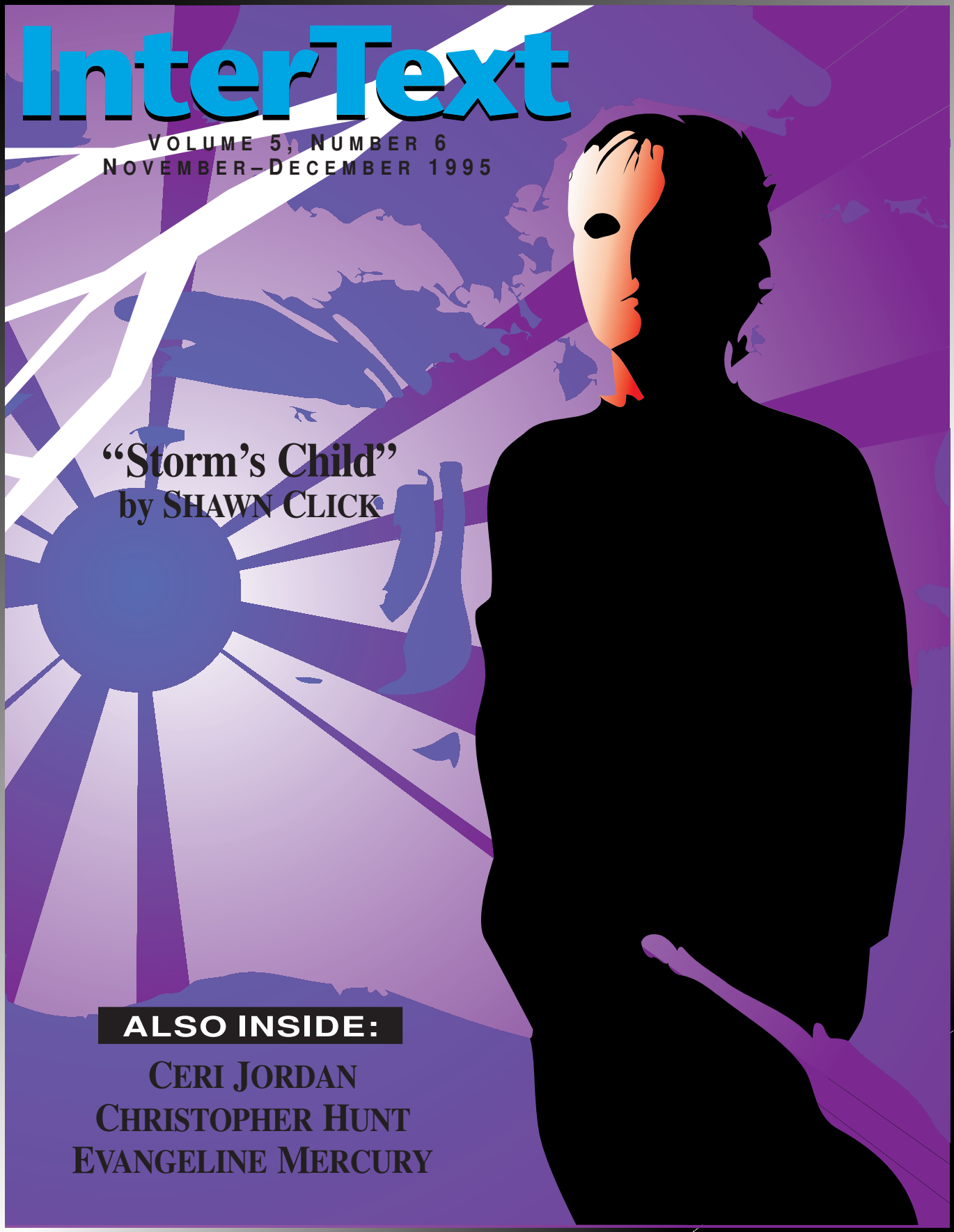
InterText

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 6
NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1995



"Storm's Child"
by SHAWN CLICK

ALSO INSIDE:

CERI JORDAN
CHRISTOPHER HUNT
EVANGELINE MERCURY

ISSN 1071-7676

JQUAN

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NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1995
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***InterText*'s next issue will be released January 15, 1996.**

***InterText* Vol. 5, No. 6.** *InterText* (ISSN 1071-7676) is published electronically on a bi-monthly basis. Reproduction of this magazine is permitted as long as the magazine is not sold (either by itself or as part of a collection) and the entire text of the issue remains unchanged. Copyright © 1995, Jason Snell. All stories Copyright © 1995 by their respective authors. *InterText* is produced using Apple Macintosh computers and is converted into ASCII/Setext, Adobe PostScript, Adobe Acrobat PDF, and HTML (World-Wide Web) formats for distribution. For more information about InterText, send a message to *intertext@intertext.com* with a subject of *info.* For writers' guidelines, send a message to *intertext@intertext.com* with a subject of *guidelines.*

First Text

JASON SNELL

KEEP OUT!

OF ALL THE FUNNY LINES HE uttered in his 87 years on the planet, maybe the most famous Groucho Marx comment is this: "I don't care to belong to any club that will have me as a member." Given his fame, it's doubtful any club would have turned Groucho away. But the fact is, there are certain places in this world where most (or all) of us would never be allowed entrance. People want to feel special, feel that for whatever reason—whether it's their schooling, their experience, the color of their skin, the social standing of their parents—they're on the inside while the unwashed masses are on the outside.

The information revolution currently manifested in the popularity of the Internet was supposed to make publishing and distributing information easier than it has ever been. For the first time, individuals were supposed to have power previously only given to an elite few—the power to widely distribute ideas.

And it's true. Something like *InterText* could never have existed in a "traditional" medium like the ink-on-paper magazine. Thanks to the technology, it's possible for a handful of people to create a publication read by thousands of people all over the world, distributed for free and without any advertising support of any kind. In that sense, you could say we're a success story.

But just because the technology has succeeded in making it *possible* for our voices to be heard by people all over the world doesn't mean that our voices will be heard by that potential audience. Although the Internet has lowered the economic restrictions to publishing, people are just replacing those old barriers with new ones. As a result, people have gained greater potential to disseminate their ideas while at the same time having that potential reduced to a fraction of what it should be.

LAST MONTH MY WIFE AND I WENT ON VACATION TO the northwest, visiting Seattle and Vancouver. While we were there, we spent some time with Steve, a friend of mine from high school who works as a transportation engineer. He always got good grades in school, including in English, but he never impressed me as a potential publisher.

When we visited him, we discovered he had been developing a series of Web pages on a variety of subjects—his newfound ability to host web pages from his America Online account had turned him into an online publisher. And there are thousands of people just like him, who are (or will be) taking advantage of AOL's page-hosting capabilities and easy-to-use Web authoring programs like Adobe PageMill, Netscape Navigator Gold, and even old-guard applications like WordPerfect, which has been spruced up with a variety of Web authoring features.

This is the promise of the Internet fulfilled, right? Sure. Except Steve's train page (or anything remotely like it elsewhere on the Web) will *never* be Cool Site of the Day, nor will it be a highlight at any of the other "cool site" compilations on the Web.

No longer can paper costs and lack of advertising dollars deter twentysomething transportation engineers with an interest in historic trains and good beer from becoming publishers. So instead, we seem to be creating a culture that turns its nose up at pages not optimized for Netscape 2.0 (meaning they're incomprehensible in any other browser). We sniff at sites that don't offer extensive back-end scripts, that don't offer an interactive forms-based quiz, that don't have professional artwork, that don't broadcast live audio, or that don't provide discussion areas.

In other words, you can have the best content in the world, but it doesn't matter unless you can prove you spent a lot of money (or a lot of time, which in a world where even amateurish Web designers charge $50 per hour) on your site. Good content? Well, we can take it or leave it, but if you've got an animation of a spinning cow on your pages (the appropriately vapid draw behind Time-Warner's travesty called *Netly News)*, you've got to be good, right?

Sure, packaging and delivery matter—information has to get to its audience in a useful and compelling way. Evaluating web sites on the basis of their window-dressing is very much like judging a book by its cover, yet we seem to insist on doing it. We've *got* to create those clubs that wouldn't have you as a member, and now we'll resort to the trivial to marginalize the very people who just got some power and freedom.

Welcome to the exciting, empowering "new world" of the Internet. Bring your fresh ideas. And bring your credit card, because the Internet doesn't respect content, but it does respect American Express. Sound like any old worlds you know?

Handlers

CERI JORDAN

"If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man." —Mark Twain

IT'S AN UNCERTAIN BUSINESS, DOG HANDLING.

Connecting is easy enough. All you need is a PC with access to the normal webs, the deviousness of a hacker, and a little patience. It's what you do then that matters.

They can tell, you see. They can tell that it's not their normal handler, that the command on the microchip inside their heads is not His Master's Voice, that something's wrong. If you're not careful, gentle, patient with them, they'll howl the kennels down until someone thinks to check their Links for an incoming signal and then you're as good as dead—

Got him.

Through the Link I feel his confusion, the faint sensation of hair prickling upright on the back of my neck, even a low defensive growl starting to rise in my throat as it is in his.

Withdraw.

Just a little, into background noise at the back of the mind, present in the way that a word on the tip of your tongue is: there-but-not-there. Flickering ghostly among all those unfocused, nagging sensations that pass for animal memory, brushing through them until I find something that will serve.

There. His last meal, the sensation of tearing raw flesh.

Link the sensation of pleasure to your presence and slip through into his consciousness, just for an instant, then withdraw: then again, and again…

By the fifth time, he dimly associates the shadowy presence brooding behind his eyes with some sensual pleasure, and by the eighth, he is welcoming it, welcoming you, anticipating.

Begging for it.

And I almost lose him in the wave of anger and desperation and pain, have to fight it down, pushing the image of her face out of my mind, closing connections and locking doors, filling my head with the dull wet sensations of animal pleasures instead, things he will know and understand…

Forcing out of my head the memory of the balding receptionist bantering with his friends under the RENT TERMINAL SPACE BY THE HOUR—ANONYMITY GUARANTEED sign as he fetched me my key *I keep trying to get my wife to do it doggy-style but she won't come out in the yard* and their sick laughter echoing all through the lobby.

New memories. Dog memories. A moment's freedom in the yard, running for the very joy of it; last visit to the breeding center, stupidly mounting bitch after bitch, as required.

Not much difference between dogs and people, really.

Growing cynical now—suppress that. Dogs don't understand cynicism. Mustn't confuse him, mustn't jeopardize the link.

Not much difference between dogs and their handlers.

And that is something the mastiff really does understand.

BEGINNING TO SNEAK TINY CAUTIOUS FEELERS INTO the senses now, test them out: one eyelid scrolls back, the slow brown eye rolls, a blurry monochrome pan across the yard beyond the wire. The guard on the wall, rifle slung over his shoulder, the visual confusion of broken cloud at his back. Someone coming to feed them now, hoisting buckets of raw stinking flesh to the hatches, his sense of smell abruptly sharpened: she has fair hair and for an instant I think, stupidly, it is Laura.

New memories. Dog memories. A moment's freedom in the yard, running for the very joy of it; at the breeding center, stupidly mounting bitch after bitch. Not much difference between dogs and people, really.

And I am not, under any circumstances, supposed to think of Laura.

But I do, of course.

I TRY TO THINK OF HER AS SHE WAS WHEN WE FIRST met: I a nervous, sober girl of 17, and she a high-flying programmer, magnificent and unattainable. Surely she could never want me.

I try to remember finding out that she did. Try to think of the flat and the holidays in Asia and the silly petty arguments that ended in lovemaking among the scabby shrubbery of the roof garden on sunny afternoons.

I try, and I fail. Instead I find myself seeing the funeral.

THEY SENT HER HOME IN A SEALED COFFIN.

At the funeral, the minister went outside to distract the armed, dark-suited men who had materialized the moment the hearse drew up, while I cursed and sobbed trying

to prise open the welded metal box for one last look. Her father and my brother and the curate were all hammering at it with candlesticks and pulling at the welds with their nails, but when eventually the curate's husband hissed at us from the door that they were coming, we had only bloodied fingers and a scratched coffin to show for it. I wept, more from frustration than grief, and had to keep my left hand in my pocket all through the service to hide the blood on my black lace gloves.

It would be nice if I could say I'd told her that taking work with Quälek was a bad idea—*never get involved with government agencies, there's always trouble*. But no, I'd been delighted. Top of her field at last: cybernetic communications with guard dogs today, human experiments tomorrow.

Human experiments,God,don't even think about that—

DON'T THINK.

Or rather, think dog.

Taking tentative control of the legs now. Peculiar sensation, four legs. Coordination problems. Hard to balance. Glad I waited until the feed was over and the staff was gone. If they saw him tottering about like this, they'd have him shot as rabid. It gets easier. You learn how much control to allow him, how little effort you actually need to trigger each step. You learn to cooperate.

Because we're in this together, aren't we?

Dog tail wags eager assent.

Almost due for morning exercise now. He'll be here soon. And we'll recognize him. Oh yes. As long as I live, I won't forget that face.

THE VIDEO FOOTAGE ARRIVED THE WEEK AFTER THE funeral.

I still can't believe their arrogance. To not even fear that I might go to the civil police or the media with it, or even attempt some personal revenge. To have found it *amusing*…

It came in a plain package without a note. I had been trying to get information from Laura's co-workers about what had happened, and hoped this might be some anonymous response, so I put it on at once.

Laura.

They had not tied her, but the rifle muzzles wavering in and out of shot were all too plain, and her naked back was piebald with blood and bruises. One of them fastened a collar and leash about her throat, and then the oldest of them pushed her down on the bare concrete and mounted her from behind, doggy fashion, and she cried and begged and closed her eyes as if it might all fade away, and then the next of them, and the next…

I tried to make myself watch the whole tape, as if understanding would somehow make it easier to bear, but I never could. And I did send copies to the media and the police, but as you can imagine…

Just before I came here, I carried the original tape reverently up to the rooftop and took a blowtorch to it.

THE HANDLERS ARE CROSSING THE YARD.

I recognize quite a few of them, and I wonder how many it will be possible to take this time. How many seconds will my tool have before some gaping horrified thug regains enough composure to draw a pistol? Enough time to tear out two throats, if I impress upon him the need for urgency.

But carefully, little one. No hasty casual ripping, as you would to bleed your prey to death. There will be medical aid close by; there's too much chance they'd survive. Your jaws are strong enough to snap a man's neck. Do so.

Key in the lock. Turning.

Bound from the cage as you always do, friendly and docile, so they are taken utterly off guard. As she must have been the night she found policemen waiting in the lobby as she left work, and the armored van outside.

They will destroy you as a rabid beast, but you die a martyr. As will the next dog, and the next, until I am caught or they all are dead. And I mean *all.*

I think I will find a female next time.

They should learn that even bitches can bite back.

CERI JORDAN

Is a writer, theatre practitioner, and general rogue and vagabond. She lives in Wales and has had work published in several small-press magazines. This is her first electronic publication.

D u s t

CHRISTOPHER HUNT

In the war against brutality, pain, and hopelessness, feelings can be your greatest enemy—or your most powerful ally.

WE CAME AT DAWN TO THE CITY OF THE DEAD. The heavy treads of our tanks and APCs ground the crumbling road into bone-white dust.

We perched on the riveted white edges of our armor-plated vehicles, eyes narrowed in the sun's early glare, our skin and uniforms coated in layers of grime and sweat.

Huddled corpses watched us from the roadside, their freeze-dried haunches settling softly into the desert's swirling sands, their sticklike bodies as linear and two-dimensional as a child's drawings. They stared at us accusingly from hollow faces, empty eyes grimly welcoming, mouths stretched wide in sardonic grins, crooked skeletal fingers still clutching rusted food bowls licked clean and bare. Tattered shrouds fluttered diffidently in the careless breeze.

Even the flies were dying, buzzing angrily in futile circles, tearing at flesh as dry and unnourishing as old shoe leather.

The city shimmered in the morning light, a vast jumble of bleached and broken buildings, hollowed out and brittle as old bones. A tangled forest of TV antennas and satellite dishes stretched from the rooftops, their angular, leafless branches black against the morning sky. The sighs of the dead whispered through silent alleys and gaping windows.

A woman crouched on an empty oil drum next to the gate of a barbed wire enclosure, hugging her knees tightly. A Red Cross armband was wrapped around one of her sleeves like a bloody bandage. Empty grain sacks were scattered around her like discarded clothes. Her sunburned face was lined and scarred with the pain of others. Her eyes were as hard and blue as our helmets.

"You're too late," she told us, her voice dry and gritty as the desert wind. "You're always too late."

We offered her water and food, penicillin and kind words, but she took nothing. She crouched silently on her oil drum, rocking gently back and forth, gazing unblinkingly at the desert behind us, as if by staring at it hard enough she could force it to bloom, to bring forth the life buried deep within its sandy bosom.

Finally, we picked her up. She crouched in our arms, still rocking, her body humming like a high-tension wire. Her hair was knotted in a loose bun; stray strands as thin and dry as old straw rasped against her face and neck. We carried her to the ambulance, laying her gently on a thin canvas cot in the stale, overheated interior. We sponged her face with lukewarm water and disinfectant, wiping away death's residue but not its memory. We placed salt tablets and Nembutal under her tongue and a melting ice pack on her forehead. We stretched her curled limbs and spoke gently to her of ice cream and cool mountain streams.

"You're too late," she whispered, eyes sliding behind translucent lids as consciousness shut down and her mind moved to deeper levels. We watched as sleep passed its healing hand across her features, softening sorrow's lines. No longer a haggard woman overwhelmed by despair's fierce tenacity, she seemed almost a girl, innocence not yet faded from her face. Hope persisted in the serene curve of her mouth, the determined angle of her jaw, the gentle rise and fall of her breasts.

WE SHOULDERED OUR WEAPONS AND STEPPED BACK out into the dying landscape, posing grimly for the television cameras that tirelessly tracked us through frame after frame of emptiness, desolation, and death, breaking down the horror into digestible fragments ready for instant transmission to televisions in that other world,

We placed salt tablets under her tongue and a melting ice pack on her forehead. We spoke gently to her of ice cream and cool mountain streams. "You're too late," she whispered.

a world so distant we were beginning to doubt its existence, where death was a well-kept secret. That world existed for us now only as a secret memory, a myth embedded in our DNA, a place to which we could never return, except in our dreams.

We had come to this land with our guns and our butter, offering dreams of peace and salvation. We brought high hopes, the certainty of conviction, and the confidence of righteousness. We were here to fight for an ideal more urgent, more compelling than truth, democracy, or the American Way—we were here to fight for life. We were an army of Mother Teresas, armed to the teeth and bristling with good will. Now, only three months later, we had become as eternal and as permanent a part of the landscape as the roving bands who preyed upon the dead and the not-yet dead. Past and future lost meaning as we wandered grim-eyed and bone-weary across fractured plains and river beds.

We were ghost-warriors in clouds of smoke and dust, on a quest with a goal as ephemeral as the mirages in the near distance. We knew only that our task was to dispense justice with fair-handed impartiality, to distribute death and life as required in accordance with the strict guidelines listed in the little book entitled UNPROFOR *Rules of Engagement,* which we all carried in the breast pocket of our desert fatigues.

WE ENTERED THE CITY, PASSING THROUGH A MASSIVE stone gate festooned with time-worn carvings of unknown gods and goddesses. The cameras followed, storing our images on magnetic tape, compressing our actions and modulating our thoughts, transforming us into discrete packets of data.

A half-dozen attack helicopters angled across the sky, the air vibrating with their passage.

The city was ancient, a barren metropolis bearing the ravages of millennia. The center of a civilization that had declined long before our ancestors emerged from the forests to trade bone for bronze and fur for wool, the city had once ruled a verdant empire stretching from the bright coastal plains to the dark heart of the continent. Now it was home to scavengers and the dead, its buildings reduced to speechless ruins, their artistry and craftsmanship eclipsed by the random etchings of sand and wind.

The journalists spoke with conscientious excitement to their cameras, somberly contrasting the city's thriving past with its brutal present. They spoke as if by rote, reciting passages from some ritual catechism learned long ago in bright fluorescent temples. Now the words were shorn of meaning, their significance eroded by ceaseless repetition. While the journalists declaimed in their obsolete tongue, the cameras turned away, panning intently across the faces of the dead, peering curiously at faded murals and maimed statues.

We halted in the city's main square, securing the perimeter and dispatching patrols to scour the twisting alleys for signs of life. We set up an emergency broadcast system and began announcing our presence, declaring that the city was now under our authority and that food, water, and medical assistance would be made available to all those who required it.

There was no response.

We set up our field kitchen and had our lunch. We ate wilted greens and warm, soggy cold cuts.

Billy MacDonald sat beside me in the shade of a chipped and mangy lion, writing a letter to his girlfriend. He wrote her the same letter every day, concealing his desperate longings and deepening bitterness in carefully couched words of cheer and steadfast belief. He didn't want to worry her, he said. She wouldn't understand the truth.

Billy never sent the letters. He folded each one carefully and placed it an envelope, printing his lover's name and address in small crimped characters on the face of the envelope, and then depositing it in his knapsack. He was afraid she wouldn't answer.

We were all afraid she wouldn't answer.

IN THE AFTERNOON, WE WERE ASSIGNED SANITATION detail. This meant collecting and disposing of the dead.

We moved cautiously from house to house, grimly alert, methodically clearing each domicile of its lifeless inhabitants as if battling them for control of the city.

We loaded the dead on flatbed trucks, stacking their insubstantial bodies like firewood. When the trucks were full we drove to the outskirts of the city where other men unloaded them, piling the corpses in pyramids and dousing them with gasoline.

As the afternoon dimmed into evening, the dead still burned, rising heavenwards on plumes of black greasy smoke.

When night fell, the living began to stalk us. The men who raided the airlifts and the convoys, who ambushed aid workers and isolated patrols. The men who had brought death to this land and who now fought each other for mastery over the lifeless remains.

The popcorn crackle of gunfire echoed in the hollow stillness. The sky lit with flares and powerful searchlights. We fired at shadows, smudged blurs of heat in our nightscopes. In the city of the dead, the living were patches of darkness against white walls, fleeting ghosts materializing briefly in windows and on rooftops, bright-eyed creatures of the night who faded in the light of day.

In the morning we found the corpses of those we had killed, their bodies stiff-limbed and heavy, more substantial in death than in life, as if only in death could their existence be confirmed.

WE HAD JUST FINISHED CLEARING OUR SECTOR OF THE night's dead and were sprawled in the thin shade of a dying palm tree when we saw the lieutenant and the relief worker walking toward us along the empty avenue. The lieutenant walked thoughtfully, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. The relief worker was speaking animatedly, her hands in constant motion, as if she were simultaneously translating her words for the benefit of deaf or distant onlookers. Together, they looked like a pair of academics strolling across a campus, engaged in profound discourse.

The lieutenant was a hunched, nervous young man whose pale cheeks were sprayed with angry traces of acne. He carried his authority tentatively, like something too hot to touch. When he spoke his overlarge Adam's apple trembled in his throat, as if all his fears had

coalesced there in a huge lump too big to swallow. Once we had despised him, treating him with ironic deference. Now we pitied him, sharing his pain, seeing beneath his pinched, wary features the bookish child who had once fled the playground and sought refuge in adventure stories and medieval fantasies, seeing himself a noble warrior, a selfless knight bringing succor to the world's downtrodden.

Now those dreams were gone, the knife-sharp clarity of youthful idealism dulled by the callused reality of a world impervious to faith or reason. Like all of us, the lieutenant no longer sought to make an impact, but only to survive.

Our sergeant pushed himself stiffly to his feet, saluting as the lieutenant came up. Nobody else moved.

"As you were," said the lieutenant, flapping his hand against his forehead as if brushing at a fly. He was staring at his boots, perhaps searching for something in the intricate patterns of dust and cracked leather. The relief worker watched us silently, arms folded under her breasts. She looked stronger today, her body relaxed, but her eyes still seemed to be focused on some invisible point in the distance, registering us only as foreground static. The hope we had seen in her sleeping face was gone.

The lieutenant shuffled his feet, reclasping his hands behind his back. "Ms. Lindquist here," he jerked his head toward the relief worker, "has indicated that there may be a relatively large group of still viable refugees located at an Irish relief camp a few klicks north. The location of the camp has been verified by air but no on-site examination has been carried out."

We watched his Adam's apple as he spoke, measuring the cadence of his words by its movement. He licked his lips and glanced at us briefly before returning his gaze to his boots. "Colonel wants us to check it out," he mumbled.

"That mean now, sir?" said the sergeant. There was no trace of contempt in his voice. Though older and wiser, the sergeant never treated the lieutenant with anything but the utmost respect. He cautioned and counseled, maneuvering the lieutenant without questioning his authority. It was as if he were adviser to a child king, discreetly controlling his master's actions while grooming him for leadership.

The lieutenant nodded. "Ms. Lindquist here will accompany us."

"Has transport been laid on sir, or are we humpin' it?" the sergeant asked.

The lieutenant nodded vaguely. "Transport, yes. We'll take a couple of jeeps."

"Yes sir," said the sergeant crisply. He turned to us. "Alright! You heard the man," he snapped. "Get off your asses. Let's go."

We rose without enthusiasm, slapping at the chalky dust on our fatigues. More than anything we wanted to sleep. To sleep and sleep until the nightmare ended.

"We're probably too late anyway," Billy MacDonald murmured.

THE ROAD NORTH WAS A NARROW TRACK THAT WOUND sinuously through abrupt hills. Deep ruts had been carved in the road by the ceaseless passage of aid convoys weighed down with powdered food and medicine. Here the sand was the color of rust. Fist-sized chunks of malachite glittered like emeralds in the dust.

We sat in the back of jeeps, helmets pulled low, eyes barely open, watching without seeing. Our weapons were cradled loosely in our arms, our flak jackets hung open. Though the area had not been declared secure, we anticipated no danger. For us, death struck only in the dark.

Only the sergeant was alert, his eyes on automatic scan, tracking the low-slung hills with pinpoint precision, focusing in on scattered patches of scrub and brush, searching for the glint of metal, the sudden star-bright flash of sun reflected from a sniper's scope.

The sergeant maneuvered the lieutenant without questioning his authority, discreetly controlling his master's actions while grooming him for leadership.

A lone vulture circled us lazily, drifting across the sky in long, low arcs.

The lieutenant sat in the lead jeep with Ms. Lindquist. She was still talking. It seemed as if she were trying to comfort him, as if now that there was no one else left for her to save, his puerile timidity compelled her attention, gratifying the same needs that had brought her to this helpless land.

No one else spoke. Words seemed futile here, their meaning disintegrating almost as soon as they were uttered. Conversation was something we no longer understood. It implied the interaction of personalities, the subtle give-and-take of social intercourse. But the distinguishing features that had once set us apart as individuals had been worn away by sand and wind and persistent despair. Like our excess flesh, the painstakingly constructed masks we had once worn were gone, leaving only bone, sinew, muscle, and some indefinable core that told us we were alive, but nothing more. We no longer knew if we liked each other or hated each other. We didn't care.

Being alive was enough.

THE RELIEF CAMP WAS ONLY SIX KILOMETERS FROM the city. It took us nearly two hours to get there. While we drove, images of the world flickered behind our eyes. Air-conditioned supermarkets and glittering department stores, soft ice cream cones and barbecued steaks. We wondered what we would do if we ever got back.

The camp was surrounded by a flimsy fence built of plywood and rusted chicken wire. The gates were open, hanging from their hinges like broken cupboard doors. The vulture settled on one of the gateposts, its flat, dead eyes mocking us as we approached.

We drove slowly through the entrance. Here, too, the dead had gathered to greet us. Many of them had been shot. Some hung limply on the fence, their hands still tightly clutching the wire, as if they had just paused to rest for a moment before resuming their climb.

They had not been dead long. They stank. A rank odor of decaying matter and fetid water hung in the still air, like flowers left too long in the vase. The stench stung our nostrils. We rubbed mentholatum under our noses and wrapped sweat-soiled bandannas around our faces.

The Irish flag still hung above the compound, flapping briskly in the sour breeze.

"We're too late," said Billy MacDonald.

We pulled up next to the living quarters and climbed out of the jeeps.

"Secure the compound," said the lieutenant, his weak voice muffled by his bandanna.

The sergeant nodded.

We fanned out, weapons at ready, more alert now, as if wakened by the smell of death. We walked slowly among the dead, occasionally prodding them with our boots, throwing ourselves to the ground at the slightest sound. The flap of a loose shirt. The sudden sigh of released gas.

The vulture swooped down from its post, pecking its way fastidiously through the corpses, chattering excitedly to itself.

Billy MacDonald lifted his rifle to his shoulder and squeezed off a shot. The impact flung the vulture against the fence where it collapsed in a heap of twitching feathers. We all started firing.

When our magazines were empty, we declared the compound secure. We slammed fresh magazines into our rifles and kicked down the door to the living quarters. We burst inside, covering the corners of the room, our eyes bright above our faded bandannas.

Six people knelt against the far wall, their hands bound behind their backs, their faces pressed against the cracked plaster like supplicants at the Wailing Wall. Two were men, four were women. All were naked. The men were black. The women were white. All of them had been shot in the back of the head at close range. Thick black pools of crusted blood had coagulated on the floor.

The lieutenant coughed, turning his head away. Ms. Lindquist stared at the corpses, her fierce eyes filled with rage.

"I assume those are the relief workers?" the lieutenant mumbled to his feet.

Ms. Lindquist nodded grimly. She stared around the room like an angry lioness, and the scent of blood sharp in our nostrils. At that moment we heard a long, soft cry, faint and distant, almost like the mournful wail of a lonely cat.

We tensed, listening.

The lieutenant's head bounced up. "What was that?" he whispered. His Adam's apple quivered.

"Be quiet," commanded Ms. Lindquist. Her nostrils flared. She thrust her head forward, twisting it slowly from side to side. Her tongue protruded slightly from her mouth, flicking across her lips as if tasting the air.

Again the cry came. A ghostly lament, eerie and high-pitched, its source indeterminable.

"In there," said Ms. Lindquist softly. She pointed at a door on the side of the room.

We moved forward cautiously, padding deathly-quiet across the hard-packed earthen floor, our fingers stroking the triggers of our rifles. Rumors whispered in our heads, memories of macabre tales told by nail-hard paratroopers from the French Foreign Legion. Suddenly, we were afraid, afraid that this land could no longer absorb the crushing burden of the dead and was now rejecting them, returning them to life.

The sergeant leaned against the wall next to the door. Gently he turned the doorknob and lightly pushed the door open.

The room was dark and windowless. A thin shaft of pale light fell through the door, revealing only gray shadows and dust. The Sergeant slipped his hand inside, feeling the wall for a light switch. After a moment, he shook his head and signaled us to go infrared.

Hearts pounding, we pulled our goggles down over our eyes and stormed into the room. Our rifles were slippery in our hands.

It was the infirmary. A long row of beds ran along each side of the room, each bed occupied by a heatless body. The room smelled of formaldehyde and excrement.

We scanned the beds slowly, searching for signs of life. There were none. The dead lay unmoving on their beds, their shadowed eyes locked on the exposed steel beams over their heads. Had the cry come from these assembled corpses? A trick played by gas-bloated stomachs and intestines? The last breath of air expelled by a collapsing lung?

"It's clear," the sergeant said.

"You sure?" said the lieutenant.

The cry came again. Longer now. A cry of despair, unalloyed fear. Definitely human. And definitely alive.

Like a child having a bad dream.

We stood frozen in the thin shaft of light like rabbits caught in the glare of an approaching headlight.

"It comes from in here," said Ms. Lindquist. "I am certain."

We heard sobbing.

Somebody found the light switch.

"Check under the beds," said the sergeant.

There were three of them. Huddled tightly together under the last bed. Tiny, bone-thin creatures with huge heads and big round eyes. Their ages were indeterminate. They might have been three years old. They might have been fifteen.

At first they were afraid, weakly scrabbling away from us, snapping at our hands with toothless mouths.

Only when Ms. Lindquist crouched down and talked to them softly in their language did they relax. They answered her quietly, the sound of their voices like birdsong. They folded themselves into our arms and let us carry them outside. Their bodies were ethereal and insubstantial. It seemed as if they might float away on the breeze like falling leaves. Their eyes were serene, staring at us expectantly.

We stroked their fragile heads, whispering to them, words suddenly coming easily to our tongues in a tumbling rush. We cooed and murmured like brand-new fathers, amazed by these fragile creatures, awed by the forgotten miracle of life.

"I hope we're not too late to save them," said the lieutenant. He watched the children warily, as if afraid they would crumble into dust before his eyes.

Ms. Lindquist smiled. We saw again the face we had seen yesterday, the hidden face where hope still lived. "You're not too late," she said.

THAT NIGHT BILLY MACDONALD SAT UNDER THE stars in the city of the dead and wrote another letter to his girlfriend. The lieutenant brought us a case of beer and fresh batteries for our Game Boys and Walkmans.

The light of the stars turned the city to silver. We drank our beer in the cool glow, marveling at the sweep and depth of the star field. We had never seen so many stars. They coated the sky like glitter dust. We drank our beer and argued over the names of constellations and talked about adopting children. We watched as Billy MacDonald removed all the letters he had saved from his knapsack and set them alight. We laughed and clapped our hands as our unwanted memories snapped, crackled, and crumbled into fine black ash.

WHILE WE SLEPT THE STARS SPARKLED IN OUR DREAMS like bright-eyed children.

IN THE MORNING WE SAW CLOUDS CLUSTERING ON the horizon. A cool breeze caressed our faces, carrying with it the fresh clean scent of rain. A few wispy tendrils of black smoke still trailed across the sky. We let the children wear our helmets and carried them to our jeeps. The cameras congregated around us. The journalists spoke new words, unrehearsed, spontaneous, their deadpan monologues barely able to restrain long-pent emotions.

Before we left the city, a grinning Billy MacDonald went to the quartermaster and mailed the letter he had written during the night.

Later, as we drove into the desert, the sound of children's laughter was loud in our ears.

CHRISTOPHER HUNT

Was an encyclopedia salesman, waiter, cook, clerk in a porno bookstore, and factory laborer before ending up in Japan, where he taught English and later worked as a copywriter with a Japanese ad agency. He is the editor of the online magazine Circuit Traces.

Barefoot Sinderella

EVANGELINE MERCURY

"Our memory is our coherence, our reason, our feeling, even our action. Without it, we are nothing." —Luis Buñuel

IT IS SIX YEARS AGO, AND I AM WALKING BACK TO OUR apartment from the Dairy Queen, and I can smell the popcorn blowing out through the Texaco door when the Friday night black jackets go in. This is my secret Texaco walk, I am speeding in my mind, and I am barefoot, on the tar, trusting the night that there is no broken glass to step on, knowing this isn't a broken-glass kind of night. The sun is still in the tar, and my feet are hot, and I walk to where the cars are parked in the spaces, and smell the engines burning, and I breathe the fury.

A Mexican boy with a net on his head (though I'm sure he calls it something else) looks at me and I smile, but he is trying to be cool, and he looks away, and he adjusts his net in the rear-view mirror. I have a bag of bottles, klinky pink bottles that I bought at the Texaco. The condensation is making the bag wet and I worry about dropping them, because I spent six dollars on them, six dollars to get drunk and do things that I really want to do but am afraid.

I walk through the shadows, under the red star, where I have to watch out for those prickly things that grow around signposts, a vampire.

There is a car lot by the Texaco with a shot-out rusty sign that says JORGE'S USED CARS. I walk onto the pavement then, past Jorge's cars, past the Tuesday–Friday trash dumpster where the garbage men squished a bum once, and I see a van where a man in a brown cowboy hat sits in the driver's seat, and the shadow of his hanging plastic Mary is moving across his forehead, as a car pulls into the parking lot.

As I walk past him—slowly, so I won't offend him—I can smell his life in the van: marijuana, sandalwood, oranges, tortilla chips, and underarms.

I walk under the windows of our complex where children are inside, getting ready for bed in rooms with soft lights and Cinderella lamps, and I think of how I may want children someday, someday, I say someday, then every morning I wake up and wipe out my life from back to front so that I only live that day, and I don't plan children in that way, and then I smell the van again.

I wonder what it is like to know people like that, to ride around in a van in south Texas and smoke pot, sitting beside sweaty bodies with brown skin, men who would touch me and make me feel like a little girl again, and inside I would scream for them to stop but really want them to go on, and I would jump out crying, and then my van ride would be over, not what I thought it would be, so I decide I wouldn't go on a van ride with them after all, but maybe I would sit out on the curb and talk to them, and ask them which badges they wear, and tell them about a spider I saw one time in a park in Del Valle that changed colors when I blew on her to make her move.

That would be a cool thing to tell cool people who ride in a van, and then my gypsy laughs. I hate her, but I want to keep her around. She says: Your wanderlust is going to kill you.

I walk on, I get to our apartment but I don't go up, I decide to drink with my girlfriend Cheryl. She is cool, a Mexican I met here. She likes beer, and I like wine, and together we sit and have a grand old time, and she tells me stories about her Mexican family that is spread out all over Texas, and about Mexican tradition and cultures. It all spins together like whirling gold, and occasionally she tells me a racist joke to keep me in line.

The first time she told me a joke about white girls I laughed, even though my face cracked. I saved my cry for later when I went home, though, because a tiny whisper

I wonder what it is like to know people like that, to ride around in a van in south Texas and smoke pot, sitting beside sweaty bodies with brown skin, men who would touch me and make me feel like a little girl again.

told me it was like an initiation, because Cheryl is tough, and I have to be tough to hang with her, so I was. I sprinkled in some Oh Hells and some Holy Shits, it felt weird but I did it, and I don't know why she likes me, I never know, but I don't ask, either. I probably wouldn't like the answer, because, like I said, Cheryl is tough.

This morning she told me she had gone to a funeral last night for her cousin who was hit by a truck, and I said I was sorry, and she told me about her family who got into a fight over who loved the dead cousin the most, and they knocked the casket over, and her cousin fell out all stiff, but nobody was in the funeral parlor because it was some kind of midnight mass (she called it midnight mess), so they all just helped stuff the body back in, and her brother got the body's lips caught on a handle fixture on the casket and tore the body's stitches, so they all pretended they were so upset that they had to close the casket lid, and the next day when the public came in no one knew his mouth had been torn off, and she laughed all through that

story. I don't know anybody like Cheryl, she is tough but she cries when she is drunk, and she swears like white trash from back home but her house is clean, so I never really know what to think about her.

I knock but Cheryl isn't home, and I feel a twinge of jealousy that she is out doing something else, without me, even though there are a million places in Austin for her to be. I go upstairs and sit my bottles in the refrigerator, and get a plastic cup (because soon I will be drunk enough to break glass), and a straw (because I get drunk faster with a straw), and take my first bottle out to the porch, where I sit at night and watch the twinkling Christmasy lights downtown, and I wonder about all the lives going on down at 6th street. I wonder about all the music playing in the bars, but I hate cigarette smoke, so I don't go.

I am so hot, sitting in the patio shadows in my white wicker chair, the wind is blowing my skirt up, I wish I had a man, and I drink.

I think about a Mexican boy I saw mowing the grass today, so hot, working out in the sun, with the Marquis de Sade for a boss, no doubt, and I went out and took him a can of pop, and I held it out to him, and said, "You look so hot, I had to bring you a drink."

I handed it to him, but he didn't take it. He said, "No speak engless, no speak engless," so I gestured and said, "For you. To drink."

"Thank you, thank you," he said, and I turned and walked off, I thought maybe I shouldn't have brought him strawberry, it would make him even more thirsty, but when I grabbed it out of the fridge I grabbed strawberry because that was my favorite, and I thought it would be nicer for him.

In my queen chair I think about his white t-shirt stretched across his tight chest, and his boy arms with the muscles already developing, how he was pushing the mower, how he looked at me like a kid, and the breeze blows my skirt again, and I am sickened with myself, using him now, when earlier my intentions were pure, and isn't that just like me? Yes, says the spider.

I drink some more, I am halfway done with my strawberry wine and I go in and get my radio and put on Patsy, a perfect voice for this perfect night, and I watch a fight out in the parking lot of a bar down the way, I think I may see somebody get stabbed tonight, it would be my first time, I have never seen violence this close, and not do anything about it.

One man is Boss Hogg-fat and his yellow shirt is undone to his bellybutton, and if I got close to it there would be lint in it, just like my dad's. The other one is just a greasy weasel, and I feel sorry for him, I try to imagine his life and all that comes is bourbon in my throat after I have thrown it up. If this were a movie he would be the one to get stabbed and bleed to death in the dark parking lot while clutching a picture of his girlfriend whom he had made a promise to that he would quit drinking.

They are swaggering around each other, calling each other "redneck," and I laugh, what kind of thing is that to say? Maybe they are friends, really, they know "redneck" is stupid, and they are trying to diffuse things, do men think like that? They are both rednecks.

I see the man next door come home, his name is Joe, he is from Brooklyn, and he married a lady from somewhere in Asia whom Cheryl calls "gook" when the lady is going in and out of her apartment. I pretend I don't hear Cheryl when she tries to get me to agree with her, or when she gives me those looks. Cheryl's brother was killed in Viet Nam and she told me never to talk about it, and she hates the song "Billy Don't be a Hero," so I never play the oldies station with the windows open.

Joe is fatherly, even though he is just a little older than me, and his black hair matches his black brows, and he has a happy-sad face like those men in the '30s who wore flat hats and stood in line for soup and bread. I like him. I would fuck him, too, because he is so odd, so different from me, I don't have any reference points for him in my mind, and I could enjoy myself.

One day Joe comes home and Cheryl and I are shooting water guns, and he says hello with the big box of Air Force religion under his arm that says Miller High Life, and I say hello, and he says, "You'd better bring your cat in, it's Halloween," and I say, "Do you mean somebody might put a firecracker up No Name's butt?" and he says, "No, the Satanists are out cruising for black cats." Just as pretty as you please.

"Thanks," I say. That is about all I have said to him except hello, and hello Joe in a singsong voice when I am horny and proud of it, and he smiles different.

Tonight the base looks like a UFO dream, what they must have dreamt our earth would be like on their way here, even if it took them just seconds, a light-up twinkle dream, like it is a beautiful thing, except I know that underneath, underground, undercover, buried deep, there are bombs, and dead aliens in ice, carved up, and their atoms are crying to be alive again and get out of the twinkle dream, because I fuck one of the men that goes under there, he told me because I wanted a secret in exchange for what he wanted, and he gave it to me one sacred night, which is all he had to offer me, and he knew it, after ten bottles of courage and some Whole Lotta Love.

Albert Einstein said that if you physically remember a place, it actually exists, though not materially, but that is the very last expression of anything, anyway.

So now, six years later, I think of the base, taps at ten, touch-and-go's at 9 A.M. every morning like a hurricane across the street, the grackles, La Chusa sitting on a

telephone wire that Cheryl screamed at when she was drunk and told me to go get the hot peppers!

I carry that in my head, and I build it, with souls I love, who like to open the sliding glass door onto the patio and let the curtain blow out like a flying white ghost in our Escape From the Sun apartment complex, while we sit and watch Ra go down in purple-and-yellow stripes, an Egyptian-Aztec god who just ate his virgin Texas children, who is going to sleep now with his gold armor on, and we love the smell of charbroiled hamburgers from the Dairy Queen, and the sounds of the jukebox from the bar across the street that gives off amber glows from its mouth like a lust monster.

The base is mine now. I am going to keep all that even though one of the people on a BBS from Austin told me *Del Valle sucks!* because I sustain lives there, I work a weave with other people who think of the base, we all weave a blanket in space with our memories, our atta-boy-gung-ho-drink-like-a-fish-starve-til-payday memories. There are people sitting on the blanket, people ride on the blanket, the blanket covers Del Valle with protection still, it is becoming even though the base is gone now, it is woven in dark pink and golden thread, and it floats like a big square over Del Valle, like a flag laying down, blowing each time somebody thinks about his or her life there, and it doesn't suck.

I sit on the blanket and talk to my memory-friends: the people I baby-sat for; the pilot stationed there who died in a jet crash, and his mother is there, who was told all of her son's body was in the coffin (but it is a lie); the man who worked as a bagger at the commissary who gave me my hundred-dollar bill back when I thought I was giving him two ones; the dog I had to kick because it tried to bite me one night when I was riding my bike by the high school; the people who worked in the gordita place, and the men who ate lunch there and kept their hats on during lunch like it is some wonderful thing to wear a uniform, to be part of a blue collective; the indoor rummage-sale lady where I bought my straw chicken basket; the man who worked at the Texaco who smiled at me when I came in drunk for life and wine and told me, "You have a nice night, now, you hear?" knowing I would; the ghost-town elementary school that was flat and spread out just like an elementary school in the West should be, a mesa school, with overhanging porches like a turn-of-the-century boarding house and my name is Peregrine, only at night it was full of triangular shadows, children's kickball echoes, and their soul prints in primary colors, taped to the doors like mini Jesus-hands, blowing hello; the policemen who rode by and tipped their Texas hats, making sure all was safe, knowing about domestic violence in military families in the summertime heat; and my *me s'hahnee* friend Ed who wore his full metal jacket all the time even though I wanted him to take it off.

And sometimes I lay on the blanket I weave over Del Valle and stare at the stars, it is like laying on a waterbed outside on a roof, and sometimes I don't talk to anybody else, even though Ed comes and the policemen come and the pilots come and the landlord comes and the bartenders come, but sometimes I wish they would get off my blanket, except Ed, because I weave it best, but it is their blanket, too, and they weave, too.

EVANGELINE MERCURY

Grew up running wild in the West Virginia mountains, which are full of snakes. Her favorite road is Route 10. Sometimes she writes from a blue star salon in Morocco, while drinking from Kerouac and Lawrence Durrell. She has written books called Cowgirl Homily, Witcher Woman Hollering Tree, *and* Radio Mija. *"Barefoot Sinderella" is based on her time in Austin, Texas. She lived it while listening to Patsy Cline, and wrote it while listening to Mazzy Star.*

Storm's Child

SHAWN CLICK

The forecast said "cloudy, with a chance of rain."
Forecasters deal with chances.
But not Samuel.

"IT'S GONNA RAIN TODAY, DAD."

Josh Thorst peered at his son over the top of the morning paper. "Rain?"

Samuel nodded. He was sitting at the other side of the dining room table, swallowed by a high-backed mahogany chair, crayons and a notebook before him. He picked up a crayon and drew a swath of gray across the paper. The bangs of his dark hair fell across one eye. His mouth curved into a frown of concentration.

Josh glanced out the dining room window. The sky was a clear, crystalline blue, and cloudless. Even Mount Rainier, visible above the trees to the east, stood without its customary cap of mist. It was a beautiful August day, full of the promise of warmth and sun. "Are you sure?" Josh flipped to the weather forecast; it teemed with graphics of smiling suns and cloudless skies.

"I'm sure, Dad." Samuel's voice carried a tone of impatience.

"But the weather report..."

Samuel stopped coloring. "Dad," he sighed.

"I know. I'm sorry." Josh went to the closet and hunted for an umbrella. Another glance out the window left him feeling like a figure in a "what's wrong with this picture?" page in a children's activity book. But there was no reason to question his son. If Samuel said it was going to rain, it was damned sure going to rain.

"Gonna be a storm tonight, too," Samuel said.

"Tonight?"

"Yep. A big one." Samuel smiled.

Josh suppressed a frown. Samuel was only six years old, but he loved a good storm. Although children his age were usually frightened by violent weather, Samuel welcomed howling wind with the excitement most children reserve for snow on a school day. During the last big storm, back in June, Samuel had sat at the front window, kneeling with his palms pressed against the glass. He had seemed in awe, reverent.

"Can I stay up for it?" Samuel asked.

Lizbeth stepped into the room, cradling a basket of laundry. "Stay up for what?" she said, doing a double-take as she glanced at Josh. "What are you doing with the umbrella?"

"Samuel says it's going to rain."

"Today?"

Josh nodded. "And a storm… tonight."

"Really." She clicked her tongue. "Well, I guess we're due for a bit of rain."

"Yep," Samuel said, then went back to his coloring. He was drawing dark clouds—gloomy and ominous—hanging above a house made from a triangle and square. The building seemed small and vulnerable, and jagged blades of lightning, outlined in yellow, lanced through the sky.

"See ya, Samuel," Josh said. "Be good."

"Dad? Are you gonna be late again?"

Josh looked back. "I don't know—I might. I have lots of work."

Samuel scowled. "You're always at work."

"I know it seems that way, kiddo," Josh said, "but it's important."

Samuel's frown looked as solid as fired clay. It hadn't been an easy year for him, with the move, a new school, and a summer without his friends. The house was the first to be built in the new development, so Samuel didn't even have a neighborhood to explore.

Lizbeth's father had referred to Samuel as a shaman, and Lizbeth adopted the nickname after they knew Samuel's talent could not be a string of coincidences.

"Your father's doing a lot for us," Lizbeth added. "We should be proud of him."

Josh winked at his wife. His heightened workload had been hard on her as well, but she still managed to support him. It couldn't be easy. She smiled back, but there was a hesitation.

"I'll see you tonight, Samuel," Josh said.

"But Dad—"

"There's nothing I can do about it. I'll see you tonight."

"Okay." Samuel's frown transformed into a pout. "Bye."

Sighing, Josh took his wife's hand and headed for the front door. Outside, the sun seemed to shine with extra enthusiasm, as if to deny the rumors of impending clouds and rain. Cupping his hand over his eyes, Josh looked up. "This is unbelievable," he said.

It was a gorgeous morning. Their house sat at the crest of a hill, above a sprawl of newly paved roads and vacant lots. The lots were just parcels of stark, leveled earth, but as always the sight filled Josh with satisfaction. They were the framework of his dream. To the south, a gap in

the trees provided a view of the arching span of the Narrows Bridge. The water was strung with the white sails of distant boats, like a thin sky speckled with drifting stars.

They didn't actually own the land, but Josh felt like it belonged to him. The development had been his idea: he'd found the site, rounded up the investors, handled the purchase, managed the licensing process, and supervised the contractors and realtors. Now, every lot was sold, the seeds of the project were planted, and homes would soon rise like flowers unfolding in the rains of spring. It was the culmination of all he'd ever wanted for himself and his family.

"Hard to believe we're in for some bad weather."

"You know our little shaman." Lizbeth wrapped her arm around his waist.

"Yeah." Josh didn't care for that term. Lizbeth's father was one-half Salish Indian, a heritage that revealed itself in her dark complexion and hair. Lizbeth had passed those traits to their son, though one feature defied both of his parent's attributes: eyes that were a deep, indigo blue. Lizbeth's father had once referred to Samuel as a shaman, half-jokingly mentioning his blue eyes as proof, and Lizbeth adopted the nickname after they knew Samuel's ability—his talent—could not be explained as a string of coincidences. The title made Josh uncomfortable. He liked to think Samuel merely had some strange physical quirk that gave him an aptitude for forecasting the weather, like old men whose arthritis acted up when humidity dropped. Calling Samuel a shaman carried a sense of mysticism… magic. Josh didn't believe in magic anymore.

"You seem down this morning," Lizbeth said.

"No, I'm fine."

She pursed her lips. "Sure?"

"Yeah." Turning back to his wife, he tried to dispel the dark shadows in his thoughts. His son's capability did not seem to carry any ill effects. Josh should probably consider himself lucky—how many other people were gifted with a child who could out-forecast every meteorologist on the planet? If nothing else, the kid had a guaranteed career in a few years. But at the back of his consciousness, Josh felt a nagging uneasiness, as if he were surrounded by malicious phantoms, only vaguely aware of their presence.

"Things are going to be okay," he said, almost to himself.

Lizbeth looked back at him, her head cocked. "What?"

"I mean Samuel… us. We're going to be okay."

"Sure. Things have been going great. Your work'll settle down pretty soon."

"It's just that Samuel seems so..."

"Moody?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Lizbeth paused. "He misses you."

"I miss him too." Josh looked toward the front of the house. "I really need to spend more time with him."

"You'll have your chance—soon."

"We've had this conversation before. Soon never comes."

"It will." Lizbeth gave him a gentle shove. "C'mon—snap out of it. Are you trying to get me depressed, too?"

Josh shook his head and forced a laugh. "You're right—I'm just being paranoid, I guess. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop."

She hugged him, nuzzling against his neck. Despite the day's warmth, Josh felt goose bumps rise along his arms as her breath caressed him. "Don't worry," she said. "You've done great. You deserve the success."

He tilted her chin upwards and kissed her. "I don't deserve you."

"You're right."

Playfully, he slapped her backside. "Modest, to the last. You'd better go see what your son is up to."

"Aye, sir." She performed a mock salute, stepping back. "Love you." She stood, watching, as he climbed into the car and backed out of the driveway. Josh waved at her and honked as he spun around and pulled away.

At the bottom of the road, Josh glanced back at his home in the rear-view mirror. A sense of trepidation crawled through him, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. He saw his home like the one in his son's drawing, perched beneath swelling storm clouds, small and inconsequential against the forces at work in a darkening sky.

IT WAS NEARLY SEVEN O'CLOCK WHEN JOSH EMERGED from his downtown office. He was leaving work late again, but not so late that he missed the dawning of Samuel's storm. A cold wind buffeted the street, sending papers skittering across the pavement. Leaves swirled and spun within invisible vortexes and, above, a shroud of dark clouds spit a fitful rain.

Bracing his umbrella against the wind, Josh began to cross the street. As if on cue, the rain began to fall with vigor as he made his way to his car. Once there, he spent several awkward moments trying to find his keys, digging through each of his pockets while struggling to balance the umbrella. Finally, he was able to open the door. He climbed in, flipped the heater controls on high, and rubbed his chilled hands together.

This was August? It felt like the middle of November. Why couldn't Samuel have been wrong just this once?

As he drove home, the storm intensified. Rain, relentless and brutal, pounded against the windshield like a barrage of stone pellets. The clouds thickened and the day became prematurely dark; night was descending two

hours early. Josh drove hunched forward, straining to see, every muscle tense. His car shuddered in the stiffening winds as he turned into the development and guided the vehicle up the hill toward his home.

The house was well lit, shining like a lighthouse perched at the edge of a rugged shore. At least the power was still on. To him, the building was more than a home; like a soldier's medal, it was the symbol of all he had accomplished. It was his achievements solidified into wood and glass.

Bracing himself, he slid out of the car. The wind tore at him and the rain battered his face. He stumbled, then charged toward the door with his head held low. He didn't bother with the umbrella, thinking the short distance to the house would leave him relatively unscathed. He was wrong. In a matter of seconds, he was soaked from head to toe.

The door opened before him. He leapt through the entrance. Lizbeth jumped aside and closed the door. "God, honey, you look like a drowned rat."

"I feel worse." He shrugged off his dripping jacket. "I need a shower—a hot one." He turned toward Lizbeth. She was wearing a green silk robe and her hair was tied back, accentuating her face and neck. She smelled faintly of scented soap and perfume. "Wow," Josh said, gawking.

Hands on her hips, she tried to frown at him. "Get going. Don't leave too many puddles."

"How long to dinner?"

"Sam's already eaten." Her forced frown drifted into a mischievous smile. "I thought we might have a late dinner. Just the two of us."

"Sounds great."

She glanced up the stairs. "Sam's in his room… I don't think he's feeling too well. Probably picked up a cold."

"Crap. That's too bad." Josh stepped forward to hug her, but she backed off, hands held up in defense.

"Forget about it. Save it for later."

Samuel was sitting on his bed, staring out the window. Beyond the glass, dark clouds coursed through an ashen sky.

Josh finished tying the belt of his bathrobe. He had allowed himself the luxury of a long, very hot shower. He felt better, energized. The storm outside was only a distant concern. "Hey Samuel," he said, stepping into the room.

His son cried out and nearly jumped off the bed.

Josh rushed forward. "Hey, it's just me, buddy. Are you okay?"

Samuel stared at him. His face was pale, like the visage of a skull. In the shadows of the room, his eyes were hollow sockets. He was trembling.

"Samuel?"

The boy blinked. "Hi, Dad," he said, his voice a whisper. "I'm scared."

"Scared?" Josh sat beside him on the bed and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Since when do storms scare you?"

Samuel turned toward the window again. "It's different. They're coming."

Josh pulled his son closer. "What do you mean? Who's coming?"

"I called them. I didn't mean to."

"Them who? Come on, Samuel… you aren't making any sense."

No response.

"Did you fall asleep? Did you have a bad dream?"

Samuel thought for a moment, biting his lip. "I don't know—maybe."

Josh rubbed the boy's back. "That's probably it. You're okay. You know Dad and Mom would never let anything hurt you. We'll always keep you safe."

"They want me. They say I'm supposed to go with them."

Samuel was trembling. "I'm scared." Josh sat beside him. "Scared? Since when do storms scare you?" Samuel turned toward the window. "It's different. They're coming."

"Who's they? Something in your dream?"

"I guess so."

"Dreams can't hurt you," Josh said.

"I know."

"There's no such thing as monsters, or ghosts, or any of that made-up stuff. Right?"

Samuel nodded. "Right."

"Right. Let's see a smile."

He managed a grin.

"That's better." Josh pulled the bed covers back. "Climb in, bud."

Samuel crawled beneath the blankets, his gaze drifting back to the window. Josh pulled the covers up around his son and kissed him on the cheek. "G'night, kiddo," he said. "Everything will be okay. I promise."

"Okay."

Josh stepped out of the room, leaving it slightly ajar, and peered back through the opening. A fragment of light from the hall, a yellow oasis of illumination, stretched across the floor and up the side of the bed. Samuel clutched his blankets with small, delicate hands and stared at the window.

Beyond the glass, the storm raged.

"HOW'S SAM DOING?" LIZBETH ASKED AS JOSH marched down the stairs. She was sitting on the couch in the living room, sleek legs extending from the hem of her robe.

Josh dropped down beside her. "The storm is scaring him."

"You're kidding! He loves a good storm."

"Nope. Not this time."

"Is he okay?"

"I think so… I don't know. He had a bad dream. Hell, he was probably still dreaming while I was talking to him. He wasn't making much sense."

"Kids do that sometimes," she said. "Waking dreams."

"I suppose that was it. I feel sorry for him. At that age, I had a bedroom full of monsters. They were under the bed, in the closet..."

"And the boogeyman was in your underwear drawer, right?"

Josh smiled weakly. "I don't know. I never checked." He sat forward, head resting in his palms. "It was strange, Liz. I spent so many nights being… terrified."

"Lots of kids go through that."

"Did you?"

"No. Not really. What were you scared of?"

"The dark… monsters… I don't know."

"How'd you get over it?"

He shrugged. "I just finally forced myself to quit being scared. Planted my feet in reality." He wondered if that decision had brought other changes in his outlook. Despite being raised in a devoutly religious family, he liked to think of himself as the consummate skeptic. Religion was a mythology, and the same went for paranormal phenomena, UFOs, astrology, and Bigfoot.

"Well, I'm proud of you," she said.

"Thanks." Josh grinned. "At least I was finally able to open my underwear drawer."

Laughing, Liz wrapped her arms around him and looked back toward the large front window. "The storm's picking up." Josh followed her gaze. Water fell against the glass in sheets, and gusts of wind buffeted the house. "Cozy, don't you think?" she said. "Brings back memories."

He leaned back on the sofa, settling into her arm. "What year was that… eighty-five?"

"Eighty-six. Sam was born in eighty-seven."

Josh nodded, thinking back to another storm. He and Lizbeth had celebrated their anniversary in a cabin on the coast. That night, a storm swept in, knocking out the cabin's power, and for a few hours they sat at the window, marveling at the beauty of reflected lightning upon a dark slab of sea. Then they made love, their passion accompanied—and enhanced—by the cry of the wind, the drumming of the rain, and a sense of seclusion. It was as if the entire world consisted of three things: him, her, and the howling darkness. They seemed a part of the storm, an element of primal energy. He could remember looking into her eyes, sparkling with the reflected light of candles, realizing he wanted nothing more than her for the rest of his life.

Nine months and two weeks after that storm, Lizbeth gave birth to their son. It was raining heavily that day; the streets were flooded and traffic was hopelessly clogged. The drive to the hospital was a nightmare, navigating through lines of cars, sliding through standing water, his gaze snapping between the rain-shrouded roads and the pained, urgent expression on his wife's face. A block from the hospital, Lizbeth gave birth in the car, bathed in rain that swept through the open door, assisted by a physician who was driving into work at the right moment. The final stage of the labor was brief and intense; their child came into the world heralded by a rolling blast of thunder.

"I hope Sam is okay," Lizbeth said.

"*Samuel* is fine."

"Sam," she said, through gritted teeth.

Josh laughed. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her closer. "Samuel," he growled.

She kissed him, her soft lips wavering at his mouth, then gliding to his neck. A warm, tingly feeling crept across him.

"You win," he said, and reached for the belt of her robe.

Thunder roared.

"WOW," LIZBETH SAID, SITTING UP. "THAT WAS A big one."

"Thank you." Josh tugged her close. He felt like he was about to float off of the couch. It had been an intense experience.

Lizbeth smirked at him.

"Oh—you mean the thunder."

She giggled. "Maybe." She looked out the window. "Jeez, it's really getting bad out there."

Josh stared out into the night. Now a sheet of water poured down from the eaves, creating a glistening veil. Josh thought he could see the distant outline of trees whipping back and forth like the tentacles of some great beast. Lightning flashed, and a second later, thunder cracked.

"Close," Josh said.

"Thank God we still have power." Lizbeth grabbed her robe. Throwing it over her shoulder, she padded toward the bathroom.

Another burst of lightning. The house seemed to tremble against the blast of thunder. He put the palm of his

hand against the window. The cold glass was shuddering as the wind lashed against it. How much could it take? He backed off the couch, eyeing the window uneasily.

Lightning again. Thunder.

Josh wrapped himself in his bathrobe and tied the belt. The light in the hall flickered.

Something moved in the darkness beyond the window: a quick shifting, shadows detaching from deeper shadows. He moved forward a step, straining to see through the torrential rain. What could be out in a storm like this? An animal perhaps, driven from the woods? Or was it merely a trick of his imagination?

There was a crackling sound, very loud. An instant later, a deafening crash shook the floor. The bulb in the hall light exploded with a pop, and the living room was plunged into darkness.

"What the hell—?" The air was thick with a sharp, acrid smell.

"Josh!" his wife called.

He stumbled into the bathroom. Lizbeth stood at the sink, holding a flashlight she had managed to recover from the cabinet, directing its beam toward the vanity mirror. Tendrils of smoke drifted from the broken remnants of the bulbs along the frame. Tiny shards of glass covered the counter and floor.

"What happened?"

"I think the house got hit by lightning. Are you okay?"

Her voice shook, "Sam—!"

Running, following the dancing illumination from the flashlight, they charged up the stairs and down the hall to their son's bedroom.

A shrieking wind tore at them as Josh flung open the door. The bedroom window was open. Lizbeth aimed the light at the bed, but Samuel wasn't there. The impact of that empty bed made Josh's head spin. A cold certainty held him in a fist of ice—he would never see his son again. Then Lizbeth swung the light across the room and the glow settled on the boy, kneeling before the window. He was sitting still, hands held up, face raised to the storm.

"Sam!" Lizbeth cried. "Get away from there!"

Samuel did not respond. Josh rushed into the room and scooped up his son, carrying him toward the doorway. Once away from the window, he took a quick survey—Samuel appeared unhurt, but his eyes seemed empty and distant. His pajamas, clinging to his cold skin, were soaked. "Are you okay?"

Samuel stared at the window.

Josh grabbed the boy by his shoulders and gave him a gentle shake. "Samuel! Are you okay?"

"I called them," Samuel said faintly. "I didn't mean to."

"What? Who?"

"Them." Samuel pointed at the window.

Nudging Samuel into Lizbeth's arms, Josh crept toward the window. He moved with cautious, pensive steps, as if he were a hunter sneaking up on dangerous prey. Outside, the rain fell in swirling darkness. The clouds overhead were a deep black, suffused with a disturbing green and yellow; they seemed fetid, diseased. Trees along the ridge line were swaying; several were toppled, and others were stripped of their greenery. The plots of land were a mess: rivers of mud flowed across the soil, and the streets were covered by water and debris—the drainage system had failed to keep pace with the rain. Josh hadn't realized the storm was doing so much damage. All his work washing away. Come morning, there would be one hell of a disaster to deal with.

"There's nothing," Josh said. "It's just the storm. Everything's okay. "No, Dad—they're there. You don't see them? The people in the storm? They said I have to go outside."

"Josh?" his wife called out.

"There's nothing," he said, turning back. "It's just the storm. Everything's okay." He tried to keep the tension out of his voice. The storm was going to cost him a ton of money and set construction back several weeks. "It's okay, Samuel."

"You don't see them?" Samuel asked, his voice trembling. "The people in the storm?"

Josh sighed. "No one's there. It's just a bad dream."

Samuel shook his head. "No, Dad—they're there. I saw them! They said I have to go with them… go outside." He turned to his mother, his eyes wide and desperate. "I called them. They're out there."

Lizbeth hugged him. Her hair drifted in the wind, moving about her face. "It's okay, Sam. Just a dream."

"A dream," Josh said, for emphasis. He put both hands on the window and tried to pull it closed. It wouldn't budge. Cursing under his breath, he tried again. The window refused to move. The house was only a few months old and it was already falling apart. "C'mon, let's get downstairs." He would worry about fixing it after his family was out of the cold. "I'll carry Samuel."

Lizbeth relinquished her hold on their son and shut the door behind them as they entered the hall. The piercing cry of the wind was muffled.

"I called them. They say I belong with them." Samuel raised his head. "Don't you hear them?"

"It's just the wind."

His son was scared—more frightened than Josh had ever seen him. What was wrong? Reaching up, he felt

Samuel's forehead. Perhaps he had a fever. He pressed the palm, then the back, of his hand against his son's brow. No. The skin was cool—too cool.

He took a heavy wool blanket out of the closet and wrapped it around Samuel. "There you go, bud," he said, patting him on the back. "Better?"

"Yes," Samuel responded in a tone that was hushed, detached. "Thank you."

They made their way toward the first-floor landing. Lightning flashed, and, in the moment of clarity between two heartbeats, Josh saw forms outside on the porch: several of them, with vague, nebulous faces of gray, eyes black as night—and hands pressing against the glass.

He stared at the window, his breath catching in his throat. The lightning flash was gone, and all was darkness.

Lizbeth touched his arm. He jumped.

"Josh? What's wrong, honey?"

"Nothing." A salvo of lightning burned through the night. The porch was empty. "Nothing," he said again. But he couldn't move. He waited, staring at the window, his son held tight.

"Josh?" Lizbeth pleaded.

He heard a sound within the chorus of rain and wind—movement, rustling—from behind him. He grabbed the flashlight from his wife, and, supporting his son within the crook of one arm, he moved upward one step, then another. The hall was dark and empty.

Samuel's door rattled. He swung the light toward it. Slowly, methodically, the knob was turning.

"Jesus," he breathed, stumbling back a pace. The light fell from his grasp. With a series of muffled thuds, it tumbled down the stairs to his wife's feet. Josh turned. His hands were trembling, and he breathed in short, ragged gasps. It was just a storm—nothing more. There were no such things as monsters. No ghosts.

Lizbeth picked up the errant light. "What's wrong?" she said.

Josh reached the landing and made an effort to compose himself. The doorknob hadn't been moving; the forms on the porch were just tricks of light and shadow caused by the lightning. "I'm okay," he said, taking a deep breath. He clutched his son firmly, looking down at him. "Everything's all right, bud."

Samuel nodded fractionally.

"You okay?"

"Uh-huh," the boy responded.

There was a knock at the front door.

Samuel yelped. "It's them!"

"Who the hell would be—?" Lizbeth began.

Josh stepped back toward the hall. His son's words resounded through his thoughts. *It's them.* For many moments, the three of them simply stared at the door.

Another knock, louder, more urgent. Then another.

Lizbeth headed for the door.

"Don't open it!" Josh hissed.

She turned toward him, eyes narrowed, unspoken questions evident in her expression.

What would he tell her? Don't open the door 'cause the boogeyman will come in? He was being irrational. He could picture himself, white as fog, shaking, staring at the door as if he expected it to sprout fangs and pounce on him. What if someone out there needed help?

Did boogeymen knock? He didn't think so. "I mean," he stammered, "look before you open it."

"Sure." She peered through the peephole, one eye pressed against the door, for several moments. The flashlight was pointed at the floor, its glow fragmenting into motes of reflected light upon the polished wood.

Josh held his breath.

Samuel whispered something, too soft to hear. His voice was like the sigh of a summer breeze.

Lightning shimmered, stark and lustrous.

Lizbeth turned back to Josh. Her mouth was bent into a curve, half-smile and half-grimace. With a flourish, she swung open the door.

The porch light was dangling from its mounting above the door, broken loose and suspended by a long length of wire. A cold gust of wind made the light swung toward the open door. The rain, falling steady and hard, was a liquid haze, illuminated by pulses of lightning leaping from cloud to cloud.

"There's our suspicious knocker."

Josh remembered to breathe again. He felt like an idiot. Looking down at Samuel, he said, "See? Nothing to be afraid of."

Straining against the wind, Lizbeth shut the door. "What now?"

"Maybe we should find someplace to stay for the night."

"I'll try the phone."

Josh followed her into the kitchen and deposited Samuel on the edge of the breakfast bar. Lizbeth grabbed the receiver from the wall, listened, then tried to dial. Finally, with a scowl, she slammed the phone down. "It's dead."

A cold draft stirred around them. Samuel's drawings on the refrigerator, most of them depicting storm clouds and lightning, rustled beneath their magnet anchors. Thunder rolled, low and threatening, like the growl of a dog. Where was the wind coming from? Upstairs, perhaps, through the stuck window in Samuel's room? No… that couldn't be. The bedroom door was closed. Or was it? Josh spun around, peering into the hall.

There was a knock at the door, and another, heavy and hollow. Josh swore under his breath. He should have secured the damned porch light.

Samuel sat with his hands on his knees, looking around with nervous, furtive glances. "They're calling," he said.

Lizbeth aimed the light at the kitchen window. "What are we going to do?" she asked. "Should we just stay here?"

"I don't know…. I don't think so."

She looked toward the front of the house. "Would the car be safe?"

"I've heard a car is safe in a lightning storm. The rubber tires ground it." He stepped forward and leaned against the counter. "But this doesn't seem like just any storm."

"I know… it's pretty bad."

"No, it's more than that."

"It's just a storm. We'll be fine, hon."

He looked back at her, not answering.

"Josh?"

"Yeah, I know. Lightning is always hitting things—people, houses. It's not unusual." He said the words to convince himself, not her. The storm seemed purposeful, malevolent. But that was just his fears, distorting events, conferring malicious intent upon a thing incapable of deliberate action. It was just a storm. "I'll need to get my tools," he said. "See if I can get Samuel's window fixed. Then we'll get dressed and head out." Making the decision, dealing with the situation as a rational adult, gave him some confidence. He marched toward the utility room, looking back. "We'll find a hotel that still has power."

Lizbeth lifted Samuel down from the counter. Taking the boy's hand, she guided him into the dining room and patted one of the chairs. It was a spot shielded from the threat of breaking windows. "Wait here, Sam."

He climbed onto the chair. Lizbeth adjusted the blanket until only his round face was visible among the folds of dark fabric. "Your daddy will take care of everything," she said.

Samuel seemed to be looking past her, at some distant point. "Okay."

Lizbeth followed Josh into the utility room. "I'm worried about him," she whispered, standing in the doorway.

Josh pulled his toolbox down from the shelf. He flipped it open and sifted through a jumble of equipment and fittings. "Me too. But he'll be okay. The storm spooked him. It was bound to happen sooner or later."

"I hope that's all it is. He's just acting so… strange."

"He'll be better once we get him somewhere warm and well-lit." Josh pulled out a hammer, a screwdriver, some fasteners, and another flashlight. He hoped it would be enough.

She tried her best to smile. "Some night, huh?"

"No kidding."

She put her arm around his waist as he emerged from the utility room with his hands full of supplies. "I'm proud of you."

"For what?"

"Taking care of things."

"Thanks." Obviously, she hadn't seen through his pretense of composure. Or had she? Perhaps she was trying to instill a bit of confidence. "Why don't you stay with Samuel. I'll see what I can do with that window."

"Aye, sir." She kissed him on the cheek. "Good luck."

Josh strode toward the front of the house. Three steps into the hall, he heard his wife's voice, loud and frantic. "Josh!"

He raced into the dining room. Lizbeth was standing near the table, probing her surroundings with the flashlight, searching.

The blanket lay on the floor. Samuel was gone.

Josh's heart seemed to stop. He flipped on his own light, sending the shaft of illumination into the kitchen. Lurking shadows slid away from the radiance, revealing nothing. "Samuel!" he shouted.

"Samuel!" he shouted. He wiped the rain from his eyes and spotted a small figure perched near the ridge. Samuel did not turn; he seemed unaware of his father's presence.

Only a peal of thunder responded.

Louder. "Samuel!"

Silence.

Lizbeth looked toward him, then ran through the kitchen, into the dining room, and down the hall, circling the first floor of the house. Josh followed her. The glow of their flashlights carved through the darkness. They called his name. They opened closets, searched behind and beneath furniture, each time hoping to sight the blue pajamas, the small, delicate face.

There was no sign of him.

Josh stopped at the front door. It was still closed. He grabbed the knob, his hand shaking with tremors charged by worry and adrenaline, and pulled the door open.

Hushed darkness stood before him. The wind had fallen silent. The rain was nothing more than a gentle mist. It was as if the storm were an animal that had been fed and was now satisfied.

Could Samuel have gone outside? Why would he do that? Images sprang into his thoughts: the forms on the porch, incorporeal hands pressed against the window pane; and his son, kneeling before an open window, like a supplicant at an alter.

He had to be sure. "Check upstairs, Liz."

Her gaze swept across the open door, to him, then back. "Do you think—?"

"He's probably upstairs. I want to check outside, just in case."

"Okay." She gave the door one last, panicked glance and dashed up the steps.

Josh turned to face the night.

HE FOUND A FOOTPRINT IN THE MUD JUST BEYOND THE driveway. And another, a yard or so further on, filling with rainwater and seeping mire. The tracks were small, shoeless. Samuel's.

He tried to shout his son's name, but his voice caught in his throat.

Josh was dizzy with dread. He was wearing only his robe, but he was barely aware of the rain, or the cold water and muck at his bare feet. Lightning sliced across the sky. The development was like a wasteland of puddles and gouged earth; the newly paved roads showed cracks and dips, undermined by rivulets of murky water. It made for difficult footing, but he plodded in the path of his son's trail, eyes searching ahead, squinting against the misty rain.

The tracks led along the flank of the development. He wiped the rain from his eyes and spotted a small figure perched near the ridge. Beyond the form, dwarfing it, the Narrows Bridge stood within a haze of drizzle, its support wires rising like the ribs of a long-dead behemoth. The emerald lights of the bridge glimmered dully, accompanied by the glint of distant headlights as a car passed above the black water.

"Samuel!" Josh called, forcing his voice through a throat tight with tension. The sound seemed weak, ineffectual.

The figure began to walk, moving away. It was a smudge of shadow, silhouetted in the bridge's lights.

Josh ran, slogging through the mud. Time dilated, each moment becoming forever. He could see his son's dark hair, the blue pajamas, the wet hair curling at the nape of his neck, the pale hands. It felt like an eternity before he was coming up behind the boy, reaching for him.

Samuel did not turn; he seemed unaware of his father's presence.

Suddenly, with violent force, the wind rose again. Like a massive, invisible fist, the gust smashed into Josh, sending him reeling backwards into the mud.

"Samuel!" he yelled, but the wind devoured his voice.

He tried to stand. The gale tore at him, churned around him. He felt as though he'd been plunged into turbulent waters, gasping for breath, reaching for the surface, drowning. He managed to get to his knees, scrambling forward a few feet, hands sinking into the cold mire. But the storm was pushing him back, and Samuel—seemingly unaffected—was still walking, moving with the methodical determination of a machine. Each step carried him further away.

Josh was losing him.

"No—dear God, no!" He had no strength. His arms collapsed, and he fell flat. He raised his head, narrowing his eyes as the wind slashed against them, watching his son move away.

The panic boiled and crashed within him. His thoughts were a haze of mounting fear. He struggled to reject the terror, but it burned bright, a fire that would not be doused by logic. There was no logic to this storm, only madness. He remembered the nights of his childhood, when the shadows became wraiths, the darkness itself whispered his name, and the world was filled with endless mysteries. Monsters were real; magic was real.

He dug his fists into the mud, crying out, closing his eyes against a burst of lightning, then opening them again.

He drew in a breath, and held it. He could see them now.

They were forms of indistinct shadow, gray mist gathered into shapes vaguely human, with coal-black eyes and bodies of flowing vapor. They drifted on the wind, spinning and twisting, battering him with indefinite hands, holding him to the ground. Their whispers were the wind itself.

They encircled Samuel, but they did not restrain or hinder him. They wafted around the boy, touching him gently but eagerly, leading him away.

Josh shut his eyes, trying to will the creatures away. He had once wrapped himself with the blankets of his boyhood bed, muffling the voices, warding away shadows. Those blankets had been a stronghold, walls of fabric protecting him until morning light crept in ochre shadows along the surface of his keep. He wanted to do that now: deny the darkness until dawn made it only a memory. As the night gave way to daybreak, the chaos would surrender to calm, unreason to logic. But Samuel would be gone, and that thought spurred him to action.

Straining against the hold of the mist-forms, Josh stood. He planted his feet in the muck and took a step. Then another. And another. The beings lashed against him with unwavering force. With each footfall he grunted, but he was barely aware of the sound. His consciousness was focused on three things: the gaze of the beings, their cold whispers, and his son.

A step. Another. With agonizing slowness, he was moving toward Samuel.

The wind-voice of the things formed into words. *Stop.*

"No! Leave him alone!"

He belongs with us. He is one of us.

"Why? What are you?"

We are as we have always been.

"He's my son!"

He is one of us. He has called us.

"No!" Josh yelled. "Samuel!"

The boy stopped and turned around, facing Josh. The beings pressed against him, trying to compel him back into movement, but Samuel stood firm. His wet pajamas stirred in the rising wind. He said nothing. He stared at Josh, his small features as rigid as chiseled ice.

He is one of us.

"I don't understand," Josh said, still straining toward his son. "How? When?"

Always.

Always? Josh remembered the night of Samuel's conception: the storm, the howling wind. He and Lizbeth had seemed a part of the elements that night. Perhaps they were. And Samuel, linked to the things within the storm, had unknowingly summoned them in a time of loneliness. I called them, he had said. Don't you see them?

Straining harder, Josh lurched forward. His son stood before him, still and quiet, surrounded by the things flowing in a diaphanous haze. He was looking toward Josh, but his expression did not waver. The beings around him were frenzied, forming a barrier of churning, chaotic mist. Within that maelstrom, Samuel's form was fading, transforming, melding with the darkness.

"Samuel!" Josh cried. He leapt toward his son, reaching for him, but his hands did not make contact, and he fell through him, landing in the mud.

"No!" he screamed, turning back, clambering to his feet. Samuel was a shadow. Josh could see only his son's eyes, peering from an ashen mist. They were eyes of indigo blue: the shade of a thundercloud at twilight. Beautiful eyes.

"No, Samuel. Can't you hear me? Don't you see me?" He reached out again. "I love you. Please… don't go!"

The eyes of indigo seemed to meet his own. Their stares locked. Recognition. Knowing. "That's it, Samuel. I'm here, bud. C'mon." Josh reached out, and his hands touched something solid: Samuel's shoulders, the soaked material of his pajamas. He gripped the cloth and tugged.

Samuel fell into his arms. Josh, kneeling in the mud, wrapped his arms tight around the boy. He looked up.

The mist-forms circled around them, examining, touching. Their movements slowed, until they flowed like ink through the depths of a calm sea. A thousand orbs of pure blackness looked down upon him, but their gaze was not threatening, not evil. The wind was soft now, and it seemed to whisper of understanding.

"Please go," Samuel whispered, looking up at the creatures. His voice was detached, distant, as if he were talking in his sleep.

Like shadows submitting to light, the things faded, scattering in all directions. Above, the dark clouds broke apart, revealing patches of sky strung with shimmering stars. The rain stopped. The pearl-white radiance of the moon swept across the landscape.

In a moment, they were gone—but not completely.

"Daddy?" Samuel said, sleepily. He rubbed his eyes. "What are we doing out here?"

Josh picked him up and stood. "It's okay. You're safe."

Lizbeth was running towards them, stumbling through the mud. Josh waved at her, then looked down at his son. "Let's go home."

JOSH SIPPED FROM A CUP OF COFFEE AND GLANCED toward the window. A bulldozer swung into view, pushing dirt, its throaty growl joining the sounds of the other heavy equipment. It had been a month since the storm, but repairs still continued. He wasn't overly concerned. The lots would be ready soon.

"He's my son!" *He is one of us. He has called us.* The beings pressed against him, but Samuel stood firm. "No!" Josh yelled. "Samuel!"

The sun was bright and warm. They were well into September, with no end in sight for an Indian summer that refused to give way to autumn. The weather matched his mood: the day after the storm, he had called the office and announced he was going to use some of his accrued vacation time. He hadn't been to work in a month—and he didn't miss it.

"Hey, honey." Lizbeth was standing at the end of the hall, smiling. With an exaggerated sweep of her arm, she raised a small object into the air.

Josh narrowed his eyes. It looked like a vial of some sort, full of blue liquid.

"It's positive," she said.

"Huh?"

"I'm pregnant, you dope."

"Pregnant?" They had been trying to have a baby for nearly a year, but the announcement caught him off guard. Was he ready for another child? He hadn't told Lizbeth what happened the night of the storm—he didn't even know if he could define the experience. The line between reality and fantasy had once been sharp; now that line was blurred to the point of invisibility. It terrified him—and filled him with wonder.

"Honey?"

Don't do it, he told himself. Don't spoil it. This is important. It's right. "You're pregnant?"

Her eyes seemed to sparkle. "Yep."

"Pregnant?"

"Catch on quick, don't you?" She rushed forward and hugged him. "It's going to be terrific."

Her enthusiasm was contagious. He spun her around, while she yelped and tried to keep the vial from spilling. Then he thought of something and set her back on her feet. "Honey?"

"Yeah?" Her face was flushed. Her eyes sparkled.

"Do you think it could have been… I mean, could it have happened on the night of the storm?"

"Sure. The timing would work out."

He nodded. For some reason, the prospect of that did not trouble him. Another child with indigo eyes—a girl, perhaps—would be wonderful.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Great!"

Samuel pounded into the room and joined their hug, wrapping his arms around their legs, giggling. "Can we drive down to the park?"

"I don't know, kiddo," Josh said.

"It's going to be warm and sunny for the rest of the day," Samuel added, smiling.

And Josh knew that it would be.

SHAWN CLICK

Is a father of two and husband of one. When he isn't watching Mystery Science Theater 3000, *he is hard at work on a suspense novel.*

So, does your monkey bite the pizza guy *every* time?