoke. That way, we wouldn't forfeit the money and be thrown back into debt, and your mother could keep her sanity.

When you were ready to be born, we hit the emergency button, and the medical team arrived a few minutes later. They didn't say a word as they took Becca's vital stats and anesthetized her. Just went through the motions. You entered the world in a silent mess of blood and gunk a few hours later.

I had bet on a girl, and I was right.

Before the doctors cleaned you, you began to cry, your tiny fists clenched next to your pink face in defiance of the world. It was the first human sound in that house. It was both the most beautiful and the most annoying sound I've ever heard. You see, I had grown to like the quiet. Now you were here to break the peace, and I alone would have to deal with it.

I was given a moment with Becca as the drugs set in. She touched my face, her eyes glazing over. I kissed her fingers, then her forehead. That was the last my lips would feel of her.

That first night, I didn't know what to do with you. I could have interacted with you, but to be honest, I didn't really care. My only goal was to keep you alive. You were so fragile—I didn't want to hold you, lest I'd break you. So I placed you in the crib in the living room and picked up a book.

You sucked down some formula before I went to bed. Mimicking you as you drank, I smacked my lips, my expressions limited to those of an infant.

I awoke to your screams piercing the night. I lay there, listening. Just listening. My ears, unused for so long, soaked in the sound. Before long you quieted yourself, and I went back to sleep.

The scientists, afraid that the language of the birds and the wind would supplant human words for you, insisted that I limit the time you spent outside. So you and I spent the vast majority of those first few months inside the house. I read and you slept. Usually you were confined to your crib, but sometimes I placed you on a mat on the floor. You'd lay there on your belly, lifting your limbs like a parachuter. Sometimes you'd fall asleep at my feet, your cheek resting on my toes.

I missed your mother. I ached to hold her. It was due to this longing that I cradled you in my arms for the first time. Of course I had held you before, but never because I needed to. Like the medical team that delivered you, I was just going through the motions, burping you after you ate, hugging you if you wouldn't stop crying. But on the day that I missed Becca more than ever before, I walked around staring at the few photos of her in the house. I picked up one of her taken at a Mardi Gras party several years before. You've seen it—this is the one with the woman in the yellow tank top and the plastic beads around her neck. She is your mother.

I held the frame. I wanted to touch her face, her skin, but all I could do was smear some dust off the glass. Hearing you chirp in your crib, I realized that you were all I had left of her. So I picked you up, smelled the sweet of your skin. In that way I was able to hold Becca.

After that, you were always in my arms or on my lap. When I read in bed on Sunday mornings (not that Sunday was any different than any other day in my isolated bubble), I placed you on my chest, and you stayed there. Sometimes I'd rest my eyes and pick you up, hold you above me, your legs pumping. If I raised you too quickly, you'd smile and giggle and shriek. I'd grin back silently but encouragingly. Speak, I'd think. Tell me how happy you are.

We went for walks around the house every day. Just a few minutes every now and then. I wrapped you in fleece to keep you warm and protect you from the sun. There were no cameras or microphones outside that I knew of, but it would have been impossible for me to “cheat” and speak to you. The diffusing pin was still firmly lodged in my voice box. I wondered if my body would meld with it, rendering me mute forever.

You began to crawl. Tentative at first, afraid you’d lose sight of me. But you grew more confident. I didn’t come to your rescue right away if you sprawled on the carpet and wailed. I’d just listen. If you were still sobbing after a few minutes, I’d swoop you up and comfort you.

One day you ventured into the kitchen, your hands slapping against the linoleum. An inquisitive chirp preceded a series of rattling sounds as you tried to open one of the cabinets. Finally I heard it creak open. You must have lost your balance, because you began to cry. I waited for you to stop, and sure enough, after a few minutes your curiosity about the cabinet’s contents outweighed the shock of falling.

A pan rattled to the floor. I walked over to see you sitting in the kitchen, legs outstretched, toes wiggling, a look of pure delight on your face. Your fingers clenched the handle of the pan. I motioned to you with my hands and shoulders, asking you what you were doing. I often did this, resorted to the sign language of a Neanderthal. I liked to think that you understood.

You squealed, picked up the pan, and dropped it again. This time you weren’t as surprised by the sound it made. I pulled a few other pots and pans out of the cabinet and spread them on the floor. I guided your pan, which was still firmly in your grip, so that it clanked against a big soup pot. After you understood, I began clanking two metal lids together.

In our silent house, we made music.

You loved playing with those pots and pans. As your hand–eye coordination improved, I gave you other instruments. Measuring cups. Soup ladles. Cookie trays. If it made a sound, you used it to perform.

I worried about discipline. How could I tell you what to do without raising my voice? If I wanted you to put the kitchen utensils back into the cabinet after a jam session, the best I could do was start the job myself and hope you would mimic me. At first you thought it was a game, and the objective being that you had to take the pots back out of the cabinet faster than I put them in. I’d make an angry face and push the pots back in.

But then you’d just lose interest and crawl away. I clanged some lids together to get your attention. Then, with a huge smile on my face, I put the lid into the cabinet. You hesitated. You knew something fun was going on, but you weren’t sure if you wanted a part of it.

I needed a bonus. I grabbed a jar of your favorite baby food—sweet potatoes—out of the fridge and scooped out a nibble with my pinky finger. I rubbed my belly. Good.

You jetted back to the cabinet. Before you could get your tiny hands on the baby food, I put it up on the counter, out of your reach. I took a pan and placed it into the cabinet, smiled, and then helped myself to another glob of sweet potato.

I knew I was treating you like a domesticated animal, but how could I have known the harm? To me you were an animal. My animal, but an animal nonetheless. You moved around on all fours, communicated through grunts and squeals, and slept twelve hours a day. My feral lady.

I taught you—I trained you—to clean up after yourself. But the more obedient you became, the more I realized that I needed to teach you to be human. Hell, I needed to remind myself the same thing. Otherwise the scientists were going to show up at our door to find two wild animals pawing at the door.

But how could I educate you? I grew up with a mother who read to me, a father who filled my head with knowledge about his hometown sports teams. I couldn't teach you the alphabet—without sound, the symbols on the page would mean nothing to you. At least, that's what I thought at first.

One day it dawned on me that even though you didn't know the names for things, you understood the purpose of various objects. You recognized patterns. Food always came out small cans, not light bulbs or teddy bears. You wore diapers, not Post-It notes or leaves. Surely if you distinguished between those objects, you could label them. Maybe you didn't know it—maybe your brain labeled them for you. I just needed to show you how to say those labels out loud, or at least express them in some way.

In one of the many child-rearing books in the house, the author indicated that children had the potential to read at a very young age as long as the letters were big enough. You were almost 2 years old by this time. So I took a blank sheet of paper and wrote "DAD" in huge block letters. I put you on my lap and taped the paper to my chest. I pointed at myself, and then at the word. You patted the paper, amused by the crinkling sound it made.

I began to label other things around the house. BOOK. TABLE. BED. SPOON. PILLOW. Sometimes I found that you had untaped the pieces of paper to play with them, and I'd gently return them to the appropriate object. Soon you left the labels alone.

When I thought you were ready, I gave you your first test. I wasn't testing your ability to match the characters; rather, I wanted to know if DOOR meant anything to you. So I removed the DOOR label and gave it to you. I then used the sign language I used when we played hide and seek with your stuffed animals. Where is it?

You stared at the word, touched it. Pushed it into the carpet. Looked up at me for help. Where is it? I signed again.

You raised yourself to your feet, squeezed the paper in one hand. Hesitantly, you toddled over to the bookcase. I might have given you a C+ if you had placed the label on a book—after all,

BOOK and DOOR must look awfully similar to a 2-year-old. But when you reached the books, you seemed to notice that many of them already had labels on them.

You were full of tiny miracles. Without looking back, you veered sharply to the left and made a beeline for the door. When you reached it, you held up the piece of paper and pressed it against one of the lower panels. I don't think you knew how tape worked, so you pushed as hard as you could until you were satisfied it would stay.

My smile has never been bigger. I gleefully signed how happy I was before I scooped you up in my arms. I hugged you and held you in front of me. You grinned and signed back. What a joyful moment!

It wasn't until that night, when I lay awake in bed, that I realized you hadn't made a sound when we celebrated. You hadn't laughed or giggled in joy. I had long since invalidated those sounds by not repeating them myself. Instead of moving towards speech, you were distancing yourself from making any sounds at all. Just like DAD.

You quickly mastered the names of most of the objects in the house. We moved on to actions, which were more difficult to label. I made a game of it, and soon you could instantly identify what I was doing—WALK, JUMP, SIT—by pointing at the appropriate placard. During one of these practice sessions, a scientist showed up at the door. You hid behind me as I shook his hand. He handed me a note, walked back to his car, and drove away.

I had suspected that the scientists would tell me to stop teaching you words, as the influence might affect your verbalizations. But the note said nothing about the reading lessons. It was about your mother. While riding her bike in a park, a car jumped the curb and struck her from the side. As if it was any recompense, the note said that she had been killed instantly.

Perhaps you remember this day. You seemed to understand that something was wrong, because you took my hand and led me over to my chair. You stood there, resting your head on my knee while I tried to comprehend the idea that I would never see my wife again. It didn't make sense. After a while it dawned on me that you would never meet your mother. I'm so sorry for this. You would have liked having a mother.

For weeks and months afterwards, I felt guilty that I hadn't been there when she died. I thought that I could have prevented the tragedy, taken the blow myself. I felt guilty for sending her away so long ago. Our only communication since then had been letters and e-mails—we hadn't spoken in nearly three years.

You tried to cheer me up. You played impromptu concerts with the pots and pans. You tried to tickle me, and you offered me spoonfuls of your favorite food. But the only two things I wanted you could not give me: Becca, and a spoken word.

I began to realize that you may never speak. If language was learned, and I could not teach it to you, why would you ever say anything? How would you know that it was something you could do?

I researched the topic online. Apparently this type of experiment had been attempted before, but not for hundreds of years. Modern-day scientists labeled it the “Forbidden Experiment” because of the ethical ramifications. I guess our researchers were willing to put aside their morals to learn God’s language.

The results of the experiments were consistent—the children never spoke, and many died while still young due to improper brain development. With Becca gone, I couldn’t bear to lose you too. I needed you to speak.

I grew frustrated with you, blamed you for your lack of words. I never spanked you, but I shook you once, hard. Maybe I wanted you to say “ow,” as I had predicted so long ago. I mouthed words at you, shouted at you silently, hoping that you would mimic me with sound. You refused to comply.

I began to ignore you unless you made a sound. Tugging on my pant leg or waving your arms in front of me drew nothing but a blank stare. Inevitably you’d begin to cry, and then I would pay attention to you. But this just meant that you cried more often. I tried to ignore that too, but it’s impossible to disregard your child’s screams for more than a few minutes. It’s human nature.

One day, I gave up. I was tired of trying to force you to speak. I was missing out on having fun with you. There are so many other fathers in the world who hardly ever get to see their sons and daughters. Here I was, blessed to be with you every second of every day. I didn’t want to take that time for granted any more.

So I stopped trying to teach you to speak, and I picked up where we had left off with labeling actions. After verbs, I moved on to adjectives and adverbs and articles. You learned to construct sentences, and you learned to write. Even though the strings of your vocal cords lay silent, you could know language. Your brain could work just like any other.

In time, you learned to read picture books. The illustrations helped explain words that I hadn’t taught you. When the pages of those books were worn and smudged with your fingerprints, you moved on to short novels. If you came upon a word I hadn’t taught you, I sketched the meaning in one of the visual dictionaries I had created. Richard Scarry books helped a lot too.

You were so proud when you finished reading your first novel. You still have that tattered copy of *The BFG* on your bookshelf.

You taught yourself how to write, much to my amazement. You were six years old, and you had questions for me but no way to ask them. I still have the piece of paper with your first query pressed into the paper with orange crayon: All people speak like us?

Of course I had long since taught you what “speaking” meant. It’s one person giving words to another. You had never heard anyone speak, so I figured you didn’t need to know the difference. So I kept the full truth from you, just like I’ve kept the origin of your silence from you all this time.

Yes, I wrote. All people speak like us.

I never wanted to lie to you, but how do you tell someone you love more than anything in the world that you’ve hid the world from their eyes? I told you that we couldn’t leave our little plot of land because you had an immune deficiency. I told you that your body would crumble if you left this place.

I felt the most ashamed about this lie when you started becoming a woman. You had crushes on characters on books—you never said this outright, but I could see it in your eyes when you wrote about them. Mr. Darcy, Robinson Crusoe, Harry Potter ... did a part of you think that these men were real, that they were out there in the world and I was keeping you from them?

You’re going to be so embarrassed that I know this, but perhaps it will make you smile: I once walked in on you kissing your pillow. You were 14 or 15 at the time. You had taped a drawing of a man’s face to the pillow, the mouth red and agape. I should have left the room when I saw you puckering up for the pillow man, but I could not look away. I had never viewed you as a woman, a woman with desires, a woman yearning to meet a man and fall in love like the characters in your books. You kissed your pillow once, twice, three times, then nuzzled next to the man, burrowing your face in his. I know, you must be beet red reading this, but in a way I’m glad I was able to see that side of you. I needed to see that. It helped me start to let go.

You and I may not have ever spoken like other people, but we’ve communicated more to each other than some fathers and daughters do in their entire lives. My fingers have permanent pencil dents from the thousands of notes I’ve written and slid across the table to you. Thank you for all of your notes; I’m blessed to have a daughter who shares her every thought with me. I just want to let you know that I love you, and I hope you’ll forgive me for the way I raised you.

It’s too late for me to undo what I have done, but I cannot with good conscience keep you a prisoner to my debt any longer. I will face the consequences of the poor decisions I made when I was young and compulsive. I can handle it.

My daughter, you are free to go listen to the world. May every word be your first.

*Happy 18th birthday,*

*Dad*

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About Jamey Stegmaier

Jamey is a co-founder of Blank Slate Press and he handles submissions, works with the Editorial Board, and constantly comes up with new ways to promote our authors and their works. He maintains a daily blog focused on leadership, relationships, guy talk, and humor. He has had three short stories published and one non-fiction book, and he currently has a speculative novel in the works. His day job is directing the business operations of the Catholic Student Center at Washington University, the school from which he received his BSBA in 2003. Jamey lives in the Central West End with his cat, Biddy.

TWO POEMS

By Elena Makansi (BSP Intern)

Requiem

Drunk on starlight,
Romp romp through a field of chrysanthemums,
Pluck out your path in the shape of an
X.

Swear to your only brother,
Promises you shed like snakeskin
The rattler shaking pale ghosts to dust.

Beneath a skein of milky-way skin
You gobbled a starlit flower and crushed it
Between your teeth.

Firefly

Spread-eagle on the billiards table,
Lie face-up, making the plaster swirl like an eddy
On the ceiling, the sky, the heavens,
Where dreams float up and burn.

So I too will burn, burn to disappear,
To watch myself disappear.
Fly
To float, to blaze.

We know it's not possible. Birds fly,
Flies fly, Fireflies fly, Fire flies.
Not homo sapiens sapiens.

“What is the symbolic and supernatural meaning of fire?”
Ask, too cold, frozen solid, can't move.
Be claustrophobic.

So I drink and so we all drink.
I douse myself, limbs like ice,
Stalagtites, stalagmites, der stalag,
In Vodka. In drink, in drunk,
I'm sinking, sunken, not quite like something old and weary
But like a miscarriage.
A sacrifice? A suicide?
A fresh-from-the-womb mistake.

You want to burn. Ice-block body incinerated.
Light the match, fingers like four
Robotic machines:
I am machina! You laugh, or cackle, or something.

So I light myself and so
I burn.

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### ***About Elena Makansi***

Elena served as a full-time intern at Blank Slate Press during the summer of 2011 and continues to assist in reading and reviewing submissions. She won both poetry and short story awards while attending high school in Saint Louis. She attended the Iowa Young Writers' Studio and was awarded a scholarship and attended the Washington University Young Writers Institute as well. She continues to read widely and work on her fiction while attending Oberlin College where she is a sophomore.

# ORACLES OF DELPHI

*(an excerpt – the first three chapters)*

By Kristina Blank Makansi

Delphi in the Region of Phokis

in the Month of Mounichion in the First Year of the 110th Olympiad (340 BCE)

## Chapter 1

His heart pounded against his rib cage like a siege engine. He pressed his back into the stone wall, closed his eyes and tried to calm his breathing. He couldn't believe he'd been such a fool. Next time, Charis always promised. Next time, he always hoped. This time . . .

He pulled himself to the top of the wall and lay flat. The gates of the Sacred Precinct were locked, and he had to climb out the same way he'd climbed in. On the way out, though, he wasn't lugging a body.

He glanced behind him, toward the theater, and then down to the Temple of Apollon where he'd left Charis's body for the priests to find. Stars winked in and out as clouds drifted across the black dome blanketing the night sky. He crouched, reached for a nearby branch, and swung down to land on the ground with a soft thud.

It wasn't the first time he'd taken a life. But he'd never killed a woman, never killed anyone unarmed. Not that Charis didn't fight back. His shoulders, red with teeth and claw marks, throbbed. And his face. He ran his tongue across his lip. At least the bleeding had stopped.

He could still smell her. Still see how she licked her lips as she loosened her braids. Still taste the sweetness of her breast, and feel her hot breath as she put his fingers, one by one, in her mouth, wetting them, running her tongue over them, sucking gently until his whole body trembled. When she pulled him down into the soft pile of hay and wrapped her legs around his waist, he had been ready to give her anything—even the gold tiara. Diokles would never know. There were other treasures from the Sacred Precinct to sell.

Of course, none of that mattered now. None of that mattered the moment he felt her brother's blade against his throat and the trickle of blood drip across his collar bone. The moment Charis scrambled up from beneath him and laughed in his face. Brother and sister, what a pair. Charis's brother had picked up the tiara and threatened to go to Diokles with proof he was double-dealing—unless he split his take fifty-fifty. And not just on the tiara. On everything. He'd still be a rich man, Charis promised, laughing at how easy it was to blackmail him.

Her brother was still laughing when the dagger pierced his heart. Who was the fool now? Didn't they know nobody bested him with a blade? And then, like a wild thing, Charis jumped on his back, clung to him, all teeth and nails, punching, kicking. By the gods, he thought all of Delphi would hear. But no one did. No one came. He wanted to make her pay, he wanted to hurt her, but he hadn't meant to kill her. He groaned and his face darkened as he remembered those last moments. She was not laughing when she died.

He wasn't even sure how she died. She was on him, tearing at his clothes, biting his shoulder, his neck, one moment trying to flay his back, the next turning blue. Now she was dead. He didn't care about her brother—the wolves were welcome to feast on his bones—but he couldn't leave Charis to be devoured like carrion. In the morning Apollon's priests would find her on the temple steps wrapped snug in her winter cloak. Philon and Kleomon would wait for her brother to claim her, and then, eventually, they would give her to Phoibe for burial.

He cocked his head and listened. Not even a leaf rustled in an occasional spring breeze. Around him, Delphi slept shrouded in darkness. Under the new moon, dull patches of snow clung to nooks and crannies up and down the mountainside. The Oracle wouldn't start hearing supplicants for another few weeks and without a swarm of pilgrims, Delphi was just another remote mountain village.

Calmer now, he took a deep breath, ran his fingers through his hair, brushed the dust from his clothes, and strode down the path toward the Dolphin's Cove Inn.

## Chapter 2

Aithera pulled the covers over her head and tried to ignore the insistent rapping at her door.

"Are you awake?" Themistokles called.

"Go away."

The rapping stopped and she heard muffled voices in the hallway.

"Aithera. Aren't you up yet?"

"I am now," she groused. She threw the covers back, swung her feet onto the cold, tile floor and stretched. Nephthys, the new Egyptian handmaid Praxis had bought for her, was already up and gone. A few wisps of smoke rose from the gray coals in the brazier. She didn't know how long she'd been asleep. She was just thankful it had finally been a dreamless sleep and that, like usual, she couldn't remember the details of the nightmares that had once again plagued her.

"Can I come in?"

"No. I'm not dressed."

"Well, get dressed. Menandros is impatient to give us a tour of the theater."

She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and opened the door. “It’s too early for a tour of anything.”

Themistokles, her childhood tutor and now her mentor and confidant, scanned the room and then strode in and opened the shutters. She flinched and shaded her face as early spring sunlight assaulted her eyes.

“Nice view,” he said. “Our host obviously gave you the best room in the house.”

“He’s trying to bribe me. He hopes I’ll support the theater of Delphi like my father supported the Dionysia in Athens.”

Themistokles laughed. “That’s Menandros alright. The prospect of gold and silver trumps the joys of a long friendship. Praxis and I are sharing what I suspect is a broom closet.”

“I’m sure you both deserve it for some heinous act you committed in the past or at least for waking me up so early.”

With sharp, gray eyes, a close-cropped head of thick graying hair, and weathered skin creased with laugh—or worry—lines, Themistokles looked every bit the world weary traveler he was. He folded his arms across his broad chest and leaned against the window frame.

“It’s not that early.”

“I had another nightmare.”

“Ah,” he said. “Do you remember it?”

“Thankfully, no. But ...”

“But what?”

“It was the same sort of dream I always have. Someone is in trouble and I am powerless to help them.” She was quiet for a moment. “And yet, there was something different. Something different. And then, just before I woke, there was a man ...”

“A man? What about him?”

“Nothing.” Aithera shivered. “It was nothing.”

“It doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“Apparently I woke Nephthys up. She insisted I tell Praxis about the dreams because he’s my bodyguard and she believes the gods are warning me.”

“Warning you about what?”

“Danger. Delphi. I don’t know. She seems to believe there is something evil in Delphi and that I’m going to be caught up in it. But you know Egyptians—always invoking one god or another against some ridiculous superstition. Remember that cook of Uncle Demetrious’s who wouldn’t get out of bed if the roosters didn’t crow exactly at the crack of dawn?”

“If I recall correctly, your uncle did not appreciate that. I believe it was the man’s irrational fear of sleepy roosters that got him out of the kitchen and landed him in the silver mines.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, we rational Hellenes are immune to superstition. So back to the man in the dream.”

“There’s nothing more to tell. I don’t remember anything else.”

Themistokles turned back toward the window and Aithera pulled the blanket tight around her shoulders and joined him. To the east, over the rooftops, she could just catch the edge of the gymnasium and the gleaming temples and treasuries in the Sacred Precinct of Athena. To the west, the valley unfolded below her, a carpet of green cascading down to the water’s edge. The city of Kirra, Delphi’s port, glowed like a white pearl next to the sapphire inlet off the Gulf of Corinth.

“A charming little town for pirates,” Aithera said.

“What?”

“Kirra,” she pointed. “Remember all the tales of heroes, monsters, pirates, and stolen treasures that you and Papa used to tell me?”

Themistokles laughed. “You would charge around the house with a stick and try to kidnap Praxis as he was doing his chores.”

“I imagined I was a pirate queen and he was a prince that had been kidnapped and sold into slavery. I found out his secret identity and wanted to ransom him for treasure. He always played along until one day I told him that the pirate queen was in love with her captive and that he had to marry me.” She grew quiet.

“I remember.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget the look in his eyes. He said he could never marry me because masters can’t marry slaves even if they are princes in disguise. I told him he was wrong and dragged him in and asked Papa to tell him so.” She bit her lip. “He called me a silly little girl. I cried all night and didn’t forgive him for weeks. And now ... Papa’s been gone a year and I can still feel his hand in mine, still hear him struggle to breathe, his voice ragged. I miss him.”

“I know it’s been hard on both of you, waiting, wondering what the secrecy was all about. Rest assured that today all your questions will be answered and everything will make sense. You and Praxis will learn at last why Lysandros wanted you to travel to Delphi to fulfill his final wishes.”

“Praxis has been so withdrawn lately. He’s changed since Papa died. He was always quiet, but now ...”

“Perhaps Nephthys will cheer him up.” Themistokles chuckled.

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“Nothing you can do about it—unless you sell her.”

“From your look, I can tell you think that would be a mistake.”

“You own them both so you have the power to do whatever you like. You can sell her or forbid a relationship, but it would not improve Praxis’s mood.”

Aithera sighed and Themistokles said, “It’s hard to let go of a dream, isn’t it?”

She blushed. "Childhood dreams die hard, even when you know they can never be. But for Aphrodite's sake, I'm a married woman, now. Maybe Nephthys is exactly what Praxis needs."

"What do you need, Aithera of Athens?"

"I need a different husband, or, the gods forbid, no husband at all. But, since I'm not going to get that, I want to stop mourning, stop being sad. I want to start living again."

Themistokles looked out the window. "It's a fine day to start a new life."

"It's hard to believe you've been able to keep Papa's final wishes secret a whole year."

"A year?" Themistokles headed for the door. "That's nothing, my dear. I've got secrets I've kept for a lifetime. Now get dressed. We're keeping Praxis and Menandros waiting."

### Chapter 3

Menandros stood on the threshold of the theater and blocked Aithera's entry. "I know it's early, my dear, but I want you to experience my theater when the light is just so." He glanced up at the tree line on the hill cradling the theater. "In a moment, Apollon's rays will break through those trees and Delphi's sacred theater will be bathed in the god's rapturous morning light. And just wait till you see our new thymeli, the sacred altar of Dionysos. It is made of pure white marble and the sunlight makes it shimmer like gold."

"It must be a sight to behold." Aithera's eyes twinkled. "Did you know my father always supported a playwright for the Dionysia?"

Menandros's head bobbed and his cheeks turned red. "I had heard that, yes. And I was hoping that ... well ..."

Themistokles laughed, put his arm around Menandros's fleshy shoulders and squeezed. "A playwright at a loss of words. Better find your tongue, old friend, or Lysandros's daughter may lose faith in your talents as a poet."

"Well ... um ... I'm disappointed that your Praxis is not here for the tour as well," Menandros stammered. "I understand he is instrumental in helping you manage your father's estate."

"Never fear. Praxis will join us momentarily. He wanted to let his old friend Palamedes, the temple artisan, know we had arrived in Delphi," Themistokles said.

Menandros stopped and turned to appraise Themistokles. "By Apollon's arrows, Praxis knows Palamedes? But how? I know Palamedes is Syrian like Praxis, but how would they come to know each other?"

"My father arranged for them to meet on my first trip to Delphi," Aithera said. "I was six and Praxis was about 16. The two have corresponded ever since. Their letters have helped Praxis retain his ability to read and write in his native tongue."

“He’s a great man, indeed,” Menandros boasted as if he was personally responsible for Palamedes’s generous personality. “And he’s been a good friend to my houseboy, Zenon, since we arrived in Delphi. Surely you’ve seen his work. What a talent, what an artist! I own several of his pieces. Originals. Not like those copies they sell in the gift shops or hawk along the Sacred Way.”

“Yes, my father—”

“Stop!” Menandros exclaimed. “I’m so sorry to interrupt, my dear, but we’re about to miss our morning light show. I want you to go first, to see for yourself that there is no theater more beautiful in all Hellas.” He stepped out of the way, bent low and swept his hand out for Aithera to step past him into the theater.

“By the gods!” Aithera gasped.

“It is beautiful, is it not?” Menandros sighed in delight. He turned to Themistokles. “I knew she would be impressed.”

“Shut up, Menandros.” Themistokles brushed past him and followed Aithera as she rushed toward the altar of Dionysos set in the center of the stage.

“What?” Menandros, his brow furrowed in confusion, followed in Themistokles’s wake. Then he saw the altar and staggered back as if he’d run headlong into a wall.

Aithera and Themistokles walked slowly around the altar. Naked and draped across it was the dead body of a young woman. The woman lay on her back, arms splayed off to each side, legs spread wide. A snake, belly sliced open, lay tucked between her legs, head resting between her breasts. A mass of long, tangled hair hung limp with the tips of the curls a whisper away from the paving stones. Her head dangled off the edge of the altar and her empty eyes stared upside down at nothing—at everything. A stiff breeze picked up the woman’s curls and twisted them toward Aithera like Medusa’s grasping snakes.

Aithera shuddered and turned to Themistokles. “Nephthys was right. There is evil in Delphi.”

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About Kristina Blank Makansi

Kristina is co-founder, editor, and publisher of Blank Slate Press. Her first novel, ORACLES OF DELPHI, a tale of murder, intrigue, and romance in Ancient Greece, is complete and she is working on her second novel. Over her career, she has worked as an advertising copywriter, marketing coordinator, writer and book editor. She has a Masters in Teaching (Secondary Education) and a BA in Government from the University of Texas.

For more information about Blank Slate Press, the Treehouse imprint, and how to apply to be a BSP or Treehouse author, visit www.blankslatepress.com.