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How We Live Today and Other Stories

Gregory W. Rohloff
Creative Writing Workshop, greg.rohloff@gmail.com

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by

Greg Rohloff

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M.L.S. Fort Hays State University, 2010

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This thesis is dedicated to my wife Judy and my sons for their support, encouragement and belief that I could see this course of education through.

Acknowledgments

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I wish to thank earlier teachers who challenged me to improve my effort in writing, journalist Thomas H. Thompson, who impressed upon me the value of story, and to Dr. Sally Kitch, then a sophomore composition teacher at Wichita State who was the first to encourage me to consider a career in writing.

Table of Contents

Abstract

How We Live Today is a collection of stories about family connections and the process of making amends to keep a family whole. The families are not just traditional families, but also arrangements constructed out of necessity, circumstance, or convenience. The title story tells how a man ends a lengthy divide with a stepmother for the sake of her, his son, and ultimately himself. We see adolescents do the right thing in their circumstances at the risk of losing peer standing or to avert future social damage. An older golfer encourages a younger golfer, easing guilt but realizing that respect for the game ties golfers together. A young professional steps outside of his bounds to help a family of necessity, a group of gay men stricken during the first AIDS outbreak. Another man erases anxiety by dismissing the differences he has perceived in his relationship with his son. And finally, a young man sinks irretrievably into self-destruction over broken family ties.

Keywords: creative writing, short stories, fiction, short fiction

How We Live Today

Cecil edged into bed, careful to avoid jostling it and bothering Rose. This was the routine, and had been for the past six years. Each night a variation of two. Rose was either asleep or in pain. Arthritis was her prize for surviving cancer; radiation therapy and chemotherapy stripped down her immune system, and arthritis crept in. But Cecil reminded himself as if it were a prayer, she was alive.

He reached out to touch her, slowly, softly, taking great care. If he touched her on the back instead of her arm, she might be jolted by pain and pull away from him. Land with too much enthusiasm on her arm and her sleep could be broken, possibly not to return until just before dawn. But gently, he could feel her warmth without hurting her or disturbing her. And Cecil could be grateful; with her alive, this could not be the worst.

Rose stirred when he touched her tonight. “I’m glad you’ve come to bed.” Her voice was soft, like a little girl’s.

“I’ve bid on four more free-lance jobs and sent out a resume to an office in Fort Worth,” Cecil replied as he ran his hand down her shoulder. He forced confidence into his words; the last call he had gotten from a lead on this website was a guy who wanted a logo for his car wash. He came into Cecil’s studio off of the garage with a computer-drawn mountain, its peak poking through the clouds. But the straight line drawing looked as if it had been done on an Etch-A-Sketch. Car Wash Man said he wanted something that could go on a business card, website, and the lighted sign over the car wash. At the ad agency, this project would have gone easily over a thousand dollars, but Cecil said he could do the design work for two hundred dollars, and then forty dollars an hour for no more than ten hours to coordinate with the sign company and the web host. The guy

shook his head, and three weeks later the Etch-a-Sketch design started popping up in Google ads whenever Cecil searched “Dallas area graphic design jobs.”

Cecil listened to Rose’s soft breathing as she drifted back to sleep. And his thoughts swirled around what he had to do in the morning for Thanksgiving dinner. He already had placed the turkey in a roaster in the refrigerator and scrubbed potatoes so they could be peeled first thing What rattled him now was how quickly Rose tired. She had done everything for holiday meals before her arthritis worsened. Now, it ruled her time, and she grew worn out quickly. Making a pumpkin pie and a peach pie was all she could manage before she went to bed.

Cecil thought how their son Jason struggled when he first enrolled in Dallas County Community College. Now he was within a semester of transferring to the biomedical engineering program at the University of Texas-San Antonio, a field Cecil had never heard of until Jason brought home the transfer application. Past doubts about Jason’s future now seemed like an irrational fear.

Cecil’s stepmom, Claire, slept in the guest room. She had married his dad five years after his mom died of a heart attack. After Claire married Dad, she seemed distant when he came home from college. On an Easter weekend he tried to clear the air, but her words stuck with him. “If you can’t pay for your schooling yourself, then you shouldn’t be going.” At the end of that semester in his junior year, instead of returning to Tulsa, he joined a friend on a summer job search in Dallas. That summer he met Rose Cline, a sophomore at Southern Methodist University, and his summer job turned into full-time employment that led him to stay in Dallas.

Cecil never told his dad what Claire had said, but his visits home became rare and short before Jason was born. Claire did not have children before her first husband, an advisor in Vietnam, died in combat before it was a war. So becoming a step-grandmother broke down whatever resistance she had toward Cecil. When he saw how Jason had favored her among his grandparents, then he warmed to her, but never felt close.

Cecil also thought of his father's death the week after last Thanksgiving. And how the previous summer when he and Jason took Dad on a fishing trip to Grand Lake that he had tried to avoid his father's failing health. Although the first day had gone smoothly, the second day of taking a boat out on the lake wore Dad out by ten o'clock that morning and he slept through lunch and the afternoon. Instead of going out on the lake that evening, Dad insisted on going home, saying he felt too weak to return to Tulsa in the morning and go straight to the dialysis center. Two years earlier, he was spry enough to do it that way, but on this trip back to Tulsa, Dad broke down in tears as he said this would be his last fishing trip ever. Now it pained Cecil to have dismissed his father's concerns by saying that heat had gotten him down, and that he'd be fine with a couple days rest at home. A month later his father suffered a mild stroke that put him in the hospital for a week. The stroke required occupational therapy visits for six weeks that were worked in around his three-days-a-week dialysis routine. Thus his life turned into trips in the morning for dialysis or therapy and naps in the afternoon that lasted until dinner, for which he had no appetite, and then to bed.

Now Cecil wished that he had not cut short the trips to his parents when it was just him and Rose because of his ill feelings toward Claire. And he wished that he had let Jason spend more time at holidays with both sets of grandparents when he was in

elementary school and middle school. And while the rift with Claire had lessened, Cecil knew it was not healed. Now he decided he must let her know that he believed her marriage to Dad was what kept his father alive. And with that thought, Cecil drifted off to sleep.

When the alarm rang the next morning at 6:30 a.m., the first to stir was Fritz, a 12-year-old yellow Labrador that slept on a pad on Cecil's side of the bed. Fritz began sleeping there when Rose started her treatment for melanoma spots on her back and shoulders. When she had checked in at the hospital, Fritz stretched out near the front door during the day, and that first night claimed the spot near the bed on Cecil's side. When Cecil could not sleep, he prayed out loud, not so much for a miracle cure, but for comfort, hope and understanding. When Cecil finished, he noticed that Fritz had raised his head from slumber and was watching him closely as if the petitions had been directed to him. As the radio alarm buzzer faded into the voices of *Morning Edition,* Cecil watched Fritz huff to pull himself up, and he thought once more that this could be Fritz's last winter. Perhaps this winter would be mild, a blessing to Rose and the old dog who had become Cecil's morning walking companion.

Cecil slipped out of bed quietly and gently pulled the covers up around Rose. Fritz wagged his tail as Cecil slipped on a robe and house shoes for the walk to the back door to let Fritz out into the yard. Cecil's morning rituals continued with a cup of coffee, decaff because that was easier on Rose. When he heard Claire in the hallway, he pulled down a coffee cup for her. Cecil stirred a maple flavored creamer and sugar into one cup and offered it to Claire.

"Black's good," she said, but Cecil persisted and extended the cup. "Try something special for the holiday."

She looked at the stream of creamer inside the cup and stepped back. "That's too much. Maybe a teaspoonful."

Cecil smiled as he turned to take another cup. He wanted to tell her that she would not taste the maple flavoring with just a spoonful. "I'll set this one aside for Rose," he said, and measured out a spoonful of the creamer and gave Claire the cup. "I hope you'll like it."

"Oh, I don't know," she said as she filled her cup. She stared at it for several moments. "We never had extras like this when I was growing up; we made do, and got used to it."

The tone in her voice wiped away Cecil's smile and his throat tightened. "I hope you like it." He shifted his gaze away from her, for now the memories of her nitpicking over his habits and choices through college were as strong as if they had never left, that a divide existed that would never close within their lifetimes.

She sipped more and shook her head. "I guess that's okay, but it's not for me; I've got to have it black with a little water if it's too strong."

Cecil looked at her arm as she held the cup. As he offered to dump it for a fresh cup, he could not ignore what he saw, a frail arm dotted with age marks and the slightest trace of fading scars. She too could soon be gone, and what would it matter if her tone was snippy or sweet?

"Out on the farm in the Depression we felt lucky to still have our place," she said, "even if it meant going through the house and gathering up the coins to make the last

dollar to pay the land taxes. We grew our own food in the garden, and we just didn't have money for any extras."

The softness in her tone took the tightness from his mouth, and as she pulled the cup up for another sip, Cecil realized that the strength in her words mattered more than the visible frailty. He was glad that he had not laughed at the spoonful of what amounted to sugar water spoiling her cup of coffee.

"Since Rose has been sick, and we've been pulling money from savings that we thought we'd never touch just to tide us, I never gave much thought to the little luxuries," Cecil said. "Strength isn't always being strong enough to fight back against the storm."

"That's the truth," Claire said, and smiled at Cecil.

He took a deep breath and set his cup on the counter.

"When you and Dad got married, I wasn't sure what he was wanting or needing," Cecil said. "I was away and my sister was just starting her family. We both were wrapped up in our own concerns."

"That's pretty much what your dad would say when he talked about you two and your families," Claire said.

"I should have said this long ago, Claire." Cecil swallowed hard. "You made Dad's life better. Thank you, for all you gave to him and for all you did."

She nodded and looked away, and Cecil stepped aside out of Claire's way to sit at the counter. Rose came in and took the coffee with the creamer that had been waiting for her, and sat next to Claire.

As they sipped, Cecil turned on the oven and pulled the roaster from the refrigerator. Cecil made sure the turkey looked right before going into the oven. And

when he took a dozen eggs from the refrigerator before setting a large saucepan filled with water on the stove, Claire spoke up.

"How about I fix the deviled eggs," she said. "Jason always likes the way I fix them."

And Cecil, only moments before wondering how he'd manage to get Thanksgiving dinner put together, nodded. "Anything you want to fix, I'd greatly appreciate, Claire."

"If you'll get me the mustard, mayonnaise, and seasonings," she said.

"You bet, Claire," he said. "Anything else?"

"I like to put in just enough Tabasco sauce that you can taste it without reaching for a glass of water," she said as she loaded the eggs into the sauce pan.

"It's in the door of the refrigerator." Cecil started to get it out, but Claire interrupted him.

"I won't need it until I'm mixing the filling. As soon as I get these eggs boiling, I can peel the potatoes, too."

"OK," Cecil said as he broke into a grin. "But don't wear yourself out."

"There was a time with my first husband, Thanksgiving would be at my folks' farm, and we'd cook for thirty. And that'd be turkey and ham, mashed potatoes and sweet potatoes, four kinds of pie – the whole works."

"I bet that was a time," Cecil said.

Claire poured more coffee, and Rose excused herself for her morning round of medications.

"When Jason gets up," Claire said, "I'll ask him to mash the potatoes. Your dad got a kick out of that when Jason came up for a visit over Christmas when he was about twelve or so, before he got to high school. and he asked if he could mash the potatoes."

And Cecil was comforted that Claire had found comfort through a connection with Jason that he had known little about. And through that connection, Cecil saw that her help with the dinner asserted that she was a part of this family.

By the time Rose returned to the kitchen, Jason had mashed the potatoes and spooned a large dollop of butter on top before Claire covered the serving bowl with tin foil. Cecil quartered two large yams and placed them in a small baking dish with butter and cinnamon and placed it in the microwave.

Rose poured coffee, and when she went to the patio, Cecil took another cup and joined her at the patio table. When he sat down, Fritz sat up, wagging his tail. Cecil reached down for a rope chew toy and tossed it over Fritz's head. The old dog did not move as it sailed past him, but when it landed, he chased it and sniffed it. He left it in the yard, and trotted up to Cecil.

"He must be going blind," Cecil said.

"He's getting old, and he's wearing out," Rose said matter-of-factly as if she were talking about a twelve-year-old television set or car.

In that moment, and for just a moment, Cecil could see a future day with Fritz hoisted onto a veterinary exam table and the vet measuring out the dosage of pentobarbital to ease Fritz out of this life. And he thought for a moment to get past the obvious comment that he, Rose, and Claire were also getting old and wearing out.

"He's been a great dog, Rose," Cecil said. "I'm not sure I'd want to replace him when he's gone."

"Jason's going to school in San Antonio means he will probably find a job there," Rose said. "We may want to travel as much as we can; maybe even move toward the coast."

"I guess that depends if I ever catch on with someone needing a graphic designer," Cecil said. He was worried about how long their retirement nest egg would last if they continued to dip into it before he could draw Social Security in a dozen years.

"Maybe you should look beyond the Metroplex," Rose said.

"Your doctors are here," Cecil said, realizing that argument was beginning to feel like an excuse. "Let's enjoy today, Rose. Despite our worries, we've got a lot to be thankful for."

Inside around the table, Jason, Rose and Cecil took their usual chairs at the dining room table. Claire hesitated to pick a chair until Jason motioned her over.

"Sit here, Grandma," Jason said, and he pulled out the chair next to him.

"For a table blessing, today, let's share what each of us is thankful for," Rose said. "I'm thankful for my water aerobics class for giving me exercise that strengthens me without causing pain." She looked across at Jason

"I'm thankful that I've gotten accepted at UT-San Antonio for a career that has a big demand, and is something that I'm interested in and good at."

Claire smiled, causing Cecil to recall how she had chewed on him about the arrangement his father had made with him for college. “I’ve got my health and places to go so I don’t have to just sit at home,” she said.

Cecil cleared his throat. “I could keep it simple and say that I’m grateful for family, but that would be something that one might expect in the Norman Rockwell illustration of Thanksgiving.”

While Claire spooned out mashed potatoes and Jason slid the turkey platter toward his plate, Cecil continued. “There was a time when I was younger I was uncertain if we’d ever sit down like this, but when Dad passed away, I realized just how much you gave him, Claire; he would not have lived as long as he did had it not been for you.

“Thus, Jason, you got to know a grandfather on my side of the family,” Cecil said, and he turned to Rose. “At times, we seem consumed with paying for your medical bills and prescriptions. But those, Sweetheart, are just circumstances. You’ve given me everything you could give, so today, I’m thankful to sit next to you.”

Today was not a day to worry how things would be paid for, or if he would find another job after two years of sending out resumes, or how Jason would do on his own. And as he completed serving his plate, he resolved that he would only consider how this moment, however far it might be from a Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving, was what mattered for now.

The turkey, dressing, potatoes, the pies – all were just symbols that had no power to draw perfection into Cecil’s life. This dinner grew out of a rash moment with Claire that led him to Rose and a life that had its share of adventure, laughter and joy to outweigh the fears and disappointments. What mattered now was how Claire had lit up

because Jason was her grandson from the first visit as a baby to the more recent trips when Jason would clear the gutters and help around her house. For in Jason's eyes, they were Grandma and Grandpa. And in return, Claire would bake cookies when Jason was there for a visit. That we were all here, in this house, Cecil thought, that is what mattered.

All I knew about “andante’’ was that it had something to do with how the piano was played, and that my ability to guess how never met Mrs. Dalkington’s expectations.

“Move over,” she said, and she rose from her chair next to the piano in her studio, setting Ramon, her music critic Chihuahua, on the floor. Trembling, he looked at me, and as I watched him, he flashed jagged stained teeth and growled softly. “Like this, Ronald,” she said. Her wrinkled and age-spotted hands flew over the keyboard, turning out a tune that sounded nothing like what I had just produced.

When I returned to the piano bench, her scowling nod meant that I should play. Deep breath, and then I pressed my fingers as if I could squeeze the sound out of the piano. Before the end of the first line, I struck the wrong notes again for the C-sharp chord, and Ramon was disturbed from his place on her lap as she again motioned me aside.

“No, no, no, Ronald. Like this,” she said as Ramon again showed his brown and yellow teeth. “Smoothly. Play smoothly. Don't attack the keys; sweep your fingers across them. I don't know how many times I have shown you.”

When she played, “The Dancing Spider” sounded like the prelude to a Mozart concerto rather than the third song in Book II of *The Tauber Series of Piano Instruction for Children.*

Why couldn’t I be swimming, this last weekend before school started, or have one more baseball game. Anything but sitting next to Mrs. Dalkington. What was worse? The

hem of her dress brushing against my leg, or the sour breath that seeped from Ramon's mouth when he perched on the piano bench next to me, snarling while wagging his tail.

When she finished, her pale lips pinched together so tight they seemed like a single line, and she asked, "See the difference?"

I nodded and slid back to the center of the piano bench, careful to position my hands so I could at least start out as smoothly as Mrs. Dalkington. The song still sounded the same as my first attempt, but Mrs. Dalkington turned encouraging. "That's better. You're starting to get it." As I finished, she leaned across and clipped a note to the page.

"Be sure your mother sees this," she said. "It's about the fall recital. You'll play with the other beginner students, and I want you to play 'The Dancing Spider.' When you can play this part in the proper tempo, we'll start working on the fun part. See these?" Her hand swept across marks with the first four measures at the top of page two. "That means you'll press that pedal so that the notes blend. And here – these dots by the notes where it says *allegretto mp* – means you'll play staccato so that it will sound like dance steps, light and fast, how a spider would dance."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, ending the lesson in polite agreement with her and turning aside in case the image in my mind, a spider doing "The Monkey," made me smile. The rule, she had said at my first lesson, was that she was more forgiving to students polite in their speech and manners. She was harsh with the students who left rivulets of dirty sweat on the keys because they had played outdoors before their lesson in the studio that was always kept warm for Ramon, who shook constantly even though he wore a sweater.

"Is your mother picking you up?" She scribbled something on my page in her notebook.

"No," I said. "My cousin's wedding is this evening, and she's at the church helping decorate the fellowship hall for the reception. She told me to walk home."

"Make sure you don't lose that note," she replied. "I'll put a second paper clip on it."

Once out the front door, I took the porch steps two at a time and raced up Allison Boulevard, across Central Avenue and then to First Street and its shaded sidewalk away from traffic. I wished I could get out of the fall recital, which had seemed like a great event when I first started taking piano lessons in fourth grade. Now I wanted to play a different instrument – trumpet maybe – so I could be in the concert band at Jefferson Junior High, or guitar in a rock band.

The kids living west of Jefferson would go to Central High School, and the kids in my neighborhood would go to Fremont High. Through sixth grade and into this summer, that made no difference. But by the start of ninth grade, we would split apart, picking new friends, shifting loyalties based on the high school that we would go to.

Hillsdale Park was where kids rode skateboards, played touch football or basketball or hung out at the park swimming pool. But most of the kids on my side of the neighborhood went to the YMCA or, if their families were wealthy enough, to the pool at Cedarcrest Country Club. But now, Hillsdale Park, next to Jefferson, was still OK, and so I wanted to see if any of my friends were there. Mom could see Mrs. Dalkington's note tomorrow, and when she saw the date of the recital, my practice time would kick up from a half-hour a day to an hour, and she would remind me that when I was older, I would be glad I learned to play the piano, a skill she always said was important socially and personally satisfying. And she would tell me that I had learned how to accomplish

something despite its difficulties. And it didn't have to be fun all the time. And I wished that the warm stale air in Mrs. Dalkington's studio didn't smell like Ramon.

At the edge of the park I rolled my piano book and tucked it under my arm so if I saw friends, they wouldn't notice the book right away. I wouldn't have minded lessons so much if I played real songs; I can't imagine anyone other than Mom and Mrs. Dalkington wanting to hear me play "The Dancing Spider."

Bradley Russell charged out the doors of the community center, really a gym with a couple of smaller rooms and a Coke machine in the hall outside the gym. He was the sixth grade basketball star, class president, and bully. If he was in a good mood, I liked hanging around him, but if he decided to have it in for someone, not even the teachers cared. When he saw me, Bradley yelled out, "Spencer, hey Spencer!" and then ran toward me.

I hated that moment because he called kids he didn't like by their last names, so I braced for trouble. I tightened my hold on the music book and gritted my teeth.

"Hi," I said, hoping he didn't notice my music book.

"Where you been?" Bradley asked, but he did not wait for a reply before firing off another question. "You going to Jefferson or Danbury Prep this year?"

Danbury was a rich kids school that opened up shortly after the first year that black kids were bused around town to different schools other than the ones in their neighborhood. When it opened, the parents in the schools that were taking black kids for the first time accused the Danbury parents of being snooty, but a couple of years later when Danbury's high school was large enough to compete in sports, and the wealthier black families were approached, then the parents were accusing the school of recruiting

for athletics. That's just the way our town was; the parents fretted and the kids played it for a joke.

"Jefferson," I said. "I heard you were going to Danbury."

"I might for high school," he said. "Tje girls are prettier there, but I'd rather go to Jefferson to play basketball."

I tried to step past him, but Bradley blocked my path. "Where're you going? You ought to come with me to Tim Wilkerson's."

"I have to get home," I said. "I got to go with my parents to my cousin's wedding tonight."

"Tim's mom is taking us to the movies tonight," Bradley said. "Do you have to go to the wedding?" He started to snicker, and I knew something was up with the invitation.

"Yeah, all my aunts and uncles will be there, so..." I quit talking when Bradley looked around.

Bradley pulled out a hand-rolled cigarette from his pocket. "You got any matches?" he asked as he slid it back inside the shirt pocket.

I grinned and shook my head. "You playing cowboys and Indians rolling a cigarette like John Wayne?"

"Dumbass, it's grass," he said. "I got it from my brother when he was back home from Vietnam."

I squeezed the music book tightly. And then Bradley motioned me to follow him.

I shook my head, too nervous to say no. Now I wished that I had gone straight home instead of through the park. Marijuana? The thought of him just having it rattled

me. My stomach felt like a rock dropped into it, and my neck tightened as I wondered if we'd land in juvenile hall if the police drove by.

"Come on," Bradley said. "We'll go to Central Pharmacy. I'll ask the clerk something and you slip a lighter into the middle of whatever that is under your arm." A grin spread across his face as he watched my reaction to this plan.

Then Bradley grabbed at my piano book. He tugged at it and it fell to the ground, popping open to Mrs. Dalkington's note. Before I could grab it again, Bradley picked it up and inspected the cover.

"Piano?" His voice was loud and exaggerated. "You play piano? Are you going to play at that wedding?"

If I were bigger and stronger, I would have punched Bradley in the gut and dared him to do something about it. But he was a head taller than me. I braced for whatever he wanted to dish out. The muscles in my leg tightened and my gut felt hot like I had to pee.

"Yeah, I take piano lessons." My words were meek and defensive, so I shut up and looked away.

Bradley flipped through the book, stopping at Mrs. Dalkington's paper clips, knocking the note to the ground.

"The Dancing Spider? Is this Hendrix or Zappa?" Bradley laughed, his head back, as I picked up the note. Done with his joke, he tossed the book toward me.

"You coming with me to Central Pharmacy?" he asked, the grin gone and his head bobbing as if he was deciding for me.

"I started piano lessons two years ago, and I'm just learning how to read music and play smoothly." Now I felt like a certified wuss, for the explanation sounded more

like Mrs. Dalkington and less like anyone who could stand up to Bradley Russell. I pushed past him, my right hand starting to shake, and he peeled around to catch up with me.

"You can grab a lighter and we'll be out of there in less than a minute," Bradley said as he stepped slightly in front of me to block my path.

I shook my head while brushing past him, hoping that someone else I knew – anyone else – would show up. The rock in my stomach grew larger, and my shaking grew worse. "I have to go home," I said. My voice was soft as I looked away to head home. As I reached the street corner, Bradley following me, I noticed across the street the front door swing open at Lisa Michaels' house. She qualified as the most popular girl at school. Her mother served as room mother from second grade on, and we liked her mom for the great parties.

When Lisa got to the curb across from us, she waved. When I waved back, she came across, dropping a friendly "Hi, guys," as if she had expected me to be with Bradley.

Immediately he peppered her with questions about what she was doing this last weekend before school, dropping the information that he and Tim were going to the movies, and that she should get her mom to take her and her friends to the movies, too.

Lisa wrinkled her nose. "I'm going to a tea at the Girls Junior Leadership Club at Jefferson."

As she spoke, I wondered if I was the only one noticing that she wore lip gloss and eyeliner, and that her T-shirt had a scoop neckline, like the older girls wore; she

looked more like a high school girl and less like the girl who was part of my science fair project team. I could not speak; I could only stare.

"Ronald," she asked, "are you going with them to the movies?"

I shook my head and looked away for a moment. "I was just, uh, just walking home from my music lesson, and I saw Bradley when I got to the park." I wondered if she understood my stammering. She twisted around in front of me and looked at my arms folded across my piano book.

"Since you don't have an instrument," she said, "I guess that's a piano book."

"He's marked his favorite song – 'The Dancing Spider,'" Bradley said as he laughed at me. I cringed at the prospect that Lisa would think it was funny, too. I gave her that look that meant it was okay to laugh. For a moment, I thought back to the last week of fifth grade on the playground when I joined in with Bradley and Tim when they had started to pick on this kid named Gary. No one had liked him because he wasn't very good at any sports, and when we had fitness testing in phys. ed. he cried when he failed at all three attempts to do a pull-up. I wasn't the only one; it was most of the guys, mainly to keep Bradley and Tim from bullying us.

But her look wasn't one of joining Bradley. She reached for the corner of the book and bent it back far enough to see part of the cover.

"I remember that book," she said. "Do you have Mrs. Dalkington? I've had her since third grade."

I nodded, starting to feel a little more comfortable as Bradley stopped laughing.

"Yeah," I said. "I've got Mrs. Dalkington."

Lisa smiled and leaned toward me.

“Does Ramon ever growl at you? I can't stand how his breath smells. My mom says it's because he's so old and his teeth are rotting. One time when I went to her restroom, I could see into the kitchen and he had a little bowl of milk next to his food and water bowls, and so I peeked in there to see what he ate. Little bits of the canned food were floating in the milk.”

Lisa made a face; her lips parted, the bottom lip turned down, and she stuck out her tongue while her eyes bulged. Then she burst into loud laughter, and she was not looking at Bradley, but just at me.

“Gross.” That is all I could think to say, so I started laughing, too, and the muscles in my leg relaxed.

Bradley turned back toward me. “I’m going to Tim's.”

I looked at him as turned toward Lisa. “You really ought to go to the movies with us. Bring some other girls, too.” Now his voice was cold and threatening, and he stepped toward her.

“I don’t want to Bradley.” Her voice, warm and lively when she came over, now was soft and fearful. She looked away from him, and then she turned to me, her eyes wide, her mouth pinched shut.

“She said she didn’t want to go, Bradley,” I said, and I widened my stance. “Say ‘hi’ to Tim.”

Bradley balled up his fists as he stepped close enough to lean over me. “I was talking to her.”

For a moment I wished I hadn’t spoken up. He reached toward me as if to grab me, and I stepped back. When he grabbed my shoulder I tried to pull away, but I could

not. Bradley started to grin, the way he did when he made fun of Gary. I pulled the rolled up piano book from under my arm as he started to squeeze my shoulder, and I swung it as hard as I could at his fist that was now chest high. As I swung, he leaned forward and the book sailed past his hand and clipped the corner of his mouth.

Bradley screamed and blood gushed from his lower lip and cheek.

"My braces!" he screamed as he spit blood. "If you messed them up you're going to pay for it." He sobbed once loudly as he turned, and when he reached the end of the block he broke into a run.

I looked at Lisa, wondering what she would do.

She was motionless, her eyes still wide. "Bradley can be such a bully," she said.

I nodded, wondering if what they said about standing up to bullies to make them leave you alone was true. We started walking toward her house, just as I would as if she were not there, and I had not been interrupted on my way home. As she walked with me she smiled, just a slight smile. "You ready for school Monday? It's going to be weird being the seventh-graders and the youngest at the school."

"Yeah." No other thought came to mind; her lip gloss held my attention as if it were something that did not belong, just as the marijuana from Vietnam in Bradley's shirt pocket did not belong, and my piano book turning into a weapon did not belong.

"Yeah, to which one – ready for school," she asked, "or weird being a seventh-grader?" She smiled again, and I relaxed.

"Both, I guess," I said, my voice steadying. "I hadn't really thought about this being much different from last year." For a moment, that made sense to me, but with Bradley spitting blood, the joint in his pocket, and her lip gloss in mind, I stumbled on.

“Maybe harder. Yeah,” I said, looking away, “harder.” For a moment, I looked off into the distance hoping to find something to keep the conversation going. Then the front door slammed, and we turned to see Lisa's mom locking it.

“Got to go,” Lisa said. “See you Monday.” And she did that half-run, half-walk thing that kids do when they do something with a parent, that somehow disappears when you get older, but the parent still treats you like a little kid, like they miss seeing you walk like a kid.

“Yeah, see you Monday.” I turned and walked away, checking that I still had the note. Blood soaked into the note and I wished that it had landed in the standing water in the gutter so I wouldn’t have to explain to Mom. She’d probably make me practice the song for the rest of the afternoon if she knew all what happened. As I crossed the street, I wondered what the year would be like. If Lisa would be like a girlfriend by the end of Jefferson, and how good that felt just thinking about it.

I wondered what I would do if Bradley and Tim came at me to get back for Bradley’s bloody mouth. At the end of the next block, Bradley was standing on his porch, still dabbing at his bloody lip. As I got closer, he opened the screen door and stepped partly inside, and when I was directly in front of his house, he hollered out: “You’re going to pay.”

And I wondered if he would jump from the porch and try to get some licks in. But that did not matter. Now I was not afraid.

The Last Good Halloween

The gunpowder smell and the fine gray dust that coated my fingers as I pulled firecrackers from the pack of Black Cats raised my Halloween spirits. Halloween may seem like a little kid's holiday, but, at fourteen, this was my favorite holiday; Christmas was no longer toys, but clothes my mom picks out, and the Easter basket has less chocolate candy and more jelly beans than when I was a kid, and if I never see another chocolate-coated marshmallow again, I'd – actually, I could use one right now, a marshmallow rabbit with a Black Cat fuse hanging out its butt; trick-or-treat.

I dropped the Black Cats into a grocery sack, along with a dozen smoke bombs. The gunpowder smell now danced through my senses, and as I looked at my hands, the dust sparkled in my closet light. I took a deep breath and finished my task, carrying to my bathroom trash basket the crinkly yellow paper and the label with the bright yellow-eyed stare of a black cat. I washed the residue from my hands as if this would free me of the responsibility of whatever happened that night. I dropped in an old Zippo lighter, rolled the bag tight and tucked it under my arm to go out the kitchen door.

"See you later, Mom; I'm going to Steven's to play ping pong." Before she asked about the bag, I was out the door thinking how easy it is to fool a parent.

A block from Steven's house, I saw a Chuck from school who always smiled because he was constantly dreaming up pranks. As I approached, he called out: "Hey, Roland, give me some of your trick-or-treat candy."

I stopped and flashed the top of the bag open. "Firecrackers and smoke bombs. Steven and Reid and I are going to Clinton's; want to come along?"

Behind me I heard footsteps, and as I turned, I saw Hutch, who tossed something to Chuck behind my back. And when I looked Chuck's way to see what Hutch tossed, a cold spray of a sickly sweet smelling shave cream hit the back of my neck. Hutch continued to spray down my back, and Chuck chortled out loud as he jumped behind me to join Hutch. As they laughed, I dropped my bag and dug out the lighter and a smoke bomb. But I was laughing too hard to flick the lighter. They peeled away toward a park down the street where a party was supposed to be.

At Steven's I tucked the firecracker bag against my side when his mom opened the front door. "Is Steven here? We're going to Clinton's to play ping pong."

"I'll tell him you're here. You boys be careful. I'd drive you over, but Steven's dad doesn't want to mess with the trick-or-treaters at the door."

"That's OK. We're going to go to Reid's first and then we'll go over from there."

As we entered the kitchen, she winced and wrinkled her nose. "That smell!" she said, "What happened to you."

Steven, also smelling the shaving cream that covered my shoulders, grabbed a kitchen towel and flicked it across my shoulders, smearing the shaving cream down across my back, and his mom scooped it off with a paper towel and flipped it into the trash.

"Chuck and Hutch jumped me on the way over here."

"You boys should just stay here and watch TV. Those guys are so mean." Steven's mom talked as if we were still in Cub Scouts, and I shook my head.

"We'll be OK. They took off for College Hill Park, and we're going the opposite way." Teen-agers on this side of town gathered at the park at night. The park twisted

through a hilly neighborhood with hiding places among lilacs and the oak, elm, cedar and spruce trees. Police patrolled the park, shining their cruiser spotlights and turning it a game of hide-and-seek. I looked at Steven's mom, and this explanation that we were going away from what a parent feared the most – a park with drinking, smoking and cops – seemed to relieve her.

Once the shaving cream was off my back, we took off. The night turned chilly in my damp nylon windbreaker, but I didn't care. I showed Steven the fireworks, and he smiled. "Look at those kids walking this way. Give me a smoke bomb." Four kids in pirate and hobo costumes and small enough to be fifth-graders, were a block away. We checked the traffic, and I flicked the lighter, shielding the flame from both the wind and the kids.

"Let's light 'em up and shag ass out," Steven said, grabbing a smoke bomb. I could tell when he had gotten a letter from his brother, who went through ROTC and was a clerical officer in Saigon. He used soldier slang in his letters even though, so far, he had not been near a firefight. My brother joined the Air Force when the draft board lost his records and told him he'd be reclassified 1-A. He was a supply clerk in Thailand at U-Tapao with bombers. He had seen one enemy attack, a guy throwing a satchel bomb into an ammo dump. By the time my brother pulled the handgun from his desk, the guy had run back into the jungle. Even though the war scared me – in four years I could be drafted – the chance that Steven, Reid or I would follow these two were fading. War protests had come to our town, even though few adults sympathized with pulling troops out because we didn't want to go. I and my friends shared a feeling that we would have

another option. Maybe Bobby Kennedy would be elected president next year. So we played under the notion that we were safe.

With no cars coming from either direction, Steven stuck the fuse into the flame, and when it sparked, he tossed it overhand about sixty feet and grabbed a second one and threw it also. We sprinted across the street and slid down the creek bank until we were below street level. Then we crept back up on our hands and knees and we heard squeals and laughter from our targets. We emerged from our hiding spot and strolled across the bridge that led to Reid's house. In five minutes we wee detailing our triumph, and he broke into the chorus of his favorite song, "Light My Fire."

Halfway to Clinton's, we lit our punks, those slender cork-like sticks that can smolder and light fuses for an hour or so. Clinton moved to this new neighborhood right after school started, so we were not quite sure where we were. We just knew we had to find a neighborhood shopping strip catty-corner from the Safeway. We walked toward the glow of the lights of the grocery store parking lot, and when we saw Village Square, we remembered our way to Clinton's.

His house was two blocks from this intersection. A liquor store was in the corner nearest us, and as we walked toward the intersection, we saw three guys prance out and get into a white fastback Plymouth Barracuda, a '64 with the big back curved window and dents on the right front fender. Their laughter was gravelly, and when the liquor store owner leaned out the door yelling for them to stay out, one of the guys, with long greasy swept-back hair, turned. "Fuck off old man," and the others erupted in laughter even louder.

Reid pulled a smoke bomb out of my bag. He lit it and rolled it into the parking lot as we raced through the pedestrian crossing on a yellow light. The Barracuda backed out and, to the groans of a sputtering muffler, the car lurched forward, swerving around a truck that stuck out slightly beyond its parking space. We heard the smoke bomb's faint bang, and a billow of yellow smoke rose as the Barracuda passed it. The front end dipped sharply, and the engine choked out as the driver slammed on his brakes. We took off running, and I looked back over my shoulder. The driver was watching, and I screamed out as we turned into an alley that curved around to Clinton's back yard at the corner. We hooted out laughter as we raced down the darkened alley, kicking in extra speed when we passed a driveway with a light shining over the garage door, and then, next to a dumpster, we stopped for a moment to see if the Barracuda was chasing us.

A clean getaway, and we sauntered past the fence that marked the back and side of Clinton's yard and stepped onto his front porch. We rang the bell, and Clinton's dad answered.

"Hey, fellas! Come on in." We stepped into the foyer, and Clinton's dad, grinning widely, slapped Steven on the back. "You guys trick-or-treating? All I got left are some beers." Clinton's dad was the only dad we knew who kidded us about beer, and I wondered if he knew about the last night of summer before school started when Clinton met us at Cypress Creek Park with a couple of beers that we split among six guys. We managed to empty one can and pour out a third of the second can into the creek.

"Is Clinton here?" Steven asked, and his dad shook his head as he replied, "He left a little while ago and just said to tell you guys he'd see you at school."

We shuffled for the door, glad to have broken the chill, and once on the porch, I offered a guess. “Chuck asked where we were going and I told him we were heading here; he and Hutch must have gotten here first.”

We crossed the intersection opposite of Village Square and watched for the white Barracuda as we walked across the driveway of a Texaco gas station, long darkened inside but brightly lit near the entrance to its service garage. After three blocks, we turned down Douglas Avenue, which runs a good twenty miles across our city, narrowing only where it becomes the main street through Avonshire. This neighborhood was much like our neighborhood, but it was marked by a city limits sign because the developers built it as a suburb in the 1930s. Even though the city grew around Avonshire, it had never been annexed by the city, and my dad’s guess was it never would. He would go off when he saw kids from that neighborhood at the schools in our neighborhood because their families paid a small tuition but not school property taxes. The streets curved broadly through Avonshire, and the houses, some three-stories, were meant to look like an English country village with estates surrounded by trees and gardens. The neighborhood was only about six blocks by eight blocks, and it had its own police officer, who usually parked along Douglas to catch speeders and hassle kids from outside the neighborhood. We watched for him as intently as we did for the white Barracuda as we zigzagged through the neighborhood. Our path kept us in the shadows, sometimes cutting in the opposite direction we needed to go until we turned onto Mission Road where we walked briskly until we reached the shadows of the oak and fir trees.

Steven asked about my brother in the same way he always asked. “Gotten any letters from Ray lately?”

"Tuesday. He was saying that after the jungle plants closest to the base were sprayed, they turned brown the next day, and the day after that he was sick. His sergeant told him to go back to bed instead of sick bay so they wouldn't ship him out to the hospital in Tokyo."

"When did he write the letter?"

"A week before we got it."

"Doesn't that scare you?"

I shook my head even though I knew what Steven was getting at. A guy could write and mail a letter one day, then get killed by a rocket or a V.C. attack before the letter arrived. And that's what bothered us most at fourteen, not knowing what happened during the week between when a letter was written and when it arrived.

Most of the houses were dark, so we stayed in the middle of the street searching out a spot to drop firecrackers as our last mission of the night.

As we came around the curve on Lynwood, we saw a beat-up Chevy stop in front of a house with a porch light on, and four kids, none of them taller than four-feet, bounced up the driveway and rang the doorbell. As we neared that driveway, the front door opened, and a man wearing a white shirt and black trousers clutched a bowl and started dishing out candy. "You kids are almost too late to get anything, so here, take all you want."

Each child took a couple of handfuls, and Reid said, "Let's see if he'll give us candy."

The three of us stepped onto the porch as the little kids raced back to the Chevy, and we slouched as Reid squeaked out "Trick or Treat."

The man pulled back his candy bowl and scowled. “You boys are too big for this. Go on home.” As he closed the door we stopped in the street at the end of his driveway.

There, Reid grabbed my bag and dumped a pile of fire crackers. For good measure, I cleared a space in the middle for a couple of smoke bombs with their fuses up, and then piled the firecrackers atop the smoke bombs.

“Put all the firecrackers in the pile,” Steven said, but I refused. “I want some the next time I see Chuck and Hutch.” We looked up and down the street, and I flicked the lighter and waved it past the firecracker fuses. I pulled a couple of smoke bombs from the bag and lit one and dropped it on the pile.

But before I got out of the driveway, the smoke bomb I was tucking into my windbreaker pocket fell into the street. I stopped to pick it up, and when I started out again, the first firecrackers popped, and a big Buick swung past Reid and Steven, who kept running. A blinking turn signal caught my eye, and I froze and waved the Buick to stay out of the driveway. Before the woman driving the car could get out, the front door to the house opened and the man bellowed. “You little punk, you stop right there. I’ve already called the Avonshire patrolman, and he’s on his way over. You blow up your firecrackers in my driveway because I wouldn’t give you a little candy bar? What the hell’s wrong with you?”

The man kept coming alongside the driveway as the last of the firecrackers exploded and a smoke bomb ignited. I grabbed it and tossed it as far down the street as I could, hoping that somehow this would soothe his anger. I kicked the other smoke bomb into a muddy spot in the grass and that doused it.

Now the woman stepped from the car, parked with the engine running, and she said, “Have the kids come in yet? I’ve been everywhere they said they were going, and I didn’t see anyone out at all.” She sounded as if she might start crying at any moment.

The man replied, “No honey, I thought they were home when I heard laughter on the porch, but then the doorbell rang, and some little kids were there, so I gave them candy. Then this hoodlum and his friends came looking for trouble.”

His glare cut through me, and I felt like I could join his wife in reaching for the Kleenex box. I looked away, scanning up and down the street, and then turned to him again. “When we came down Mission and turned onto your street, we didn’t see anyone.”

His expression melted from anger to fear, and before he could say anything, I softened my voice, and continued. “I’ll go looking for them and walk them back here. Are they little kids? I promise I won’t just sneak off. I’m sorry for letting my friend dump out those firecrackers.”

Before he said anything, his wife spoke out.

“You were part of the ninth-graders from Robinson Junior High for the orientation visits at Central High last week, right?”

I nodded, and I looked at her more closely. She was the volunteer who helped me fill out the directory sheet that was in the enrollment packets at the high school. “Our daughter is your age, and she was taking our eight-year-old son around the neighborhood. She said she wanted to stop at her friend’s around the block, a red brick two-story, but the house was dark when I drove past.”

I started that way, but the man spoke out. “Leave your firecrackers.” I set the bag on the driveway, keeping my hand in the windbreaker pocket holding onto the smoke bomb so I’d at least have one.

“I’ll get back here as quick as I can, sir.” I sounded serious, but he did not look fooled. I walked looking only straight ahead, for all the porch lights along Lynnwood were dark. At the bend, I saw a girl with long hair jabbering at a boy with some type of helmet on his head, and I hollered at them. “Does your mom drive a blue Buick?”

They stopped immediately and stood motionless. When I got nervous I fiddled with my glasses. I could see her smiling at me and I pushed my glasses up three times before I spoke.

“Sorry to scare you, but your parents are looking for you. My friends and passed your house when we saw your dad giving candy to some other kids. My friends wanted some, too, but your dad told us to leave, and that’s when your mom pulled up all upset that she couldn’t find you.”

They stepped forward, the girl laughing lightly, and in the street light, I saw the boy was dressed as an astronaut. I was amazed at how pretty she was, tall, with thick blonde hair to her shoulders.

“We would have been home an hour ago, but my friend asked us to stay and watch a scary movie. I called home, but no one answered.”

I wondered if she used the same trick of knowing how long it takes someone to reach the phone so you can hang up and say no one answered.

“I promised your parents I’d walk you back down the street.” We walked three across, and I was amazed that she was not kalumphing along like the tall girls I knew.

Each step was like she was gliding on skates, her shoulders barely swaying and her head steady. The boy resumed jabbering about the movie.

Just as I started to feel comfortable enough to ask about school at the new junior high, I heard a sputtering muffler and saw headlights bouncing up the road from behind us. I pushed them onto the yard as I turned to look. It was the white Barracuda.

"Quick," I yelled, "run toward those trees." I grabbed the boy's hand to pull him along, and when the Barracuda passed, I glanced sideways before turning away. The Barracuda rumbled to a stop, and the driver threw it into reverse and peeled back toward us.

"Just go!" I clutched the smoke bomb with the hand in my jacket pocket, and squeezed tightly the hand of the astronaut. The helmet bounced up and down on his head and he squealed in pain and stopped, causing both his sister and me to stumble as the Barracuda skidded to a halt.

The driver rolled down the window. "Hey chicky chicky, you want to go trick or treating with us? We got treats for you." He gunned his engine, bouncing the car forward.

I muffled my voice. "Run home as fast as you can and if anyone gets out of the car, pound on your neighbor's door and scream as loud as you can scream."

All three of us ran, the girl grabbing her brother's shoulder and dragging him as he hung onto his helmet with one hand and his candy bag with the other.

I dug the lighter out of my pocket and turned to see how close the Barracuda was. When the driver gunned the engine again, I lit the smoke bomb, and when I threw it, it bounced off the hood of the Barracuda and landed in the opposite gutter where it erupted.

The driver swerved toward me and started shouting. “Is that one of those assholes that threw the smoke bomb by the liquor store?”

I watched the girl and her brother reach the edge of their front yard, and she started screaming for help. I turned to run, but the Barracuda cut me off by turning into the driveway next to the girl’s house. Both doors popped open and the three guys hopped out as I ran around the back of the car. The guy from the front passenger seat grabbed me and spun me around and the guy that had been sitting in the back seat punched me in the back of the head. I slammed face first into the driveway. My glasses broke and my face scraped across the pavement. The driver ran around the front of the car and tried to kick me, but I rolled from the driveway into the grass.

I heard yelling from the front porch, and just as quickly as those three had left the car, they were back in it. The Barracuda lurched into the street, tires squealing as they pulled away. I closed my eyes face down in the grass, colder now than when Hutch and Chuck sprayed me with shaving cream, zero confidence in emerging from this with any dignity. The next thing I felt was the man’s hand on my shoulder as he rolled me onto my back.

“You OK? Oh, shit, you’re bleeding.” I wiped across my cheek, which felt hot, and the blood on my hand glistened in the street light, scaring me because in the dim light and shadows it looked so different from a bloody scraped knee. He tugged me up onto my feet. “Let’s get you into the house.”

My glasses slid down my face, and I grabbed the broken frames, now feeling like a total doof as I walked alongside him. He dabbed at my cheek with his handkerchief as we went inside.

"Honey, send those two to their rooms and get something we can put on this." He guided me into the kitchen where I sat at the table while he ran hot water on the handkerchief and wiped my cheek. "It's just a scrape," he said. A couple of minutes passed in silence, me wishing I was at home, before his wife came in with an ointment that she smeared across my cheek. It stung like fire, and then she patted my face dry and stuck on a wide Band-aid. I wondered what their daughter heard when the guys started yelling at me, and then I wondered if she had heard anything, if she had told her parents.

"I'm still mad about the stunt you pulled earlier," the dad said, sitting across from me, "but I do appreciate you sticking your neck out for my kids like that. Let me see those glasses. I can make a temporary fix; the lenses aren't scratched." He pulled electrical tape from a desk next to the door to the garage, and then he rooted around in the drawer, settling for a notebook pad and a scissors. He cut two strips of cardboard from the back of the pad and taped them to each side of the broken arm and, after trimming the excess cardboard, gave me my glasses. The cardboard held the arm straight, but when I put them on, the glasses sat crooked.

I thanked him and looked away when I heard the daughter come into the kitchen.

"Do you have to take him to the hospital?" Her voice was soft and clear, and I wanted to look at her, but feeling like a dork, I didn't want to push my luck.

Her dad shook his head. "His cheek's scraped up pretty bad, but he'll be OK." He turned to me without pausing. "Let's get your firecracker bag, and I can give you a ride home."

"That's all right. I live on Parkwood across from Cypress Creek Park. I don't mind walking."

"I'd feel better dropping you off." And he led me to the front foyer and out the door. Just as we got to the car, the Avonshire patrolman pulled into the driveway.

"Mr. Jackson? Is this your fireworks offender?"

He waved the officer back. "We worked it out. I'm taking him home."

"What's in the bag?" The officer stepped toward me, and I handed it to him. He looked inside and set the bag down. "I'm confiscating these, and giving you a court summons. Avonshire ordinances prohibit explosive fireworks within city limits anytime other than around Independence Day, so you can't work that out between yourselves."

Mr. Jackson stepped forward. "You can write it on me."

"I'm not taking a chance that he'll think he can get away with doing anything here," the officer said, turning to me.

Mr. Jackson looked away from the officer, staring at the ground for a moment.

"Officer," I said as solemnly as I could with a shaving cream odor drifting from me and my eyeglasses hanging crooked, "the fireworks being here is my doing. Give me the ticket."

He motioned toward his patrol car. "Get in. I have to take you to your parents. You'll think twice before coming in this neighborhood again."

Mr. Jackson leaned in. "Write the damn ticket and give it to the boy. I'll take him home. You need to be after the hoodlums that beat him up and threatened my son and daughter. She said they were in a white Barracuda."

"White Barracuda? I wrote the driver tickets earlier in the evening for having both a taillight and the license plate light burned out."

"Shouldn't you be after them for trying to kick this boy's head in, and for threatening my daughter?"

"They're long gone from my jurisdiction. I'll radio city police, and they can chase them down."

When the cop returned from his car, he pulled out his ticket pad, and I gave him my name and address. He handed the pad to me and told me to sign. When he ripped the ticket from the pad, he looked at Mr. Jackson. "You sure you want to give him a ride?" Mr. Jackson nodded and motioned me to get into the Buick as I stuffed the ticket into the back pocket of my jeans. We watched the patrolmen disappear around the bend into the darkness.

But instead of getting into his car, I said, "I'd really rather walk home." He shook his head and looked away as I explained how I would cross Woodlawn and walk down to the park. He motioned for me to get in, but I continued my explanation that the Barracuda guys would not be able to see me walking through the park, which was no more than a couple of blocks to my house. And if they did see me coming out of the park I knew which yards had fences and which ones didn't, and how I could get to my house ducking in between houses.

Mr. Jackson was still shaking his head as I finished my explanation. "Do you even think of what could go wrong running through someone's backyard after dark? If my kids were doing that, I'd bust their rears."

He stared at me as I stood outside the Buick, and I thought about the differences between Miss Elegance 1967, the Astronaut, and my gang of pranskters who were more worried about brothers in a war than what could go wrong with our stunts. The war made

us feel like we weren't children of privilege even though we were. It was the guys in the beat up Barracuda who were more likely than us in a few more years to be shot at by a jungle sniper while they were out on a night patrol.

"Are you going to drop me off or are you going to go to the door and demand to see my parents?" I asked.

"Just get in," he said. "It's late so I'll drop you off, and you can explain to your parents your patched up face and broken glasses in the morning."

We rode in silence as we drove down Woodlawn to Douglas. Now the neighborhoods seemed the same except for taller trees and bigger yards in his neighborhood. When we got to my street, he turned and stopped at the curb. "Is it this block or the next?"

"This one," I said. I started to open the door, and then I turned back to him. "Mr. Jackson, I'm sorry about the firecrackers in the driveway. If we'd been bad kids or just mad about the candy, we would've set the firecrackers off on your porch or in the flower bed."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better? Or is it just an excuse?"

"Sounds more like an excuse," I replied. "I guess I should have stopped at sorry."

Mr. Jackson nodded. "Bet you never do something like that with firecrackers again."

For a moment I think about what he said, realizing that we would be more interested in football and after-game dances. Instead of running around the neighborhood, Steven, Reid and I might be playing in that game and going for pizza or something after the game, wherever high school kids go to hangout.

I got out of the car and as he turned around to go home, I walked down my street, just as quiet as his street was when I went looking for his kids. Then I realized I did not know his daughter's name, and I wondered if we would have any classes together, or if we'd have different groups of friends. I reminded myself to remember her last name, Jackson, so when student directories came out, I could at least find out then. But then I wondered if she would think she was too good for me if she knew the whole story.

I'm Away

The solid click of the ball, as resounding as a hammer striking a nail, fed Charlie Hays' confidence. He followed through on this drive on the fourteenth tee with a relaxed pace – holding his head down as his hands guided the club through the contact until his shoulder turn, the source of the power behind that resounding click, gently pulled his head around to the line of the flight of the golf ball.

Certain that he had struck the ball as well as he could, Charlie gloried in the moment by relaxing as his eyes caught up with the ball in flight. Just short of preening – he had hit the ball well before, and he was certain he would hit it well again – he held his hands up around his shoulders as the driver drooped toward the ground.

The click of the ball contrasted with the rustling maple leaves and the whistle of a meadowlark as it sat on the out-of-bounds fence row along the fairway. Sunlight reflected on the ball as it rose to its apogee, where Charlie caught sight of it, and he watched until it hit the ground. It stopped some two hundred fifty yards away along the left side of the fairway, reaching the slope up to the green.

Normally, Charlie would be collecting compliments from his usual playing partners, but on this breezy August afternoon, he chose to play alone to prepare for The Riverside Golf Club's tournament in a week.

Ahead near the green, a slender shaggy-haired teen, wearing a white T-shirt and cut off jean shorts, worked to get a ball out of the sand trap. Charlie had caught sight of the kid a couple of times. And though he too was playing alone, Charlie had paced himself to remain behind him until near the closing holes, a par three at fifteen, a short, tight par four over a creek on sixteen, a longer dogleg-left par four on seventeen, and a

par five to close that snaked along the creek and through the trees. The shade would feel good by then so long as he kept his ball clear of the woods.

As Charlie walked up the fairway he watched the kid take several practice swings in the trap before attempting the shot. The kid hesitated with his backswing and then swung wildly, burying the clubface into the sand and popping the ball just over the lip of the trap. It stopped on the fringe of the green. The kid raked the sand trap carefully before hitting a bump shot toward the hole.

Charlie watched the kid take another awkward practice swing. The unsteady swings reminded Charlie of how he had learned to play and how the kid seemed unprepared when he finally hit the ball. It skipped onto the green, rolled a foot wide of the hole, and stopped about twelve feet away. When the kid turned to pick up his bag and trade the wedge for a putter, he looked at Charlie standing in the fairway, waiting to hit his approach shot. The kid waved him on and stepped to the back of the green.

Charlie took a practice swing with the nine iron, then checked his grip and his stance before checking his aim once. He locked his gaze on the ball, ignoring how the afternoon sun sent beads of sweat rolling from his temples onto his cheeks. Again, the clubface made a sharp click as the ball shot upward on line with the green. A breeze pushed the ball right of the flag as it landed on the green and bounced slightly left before rolling not far from where the kid's ball had settled. Charlie slid the nine iron back into the bag and walked briskly with his pull cart down the side of the fairway still hoping the kid would putt out.

The kid took his time lining up the putt, and when he finally hit it, his aim was directly at the hole instead of adjusting for the slope of the green. The stroke was again

too hard, and the ball caught the break about four feet past the flag and rolled down the slope, stopping eight feet from the hole.

The kid started to line up the second putt, but now Charlie was nearing the green, and the kid stepped back from his ball and waited for Charlie to park his pull cart and join him. When the kid stepped back from his ball, Charlie smiled. “Mind if I play along?”

“Sure,” the kid said. “I’m Richard. I was going to let you play through. I haven't played much; wound up by myself when my friend couldn’t play.”

Charlie nodded and stooped behind his ball to judge the break and pick a point to aim for. He said nothing, a habit of years of hustling bets with guys who thought they were pretty good. As he stepped back to the ball and looked at the break in the putt, his past reminded him of what he had done for years on a twelve-foot, side hill putt. Bet for a Coke and then miss to set up a series of oddball bets to win a hundred dollars from a sucker.

Now he lined up to make the putt. After a single practice swing to set the speed of the putt, he stroked the ball. It rolled eight feet to a point about four feet above the hole and then caught the break, curling toward the hole, but stopping a foot past – his aim was six inches wide.

“Nice putt,” the kid said. “Go ahead and tap it in unless you just want to pick it up.”

Charlie, saying he wanted the practice, again lined up his putt, and after a practice swing, stroked the ball into the cup. As Charlie retrieved his ball, he looked at the kid's lie. Sensing a need to encourage him, he offered his assessment. “Looks straight in.”

The kid stepped up to the ball and mimicked Charlie's routine. He looked at the cup and then at Charlie, who nodded slightly. The kid hit the ball firmly, almost too firmly, as it jumped the front edge of the cup and struck the back edge before bouncing back to the front and rattling in. The kid snapped his head back as if he were surprised.

Charlie offered his best encouragement. “Getting in is all that matters. Pretty doesn’t count for anything.”

They walked silently to the fifteenth hole, a par three, one hundred fifty yards split by a ditch about fifty yards in front of the green. “You're up,” the kid said. “I got a seven back there.”

Charlie pulled his eight iron, but when he felt the stiff cross breeze, he traded it for a seven iron, and went through his setup quickly. Again the ball took off cleanly, but the breeze was stronger than Charlie had estimated, and the ball came up short, stopping on the fringe at the front of the green.The kid shook his head. “Thought you had that on the green.”

“Me too.” Charlie wiped the seven iron's face clean and slid it back into the bag. “Hit your five and swing easy. At worst you’re going to the back of the green if the wind dies down.”

The kid nodded and took out the five. But again, his lack of confidence betrayed his shot, which squirted off so far to the right of the green that it sailed toward the sixteenth tee box and rolled onto a patch of hardpan nearly fifty yards wide of the green.

“That's OK.” Charlie said. “You just need to trust your swing and you would have been right there.” He thought of similar results when he had first taken up the game. “Since you got a ways to go, I'm going to go ahead and hit my pitch shot. Watch how I

get it to the back of the green, or try to." He laughed as he said the last part, and the kid seemed to relax.

By the time the kid got to his ball, Charlie had lined up his chip shot with a sand wedge. He took a single practice swing, looked at the flag, and struck the ball. It landed on the upslope of the green, in line with the hole, but six inches at most from the spot where it would have landed on level ground. It bounced once and rolled to the left of the hole, stopping about six feet short.

Charlie slid the club back into the bag, realizing that he should have pitched with the seven iron so that he would have gotten more roll. He waved to Richard, who again mimicked Charlie's setup routine – lining himself up with the green and flag stick, taking a practice swing, and a moment later, pulling the wedge back for a half swing. This time, though, he rushed his swing, and hit the ball so thin that it rose only a couple of feet above the ground as it skittered onto the green to within three feet of the flag. Richard walked quickly to the green, head down, but Charlie smiled, thinking who looked like the sucker now.

"I'm away," Charlie said. He lined up his putt, judging a slight break to the right. How hard to hit it, though, remained a mystery, for the putt was into the breeze that was changing from minute to minute. Charlie raised his head as he struck the ball, and the ball immediately skipped to the right, no chance of going in but stopping within a foot of the hole. "Looks like I get my bogey this time," he said, tapping the ball in one-handed.

Richard drew a deep breath and rolled the straight-in putt into the hole.

"Nice putt," Charlie said, reaching into the hole for the kid's ball so he could replace the flagstick. "You get par, and that puts you up first in the tee box."

Richard took his ball from Charlie. “That's what gets me about golf. I hit two bad shots and wind up with a par, and you hit two shots that looked perfect in the air but you wind up with bogey.”

“Now you're getting an idea of why we play,” Charlie said as they walked to the sixteenth tee. “The only thing you can control out here is your hands. Grip the club right and swing confidently, and one of two things will happen, neither under your control: You may get a good result, or the golf course bites you in the butt and you get a bad one. The only thing you can do is hit the ball as good as you can the next time around.”

The sixteenth was only three hundred twenty yards from the middle tees. But a creek cut in front of the tee box across the fairway and then doubled back two hundred yards out and ran toward the right side of the fairway, making the target area from the tee box too small for a driver. The kid seemed nervous about the shot, and Charlie offered advice again, that if he felt confident hitting a three- or four-wood along the left side, he would have a wedge to the green. But if he felt spooked trying to hit the ball across the creek and keeping it inbounds along the right-hand side of the fairway, he could hit a four iron short of the creek and hit a seven iron for his approach shot to the green.

Richard pulled out his three wood, a scuffed up club with a worn grip, and took a practice swing. But he was no more confident after that practice swing, and as he took a deep breath he seemed to freeze until his shoulders tightened, and he swung out of desperation, smacking down on top of the ball and kicking it out about fifty yards before it dropped into the creek, sounding like a rock hitting the water. The kid slumped his head and smacked the club head softly against the ground.

“Perfect execution for that old ball,” Charlie said. “It got the watery grave it deserved.”

Richard smiled, and before he could dig another ball from his bag, Charlie pulled a new Titleist from his pocket and tossed it to the kid.

“Here, swing away. You'll get it across that creek this time if you'll forget the creek's there and relax. Slow and easy will put you right in the middle of the fairway.”

The kid teed the ball up and swung slow on the backswing. The ball sailed across the first leg of the creek, and as the kid rolled into his follow through, he watched it clear the other part of the creek by fifteen yards, stopping a hundred yards from the green.

“That's the way to take it up that right side and draw it back to the middle. If you had hit your driver that way you would have gotten up the slope and rolled a good thirty yards after it landed. But the shot you played was the smart one. Forget that first shot. We'll say you're hitting two so if you get another good result you've got a chance at birdie.”

Charlie hit a four wood two hundred twenty yards down the left side of the fairway where he had a clear shot to the green. As they walked down the fairway, Charlie asked the kid how long he had played golf.

“I started this summer. I've caddied for a couple of the tournaments here with the friend who sold me his old golf clubs. He plays on the golf team at school, and I might play next spring.”

“Go ahead and give it a try,” Charlie said. “The worst that can happen is the coach won't ever play you in a match, but you’ll get plenty of practice and tips from the coach and the assistant pros here.”

Richard nodded and pulled out his nine iron as he approached his ball, gleaming white and setting up in the fairway grass. Charlie wanted to ask the kid how he planned to hit it, but he resisted the urge to coach the details of the game. “Take a couple of practice swings, and the one that feels right, try to do it again.”

The kid pushed the shot slightly to the right, but it still landed on the green, curling with the slope and stopped about twenty-five feet from the hole.

“Anytime you're on the green in regulation you got a chance.” Charlie tried to draw Richard into more conversation, but the kid hesitated, just nodding at that comment without any apparent change in his level of confidence.

Charlie's ball also had set up nicely, and he took a sand wedge, gripping on the end and after his practice routine, swung hard and quick, not looking for the shot until he had gotten to his follow through. Richard again complimented the shot, which landed in front of the hole by about fifteen feet and rolled slightly to the left before stopping.

“So, you don't mind playing with an old guy? You seem pretty quiet about everything.”

“No sir,” Richard said. “I'm just not used to having someone I don't know watch me hit.”

“You've sprayed the ball around,” Charlie said. “That's the way we all start out, so don't worry about where it actually goes. Play on that golf team and the coach will at least make certain you know how to grip the club right and line yourself up right. You've already got a pretty good rhythm to your swing, at least when you're swinging with confidence. Just remember what every beginner hears: Nobody ever had an 'eighteen' for

the round, so there's always room for improvement no matter how good or how bad you play."

By the time they reached the green, Charlie felt compelled to give the kid at least one tip, but he put it in the form of a question. "Which way is it breaking?" he asked when Richard first looked at the ball with a side hill break. But Richard didn't reply, so Charlie tried another question. "You know how to figure how hard to hit it?"

Richard shook his head and took a practice swing.

"The rule is simple, but the shot can fool you. You've got to hit it hard enough to get uphill from the hole. The harder you can hit the ball the less it will break. But you're going uphill only part of the way; the ball will turn over sideways when it catches the break. You want to be on the high side of the hole so it runs to the hole when it starts to curve downhill."

While that sounded like gibberish to Charlie after he got it out, Richard nodded and took a stance for more practice swings.

"That line looks pretty good," Charlie said as the kid moved the putter hesitantly. "The ball will be slowing down when it catches the break and starts to go downhill. But don't think so much about it that you baby it and leave it on top. When the ball gets to the hole, you want it going the same speed down the hill as up it." Charlie wasn't sure that was accurate advice, but it always had seemed right when he had a side hill putt.

Charlie stepped back behind his ball to line up his own putt as Richard took a last look at the hole and the spot on the slope where he expected the ball to break for the hole. Then he hit it. Even though the putt was too hard by a slight touch, it was still close enough so that when it turned down the hill, it looked for a moment that it was on line.

But as it picked up speed, Richard's gasps stopped when the ball rolled six feet past the hole.

“That's not bad,” Charlie said. “You always hear you should try to get your long putts to within three feet of the hole, but that doesn't always happen. Your putt now is just like the one on fourteen. Hit it straight to the hole and it will go in.” Charlie realized that he was talking too much, so he tucked his head, took a practice swing to gauge the speed, and then he rolled his putt toward the hole. It stopped six inches short, and he tapped it in for the par without waiting.

Richard seemed preoccupied with his own putt, taking three practice swings before stabbing at it with the putter. The ball stopped short at the lip of the cup, and Charlie offered a nod of the head and a “that's OK” as the kid tapped the ball in.

On seventeen, the tee box was set back, and the shot to the dogleg seemed unreachable.

“Sitting back like this is an advantage. Aim for the bend in the dogleg,” Charlie said. “Hit it dead straight and you’ve got a clear shot to the green. Hit a draw and the ball will follow the bend, and you’ll be closer to the green. Hit a high fade and you’ll set up on the right side of the fairway, and you have a better look at the green.”

Charlie teed off first, Richard rolling the Titleist between his fingers as Charlie hit. He pushed the shot right, and it wound up along the right hand rough. The kid followed, and trusting Charlie's assessment of the hole, he swung confidently with no hesitation at any point in the swing. It took off down the middle, but with his draw, it followed the bend in the fairway.

When they got to Richard's ball, Charlie once again offered encouragement, spurred by the time he played with a squat, beer-drinking, loud-talker who invited himself to play with Charlie. Charlie held off on the front nine and then started with the bets on the back until he was up a hundred-and-fifty dollars. Then he had a similar approach shot that the kid now had. But Charlie could not get the loud-talker out of his mind, how the jabberer had landed his shot squarely on the green and was within fifteen feet of the hole. Charlie offered a double or nothing bet that he could land the ball in front of the green but still get closer to the hole. “Two-hundred,” the man said, laughing. And when Charlie’s shot bounded from the fringe onto the green and rolled to inside of ten feet, the man grew angry and demanded a double or nothing bet on the putts. The loud-talker bet he’d sink the straight-in fifteen footer, and that if Charlie needed two strokes to hole out, they would then break even. Charlie nodded, and when the man rolled in the fifteen-footer, Charlie said, “Nice putt,” and then stroked his straight-in putt into the hole without a practice swing. “Five hundred or your clubs.” The man broke down in tears as he handed his clubs to Charlie and walked to his car.

“See the front middle of the green?” Charlie said to the kid. “Aim there and if you come up short, you'll have a little chip shot that lands on a flat part of the green. You'll still have a good score for the hole.” The kid took aim with a four wood, but with trees surrounding the sides and the back of the green, the kid panicked. He swung hard and fast, rushing his hands through the swing before the clubhead had gotten back to the ball. Instead of the clubface sweeping through the ball squarely, it was facing up, and the bottom edge of the clubhead struck the ball, popping it high into the air only about eighty yards before it landed and rolled another thirty yards.

“When the round is over,” Charlie said, “I like to compare what I did on my bad shots with what I’ve done on my good shots,” Charlie said. “More often than not, being rushed is what the bad shots have in common. Take your time; the ball doesn’t go anywhere until you hit it.” Charlie did not want to belabor the point, so he headed over to his ball, splitting away from the kid by the width of the fairway.

He was just under two-hundred yards from the green, and with the breeze in his face, a three iron would have been perfect, he thought, if only he could still hit it as well as when he was thirty-eight, and not the unsteady results of trying to hit that club now at fifty-eight.

For all the advice that he had dished out, none could ease his distrust of hitting a long iron now. He could not decide if it were the vagaries of age and weakening eyesight that played tricks on his hand-eye coordination or the vanity of wanting to hit a good shot now as a proof that the advice he was offering was valid. He gripped the three iron loosely and pressing it behind the ball, he waggled the club head, hoping that the lack of confidence would melt. He tried to force himself to relax, but that trick only caused him to squeeze his hands tighter around the club as he started his backswing. Deep down, Charlie knew that starting a swing wrong was an acceptable reason to stop a swing and step back. But he also knew that waiting could deepen his doubt so he let the swing play out.

He struck the ball sharply, but his hands were too tight to return the clubface back to square, leaving the face open and pushing the ball to the right where it settled behind a clump of trees near the green. From there, Charlie knew from experience the best shot

would be a chip back toward the fairway, and then the fourth shot would be to the green. With luck it would land close enough to the hole for a chance at bogey.

The kid's third shot stopped just short of the green, the ball sitting on the fringe about twenty feet from the hole. After Charlie bumped the ball out from behind the trees, his pitch shot stopped in the middle of the green, safely on, but no sure putt because of a sharp right-to-left break.

The kid, lying three, pulled out his pitching wedge. Charlie wanted to tell him to try his putter, the old advice that the worst putt will always be better than the worst chip shot, but he bit his lip. The kid flicked at the ball, and it skipped over the edge of the fringe, landing fifteen feet from the hole. As it rolled, the kid's eyes widened as he watched it stick between the flag and the edge of the hole until the wind rattled the flagstick, dropping the ball into the cup.

“Routine par,” Charlie said loudly, clapping his hands. Richard smiled, still silent as he pulled his ball from the hole and then took out the flag for Charlie's putt. Charlie rolled the ball smartly, expecting it to catch a break maybe five feet from the hole. But the ball was rolling too fast to catch the break at that point, and when it finally did break, it was off line, missing the hole and rolling four feet past. Charlie lined the putt up quickly, and after a single practice swing, stroked the putt, dropping it dead in the middle.

“Double boge' for me. Looks like you get to show me the way home.”

The par five eighteenth, five hundred-thirty yards, was a test of fatigue versus concentration and confidence. The fairway ran uphill from the tee box with trees lining both sides of the fairway. With the tee box set forward, the top of the hill seemed

reachable even though it was still more than two hundred yards to the crest. As they arrived at the tee box, Charlie turned to the kid. “Let’s play for a Coke.”

The kid crinkled his expression as if he were unsure that he had enough money for two Cokes. But he took out his driver and belted the ball as hard as he could hit without rushing his swing. It sailed up to the top of the hill and bounced high one time before rolling down the slope.

“That looked nice,” Charlie said. “You can finish out with par-par or par-birdie.”

The kid smiled at the remark.

Charlie teed up his ball and quickly launched his drive as he resisted the surge of adrenaline that came with making a bet. Again the click of the club hitting the ball was loud, and the ball climbed steadily, clearing the top of the hill before hitting the ground and bouncing sharply down the hill.

The two walked down the middle of the fairway silently until Richard turned to him, but then looked down. Charlie guessed what Richard wanted to ask.

“I’m Charlie Weathers,” he said, “I’ve been playing around town and through this part of the state for forty years when I wasn’t selling cars or boats.”

Richard nodded and looked toward his ball, and Charlie continued. “You seem to have a pretty good sense of what to do. Practice will build your confidence.”

When Richard broke off for his ball, he smiled. Charlie pulled out a three wood as he walked, picturing a shot on line to the green, skipping on, although he would be happy if the shot were simply on line and stayed out of the sand traps along the right side of the green. He thought to a time he would line up dead on the flag, but locking his wrist would take the shot off line and into trouble, and then he’d double the bet.

As he lined up the shot, he thought he could go one better; mishit the shot and then let Richard win the hole and the bet. *Just a little giveaway to pump up the kid's confidence.* He stepped back from the ball and turned toward Richard's direction.

Richard hit a four iron as hard as he could swing it, pushing the shot toward the right hand side of the fairway about a hundred and thirty yards from the green. Charlie took a couple of practice swings with the wood and then thought again about the sand traps. When he knew he would not get that thought out of his mind – a zen knowledge that the worst fears are more likely to come true than the best result – he stuck the three wood back in the bag. *It'd be so easy to drag the wood shot and get into a trap.* He ran his hand over the three wood once more. *Respect the game and play honest; losing intentionally is just as wrong as setting up sucker bets.* Charlie glanced toward Richard and then pulled out his five iron. Lining up toward the left side of the green, he could easily place the shot about a hundred yards short of the green, leaving him a chance to hit a pitching wedge hard enough that it would stop where it landed.

Charlie was confident enough that he could have hit the shot with his eyes shut once he had lined up with the ball and had his aim right. This was what he liked about golf when he was competing for a winning score instead of a bet, a chance to confront his fear of a bad shot, and if he could not overcome the fear and swing the three wood anyway, he could find another path, another way to play the shot for a good outcome.

The ball sailed across the middle of the fairway, and when it settled in, only a bad hop kept it from being as close as he had hoped. The ball hit a sprinkler head and instead of bounding forward, it bounced hard to the right. Still, he was no more than one hundred

twenty yards from the green, and, instead of the pitching wedge, a nine iron would easily reach the middle of the green.

Richard and Charlie crossed paths as they walked up the fairway.

“We both have pretty good shots at par here,” Charlie said. But Richard didn't seem to take much encouragement from that judgment and Charlie wished he had kept quiet. As he walked, he pulled out the nine iron, looking at the blade to make certain it was clean, that no mud had packed into the grooves on the club face that would cut into the ability to control the shot.

As they neared Richard's ball, they parted again, Charlie stopped twenty yards behind Richard to follow the flight of the ball if Richard mishit his shot. He wavered between two clubs, and when Charlie hollered out about needing to clear the trap, Richard pulled both clubs out and turned toward Charlie. “Seven or eight?” he asked in a mild shout. Charlie stopped and hollered again, “Seven. Swing easy and think about the ball landing on the front edge of the green.”

Richard slid the eight back into the bag and took a practice swing. But he could not take his eyes off the sand traps, and he again rushed his swing, this time his shoulders tight, and pulled the shot, which landed in the sand trap farthest from the hole.

Charlie cleared his mind of Richard's trouble and concentrated on his grip and aim to banish any thought that of chunking his shot would do Richard a favor. He started the backswing slow and then swung hard so the shot would stick where it landed.

The click of contact was resolute, and Charlie caught sight of the ball soaring high above the green as he completed his follow through. It bounced once to the right a couple of feet and stopped within ten feet of the hole.

As he neared the green, he hoped that Richard would not panic. Charlie wished for a moment that he were playing alone so that he could line up the birdie putt and drill it without waiting on any other shot.

The two met up again in front of the green. “Anyone ever tell you in golf worrying about a hazard is the surest way to land there?” Charlie said.

Richard took out his pitching wedge, and lined up his shot. He twisted his feet from side to side, trying to get comfortable, but the more he squirmed the less comfortable he looked. He took a practice swing, burying the club head deep in the sand, causing it to spray across the green. Charlie smiled and looked away, thinking how his usual playing partners would razz him for that and call the penalty.

“Your lie is pretty good so you don't have to blast out,” Charlie said, thinking about how he learned to hit a sand shot. “Besides, this trap is flat like a fairway trap instead of a deep bunker like you see in the pro tournaments. Pretend you're not in sand and swing for the distance to the flag like it was sitting up in grass. It won't be pretty but you won't hurt yourself.”

Richard again steadied his stance, pulling the wedge back only a couple of feet. He swung smoothly, clicking the ball and scattering only a little bit of sand this time. The ball squirted out of the trap, landing on the back side of a tiny knoll between the trap and the green before trickling onto the green. He let out a deep breath even if he was still more than twenty feet from the hole. After raking the trap smooth, Richard pulled out his putter and went straight to his ball. He rushed through his setup and practice swing before backing away from the putt and taking a read on the green’s slope. The putt was mostly uphill, so when Richard stepped back up to it, he looked once at the cup while taking his

practice swing and then tucked his chin against his chest and stroked the putt. The ball raced up the hill and broke slightly left about three feet from the hole and curled away from it.

Charlie straightened up and stepped to the side. “Go ahead and putt out,” he said. “Bogey's not bad for the situation you had there.”

Richard stepped up to the ball and again looked at the cup as he took a practice swing that in no way was indicative of the distance he had to the hole. But when he drew the putter back for the actual putt, his backswing was slow and precise and the ball dropped into the cup.

Charlie lined up his putt, aiming about six inches above the hole, and sent his putt rolling. It took the path that he had wanted, but he had underestimated the amount of break to play, and the ball curved away from the hole as it rolled near, stopping a couple of feet away. Still standing at the spot of his first putt, Charlie drooped his head and shoulders for a moment, then took another practice swing, as if the ball were still there. “Thought I had my birdie.”

Richard nodded in agreement but was silent as Charlie walked up to his ball and lined up the putt, tapping it firmly without a practice swing. The putt slid a little but caught enough of the hole to drop. The shots were honest, and whatever thoughts and regrets he had about playing the past dishonestly to win sucker bets were tucked away.

“That's a heckuva way to finish, Richard. You hit a safe drive after you scrambled for the par, and it looks like everything is going good. But you ran into trouble, and when you could have fallen apart, you came out of the trap OK and nearly saved par. Whenever it seems like you're safe, the game sneaks up on you and takes everything away, and

when you have to do something you're not sure that you can do, it gives it all back. That's what makes it fun."

Richard looked as if he didn't quite understand, picking up his golf bag and sliding in the putter. Charlie, sensing he had stepped into some deep age gulf that made him sound as if he were speaking a foreign language, felt compelled to explain himself, that golf was a worthy endeavor.

"You can play the same course every day all summer long, and you may never see the same shot twice. The funny thing is, your score is likely to always be about the same once you hit your level of skill. It's just that once in awhile when you get a couple of birdies and par the holes that you usually bogey, you feel like you've won."

Richard was silent until they got to the clubhouse. "Thanks for your help. I probably learned more than I realize. Maybe I will go out for the golf team. We're so stacked in basketball this year I may not make the junior varsity."

"Would you caddy for me next week?" Charlie asked. "Tell them at the counter."

Richard smiled. "Sure. Maybe I can learn how to hit some of those shots I can't hit now."

Now Charlie was silent as he watched the kid go to the Coke machine outside the pro shop. He should buy Richard a soda. As he started to offer, a group of teen-agers dressed in cutoffs and white T-shirts like Richard came off the ninth green. Richard saw them and joined their circle, trading jokey insults and the usual moans about the end of summer.

Charlie listened and realized that their circle was not much different from his usual partners who told stories of putts that should have dropped and shots through the trees that found the green.

"Richard," Charlie called out. He waved a ten-dollar bill as Richard approached. "Treat your friends. You earned that." And Charlie backed off, not wanting to intrude.

Did You Hear the One about AIDS?

When I scanned the obituary clerk's list prepared for proof reading that afternoon's obituary page, one name jumped out and made me swallow hard. How long had I known Tad? Four, maybe five years at least. I jotted out a note for the entertainment writer on how she needed to go to the funeral and talk to the family and his friends. Tad had been an entertainer in the Texas and Louisiana gay club circuit before his HIV positive diagnosis.

And fragments of memories roared back – meeting him and his drag show troupe of Marilyn Monroe impersonators, and how AIDS had picked them off one by one. And the joke that made clear the divide between our worlds. It started with that cruel punch line, meant to shield from the fear of the unknown as much as to punish those outside the straight world norms. And the memories always came back to that joke.

The 7:00 a.m. news budget meeting was drawing to a close, with Doc, the news desk editor in charge of the editing and layout desk, cranky that this edition of the afternoon Times-Bulletin not only did not have a murder for page one, but the wire was full of stories about the new disease of the eighties, acquired immune deficiency syndrome. "First we get Reagan, now this shit," Doc muttered as he looked over the list of page-one stories: an Associated Press feature explaining the difference between HIV-positive and AIDS, with a paragraph added about how neither was a problem locally; a profile of a returning Peace Corps volunteer; an advance about early campaign visits for the two frontrunners in the upcoming election for governor; and a local cute-kid photo.

As we broke from the meeting, Lisa, an assistant in the lifestyles department, tugged on Doc's arm. She had been lobbying for a transfer to the news desk, and so each time she sat in on the meeting, she got close, either with a compliment or a reminder of her goal of copy editing.

"You know what AIDS really stands for?" she asked, drawing a smile from Doc. "Anally injected death syndrome." While Doc roared, everybody else smiled and shook their heads.

After editing the stories for the final edition, I took a late lunch to meet my fiancé. Joan worked as a medical lab tech. As we ate, she asked about the news. Her interest perked up when I mentioned the AIDS explainer and how we added a paragraph in that story that AIDS and HIV were no problem here. She shook her head at that.

"You know it's just a matter of time," she said. "It's not just the East Coast and West Coast now; bigger cities across the country are reporting cases."

I asked her when she thought it might hit here, and she shrugged. "Lab techs are getting worried. The hospital had three phlebotomists quit because they said they weren't able to draw blood if they had to wear protective gloves, and a lab tech said if the hospital didn't provide face shields, he'd quit when the first case arrived here."

"Wow." I was surprised that simple protective measures were seen as a hindrance. But I didn't want to think what such fears, whether justified or mistaken, might mean for her. "Hey, I got a joke for you."

She smiled slightly, and I told her Lisa's joke. Although her smile remained, she closed her eyes and shook her head.

h “Rick, did you know our waiter was standing behind you to take the check to the cashier?” Now her smile disappeared. “He didn’t look happy.”

“He’s probably wanting to get one more customer on his lunch tables,” I replied.

“I don’t think that’s it. He looked stunned.”

“Maybe he’s a sword swallower.”

The week after Thanksgiving as I drove home after a workout at the gym, I noticed a Cadillac – a mid-seventies red Eldorado – parked in the driveway of the apartment building next to mine. The car’s occupants, five guys all dressed alike with their hair in bleached blond blunt cuts that framed their faces, got out on an icy day. The first guy out of the car, the driver, held the door for the front passenger-side guy, who grasped the first guy’s faux fur coat collar to steady himself on the ice. Then the second guy opened the back-seat passenger door and the third, fourth and fifth guys filed out, each grabbing the collar of the person in front of them. They slid across the ice in this single-file train until they reached their apartment door, and one-by-one, they disappeared inside.

As I got out of my car I noticed my shoe lace untied, I kneeled to tie it. As I arose, I heard a cat-call whistle. I spun around and there were the five, all holding black evening dresses over their shoulders.

“Come see our show tonight,” the front-seat passenger said.

“Show? What kind of show do you guys do?”

“We’re entertainers,” another said. “We sing, we dance, we make romance – come alive.”

"I bet you do," I said, "but I'm going to my girlfriend's to figure out a wedding date."

"Bring her," another pixyish voice spoke out.

"Maybe sometime." I laughed, and they giggled among themselves as they stretched their dresses out in the trunk of the Cadillac and took their places in the car.

Whenever they saw me out running through the neighborhood the following spring, one would shout out a "Hi, Mr. Runner," or honk the Cadillac's horn, and I'd wave back. When my birthday was approaching, I caught them in the parking lot to ask about a Marilyn-style rendition of "Happy Birthday." The driver stepped forward. "We get a three-hour minimum at $100 an hour, plus expenses for makeup and dry-cleaning the dresses."

"A discount for a friend?" I said.

"Friends don't ask that," he said. His words were clipped, and he did not smile.

"I get it," I replied. "If your friends won't support you, why should anyone else?"

"Especially the ones that think they're funny." And he walked away.

Now I recognized him – the waiter at lunch when I told the joke. I followed him up the driveway.

"Hey, were you a waiter at the Silverlight Grill last fall?"

He stopped but said nothing.

"I owe you an apology."

"For a lousy tip?"

"For a lousy joke. I work in news, and we have to deal with all kinds of horrible things. So when something like AIDS comes along, dark humor is our shield."

"Is that a reason or an excuse?"

"Both, maybe," I said, realizing that my words lacked sincerity, and the words I said in the restaurant said more about me than him. But his anger was unrelieved.

"For some of us," he said, "it's not very funny as we try to hold everything together. Not until someone you know or love gets taken from you can you understand." And he turned and walked into his apartment.

Three months before the wedding, Joan and I decided to buy a small house halfway between the downtown neighborhood where I lived close to the newspaper office and Joan's apartment on the west edge of the city near the medical practice where she worked. The two-bedroom, two-bath bungalow had a house payment less than our combined rents.

The wedding preparations were in her hands, and the house preparations were in mine. After repainting the spare bedroom, I moved out of my apartment and slept on a love seat that folded out into a single bed. I spent evenings repainting the other rooms, replacing leaky faucets in the kitchen and the bathrooms, caulking the windows, and repainting the exterior trim. As rooms were finished, we moved in Joan's furniture.

When I had the house done, I resumed my exercise regimen alternating between weight lifting and jogging. Late one afternoon, returning from running through the neighborhood park, I noticed the red Cadillac parked in the driveway of a house three blocks from my house. I had not seen the five entertainers since I moved.

As I crossed their driveway, a familiar voice spoke out. "Mr. Runner! Join us in our hot tub!"

I broke stride and turned, and there were the five blond heads sticking up just above the rim of the hot tub, partially hidden by a screen on the edge of a patio.

"Thanks for the offer," I said, "but I think I need a shower first."

"You're always welcome in our hot tub."

"Really? Let me know when you're on vacation, and my wife and I will keep the hot tub busy."

"So long as we're still neighbors."

"Yeah, our house is down the street about three blocks away," I said. "When did you guys move over here?"

"Two months ago," the driver of the Cadillac said. "I got some inheritance money from my aunt, and with what we'd saved while crammed into that little apartment, we bought this house – paid cash."

"Wow. So I guess the shows go on."

"They do. Want to hire us to perform at your wedding reception?"

"Joan's handling that department. You'd have to talk to her." I laughed, and they turned back toward their conversation inside the tub. I trotted home, thinking how odd it was to know this group that earned money with their drag show.

A year-and-a-half later, I was taking lunch to the urgent care clinic where Joan ran the lab. I could enter through the employees' entrance in back if anyone was taking a cigarette break, but today, I walked in through the main entrance and waved to the receptionist. She buzzed me into the hall that led to the lab and X-ray waiting area.

Inside, I saw the five blond guys sitting in a row of waiting-area seats. The driver smiled wanly and waved when he saw me, and I stopped for a moment to talk.

"Ricky's sick," the driver said.

I looked down the row, and as I tried to put a name to a face that looked like the other four faces, the driver spoke up again.

"Front seat of the Cadillac with me. He's lost weight, and he keeps getting chills and fevers. He's here for some tests."

As he spoke, I realized that although they all were slender, one was noticeably thinner than the rest.

"Sorry to hear that Ricky. I hope you get back on your feet and into those high heels again."

He smiled as a tear streaked his cheek. "Thank you."

"I've got lunch for Joan. She gets pretty hungry waiting for me."

"She's been nice to us these two weeks we've been coming here," Ricky said. "She always has a group of chairs for us so we don't have to stand in the hall."

"Yeah, she's sweet that way," I said as I turned to take lunch to Joan. "I'll let her know you're here."

Three weeks later, Joan came home glum.

"Your friends, the entertainers," she said in a shaky whisper. "Ricky has full-blown AIDS, the city's first case apparently, and Tad is HIV-positive."

"Tad?"

“The waiter when he was your neighbor.”

“So I guess this better not wind up in the newspaper tomorrow, right?”

“The Health Department will make an announcement tomorrow afternoon,” Joan said. “Doctors from the clinic will be on hand to assure that no one who tests positive is putting any other clinic patients at risk simply by being in the same waiting room.”

“I’m going to walk down to their house,” I said, “and see if they want to say anything for the newspaper.”

“Good luck with that. They all were pretty shook up when they left the clinic.”

Two years, I thought as I walked the five blocks, and I knew two names, Ricky and Tad. Then again, they call me Mr. Runner. Five blond heads sliding across an icy parking lot, single file, hanging onto each other by their fake fur collars; five heads bobbing in a hot tub, five guys packing slinky dresses into a Cadillac.

I knocked on the door and one of the three for whom I had no name answered.

“Is Tad here? Joan told me what’s happened.”

“He’s taking Ricky to the airport. Ricky’s flying to Houston to his parents. Houston’s had other cases and one of the hospitals is set up to care for AIDS patients, keeping them comfortable as long as possible.”

“Can you tell him I came by. I wanted to ask all of you if you wanted to tell your story, put it into your words in the newspaper article that’s going to run.”

Panic swept across the guy’s face.

“The doctor said the Health Department announcement would not mention us by name. You need to talk to Tad.”

“Mind if I wait?”

He showed me into the living room, and I sat on the couch. No more than ten minutes passed before Tad came in through the back door and sat down with me.

"I hope you don't mind that Joan told me what's going on," I said.

He looked down and shook his head. "You would have figured it out once we started disappearing, and I put the house up for sale."

"That's going to be tough – not just for you but for your friends. I've gotten used to seeing you guys around."

"Thank you," Tad said without looking up.

"I came by to ask if you wanted to tell your story in your words tomorrow." I was surprised that my words were sticking in my throat, and I wondered if he could hear me.

Tad sat up straight and stiffened. "The doctor said we wouldn't be mentioned. I haven't told anyone I know, not even at the Club Zanzibar. You want to help? Fill in for Ricky tomorrow night on stage." He smiled for a moment.

"Sorry, Tad. I got to stick with my day job. If you don't want to go public, then I won't even tell the reporter who will go to the news conference that I know you." I stood up to let myself out. "You going to be OK?"

"I'm HIV-positive, and in every other case so far, that's turned into full-blown AIDS. So, yeah, I'm good." And he raised his head again momentarily and smiled weakly. I could read his pain; I didn't know what to say. I stuck out a hand to shake.

He looked at my hand as if it were a foreign object. I dangled it for a few moments more, but he turned his head away and started to speak as I pulled my hand back.

“I’ve read casual contact does not spread the disease,” Tad said, “but do you really want to take the risk?”

I didn’t know what to say. I sat back down, closer to Tad than I was a few moments earlier. For nearly two years I had thought of this group as a neighborhood oddity. We traded barbs and jokes without moving forward from mere acquaintances to become trusted friends. Now, I felt a sting as if I were the one who was sick.

“For now,” I said, “you’re anonymous patients. And if you want to share your story later on, you deserve that, putting it all into your words.” And I thought of Doc and Lisa and what they thought was a harmless joke to break tension, and Tad raised his head, nodding for a moment, forcing a smile. “You know where to find me.”

“Club Zanzibar and its nine o’clock and midnight shows.”

His smile widened. “You sneaked into the show once?”

“I wish I could say I did, but a writer who joined the newspaper six months ago organized a bar crawl that started with a strip joint and ended up at the Zanzibar. Jay said you guys were prettier than the strippers at the Body Shop.”

“So, is the writer gay?”

“Don’t know,” I said, shrugging. “When he went around the newsroom to see who wanted to go, he said he wanted people to see a part of the world outside of the usual haunts journalists think all real people frequent.”

“He sounds like a good guy,” Tad said.

“He likes to shake things up.”

Tad motioned me closer. In a near whisper he said he had a question for me.

"If I wanted to tell my story just to my aunts and uncles and cousins in Iowa, would you help me with that?"

"Sure, so long as it wasn't a book and you kept me away from Joan."

"You are so straight, you could give lessons to arrows," Tad said. "I'm starting on some kind of medicine. Come back in six weeks and I want to explain how I need their support and encouragement."

"Six weeks it is."

When I got home, I told Joan that I would be spending time with Tad to help him write his story for his family. I scarcely gave him a thought as those six weeks passed, but on the scheduled Sunday afternoon, I knocked at his door. No one answered immediately, and I wondered if the deal was falling through. Just as I turned to leave, Tad opened the door.

"Sorry it took me a while to get to the door," he said. "I was taking a nap, and we're down to three here now – me, Jason and T.C. – since Ellis moved to Los Angeles to be closer to home."

"No big deal. You said to come by after you'd been on your medicine for six weeks, and I was just checking to see if you were ready to tell your story."

Tad pulled the door open wider and motioned for me to follow him into the living room. He was paler and the muscle tone in his arms had gone away. He flopped onto the couch and looked at me as if he wanted me to save him.

"The doctor says the medicine I'm taking a doing what it's supposed to do," Tad said. "I just wish I could feel better and do something besides watch TV. The highlight of

my day now is a show from Chicago. A black woman listens to people's sad stories and then she tells them they should feel good about themselves for surviving."

"You're going to survive, right?" My head bobbed up and down as I spoke in a tender voice, as if I could will him to survive.

"That would be a cures," he said. "As sure as Reagan gets re-elected this fall, unless some other medicine comes along, this is going to kill me." He looked away, forced a smile, and looked back at me. "The drugs I'm on, the prescribed ones, are supposed to slow down the onset of AIDS. Another one calms my nerves."

"You know," I said, "a year ago, slowing the progression seemed impossible, so you never know what's going to come up in a year or two more. I'm staying positive, Tad."

"Ricky's in hospice," he said, looking away.

"But that doesn't mean it's a certainty for you." We both sat quiet for a couple of minutes until I broke the silence. "You still want to tell your story?"

Tad nodded. "To family."

"Have you put anything on paper?"

"I have." He got up from the couch and opened a drawer on a desk in the corner of the room and pulled out a stack of pages.

"Ten so far," he said, waving them in front of me.

I took them and started reading. He sat quietly, watching me flip pages. I was impressed by what I had skimmed through.

"I have maybe five more pages to say what I want to say," Tad said. "Can you help me fix it up?"

I nodded. “Will you have it done in another week?”

“I can, if I don’t sink into a stupor from the medications.”

A week later, I came back, and Tad had placed his pages in a large manila envelope. He did not come to the door; Jason gave me the bundle as he introduced himself. As I looked inside the packet, he asked me if I was still running.

“Sure,” I said, and I recognized his voice as the one who always called me “Mr. Runner.”

“Is Tad OK?”

“Just tired,” Jason said. “He stayed up late the last three nights writing and rewriting.”

“OK. Tell him I’ll mark these up and give him suggestions that he can use anyway he wants to.”

“Tad really appreciates this,” Jason said.

I set the envelope aside that evening. Two days later, I read through the manuscript, which was structured as a letter. Tad’s thoughts were clear and heart-breaking. My fears that the last part would fall into a screed about being misunderstood and unappreciated fell away as I turned the pages. Tad thanked his parents for their encouragement, and the understanding they showed when he came out to them. He had separate pages for both of his sisters, and at this point, I felt that I was intruding. There was nothing I could add to make his story clearer, and I went back to the start to scan each page for typos and misspelled words, circling only two errors toward the last pages.

I returned the envelope and left it with Jason, asking him to thank Tad for me.

"I'm leaving this weekend to go back to Dallas before I'm too sick to spend time with family and friends there," he said, "and T.C. wants to move to Los Angeles and join Ellis selling advertising in *The Advocate.*"

"Who's going to look after Tad?" I asked. "I can help in the evenings except on weekends."

"His sister is coming to help him get the house ready to sell. Then he's moving with her back to San Antonio."

"Who's going to fix his meals while he's here?" I said. "We can help with that."

"People at the Zanzibar have arranged that. We've got food, but Tad has absolutely no appetite, unless someone brings weed."

"When his sister gets here," I said. "I'll check with her about moving and loading the furniture." I realized that Tad's community went far beyond the house and the club.

Later that week as I was driving past the house, I saw Tad getting out of the Cadillac with a woman carrying a suitcase. I pulled over.

"I'm stopping to let you know I can help in the evenings," I said. Tad's sister looked puzzled and he leaned over to her.

"He's an editor for the afternoon newspaper," he said. "We met when he tried his hand at comedy."

I winced, hoping that the harsh joke had been set aside. I looked at his sister. "I'm Rick, I've known Tad for three years. And in spite of what he says, I can help with the heavy lifting."

"I'm Lisa. We're going to move the extra beds and dressers out of the guest bedrooms. I may need some help painting those rooms. And then we'll tackle the big

stuff, what he wants to take with us to San Antonio. What he wants to sell or give to friends, they will take care of that."

"Joan and I are up for more painting. I did our house when we got married," I said, pointing down the street.

"Thanks for stopping by," Lisa said. "I've got to get Tad inside and down for a nap so we can start sorting stuff this evening." She turned and guided Tad through the kitchen door.

As they were going in, I heard Tad's remark: "Maybe he wants the hot tub." Whatever he said after that or what she said was cut off as the door closed. But it brought to mind how funny his group was together, a memory broken by the pain of knowing how an emerging disease had taken that little group apart.

Later that week, I repainted the two empty bedrooms, and broke down the beds so they could be picked up by a furniture consignment shop. The dressers slid easily into the garage because their drawers had long been empty. When that job was done, Tad thanked me and presented me with a shopping bag.

"Here's something I want you to have," he said, "so you'll always remember me."

"What? The keys to the hot tub? Your Marilyn dress?"

Tad broke into a laugh, the last time I heard him laugh. "Listen, brother," he said, "those dresses went to the resell shop and paid for some meds. I wouldn't give those away. Lisa and I are driving to San Antonio tomorrow. That's when the 'For Sale' sign goes up. Movers will pick up some things we're taking with us in the morning, and the furniture consignment store will take the rest. If you need something that's in great taste,

seriously, go down to *Second Time Around* and buy some of my furniture. Good taste is transferable."

"We might do that, Tad," I said and then walked the five blocks home.

Inside, I showed Joan the shopping bag as I sat it on the kitchen table. "A gift from Tad," I said.

She opened the bag and started laughing as she shook out a neatly folded waiter's apron with Tad's nametag pinned to it.

I tossed the apron and nametag onto the table. "He'll never let me forget that."

"Good for him," Joan said, and she draped it across the back of a kitchen table chair. "You're lucky he would talk to you at all."

Deep down, I knew she was right, but at the same time I wanted to resist that sense; I established a relationship with him as a professional journalist, just as I had established working relationships with other people in the community.

"Why do you say that?" I asked. "I try to get along with everyone in the community."

"You always say a journalist needs to have empathy to succeed, but if you only have feelings for people like yourself, then that's not empathy," Joan said. "And I see the same thing at the clinic. Everyone worries about AIDS now, but only because they think they might catch it by accident."

I straightened the nametag and thought about how I did not look down on him as a waiter, but how I was a bit reluctant at first to speak with Tad and his friends when I saw them at the apartments. Yes, Joan was right.

Right after Reagan's re-election, the oil economy, which was a big economic driver in our part of Texas, tanked. Both oil and gas producers and the service companies they employed to drill and take care of their wells cut back their office staffs. Even though the circulation of the afternoon newspaper was still up from the previous three years, corporate owners announced in the annual visit that the time might be at hand to fold the afternoon paper into the larger-circulation morning paper and trim back the staff.

When the meeting ended, Jay came to me and told me he had some pressing family matters in Denver. He said he wanted to be at the top of the list for cutbacks if severance packages would be included, fearing that a feature writer was a luxury.

I urged him to wait out corporate decisions, even though I understood how afternoon newspapers were folding because of demographic matters, not content. At the end of that week, Jay turned in his two weeks notice. He finished a three-part series on local musicians and how they balanced day jobs with club gigs. His last story, he said, would be about a rural home health aide and her work with AIDS patients.

I asked about photos and privacy concerns. Ralph, our photo chief, suggested a standup portrait with a cornfield as a backdrop, to avoid any unintentional revelation because of a detail in the photo background.

Jay finished the story and when I went over the details, I wondered how Tad and his crew would have fared had such services been available then. It ran page one the Sunday after he had left, and the letters to the editor, both laudatory and complaints, ran throughout that week.

Over the next three months, corporate decided that even though the local economy was picking up and advertising sales had shown signs of turning around, page

counts would be tightened, and vacancieswould remain unfilled. The smaller papers and the hiring freeze meant lower costs and a better profit margin, but also more complaints about stories not covered, and subscriptions dropped. The talk of folding the morning and afternoon papers into a morning only edition resumed.

With that, I asked Joan if I should float inquiries.

"Sure," she said. "We've got vacation coming up. Let's go somewhere you'd like to work, check out the city, and then go for it."

I hugged her as I suggested Kansas City with a side trip to Chicago to visit her brother. The trip the next month went off without a hitch, and we came home with real estate listing brochures for both Kansas City and suburban Chicago, and contact information for papers and city magazines in both places.

My first day back to work I pushed copy through without saying much to anyone until break time. I cornered Ralph in his office to fill me in on the gossip. He ticked off his tidbits. James, a night shift photographer, was going to Tucson, and the hiring freeze was extended for another three months.

"That means I might have to cover some night assignments," Ralph said, "plus shift the day photographers to cover James' weekends, without running up any overtime or cutbacks in advertising assignments."

"Sounds like we settle for less in the newsroom," I said.

"You know that's how it's going to shake out," Ralph said. "But here's the big shocker. Jay's in hospice."

"Was he in some kind of accident?" I asked as I sat up straight against my chair back.

"No accident," Ralph said. "He's sick, AIDS."

"When did this develop?" I shook my head in disbelief.

"You remember how his face would break out with splotchy red spots? When he said he needed to go home, I invited him to dinner," Ralph said. "He had a real coughing fit – thought I'd have to take him to the hospital."

"And?" Curiosity, fueled by fear, was eating a hole through me.

"He said he had some medicines in the car and I got them for him. I didn't know what it was, but the doctor's name on the bottles was the doctor he interviewed for his AIDS story." Ralph shook his head and shrugged.

I felt sick, and Tad's words ran through my mind about how you can't understand how AIDS strikes crippling fear until it takes someone close.

"How bad is it?" I asked, choking out the words as if I already knew the answer.

"As bad as it can get," Ralph said. "He's got full-blown AIDS, and shortly before he gave his notice, he was diagnosed with lymphoma. He didn't want anyone else to know until he went into hospice."

I slumped in my chair, my mind flashing the image of Ricky sitting in the clinic waiting area, his head down, his body withering, surrounded by the people who treated him most like family.

When Tad's obituary notice arrived, I was not shocked but saddened. When I considered how he had lived almost three years after his diagnosis, I was glad he had that time with his sister. My understanding of him grew through the acts of his friends. Several other

drag performers mimicked Tad's Marilyn Monroe performances for a fundraiser when they learned that he started having frequent bouts with pneumonia. The money was not for him, but to fund distribution of AIDS-awareness brochures and a counseling service.

When those friends organized a memorial for him here, they arranged for Lisa and their parents to attend. I wrote the note for our entertainment writer, Shawna, and when she got it, I explained how Tad had been among the first cases in the city, and how his fans and friends were a force for AIDS education here.

No more than twenty-five people attended the memorial, But Shawna focused on the emotion that the event stirred. Her story, twelve column inches, fell within the new corporate dictum of feature stories being short enough that they did not jump to an inside page from the section front. But with Ralph's photo of Tad's Marilyn wig on a stand with flowers, the story moved from the local news section to the front page that afternoon. No one argued that any other local story was stronger and more deserving of front-page attention.

The next morning, though, during the news budget meeting, the executive editor told me to come to his office after the meeting. There, he tapped the previous day's front page as he stood leaning over his desk, and I took a chair.

"Nothing stronger than this yesterday?" he asked in a tone that meant he did not want an explanation.

"Everyone liked the story," I said, folding my arms across my chest, "and when the city council canceled a budget hearing, Tad's story moved from the metro front to the cover."

"You know the rules on page-one obituaries," Jerry said. "He wasn't a business or political leader. He's not from a prominent family here. If you walked out on the street and asked people if they knew this Tad character, how many people do you think would say they did?"

I said: "I was going by the principle that a good paper surprises its readers by informing them in a way about something they normally wouldn't talk about."

Jerry turned his back for a moment and then faced me again. "Don't do this again without me knowing about it first. We're going through some big changes in a few months that may or may not include cutting out the afternoon edition."

"So has corporate made a decision?" I asked.

"No one has said that, but they're talking about it," Jerry replied. "And what do you think would be the effect if we get complaints about this story?"

"Have we had any yet?"

Jerry shook his head. "But when I go to the Chamber of Commerce board meeting this afternoon, anyone that tries to back me into a corner will be giving you a call. They are advertisers, not just readers. Newspapers don't survive by pleasing their readers while pissing off their advertisers."

He tossed the paper onto a stack next to his desk and sat down.

"If we go to a morning only edition, we won't need both day and night city editors and the two assistant editors. We'd need three of you four; who do you think I'd be forced to cut if I get an earful this afternoon?"

He looked away, and I went out to the city desk to start reading the copy and pushing it to the layout desk.

Out of the Dark

The constant barking is what finally got to Kenneth. Stone, a galoot of a mutt that belonged to his son, holed up in what was now a spare bedroom. Mostly he curled up on a blanket, shivering even though spring was turning to summer. He barked at any noise. And when Kenneth looked into the room has he walked past, Stone alternately growled and whimpered.

For three days that was the routine. Kenneth tried to watch television, Stone barked. Kenneth nudged him to go outside, Stone growled. Kenneth turned out the lights and slipped into bed, Stone whimpered at the door until Kenneth turned on a light. And when Kenneth turned it back off on that third night, Stone responded with a series of piercing whines that continued until dawn.

With daylight spreading across his bedroom, Kenneth shuffled out of bed and put on his house slippers, trousers, and robe. He dropped his cell phone into the robe pocket and yawned down the hall toward the kitchen, reminding himself that Maggie would be calling today. Now Stone was silent. “Maybe I can tell her that worthless old dog is dead,” he muttered as he passed the room where Stone was encamped.

The room had been his son’s bedroom before he had gone to college. Ronald brought back Stone as a gangly pup over a Christmas break, a gift from his girlfriend Caroline. That she would give him a dog sealed the relationship for Ronald, and two years after their wedding in which Stone carried the ring in a basket as “best dog,” Kyle and Kurtis, the twins, were born.

Kenneth made coffee and poured a bowl of cereal. He reached inside the kitchen cabinet next to the sink where Maggie kept his diazepam. He started taking the anti-

anxiety medication when he realized Ronald would not follow him into the family trade, a butcher shop Kenneth had inherited from his father, who had inherited from his father. Ronald broke from that when he switched from a business major to petroleum engineering when his introduction to business course focused on the corporatization of business segments that had long been family owned. Kenneth counted the tablets inside the prescription bottle – he had twelve – knowing that when Maggie came back she would check to see if he had indeed taken them. And she would check because Kenneth argued the pills did nothing when he was on an even keel, and then he would not take them until he was overwhelmed by fear. The plan was for Maggie to return by the end of the week from her stay with Caroline and the twins while Ronald headed out to a drillship in the Gulf of Mexico.

As Kenneth waited for the coffee to finish brewing, he ran a glassful of water and took his morning pill, the first of four for the day. Instead of replacing the bottle in the cabinet, he slipped it into his bathrobe pocket.

Kenneth topped his bowl of oat flakes with strawberries and stirred two spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee. Without Stone's yowling, he had enough peace to read *The Houston Chronicle,* perusing each page as he alternated between bites of cereal and sips of coffee. As he finished his cereal and coffee, he decided to run Stone out into the backyard before he could foul the bedroom carpet. The dog remained silent as Kenneth trudged down the hall and peered in through the doorway. He whistled softly, the way Ronald would handle the dog, but Stone did not raise his head.

"Stone," Kenneth called out, and still the dog did not budge. *Damn, Maggie will think I did something to him.* And as he stared at the dog, he thought how Maggie

volunteered to keep it. The twins were down with sinus infections when Ronald left and Caroline took a day off from work to keep them home so they could recuperate. But that afternoon, Kyle felt frisky enough to pull out his skateboard to try a jump on a plywood ramp he had built from scrap wood left in the alley. On his second attempt he broke his left wrist, and Maggie agreed to stay with him the rest of the week. And that is how Kenneth was now standing over and staring at a dog who had kept Kenneth's lifelong record intact of never meeting a dog that he could tolerate, let alone like. All because Maggie insisted before Kyle's accident that they could watch the dog together. She twisted Kenneth's arm, so to speak, by saying this would bridge his differences with Ronald that had started when Ronald was a child, a concern that frequently took over his thoughts since he retired.

Kenneth leaned over Stone and reached for his collar when the old dog's eyes rolled open. He snapped at Kenneth who stumbled back, nearly falling. When Kenneth saw the shreds of a potted jade plant that had stood in the window sill, he yelled "No" at the dog, and picked up the shredded leaves from the carpet.

Stone wobbled up on his feet but fell on the first step toward the door. Kenneth set aside the waste basket that he had been filling with the remains of the jade plant and stood behind Stone. He hesitated to wrap his arms beneath Stone's chest and decided that hoisting the dog up by his collar would be safer. Stone took a couple of steps with Kenneth guiding him by his collar, but the dog's steps were short and as much to the side as toward the door. Kenneth let go so Stone would not pull him over as he swayed from side to side.

The dog's tongue lolled out, and when he slumped to his haunches, gurgling rumbled from his throat as he turned to look at Kenneth. The gurgling erupted into a spray of vomit that splattered bits of the jade plant across the carpet, the door frame and Kenneth's pants.

"Damn it," Kenneth shouted as he stepped back from Stone. His trousers stuck to him where the spray had soaked the pant leg, and as Kenneth pulled the wet spot away from his leg he noticed that the hem of his robe had also been hit. "Stone, they're going to think I did something to you, you stupid mutt."

Kenneth's thoughts went back to the first dog that Ronald had wanted, a Jack Russell terrier mix that he asked for when he took on a paper route at thirteen. Ronald had promised to buy the food out of his earnings and keep Snapper in his room at night on a makeshift bed fashioned from old blankets and a worn pillow. Kenneth hated how the dog dug in the yard and dashed around yapping whenever the doorbell rang, the postal carrier appeared, or when Kenneth came home from work.

Ronald started the paper route during the summer. But once school resumed the route proved too much work with early morning deliveries before school and a smaller route after school for the afternoon edition. When Ronald finally gave up the job just before Halloween, Kenneth persuaded Maggie that Snapper ought to be moved out to a farm on the edge of town with one of Kenneth's beef suppliers. There, Snapper would keep the mice population down around the barn and feed silo. Kenneth insisted that Ronald ride with him to deliver Snapper to the farm, but on the ride home, Ronald sobbed softly and kept repeating "Not fair, not fair."

"Come on," Kenneth said to Stone. "You're going outside. You'll eat when your stomach settles down." He again latched onto Stone's collar and half-walked and half-dragged him to the kitchen door. The pungent odor of Stone's vomit went with him through the house, and after Kenneth guided Stone down the back porch and into the yard, he shed his robe and flung it over a lawn chair and stomped back to the bedroom closet for clean pants. He rolled the stained khakis into a ball and set them inside the washer as he headed toward the kitchen.

Now his thoughts roiled, for he had agreed to this task as a way of making amends with Ronald. If Stone were to die from eating that plant, Kenneth could hear the blame dished his way, creating a greater divide with Ronald, Caroline and the twins than what he imagined already existed.

Kenneth looked out the kitchen door window, spying Stone wandering over to a water dish. As the dog drank, Kenneth slipped out with Stone's food dish and set it on the edge of the lawn away from the porch steps. Instead of rushing for the food as he did on previous mornings, the old dog flopped next to a pine tree that cast shade across the yard, for now the time was nearly noon. Kenneth went back into the kitchen, where the cereal bowl in the sink and the coffee cup next to the coffee maker looked out of place. The cup did not look like the one he remembered drinking from, and he whirled around.

"Maggie! Are you here?" He waited a moment before shouting out her name again in the silence. He passed through the corner of the dining room to the hallway that led back to the bedrooms. *Shouldn't she be here,* he asked himself as he looked around, unmindful that he had missed taking his second pill of the day. Now he felt cold, for he had on just an undershirt with his slacks. And not only could he feel his heart racing, but

the pulse beat echoed in his ears. Trudging toward the doorway to the spare bedroom, he glanced in, but nothing looked familiar, and he continued to the front bedroom, now flooded with mid-day light. As he stepped into the room, his gait turned unsteady, and his hands trembled as the panic engulfed him.

Instead of pulling a shirt from the closet, Kenneth, grumbling about how Stone kept him awake, headed for bed. He slipped off the house shoes and unhitched his belt and slacks. He sprawled across the bed, wondering if Maggie might be in the bathroom or maybe the kitchen, or watering the front yard flower beds. But before more possibilities could race through his mind, he wrapped the pillow across the back of his head as he buried his face in Maggie's pillow.

And he thought of how the distance from Ronald had started, Ronald's eleventh birthday and a promised dinner out. When they arrived at the neighborhood Chili's, Kenneth pointed the hostess to a table he wanted. As they were seated, he stood before a picture over the table showing a part of Houston's past.

"See that, Ronald. You're related to someone important enough to be remembered," Kenneth said. The picture was of Ronald's great-grandfather, standing in front of a shop window with the name painted in large block letters: "Growney's Fine Meats."

Ronald looked at the picture for a moment, then glanced at the menu. "I want shrimp," he said. "Let's go to Red Lobster."

Kenneth leaned toward Ronald. "This restaurant has shrimp. Aren't you interested in how our family is a part of Houston's history?"

But Ronald was silent until the waiter came, and when Ronald asked for popcorn shrimp and fries, the waiter said Chili's had grilled shrimp on a bed of steamed rice. Ronald cried, and when their food came, he picked at the shrimp before pushing the plate away.

Burying himself in the pillows did not calm Kenneth's panic. He hoped it would protect him from falling deeper into his self-dug pit. But the one thing he hoped for, Maggie's call, was now going unanswered. He he could not hear the cell phone ringtone that meant she was calling. The phone was in the robe pocket with the pills, out of earshot on the lawn chair near Stone. Stone raised his head momentarily as the hand-bell chimes ringtone drifted from the robe. But then the dog went back to sleep.

Instead of talking to her he thrashed around in bed, worrying how Stone's encounter with the jade plant would be interepreted. And he gave no thought to taking another one of his anxiety pills, for he had often told Maggie when she reminded him to take one that they did nothing for him.

What had started out as a clear and sunny morning was turning into a blustery afternoon. The clouds that had been white and wispy now were gray and billowing. A clap of thunder stirred Kenneth and distracted him from the sensory torture he was enduring instead of going to sleep. The pillow on his back was scratchy, and the one on which he buried his face smelled of Maggie's shampoo and the scented soaps she washed her face with at night. The room was dark, and as he rubbed his eyes and stretched, he wondered if he had actually slept through to the next morning.

Stone howled at the kitchen door as more lightning flashed and a low rumble rolled through the sky. Kenneth heard the dog and stumbled through the house on his way to the back door. Panic washed through him as he whispered to himself, "Where's Maggie, where's Maggie." As Kenneth approached the door, Stone reared up on his back legs, pawing at the screen door. The rain had pelted him and matted his short, gray-haired coat to a series of spikes along his neck and back.

Kenneth stared hard at Stone, for now he saw not his son's dog, but a dog from long ago – a neighbor's dog when he was six years old and a sudden spring shower caught him by surprise on the walk home from school. Three blocks from home he started running, unaware of the dog on the Stankowskis' porch frightened by the storm. As young Kenneth raced past, the dog leapt from the porch, and before Kenneth had reached the end of the block, the part boxer, part German shepherd caught up with him and jumped onto his back.

As Kenneth sprawled headlong into the street, the dog sailed over him, spun around and jumped on top of his back, his teeth sinking into Kenneth's coat. Kenneth bawled as the dog shook him. Mr. Stankowski came running from the house. "Butch! Bad dog, bad dog!" he screamed as the dog shook Kenneth from side to side. When the dog saw Mr. Stankowski, he let loose of Kenneth, and Mr. Stankowski grabbed Butch's collar and yanked him backwards hard enough to spin him onto his side on the street.

Kenneth let out one last shriek as he rolled away from them and stood up. His forehead was gashed where he hit the asphalt, and tears rolled down his muddied cheeks. Mr. Stankowski reached for his hand while holding Butch, who now settled back as if he had been chasing a rabbit.

"I'm so sorry, buddy," Mr. Stankowski said as he knelt to look Kenneth in the eyes. "I don't know what got into ol' Butch – if he got spooked by the storm or what. You OK?"

Kenneth sniffled, but the pain from his forehead was enough to keep the tears rolling as the rain washed away the blood and mud.

"Let me see your back," Mr. Stankowski said. "Does it hurt?"

Kenneth turned for a moment and then looked back at the dog.

"Come on, I'll walk you home." Mr. Stankowski took Kenneth's hand while he guided Butch away from the boy, and Kenneth guided them the two blocks. The sudden storm now turned into a drizzle with wind blowing more water from the trees than fell from the sky. Kenneth pointed to his house, still unable to speak lest Butch spring at him again.

"I want to talk to your parents, son," Mr. Stankowski said, "and assure them that Butch has never done anything like this before."

Kenneth went in and called out to his mother.

When his mom saw blood on Kenneth's face, she gasped, and Mr. Stankowski spoke immediately. "I'm sorry for what happened," he said. "Butch was in the garage with me and then he went out on the driveway. When the storm blew up, he ran to the porch. I saw your boy take off running, but I didn't think of that as anything. When the clouds opened up, I called for Butch, but he didn't come, so I went to look for him. Next thing I was pulling my dog off your boy."

"The dog knocked me down, Mama," Kenneth said, "and grabbed me by the back." He turned to show his ripped jacket.

"Ma'am, I'll pay for everything," Mr. Stankowski said. "The doctor, if he needs stitches, and a new coat. I don't know what got into Butch, other than a couple of days ago some boys were teasing him – not your boy, ma'am."

"Is that true, Kenneth?" she asked as Mr. Stankowski backed away from the door.

"I didn't tease him," Kenneth said, all the while watching Butch. "Eddie Hinkley was ahead of me and he threw a stick at the dog. When I walked by he growled and jumped against the fence. I let him alone."

Butch's tail was wagging as Mr. Stankowski turned to lead him away.

The image of Butch's tail wagging was now fresh in Kenneth's mind as Stone barked lightly and started wagging his tail. Kenneth backed away from the door and went for the cabinet where his pills had been. But now, Kenneth wondered what had happened to the pills, because the time for the third pill was approaching. And the memory of Butch stayed in his mind, deepening his anxiety.

Stone shook water from his coat and whimpered as he stood at the door.

"You ain't coming in until I figure this out," Kenneth said, wondering again if he had slept through to morning. He shook his head, trying to chase away the demons stirring his anxiety.

"Dadgum dog, keeping me on edge," Kenneth said as he looked out the door once more at Stone who stared back at Kenneth.

As the dog shook more rain from his coat, Kenneth pulled back. For when Stone stopped shaking and righted himself, he now looked like Butch, and Kenneth shuffled

backwards, turning to get away before the dog crashed through the door and took him down once more. In turning, his leg gave way and he fell face first on the tile floor, opening a gash along his hairline.

"Maggie," Kenneth groaned out as loud as he could speak. As the blood trickled down his face, he touched his hand to it, calling out once more to Maggie. He shook his head as he looked at the blood. "Where'd she go? Maggie," he stammered as he looked at the blood, momentarily wondering if the dog that looked like Butch had gotten in and bitten him. "Maybe she's gone for good." And tears streaked through the blood while Stone shook more rain from his coat and then retreated beneath the patio table.

Kenneth crawled from the floor to the bathroom to tend to the gash on his head. Now the time had passed for his third pill of the day, but the pills were the furthest they could be from his concerns.

Inside the bathroom he looked at the cabinet drawers as if their contents were a mystery. He could no longer remember where bandage strips and the antibiotic ointment were stored. As blood oozed down his forehead he opened and slammed drawers randomly until he settled on washing the gash with warm water and soap, and pressing a wet wash cloth to it. *If only Maggie were here*. But now he was certain that she would not return; the buildup of disappointments through the years had swept through her life also and washed away the hopes they carried into their marriage. Just as he had pushed Ronald away little by little, now he was certain he had pushed Maggie away, too, in this week that she had said would ease the tensions he felt with his son.

No matter how much water he splashed, blood continued to trickle. The antibiotic ointment sat on the back of the counter and he squeezed some out to spread across the

cut. Then Kenneth pressed the wash cloth once more to it. That dog, Maggie gone who knows where, Kenneth wondered how he would have survived had the dog been inside when he slipped and fell. He shuffled his feet as he walked head down to the bedroom. Now he felt dizzy, and he feared he had suffered more than a simple cut. And while he was contemplating the cause of the dizziness – an aneurysm, he wondered – he noticed that his arms and legs now felt so heavy he was tempted to stretch out on the floor to sleep just outside the bedroom door.

Instead, he drug himself through the door, slid the house shoes off and stretched out on top of the bed, rolling over on his back so that the cut would not stain the bed spread. *My last act in life cannot ruin something that Maggie loved*, and he recalled the day that she had finished the quilted bed spread after three months of cutting, fitting and sewing in her spare time.

Sleep overtook him rapidly and after an hour of hard, deep sleep, he awoke for a moment when Stone again barked at the back door. But a lack of certainty of exactly where he was and the time kept him atop the bed. The room was dark, and the shadows produced by the street light waved along the curtain. He watched them, wondering what exactly was outside as sleep overtook him again.

Immediately he began to dream. He saw himself sitting in bed, calling for Maggie, but his voice echoed through the house and went unanswered. He arose and began to walk about the house. Everything was exactly where he expected it to be, as if Maggie had been there and straightened up while he was at the butcher shop. *Am I awake?* Again, he called for Maggie, but once more his voice echoed hollowly. Before he

could turn and walk back to the bedroom, he heard a high-pitched bark and the skittering run of a dog, smaller than Stone, and he whirled around to see a reddish-tan mutt.

"Snapper," he called out, and the dog let out another squeal of a bark, his tail wagging as he raced up to Kenneth and jumped against his legs. Before Kenneth could reach down for the dog to push him away, Snapper raced around his legs and disappeared back into the kitchen where he scratched at the door. "Can't be him, it's been thirty years since I took him out to the Reynolds' place." Kenneth let him out, and he and Stone yipped and jumped as they raced around the yard.

Kenneth leaned against the door, staring into the darkness. "Nothing wrong with that little dog that would have been a threat to me, nothing at all," he said. All Kenneth could hear was the chirping of crickets and katydids. He tried to whistle the way Ronald called Stone, but his lips and his throat were too dry.

Then he heard a yelp and a snarling growl, deeper than Stone's bark, and he saw Snapper racing for the back porch. a large black dog lunged out of the darkness and raced after him. "Butch," was all he could say as the dog's stride ate up the ground between him and near the porch he leapt at Snapper, catching him by the back. The black dog shook Snapper from side to side and then flung him down. Before they could reach the porch, the black dog leapt at them, with all three tumbling forward in a pile of tails and legs and flashing teeth. The black dog grabbed Snapper by the back, shook him mightily and flung him down. There the tan and red dog lay silent.

"I've killed that dog, should have never let him out," Kenneth said to himself, wondering how he'd explain to Maggie Stone's seeming disappearance and Snapper's demise. Butch circled the yard and came back to the porch, snarling at Kenneth. In a rage,

Kenneth charged through the door and grabbed a spade from the garden tools in a barrel by the door, as he recalled how Butch had knocked him down and hurt him.

"I should have fought back," he said, as he broke into a run toward the dog as if he were Ronald's age and not a retiree dependent upon a daily medication routine. As the black dog growled, Kenneth swung the spade, striking the dog in the rib cage and back hip. Butch crumpled to the ground, howling, and as Kenneth approached, the dog pulled himself up on his front legs and staggered to the back fence. Kenneth screamed at the dog as he circled past it to open the gate, and he screamed again as the dog whimpered and staggered down the alley.

At the porch he patted Snapper's lifeless body, and thought of how he'd explain to Maggie and Ronald his failures.

Kenneth went back inside, feeling as if he were dragging thousand-pound weights with his legs and he headed for bed. He crawled back on top of it, and his eyes closed in deep slumber.

"Kenneth!" Maggie called out as she entered the bedroom. "I've called four times this afternoon. Why are you still in bed?"

Kenneth stirred but did not open his eyes. His first thought was that his dream was resuming, and he wondered if he should tell her about the Butch's attack and Stone's disappearance. Maggie shook the bed and the motion pulled Kenneth up. He tried to swing his legs over the side of the bed, but now he felt sick to his stomach, and he was groggy. His feet flopped to the floor, but when he stood, he crumpled down, jarring his

head enough when it struck the edge of the mattress that the flow of blood resumed from the cut on his head. He leaned against the bed, letting out a sigh.

"Good God, Kenneth, what have you been doing. Where's Stone?" Maggie asked as she bent down over him. "Didn't you check my message that I left earlier this afternoon that I'd be home today instead of tomorrow?

Kenneth shook his head, for now he wondered the same. Had the encounter with the dogs in the back yard been real or a dream, and he wondered about the blood seeping down his forehead.

"Stone?" he said. "Maybe he's in the back yard with Snapper. I'm sorry honey."

"Who?" Maggie said. "What are you talking about?" She did not wait for a reply. Instead she left the room, and her steps clicked as she headed for the back door.

Kenneth settled back into bed. *Maybe this is still a dream and I'll wake up when the alarm goes off and I'll hear Stone barking to go outside.*

He heard Stone bark once, and then he heard Maggie call the dog in as she opened the door. Stone brushed against Maggie as he entered the kitchen, his tail wagging, and crusted mud falling from his feet after spending the afternoon outside in the storm. Then he sauntered for the bedroom, while Maggie searched for Kenneth's anti-anxiety meds.

Stone met her in the hallway outside the bedroom and followed her into the room.

"Kenneth, where are your pills?"

Kenneth shook his head as images of the black dog, Mr. Stankowski, Stone eating the jade plant and the rain swirled through his mind. What had been real and what had been a dream, he wondered, unable to look at Maggie.

She reached down and pulled his arm upward. “You’ve got to get up, Kenneth. Sit on the edge of the bed while I get your clothes. How did you cut your forehead?”

And he thought of the pills and his phone as he looked around for his bathrobe, and recalled how he had flung it off in the backyard before the storm.

“I think I left them outside with my bathrobe,” he said as he grasped Maggie’s hand to steady himself and sit on the edge of the bed. Stone rubbed against the bed, his tail wagging harder, and his eyes locked into Kenneth’s gaze. Kenneth wanted to reach out and pet him, but he still felt too unsteady. “Hey, old boy, Ronald will be glad to see you.” As he spoke his thoughts turned toward his son, this time with a spark of gratitude. *Geology is what he loves, and this slobbery mutt, too.*

“Stone chewed up the jade plant and threw up,” Kenneth said, “getting me and the bathrobe.”

Maggie shook her head. “You’re worse than the twins,” and she marched through the house and out the back door. A moment later she returned and shook the pills at Kenneth.

“You know how you get when you don’t keep up with this medicine,” she said as she pulled off the cap. “Hang onto this while I get some water and something for that cut.”

Kenneth cradled the pill in his hand as he listened to her digging through the cabinet drawer with the bandage strips. He knew one thing for certain. The dream would remain his secret.

"No sir, officer, haven't seen Ricky for a long time."

"Long time? A couple of days? A week? Which is it?"

"Don't know right off. We ain't exactly homeys. If I see him around, we talk. But I don't go looking for him, you know?"

"No, I don't. He's causing problems. A store camera had him loading a shoplifted TV into a car ten days ago – this car. And a couple of days ago the camera at Wal-Mart shows him bumping and scuffling with an old woman. And he hasn't been seen since."

"Yeah, that day. He said he had a TV for his mother's birthday present. But then he got a little spacey on me. You want the TV back. I didn't know it was stolen."

"Where's he live?"

"Don't know. He took off on the way to meet his mom. Come to my house, I can give you the TV now if you think it's stolen. OK?"

***

Ricky Chebesky slipped a couple of pills under his tongue as he walked toward the lawn and garden entrance to Wal-Mart. Inside the chain-link fence, he meandered around the annual and perennial garden plants, occasionally casting a glance toward the parking lot and the arrivals of other shoppers. The clerk on duty, Melva, offered help, but he shrugged her off. He watched her go inside to the aisles where pesticides, herbicides, garden hoses and lawn furniture were displayed. When she came back out, he decided he would take his cart inside the store to slip a 50-foot hose into it. He'd take it to the front of the store and tell the greeter he was returning it.

Before Melva could come around to watch where he was going with the hose, he would have the blue tape on it marking it as a return, and he'd go to customer service where he would apologize for losing his receipt, knowing full well the return clerk was tired from sorting all of the morning returns and the long lines, and she would refund him the retail price, $34.95. *Money for another day*. But this time, the return clerk slipped him up.

"I can't give you cash. I'll put it on a gift card."

"That'd be fine ma'am." He turned sideways to the counter, still looking for Melva. When the clerk set the gift card on the counter with a return form for him to sign, he grabbed the pen and scribbled his name before pushing it back to the clerk, who squinted at the signature for a moment before thanking him. She took the hose, the pen, and the return form and turned away from Ricky, who tucked the card into his shirt pocket, happy that he had made $35 for his 10-minute ruse. He left for the entrance for groceries on the opposite side of the store from the garden center. Just outside the door in the fading light at dusk, he spotted a likely target for the rest of his plan. Two tall African women in hajibs pushed shopping carts as they crossed the driveway in front of the store, and behind them was a gray-haired woman walking with a cane. A large gray purse hung from her left shoulder.

Grandma, Ricky said to himself, and he passed the two Somali women and lined up to pass the gray-haired woman on her left side.

The woman, dressed in a floral long-sleeve pullover blouse and a khaki-colored skirt, wheezed as she walked, and as Ricky passed her, he slipped his left arm through the purse strap and pulled it from her shoulder. As he ran, Ricky looked down at the bag as

its sides bulged and wiggled. Staring up at him, an iguana at least sixteen inches long writhed its tail free from inside the bag. It whipped its tail across Ricky's arm and blood sprayed as he screamed and he ran for his car.

Ricky squeezed his arm and pulled the sleeve of his hoodie down, and he ducked between a pickup truck and the return rack for grocery carts, where he slipped another pill in his mouth, and there he stayed listening to cars pull in and out of the lot until he was certain he could make it to his car. He spun around as he stood, and when he saw his car with the old woman standing beside it, Ricky pulled up his sleeve.

"Look how I'm bleeding!"

"Not my concern," the old woman said. "Take me home. I saw you get out of this car. Unlock it, or Seymour will have another go at you. He's mean when he's hungry."

Ricky unlocked the passenger side and the old woman settled in, taking her purse and setting it between her feet on grease-stained fast-food bags. Ricky pointed to his arm again, but before he could say anything, the old woman spoke.

"It's going to bleed until I say it stops," she said. Her eyes, a sparkling blue in the sunlight, now were ashen gray.

Ricky started the car, and the old woman directed him to stay on the freeway frontage road until he crossed Washington Avenue and then turn on Polk. She hummed a slow tune, and Ricky asked about the song.

"It's my wedding march," the old woman said, her forehead now a shade of gray slightly lighter than her hair. "Turn there." She pointed to a house in the middle of the block.

Ricky stopped in the drive next to a the house's side door. The old woman got out, but left the purse on the floorboard.

"Get out and hold this door for me," she said as she leaned on the rail. She wheezed as Ricky squeezed past her on the steps and he opened the door.

The wound was still bleeding as Ricky followed her through the kitchen.

"Can you fix this?" he said, pointing to the streak of blood that ran from just below his elbow to his wrist.

The old woman was silent as she entered the bedroom and kicked off her shoes. Her toes were black, and when Ricky entered the room she pointed to the dresser.

"Get my lotion and rub some on my feet the way you did when you were a kid," she said.

"What about my arm?" Ricky screamed.

"Aw, hell," she said. "Do what I say." The bleeding stopped.

Ricky looked at his arm. The fresh blood of just a few moments ago had dried, leaving a crusty streak that he brushed off.

"Are you my grandma?" Ricky asked.

"Who else would I be?" she said. "Now rub the lotion on my feet. Be sure and get all of the toes, too. Arthritis doesn't care what it makes hurt."

"Yes ma'am," he replied and squeezed a dollop into his left hand, but as he rubbed it across the base of the toes on the right foot, they crumbled, one by one, and the black spread toward her heels. Ricky pulled back, but the old woman snorted.

"Ain't you going to do the other one?" As the old woman settled back on the bed, Ricky slipped off the sock, and the toes on that foot crumbled, too, and the gray pallor

raced up her ankles. Ricky rubbed the lotion on the foot for a moment, and when the woman sat up, her eyes were pitch black.

"You can't be my grandma," Ricky said. Then he wandered back to the bathroom, shut the door tight, and opened the medicine cabinet. Toward the back of the top shelf he pulled down an amber bottle and read the label: "Hydrocodone 10mg. One tablet orally once every 4 hours." Ricky listened at the door for a moment, and then spun open the bottle and shook out a pill, swallowed it, and then shook out another one that he slurped down as he bent over to drink from the sink faucet. His thoughts rambled to his grandmother, how she had died five years after he went to live with her when he was ten years old.

The house was now still and Ricky went to the couch and stretched out. Most nights he slept here by falling asleep watching television. Now the house was dark, lit only by a street light shining through a rectangular window in the front door. And in that light, the old woman came into the room and stood over Ricky.

"I am your grandma, Ricky," she said. "You stole from me when I was the only one good to you. If you wanted something that cost a dollar and all I had was a five, you never gave me back the change. And when I said no, you'd sneak into my purse and if I asked if you had taken anything, you'd lie about it."

She ambled about the room, and Ricky stared at her as she continued. "When you wanted that lizard, I bought it for you hoping you'd take an interest in science and do good in school. But you took the money for the clean crickets at the pet store and spent it on worthless crap. And you didn't even care when I took Seymour to the vet when he was

about to die; I paid her to take care of him until she placed it with someone who was responsible."

"All I wanted, Grandma," Ricky said as tears welled in his eyes, "was to go home to Dad. I knew Momma didn't want to take care of me."

"All you wanted," she said and made a spitting noise as she turned from him. "Your daddy was a busy man with the trucking line, scheduling drivers, bidding on hauling contracts. He had a lot on him, and he needed his free time to blow off steam, just like his dad. Your momma's to blame for your miseries."

"I just wanted him to take care of me," Ricky sobbed.

"And that fell to me, you ingrate," she replied. "When you broke your arm on that fool skateboard, didn't I let you have my pain pills instead of taking them for my arthritis? And when your arm healed you stole the rest of those pills from me."

"You've got four TV sets in here?" she said. "You steal them, too?" Ricky was silent, and she continued. "Whose house is this? Did you just break in? Maybe some old person who lived alone and didn't have family around died, like I did."

"A man's paying me to repaint it," Ricky said as he sat up. "Only he doesn't always come up with the cash I need, so I got to do something."

Now the old woman was completely gray, and as Ricky started to say something she faded away, and he stopped cold. Tears welled in his eyes. He wanted to say that he was sorry, something that he had never said to her all that while that she took care of him.

Instead, Ricky went back to the cabinet where he had stashed the pill bottles from the purses that he had snatched in the mall parking lot. He poured out a handful of pills and choked them down before going back to the couch.

Within minutes, though, he gasped for air, and he thought the room was too closed up for enough air to circulate. He arose and tried to open the window, but it had been screwed shut.

He staggered back to the couch and collapsed, and the last sensation he noticed was his belt squeezing tight enough as if it would crush him.

"Grandma!" he called out, and his breaths turned into wheezes as he stirred around. Again, he saw the shadowy figure emerge from the kitchen, and as she passed through the street light, she turned into a soft white.

"Can you eat some strawberry shortcake?" she said as she pushed a plate toward him. "You still like lots of whipped cream?"

Ricky smiled as he struggled to sit up. *Strawberries and whipped cream.* Now he could see Grandma picking through the clay pots that she had planted each year with strawberry plants. She carried the berries into her kitchen, rinsed them and cut them into quarters that she spooned over a soft cake from a bakery outlet store. Then she sprayed a whipped topping until the strawberries were barely visible, and she set a plate at the table for Ricky and one for the neighbor boy, Jason, who would spend the night during the summer as often as he would go home after the two boys raced around the neighborhood on bikes, skateboards, and rollerblades.

But Ricky could not sit up; his throat was tightening and he reached across the table where he had the vision of the shortcake and grabbed a plastic cup that he had filled with water earlier in the day. He fumbled around with the cup, splashing water on the floor and on the edge of the couch, and could barely wedge the cup between his dried lips for a sip that mostly dribbled down his chin.

He set the cup on the floor next to the couch and settled back, thinking of how Jason had immediately became his best friend when he moved to Grandma's house, and he wondered where Jason was, if he was still playing baseball somewhere in college like he was when they started high school together six months before Grandma died. Now he regretted not accepting Jason's parents offer for him to stay at their house while he completed high school.

Ricky returned to his Dad's house and tried to avoid him and his run of girlfriends who would stay for a month or two and then leave and be replaced by another. And he thought about the one, Eileen or maybe Irene or Jean, Ricky could no longer remember the name, who didn't work and would offer him a hit on a joint or a meth pipe, and he was pulled in to what he had thought he had broken free when he lost his supply of pain pills when Grandma died. He tried to remember what she looked like, but now the only image was the haze of smoke from the pipe, and how over the course of the three weeks that she was around that he had gotten into enough trouble at school that his dad had agreed that he could get his GED.

And a year after that, he was on his own, driving the dented, sputtering brown Ford Escort sedan that contained a pile of fast food trash and one purse, and hoping to find a place where he could work and find another friend like Jason.

As sleep overtook him, he saw himself being dropped off by his mom after she separated from his dad and she took off for California with a new boyfriend. And Grandma carried the suitcase with his clothes, and he carried a shopping bag loaded with a couple of books and an array of toys, and a spare pair of sneakers. As he watched his

younger self follow Grandma into her house, he wished that he could live through that all over again to thank her for her kindness.

The rain fell off and on for three days, and when a neighbor saw that the kitchen door was open after the storms had passed, he knocked and hollered out, asking Ricky if he was all right. When he heard no answer and caught a smell of death, the neighbor called police. They found Ricky's body gray and swollen on the couch, and surveyed the accumulation of purses that he had snatched, the TVs and electronic gadgets he had shoplifted, and the supply of random stolen prescription bottles. Neighbors watched the show from their yards and driveways until the cops had carted off what looked like stolen property so they could clear the complaints, and a mortuary service had bagged Ricky's body and driven it away.

A police supervisor ran Ricky's driver's license number and came across a warrant for a missed court date, and the tags revealed Ricky's father's name and address in Houston. The officer called the number, and when he finally reached Ricky's father to ask him to come identify the body, his father said he could be there in a couple of days. Before hanging up, he asked if the county provided indigents with burial, and the cop said that would have to be worked out when he got to town.

Vita

The author was born in Wichita, Kansas. He earned a bachelor's degree in liberal arts with a concentration in journalism from Wichita State University in 1975, and a master's of liberal studies with a concentration in English from Fort Hays State University in 2010. After a career in journalism, he began teaching English composition courses at both West Texas A&M University and Amarillo College. He joined the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop in 2015 to pursue a master's of fine arts in fiction.