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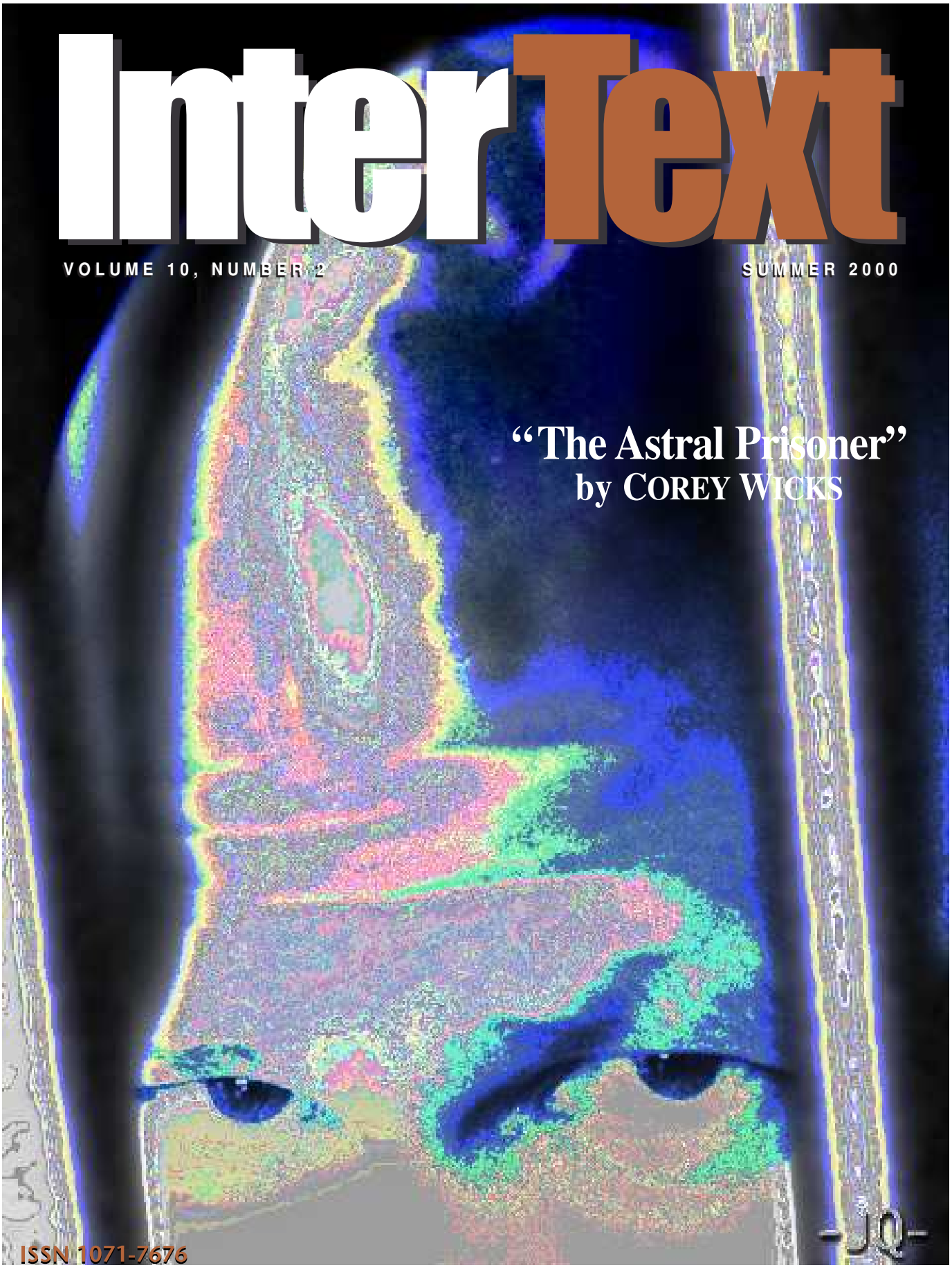

"The Astral Prisoner"
by Corey Wicks

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The Astral Prisoner

COREY WICKS

Sometimes freedom is a prison.
And vice versa.

NOW, YOUR HONOR, LET ME DRAW YOUR attention to Exhibit F. I would like to ask the Court to read this document into the record, for I believe it will prove beyond a reasonable doubt that my client is emphatically not guilty of the charge of first-degree murder.

10 September 1997
Journal entry of Wallace E. King
Idaho State Penitentiary

I am a prisoner. My crimes are a matter of public record, as anyone who has recently read *The Idaho Statesman* knows. What the public does not know, however, is that I have escaped… and yet I am still a prisoner. For the past few months I have escaped on a regular basis, you see. I exit my cell, walk past the guards on my block, scale the razor-wire fence, and I am free.

Sometimes I visited my ex-wife and children in Nampa. I have stopped going there—it has become too painful. Often I follow the wardens home after their shifts end. Warden McGovern, for instance, lives in a big white house at the end of Del Sol Lane. He owns a golden retriever, drinks Corona beer, and his wife prefers to be on top while making love. I know this because I have accidentally entered their house on several occasions while they were in the act. I didn't stay and watch because, contrary to what the prosecuting attorney stated at my trial, I am not a pervert.

It came out during my trial, you see, that I owned a large personal library that included works on the occult, metaphysics, and the paranormal. They used this as evidence to suggest that the killings were satanically inspired—which, of course, is bullshit. Now all those precious works are gathering dust in some police vault as evidence in the famous case of *Idaho v. King*. How I could use those books at this moment! Perhaps if I had them with me in my cell I wouldn't have made this final mistake.

It was only here in prison that I started practicing the art of astral projection, you see. And entirely from memory. Back when I was still married, I had started studying ceremonial magick and psychic phenomena primarily out of curiosity. I delved into the rituals of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and I read all about Carlos Castañeda's psychedelic adventures. That was when I had no intention of actually practicing any "out-of-body" experiments of my own. If I had known that I would wind up in a maximum-security prison, I would have paid closer attention to the methodology of astral projection.

The first time I actually left my body, I noticed myself floating off my bunk toward the ceiling. The moment I realized what happened, however, I immediately snapped back. Eventually I taught myself how to rise above, turn around, and look at my sleeping body while my astral body was wide awake. Gradually I learned to walk down the cell block and to exit the prison grounds entirely.

When I first started exiting my physical body, the world outside appeared exactly as it was in the physical world at that moment in time.

You will never know the elation of rediscovering your freedom after it has been taken from you. I kept a journal beside my bunk and mastered the technique of "sleep writing" while within the dreamlike state. As a dream quickly fades away upon awakening, the memory of the astral journeys would quickly dissipate if I didn't immediately write them down. Yet, once I had written an entry, I committed the contents of my astral prison escapes to memory. Then I destroyed the item. The guards and wardens might not look favorably upon such "other life" activities beyond the prison walls, should they discover any of my entries—especially if they contained details of their private lives!

When I first started exiting my physical body, the world outside appeared exactly as it was in the physical world at that moment in time. If I left my body at, say, 7 p.m. and I entered into a house, they probably would be watching *The Simpsons.* It would appear very much like the real world. Yet, often the images were fleeting and somewhat blurred because I did not fully know how to control my astral body nor how to concentrate my thoughts. Therefore my travels often became a kaleidoscope of psychedelic real-world images combined in a disjointed fashion. It was very much like ordinary dreaming, only more vivid.

However, once I built up a kind of astral stamina and strengthened my powers of concentration, I learned how to stabilize the images. Thus, if I wanted to visit the pyramids of Egypt and the Sphinx, I merely concentrated on that desire for a moment and suddenly I was *there* standing before the Sphinx's paws. I used this method to

travel to Shanghai, Bangkok, Bombay, Moscow, Berlin, Vienna, Paris. Anywhere I wanted to vacation, I merely packed my astral baggage and off I went. And yet, my body remained confined in the Idaho State Penitentiary.

After several months of out-of-body adventures, I made the most frightening discovery of my life. I learned that there are living creatures who inhabit our dreams, just as fish live in the sea or birds live in the air. I had read about these beings before, but it was an enormous shock to realize that I was actually encountering living beings in a surrealistic world. I believe Carlos Castañeda called them inorganic beings or *scouts* from other worlds or dimensions.

Usually the scouts appeared as incongruous elements in dreams, such as an object out of place. The trick was to focus your attention on the out-of-place element. Usually it would transform into an intelligent being of some sort. Often one would have to bargain with the scout in order to learn the wisdom of that being's particular dimension. Most of the time this involved sharing energy with the scout. I don't know why, but it seems that the energy from our particular dimension is a highly priced commodity in the interdimensional marketplace.

The first time I encountered a scout I was in a department store examining a set of finely decorated Chinese porcelain jars when suddenly I noticed a rodeo clown standing next to me. For some reason I instinctively reached out and grasped his hand. At that moment all the images of the department store started to swirl in a giant vortex. It seemed as if the clown and I were traveling through a giant funnel of light. Then suddenly the swirling stopped… and there I stood in another world.

This particular world was especially bright with neon colors. There seemed to be geometrically shaped glass houses that diffracted light the way a prism separates light into the rainbow spectrum. There was a pungent fruity odor in the air and I caught a glimpse of a dazzling forest of violet and crimson trees.

All this took place in a split second before I was jolted awake in my bed. The shock of knowing absolutely that other worlds exist simultaneously and parallel to our world caused me to immediately awaken.

The world of the rodeo clown scout was the most pleasant I have encountered. Others, such as the one I am currently in, are far more dark and sinister. I believe Castañeda himself had visited this world. Here the beings appear merely as murky gray clouds of energy and the world is essentially a darkened labyrinth of tunnels—much like a honeycomb.

Unfortunately, I had forgotten that one must never speak a desire to stay in an inorganic being's world. That is why the prison guards shall find my body, bruised from my thrashing around as my astral self journeys from place to place, next to this undestroyed journal entry. My final journal entry.

I'm sure the guards will be falsely accused and sentenced for my death. Believe me, I know exactly what they will go through. For I myself am but a prisoner.

COREY WICKS

Is a local government reporter for The Star-News*, a weekly newspaper in McCall, Idaho. Recently he was honored by the Idaho Press Club for his crime reporting. He is a voracious reader of esoteric literature, and is a member of several esoteric organizations, including the local Masonic lodge, the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, and the Traditional Martinist Order.*

Cat's Pause

FAITH L. JUSTICE

There's an animal inside each of us.
But what's inside the animals?

KEFIRA WOKE UP FEELING WARM AND SATISFIED. She stretched, extruding her claws and plucking at the rumpled blanket with alternating paws as she arched her back and flicked her ears and whiskers forward. A deep rumble started in her chest and erupted as a satisfied purr.

Her round yellow eyes snapped wide. Whiskers? Claws? Lord Androff's bells! She glanced around the room, feeling disoriented by the faded colors and distorted depth perception that flooded her brain. An overpowering smell of human sex came from the narrow bed she shared with the young guardsman snoring next to her.

Thinking furiously, she started licking her paw and wiping at her red-gold face. Snout wrinkled in disgust, Kefira realized what she was doing and stopped in midstroke. Panic gripped her. What happened? How had she acquired this feline form? Her ears flattened, hackles rose, and she bared her teeth in a frightened hiss. Kefira harshly suppressed an almost overwhelming urge to go racing through the room in a blind panic. After a few tense moments, her natural curiosity wrestled down the fear.

How had she changed overnight from a reasonably successful street acrobat into a cat? Had she crossed a powerful sorcerer? Insulted a rich merchant? Her thoughts fixed on Almon. The kind older man wanted to be her patron, but Kefira wouldn't give up her vagabond life to settle down.

She had tried to explain her need for freedom the last time they coupled, but he still didn't understand why a female wouldn't jump at the opportunity for safe and comfortable surroundings. She pictured the hurt in his eyes and the resignation in the slump of his shoulders. No, Almon would never do this to her. He was too honorable.

" 'Fira?" Cahil mumbled sleepily as he rolled over reaching for her. A sudden fit of sneezing convulsed his body. Cahil's brown eyes widened as they spied Kefira watching him curiously from her side of the bed. He reached for a neckerchief from the hastily discarded pile of clothes on the floor. His normally bronze skin colored to a bright red as he tried to quell the sneezing.

"Damned cat! How'd you get in here?"

Kefira dodged a backhanded swipe and leaped for the nightstand, knocking over a guttered candle. She skidded with a surprised yowl over the edge and onto the polished wood floor. Candle, holder, and assorted bright cheap jewelry cascaded around her as she scrambled to reverse directions and escape under the bed.

Cahil pulled the blanket off the floor and peeked under the bed. The watery eyes and runny nose spoiled his good looks. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty. Nice kitty. Come out from there." He lunged for her. Kefira avoided his reaching grasp by cowering in the dusty corner.

"Gods-blasted cat!" His stubbled face disappeared. Kefira listened to the curses called down on cats and changeable women mumbled between sneezes. He quickly pulled on his tights and officer tunic, buckled on his sword and searched the floor for his boots. She poked her bewhiskered nose from under the bed watching for her chance to escape.

Now. He was heading for the door. Kefira dashed between his legs, sending the unfortunate young man crashing to the floor with a surprised yelp. She sprinted down the stairs with a sense of regret mixed with her greater sense of urgency.

Having a cat body offered a different perspective on the world. She was a small, relatively frail animal in a world of giants. But her feline form had some advantages. As an acrobat, she appreciated the quick reflexes and flexibility. That move off the night stand was a pretty good recovery. Kefira took advantage of her naturally low profile by following the shadowed wall behind the bar to the open kitchen door. She slunk into a noisy crowd of cooks and servants getting their breakfast before starting work. *Food.* Her stomach clenched.

Her feline form had some advantages. As an acrobat, she appreciated the quick reflexes and flexibility.

She had come to the tavern with one purpose last night, and it wasn't dinner. Kefira purred contentedly, one paw raised. She had laughed and flirted with several men until Cahil had entered the room. The musky scent of the well-built young guardsman had attracted her immediately. He had responded to her with poorly concealed lust. They barely waited to get to their room before tearing off their clothes for intense, frequent and sometimes violent love-making.

The sharp scent of another cat brought Kefira back to the present. She had forgotten about the scarred old tabby who was unofficial mascot of the inn. His scent marked his territory throughout the kitchen. Kefira rubbed her head and tail over the markings, masking them with her

own scent as she stealthily tread through the room. That would give the old tom fits!

She reached the open alley with no sign of the tabby, then made a dash for a pile of litter strewn against a gap-filled fence. Kefira hid behind several smashed wooden boxes and a tattered pallet that leaked straw. She settled on all fours to think about her situation, tail curled forward, the end twitching. She needed help for her strange affliction.

Matrika. The witchwoman had helped her when Kefira first arrived in the city, penniless and with a mysterious gap in her memory.

She mused on the cause for her predicament. Maybe Cahil was cursed, and every woman he loved turned into a cat to which he was violently allergic. It's too bad cats can't chuckle, she thought as she flicked her whiskers half in amusement and half in frustration. She shrugged. Fruitless speculation wouldn't help. She needed to get to Matrika.

Kefira stretched herself briefly and checked out the alley. Matrika lived on the other side of the Bazaar. Her large, rambling house sheltered an odd and ever-changing assortment of human and animal occupants. At this time of day, she should be at home studying her books on magic or conducting her experiments. Matrika supported herself and the others who occasionally turned to her for help by doing a brisk business in small white magics, such as love potions, fertility charms, and traveler's protections.

A streak of movement tracked across Kefira's vision. Her feline body bunched and leaped. The small rodent gave one squeak before she bit through its spine at the base of its skull. Ugh! Hungry as she was, Kefira pulled her lips back in disgust as she realized what she contemplated for a meal. As a woman, she had a lively appetite and eagerly tried exotic foods. Raw fish, maybe, but fresh mouse pushed the limits of her curiosity.

A low growl caught her attention. The inn tabby emerged from the dark crowded space between two buildings. They stared at each other for several seconds, then the tabby made a brief cautious move towards her, stretching one paw forward.

No! My kill! Kefira started a growl deep in her throat as she arched her back and fluffed her fur to make herself look larger and more imposing. The other cat sniffed briefly and lowered himself to the ground, staring unblinkingly.

Kefira watched cautiously as the tabby's muscles bunched and his hindquarters dug in in anticipation. In a flurry of movement the tabby leaped. She dropped her meal and reared to meet him, rolling onto her back. Kefira raked his soft belly with her sharp hind claws and bit at his neck. Pain lanced through her as the tabby snapped at her face and tore an ear.

It was over in a few furious seconds. Kefira wriggled out from under the larger cat and backed down the alley, hissing and growling. The tabby picked up her dinner as she turned tail and raced away, her fear and pain replaced by a growing sense of unease. What was that all about? Why had she fought the tabby over a disgusting rodent? She had a more important goal… if only she could remember what it was.

An overwhelming sense of loss boiled up from her empty belly, clutched her wildly beating heart, and constricted her throat. The panicked animal let loose one prolonged scream that sounded like a baby being tortured. She set off at a ground-eating lope, charting a straight course through the thicket of human dwellings. Home. Something awful would happen to her if she didn't get there.

A SMALL TAWNY CAT JUMPED THROUGH HER STUDY window from the ash tree, startling Matrika. The graceful animal immediately leaped to her desk. It daintily picked its way through the clutter of jars, books and charms and plopped itself down with a rumbling purr in the middle of the book Matrika was reading. The rumpled woman removed her reading spectacles from faded blue eyes and pushed small curling tendrils of gray-streaked hair behind her ears.

"Well, kitten, you sure know how to get a body's attention." She ran a gentle hand over the animal looking for injuries. Matrika examined the torn ear and sighed. "Got into a scrape, have you?" The cat continued to purr contentedly then rolled over and exposed a lean stomach to be scratched.

"Come, kitten, let's get you some food." The witchwoman picked up the trusting animal and carried it down the hall. She stopped at a small room at the top of the stairs, rapped on the door and asked the occupant to join her in the kitchen. Matrika cradled the cat like a baby, petting and talking to it in a soothing murmur.

The kitchen was cool and dark with wooden shutters blocking the intense afternoon light. She put the cat down near the empty hearth and reached into the cold closet for a pitcher of cream. She poured the cream into a chipped saucer while the hungry animal mewed and paced. Matrika placed the saucer on the flagstone floor and turned as a tall, awkward-looking girl entered the room. The teenager had wild red hair corkscrewing in an untamable jumble down her back. Freckles dusted her long nose.

"You wanted me, 'Trika?"

"Kefira's home, Gemina." She gestured toward the cat daintily washing its face in the corner.

"What?" The girl looked startled and raced across the room. Gemina picked up the small feline and scratched under its chin.

"She just came in. I saw her performing a few days ago, so the reversion must be recent. Your spell lasted for nearly three full moons." The sorceress frowned at her star pupil and her favorite pet for a few moments, then turned to put away the pitcher.

"I'm sorry, 'Trika," Gemina mumbled. "I didn't mean to cause trouble. I just wanted to try that new changer spell you taught me. She's all right, isn't she?" The girl anxiously inspected the injured ear.

Matrika reached out to tousle the unruly red hair. "I'm sure you meant no harm, Gemina. But next time, try to think about the consequences. All magic has a price, you know. Sometimes you pay, sometimes another. We're here to protect, not abuse weaker creatures."

KEFIRA STARTED TO MAKE A BED in the girl's lap, kneading a bony thigh with both paws. She circled twice and settled in a comfortable heap, tail tip over her nose. This was good. Food. Home. A nest for the kittens to be born in nine weeks. The human voices faded to a low murmur as the contented animal drifted toward sleep, the vague uneasiness plaguing her only a distant echo of regret.

FAITH L. JUSTICE

Is a science geek and history junkie. She has worked as a lifeguard, paralegal, college professor and business consultant to support her writing habit. She's published numerous short stories, poems, and reviews in the small press, has completed a fact-based historical novel, and is working on the sequel. She lives with her husband, daughter, and cat in New York City.

Millie's Antiques

WILL PAYNE

Who knew that looking at antiques would stir up old memories?

THE SHADES ARE DOWN, BUT THE SIGN SAYS *Open,* so I twist the knob and go right in. A bell hooked to the top of the door clinks loudly, giving me a little start. The shopkeeper is sitting at her desk a few feet inside, pretty well concealed by bulky old furniture and some department store mannequins standing at attention between me and her, like bodyguards. Even before her cheery 'hello' I know she is there, because her cigarette smoke hits my nose, mixing unpleasantly with the acetone smell from her nail polish remover.

I wish she wouldn't smoke. I suffered nightmares of withdrawal symptoms before I could quit smoking. After taking the Five Day Plan three times, I still get a nervous tightening of my throat when I'm in a smoky room. At the hospital, I saw one guy who had lost both feet to a land mine, and now he lay there dying from lung cancer. That oncology ward was real Marlboro country.

There are worse things than being a Section Eight.

"How are you today, sir?" Almost no accent, but I'm sure she is Vietnamese.

"Just fine," I say. "How about you?" I squeeze through the barricade of cupboards and dressers to see her better. She is slim, with long, straight black hair and dark, lustrous eyes. She is very good-looking. As with so many women of her race, her body is like a child's, though she is surely forty years or more. Why is she hiding back here, anyway? Of course, there is good cover all through this big, one-room shop, and it is dimly lit. Apparently no one else is here, except the lifelike but grotesque mannequins. In this light, they could be taken for real… if they had on any clothes, that is. I don't see any indication that the lady is packing a gun, unless—what the hell! She's only an

"How are you today, sir?" Almost no accent, but I'm sure she is Vietnamese.

antiques dealer, so why should I even think about that? Actually, a woman alone in a shop like this one probably should have a pistol at hand.

She continues working on her nails, like an untrained gift-shop clerk, but asks me the inevitable question all dealers like to ask: "Are you looking for anything special I could help you with? I am Millie Tran. I know everything in the shop."

Was that meant to be just a helpful bit of information, or was it really a tactful warning against shoplifting?

"I'm not looking for anything in particular," I tell her. "Will it be OK if I just browse around a few minutes?"

"Certainly, sir. It is so warm this afternoon that I closed the shades to keep out some of the sunlight. If it is too dark for you to see things, I will open them again."

"No problem," I tell her, as I move away. I wonder if

she will really let me off the hook this easily, or if she'll tailgate me through the place, trying to sell me something. If you tell them the kind of things you like, they'll hound you about it.

Jimmy is in the little shopping plaza across the street, and I won't have long to look before he comes for me. I was careful to tell him where I would be, as a good little kid should. Actually, Jimmy is my brother, three years younger than me, which is what kept the lucky son of a gun from going to 'Nam along with me. So what does he do instead? He joins a busload of war protesters to block the Pentagon entrance.

At the time, I thought he was nuts. Now who's nuts?

As I meander toward the back of the room, Millie appears again, wraithlike, to tell me about an inlaid mahogany sideboard I am trying to navigate around. Why can't she just let me look? I don't give a damn about furniture.

"This sideboard," she announces with an air of importance, "came out of one of the oldest houses in Washington County, and I just marked the price down this morning. It is a very good buy."

"Thanks, but I don't have space for any more furniture right now." It's none of her business that my temporary home has been an attic room in Jimmy's house since I was released from the Martinsburg Veterans' Hospital last month. My third stint there since I was discharged. Recidivist, you might say. I wonder how many chances they'll give me before I have to stay there permanently?

A little voice in the margin of my consciousness is saying, parrotlike, "Maybe it would really be for the best, Don. Maybe it would really be for the best. Maybe it would really be…." Hell. At least I didn't get Agent Orange.

For a while after I left the service I dabbled in collectors' items, mainly from the Fifties. Not real antiques, but stuff like old juke boxes, Coke machines, almost anything coin-operated. I don't have room for that sort of thing now, but I still enjoy looking. Long time since I browsed in a place like this. I can move through every square foot of the store that's big enough for a man, and all without making a sound. If I do just that, maybe she'll lose track of me for a while. So far, the old floorboards haven't squeaked at all. In the jungle, any step could go *crunch* or *squish* or send some other creature scurrying away. Then all hell might break loose.

Other than furniture, a lot of Millie's inventory is scruffy, damaged yard-sale items. A push-type lawn mower with corrugated metal wheels, like some tracked vehicle from the First World War. A white wicker rocking chair with a hole in the seat. Had been a potty chair, of all things. Imagine rocking while you go. Good for a planter now, says a tag tied to its arm. As I turn into the other aisle, heading back toward Millie's desk, I see a baby carriage with two wheels missing, looking more like a covered wheelbarrow or maybe the R2-D2 in "Star Wars." An old farm scythe, which my touch finds to be still sharp enough to cut through heavy jungle brush. No jungle here around Hagerstown, but my imagination grows it instantly, so the scythe can once more enjoy its purpose in life. It must be nice to have a purpose. To hold a job again.

I bend down to examine a large, brass shell case. But I see it's not, really—it's actually an umbrella stand. For fun, I start seeing other things around me as something different, but similar to what is really there. The way, as a boy, I used to look into hot coals in the fireplace and imagine that I could see glowing people and animals moving around. The same with clouds skimming along overhead, changing shape to act out their roles. Now Millie's furniture begins transforming into caissons and howitzers. The smaller things are grenades and spent shells and helmets and whatnot. It's like a game now, to identify these things.

As soon as it hits me that I'm playing a game, I try to stop myself. Dr. Moscowitz warned me against this sort of daydreaming. He said it could induce a relapse. Hell, I don't need that again, after being out just a few weeks. The pills I take help some, but I have to do my part, too. It's just that antique shops are supposed to induce nostalgia, and I've always been an easy mark for that sort of thing.

Unexpectedly, Millie is beside me again, interrupting my reverie. "Do you like cigarette cases or pipes? Many men collect smokers' items, even when they do not smoke." She is leaning over a table, slender as a bamboo, with dark hair swinging loosely over her shoulder. Her low-cut neckline permitting me to glimpse her small breasts. Is she doing that deliberately, to distract me?

With an effort, I focus on her voice. Now I know that this lady can be pretty stealthy. "I quit smoking a few years ago," I tell her, "and so far I don't collect smoking or tobacco items."

"I have a showcase of such objects over there next to that old blue pie safe. Some very fine examples. I do hope you will just take a look at them. Not to buy, you know, but just to see."

"Thanks, I'll look when I get over that way." I wonder why she is so eager for me to see the smoking paraphernalia?

I don't think it shows on the outside that I'm in recovery—drugs and alcohol, among other problems, according to those well-adjusted, well-degreed healers at the hospital. They think they know who's sane and who isn't. But the maze of rooms there offers many corners for lies to hide, unspoken, unnoticed.

Now she seems unwilling to let me go. Looking me up and down, she asks, more like a statement, "You are military?"

"Not any more, but I was in the Army, years ago. How did you guess?"

"I would also guess you were in Vietnam, in combat. It is not difficult to see the signs when one knows what to look for. You still have the erect carriage, the short haircut, the right age, the depressed, haunted look."

"What do you mean, 'haunted look?' What does that have to do with anything?"

"Sir, there is a gentle child in each of us, who may not be ready for the fast maturation demanded by war. People like that, the healthy type, often continue to suffer damages from war long after peace has come. Then there are those of the unhealthy type, whose violent nature is nourished by battle, who remain forever immature. I think you are of the healthy type. So I know that you could never become a general." Her small, solemn laugh.

She is really beginning to bug me, but I am also curious. "You seem to be a philosopher as well as an antiques dealer."

"Actually, a psychologist." She smiles, appearing friendlier than she has up to now. "The Americans pulled out of Vietnam shortly before I received my doctorate in Paris. I came to this country, since I could not return home."

So she must be close to my age, but doesn't have a single gray hair. While my hair is mostly gray. Makes me look older than I really am. "How did you happen to come to Hagerstown?" I ask.

"I married an architect, also a Vietnamese refugee, who practices in Hagerstown. But I soon found there is not much need in this town for a female Vietnamese psychologist. So I started this little business. My parents once had an antiques shop in Saigon, and I learned from them. I import a few things, you see." She waves toward a display of Oriental porcelains.

It's possible I had visited her parents' shop back in the seventies. I had days off in Saigon, and sometimes browsed the antique shops. Some had porcelains just like these. "You have a very diversified stock," I said. "Just about anything a collector might be interested in, I suppose."

She gestures to encompass the room. "But you will see that I have no military artifacts of any sort in my shop. To me, in a broad sense, there is no justifiable war, and I make no concession to that kind of collecting."

"So you could never become a general, either?" I ask, seeing now that she was trying to make me swallow some kind of chickenshit propaganda. I'm not a hawk anymore, but she's now an American dove. Hawks, doves… chicken bones make good missiles to launch at weaklings. I start to remind her about the box of grenades under a nearby walnut dining table, but then I remember they are really pewter ice cream molds.

I've always disliked talking about the part of my life spent in Southeast Asia, but this woman knows a few things already. So I tell her, "When I first went to Vietnam, I thought it was justifiable from our point of view: we were going to help South Vietnam fight the Communists. Since I got back home and learned more of the truth, I've had to reconsider the whole business."

My head is beginning to feel a little woozy now. Maybe Robert McNamara is seeing a shrink, too.

She smiles faintly, wearily. "The truth is not an absolute. The French believed they were helping us, too. Then, later, the Americans. After more than a million Vietnamese died, and sixty thousand Americans, many others also reconsidered the war. They are the ones who are now drowning in guilt and who keep the psychiatrists busy."

My head is beginning to feel a little woozy now. Maybe Robert McNamara is seeing a shrink, too. I read something about him recently…. Maybe he does, but just won't tell us. Only your warmonger knows for sure.

"I don't have long to look today," I tell Millie. "Do you have anything coin-operated? That's one of my interests."

"Oooh, my one-armed bandit," she says, her manner instantly changed. "Look over here. They are hard to find, and this one is dated 1938. It works perfectly, but the jackpot has only a few nickels, now. I bought it at an estate sale just this week. You are welcome to put a nickel in to test it, if you wish."

"Maybe I will." I touch the embossed decoration on the slot machine and stroke the lever affectionately. "I don't see a price tag. How much is it?"

"I haven't really decided on a price yet. Most of the ones I have seen run over a thousand dollars, but this one is pretty scratched up…. Would you like to make an offer?"

"No, thanks," I say. "I can't buy it, but I'd like to look around a little more"

"OK, sure, but please let me know if I can help," she says, and turns back toward the front of the shop.

I've never liked making offers. I'm not a gambler, either, but I do like the old slots. I continue admiring it for a couple of minutes, then look at my pocket change. Yes, there are three nickels. I put the first one in and pull the lever. A lemon, a cherry and an orange. I push in the second and third nickels. No better luck.

It's a little like feeding ammunition into some bizarre model weapon. The lever works like a trigger. Probably meant to be man-portable, but it is a little too heavy. Maybe a prototype. The R&D people back home are always sending us something for field-testing. I lift it, my finger at the ready on the trigger. It's unwieldy, not like any weapon I've ever handled before. Must have some pretty complex mechanism inside. But they'll have to make it lighter if they expect it to be standard issue. Holding the thing in front of me, I move cautiously around a shipping case. Such good cover, but I'm sure one of them is here, pretty close….

"Oh, you startled me!" Now Millie is in an alcove near the front window, trying to straighten a large painting. "Do you want to reconsider the slot machine?"

She turns around, so her back is to the wall. Her eyes widen now—she is suddenly aware of being cornered. I fix her in my gaze and squeeze the trigger gently, just as she screams out.

But something else has happened, too. A door has opened, and I am surprised to see my brother walking in.

I don't know what he's doing here.

He could get himself hurt, standing in the open like that….

WILL PAYNE

Lives in south-central Pennsylvania, where he has been an environmental activist and a columnist for several newspapers. His poetry, fiction and nonfiction have appeared in several literary magazines, including Potpourri, Warm Welcomes, Potomac Review, *and* Bohemian Bridge. *He is currently working on his first novel. "Millie's Antiques" is his first publication in an online magazine.*

This Great Divide

ERIC PROCHASKA

Our lives aren't just built by who we are.
They're also created by the events around us.

So you have a little Christmas wish and you walk out to the back end of the rail fence with the crisp but snowless ground crackling under your boots. You've come here countless times, and though it's your "secret place," your private place to sort through your thoughts, anyone who knows you knows where to find you and when it's all right to approach—maybe by the way you prop your right foot solidly on the bottom rail, and lean against your forearms on the top rail. It's well behind the house, but just shy of being occluded by the edge of the barn. You never really had to hide from anyone, anyway—except maybe when you experimented with smoking when you were nine—and you figured out that it's easier to be left alone when you're in the open than when you seek shelter. If you try to be alone, that's when everyone suddenly thinks you need them around. This is where you stood on summer days as the crop duster swooped overhead, having raced toward you dangerously low and fast, wobbling and rocking from one wing-tip to the other, somehow graceful in its perilous way. Then, right at the fence where you stood, often with your friends, bicycles discarded on the sparsely weeded rough dirt behind, the unsteady plane would cut its spray and swan dive toward the clouds. Even if you didn't exactly shower in it, the cloud did mist over you in the wash of the wings. You didn't know a thing about cancer back then, and you don't pay it much concern now, figuring what's done is done, anyway, and there's bigger thoughts to take up your time.

After years of practice, you can recognize any make of car solely by the shape of its headlights at night.

After years of practice, you can recognize any make of car solely by the shape of its headlights at night, except for a few of the newer imports, since you haven't had much of a chance to inspect too many of them, and they all seem the same. But you can pick a Ford from a Chevy or a Jeep as soon as it comes over the rise almost a mile off. You can give the model year, most of the time, because of the amber lights bordering the headlights. Still, it's not a skill you bother trying to impress people with. It's just something you picked up while waiting for your father to come home. His will be the one with the driver's side light much

brighter than the passenger side one, which you figure is due to burn out any time now, so you watch the "pop-eye" trucks coming at you, too. With the sun practically gone and the red glow washed along that western ridge, many of the cars still don't have their lights on. But you don't expect to see him this early, anyway.

You're not a rancher or a farmer, though you're pretty much surrounded by the both of them out here. The fence is your family's, and so is the land, but the crop belongs to a man who drives here earlier than you've ever woken on purpose, every morning for months. He has his own land, and rents a few acres here and there all the way between Cliffside and the junction. You don't see him this time of year except maybe at the store, but more often you see his wife. Still, you see more of him than of your father, and you don't want to be helpless like that little child you remember out here at this slowly rotting fence, but if there's a single wish you could have, you'd leave the gold and the dead in the ground and just have more time with him before it's too late.

Behind you, from the kitchen window, smatterings of sound are spilled into the lingering twilight as someone washes dishes at the sink, and someone else calls from deeper in the house with a request. Your aunt and her family arrived late this morning, always a few days early in these years since Mom left. It's all the family you have in the world, and for a moment the world seems like a very expansive place with no family in it. By now her eyes—because of course it's your aunt at the sink—have found you. She's probably been pausing at each window around the house, pulling the sheers aside inconspicuously for a cursory glance outside, making the maternal rounds, if you will. And maybe she stopped in the kitchen when she caught sight of you, and the dishes just seemed like a worthwhile way to occupy the time as she waited to see if you are all right. It must be hard being suspended between being a mother and being a stranger.

You can almost feel the warmth from the small window, where, if you turn, you will almost certainly see her figure. She's wiped the fog from the pane with a dry towel and her eyes are fixed on you, you imagine unpretentiously. And you expect that she's not concerned you might know. In fact, she'd probably welcome your coming to her and confiding everything. Or maybe not. You can't know for sure, so you don't risk burdening her. Besides, you're not sure you want to. You're well aware that your problems are probably just that: your problems. They're probably inflated to immensely awful proportions in your mind, you figure, and when you're so close to being considered something of an adult it sure wouldn't do any good to go whining about such trivial worries.

You'd like to just stay out there longer, but realize it won't do anything more than fuel her anxiety. The chill is starting to work its way beyond your skin, through your body. Those headlights won't be coming, you know. Not until after dark. But even if you're almost an adult, maybe there's no harm in wishful thinking, as long as no one else knows. So, before someone feels obligated to fetch you, you voluntarily stroll back to the house, careful to wear a light smile as you enter so no one thinks you're being moody. No need to drag down the rest of them.

"Oh! Hi there!" she chirps in surprise as you go in the kitchen door. It's hard to tell if the surprise is real, or if she's just acting to not have been watching you. "I thought you were in the living room with the boys."

"Nah," you say. "I was just taking care of a few things outside."

"Well, Don and the boys are in watching TV, if you want to join them."

She doesn't even realize she speaks as if it's her house. Doesn't matter, though. She is the mother here.

Your Uncle Don is in your father's secondhand recliner, the one you practically had to twist his arm to buy at the garage sale after your mother took off with all your furniture. Again, you know it doesn't matter, but it's a territorial thing. This is where you father sits when he gets home. He takes off his cumbersome work boots and jut relaxes for a few minutes as you heat up dinner. Sometimes, often, he falls asleep during the news. You've learned not to wake him before it gets late, because if you do he insists he's not tired, and that it's too early to go to bed, anyway.

You sit on the floor near the couch, where your two cousins share a comic book.

"Boys," your uncle says. "Scoot over. Make room for your cousin up there."

"Nah, it's all right," you say, though they're already obediently huddling toward one end of the couch.

"Don't be silly," he says. "We don't want to make you sit on the floor in your own house."

You get up on the couch mostly because he's made such a production out of it, and you are genuinely appreciative for the effort, though you often sit on the floor, anyway.

"What do you want to watch tonight?" Uncle Don asks, extending part of the newspaper toward you. The arm of the vinyl couch moans as you lean across it to accept the paper, but you realize looking at the weekly TV programming guide from the Sunday paper that your life is merely a compilation of second rate made-for-TV holiday specials. So you break into a grin that you decide not to try to explain to your uncle, who is trying to seem disinterested, though you are aware he's practically studying you. He's not a bad guy, but you've never been able to talk to him about something you are interested in. It's always his topics, his memories. Anyone can learn to

appease him by listening with an attentive appearance, but it takes a lot out of you, and you're not up to it tonight.

"I don't much care," you say. "Whatever you want."

Your father has dreams. He has dreams of you going to the university and becoming whatever you want. "Whatever it takes," he sometimes says enthusiastically. But you watch him working himself to death to give you a better life and if you had just one wish, this wouldn't be it. You've tried to get a job in town, but everything from the supermarket to the hardware store to the gas station is always fully staffed, with waiting lists longer than your family's history in these parts. Everybody's hurting some, and they take care of their own first. You can't really hold that against them, but you wish there were more of "your own" here, too.

And you wonder if part of what drives your father is that he wants to give you everything. You think maybe he still wants your mom to come back, and maybe that he thinks if he could have given her more that she would have stayed. But you don't want more things: you want more of him. Still, you're afraid. Afraid that maybe this drive to please you is all he's got left in his fuel tank, and if you take that away from him, too, he might just wear down altogether.

"You're a senior this year, right?" your uncle asks during the commercials.

"Yeah."

"Thought about where you're going to college?"

"Well, you know how it is these days. I'm guess I might go up the road to the community college for a year or two."

"Got any idea what you want to major in?" he asks.

"Wildlife management, maybe. We'll see."

"Any jobs in that? Wildlife management? What would you be, a park ranger?"

"Would you fight forest fires?" your younger cousin, Danny, asks.

"Nah, I wouldn't be fightin' fires. I'd be keeping track of the animals, mostly, I suppose. I'm not exactly sure."

"You wanna work in Yellowstone, or something?" Uncle Don asks.

"Yeah, or maybe Glacier," you say, cutting yourself short, because the program is back on, and your uncle's head has turned toward the television.

Next to the sofa that used to rest along the wall beneath the window, there was an end table that had a door, like a cabinet. Inside there was a picture album. The first page was of your parents' wedding. You never recognized many of the people, anyway, but it looked like a pretty happy time. A few pages later, there were some shots of your mother still young, with a glowing face, posing for a profile shot. She was pregnant with you. Then you were born, and captured on film, too. From that point on, most of the pictures were of you, or you and your father, or you and your mother, but hardly ever everyone in the same frame. You'd flip through that album on occasional rainy Sunday afternoons when you were young, and your mother would narrate. Even though there's nothing that you absolutely long for or miss, it would be nice to browse through that album right now.

Soon there would come pages of this house when your family bought it. You remember that. It was exciting. The mill was booming, so lots of folks were buying up land outside of town. It was like living in the suburbs. Now it's

Your mother had a lot to do with getting the place, you remember. It was her initiative, her idea, her dream.

life in the boonies. Your mother had a lot to do with getting the place, you remember. It was her initiative, her idea, her dream. You were all of six, but these are things that stay polished in your memory. The houses were spaced out, as everyone wanted their land, so nights were always quiet, except for the invariable rig passing by on the highway. Cars only made sleek sounds like skimming the surface of still water; but sometimes the rigs would use their brakes suddenly, and make that noise like the whole thing was crashing in on itself. "Another antelope on the road," your dad might say.

By bus, it took nearly thirty minutes to get home from school, because they had to let off the kids who lived closest first. No one your age lived anywhere near you, though, so your mother sometimes let you go home with a friend after school to play. She would come get you in time to make dinner before your father got home. Or sometimes a friend would come home with you. Seven miles from town. Times were pretty good.

The mill stands about five miles on the other side of town. It had its boom during the first years of your elementary school education. But by middle school, they were talking layoffs. And when you were in the eighth grade your father no longer came home for dinner. There had been a strike, a walkout, layoffs. You name it. When the dust settled, about forty percent of the workers were still employed, and they were quite obligated to work twelve-hour days, and felt grateful for the opportunity to do it, too. Your father was one of the lucky few.

More and more, the twelve-mile drive to the mill became just more thankless overtime. And life here became quieter, lonelier than the moon. Your mother was

detached already. So you really weren't as shocked as you should have been when she packed up and left.

"Boys! Get washed up for dinner!" your aunt calls from the kitchen doorway.

"All right!" they answer, instantly, though not hurriedly, moving for the bathroom.

"Aren't we waiting on Dad?" you ask, instinctively, before you realize it might sound snappy.

"Of course," she says. "He gave me strict instructions to have dinner on the table at eight, sharp, though. And I do need to feed the boys before they starve to death, Honey."

"This boy, too!" your uncle calls over the back of the recliner.

You go to the front window to check the highway, but you can't see much of it from that side of the house. "I'll be out front!" you call to your aunt.

"Well, dinner's just about ready," she says.

"I know. I'll just be right outside."

"All right. I'll call you."

You shut the warmth and talk and television inside and passively wish you had worn a jacket. Nights are deceptively chilly. Keeping an eye on the road, you fetch an armful of firewood at a time and fill up the rack near the kitchen door. Then you switch on the barn light and splinter off some kindling on the old stump. No sign of him yet.

What are your dreams? More than dreams you have fears. You fear being stranded with no job, no way to keep going, but having to keep going all the same. A while back, you had a dream that was almost like a fantastically vivid painting because you can't really remember any movement—though there must have been—but just the sensations of being caught on that canvas. You stood beside your father, who stood beside his car, which rested alongside the highway whithatch runs along your field. Only it wasn't your field. It had unimaginable flowers, like that giant meadow of poppies in "The Wizard of Oz." It was your highway, though. You remember the network of tar lines, like a magnified alligator's back, running across and along every few feet for the miles of straight miles that the highway extended. In that direction your mother walked. It seemed they had fought—she had fought, he had complacently responded—that it was time to be going, but he wanted to look some more at all those flowers and the mountains beyond them and the sun and sky beyond those. You can't remember there being anything spoken, but you remember she meant, "You're wasting your life." And he meant, "This is my life."

You remember the magnetism of watching your mother leave you, and sensing that it was all right, after all. For here there was another attraction. She walked east, and east could always be held. But further, over that low but visually insurmountable rise, lay the west. The west was where you would go. But now you would wait with your father. It was, after all, as beautiful as Heaven.

Yet the dream was only a trite community theater production of the truth. It hadn't really been like that. Your father's mother was going under for surgery, and he was heading home to be with her, since the rest of the family couldn't make it. Your mother said that they couldn't afford for them both to go, and she hoped he'd be fine going alone. He should have known something was wrong when she talked about money as if it were finite.

He drove out of sight down the east stretch of the highway. You waved from the fence. The next day, your mother was up early, and somehow had a moving van which two stocky men were loading with what you had thought was your furniture. She didn't answer when you asked her, "What's going on, Mom?"

She kept herself busy, packing and even helping the men load, but it only took less than two hours, and as the furnishings and boxes spilled out of your home and into the back of that truck like the sand from an hourglass, you realized that there was no more reason on this earth to treat your mother like a mother, and you grabbed her by the arm as she once again tried to slip by you.

"Tell me what's going on!" you shouted at her.

"We're… listen," she said. "Listen… we need to… just let me put this box in the truck, and we'll talk."

You looked at her and realized that your anger had already peaked, and that frustration was losing the bout to desperation and anxiety, so you let her go and followed her to the doorway, watching as she gingerly set the box inside the truck, then came back inside. She sat on a kitchen chair, you leaned against the counter. The room held only the two of you, two chairs, and a few wads of newspaper leftover from wrapping the dishes you had naively planned to continue eating off of.

"Well, kiddo," she said, "I guess you can see…." Then she started to break down. "You can see… I'm going."

"Why? Where are you going?" You asked, leading her like a child.

"I'm… Oh, honey, you just don't understand! I can't… What's going on is just… Oh, honey!" Then she really started to cry. "Just, you know I love you. You know that. So, just tell your father I'm so sorry."

You watched her cry for a moment, but maybe knew in that one morning you had already stopped loving her. You looked at her like she was an actress, and she wasn't about to convince you of how much she was hurting when you were the one who would still be standing there when everyone else pulled away, and you were the one who would have to be brave enough to break your own father's heart.

You watched her go, without being offered a hug. That evening… well, that evening was hard for you. Except for your room, which she had left alone, and your father's things, which were now stacked in neat little piles on the floor of his so vacant bedroom, you didn't have but an end table and a roll of toilet paper in the whole damned house. In the sun's hazy golden wake, you set up a few old cans on the fence and knocked em down again with a pellet gun from thirty yards. But that was just to keep you from thinking. You realized that, if you ever started, you had already stopped hating your mother, even resenting her. But you couldn't say that you loved her again. That truly had all come to an end that morning. Still, you had wanted her to come home, just so that you wouldn't have to see the look on your father's face.

After four days of waiting for your mother to come home, of hoping she'd at least call, but mostly hoping she'd come home before Dad knew she was gone, and before she was gone so long it meant she was gone for good, a little bird told you she wasn't coming home. You hated that bird enough to finally cry. The next day, your father pulled up the drive.

Your mother called a few days after he arrived. He had been in a minor state of shock, though not panic, until then. After that single phone call, he seemed all right. Really. He got the answers he needed, apparently. The most shocking thing about your mother's departure was that your father remained strong, focused. But he had to be. Mom had taken everything solid from you, and your father had to start over the very next day by buying anything to start filling the house up again. You ate caned food off of paper plates for about ten days. Meanwhile, you learned to cook, fast, and learned how to shop, too.

The UPS truck delivered new dishes another week later, and periodically brought other items ordered from the JCPenney or Sears catalogs. But your father needed to be frugal. See, your mother had racked up some sizable numbers on their credit cards. Even the things she took from under you weren't paid for. So your father worked diligently to pay off things he didn't even own, and tried to put together some sort of life for himself with the leftovers. "I guess she deserved something after so many years," he said once, as if he were admitting life had been punishment for her. But you were alive and aware all that time, and you knew full well that only the end had been hard. You knew how well he treated her, and you started to resent her again because she was breaking a man who was carrying all the world that you could see on his back.

Not long after she left, mandatory overtime was lifted and a voluntary system began. Your father, burdened as he was, kept working the long shifts. He still does. He's got those old credit card bills just about whacked, and everything in this house is paid for. But the house is a burden all its own. No one could afford to buy it after the mill's troubles, and he certainly can't afford to buy a second home simultaneously, so he's stuck out here in the home his wife wanted. You're thinking of telling him, maybe even tonight, that you want to go into the military for a few years before college, even though he knows it isn't true. But you think you can convince him. You think that maybe the relief that he'll feel when he hears that will be enough to make him accept it. And, honestly, though you've never considered yourself a soldier, you figure it won't be all that bad, and that it's worth it to see him come home in the daylight again. No matter what happens, whether you spend a year or two at the community college nearby, or enlist, you'll be leaving soon, and you'll be more worried about him then. You need that time, that time you've been missing. You need it everyday for the rest of the days you have together, and you need it to start now. So you drop the kindling in the box by the firewood, and though you can hear your aunt calling you from the front door, you just respond "OK," then wander off and assume your normal position at that fence, and consider maybe going in to get a jacket. But, no, he'll be coming home real soon.

Mom had taken everything solid from you, and your father had to start over the very next day by buying anything to start filling the house up again.

ERIC PROCHASKA

Currently teaches English at the University of Seoul, in South Korea. His recent publications include "My Garden Which Never Grows" in the e-zine Moondance *(Spring 2000).*

On a Clear Day

BRIAN QUINN

Some momentous experiences can seem much less impressive with the passing of time. Others, not so much.

WE WERE FLYING ACROSS OHIO FROM EAST TO west, heading for Oshkosh. It was a hot, bright day in late summer. Airspeed, 220 knots. Moderate headwind. We were at 5,100 feet. I was at the controls, and Sam Cross sat in the co-pilot's seat, telling stories. Below us was I-90, like a black ribbon across the green of Ohio. I was using the highway as a convenient directional. My flight plan: follow the interstate to Chicago and make a right. I had just passed a friendly word with the tower at Akron Airport when Sam spoke up.

"I hitchhiked on that road once—did I ever tell you?"

"No," I said.

"It was Thanksgiving, years ago. God, it was cold, so cold. We were going the other way. We stood under one of those bridges down there, with Akron just a few miles away and New York City 500 miles ahead. On the east side of the bridge the sun was shining, casting hard-edged black shadows; and on the west side it was snowing. It was like we were on some sort of meteorological margin. I was with a friend of mine, Rob. We were having a great time, even though we were frozen and tired and grungy. We were just 18, freshmen up at college. I had just fallen in love for the first time, just gone away from home for the first time, just started thinking for myself for the first time, taking care of myself for the first time…"

"Tell me about the falling in love part," I said. "I love those stories. Was she pretty?"

"I thought so. She was the first girl I ever…"

I interrupted. "Do I have to hear this part?"

"…the first girl I had ever kissed, I was going to say," said Sam. "I know, that's hard to believe in these days, but it was true nonetheless. Her name was Kristen Daily, and I swear I thought I'd marry her."

"What happened to her?"

Sam shrugged. "I was madly in love with her then, but I was such a baby. The tortures that woman inflicted on me—or rather, that I suffered for her. Almost from the very first. We met at dinner one night, when she sat down with Rob. She was so blond, so slender, so blue-eyed, and I was just so shy, so removed, and so, so jealous of Rob. I suffered immediately."

"You stole your friend's girlfriend? You're a louse!"

"I did not. It became obvious pretty quick that they were only friends. Rob had a girl back home in New Haven. No, I never stole her from anyone. She was unattached, but somehow we got attached. I walked her back to her dorm. We talked. You know… how does someone fall in love, anyhow?"

"Don't ask me," I answered, scanning over the controls.

"Anyhow, we were soon in love, or at least I thought we were, and everything was perfect."

"Oh, really? Perfect?"

Sam smiled. "No, you're right. Kristen was not perfect. I found that out later. She was capricious, at times cruel, a flirt, and very middle class. But that was a good lesson, because I'm not perfect. My faults are different from hers—no better, no worse—and I can be cruel, too.

She was so blond, so slender, so blue-eyed, and I was just so shy, so removed, and so, so jealous of Rob. I suffered immediately.

But learning that perfection and love have nothing to do with each other were lessons I needed."

Cross stopped suddenly. "Is all this boring you? I'm just remembering a lot of it for the first time in years. My wayward youth. Stop me if I bore you—I'm just blathering on like Marlowe in a Joseph Conrad story."

"I like Conrad," I answered, and told him to continue.

"Anyway, I was telling you about my hitchhiking adventure. That happened about a month after Kristen and I met. By then we were a campus fixture, Kristen and I. We'd sit anywhere, everywhere, the science building (she was a geology major, for God's sakes), the library, the lakefront, the dining hall, wherever. And we'd talk. That's all I really remember doing in college was talking. I have no idea where all those words came from, and, now, honestly, I hardly remember any of the words themselves.

"One night we all took the train down into Chicago to see some show or concert, and on the way back we talked about hitchhiking. I remember that Rags Wheeler was there. He told how he ran away from his home in Macon, Georgia, and hitchhiked to New Orleans when he was 15. Chad Tower told how he hitchhiked from New York to Washington. Judy Ng said she used to hitchhike in Taiwan all the time—it was accepted. It became a general bull session about hitching and bumming around. Remember, I had been nowhere and seen nothing then. Even when I had traveled at all, I went with my family or with a group. I felt like I had never done anything."

"Well, that's changed, yes?"

He smiled. "Some, sure. The one thing that I remember clearest in that talk was that nobody had hitched anywhere during the winter. Only the summer. Winter was somehow too dangerous, too forbidding."

"So, of course, you had to, right?"

"Well, I'm a sucker for a dare, especially a dare I dare to myself. And Rob, I discovered, felt the same. After we got back to Lake Forest, Rob and I wound up in the laundry room with a road map of the eastern United States."

"The laundry room?" I asked.

"It was two in the morning. We didn't want to disturb roommates and all."

"Oh, of course. So you made a laundry room pact, eh?"

Sam smiled again. "Yep. We decided to hitchhike to New York over Thanksgiving week. You understand," Sam said, "there was absolutely no reason to do this. Our parents were definitely sending us airfare. We just wanted to. And to make sure we would, we very quickly told everybody we were going to do it.

"Naturally, Kristen didn't think much of our planned adventure. She knew Rob and liked him, but she worried about us. That was great, to have a woman who wasn't my mother worrying about me! That was fine with me. To leave a young woman with a kiss and go off to face some unknown, some darkness, maybe some danger. That was very fine indeed, and Kristen, though worried, was good enough not to try to dissuade us.

"So Kristen and I talked constantly, and Rob and I looked at maps and made our plans, and our friends bet each other that we wouldn't do it, and the days went by. The week of Thanksgiving was midterms week. It was cold and blustery, not snowing yet, but the north wind was sharp. On Monday I breezed through my chem exam and struggled through philosophy. I had a paper to finish for my sociology class instead of an exam.

"Kristen's exams were all completed on Monday and that night she took the six o'clock train down to Chicago, where she would switch to a train for St. Paul, Minnesota, where her family lived. I went to the station with her. I carried her bags to the platform while she bought herself a ticket. Down the tracks I could see the bright light of the train approaching. Kristen came over to me and we kissed and I said goodbye. She knew how I felt. I didn't really want to see her get onto the train, didn't want to watch her pull away north. So we kissed and I walked away. I could feel her eyes burning the back of my head, boring into my back. The bells of the train crossing were ringing, and the red lights were flashing as the barrier came down, and suddenly I turned around and called her name."

Sam laughed at himself. "Kristen looked at me with such surprise. I had told her when we first started going together that I believed in clean goodbyes, that once I had said goodbye—for the evening, for the weekend, or for whatever—I would never turn back to wave or anything. Clean goodbyes. And yet, there I was, turning. Kristen was stunned. She looked pathetically happy that I had broken my rule for her. I called to her and she ran up to me. The train was screeching to a halt, already the big double doors in the center of each car were opening and the conductors were swinging gracefully down onto the platform like dancers.

" 'Give me something of yours,' I said, 'something I can take with me to New York.' She unwrapped this long blue-and-white scarf and threw it around my neck. 'Here, I hope you'll stay warm,' she said. Almost everyone was on the train by then. We scooted over to the doors and I tossed her bags up after her and then the doors closed and she was gone. I yelled 'I love you!' but she could not hear me over the clatter and crash of the train gathering speed, and then she was gone. I walked back to the dorm feeling like a tremendous hypocrite, but a very happy one. It was all just crap that I'd read in a book somewhere, about clean goodbyes and not looking back."

"Hemingway, probably," I said. "The man has a lot to answer for."

Sam laughed. "Too true. Anyway, the next day was Tuesday and we were getting a ride out to the interstate to begin our adventure."

"About time," I said.

Sam laughed again. "Well, maybe. But all that preface is necessary, I think. Everything has a context, even just getting from Chicago to New York to celebrate Turkey Day. And that was the context. Kristen, college, youth. And the weather, I suppose. It was cold. We didn't get out to the interstate until late in the afternoon, about three. The sky was obscured without any rain or snow falling, but the threat was there. I had Kristen's scarf wrapped around my neck. It was getting dark already. Rob carried a small bag, like a gym bag. I took nothing with me. Rob had made a sign that said NEW YORK printed in bright red capital letters.

"We each had some money. I think I had $30. We were let off onto the side of the interstate out near O'Hare. The wind whistled across the wide roadway and we jumped up and down with excitement, two stupid 18-year-old kids out on a lark on a cold November afternoon. Neither of us wore gloves. I don't think either of us owned gloves. We took turns holding the sign up to oncoming traffic and finally an old man in an orange Pontiac stopped and picked us up and we were off. He was heading into Indiana, he told us.

"This was great. We were on our way. The old guy stopped at the tollbooth and the toll collector leaned out and told us it was illegal to solicit rides on the United States interstates. He sounded so disapproving. Rob and

I looked at each other and laughed inside. This was better and better. We were on our own, between our two homes, with school and our futures behind us, and our parents and our pasts in front of us in a great inversion… And a woman was sitting in a stone house in Minnesota worrying about me and the authorities already disapproved. Rob and I were very happy where we were.

"We drove past Gary with that old man and it was dark then. I saw the small flames atop the smokestacks for the first time from that old man's car. He was a sour, grumpy old guy, a salesman, who talked incessantly, but he only had one topic."

"Sex?" I asked.

"Absolutely, but sex with a twist, with a twisted anger to it. He talked about the waitresses who would put out in the diners along the roadway, about hitchhiking girls he had propositioned and how he'd made it with some of them, about farmer's daughters and college girls and women of all colors, weights, and levels of attractiveness. Well, what with his incredibly long catalog of women who had been blessed with his sexual skills, it seemed to take days before Rob and I were let out by the side of the road a hundred yards from the La Porte, Indiana, exit. We were profoundly embarrassed, but still we both felt this was an adventure, a real adventure, and that he had been a character in an adventure, almost a stock character."

Sam laughed. "La Porte! La Porte! Hardly a name of magic, eh? A little known rural burg somewhere down below us where farmers buy tractors and Ford pickup trucks and seed. There's a movie house and a 'home cooking' restaurant and a corner bar and the county high school. I think it might be the county seat. I don't know for sure, though. It has a substation of the Indiana State Police, however. The station is painted white and blue and it's very clean inside. That I know.

"The night was as black as burnt coffee, which we would have gladly accepted at that point. We were cold, just out of that old guy's overheated car. Rob wasn't dressed for winter. He wore a thin corduroy jacket. I took Kristen's scarf off and lent it to him. Cars passed us by scornfully. We kept our thumbs out when there were headlights coming at us, then plunged our hands into our pockets as the cars passed. We had had such luck already—one ride! That was our luck—that it shocked us when we were still standing by the side of the road a half-hour after the old man let us out.

"Finally a car pulled onto the shoulder in front of us. I screamed in delight and Rob grabbed his bag and we trotted to the car. A red light suddenly whirled on the car's roof and a siren moaned softly. A large, a very large State Trooper climbed out of the car. 'You boys don't understand,' he said. 'You're not allowed to hitch on the tollway. Come on, fellows, get in.'

"We climbed into the back seat of the cruiser, feeling abashed and foolish. 'Cold out there, isn't it?' the trooper asked. We didn't answer. He didn't care. 'Heading for New York, boys?' We nodded. 'Well, good luck, but you're going to La Porte first.' We rode into La Porte. The cop was a human guy. His car was warm. He told us we could not hitch on I-90, but we could on route 20, which was parallel. But first we went to the stationhouse. Cops took our fingerprints and asked our names and checked to make sure we weren't runaways or wanted men. We sat on a long, hard, wooden pew, like a church pew in a state police station in middle Indiana somewhere. Time was passing. It was almost 11.

The door was six feet to our left. I grabbed Rob and his bag. Rob started to say something but I shook my head at him.

"The shifts changed. A sergeant came in and looked us over. Then he and the desk officer went into the back room somewhere, probably to get coffee. We were left alone. The door was six feet to our left. I grabbed Rob and his bag. Rob started to say something but I shook my head at him. We ran out the door and ran as far as we could in the dark. It had begun to rain lightly, a cold mist. Rob ran loosely, easily, a track man. I kept just behind him, urging him on, adrenaline pumping furiously through my veins.

We escaped.

"I can't tell you what that meant to me. It was Robin Hood and Zorro, Jesse James and Cole Younger, Harrison Ford movies and all the remakes of "Beau Geste" and "The Prisoner of Zenda!" Even as I ran I laughed at my pretending, at my pretensions. It was preposterous. We had been caught hitchhiking, for heaven's sakes. But it all fit in with the adventure. It was all part of it, running from the cops in the rain in mid-America, and me in love for the first time. Our breath spouted in front of us hot and steamy and we tore through it as we ran. We were running past a feed grain store in La Porte, Indiana—the stuff of romance, yes?"

Sam looked down at Indiana and smiled. The engine hummed softly. The radio crackled and popped, but no one interrupted his story.

"We ran until we hurt and then we slowed down and tried to figure out where we were. I had tried to remember which road lead up toward the Interstate and I guess I was right, because up ahead of us we saw the glow of traffic. We trudged up toward the highway, watching warily behind us for the State Troopers.

"That was when we actually had some luck. A bright

yellow Mustang pulled over and a young guy rolled down the window and asked if we needed a lift. 'Yes!' we cried and we piled in as quick as we could. He was a teenager, like us, and he was going into South Bend for some reason or another. We told him about the cops and he said, 'I hate pigs!'

"We rode together until South Bend, where, it turned out, Rob had a friend at Notre Dame. We debated calling the guy and staying with him, but we decided to keep going. The kid in the Mustang suggested we go to the truck stop by the interstate and try to bum a ride with a trucker. We thought that would work, and, sure enough, it did. The third or fourth trucker we asked was heading for Toledo, Ohio, and he said he'd give us a ride. So we rode high and dry and warm across the rest of Indiana and into Ohio. It was late when we got down from that trucker's cab, and we were achy from the bouncing and giddy from being awake.

"We had no idea where we really were—somewhere in western Ohio, that's all. Not many cars were going by at that hour. Rob and I waited under a highway bridge, out of the freezing rain, sleet, snow, whatever it was then. We were actually happy. I wrapped Kristen's scarf a bit tighter around my neck and stamped my numb feet on the concrete. Although I was cold and bored and tired, I still quivered with excitement. Every bit of me knew that this was an adventure, that every car or truck that picked us up was part of the adventure. Even the cars that whooshed by and ignored us were part of it. I walked deeper into the shadows of the bridge and peed against a pillar, my back to the road. Rob yelled my name.

"A van was slowing down, a white van with a luggage rack on top. We ran over and climbed in. The driver was a guy in his twenties, going back to Akron where he worked in the Goodyear factory, he said. He gave us a ride. I fell asleep on the dirty floor of his van, my head on Rob's bag. Rob snored in the passenger seat. The radio played country music.

Sam stopped. "Well, nothing much else happened. That guy let us out near Akron, and we waited out the dawn on that meteorological margin I told you about. The snow behind us, sunshine ahead. A guy picked us up there after a longish wait, and gave us the best ride we had had, all the way across Pennsylvania to Philadelphia, Willow Grove, to be exact. The driver was a silent kind of guy, not unfriendly, just not talkative. I tried to figure out what he did, but he was just someone going home for Thanksgiving, like us.

"The Pennsylvania Turnpike looked very beautiful to me. The rain and snow hadn't fallen this far east, and it was an autumn land, all browns and yellows. There was an old barn near Somerset and I imagined rebuilding it into a home for Kristen and me. Rob was asleep again. I was no longer tired. The guy listened to talk radio and muttered at some of the callers. He seemed faintly right-wing, but not a jerk. I stared around me from the back seat.

"We got our last ride near Philadelphia. A man and a woman in their late 40s picked us up and drove us into New York City. They said we reminded them of their twin boys, who were at NYU. They had Maryland license plates. They were going to have Thanksgiving with Danny and Davy in 'Greenwich Village, imagine that!' We thanked them for the ride and got out of their Ford just under the Washington Square arch. I was on more-or-less home turf, then. My folks lived out on Long Island, but friends and I had often come into the Village for shows and to buy albums and books. It was just about five. The city glimmered and gleamed in the dusk. With the change in time zones, it had taken almost exactly 24 hours to get to New York from Chicago.

"We still had most of our money left, so we splurged on a cab. I got out at Penn Station. Rob got out of the cab for a minute, too, and hugged me. We didn't have to say we had made it. We had, and that was that. We were dirty and stupid with fatigue and cold. We were unshaven and splashed with the mud of five states. We had come so far, through wet and cold and dark. We had been arrested and had escaped. People passing by heading into Penn Station looked well dressed and clean. They smelled fresh. They were smiling and carrying packages and briefcases.

"I said goodbye to Rob and laughed. He laughed back. He continued on to Grand Central, I went into Penn Station and ate a slice of pizza. I bought a ticket for the train and a paperback book. On the train I looked at the people around me with surprise, somehow. They looked so normal. I started to read the book and almost fell asleep. I stood in the vestibule near the door so I wouldn't sleep past my stop.

"I listened to the other passengers talk, and their New York accents were thick and relentless. I had never noticed how we spoke before; I had grown up there, talking like that. But I was growing away from them. Kristen made fun of my accent and I know I was trying to change, to soften my speech, to slow it down."

"You don't have much of an accent now," I said.

"She kept working on me, I guess." Sam smiled. "Even years after she was gone.

"At 6:30 I was home. My folks were in an uproar to see me. My mother had been telephoning me every hour to find out when I'd be home. My father glared at me for making my mother upset. But they were both happy to see me. My mother screamed even louder when she learned I had hitchhiked home. Dad just smiled."

Sam shrugged. "That felt fine, too. Everyone asked where I had gotten the scarf and I just said 'College.' I hadn't told anyone about Kristen yet, and I wouldn't for

a while. I went upstairs and showered and shaved and changed and called my old high school friends. We said we'd meet at the local diner, around the corner from my family's house. I got there early and called Kristen from a phone booth. Then I waited for my friends.

"The next day was Turkey Day. I ate enormous quantities of turkey and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie. Then I went for a walk. It was cool, but not cold. I saw my reflection in storefront windows and didn't think I had changed that much on the outside. But I was different. The place seemed smaller. I saw my high school girlfriend and I was embarrassed, somehow. So was she. She had been dating other people, too, and neither of us knew how to say that. But eventually we did, and we stayed friends.

"Well, that was that. Kristen and I broke up long, long ago, before the next term was even half over. If I felt pain at the time, it's long since passed. God knows where that scarf is now. I haven't hitchhiked in, oh, who knows how long? I can't stay up all night these days. No matter."

For a while we flew on in silence. Sam looked out his window. On the horizon we could see Chicago spreading itself out in front of us, stretched along the deep green water of the lake. I began a gentle bank to the right, to the north. The sun gleamed off the wings. The sky was a bright blue, endless and wide.

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That would make him the biggest bigamist in bigamy history.