

Thirst For Fire

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Waiting

by Steven Meyer

In the line of a local video store, a young couple stood a few feet apart from each other. To a normal observer, there would seem to be nothing odd about this. But to the couple, that small amount of space represented an even larger gap in their relationship. At the very start, things were good. They were almost normal. Nobody really thought they would make a good couple, but somehow they persevered. The first few months of their relationship were a torrid affair of laughter and lovemaking.

After a while, though, their relationship began to sour. His self-confidence problems and her fear of failure mixed into some potent brew of doubt and anger. Every time she looked at him, all she could think about was how much happier she had been alone. Every time he looked at her, all he could think about was the first time they met.

They met at a party, like a lot of couples do.

What made it unusual was the fact that heavy drinking was involved. To anybody who has ever gone to college or lived in Wisconsin, this would seem perfectly normal. But the way it happened was anything but...

The man was the record time-holder for keg stands and he was going for an even bigger record. He was thirty-seven seconds into the keg stand when the girl walked into the kitchen where two friends were holding him upside down while drank copious amounts of semi-warm beer. She watched the boy with a wondrous eye, thinking how immature guys her age really were. He caught her glance, and by doing so, lost his concentration. The lukewarm beer flowing through the nozzle suddenly filled his throat as he lost his rhythmic breathing and drinking pattern. His face exploded in a

foamy mixture of beer and saliva, causing the two guys holding his legs to suddenly jerk away in disgust. When they dropped him, his head slammed against the keg, knocking him unconscious.

Finally he came to, and she was standing above him with a worried expression on her face. He just smiled at her and said the first thing that came to his mind.

“Ow. You ruined my record.”

Now they were standing in line, trying to ignore all of the hurt and agony they were putting themselves through. He felt like he could never really be himself around her. She felt that he was himself around her way too often. In fact, his off-the-wall sense of humor and behavior had always made her feel... normal. When she was single, she was the wacky friend; the one who was slightly odd, but in a good way. Now that they were together, she had lost that title to a man who once stood up in the middle of a crowded bar and serenaded her with a striptease to the theme song from “Shaft.”

They moved forward in line, the man humming the tune of a They Might Be Giants song under his breath. The woman recognized the part of the song immediately.

No one in the world ever gets what they want and that is beautiful
Everybody dies frustrated and sad and that is beautiful
She always thought God had a good sense of humor, and even stronger sense of irony. As soon as these words popped into her head, a fifteen year old boy who had just received his learner’s permit drove his fathers van through the front of the store. The van smashed through the windows that usually separated the outside world from the inside, spraying glass onto everyone around them. The van careened into the store, screaming people trying to get out of its way. The girl turned and dove behind a candy display just in time to see the van fly by her. When she looked back, her boyfriend was nowhere to be seen.

After checking herself for any injuries (Just a bruise or two and

some little scratches), she climbed out from underneath the pile of candy bars that had managed to shield her. She stepped over some of the wreckage, which included people, mangled and bleeding, crying out for help. She could feel them trying to grab at her as she walked by them, knowing how desperate they were for her help. She just had to see him before she could deal with anybody else.

She found him pinned between the front of the van and the Drama section. It seemed fitting in retrospect.

She knelt down next to her boyfriend and tried to take his hand. In it was the video they were going to rent. It was some stupid comedy with the guy from “That 70’s Show” that some friend had said was funny. Her boyfriend hated the actor, but trusted their friend enough that he would end up renting it anyway. She let out a small cry when she finally looked at his face. It wasn’t that it was disfigured or gory or anything. Instead, despite of a few scratches and some blood that was pooling in the groove of his right eye socket, he looked perfectly fine. He was alert and alive. When he saw her, he smiled a little. The first thing that struck her was how her stupid boyfriend couldn’t even die normally. The second thing that struck her was how horrible that last statement sounded.

His breathing was shallow, as if one of his lungs had been punctured. She didn't know about medicine, but she had watched enough "E.R." to know that shallow breathing wasn't a good sign. When he talked, it came up sounding very watery, like his lungs were filling with fluid. She couldn't help but shake the feeling that she shouldn't have watched the show. Ignorance is bliss, and she felt she would be much better off not knowing exactly what was wrong. She didn't want to know he was dying.

“It kind of sucks when you think about it,” he said quietly. She nodded, a tear streaming down the side of her face.

“You were really looking forward to seeing that movie,” she replied. He smiled at her, knowing that he would’ve said the exact same thing if their positions had been switched.

She called the proper people that one should call in these sorts of situations. She tended to the people who required the most immediate care and couldn't provide it for themselves. The people who were lucky enough to be nowhere near the front of the store helped her. By the time they were finishing up, the first ambulance showed up outside. The fifteen year old driver was sitting on the curb, crying his eyes out. He doesn't know that, even though he caused this horrible accident, nobody will hate him for it. He's young, he didn't know any better. He should take that and run with it as long as he has the opportunity.

Knowing there was nothing more she could do, the girl walked back to her boyfriend. He was still awake and tried his best to smile when she showed up again. They talked a little bit about the first time they met, and joked about how he was such a magnet for drama and injury.

He did end up dying, there's no doubt about that. A human body can only take so much strain before it just gives in, and having a van hit you and drag you a dozen or so feet can cause a hell of a lot of strain.

After that, the girl was never the same. She didn't become dark or drawn into herself. In fact, she became even more of an extrovert. She was once again the wacky friend, the funny one. She wasn't normal or anything, but who wants to be normal anyway?

Two months after the accident, she had realized what her boyfriend had done. He hadn't replaced her by being the crazy guy he was. The reason she felt so normal was that she was normal, with the tendency to go wild from time to time. All he had done was shown her how to be the crazy friend, and how to do it right.

Now, whenever people ask her how she got so funny, all she says is that a her boyfriend was the victim of a fatal hit and run accident in the middle of a video store. This would always be met with shocked expressions and stares, but she'd just smile back at them. It may

have been horrible to them, but to her... It was the greatest gift her boyfriend had ever given to her. And that is beautiful.

Rock Dreams

by Sarah El Ebiary

You start to feel the caffeine wearing off. It happens every day at about this time, 4pm sound check. Hopefully someone will be bringing you some coffee brewing in the catering room backstage. You casually hurry to get on stage. You look down at your beat-up leather watch, and it's 4:10. Today you're in Des Moines, Iowa at the Grand Theater, famous for those bright yellow stairs you're climbing up that lead to the stage of the auditorium.

"Man, these stairs are ugly," you say to yourself but can barely hear. Your ears are still ringing from the night before when the tour hit Omaha, Nebraska (the VIP room had blue shag carpeting). You've never seen the Paradox more packed with people before last night. The sheer noise of the crowd that burst from the venue totally overpowered the music. Their energy transferred to every one on the tour, and the party after the show continued late into the bus ride to Des Moines. You didn't go to bed until 9 in the morning just as the buses were pulling up to the venue. So far, you would agree with the rest of the guys and say that it was the best stop on the tour. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, you can see the sound engineer, Randy, looking impatient. As soon as the guitar is done, he can take off to grab a bite to eat before the doors open at 8pm.

You walk downstage toward the front of the house and squint your eyes from the glaring stage lights that nearly blind you. You reach down to pick up the long, black, guitar cable that Randy left sitting for you at the edge of the stage, just as he does every sound check. Carrying the cable in your right hand, you walk back upstage toward the guitar rack, which was already unloaded and set up by the crew. They're pretty much a great group of guys, except for the new tour manager, Nigel. You wonder how much longer you can put up with his demands.

The rest of the instruments, drums, bass, and mics, are also already set up, checked, and ready for tonight. The guitar is always the last in sound check, and it's time for you to get to work. The row of guitars hanging from their pegs glisten from the reflection of the stage lights. You lift off the Gibson SG Special from the rack, and carry it to center stage. The cherry-red beauty that you hold is so much nicer than the first guitar you got when you were 13.

That was just a generic Fender Strat rip-off that your older brother, Sam, had bought from Sears. He never really learned how to play it anyway. After he turned 16, your parents got him a car and his interests turned toward going to concerts, amongst other things. He always took you along to the local shows in Bethesda, and on the way there, he blasted the album of the headlining band from custom speakers you helped him to install. As he drove, he barely held the steering wheel while he tapped his fingers and thumbs to the beat of each song. He never missed a fill, and always kept a good beat. Eventually he figured out his love for the drums was too strong to resist. He's busy playing for The Monks now, and they're getting pretty big. Even though you're roommates, you hardly see each other with both of your touring schedules. Maybe one day, you'll both be home long enough to start a family band.

For now, you've got an alright gig with this band, Rio Fields. They're based around the Washington DC area and you found out about their opening last February from a flier in the coffee shop near your house. You met them on a Saturday afternoon, and as soon as you got to their practice space, they basically told you to just play. You wailed out a few scales, and their heads slowly nodded, although you pretended not to notice. The next day, you received a call telling you that you were in. You left for tour about a month later, and you got to see a great portion of the midland United States. It's nearly summer now and you've adjusted to the daily routine. Although, these past couple of weeks of staying up late is starting to catch up to you and your lag is starting to get noticed.

"Glad to see you've arrived," sneers Nigel in a sarcastic tone as he walks the floor of the venue with one of the promoters. You pretend

to flip him off, but he didn't see. He was too busy negotiating the deal for tonight's show. He's got a lot of experience touring with bands, mostly in the UK. Over time, he developed a rude-boy demeanor, but least he's honest. Nigel replaced Larry a couple of months ago when Rio Fields fired Larry for trying to rip them off. From what you heard, a lot of the funds that the band had budgeted were deposited into Larry's personal bank account. His excuse for doing it was that he was the hardest working person on the tour and that he had earned it. This tour was scheduled to try to recoup some of that lost money.

"Whenever you're ready," Randy says from behind the sound board.

He speaks into a microphone that communicates into the center monitor wedge. You give him a nod "OK" as you tuck in the cable through the vintage embroidered guitar strap and plug it into the guitar. You put the strap around your neck and let the guitar rest against your belly. The comforting pressure of the mahogany body feels safe and reassuring, almost reminding you of being back home in Maryland.

Ten weeks of being on the road makes those first few steps into the house, after the front door closes, truly pure. It feels as if the past fifty cities were merely a blur – like a recurring dream you've had every night. You're living that dream now. You relish the thought of sleeping in your bed without having to smell the stench of nine gassy guys crammed on a bus. You can't wait to be in your own house, and hopefully Sam will be there to welcome you when you arrive.

"Hey Nate!" you almost hear him call out. *

"Nate!" Randy had been shouting for a few minutes, but you were too lost in your own world.

"Oh sorry, man," you chuckle, even though you're not really sorry.

He knows how you become distracted without caffeine, so he snaps

you back into reality at least once every sound check. You begin to wonder about that coffee you wanted.

“You alright?” Randy asks irritated, probably hungry. You better make this quick or he’ll be like this all night. “Play a G for me,” he says.

Always a G for some reason. You’ve heard it was the most soothing note in the world, but you aim to challenge that notion.

A loud, crunching guitar chord rips through the auditorium. Each booming strum sends you back to the electrifying moment in your bedroom when you first tried jamming on Sam’s old guitar. Your parents used to shout for you to turn it down until their voices turned hoarse. But of course, you could never hear them because you were playing for the thousands of screaming fans in your head. You were mostly strumming as fast as you could while stage diving off of your bed. It was then that you decided you wanted to play music for the rest of your life, and after twelve years of dedicated strumming, you’ve greatly improved. Man, that sounded terrible. *

“Hey Randy, can I get more of a mix in my wedge?” You look out to him leaning over his board. Adjustments are made, switches toggled, and toggles switched.

“Try again,” he says. You nod your head to the side as you strum a few more times. You look down at your electronic tuner and change the tuning to drop D. Did you ever think your life would turn out like this? After countless hours and random garage bands, keeping that dream alive has led you here – to Des Moines, Iowa at the Grand Theater, famous for those ugly, yellow stairs.

“Alright, sounds good,” you call out to Randy. He takes off his classic sound engineer earphones and heads for the door. Soon you are alone in the giant auditorium. A couple thousand empty wooden seats stare back at you while you unplug the cable from the guitar. You’re always the last one to leave sound check while the other guys have already taken off. Some of them head to the bus to play

video games. The rest of them are with their “girlfriends” or groupies, rather –anything to pass the time.

You take off the guitar, which is now warm, stiff, and heavy like your favorite jean jacket. You walk over to the six foot Marshall stack, stage-right, and lay the guitar gently in its stand beside the amp. It will need to be tuned again prior to the show, but for now you’re caffeine deprivation is getting unbearable. You walk off the stage and head down those annoying yellow stairs. The hallway to the right of the stairs leads to the catering room. On a mission for that coffee, you don’t even acknowledge Nigel patting you on the back as you pass in the hallway. “Probably his way of saying, ‘sorry for being an asshole earlier,’” you mutter to yourself. His key ring continues to jingle as you walk oppositely down the hall.

You finally arrive to the catering room and there’s a long table of deli meats and other sandwich fixings laid out in an organized spread. It’s not a demanding rider, unlike The Monks’, which requests that the promoters order Singha, this crazy imported beer from Thailand. You’re happy you’re not that pretentious. You just want coffee. You reach for the coffee pot. There’s just enough left for half a cup, but you don’t feel like complaining. Perhaps there’ll be more made later? You drink it down and it tastes stale and lukewarm. It should at least hold you over until you get to the bus.

You walk back down the hallway and head for the side exit where the buses are parked. Standing outside, you notice that there’s already a group of female fans lingering around the bus. They start to make their way toward you, but you don’t feel like talking. They act as if they know you, but you know that they just want to get backstage. You slowly bang three times and two short on the glass door, which is the secret code that will signal Nigel to let you inside the bus. While you stand there waiting, you ignore the girls by looking rushed, continually glancing at your watch. It’s 4:59. The door finally swings open and you drag yourself inside.

You feel more exhausted than most days. As you make your way down the bus to take a seat on the bench along side the windows,

you think about the three hours you'll spend between sound check and doors. Some day, those few hours will be filled with interviews, meet and greets, and any spare moments to fit in a drink and a bite to eat. By that time, it won't matter if you're a few minutes late for sound check because every day will be spent playing music. There aren't many people out there lucky enough to get paid for doing what they love. Even though the money is not that great, you were never one for an 8 to 5 job. On tour, the hours are long, but routine, and there's a lot of down time. Nevertheless, with this kind of schedule, it's vital that you relax for just a few minutes; otherwise the lifestyle will get to you. Fortunately, you've managed to stay clean from speed for the past fourteen months. Yet in every city, demons disguised as celebrities and beautiful women continue offering to get you back to normal.

"We miss the old Nate," they'd say to you, but you shrug them off now. You remind yourself that the music's more important anyway.
*

A loud knock on the bus window startles you awake. You wonder how long you've been asleep. Is it time for doors yet? You lift your arm until your wrist is at eye level. You look at your watch, and it's only 5:45. There's still plenty of time before you have to get up. You look out the window expecting to see some one familiar knocking on the glass, but it's just a bunch of fans. You notice all the short skirts and wonder if they're wearing anything underneath them.

You remember that crazed fan in Cleveland last year (the restaurant on the ground floor of the club had the best meatloaf sandwich). You think her name was Jenny, or Jaime, or some thing with a J. She would do anything, literally anything, for a backstage pass. She arrived at the venue wearing only a brown fur coat and had a handful of sharpie markers. Her goal was to get every member of the band to autograph her barely legal body; some bragging rights that would have gotten her. It never ceases to amaze you what some of these fans are willing to do to be cool, but at least it's entertaining. You double-check your back pocket for extra passes, perhaps they'll be used later tonight?

On the other hand, not all of these girls are looking for a sleazy, good time. In the back of your mind, you have a feeling that the perfect girl will be waiting for you at some random show, perhaps on the west coast. She would share the same love for music that you do, and you both would stay up late debating over the phone which Stooges album is better (you would argue "Fun House," and she would disagree in favor of "Raw Power). Maybe after awhile, she would be willing to move to Maryland. After a long tour, it would be nice to have some one to come home to, other than Sam. You eventually decide that it would be too much work to maintain a girlfriend while touring for months out of the year. How do some guys do it? The road can be lonely, but relationships are trouble. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to leave her waiting for you back home.

*

"See you later, Nate." Nigel says as he leaves the bus. The crew wants to have a meeting with the band after the show. You wonder how that's going to go. Last time you all gathered was a few months ago in Denver (the stage was only a foot off of the ground, and it felt so intimate to be that close to the crowd). Larry had called a meeting with the band about getting his salary raised. It was obvious that he was planning to continue taking more money anyway, so it was time for him to go. You've heard recently that he was touring with another band now.

You shake your head then gently rest your head against the window. Not too long after, another loud knock startles you awake yet again. This time you wonder how two hours went by so fast as you look down at your beat up leather watch. It's 7:57. Doors should be opening any minute now. Pretty soon hundreds of dedicated fans will be pouring into the venue, scratching each other's eyes out for a spot along the front stage fence. That crammed little space is the best seat in the house, in your opinion. It was where you and Sam would always stand when you would go to concerts. It's right in the middle of all of the action. You're in full view of the performing band while you battle all of the elbows and arms that poke into you. When you're down there, some one

invading your personal space is an understatement. Throughout the excitement of the show, sweaty bodies become pressed up and stuck together. All of the tension and competition to be the most dedicated fan disappears when that one song starts playing and a family of audience members brand together to sing every word in unison. The feeling is incredible to see that from the stage every night. It's a reassuring thought that makes this whole lifestyle worth it to you.

The final mic check will need to be done soon. You dread having to venture back outside, but all of the girls who have proved themselves worthy should already be backstage by now. You walk back up those hideous yellow stairs that lead to the stage, and make your way across the floor. On the other side of the curtain, you can feel the anticipation of the audience waiting for it to lift. The mics are set up and waiting for you, while the crowd has no idea who is actually back there saying: "Check...one...one-two... Check one...two." You're satisfied with how blaring the vocals are in the wedge.

Suddenly in the corner of your eye, you see Nigel approaching with the band following behind him. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Rio Fields. It's the first time you've seen them all day. They even walk like rock stars, with wide steps leading their shiny silver belt buckles. Their "girlfriends" stand off to the side of the stage, and in the brief glance you take to check them out, you immediately figure out the difference between the real girlfriends visiting from home and the ones from the road. In general, the girlfriends from home stand with their arms crossed; enthusiastically inept for the forthcoming set they've seen dozens of times. They still mouth all of the lyrics to the songs, but compared to the other girls, well. The girlfriends from the road are waving their arms in the air, like it's the best moment of their lives. They are singing, nearly screaming, the lyrics as if the microphones could reach their signal from their positions at the side of the stage.

Frankie, the lead singer/rhythm guitarist, approaches you and holds his hand out for the mic. He grabs it out of your hand without even a thank you. Every night, never a thank you. You sigh to yourself

and head over to the side of the stage. You assume the position as you do every night and kneel down in front of the girlfriends. Your job includes waiting for some one to break a guitar string.

Soon the house lights fade to a dim, and the curtain slowly lifts open. The noise in the auditorium gets increasingly louder as the crowd welcomes Rio Fields. The band takes their places and eventually starts playing the first song on their set list, "Lady Love." You pull out your flashlight to look down at the itinerary on the back of your pass. Tomorrow night you'll be in Chicago at the Westside Ballroom. You wonder if that great coffee shop next door to the venue is still in business.

Right before the second chorus of "Lady Love," Frankie breaks a string on the Gibson. It happens every night at about this time, 9pm. As you run out to switch guitars with him, you wonder if there's any more coffee brewing backstage.

The Overpass on Thorn Street

by David Sanchez

The twilight began to take hold over the hills.

I stood in the middle of the overpass on Thorn Street and watched the traffic rush under my feet. I did that frequently when I was younger, idle moments and a whole desert spread out across the Upper Valley.

When I was younger the thought flashed through my mind. It always sent chills down the back of my legs. It was almost like a dare, the thought of jumping off the overpass onto traffic below. It was never a death wish, because back then it never crossed my mind that I could die if I tried it.

I stood on the overpass and watched the traffic flow, the old flirtation with the dare that never died. The goosebumps of fear still coursed down my legs whenever I leaned forward to look straight onto the asphalt of the freeway. The encroaching twilight made more drivers turn on their headlights before they rushed under my feet. Whenever the 18-wheelers rushed past, they shook the overpass. Some blared their horns if they saw me wave to them. My hands grew colder with the steadily decreasing temperature, my fingers intertwined with the chain link fence. The concrete of the overpass wall exhaled the trapped heat of the now-dying sunlight.

I used to pick up gravel from the sidewalk and place it on the edge of the concrete wall of the overpass. Through the gap between the wall and the fence I flicked gravel pebbles into the flowing traffic and kept an ear out for the tiny impacts on passing windshields and car roofs. One day I used larger pebbles and nudged those over the edge, and I managed to hit some 18-wheelers with them. Apparently one of the truckers alerted the police, and a black and

white cruiser stopped behind me. When I heard the driver-side door open and close my heart leaped. “What’s your name, young man?” the officer asked, his clenched jaw a sharp contrast to the frightened gaze of my reflection in his mirror-tinted sunglasses.

“Max Romero,” I said. I wanted to give a different name, but guilt overpowered my thinking. I put my hands behind me and cleared the last few gravel pebbles off the edge. I did not want any incriminating evidence against me.

“You know it’s a felony to flick rocks onto traffic,” the officer said through the clenched jaw. I never knew if that was true, but at the time my breath seized up.

“No, sir,” I wheezed. The officer kept a hard gaze upon me.

“Now you know,” he said. “I don’t want to see you doing that here again, or I’ll call your parents.”

“Yes, sir,” I stammered. “I won’t do it ever again.”

“Okay,” the officer said, his voice and jaw softened by pity. He walked back to his cruiser, turned on the headlights and drifted across the overpass toward Doniphan Boulevard.

The increasing twilight reduced the stream of red and white lights to a slow trickle of diamonds and rubies on a black velvet road. More 18 wheelers rushed under the overpass, and I felt more tiny rumblings under my feet. The concrete and the fence were colder against my skin.

The thought I dismissed as an imaginary scenario for a bored young mind slowly built up strength, and I looked down into the darkness of the asphalt. I felt the old goosebumps of fear through my legs. It was still not a death wish, because I felt I could cheat death and survive. I mapped out the process by sight: climb the fence, perch myself on the edge of the overpass, wait for the perfect moment

and make the jump. If I aimed for an 18-wheeler, all the better, I thought, because I would land on top and hang on. It sounded simple. I decided to take the dare.

The fence on the overpass was curved, probably to deter others from attempting what I planned that early evening and past evenings when I was younger. It just made the climb over and onto the edge of the overpass a bit more time-consuming. There were a couple of cars that honked to protest my actions as they passed behind me on Thorn Street. I paid them no mind and straddled the top edge of the fence. I saw the traffic rush by faster under the overpass. I had a brief moment of doubt, but that was overruled by the growing sense of fearlessness as everything happened as I had visualized before and at that moment.

I scaled down the fence toward the edge of the overpass with greater caution. If I slipped, I would have fallen and been hit by a car. I made it to the overpass edge and felt around with the toe of my sneakers for sure footing. I turned myself around, kept my heels squarely on the overpass, and faced the oncoming traffic. The hills were not a distant part of the black night sky.

Now came the difficult part: I had to wait for an oncoming 18-wheeler and then calculate the perfect timing for the jump off the overpass. I felt my fingers intertwined with the chain links of the fence.

The goose bumps of fear coursed down the back of my legs, stronger than before.

Is this really within possibility? Yes. A thousand times, yes.

You do know you will die or be severely injured if you follow through, don't you? I won't die. Adrenaline will dull the pain or stop it altogether. At worst I'll break a leg.

You're convinced everything will turn out just fine? Yes, otherwise I wouldn't have gotten to this point in the first place. I know I can do

it. I know.

My heartbeat quickened and my chest constricted, as if I had fallen in love. My fingers kept their grasp on the chain link fence as a soft desert breeze blew up into my shorts and the chill kissed my thighs. And then it happened.

The sharp motion forward happened so quickly it didn't register until I felt myself cut through the air. It felt as if I dove into a pool of thick molasses. The sense of movement was slowed and I saw everything at once. There was the elementary school where I went to play basketball for hours until I could no longer see the hoop against the darkness of the backboard. On the other side of the freeway were the rich people's houses. I had friends who lived in that neighborhood, but I didn't think about what they did at that moment. I caught the faint smell of sagebrush from the hills just above the rich houses and the elementary school, along with a brief biting chill of a breeze.

Three cars passed just below me: a white 4-door sedan, a red minivan, and a gray truck like the one my dad drove. The 18-wheeler I targeted began to get closer to me, and I saw the eyes of the driver move from the road up to me. There was a sudden change from jaded to deathly frightened in his stare while my body flew just above him.

My body crumpled like a rag doll hitting the floor after sliding off the bed. My legs hit the trailer roof and they gave out on me. I hit the metal roof of the trailer with a thud. I bounced once, then slid from the front of the trailer to the back before my instincts kicked in and I made a frantic clawing for grip. I took hold of a metal edge, but the momentum of my lower body overpowered my fingers. I flailed off the roof of the trailer and hit the warm asphalt below in a tumble. I saw and heard the 18-wheeler's tires bounce and smoke in braking. I then heard a car horn honk frantically while I stayed frozen on the freeway asphalt. I felt my neck cringe as I turned my head from the 18-wheeler to the sight of a petrified woman driving

a Chevy minivan. My body sprang up from the freeway and went into a frantic run, away from the screeching brakes and angry honks of the traffic. The pool of molasses gave way to the feeling of being flung out of a slingshot as I ran home.

A week later I woke up and walked to the overpass on Thorn Street. The traffic from rush hour made its way under my feet. Whenever the 18-wheelers rushed past, they shook the overpass. I caught a faint whiff of exhaust fumes and ran my fingers on the chain link fence. When I looked down to the asphalt of the freeway below, I expected to feel the goose bumps of fear course down my legs. That morning was different, because I smiled and laughed, as the approaching sunlight began to take hold upon the hills.

West Oakland Bridge

by Jennifer A. Leland

Darryl saunters through the thick sunlit air.

"Chuba, 20, Fo-tay, Black as an ace of spades, as black as me" he calls out to no one in particular as his slow strut comes to a halt before me. He does not look at me, but instead kisses my forehead and smiles, a child's grin across a man's face.

These are words for heroin, something I don't do any longer. I've said no to him for two years now but I still say it again, saying, "No Darryl, I'm alright today. OK just how I am."

Darryl is sick most of the time or he is high. There is rarely an area of gray up here on this freeway overpass, suspended above the flatlands flat-landsakland. Either you are high or sick, straight or doped, buyer or seller, snitch or fiend. I am the only gray around here and I am leaving.

Some folks would say you can't stay clean among dirt. But Darryl is my friend and isn't that the same "black-and-white-thinking that makes defines addicts in the first place", words I learned in NA. Darryl and I started meeting at this overpass 3 years ago, when I was 17 and he was 15; but I always felt younger than him. Darryl fingers his bag for an extra cigarette filter to tip off his point (needle) and across the way his lover, Emanuel points to his eyes, assigning himself lookout to protect our spot from cops. Darryl loads his point with last night's water, residue that drips from bars still wet from this morning's fog. He empties his needle into his arm and then turns to the freeway below but does not care. It is all internal now. I sit near him and lay my head on his shoulder.

The sun floods my face with heat and light and I realize that I don't care as much about Darryl these days. He has always been a big, wise brother-type to me, but you can't care about someone you

know is so sick like him. I peek over at him and ache with desire to tell Darryl about Sal, about how handsome he is and how we got married at the Church of Elvis in Portland last weekend. Only 5 bucks to get hitched and Sal gave me a Zoe watch from the Muppets that makes me smile inside and out. Darryl's eyes grin now and flash and I know he is feeling better. If I did tell him, I can already hear his response spinning in my mind.

"Wants make aches and you ain't fixing to be aching your whole life, are you?"

So I stop wanting to tell him much of anything. So, I don't tell him.

The bottom of the sun floats over the horizon now and Emanuel is finished with his lookout so I point to my eyes while he fixes himself. I put my forehead to the cold fence and hang my eyes over West Oakland like a god. I know this is my last time here on the overpass; "the bridge" is what we call it. I don't fix anymore but rituals are hard to come by and this being my last day and all. I just want to be here for some reason. Tomorrow, Sal and I are going to Mexico, not for a honeymoon, but to go and live under an unknown sky for awhile. We both bought new boots this morning from St. Vincent's, leathered all the way from Italy, big and brown. Sal told me they will carry us any old way the day decides to take us. I smiled at him smiling and I know I'm finally in love when I can sink myself between Sal's long lashes and something already broken breaks in me again. Breaks into a sweet sort of sadness and warmth. This how I spell love.

I squeeze Darryl's hand to say goodbye but I know he already knows. This is how goodbyes are for me above 880 and its 5 freeway lanes stretching towards the sunlit south. I know Sal is waiting for me and our new boots that are going to take us anywhere and I must leave this place. I can say goodbye to Oakland because right now, it is only a reminder of where I don't want to be. It doesn't tempt or taunt because finally I am leaving. I don't want it, so it doesn't make me ache. It just lies there, all hot and industrial with chemicals and filth choking the air and kids selling

crack on nearly every corner, mistaking diamonds on their fists for shields. But if you look for truth, you can find it too. Just look to corner shrines, the way a church swells on a hot Sunday afternoon, the way a BBQ bends aggression into acceptance. It's beautiful-sad. These are fusion words and vocabularies that Darryl and I made up one day on the bridge. Beautiful-Sad. Angry-Sad. Fear-Wish.

Darryl's eyes are half open slits now and his head slides back across the fence. I think about what he doesn't know-- that having no wants also makes aches and even when you get what you want, you have to protect it. It aches no matter what. These are the words I want to leave Darryl with but he's gone like a dried up river. Beautiful-Aches. I check my new Zoe watch because finally time means something to me and I kiss the soft spot on Darryl's head goodbye and say thank you. I climb down the ramp into the shadowed city and walk toward where Sal is, where the 7th Street ghosts roam and mutter and all I have to do is look for the brightest eyes and sometimes the saddest eyes leaning against Dr. Bills Pharmacy, not buying points or cotton but sipping on an orange soda smiling his whole face up at me.

Hard Labor

by Rebecca Sturgeon

She wakes up between contractions, alarmed by the absolute stillness of her body. She tucks her notebook and pen under her arm and stumbles into the bathroom.

Dear Jean, she begins, settling down onto the floor, it has been too long.

She pauses to let her next contraction rumble across her abdomen. As the pain grows, she bites off tiny chunks of air. With her left hand, she traces circles above her pubic bone. The muscles beneath clench tighter. She leans forward over the toilet bowl and vomits.

So sorry for the mess of this letter. You would not believe where I am right now.

Her husband taps at the door, calls her name so softly she barely hears it over the sound of her water breaking.

Jeannie, I don't have much time to write. Just know I think of you. Her husband opens the bathroom door, his face equal parts worry and resolve. He lifts her to her feet and drags her to the car. She trails amniotic fluid like a snail. In the car, she begins again, tracing letters across her arm with her fingernail.

Forgive me, dearest daughter, that you died so young, and that we so soon replaced you.

Shipwreck

by Jim Parks

A steady pull, that's what one needs in these circumstances. Just pull along in the water, don't fight the tide, just rest between strokes, change positions from side to back to breast stroke and relax.

He knew his position. The hell of the thing was the tide was falling off the Little Bahama Bank to the Tongue of the Ocean, that one mile deep, one hundred twenty-five mile long, twenty-five mile wide trench between New Providence and Andros, and it was hard on him.

It was just a matter of controlling one's fear. He knew that in his rational mind, but in the primordial mind, the one he couldn't control, he knew the danger of appearing weak, a prey for the bull and Mako sharks that prowl the banks when the tides rush out.

Overhead, jetliners made their whistling descent to the airport. He could see the amber lights of Golding Point power station and the lighthouse above the golf course.

Oh, he knew where he was, okay. Just beyond, the cricket fields and the split in the road that took one over the hill, either to Bay Street and downtown or to the local fellas' neighborhood and Fox Hill beyond.

She had flipped just before dark fell like a curtain and the pink sky turned to a blaze of bright orange in the northwest, then to a greenish flash just above the horizon that spread upward and outward to that deep, inky blue above the ocean.

Snotty weather, too snotty for Lady Patricia he discovered when he left Fresh Creek inlet on Andros. But friends are friends and after they "passed good time," people looked at their watches and made

their goodbyes. After the lobster and conch were eaten and rum drained from the bottles, he had napped a little and made all secure to go back to Nassau town.

His heart had been heavy when Patricia got on the plane for Miami. She and he, the boat and the waves and wind, beat against the northeast and he started a long reach for that magical place.

Now, in the water, the chop, he gazed up at the airplanes and sensed they were mocking him.

“Watch it, old man. That’s no way to be thinking. It’s only been a few hours of swimming. Just keep pulling along steady.”

She went down in a hurry. Her iron ballast in the bilges, window weights from sashes, shifted when he came about and a plank had sprung. Her ribs had taken all the pounding they could handle. He missed his grab for the bag with his fins and mask and snorkel, and as she went down, he went up her mast hand over hand, careful not to get tangled in the shrouds or the lacings for her main sail.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit!” he shouted. It would have been comical if he had seen it on a movie screen or in a television program.

He started to swim, crying, “God, help me. I will survive if you allow it.”

A piece of plywood from the deck in her cockpit popped up beside him and her tiller, a piece he had made from laminated red oak gleaned from the abandoned dunnage on the docks at Man O’ War Cay, floated to surface just behind it.

He grabbed them and crawled aboard, starting to make his pull for the power station that was just peeping over the horizon with its amber lights blazing.

What about the sharks?

If they hit me, there's nothing I can do about it. If they don't, then I will have been worrying about nothing in particular.

He knew his capabilities, how far he could swim.

But how far would that be? His course made good, over the ground below him a mile deep, would be one thing. His course through the water was another matter, what with the bulldozer force of the tide. The board and the tiller's buoyant qualities were helping him. He wasn't completely immersed.

His course. He adjusted it. He constantly made for a point just about ten degrees above the lighthouse because he knew his aspect in the water was not very efficient and he would be pulled across the inlet and out to sea, into the shallows of the Exumas chain if he didn't.

The trick was to keep his wits about him, not to thrash and panic, to control his fear. He had the image of two great boxers circling each other, feinting jabs and landing hooks, looking for that chance to land an uppercut with a lot of stuff in it.

Like that, it was all in the stance, the footwork, the timing, and the insouciant lack of trepidation.

He laughed out loud, a bellow that astonished him. Rough going.

“Get rough with it, sailor man!”

It was going to be an all-nighter. Already, two hours had passed and the prospect of New Providence was getting higher on the horizon. His chronometer strapped to his wrist told him the tide would go slack in another couple of hours.

Well, will we dance and sing all night? Yes, we will, yes, we will.

Eat up everything in sight? Yes, we will, yes, we will.

Everybody, drink, drink this toast...Drink this wedding toast.

Drink, oh, drink this toast...To the two we love the most.

* * *

They sat in the afternoon sunshine, avoiding the oil stain in the driveway, leaning up against the rear wheel of his dad's massive old Oldsmobile, the one he had given his mom when he got the new one. It was a wheezing rattle trap just good enough to get her from the job to the grocery store to the dentist's office to the post office to the bank and back to the grocery store, thence to the laundromat.

Patricia's golden hair and deep tan contrasted with her obviously fair complexion. She smiled and passed him the joint.

"I got this from Tillie. She met this dude hitchhiking and he can get it for ten dollars a lid, man. It's some bad shit."

Her English accented with the native Dutch was charming. Her dad, a petroleum engineer with a lot of experience in offshore operations in the North Sea, had relocated to the boom town to be nearer the corporate office. He could hardly believe his good fortune. He had scored an exotic, a European girl, because he made her laugh. It was that simple.

He inhaled deeply and felt the glow, the slight pressure inside his head, just behind his eyes, the little thrill from his balls up his spine to his neck and the roots of his hair.

He stared at her long, bare toes in her flip flops and followed the elegant lines of her shins to her knees and heavily muscled thighs. She wore one of his cowboy shirts knotted above her midriff.

Oh, she was a keeper. She wore a little ring he had gotten at the flea market, an Indian ring made of multicolored beads and wire that she twisted and turned on her elegant finger. Around her neck,

she had a shark's tooth he had gotten on an expedition to California to try to learn to surf.

She wiggled, giggling and starting to say something and he made a gesture with his hand, palm down, grabbing hers and handing her the joint with the other hand.

“Baby, don’t. Just feel the vibe. Just feel it.”

She sighed.

“You’re such a moody fuck, Jimmy.”

“I know it, honey, but, hey, I’m all yours.”

They harmonized a capella on Billie Holliday’s “Lover Man, Where Are You?”

He grabbed his harmonica from a shirt pocket.

“No, baby, here’s where it changes. This is where the change comes. Dig?”

He gave her the chord.

She sang it perfect pitch.

It was a moment, but it sustained him now in the fifth hour of the swim.

He was a heartbreaking couple of hundred yards from the little harbor at the power station where they dock the tankers delivering diesel. The rip of the tide kept sweeping him out and away from the place where he wanted to be. Then the surge would carry him too far when he tried to correct back to the northeast. He knew he couldn’t make it there. Too much sharp coral. Cliffs too high.

He had been vomiting sea water and the diarrhea was starting to

bother him. With every stroke, he felt it squirt out inside his shorts, just warm water really, but it was steadily dehydrating him. There was no way to keep the stuff out of his mouth.

He thought of a large glass of iced tea, a milk shake, a freshly cut cantaloupe, a squirting, ripened peach.

He thought of Patricia's exquisite ass when he thought of the peach, of her posing with one foot planted flat and the other pointed with the toes resting on the gunwale of the boat, shouting "Yoo hoo, beautiful people."

He could have all that if he just didn't give up.

* * *

He rested a little bit, just sidestroking along, guiding himself with his feet and his hands.

"Got to get with it, man. Don't want the sharks to think they've found something that is dying."

Dying? Where did that come from?

He didn't believe it when the first fin appeared right in front of him, slicing through the water like a knife. A second appeared off his left side and he felt something shove him from behind.

He did a little dance in the water, panicked, screaming for all the world to hear. His head dipped under the water and he heard the high-pitched sound of a record player turned to five times its normal speed.

Almost like a burst transmission of encoded radio signals, something he didn't understand.

Another shove. He followed the direction he had been thrust into,

fighting to outrun whatever had pushed him

“I guess this is it.”

He turned to fight and there it was. The massive bulge over the eyes, the bottle nose, the flattened tail, the blow hole spouting spray and air like a pneumatic tool suddenly unhooked from the hose.

The truth was, he could barely see. His eyes were swollen almost shut.

He kept swimming, following the guide of the porpoises. They were shouting their eek, eek, eek noises at him, fussing at him, making him mind.

As quickly as they had come, they were gone, and he found slack water.

He breast stroked toward the fuel dock as easily as if he were in a swimming pool in a motel courtyard.

The surge pushed him against one of the massive earth mover tires used for fenders and he climbed aboard it, reaching up for another grasp, and pulled himself up to stand on its top. From there, it was easy enough to climb to the next one stacked atop it, and grab the chain that held it to the dock.

He crawled onto the creosoted planks and pulled their pungent aroma in as if it was some magic elixir.

He rolled over on his back and said goodbye to “Lady Patricia.”

It was a short period of mourning. Almost immediately, he began to shiver.

* * *

He regained consciousness and checked his chronometer. The numbers and hands on the analogue dial glowed green and sickly, the way he was feeling. He'd been asleep for about fifteen minutes, and he was starting to shiver uncontrollably. His body temperature was the same as the water, which was probably at least ten or fifteen degrees cooler than the air.

He jumped to his feet and made a run up the dock. He found his way blocked by a chainlink fence and gate secured with a sturdy chrome padlock and a length of rusty log chain.

He cursed the thing and shook it.

“Who the hell they think they’re gonna lock out?”

Up and over the gate, resting one sneaker on the chain, another on the cross bar of the gate. He almost tore his shorts off on the barbed wire on top, then leaped down and caught himself.

He staggered to the guard post where he could see a Bahamian in a funny cop uniform asleep with the newspaper on his lap.

“Mister. Mister. Help me. I’m cold.”

The Bahamian jumped to his feet and grabbed his night stick and a flashlight, blinding him in its beam.”

“Mon, what the hell you doin’?”

“I sank my boat.”

“What boat, boy? What kinda boat?”

“Sloop. Native sloop, man.”

“Where you come from, boy?”

“Out there.”

He pointed to the water past the dock and the inlet, out in the Tongue.

“Mon, you crazy. It’s sharks out there bigger than you! This private property. What you want me to do about it? You trespassin’.”

He couldn’t stand up any longer. His rectum released another rush of the warm water, which ran down his legs with all the rest of the sea water, and he collapsed.

“I’m cold, man. So cold.”

He felt the weight of some fabric draped over top of him. He grasped it like a baby in a crib, shivering and wiping the mucus out of his nose and mouth.

“Blow your nose on the flag, nigga, blow you nose on the flag!”

The guard was whipping him with the newspaper.

He couldn’t help but laugh. He had made a swim of about seven miles over the ground and no telling how many through the water, and here this goon was chastising him with a newspaper for blowing his nose on something he couldn’t see.

“I’m sorry, sir. Please leave me alone.”

* * *

He awakened when someone nudged him with the toe of a highly polished boot. He could see blue trousers with a wide red strip up the outseam.

“Sir, how did you get here?”

“I swam, sir.”

“Why?”

“Because I wrecked my boat, The Lady Patricia from Man O’War Cay, and I swam over to here.”

“From where?”

“I make it about seven mile off of Golding Point Light by dead reckoning, sir.”

“Mon! You so lucky to be alive!”

“I know you are right, sir.”

“Does she present a hazard to navigation?”

“In what way, sir?”

“Would another boat or ship ground on her hulk?”

“I don’t think so, sir. I believe the water is more than a mile deep out there, at least somewhere. She is in very deep water.”

“I am going to call ambulance for you, sir. Are there any other survivors? Was anyone lost.”

“No, I was single-handed.”

“You are so foolish, mon. So foolish.”

There was dark laughter from a dozen people gathered around that he couldn’t see.

Someone else: “Dat nigga got no sea sense, none whatsoever.”

* * *

At Princess Margaret Hospital, he was aware of lights passing over his head as the cot was rolled into the ward. He was asked his name, his social security number, if he had a passport, what was his address in the U.S. Was there anyone that they could contact?

He was aware of the smell of crisp starch and green soap, alcohol and the smells of human misery, body odor, infection, sweating sick people.

He answered between snores and was awakened by someone pressing with their knuckles on his breastbone. It hurt mightily and awakened him right away each time.

“I’m the doctor. I’m going to start an IV in your left hand with saline solution. You are very dehydrated. You would have lost consciousness in awhile. We are going to keep you under blankets until your body temperature returns to normal. Please try not to do anything too foolish while you are here, you bloody American.”

* * *

He saw visions of people coming and going, people he knew, some that he didn’t.

He awakened once screaming Patricia’s name. He thought he had seen her disappear beneath the waves.

Another time, he awakened when someone punched him in the arm and told him to be quiet.

He was aware that he had been talking about the Houston waterfront.

“That’s what you call the Washburn Tunnel, man. It goes under the ship channel from Pasadena to Baytown. You got to use it to get over there from the refinery. Good place to get away from the fuckin’ traffic.”

He was laughing bitterly.

“Huh? You don’t know about Houston traffic?”

He awakened all the way and saw the doctor for the first time, a spare man with a pencil thin moustache and coffee colored skin, his curly hair slicked back with pomade, wearing a crisply starched lab coat.

“You from Houston, mon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have some colleagues that were trained at the Houston Medical Center. You know that place?”

“Yes, sir. Is that where you went to medical school?”

“No, mon, I got my diploma troo da’ mail.”

There was laughter up and down the ward, a dozen sick Bahamians and the nurses, all giving him the business.

“I got my diploma da’ same place you got your ideas ‘bout how to sail da’ boat, mon. Hey, mon, you know, if banana come on banana boat, right, mon?”

“Yeah.” He said it cautiously. He knew this was going to cost him something.

“And pineapple come on pineapple boat, right, mon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Den, what kinda boat AIDS come on?”

“I dunno.”

“Ha ha ha. Coptin’s dinghy!”

There was an explosion of laughter.

“You better check your dinghy, mon! Or did you sink dat, too?”

There was another crescendo of laughter.

* * *

The next time he awakened, a nurse was poking his shoulder with her finger. The IV was gone.

“This is Miss McWhirter from the American Consul’s office, sir.”

“Hello, Miss. What can I do for you?”

“You can leave the Bahamas.”

“Why”

“Because,” she said from inside her exquisite helmet of brown hair and aviator glasses, tapping a pencil eraser against a manila folder, “the Bahamians don’t appreciate your wrecking an undocumented vessel in their waters. Not to worry. While you’ve been asleep, the investigation has cleared you. There is no foul play, no one was lost; according to the people on Andros, you left there alone. This has been ruled an accident caused by an error in judgment on your part. If you will sign here, you will be cleared of any liability, including your hospital fees.”

“I’m very grateful, Miss.”

“You will be needing this.”

She handed him a crisp new passport.

“Have nice day, sir.”

“Same to you, Miss McWhirter.”

“Oh, and one more thing. Here’s a copy of the front page story about you in the newspaper.

Ooh, that stings, he thought.

Inside the manila folder she handed him was a Federal Express envelope. There was a short note from Patricia and an airplane ticket to Amsterdam.

“Come home, lover man. All is forgiven.”

* * *

They gave him a crisp new suit of scrubs and called him a taxi.

On the ramp outside the door, the doctor hailed him.

“Well, now that you’ve had your ridiculous Huckleberry Finn adven-
chuh, I guess you can brag about how you battled the mighty ocean
sea to a stand still, eh?”

He grinned.

“Something like that.”

“That’s about what I expected, mon. You silly American fuck.”

The taxi driver smirked at him.

“You wreck dat boat, mon?”

“Yeah, mon.”

“You oughta be shamed to look anybody’s eyes you meet, doddy. Dat was good boat, mon. I’m gonna tell da boys from Man O’ War Cay on you.”

“Okay.”

“Where to, doddy?”

“Barnett’s Bank on Bay Street.”

Inside, there was the smell of fresh ink and the cool authority of cash and electronic equipment. He withdrew all his cash and had it converted to traveler’s checks. Up the street, he bought a mackinaw at a yachting supply store and hailed another taxi to the airport.

When he walked aboard the American Airlines shuttle to Miami, he smiled at the flight attendant.

“Did you enjoy your trip to the Bahamas, sir?”

“It was some kind of ridiculous Huckleberry Finn adventure, honey. I haven’t quite made up my mind yet.”

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

by Irving Hubler Jr.

If you have ever gotten so hooked on a song that you can't stop listening to it then you are probably one of those people with something missing from their life. I was one of those people. I couldn't tell you why or what I felt I was missing, but the song Shama Lama Ding Dong, from the movie Animal House, had me possessed.

I didn't see the movie or hear the song until a year ago. To explain why I hadn't seen the cult classic about campus life until two years out of college—even though I attended the University of Oregon where the film took place—I have to blame Marin County, California dead-heads. Every time the movie was showing in somebody's room or one campus or at the local arts theater, the audience would invariably be full of upper-middle class kids high as kites and just on the verge of trading their tie-died 'Steal Your Face' or 'Shoreline 1995' t-shirts in for short-sleeved, blue-striped button-downs and Dave Matthews Band fan club baseball hats. Not my crowd, so I avoided it like everything else those Golden Gate-ers loved so much. Then, a local brew-and-view establishment showed Animal House as a double-feature with Ferris Bueller's Day Off, and who can miss the chance to see that movie, while drinking beer, again.

The band, in the movie, plays the song at a small African American club, the Dexter Lake Club, where our heroes take girls to under false pretenses. I initially found that funny because I thought it was a safe bet to make that Dexter Lake didn't have enough African American citizens to start a glee club, let alone have their own night club (probably a sad and unfortunate bi-product of Oregon's dark history of 'Sundown Laws'). That passed away the moment Otis, of Otis Day and the Knights (who perform in the movie), tells the band, "Hit It," and they churn and croon their way through an unforgettable torch-song, one of rhythm and soul legend. I was

frozen in my seat. My heart pounded. The hairs on my neck stood up, my head tingled, and I could feel it. I could feel my life fill up in a way that I haven't for a while. In retrospect, I was over reacting, but who could not fall in love with lyrics like, "That is why you are my sugar-dee-dee-do."

A few days later, I sat at my computer, listening to the song repeatedly on my iPod, searching for more information on Otis Day and the Knights. I was disappointed. DeWayne Jessie, a character actor, was called up to play the role of Otis. From the success of the movie, he got requests for the band to play at state fairs, weddings, corporate parties et cetera. There was no Otis, no man in particular that was the man who set my heart on fire. I found out that one could actually book them for a show; that they were touring even to this day. It all seemed a bit hollow to me. I figured it would drop.

Three months passed, I was surprised that my iPod hadn't busted yet, and I was on the phone with Lloyd St Martin Variety Artists International Incorporated booking Otis Day and the Knights for one night at Molly Thatcher, my friend's bar. It worked out for them because the band had a week between their Bakersfield Basket Festival and Hot Redding Nights gigs. They had to be paid upfront, but I just put up the money that was supposed to be for my trip to Paris. I only slightly regret that decision. Jon had nothing going on that night at Molly's and said he would charge five bucks at the door to make it worth his wild.

I am not the only one who likes Otis Day and the Knights. Molly's was spilling out the front door with people. Jon was excited. The whole energy of the place was almost too much to handle.

I went up to Otis before their set, to make sure they played the song, "Otis-my-man, he he he, I read about that on the web site, and it is of course from the movie, yeah."

I was nervous. Was I talking to DeWayne or Otis?

"Yeah, this should be a good show. Use to playing bigger venues

though, but you paid for Otis and Otis you will get." He had the serious look of a businessman, nothing like the passionate young man on stage in the film.

We stared at each other for one good awkward beat.

"Will you play the song?"

"Baby, Otis plays only the greatest." He walked away but stopped next to a poster-sized, glass framed photo. "Hey, I have these too, but they are of me. Ten dollars. Want one?"

It was a gigantic print of my ex-girlfriend Caroline Hammond. I loved her so much, even though she treated me like dirt and slept with my brother. The photo had hung above my couch as a devotional piece. After the break-up, I couldn't live with the thing, but I couldn't destroy it either. Jon said he would hang it in the women's bathroom.

I guess he never got around to it.

"No," I was struck slightly dumb at the discovery of something I forgot about. "No just your Shama Lama Ding Dong."

"That's not funny man." Otis walked away.

They opened up with Shout and the crowd went crazy; people danced on their backs on the floor like in the movie. Some people were in togas. Everyone was drunk. I sat patiently by the bar waiting for something I couldn't describe to myself. What could possibly happen? I figured out what I was feeling. Some part of my heart hadn't let go of Caroline. I never did anything to get rid of her from my heart. I exited the adulteress from my routines, but not my emotions. I felt bad. This whole thing and I just needed to be reminded to get that woman out of my heart. I should have gotten Neal Diamond, I felt so dumb.

They crowd flexed and cooed with joy. They had already played for

an hour. Otis (DeWayne) took the mike, "It feels so good to be here at Molly Thatcher's. We like to do for you a tune entitled Shama Lama Ding Dong, so hit it!"

The song.

The crowd disappeared to me. I fell into a chasm. I was faced with my denial and my need for execution. I knew what had to happen.

Honestly, with everyone so drunk, I thought no one would care. I ran to the back, got the photo of Caroline, and brought it out to the dance floor. Instead of cheering me on, or just flat ignoring me, the crowd and the band fell silent. I felt their doubt and confusion from their eyes, as everyone was looking at me. What they were puzzled by was the sight of a grown man, me, smashing a giant glass-framed photo on the ground, stomping on the shards and image, shouting, "I hate you Caroline! I hate your heart!"

Unmasking Mom

by Megan Schindler

The first time I saw my mother without makeup on, I thought she had died in the night. Stopped cold in the middle of the kitchen holding my cereal bowl; then I dropped the bowl and made a run for it. Took the nanny more than two hours to convince me that what I'd seen wasn't a ghost, and by that time Mom was already on set, being made into somebody else.

That's the nature of the business. If you have a self, you have to cover it up for the camera; and if you don't, they give you one easily enough. Either way, the result is the same: a mask of plastic products designed to look like a face, whether it be a living or dead one.

Which is what flipped me out about Mom that day. She didn't even look like she had a dead face; she looked naked up there, like she had been erased. In a split second, I imagined her as a pastel sketch on a life-sized canvas—that was it, somebody had replaced our kitchen with a canvas, a set piece, during the night—that had recently been rubbed out with putty. Like she didn't look right, the image wasn't quite what they wanted, and they'd have to do it again.

Later, with the nanny, I kept insisting that the person who'd been standing in our kitchen was a woman made up to look like Mom. They'd done a pretty rotten job of it, I said, and if they thought I was going to fall for a trick like that they had another think coming. I was a tough little kid, but dumb.

Now, though, things have changed some. Sitting beside her bed in the hospital, I don't feel tough at all. But I don't feel dumb either. I feel like an old man who's wasted his life trying to build a staircase to the sun, only to reach the top on his last day and realize he's barely left the ground.

The nurse comes in to check something. She bends around the bed and flips a switch on the wall.

"Thank you," I say. I hadn't noticed the sun was setting.

"Got to be able to see her pretty face," she says cheerily.

In the fluorescent light, Mom looks like a bump in the sheets. The only thing that gives her any color is her mouth, which hangs open: a spot of black on white marble. If I take my glasses off, I can almost imagine her whole face as a cartoon eye, a round white ball with a black dot near the bottom. My mom's face is Bugs Bunny looking down as he winks. Her shoulders could almost be his puffy cheeks.

It's night now. All over the hospital lights are being flicked on by nurses who don't notice dying people anymore. Bugs Bunny eyes are staring in a hundred directions. At least I can make Mom different. I reach up to her chin and close her mouth. Then I turn off the light.

I'm barely pulling into the driveway when a face like a harpy's flashes in front of the headlights.

"Where have you been?"

"Shit, Pam. You scared me," I tell her. "Can you give me a second to park the car?"

Evidently, I'm putting her out; she peels off and stands next to the walkway, smoking a cigarette and tapping her foot.

"Come on, Derek, it's freezing out here."

"Haste makes waste." I take my time parking and making my way to the door. Oops—can't find my key. Is it in this pocket? No. Maybe my back pocket? Not there either. Did I leave it in the car?

"This is not funny."

The truth is, I'm not doing it to be funny. I was in a different mode until the moment when she attacked my windshield like a bat, and I'm actually having trouble moving out of it. I don't know what to say to her and am acting like a fool to buy time.

"Thank God," she sighs, seeing that I've found my key.

I open the door. She barges in. Maybe she just wants to have a drink and watch some TV, I'm thinking. I'll tell her I need a shower, and by the time I come back down she'll be passed out on the sofa. Hoping for the best, I excuse myself and head upstairs to my room.

No such luck. She follows me. Flipping on the light before I'm even in the room—what is it with women and light?—she sashays across the carpet and flops onto the bed.

"I'm a mess," she announces.

Great. Here we go again. Resigned to a night of playing psychiatrist, I sit on the bed beside her and start taking my shoes off. It takes a few moments for me to realize she hasn't said anything. Can't she just say what she needs to and get out? I think, but again, no such luck. She's waiting for her cue tonight.

"Oh, really?" I offer.

And she's off. "I'm telling you, Derek, I just can't take it anymore. I mean, if the customers changed every now and then, it'd be something. But it's always the same old guys, night after night, staring like they never saw it before. And this after five nights in a row—five nights I worked this week, five nights I saw the same fucking guys. It's not like they tip me anything—they just stare, not even wide-eyed, but more like my dad used to stare at me when I was a kid, like I'm a bug and they want to squash me. I swear, I think they're stalkers, Derek. Every one of them."

"Have you ever seen one of them following you?"

"Not me. Somebody else, though. For sure they're stalking somebody else." She punctuates the statement with one dramatic drag off her cigarette.

The woman makes me laugh. I can't help it. Pam's fun to be around sometimes; you just have to be in the mood for her. Ninety-nine percent of the time you're not, but she can get you there. She has a talent for manipulating men's moods.

We've dated every now and then, I'm ashamed to admit. Like I said, sometimes I just can't help it. But I can only take so much of her, so usually we last a week or two before I kick her out. She, on the other hand, doesn't seem to be able to get enough of me.

"Wanna have sex?" she says.

I shake my head. "I'm not really in the mood for it."

"Well, I am." After lighting another cigarette, she rolls over onto her belly to face me. She pushes her tits together in that way girls do when they know what they're after and tells me this: "I've been horny all night. Watching the other girls dance turns me on, baby. Is that weird?"

"Um... I don't think so."

Pam giggles and inches closer. "You remember Tiana? The redhead?"

I nod.

"Well, there was this guy there tonight—and I'm telling you, he was hot, baby. Young, tall, a rod about as thick as my arm—"

"How could you possibly know that?" Pam. She's a great girl and all, but she does have a tendency to exaggerate.

"I could see it through his pants. Cause she was all up on him—Tiana. Had her stuff right in his face, rubbing it up and down like he was giving her head. And I swear, that boy was about to shove his face in it. You should have him."

She rambles on. For the moment, I'm stuck on the thought of Tiana, whose dance style I remember very well. She was the first girl I laid eyes on when I first went into the place—it was either for a bachelor or a bachelorette party, I can't remember—and I thought, yeah, this is the one I've been looking for all my life.

She was about five foot ten, with all the typical trimmings of a Hollywood stripper, and she danced like she was made out of rubber. But that wasn't what got me. It was her face: she had the sweetest, most innocent face I'd ever seen. Like Shirley Temple Barbie or something.

Pam and I first got together when I paid her to spy for me, to find out if Tiana was available. If I'd known back then how tricky Pam was, I would never have asked her to do it. But at the time she just seemed like a friendly old-timer, a woman who'd been stripping for so long she'd seen her tips peak and fall and was now just hanging on because she didn't know what else to do.

When I look at her now, I see a totally different person. Deceitful. Vengeful. Bitter. A pretty good lay when the chips are down, and not so scrupulous that sex has to mean something. I'm wishing she were Tiana; she's most likely wishing I were the guy she saw in the bar. Anyway, I start to touch her just to shut her up and pretty soon we're going at it. It's worth the trouble, for a change.

I wake up and reach for my cell phone to check the time. It's almost ten o' clock. I have seven new messages, which I ignore.

"Wake up, Pam." She snuggles deeper into the covers. Being here is a luxury for her, I know, like a kind of vacation from the grit of her real life. But at the moment, I don't care.

"Come on." I shake her until she opens her eyes. "Time to get up. I

got things to do."

She's not happy about it, but she sits up. Apparently, she put her clothes back on after I fell asleep and before she crawled under the covers. Or did I just forget to take them off? Looking more like a harpy than ever, she yawns and lifts another cigarette to her lips.

"Let's go, Pam," I say, pulling up my pants.

She exhales a stream of smoke under the covers. "Watch this." After a moment, she raises the blanket again; a thin puff of smoke rises into the air.

"That's gross."

"Who cares? I know you were going to wash them tonight anyway."

The comment makes me wonder how perceptive she is while I finish getting dressed. Sure, she knows I'm not interested in dating her, but she couldn't possibly know I'm repulsed by her. She wouldn't sleep with me if she did. That's the thing about Pam: being wanted gets her going. Her need for attention is what got her into stripping in the first place.

"I need some money, Derek. I didn't make enough today."

"How much did you make?"

She eyes me for a moment. "Fifty."

"Yeah, right. I'll bet a hundred and fifty at the very least," I say as I begin the search for my missing sock. It never fails: the only time you lose one is when you're dying to get out in a hurry.

"Come on, baby. It's the end of the month, I got bills coming up, and you know I got ripped off on the bus a couple weeks ago—oh, didn't I tell you?—and I've already talked to my boss, he's gonna let me work overtime next week, so I can pay you—"

Silently, I toss her my wallet, which she pilfers for cash. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't let her near it, but there's only a hundred bucks in there—a fact which she notices with a frown.

She doesn't say anything, though. Just takes it and gives the wallet back.

"Have you seen my other sock?"

With a smile, Pam pulls it out of her back pocket. "I was planning on holding it for ransom."

I put it on. "Here's a tip," I tell her. "Next time, steal something a little more valuable."

"Like your watch?"

I feel my naked wrist. "Yes, for example."

She smiles and drops it into my palm.

"You got anything else?"

"I guess you'll find out eventually."

Great. I don't care much about the stuff, of course; it's the thought of seeing Pam again soon that bothers me. But it's my fault for not running her over when I had the chance tonight.

"Just get out before I spank you," I say—but she has already sidled out the door.

Thank goodness she's gone. I go to check my reflection in the bathroom mirror, run some gel through my hair, and head back downstairs and out. Things to do. First things first: I have to talk to Freddy.

Around 10:30, I show up at his place, and it's already packed. Since before I was born, Freddy's been throwing three parties a week, minimum, at his house in the hills. It's Hollywood history; he's probably in all the guidebooks by now. My mom and he met at one of the first ones, back when she was still a starlet. I guess that's all history now, too.

Of the hundreds of stars and innumerable wannabes who've partied in this house, about half are probably dead. Freddy, however—despite the odds of overdosing, drinking oneself to death, or going broke—has endured. Sometimes I hope I have his longevity gene; most times I don't.

I leave my car with the valet and climb the pebblestone drive to the house. There are about half a dozen people smoking weed outside; someone tries to pass to me, but I decline. I'm starting to feel guilty about lost time, and guilt always puts me in a bad mood. Pushing through the circle, I open the door and go in.

Dim red light, music, and smoke pour into the doorway, their combined effect nearly choking me before I can take off my coat. There are a hundred bodies in the foyer, dancing, drinking, gabbing, smoking—doing all the things I like to do sometimes, when I'm in the mood—but I'm not right now. So when Sam and Marty call me from across the room, I ignore them. In a room stuffed with ninety-five women, I feel sure they won't mind.

And the women—they're stifling. White ones, black ones, gold ones, brown ones. Tall, short, curvy, skinny, long-legged, big-breasted, classy, trashy, anything a guy could ever want. Even at seventy, Freddy can't get enough of them. I'm only thirty-five, but I've had enough. To me, they're like a bunch of tropical flowers as I fight my way through the jungle.

"Derek!" Somebody grabs my arm and jerks me aside. "Haven't seen you around in a while."

I have no idea who he is, but I smile and clap him on the shoulder.

"Hey, man! How've you been?"

"You been hiding from us or what?" He leans closer to my face and exhales a pungent chortle.

"Are you kidding me, man? No, look, you know how it is."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

After a second, I realize he's kidding. We laugh at the idea of him buying a drink for the son of the host. He knows I'm Freddy's son, then. Must be somebody I've known for a while. Or maybe he knows Freddy and we've only met once. Staring at him a little harder, I have to admit I just can't remember.

"Freddy around?" I ask him.

"Haven't seen him."

It's a convenient way to excuse myself. Having shaken his hand and promised to stop back by for a shot, I head for the back room, where Freddy usually entertains the invited guests.

Down a short staircase, a door with a blue light hanging over it stands partially open. Phil, who I've come to believe is Freddy's bodyguard, though I've never actually seen them together, is standing in the hallway. He takes up so much space that I can hardly get by, which I suspect is the point.

"Hey, kid," Freddy greets me when I finally squeeze in. I have trouble finding him in the dark. Once my eyes adjust, I see him sitting with three other men at a table in the corner.

"No girls tonight, Dad?"

"I wasn't in the mood."

Approaching the table, I see that they're playing some kind of card game I don't understand. There are only high cards on the table, sometimes more than one of them—two aces of spades, for example. After pretending to be interesting in the game for a polite minute or two, I say, "Well, that's unusual."

Freddy looks up for the first time. "Give me a break, kid. I'm not that heartless."

He goes back to his cards. What was that supposed to mean? I wonder. Judging by the number of girls he's plucked and dropped back off on Sunset Boulevard over the years—well, he may not be heartless, but his heart folds up into a convenient stowaway bag when necessary.

"Oh, come on," I challenge him at last. "You can't pretend you've been living a monk's life ever since Mom got diagnosed with cancer."

Freddy lays his cards on the table and looks up at me with a funny expression on his face. "No, I haven't," he says.

"Then why start today?"

Suddenly, I realize that the other men are looking at me, too. I feel uncomfortable, like I've interrupted something much more serious than a card game.

"Why are you here, Derek?" he asks, a pinch of irritation in his voice.

"To tell you that she's gotten really bad." Ignoring the expressions on their faces, I continue, "Look, I know you probably don't care about her anymore, but I thought you might want to see her before she dies."

"She's already dead, Derek."

I don't believe him.

"Go turn on your radio, for Christ's sake."

Whoever does makeup for funerals should get into the movie business. I haven't seen Mom looking this good since she was in *Leda and the Swan*. Like her old self again, almost.

They've got pictures of her in every stage of her life—except the last one—lined up along the tables outside the visitation room. Friends and family only allowed inside. I hear a fight break out at one point and head outside just in time to see Pam sock the funeral home attendant.

"I didn't think you'd show up," I tell her, pulling her in before the guy can think to fight back.

"Why?"

I shrug. Maybe I was wrong about her.

Afterwards, I take all the photos home and line them up along the bedroom wall. I'm playing a little game with myself to see if I can identify which one was my mom.

They're all so different. This one was before I was born. She was a showgirl, like Marilyn Monroe only never as famous. One of the girls the men in Hollywood wait for. Some, like Mom, are lucky enough to grow into women; others, like Tiana and Pam, never make it. Thank God I don't remember her this way.

In this one, she looks like my mother, only much more alive. Probably because this was from a film in which she played a seductive divorcee. It was the year I started school, I think, because I remember her picking me up with her hair styled like that—but she never had that look on her face. I know the look; I've seen it a thousand times on the screen. But if I try to recollect it on her living face, I can't. Her look was more—more—

Here's one of her Oscar performance. I hardly saw her that year, and times weren't good when I did. In the photo she looks

beautiful, proud; I remember her as a woman growing old, her nerves frayed to the point that she couldn't stand to be with me in a well-lit room. The few times I was with her that year, she broke down crying after an hour or two.

And there are others. They seem to fade as she grows older. For a moment, I wonder what the reporters would have done if I'd placed a photo of her last day on the table. Or Pam—what would she have done? Would she have seen herself in the body of the dying woman and determined to change—asked me to marry her, or become a teacher?

What about Freddy—how would he have reacted? Would the photo have singed him with the fear of his own impending death—it couldn't be long now—and made him hurl himself into the mass of dancing bodies at his parties, to see what hell was like before he got there? Or would it have reminded him of some little bit of humanity he saw in her thirty years ago—a spark of life, which he had then decided to take for himself?

One by one, I take the photos out of their frames and toss them in the trash. They're worth nothing now; my mother's face has been masked and photographed and copied so many millions of times that it hardly matters if she doesn't have one anymore.

I take out a pen. I don't know how to draw, but I don't think it really matters. On a sheet of notebook paper, I begin to sketch the form of a face, the face of a woman smiling. I hold it up to the light. Yes. There's something of her there. It doesn't look anything like her pictures, but somehow more than any of them, it looks like Mom.