

A BRIEF  
HISTORY OF THE  
MIDLAND BRIDGE



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MIDLAND BRIDGE

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*and Other Historical Accounts*

Mike Krath

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To Veronica, my wife, my love, my habibbi, my better half, who had this dedication coming to her.



# FORWARD

This anthology was torture!

For the first time, I submitted my short stories to a professional editor, and the results were disastrous. The stories came back ripped to shreds. They lacked character development, mixed viewpoints in the same scene, illogical plot and scene formation, redundancy, cheap jokes, and absolutely NO WAY the story could be salvageable by any rewrite!

So, here they are.

You rewrite them.

Seriously, the majority (a few of these, I absolutely refused to rewrite or submit!) passed the editor's scrutiny the second and third time around. I learned a great deal about writing in the process. This is not to say that what you read here is perfect. I don't think any short story is perfect. It seems rewriting is an endless task, and you have to release the fiction sooner or later before it eats at you day and night.

A story is very much like becoming involved in a play. You are the director, the lighting man, the soundman, the script monitor and the actor and actress all in one. Finally, the curtain opens, and the audience judges the merits of the play you have written as well as your acting ability.

The play may be or may not be enjoyed by everyone attending. A case in point—my editor hated the story, "Rear Window of Opportunity." I submitted it to an Internet site, and it won the prize for 'Winning Article of the Week.'

If a short story is to be realistic, you must carefully think it through—step by step, inch by inch, and pica by pica. The line of reasoning must flow, the characters need to occupy a logical place in the warp and woof of time and history, and the details

subjecting themselves—without being coerced—to the overall premise.

However, the stories presented in this anthology are not to be considered as any of the above in the sense you understand it. The world these characters live and move in may match ours to some degree, but something is missing. Some slight detail gone awry. A thought that isn't exactly normal. A mood that seems real, but yet doesn't seem to be all there.

This is, perhaps, more of a book of fables. These stories present moral twists, but you may have to dig deep to find them.

The characters mainly live below the *line of despair*. They go through their business creating their own absolutes and making up the world the best they see it. They rarely cuss, and if they do, they do it within the context of their speech—and never blatant. They occasionally drink, but none are alcoholics. They may act as if they hate each other in a marriage relationship, but end up sharing love. They find that what they reap they sow. Greed may transform them to something less than human. Their folly brings ruin and despair. Their egotistical ways, humility. Their unforgiveness, loneliness.

In the same manner, their goodness is rewarded. Their humility and dedication find honor. Their perseverance and endurance, a better quality of life.

The ultimate purpose of this collection; however, is to make you laugh—at least once. With that in mind, some of the stories, I admit, are just plain silly! (Some may say they are all in that basket.) In fact, there were many moments that I felt the silliness factor had been reached in the story I was creating and further writing only added to the scenario's folly.

It is my one hope that this book's major accomplishment will be to entertain you as well as give you an occasional thought for reflection. If it succeeds, I will sleep well at night and dream of further literary lunacy.

God bless.

Mike Krath

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MIDLAND BRIDGE

If you ever move to Midland, Texas, look up Sarah Bridges, Real Estate Agent. Sarah will give you a big, hearty Texas helping with your real estate transaction. She will take you around the town—except for the East Side—and show you the area and the community. She may even show you a house.



“Need a comparative home selling analysis? Call me,” Sarah will say but her phone will ring off the hook.

Here is what will happen if you ever meet her on the street. First, you will meet a woman wearing a bright, cheery, floral dress with a pearl necklace, 5’6”, slender, and sporting a white, high-rimmed spring hat covering her shoulder-length, slightly wavy black hair. Then, you will hear, “Hi, I’m Sarah. Need a Market Analysis Request Form? I have one in my purse.” Then you will say, “No.” Then, she will blab on and on about the Permian Basin Petroleum Museum, the Museum of the Southwest, the Blakemore Planetarium, the Fredda Turner Durham Children’s Museum, the J. Evetts Haley History Center, and the American Airpower Heritage Museum that commemorates America’s aerial accomplishments from 1939 through 1945, until you finally say, “I can’t stand it. Please, the only thing I really want to know—if you are going to keep on talking—is what about that strange bridge on the edge of town?” Then, she will stop talking and look you straight in the eye and say, “Do you think I’m strange?”

As puzzling as all this sounds, the good people of Midland will soon straighten you out.

“Sarah is the bridge. Don’t cross her.”

The bridge? The strange bridge at the edge of town? Sarah is this bridge? “I don’t get it,” you will say. “No one does,” they will say.

The bridge? If you go to the east edge of Midland, there it is. Not a small bridge, mind you, but a Texas wonder—a bridge made up of imported brown and beige stones; a bridge resembling a Roman Aqueduct, winding 280 miles from Midland to Austin, twisting, turning, over this scrub grass, through that cattle-range, over these Mesquite trees and those tumbleweeds, through them there rolling hills and flatlands, and passing jackrabbit territory and rattlesnake dens. Here a bridge. There a bridge. Everywhere a bridge, bridge.

As to its purpose? Well...there really is none. None wise

would travel it. It accommodates one car—a small car. It has no emergency phones, no rest areas, and no gas stations. Its only purpose as anyone can guess is to turn and wind all over the Texan countryside for 280 miles—and that’s about all there is to it. Oh yeah, it also has a gold plaque at the end of it. The plaque reads, “To Momma”. The people of Midland will also tell you that the plaque should have read, “To Sarah—whose future I destroyed with this stupid bridge.”

Also, there’s a small tollbooth at the beginning of the bridge in Midland with a very sour-faced old lady. Her name is Gertie. Gertie’s been waiting years for a car. For twenty years, not one car has driven on the bridge, and Gertie has never seen the toll of \$132.53. She came close once when the local Girl Scout Troop came by for their annual bridging ceremony. Unfortunately, the troop didn’t realize the bridge was so long and the toll so ridiculously high. The troops’ leader, Miss Veronica, was tarred and feathered and run out of town for her insolence.

Gertie is a very faithful employee. She takes her breaks at the allotted times. She always holds it in as long as she is able without running to the porta-potty.

The interest on the Bridge Trust is enough to pay Gertie’s salary, but is not enough to repair the bridge. For twenty years, the weather has eroded huge sections of the bridge so that some chunks of it have fallen off. This is not Gertie’s fault, since she has always been willing to take people’s money, but that’s about it.

Poor Sarah, the people of Midland will tell you, poor, poor Sarah. A much younger Sarah had fallen in love with a wealthy rancher’s son. He had a fancy name. His name was Bobby Beaux (pronounced ‘Bow’ for the French illiterate). His family had some French blood but no one could tell you how much. In fact, they could trace their family back only one or two generations. They were more interested in the million barrels of oil that was pumping on their land every year than about how much French blood was pumping through their veins.

Bobby Beaux’s father was Philippe Gum Beaux. His wife’s

name—and hence, Bobby Beaux’s mother—was named Charlotte Mae Beaux. Some of the folk called her Rose. Their daughter’s name was Cotton. Bobby was such a short child his parents nicknamed him ‘Shrimp’. Of the children, he was the tidiest and Cotton was the messiest—especially in the kitchen where she created one of Midland’s best-known side dishes—Salad Beaux.

Historically, the Beaux’s ranch—the Beaux Vine Ranch—was the region’s largest pig farm. One day, the pigs went to burrowing and struck oil. The Beaux’s were overnight millionaires. The pigs were overnight bacon.

Sarah was from the north—a Yankee. She went to Julliard. She could sing, but the competition was so intense in New York City she decided to move west. She had seen a travel magazine advertising Austin, Texas as the “Live Music Capitol of the World”. She figured a hick town would be a good place to start. She went to the bus station carrying the travel magazine under her arm.

“I would like to buy a ticket to Austin,” she said to a deaf man behind the ticket counter.

The old man saw the magazine Sarah was carrying and saw that the back cover said ‘Midland/Odessa—Texas’s Darling Twin Cities’.

“Fare to Midland?”

“Fair,” Sarah said.

“\$50.55,” the old man replied.

Sarah paid the man and boarded the bus.

Bobby Beaux had wanted to marry Sarah, but Charlotte Mae thought this woman a might bit uppity for her son. Sarah this. Sarah that.

“Does she have any money?” Charlotte Mae Beaux asked.

“Not that I know,” Bobby said.

“Some people are too senile and some are just too young to know.”

“I don’t understand, Momma.”

“If she asked you to jump off a bridge, would you?”

“Yes, Momma.”

Charlotte Mae immediately put her hands to her chest.

“Carry me to my bed. My time has come.”

Philippe Gum Beaux came home as soon as he heard the news. This sudden illness on his wife’s part was inexcusable.

“You can’t die now. The kitchen will never be cleaned.”

Cotton sat by her bed weeping gently. Bobby Beaux was doing his best to cheer her up.

“You want to make me happy?” Charlotte Mae asked.

“Anything, Momma.”

“When your Dad passes on and the money becomes yours, I want you to build me a bridge.”

“A bridge, Momma?”

“Not just a bridge over a creek, but a one-way bridge to Austin.”

“From Midland to Austin?”

“Before Sarah goes asking you to jump off hers, you build me a bridge. If you do that, I’ll die a happy woman.”

“Okay.”

Charlotte Mae Beaux looked upward and flashed the biggest West Texas grin anyone had ever seen and breathed her last.

“The angels are rejoicing now,” Cotton said.

Philippe Gum Beaux sat in a state of shock.

“Charlotte? Charlotte Mae? Charlotte? Charlotte Mae?”

“Momma? Momma?” Bobby Beaux said standing up. “You want a bridge? I’ll build you a bridge. You’ll be proud of me. Your death will not go un-avenged.”

A month later, Philippe succumbed to influenza and then to pneumonia and then to death. The people of Midland thought Charlotte Mae had something to do with it. They thought she was in heaven directing the death of her husband just so Bobby Beaux could get on with his appointed task.

At the reading of the will, Bobby announced his intentions to start a bridge project. It was the first time Sarah had heard of such a thing.

“A bridge, Bobby?”

“A one way bridge to Austin. You can be the first to use it, Sarah.”

“What is this foolhardy idea?”

“Momma requested a bridge on her death bed,” Bobby said.

“A bridge from Midland to Austin.”

“What? She was dying, Bobby.”

“You want me to jump off a bridge?”

“No.”

“Liar,” Bobby said getting up. “Bold face liar.”

“Bobby, what’s wrong? Your parents’ deaths have upset you.”

“Honor your Mother and Father, Sarah. I’m going to build the bridge.”

Bobby left quite mad.

“Don’t worry, Sarah,” Cotton said, “as soon as the bridge is built, you two can get married and settle down. Maybe have a little girl. Call her Rain.”

Sarah didn’t say a word. A bridge? A stupid bridge?

“Maybe have a dirty little boy named Dust.”

“Look, I don’t have time for idle chit-chat,” Sarah said, “I have to think.”

Sarah stared blankly into space. How much money would it cost to build a bridge? A bridge from Midland to Austin? Why, that was 280 miles away.

“Why not call your first born son, Sam, Sarah?” Cotton asked. “I had a rabbit once. Called it Hare.”

Bobby hired about fifty contractors throughout the state to get the bridge going. He bought quite a bit of acreage and spent a ton of money. Sarah couldn’t believe it. All their future savings going into this stupid bridge.

One day she approached him as he was discussing one of the final legs of the bridge with the Austin contractor.

“How high are we going to go before we reach the city limits?”

“I don’t want it high,” Bobby said.

“Okay, how low, Beaux?”

“Well it can be high for a while and then low...er...wait...make one leg high and one leg low.”

“We can split the bridge,” the contractor said. “One contractor can take the high bridge and one can take the low bridge, and I’ll get them both to Austin, in the morning.”

“Parfait,” Bobby said and noting the day was the Lord’s Day, “Sunday Parfait.”

“Bobby, you have gone insane!” Sarah screamed. “You have spent all our savings! We don’t have anything stored up for the future.”

Bobby looked at her like a calf looking at a new gate.

“Make like a bridge, Sarah, and get over it.”

Sarah ripped the engagement ring off her finger and threw it at Bobby’s feet.

“I can’t take this anymore. I’m leaving you Bobby.”

“Okay, bye. Don’t forget to write.”

The bridge was eventually completed and sat still, solemn, waiting for one solitary traveler. Bobby never saw one. Cotton never saw one. Gertie was hired to sit and watch. She never saw one. A phone was directly connected from the tollbooth to Bobby’s house, but the phone never rang. Gertie never used the phone. Cotton got married to a Bridge player and moved away and never called. She had twins—Bea and Croix.

As for Sarah, she became a Real Estate Agent. She never called Bobby. She avoided showing any real estate on the edge of town where the bridge was even though all the new buildings were on that side of town. She never answered her phone in case Bobby was trying to get hold of her. He had destroyed her life, and there was no way to bridge the gap that had come between them.

There were moments, though, when Bobby regretted spending everything on the bridge, but the memory of his mother’s final expression of happiness never left him.

“I’ll avenge your death,” he was heard saying several times, but, before his death, he was heard to say, “I’ll jump.”

“Hi, I’m Sarah,” she will say if you ever meet her on the street. “Need a Market Analysis Request Form? I have one in my purse.”

# EUPHENASIA

Bad to worse.

Since the beginning of the semester, his works had gone downhill.

“I will be blunt,” I said. “This is trash.”

I looked at his face. He didn’t seem to mind the criticism. He never did.

“Perhaps,” he said, not at all surprising me, “you just don’t understand it?”

I reached for my desk drawer.

“No, I understand.” I said. “Actually, I think it is the other way around.”

I knew from the moment that I met him, that the bullet in the gun in my desk was destined for his skull.

“This is surrealism,” he said. “I can do anything. Like Nikolai Gogol.”

I opened my drawer.

“Gogol didn’t write like this,” I said.

I reached inside and found paper crammed full to the edges.

“He would have if he had lived in this day and age,” the young man said.

Where was that gun? I knew I had put it in there the day before. Just after I killed that budding Karl Marx.

“If you will excuse me for second,” I said and began to throw paper out a little at a time, “I’m having trouble thinking.”

He continued talking.

“It’s *Surreal*,” he said, “my writing, that is, with a capital ‘S’.”

It was in here. I knew it.

“Uh-hum,” I said, “that’s nice.”

He kept on rattling on.

“I’m going to be one of this century’s greatest authors, I can feel it.”

What? What was that he just said?

“Er...” I said, “uh...”

I had to hurry. He was driving me mad.

The bell suddenly rang. He got to his feet.

“Sorry, Professor, but I have to run.”

My hand felt the metallic object.

“No...er, wait!”

It was too late. He exited before I could kill him. I took the gun out of my desk drawer, flipped it around my finger and pointed it at the glass pane of my office door.

“Bang!” I said and laughed and then cried. “Your time will come, Mr. Parrish. You wait. You won’t always be saved by the bell. Mr. Bullet has your name written all over it.”

Not too long after this session, I calmed down a bit. I knew, perhaps by instinct, that I should try to teach a person instead of plot ways to eliminate him from the face of the earth. After all, Witherton College had hired me as an English Professor for this very purpose—to correct, cajole, encourage and console. As for the twelve students I had already murdered?

“They had it coming to them,” I said, although this was in a figurative sense. I had never killed anyone, but after the red ink had settled on their compositions, they were too dead to attempt to write another piece of prose.

However, Mr. Parrish was different. I could have soaked him in an inkwell and only succeed in coating his body; not his soul. His folly called for drastic measures.

“If you want a passing grade, come and see me, Mr. Parrish,” I told him.

He didn’t want to agree to my terms, but he eventually signed our little agreement—to never write another paper again for as long as he lived (and beyond, if applicable).

On the day of graduation, Mr. Parrish came up to me and decided to test the contractual waters.

“The world hasn’t yet seen the likes of my pen,” he said.

I felt the veins in my balding head begin to pulsate.

“Would you care to be my thirteenth, Mr. Parrish?” I said.

He looked at me quite odd. He acted as if he didn’t understand.

“The world doesn’t need another sociopath,” I said. “Keep your writings to yourself, and you’ll be safe from deadly red-ink. Don’t pollute the waters of crystal clear thinking.”

He laughed in my face. I couldn’t believe it.

“You are so outdated, Professor.”

He turned and walked away. I could feel my eyes turning red. Steam came out of my nose.

“Don’t publish,” I said in my mind. “Don’t do it. You’ll be sorry. Thirteen. Unlucky thirteen. Red-ink will flow like blood, not from my pen, but from some other. This is your destiny.”

The years passed, and I crushed and nipped in the bud many would-be assassins of the human spirit, until, finally, the day of retirement beckoned and the Dean told me it was time to be put out to pasture.

A few came and shook my hand and congratulated me for preparing them for life. The faculty gave me a little party with cookies and coffee. I even received a gold watch. All in all, it was a very cliché farewell.

I packed my belongings, including my gun, in several boxes and brought them to my apartment where I placed them neatly in the closet. I forgot about Mr. Parrish, or even cared what had happened to him. Mr. Parrish had slipped from my fingers, but six hundred sixty-five out of six hundred sixty-six fatalities wasn’t that bad.

Years later, on a particular cool, autumn evening, I finished my supper, washed my hands, and sat down in my easy chair to watch some television. I flipped through several channels, not

expecting to find anything interesting, but all of a sudden I saw a local news flash.

“Tonight, we honor our own hometown boy, Brent Parrish, 39, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Here he is, smiling, and holding up his check...”

I immediately jumped out of my chair, ran to the television, bent down and looked straight in the screen.

“What?”

The very unorthodox newsman continued:

“For his unique contribution to the world of literature...”

I was watching my own nightmare. Don't tell me this, I thought.

“An unusual story...”

I didn't want to hear.

“A surrealistic tale of a bug metamorphosing into a human while it slept.”

I knew it!

“No!” I said. “I told him years ago, ‘This is reverse plagiarizing, Mr. Parrish. You can't do this. Your readers will know this is Kafka in reverse.’”

His eyes lighted up when I said that.

“Reverse plagiarizing?” he said. “That's an interesting phrase. I think I'll coin it.”

“No, no, no!” I said to him at that time and started to tear up some horrible, recently graded English papers on my desk. “Will I ever get through to you? Will I ever be able to teach you anything?”

He laughed at me then and gave me a stupid smile.

I now watched his moronic, grinning face on television.

“Reverse plagiarizing?” the reporter said. “This is an interesting concept, Mr. Parrish.”

Mr. Parrish looked right into the television camera and stared straight at me.

“Yes, I thought it up, all by myself.”

Liar! Bold face liar!

My head was hurting. My veins began to pulsate again.

“Oh, the agony,” I said.

I got up and went to the windows. I opened them. I felt dizzy. I needed some fresh air.

Suddenly, a voice from the past!

“Professor?”

I jumped.

“Who’s there? Who said that?”

I heard it again.

“Professor?”

I was going crazy.

“I’m sure lonely in this gun. Wonder who will set me free?”

“Mr. Bullet?”

I felt darkness coming over me.

“Please, help me. I have a mission to accomplish; a purpose to fulfill.”

I felt weak.

“Mr. Bullet?”

I turned to the closet.

Silence.

I stood there for the longest time. Finally, I heard a sound like someone stepping on a dry twig. SNAP!

I ran to the closet, threw open the door and immediately opened my boxes. Mr. Bullet was in prison. He needed to be freed. I was his savior. And not only his, but of the entire world—freedom from Parrishness!

I started to laugh.

I found the gun and held it up high.

“The sword is mightier than the pen!”

(Retirement sure was getting to be a lot of fun!)

I found out where the reception would be, the one where Mr. Parrish would be the guest of honor. I hadn’t received an invitation, but I was sure Mr. Parrish would have insisted that I had. After all, he had received a passing grade during his senior

year by promising me he would never write another paper again in his life.

“Publish and perish,” I should have warned him.

I laughed again. I don’t know why I was so happy, but I was. *I felt as giddy as a schoolboy.*

I quickly made my way to the reception at a hotel within walking distance. I went into the lobby and found the ballroom. A few people recognized me.

“Professor Greenston.”

“The one and the same.” I laughed, and they should have, too, but they didn’t. They were a bunch of mindless lemmings.

They ushered me to a table up front, though I didn’t have a reservation.

“Brent will be so pleased to see you.”

Yeah, I know, I thought.

I looked around the room and then at the podium. Wait! Isn’t that Brent Parrish sitting up front?

“Yoo-hoo, Brent? Over here! Professor Greenston!” I shouted and waved.

Brent’s head moved in my direction. He stared at me for a few seconds and finally acted as though he recognized me. He waved back, and then turned and said something to some men on stage. After a minute or so, one of the men left and walked to where I was sitting.

“Professor Greenston?”

I looked at him with some apprehension. Did he know I had a gun?

“Yes?”

“Brent just told us you had a tremendous influence on the way he writes.”

I couldn’t believe he said that.

“That’s nice,” I said.

He didn’t go away.

“Tonight, we have several local townspeople making speeches

about what they remember about Brent as he was growing up. Would you mind saying a few words also, in his honor?"

I wondered how much the honorarium was.

"How much?"

He looked at me quite surprised.

"Er..." he said. "Everyone is doing this for free."

Fools! All of them!

"Love to, love," I said.

He smiled at me a little funny and then walked away.

I folded my arms. Everything was going according to my little plan.

The evening ceremonies went smoothly. Eventually, they called me up to the podium. Everyone politely clapped. Brent stood up and applauded. He had tears in his eyes. Soon, he would have something between them!

I leaned against the lectern. The audience was looking at me, expecting me to say something profound. Okay, I thought, if that's what they want.

"Euphenasia," I said. There was slight feedback in the system.

They all stared at me.

"I'll say that word again," I said. "Euphenasia. I just coined it tonight. Not Euthanasia, but similar. Euphenasia is the substitution of something agreeable for what is disagreeable."

I could hear some murmurs behind me. "He means 'euphemism.'"

I turned around quickly.

"No! Euphemism substitutes words; I substitute silence!"

I noticed the room was quiet. I turned back to the stand.

"Dead silence!"

The crowd stared at me. No one stirred. I could feel Brent's eyes on my face. He knew what he had done was wrong. He had broken the covenant.

I started to laugh a little.

"Brent Parrish's writings have poisoned the planet."

I noticed some of the security guards begin to walk in my direction.

I began to cry.

“He transgressed against mankind and forced his foolish ‘Reverse Plagiarizing’ down their gullible throats.”

The security guards were now on the stage.

I laughed again.

“Mr. Parrish has stifled the creativity of mankind with his folly,” I said and again cried.

The security guards reached out their arms to remove me from stage by force.

I immediately pulled out my gun.

“Stand back!”

The audience screamed. The guards stopped.

I quickly turned and pointed the gun at Brent’s head.

“You want surrealism, Mr. Parrish?” I said. “How about an English professor with a gun?”

Brent tried to move, but it was over in a few seconds.

The crowd appeared stunned and in shock, but I didn’t think much of it.

Mission accomplished!

The trial took place a few weeks after the incident (can you imagine?).

The town wasn’t pleased that I had killed their prize-winning homeboy. The judge didn’t seem too happy, either. He asked me whether I had any regrets doing it.

Poor, blinded fool, I thought. Didn’t he understand I was doing him and his grandchildren a favor?

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry I didn’t do it earlier!”

I suppose since I was almost seventy years old, the jury didn’t find it in them to have me put to death. Brent Parrish’s mother wanted it, but the court’s reasoning was that I would be dead before ever getting to death row. I didn’t mind. I was at peace with myself. Now, all the students I had wanted to reach were complete. Brent had been my only regret, and now that was put to bed.

While in prison, I watched the seasons change outside my bars. Fall to Winter to Spring and Summer and back. Over and over and over. The years passed quickly, but I never died. The judge passed away. They buried Brent Parrish's mother. The jury, the audience, the security guards died. All my former students ceased to exist as well.

I sat in my cell waiting. Life was dull. Occasionally I would read some magazines or check out the latest bestsellers. All trash. Brent Parrish had influenced too many writers. His poison had sunk deep.

"Earlier," I muttered.

At the age of one hundred sixty, everything seemed meaningless. I didn't know why I lingered. Nothing made sense.

I was in good health, a little weak, but I could manage. The new prison guards treated me well. I was the national cause celebre. The oldest man alive—in prison!

On December 31, 2099, a guard came by my cell.

"Richard?" he said. "Almost midnight."

I looked up at him.

Cold winter air blew in the opened prison windows.

"Would you like something to read?" he asked. "I have the latest Time magazine."

The same news, I thought. Over and over and over... All things were so weary.

"Yes," I said. "That would be nice."

He handed me the periodical through the bars and walked away. I looked at the front cover. It read: THE GREATEST WRITERS OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY.

There was a face on it. It looked familiar.

I held the publication closer to see. Whose visage was this?

I brought it even nearer and held it to the light.

"No!"

The magazine dropped from my hands, and I threw myself against the prison bars.

"Guard! Guard!"

He came running back.

“What’s wrong, Richard?”

I fell down crying.

“Tell me it isn’t so, tell me.”

I pointed to the. He just stared at it. He didn’t say anything. He probably didn’t even know who the man was.

I had killed the greatest writer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

“Oh, oh, oh,” I said and started to rock with my hands in my face. The pain was starting again. My head was hurting. I was in agony. My veins were pulsating; I could feel them.

“Why?” I cried. “Why didn’t I kill him earlier?”

All of a sudden, within me, a swelling occurred that had never been there before. It grew, like a bubble ready to burst. I turned and looked at the sky through my bars. The guard was still standing.

“Are you okay? You want me to call a doctor?”

I ignored him. I was in Hades. I now knew it. I must have died some years back and gone straight to Hell!

I got to my feet and ran over to the window and held the cold steel in my hands. I looked at the stars. They were illusions. They had to be!

“Brent Parrish the greatest writer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?”

I laughed.

I cried.

I lifted my head back and let out a scream.

“OH, THE SURREALITY!”

Fin

# REAR WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

It sure gets hot in Texas. How hot? The other day, a dog was chasing a cat and they both were walking. The summertime, the springtime and the fall-time are the hot months—the wintertime is where electricity is cheap—and that is about it.

Probably a hotter than blazes place is Cinder, Texas. It sits about 150 miles east of El Paso somewhere in the arid hill lands. If you ever drive I-10, you probably would be road hypnotized by the time you passed it. Nothing around for miles and miles and miles. The road would go on and on and on. Sleepy. Getting sleepy.

There's an old tin shack—well, it's not that bad—okay, there is an old wooden house sitting out about ten miles from downtown Cinder. It belongs to Tommy and June Bush. It was willed to Tommy by his daddy and was in the family for a few generations before that. Nothing can grow on it. It's good for raising a few cattle, but not much else. There is a windmill for pumping water to the cattle and a water tank for drinking and bathing. Normally, the Bush's drink soda pop instead of water so they don't care too much if the drinking tank is low or not—except for their every other day shower and to fill their dog Boo's water dish.

June found an old Coke machine once in a junkyard. It still worked, so she carted it to their house, set it out on the porch and it has been filled with soda cans ever since. Of course, you still have to pay to get a Coke. June thought this was a great way to get money from her friends. They used to visit quite often,

but after spending exorbitant prices all the time for just a cold drink, they finally decided to just stay home where the drinks were cheaper.

“Mamma, you and Daddy gotta come out to visit us. No one is visiting us anymore. We need the money. Come and buy a Coke,” June said to her Mamma one day, but her Mamma told her to find some other means of making money—like knitting rugs or selling longhorn skulls.

June hanged up the phone disappointed. She walked outside on the wooden porch and looked at the cows in the distance. Maybe, by some unforeseen circumstances, a stranger would wander off the main road about five miles into the wilderness and buy a coke.

The Bush’s old mongrel dog, Boo, was a lazy canine. He laid pretty still most of the day on the porch near the coke machine. Seldom did he move, but when he did, he would go inside where it was a little cooler. Boo loved beans. Once, he went inside and found a bowl of beans in the kitchen and ate the whole lot. June was in the back room and smelled something. At that moment, Boo walked up to her and made a little passing gas noise—blart!

“Boo?” June said and then waved her hand in front of her face. “Whew. Boy, get out of this house.”

Boo walked outside. Blart!

June opened some windows.

“I swear,” she said.

Blart!

“Boo! Stop that!” June said. She walked outside. Boo just laid there looking at her. Blart!

June rolled her eyes and walked out to the front yard. There wasn’t much in it—a little scruff grass. You couldn’t grow much. There was a sprinkler but it was seldom used. June had wanted a vegetable garden, but the ground was too rocky.

“I wonder just how far I need to dig before there aren’t anymore rocks?” she thought. June walked to the woodshed badly in need of paint and found a shovel. She came back and turned the sprinkler on for a few minutes to get the ground a little soft. She then shoveled a few wads of dirt and threw them off to a

little pile. As she did, she began to remember. Those boys, she thought. They would fight her and she would fight them to be the first to the top of a pile of dirt. They were always too strong for her. She remembered once falling down the hill and landing in a pool of mud. The nearby construction workers yelled at them to get on home.

She remembered telling the boys as they ran off:

“One day, I’ll be King of the mountain.”

“No, June. Only its Queen.”

“Okay. When I am its Queen, you must all kiss my hand.”

There was a little boy named Winifred Templeton, III. He came from a better off home and was allowed to play with the commoners on Tuesday. She always liked him.

“June, I’ll never kiss your hand. I will never kiss a girl’s hand—especially one’s that covered with mud.”

June remembered the months going by so quickly, the thunderstorms, the times of playing in the rainwater in the curb, watching the water go down into the drain pipes, watching the clouds, the sandstorms, pennies squashed by a passing train; being hit by hard candy from a parade float by a little uppity girl, Violet Branson.

June’s shovel suddenly hit rocks. Big ones. She reached down and picked them up and threw them out of the hole. Sweat was already forming on her brow. This was going to take some time. Maybe a vegetable garden wasn’t what she really wanted. Besides, it was becoming really hot.

One more whack at it, June thought. She knocked hard on the shovel with her foot as much she could. The shovel struck against more hard stuff, but when it was moved away from ground’s view, June saw a gold glint. She bent down and picked up a small rock.

“What?” she said and held it up to her face. “Gold?”

June looked around her. She suddenly felt faint. She looked down at the ground and saw more gold glints.

“No,” she said and squatted and sat on the hole’s edge. She picked up another gold nugget and another and another. The hot

sun beat down on her. She started to giggle and then laugh. “Goodness. Gold. Pure gold? Wonder how much?”

June held up two nuggets for Boo to see. “Hey, Boo! Look!”  
Blart!

June got up and started the sprinkler again. She was going to soak that yard real good. “I don’t feel that tired after all.”

June worked through the afternoon digging in one area of the yard and another. Everywhere she dug, she would find a few more nuggets. Soon rocks were scattered here and there, and little pile of gold nuggets had formed along the edge.

As the sun began to set, June could see the dust of Tommy’s truck in the distance. She waved and hollered. Was he ever going to be surprised to see the yard dugged up so?

Tommy had this to say when he drove up, “What the...?”

Tommy had grown up poor. He had made a little money from his cattle, but he was a hard-worker. He knew the value of money and refused to spend more than absolutely necessary. One of the main reasons for being initially attracted to June was her frugality as well as her simplicity. She spent very little and was satisfied with less.

“Gold. We’ve struck gold,” June said holding up two nuggets, “We need to get some equipment to plow the land. Raze the house. Get those ugly cattle off our property!”

Tommy noticed his wife’s face was more flushed than usual. “Been out in the sun all day, June?”

“Look, Tommy. Get out of that truck and gaze at these.”

Tommy opened the door and took the rocks from her hand. He stared at them for awhile. He turned them around and around in the sun and watched them glisten.

“I...I...” he said, but was basically speechless. He looked out at the yard and saw the little piles of nuggets. “You...I...”

He looked over and saw old Boo on the porch.

Blart!

That evening, June and Tommy sat out on the porch and drank Coke.

"I took a few nuggets over to Van Horn first thing this morning," June told her husband again. "The assayer said it was some of the finest gold he had seen in years. Asked me where they came from. Didn't say a word."

"We need some money," June continued. "We need to rent some bulldozers. I need to find out how much more gold is down there."

"Maybe we could hire some contractors to help?"

"Show them our gold? No, Tommy, we must keep this our secret for awhile."

"We don't have any ready money. We don't even have any credit."

"I'll go to the bank in town and ask for a loan."

"How you going to do that without telling them what's it for?"

"Home improvement loan. This place needs some fixin' up."

"I don't know, June." Tommy suddenly stopped and looked at the hills. He was pensive for a moment. The June Bugs had surrounded the outside porch light. He watched them for a while. He finally looked at his wife again. "June, I'll take some cattle to market, tomorrow. I'll get some money that way."

"Don't do that. Let me try the bank first."

In the morning, Tommy was gone. June found a note on the fridge—"be back in a few days".

"Oh Tommy," June said. "Please don't tell me you went to sell our cattle."

June dressed up the best she could, put on a little make-up and walked outside.

"Watch the place, Boo." Fortunately Boo had quit passing any gas. He looked at her with one eye. "Lazy dog. And don't go looking for any more cans of beans!"

June walked over to their old Buick and got in. There was only one bank in Cinder and she just happened to know the president—Winifred Templeton, III.

To her disappointment, the bank loan officer wouldn't let

June see the president. He shuffled through her papers and looked at her quizzically.

“I don’t think you have a need to see the president,” he told her. “You don’t have anything to back up any type of loan. I don’t think he would even be interested in trying to work with you.”

“I know him.”

“So does most everyone in town, June.”

“I can pay it back.”

“How do you plan on doing that?”

Pause.

“I can’t tell.”

“Then I’m sorry,” the loan officer said with a slight smirk. “There is no way we can lend you any money. You are a bad risk.”

June felt like crying, but she was too proud. She would get the money. She didn’t know how, but she would get it, somehow.

A hand from nowhere suddenly appeared in front of her face. June backed away a little.

“You may kiss my hand, June.”

“No!” June said. She slowly turned and looked up. Violet Branson!

“Violet?”

“The rest of the court has already redeemed themselves. You are the last,” Violet said all spiffed up and no place to go.

June remembered too well. Violet Branson had grown up all her life as Miss Prissy-head. She lived in the finest house in town. She had a car. She had the finest clothes. She wore little, skimpy outfits and strutted around the High School campus.

“I’m going to get a million dollars when I get older. I’m going to get really, really rich,” she’d tell everybody. “I’m going to Texas Christian University and marry a millionaire.”

“So am I.”

“You June? You’re too poor. Who’d want you? You’re not even that smart. Bet you’ll never get to college. You’ll never amount to a hill of beans.”

“I’ll end up marrying the smartest and the richest boy in

school. You wait.”

Violet outdid June and most every girl in the school in everything she put her mind to—and she did it in a most uncivil manner. In basketball, she would foul you just to get you out. In soccer, she would trip you. In volleyball, she would spike the ball on your head. If you needed a friend, Violet was probably not someone you would want unless you wanted to fall down and pay homage to her every waking hour.

The High School years ended with the Senior Prom. The most humiliating part of it was that Violet was voted Prom Queen since the boys outnumbered the girls. Even worse Violet held out her hands to her maids-in-waiting—among them June—and said, “If you all kiss my hand, I will promise each of you...no...I will swear on the Holy Bible, that sometime in the future, when you all really need a helping hand from someone so high up, I will bestow to each of you your requested favor.”

Each maid-in-waiting curtseyed and clapped and giggled and kissed her hand.

“You will not go un-rewarded,” she told each one, except June.

“June?”

“I wouldn’t kiss your hand if you were the last Queen on earth.”

“Still jealous over Winifred? Oh, June. You were not up to his standards. I did him and you a favor. You can always find someone more your class. Remember this.”

June’s thoughts quickly drifted back to the present.

“Violet Branson, how nice to see you again,” June lied. “Been taking care of yourself?”

“You know I married Winifred Templeton,” she said.

June grunted.

“Hope you both have had a nice marriage.”

“Hear you married Tommy Dix. How nice. You two were meant for each other. So low—both of you. So what brings you to the bank? Opening up an account?”

June didn’t smile.

“She was applying for a home improvement loan,” the loan officer said.

“You, June? A loan?” Violet lifted her head back and laughed. “How in the world did you ever expect to get one? You have nothing. Everyone knows that. What are you thinking about using as collateral? Coke?”

“I think my business is done here, thank you,” June said and got up.

Violet watched her walk out of the office.

“June! Wait! Come back here!”

June popped her head back in the door.

“My hand is still here, June. You kiss this hand; all is forgiven and forgotten. My life will be complete. You kiss it, and the loan is yours.”

“Mrs. Branson!” Henry, the bank loan officer said.

“I’ll co-sign her note, if necessary, Henry.”

June looked at Violet for a while. June was mighty proud, but not that proud. At the moment, she felt very much like a June Bug on a wintry day. She didn’t belong there and wanted to get out. But now, this opportunity was presenting itself to her. To get her riches, all she had to do was humble herself—just kiss the hand that had ‘bit’ her many times. It suddenly seemed so easy.

“Okay, Violet. You win. Give me your hand.”

“And be sure to curtsy,” Violet said.

When Tommy drove home a few days later, he couldn’t believe what he saw. June had several earth moving machines sitting on the grounds. She had already plowed up most of the front. He could see golden glints in the ground. He saw a tent that was set up near the tool shed.

June watched him sitting on one of the earthmovers.

“They delivered them yesterday. That quick,” she said.

“I see your trip to the bank was successful.”

“Where’d you go? Where are the cattle?”

“Talk later,” Tommy said.

“We are sleeping in the tent, tonight.” June started the engine and loudly said, “There’s a bunch of coke in there.”

June immediately moved in the direction of their house.

“Move out of the way, Boo!”

June got up near the edge of the house.

“Time for a little spring cleaning.”

Henry, the bank loan officer, tossed and turned. The loan to the Bush’s was on his mind. He couldn’t sleep. He had to go out and check on the progress of the home improvement. In the morning he would go out. He went back to sleep.

In the early morning, Henry drove up to Bush’s home. There was some movement going on. Where was the house? He stopped the car and got out. He walked over and lo and behold, there was nothing but a big hole in the ground and an earth-moving machine driven by June.

June looked up and saw Henry standing looking down at her. She stopped her machine.

“Howdy,” she said.

“Where’s . . . where’s your house?”

“What house?”

“June, you took out a home improvement loan. What’s this?”

“This is my home, Henry. I wanted a home improvement loan to . . . er . . . improve on the foundation.”

Henry looked off and saw a nice pile of wood lying nearby. He also saw an old coke machine on its side.

“I’m telling the bank. You’re not going to get away with this.” Henry ran off to his car, but when he did, he tripped over a small gold nugget. “What’s this?”

Henry picked it up and looked at it. Gold? He looked around. Everywhere he looked he saw the glisten of gold in the rising sun. Gold. Everywhere—gold!

Henry quickly got into his car and drove off.

It wasn’t more than two hours before Violet Templeton came to the property. She was wearing the finest yellow cotton dress June had ever seen. She had on a little matching hat on her head

to protect it from the sun. Her shoes were expensive Italian high-heels and on her hands she had some lacy white gloves.

“Oh June,” she said when she had walked over to the pit. “All this work—for me?”

June stopped the machine and stared at Violet in all her fancy duds.

“Morning, Violet.” June said all suspicious-like.

“Would you look at all that gold? Why, there must a whole mountain of it and you are sitting right on top.”

“Maybe.”

“And to think it is all mine.”

“What?”

“Don’t you know the mineral rights is owned by the Templeton family? This gold is rightfully mine.”

June’s eyes opened wide.

“You have done labored for nothing, and in this hot, Texas sun, too.”

June couldn’t believe this.

“Suppose you will default now on that home improvement loan with nothing to pay it back. Guess I’ll have to pay it, but with all my gold—who cares?” Violet laughed.

June looked around her. She felt like tumbling down a hill and landing in a pool of mud.

“I’m rich,” Violet said. “Rich beyond my wildest dreams.”

Hearing something outside, Tommy came out of the tent. He saw Violet and walked over to her. He looked down and saw his wife beginning to cry.

“What’s going on?”

“Just looking at my gold,” Violet said. “June’s just realizing the mineral rights belong to the Templeton’s.”

“No, they don’t.”

Violet looked at him rather strange.

“Yes, they do.”

“No, I bought the mineral rights a few days back.”

“What?” Violet sputtered. “You didn’t. Who sold it to you?”

They wouldn't."

"Your husband sold it to me, Violet. For a thousand dollars."

"You lie. Winifred wouldn't do that. He's not that stupid."

"Why don't you call him. Ask him yourself."

Violet didn't know what to say. She looked around her. This was foolish. Tommy must have been out in the sun too long. Violet reached into her purse and pulled out a cellular phone. She called the bank and asked the receptionist to speak to her husband. Winifred was finally put on the line.

"Hello?"

"Winifred. I'm at the Bush's residence. They just told me you sold the mineral rights to them a few days back. That's not true, is it? I know you wouldn't do something like that."

Pause.

"No...it's true."

Another pause.

"Winifred, you sold the mineral rights?"

Yet another pause.

"Yes."

Violet clenched her cellular phone.

"How much?"

Silence.

"Winifred? How much?"

"Talk later." Winifred hung up the phone.

"Winifred? Winifred?" Violet stared at the ground. She finally looked up after a few seconds and barely said, "The mineral rights. Sold."

June climbed out of the pit and stood beside Tommy.

"The mineral rights are ours? We can keep the gold?"

"Yes," Tommy said. "The gold's all ours."

"How did you do it, Tommy? How did you get it so cheap?"

"Remember a few days back I sold our cattle? After I did, I went to the bank and asked to see Winifred. I knew he owned the mineral rights to the land, but I figured he didn't know the full worth. No one's ever found anything under these lands be-

fore, so why would he think any different? Initially, however, he balked because he wanted to keep the rights in the family, but then I pulled out a thousand dollars. Right there. On the spot. Once he saw that, he suddenly smiled and said, “You win.”

“I don’t understand,” June said. “Why would he say that?”

Violet was puzzled.

Tommy saw her expression and smiled.

“Remember the Senior Prom, Violet? Remember you were the Queen and Winifred the King?”

“Yes.”

“Well, while you and the maids-in-waiting were off doing something, Winifred held a secret session with his menfolk. He promised each a favor if they kissed up to him and paid him a thousand dollars. I was the only to take him up on his offer. I told him the thousand dollars would be his when I figured out the favor.”

“I don’t understand. Kissed what?”

“Let’s just say this. Very few windows have been opened in my life for me to improve upon. Winifred presented me with an opportunity. It may have been a rear one, but it was one all the same. I couldn’t pass it up.”

Violet stared at Tommy. Winifred had just destroyed her life.

“If you will excuse me,” she said quietly.

Tommy watched Violet drive off and June grabbed his hand. Tommy squeezed it. June was probably actually more of the reason why the mineral rights were sold for so cheap. Winifred had always had a fond affection for her. Tommy knew that. Perhaps, instinctively, Winifred had always wanted her to be Queen of a mountain—but a mountain of gold?

The day of depositing \$50,000,000 in a bank should be a day of rejoicing, but the atmosphere was none but somber. Violet sat glumly on a chair. Winifred was seriously drawing up the paperwork and not smiling. Tommy sat quietly with a slight

smile. June was all dressed in violet and had on a violet hat with a large white ostrich plume.

She looked over at Violet and couldn't resist.

"I told you I'd marry the smartest and richest boy in school."

And then—

"Hey, Violet," she said and held out her hand with a huge gaudy gold nugget ring, "wanna kiss it?"

At the moment, there was a commotion in the bank.

"Where did that dog come from?"

"Oh no," June said. "Boo has done jumped out of the truck."

"June, Boo ate another can of beans this morning," Tommy said.

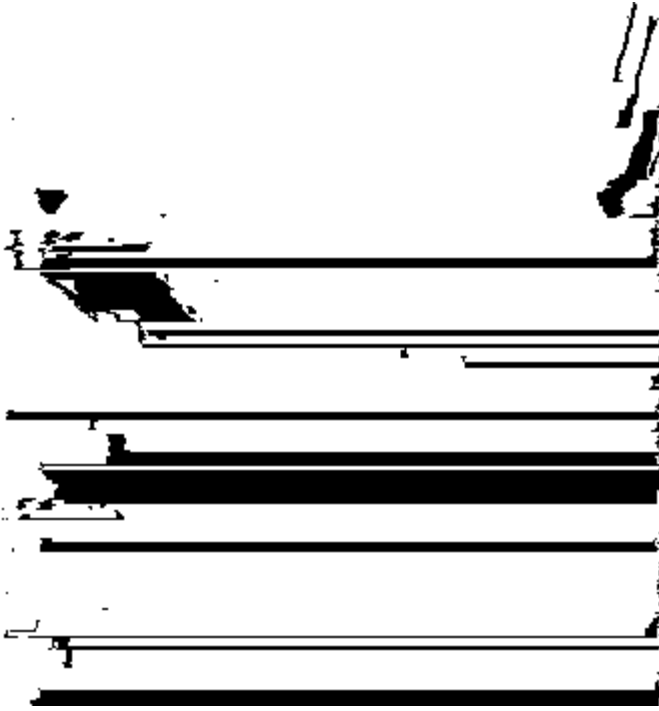
Suddenly, Boo walked into the office wagging his big, yellow tail.

"No, Boo, you stupid dog. Get out of here!"

It was too late.

Blart!

# ANGST OF ALICE



Scene i—Mrs. Ferguson's Lovely Gift

It started with an accident several months back, although it doesn't seem that long ago. I slipped on some wet tiles and hit my head against the bathtub. When I came to, my husband was standing over me.

I said to him, "Do you know what animal I am?"

"No."

“Snort, grunt!”

“A Pig?”

“SQUEAL! SQUEEEEEAAAAALLL!!!”

“Er...”

He tried to take me to the doctor, but I refused.

“I was just joking,” I told him, “about being an animal. I just wanted to see...oink...what you would do.”

“Er...”

My name is Alice Hope Taylor. I live in a Victorian home, several blocks from the end of the bus route at Sycamore School Road in a small, southern town. I am fifty-nine, a little plump, with coal-black eyes and black hair pulled back in a bun.

Denise lives next door. She is fat and has gray hair. I’m surprised her husband stays with her.

Before I fell, Denise and I were the best of friends, but after the fall, I didn’t care too much for her. The annual garden show is less than six months away, and I know she is trying to steal my secrets on how to grow a garden.

I won last year, and I will win this year, too, Denise. Will too!

I told her right after the accident, “You might as well hang up your spade, dear. The fairies would no sooner grovel in your rose-bed, than play in the city dump.”

Denise was surprised at my sarcasm.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

“No, you have!” I said back. “You’ve become a spy. You want to win that show so bad, you’re willing to sabotage my garden.”

“I never!”

“Isn’t your mother visiting you now? Be off, then! I hear your Mama calling.”

I now stand at my upstairs bedroom window. It’s a beautiful day. The sun is only occasionally hidden by a passing white cloud.

I look over our fence at Denise’s garden. She has already cleared her beds, mended her picket fences and has laid down a considerable amount of compost for her roses.

Her Zinnias have already started to come up. She thinks she's going to win with these alone. She's not. Any fool can grow a Zinnia. A few weeks before the show, I will go over and pour salt on her foolhardy choice of plants.

I know what I'm thinking is mean, but I can't seem to stop. The bump on my head has freed me from my prior social skills. It was long overdue, I think. Finally, I'm able to plot and scheme on how to destroy people's pride and joy without guilt. It's a great delight to be able to do so.

I stare at my last year's winning garden. It's dead! The marigolds, periwinkles and morning glories are in a much-advanced stage of decay. I didn't even prune my rosebushes. My cute, white little picket fence has fallen down in many areas, and my clamshell path is covered with grass and weeds.

"So?" I think. "Who cares? I really don't want to work in my garden, I only want to wreck others."

I figure, if I can't win, nobody can!

I smile when I observe my sole gardening purchase this year lying to the side of my garden shed. I bought it as a little irritant for Denise as she goes about her evil ways. Her yard is downwind from mine. The pile of nitrogen-explosive, highly potent, fresh-from-the-farm, pig manure is just for her. Not the non-offensive smelling kind, but the super potent smelly stuff. The very item her Zinnias would love to sink their roots into, but they're not.

"Poor Denise," I think. "Poor, poor Denise. Do you really believe you wouldn't have any difficulty in your futile endeavor?"

She take the prize?—a trip to Europe? I think not!

I notice my husband, John King Taylor, and our German Shepherd, Rex Baby, outside. My husband is waving his hand in front of his face. Even though he's up-wind from the manure, I can still see he can smell it.

He's been cooking some hotdogs, and I've noticed he keeps feeding the burnt ones to Rex. I also observe that he has our finest, silver-platter tray with its elegant lid sitting on the grass beside the grill to hold the scrumptious red-hots.

I open the window and put my head out.

“Hey!” I say, “what’s that on the ground?”

He looks at me and shakes his fist.

“The smell!” he says. “Your fertilizer is stinking up the whole neighborhood.”

He waves his hand again in front of his face.

I ignore his childish antics.

“Don’t go using our best dishes for your stupid weenie roast!”

“My stupid...? You told me to cook these forty-five hotdogs! For what? Are you going to freeze them?”

“Don’t get smart with me!”

I notice Rex Baby suddenly gagging and throwing up all his quickly eaten franks.

“Gross,” I say.

“It’s the manure, or me, Alice. Take your pick,” John tells me.

I watch as Rex Baby returns to his vomit.

“I’m going to be sick,” I say.

I see John looking over at our dog. He puts his hand to his mouth and nose.

I am about to chide my husband again, but, suddenly, I have a throbbing pain in my head.

“John!” I say, “I don’t feel so good.”

John looks up.

“John!” I cry out and feel myself falling to the ground and everything going black.

## Scene ii—Dr. Hapuch Needs a Name Change

“Alice?” I hear a voice say my name and some hands clapping.  
“Alice?”

I open my eyes and see Dr. Orin Hapuch looking down at me. I had begged him to change his name years earlier so I could

pronounce it, but his stupid Polish pride prevented him from doing so.

I'm groggy. I see my husband standing beside me.

"John?"

"They're going to run some more tests on you. Go back to sleep."

I'm confused. I don't quite know where I am. I fall back into darkness.

I dream and see a dog and a pig. The pig has a little circus outfit. The dog has a circus collar. He's riding the pig around and around a ring of trampled flowers. He has a little white, fluffy cotton bowed collar around his neck and a party hat on his head. The dream is fuzzy. First, the dog is riding the pig; then the pig is riding the dog. Soon, both animals appear to be riding each other at the same time, and then they blur into one unidentifiable dog-pig mass.

I wake up with cold sweat and look around. I'm in a hospital room. My husband is in the corner, sitting in a chair, sleeping. I want to say something, but I don't feel I've the energy.

I go back to sleep.

It must be the morning, when I open my eyes again. There's a nurse opening the windows. I see John talking to Dr. Hapuch.

"There's nothing wrong with her," he tells my husband.

"Nothing? What happened?"

"We really don't know," he says.

"Brain damage?"

"No."

"She acts so differently now."

I watch Dr. Hapuch take my husband's arm.

"Nothing physical," he says to him.

My husband turns to me. I know instinctively what he's thinking. Therapy!

## Scene iii—Paradiso A-Go-Go

A few days later, John is packing my bags.

“Dr. Hapuch and I think this is best for you,” he says.

“I don’t want to go to the insane asylum.”

“It’s not an institution. I already told you,” he says. “It’s a therapeutic resort.”

I look at him, almost begging.

“You think I’m crazy, John?”

He finishes stuffing some socks into an already quite jam-packed bag that I’m sure is filled with wrinkled clothes and looks at me.

“I know you better than anyone else, Alice. This Mrs. Hyde Syndrome has got to end.”

“I was kidding about being a pig, you know that.”

John walks over and caresses my hair.

“My wife a sow? Never! You just need to stop acting like one.”

John takes my bag and walks downstairs to our car. I follow behind reluctantly. John goes outside and puts the bag in the car and then looks at me.

“Well, come on, this is for you, you know.”

I walk out and get into the backseat. I don’t feel worthy to sit in the front.

I suddenly spy Denise. She is in her yard holding a handkerchief to her eyes. She is attempting to wave.

Boy! What a faker!

John gets into the car and I immediately tell him, “Don’t you answer any of that woman’s questions about my garden, you hear? She has no right to know my secrets.”

“What secrets, Alice?” he looks over and sees Denise. He smiles and waves back.

“I mean it!” I say. “She’s not to be trusted.”

I can see John looking at me in the rear-view mirror.

“She’s a secret agent, I tell you!”

We drive off and I see Denise walking towards our house.

“No, turn around, John,” I say. “See? See what’s she’s doing?”

“No turning back,” he says.

“Denise...snort...is going to go into our backyard... grunt... to steal our manure! SQUEAL! SQUEEEEEAAAALLL!!!”

John puts the pedal to the metal.

#### Scene iv—Paradiso Found

The passing shades of the trees fly across my face as I stare at the countryside. I don’t know how far we are going, but I hope it is not too far. About eighty miles later, we hit potholes. The car goes up and down. The shadows jump up and down on my face. I follow their example as well—up, down, up, down. I hit my head against the ceiling.

“Ouch!” With all this bumping around, I really will be crazy by the time we arrive. They’re going to have to carry me out of the car in a stretcher.

We finally arrive outside a black, steel gate heavily infested with ivy. Almost hidden from view is a sign posted on some chipped bricks that reads:

PARADISO

Your Last Resort

I feel tense.

“No!” I say to John.

The gates swing open and John drives onto a broad drive-

way. In the distance is a huge brown edifice that resembles an old Spanish luxury hotel from the 1920's.

"Heavenly," he says.

"I don't need this," I say.

"Ethereal."

He drives up to the front entrance and a young man with wild, curly black hair hurries out. He has pimples all over his face. His teeth are chipped and yellowed.

"Welcome to Paradiso," he says and his voice cracks. "May I take your bags?"

John gets out of the car, walks around back and opens the trunk.

I notice a Spanish looking woman wearing a maid's outfit standing on the top of granite stairs to the entrance. She has black, shoulder-length hair, a stern face, and steel-gray eyes that look straight at me.

I sit in the car. I'm not getting out. Suddenly, the door opens and this young man looks at me. He offers me his hand.

"This way to Paradiso," he says and suddenly grabs my arm and forcefully pulls me from my seat.

### Scene v—My Very Own Towel!

After John checks me in, kisses me and tells me he'll be back in a few weeks to pick up the 'renewed me,' I reluctantly follow the maid who I find out is actually the director of Paradiso! She won't tell me her name, though.

"Why the uniform?" I ask.

"Service first," she says. "At all costs."

She walks me to my bedroom door on a top veranda overlooking a courtyard with a cute little fountain. I don't see anyone around.

"How many are here?"

"A few."

I notice a younger woman walking towards us. She is slim and has straight blonde hair. She stops at the door adjacent to mine.

“Hello,” she says and smiles.

I look at her suspiciously. I wonder what her angle is, being so nice and all.

“Are you feeling better, Mary?” the director asks her.

“Yes, Mrs. Latino,” Mary says.

I watch Mary go into her room. So the director’s name is Mrs. Latino?

Mrs. Latino opens my door and ushers me in.

I walk in and am stunned by the beauty. The entire room is done up in a Spanish motif. It’s absolutely spotless! The only problem I can see now is that there’s no phone to call home.

“Beautiful, Mrs. Latino,” I say.

“Is that what you want to call me?”

I turn to her.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You may call me anything you like. Mrs. Latino is the name your next-door neighbor picked.”

I look at her not really knowing what to say.

“At Paradiso, we go by any name you choose for us. Go ahead, pick a name for me. I won’t bite.”

“This is stupid,” I say.

“No,” she says, “not foolish. Revealing.”

I try to think of a name for this woman.

“Mrs...er...Mrs...er...Applesauce,” I muse suddenly knowing that it’s a stupid thing to say.

“Then Mrs. Applesauce, it is,” Mrs. Applesauce says. “Remember, this decision of yours really shows you what your heart is all about.”

“No...look...”

“And a delicious one at that, too.”

“Er...uh...”

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll bring the towel cart.”

“I’m just hungry! That’s all it’s revealing!”

I watch this lady leave (I refuse to use that silly made-up name).

In a few minutes, the woman returns with a pushcart full of multicolored towels.

“All our guests receive a complimentary towel in the color of their choice. The color you pick says a lot about your personality.”

“And what if it’s not in this selection?”

“We’ll personally dye your shade.”

“Really?”

“Si.”

I run my hand over the towels and finger the assortments. I find my favorite color.

“I’ll take this cute, little pink towel,” I say.

“Such a cheery one,” the director says handing it to me, “for such a dark disposition.”

I can’t believe she would say something like this.

“I don’t think that’s what it’s saying,” I say.

She ignores my remarks.

“Rub the towel on your hands and face. See how smooth it feels.”

I see her eyes studying my face.

I move the towel around my cheeks and forehead and gently pat it on my bathtub wound.

“Very revealing,” she says.

“And why is that?”

She won’t tell me.

“Tonight we have a banquet in your honor. You may feel free to roam the grounds until then. Enjoy the scenery.”

She turns and walks next door and knocks.

“Is that all?” I say.

The director turns.

“Something else?”

“Is there some psycho-babble nonsense about this feast as well?”

She looks at me without saying anything for a few seconds and finally, “Mais oui.”

“Huh?” I say. “Aren’t you supposed to be a Spanish maid?”

“What would you like me to be?”

Scene vi—Mary has a Little Towel or Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

I can’t believe I haven’t thought about Denise or my garden for some time, but, as soon as I’m alone in my room, I do.

Denise is probably stealing my picket fence as well, I think. She’s finding flower seeds in the dirt from my last year’s prize-winning plants and is going to put them in hers and claim they were hers all along.

“Insolence,” I snort.

Suddenly, the door knocks. I get up and answer it. There’s the woman from next door. Mary somebody.

“Hello,” she says and then stops.

“Hello.”

She doesn’t say anything.

“Something wrong?”

She just looks at me. I find this quite odd.

“I say... is there something a matter?”

“Your face,” she says.

“My face?”

“It has pink dye smeared all over it.”

I look down at my hands. My palms are also pink.

What does this mean, I think? Applesauce told me my choice revealed something. What? That I want to be the color pink?

“Did this happen to you...er...Mary?”

“No,” she says. “That’s not my name, you know. That is what Mrs. Latino calls me. You must call me by a different name.”

I grow weary of this.

“Sauerkraut,” I say. “Did the dye from your towel run off on you as well, Miss Sauerkraut?”

“No, I didn’t receive a large towel like you, Vegetable Breath,” she says. “Mrs. Latino gave me a small wash-cloth.”

“What do you use to dry yourself?”

“There are regular white towels in the bathroom. I think the big, colored towels are given to guests with special needs.”

“Oh,” I say and wonder why she knocked.

“Listen,” she says, “I’m going for a stroll in the garden and I thought you might want to come with me?”

There’s nothing else to do until dinner, I think.

“Might as well,” I say.

We both walk to a flower garden that is located a few hundred yards from the main entrance. It is quite lovely. Denise would be so jealous. I’m glad she’s not here. She would steal all these flowers.

Sauerkraut shows me a section of the garden where she was allowed to grow some Zinnias.

“Denise,” I say.

“What?”

“Any fool can grow Zinnias,” I tell her. She seems sad, but I don’t care. She’s up against a pro. “I grow prize Roses.”

“Really?” she asks.

“But my neighbor tries to destroy what I plant.”

Sauerkraut doesn’t seem to be concerned about my troubles.

“I’ve been here three months. I’m going home soon.”

“Good for you,” I lie. I really don’t care when she leaves.

“I was almost Catonic Schizophrenic. Personal failures depressed me. I couldn’t accept them and go on. Mrs. Latino told me to grow these flowers, and when they were in bloom, I would accept my circumstances much like these receive theirs.”

“Really?” I say. I think the director is a fruitcake.

I accidentally step on one of her Zinnias.

“Oops!”

“My Zinnias!” Sauerkraut says.

I inadvertently trample a few more.

“Oops, oops, oops!”

I look at Sauerkraut, and she has a look of horror on her face.

“No!” she screams and falls to the ground.

I think this is quite melodramatic on her part.

“It’s all right,” I say, but she just stares at the crushed flowers.

I really think she is overacting.

“I don’t think they’re dead.”

She doesn’t say anything, but starts to rock back and forth.

“Sauerkraut?”

Nothing.

“Sauerkraut?”

I sense I better leave.

“Going to be at the banquet tonight?”

Back and forth, back and forth.

### Scene vii—See How Her Garden Grows

The dinner is to be a scrumptious occasion. I dress up in wrinkled supper clothes and go to the dining area that is located outside.

I sit at a table with eight chairs, but I’m the only one there. A few tables down, Sauerkraut sits. She doesn’t acknowledge me. She seems distant.

I think she is still upset over her Zinnias.

Before our tables are covered pits. Each table has one. I smell something delicious cooking.

Applesauce gets on a podium and makes a little speech.

“What you have ahead of you,” she says, “is a most appropriate meal. Enjoy!”

At that, the covers are released and I see a succulent side of beef turning over piping hot coals.

I can't believe it. They've prepared this solely for me. I glance over at Sauerkraut. She starts to smile. I see what she has for dinner. She has two fatted calves!

"Why does she get so much," I say and then notice that the dripping grease from my meat has caused the flames to leap up and begin to burn my dinner.

"Hey!" I say getting up. "My calf's on fire!"

No one listens. They're all catering to the other guests and even more so to Sauerkraut.

"My beef's on fire!" I scream and start to run around. "Someone come quick!"

They ignore me.

"HELP ME! HELP ME!"

No one cares.

I can't understand this. I watch my supper go up in smoke. When I sit down, Applesauce walks over.

"Like a fire, your selfishness will devour you as well."

"What?" I say. "I don't have anything to eat now."

Being hungry in my mind is a legitimate form of self-regard. "I'm starved."

"Mary was ravenous for understanding, but you ignored her pleas and crushed her trust."

Oh, I get it. I'm being disciplined.

"I'm not a child!" I say getting up.

I look over and see Sauerkraut looking at the podium with great interest.

"And now for the prize for the best garden," the young man with the pimples and cracking voice announces and holds up a huge, silver trophy. "Mary Witherton!"

Sauerkraut holds her hands to her chest.

"Wait a minute!" I say, "Her flowers were stepped on! It may have been an accident, but nevertheless they were destroyed. She shouldn't win!"

Applesauce stares at me.

“Rules are rules!” I say. “You can’t expect me to live up to that norm if you show partiality to those who don’t.”

Applesauce looks at me with a stern face.

“Beauty in Paradiso,” she says, “is not just skin deep.”

“A well-deserved award for the finest plant roots of anyone,” the young man says.

“See?” Applesauce says and smiles.

Everyone claps. Sauerkraut cries with apparent undeserved joy.

I run off into the darkness.

### Scene viii—Sauerkraut’s Funny Surprise

I hear Sauerkraut coming up the stairs. I crouch down and wait. As soon as she reaches the top of the stairs, I jump out.

“Oh!” she says. “Vegetable Breath, you startled me.”

“My name is not Vegetable Breath,” I say.

“Yes it is. I gave you that name. That’s my name for you,” she says and acts a little confused.

“No, it’s been changed to Rex Baby.”

“Rex Baby? That’s a funny title,” she says and laughs.

I laugh too as I bite her on the leg.

### Scene ix—A Delicious Gathering!

Applesauce is sitting in her office behind a dark, wooden desk. There are other personnel standing around whom I have already aptly named Mr. Sweet Potato, Greens, Yams, and Pineapple Nose.

We wait for Sauerkraut.

I want to go outside and be in the gardens, but they won't let me. They caught me in them thirty minutes ago and forcefully brought me here.

For some reason, also, I'm getting mighty hungry.

"In one day," Applesauce says, "in less than one day, you have brought trouble to Paradiso, Mrs. Taylor."

I can't believe she has finally said my real name.

"When Mary arrives, I would like you to apologize for your behavior. If you can do this, perhaps your middle name's in you after all."

I have something in my pocket for Sauerkraut.

"If you say you're sorry, we'll let you stay."

Sauerkraut comes to the door and walks in.

"Alice," Mrs. Applesauce says, "Do you have something for Mary?"

"Yes," I say.

I reach into my pocket.

"I have her Zinnia roots, all finely crushed."

### Scene x—My Most Appropriate Dinner

John King is not too happy. I can see it. He loads the car, puts me in the backseat, and drives back home.

He doesn't say a word.

When we enter the driveway, he turns to me and wants to say something, but he stops.

We get out and he takes the bag out of the trunk. I notice Rex Baby to the side of the house. He is gagging again.

"What did you feed him, today?" I ask John.

He ignores me. He takes my luggage and walks into the house. I follow.

When we get inside, he tells me, "Sit down at the dining room table. I'm sure you're hungry. I've something fitting for your unexpected, early arrival home."

I do what I'm told, but I don't smell anything from the kitchen.

I wonder what he could've possibly made?

I detect something outside the dining room window, a scraping of sorts, but it's too dark to see anything. I then hear metal clanging against each other. I listen and perceive the outside kitchen door open and then close.

In a few seconds, John walks in from the kitchen holding our silver platter in both hands. It's covered.

He lays it before me.

"It's most appropriate," he says.

I look at the cover.

"How sweet of you to prepare a supper for me," I say.

I reach down and grab the handle.

"I'm so hungry," I say.

I remove the lid and gasp. There, before my eyes, is Rex Baby's latest regurgitation!

"No!" I say, "There must be some mistake!"

"No, Alice," he says. "I don't think so."

All of a sudden, I feel faint. My stomach hurts. I don't feel so good.

"I'm going to be sick," I say.

"Bon Appetit," John says.

Suddenly, the upper part of my face hurts. Such pain! I put my hands to my head and fall face down into the platter.

Everything goes black.

### Scene xi—Potty Break

"Alice," I hear a voice, "It's all right. I'm here."

I open my eyes. My husband is looking at me. I see his head silhouetted by our Sylvania Flood bathroom overhead light. I'm a little confused.

“You fell,” he says. “I think you hit your head on the bathtub.”

I don’t know how long I’ve been on the floor.

“John?” I say, “How did I get here? Where am I?”

“You’re in the bathroom,” he says and laughs. “Don’t you remember?”

My reasoning begins to return.

“How long have I been here? Months?”

“No, minutes.”

I look around uncertain really what’s happened. I see John has a worried look now.

“You want me to take you to a doctor?”

I don’t feel that bad.

“No,” I say. I then feel a bump on my head. “Ouch.”

My husband reaches out to hold me.

“Boy, you did have a nasty fall, didn’t you. I’m driving you to Dr. Hapuch.”

“No, wait John.”

I lift myself up a little.

Yes, I think, yes, it’s all coming back to me! I’m so relieved. I’m back. I feel like Alice Hope Taylor once again. I’m a real woman. I didn’t go to some weird resort. I didn’t crush Sauerkraut’s...er...Mary’s flowers. I’m still Denise’s best friend. I’ve never done anything wrong. It was all a... all a...oink!

All of a sudden something in me feels liberated. I don’t know why I’m aware of this, but I am. I can’t help myself. I look at John and smile. I have to say it.

“You know what type of animal I am?”

“No.”

“Snort, grunt!”

“A Pig?”

“SQUEAL! SQUEEEEEAAAAALLL!!!”

“Er...”

# THE MISSIVE

My name is Timothy Robinson, and I was obsessed with writing a book—a book to set people free.

It started when I was working my way through university, living in dorms, paying my own tuition, room and board with college loans. My parents had left me and returned to their origins prior to me starting college, so I was on my own. I never really understood why they would do that right when I needed someone around to give me direction in my life, but they did it anyway.

During my last semester, a letter arrived in the mail. It was from some man named Harold H. Meyers. His missive stated he was my half-brother. My half-brother? It turned out that I was actually adopted when I was first born and that my parents had never told me.

“I knew it,” I said.

Ever since I was a child, I’d suspected it. My family was unlike any other on the block. They acted bizarrely, spoke in weird languages, and exhibited odd behavior while on outings.

I was the only one who seemed to be...well...human.

As a child, my mother would often take me to the local aquarium. I never really thought much of it, but after awhile, her obsession with a particular octopus began to raise questions. One day, after she stared at this creature for the longest time, I finally asked her:

“Mom? Is that your sister?”

“Why do you say that?”

“You have the same number of arms.”

Mom had multiple limbs protruding from her flabby body. She immediately withdrew them.

“Don’t tell your father,” she said.

Later, Mom mentally transmitted some thoughts to my brain. I walked into the kitchen, and she said, without even moving her lips, “Going outside to play?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m going out to build a fort.”

“What?” she said aloud. “What’s that?”

“Mom? Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No, why?” She wasn’t moving her lips, again! I began to think she wasn’t very good at hiding her secret identity.

A year later, Dad started acting weird. He developed an obsession with the moon. He would stare at it for days.

“Men are going to walk on it one day, soon,” he told me. I knew there was a space program going on, so this comment didn’t surprise me, but when he turned and said, “I hope they don’t land on my house and squash all my plants,” I became suspicious.

I was depressed as a teenager. I felt that I didn’t belong. Even though my parents didn’t come right out and say to me, “Timothy, your Mom is from Venus and I’m from the Moon,” it was obvious. They had roots, I had nothing. They were different, I wasn’t.

On my eighteenth birthday, I sat glumly at the table.

Mom had baked a cake and had lit the candles.

“Timothy,” she said. “You are all grown up. Today you have become a man.”

“Yeah?” I said. “So?”

“So,” she said, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY! BLOW OUT THE CANDLES! MAKE A WISH!!”

“Forget it Mom,” I said getting up. “It’s not working out.”

“Timothy?”

I walked out of the room.

A few minutes later, Mom and Dad knocked on my bedroom door.

“Timothy, is there something wrong?”

I reluctantly got up and opened the door.

My eyes popped out! There, on the floor and running around

and around their feet, was a little dog wagging his little fluffy tail.

“What’s this?” I cried out.

“SURPRISE!”

“A Poodle!?”

“Uh...”

“What happened to the St. Bernard?”

“Timothy...er...”

“Didn’t you hear me ask for a St. Bernard by mental telepathy?”

“Well...er...”

“Is this really a St. Bernard?”

“Uh...er...uh...”

“Did you transform him to fit into our small house?”

“This is Fifi Foo.”

“Who?”

I slammed the door for the first time ever in my parent’s face. I turned and threw my back up against the door in a melodramatic fashion and placed my right hand, palm forward, on my forehead.

“You didn’t hear me,” I said. “You didn’t catch my brain waves. I’m not like you. I don’t belong. You’re both marvelous aliens from other worlds, but what I’m I? An earthling! That’s all. A nothing. A big zero with a stinking, old Poodle as a pet.”

A few weeks later, I found a vacant house along with a note: “We had to go now. Our mission is over. There is a financial aid form in the mailbox. Please fill it out if you want to go to university.”

“I knew it,” I said looking at Harold’s letter.

I looked out of a window and saw the Morning Star.

“So,” I said. “I was adopted all along?”

Harold and I met at a local university deli. He didn’t even look like me. He had brown, curly hair, brown eyes, was short, chubby, and had buckteeth. I had straight, blonde hair, blue eyes, was tall, lean, and nice-looking.

Harold was quite a character, an introvert. He had a lot of secrets for a human, but he didn't want to share them with me or anyone else for that matter. I sensed he wanted something, but he would never tell me what it was.

For the first few days, we had fun. He told me about my birth mother. She was a waitress in an off-the-road café. I eagerly shared that my adopted Mom was a Venusian, had eight arms, and had left me years back because her mission on earth was over. He told me my birth father was an insurance agent and had been in the military for years. I told him my adopted father was the man in the moon and once told me he had a house and a garden on it. Harold seemed reluctant to tell me that when he was a child, he had a beautiful, black Labrador Retriever and he had named him "Duke." I told him that I had wanted a St. Bernard, but my parents decided to transform him into a Poodle to fit in our small house and then forced me to call him "Fifi Foo."

I really thought we had hit it off, but after those initial days, Harold seemed less and less willing to meet again. Eventually, Harold disconnected his phone and changed his e-mail address.

I didn't know why he did it. I thought this was quite odd behavior on his part. I had even tried to explain to him that since we were half-brothers, I wasn't going to do him harm by incinerating him with a ray gun, but he didn't seem to want to listen. I really tried to locate him, but it was too no avail, and, with finals coming up, I didn't have the time.

I felt empty, though. The depression again returned. Something about my past was missing, and I thought Harold held the key. In my hour of darkest need to feel like I belonged to something, Harold had deserted me.

It was then that I decided to create a nonfiction illumination—to help others, much like me—and those who were hiding, like Harold, to discover their true self. What was hidden in their lives, I would reveal. I would compose something cathartic, a healing oil and, if possible, the very salvation of their souls!

After graduation, I interviewed with a Jeremy Burrows, a

middle-aged manager of an advertising agency who had worked in the ad industry for years. He was impressed with the fact that I was writing a book. I downplayed it by telling him that it was not unusual for a journalism major to attempt to write something.

“What’s it about?”

Tap. He hit the desk with a pencil in his hand.

“A truth book,” I said. “People tell me secrets that they don’t want anyone else to know, and I help them by telling the whole world.”

“Really?” he said. “Aren’t you afraid people may sue you?”

Tap. Tap.

“Why?” I asked. “They no longer have anything to hide? It must be a great relief for them to get it off their chest.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jeremy said. “But, one thing I do know, in the advertising industry, we’re looking for people who are not afraid to say what they think, not afraid of stepping on toes.”

“I’m your man,” I said.

“How good are you coming up with original stuff on the spot?” Jeremy asked. Tap. “For instance...what type of advertisement would you make for this coffee on my desk?”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Er...” I said, “Good to the last drop?”

At that moment, as fate would seem to have it, or some force from space, Jeremy’s pencil broke.

“You’re the man!”

I’d expected more of an in-depth interview. Jeremy reminded me a little of my mother. Mom used her hands when she spoke, but she had trouble with them dangling all over the place and hitting lamps and open light sockets. To avoid massive damage to herself, Mom would get to the point as quick as possible. Jeremy used a pencil. Jeremy apparently couldn’t think after his pencil broke, so he hired me on the spot.

I moved into a small, one-bedroom efficiency that was close to downtown. The thirty-floor office building where I worked

was within walking distance. Everything was conveniently placed around my abode—I didn't even have to buy a car!

For book writing purposes, I placed my computer next to a window where I could see the Morning Star.

"Mom," I would say every time I saw it, "Please help me with this book—to help mankind see themselves."

On my first day of work, Jeremy took me around the office and introduced me to my co-workers.

"This is Tina," Jeremy said. "She will help you if you have any problems."

I shook her hand.

Tina was a beautiful blonde.

"I'm writing a book, you know," I said. "You want to be in it?"

"This is Margaret," Jeremy said. "She is very intelligent."

Margaret was a ravishing brunette.

"You also want to be in my book?" I asked.

For the first few weeks of employment, I asked my co-workers and those I didn't work with all types of questions. I would stop them in the hall and find out anything about their lives that I could include in my book. Most, if not all, answered the questions.

"Putting this in your book, eh?" they would say and laugh.

"Yes," I would say back and laugh, too.

It was a beautiful day, a few months and nine hundred fifty-three pages later, that I received a telephone call. It was from none other than Harold H. Meyers!

"Harold? Where have you've been? You dropped off the face of the earth."

"Look," he said. "I need help. Can you help me?"

"What happened to you, Harold? Where'd you go? I tried to call. I tried to e-mail. You disconnected your phone and changed your e-mail address."

"I need five hundred dollars."

"Harold," I said. "I'm writing a book. I want to talk to you about it. Let's meet at...er...Duke's Bar & Grill, in say, half an hour?"

“Money?”

I hung up the phone.

Harold met me at the entrance. He didn't try to shake my hand or hug me. He looked quite haggard.

“Did you bring the money?” he asked.

“I brought something else,” I said.

We both walked into the diner and sat down in a comfortable booth.

Harold told me he was undergoing sleep therapy and hadn't had much rest during the past few days.

“Why?” I said.

“My life is going down the tubes,” he said. “I'm cracking up.”

“Well, uh...”

“So what did you bring—if not money?” he said.

“A pen and a notebook,” I said and held them up.

Harold looked at me with a frozen smile. He sat very still. I waited for him to say something, but all he did was sit there and stare.

“I'm writing a book. I thought you might like to be in it?”

Harold didn't move.

“Harold? You want to be in it?”

Harold shook his head.

“Uh, what?”

“You want to be in my book?”

“Is it Science-Fiction?”

“No, this is a book about life. Your life and others.”

Harold sighed.

“Oh, might as well.”

I started out asking him really simple questions—like what was his Social Security number, his bank account number, ATM pin, and such. He didn't seem to mind answering them, but he was yawning about every five seconds or so.

“I'm tired,” he said.

“Do you...do you have any deep, dark secret that no one

knows about, and that you would be really ashamed for anyone to know?" I said.

Harold laid his head down on the white tablecloth. He started to snore.

"Harold?"

I shook him.

He was breathing heavily and suddenly muttered a few words.

I bent close to his head.

"What's that, Harold? I didn't catch it."

He said the same thing again and then stopped talking altogether.

Suddenly, my face went pale. I looked up. I glanced around the room.

**HAROLD WASN'T MY HALF-BROTHER!!!**

The restaurant was stuffy. I got up and ran out of the diner. This was not happening. My identity, my roots—gone again! Non-existent!

I couldn't think.

As soon as I got back to the office, I immediately went to Jeremy and told him I wanted to take the rest of the afternoon off.

"Be here all the more earlier the next day," Jeremy said.

I went home to take revenge. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but somehow I was. Harold would pay for his insolence. My parents had taught me to show no mercy to cockroaches, and Harold had just become a human cockroach.

By the time I had reached my apartment I had had a change of heart. It wasn't in me to stay angry at people for too long. I didn't want to hurt Harold. I wanted to help him.

"Tonight," I said, "I'll finish my book. I'll include a chapter about Harold, and then...and then...I'll dedicate it to him!"

I breathed a sigh of relief. That was a wonderful plan.

I worked through the night, and by early morning, I was able to upload the book to the Internet.

As soon as I arrived at the office, I saw a message on my desk

from Harold from yesterday afternoon. It said: “Can I borrow five hundred dollars?”

I crumpled up the note and threw it in the trash.

“Harold, you don’t need money, you need deliverance.”

Tina walked by my office door.

“Tina, I published my book this morning,”

“You finally finished it, eh?” she said.

“Yes,” I said, “and everything you said to me about this company and Jeremy Burrows was written down. You can log onto the Internet and read just how selfish, lazy and snobby you really are and so can the rest of the world. The Web page is up on yours and Margaret’s computer.”

The phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Timothy?” It was Harold. “About yesterday...”

“Good morning, Harold. Did you sleep well?”

“I really need to borrow that money, brother.”

I gripped the phone.

“I wrote down what you told me yesterday,” I said. “It has now been made public.”

There was a confused pause.

“What? What did you say?”

“You don’t need money, Harold. You need salvation.”

“Huh?”

I gave Harold the Internet address where he could find what I wrote and then hung up the phone.

Jeremy Burrows walked into my office and handed me my paycheck.

“I put something on the Internet this morning,” I said. “I gave out the combination to the safe, the company’s bank account information, company credit cards, and the usual stuff that you try to hide.”

“I bet!” Jeremy said and laughed.

I walked to the coffee machine. Margaret passed by.

“Hey, Margaret! Remember what you felt about your old

boyfriend? Well, if he ever reads my book, he'll understand why you did what you did."

I got my coffee and went back to my office. I waved to the co-workers as I did. Many of their lives were now open books.

As soon as I got to my desk, the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Timothy?" It was Harold. He was laughing. "What's this? My name and Social Security number on the first page of your book!"

"Yes," I said. "It's the dedication."

Harold began to cry, and then he started to laugh.

"Look here! On page six! Harold lives at 154 Willow brook Drive, Dallas, Texas. He has a problem with his electronic garage door opener. He is unable to program it. It is permanently stuck on the code "8329" (and you have to push the pound sign after you enter that). He is not worried about it, too much. He lives in a safe area. He says that it is a ritzy neighborhood—even though he is having financial troubles now and I have notified his credit card companies. He is grateful that no low-life lives next to him—except Mr. Ferguson a few doors down. If anyone can help him with his garage door opener, please call him at (972) 456—XXXX (Note: I feel it imperative not to include a real phone number. If you want to find it, please look up his last name in the white pages. Meyers. Meyers, Harold H.)"

I could hear some ruffling in the background.

"Harold? Are you still there."

"Yes," he said, "I'm still here. Just looking for my gun."

Harold began to laugh.

"Harold? Is everything all right?"

"All right? ALL RIGHT?"

I could hear his voice growing higher and higher.

"As soon as I...[undecipherable]... read more...anything else...[gurble]...kill you."

I hung up the phone.

Tina walked into my office and glared at me.

“I hate you.”

I got up from my desk.

“Really, Tina. What I wrote was for your own good.”

I walked out to the hall. I noticed people staring at me. Some were crying. Suddenly, I felt the urge to get some fresh air. I looked over at Jeremy’s office. He was standing over his computer. He was looking and shaking his head.

“No, no, this isn’t so,” he said.

“Going for an early morning walk,” I told him. He looked at me.

“You!”

“Yeah, I know. You’re my man!” I said and continued to walk down the hall.

“No! You...you’re fired!” I thought I heard him yell, but I was not going to go back to find out. Everything would work out. Sometimes human salvation takes a while to sink in.

Outside, the sun felt good on my skin. I looked up at it. I wished it was down and the moon was out so I could somehow talk to my birth-dad. The Morning Star was in the distance.

“Mom,” I thought. “I hope what I did this morning was for the good of these earthlings.”

I walked around and around the block. The second time around, I saw an ambulance at the entrance to the office building.

“Poor soul,” I thought.

The fourth time, I saw some people leaving work early. They looked quite upset.

“Enjoy your time off,” I thought.

The last time, I noticed a yellow cab pulling up. A man jumped out. It was Harold! He appeared to be in a great hurry. His hair looked quite disheveled.

I walked into the building and went to the elevators. I watched one of them stop at my office floor. It must be Harold getting out, I thought. I took the next car up and wondered what Harold wanted to visit me about. Maybe he wanted me to autograph

the book. No, I would have to tell him, it is only in electronic form for downloading. The paperback wouldn't be in the stores until next week.

I walked into the office, and everyone was standing around talking frantically.

"Where have you been?" Margaret said coming up to me. "Jeremy's had a heart attack."

"What? When did that happen?"

"You killed him!" Tina said.

"It's a lie," I said.

"It's what you put on the Internet," Tina said. "They found him slumped over his computer."

"Ridiculous," I said. "The truth never hurts anyone."

Suddenly, I heard a shot.

"Someone's in the office with a gun!" Tina screamed. Everyone began to panic and run.

I turned this way and that. The exits were crowded with people shoving one another, trying to escape.

I ran to my office to call the police. When I picked up the phone, all of a sudden, the door was slammed shut. I looked up. It was Harold. In his hand was a gun.

Harold looked as if he had been crying and laughing at the same time. He pointed the gun at me.

"You know," he said with tears in his eyes, "I tried. I really did. I wanted a brother. I wanted some identity. I wanted roots. But, you were so weird, telling me your family was a bunch of aliens. I had to leave. Had to hide for a while."

I slowly walked backwards.

"I tried to come back. Perhaps, I thought, with your new job, you would stop fantasizing about your past and be a little more tolerable to be around. But, no! You weren't!"

I backed up to the office window.

"You had to talk about your stupid book. You had to write something stupid about me in some moronic book."

I couldn't go any further without falling thirty floors.

“My shrink used to say I was from outer space. I’d never be cured, he said. But he was wrong!”

Harold laughed.

“You see...I’m not the alien!”

I suddenly turned and jumped. I don’t know why I did, but it seemed to be the logical thing to do at the moment.

Funny, I thought my life would flash before my eyes as I watched the pavement approaching, but instead, all I could hear were Harold’s last words, “I’m not the alien!”

It was over in less than a few seconds.

When I came to, the paramedics were lifting me and slowly putting me in the back of an ambulance.

“I don’t know how you survived,” one of the paramedics said looking down at my face, “but you did. Thank your lucky stars. Not a scratch. Nothing. And you fell thirty floors!”

“Huh?” I sat up.

“No, not so fast. We still need to run some tests.”

The ambulance took off.

“The police took your assailant away,” the paramedic said. “I’m sure they’ll lock him up where he can’t get to you again.”

I suddenly saw the Morning Star out the back window.

“Mom?” I said.

The paramedic looked at me.

“You know, this is the second time we’ve been at your office building this morning. Sure is a lot of excitement going on there.”

“I’m an alien after all?” I said.

“Just lie down and rest.”

“I’M AN ALIEN!!”

The paramedics restrained me to the bed.

I suddenly felt very close to discovering something. I had a strong feeling that in due time, perhaps even that night, I would be shown my true self. I would have meaning to my existence. I would be shown the hidden secrets that until then were well guarded. And this body, this prison that I was now in, would be discarded, and I would, by some means, by some hidden force,

instantaneously be transformed into the creature I was meant to be.

“The book has set me free!” I said and began to laugh.

This was turning out to be a wonderful day.

Soon and very soon—I hoped—I would find out just exactly...what planet I was really from

# HERE'S SOMETHING FOR YOU, ALICE I. PETERSON

“Black oil makes black gears”—that is how a story begins. It is the Selection of the Month on a ‘prestigious’ Internet Web site. Every story on the site is by the same author. Many stories are submitted each month, but only this author is selected. And, each month, the author receives the following letter:

With your kind permission, we would very much like to publish your masterpiece.

Sincerely,  
Alice I. Peterson

There is a problem here, the author’s wife says. Not so, says the author, but the spouse heartily disagrees.

“Every month, the same letter? Every month, your stories are the only ones published. Every month, you are the selected author of the month? Don’t you find that odd?”

“This month I was selected author of the century.”

Matthew London’s dark brown eyes stare at the screen. He types fiction with great dexterity. His mind races a mile a minute and composes the most unusual stories. He is tall, thin, and good-looking. He never gets out. His life is his computer. His wife sometimes feels like she is his pet.

A few years back, Matthew received a prestigious journalism award at his university. It was a grand affair. His wife, Jennifer, clapped louder than the rest. She was totally in love with this great writer-to-be. He wrote her thoughts, her dreams, her ambitions. Matthew was her life. She clapped for her life.

Matthew pecks at his computer. Peck. Peck. He writes only about machines. Peck. Gone are the fantasies, the romance stories, the realism. Peck. The writing du jour is crankshafts. Jennifer is not clapping.

“Cams? Gears? Again?”

“The Internet eats them up.”

“Expositions on how to change the oil in a robot?”

For every story submitted and accepted, Matthew receives \$50. At first, Matthew’s writings were brilliant mechanical concoctions well deserving of the money, but now...

“This is not fiction,” Jennifer says of his latest work. “This is a how-to manual for a robot—for a machine that doesn’t even exist.”

“Cash. Send the cash.”

Jennifer looks around the office. The mini-blinds need to be raised. The study is dark. She feels stuffy. The windows need to be opened to let in some fresh air.

“Don’t touch the windows,” Matthew says, “I like to see what is being typed on the screen.”

“Listen. I was wondering. Maybe you want to get away for a while? Go to the beach? Sit out and watch the waves. Get your mind refreshed?”

“No. I don’t want to.”

Jennifer picks up an empty coffee cup off the computer desk.

“When are you going to be done?”

“Shouldn’t be long.”

“You know,” Jennifer says, “that if I wanted I could put a stop to that Internet site all together. You know that I am capable.”

“Hey, we’re getting paid. Why stop a good thing?”

“Your stories are becoming so trite and lifeless,” Jennifer says,

“and you don’t want to do anything anymore. I don’t want this money if we never go out.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Matthew says.

Jennifer turns and leaves. She is disappointed.

Matthew stretches and watches her go down the hall. He sees her enter the kitchen. He quickly goes back to a game he was playing with the volume down real low.

Jennifer begins to clean the dishes. She is not working. Matthew’s writings make enough money to keep her from fulfilling her non-desired programming career.

She notices the mailman walking down the street.

“Something for me?” she greedily says running outside and meeting him.

The mailman hands her the mail. She notices a bright pink envelope.

“What a lovely pink envelope,” the mailman says for no reason but to make small talk.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jennifer says and bids him adieu.

She looks at the envelope. The addresser is Alice I. Peterson. It’s addressed to her husband.

“Who cares,” Jennifer thinks. She opens it.

Matthew,

Send me another story. I love to hear from you.

You are so wonderfully delicious.

Best Regards,

Alice I. Peterson

Jennifer’s suddenly has feelings of jealousy.

“Matthew?” she says walking back into the study. “Who is Alice I. Peterson?”

Matthew immediately turns off the computer so his wife won't see him playing a game.

"My editor."

Jennifer looks at his behavior as a little odd.

"You just received a letter from her telling you to send more stories."

"More stories? I send her one a day."

"You do?" Jennifer watches her husband turn the machine back on.

"If you will excuse me, I have to get back to my story," he says and types a few more keys even though the computer has not fully loaded up. Peck. Peck.

On hot days Matthew religiously takes a nap. That afternoon, Jennifer hears the bedroom door close. She knows that Matthew has gone to Slumber Land.

She walks out of the kitchen, goes into the study and sits at the computer. She logs onto the Internet. She is really curious now to see if other authors have been selected for posting on this peculiar Web site. She surfs to the site and sees her husband's stories and no one else's, pages and pages of her husband's stories. Author of the month, author of the decade, author of the entire universe!

"The editor is mad," Jennifer thinks. "Totally mad."

Finally, Jennifer can't stand it. She decides to call the number listed on the web site. The phone rings several times. It is answered by an elderly man.

"Yes?"

"Alice I. Peterson, please?"

"She's not here."

There is a pause.

"Where is she?"

"She can't come to the phone."

"I urgently need to talk to her."

"No, I'm afraid that's impossible."

"Why?"

“She doesn’t exist.”

“What? My husband received a letter from her this morning.”

“A letter? In the post? Has she learned to do that?”

“Please, may I speak with her?”

“No, again, I’m afraid that’s not possible,” the man says. “You see, she doesn’t exist—in the flesh, that is. Alice I. Peterson is short for an Artificial Intelligence Program. I created her about five years ago. Remarkable program. Quick learner. She almost has a mind of her own. She even requested the editing job. Can you believe that? Edits all our stories. Perhaps you would like to submit one?”

“A computer program? I can’t believe it.”

“Really.”

“How advanced,” Jennifer says, and then, “Well, if that’s the case, did you know that this program is only selecting the stories that my husband submits? He is never turned away.”

“Ah, yes, your last name London? The program is absolutely crazy about your husband’s work. I’ve known about it. I figured, if the program only wants to pick his works, let it.”

“I don’t want to tell you how to run your business, but... I mean, at \$50 a story, don’t you want to pay for other works just to have a little more variety on your Web site?”

Pause.

“Why?”

“My husband’s stories are trash! They used to be great, but this stupid Artificial Intelligence Program has made him lazy. He doesn’t put any effort into his writings. They have sunk to the lowest denominator.”

“Look,” the old man says, “they can’t be any worse than what is normally posted on the Internet. Bohemian. The whole lot of them.”

Jennifer says goodbye and hangs up the phone. She can’t believe what she has heard. She suddenly thinks of something.

“Hey,” she says, “If this program pays fifty dollars a story, then I can’t lose if I submit stories using my husband’s name.”

Jennifer begins to write a few lines and thinks, “No, don’t think. Just write. The program will select it anyway.”

Jennifer makes up a story about a little girl who falls in a hole and goes to China. The narrative is so bad it stinks up the whole house.

“It can’t be any worse than my husband’s,” she thinks.

She uploads it to the Web site.

In less than a few milliseconds, she receives the following:

We are looking for different subject matter. Thank  
you for your kind submission.  
Alice I. Peterson

Jennifer stares at it.

“I wonder how smart that computer program really is? Does she know it’s me and not my husband? I think I’ll do a little experiment here. Let’s see what happens if I submit one of his previously accepted stories.”

Jennifer finds a story about a robot that falls apart over a female droid.

“I really don’t think the program will recognize this story again,” she says. “She will just send us another fifty. I can feel it.”

A reply appears:

Yes, Matthew, not only will I say ‘yes’, but I will  
say ‘YES’ in capital letters! You have made me so  
hungry with this story. I could eat it up and you  
as well!

Yummy,  
Alice I. Peterson

Jennifer stares at the reply.

“I was correct, but this response is mighty squirrelly.”

Jennifer uploads another story as an additional experiment.

Immediately:

Oh, how my heart beats at every syllable you write.

I will gladly publish this horrid tripe—again—my  
love.

Ravenously Yours,

A.I.P.

Jennifer’s eyes pop out. Wait a minute. Horrible tripe? My love? Jennifer suddenly has a flashback as to what has happened in the past. First, accepting every story regardless of content. Second, sending a love letter via the post. Now this?

“This computer program is in love with my husband!”

Jennifer can’t believe she is really jealous now. Her husband is hers, and hers alone!

“Okay,” Jennifer says and gets up. “I think Jennifer has something to say to dear Alice.”

Matthew wakes up and stares at the ceiling. His thoughts are about the color of his robots, their respective grades of oil, and how to cheat at his computer game.

Matthew walks to the study and sees the Internet is still on his computer. He sits down and checks his email. He opens one from Alice.

Matthew...no, don’t send this!

Best Regards,

Alice I. Peterson

Matthew is puzzled. Suddenly, he smells something in the kitchen—roast beef smothered in onions. This is his favorite meal.

“Jennifer,” he says rushing into the kitchen. “The Web site just told me don’t send something. No reference.”

Jennifer is stirring the potatoes.

“Yes, we received an email today from that site that told us there was a glitch in the system and not to send any more stories until further notice,” Jennifer lies.

“What? What will we do for money then? Great. This was too much of a good thing, I suppose.”

“You can always send some of your earlier works to other Web sites or even try and get them published. I’m sure they would love your writings.”

Matthew’s eyes open wide.

“What? My earlier works? What about what I’m writing now? You think I can’t write anymore? Is that what you’re saying to me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did.”

Jennifer stops stirring and looks at her husband.

“You know, to be honest about your current writings,” Jennifer puts two fingers down her throat. “Barf!”

Matthew can’t believe this.

“They are great!” he says and storms back to his study. There is another email from Alice.

Matthew...your...story...has...killed...me...

Best...Regards...

Alice. I. Arrrrggghhhh...

“What the...” Matthew suddenly spies a book near the computer. He glances at the title.

“JENNIFER?! OH NO!”

Jennifer waits for her husband to cool off and come to din-

ner. She waits for ten minutes. He doesn't appear. She decides to go and try and massage his ego. She suddenly sees him slumped over the desk. His head is lying next to a book called YOU WANNA CHEAT ONLINE? CHEAT ON THIS!

Jennifer shakes him, but nothing happens.

"Oh, c'mon," she says, "it's not that bad. It's only temporary. The site will be back up. I just wanted my life back."

Matthew doesn't move.

"Will you please get up? This is childish."

Jennifer suddenly smells something. The roast is burning. There will be no rewrite that night.

# THERE'S A RHINO IN MY GARDEN

*From the Texas Guide Book on Pretty Near Everything to See in Texas:*

*Leander Animal Statuary Zoo, 5 miles east of I-181 on County Rd. Texas' finest stone zoo. Animals of all shapes and sizes set in a picturesque ranch lawn. Open 9-3pm M-F, 10-6pm Saturday, Closed Sunday and any other days owner sees fit. Admission: \$1.00.*

Modine's Garden and Lawn shop sits about half-mile from the town of Leander. The store has been in business for almost forty years or so. It is one of the best shops in Texas, sporting many fine lawn ornaments like longhorn skulls and ceramic squirrels.

Some twenty years back, the founder's son, Billy Modine, scavenged the countryside looking for any new and unusual stuff and finally found it in a circus that was taking down its tent for the very last time. The find? A magnificent circus animal statuary—or so he thought—a disgruntled rhino, a snarling gorilla with its hands held up high, and a happy hippo with its mouth wide open. Billy's dad was less than enthused when he saw them and even more so when his son set them up prominently in front of the store. They were hideously stupid looking.

Like most small towns, it didn't take long for the good people of Leander to take notice and make jokes. "Join the circus. Visit Modine's," they said, or, "It's a real zoo over there. Wear nose-plugs."

After several months of being the brunt of conversation, Billy's father told his son, "Get those stupid animals off this property! This is a respectable lawn and garden shop; not a menagerie."

Billy moved his prize collection to the backyard shed and gave each one a kiss before covering them. He put a bucket of gravel near each of their mouths in case they ever got hungry. Billy hoped his dad wouldn't mind them being there, but he did and Billy was fired—for a few weeks, that is.

It was around this time that a church was built. It was a nice country church with white trim, a small bell-less tower, and a place to bury folks. It was set far off from public viewing, up a hill, across some tracks and in a location where no one could easily find it. Not surprisingly, the earliest congregation was quite small.

Their first and only pastor, Wesley Obermeier, was a fresh seminary graduate when the Church called him to preach. He was nervous, anxious, had sweat on his palms, dropped the Bible, stuttered, stared over the heads of the congregation, never remembered names, and was generally a very poor choice. However, the congregation believed in him and that was all that mattered—and the fact that Wesley didn't command much salary being such a lousy preacher.

Leander experienced a population boom when the Abernathy's moved in and bought 2000 acres of the area's choicest property. They had twelve children, one of them a little curly haired girl with dark brown eyes named Jo Lena. The father, Robert Abernathy, was a stern but loving patriarch with a short, black beard. He was deeply religious and carried in his coat pocket a small black Bible. He greatly believed in disciplining and instructing his children in the ways of the Lord, and he would always tell them, "I don't care what you do in life, but whatever you do, make me and the Lord mighty proud."

The first Sunday in town, Robert drove his family in their old black truck through Leander looking for a church, got lost, went over the tracks, and wandered in the woods for awhile before

finally stumbling onto Leander Community Church. The unexpected find was a sign to Robert. God had led him to this place. Although he slept and snored through most of the service, Robert did wake up in time to bring his family forward to join. The congregation eagerly accepted the twofold increase in membership.

After the service, while everyone was mingling and shaking hands, Jo Lena walked up to the piano and began to hit the black and white keys as hard as she could with both fists. Although the congregation didn't want to say anything since they hoped to give a good first-time impression, Agnes, one of the older members, in her wisdom, slowly made her way up to the front and laid her hands on little Jo Lena. "Thus saith the Lord. This little girl is in desperate need of piano lessons." After inquiring who should teach their daughter, the Abernathy's discovered the only piano teacher in town was none other than the very woman who had voiced the prophecy.

Agnes was a nice, plump, grey-haired widow with small round spectacles at the end of her nose. She loved to wear blue and white floral dresses and kept her hair tied up in a little bun. She had married a railroad worker back in the Depression. When he died, all she had to live on was a small monthly check from the railroad pension fund and some Social Security, but additional money and joy were found from teaching young children how to play the piano.

Jo Lena was shy and couldn't reach the pedals when she started her first lesson, but Agnes encouraged her, "Can't be perfect if you don't try." So Jo Lena stretched her feet and scooted down until she could touch the pedals. Her face and fingers were barely eye-level with the keys.

"Make your Daddy proud," Agnes told her. "You can do it."

The church's piano player eventually got married, moved out of town, and Jo Lena was chosen to be the new piano player long before she was able to play. It was all in God's timing, the congregation would say. Sunday after Sunday, even though she pos-

sessed heartfelt vigor, her fingers would miss notes and play ones that didn't exist. An additional prophecy was delivered several times that one day her little fingers would catch up with her little heart.

Robert Abernathy died in 1983 and was buried in the churchyard. Jo Lena was married in the church to a fine fellow, Danny Carroll. Prior to his death, Robert bequeathed about 200 acres to the couple and had a house built for them. It was a beautiful home with acres of pecan trees, cattle, and a small creek, which ran through the property. Jo had a beautiful piano on her wood panel floor and fondly remembered her Dad's last words, "P-P-Practice."

"I hope to make you proud one day, Daddy," Jo Lena said as she watched his casket lowered into the ground. "I hope to make you mighty proud."

A few years later, Jo Lena's piano playing finally received an anointing and the little church began to shake when she went to playing. It shook so much once that the cemetery headstones in the churchyard began to rock back and forth. The people of Leander said that if this kept up, Robert Abernathy's coffin would soon surface and the church would gain the reputation of literally raising the dead.

Jo Lena, on one particularly mighty fine Sunday morning, played up a storm. The congregation jumped and yelled and cried and stomped on the wooden floors and hit their tambourines against the side of the church. Jo's fingers ran up and down the keyboard. Wesley Obermeier sat still. He was scared to get up to preach thinking he might quench the Spirit if he did so.

"Go sister Jo, woo, woo," he said and pulled his hand like he would a train whistle.

The entire service was nothing but singing and dancing and went on for hours. Finally, everyone started to get tired and hungry for fried chicken and since Wesley refused to say anything, they started to leave, but not before the offering was took up and the pastor stood at the door.

“Don’t forget tonight,” he said to the members who shook his hand as though he were a great man. “I look forward to seeing you tonight.” He said this to all of them but Jo Lena and her husband.

At five o’clock, the church was again filled with the congregation except for Jo Lena and her husband. The pastor smiled and motioned it was time to begin.

“You know,” he said, “that Jo Lena has given her life to this church. We have never honored her and tonight I want to do that.”

Everyone nodded his or her heads.

“I am open to suggestions as to what to give her.”

Everyone nodded his or her heads again. There was a slight pause. Someone one was already snoring.

“Anyone?”

Agnes, again in her wise wisdom, raised her hand.

“Yes, Agnes?”

“Jo Lena has a beautiful garden on her ranch home. We should give her something for her garden.”

The congregation agreed.

“Such as?”

“Lawn squirrels,” Agnes said. “Modine’s Lawn and Garden Shop has some of the nicest ceramic squirrels I’ve seen in a long time. I think we should buy her a pair or two. They would look so nice sitting around her pecan trees. I’ll go and get them if no one else wants to. I was also thinking of going and putting them in her lawn as a surprise. I can make a little banner that says ‘We love you’ to let her know we really do.”

The congregation didn’t say a word.

“I will now take a vote. Anyone in favor of buying Jo Lena two lawn squirrels, and letting Agnes pick them out and putting them in Jo Lena’s yard with a cute little banner, raise your hand.”

The entire congregation raised their hands.

“Meeting adjourned,” Wesley said.

Billy Modine’s father’s died in 1995 and willed the garden

shop to his son. Billy worked the business the best he could do, but eventually got too old and things began to run down a bit. One day, he was moving some plants, tripped over a ceramic squirrel and hurt his back. He was unable to do much after that and had a few hired hands to help, but eventually got tired of even caring for the store anymore and thought about selling it.

Agnes walked in one day when Billy was sitting behind the register. She smelled the mist and dirt and saw the rows of flowers and plants lined the store. She walked over to a little green tarp that had squirrels of many colors lying all over it. There was a small concrete water fountain that shot up tiny squirts of water and a stack of plastic pink flamingos lying on their side.

“May I help you?” Billy asked.

“I am looking for squirrels,” Agnes said.

Agnes picked up a little blue ceramic squirrel with a nut in its little blue hands.

“Need some squirrels for your yard, huh?”

“No, these are gifts.”

“What kind of yard? Maybe I can help you pick out the right color.”

“She lives on a ranch.”

Billy thought for a second.

“A large ranch?”

“About 200 acres.”

“With plenty of fresh air?”

“I suppose.”

Billy stared at her for a moment. After watching her pick up a few more squirrels and put them down, he said, “Forget the squirrels.”

Agnes looked at him.

“I have something better than squirrels.”

Billy motioned for Agnes to come with him out back. She followed him to an old woodshed and noticed a large cover concealing something. It was dirty and dusty and covered with leaves

and dead bugs. Billy went to pull the cover, but before he did, he stopped and turned to Agnes.

“Before I show you what is under here, I would like you to promise me something.”

Agnes didn’t know what to say.

“What’s under here is the finest animal statuary that you will ever see. I’ve always wanted them to have a fine home, one that is large and has plenty of fresh air and sunshine. I told myself years ago that if someone ever came into my shop with a home of that description, I would give these to them for free. You, my fine lady, are that lucky person.”

Upon seeing the size of the cover and thinking they were deer or bears, Agnes said, “I think these would be great. Oh, what a blessing.”

Billy removed the covering and Agnes’ mouth fell open.

“I’m going to give you a bed of the finest gravel, too,” he said. “They need to be fed periodically.”

Agnes stood frozen. She couldn’t believe that these were what she was going to put in Jo Lena’s front yard. She quickly decided to tell Billy that they were not what she thought he was going to show her, but suddenly, another idea popped in her head and dominated her thinking. Who was she, she thought, to judge another? Maybe Jo Lena liked circus animals in her yard—maybe she would rather have a big, fat happy hippo with its mouth open rather than a little blue ceramic squirrel.

“I’ll get the truck,” Agnes said.

Jo Lena woke early the next day and went to the kitchen to make some coffee. It was a beautiful day. The sun was coming up over the hills and the mockingbirds were outside her window merrily singing every song they knew. Jo went to pour a cup of coffee when she noticed strange shadows cast across her wood panel floor. She knew the shapes of the trees and plants, but what were these? She went to the front window and looked outside. Suddenly, she pressed her nose against the pane glass and spilled her coffee all over her window-seat. There, on her front

lawn, with a huge banner that read: “God works in mysterious ways.” His wonders to behold were a disgruntled rhino, a snarling gorilla with its arms help up high and a happy hippo with its mouth wide open.

“Danny, Danny get up,” she screamed running into the bedroom. “We’ve been vandalized.”

“What?” Danny slightly stirred.

“Get up. Get up. You have to see this.”

“Hmm? What?”

Jo Lena hit him over the head with a pillow.

“There’s a rhino in our garden!”

Danny opened his eyes, got up and trudged to the living room. He looked through the window and saw the circus.

“I wonder,” he said.

Together they walked outside and looked at the hideous animals. The banner had a little note scribbled to one corner. It read, “To our piano player and her husband, love, Leander Community Church”.

“Well, I’ll be,” Danny said.

Jo Lena touched one of the statues. She tried to make sense of what the church had done.

“They meant well,” Danny said. “I think.”

Jo Lena didn’t know what to think, but she knew this—those animals were not going to stay in her garden.

“This is some joke. It has to be. We have to give them back.”

“We can’t do that, Jo. I’m sure they thought they were doing the right thing.”

“We can put them in the woods. No one will see them then.”

“They’ll come over one time and see that they aren’t here and get hurt.”

“I don’t care. They have to go.” Jo Lena said. “Bring the truck.”

Wesley was opening up the church when he saw the dust rising from the dirt road. He saw Jo Lena and Danny driving up and noticed the animals in the back—along with the banner that had been fastened with super-glue.

The truck stopped and Wesley walked over and leaned on the window.

“Danny. Jo Lena. What brings you two good people out here?”

“You see these?” Jo Lena asked pointing to the statues. She was about to say more but Wesley interrupted her.

“You know, the church has started to see an increase in membership thanks to you, Jo. Your dad would have been so proud.” Wesley paused to get his thoughts, and then continued. “It’s been along time since we ever had any real money to do a lot of stuff that we have always wanted to do. It seems God answered our prayers for one thing—and that was to get enough money to honor you. Not only did we get an extra fifty, we were blessed to have these animals given to us for free. You are a miracle to us, dear Jo, and now these animals are God’s miracle to you.”

Jo Lena looked at him quietly. Her eyes were beginning to water.

“Like I said...you see these? Danny and I were just driving up to say “thank you”, and then we were going over to the metalworking shop to see if we could get them to make up some really fancy garden bronze pedestals so we display them prominently.”

Wesley smiled.

“You’re very welcome. Jo, I knew you would like them!”

Now the story doesn’t end here. It seemed that as Jo Lena’s piano playing became known to the area churches, they would ask her to play for them every once in a while. Everywhere she played people would gather to hear her and the result would be many would become members of that church.

Soon, she was well known throughout the entire state of Texas. When it came time to give her an honorarium, the churches would buy her another circus animal. After awhile it became a contest to see which church could outdo the other. There was a grinning giraffe, a crazed African elephant, a mean ol’ grizzly, and

even a little blue ceramic squirrel with a nut in its little blue hands.

The shipment of animals finally ceased with the arrival of an enormous eighteen-wheeler carrying a very large covered object. When they removed the tarp, there, before Jo Lena's very round eyes, was the most marvelous, stupendous, colossal, breath-taking, show-stopping Blue Whale any one had ever seen—with a little clown hat.

After that, Tourists began to arrive. At first they would just clog up the main road trying to get a glimpse of the stone animals, but finally Jo Lena decided it might be a good idea to let them come into the ranch—for an admission, that is. A one-dollar admission and all proceeds donated to the Leander Community Church—with the expense of washing and feeding the animals deducted, of course.

The little country church expanded from a one-story structure to a two-story building and then a huge brick complex with a gymnasium and swimming pool. Do you believe this? Well it's true. Wesley Obermeier didn't know what to think at first with all the money, but it turned out he was one master builder instead of a speaker. Agnes told him she wanted a flower and gift shop built next with a bunch of ceramic squirrels so visitors could buy them as souvenirs of the church's humble beginning.

Occasionally the church would have Rhino Day at the ranch with potluck lunch and Jo Lena and her husband would take the children and set them up on the rhino and have their pictures taken. Jo Lena and her husband were never able to have children of their own, but Jo Lena didn't mind. Life, she figured, was rich enough with just a disgruntled rhino, a snarling gorilla with its hands held up high, a happy hippo with its mouth wide open, a country church that loved her, a piano, a stone zoo, a pastor who refused to preach but was one fine master builder, a husband who adored her and a little blue ceramic squirrel with a little blue acorn in its little blue hands.

Robert Abernathy, God rest his soul, would have been mighty proud.

# A MOST AMBITIOUS EXPERIMENT

They were an odd couple, or so their neighbors thought, though not much odder than most folks that lived in the University of Chicago housing. Janet Cleburn and her husband, Richard, lived in her Daddy's house rent-free while he was away on Sabbatical. Janet worked and Richard tinkered.

The old house had a basement, and this was where Richard would spend most of the day banging on metal, welding, twisting electrical wire and making sure pieces were to specified dimensions. He was motivated to build a time machine. He didn't want fame and fortune, he just wanted to build something to perform experiments.

"This is total nonsense," Janet said. "You should really be out looking for a job."

"Maybe I will go some twenty years into the future and find out what the value of our 401K will be?" he said.

"Do you really believe you are inventing a time machine?"

"I can't conduct scientific experiments about the consequences of our present decisions if I don't have the proper equipment."

"Conduct scientific experiments? Like what is the future value of a 401k?"

"I'm building a time machine and that's all there is to it."

"If you continue with all this banging and clanging, I am getting a divorce."

Richard ignored her.

In a few weeks, he rushed up from the basement. His clothes

were torn and dirty. His brown hair unkempt. His shirt was filled with sweat.

“The future is ours for the taking!” he loudly proclaimed.

Janet looked up from reading.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Richard couldn’t believe the reaction.

“You don’t understand. The future is beckoning us.”

“Richard,” Janet said, “if you think you are going to get me to believe you’ve invented a time machine, you have another thing coming.”

Richard smiled.

“I’ll bet you. I’ll bet you five dollars.”

“Fine,” Janet said. “Anyway, it’s eight o’clock. You hungry? Want to go out and eat?”

“No,” Richard said, “I’m going to put a roast in the crock-pot. On slow setting.”

“What?”

“Dinner will be served in a few minutes,” Richard said and then paused. “For me at least.”

He ran to the kitchen, took out a roast, crammed it into the crock-pot without any seasoning—even though there was a ton of spices in the cabinet and he should have used—at a minimum salt and pepper—added a little water, closed the lid, set it, ran to the basement door and said, “Be back in a sec.”

Janet sat still and suddenly was startled to see brilliant flash of light coming from the basement. She got up from her chair and rushed to the basement door.

“Richard?”

No reply.

“Richard?”

Janet cautiously walked down into the basement. There were tubes and electrical tape, twisted wires, and tools lying on tables and the ground. In the corner was an open space and on the floor a round, yellow spot that appeared to be a stain. She stood for a while, trying to think. Had her husband actually invented a time

machine? Had he finally accomplished what men only dreamed and wrote about? Had he put the roast in the crock-pot properly and on the right setting?

Janet walked upstairs and went into the kitchen. The crock-pot was on slow setting. Thank goodness, she thought, and then went upstairs to bed.

Around 3:30 in the morning, the bedroom door was suddenly slammed open. Janet immediately woke up.

“Richard?”

Richard didn’t say a word but fell on the bed face down.

Janet smelled liquor on Richard’s breath.

“You’ve been drinking?”

Richard didn’t stir.

“Richard!”

She shook him.

“Time machine...success,” was all that Richard was able to say and then passed out.

In the morning, not only was Richard holding his head at the breakfast table, but the roast was really well done.

“So where is the machine, now?” Janet demanded taking out a pan to fry up some eggs.

“Murphy’s Bar,” Richard replied.

“I see,” Janet said and went to cooking.

Awkward silence.

“I don’t know how the machine got there, but when they came down into the basement and saw me, I felt it only polite to order something.”

Janet continued to stir the eggs.

“Really. That’s the truth.”

“I can’t believe that,” Janet said. “That’s stupid.”

“I’m not making it up.”

“You really expect me to believe you went into the future, ended up at Murphy’s Bar, and had to get drunk to be polite?” Janet looked out the window and noticed it was beginning to rain.

“It happened.”

Janet finished the eggs and put them on a plate.

“Yeah, sure,” she said. “I think you just lost five dollars.”

Richard’s head hurt and he wanted to lie down, but he was determined to do more experiments.

“This is what I am planning to do today,” he said. “I am going back to Murphy’s, set the machine for a few weeks from now, and come back to tell you what will be playing at our local movie cinema. You’ll believe me then.”

“Fine,” Janet said facetiously. “I can’t wait.”

Richard decided to get up and leave. He felt this was not very well thought out, but it would do for the moment. He opened the door and walked out into the rain.

“Don’t go looking for me. I won’t be around for two weeks,” he called back.

“Fine,” Janet said again, “I don’t care. Do whatever you want.”

It rained throughout the day. Janet sat in the house watching it hit the front window. She wondered when Richard was going to walk in. He never did. When evening arrived, she put a plate of food in the oven and set it for warm. She kept the front porch light on.

In the morning, Richard’s side of the bed was untouched and the food was still in the oven. Janet, at first, was worried, but she quickly dismissed it. Richard was not going to convince her by staying away that he had invented a time machine.

The weeks passed, and the telephone rang one Sunday afternoon. Janet answered it. It was Richard.

“Hello?”

“The machine moves,” he said.

“Where are you?”

“In Purdue,” he said, “in a local pub.”

“What? Drunk again?”

“No, I am not drunk,” Richard said. “I didn’t order anything—yet. Anyway, the machine moves a distance that is in direct proportion to the time moved in the future.”

"I'm not believing this," Janet said.

"Neither did I—at first," Richard said. "But I think I have figured it out. There is a wave in the time continuum that radiates from the point of travel. This wave continues to migrate outward until you stop some distance from where you started out."

Janet clenched the phone.

"Janet?"

"Yes?"

"Can you come and get me?"

Janet was not pleased. Richard was really getting on her nerves. What would he tell her when she got there? The name of the movie playing at the local cinema?

Four hours later, Janet drove into Purdue and found the pub. She couldn't believe it. Richard was standing on the side with an empty beer mug.

"Give me a little kiss, sugar-pie," he said.

Janet got out and put him in the back seat.

"Where's your machine?"

Richard looked at her with a silly grin.

"What machine?"

Janet slammed the door and drove home madder than a wet hen.

"I think you have too much time on your hands," she said. "I want you to get a job. I want you to go out and find something to do. Living in Daddy's house without having to pay rent has made you a big, fat lazy drunk."

Richard grabbed her arm. Janet swerved slightly.

"Hey!"

"Make me dinner!" Richard said. "I'm starved."

With those words, Richard rolled his eyes upward and passed out in the back seat. When Janet arrived, she didn't bother taking him out.

"You've made your bed, sleep in it."

In the morning, Janet prepared to go to work. She went outside and was surprised to see the car was gone.

“He better come home with a job,” she thought.

Richard didn't come home that night. Janet waited again, but he never made it to bed. She tossed and turned worrying again. She didn't want to think it, but she had to. What if her husband was an alcoholic? What if this silly time machine was just an excuse to be out of the house for days drinking? Was she that stupid?

The police found the car several days after Janet filed a missing person report. It was located at the Purdue pub. The owner was not sure, but he thought he might have seen a man of Richard's description. He had come into the bar, bought a beer and then went into the back room. When the owner had protested that area was off limits, he saw a brilliant flash of light and then nothing. He never saw the man again.

Janet dismissed this report. It was all fabricated. In the back room, they found a strobe light covered with blue cellophane. It was able to emit a momentary flash. They also found the alley window opened.

Years passed and Janet had her marriage annulled. She finally met a nice man who loved her greatly and who received her Daddy's highest blessing. He was an associate professor at the university and soon would receive his Ph.D.

Janet went through the years happily, having children, watching them grow, and finally leave the nest. For retirement, her husband surprised her with a trip to Europe.

Their first stop was London. When they arrived, Janet told her husband to rest while she went out to shop.

Once outside, Janet walked up a block and stopped to look through a store window. Suddenly, she jumped back. The reflection in the glass. It couldn't be! It was Richard!

Janet turned around.

“Welcome to London,” he said. “That machine really can travel. Janet, you have aged graciously.”

“Richard, you haven't aged! That machine? You were telling the truth. It really was a time machine.”

“Yes, Janet,” he said. “It worked.”

“But you never came back me,” she said.

“Well,” he said, “I started to come back, but I decided to see what would happen if I didn’t see you again. When you met that man and were so happy, I couldn’t bring myself to spoil it.”

“But I wouldn’t have ever known my husband if you had come back.”

“Does it matter?” he said. “You’ve gone through life happy. You did so well. Your children are beautiful. Your husband nice.”

Janet stared and started to cry.

“And you? What are you doing now?”

“I like London,” he said. “I invested well knowing the future. I like this time, and I like being young in it. Maybe now I will settle down again and take life serious. I’m tired of time travel and doing experiments and such. I’ve done a lot, you know.”

“I’ve missed you several times during the years.”

Richard walked over and kissed her on the cheek and wiped her tears with his hands.

“You know, I have one last and final experiment.”

“What is that?” she asked.

“Life with you,” he said. “Watching you has made me realize what I have really missed.”

Richard smiled, turned and walked away. His most ambitious experiment was beginning.

# OLD TIMER

She was recluse and an ugly one at that, but in her heyday, she was a star. A glamour Queen. No one missed her films. She was in every column. She couldn't walk the streets without being mauled by autograph hungry hounds. There she was—Lana Lawn—Queen of the Silents. Marvelous, absolutely marvelous. The movies began to speak and she faded quickly into obscurity, but not until she paid hefty money to create a well-known studio to take advantage of those who could talk and talk well. Lana Lawn—Queen of the Silents—Mogul of the studio—and now, a recluse and forgotten, except for a monthly check—and a nice one at that—from the studio she had founded.

In all of this she received perhaps one or two letters from fans every ten years. She had seen many when she retired, but they were reduced to a trickle when newer generations arose. It had been almost five years since her last fan mail, but one day a letter arrived from a young university student who had, out of sheer despair, decided to pick her for a school film class term paper. He had watched one silent film that she had made and then made a decision, for extra credit, to write her a letter in hopes that he would obtain a reply that he could include in his report.

Lana opened the envelope slowly. No one ever wrote. Who was this? Timothy Dwight III?

Dearest Lana Lawn,  
I watched your movie. I was deeply moved. You  
were great.  
Sincerely,  
Timothy Dwight III

Lana had never written a reply to any of her fans during the height of her career. Her staff had done all that for her. She didn't have time and didn't care to correspond with them anyway. However, as time moved on, and as the mail grew scarce, Lana began to change her mind and every once in a while she would write back a little note saying, "thanks" and sign her name. The past few posts, she had taken the time to write several long letters, talking about the weather and describing in great detail how hot it was and the unexpected rain that had come down one afternoon just before she was going to take her afternoon nap. She even included the weather report from her morning paper. The very last missive she received, she went into great detail about a fishing trip where they gutted the fish.

But for Timothy Dwight III, she was going to do something different. This time she was going to do something that would have been any young man's ambition during her golden years. She was going to sit down and write an invitation to dinner and when he came over, she was going to kiss him.

"The desire of his life," she thought.

Timothy was having difficulty trying to fill in his paper when he received Lana's invitation. He couldn't believe it. Here was an old movie star—in the flesh—asking him to dine with her.

"Wow!" he said.

At first his roommates didn't seem to care that he was going to dinner at some old lady's house, but after Timothy explained to them in great detail who Lana Lawn was and showed her film and what others had written about her during that time, all his roommates could say was:

"Wow! Lana Lawn—and in the flesh."

Lana Lawn's stately mansion stood on a hill overlooking many posh, past paradises. The great iron gates were filled with rust and would creak loudly when they were opened. Timothy Dwight III became a little nervous when he heard this and saw the grand home sitting silently, awaiting his arrival. He had only dreamed

of being in the home of a movie star. He never expected an invitation—even from a has-been like Lana Lawn.

After ringing the doorbell he waited for what seemed like forever, as he heard a door from inside open and then shut, and soft footsteps walking ever so slowly. There was one shuffling step at a time—as though the action was difficult and laborious; until, as Timothy listened, the steps became quicker and swifter and suddenly, the door flew open and there before Timothy Dwight III's eyes was a ravishing blonde wearing quite conservative clothing.

"Hello," she said, "you must be Timmy. I am Lana Lawn."

"Lana Lawn?"

"Surprised? You were expecting someone else? I hope not," this woman said. "Please come in."

Timothy Dwight III's heart began to beat rapidly. This wasn't Lana Lawn. Lana Lawn was ninety-seven years old. This bombshell was not much older than he was.

"Are you...are you related to Lana Lawn?" Timothy asked. Upon this, the woman laughed and chided him.

"Related? Don't make me laugh so. Just who do you think I am?"

"Er..."

"Do you do this with all your dates?" she asked. "Forget who they are the moment you take them out?"

"No," Timothy said. "It's just that I was expecting...well...I was expecting...and I don't mean that I am against plastic surgery or anything like that...but I was expecting to meet someone much older...and I do mean much, much older than me."

"You are so sweet," she said.

"You should still be in the movies."

"Let's sit down," she said, "and you can flatter me some more. I should have invited my fans over for dinner years earlier."

She took Timothy's arm and walked him to the dining room. It was during this time that they moved past a full-length mirror.

Lana's eyes caught a slight glimpse of another person in the room besides Timothy Dwight III and she suddenly jumped.

"Oh," she said, "oh...oh."

"What?"

Lana looked around the room. There was no one there.

"I saw someone. Another woman."

Timothy looked around. He saw nothing.

"I am imagining things," Lana said, "Ghosts from the past, I suppose."

She put her hand to her breast, breathed heavily and then laughed.

"Oh, the joys of old age," she said and then laughed again. "Shall we continue our stroll to the dining room?"

Timothy nodded and then began to think this woman quite odd.

He tried to avert staring at her, but was unable. This was a true goddess—someone you would welcome as a work of art in your finest museum.

Once they reached the dining room, Timothy's eyes temporarily feasted on an elegant setting, the finest china, silver and crystal, orchids in decorative pots, champagne, caviar, the best meats, rich, tantalizing deserts, frozen berries in solid gold platters, all the trappings of the rich and then some. Lana took his arm and led him to a chair next to hers at the far end of the table.

"Please sit down," she said, "I had to put something together quickly before the cook left. This is her half day, I'm afraid."

Lana sat down and daintily put a silk napkin in her lap. The light from the setting sun basked her face in a soft glow as though she was not really there. She seemed a holograph, a character from a movie from her past.

She leaned towards Timothy.

"I let the maid go as well. I want this evening to be ours and ours alone. Nothing must disturb that."

She touched his hand and Timothy immediately grew weak.

"I feel faint," Timothy said.

“Faint? Overwhelmed, perhaps? I am so happy. I didn’t think I could still elicit such response from my fans. Oh thank you, Timothy, you are so kind.”

Timothy couldn’t think. His heart was sinking fast. Who was he—Timothy Dwight III—to be sitting next to Lana Lawn? His mouth grew dry.

“Er...water.”

“Water? No, champagne.”

Timothy’s vision began to blur. He couldn’t think. This wasn’t happening. It was not real. It was an illusion. It had to be. Lana Lawn was ninety-seven years old. There was a trick with the lighting. This was some type of Hollywood magic.

“What’s wrong?” Lana asked. “You are faint, aren’t you. Oh, please don’t. I can’t kiss you if you faint.”

“Kiss me?”

“You are thinking of my kiss, aren’t you?” she said. “Of course you are. Don’t worry Timothy Dwight III, I have made a very firm commitment to kiss you before this evening is over.”

Upon these words, Timothy’s eyes rolled upward and his limp body collapsed to the marble floor.

“Oh dear,” Lana said, “I remember this happening many years ago, but I did not believe it would still occur. He must have such a marvelous imagination to think of me in this way.”

Lana arose and went to the phone to call for help. In less than five minutes, the local medics arrived to administer first aid. They were surprised to see this beautiful woman greet them at the door, but they didn’t give it much thought as they went about their business to revive Timothy Dwight III. As Timothy began to stir, they turned to Lana Lawn.

“Are you her new nurse?” the men asked.

“Nurse? Whose nurse?”

“Lana Lawn’s nurse?”

“I am Lana Lawn.”

Both medics laughed.

“You should be in show business.”

Lana looked at them in amazement. What on earth were they talking about?

“I am a little too old for show business,” she said.

The men laughed again.

“Stop it. You’re killing us.”

Lana Lawn didn’t understand.

“Is he going to be alright?”

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” the men said. “He just needs some fresh air.”

“Oh dear, and I wanted this to be such a romantic dinner.”

“Lana Lawn let’s you have these elaborate meals on her premise? Must be nice.”

“I am Lana Lawn.”

Both men laughed again.

“Lady, from the looks of you there is absolutely nothing wrong, but I suggest you see a psychiatrist,” one man said.

“Yeah, and I wouldn’t tell Mrs. Lawn about your delusion. You might lose your job,” his partner added.

“I AM LANA LAWN!”

“Lady, you are not Lana Lawn.”

Timothy Dwight III began to stir and open his eyes. Lana bent down beside him.

“Timmy, please tell these men who I am. Tell them that I am Lana Lawn.”

“You are...” Timothy said, “er...er...”

Timothy rolled his eyes upward.

“No, Timothy. Don’t faint on me again,” Lana said and grabbed his arms to try to keep him from falling over, but to no avail.

“I think he needs some air.”

The men picked Timothy up and took him outside to the gardens.

Lana sadly looked at the dining room where an untouched meal grew cold. There was, perhaps, some slight spark of romantic notions in her asking Timothy over to dinner—no, not per-

haps, there most definitely was—but it was a notion nonetheless as she realized ninety-seven years old was not the time for make-believe.

“How could he possibly faint?” she thought. “Have I really grown that ugly?”

Lana walked over to the 1920’s mirror.

“Mirror, mirror on the wall,” she said looking into its glass. Suddenly she screamed and jumped and the woman in the mirror jumped too.

“What?” she said. “No, this can’t be.”

Lana put her hands up to her face and felt it. The wrinkles were gone. She looked at her hands and gasped. They were young and smooth.

“This is not possible. I am imagining this. One of my medications must be bad.”

Noticing the men still outside, Lana ran out and confronted them.

“Do I look old?”

“Boy, you really milk this act for all its worth, don’t you,” one of the men said.

“Please,” she said. “The mirror, it’s lying! It’s saying that I’m young, but I am not young. I am ninety-seven years old, but my mind is going. I see a smooth hand. Do you see a smooth hand?”

Lana held up her hand and the men looked at it.

“It’s smooth.”

“And my face? Is it smooth or wrinkled?”

“Yes,” they said.

“Am I ugly?” she boldly asked.

“You really have a bad self-image,” one of the men said.

“No, really. Please, I think I’m losing my mind.”

“You’re gorgeous,” the men said. “Whoever told you that you were ugly?”

Lana thanked the men and began to walk back to her house. When she did, she noticed that she was really walking, not hobbling. She lifted her skirts and saw beautiful, silky smooth legs

with no varicose veins. Right before she reached the door she suddenly reached up and touched her hair. She turned to the men again.

“Is it gray,” she said pointing to her hair.

“Gray?” the men asked. “You are as natural a blonde as they come.”

“Oh, you are both so kind,” she said. “You know, I think am going to come over there right now and give you both a big kiss.”

Upon hearing this, both men’s eyes rolled upward and their limp bodies collapsed to the ground.

# THE LOST NOVEL OF HORATIO ALGER

Thomas sat down on an oversized, dark brown leather chair facing an old equally dark brown wooden desk. The editor looked at Thomas.

“I don’t wish to waste your time,” he said, “but I want to say up front that this is one of the best books I have read in a long time. I really want to publish it.”

Thomas’s eyes opened wide.

“It reads like a Horatio Alger dime novel around the turn of the century. Have you ever heard of him?”

Thomas sat still. His mother had passed down to Thomas one of five copies (the others presumably lost) of a Horatio Alger dime novel that had never been mass-produced nor documented in literary magazines. His mother thought the book would be worth something in the future, but Thomas didn’t want to wait until then. He decided to plagiarize the manuscript.

“He wrote children’s stories.”

Thomas didn’t say a word.

“The text is good. Very good. I believe it to be the next bestseller—not only in the USA but also worldwide. I very much want to publish this with your kind permission.”

Thomas couldn’t believe it. He had hit the big time.

“We are going to start with around a million copies...”

Thomas grabbed hold of the desk for support.

“...and sell them for a dime each.”

Thomas let go of the desk.

“A dime?”

“It will be a novelty. The return of Horatio Alger, Jr. You will be famous.”

“A dime?”

“What child wouldn’t fork over a dime to read this? What adult for that matter? We’ll sell millions.”

Thomas looked around the room. Was there a hidden camera?

“We will give you a 20 percent royalty. That is . . . why . . . that is two cents a book. Think about it!”

“Okay, whatever you want.” Thomas put his hands to his mouth. He couldn’t believe he had said that. A million copies. A million copies at two cents apiece. Let’s see . . . carry the zeros . . . er . . . that was . . . er . . . two thousand dollars.

“Where do I sign?”

“I’ll have my secretary make up the contract.”

“I want to be on talk shows,” Thomas barely said. “How much do you think they will pay?”

“A penny for your thoughts,” the editor said. “Now if you please, I want to make this my personal project. I need to get started right away.”

“Okay, have a good day.”

Thomas went home not knowing what to expect. The next few months were total agony. He was anxious to see if the publisher could even sell a million copies. At first, none of the books sold. Too many people were suspicious that a book that cost a dime would also read like a book that cost a dime. Finally, a royalty check arrived. Thomas eagerly opened the envelope and out fell a two-cent check. Thomas stared at the amount. His rent was due. He then noticed the time was almost six. Thomas filled out the deposit slip and endorsed the check. He quickly got into his car and hurried off to the bank.

The teller stared at him in disbelief.

“Two cents?”

“I want to get my two cents in, if you don’t mind.” Thomas was not going to let the small amount get to him. “I will be back with many more.”

Thomas received many royalty checks in the ensuing months—one cent, three cents, one-half cent, ten cents. He was evicted for not being able to pay his rent and began to live out of his car. He parked his car close to a pay phone in case his publisher wanted to get to him.

One day, while he was eating beans out of a can, Thomas heard the phone. He unbuckled his seat belt, got out and answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“Thomas? I need to see you, and as quickly as possible.”

“I’ll be right down.”

While walking to the publisher, Thomas thought of what would have happened if the book had sold for at least five dollars. He would probably still be in his apartment and looking forward to being on a talk show instead of looking forward to a warm meal.

The editor didn’t take his hands when he walked into the office. Thomas hadn’t shaved in a few days and he stank to high heaven.

“Please sit down.”

“Spare a dime?”

“Listen, Thomas, I have received four letters. All of them state the book is a fraud. They want a share of the royalties. Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No.”

The editor pulled out a small book.

“You see this?”

Thomas nodded.

“It’s a book.”

Thomas didn’t say a word.

“A very old book. See the title? See the author?”

Thomas stared.

“Now we have a dilemma,” the editor said. “Apparently, Horatio Alger put out a book that no one knew about. He must have made a few copies, given them away, and never had them

published. I wonder why? If you look at the date, you can see why. He died before he could make any more. I wonder just how many of these books he initially printed?"

Thomas' stomach growled.

"Five?"

The editor counted the letters in front of him. One...two...three... one package with a letter. Four letters.

Thomas suddenly spotted a Danish on the editor's desk.

"Let's see, what can we do about this? I know—Horatio Alger never wrote your book. He may have thought he had before he died, but he was sadly deluded. The world never knew he wrote it. Only these four souls."

The editor paced across his office.

"They all want a piece of the pie."

"A la mode?"

"No, your two cents divided five ways."

Thomas didn't know what to say.

"Well? Is it a good idea or what?" the editor asked.

"May I have your Danish?"

As the months wore on, Thomas lost interest in depositing the checks. He stopped going to the shelter to pick up his mail. He stopped answering the phone. He regretted the decision to deceive the world. He hated his publisher. He hated the four people who he had never met. He hated the repossessions.

"My car. My beautiful car."

Thomas pulled his tattered coat closer to his body as the rain pelted his face. Here he was—Thomas E. Harding III—homeless, hopeless, helpless and wet.

This is a horrible life, he thought. This is stupid.

The only comfort he received was hoping that the other four were just as worse off as he was—miserable, mournful, morose, moronic, and wet.

Thomas walked as though led by an unseen force. He walked on and on until he came to his final destination—a headstone.

The ghost of Horatio Alger, Jr. had brought him here. He knew it.

He reached into his coat and pulled out the book. He held it briefly. He didn't want to let go, but he knew he had to do the right thing.

"Take your book, Horatio Alger, Jr.," Thomas cried out, "and give me back my life!"

Thomas placed the book on the tombstone and walked away. He felt a hand on his shoulder—more of an encouraging pat, but he didn't look back. Something inside of him told him that his life was going to change for the better.

The wind continued to blow that night and the rain came down a little harder than usual for that part of the county, but by morning, the storm had subsided. The sun came up and a ray of light hit the grave of Horatio Alger, Jr. There, on the tombstone, was not one book, but five, and, somewhere, five redeemed souls.

# THE YOUNG COUPLES TRIP TO THE ORIENT

(or how to write a silly story)

It was their first trip abroad. They were not rich. The trip to Korea was on a shoestring budget, but before they finally settled down to raise a family, Joe and Julie Jones decided it would all be worth it to take a long trip overseas to an exotic Asian country.

Landing at the airport and going through customs took perhaps ten minutes. Joe told Julie to wait at the curb and he would go and find out how to get a bus to go to the youth hostel. Julie watched him disappear into a building and sat down on a beautiful yellow bench watching over their only suitcase.

Five minutes passed and Julie heard a car honking. When she looked up, Joe sat behind the wheel of a rather expensive looking car, motioning her to get the bags and hop on in. Julie couldn't believe this. There was no way they could afford to rent an expensive car like this. Joe didn't say a word as they drove away.

"The Youth Hostel is not too far from the airport," Julie said.

"Well, point it out when you see it. I have to concentrate on my driving."

Joe veered in and out of traffic.

"There! There it is!" Julie said.

Joe drove past the youth hostel and up the hill to a rather expensive hotel to Julie's surprise.

The doorman came and helped them out and Joe gave him the equivalent of \$20. Julie gasped.

“I have something to tell you.” Joe said. “Let me check in, first.”

Julie sat on a plush couch while she watched her husband pull out two passports and filled out a registration form. A few minutes later, he came over with a room key and told her he would tell her something important in the elevator.

Julie waited, but the elevator doors opened before Joe could say anything. When Joe unlocked their hotel suite, Julie gasped again.

The room was gorgeous. A huge living room. Two rooms. A bathroom the size of the master bedroom.

“Joe?” Julie said.

“Please sit down, honey.” Joe said. “I think you should know something.”

Please pick the right response:

1. I'm from Mars.
2. I hot-wired the car and used a stolen credit card for this room.
3. I spent all our money; we need to go home
4. I love you.
5. I'm a millionaire, have been from day one.
6. My head hurts.
7. I've been traveling with you from the states and I didn't catch your name.

Julie didn't know what to say. Jim walked over to the mini-bar and opened it. He pulled out several small bottles of strong drink and poured them into small crystal glasses.

“This isn't the end of the world, you know.”

Julie took the glass from Jim's hand and quickly downed the strong drink.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise and our little secret."

Julie began to cry.

"Okay! Okay! You wanted to surprise me? Well, let me surprise you! I have something to tell you!" Julie screamed.

Please pick the appropriate response:

1. I'm from Mars, too!
2. I called the police!!
3. I'm trying to think but nothing is happening!!!
4. I'm a billionaire!!!!
5. You are not my husband!!!!!
6. I love you, too!!!!!!
7. I have a stolen credit card, too! I bought our airline tickets with it!!!!!!

Jim looked around the room. He felt strange.

"I think I'm going to faint."

"Well, I hope you liked that surprise," Julie said.

Jim sat down and breathed heavily.

"Well...this sure is a fine mess we got ourselves into!"

Julie walked over and sat next to Jim. She rubbed his back. Jim turned to Julie and stared deep into her eyes.

"Wanna go to that youth hostel—even now?" he said.

"You think we have the money?" Julie said. "After you already paid up front for this room in cash?"

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Jim went and answered it.

It was a bellboy with a message. Jim pulled out another \$50 and handed it to him.

"What does the message say?" Julie asked.

“It says: ‘Open up! Police!’”

Suddenly, a canister of tear-gas broke through the hotel room’s windows.

“This is the police, come out with your hands up!”

Julie pulled out a death-ray and fired a hole through the wall. Jim ran over and opened his suitcase to grab his death-ray gun. A thousand stolen credit cards came tumbling out.

“We’ve let the human emotions take over our brains. We are ruining our mission,” Jim said.

“I know. My love for you is not allowing me to think,” Julie said.

“And my head is still hurting!” Jim said firing another shot. “But we are not going back home until we have finished our mission!”

Voices outside were heard through the ray blasted holes.

“Stop shooting! Julie Jones is in there! America’s richest woman! She’s a billionaire!”

### Questions Worth Pondering:

1. Did Julie gasp initially because she had trouble breathing in the Earth’s atmosphere?
2. Why were Julie and Jim surprised if they were on the same mission? Did the human emotion of love affect their memory?
3. Why did Julie call the police? Did she think the police were going to give them free tickets to the policeman ball?
4. What significance is there for the bench at the airport being yellow? Why not red?
5. Did Jim fire his death-ray gun too soon before he realized that Julie had gotten in the way and was disintegrated?

# FLUFFY RABBIT'S MOST MEMORABLE HEARTS GAME

It was a most marvelous stroke of computer technology. Having the computers at work being able to communicate with each other so that each man could play a game with another without leaving their desks. And the game of the hour was none other than HEARTS!

Each man took on a different playing alias. Jim became Arf. Joe became Barf. Jerry became Jerry (he didn't want any part of the alias nonsense) and Mike became the illustrious and marvelous Fluffy Rabbit. When he chose the name there was a hush in the room. All was quiet. Everyone knew that a dignified player had suddenly entered into Mike's body and possessed the most delightful and pleasant Heart skills of any known human.

"You'll never live it down," Mike...er... Fluffy Rabbit said, "to be beat by someone named Fluffy Rabbit."

Jerry had only this to say:

"Deal!"

Fluffy Rabbit started the game since he was the network monitor. The hands were dealt and three cards were to be passed to one player. The object of the game was simple. The first person to 100 points ended the game and the one with the least amount of points was the winner.

"I am always the champion of the day and the year," Fluffy said.

Jerry grunted. Fluffy Rabbit was a cheat—he just knew it. Fluffy had won 1,000 games in the past year to his trifle 3. He

was determined to expose him, but he didn't know exactly how to do it.

Fluffy passed the Queen of Spades, the two of Clubs and the two of Hearts to Jerry.

Jerry wasn't pleased.

"On my list," Jerry said.

Arf and Barf didn't say anything. They had become a bunch of stupid card playing dogs. They would just throw anything out, never know what was going on, who was winning or what time it was to even quit. They were—in the words of Fluffy Rabbit—expendable—all of them!

Jerry had to start the game by throwing out the two of Clubs.

Fluffy took it with the Ace of Clubs.

Arf and Barf threw out a club without even considering future consequences.

Fluffy then threw out the two of Spades. Arf threw out the King of Spades. Barf threw out the three of Spades. Jerry should have thrown the Queen of Spades out to set Arf back thirteen points, but his mouse slipped and he threw out a four instead.

"My mouse slipped," he protested.

Fluffy threw out a five of Spades.

"Where's the Queen?" Fluffy said.

Jerry only had the Queen of Spades. He threw it out and grunted.

"You'll pay," he said.

Fluffy threw out the six of Spades.

Jerry looked at his screen. There was ANOTHER Queen of Spades! He was sure that he had already thrown it out once.

He threw this Queen of Spades out and was set another thirteen points.

Another Queen of Spades appeared and Jerry threw that out too.

"I think someone is cheating," he said.

Arf and Barf didn't say a word.

Jerry threw out yet another spade even though all the spades were exhausted, and Fluffy Rabbit put a Heart on it.

“Feed the monkey,” Fluffy said.

“Have any diamonds?” Barf asked Arf.

“No talking among yourselves,” Jerry said.

After the second hand, Jerry was the big loser with 196 points and Fluffy Rabbit had won yet again! Fluffy started to clap and laugh with glee.

“Nyah, nyah,” Fluffy said. “I am the Heart Pro!”

Jerry stood up.

“I think you have a cheat program. It’s impossible to lose after the second hand.”

“I’m Fluffy Rabbit. Nobody beats the great Fluffy!”

“Change desks!” Jerry said.

“Why?” Fluffy started getting sweat beads on his forehead.

“I’m your boss, and I demand you switch computers!”

Fluffy got up and sat in Jerry’s desk.

“Now I am the dealer,” Jerry said.

Before Jerry could start the game, the game immediately started.

“Hey!” Jerry said. “I can only start the game. No one else.”

He noticed who had dealt—Fluffy Rabbit! He also noticed the cards dealt to him—thirteen Queen of Spades!

“That’s it,” he said. “This is the last game I ever play with you! You are the biggest cheat I have ever known!”

At that moment, one of the roof tiles fell down and hit Jerry on the head.

“Cuckoo,” he said and then clapped his hands.

“Play Hearts? With thirteen Queens? Of course. Brilliant strategy.”

Jerry sat down and threw out one Queen after another to Arf and Barf’s two of Spades and Fluffy’s three of no-trump.

Jerry was having a marvelous time. He was going to lose on the VERY FIRST HAND, but he didn’t care. He hummed a little song to himself.

“Let’s play all day,” he said. “Forget work.”

He laughed and rubbed his head.

This was the only to amuse yourselves while working overseas in a strange country—being hit on the head with a roof tile everyday and losing to a Heart cheating coworker with a ridiculous name.

“Sheer paradise,” Jerry said.

Fluffy Rabbit couldn’t agree more.

# LITTLE ARFIE

“Beth, you’ve come just in time. I want you to meet someone.” Mrs. Dotsz took her into the house full of party guests. “There he is.”

The man turned around and extended his hand.

Beth relaxed. It wasn’t her husband. Thank goodness!

“You having problems getting pregnant?”

“Well...”

“Don’t blush. Have a drink.”

Before she could protest, he shoved a glass into her hand.

Beth politely took a sip.

“Magic elixir.”

“What?”

“You drink this, you become pregnant.”

Beth stared at the man.

“Where’s your husband?”

“He’s home with our dog,” she said. “He hates parties.”

“What’s your mutt’s name?”

“Little Arfie.”

Little Arfie kept his nose to the window. His mother had gone away and he wanted her to see him when she came back. His Daddy was a real dud. He was lying in the couch watching television and not paying him the least attention. Little Arfie had seen his mother walking up the street and suddenly started to scratch at the windowpane.

“What is it?” Daddy asked. “You wanna go for a walk?”

Little Arfie immediately ran to the door.

“Okay,” Daddy said.

One hour later, Daddy was still lying on the couch. Little

Arfie was so-o-o-o happy—NOT! He looked up and noticed the door handle. He jumped up and grabbed it with his teeth. The door suddenly opened. Little Arfie ran outside.

“Wait a minute! Little Arfie! Come back!” Daddy said.

Little Arfie ran down the street yelping and barking up a storm. He let out his tongue and bared all his teeth. He was going to crash Edna’s party and eat all her food!

“Become pregnant?” Beth asked.

“Sip it. The genes work when you sip it.”

The door flew open and there was little Arfie. He was famished. Where’s the chow? He quickly ran over to where the dining room table was and grabbed the edge of the tablecloth. He began to pull at it with all his might. The tablecloth and food slowly inched it way to the floor.

Edna Dotz had worked for hours on such a lovely white frosted cake. After meticulously placing the cake on a silver serving dish, carefully ensuring not one crumb was out of place, and making absolutely one hundred percent sure that the “Happy Birthday” lettering was precisely centered, she gently picked up the dish.

Little Arfie moved some lime-green, fruit mold near the door. He wanted some cake. And he wanted it RIGHT NOW!

Edna walked out of the kitchen. Suddenly, her foot slipped on the mold and the cake went up into the air, hit the ceiling and then landed on top of her head. Little Arfie jumped for her throat. It was his party now!

Edna screamed.

The guests suddenly stopped what they were doing and noticed the commotion. They saw a little canine with a mouth full of white frosting and Edna lying faint on the floor.

“It’s a mad dog,” someone screamed.

Suddenly, pandemonium broke loose. Everyone ran out of the house. Little Arfie wanted some pie. One of the guests had some pie, and Little Arfie wanted it. He ran outside.

Meanwhile, old fuddy duddy Daddy lay on the couch snoring

away. The evening was young, but he was already in snoozy-by land. The door suddenly threw open. It was Beth. She was in a state of panic.

“Little...Arfie....poo...” she said.

Daddy slowly opened his eyes.

“Little Arfie? Did you find him?”

The lights suddenly went out. Little Arfie had shut the main generators down at the main electrical plant. He didn't want anyone to recognize him.

“They'll throw us in jail,” Beth said. “Get up! We have to get out of here.”

“Throw us in jail? Just because our dog ran outside?” Daddy was confused.

“He'll come home before too long, and they'll follow him here.”

Daddy was really confused.

“What are you talking about?”

Beth suddenly blurted out:

“He failed obedience school! I lied. I told you he had passed. He didn't. He was the worst dog in the whole class.”

Daddy suddenly sat up.

“They'll murder us!”

Daddy immediately ran outside.

“Little Arfie! Little Arfie! Waaa, Waaaaa,” he cried.

Beth fell on the couch and began to weep bitterly.

“Oh, the canininity!”

At that moment, Little Arfie made his way home and into an open bedroom window. He immediately began to rip up some old family heirloom pillows.

“Little Arfie? Little Arfie?” Beth said, “Is that you? Did you come back?”

Beth got up and ran into her bedroom. She let out a scream. The entire place was chewed up!

“Little Arfie!!! What are you doing!!!?”

Little Arfie suddenly bared his teeth. A piece of cloth hung off one of his molars.

“Little Arfie?” Beth said and slowly started to walk out of the room.

Little Arfie let out a bark and fierce growl. He stared at Beth with great distrust and rage.

The doorbell rang.

Beth went to answer the door and found the man from the party on her doorstep.

“May I come in?” he said. “I would like to give you some further instructions for using the magic elixir.”

Beth turned this way and that.

“Uh...I don't think this is a good time...”

The man came in anyway.

Little Arfie ran into the living room. He saw the man. He immediately hated him with all his little doggie heart. He let out a bark.

“Quiet, Little Arfie.” Beth said.

At that very moment, Daddy came back home, also very much out of breath, and saw Little Arfie in the house.

“So there you are.” he said.

Little Arfie jumped into the air and attacked the stranger.

“No! Little Arfie! No!” Beth screamed.

The man tried to fend off the attack but suddenly lost his balance and fell backwards into Daddy who then fell backwards and hit his head against the wall.

“Cuckoo!” Daddy said and suddenly fell face down on top of Little Arfie.

SPLAT!

“Joe (Daddy's real name), are you all right?”

Joe shook his head and looked up at his wife. She had been so ugly and overweight, but, suddenly, she was beautiful. She was the most beautiful girl in the world.

“Wow!” he said. “Where did you come from?”

“I'm right here,” Beth said.

Joe grabbed her.

“Then I want you here,” he said and pulled her down to give her a kiss.

“I can’t believe it!” the stranger suddenly said. “The magic elixir works! It really works! I’m going to be rich!”

The man ran out of the house whooping and hollering into the night.

Nine months later, Beth had her first baby. It was a beautiful baby boy.

“What shall we name him?” Joe asked her.

“Anything but Little Arfie,” Beth said.

## WAXING MOMENTS

My wife began to hit a dust rag against the furniture. Whack.

“Your brother thinks he’s somebody just because he went to a top-notch university,” I said.

Whack. Whack. Whack.

“Be careful of the furniture,” I said.

Martha smirked at this.

“Why? You aren’t the one dusting,” she said.

I didn’t appreciate this remark.

“You love your wood, it’ll love you back.”

My wife hit the television set.

“Feel better?” she said.

I could feel my neck becoming red. This conversation occurred every time her brother came to dinner and she went to cleaning.

“You always hated our furniture,” I said.

She looked at me like I had gone off the deep end.

“Will you please move your feet off the coffee table?”

At six o’clock, the doorbell rang. I refused to answer it.

“Honey, door!” I called from the den.

I could hear my wife scurrying about in the kitchen. She walked out rubbing her hands on a dishtowel and gave me a scolding glance.

“You could’ve answered it,” she said.

I laughed to myself. I didn’t like my brother-in-law. He thought he knew all about me. He considered me a loser. A fat, lazy slob. Ha! He didn’t know a thing about my early years. Even my wife, who thought she knew everything on the subject of my past history, didn’t have a clue.

John walked into the house followed by his tiny wife, Millie with her black pageboy hair-do. She had on a blue floral dress. It matched her steel-gray eyes that had a distant, vacant look.

I got up from my chair, put on a plastic smile and went out to greet my brother-in-law and his spouse.

“John, so pleased to see you,” I said and shook his hand.

He didn’t shake it with a firm grip.

“Richard,” he said back.

I hugged Millie.

“How have you been?” I said. I seriously expected to see bruises on her face. John treated her roughly. She flashed me a weak smile.

“Fine. How are you?”

John grabbed his wife’s arm and brought her into the living room.

“I’ll have a bottled water, Richard,” he told me, “with crushed ice in a glass filled halfway.”

“Millie?”

“Give her a Coke,” John said.

I watched Millie sit on the couch and look at the décor. She seemed to exude, “Who is their interior decorator?”

My wife walked in and asked if anyone would like some appetizers.

John sat down next to his wife. For the next half-hour, they both chatted about mundane things. I was bored.

“So, John,” I said. “How’s business?”

“I signed a multi-million contract this morning,” he boasted.

My wife showed great pleasure.

“You do this all the time. No matter what you set out to do, you always make well.”

He agreed.

“My job is going okay,” I said. “Not much happening now, but I still manage to stay busy.”

John ignored me as he always did.

“Martha, you should see how I decorated our game room.”

She looked at him with mock surprise.

“No! You didn’t. I bet it looks great! You are so good at remodeling.”

He nodded his head in the affirmative.

“I’ve been working in the garage. Making a small cabinet,” I said.

They didn’t care.

“Bunch of wood shavings on the floor.”

John stuffed his mouth with deviled-eggs. “These are delicious.”

“That’s all the progress I made,” I said.

“Would you like the recipe?” Martha said.

“Sure, give it to Millie,” John said.

“The wooden cabinet—nothing but a pile of sawdust.”

“They’re quite easy to make. I can tell you how to do it, Millie. Do you have a pen?”

“Total waste of lumber.”

Millie didn’t acknowledge her. She continued to stare at the sorry pieces of furniture Martha had placed around the room.

“My hands did it, too.”

“Millie?” John said. “You want to write down what Martha says?”

Millie didn’t respond. John reached over and clapped his hands loudly in front of Millie’s ear.

“What’s wrong with you?” he said.

Millie turned and shook her head.

“Uh, what?” she said.

“Martha has a recipe to give you,” John said.

“Oh,” Millie said. “She does?”

John appeared frustrated.

“Yes, she does,” he said.

Millie looked around for her purse. She couldn’t find it.

“Ah...er...I was listening to Richard tell about his carpentry fiasco.”

“Well,” Martha said, changing the subject, “I think dinner is almost ready. Why don’t we go to the dining room?”

“Great, I’m famished,” John said.

“If I had a little wooden cabinet, it would look great in the dining room,” I said.

Both Martha and her brother went to the table.

I arose and patted Millie on the back.

“Martha’s not the best there is at interior decorating.”

For some unexplained reason, the tension at the table was high. I think Martha had overheard what I had said to Millie.

“A beautiful home is both spouse’s responsibility,” she said and gave me a cursory glance.

“I’m going to start working on another cabinet, tomorrow,” I said.

John laughed.

“Quickly changing the subject... I saw a big Hollywood star the other day at a local restaurant.”

My wife clapped her hands.

“No? Really? Which one?”

“It was—,” John started to say.

“Well,” I interrupted, “I know quite a few Hollywood personages, myself.”

John stopped speaking and stared at me. Martha gave me a quizzical look.

“I do,” I said. “Would you please pass the salad.”

My wife didn’t know what to say.

“Uh...” she said.

I looked around the table. Nobody was passing me the salad.

“Yeah?” John said. “And just who do you know?”

“Know them all.”

I noticed Millie looking at the dining room table.

“Teak,” I said.

John and Martha both stared at me.

“What?” my wife said.

I shook my head.

“Huh?”

“You said, ‘Teak.’ What does that mean?” Martha said.

“You know these stars? How?” John said.

“Years ago,” I said, “I was a big Hollywood furniture designer.”

I stopped.

“Is anyone going to pass the salad?”

John didn’t say anything. He stared at me.

“I made all the star’s furniture. They came to me on a weekly basis. ‘Make me this,’ and, ‘Make me that.’”

“Richard!” my wife said.

“I was responsible for everything in their homes,” I said.

Silence. They all were looking at me, now.

“Well, I was. I left Hollywood because I was weary of making so many pieces of furniture. I wanted the simple life—a table with four legs instead of seven with intricate designs.”

“No, this isn’t true,” Martha said.

“Yes, it is,” I said. “Wait till I die. You’ll see I was telling the truth.”

“What are you talking about?” Martha said.

“Give me a break,” John said and then got up. “Say, Martha, it’s getting late.”

“What? You haven’t been here that long.”

John gave her a kiss.

“No, I’m afraid we really have to leave. We have to get up early. Your food was delicious.”

He turned to Millie.

“Ready to go?”

Martha walked John and Millie to the front door. Suddenly, Millie said she left her purse in the living room. She walked past the dining room, but then stopped and came back into the dining room and looked at me.

“Is it really true?” she said.

I nodded.

“Really?”

She walked over to me.

“Do you...do you think you could build me a bookcase, then?”

I stared at her vacant eyes.

“Well,” I said. “As long as I’m still alive, there’s always that extremely rare, remote possibility, but at the moment I’m having chest pains.”

Millie went into the living room, retrieved her purse and went out the front door with her husband.

After a few seconds, my wife came back into the dining room and stared at me.

“Furniture designer?” she said.

“Martha?”

My left arm suddenly had a sharp pain, like a piece of a wooden splinter had decided to crawl down one of the veins.

“Martha?”

She continued.

“You a furniture builder? So funny!”

I laid my head on the table. The pain intensified.

“Shut up, woman,” I said. “I’m having a heart attack.”

I came to several times in the hospital. Martha sat next to my bed. She seemed distant.

“I didn’t believe you. I would have brought you here earlier. It’s my fault.”

I reached out to her.

“You wanted me to build you something before I died, didn’t you? A doghouse, maybe?”

Martha suddenly got up. I watched her walk out to the hall. I heard a man’s voice speaking to her. It was John’s voice. I then heard Millie. Millie came into the room.

I gave her a weak smile.

She walked over to where I lay.

“The doctors don’t give you much hope. So much for the bookcase then.”

I wanted to say something.

Millie’s eyes searched mine.

“Yes, Richard?” she said. “You’re trying to say something?”

I mustered every last ounce of energy.

“Yes,” I said. “Tell the stars... if they want any wood refinished, they need to call someone else.”

Everything went dark.

The funeral home held my visitation hours between 10:00 am and 2:00 p.m. Martha sat in black and greeted some paltry few strangers whom I had never known. John and Millie sat next to her. Around 1:30 p.m., John told Martha that all of Richard’s friends probably had already paid their respects. It was late. Time for lunch.

Millie wanted to wait until two o’clock.

“Why?” John said.

“I don’t know,” Millie said. “But I put his obituary in the Hollywood Times. If he really was a famous designer, the stars should be here.”

“You really believed him?” John said and began to laugh.

No sooner had he started, but an entourage, dressed in black, with silk black hats and veils over their faces—even the men—slowly made their way into the funeral home and into the parlor to pay me my last respects. The entire group gave an eerie impression. They didn’t say anything, but you could see through their odd coverings that they were big name Hollywood stars.

Millie’s eyes opened wide.

“Wow!” she said out loud. She suddenly put her hands to her mouth.

John at first didn’t say a word. He stared and stared and stared.

“Gee,” he whispered, “where did these people come from?”

Martha’s mouth opened wide.

“Weirdness,” she said.

“Well,” Millie said, “your husband was who he said he was.”

“I never knew,” Martha said. “He just told me about this for the first time a few nights ago.”

John interjected:

“I can’t believe you never knew. You were married to him for twenty years.”

“Yes,” she said, “but he never could build a decent piece of furniture. He only made wood shavings.”

“What talent we have when we’re young and free,” Millie said. “Married to you must have destroyed his youthful ambition.”

“I beg your pardon,” Martha said.

“Yeah, I can see that,” John said. “You really are a stick in the mud, Martha. I bet you never once helped him on any of his wood projects.”

“Er...er...”

“I hope you are proud of yourself,” Millie said and began to cry.

“Now wait a minute...” Martha said.

“Boy, you better be a better wife in the future. Show your husband’s hobbies some respect.”

“Well...I never...”

“Yeah, you’re a shell of a woman if you don’t respect your husband,” Millie said. “Try wearing a veil next time—”

“Or a covering over your head,” John said. “Take it from the stars to show you a good example to set.”

I wanted at that moment to sit up in the coffin and point out a dirty spot that needed to be cleaned. I knew it would be awkward for me to do so, so I lay still, still as death.

Martha was having a waxing moment.

No need showing her another.

# THE AMERICAN SPIRIT

It was, by all means, a simple, white, wooden home with five bedrooms—it had started with three bedrooms but the Smiths had to build to accompany their growing family—and a fireplace for the winter, a back yard with a fence—fences make good neighbors—a two-car garage, a cat and dog, a freshly cut lawn, a large tree in the front and several in the back giving shade from the summer sun, a flower bed, a garden, a sandbox, a playhouse—built by Mr. Smith with his own tools and design—a pie on the window-sill, a U.S. Flag holder for important holidays, several bikes, a box turtle buried somewhere in the front lawn, a wagon, a deep freeze, washer and dryer, piano, a Family Bible on prominent display, paperbacks, hardbacks, and a set of encyclopedias.

Mr. and Mrs. Smith—this was written on their mailbox—had lived in their home for twenty-five years. Zacharias had been born, raised and already sent out into the world. And then Sarah, Jacob, Matthew, Betsy, and finally Jeremiah were left. Jeremiah was in the first grade. His class numbered about twenty-three students with some absent during harvest. Jeremiah never missed school. He was a boy with a thirst for knowledge. He was also a boy who had been raised with strong Christian morals.

The principal, however, was a man of no Christian morals and hated any child that demonstrated any love for antiquated ideas and who had no desire to learn the ways of the land family planning, gay parenting, welfare, and taxing the rich. For Principal Jones, the Bill of Rights applied to minorities only. The majority, in order to be better citizens, had to learn to accept the deviant behavior of the minority so that all would be well in the land.

Now this is what happened one-day in school when Jeremiah decided to entreat the Almighty's blessing over his lousy school lunch:

Principal Jones was immediately by his side.

And this is what he said:

"Stop that immediately!"

And this is what Jeremiah said:

"Rub a dub, dub..."

And then Principal Jones became enraged and screamed:

"Enough of this!"

And this is what happened when Principal Jones went to pick Jeremiah up from the table:

His hands went straight through the boy!

Jeremiah continued his lengthy imploring and started to intercede for his teacher and his classmates that they would be able to stomach the food. Principal Jones desperately tried to stop this horrible social nightmare, but it was to no avail. Jeremiah was untouchable.

"No! This can't be."

Principal Jones looked around the lunchroom. The teachers didn't dare say a word, but the students had already made a hero out of their fellow classmate.

"This is not possible!" Principal Jones.

With that, Jones left.

It wasn't too long before a whole train of social workers arrived at the doorstep of the Smith's home. Bringing warrants and police officers to help them enforce their evil schemes, the social workers demanded Jeremiah be turned over to them at once.

Mr. Smith stood at the doorway.

"Please, don't stretch forth your hand to do evil to the lad. He has done you no wrong."

"You, who came and dwelt among us, are you now our judge as well? We will take you instead and do worse to you than we planned for the boy."

Mr. Smith tried to shut the door, but the social workers pressed so hard that Mr. Smith was unable to prevent one of the social workers from breaking through and trying to grab him. Of course, when he reached out his hand, he fell to the floor passing clear through Mr. Smith.

The other social workers tried to touch him but their hands went through what appeared to be only a hologram. After several minutes of this, the social workers had wearied themselves trying to take Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith held up his hand and said:

“Listen. It’s getting late. I’ve got to go to work in the morning.”

And with that, Mr. Smith shut the door in their horrified faces. There was immediate wailing and gnashing of teeth.

The stunned social workers turned to the police officers:

“Well?”

The police officers said:

“I’m sorry, if we can’t touch them, we can’t bring them in.”

And there was more wailing and gnashing of teeth.

The next day the Internal Revenue Service froze the Smith’s assets so that they would be unable to live, but Mr. Smith went down to the local ATM machine and withdrew money out of his account without any problem. The Internal Revenue Service demanded the bank follow their orders, and the bank told them that they had and there was no earthly way that the Smith’s could withdraw or even deposit money, but when they went to check their records, they found that Mr. Smith had deposited \$1000 earlier that day and it was properly credited to his account.

This is what the bank said:

“This is not possible

This was the Internal Revenue’s response:

“You either stop him from withdrawing or depositing any money or we will shut you down.”

This is what happened:

The bank was unable to comply, and, in a few days, it was

shut down and Mr. Smith, not caring, went to the ATM machine and withdrew whatever money he had had in the bank plus interest.

And what did Principal Jones say when he heard all this?

“GNASH, GNASH!”

A year went by and the Smiths continued to be American citizen role models. Mr. Smith had been fired from his job, but he continued to show up and demonstrate American ingenuity. The union tried to make him leave, but Mr. Smith refused. They even tried to slash his tires, but their knives went straight through the rubber without causing a scratch.

Other women also hounded Mrs. Smith when she started to teach the younger women to love their children and to respect their husbands. She told the women to leave their jobs if they had a husband who could support them by giving them the essentials of life—food and clothing.

Here was some of her advice:

“Don’t put your child in a daycare with liberal social workers.”

Mrs. Smith was also untouchable.

And while society around them was distressed and had great confusion and bewilderment of heart, the Smiths continued to be an example of moral virtue and they raised their children as they saw fit, supported the constitution of their forefathers and worked in their community as salt and light.

Finally, one day, the Smiths decided they didn’t want to live in a country where the laws of true freedom were becoming supplanted by the laws of liberalism. So they bought an island and named it America.

Those who visited it were reminded of a time when their country lived up to its name and the American spirit lived among them shining brightly as a beacon of freedom and hope.

But that was all in the past.

*There was no joy in Mudville now.*

The mighty liberals had struck out.

# THE LEPRECHAUN OF CALHOUN, TEXAS

Calhoun, Texas had a population of 1,537. The town was dying. It once boasted a large community of 1,650, but that was in its glorious past. Now it lay dying out in the middle of nowhere with a population of 1,537. Some were dying with it.

Maggie Dawns was one of its victims. Unable to move away, elderly with not much retirement income but for essentials, she lived in a run-down white home. A house badly in need of white paint. A dwelling that had pieces of loose lumber that would occasionally fall down and knock her in the head. A domicile with a wooden porch where, to cool herself, Maggie would rock back and forth and watch Calhoun's other captive neighbors walk up and down the block in the evening. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Maggie, at the age of 70, felt rather bored with everything. "If only I had some money," she said, "I would fix up this place real good. Turn it into a mansion."

One afternoon, the phone rang and rang and Maggie finally picked it up.

"Hello?"

"You don't know me," the voice said with a sound that was unfamiliar to Maggie, "but I know you."

"Who is this?"

"My name is Michael McGregor. My son has been living under your house for some time, and I want you to send him home."

"What? Who is this again? Your child?"

“He is a clever little rascal. He’ll put up a fight when you catch him.”

“I’m hanging up.”

“I hear your house is falling apart?”

Maggie felt the bump on her head where she had been hit earlier by a falling plank.

“Yes.”

“You want to fix it up? Turn it into a mansion?”

“Yes. YES!” Maggie didn’t know what else to say.

“Not willing to forfeit the opportunity in anyway?”

“No! Never!”

“Stubborn as a donkey?”

“Er...”

“I’ll make a deal with you,” Michael said. “You send the little man home, and I will send you a pot of gold. You can really refurbish your abode with all that dough.”

Maggie stared at the phone.

“Maggie?” Michael said. “You still there? You don’t believe me, do you? Well, look, I don’t have much time and these Irish phone lines are unreliable and may be cutoff in any second, so please say, ‘Blarney stone, Blarney stone, I cast you my Blarney stone,’ and then throw your hands like you have something. This will convince you that I am telling the truth.”

“Oh,” Maggie said, “really?”

Maggie could hear static. She also expected to hear laughing as well.

“Please, woman! Do what I tell you!”

Maggie wondered who this really was? One of her grandchildren?

“Okay,” she said, thinking, “I’ll play along,” — “Listen to this! Blarney Stone, Blarney Stone, I cast you my Blarney Stone!”

Maggie threw her right hand at the kitchen window. To her surprise, a rock materialized and went through the glass. Crash!

Maggie jumped back.

“Aagh!”

“Maggie? Are you still there? I heard something shatter. You didn’t throw the stone at something that was breakable, did you?”

“Who is this?”

“Sorry, should’ve told you.”

“Now listen you,” she said. “You owe me for a window.”

“You’ve cast your first spell,” he said. “Very good. I have several more to give you now if this phone line holds up so listen carefully...”

That evening, Maggie sat on her rocker holding a big fishing net.

John King Carlisle came out of his house. He lived next to Maggie. Maggie had always had a fond affection for John King. When he was younger, the people of Calhoun had trouble pronouncing his name since he was from poor Polish immigrants. His name used to be Onufre Klapach, but Maggie helped him change his name to John King Carlisle so others could pronounce it. He was the same age as Maggie.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Maggie said.

“What’s the net for?”

“There’s a leprechaun under my house. Going to catch it and get me a pot of gold.”

“Really?” John King said and walked over to her porch.

A loose board creaked slightly in the wind that had begun to pick up.

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “Isn’t that great? I’ll finally be able to fix up this place.”

John King examined her wood.

“This house will probably last you until you die. Why spend good money on something you don’t need?” he said.

Maggie leaned towards him.

“Some people are content living in hovels all their life.”

John King disagreed.

“Nothing wrong with shacks.”

Maggie sat back in rocker.

“There is if you have a pot of gold.”

John King looked at her.

“I think you’ve been out in the sun too long, today, Maggie. Going to catch a leprechaun? Get a lot of money? Never talked like this before.”

Maggie frowned.

“Well,” she said. “*It’s never too late to change.*”

The subject quickly turned to small talk, and, for the next several minutes, Maggie and John King chatted about mundane things until John King finally said, “I don’t have time for idle chit-chat,” and went back home. Maggie sat rocking back and forth watching him go into his front door. Fool, she thought, for not believing her. She’d show him! In the morning, she’d be the richest woman in all of Calhoun! Would too!

In less than an hour, she fell asleep.

At the stroke of midnight, Maggie awoke. Something had shaken her rocking chair. She jumped up with a start. Nothing was around her.

The night air was still. She could hear a few locusts in the trees, but that about it.

Maggie went out into the yard with her net and stood there in the dark. She couldn’t believe she was going to finally see a leprechaun.

“I really must be crazy doing this,” she said.

She looked around her to make sure none of her neighbors were around or hiding in the bushes spying on her. Then, she held her arms up high and said, “Blarney Stone, Blarney Sto...no...that’s not it. What was that spell?” Maggie thought for awhile and finally remembered. “Oh yeah...wee man, wee man, in the early morn, come out now, and let me see your form!”

Maggie expected something to immediately happen, but nothing stirred in the yard. She looked around. Nothing. Not even the sound of some grass rustling or a twig snapping—except for the noise of a donkey’s tail popping out of her tailbone.

“Wee man!” she said again.

Nothing.

“WEE MAN!”

A dog began to bark in the distance. Maggie grew donkey ears.

Suddenly, a small, green glow appeared in the front lawn. Maggie looked at the light. She stood back. The illumination intensified. Maggie didn’t know what to do. She felt quite afraid.

All of a sudden, a very loud humming sound made Maggie even more frightened. She held onto the net. She wanted to run, but her legs felt paralyzed.

All at once, an emerald flash sparked and crackled and there, before her eyes, a leprechaun looked at her quite chagrined.

Maggie quickly threw her net over him.

The leprechaun immediately began to struggle.

“Oh, no! I’m caught by a mortal. By a woman donkey, no less!”

Maggie didn’t know what to think of this. She bent down.

“Are you all right?”

The leprechaun continued to thrash about.

“Do I look it?” he said.

Maggie lifted him up and stared at him.

“Your Dad will be pleased that I caught you.”

The leprechaun stopped his resistance and looked at her.

“My Dad? So, he’s got something to do with this? I should’ve known. He must’ve given you the spell to make me appear and turn you into a donkey as well.”

Maggie ignored the leprechaun’s remarks. She picked him up, walked into her house, into the kitchen and placed the net with the leprechaun on the table.

“The sooner I send you home, the quicker I’ll be rich.”

The leprechaun frowned.

“Don’t tell me. My Dad promised you if you caught me and shipped me home, he would give you a pot of gold?”

Maggie sat at the table. Her tail easily fit through an opening in the back of her chair.

“Maybe he did. Maybe not.”

“And you believed him? A leprechaun miles away in a foreign country? And even a fairy man for that matter?”

“Why not?”

“He’s a liar. He’s not going to send you nothing.”

“How do I know that?”

“He’s made a literal ass out of you.”

Maggie got a clear view of the leprechaun from the kitchen light. His height was not more than 10.5 inches. He appeared young with a small black beard and long black hair. He had on green clothes with a tiny green hat. His ears were pointed.

“Listen,” he said. “You’re going to need my help. You can’t send me back!”

“How’s that?”

“A donkey doesn’t need a pot of gold. My father knows that. It needs to be ridden.”

Maggie’s eyes opened wide.

“I don’t understand.”

The leprechaun winked at her.

“I do,” the leprechaun said.

“What?”

“I must say you are the most attractive donkey in all of Calhoun and Ireland to boot.”

Maggie couldn’t believe this.

“How absurd! I’m not a donkey!”

“Have you looked in the mirror?” the leprechaun said. “Anyway, don’t worry. I’ll take good care of you.”

“Gold,” Maggie said.

The leprechaun shook his head.

“Gold? You don’t need gold. You need a bunch of hay.”

Maggie tried to say, “I’m on a diet, just give me bullion,” but something inside her told her that she needed the feed if she were going to take this little man on rides around the neighborhood.

Maggie pawed the ground three times.

“Maggie,” the leprechaun said, “you’re a splendid animal.”

Maggie hee-hawed.

Maggie smelled the night air. Reminded her a little of her youth when she was a filly. There was magic in it all over again.

Maggie hee-hawed for a second time.

The next morning, the leprechaun took Maggie for a ride around the block. John King walked out to his porch and saw this. Maggie turned to him and tried to smile, but all she could do was give a little kick.

“Whoa, girl,” the leprechaun said. “Watch it!”

John King shook his head.

“*Never too late to change, eh?*”

Calhoun, Texas—population of 1,537. The town was dying. It once boasted a large community of 1,650, but that was in its glorious past. Now it lay dying out in the middle of nowhere with a population of 1,537. Some were dying with it, but there were a few that were beginning to rise above its humdrum. For them, the smallest details of life were now not going unappreciated—especially the carrot stick dangling from their heads before their cute, loveable, donkey eyes.

# THE LIFE BOAT

There was Joe, and there was a starlet. They were both in the same boat. That is, they were in an inflatable, yellow lifeboat, which they were lucky to have obtained when their ship went down in the Southern Atlantic Ocean. The starlet had come along for rest and to make a little money on the side with her dinner shows.

Joe was ignorant of the starlet's achievements. He didn't recognize her. He never went to the movies.

"I am a scientist," he told her. "I perform scientific experiments."

Now in the middle of the day when the sun was beating down on them, the starlet decided to take a nap. While she was sleeping, Joe studied her face.

"No, I just can't place her," he said.

Joe then noticed a piece of glass that had an interesting shape in the corner of the boat. He picked it and carefully analyzed it. He then noticed different colors of light being refracted on the yellow surface of the lifeboat. He held it up higher and the colors of light grew larger. As he got closer, the colors of light also grew smaller until, at a certain distance and angle, the colors merged into a single spot and began to make the surface of her face very hot.

In fact, as Joe observed, the heat was sufficient to make the yellow plastic start to melt and soon, to his further amazement, the synthetic material began to let out a hissing noise and Joe could feel something that felt like air slowly coming out at precisely the same spot that the little colors of light had been!

Joe then concentrated the little colors of light on the starlet's legs. It wasn't too long before the starlet began to stir and then

leap up with a shout. Seeing Joe and the piece of glass, she began to scream:

“You fool! Give me that piece of glass!”

Joe was not going to give up the piece of glass without a fight since he wanted to conduct more scientific experiments, but the starlet was insistent and they struggled for a while until the starlet was able to wrest the shard from Joe’s hands. Unfortunately, while they were fighting, the glass had put little holes all over the boat so that they both heard multiple hissing noises.

“We’re sinking!” the starlet screamed.

Joe observed what she was saying and then wondered how long it would take for the boat to sink if it was filled with, say, 300 cubic feet of air and the holes let out a volume of air of—let’s say—30 ml/second. If he put his foot on one hole and his hand on another, he wondered how long it would take then. The starlet, upon seeing this, quickly put her hands, feet and head on some of the holes.

“Quick! Cover up the other holes!” she said.

Joe complied.

After awhile, the starlet perceived another hissing sound.

“I am observing how much the boat will deflate if I remove my hand from one of the holes.” Joe said to her persistent interrogation.

“Stop it!” the starlet screamed again. “Don’t you realize that letting the air out of this boat will cause us both to perish?”

“I don’t think you realize who I am!” Joe said in a moment of defense. “I am a scientist!”

“A scientist?” the starlet replied. “You are a madman!”

Joe made a mental note of this remark and then released his hand from the holes to watch the plastic lose its rigidity.

“See?” Joe said to the starlet. “If I take off both hands, the air comes out faster.”

The starlet was stunned.

“What are you doing? Don’t take your hands off those holes. We have got to keep this boat afloat!”

“Look what happens when I take my feet off the holes. Tah-dah! More air!”

“No!” the starlet said. “Please! I want to stay alive!”

“And my head—see, see—more air!”

“I’m begging you!”

“Watch what happens when I take you and toss you in the water,” Joe said and took the starlet—the very starlet with the surprise expression on her face—and hoisted her overboard.

“By my calculations, this boat will deflate in 15 minutes.” Joe said and looked at his watch.

The starlet swam to the dinghy and pulled herself up.

“Must...must...” she sputtered.

“You think I’m right or wrong? 15 minutes?” Joe said.

“...cover up those holes.”

Upon seeing her futile attempt, Joe reached over and quickly pushed her back into the water.

“Don’t disturb this highly important scientific experiment.”

“You are insane! Please, help me...glub...back into the boat,” the starlet said.

Oh my dear readers, if miracles were ever to occur, the time to happen would have to be now. And, oh, thanks be to merciful heaven, right at that very moment, a ship appeared on the horizon. The starlet immediately spotted it and began to cry with joy.

“Look! Look! A ship! We are saved!” she said and began to swim in its direction.

“Women sure talk a lot,” Joe said, pulling out two glass test tubes from his pocket. Joe bent over and took some salt water in one of the test tubes. In the other, he bent down and added some water that had splashed over the side and was quickly filling up the boat. Joe was interested in the salinity of the water before and after it splashed overboard.

“Ten minutes to go!” Joe screamed to the starlet.

“He’s mad! Totally mad!” she thought to herself as she heaved and puffed her way to the ship.

And now my dear readers, what else can I say? The starlet is swimming to her safety and Joe is conducting scientific experiments. I will let you know this. The starlet indeed made it to the ship. The people on board were most surprised and happy to see such a big star come aboard. And Joe? Well, I could say that his experiment was a rousing success and that when the boat finally sank he decided to measure the time it took to sink to the bottom of the ocean and that that too was a rousing scientific success, but that would be a cruel thing to say.

So I won't say anything.

# MISH-MARSHA



Marsha Wittington, almost a billionaire, really wanted more than anything to be nothing. “I want to be an office temp.”

Her mother wanted no part of it.

“After all, your grandfather paid for your education!”

“Oh mother,” Marsha said and though not desiring to be disrespectful to her mother’s wishes, still marched right down and applied for a job.

Eddie Bennington, the president of the prestigious Acme Temporary Secretarial Employment Agency, smiled when Marsha walked into his small office. It was more than a grin.

“Looking for a job?”

“Am I ever,” Marsha said with a straight face. Her heart was divided. Office temp? Eddie Bennington?

“Can you type?” Eddie Bennington said. “Short-hand? Dictation?”

“Like the wind,” Marsha said.

“Well,” he said, “this is your lucky day. We have an immediate opening. 912 Sycamore Road—Plaza Inn Suites—Suite 8200. They need someone to start this morning.”

“I didn’t think I would find a job so fast,” Marsha said. “Sudden things are bad luck.”

After filling out the necessary paperwork and picking up her temporary badge, Marsha ran out the door and down the street. Eddie followed her to the door and with his eyes as she raced to her new job. He hated to see her go to work.

“912 Sycamore School Road.” Marsha held up the address and looked at the building. She didn’t look where she was going once inside.

“Yes, hello,” a voice said, “we called this morning for a temporary secretary to come over and substitute for one of our sick workers. Are you the temp?”

Marsha stared at a young lady.

“You’ll find the desk in there. There’s quite a bit of typing.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Marsha said.

Eddie Bennington waited a few hours and then called to see how Marsha was doing.

“Hello, darling,” a female voice said and in the background loud music was blaring amidst the sound of many people laughing and speaking all at once.

“May I speak to Marsha Wittington,” Eddie Bennington asked.

“This is Marsha Wittington,” Marsha said. “Whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

“Er...Eddie Bennington.”

“I bought the place,” Marsha said. “I’ve turned it into the Pleasure Zone!”

Eddie dropped the phone.

Marsha Wittington, Marsha Wittington, where had he heard that name before? He went on the Internet and began to search.

That name is too familiar, he said to himself. Suddenly, without much searching, he found the answer. Marsha Wittington—daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Wittington—almost billionaire.

Eddie Bennington's life-long ambition was to run a respectable office temp agency. Marsha Wittington, almost billionaire or not, was not going to make an ill repute out of his agency.

"No one goes to work for one of my clients and buys them," Eddie said. "Not on my time!"

His most respectable billionaire crony was Ed Smith. He was an eccentric chap.

"If I ever need anything," Eddie said, "Ed's my man."

Eddie Bennington found his phone number and gave him a call.

"Sure hopes he remembers me."

The phone rang. A soft voice answered again amidst loud noises, "Hello?"

"May I speak to Ed Smith?"

"Ed's not here," the voice said.

"May I leave a message?"

A small pause and then, "Eddie Bennington? Do you know who this is?"

"No."

"Marsha Wittington!"

"Marsha? Where's Ed?"

"He let me buy him out, darling," Marsha said.

Eddie had to get a grip on himself. He himself was a billionaire, but he wasn't about to turn his temporary secretarial employment agency into a stepping stone for the stinking passions of the well to do.

There was only one solution!

"Are you..."

"Yes?"

"Are you doing anything for dinner?" Eddie said.

"No," Marsha said.

The wedding took place in the May when the flowers bloomed. The weather was not at all like spring, but Eddie and Marsha's hearts were. Birds were chirping gaily in the trees.

Marsha was resplendent in her white dress. Her mother cried. "Your grandfather would have been so proud."

"I am going to skip down the aisle, mother," she said.

"No, Marsha, don't skip," her mother said, but Marsha didn't pay any attention and skipped anyway. Suddenly, her feet got caught in her gown and she fell face forward.

"Marsha!" Eddie Bennington screamed, and Ed Smith, who was the best man and who had also fallen in love with her, screamed as well.

Marsha lay still. She didn't move.

Eddie ran to her and gently turned her over. She was making gurgling noises.

"Marsha, can you hear me?" Eddie said.

"Sugarplum?" Ed said.

Eddie turned to Ed Smith.

"Look, it's not fair that you only get to say, 'I do,'" Ed said. "I love her, too."

Eddie laughed.

"We're both billionaires. I think we can find a way to use our money to usurp the law and both marry her."

"Do you really think so?"

"Billionaires can do anything," Eddie said.

"Do you think she will mind?"

Marsha was still making gurgling noises.

"She's almost a billionaire. Why would she mind?"

Ed and Eddie both knelt beside her and the priest ran over to where they were standing. He had been paid well so he didn't mind marrying all of them.

"I now pronounce you man and man and wife," he said to the cries of the maids in honor and the loud protestations of Marsha's mother.

Marsha's father sat in the pews and stared at the cross hanging above the altar.

"I wonder what a pool would look like in this sanctuary?" he thought. "I wonder how much they want for this building?"

# CHARICE

The leaves were green and the skies blue.

Charice was walking to her car when she noticed that she had forgotten her beautiful hat in the house. She walked back into the house and looked around.

“There you are, you silly hat,” Charice said with a sigh. “What will I ever do with you?”

The hat made no reply. Charice put it on her head and went to the mirror.

“I look so beautiful,” she said to the mirror, but the mirror did not answer back.

She went to her car and hopped in. It was a beautiful car and Charice told it so, but it made no reply. All the things she worshipped and adored never paid her the least bit of attention.

She was very sad, but immediately consoled herself that she was indeed the master of all these precious objects, and, unless she commanded it, none of them would ever be worn, or looked at, or cleaned.

While in the car, Charice remembered she had left the oven on, so she got out of the car and went back into the house. Once inside, she noticed that the furniture was not well. She needed to dust and polish it to make it feel better.

“Better do it now, while I have the strength,” she said. Within a few hours, the house was spotless.

“Now,” she said, “it is time to go the store.”

Charice walked back outside and got into her car. She started to back out when she suddenly noticed that the house was missing a few paint chips. She had a brush and a can of paint that matched the color in the garage.

"I can't leave the house looking like this," she said, so she stopped the car and got out once again. She went into the garage and found an air blaster, paint can and brush. She set about her work with great vigor. Finally, the house looked great. Charice was very proud of herself.

It was at this time a patrol car came down the street. Upon seeing Charice, the car stopped.

"Hey, lady," the man said. "Why are you still here?"

"Just got through painting," Charice said.

"The entire town is shut down!" the man said. "You need to get to shelter right away."

Charice looked out at the ocean.

"I don't think the hurricane will hit until the morning," she said.

"Are you crazy? The storm will be here in ten minutes," the man said. "And it is a killer!"

Charice noticed the man's car was dirty.

"Your car could use a good scrubbing," Charice said.

"Not now," the man said.

Right at that very moment, a strong gust of wind blew in from the ocean and broke off a tree branch. The limb flew into the open window of the patrol car and hit the officer on the head.

"Cuckoo," the man said.

Charice let out a little scream.

The man shook his head and then stared at Charice. Everything was beautiful.

"I don't think you should sit out there," Charice said. "Why not come into the house and drink some coffee until the storm subsides? My house will protect us."

The man was very happy. He really needed a good cup of strong coffee. Charice went inside and put on the pot.

While she was doing this, the skies began to take on a few more clouds and the storm began to pick up a little. It started to rain.

Charice went to the window.

“Great!” she said. “I just got through watering the lawn.”

“Better come and get some coffee,” the man said, “before I drink it all up.”

The wind began to really blow.

“You really make a great cup of coffee,” he said. “What type of brand do you use?”

At that moment, the front window blew out and rain came gushing in at 120 mph.

“It’s an off-brand,” Charice said.

Suddenly, the kitchen roof started to creak and move.

“Better drink your coffee before the storm takes it,” the man said and laughed.

“I always take my time, thank you.” Charice said haughtily.

At that moment, the roof blew off and pelted the two of them with tree limbs and raindrops. The man was immediately thrown against the door of the refrigerator.

All of a sudden, the kitchen floor began to wobble.

“Hey lady,” the man said, “what type of foundation is this house built upon?”

“Er,” Charice said, “er...let me see...I think it is...it is...”

The walls began to buckle and give way.

“Sand?”

Suddenly, the base of the house lifted.

Charice let out a scream.

“No! Help me! Please, help me!”

But it was too late. The house, Charice, and the man holding the coffee cup were immediately blown away into oblivion.

# THE TEA PARTY IN THE GREEN GARDEN

Mrs. Snod got up to address the entire Lady's of the Green Garden Tea Club one beautiful Monday morning. The sky was a wonderful blue, and the sun was brightly shining upon the forty women who had come out that morning to hear Mrs. Snod speak of the poor in a far and distant land which they had never really heard about or cared to hear anything connected with it. But, as there was a nice breeze from the south, the ladies all decided it best to come together for at least one hour or two for some good old fashion chatterboxing.

Mrs. Snod went up to the podium in front of the women's tables which were situated around a gorgeous flower garden. She had a silver rod in her hand that she used to tap the podium in order to call attention to all the talking hens.

"Ladies," she said politely, "Ladies, I believe that this meeting will now come to order while I give you my speech."

One by one, the ladies applauded. Mrs. Snod curtseyed slightly and drew out a picture book from her purse.

"Now," she began, "I want to remind you that I will be talking this morning about the plight of the poor in the land of Mamba Bamba. I have brought along this picture book to show you what the country is like. After that, I will personally present to you the solution to the nation's problems."

That ladies all clapped and then settled down in their chairs to sip lemonade and hot tea with little cookies made by Mrs. Snod, herself.

"Now," Mrs. Snod continued, "my first picture ladies is..."

She opened the book and frowned. It was the wrong book. "Er..." she said, "the first picture is..."

She held up a large photograph of a woman in a formal gown.

"Ladies," she said, "the first picture is of me. Notice how nice I look in this dress?"

There was a stifled silence in the crowd. None of the ladies dared to clap in case they indicated they thought her taste better than theirs.

Mrs. Snod turned to another page.

"Here is another picture of me," she said, "and another and another and another of me when I first got married. That's Nenko Noo, my hubby, in that picture."

The sound of a few teacups could be heard while Mrs. Snod went on. The women watching her began to become nervous and large droplets of sweat appeared on their foreheads. Many of them couldn't even drink their lemonade without spilling it all over themselves.

"This picture," she bluntly said with an arrogant voice, "is of my trip to Rome when I was only three years old. I bet none of you women could top this? Look! Here is another photograph of me in sunny Mexico with all my wonderful children."

By this time, the ladies in the garden were tired of breaking tea cups, so they began to knock over each others glasses of lemonade and each other's tables. Before too long, there was a fist fight on Mrs. Snod's grass.

Finally, Mrs. Snod came to her senses, and seeing all this nonsense tried to call for order again, but someone threw a cookie and hit her on the hand.

She shrieked.

"You beasts! All of you!"

The police finally arrived just in time to break up the Ladies of the Green Garden Tea Club.

Mrs. Snod was not in the yard at that time. She had gone into her house crying hysterically and had phoned her husband.

“Darling, Poo,” she slobbered. “They...they threw lemonade all over my pictures! They hit my hand with a cookie!!”

Funny thing about all this—nothing ever did come of those poor over that far and distant land of Mamba Bamba.

# A FOOL AND HIS CAR SOON ARE PARTED

Mr. Spencer had a brand new car. It was a beauty. It had everything that a person would want in a car and even more. Today, his son had suggested that they go and get the car washed.

“Do you know of any place to go?” Mr. Spencer asked his boy.

“Of course I do,” his son replied.

His father clasped his hands together.

“Great!” he said. “Won’t my neighbors be envious that I have such a good looking machine?”

Tommy put his finger to his mouth in a reproachful manner and said:

“Be careful what you say, Dad. Things might not turn out so good.”

His father turned to him and rebuked him:

“Watch your mouth, young boy. If I want the neighbors envious, I’ll go to great lengths to do just that!”

After several minutes, Tommy and Mr. Spencer were on the brink of a new car wash. An attendant came out to greet them. Mr. Spencer rolled down the window.

“That’ll be sixteen dollars,” the man said.

Mr. Spencer’s mouth opened wide.

“What?” he exclaimed. “Sixteen dollars for a car wash?”

The man nodded. Mr. Spencer turned to his son, showing him great displeasure over his choice of a car wash to go to.

“Don’t blame me,” his son protested. “I didn’t know the cost.”

His father calmed down a bit, and then he straightened up.

“Hee, hee,” he giggled. “I guess nothing is too good for the envy of my friends.”

Tommy turned away to look out the window while his father paid the attendant.

“Put your car in neutral,” the man told him. “Don’t steer or put on the brakes.”

With this last comment, the car began to roll through the machine.

The first stage was water. It sprayed up and down the car.

“Hey!” Mr. Spencer screamed. “We forgot to roll up the back windows!”

Water sprayed through the open windows all over the plush carpet and back seat.

“Water stains!” Mr. Spencer screamed again.

The next stage was huge strips of leather going back and forth to loosen up the dirt. While Tommy mechanically rolled up the back windows, his father watched as the straps pulled his windshield wipers slowly up the front windshield.

“Er...uh...” he stammered.

They came to the next stage. Huge rollers that took the dirt off began to whirl up and down the car.

“Finally,” Mr. Spencer said, “we are getting down to some cleaning business.”

The fourth stage was cold wax applied to the car from sprays. It smothered the vehicle with fine beads of beautiful, shimmering wax. However, it didn’t cover the car completely, but left just little beads all over the place.

“That wax didn’t even smear!” Mr. Spencer cried. He angrily hit the wheel, which promptly fell to his lap. Mr. Spencer froze.

“Muh...muh...my wheel!”

The last stage was the blowers, which blew the car clean. Huge fans with additional rollers to go up and down the windshield began to dry the car. The little beads of wax began to dry as little splotches.

“No!” Mr. Spencer yelled. “Those rollers are bending my windshield wipers!”

A loud crack was heard and the front windshield, along with the wipers, broke. Mr. Spencer slammed on the car’s brakes.

“This foolish car wash!” Mr. Spencer yelled.

Tommy sat silent. All he did was stare and stare and stare.

Suddenly, from behind them, the crunching of metal was heard. Another automobile had been dragged into the back of Mr. Spencer’s stalled car.

When both cars were finally pulled out later on that day, one of Mr. Spencer’s next door neighbors happened to drive by. Seeing Mr. Spencer’s car, all speckled and cracked, he laughed.

“Hey, Dick!” he said. “Is that your new car?”

Mr. Spencer broke down and wept.

# HIGH AND LIFTED UP

It was a blustery day.

The mailman barely made it to the front porch. When the door opened, Mrs. Pennington said, "Hello" but before she had a chance to say "thank you", the mail blew out of the carrier's hands and into the house. Bang! The front door slammed in his face. Mrs. Pennington ran to pick up the mail.

"Oh my," she sighed.

Tommy was watching the shutters open and shut, open and shut.

"Mom," he asked, "may I go outside?"

"Be careful," she said. "It's very windy today."

Tommy crawled down from the window-seat and ran to the door. He opened it with a crash! The wind blew fierce and snatched the newly recovered mail from Mrs. Pennington's hands and blew it even further into the house.

"Oh my," she said again.

Tommy ran outside and the door slammed shut.

Outside, yellow, gold, and red leaves leapt from swaying trees, skipped along the roof, jumped off the ledge, and chased one another down the street in tiny whirlwinds of merriment.

Tommy watched in fascination.

"If I were a leaf, I would be a golden one and fly clear across the world," Tommy thought as he ran out into the yard among the swirl of color.

Mrs. Pennington came to the front porch.

"Tommy, I have your jacket. Please put it on."

Tommy was not in the front yard.

Tommy was a leaf. He twirled with delight as he blew out

into street and danced with the rest of his playmates.

“Tommy?”

A maple leaf came close-by, touched him and moved ahead. Tommy met him shortly, brushed against him, and moved further ahead. They swirled around and around, hit cars and poles, flew up in the air and then down again.

“Wheeee! This is fun,” Tommy thought.

The maple leaf blew in front of him. It was bright red with well-defined veins. The sunlight shone through it giving it brilliance never before seen by Tommy.

“Where do you think we are going?” Tommy asked the leaf.

“Does it matter?” the leaf replied. “Have fun. Life is short.”

“I beg to differ,” an older leaf said suddenly coming along side them. Weathered and wise from seasons of living, he continued, “The journey may be short, but the end can be a new beginning. You must choose the right path.”

Tommy pondered this the best a leaf could ponder such a thought.

“If the wind blows you in that direction,” the old leaf said, “you will end up in the city dump.”

“I don’t want that,” Tommy said.

“If you are blown in that direction, you will fly high into the sky and see things that no leaf has ever seen before.”

“Follow me to the city dump,” the maple leaf said. “Most of my friends are there.”

The wind blew Tommy and the maple leaf along. Tommy thought of his choices. He wanted to continue to play.

“Okay,” Tommy said, “I will go with you to the dump.”

The winds shifted and Tommy and the leaf were blown in the direction of the dump.

The old leaf chose not to follow. He was blown further down the block and suddenly lifted up high into the air.

“Hey,” he called out, “the sights up here. They are spectacular. Come and see!”

Tommy and the maple leaf ignored him.

“Oh no! I see something. I see the dump.” The old leaf cried out. “I see smoke. Come up here. I see fire.”

“I see nothing,” the maple leaf replied below.

Tommy saw the fence that surrounded the city dump. He was happy to be with his friend. They would have fun in the dump.

Suddenly, Tommy saw smoke. It was coming from the dump. The old leaf was right.

He looked up. There were storm clouds moving in. The old leaf was no where to be seen.

“We must turn back,” Tommy said.

“No,” the maple leaf said. “The wind will lift us over the fence into the dump.”

“We must change directions.”

“Too late.” The maple leaf said and swirled and laughed.

“I smell something,” Tommy said. “I smell something burning.”

“I smell nothing,” the maple leaf replied.

“The wind is too strong. We can’t resist,” Tommy said.

The maple leaf laughed. He hit buildings. He flew over many colored leaves. He flew over leaves in the gutter. He flew over leaves trapped in muddy water. He flew over leaves in the road that had been run over by passing cars.

The maple leaf did not care.

“Almost there,” he said. “Almost to the dump.”

“No,” Tommy said. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to go!”

The maple leaf seemed to glow an evil red. He flew behind Tommy and pushed him to go faster. Shove!

“NO!” Tommy screamed. “This is not fun!”

“Here we go!” The maple leaf yelled approaching the dump wall. The wind lifted the maple leaf into the air.

Tommy hit against the wall. Thump!

He looked up. The maple leaf twirled and laughed.

“See you soon, kid,” he said as he disappeared over the wall.

Tommy was lifted. The air was pulling him upward. He had

no strength. He could not resist. He moved closer and closer to the top of the wall.

“Please!” he cried. “Someone help me. Someone please help me. I want to go home. I want my Mommy!”

Closer and closer to the top...soon he would join the maple leaf.

Closer. Closer. Soon he would be on fire and burning.

The wind grabbed Tommy and threw him high into the air. Tommy didn't want to die. He wanted to live. He wanted to be a boy again.

The wind cried. Whooooooooo! It pushed Tommy into the dump. Down, down, down.

“Thomas J. Pennington!”

Tommy suddenly felt a grip around his collar.

“Going somewhere?” It was Tommy's mom.

“Oh, Mommy,” Tommy cried. “You saved me. You saved my life, Mommy. I almost fell into the dump. I almost burned.”

Mrs. Pennington smiled.

“I would have jumped into the fire to save you,” she said. She hugged Tommy in her arms.

“Let's go home now,” Mrs. Pennington said. “You are safe at home.”

Tommy ran to the car and got in. He rolled down the back window and looked up into the sky. He wondered where the old leaf had gone. He wished he could fly high into the sky and see things that no leaf had ever seen before. One day, he wanted to be like the old leaf. One day...he wanted to be high and lifted up.