

not so GRIMM

gentle fables
and cautionary tales

by
Becky Haigler



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All characters in these stories are fictional and not intended to represent any actual persons, living or dead.

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Dedication

To my parents, for your wonderful
example and support

To my children and grandchildren,
with prayers for your future

To my husband, my best
cheerleader

To my partners, thanks!

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Introduction

I was born while my parents were students at a small state college, just after World War II. We lived in Quonset huts repurposed as married student housing. My world consisted of adults reading and writing. There is a family story that the summer I turned two, on a few occasions when babysitting was unavailable, Mother took me with her to English class. We sat in the back row and I busied myself with pencil and paper, like the other students. The Prof said he didn't mind my being there, but he wanted to see the notes I took!

On my parents' bookshelves were volumes of poetry by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Rudyard Kipling, as well as *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. Sometimes, Daddy read aloud from those collections. I'm sure my parents read me stories when I was very young, but Mother started teaching me to read at age two, and I mainly remember reading to myself. I recall getting my library card before I entered first grade.

In grade school I got to order books for my own bookshelves several times a year from the Weekly Reader Children's Book Club. I read each selection many times and still have some of the favorites. Volumes of fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm,

bought by my parents, were another treasured source of entertainment. I read them over and over and over. I can still see the rusty orange cover of the Andersen and the gray-and-burgundy binding of the Grimm, so I'm sure those stories carved deep paths in my mind.

A reviewer for the anthology *Able to...*, which included two of my stories, mentioned that my work had a "fairy tale" quality to it. However, when I started writing magic realism stories in the 1990s, I was more aware of being influenced by the Latin American writers of that genre, especially Laura Esquivel's wonderful novel *Like Water for Chocolate*. I also studied some Latin American magic realism in the 1980s, while preparing to teach Spanish – Borges, Cortázar, García-Márquez. But when it came time to title this collection, it seemed right to reference the old fairy tales.

Gates of Eden

Flowers didn't actually fall from Evita's lips – not at first, and not all the time. Even Evita herself didn't know for a long time what happened when she spoke. On the South Texas *hacienda* of the Montalvo family, with formal gardens and flowering hedges, no one found a stray flower here and there very remarkable.

The children's nanny noticed before anyone else, but she never understood the significance of the flowers left in her small rooms. "Evita is the dearest child!" Marta exclaimed to the cook over a late supper. "She loves to be read to. 'Oh, Marta, you read the best stories!' she'll say. And how she loves flowers. Sometimes she hides little sprigs and buds in her gown when the children come for a story before bed. I never see her carrying them, but she forgets them by my chair. When I ask her about the flowers, she never remembers. But I know it's her. It wouldn't be Cezarito, now would it?" And Marta and the cook laughed at the thought of Cezarito carrying flowers in his pajama pockets.

Evita's brother César, older by two years, possessed a temperament quite different from that of his sister. Openly curious and direct, though not rude, Cezarito sometimes seemed a bit rough, more from impatience than unkindness. Evita was in awe of César and

hardly ever spoke to him in her early years unless he addressed her first.

Building block towers in the playroom, César gave Evita orders. Acting out adventures from the stories Marta read, Evita always played first mate to César's pirate captain, or brave warrior to César's Indian chief. Once, at the beach, she begged, "Build me a castle, too, Cezarito. Yours are the best castles." César turned to acknowledge her praise as his just due and then looked back at his project.

"Hey! Get your old flowers out of here! This is a fort for the Foreign Legion, not Sleeping Beauty's castle." He snatched up the flowering vines creeping along one wall of his fortress and threw them into the surf. Evita was as surprised as César to see the flowers and could not say why she turned away feeling guilty as well as sad.

The Montalvo children knew their nanny better than they did their busy parents, whom they saw sometimes at breakfast and for a few hours in late afternoon or on weekends. *Mami* and *Papi* were kind and regal, but preoccupied. *Papi* always had a phone on one ear and papers full of numbers in one hand. *Mami* was forever dressing to go to a luncheon or out shopping. They were content to have Marta see to the children, so long as they were healthy and well behaved.

This aristocratic life was part of the reason Evita's flowering talent went so long unnoticed. She had no reason to observe her mother at domestic tasks, and the daughter's adoring

comments on her mother's beauty were never accompanied by a single flower.

Mami's singing, however, often inspired Evita to plead, "Again, *Mami*. You sing so beautifully. Just like my music box." And *Mami* or the maid would later find daisies or small gardenias behind the sheet music or in the creases of the padded music bench.

Papi always sighed somewhat impatiently at the carnations or wilting pansies that turned up in his pencil box after he had spent a few minutes amusing the children with drawings of animals and fairies, so different from his usual columns of figures. "Your pictures are better than the ones in my books," Evita liked to say, unwittingly strewing blossoms with her words.

Cezarito attended a public school in the small city at the edge of the family's estate. Evita, however, at the appropriate time, went to Our Lady of Perpetual Virtue Academy for Girls. She made friends in the usual way, and though the girls had their disagreements, as children will, they also encouraged each other.

The other girls might notice the black-eyed Susans or snap dragons that happened in their desks and exclaim with pleasure, but they accepted them with all the other miracles and mysteries in their world and did not connect them to Evita's conversation: "You are the best speller in class, Sara." "You color so neatly, Ana." After all, such turns of praise came no more often from Evita than from other girls. It was not as though bouquets filled the room whenever Evita spoke, only that her words of genuine

praise for honest effort took form – became flesh as it were – in fresh flowers.

Evita knew she felt a little pleasure when flowers were discovered in the schoolroom, on the playground, or under a friend's pillow during an overnight visit, but she still had not put it all together in her mind. It did not occur to her to claim the power or the responsibility that the floral offerings signified.

In her sixth year at school, Evita turned eleven and began to experience the stirrings of puberty. To say she blossomed was no cliché in Evita's case. In addition to a heightened physical beauty, Evita began to develop the quiet, observant *knowing* many truly beautiful women possess, and there was an increase in her kind comments and their floral accompaniments.

Evita also enjoyed a particularly gifted teacher that year. Miss González earned many tributes from Evita such as, "That was an interesting geography lesson." Or, "You explained the arithmetic so I could understand." Finding her favorite tiny red carnations in desk drawers, in her pockets, in her handbag, both pleased and puzzled the teacher.

Miss González could not resist trying to solve the mystery of the flowers, especially since no one in the class claimed responsibility for herself or credited any other girl. When questioned alone or in groups, the students shrugged. For the girls in Evita's class, stray flowers were an incidental fact of life, no more remarkable than finding someone else's bookmark left in a book from the library. Miss González's inquiries

however, along with Evita's own maturing heart, led to the beginning of the girl's understanding of her unique ability.

By the time Evita's parents allowed her to go to public high school, she had command of the gift. She had never articulated the process to anyone, not even to herself, but she understood that to speak in praise of someone's efforts resulted in the appearance of flowers. With the passion and excess of youth, the blossoms were sometimes elaborate: gardenias, anthuriums, or rarely, an orchid. At times, with close friends, admiring their poems, drawings, or athletic prowess, Evita actually felt soft petals lapping at her lips. She always managed to turn away and gather the forming flower into her hand. The sight of Evita with flowers was so common her friends scarcely noticed. Nevertheless, she began consciously to restrain her once-spontaneous affirmations and occasionally to plan a shy tribute.

At first, the joy Evita felt producing a few violets for a friend's hair or a rosebud for her mother was innocent. It took a few years for the experience to become an expression of power on her part. Even though no one else was aware of the change, Evita sometimes felt superior – a queen dispensing favors to the common folk.

Silk flowers began to appear. They were of the highest quality and quite exquisite. Cunning baby orchids and flawless tea roses, fashioned in rich hues of real silk, turned up now and again instead of natural blossoms. These puzzled Evita but also exhilarated her. The real flowers had

been a part of her life since she could remember, but these, the silk ones, seemed a true expression of her own skill and she felt a thrill whenever one appeared. She looked for her favorite, a daisy, and successfully willed it to appear a few times by flattering friends into helping her.

"Will you help me choose the poems for my folder, Susan?" Evita asked. "You always get the best grades in literature class." Or, "You bake wonderful brownies, Stella. Won't you bring refreshments for choir practice?"

During Evita's final year in high school, with comments such as these, silk blossoms outnumbered natural ones. Sad to note, the consciously-produced daisies appeared more often than ever. The quality of the flowers began to decline, from expensive silk to cheaper organza, and finally to rather shoddy cotton in garish hues. Evita scarcely noticed the change. She was bored with her gift. She did not care whether those for whom she produced blossoms received them or not. Long ago she had stopped collecting any unclaimed flowers.

Once in a while, at home, a remark to the cook, "Elena, your *carne guisada* is my favorite," would result in a spray of bluebells or baby's breath. Admiration for Cezarito's appearance on the Dean's list could still cause rosebuds. These were some of the only people left in Evita's world whom she acknowledged as her superiors in any area of life that mattered to her. Evita remained, of course, unfailingly polite and was still solicitous of the feelings of others.

There was, however, a slight brittleness at the edges of her brightness. C  zar remarked upon it during the summer as Evita prepared to leave for a prestigious women’s college in the northern part of the state.

“Well, Kid, I used to worry about you,” C  zar said. “You were kind of odd, you know? Always playing with flowers. I never thought you’d be able to go away on your own, but you’ve got a little toughness to you now. I guess you’re going to be all right. You call me if you need anything, okay?”

This rough expression of affection from C  zar took Evita by surprise and she exclaimed sincerely, “I’m glad you’re my brother, Cezarito!” The soft creaminess of the gardenia’s petals brushing past her lips as she spoke was unexpected. In her confusion, Evita ducked her head to C  zar’s chest, but not before he saw her startled expression and her hand fly to her mouth. He wondered if she were going to be sick and so returned her clumsy embrace reluctantly.

“Hey, what’s the matter? Are you okay?” Regaining her composure, Evita pulled back and nodded. She held out the perfectly formed, naturally soft flower to C  zar and smiled shyly. He laughed. “Up to your old tricks again I see. Can I have this?” He tucked the gardenia into the lapel of his summer blazer and left to pick up his date.

Flowers for Cezarito always reminded Evita of the way things used to be, but it did not soften her brittleness, nor discourage her from the petty flatteries she had learned.

At college, in a new environment, Evita felt a little insecure. Except for her roommate, she made acquaintances, but not real friends. The first day the dorms opened, she had spontaneously praised her roommate's flair for decorating and quickly discovered white carnations scattered on the bedspreads. She gathered them up and searched for a container, muttering something about always forgetting to put flowers in water. For a while after that, learning her new routine and keeping up with her studies so absorbed Evita that she hardly thought of anyone else. When she finally began to get settled and take an interest in campus activities, she naturally employed the motivating techniques she knew best: sincere praise and its poor cousin, flattery.

Knowing the power of her words, Evita determined to be sparing in her encouragements. She worried a fair amount about people noticing flowers scattered around. After all, no warm gardens flourished in the college town and no generous bouquets graced the hallway tables as they had at home. So, she experimented a little in the dormitory, praising one roommate's skill with her hair and another for her perfect popcorn. When Evita looked for flowers in the room, she found some small embossed-cardboard bouquets, like old-fashioned Valentines. She traced the raised designs with her fingers again and again, as if her touch would tell her whether these flowers, too, came from her lips.

A few more trials convinced Evita her flowering words could be expressed, in this harsher climate, on fine quality paper, so as not to startle anyone with the incongruous appearance of blossoms in winter. She felt both a twinge of disappointment and a breath of relief that she would not have to be careful of her speech after all. The flowers were an aspect of her past she might recall fondly but whose passing she did not mourn. For a time, Evita collected the Victorian-style cards when she came across one. The paper on the cards gradually became thinner and shinier. The raised designs became flatter and finally disappeared, so the slips of paper flowers her compliments produced were only like misplaced magazine illustrations, fallen out of a child's scrapbook.

By the time the flowers degenerated into cheap gum-ball-machine trinkets, Evita wasn't looking for them anymore. In any case, she would not have recognized such carnival prizes as being descendants of the beautiful bouquets of praise she once produced. Rarely, rarely, a sprig of lily of the valley or some blue forget-me-nots happened, usually after a telephone conversation with C ezar.

C ezar had noted Evita's "toughness" in the summer after she finished high school, and in fact, she developed a protective shell to deal with her surroundings on campus. By spring, she could hold her own in any class discussion, crowded cashier's line, or dormitory gossip session. Her brightness now seemed shiny and rather hard, though not brittle anymore.

There was no sense at all that anything could break her.

Where beautiful speech had been her gift and then her tool, eloquence now became a weapon for Evita. Her skill at debate in both formal and informal settings gained admiration on the campus. She pondered careers in journalism, law, or politics, where she might continue to enjoy the prestige and power accompanying such skill. Evita also developed a reputation as a wit. Her joking remarks tended to be slightly pointed, if not actually sharp. For the first time in her life, some people who knew Evita were not glad to see her when she entered a room.

In May, there was a population explosion in a genus of small lizard on the campus. Specimens of varying sizes appeared in nearly every building and even in second-floor dormitory rooms. It was not a plague of lizards, but rather a minor natural phenomenon, as an increase in the number of seasonal wildflowers might be noted in a year of good rainfall.

Evita was more conscious of the lizards than her classmates. She spotted one of the skittering visitors two or three times a day during the last month of classes. She had always a vague sense of disquiet when she saw one. She knew the feeling was not fear or revulsion. Having grown up with a brother and a large garden, Evita had no dread of lizards. She found herself occasionally looking up in mid-sentence, knowing, expecting to see one of the small reptiles darting along the baseboards with his bright eye turned to her.

Evita had no name for her uneasiness. She discovered that her anticipation of the lizards' appearances coincided with jokes made at the expense of others, especially if the subject of the jest were not present. One night after a student recital, Evita declared to a group reclining on the floor of the dorm lounge, "When Barbara hit that high note, I thought a fire truck was going by!" Almost immediately she heard the tiny lizard scritch-scratching on the linen sleeve of her crisp spring blouse and felt the tiny claws running down her forearm. Everyone laughed, first at the joke, then at the visitor.

Evita shivered involuntarily and made an excuse to go to her room early. In her mirror, she saw the smooth hardness of her face. She did not need Cezarito or anyone else to tell her the brightness was gone. She thought it was how grownups were supposed to look.

The last few days of classes and exams were difficult for Evita. She did not sleep well or study effectively. Her acquaintances all found her uncharacteristically quiet. The lizards found their way back into the hedges and rock walls of the campus.

Evita packed her belongings at the end of the term and waited in the quadrangle for César's car to appear to take her home for the summer. She stacked her bags and boxes on the sidewalk in the shade of a large tree to wait. The appointed hour came and went. The shadow moved on, leaving Evita's things in the glare of the sun. By the time César finally arrived, Evita was sweating and irritated.

César apologized. "Sorry, Kid. I took a shortcut to avoid the tollway, but there turned out to be construction delays on the road."

Evita was not pacified. She didn't stamp her foot, but stood with hands on hips to declare, "That was a really stupid and selfish thing to do, Cezarito. I've been waiting here since..."

Evita could not finish her sentence. She gagged and coughed. César gasped and stepped backward as a small frog leapt from Evita's mouth toward him. He cringed in disgust as Evita retched again and again, emptying her stomach.

"I'm so sorry, Cezarito," she cried. "Help me. Please help me. You always know what to do." At this last declaration, Evita felt the white petals of a tiny snowdrop brush her palm, stretched out in supplication to César. She sobbed more deeply at the sight and crushed the blossom to her desperately.

César embraced his weeping sister. "Let's go," he said. "I'll take you home."

Mr. Merrill's Extraordinary Driving Cap

Merrill found the cap in the store at closing time. The butter-soft, fine leather driving cap immediately reminded him of the British racing green MG classic he had seen parked a few times across the street. In fact, the leather looked a match for the upholstery of the MG. The cap rested between *The Atlantic* and *Audubon* in the periodical section of Merrill's Used and 1/2 Price Books and Magazines. It had been placed as carefully as if it, too, were merchandise displayed for sale.

Reviewing the customers of the day, Merrill recalled only a few regulars and semi-regulars. Some of the men wore hats: the teen-ager in a backward baseball cap, the postman, the artist who affected a beret, and the retired professor with a Tyrolean topper. The cap did not seem a match for any of them, but Merrill had not noticed the green MG in the neighborhood for a month or more.

Merrill turned the cap over in his hands, looking for markings. There was not even a manufacturer's label or size tag. He enjoyed the smell and feel of the leather and could not resist placing the cap on his head. He thought of Walter Mitty and pictured himself in tweed golf

knickers. With another adjustment of the bill, he imagined himself stepping into the British sports car. The fantasy passed, but Merrill wore the cap as he worked, planning to place it on a shelf behind the counter. Doubtless the owner would come looking for it.

As he dusted and straightened shelves, Merrill hummed, content among the books he loved, in the shop that had been his life for almost thirty years. Working his way to the front of the store, Merrill forgot the cap as it settled on his head, a better fit than the gray fedora he owned but rarely wore. He pulled on the jacket he had worn that morning and stepped into the last of the afternoon sunshine with the comfortable cap still on his head.

Merrill passed the dry cleaner and the shoe repair before he caught his unfamiliar reflection in the darkened window of the chiropractor's office. He ducked his head to pull off the cap and tuck it into the front of his jacket. *What if the owner were someone from the neighborhood?*

Merrill stopped at the bank and dropped an envelope into the night depository, then continued past familiar storefronts, cafés, houses and apartment buildings. He watched arguments and friendly conversations as though they took place in mime. Light evening traffic easily masked the voices, especially since Merrill was growing deaf.

Recent immigrants from various countries peopled many of the neighborhood homes and businesses. Even when Merrill could hear their conversations, he often could not understand

them. At the corner grocery where he stopped for oats, brown sugar, and cat food, Merrill had observed at least three generations of an Iranian family, maybe four, behind the counter in various combinations. While they waited for customers to make their selections, they argued in their native language or translated news from a portable TV for the grandmother.

When Merrill unzipped his jacket to take the shopping list from his shirt pocket, the driving cap fell out. He placed it on his head absently, reading over his small list of necessities. He filled a handbasket methodically from the familiar aisles of the store, and then approached the register. He was surprised to hear the grandmother say, "This one is a good man, but lonely I think." Years of working with customers helped Merrill mask any dismay at having his psyche probed so publicly. The son's reply, "Yes, but who isn't?" made the remark less personal and Merrill was able to check out without embarrassment.

On the street again, Merrill was glad for the warmth of the cap and the evening somehow changed. Wherever he looked, people's faces came into sharp focus and their conversations became audible in snatches as his gaze passed over them, rather like twisting a radio dial or flipping through the channels on TV. He heard construction workers and pedestrians on the opposite side of the street as well as children and shopkeepers with whom he shared the sidewalk.

"Going to quit now. Almost dark."

"...overtime last weekend and next, too."

"Can't catch me, ha ha!"

"I'm gonna tell!"

"Goodnight, Sam. We'll start inventory tomorrow."

These routine exchanges seemed cacophonous to Merrill, who usually heard only his own thoughts and the most intrusive noises on his daily walks. He noted again the peculiar quality of the evening atmosphere as he shifted his small burden of purchases and turned the corner onto Holland Street.

The neighborhood was old: an enclave of neat, tiny lawns and large trees, bordered by high-rises and offices in one direction and a gated addition on the other side. Merrill never tired of observing the seasons in the trees and shrubs and flowers of the neighborhood. Sadly, these beauties brought memories of Mrs. Merrill, gone for five years.

After her death, Merrill remained two more years in the house they shared all their married life. Their son, Merrill Junior, came to help dispose of most of the furniture and his mother's treasured things. He took a few books and some family pictures, but neither he nor his wife had any interest in the outdated furnishings and costume jewelry left by his mother. For himself, Merrill Senior kept his beloved books, in their glass-fronted shelves, and enough other furniture to fill the tiny rooms he took at the Mount Vernon apartments.

Merrill shared the Mount Vernon with other widowers and widows, struggling students,

starving artists, a young man dying of AIDS, and a recent parolee from the state prison. Most of the tenants were quiet and solitary. Merrill knew a few of their names but did not count any of the residents as friends. Making friends had been Mrs. Merrill's department. Approaching the Mount Vernon, Merrill saw Mrs. Chadwick on the porch at her end of the building.

"Good evening, Mr. Merrill," she called. Merrill made a short wave in response and heard her add, "Surely he's lonely too." It was the second time that evening his comfort and isolation had been invaded by a mere acquaintance. Merrill did not show his agitation, but quickened his step.

"Yes,...well... Good evening, Mrs. Chadwick," he managed to say. He hurried up the steps of his own covered porch.

Inside his comfortable lair, Merrill switched on the floor lamp beside his leather armchair. "Do I look so sad?" he wondered. Not a day passed that he did not miss Mrs. Merrill, of course, but he bore his grief with stoicism, which could hardly be distinguished from any other of his emotional states. He did not feel any more sad or lonely or stressed than usual. He turned to the beveled mirror next to the door to see if his face portrayed some deep sorrow. The thought disappeared quickly when he saw the leather driving cap on his head. He chuckled and hung the cap with his jacket on the coat rack of the mirror frame so he would be sure to take it back to the shop in the morning.

After breakfast, Merrill gathered into a cloth tote bag some catalogs, tea bags, and mousetraps he needed to take to the shop. On top he placed the leather driving cap. He would have the cap available for its owner to reclaim, but he had to admit it would not disappoint him if whoever had left it could not remember where to look for it.

After a suitable time, say a week or so, Merrill could feel free to appropriate the cap and wear it as his own. A shopkeeper often came by odd treasures in this manner. Over the years, quite an assortment of abandoned belongings had passed through Merrill's hands, including small amounts of money, a coin commemorating the first men to walk on the moon, and a ring with a ruby set which Mrs. Merrill loved to wear. But the leather driving cap caught Merrill's fancy as nothing else ever had. He laughed at his own enthusiasm and chided himself, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods!" He patted the cap inside his tote bag.

At the corner market, Merrill stopped to buy peanut butter for the mousetraps. It was early, and the grandmother who had remarked his loneliness the night before was alone behind the counter. Embarrassed again, Merrill tried to make small talk as he paid for the peanut butter. "Beautiful spring, isn't it? Always nice to see the trees budding out, even if it does play havoc with the allergies, eh?"

The grandmother looked at him stolidly, made his change and announced with a shrug, "No English."

"But I heard... You said..." Merrill's usual composure abandoned him and he hurried out.

Merrill allowed himself a brief pout as he walked toward the shop, but had to abandon his self-pity before arriving. One of his distributor's trucks had come early and the driver waited impatiently on the walk. Merrill hurried the last block of the way. He tossed his bag on the counter as soon as he unlocked the door. By the time he signed the bill of lading, customers were arriving and Merrill stashed the tote bag under the counter.

Traffic in the shop slowed in the early afternoon. Merrill set the mousetraps in the back room, placed the driving cap on a shelf behind the register, and began some quarterly book-keeping duties. The postman arrived about two o'clock. He was the first to comment on the cap. "Fine hat on your shelf, Mr. Merrill. Are you stocking haberdashery now?"

Merrill chuckled and picked up the cap. "No. No, someone left this in the shop. I expect the owner will be looking for it." He turned the cap over in his hands, caressing the leather. He offered it for the postman's inspection with a tentative, jealous gesture. The two men bantered for a few minutes and Merrill modeled the cap. A woman entered the shop and stood quietly while they talked. Merrill turned his attention to her when the postman began to leaf through some new/used comics.

The woman was about Merrill's age, maybe a little older, with gray hair in a youthful style. She wore neat slacks and a light sweater and carried

a plastic bag from the grocer's with a paper packet inside. There were laugh lines around her attractive eyes and mouth, though no smile softened her face today. "May I help you?" Merrill inquired.

"Do you buy books? From individuals?" she asked, holding her bundle like a cake to be entered in the county fair.

"Yes, ma'am, I do, depending on the value of the book and on whether my customers would be interested in it." He paused. "There are a lot of variables involved."

"Yes. Well, it's valuable. I'm pretty sure it's valuable." She placed the blue plastic bag on the counter. As Merrill unwrapped the book inside, he heard her add, "Please, God. I don't know what else to sell. If only Charlie weren't so sick. He'd know where to take them."

Merrill cleared his throat nervously, uncomfortable with the woman's display of emotion and hinted need. He wondered if the woman were some sort of con artist, trying to arouse his sympathy with her story. He half expected to find a cheap reprint of a McGuffey reader, or worse, a vanity press copy of the woman's grandmother's poems.

He discarded the final layer of paper. For a second Merrill lost the carefully constructed poker face a dealer in used merchandise must cultivate. A tiny "Oh" escaped his lips and his eyebrows arched ever so slightly. He touched the signature on the title page of Carl Sandburg's *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years, Volume I*. He turned a few pages, savoring the

quality of the paper as lovers of books do, then turned back to check the date again. An autographed first edition if the ink could be believed. Merrill cleared his throat to steady his voice. "It's lovely, but..." he began.

The woman interrupted. "There are more. I have to have a car payment this month. Volume II, and then four volumes of *The War Years*. I don't know what else to try to sell! The signature is authentic. The bank will wait on the house but... If you can't help me, do you know who can?"

Merrill studied the woman's face as she spoke. It seemed two women were speaking at once. One monologue layered over the other. One he heard and one he *felt*, for lack of a better word. Perplexed, Merrill did not respond to the woman's question. She took his hesitancy for skepticism. "It's quite authentic and not stolen, I assure you. My husband worked for a member of the Sandburg family when he was in college. Oh, how long ago that was! He became a trusted and favored employee. Charlie has always known how to make himself indispensable. When the gentleman died, he left his money to his children but he left the books to Charlie, to my husband. We always thought they would be a legacy to our children, but there weren't any. So, what can you offer me for it?"

Merrill continued to hear two voices in the woman's speech. Nervously, he gestured to brush back his thinning hair and found the leather driving cap still on his head. Now he felt foolish as well as confused. He pulled off the cap

muttering, "Sorry." He forced himself to the business at hand. Merrill had to consider, however fleetingly, that while the woman knew her offering was valuable, she had no idea how valuable. How much, or how little, might one offer that would be honorable while still leaving the largest margin for profit in the resale?

As he pondered this moral and retailing dilemma, Merrill asked the woman a few questions about the condition of the remaining volumes. She answered quietly, without the urgency of her previous replies. Merrill was relieved not to have to sift through the dual-natured responses she had given before, however her voice was now so soft he cocked his good ear toward her with the effort to hear. His conscience overrode any stirrings of greed and Merrill explained to the woman that she really needed someone who could arrange an auction for rare book dealers and collectors. He added, "However, I understand that with your husband's illness and your need for some ready cash..."

She interrupted, "Oh dear! Did I really say that? I was determined not to. I didn't want to appear either manipulative or too desperate." Merrill felt confused again. He was used to hearing less, not more, of what people said to him. Still, he knew what he had heard in their unusual conversation. He deferred the puzzle for a later time. Merrill wrote a note to a colleague who would arrange for the books to be auctioned and also make the woman a loan against their expected value. Merrill would receive a small

percentage for the referral. The woman bound up her parcel and thanked him repeatedly on her way out.

Merrill sighed deeply, as if he had just completed some difficult bit of bookkeeping. He had forgotten anyone else was in the shop until the postman approached the counter again. "Wow! What a find, huh? Too bad you couldn't cash in on that one. By the way, how did you know her husband was sick and she needed money right away?"

"Well, I heard... Sometimes you just... Intuition?" Merrill could not formulate an answer any more logical to himself than to the postman.

The shop remained quiet in the afternoon. Merrill had plenty of time to replay in his mind the "Sandburg Incident," as he began to think of it. The curious conversation of the woman overshadowed the exhilaration of the valuable find. He mentally repeated the scene, every gesture, every look, every word, as carefully as he could, trying to discover what about the woman's speech so puzzled him. No, only the first part of the conversation bothered him. Later, after removing the hat... The hat. Of course! That explained several things about the past twenty-four hours.

At last Merrill made the connection of his improved "hearing" and the lovely leather driving cap found the previous afternoon. The sidewalk conversations overheard, the Iranian Grandmother's comment, Mrs. Chadwick's thoughts, and now the "Sandburg Incident," were all owing to the cap. Merrill caressed the

supple leather with new affection, eagerness, and a touch of awe. He chuckled and returned the cap to its comfortable place on his head, thinking no more about the unknown owner who might come to reclaim it.

As soon as he could, Merrill hurried out a lingering customer and turned over the Open/Closed placard in the window of the shop. He could hardly wait to get back out on the sidewalk to test his theory. He felt like humming as he walked. Instead, he held his breath, turning his head slightly from side to side, like a mobile radar unit. He marveled at the range and diversity of the conversations he could pick up just by focusing on the faces of the speakers.

Merrill detoured from his usual route a few blocks to take in an oriental market. He wanted to test another aspect of the augmented "hearing" afforded by the cap. He was pleased, but not now surprised, to be able to understand everyone he overheard in the store. When he realized he was wandering up and down the aisles grinning foolishly, not behaving at all like a shopper, he chose a cellophane bag of dried mushrooms and some salted plums. He walked around a few more minutes, enjoying the sense of being an invisible observer. There was an unexpected rush of power in knowing that the Chinese and Korean customers could not guess he understood their comments about the price of pork.

Merrill hoped Mrs. Chadwick would be on the porch of the Mount Vernon again tonight. He imagined all sorts of things she might be

thinking about him, and finally blushed, having succeeded in embarrassing himself. He resolved to analyze later whether or not he would want Mrs. Chadwick to think such things about him. When he turned the corner onto Holland Street, the porches of the Mount Vernon were empty of people. Merrill shrugged and laughed at himself.

Preoccupied with thoughts about the cap, Merrill moved more slowly than usual, heating supper for himself and putting out food for the big gray cat that shared his rooms. He sat in his leather chair with a mug of vegetable soup and contemplated the cap hanging near the door. He imagined applications for the unique properties of the driving cap. In some scenarios, he emerged a sort of superhero who was able to save the day because of his extraordinary gift! From pride, he moved to greed, imagining how he might make a killing on the stock market by hanging out in espresso bars near the investment houses to catch trading tips by wearing the wonderful hat.

Merrill became quite excited and decided to get a pencil and pad to jot down some of his better ideas. As he searched the desk drawer, someone knocked. Frowning at the intrusion on his daydreams, Merrill opened the door to find Mrs. Chadwick.

"Good evening, Mr. Merrill. I baked some cookies today. They're really too many for just me. I thought I'd share them with the neighbors." Mrs. Chadwick proffered a plate swathed in plastic wrap. Still thinking about the driving cap, Merrill wondered what he might be

hearing from Mrs. Chadwick if he had it on. He regarded her quizzically.

She took his silence for irritation. "Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. You've hardly had your supper and here I am intruding."

Mrs. Chadwick's discomfort roused the gentleman in Merrill. "No, no. It's no bother. Please come in." Merrill positioned a chair to face his own. "Please sit down, Mrs. Chadwick. I'm about to make tea. Will you join me? We'll have some of those cookies."

"Please call me Ruth. Well, I suppose I could stay for just a minute." Mrs. Chadwick's self-satisfied blush did not escape Merrill's notice, and he smiled to himself as he made the tea. The two neighbors spent a long hour making tentative acquaintance and found they had several things in common. Mrs. Chadwick – Ruth – admired Merrill's books and made fast friends with the gray tomcat.

Merrill was genuinely sorry to see Ruth make her gracious exit. "Thank you so much, Ruth, for the cookies. I don't usually have sweets, but they were a treat. Come again sometime, anytime, I mean soon." He felt himself babbling and tried to end on a more controlled note. "I'll see if I can find that gardening book I mentioned, in the shop tomorrow."

Merrill did not sleep well. His mind raced with possibilities for the powers of the driving cap, and when he dozed, he dreamed of walking along a creek bank in the tulips with Mrs. Chadwick – Ruth. Unrested, he roused himself

with difficulty to his morning routine. He did not take coffee on the veranda. He put on his jacket and stuffed the driving cap into his tote bag.

Merrill walked to the shop by a different route than usual. He took his time, letting the chill morning clear his head. He stopped in the courtyard of a church and sat on a stone bench near a large Celtic cross. He took the driving cap out of his bag and sighed, crushing the soft leather to his chest. He placed the cap on his head hopefully, but it did not seem to make such a perfect fit as it had before. Finally, he got up. Stepping over some ivy, he climbed a small pedestal and hung the cap from one arm of the cross. It seemed neither incongruous nor irreverent perched there. Merrill regarded the cap for a minute before leaving the courtyard. His step was lighter walking to the shop, but his head was cold and bare.

By the time he reached the shop, a full ten minutes later than usual, Merrill had formulated a plan of action. He began a list of things to do for the day: 1) appointment with audiologist – hearing aids? 2) gardening book – Ruth; 3) leather goods catalog – cap.

Merrill straightened up from his list on the counter. Through the shop window he caught a glimpse of a British racing green MG classic pulling away from the stoplight at the corner. He smiled, thinking about the leather driving cap in the courtyard. He wondered who would find it.

Chronological Order

Carolina saw a dark shape moving through the curtain of snow at the same instant she felt her truck begin to slide on the black ice of the parking lot. The figure might have been reaching out to her, but she probably wouldn't have stopped, even if she hadn't been preoccupied with trying to stabilize the slide of the heavy pickup.

The mall day ended at nine and whoever closed the shop had to vacuum, straighten merchandise and tally the register. By planning ahead, it was possible to get away before nine-thirty. Whoever closed the shop had the additional duty of dropping the bank bag at the automatic teller on the edge of the mall parking lot. Carolina and her assistant manager, Lisa, learned to be alert to their surroundings and move quickly, but there hadn't been any problems with armed robbers at the mall for over five years. Or so the security agency said.

As manager of The Chain Chain, a small accessory shop in the mall, Carolina was using the fashion merchandising degree she'd earned at the community college back home. She enjoyed living in her efficiency apartment and saving money, for a house or maybe a nice wedding, if she met someone. She was glad to be out of tiny Seymour, even if Lubbock wasn't

as much city as Dallas or Houston. And she was really glad to be out of the dead-end relationship with Donald. Carolina thought she'd give a lot to undo the last two years. But, as her mother often said, "You don't get to go backward. Just pick yourself up and keep moving."

Staying late for inventory and laying out new merchandise was the part of her job Carolina liked least. It meant her departure from the store would be two to three hours later than usual. She could sleep late the next day, but she didn't like being the last employee out of the mall except for security guards.

Inventory night on January 31 was even worse. A north Texas blizzard came up and visibility was especially low. Headlights reflected from the thick veil of blowing snow instead of showing a path. Lines on the parking lot were obscured. Only stop signs marked the once-familiar terrain and exits onto city streets, but even the stop signs were difficult to see in blizzard conditions. When Carolina felt the soft bump near the back of the truck while recovering from a slide, she imagined she had grazed an unseen curb. She didn't want to think about the dark figure she might have seen as she pulled away from the bank kiosk.

At home, Carolina quickly washed her face and pulled on flannel pj's and warm socks before curling up under a down comforter where her cat, Noodle, was already snoozing.

Noodle meowing for breakfast woke Carolina. The clock radio declared 11:10, late for Noodle. Scarcely any light showed at the edges of the

window blinds, not enough for mid-morning, even in January. Carolina flipped open her cell phone, charging on the bedside table. It too showed 11:10. She stretched under the down comforter before emerging for a quick visit to the bathroom and a trip to the kitchen alcove to serve Noodle a tiny can of Feline Feast and some fresh water. The view from the window next to her compact dining table showed a courtyard worthy of a postcard photo with sparkling snow and ice-trimmed shrubs. No one had tromped through to the parking lot yet that morning. Carolina looked at the clock on the microwave – 11:10. Though the details didn't add up, she speculated a brief power outage in the previous night's storm.

During national morning talk shows, the TV scrolled local weather and news of schools and businesses that would open later or even be closed for the day. Carolina knew the mall would be "business as usual." When the New York announcer proclaimed seven-forty-five a.m., Carolina moved to reset the microwave to six-forty-five, Central Time. As soon as she pressed "Enter," the display showed 11:10. She shook her head and returned to the still-warm comforter. She reached for her clock radio and reset the time. Rolling over, she did not see it return to the insistent 11:10.

The next time Carolina awoke, pale winter light illumined the parchment blinds. When she stretched, her empty stomach pulled toward her backbone. She remembered she had not eaten since lunch the day before. She thought about

pancakes, or an omelet, and wondered if she still had time for a big breakfast and a couple of errands on the way to work. She turned to the radio and saw 11:10, again. She growled at the stubborn appliance, rousing Noodle from his nap on the neighboring pillow. Quick-dial to her assistant manager was number four on her phone.

"Lisa, what time is it anyway? All my clocks are screwed up. Maybe the storm or something."

"Hey, Carolina. Yeah, it's crazy out there. It took me forty-five minutes to get here this morning when it's usually a fifteen-minute drive. The streets are like ice, but at least the salt trucks have been out. The loop is actually less slick than the side streets."

"Yeah, but what time is it? I'm supposed to come in this afternoon and I don't know how much time I've got left here."

"Oh, you're fine. It's only ten-thirty. School kids are already starting to show up to cruise the mall, though. Any time they get a free day from school... Listen! The awfulest thing happened! When I finally got here this morning, there was an ambulance and some police cars in the south lot, near where we usually park. I had to go to the west lot. I asked one of the security guards about it when he walked by a few minutes ago."

While Lisa talked, Carolina stared, unfocused, at her clock radio, but as she listened, the display seemed to grow brighter and burn into her consciousness. She knew the significance of the numbers before Lisa finished her story.

"Some old guy just crumpled over in the parking lot and froze to death in the storm. The manager of the pretzel place got here first and called 911. They don't even know who he is yet."

"What time?"

"It's about ten-thirty-five. You've got plenty of time. You should allow an extra fifteen minutes or so, just in case, but it's okay if you don't get here right at one."

"No, I mean what time did he...did the guy...? Do they know...?"

"Well, it had to be late. I mean nobody saw him until this morning. He wasn't there when you left, right?"

"I didn't see him." Carolina's voice was husky. She clicked "End." Let Lisa think the signal had been lost.

"What was I supposed to do?" Carolina asked over and over, her voice rising in volume with the anguish. She gathered the down comforter around her body with desperate clawing gestures. The green numbers stared at her relentlessly from the clock radio: 11:10.

Flight of the Wickerplane

I saw the little wicker biplane in an import shop and had to have it. My wife thought I was crazy. I'd never told her the story. It's not something you expect people to believe. We didn't have much money at the time, so \$19.95 was a major expense.

Here's the deal: when I was a kid, I saw a late-night movie about this primitive tribe – from Africa, Indonesia, I don't remember – fascinated by a small plane they saw in their sky from time to time. Since they had no contact with the outside world, the plane became a mythic entity to them. First the children started trying to make imitations of the plane as toys, then the shaman created a model out of twigs and it became an object of veneration for the tribe. They told stories about the flying god whose eyes glowed in the dusk, who sometimes waved his giant arms at them, and who, by the claim of one tribal elder, could swallow up a man and take him away into the sky.

I told Marla about the movie, but that wasn't why I had to have the little wicker plane, or wickerplane, all one word, as I thought of it. It's time to get the story down.

I was pretty much a geek in high school. The Coke-bottle lenses in my glasses were an effective curtain between me and other people.

Nobody seemed to be able to see in to who I really was and I couldn't see them all that well, either. I could see to read and that's what mattered to me. My one claim to fame was winning a contest my senior year when the Tuesday Ladies' Study Club offered a prize for the best essay titled "Reading Opens Doors." I think they expected some cute girl in a plaid skirt to win, but they were nice enough when it turned out to be me who came to read and accept the twenty-five dollar check. After that, I started thinking maybe I could be a writer as well as a reader.

I was lucky my folks could handle tuition for two years at the community college. I did a little yard work and dog sitting to earn money for books. What with reading and mowing grass and picking up dog poop, I spent a lot of time looking down.

My dad was okay. I mean I loved him. We didn't talk much and neither of us was the kind to throw a ball around. It kind of surprised me that his dying left such a huge hole. I had just gotten a grant and a little scholarship money to finish my degree at the University when he died, but Mom said to go on. Grandma was moving in with her and it would be easier for them to get settled.

My apartment was about eight blocks from campus. A few decades earlier, it probably commanded a high rent because of its proximity to the university, but by the time I got there it was rundown enough I could afford it. The tenants included some students, a couple of

single moms and their kids, a woman I thought was a hooker, maybe an ex-hooker, and Deems.

Deems was a step up from a street person. Obviously he had a place to live, but he always had a three-day growth of whiskers. I never saw him either clean-shaven or with a full beard. When I thought about that later, it made me laugh – another of many mysteries about Deems. He wore an assortment of long-sleeved plaid shirts, winter and summer. His faded jeans always looked the same, so I don't know if there was more than one pair. Sometimes he wore a greasy ball cap, sometimes not. The boots were the most striking feature of Deems' wardrobe – not cowboy boots but smooth, black engineer boots, always clean and buffed to a soft sheen, nice as glove leather. I saw later that the soles were thin.

Deems seemed to be always outside, sitting in a folding chair in his open doorway or puttering with the accumulation of junk that started outside his door and reached around the end of the building. His was the last apartment in the row. He'd been there a long time.

Deems had a habit of talking to himself out loud, like some street people do. When you pass by, you're never sure whether they're talking to you or not. You want to be polite, partly for the sake of good manners and partly because you're just a little afraid ignoring them will be taken as an insult and set off a tirade. On the other hand, you don't want to encourage them too much and get drawn into some surreal discussion based on

their paranoia. Or make too much eye contact and have them ask you for money.

Anyway, going to and from class, I always spoke to Deems. At first, he just waved and bobbed his head. After a few weeks, he began to comment on the weather or the previous night's late partyers. I kept walking and made responsive noises that he could interpret however he wished. Finally, somehow, we exchanged names.

One of Deems' piles of junk was covered with a tarp and it seemed gradually to grow bigger under there. Once in a while, I'd see him pulling up the cover as I was leaving for an early class, as if he'd been working for a while and was just finishing up. Once I caught a glimpse of a wooden framework under the tarp and said something like, "Quite an undertaking." Deems muttered about his "project."

By the spring of what was supposed to be the final semester of my M.A. in literature, I had a few acquaintances, other grad school geeks who spent a lot of time looking down, reading, writing, researching, like me. We sometimes had a party at someone's place or met at a bar over cheap beer. Once I came home after midnight and Deems didn't hear me until I was close enough to see the "project" fully uncovered. He had constructed a half-size model of a biplane, like a Wright brothers' tribute or something. Only there was no canvas covering, just an assemblage of odd bits of wood, like the wickerplane I remembered from the movie.

"Cool!" I said. "It's the wickerplane!"

Deems didn't get the reference. "It's my project," he said quietly. I could tell he hadn't really wanted me to see it. But he didn't rush to cover it up. He liked that I didn't laugh, that I thought it was something cool. We stood there for a while looking at the plane. I walked around it, not touching anything.

When I spoke it was with true reverence. "It's amazing, Deems."

"You want to go up?"

That's when I laughed. "Sure!" Deems didn't seem to know he had made a great joke. He was covering up the wickerplane and ignoring me. I knew it was time to leave.

I didn't see Deems for a day or two. The next time I passed his doorway, he just stared. I couldn't see well enough to gauge people's expressions unless I was pretty close to them. I went more by tone of voice. Deems didn't say anything. His hand rested protectively on the tarp over the wickerplane. I felt bad that Deems thought I was making fun of him, but if his invitation to "go up" had been serious, he was on a different wave length than I had thought and I was leery of getting trapped in his fantasies.

Over the next few weeks, we started speaking again. I don't remember which of us broke the silence to repair what was a rather tenuous relationship to begin with. I was at a critical juncture in my thesis and my advisor was suggesting I add some French and German authors in my survey of flight images in early twentieth-century writing. I didn't see how

I could do it without taking another semester, asking for an extension. It was pretty depressing.

I remember it was late March, when the weather could be gorgeous spring or mean winter from one day to the next. The afternoon I came dragging into the courtyard of the apartments was a beautiful blue-sky day, but all I saw were my ragged Chucks at the bottom of my ragged jeans and some dirty piles of ice left from a snowstorm a week earlier. Deems stood in his doorway.

"Hey, Deems."

As I came closer, I saw he was studying the sky. "Good night; good night," he said several times, though it was only about four in the afternoon.

Maybe because I was miserable with frustration over my own "project," I felt a kinship with Deems just then. I looked at him through my thick lenses and tried to see what he was feeling. He rubbed his hands together in cartoonish anticipation. I'm amazed I could leave my own misery long enough to see what was going on. "Going up?" I asked.

Deems stared. I guessed he was sizing up my intentions, looking for any sign of my previous lack of faith. Finally, he repeated his earlier invitation. "Want to come along?"

I was too miserable to laugh at anything. "Sure." It felt like I'd made a suicide pact – scary, final, inevitable.

"Eleven forty-five," Deems said. I nodded again and scuffed into my apartment. I

collapsed on the futon and fell into a dazed sleep, too old to cry.

It was about 10:30 that evening when I woke up, still depressed and groggy from the unaccustomed nap. I heated water for a cup of noodles and looked for a spoon. I remembered Deems' invitation, chuckled and peeked out the blinds. Deems pattered around the wickerplane like a flight crewman.

I didn't know how the evening could possibly end well. At 11:30 I stepped into the courtyard, feeling that sense of inevitability again: whatever disaster awaited would be the perfect end to a disastrous day.

The night remained as clear as the afternoon had been and it was cold without wind. Deems was bustling around but not agitated. He pulled on a leather helmet with earflaps and goggles, like Snoopy's, and offered me a knit cap and scarf. "Might better take off your specs," he counseled. I almost laughed again, thinking of doing aerobatics in the wickerplane. When I slipped the glasses into my jacket pocket, I was very close to being blind as a mole rat.

Deems got in. Suddenly I felt a gentle rocking and the wind rushing past us. There had been no "take-off," certainly no roaring engine, but we were in the air! There was an empty feeling in my middle. My stomach had vacated its usual position and tightened into a little ball under my heart. I wasn't nauseated, just incredulous. I remember thinking I must be asleep, dreaming, on my lumpy futon.

The wickerplane didn't fly very high. We had to swerve around some buildings in an office park and the high-rise dorms on the university campus. Deems followed major streets around the city and I recognized most of the parks and churches. When I jammed my hands into my pockets to warm up my fingers, I found my glasses still there. How could I see everything so clearly? It had to be a dream.

In the city, there are always a few cars, even at one or two in the morning, but there was no traffic. Deems flew into a new subdivision at the south end of town – no trees, raw-looking yards, cookie-cutter houses. As we got closer, I saw a crowd running toward us from a side street.

I leaned forward to stare at the runners. They were dark-skinned, dressed in loincloths. Some had streaks of white paint on their faces. It was the tribe from the wickerplane movie!

When we got even with them, Deems steered to move parallel with their running. We floated along for a while, maybe forty feet above them. We turned a few corners and crossed a playground, but the runners continued to move with us. I noticed the tribesmen always looked up. They never looked at their feet or tried to gauge when a corner was coming up. Even cutting through the park, they kept looking up at us.

Finally, Deems nudged the wickerplane over a highway and we left the runners behind. I was elated. The night was incredible. I wanted to babble on to Deems about the tribe of runners, about being sorry I had ever doubted his "project," but I was too full for words. I pulled

my hands out of my pockets to pump my fists in the air like I was Rocky Balboa. My glasses tangled in my fingers, then flew out ahead of us in a slow-motion arc; there was no mistaking the missile. Deems turned to look at me. Maybe I only imagined hearing a tiny crash of thick glass on pavement.

I felt a wave of horror and nausea at the loss of the lenses that were my lifeline. The dream was turning into a nightmare.

Then, we were in the courtyard again; no more fuss at landing than there had been at takeoff. Deems put out a hand to help me out of the plane. I must have looked awful, still thinking about my lost glasses. I shook his hand silently and trudged off to bed.

The next morning I woke before the alarm. I felt relaxed even when I thought of my thesis problem. It didn't seem so horrible in the light of a new day. Difficult, yes, but not hopeless. What if I did have to grind out another semester? It wasn't like Harvard was holding a position, waiting for me to finish.

I remembered the "flight" of the wickerplane. I smiled and stretched, still feeling it must have been a dream. Maybe I'd tell Deems about it. I reached for my glasses. They weren't on the bedside table. I sat up and felt on the floor. I turned out my jacket pockets, then started to panic. I didn't have money for another pair. Anyway, the specially-ground lenses took a week or more to order in. How was I going to get any work done without them? I searched the bag

where I had trashed the Styrofoam cup from my noodle supper. No glasses.

I stared out the window. Deems had left a cap with a Dallas Cowboys logo on the hook below his mail box. I could see the star...from my window...without my glasses.

I got a little crazy, reading everything I could find from as far as I could, squinting and reading with one eye, then the other, then both. When I ran outside, it felt like being let out of a box. Since I'd never had much peripheral vision with glasses, the whole world was suddenly very wide. I felt almost drunk, learning to walk without constantly looking down. In the morning sky, swallows swooped by. I could see their scissor tails. I thought of the runners from the night before, looking up at the wickerplane, running with their heads up. I laughed.

Deems opened his door a crack, waiting for me, but he didn't want to meet my eyes. "Sorry about your specs."

"No, it's fine, really. No problem. Thanks for a great ride, Deems." He closed the door, duty done. I shouldered my backpack and headed toward campus. I resisted the urge to grab everyone I passed and ask if they had any idea how beautiful they were. I'm sure the grin on my face was scary enough.

Reworking my thesis was tough, but it was for the best. The research gave me the idea for my first novel. And, that's the summer I met Marla in the library. I would never have noticed her smiling at me over her computer if I hadn't learned to look up now and again.

I think Deems stopped working on the wicker-plane after our flight. I asked him once if he was going up again. He started talking about aerodynamics and weather patterns and lost me; himself, too, I think.

Fourth of July weekend, I took the bus home to see Mom and Grandma. I hadn't told them about losing my glasses and certainly hadn't said I could see without them. They didn't say anything except how "healthy" I looked.

When I returned, the manager was pulling furniture and other junk out of Deems' place. "Heart attack," he said. I rested my hand on the wickerplane under its tarp. I thought about whether I wanted to see the plane one more time or just remember the glorious flight. Finally, I flipped the cover up. On the ground, near a supporting strut that would have had a wheel on a real plane, I found what was left of my old glasses, earpieces twisted, a little of the thick glass in one frame. When I straightened up I saw a little plane coming into view trailing an advertising banner: *LEARN TO FLY call 555-WING*. That's what I printed on the ribbon tied to the tail of the little wickerplane I bought.

Guardian

When I heard the pulsing whine of fire sirens weaving through my brain, the full pattern of the day finally became clear. It started this morning when I was sitting at the intersection of South First and Treadaway, wondering if I had ever made a green light there on my way to work. At least the billboard ahead changes every couple of months. This week it says, "Guardian Home Security Systems," and shows a house wrapped in chains with a big padlock. Anderson isn't a big city, but it has its share of crime, and I wondered if my wife Katherine and I should get a security system. We don't have a lot of stuff a break-in artist would want – the laptops, maybe the TV.

When the light changed, I turned left and found myself behind a tire shop van. The logo showed a car being carried by four angels. "Trusty Treads: We Keep You Safe." I thought about the spot on my left front tire that's wearing unevenly.

In the parking lot behind the office, I put on the emergency brake and clicked the lock on my ten-year-old sedan. A decal on the back window caught my eye: "Saf-T-Glass®." My brain started stirring bits of the morning together into a stew. Safety. Security. Warning labels on everything. Lots of them responses to people who sued

manufacturers because they didn't have good sense themselves. Nobody's going to keep you safe. Got to look out for yourself. The world's a dangerous place.

I stopped the train of thought before it could take me to the little house on Cedar Street where we were living when Dad left. In the Parkview Business Suites, I picked up mail and sorted it as I headed to Merkel Accounting. Mostly junk mail, including a full-color flyer from the Guardian Home Security outfit I'd seen on the billboard earlier. They advertised fire alarms, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, along with break-in alarms.

That flyer really sent me back to Cedar Street – the time my brother Carl and I almost burned the house down when we draped an old scarf over a lamp so we could read in bed after lights out. Then we got up and sneaked into the living room to watch TV instead. Mom was sound asleep, always tired from working at the cafeteria to support two hungry boys. We didn't know it would be dangerous, fabric so close to the lightbulb.

Smoke started tickling our noses in the living room about the same time the scarf burst into flame. I grabbed the cord to unplug the lamp and we carried glasses and bowls of water from the kitchen and bathroom and tossed them into the fire, but a curtain and the bedspread were partially burned. Mom woke up and beat out the flames with a throw rug.

The landlord was really mad about the burn marks on the windowsill and the scorched

linoleum. Mom had to talk fast to keep us from being thrown out. Until then, I just knew she worked long hours and didn't have money for the kind of toys and clothes other kids had, but I hadn't thought we were "poor."

That's probably part of the reason I became an accountant – growing up counting every penny. I've thought about going out on my own lots of times. Even had clients tell me I should leave Merkel's and they'd follow me. I can see the name on the door alright – Ben Ward, C.P.A. I'm glad to have a steady job, but there's so much we could be doing more efficiently if Merkel would move into the twenty-first century and really go digital. Still, I'm not inclined to take on the risk of running my own shop – especially now that I have a wife to take care of; maybe a family one of these days.

Quarterly tax reports are due in a week and I had five accounts to work on today, including Anderson Lock and Key, Castle Rock Gates, and Safe Shield Glaziers. I thought again about the theme of "safety" that seemed to be popping up everywhere. I remember thinking *I can play this game!* and made a mental note to pick up some condoms on my way home.

I broke for lunch, but Merkel was working through again and wanted me to bring back a sandwich. Outside our suite was one of those collapsible orange signs warning "Caution. Wet floor." I avoided the sign but almost ran into the mop and bucket parked at the corner of the corridor. While I walked to the diner, the word

"caution" played more games in my head: a big black crow cawed, "Shun the corned beef!" But I always do.

At the counter, I studied the menu while I waited, though I know most of it by heart. I noticed a box on the last page that never caught my eye before: "City of Anderson water supply safe for public consumption. Marvin Appleton, State Health Inspector."

In the afternoon, a new client came in. Merkel sent her straight to me. "My associate, Ben Ward, will take care of you, Mrs. Covington. He's very good; handles some of our most important accounts."

Mrs. Covington has started a new business producing leashes for toddlers – bright yellow with black accents. Her logo is a fat bumblebee; the company name "Bee Safe." She misunderstood my quizzical look. "It only looks cruel to people who've never tried to keep up with a three-year-old in a busy mall." But I was just thinking, *What's up with all the safety stuff?*

I did remember to get condoms on my way home, but only because Katherine called and asked me to stop for her allergy medicine. I strolled around DrugRite waiting for the prescription. The number of products that invoke the words "safe" or "safety" is amazing: medic alert jewelry, rubber-tipped canes, bathtub liners, buffered aspirin, baby shampoo...

By the time I got home, I was feeling anything but safe. I think the world seems more dangerous when you're hounded all the

time to "be safe." I tried to settle down with a magazine before supper. The first page had a big sailing ship advertising Steady On Life and Health Insurance.

Somebody knocked and I wondered why whoever it was didn't use the bell. The stranger had dark, wavy hair, softly draped tweed trousers and Italian loafers but he offered a strong hand. "Hi. I'm Angelo Guardi. You don't know me but I know you. Please call your wife."

I'm sure I scowled at him. I don't like door-to-door salesmen and I wasn't inclined to bother Katherine while she was trying to make dinner. The stranger stopped smiling. His voice became firmer but I didn't feel threatened; I felt compelled by Angelo's instructions. "It's important, Mr. Ward."

All of a sudden, I felt I had to get Katherine to the front of the house. I left the door open and ran to the kitchen. Katherine was pouring greens from a bag into salad bowls. I grabbed her hand. She was too surprised to resist when I pulled her to the living room.

The guy wasn't at the door. I hurried Katherine out to the front walk. She had begun to babble irritated questions. I told her, "Just wait, Honey. We need to see what this guy says."

Then, a muffled boom pulsed through the house. Through the open door we saw flames pouring from the kitchen into the living room of the bungalow. Katherine screamed. I held her tightly as we moved away from the house.

I finally got it while we were waiting for the fire trucks. I found a business card on the

sidewalk: Guardian Home Security Systems, Angelo Guardi, Licensed Representative. Everybody can use a little help sometimes.

Starry Night

When the sky is really dark, clear but not much moon, the stars take over the night. If you look across the I-220 bridge back at Shreveport from our little cove on the south shore of Cross Lake, you can feel like you're on the edge of Van Gogh's "Starry Night over the Rhone." Not that other "Starry Night," at the café, or the one with the village. Those are okay, but the starlight on the water does it for me.

I can't remember the first time I ever came out here. It was my uncle's fish camp and he and my dad used to bring me out here. Uncle Zach never married, so when he died, Dad got it. Now Dad's gone too and it's going to be mine. We could have sold it lots of times, especially after the fancy houses started going in a little ways east of here, but Zach and Dad didn't need the money. I could use some help with my student loans but I'd also like to hold on to the property.

I've loved the night view over the water, back to the bridge, all my life. When I was just a kid sometimes I'd squirrel away in my closet and think about that when Mom got to yelling, or later when she was sick and crying all the time. For a long time, after she had to go away and it was just Dad and me, at night I pretended I was camping out at the lake. I guess because she

wasn't expected to be there I didn't miss her so much if I imagined I was at the lake, with the stars. And when I got bored in classes, I doodled the outline of that bridge or the vaulted arches underneath it, like a cathedral.

My French teacher had a lot of famous paintings on posters which she rotated on her walls during the year. When "Starry Night over the Rhone" came up in October of my junior year it was the first time I'd ever seen the Van Gogh and I couldn't believe what I saw. It was my scene, looking over Cross Lake and the I-220 bridge. Even though Van Gogh was Dutch, "Starry Night over the Rhone" was a French location and I was hooked. I really got into French and amazed everybody, including myself, that I could make an A in something.

I soaked up everything I could about Van Gogh, too. Found out he might have been manic-depressive, like my mom. Or maybe just depressed, like me. The French club took a field trip to a Dallas museum for an exhibition of the impressionists and I got to see a couple of his lesser-known works, some portraits. In the museum gift shop there were postcards and posters of all the Starry Night paintings. I decided to skip supper at the restaurant on the way home so I could spend \$14.95 for a poster of "Starry Night over the Rhone" – a big commitment for a sixteen-year-old boy, even a nerd. I put it up in my room, but I never told Dad why I liked it so much. I don't think he ever saw in it what I did.

About a year ago, when Dad had his heart attack, I came out to the camp after leaving the hospital because I really needed to get quiet on the inside. The doctors were already telling me it was a bad one and that Dad might not make it. It was a lot for a college kid with no close relatives and no real friends. I had taken Katie out a few times, but I didn't think she wanted to know about my family problems. Jimmy was the only one I might have talked to and he was out of town for his grandparents' anniversary. That night was the first time I got lost at the lake – that's what I called it.

Maybe I was disoriented, from worry or fatigue, but I know this acre of land like I know my bedroom. You pull off the parish road onto a little patch of gravel Zach and Dad spread themselves. Then you take a path worn down by our tramping through a stand of live oaks and pines and brush of various kinds. After 20, maybe 30 yards, you come out in a clearing next to the water and there's a little picnic shelter we built and the old dock where we keep a boat tied up. For a few years we had a storage shed on the property but kids or vagrants started breaking in and taking stuff. Somebody even camped there for a while one winter. We finally tore it down. Anyway, there's only one way in or out from the road, but I got lost on my way back to the car that night.

I checked my watch, so I remember it was about 11:00 that night. When I came through the trees, my car was gone. I couldn't believe it. I didn't need that on top of having my dad

maybe dying in the hospital and mid-terms coming up. I tromped on up to the parish road, or where it should have been, but there was just a dirt track. It was obviously worn down by a lot of traffic, but there was no sign of any paving. It freaked me out. I couldn't figure out how I could have gotten lost on my way from the lakeshore to the road, in a spot I knew as well as any place on Earth.

I stood there staring up and down the dirt road for a few minutes, trying to think what I was going to do next. My cell phone doesn't get good coverage at the lake and I doubted I could get a signal, even if I had someone to call. While I was standing by the road, I heard noises like from the sound track of an old Western, a creaky wagon being pulled by a horse. I stepped back and tried to blend in with the shadow of a pine tree.

I saw the light swaying first. When the wagon came into view, I could see the driver had a lantern hanging from a pole sticking up in the front corner of the wagon. He was talking to his horse a little, not too loud, and then he started singing, in French. I could make out a few words, but I didn't know the tune. Now, this is Louisiana, but not south Louisiana, and there aren't a bunch of people here who go around speaking French, even though we like to pretend we're all Cajun when we talk to people from Texas.

I waited until the wagon passed, then I turned to go back through the trees to the water. I don't know why. I guess it seemed like a safe

thing, to go back to a familiar place, while I decided what to do.

From the picnic shelter I stared up at the path to the road and satisfied myself there really was only one way out. So I headed back to the gravel clearing again, and my car was parked right where I'd left it. I alternated between thinking *Thank God I'm not crazy after all!* and *I must be going crazy, like Mom!*

I drove home and slept like a rock. It was after Christmas before I had time to come back out to the lake. Dad got better for a while. I finished up the semester okay and started thinking about what I would do after graduation. Jimmy was planning to go to Ole Miss for a Master's in engineering. Katie was talking about a music school up north somewhere. I had a feeling she was fishing for me, or somebody, to ask her not to go, but I didn't have anything to offer her. There's not a whole lot you can do with a liberal arts degree, lots of French and history and no teaching certificate. I really don't want to teach.

Dad and I watched some bowl game the day after Christmas. He couldn't even stay awake through the third quarter. He was losing strength every day. When he got in bed about eight, I said I was going to see what Jimmy was doing, but came out here to the lake by myself instead. I wasn't feeling much like being with other people. It was one of the good nights – no moon, no clouds, and not too cold yet. We don't get much real winter in Shreveport. The stars were big as I've ever seen them, kind of flaring

out, and there was a breeze that rippled the long reflections of city lights on the water, just like in the painting. I sat on the picnic table and stared out at the water for a long time. No expectations, no decisions to make – that’s what I like about being here.

While I was staring, a sailboat came up to our dock. That’s not too unusual. The yacht club is on the south side of the lake and lots of people like to sail Cross Lake at night. It’s safe – no sand bars, no odd trees out in the middle. It was unusual that this boat wasn’t carrying a light of any kind. Sort of appeared out of nowhere. A guy hopped out and tied up next to our little boat. Then things got weird. He helped a woman out of the boat and they started walking up the dock toward where I was. The woman was wearing a long, Victorian-era dress with a shawl. She had a hat tied on with a ribbon. I thought maybe they had been to some kind of costume party at the yacht club, but I couldn’t figure out why they tied up at our place. The couple walked past me and made for the path to the road without acknowledging me. I heard them talking softly to each other in French.

Then I got it: the painting has a man and a woman and a couple of small sailboats in the foreground. I never paid much attention to that. The figures are very dark and they weren’t part of my scene, my ‘starry nights’ – until then. I turned and watched the man and woman walk through the opening in the trees, then looked back at their boat bobbing at the end of our dock. I remember wondering if I should feel

afraid, but I hadn't been feeling much of anything for quite a while. They didn't look like ghosts and there wasn't anything creepy about the pair anyway. I followed them up the path to the gravel clearing.

When I got there, my car was gone again, and so were the people I had followed. I remembered the wagon I had seen before, and wondered where the driver had come from and where he might have been going. I turned right onto the dirt road, the direction the wagon had traveled, and started walking. I had a vague idea that I'd find someone to talk to and figure out what was going on.

The wind came up a little bit and I turned up the collar of my coat, but it still wasn't too cold. It seemed like I walked a half-mile or so before I saw some low-roofed stone buildings. A few had light in the windows, but nothing that looked like electricity. It was definitely not the neon-lit bait store I'm used to seeing along there. That's when I thought *What the heck am I doing?* and turned back, almost running toward the fish camp. My car was in the gravel clearing. I jumped in and drove home shaking.

I didn't come to the lake again for a couple of months after that. Tried not to think about what had happened those two nights that I "got lost." By March, Katie was going out with a guy from the music department and Jimmy had found the love of his life in a coffee shop near campus. Dad was in the last stages of heart failure. We were both just hoping he could hold on until graduation. I realized I would be losing my

father and my school routine at about the same time.

I tried to stay busy during spring break working on a paper for my European history seminar, but I couldn't stay at the computer forever. I came out to the lake that Thursday night. On the way here, I started thinking about whether or not I wanted to "get lost" again. I thought about whether I had just wiggled out those two times or... Or, what? I couldn't articulate what the alternative might be. And anyway, losing my mind was a more likely scenario, given my family history and my current stress. That night I fell asleep on the picnic table and didn't go back to my car until just before dawn; I didn't "get lost."

Jimmy got married after graduation and took his new wife along for grad school at Ole Miss. I don't know what happened to Katie. I got invited to work as a graduate assistant in the history department and it seemed like as good a plan as any. Dad didn't die until July, but he wasn't able to make it to the graduation ceremony.

After that, I started coming out to the lake about once a week. I've never seen the couple with the sailboat again, but when the night is just right, my car will be gone when I first go up the path to the road. Usually, I just go back down to the picnic table and start over again and everything's straight. A couple of times I walked up the dirt road to the village again. Once, I moved in close to one of the little houses and listened to the people inside talking in French. Last night I heard the wagon on the road again.

I've pretty well decided that, come next starry night, I'm going to flag down that wagon driver and go for a ride.

Time for a Change

The wind ruffled her hair. Patricia thought it was a breeze from an oscillating fan in the corner of the workout room, but then she heard the sweet, robust call of a Carolina wren. What had been a stationary bicycle in the women's fitness center was whizzing down Highway 171 under Patricia's pedal power. She rode past WalMart and the mobile home sales lot, too shocked to feel frightened by the amazing occurrence. The breeze was just enough to keep her from sweating, and light glowed on the spring shades of green beside the road. She almost reached the Keithville post office before she decided she'd better figure out how to return. With an instinctive, quick back-pedal motion she was in the workout space at Feminine Form again, pumping her stationary bike like a Tour de France cyclist.

Patricia usually tried to arrive for her workout about ten in the morning. The early group would be gone, or going, and the lunch break patrons wouldn't be in yet. She liked it that way. Patricia wasn't antisocial, exactly. If there were other women working out who wanted to talk, she could chit-chat, make polite noises and smile at appropriate times. She was careful to greet the attendant and other customers when she arrived and to say goodbye when she left. She made a

point of playing the weekly games to earn "bonus bucks" and generally fit in as much as she could without really getting to know anyone.

Patricia expected other women probably commented about how quiet and focused she was, if anyone else happened to be in the workout room when she left. The idea of herself "focused" on exercise was funny to Patricia. She hated it. She'd been working out in some format or other for the last five years, but never learned to like it. Never had any "burst of energy" or "felt better" because of it. She did it because she was almost sixty and knew she needed some sort of regular physical activity to maintain strength and flexibility, especially now that she was retired and not walking around a classroom all day. Patricia knew she was a little overweight but had no interest in dieting. The only thing she liked about exercise was feeling proud of herself for doing it regularly when she hated it so much. She'd rather sit with a book and a cup of coffee.

Instead, Patricia drove five minutes to Feminine Form three times a week and made the rounds of the various exercise machines and the springy dance boards spaced in between them for aerobic activity. She was well aware that regular walking of the half-mile distance, instead of driving, would be a no-cost activity and probably yield at least as good returns in physical fitness as the time she spent at Feminine Form. But the bank-drafted membership was part of what pulled her up off the couch to exercise, so it was worth it. And she often combined trips to Feminine Form with shopping

or recycling, taking clothes to the cleaners or getting a haircut, so there wasn't much additional fuel cost.

It was a particularly beautiful late-April Wednesday in Shreveport when Patricia began her cycling adventures. The sky was Wedgwood blue with only a few cameo clouds. The azaleas were spent but oaks and maples had leafed out to join the evergreen pines and magnolias. Even drastically pruned crape myrtles were bushing out with greenery. Patricia drove to Feminine Form with windows down to enjoy the morning air.

Only Marlena was in the workout room, hula-hooping for her cool-down activity and gossiping with Bonnie, the attendant. She was gone before Patricia finished a quarter of her first rotation on the machines. Some women liked the attendant to stand around and chat while they exercised if there was no one else to talk to, but Bonnie had figured out Patricia didn't really care for that. She used the time to finish some paperwork, make a few phone calls and play computer solitaire.

Patricia worked her way around the circle of machines, moving from the leg press to the rower to the bicep/tricep apparatus, and so on, whenever the perky recorded voice called through the music, "It's time for a change!"

Another thing Patricia liked about arriving when no one else was working out was avoiding the awkwardness of crowding up on another woman if she decided to skip a certain machine on the circuit, or of someone else crowding up

on her if she wanted to take longer at a particular station. The stationary bike was one she liked to linger on. Sometimes she closed her eyes and pedaled through several rounds of the voice announcing, "It's time for a change."

And so, that beautiful April morning, Patricia cycled right out of Feminine Form and south on Highway 171 on the heretofore-stationary bike. When she reversed pedaling and found herself back in the workout room, Patricia felt as if she had just awakened from a vivid dream, that slightly disoriented state when you try to act as if you haven't been asleep at all, as if you are quite alert, thank you, to anyone who might be watching. But no one was watching. Bonnie was on the phone with a prospective client and didn't even glance at Patricia.

"It's time for a change," the voice announced, and for once Patricia agreed. She moved from the stationary bike to the cushioned dance pad to her left and started doing jumping jacks. She wondered how many "times for a change" she had pedaled through while tripping down Highway 171. Patricia tried to remember when she had first arrived and was surprised to discover she'd only been on the premises fifteen minutes. She managed to complete two more circuits of the workout equipment, but skipped the stationary bike when she came to it, both times.

On the way home, Patricia concentrated on what she would make for Jonathan's supper and how many loads of laundry she still needed to do that afternoon. She didn't have any frame of

reference for thinking about what had happened to her that morning, except maybe the biblical story of Philip, who went running on an errand and then was suddenly at his destination. But she hadn't been planning to go south on Highway 171, and couldn't imagine why she would have suddenly been tooling along there on a bicycle, never mind how she could have been traveling on a stationary bike. It was safer to treat it as a daydream.

Friday morning, Patricia didn't go to Feminine Form. She wasn't avoiding the location, just marshaling her energy for mowing the lawn and pruning some shrubbery. Yard work was plenty of exercise. The following Monday, she returned to her routine and arrived at Feminine Form at 10:10. Once again, by the time she was halfway through her first circuit, she was the only customer.

When Patricia came to the stationary bike, she blew out a sharp breath, as if steeling herself for a difficult task, and hopped on. She pedaled slowly at first, then picked up speed. She didn't close her eyes for a bit, but after the cheerful voice assured her, "It's time for a change," two times, she began to relax against the back support and closed her eyes.

Almost immediately, Patricia noticed a change in the quality of light through her eyelids. Honeysuckle scented the air and the wind rushed past. She pedaled on. When she opened her eyes, she was once again traveling south on Highway 171. What was it about that

road? She didn't even know anyone who lived out that way.

Patricia kept traveling past the point where she had turned back on her first trip out. Spring is a sublime season in northwest Louisiana and she decided just to enjoy the day. Since the situation was quite surreal, Patricia didn't concern herself with other traffic and was frankly not paying much attention when she approached the blinking light near Mansfield School. She noted afterward that the scene really did unfold in slow motion, as she had heard accident victims say. She felt as if she were watching it all from outside herself, perhaps from the top of the hill that descends toward the traffic light when approaching from the north. The school was on the southeast corner of the intersection and a convenience store on the southwest.

A young mother, carrying one child on her hip and holding the hand of a preschooler, was about to cross the highway from KwikMart to the school. They stood a few yards south of the actual intersection. An eighteen-wheeler whizzed past the pedestrians, never slowing for the blinking yellow light. The mother then started across the four-lane highway, hitching the baby up on her hip and pulling the reluctant older child along. Because of the truck, she had not seen the SUV that pulled up from the east, and that driver had not seen her. He was intent on entering the highway as quickly as possible and barely paused for his blinking red light and the passing truck.

Patricia approached the intersection faster than she could have pedaled on a regular bike. As the SUV turned south, already picking up speed, Patricia was also entering the intersection. The driver jerked his steering wheel hard left and ran onto the median, brakes screeching. Patricia was pretty sure he was cursing her and her bicycle as well. The pedestrians froze for a moment in the middle of the far right lane while the near collision played out in front of them. The mother pushed her preschooler back to the gravel shoulder and collapsed with him and the baby on the ground. They screamed and shook, with dry eyes and twisted mouths of belated fear.

Patricia wondered later why she didn't start braking sooner, in reflexive self-protection, but she understood that her role had been to deflect the SUV from its trajectory of collision with the family crossing the highway. And, when she finally did reverse motion, she was instantly removed from the scene and back in the workout room at Feminine Form, pedaling backward with such urgency her legs ached.

Bonnie noticed Patricia's wide eyes and asked, "Are you okay? Have you been checking your pulse rate?"

Patricia tried to smile. "It's time for a change," she whispered. "I think I'd better not do three circuits today."

This time, Patricia could not dismiss her cycling adventure as a daydream. It had been too intense. She replayed the incident in her mind throughout the afternoon. She couldn't

make sense of it, but she tried to decide what to do next. Should she avoid the stationary bike whenever she visited Feminine Form? Were any of the other machines likely to start behaving strangely? She scanned the classified section of *The Times* to see if anyone had a three-wheeled bike for sale – one with big, fat tires and a deep basket. Maybe she should just ride through the neighborhood for exercise.

Both options seemed safe but somehow unsatisfying to Patricia. She could scarcely admit to herself that a part of her, just a small part, thought it might be fun to see where the erstwhile-stationary bike might take her next time. Did the bike only travel down Highway 171? Would it always encounter the same near-accident? Or was this her chance to be a superhero, arriving in the nick of time at scenes around the area, preventing various tragedies? The thought intrigued Patricia enough that she spent some time imagining news stories that would ensue, and made serious plans to upgrade her workout clothing.

Patricia didn't think there would be photographs of her in the media. It had seemed very clear that her presence on Highway 171 was needed only for the seconds necessary to divert the SUV from its original course. But she thought it would be a good idea to look her best while she was out and about, so people at the scene would have something stylish, and memorable, to describe in interviews when they recalled the mysterious woman on a bicycle who

appeared out of nowhere and just as quickly disappeared.

When Patricia was finally able to leave this line of fantasy, another thought occurred to her. What about the first time, when she back-pedaled out of the scene before anything happened? Had there been an accident that day, that she was supposed to avert but didn't because she abandoned a cosmic assignment? If she didn't return to Feminine Form and her adventures on the stationary bike, would people die that she was supposed to save? Patricia's breathing quickened. She whispered *I didn't sign up for this*.

Patricia didn't sleep well Monday night. Jonathan had a difficult project going on at work and she didn't bother him with the strange story of her trip down Highway 171. She puttered in the yard on Tuesday. In the afternoon, she called her son Mitchell on the pretext of needing help programming the digital video recorder. She thought she might be able to talk to him about the cycling incident, but she could tell from his voice he was preoccupied with something at work, too, so she didn't pursue the topic. She went to bed early Tuesday night and slept better than she expected to.

By Wednesday morning, Patricia had decided to return to Feminine Form, work the circuit fearlessly and take whatever adventure the stationary bike might offer. She felt her hero complex had abated but she took care with her hair and even put on a little mascara. She

chose a new pink tee shirt to wear with her old workout pants.

Bonnie noticed the new shirt immediately and remarked how well it complimented Patricia's coloring. They began a conversation about hair and makeup that lasted longer than their usual pleasantries. Patricia worked her way through an entire circuit, including the stationary bike, while talking with Bonnie.

A client Patricia hadn't met before came in halfway through that first round and they included her in the discussion, which had progressed to some skin-care issues that were not strictly cosmetic. Bonnie had some scarring on her legs related to an old auto accident and Patricia promised to bring her some information about a product which could minimize scar tissue.

The remainder of her workout, Patricia spent in getting-to-know-you conversation with the new client. There was no time to close her eyes during turns on the bike.

Friday, Patricia brought the pamphlet on Scarase to Feminine Form. Bonnie thanked her but was working on end-of-the-month reports and not as inclined to chat as on Wednesday. Three other women Patricia knew slightly were working out and discussing family trips to Disney World, but all finished their workouts and left before Patricia reached the stationary bike for the third time in her routine.

The music accompanying the insistent calls of "It's time for a change" that day was odd arrangements of classic rock songs, not

Patricia's favorite track. *If only they had some classical, instrumental tracks*, she thought, *so much more pleasant*. She wasn't really expecting much in the way of adventure when she sat down at the stationary bike. It was late in her routine, the other clients' vacation stories were stuck in her head and the music was distracting. But, sure enough, she began to pedal rapidly, closed her eyes, and soon felt a change in the air around her. It was already hot – one of those unseasonable spring days that reminds you how miserable you're going to be in July, so you'd better make the most of any mild days left.

Patricia was interested to note she was not headed south on Highway 171 today. Instead, the bicycle was taking her east, along the industrial loop, toward a large city park. It had not occurred to her on previous trips out to wonder if she had any control over steering the bicycle. She decided to experiment a bit and quickly discovered she had no input in the movement of the bicycle other than providing leg power. The bicycle turned into the park near the tennis center and started down a path that meandered through the wooded acreage. There were a few runners on the path but Patricia didn't see any other cyclists. She reduced the intensity of her pedaling whenever she came up behind a runner. The bicycle slowed and carefully steered itself around the person.

The apex of the park path provided a view down across most of the grounds, including a children's play area. As in the incident with the

eighteen-wheeler on Highway 171, from the hilltop view Patricia felt the world slowing down as she took in the scene below and ahead of her. The swimming pool, which would be crowded in another month, once school was out, wasn't open. Along the pool area fence, a young woman chased after a large black dog which trailed its leash and flapped its red tongue happily, like a laughing cartoon animal. The swings and slide were empty but a toddler played alone in the gravel around and under them. Frowning, Patricia looked for the child's absent caregiver. When a man got out of a non-descript car parked near the playground, Patricia thought for a second perhaps he was the child's grandfather. But the way he looked around as he moved toward the child roused a feeling of dread in Patricia. He was looking to see if anyone were watching him. And he was looking toward the woman running after the dog – the child's mother, Patricia understood in a flash.

The bicycle had been moving deliberately while Patricia assessed the situation. She increased the speed of her pedaling as soon as she saw where the bicycle wanted to take her. She whooshed down the path toward the play area, past the man's car with its engine idling and door opened wide. The bicycle ran between the man and the boxed gravel pit around the swings where the child, Patricia saw now it was a little girl, played. The man stepped back just in time to avoid being knocked off his feet. Patricia stared hard at him as she rode

past. She wanted him to know *I see you; I'm memorizing your face.*

Patricia kept pedaling and the bike kept moving, past the play area. She tried again to steer the bike, to turn around and make another pass, to make sure the man wasn't still moving toward the child. She certainly wasn't ready to go back to Feminine Form. As the bicycle continued down the park path, ready to start a second lap, Patricia was able to turn and look over her shoulder. The man had returned to his car and closed the door. The woman was running to the playground behind her leashed dog. Patricia sighed and slowed her pedaling before making the deliberate back-pedal she knew would return her to the workout room.

Another client had started her workout while Patricia was averting an abduction at the park. The new woman was staring at her when she opened her eyes. "Boy, you really ride that thing hard!"

"You'll never know," Patricia responded with a wink. She completed her routine with the prescribed stretches and left Feminine Form humming "You Ain't Nothin' but a Hound Dog." On the way home she mused about her adventures and realized there would never be any media coverage. The people she helped would mostly never even know they had been helped. She could live with that.

The next time Patricia arrived for a workout, Bonnie was talking with one of the older clients, Millie, whom Patricia saw in the workout room once or twice a month. Bonnie was

commiserating with Millie over difficulties in coordinating car repairs and a doctor's appointment. "I'd take you myself," Bonnie was saying, "if I weren't stuck here all day."

"What do you need?" Patricia heard herself asking. It was not like her to ask personal questions, even of people she knew well, never mind those who were only nodding acquaintances. Her decision to be open to "assignments" on the mysterious stationary bike seemed to have made her more open in other situations the past few days. Why, she even had a bit of conversation with the clerk at the dry cleaners and helped a man looking for soup mixes in the grocery store. Patricia offered to meet Millie that afternoon, follow her to the mechanic's shop, then take her to the doctor's office.

"You'd do that for me?" Millie asked. "Oh, you're a real life saver!"

Patricia finished her workout but she was so busy thinking about arranging afternoon errands around her favor to Millie that she forgot about riding out to save the world when she came to the stationary bike. Another day?

Doxology

Christopher's ears were like small satellite dishes. He knew this from the taunts of kids at school. The fierce love of his mother kept the comments from damaging him too deeply, but if he could have seen himself seated at the old pump organ, pedaling air through the leather bellows while he played the hymns his mother loved, he might have wondered why his flapping ears did not propel him to flight. Christopher's two older brothers had the same sort of ears, in varying degrees of cantilever. It was almost all their father had left them.

The pump organ came from his father's family, too, and the musical talent. Great-grandmother Swift had been the organist at her country church for over forty years when the congregation finally disbanded. Two remaining deacons oversaw the sale of pews and hymnals and odd lots of Sunday School chairs. They allowed Ardella Swift to buy the organ for a widow's mite, in honor of her long years of service, and because almost no one wanted a pump organ anymore.

The rosewood organ, taller than an upright piano but not as wide, took up a place of pride in Ardella's parlor and she often hosted hymn sings for her neighbors on summer Sunday evenings. She kept the rosewood cabinet

dusted, the leather bellows oiled, and the mirror over the keyboards polished until the day she died and the organ went to her son Homer and his bride Annie.

Homer and Annie gave all their children piano lessons with Mrs. Swanson, who wasn't thrilled about their having only the old pump organ to practice on. Even so, it was clear the Swifts had musical talent. Some folks joked about their big ears – said that was the reason all the Swift children could pick out songs on the keyboard “by ear” from an early age. Harmon, the oldest, could play along with songs on the radio by the time he was ten or twelve.

Harmon was Christopher's father. Harmon and Betsy married young and had two boys, Jeff and Michael, right away. After long days in the steel plant, Harmon made music on a guitar, a fiddle, his father's old harmonica, and a stand-up bass when a friend brought one by. He taught the boys to play guitar and harmonica and the family enjoyed making music together. Betsy sang.

Jeff and Michael were in high school band when Harmon's reserve unit shipped out to Vietnam. Christopher was conceived in Hawaii, when Betsy met Harmon for R&R, a break from combat. It was only a month before Harmon's death in an incident of “friendly fire” and a few weeks before the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam.

Homer and Annie only lived another five or six years after Harmon died, and Betsy moved with the boys into their old house. Jeff and Michael had always loved playing the pump

organ when they visited their grandparents, and now they were the ones who taught little Christopher, as soon as his legs were long enough, how to prime the bellows and keep up a rhythmic pumping so the volume would be even. It was clear Christopher had inherited the family talent, the “ears” for music.

After high school, Jeff joined the Air Force and quickly earned a place in the band. The latest postcards from cities around the world where the band played were often propped in the music stand of the pump organ. Michael won a voice scholarship to the state university, then joined the opera company in Santa Fe. By the time Christopher was twelve, he and his mother were alone.

Betsy worried about Christopher, though he didn’t seem to mind that he had few friends. He did well in school and brushed off the occasional teasing about his ears. Once in a while he went with another kid to watch TV after school, or even shoot baskets in the driveway, but mostly he was content to come home after school to read and play with the family terrier, Lucas.

Besides a rotating day schedule, Betsy worked late two evenings a week at Bluegem Drugs. She would have worked more hours if they had given them to her. For a while after Jeff and Michael left home, things got a little better, moneywise. It was cheaper to feed just herself and Christopher – and Lucas. But lately the station wagon had become unreliable and everything in the house seemed to be wearing out at the same time. Betsy felt she was wearing

out as well. Her legs and back often hurt and she knew it was owing to standing behind the register at Bluegem all day. She looked forward to settling into Harmon's old recliner at the end of a day and listening to Christopher play the pump organ. For both of them, the evening of music was often the best part of the day.

One Wednesday, after Betsy worked a twelve-hour shift, Christopher greeted her with the news, "Mom, we're out of dog food. I tried to feed Lucas but the bag is empty."

Betsy sighed. She was already buying off-brand dog food from a discount chain, but payday was still two days away and she'd have to put gas in the car in the morning. Maybe there was a can of something she and Christopher didn't like, something that would make a meal for poor, uncomplaining Lucas. She sank into the recliner and said, "We'll look for something in a bit. How about some show tunes tonight, Christopher?"

The boy slid onto the bench attached to the base of the pump organ and began pumping the bellows, his slim body rocking side to side and his satellite ears swiveling with the motion. Then he began to play a medley of music from *My Fair Lady* – "With a Little Bit of Luck," "Here on the Street Where You Live," and others, ending with "Wouldn't It Be Lovely?" A few extra notes sounded from the organ after Christopher's fingers left the keyboard. He frowned and cocked his head at the odd occurrence.

"It would be lovely, indeed," Betsy said in her best Cockney imitation when the music

ended. "Have you had anything to eat?" she asked her son.

Christopher paused before answering. "There are some eggs. And a little bread. You could have scrambled eggs and toast." He thought of the stray notes that had followed the last song and picked out a silent melody with no air from the bellows to give it voice. G-G-F#-E... The notes were familiar but he couldn't place them exactly.

Betsy looked hard at him and saw that he was avoiding her question. "But have you had anything to eat?"

"I'm okay. I ate a big lunch at school."

Betsy felt her stomach twist. She understood that not only was the dog food bag empty, the fridge and cabinets were nearly so and Christopher was offering her virtually the last meal in the house. She was guilty lately of trying not to think about the bare shelves in the kitchen, about how close to the edge they were living now. She had done the same thing two weeks ago just before payday – told Christopher to eat the last can of soup and a few crackers, because she had "a big lunch at work." She'd actually eaten a small container of very old chili from the back of the freezer and a stale hamburger bun for lunch. Betsy sighed and turned to the kitchen.

As Christopher had said, there were two eggs and two slices of bread in the refrigerator. An empty juice container and a jug with perhaps a quarter cup of milk occupied the biggest shelf. In the cabinet left of the stove there was a box

of oatmeal; even a few raisins. They had the makings of breakfast anyway. Reflexively, Betsy opened the cabinet on her right. "Christopher?" The boy arrived to his mother's summons. "What's this?" Betsy gestured to a large bag of dog food, two cans of hash, and a small bottle of ketchup.

Christopher stared at the unexpected items. "Where did that come from?"

"I asked you first," his mother said.

While Christopher filled a bowl for the grateful Lucas, Betsy scrambled the hash with eggs and made toast for herself and her son. They said a prayer of thanks for the food. Christopher ate heartily for someone who recently declared himself not in need of food. He was especially thankful for the ketchup. The second time he asked for it to be passed, Betsy said, "I guess you just overlooked the stuff in that cabinet, huh?"

Christopher looked at her strangely. "Mom, I know you brought that food home with you."

"No. I didn't." Neither of them wanted to argue the point, or even think about it very much. It was late. Betsy washed up their dishes and utensils. Christopher let Lucas out for his last survey of the yard and took a small sack of trash to the container in the alley. All three took to their beds gladly and fell asleep quickly.

In the morning, Christopher pumped out a few tunes from *Oklahoma!* while Betsy showered and dressed for work. "Oh, what a beautiful morning!" she sang along. Betsy boiled water for oatmeal while Christopher set the table. He

placed a full jug of milk on the table with the bowls and spoons. Betsy stared at the milk. If the boy noticed anything unusual, he wasn't commenting. When they finished eating, Betsy told Christopher to be sure to eat all his school lunch because they really might not have much for supper that night. The next day would be payday and they could make it one night without an evening meal. At least Lucas, who couldn't understand about paydays, still had plenty of food in the big bag that had appeared the night before.

Thursday evening, Christopher was doing homework when Betsy arrived about six. He finished an algebra problem while she sifted through the day's bills and junk mail. She had already let her magazine subscriptions go and the older boys didn't write often. Betsy leaned back in the recliner and said, "Let's have old gospel tunes tonight, Christopher." He smiled, knowing that was some of his mother's favorite music. He pumped the bellows like a bicycle racer to produce hand-clappers like "When We All Get to Heaven," and "I'll Fly Away," then slowed a little for "I Love to Tell the Story." He finished the concert with "Rock of Ages," and "His Eye is on the Sparrow."

Christopher's hands paused above the organ keys and his strong legs rested from their pumping. The old organ repeated the sequence of notes it had originated the night before, then sighed. Another faint whistling sound turned out to be Betsy, snoring lightly in the recliner. Christopher slid quietly from the organ bench.

Lucas had already been fed after school, but he padded into the kitchen hopefully.

Christopher opened the refrigerator, expecting to ration out some milk for himself and for his mother, leaving some for the next day's breakfast. He made various happy grimaces when he discovered a carton of orange juice next to the remaining milk. On the next shelf lay a pound of bacon, a loaf of bread, and a package of sliced cheese. There was a jar of mayonnaise in the door of the refrigerator, next to last night's ketchup, and lettuce and tomatoes in the crisper drawer. Christopher almost shouted before he remembered that his mother was sleeping. She must have been mixed up about the date she'd be paid.

Christopher felt even his toes were smiling, wiggling happily inside his sneakers. He decided to make sandwiches first and then wake his mom, but the aroma of bacon was a pleasant alarm. Betsy came into the kitchen blinking and sniffing. "What's going on here?"

"Thanks, Mom. You know BLTs are my favorite."

Betsy stared, still groggy from her half-nap. "Where did you get bacon?"

"From the fridge. It's okay...isn't it?" Christopher was suddenly afraid the food didn't belong to them, although he couldn't imagine who would be storing food in their refrigerator, or why. "I thought you weren't getting paid until tomorrow, but I was going to have a glass of milk before bed...and I found all this stuff. I figured you got paid early."

Betsy opened the refrigerator and frowned at the orange juice. "Was the house locked when you got home from school?"

"Yeah. You think somebody put food in our fridge?"

"I don't know what I think." Betsy had discovered the lettuce and tomatoes, luxuries on her budget. Her voice was soft.

"Well, I fed Lucas when I got home from school and this stuff wasn't here then. That's why I figured you brought it, like last night."

"I didn't bring home anything last night either, Christopher." Mother and son held a long look, breaking their gaze to rescue the almost-overdone bacon from the skillet. Their prayer of thanks over the late supper was especially heart-felt.

When Betsy said "Amen," Christopher exclaimed, "That's it!" She waited to hear what he had discovered. "The music. The organ. It's the Doxology! da Da da Da, da Da da DAH," he sang. Betsy knew the song but didn't understand why the old hymn had so excited Christopher now.

Betsy and Christopher continued to find various items mysteriously supplied to the household when money was especially tight. Usually the provision was food, but there were times when over-the-counter medications were needed, oil for the aging station wagon, and once, new gym shorts when Christopher lost his on the way home. Mother and son didn't talk about the amazing occurrences but Christopher began adding a favorite tune as a finale to every

session of music-making at the organ. Betsy sang along, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow."

About a year after the hash-and-eggs supper, Betsy found a job as receptionist for a small suite of offices. The hours and pay were both better than at BlueGem. She was able to replace the station wagon and a cracked bathroom sink. Unexpected foodstuffs gradually stopped appearing in the refrigerator and kitchen cupboards. The Doxology remained a fixture of Christopher's evening concerts.

Miss Truman's Travel Bag

Diesel exhaust always made Jeanne think of Europe and the year she and Tom traveled the continent by bus and train. That experience afforded plenty of adventure and contact with local people at a modest price. Five years later, the waiting room of the Abilene bus station held no romance, but Jeanne could not escape the evocative power of the exhaust fumes. Funny how smell is such a powerful trigger of memory.

It wasn't funny, though, to be reminded of Tom while trying to think of anything but. Jeanne recited her resumé silently, imagining the job she hoped to find and the life she would build apart from Tom. Mentally tallying her small savings again, she opened the creased and highlighted classified pages from Sunday's Dallas paper.

"Are you expecting anyone else here?" Jeanne looked up to see a grandmotherly woman gesturing at the place next to her.

Jeanne glanced at the many vacant seats in the terminal but her southern manners carried the day. "No, that's fine." She inched her backpack nearer her feet and drew in her shoulders imperceptibly.

The woman settled into the awkward chair like a contented hen, smoothing her printed rayon dress with almost audible clucks and

mutters. Jeanne noticed the woman carried a felt-and-leather handbag in a style at least fifty years old.

"There," the woman announced when comfortable. "I do enjoy traveling, don't you?" As Jeanne searched for a polite but impersonal reply, the woman continued, "Oh my, I'm sorry. I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Vera Truman, like the president, you know, from Silverton, the Silverton Trumans. And you are...?" She waited expectantly, smiling, her pleasant face covered with softly powdered wrinkles.

"Jeanne...Wilson," Jeanne heard herself say. *Snap! I meant to start using my maiden name right away.* She felt helpless as a fly in a fresh web, but this spider had come to her while she was minding her own business. As much as she'd like to, Jeanne could not summon the rudeness required to escape Vera Truman's instant chumminess. She waited warily for the interrogation to continue. Instead, Vera rummaged in her outmoded bag and pulled out a large sandwich wrapped in waxed paper. Diving in again, she produced some paper napkins.

"Here," she said, opening the packet, "why don't you eat half of this?" Jeanne's hungry eyes followed the sandwich. She'd had nothing since the bitter bus station coffee in Lubbock that morning. She planned to eat at the end of the day in Dallas, as a reward for reaching her goal. Polite protests remained in her mouth while Vera

placed the larger portion on her lap. By then, refusal seemed rude.

Jeanne managed to say, "Thank you, Mrs. ... Truman," before beginning to eat.

"Oh, it's Miss Truman, dear, Miss." Jeanne heard a wistfulness in her voice. "What about you, dear?"

"Yes," Jeanne replied, nodding. "This is wonderful roast beef; so moist," she added, moving further from Miss Truman's question. She had no intention of sharing her marital problems with any stranger, never mind an old maid.

Miss Truman explored her bag again and produced two small paper cups. "Would you like some water, dear?"

Jeanne wiped her mouth. "Yes, thank you. Let me get it." She laid the newspaper on her backpack and took the cups. When she returned, Miss Truman was reading the marked listings.

"Moving to Dallas, I see. How exciting!" Jeanne felt more than ever like a trapped fly. She sat down, searching for some part of the truth to share with this generous busybody. Miss Truman did not notice Jeanne's hesitance. She inclined her head and confided, "I wanted to live in Dallas when I was young."

Jeanne turned her wrist subtly to read the time. Forty-five minutes. Maybe I can just nod and smile and she'll do all the talking. She cleared her throat and Miss Truman reached into her bag.

"Would you like a mint for that cough, dear?" She offered a wrapped peppermint.

Jeanne couldn't resist a chuckle. "Is there anything you don't have in that bag?"

"Well, I ... I always seem to have what I need!" Miss Truman's voice rose with the statement as though she were discovering an amazing truth. She smiled brightly.

Jeanne gave up trying to protect herself and turned toward Miss Truman. "So, tell me, Miss Truman, where are you going today and why didn't you go to Dallas when you were young?" *What was that saying about the best defense?*

Miss Truman, clearly pleased to talk about herself, smoothed the folds of her dress while she spoke. "Well, my fiancé, Richard Allen, died in the War, in France." Miss Truman told the story of her lost love without self-pity. Richard's letters and her study of his last months led her to become quite a Francophile. In fact, she became a teacher of French and visited France every two or three years during her teaching career. Sometimes she traveled alone and sometimes with a group of students, but always she thought about what it would have been like to see the country with Richard. Miss Truman pulled a well-worn guidebook from her bag to illustrate some of her memories.

Jeanne thought again of Tom and their year in Europe. There had been the awful experience of having a miscarriage in that Greek village with a less-than-modern clinic. But, she had experienced what Miss Truman suspected: discovering things in the company of your

beloved made everything more wonderful. Maybe we just ran out of things to discover in Morton, Texas. Her mind wandered while Miss Truman described Versailles and the Louvre.

They went back to Morton to help Tom's mother with the family dry cleaners after his father's heart attack. It was supposed to be temporary. But then Thomas, Sr. died, and Tom decided they needed to stay. His sister had plenty to do already with four children and helping with the farming. Tom and Jeanne promised each other they would get out and travel, go somewhere fun, every year, but apart from a few days in Austin, they hadn't been anywhere.

Tom and Jeanne wanted children, but it just hadn't happened. Jeanne sometimes wondered if she were being punished. She had been glad about the miscarriage, willed it to happen. They were so young and so far from home. She knew she might even have sought an abortion if she hadn't miscarried. It hardly seemed right to complain that she couldn't have a baby now, when it was convenient. She kept busy with bookkeeping for the business and some volunteer activities, but she felt her failure to produce a child made their position in the family and friendship with other couples increasingly awkward.

And it was her failure. They went to the fertility clinic in Lubbock for a long round of tests and treatments last year. Substandard care after the miscarriage had left Jeanne unable to

bear a child. Almost everyone in town knew the unfortunate details, thanks to Tom's mother.

Tom suggested they look into adoption but Jeanne declined. She decided she wasn't worthy to be a mother, though she never confided that to anyone, not even Tom. There were a couple of divorcees and at least one young widow in Morton who would be glad to have a husband who owned his own business. Tom wouldn't have any trouble starting over.

Jeanne was surprised by the tears of anger, guilt and grief that welled up in her eyes. She thought she had let all that go when she stopped counting days and weeks and buying pregnancy tests. She sniffed and blotted the corner of one eye with a finger.

At the sight of Jeanne's tears, Miss Truman, pulled a packet of tissues from her bag. "No, you mustn't feel sorry for me, dear, I've had a wonderful life."

Jeanne managed to laugh and pointed to the handbag. "And everything you needed!"

"Oh, yes. Everything I needed." She patted Jeanne's leg. "I expect you'll find what you need, too, dear." She looked at the station clock. "Oh, my! We'll be leaving soon. I could watch your things while you go to the Ladies'. We could take turns."

"You go ahead," Jeanne offered. Miss Truman placed her handbag carefully in her seat and rustled away to the Ladies'.

Jeanne did not worry until the dispatcher announced the boarding of their bus. She gathered up Miss Truman's bag and her own

things. In the ladies' room, a young mother fastened her toddler's overall straps. A pair of ragged blue jeans and sandals showed under one stall door. The other four stalls swung open and empty.

"Did you see a little woman in a flowered dress?"

The mother shook her head.

Jeanne returned to the waiting room where there were more passengers and family members than an hour earlier, but no Miss Truman. *Great! What now?* She ran to the breezeway where the Dallas bus waited. "Did a little lady in a flowered dress get on already?" The driver allowed her to step on the bus to check. No Miss Truman.

Back inside the terminal, Jeanne felt the beginning of panic. *I've got to get on the bus. What am I going to do with this bag?* She scanned the crowd again, searching for the relentlessly cheerful face of Miss Truman. She dropped her backpack and twisted the gold clasp of the old brown bag, not knowing what help she expected to find. The bag was empty. *Ahhh! I thought she had everything she needed in here.*

Clawing further into the darkness of the bag in desperation, Jeanne's fingers found something. She drew out a small, clear plastic box. It held a pair of crocheted baby booties, white with pink and blue trim. A folded sheet of paper was taped to the bottom of the box.

The crowd surged around Jeanne and the bus for Dallas left the station. She sat in one of the hard chairs again and stared at the paper she

had found in Miss Truman's bag. It was the initial application form for an international adoption agency. She thought of Miss Truman saying, "I expect you'll find what you need, too, dear."

Jeanne traded the rest of her ticket for a return trip to Morton. Before boarding her bus, she decided to leave the handbag and the Dallas paper in her chair. She kept the booties, expecting to need them.

Jeanne napped most of the way to Lubbock. When the bus stopped, a girl across the aisle jumped up and grabbed a bag from the overhead rack. She hurried off the bus and into the station ahead of everyone else. Jeanne was rubbing sleep from her eyes, but she could have sworn the long scarf in the girl's belt loops was the same flowered print Miss Truman had worn.

Spruce View

When I was very young the fact that my mother was missing the lower half of her left arm didn't seem unusual to me. I was bathed and dressed, snuggled, read to and well fed in a home that was clean and comfortable. That my mother did all this with only one hand was an unremarkable part of the miracle of security. When I started school, other children asked me what had happened to my mother's hand and I had to notice that she was indeed different from other mothers.

My first questions were answered with, "There was an accident when I was very young and I lost my hand." Of course I wanted to know if it had hurt. "For a little while," she said. And that was enough for me, and for my friends, for several years.

I was entering my teens before I thought more about my mother's disability. I suffered from the typical adolescent fantasy that I was the center of the known world, which should be as perfect as possible for my benefit. For the first time I felt ashamed of Mother's handicap, as though her lack somehow reflected on me, made me less than perfect. I think she understood my feelings more than I did, and in her patient way refused to take offense at my behavior.

One summer day when friends came to the house to hang out in my room and talk, Mother offered to bring us lemonade and cookies. Respecting our privacy, she had only knocked and I chose to talk to her through the closed door. "It's okay. I'll come to the kitchen and get the snacks." My friends knew my mother had only one hand, but I suddenly didn't want the imperfection on display. I slipped out of the room and retrieved the tray mother had prepared, without a "thank you," without even looking at her.

That night she came to my room, after I was in bed with my book, and asked if she could share a story with me. I rolled my eyes. At thirteen I was way too old for bedtime stories, although that had been a favorite ritual when I was younger. But she wasn't talking about telling a story. Instead, she handed me a yellowed sheaf of paper, typewritten on one of the old machines whose keys left indentations where the shaped letters struck the paper from behind an inked ribbon. "My mother wrote this." The manuscript was titled "Spruce View," by Joyce Martin, my grandmother.

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The village of Spruce View had its heyday as a logging town just before World War II. Once the United States entered the war, more and more loggers enlisted or were drafted or took jobs in war-related industries outside the mountains. One logging company survived,

though much smaller, as a supplier of hardwoods for cabinet and furniture makers.

Past sixth grade, children had to go down the mountain to the town of Riverbend for school. All the churches but one gradually closed their doors, and that one was served by a traveling preacher from Riverbend only twice a month. The post-war boom didn't reach up the mountain and Spruce View was dissolving like mist on a summer morning.

In the spring of 1952, Spruce View began to experience vandalism, something new in the town. At first, windows and doors of abandoned houses and shops were broken and splintered, one or two, here and there, without pattern. The sheriff tried to patrol more at night but never caught anyone in the act and never saw unfamiliar vehicles in the area.

The generator that powered refrigerators for Thompson's Gas and Grocery was destroyed when somebody packed the coils with mud and pulled wiring loose. Tommy Thompson said the wires looked like they'd been chewed by squirrels but there were no electrocuted squirrel bodies lying around. A big swamp cooler at Miss Morgan's beauty shop was pulled out of its window mounting and crushed like a cardboard box on the ground.

In June, some loggers reported finding tracks in the woods like those of a bare-foot man but bigger than any man on the crew. Most people said they were just bear tracks, but some talked of the mountain creature, known by many names in remote areas all over the world. Old

Mr. Avery found some of the tracks when his chicken coop was broken open at the roof line, like somebody opening a box he said. There were a couple of dead chickens on the ground and several more missing, but whether someone had taken them or they just flew away in fright, Mr. Avery couldn't say.

After Avery's chickens were ravaged, larger animals were found dead with vital organs raggedly ripped out – a couple of dogs, a goat, some pigs. People started looking for the monster's tracks. Some thought they saw the marks when dead animals were found, others said they were only imagining things. Plenty of folks claimed to have heard rustling in the brush when they walked near the woods, but that could have been any kind of forest creature.

Sheriff Carter and his deputy Wilmer continued patrolling through the county at night, hoping to apprehend who- or whatever was harassing the community. It was while they were driving slowly down County Road 417 near the Baker farm that Carter and Wilmer heard a cow making an awful racket, like she was hurt or maybe in labor and having trouble. They pulled their truck to the side of the road, got out and took turns holding the barbed wire apart to climb through. Not far into the pasture, well illuminated by a three-quarter moon and a country sky full of stars, the bellowing cow was writhing on the ground. They stared as the cow began to move away from them, sliding on her side, still mooing and bellowing pitifully. The noise stopped suddenly when a ragged chunk of

flesh rose from the cow's belly, then disappeared in the air. The men retreated to their truck and the safety of the sheriff's office in town.

It was harder for skeptics to dismiss the report of Sheriff Carter and Deputy Wilmer than the stories of drunken loggers, foggy old men and nervous middle-aged women. When the lawmen's tale was analyzed, the conclusion was reached that whatever was harassing the town was not only huge and evil but invisible. People began to speculate that the attacks might escalate to include human beings. Deputy Wilmer moved off the mountain.

About the time the deputy left, in the middle of all the wild stories, young Doctor Martin moved back to Spruce View with his family. James Martin had grown up in Spruce View, went away to college and medical school and then to the War. He served in Europe and was briefly a prisoner in Germany. He wanted to come home to a quiet place, a country way of life, for his wife and little girl. Doc Martin didn't put any stock in tales of the mountain monster. The people of Spruce View wanted to believe his youth and education and smiling good looks but many of them had seen – continued to see – broken machinery, dead animals and soft, deep tracks.

Doc Martin and his wife Joyce fixed up a house at the edge of town with a nice little yard where Joyce could plant a garden and their daughter Christine could play. Christine was a beautiful four-year-old with hair in long ringlets. Joyce kept her dressed in starched pinafores,

matching hair ribbons and a silver bracelet with a tiny cross charm that had come from Doc Martin's mother's jewelry box. The girl's chief playmates were her dolls and stuffed animals. Her menagerie included the usual rabbits and cuddly teddy bears, but also one fiercely lifelike grizzly with teeth showing, gift of an elderly aunt for the girl's third birthday. Her parents never understood why the furry menace was Christine's favorite toy.

In early September that year the weather was already turning cooler on the mountain. Joyce Martin had been having headaches and she took to bed one afternoon, giving Christine strict instructions to stay indoors. Ordinarily a compliant child, Christine grew bored with her books that day. She decided her mother had told her to stay inside because of the cool weather, so she found a sweater to wear and packed her favorite toys outside for a picnic, only yards from the darkening woods.

Christine spread a little cloth on the ground and arranged her toys around the edges for a tea party. She spent some time getting the group settled in a way that pleased her. She talked to the dolls and animals, scolding and instructing them, mediating their little disagreements. Once, Christine stopped her play and looked up into the trees. Perhaps she had seen something, a large shape moving toward the house, but the movement was indistinct and she returned attention to her toys.

Wind stirred the brush at the edge of the yard but the cracking of twigs was too heavy and the

bowing of branches was too deep to be caused by the wind. Christine looked to the trees again. This time the shape moving toward her became more distinct as it approached. She instinctively pulled her favorite bear close and watched as the huge creature lumbering through the brush showed itself to be the living form of her grizzly toy. She was fascinated but not afraid, she later claimed, because the monster seemed so familiar despite its gargantuan size. Its head was as large as her whole four-year-old body.

The creature moved silently, except for the breaking of branches where it strode through a thicket of hawthorn. It thrust its shaggy snout down to the dolls' picnic blanket then suddenly took Christine's left hand and forearm into its crushing jaws. Only then did she sense danger, as well as anger. With her right arm she swung her grizzly toy in a wide arc, hit the monster's nose and cried, "No!" Her slender left arm snapped, bone and every tissue severed by the horrid teeth, but the creature backed away. Christine fell, limp as one of her toys in the childish scene now in gory disarray. Her blue plaid pinafore, white sweater and blouse were stained deep purple with her life serum.

Doc Martin must have arrived in his green Rambler station wagon within a couple of minutes of the attack. Some said the creature had been driven away as much by the sound of his approaching car as by Christine's fearless rebuke. She certainly would not have survived without his quick attention.

There was a lot of talk in Spruce View about whether Christine's attacker was the mountain monster that had plagued the town for months or "just" a grizzly bear. When the child was able to talk about her experience, there was no doubt she described a bear. She even showed questioners her grizzly toy, uglier than ever after its fur was ruined by Joyce's cleaning efforts. But Christine insisted on a creature bigger than any grizzly ever known. More argument centered on the fact that the experience of the sheriff and his deputy had established that the mountain monster was invisible. Why would Christine have seen it if no one else had?

Experts from the state university came to examine the monster's bloody footprints clearly limned on Christine's picnic cloth. They could not come to agreement on the size and nature of the creature that made the prints, but it was not heard from in Spruce View again. The silver bracelet with its tiny cross charm was never found – lost to the belly of the beast along with Christine's innocent, playful hand and forearm.

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My mother sat quietly near my window waiting for me to finish reading the old story, not even coming to comfort me when I started sobbing near the end. "Why have you never told me this story?"

"I suppose when you were little I didn't want you to be frightened. After a while, it didn't seem important. I never worried about the 'bear'

returning. After all, I felt I had driven him away for good. I didn't even miss my hand so much after a few months. But I did miss my bracelet. Still do."

Plaid Christmas

The Stewart family was big on Christmas. Susan Stewart loved to decorate for all kinds of occasions, and Christmas was an excuse to go way overboard. She prided herself on “keeping Christ in Christmas” and there was not a ghost of a Santa Claus anywhere in her prodigious collection of décor – a few snowmen and snowflakes maybe, but no Santa Claus. This year, she was doing plaid – classic red and green Scots plaid with evergreen and candles everywhere. And all the family packages were wrapped in brown Kraft paper with plaid bows. The look was simple but classy. Susan thought it was a perfect statement of her personality.

Susan and Henry had never told their children the Santa myth, although they were well-spoiled with Christmas loot. When their son Hank was five and assured a friend there was no such thing as Santa Claus, the other boy made such a grand apologetic that Hank came home a convert and tried to convince his parents and baby sister of the old elf’s existence. But by the time little Hillary was in kindergarten, both children were given to rolling their eyes when friendly strangers asked, “And what’s Santa going to bring you this year?”

Apart from Santa and his various incarnations, the Stewarts participated in every

Christmas tradition Susan heard of, including those from a variety of other countries. They had German advent calendars and a Swedish candle carousel. They invited neighbors and friends from church for a Mexican posada celebration, which they combined with a birthday party for Jesus when the pilgrims finally reached the “inn” that had a place for them. And they carried the season all the way to Epiphany on January 6th, when the children got more presents from the Wise Men, according to the tradition of several countries with predominately Catholic culture. Susan was particularly proud of that custom because it seemed to justify the whole gifting frenzy by tying it to the Bible story of Jesus’ birth. Despite complaining about the difficulty of keeping all the family appointments during the rest of the year, Susan had no reservations about crowding the December datebook. She was convinced that celebrating Christmas to the point of exhaustion was a great testimony of her Christian faith.

Hank and Hillary, now fourteen and eleven, mostly didn’t mind the Christmas hubbub. It had always been so at their house, with their mother’s insistence that they must do all the traditional activities and find something new to add each year. Hank’s favorite Christmas activity was decorating sugar cookies. The children had been encouraged to invite friends for a cookie decorating party since before they started school and now their friends looked forward to it as much as they did. Susan hosted two cookie parties now, one for Hillary’s girlfriends and one

for Hank's buddies, because the girls were grossed out by the boys' inability to keep the frosting knives out of their mouths. The girls always went home with a plate of cookies to share with their families. But the boys usually ate their cookies as fast as they decorated them.

Ever since his brief apostasy to the fantasy camp, Hank was hardcore anti-Santa. Like an ex-smoker who preaches the gospel of clean air, Hank was a missionary for all the religious aspects of Christmas. He would have been content to put off all the gift-giving to the January date, to really emphasize the gifts of the Wise Men, part of the Bible story of Christmas. He was the only family member who thought they should forego a decorated tree, because it was actually a remnant of pagan traditions from northern Europe. None of the Stewart family was interested in the fact that Jesus' actual birthdate was probably in spring, or possibly fall, according to various historical information and the unlikelihood of shepherds having their flocks out at night in the dead of winter.

Hillary's favorite activity of the season was caroling. She loved making up goodie bags for the old people in the church, favorite teachers, the firemen on duty, and going out to sing and deliver the bags. It was one of the things her family did at Christmas that really seemed to be about helping other people, not just indulging themselves. She also liked filling a box for Project Christmas Cheer to send to a child in a war-torn country. She took a sandwich to school every day in November and December so

she could have the money usually spent on lunch to buy presents for her family, and she always saved back a couple of dollars for something girly and sparkly to put in the Christmas Cheer box. She thought about how it would be not to have any pretty things of her own and was very aware that she lived a privileged life compared to most of the world's children.

Henry tolerated his wife's Christmas fetish, even though he would have preferred a more low-key observance of the holiday. He loved all the traditional foods and being given permission not to think about healthy eating for a month or so. He was proud of the Martha Washington bonbons and cream cheese pumpkin roll Susan always sent to share with his office mates in December. Henry felt Susan's excess of celebration sort of made up for his own lack of enthusiasm about Christmas. He knew he was very fortunate to have a good job that provided more than enough for his family. A loving wife, healthy children who were generally respectful...Henry was often incredulous to be living what many people would consider a charmed life indeed. He knew himself to be more than a little lazy and a lot selfish. He also knew those failings were easy to disguise and that few people were aware of them, maybe not even Susan. He was less sure that his dad was fooled by his veneer of the model family man.

Grandpa Herschel, Henry's father, had been living with the family for three years, since his wife died. Herschel missed Eleanor deeply, but

he was settling into life with his son's family. He was pleased that the sale of his former home had made possible the purchase of the house they all lived in now, with the ample guest suite over the garage that was his domain. The family was really quite blessed to have him there, he surmised. Besides being able to contribute to the monthly utilities, he scouted around the property looking for fix-it projects to keep himself busy. Henry had suggested he consult Susan before putting in new electrical outlets or shrubbery, but Herschel liked to surprise the family with his offerings.

Herschel's other hobby was sending interesting forwards to his email list. Not just jokes. Herschel sent virus warnings, missing children reports, and partisan political messages. Henry had tried and failed to get his father to check out the legitimacy of these items on Snopes.com before forwarding them to dozens of people. He also tried to teach Herschel to "cut and paste" and use "blind carbon copy" when he sent out a mass mailing, so he wouldn't be sending scores of addresses into cyber space to be exposed to real viruses or spambots.

Herschel thought his son worried too much and sent him prayers. In fact, Herschel's email specialty was prayers. Not actual responses to the needs of people he knew, but cheaply-rhymed verses from greeting cards, recycled with clip-art flowers and tinny sound files of old hymns, making their way around the internet with the addition of chain-letter-style promises of what would happen if you passed them

on, and warnings of the consequences of failing to do so. Sending out prayers gave Herschel a warm feeling.

On December 20th of the Plaid Christmas, Susan was putting cookies in the oven when the doorbell rang. By the time she got to the door, the brown parcel service van was pulling away from the curb and a box was sitting on the Christmas welcome mat, right over the "Joy" in "Joy to the World." The odd thing was, there was no shipper's packaging. Susan admired the wrapping on the gift – a heavy but supple brown paper, almost like suede cloth, and a real silk ribbon woven in royal Stewart tartan – the ultimate expression of her chosen motif for the year.

Though there was no tag to identify sender or recipient, Susan felt sure the wonderful box was intended for her. It felt like an affirmation of her good taste. She couldn't really imagine Henry picking out such perfect wrapping. Anyway, why would he have a gift delivered to the house? But it was exactly the right size and shape to hold the silver and crystal bowl from Dillman's she had hinted to Henry would be a suitable Christmas gift for her. Marjory? Her best friend at church knew she was doing plaid this year, but Susan and Marjory didn't usually exchange gifts as nice as this box promised. The buzzer on the oven interrupted her speculation on the origin of the box and Susan hurried back to her cookies, leaving the gift on the hall table.

Herschel saw the box when he returned home from his bowling league. He hadn't felt much like

Christmas since Eleanor died, but there was something about this box that caught his eye. For one thing, it was the right size to hold the bowling bag he had been looking at in the pro shop that afternoon. And Henry had noticed last week that the handle on his dad's current bag was pulling loose on one side. Why not? A new bowling bag would make a great gift. Herschel smiled and whistled a Christmas carol up the stairs to his garage suite.

When Hillary saw the chic brown package she stopped to feel the luxurious texture of the special paper and curl a loose end of the silk ribbon in her fingers. She wondered who her mother might be sending the elegant box to. She thought it might be for their new pastor's family or maybe for Grandma Sutton.

Hank was next to find the fancy gift box on the hall table. He hefted it for weight and gave a good shake before heading to the kitchen to sample cookies. He wasn't sure the box was heavy enough to be a bike helmet, but it was the right size. A helmet might mean there was a BMX bike in his future.

The box was still in the hallway when Henry came in after work. Even his usual lack of interest in the Christmas hoopla was not proof against the insistent glamour of the gift. He could see that the paper and ribbon were very fine and likely costly. He expected the box was something his wife had prepared for her mother. He knew how Susan prized pretty wrappings, for even simple gifts, and he reminded himself to go to Dillman's to shop for her so he could ask

for a fancy wrapping that might be the equal of this box.

It was after supper before Susan thought about the wonderful Plaid Christmas box again. No one else had mentioned it. The Stewarts knew how to be discreet, especially at Christmas...how to allow someone the joy of making a surprise. Susan placed the box prominently under the tree, only sorry that its beautiful wrapping made her own best efforts look a bit shabby. An untagged box in the pile gave a little mystery, a little excitement she thought, to an event that was losing some of its fervency as the children got older.

The last few days before Christmas flew by in a rush of activity, as always. Hank begged off *The Nutcracker* performance by asking to go bowling with Grandpa Herschel. On their way out, his eye fell on the big square box and he had the horrible thought that Grandpa might give him a bowling ball for Christmas if he acted too enthusiastic about the game.

Christmas Eve – hot chocolate, cider, cookies and caroling, followed by candlelight communion at the church... It was midnight before anyone at the Stewart house got to bed. Still, Christmas morning, Hillary woke about five and brought her stocking into her room from the doorknob. That was a compromise worked out when the children were very young and wanted to start opening gifts before Hank and Susan had even a few hours of sleep. Hank and Hillary were allowed to retrieve their stockings at any hour, as long as they kept them in their rooms. Then,

when Henry and Susan got up at seven or so, the family approached the hallowed tree together for the serious rituals of consumerism. Sometimes Hillary actually went back to sleep for a bit after delighting in the clever toys and unusual treats Susan had searched out for the stockings. As a teenager, Hank was now actually more interested in sleeping in than getting his stocking early. So, it was after eight by the time everyone was awake and supplied with cups of coffee or hot chocolate and pastries.

The Stewarts followed a strict protocol for opening gifts, one package at a time, youngest to oldest, then around again. Even with only five of them, the process could take a couple of hours, since Susan insisted on taking pictures of each gift opening – first the person holding the box; then ripping the wrapping; finally the appreciative smile or modeling of the gift.

Since the children had been posed this way all their lives, it seemed normal to them. Although lately, Hank sometimes complained about his mother's picture-taking when his friends were around. Henry had tried a few times to get Susan to put down the camera and enjoy the moment, but by now he knew better. She would have been disappointed not to capture the moment on film, even though she had given up scrapbooking several years earlier. She had boxes of unfiled prints and discs, and now computer space, taken up with snapshots, most of which would never be seen by anyone past the first obligatory clicking through the lot

when she sent them out. Many of them weren't worth a second look anyway.

When the living room floor was covered with wrapping paper and no one had another box to open, the beautiful mystery gift was still under the tree. No one confessed to know anything about it. Susan nudged Grandpa Herschel. "I think you should open it. Wait! Let me get a photo." Inside the elegant package were six smaller boxes, wrapped identically to the larger one, but each had a gift tag: Herschel, Henry, Susan, Hank, Hillary, and finally – The Stewart Family. Grandpa handed out boxes and remarked that each was pretty heavy for its size.

Each box contained a green velvet drawstring bag. Henry and Hillary both shook a dozen or more large, antique gold pieces from their bags and exclaimed in delight. Susan, Hank and Grandpa Herschel were eager to share the good fortune but found their bags each contained a heavy lump of coal.

Susan's face moved through an array of expressions as she struggled to keep puzzlement from turning into anger. Hank didn't bother making the effort and complained loudly, dumping his lump of coal on the carpet. Grandpa Herschel allowed as how it was a pretty poor trick alright, but quickly recovered, saying he had a diamond in his bag, it just wasn't finished yet. He handed the final box to Susan to open. She wasn't sure she wanted to.

All the pleasure and anticipation created by the beautiful gift had disappeared. Father and daughter were a little embarrassed to receive

riches when some unknown giver seemed to be scolding the other family members. Hillary began counting her coins into piles to share with her mother, brother and grandfather. Henry realized he would be expected to do the same. Susan untied the last tartan silk ribbon and caressed the luxurious special paper one last time, trying to recapture some of the excitement she had felt when the original box was delivered.

In the final green velvet drawstring pouch was a miniature bagpipe. Its plaid body was another example of the Royal Stewart colors. The mouthpiece and drones of the instrument were carved wood, lacquered black. Instead of a chanter, the last and lower pipe, was a small crank, the handle of a music box hidden in the woolen folds of the little bagpipe. Susan turned the crank and cocked her ear to the melody. "Listen."

The tune played several bars before anyone recognized it. "Amazing Grace," Hillary shouted.

"But, what does it mean?" Susan asked.

Henry held a stack of coins like oversized poker chips, ready to ante them out to the stacks Hillary started. "It means nobody gets what he deserves. No one. It's all grace."

Widow Black

The filaments were fine and silky, like spider webs, and Marty thought that's what they were for a long time. Never a good housekeeper, she was no stranger to spider webs. Most of the time she told herself it was a good thing to have spiders. They caught flies and nasty bugs, didn't they? But, when she found herself grabbing at the silvery threads to get them away from her face one morning, she decided it was time to call an exterminator.

Drat that George! He left me with more than one kind of mess.

Marty Black was widowed in April. George always did the record keeping and bill paying, and six months later she was still trying to sort out his system. Why the spider webs were his fault she couldn't say, but she had a sort of permanent irritation with George now that he was gone, so it felt natural to blame him for the webs as well as anything else she had trouble with.

The exterminator said the filaments didn't look like any kind of spider he knew, but he was glad to lay down a toxic fog with the wand from his sprayer tank and charge Marty for it before he told her so.

What an idiot! George didn't leave enough insurance for me to throw money around for no reason.

She thought about calling the Better Business Bureau but decided to settle for complaining about the company to anyone she knew. She muttered about the exterminator's incompetence as she padded around the house, catching dust bunnies on her slippers. At least she thought they were dust bunnies. After a while, she realized what was accumulating on her shoes was more of the web-like filaments. Bunched up like that, they were a soft, white mass.

Marty kept hoping her daughter would make the two-hour drive from Lewiston and offer to help with housecleaning. The apple had fallen very far from the tree in this case because Marissa actually enjoyed cleaning house. Marty was always happy to let her. But when Marty hinted, Marissa made excuses about her heavy schedule at the hospital. She was the new charge nurse in the cardiac unit and couldn't get away often. Marty tried a not-so-subtle appeal to guilt, but Marissa said she'd come over when she could and didn't succumb to her mother's manipulation.

You'd think that girl would be more help to me, considering all I've been through and everything we did for her. George always did spoil that child.

Marty's cousin Annette was always asking if she needed help with anything, now that George was gone, but she never climbed down from her

Cadillac SUV in Marty's neighborhood. Annette wasn't likely to pick up a dust mop or even bring over her fancy vacuum.

Thinks she's really something because her husband's oil change franchise is raking in the dough. And to think George lent them money to get through the first year.

Marty had worked as a clerk in the nearby pharmacy for several years and her manager was very generous with time off during George Black's final illness and death. Jim let Marty come in whatever hours she could and worked the rest of the employees around that. She knew he worked a lot of extra hours himself to accommodate her and she was grateful. Taking a few hours away from the hospital to work every-other day had been a relief, a kind of respite. And after the funeral, going to work gave her something else to think about. But now Marty was having trouble getting to work and Jim was growing impatient with her.

So, what? I owe him because he helped me out before? He didn't really want to help me, he was just racking up I.O.U.s for my time? If George had worked for the city instead of White's Truck Repair – had some pension waiting – I wouldn't have had to work anyway!

Whenever Marty entered the house, she kicked off comfortable leather clogs and walked into her house shoes. Web-like filaments continued to collect on the bottom and sides of the blue terry cloth slippers, eventually puffing up around the tops, too, so it looked as if she

were scuffing around in cocoons of a giant moth species.

Marty grew so used to seeing the dangling threads everywhere she stopped trying to brush away the filaments that grew down from the closet ceiling and rested on the clothes there. Individually, each line had a lot of tensile strength. When she pulled out a garment to wear, several of the thin, silvery threads dangled from the shoulders. If other people noticed them when she went out, no one commented.

When Marty hired a carpenter to make repairs to the back fence, he trampled the chrysanthemums. She was angry with him, of course, but also with George, again, and even dredged up some bitterness for her son who was killed three years earlier in Iraq. When they were thirteen, Alan and a friend borrowed some boards from the fence to make a skateboard ramp. Even after George put the boards back, that section of the fence was never sturdy.

That boy could come up with more ways to torment me. And when he ran out of ideas, he joined the Army and went off and got himself killed. No consideration for his family at all. That carpenter should have joined the Army. They probably don't have flowers for him to step on next to their fences. George never liked those flowers there. It's a wonder they survived, the way he was always running the mower into that bed.

Marissa called at least once a week to check on Marty, even when she couldn't visit. If she had come to the house that fall, Marissa would

have been alarmed. Puffs of the webby material were collecting in small drifts in every corner of the house. Marty's favorite robe, a match for the blue terry cloth slippers, had so many of the filaments embedded in the looped fabric it was starting to look like a giant cocoon, too.

Marty didn't tell Marissa when she stopped going in to work. She didn't tell Jim either. He let it slide a day or two, then called to see if she planned to come in. She resigned over the phone and was sure Jim's sigh signaled relief. After that, Marty started calling the SuperShop to deliver her groceries. It was amazing to find she really didn't need to leave the house at all, although the delivery boys from the market were often late or clumsy. Sometimes her order was incomplete, but at least the store never charged her for what they didn't send.

When Marty stopped leaving the house, she also stopped changing into street clothes every day. She knew other people would find that odd, so she stopped bringing in mail until the following morning when she went out early for the newspaper. Neighbors never saw the woman in strange, puffy slippers and oddly padded robe who left the house for those brief moments every day.

As the neighborhood had changed over the years, George and Marty never connected with young couples who moved in around them. For one thing, Marty didn't like the camp trailer the family next door parked in their driveway.

Can't they see that thing blocks my view down to the corner? Why do they think I'd prefer

a view of their metal box in place of a tree? I guess it's not as bad as those brats across the street who destroyed my front flower beds. Why wouldn't George sell this place and move into a condo after our kids were grown?

The silvery filaments draped every doorway in the house by November. Sometimes Marty couldn't avoid getting some of the stuff stuck on her lips. When she tried to clear it away, making little spitting noises with her tongue, she noticed it was sweet at first but had a bitter aftertaste that lingered. The tendrils drooped from the hem of her robe and wound about her legs when she walked. Marty was fascinated yet repelled by its gentle stickiness, like cotton candy.

The recliner Marty sat in to read or watch TV began to accumulate the webbing in its upholstered folds. She didn't always get up from the chair at night anymore...just fell asleep there after the late news. She moved the telephone base to a table by her chair and stashed some snacks in a basket below it for those days she didn't feel like getting up at all.

Marissa worried about her mother. Sometimes, Marty didn't answer or return phone calls. If Marissa asked later where she'd been, Marty always insisted she hadn't been out, just couldn't get to the phone. Explanations were vague. Marissa made plans to bring a friend and everything needed for Thanksgiving dinner; Marty shouldn't do anything.

How thoughtful. She couldn't be bothered to come and help me clean up this mess, and now

that I can hardly get out of my chair, she tells me not to do anything. As if I could.

Friday before Thanksgiving was the last day Marty answered Marissa's call. Sunday morning when Marty woke up, her left sleeve was woven to the arm of the recliner by the accumulation of silver webbing. She thought about calling Marissa. She could almost reach the phone, but she was tired. There was a bottle of water with her in the recliner and Marty managed to get a drink. She couldn't reach a cracker or packet of raisins from her basket.

Marissa called again on Tuesday and got the machine. She was working overtime to have a couple of days off for the holiday and pushed her concerns to the back of her mind. She had watched her mother grow bitter after Alan's death and kept a distance to avoid the poison Marty often spilled out. After George died, Marissa felt an obligation to be a more attentive daughter but she was glad to have the excuse of her job and a two-hour stretch of highway to keep from being dragged into her mother's constant grievances. She tried talking to Marty about it once, suggesting her mother let go of some of the grudges she carried. Marty bristled at the idea she might not be completely justified in feeling mistreated, or at least slighted, by everyone she complained about. She pouted the rest of that day and refused to return Marissa's calls for a month. If she had known Marissa considered it a welcome breather, Marty would have been enraged.

Marty hardly heard her daughter's Tuesday call. She was very tired. The ringing of the phone and Marissa's voice on the answering machine seemed far away. She could not open her eyes to tell if it was morning or evening. She tried to lift the bottle of water and found her right sleeve was now in the grip of the webbing surrounding the chair. By the time the delivery boy from SuperShop banged on the door, Marty understood she was finally, completely, enveloped by the softly sticky threads. She knew, too, helplessly, belatedly, that she had woven her own shroud. Her lips barely parted to form an involuntary "Oh!" of insight. With the sharp intake of breath, she felt the filaments fill her mouth and nostrils. The phone rang and rang to no answer.

What Is Magic Realism?

I've been calling these stories "magic realism" since I began writing them in the 1990s. The term is not familiar to everyone, although what I mean by it is not unfamiliar to any reader of modern fiction. It's the title I like to use for stories set in a recognizable scene – a familiar world, not a fantasy one – in which there's something going on beyond ordinary reality.

The following interview, conducted by Michael Parker may shed further light on the genre of magic realism and on what it means to me as a writer. The interview subjects are Neil Ellis Orts, editor and publisher of *Able to...* (neoNuma Arts Press, 2006), myself, and David Lemaster, another *Able to...* author. The occasion for the interview was a reading we did at Parker's West Edge Books in Shreveport, Louisiana, April, 2007.

Becky Haigler

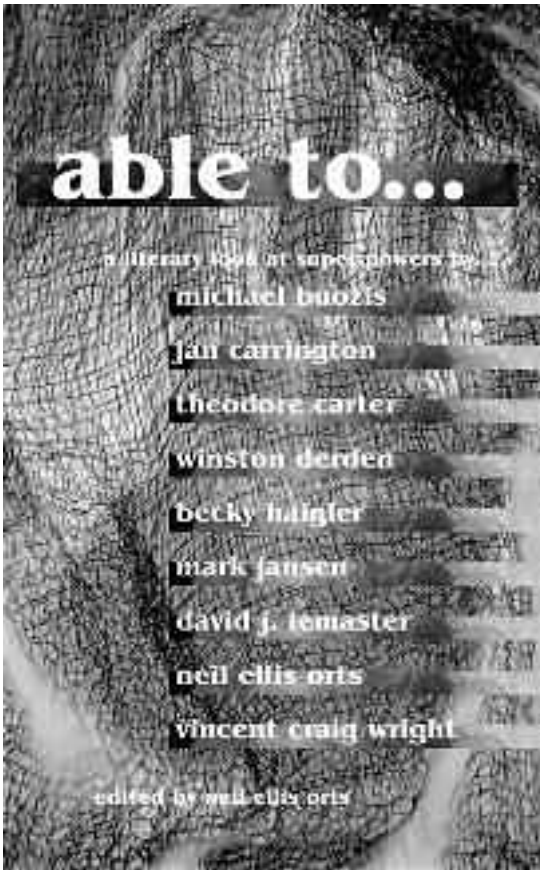
Parker: *Able to...* is subtitled “a literary look at superpowers,” and the term is applied broadly, given the usual pop culture associations. What particular resonance does the theme of superpowers have for you as a writer, or even as a reader?

Neil: I grew up on comic books and still have a deep affinity for many of the characters, even as I grow more and more uncomfortable with some of the subtle messages. I mean, at the end of the day, a lot of superhero stories end with a subtle “might makes right” message. I can’t get behind that one. Even more, I can’t get behind the notion that superheroes are supposed to “kick ass,” really give the bad guys what-for with hard-hitting action, emphasis on the hitting. I’m a proponent of non-violent resolution to conflict, so I have ideological issues with most superhero stories. But there’s a part of me that will always want to know what’s up with Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman. I know and have come to embrace my own arrested development that way.

When I started putting together *Able to...*, my notion, as I state in my introduction, was that if superheroes were adolescent power fantasies, as they’re often called, then what would grown-up power fantasies be? I wasn’t really interested in the real-world power fantasies we see played out in war zones and Wall Street, but the smaller stories. How do we

use whatever powers we have at our disposal to manipulate – for good or ill – our surroundings? I find that sort of question infinitely more interesting than how hard Superman can hit.

Becky: I read Superman comics as a kid, whenever I found them at other peoples' houses, but I didn't choose them for myself. (I



leaned toward Archie and Katy Keene.) I have vague memories of neighborhood games where someone was Superman and the bad guys could ward him off with a chunk of asphalt we deemed "kryptonite." I read a lot of fairy tales though, Hans Christian Andersen and Brothers Grimm, and there are plenty of examples there of events that bend the usual pattern of the world. I majored in Spanish in college and had to read quite a few of the magic realism stories of the 20th century Latin American writers, but I first felt I wanted to write something in that genre myself after reading and seeing *Like Water for Chocolate*. "Gates of Eden," written in the mid-'90s, was my first magic realism story. Since then, I have finished four others and have another simmering. After Neil's collection, I started to feel maybe there was an interest, a market for the genre.

David: I approached both of my stories by placing a character in a situation and then seeing what the character might do or say in response. The character comes first for me, and then the style in which the story is to be told. Each story has its own voice emanating from the voice of the character. Once in awhile I start with the style first, but that is rare. In the two stories in question, "The Mesmerizer" was inspired when my friends saw a professional hypnotist on a college campus and I began asking myself what kind of person could pass himself off in that role. "Ebony" started with a concept rather

than a person, the concept of dark turning to light – and with a person in a Sprint store – I actually saw someone similar to the way I described “Ebony” as I waited for a Sprint technician to fix my phone. I asked myself why the girl was dressed that way (she carried a pocket Bible, too) and what she could possibly think of herself. When the concept met the description, I put a central character into the story to be the reader’s guide, and the story was born.

Parker: Neil, you wear a lot of hats regarding *Able to...*, as a contributing writer, editor and publisher. As an editor and publisher, did you send out a call for stories around the theme of superpowers, or did you see particular connections among stories or writers you were already familiar with?

Neil: I posted calls for stories about “people who can do extraordinary things” on various bulletin boards online. *Image Journal’s* forum netted me Becky Haigler. I think most came to me via *Craigslist*. I’m not entirely certain where everyone came from, but those are the forums that I know generated some resonance. I knew Winston Derden before I started this process, and the rest were strangers off the Internet. (It’s not all danger out there, kids!)

I kept watching for stories with similar themes, and didn’t find any in that way. I did find a short-short story in the journal *Quick*

Fiction that I liked quite a lot and would have worked in the book. I managed to find the author online, but he declined participation in *Able to...* Which was disappointing – as a writer, I get rejected all the time, and now I was getting rejected as an editor and publisher!

Parker: Neil and David, both of you have stories in the collection that deal with theological implications of superpowers and individuals affected by the “superpowered” beings. What makes such themes compelling to you?

Neil: All of my questions in life, on some level, are theological. I’m congenitally Lutheran and I’ve been to seminary. I’m eaten up with God-schtuff. Even when I’ve tried to avoid the label, word has returned to me that I’m “that Christian writer guy.”

Having said that, I always make a point to write about people who are religious, not write religious stories. I do find the spiritual lives of people the most interesting part of them, generally speaking, even if it’s a lack of any overt spiritual life, but I have little patience for stories that are about the business of teaching a moral lesson, even as I realize almost all stories do that. I started out writing that sort of thing and quickly lost interest in it. Life is messy and a life of faith is messy, and I know of few people who have everything turn out just right because they prayed a certain way or kept a particular moral code.

That I'm gay also adds an edge to my work without my even trying, usually. Even if I wrote the most moral and moralizing story, Zondervan isn't likely to be courting me for my next novel. And I'm okay with that.

David: Theological issues are quite compelling to me and take up the majority of my reading (I just finished Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Tabor's *The Jesus Dynasty*). I was raised Baptist and have seen my faith take an incredible journey over my lifetime. I'm interested in the metaphorical meaning and impact of religion, and although I'm willing to question and doubt my religious beliefs, I'm not willing to give them up. I've been inspired by several books on religion and metaphor, most especially Elaine Pagel's look at the Gospel of Thomas, *Beyond Belief*. One of the underlying themes in most of my work is that continual struggle to reconcile knowledge and faith. It's an ongoing struggle for me personally, and one that I don't anticipate ever fully completing – but that's the beauty of faith, isn't it? If it made sense, or if I could prove it scientifically, it wouldn't be faith? Despite my quest for logic (and more than a bit of skepticism), faith still holds me and refuses to let me go.

Parker: Becky, your contributions to the collection have a wistfulness to them that strikes me the same way as some of the best *Twilight Zone* episodes, or some of Ray Bradbury's

stories. The characters with the “super” powers seem ambiguous, at best, about them and their application. Does this seem consistent with what you were trying to achieve as a writer?

Becky: Thanks, Michael! Just to appear in the shadow of Bradbury or Serling is high praise. I think the ambiguity, which I didn’t know was coming through, probably is rooted in my own worldview. As a Christian, I hesitate to ascribe “powers” to people in a way that would be an infringement on the power of the Holy Spirit. If, for example, I had a character turn the world backward, Superman style, it would be hard for me to let him do that without directly invoking God. In the *Able to...* collection, Mr. Merrill’s “superpower” is a grace that comes to him unbidden, and he has to decide what to do with it. Evita’s gift, in “Gates of Eden,” is a gift of creating with speech, an ability which mirrors the divine creation, wherein the worlds were spoken into being. Both Old and New Testaments tell us there is tremendous power in our words, so to show that power in my character is not an instance of a human being grasping for something God has reserved for Himself.

Neil: To jump in and talk about Becky’s work a minute: Becky’s stories were the very first I received. I was nervous about this, not sure what to expect. When I read the first line of

"Gates of Eden" ("Flowers didn't actually fall from Evita's lips – not at first and not all the time."), I nearly dropped the manuscript. This was a completely unanticipated and original "super power." I nearly accepted it on that line alone.

But her stories have a sort of fairy tale feel to them, at least for me. "Gates of Eden" more so than "Mr. Merrill's..." I guess, but still, they have a voice that carries you along a bit like a fairy tale, even as they're set in a recognizably real world. I think her sparse use of dialogue aids that feeling. My memories of, say, Little Red Riding Hood or Goldilocks and the Three Bears don't rely on dialogue but on a compelling sequence of "and then...and then...and then..." These sequences are punctuated with lines like "My, what big eyes you have," or "This porridge is too hot" but the story itself relies on a simple telling of events that draws you into the story. It's that tricky telling that is really showing, not telling. If that makes sense.

Parker: David, your stories contain some truly chilling moments, that come upon the reader very abruptly, almost cinematically. Are you influenced by some of the classic horror stories and movies?

David: I was trained in stage theater and film, and I do think cinematically. I'm influenced by Chaplin, Kubrick, Hitchcock, Foreman, Spielberg, Aronofsky, and a number of

other directors. Most recently, I was awed by del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, and Von Trier's works, *Dancer in the Dark* and *Dogville*. For me, in both cinema and prose, a good story must be accompanied by well drawn characters and a sense of style. There must be a complete commitment on the part of the author/director to that style. I don't see either of my stories as horror. I see them as stories about characters who respond to and interpret for themselves external events. As an audience, we are only privy to what the characters are thinking and must interpret the meanings for ourselves. I'm especially interested by how humans distort reality or what we perceive as reality to fit our needs.

Neil: To speak about David's stories briefly: I tend to not respond to horror. I read David's stories, found them compelling and well written and fitting the theme and that was that. A little dark, yes, but okay. It wasn't until I started to set up the book and figure out the order of the stories that it really hit me how dark David's stories really were. I like to think they add a dimension to the collection that would be lacking otherwise, but I also had a moment of worry that they may be so much darker than the rest of the stories as to stand out unfavorably. Maybe they do stand out, but I've only had people tell me David's were their favorite stories, never that they were out of place or too different from the rest of the collection.

(And so none of the authors get anxious – every author has been cited as someone’s favorite.)

Parker: None of you inhabit your stories with characters leaping over tall buildings or moving faster than a speeding locomotive. Were you ever tempted to write about such “superheroes,” or did that seem limiting or overdone?

Neil: During the submission process, I started noticing that the stories I liked best were not really about the powers, but about the relationships around the characters. I think to a large extent, that’s what made it into the book. The powers instigate or complicate the conflicts, but the stories aren’t really about the powers.

And I think that sort of story requires a more subtle sort of power. I received one story about a guy with super-speed and there were kernels of really good things in it, but in the end, the story was too much about the power and the interesting, troubled relationships were left under-developed.

But I can’t lie. If DC Comics were to call me up and say, “Hey, Neil, write us a few issues of *Wonder Woman*,” I’d be all over it. I’m just not likely to pursue it at this point. Superhero comics have always been driven more by plot than character and they’ve become so confined by convoluted histories that there’s a certain level of craftsmanship one can attain in the

genre, but not much above, artistically, that craftsmanship level. I think there are some fine writers working in comics. I also think there are comics writers, who are superstars in the field, who couldn't write a character-motivated story – maybe wouldn't even recognize one – if the fate of world depended upon it. They're superstars because they know how to write the corporation's icons in the formula expected. More power to them, they're making a lot more money as writers than I do, maybe more than I ever will. That's just not how my writing interests developed.

David: I'm not interested in superheroes. My best friend growing up collected comic books; I collected baseball cards. He played role-playing games, but I liked Risk and strategy/war games. He reads sci fi, and I read psychology, history, and theology. It's all a matter of interests. As I said in the first question, my approach to both of these stories (as well as to my other work) is to put an individual (realistic) character in a situation and see how he or she responds. My characters often misinterpret the world around them out of idiocy, senility, or stupidity – or sometimes out of maliciousness – and the reader is left to interpret what's really happening.

Becky: In a couple of my later stories, supernatural abilities are exercised by secondary characters to effect change in my protagonists.

However in my *Able to...* stories, the “powers” affected bystanders secondarily but had the most impact in the lives of the characters who exercised those powers. So interior action, or psychological drama, is more interesting to me than stopping trains. I think Neil expressed that idea in his introduction of *Able to...*, and that’s probably why my stories found a home with him.

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Editor’s note: Michael Parker is currently an independent bookseller in the New Orleans area. He has a literary blog called the *Abomunistic Review of Books*, which can be accessed at abomreviewofbooks.blogspot.com.

About the Author

Becky Haigler is retired after 24 years of teaching Spanish in Texas public schools. As an Air Force wife, she lived in Spain, Germany, Japan, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas. Her poetry has appeared in *Cappers Magazine*, *Christian Single Magazine*, *Jack and Jill*, *Writer's Guidelines*, *Devo'Zine*, *Caprock Sun*, and *Lubbock Magazine*, as well as the anthologies of Silver Boomer Books. Her short stories for adolescents have been published by several denominational presses. All work before 2000 appeared in her previous name, Becky McClure, and some recent work has used a pen name, Mary Carter.

In retirement, Becky has become an editor/partner in Silver Boomer Books. Currently residing in Shreveport, Louisiana, with husband Dave Haigler, Becky participates in several writers' groups and has been named to the Shreveport Regional Arts Council's Artists Roster in the literary category. She has two daughters and three granddaughters.

Other Books by
Laughing Cactus Press
imprint of Silver Boomer Books

Poetry Floats

New and selected Philosophy-lite

by Jim Wilson

August, 2009

Bluebonnets, Boots and
Buffalo Bones

by Sheryl L. Nelms

September, 2009

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prose and poetry by and about baby boomers

March, 2008

Freckles to Wrinkles

August, 2008

This Path

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Song of County Roads

by Ginny Greene

September, 2009

Grandma's Attic/Grandpa's Porch

Coming April, 2010

Books by
Eagle Wings Press
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Slender Steps to Sanity

Twelve-Step Notes of Hope
by OAStepper, Compulsive Overeater
May, 2009

Writing Toward the Light

A Grief Journey
by Laura Flett
July, 2009

coming November, 2009

A Time for Verse

Poetic Ponderings on Ecclesiastes
by Barbara B. Rollins