The woman nodded, reaching for wrapping paper.

"This was his last painting, some time before he died." She deftly worked on the packaging. "He didn't like it much after it was finished. Before he died he asked me to destroy it, he said that the woman was watching men going to their deaths. He said women have the power of life and death."

She finished her task and shrugged her shoulders. "I couldn't destroy it. I felt sure it would be important to someone."

THE WIND KEENED AGAIN AND THE FIRELIGHT brought the waves and the clouds in the painting to life once more. To its left the bulls of Pamplona thundered closer to a runner, and on the right the leaning tower seemed to shift another fraction.

WILLIAM TRAPMAN

Is a journalist and broadcaster from County Kildare, Ireland. He has been writing short stories and plays since the mid-'80s. He is the author of the short story collection Mariseo's House and Other Stories *and the novel* The Mariseo Legacy. *He is currently working on a sequel to his novel. His books are available from The Kestrel's Nest Ltd, Kilcullen, County Kildare, Ireland.*

Eat it or wear it!

"Thanks." She smiled at Jeremy. "G'night."

"G'night."

When they got to the door she looked back. The men were deep in conversation. Peter was doing most of the talking, and both of them seemed excited.

SHE WOKE TO RAIN BLUSTERED ON HER WINDOW BY A keening wind. She figured it was after dawn but not yet day. She savored the moment—the luxury of spare time before having to get up shouldn't be wasted on slumber—and thought back to the last early morning with Peter in Boston. She'd told him she didn't think she'd be going to Europe.

"Why not, Meg? We've planned this for over a year." He turned from where he'd been looking out at the street. "This is our celebration of my finishing law school—we're going to be married when we come back."

His face was in shadow against the window, but she could hear his frustration. She sat on her bed, feeling miserable.

"I'm confused, Peter. I didn't plan this, but it's happened and I need to work it out. Going away with you to Europe simply doesn't seem to be the way to do it."

He sighed and came across and sat beside her, reaching for his cigarettes. He shook one out, looked at it for a moment, then shoved it back in the pack.

"OK, honey," he said, leaning back against the headboard beside her. "Let's think it through."

And they had, sitting and talking for the rest of the morning, Peter balancing the weights of the situation on one side and the other, as he'd been taught to do.

"OK, I'll go along with that," Jeremy said later in the restaurant to where they'd all gone for an extended lunch. "I'd nothing set for the summer anyway. But are you sure that you wouldn't be better working this out on your own, Meg? You know what they say—out of sight, out of mind."

"You really mean, 'make up your mind,' don't you?" She laughed, shaking her head. "Maybe I'd let go of you both. No, at least this way we're friends together for the summer, and what will be, as they say, will be."

They sealed the pact in the rosy glow of a second bottle of wine, and each made his or her way home separately. For Peter and Megan that was the first indication of the changed circumstances: it was understood between them that there would be no more sex until the matter was resolved. That night both wondered what on earth they'd done.

It had seemed such a mature way of dealing with the problem, Megan thought as she got out of her bed on Inishmaan and drew back the curtains on her window. Yet now she felt angry. Damn both of them! It wasn't fair to put her in this position.

It was gray and wet and wild outside in the Aran morning. Dressing quickly in woolly jumper and jeans, she went to the dining room and saw only one setting for breakfast.

"They left an hour ago, *a leanbh*," the landlady told her as she brought her cereal and juice. "They said they wanted to make the most of the waves, that they had been waiting too long."

WHITE TIPS COASTED IN ON THE BEACH IN NEVER-ending armies, sometimes battering across each other before collapsing on the sand and then slithering back into the undertow. Above them, leaden clouds scuttled low before the wind. Mairead's grandfather was standing beside a lone currach.

"They're not coming?" he asked. "Your friends? They were to meet me here, ten minutes ago."

"They're gone, gone an hour."

The old man looked to the other side of his boat, at the marks where two others had been, rapidly washing away under the weather and the sea.

"They are good with boats, they told me."

"They are," Megan whispered.

"THEY WERE RACING, IT SEEMED LIKE."

The boy on Inisheer had seen the two currachs approaching. "A wave caught one boat badly and it went over. The other stopped, and after a minute the man from it dived in. Then there was rain and I couldn't see them anymore."

The guard from Inishmore looked up from his notebook. "Could you make out which one was which?"

The boy shook his head. "No, Sergeant. They were too far."

The policeman sighed and closed his book. He turned to the two women.

"I'm sorry, miss," he said to Megan. "The currents here are treacherous. We can't even be sure that the bodies will ever come in."

Megan turned to Mairead. The young islandwoman, drawing on the reserves of courage from generations of sea tragedies, held her stricken friend tight and comforted her and looked out beyond at an ocean which had once more left a woman bereaved. This time twice.

"ARE YOU RELATED TO THE ARTIST?" SHE ASKED THE woman at the picture stall.

"My husband."

The sadness that Megan had seen once before came back, but this time the American could feel it too.

"We lived on the island. He died a year ago … he'd been sick for a long time."

"I'm sorry. He was good."

"Whew! They dance hard over here," Jeremy gasped, flopping into his chair.

"There's nothing smoochy about it," Peter agreed, flapping his arms to cool himself.

A bodhran hand-drum rapped out another roll of rhythm and one of the musicians called out something in Gaelic.

"What did he say?" Megan asked.

"It is the turn of the ladies," the old man told her, and nodded in the direction of a young woman walking across toward their table. "And it looks like one of them is going to take her turn here."

She had the same red hair and outdoor complexion as the woman who'd sold Megan the painting. Her eyes laughing, she stood before Jeremy and held out a hand. When she spoke it was also in Gaelic, but the meaning was clear.

Jeremy rose, grinning at the others.

"Could this be the fairy woman who will make me irresistible?"

"I don't know why she'd want to," Peter retorted.

The younger man gripped the girl's hand. "Jealousy, Peter, suits you," he laughed, and then the two walked across to where a set was forming.

It was their normal banter, but Megan could feel the undercurrents coming stronger, waves fighting each other to claim the shoreline. She looked at Peter.

"I don't feel like dancing. Would you like a walk?"

As soon as she'd asked, she wished she hadn't. She might have trapped herself.

But Peter nodded and pushed back his chair. "Sure. I'd like some quiet myself."

THE PIER HAD A SINGLE LIGHT ON THE END THAT didn't seem nearly a strong enough marker for a boat trying to land at night, particularly an engineless currach. Megan wondered about it as they looked over the edge.

"Boatmen have done it for thousands of years," Peter said.

A gust of wind scattered across the pier and Megan shrugged her jacket closer. She walked to one of the bollards and sat, knowing that before long its chill would force her to rise again. She heard a rasp and turned to see Peter cupping a match to a cigarette.

"Oh Peter! You haven't smoked since—since we started the trip."

He spun the match into the wind, and the tip of the cigarette glowed bright as he pulled on it.

"I think there are more important things to consider right now," he said quietly. "We're flying home soon."

Another gust whipped a taste of spray over her.

"Yes," she said eventually. "I know."

"What happens?"

She shook her head. "I haven't decided. I…" Her voice trailed off.

The cigarette glowed bright again for a few moments.

"I think I have, Meg. I don't think I can wait any more."

"We agreed to wait. We all agreed—"

"It's become too much of a game, Meg."

"No, Peter. It's not a game. It's a decision for my life."

"And for mine. And for Jeremy's…."

"Mairead's grandfather—the man who was with us earlier?—he's going to check his lobster pots tomorrow, and I've arranged for us to take a trip in one of those currachs, to the small island."

From somewhere beyond the harbor came a dull metal sound. A buoy of the kind used to mark shoals near land. It clanked in an uneven rhythm, ominous, funereal. Megan stood up and looked back towards the village, willing herself to hear music from the Tig na Ceoil that would drown the unseen bell.

"We'd better go in," she said.

"HEY! *CONAS TA TU*?" JEREMY HAILED THEM. "Mairead here is teaching me Gaelic. What d'you think?"

"I'll tell you if you tell me what it means." Megan laughed, her mood lightened momentarily. "Did you get your 'irresistible' mark yet?"

"It means 'how are you?' and no, I don't think so. What's it like outside?"

"Wind coming up," Peter said. "It could be squally tomorrow."

"Great. I've arranged for us to take a trip in one of those currachs, to the small island. It'll be interesting in a real sea."

"Hey, that sounds good." Peter said, brightening too. "How'd you swing that?"

"Mairead's grandfather—the man who was with us earlier?—he's going to check his lobster pots tomorrow, and he wants to visit a friend on Inisheer. He said he'd take us with him."

"Well, it'll be different from the whaleboats." Peter became thoughtful. "Hang on while I get a drink."

He looked at Megan, an eyebrow raised.

She shook her head. "I'm tired. I think I'll go home to bed."

"We'll have this last one," Jeremy said.

She felt something exclusive between the men. It was uncomfortable.

Mairead stood up and smiled at her. "I live beside your lodgings. I'll walk with you."

They were fascinated by fields bounded by high limestone walls, built drystone, most minuscule. A few had post-harvest stubble and narrow stooks of hay stacked in the lee of the walls, drying before storage for the winter feeding of the few cows on the island. Most of the enclosures were without gates, and finding the lowest points in the walls so they could traverse the island was like trying to get through a maze with no breaks. A maze that sometimes led to surprises.

"Look at that." Megan pointed when they came around the ruins of a little medieval church, into the wind which was everywhere on this exposed Atlantic rock. Two vertical rocks with a long capstone stood stark against the sun setting into a dark cloud mass.

"A dolmen," Peter said.

It dominated a terrain where there were no trees. Even light-hearted Jeremy was affected.

"Men built it and we don't know them," he mused. "It'll be there when we're gone and nobody will know we've even seen it."

They looked at it for a long time.

"It will still be there even when the tower at Pisa falls," Peter said finally, breaking the spell.

"IT'S THE BED OF DIARMUID AND GRAINNE," the old man in the Tig na Ceoil said, taking his pipe from his mouth.

"Who were they?" Jeremy's innate romanticism always influenced him into being intrigued by any story that involved a man and a woman and a bed.

"He was one of Finn mac Cumhaill's Fianna warriors, and Grainne forced him to take her away on the eve of her wedding to Finn, because he was getting old and she didn't want to marry an aging man."

"Forced him?" Megan asked.

The old man looked at her, his eyes blue twinkles in island-ruddied skin. "Aye, young lady. He didn't want to betray his chief, but she put a *geis* on him and he had to do it. And later she seduced him."

"Ah, blame the woman for everything." Megan laughed. "What's a *geis,* anyway? Some kind of a spell?"

"No, girl, it's more than that. It is a prohibition ignored at one's peril. She doomed him to death and dishonor if he would not take her away. He had no choice."

"Why him particularly?" Peter wondered.

"He was special. He'd once been taken as a lover by a beautiful fairy woman, and she put a mark on him which ever more made him irresistible to women."

The old man ended his contribution by beginning the recharging of his pipe.

Jeremy stood up to get them another drink. "Boy, I wouldn't mind meeting that fairy woman myself." He laughed.

"You must have done it at some time," Megan teased him. "Aren't you already irresistible?"

Behind him the door opened and a clatter of men and women came in.

"If I am, why are we here?" he asked softly, then turned away.

Some of those who'd come in were musicians, and Megan idly watched them unpack their instruments. At another level she thought on the old man's story.

"You don't like Grainne," she said. "You don't approve of how she behaved. But if Diarmuid had been made irresistible by some magical means, surely it wasn't her fault?"

He scratched under his wool cap. He had rekindled the pipe and was expelling aromatic, contented puffs.

"Aye, but even with the magic mark, Diarmuid wasn't her first choice. She'd already asked Finn's son Ois'n to take her, but he wouldn't. Finn commanded great loyalty, and even with Diarmuid she had to use the geis to get him to betray him. No man should be put in that position."

She wasn't going to let him get away with that.

"But why should a woman be put in a position that she must marry someone she doesn't want to?"

"He didn't want to betray his chief, but she put a *geis* on him." "Ah, blame the woman for everything," Megan laughed. "What's a *geis*?"

The old man pulled at his pipe. "Women mesmerize us, young miss," he said. "They always had power over men. Anything they want, they can make it happen."

His words made Megan uncomfortable. She turned and watched one of the musicians squeeze an under-arm bag-powered instrument, and at the same time Jeremy arrived with their drinks. She moved to let him put them on the table and caught Peter looking at her, and she knew he'd overheard the conversation.

"HEY, THIS IS GREAT!"

Jeremy grabbed her waist and swung her around in the center of the flagged floor, then released her to the arms of a man coming in from the corner of the formation. Breathlessly, Megan managed to laugh agreement before the dancing took him briefly out of her sight, and then she was back on the sideline as another foursome took their turn to the music.

It had been made clear early that visitors were expected to get fully involved in the entertainment at the Tig na Ceoil. Now the musicians played an end-of-set flourish, allowing the three to retreat to their table.

three horses on a beach, one galloping a length ahead of the other two. The trailing pair almost touched, veins on their necks bulging as each strained to break ahead.

"Power," she murmured, leaning back against Peter and linking an arm through Jeremy's. "Power and freedom."

"Stallions chasing the mare, actually," Peter grunted.

"Same thing." Jeremy laughed.

She dug her elbow against him and linked her other arm in Peter's, moving them all to another stand.

She could almost hear the waves crashing on the shore as she saw the boatmen and their currach. And the woman watching. A signature was scrawled in a corner: Mairtin O'Driscoll.

"A good piece, a strong painter."

This time Megan noticed details about the stallholder, red hair and a face that was no stranger to wind and sun—and in the brief woman-to-woman contact she saw a sadness.

"Where was it painted?"

"Inishmaan."

Her puzzlement showed.

"Inishmaan, the middle one of the Aran Islands. In Galway Bay."

Megan turned back to the painting. Unlike the picture of the horses, where the subjects were playing in a fairly benign sea, the characters on the Inishmaan beach seemed more threatened by moodier waves. There was again the separation of the males and the female, but in this painting she wasn't the challenge.

"What do you think?" Megan asked.

Peter shifted his glasses on his nose, a gesture she guessed would become well known in the courtroom.

"I don't like the frame—it's too light for the subject," he said eventually. "But the painting haunts. Or maybe it's the place."

Jeremy had already decided.

"I want to go there," he said.

"Me too," murmured Megan.

She agreed to the price with the woman, who offered to have the picture reframed. They looked at other paintings to find a suitable style, chose a frame, and arranged to pick up the picture some time in the next week or so.

Walking away, Megan looked at the woman's name scrawled on the bottom of the receipt. O'Driscoll.

"WOW! ARE WE REALLY GOING TO LAND THERE?"

Jeremy was impressed by the sea dashing against the little pier as they approached it.

"Aye, we are," the boatman answered. "It's smooth enough today."

Grinning at the blatant untruth, Jeremy returned to enjoying the views and the spray.

The 30-foot motorboat had seemed substantial enough when they'd boarded at Doolin, but what had seemed to be a mild swell from inside the little harbor was deceptive. They'd had a spectacular ride across the sound to the island, the middle of the three Arans in size. They had earlier passed to the north of the smallest, Inisheer.

Peter and Megan sat in comparative shelter on the lee side of the boat. The journey across Ireland in the rented car had been tiring, and each had developed a mood—in Peter's case, an unusually dark one that had been reflected in the two men sniping at each other during the last 30 miles. Megan was glad they'd been able to separate, even by the short distance available within the boat.

She gazed back at the mainland, the distant rocks of Doolin misted in the spray of waves ending their Gulf Stream journey. She knew that when they returned, all their lives would have changed.

"It's an end of the world."

Peter's words seemed to echo her thoughts. He hadn't spoken for nearly an hour.

"What d'you mean?"

He pointed back towards Doolin. "Maybe it's how Columbus felt, that what was fading behind him was it, an end. In front of him, for all he knew, was nothing."

"But we know there's something." She turned to the island, then looked back at him. "Isn't there?"

A splash carried on the wind blurred his glasses. "I don't know. This place is different, Meg. This is going to be an end itself."

Then the boat was lifting up and down on the waves sloshing at the pier and they were distracted by the boatman's efforts to gauge a landing that wouldn't leave them smashed on the stone wall. Only feet away he cut his engine and shouted, "Now!"

Jeremy threw the roped old tires over the side to buffer the boat in the swells. Two weathered men above caught lines thrown to them and tied them securely to rust-crusted bollards.

"Smooth enough," the boatman observed as he handed up their rucksacks. "Thanks for your help, young fella."

"You're welcome." Jeremy grinned, hefting his luggage over his shoulder.

Megan looked across at a small beach beyond the pier. She touched Peter's arm.

"Look."

Three currachs were drawn up above the weedy tideline, upside down against the weather, looking like long black beetles asleep on the shore.

LATER, IN THE WAY OF VISITORS NEW TO A PLACE, they moved around to find their boundaries. On an island so small this didn't take long, but doing it improved their spirits.

Waiting For Waves

WILLIAM TRAPMAN

Does art really *imitate life, or are we attracted to art that is destined to reflect our life?*

THE FIRE PULLED ITSELF HIGHER ON THE WIND, flickering ruby highlights through her wine. She shivered as the gust blew to climax and subsided.

The room was alive in the semi-darkness, outlines of doors and furniture shifting in the reflections from the fireplace. She loved the intimacy of this time of the year, fall not yet over but winter pushing against doorways, testing to see if summer had made people soft. She lifted her glass and as she drank her eyes came in line with the picture.

The painting had power even in the gloom, and though she knew it was only a trick of the firelight, the two sweater-clad men seemed to move as they pushed the *currach* against the incoming waves. To one side, a woman looked beyond them to the gray of a restless Atlantic.

Sweet Jesus Christ, how long will it take?

Another gust of winter pulled at the chimney, and she tasted again the spray from the sea salting her cheeks and lips. She wiped her face with her hand and found that it really was wet.

MEGAN HAD COME ACROSS THE PICTURE IN A fashionable Dublin shopping center. Drifting among the currents of shoppers in a pleasant interlude of aloneness, she'd browsed in a bookstore, fingered patterns in Aran sweaters, and, over the steamy rims of several cups of coffee, watched the patterns of movement from the central open-plan restaurant. She once found herself being observed, by a man who didn't drop his gaze when she caught it. He wasn't really coming on to her and she let it pass. Attention was something a woman lived with.

"Hi, Megan."

The interlude was over.

She smiled up at the two men. "How was the museum?"

Peter's glasses shrugged as he wrinkled his nose. "Tacky. An exhibit of what museums used to be."

"Hell, Pete, it wasn't that bad. The Celtic jewelry was cool."

Jeremy was the T-shirt of the trio, the towheaded younger of the men. Peter and Megan had first met up with him during a rowing regatta—both he and Peter were keen competitive whaleboat oarsman, pulling for Harvard and Boston U. respectively. Though at the comfortable stage of an "understanding" with Peter—they were to marry when he joined his law firm—Megan had found herself attracted to the young artist.

"Gold brooches in glass cases don't show context, Jeremy."

But Jeremy wasn't really interested anymore. He looked around the mall. "Hey, Meg, what's this place like? Buy anything?"

Her hair swished a negative.

"Not yet. There is a place—" she nodded over the boundary rail of the restaurant "—that picture stall. I like the styles."

"Let's look," Peter said.

"Yeah. Let's pick a picture." Jeremy gave his sloppy grin. He liked to be doing—he was going to set up a sculptor's studio when they got back to Boston.

She rose and slipped the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "Let's make waves, then," she smiled.

PICTURES AS MEMORIES, THAT HAD BEEN THE PLAN, one from each of the three countries on the trip. They'd drawn straws, and Peter had won Italy, their first stop. Jeremy drew Spain, leaving Ireland to Megan. The others could advise, if asked, on choices made by the buyer of turn.

Peter had considered in his careful way and had bought a watercolor of the Leaning Tower in Pisa.

"It's likely to fall eventually, and there'd be no point then," he'd explained. "Now I have what I've seen."

"What do you think?" Megan asked. "I don't like the frame—it's too light for the subject," Peter said. "But the painting haunts. Or maybe it's the place."

Jeremy had impulsively but definitely opted for an oil of charging bulls on the Pamplona Run, the beasts snorting on the heels of the scattering runners. "The runners could lose their lives," he said. "It makes life sweeter."

Now, in Ireland, it was Megan's turn.

The framed paintings in the stall were Irish, in themes typical of the country—moody landscapes, rugged portraits, thundering horses at race.

"They're all originals," the woman selling them said. "They all worked at it for their living."

The portraits she discounted because they were too specifically personal. One equine painting did attract her,

seven, the play. He listened to this from an armchair, one of the few pieces of his parents' furniture he'd kept when his mother had died, which he otherwise never used. At half past eight, he turned the radio off again and retired for an early night—another costly necessity—with a book.

This Saturday, however … the news finished, the play started, and he found himself imagining the studio during the recording. Scruffy lot, radio actors, trying not to rustle their scripts or get too much Home Counties in their American or Somerset or Irish accents. A sentence had finished, he realized, some time ago. He couldn't quite remember when. He looked up at the radio just as an actor finally said "But surely, Mrs. Bewley…," but the radio wasn't there.

He stared. The place where it should be was there—the gap on the table between the austere little decanter and the undusted chess set—and the play was there. The quizzing of Mrs. Bewley continued. *Perhaps,* he thought, *I did throw the radio out last week. I was meaning to do it.* But he remembered turning it on. Then again, he did that every week, he told himself. Of course he remembered doing it. And Mrs. Bewley? Obviously the man next door listening at too high a volume again. He really should have a word …but since he wanted to hear the play and hadn't remembered to buy a new radio, he'd overlook it this time.

Yes, it all made sense.

When, at half-past eight, the play finished, there was a little click and silence returned. He got up from his chair and turned in for the night, hardly noticing the new space on the table and already thinking about his Sunday habits: the shoe cleaning and the walk through the woods.

During the week, a toothbrush, a rug, and an unread dictionary vanished in much the same way. On Saturday afternoon he bought a new toothbrush and also a new radio, a small Sony that ran on batteries that lasted "forever," or so the salesman said. He particularly wanted a battery model, because there was only one socket in the front room, the one where the old Philco used to be plugged in and that was, he remembered, faulty.

A friend popped over for a chat while he was listening to a concert on his new radio. She went to the bathroom and returned grinning. "You kept that quiet," she said. He didn't know what she was talking about. "Two toothbrushes, eh? And don't you find that having two radios on at the same time, tuned to different stations, gives you a headache?"

The optician gave him some tests that showed nothing except a slight longsightedness, and advised a neurologist. The neurologist scratched her head—and his—and got nowhere. Then her son, who collected old radios, lent her a compendium of wireless design. She flicked through the Philco section and asked her patient to point out the model he had, the one that had vanished. It wasn't there, he said. There were a couple quite like it, either side of that blank on the page, but nothing that matched his.

Tests, tests, tests. No shadows on the scans, no untoward flickers on the meters, no pauses in reactions, no gaps in the normal neurological functioning of a standard human brain. Except that the picture of the radio caused nothing but an ambiguous flush of activity that died away as soon as it began.

Meanwhile, his mother's chair, his car, and the spare room had followed the radio into oblivion. Unable to afford a new car and unwilling to catch the bus, he lost his job. He felt the same way about that as everything else: mildly relieved but otherwise unconcerned.

Eventually, he was sitting in a room with a psychologist. "It might be neurological, it might not," said the doctor. "You've stopped seeing familiar things. You know that frogs can't see something unless it moves?" He did. "You can't see things that have merged into your personal background. They've burned out."

He thanked the doctor and left, amused at the man's conceit. Life was mercifully simple now, and the habits that had concerned him so much were slipping beneath the surface, just as they must do for everyone else. What did he care why this should be?

That evening, he went to brush his teeth. The toothbrush had gone—hadn't he bought that just a couple of months ago?—and he stared at the empty tumbler with the last touch of annoyance he would feel. Then he looked up, into the empty mirror. All that was in it was the room, and soon that was empty too.

RUPERT GOODWINS

London-dwelling Englishman, 31, with own modem and mild Ballard/Dick fixation, seeks lifestyle of indolent SF authorhood. Currently technical editor on PC Magazine UK. *More—or less—can be found on* <http://www.fly.net/~rupertg/goofimr.htm>.

breathed deeply, its eyes wide with pain, but quit thrashing when the Mennonite placed his hand gently upon its neck. In a minute, the horse was free.

"You got some rope?" Tate asked.

The man walked around his buggy. In a moment, he returned with a strong length of rope. Tate tied the rope around the horse, and the four men pulled it from the crest of the road into the heavy grass where it laid panting heavily. The four men then pushed the buggy out of the road. Cody Ray walked back across the road and down the ravine to the truck. He reached inside the cab and lifted the rifle from the gun rack. Stuart waited in the road.

"What can we do?" the man asked Tate while standing over his horse.

"It'll have to be destroyed," Tate said.

The Mennonite nodded. "How?" he asked.

Cody Ray walked up and extended the rifle to the Mennonite. "You would shoot him?" the man asked softly. Nobody answered. He crossed his arms, unable to take the rifle. His white shirt was bright under his black suit.

"You want to do it?" Cody Ray finally asked.

The man looked over at his horse panting heavily in the stiff, dry grass. "No," the man whispered.

Cody Ray walked up to the horse and fired quickly. Cody Ray then turned to stare at the smoldering amber lights of the missile silo a few hundred yards away. When he spoke, he sounded dazed, the way he did when he had smoked too much weed. "Troy, look at my head, will you?"

Tate had turned away, looking again down on the truck slumped at the bottom of the ravine, and Cody Ray had to repeat it. "Where?" Tate asked.

A trail of peaches followed the muddy tracks of the truck. Stuart stood quietly by himself. He knew he'd soon have to tell Cody Ray about the envelope hidden in his dresser drawer. Maybe tomorrow, he thought.

He turned in time to hear Cody Ray reluctantly admit Tate might have been right about the black cat while Tate examined the oozing cut in Cody Ray's scalp. Something else was shared between Cody Ray and Tate, something too quietly secret to be understood from a distance. Then Cody Ray laughed and said, "Tonight I'm gonna find me a fine woman and some cold beer!"

Tate laughed, too; "You just don't get it do you, boy?" He put his arm around Cody Ray's shoulder.

Stuart watched their warm embrace, then suddenly remembered when he and Cody Ray had been boys running with their dogs before the shadows from the sun.

HOLLIS DREW

Is the pseudonym of a writer who lives in eastern Arkansas.

Fade Out, Mrs. Bewley

RUPERT GOODWINS

Some people rarely notice their many habits…
others aren't so lucky.

THE RADIO VANISHED FIRST. IT WASN'T MUCH OF A radio—an old yellow Philco with valves and dust and only AM and, truth to tell, he'd been planning to replace it for years. In the normal run of things its loss would have been the mild pleasure of a chore no longer required; if it had broken down or been lent to a friend or even been stolen, he would have had to buy a new one and that would have been that. But radios don't just vanish, especially at a quarter past seven on a Saturday evening. Most especially when you can still hear them.

He was a man of expensively won habits. It wasn't until his fourth decade that he learned this, and since then had reluctantly lent more and more of his energy to building tiny mechanisms of place and time to keep the world at bay. Put the rubbish out on Wednesday morning, or you'll miss the collection. Laundry on Tuesday. Groceries on Saturday afternoon, after paying the bills at the post office. Small things that most people did with no more thought than scratching, but which made his mind squirm impatiently and with the utmost bad grace. He wasn't sure that always having the fridge stocked with croissants for breakfast was worth it: a small reward.

At seven on a Saturday evening, every Saturday evening, he put the radio on for the news and, at ten past

Once a large owl blundered into the bouncing glare of the headlights from the shadow of a tree, then disappeared across the top of the truck with a panicked gray swoop. Cody Ray fiddled with the buttons on the radio until he picked up a rock-and-roll station in Iowa; the night was clear, and the signal was strong. A black-haired woman had once said to Cody Ray as they lay on a blanket staring up into the black greatness of space, "Rock 'n' roll might be simple, but it ain't profane."

Stuart balanced the cup and steering wheel in his right hand as he rubbed his shriveled left leg. Occasionally they met a truck delivering eggs from the long chicken houses shining brightly against the wings of the hills into the city to be washed, graded, and packed into crushed-paper cartons. Stuart turned onto a paved county road, and after several miles, they passed a missile silo.

Radiant pink lights the color of begonias, the kind of lights that grew the best marijuana, stood near the hardened concrete doors of the silo. A cattle gate protected the narrow entrance. A white sign with black numbers beside the gate identified the site. The area hummed like an electric substation, and even if Stuart hadn't known the biggest roman candle in the world stood ten stories tall under them, the wondrous air would still have danced with fine licks.

A black cat dashed across the road before them.

"Damn!" Tate shouted.

"What?" Stuart asked, his heart jumping suddenly into his throat.

"Bad luck," Tate said, looking along the ditch for the cat.

"You don't really believe that," Cody Ray said.

Tate took off his baseball cap to rub his bald head. He stared at the road before them. "And what do you know?" he asked.

Cody Ray laughed. "Plenty," he said bravely. Tate also laughed.

The headlights fluttered above the next rise; then in one slim moment, like something slowly rising from a muddy dream, they roared upon the Mennonite's buggy. A kerosene lantern swung grimly from the back. A bright orange reflector on the back of the rig glittered in the truck's oncoming lights. Stuart jerked the steering wheel to pass safely in the left lane, but the spooked horse reared up. Its owner stood to pull at the horse's reins. The horse jumped into the left lane as the peach truck roared past, and the horse squealed like something pained. Then the horse bumped against the side of the truck.

Stuart had locked his brakes near the top of the rise; now his tires squawked upon the pavement until they left the blacktop and the truck spun upon the loose gravel on the shoulder of the road. Stuart fought the wheel to stay in the road, but the truck was suddenly as wildly unrestrained as the horse. They left the road and plunged forward into a deep ravine. They bumped wildly over the rough ground, spewing peaches into the air, then sprayed a fountain of water in the soft bottom of the ditch before the truck lurched to a stop. Peaches rained down hard across the hood.

They sat for a minute without moving to clear the adrenaline from their brains. The only sound in the cab was an unholy crackling of static on the radio and the men's heavy sighs. The Mennonite ran down the embankment, then slipped as he hit the thick mud. One of the headlights shined brightly across his slick, white face. He grabbed the door and jerked it open. Tate and Cody Ray left the truck. Stuart slowly pulled himself up the tilted seat and followed them out the door. Cody Ray was standing on the gravel shoulder at the top of the ravine when Stuart reached him. He looked down towards the truck and shook his head. "You're dead when Grandad hears about this," Cody Ray said with a grunt.

"My horse…" The buggy was twisted in the air at a crazy angle, and the horse lay panting in the road. Tate examined its leg. "It's broken," he said, and stood up to face the Mennonite.

Stuart didn't answer.

Tate walked toward the two brothers. "You okay?" he called.

"Yes," Cody Ray said.

"Stuart?"

"I'm okay," Stuart said. He looked away from the bruised truck to Tate.

The Mennonite walked up behind them. The four men stood in the road studying the truck at the bottom of the ravine. "I had lights," the stunned man finally said.

Tate nodded.

"My horse…" the man said. He pointed towards his twisted rig. They followed him over to it. The buggy was twisted in the air at a crazy angle because of the horse's weight. The horse lay panting in the middle of the road.

Tate examined the horse's leg. "It's broken," he said when he finally stood up to face the Mennonite.

"Yes," the Mennonite said sadly.

"We need to get it out of the road before somebody comes," Tate said. He had lost his baseball cap during the wild ride. Everyone looked down the road for a speeding car.

"Yes," the Mennonite whispered softly again. He reached into his loose pocket and brought out a knife. He snapped the blade open and bent over the horse. The horse

otes haunted the chicken houses back in the hills, where each morning chicken farmers heaped fresh white snowbanks of carcasses against the barbed wire fences. Green flies buzzed at the feast, and the stench drifted for miles. Coyotes and circling buzzards soon cleaned the hosts with their ruthless liberty, though no one had seen a coyote around the Sumpter farm in years.

"Did you hit him?" Mr. Sumpter asked. Diabetes had weakened his eyes. His kidneys were failing. He was old and weak in the sorrowful way of the ancient, and he scooted when he walked across the rough wooden blanks of the porch to press his face tightly against the rusty porch screen. Only his fleshy lips moved, and he resembled a bandit with a dark silk stocking pulled tightly over his face. The sagging, rusty screen would leave his face stitched for hours.

"Missed, Grandad," Cody Ray answered with a melancholy—and totally believable—sigh.

"Well…" Mr. Sumpter said, only half-interested or half-remembering by then, and disappeared into the kitchen through the dusty penumbra that fanned out onto the porch. The rude shots had pulled him up from his books, up from the pages of his immutable China. He resettled inside the soft, familiar glow of his reading lamp and stared through the thick magnifying glass at words tugged like bloated fish from the yellowing pages. Then he drifted back into the sanctuary of his missionary days. His parents were medical missionaries in China during the bad years. His stories about muddy river baptisms and a desperate, smoky flight during a local insurrection resonated with biblical adventure and waning hope. He said the Chinese were the first to domesticate fire, eat dogs, and harness the wind. His soft lies were meant to entertain. But it's possible he knew.

Cody Ray held out his beer as a peace offering. Stuart took it. It was impossible for Stuart to fight with his brother, a summer dreamer. Cody Ray tugged at his fly to relieve himself into a row of white snowball hydrangeas planted beside the gravel driveway that circled to the rear of the house. His water arched proudly upon the hard ground. He laughed softly at some private joke.

His mild laughter was contagious. "What?" Stuart asked.

Cody Ray called through the darkness: "You best hope, Stuart, you never know when the missiles come—too much time to think. Just pray they come in the middle of the night when you're sleeping." Cody Ray shook himself vigorously before zipping up. "Kaboom, Stuart! Crispy critter!"

"You'll die, too," Stuart said.

"Nope." Cody Ray shook his head. "Not me, Stuart… not me." He said he already knew his death. It was no big thing to him.

"I hope they send your ass to Vietnam!" Stuart hissed bravely from the beer now that the planes had safely passed.

Cody Ray turned and walked silently past Stuart into the house. And from deep inside the house, Stuart heard again the sound of his brother's gently pitying laughter. Stuart couldn't move off the stoop for a long time.

At three the next morning Troy Tate waited for the boys at the sorting sheds. Mr. Sumpter had hired Tate to manage the farm when his health had failed. Tate wore a rumpled St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap. Stuart and Cody Ray were to drive the peach truck to a farmers' market in Memphis.

"I topped off the gas tank," he said. "We'll have enough to make it over and back. You got money?"

Stuart nodded. Mr. Sumpter had counted out ten dollars for their lunches the night before. "You're going then?" Stuart asked. Occasionally Tate rode with them, but most of the time he stayed at the sorting sheds to watch the migrant workers, who sometimes stole peaches to sell along the highway from the beds of their rusty pickups. Tate nodded and Stuart was glad. He liked this affable, bald man.

They watched Cody Ray shake the high sideboards on the truck to test if they were firmly anchored. Then he climbed the sideboards to test the load for shifting.

"Three bucks a bushel, and not a penny less," Tate said. It was a suitable price he and Mr. Sumpter had decided on after Tate had supervised the loading of the truck the night before. "Three bucks, Cody Ray," he repeated, but really to himself, practicing now for the throbbing farmer's market, a place where clever merchants would steal from an unwary farmer.

Stuart slid behind the wheel. Cody Ray preferred to ride on the first leg, though he might drive back in the early afternoon after the peaches were sold. Cody Ray jerked the half-sprung passenger door open then. Tate slid in last and slammed the door shut, then shut it again because the rusty latch had not caught the first time. "There's coffee," Tate said, nodding to the large red thermos resting in the dirty litter on the floor of the truck.

The old truck's tires crunched upon the gravel road, a gratifying, uninhibited sound to someone lucky enough to have grown up beside one. The air whizzed through the lowered windows; it was damp and clean, like neat whiskey. This was good country; anybody who knew anything could smell it in the air, even before they turned a shovel of the dark sweet earth. Tate poured hot coffee into a Styrofoam cup and passed it to Stuart. It was strong, the way Stuart liked it. The coffee smelled good inside the open truck cab. Stuart drove slowly although everyone fidgeted, impatient to get started. They still had a good two-hour drive to the market.

Shooting Stars

HOLLIS DREW

In the shadow of threats both obvious and unknown, Stuart and Cody Ray have only each other.

A MONTH AFTER CODY RAY WAS BORN, HIS mother left for Nevada. She told her father, Jesse Sumpter, that she thought she might have better luck in the desert. She promised to return for her two young boys as soon as she had a place to live. Mr. Sumpter thought she settled in Phoenix instead. At least her infrequent letters were postmarked from there.

Stuart was older than his brother by a year. Their father had drowned in a duck-hunting accident shortly before Cody Ray was born. Mr. Evans and two of his hunting friends had ventured out in a small boat into the flooded lands beyond the levee where thousands of ducks fed on the grain. Sometime during that afternoon, the wind had shifted suddenly from the northwest, bringing stinging icy pellets out of the plaster-gray sky, and their boat had overturned in a flooded field. The water was frigid, and the hunters had been drinking. Their waders quickly filled with water and anchored them as they thrashed for air under the flashing white flakes. After three days, they were found in several feet of water, but the icy water that drowned them had also prevented them from blooming into grotesque and unpresentable beasts. When somebody asked, Cody Ray said his parents died while he and Stuart were babies.

Stuart and Cody Ray would sit on the back stoop of their grandfather's old farmhouse to drink beer, smoke weed and watch for the B-52s. They came from the west, sneaking in on the final leg of a practice bombing run on the Titan II missile silos that honeycombed the earth around the farm.

"Shhh!" Cody Ray whispered one evening as he cocked a finger at the flushed sky. He was usually the first to see them. Stuart followed the cant of his brother's arm toward the lights twinkling on the horizon as bright incoming stars. A mock attack from the unpredictable planes usually left Stuart giddy and shaking.

The huge chariots guttered in so slowly the air ached. As they drifted in on their final low approach, Cody Ray disappeared inside the house. Stuart watched them waft over with their bomb-bay doors cranked open, insides lit up mute and sparkling like a carnival just before closing, and strained his eyes for a glimpse at the nuclear orb cruelly nestled inside the huge plane like a stone in the heart.

When Cody Ray stepped back outside, he cradled a .44 magnum rifle in the crook of his right arm. The brothers only used it to hunt white-tailed deer in the hills. While it lacked the glamorous reach of a .30-06 or .30-30, a .44 magnum bullet traveled slowly and packed a nasty wallop as powerful as a blow from a sledgehammer. Common deer rifles maimed about as many of the leaping deer as they killed inside the heavy brush. Stuart didn't think too much about it, because they were always fooling around with guns—until the rapid *wham! wham! wham!* off the muzzle sent him flying into the yard.

"What the hell?" he shouted at Cody Ray, who was squinting with his left eye, his dominant eye, down the rifle barrel at the exposed belly of a low-flying plane. He had squeezed the rifle tightly against his cheek and his flesh had shuffled into tiny ridges that resembled gills.

Cody Ray shrugged and lowered the rifle. "Missed," he said.

"You're nuts!" Stuart whispered. He wanted to puke with his fear, but he wouldn't let Cody Ray win so easily. An envelope addressed to Cody Ray from the Selective Service had arrived yesterday. Cody Ray hadn't attended his classes at the nearby college most of the spring and had failed the semester. Stuart had hidden the envelope from Cody Ray under the underwear in his top drawer. He understood what the letter meant.

Cody Ray cradled a rifle in the crook of his right arm. Stuart didn't think much about it until the *wham! wham! wham!* off the muzzle sent him flying into the yard.

Stuart limped to the edge of the yard to watch the planes disappear over a distant ridge, half expecting a nuclear cornucopia to rend them in a quick, searing flash of irrevocable light. He held his breath, badly shaken, unable to speak.

The planes floated away as gracefully as the purple martins that filled the air above the garden. Cody Ray propped the rifle against the house. Then he reached into the cooler for an icy beer.

"What was it?" Jesse Sumpter called into the gloaming from the kitchen door. Mr. Sumpter was one of the first farmers to plant peach trees down in the web of land stretched between the hills and mucky bottoms. It was an immense, rich land he called "crawdad land," land that buzzed softly under the warm light of the universe.

Cody Ray stepped backward into the deepening shadows. "An old coyote, sir," he said matter-of-factly. Coy-

something that appeared to be fear. Anne dared not ask the source of the flame behind her daughter's gray eyes, and when she learned about that scandal up at the high school, she hid herself in her tiny bedroom and wept into her pillow, and she wished terribly that she could provide for her spooky silent daughter.

Grandma Cooper was shocked, and blamed Twilight's name and, therefore, Anne. "You hear darkness every time your name's called, it affects you. You listening, girl?" But Anne was not listening, for once. Ruth remained quiet, which was not her nature. But she did not remain silent. She would watch Twilight, a certain understanding glittering in her eyes.

One night Ruth found Twilight on the porch. One slender hand on the railing balanced her, and she faced toward the shimmering lights of town.

"Looks beautiful when you're not in the middle of it, don't it?" Ruth reached to touch the shining silver of Twilight's hair, and for once Twilight allowed it.

"I loved him, Grandma. I really did."

"I know." There was no judgment or disapproval, only a simple statement of fact, and those two words gave Twilight the strength to straighten her spine.

"Love is a good thing, girlie. Don't let them tell you any different."

But they did. There were snickers and whispers and outright taunts. Students wondered out loud if she'd earned all her good grades with sex, and a band of guys, led by Reverend Helms's son, followed her around all day every day, making lewd comments and requests.

"You kiss Miss Turner too, Twillie?" Buck Helms had muttered, leaning close to her as she was at her locker so that his hot breath rained on her neck, and cool collected Twilight whirled and with one punch forced that hot breath back into his mouth.

She found herself before the principal, Mr. Walker. "Twilight, it would greatly sadden me if I had to bar you from graduating this term."

She said nothing.

"Twilight, please, you are not helping Mr. Carpenter by attempting to protect his honor."

"If you would, I wouldn't have to."

"Go home, Twilight. There's nothing here for you today. The excitement will have died down by tomorrow."

But it did not, even though Mr. Carpenter disappeared as if he had never existed. When Twilight received her yearbook weeks later, she was not surprised to find that his picture had not been published. She was followed home almost every day by groups of guys who made sexual suggestions and thinly veiled threats. The owner of the grocery store asked Twilight to quit her job. The Cooper household began locking its doors and windows during the daytime. One afternoon Twilight arrived home to find Ruth diligently scrubbing the word *whore* off of the side of the house.

And not once did Anne or Ruth or Grandma Cooper ever ask the question:

Did you do it ? *Did you sleep with your teacher* ?

For that, Twilight was grateful. At least to them, it didn't matter.

Twilight graduated June 1, 1975, as the valedictorian of her class. No one believed she had earned any of her grades with her mind, so Twilight decided to forego the traditional speech. Mr. Walker gratefully agreed.

On June second, Twilight was driven to the Greyhound station by Ruth, after dutifully kissing Anne and Grandma Cooper goodbye. So there they sat, grandmother and granddaughter, in the parking lot of the bus station. Twilight had one suitcase, filled half with clothes and half with books, her mother's string of pearls—her graduation present—and six hundred dollars, the sum total of every penny she had ever earned. Ruth had paid for the bus ticket without even asking where Twilight was going. When Twilight offered the information, Ruth shook her head. "Just tell me when you get there, baby. The stops along the way don't matter."

"I'm surprised you haven't asked why I want to do this."

"Don't need to, baby. I know, and besides, ain't none of my concern. Each person has to find his own."

Twilight clutched her bag in one hand, the money for the ticket in the other. She crossed the parking lot, determined and proud, and did not look back.

ON APRIL 1, 1978, WILSON CARPENTER WENT TO HIS mailbox to find a postcard depicting a scene from *Alice in Wonderland.* Turning it over, he read:

Curiousier and curiousier. But no regrets.

Wilson did not have to recognize the handwriting to recognize the sender of the card. Smiling to himself, he tucked it into his pocket and decided to go for a walk. He kicked his way down the street, whistling tunelessly and enjoying the warmth of the sun on his neck.

CARLA BRUMBLE

Graduated from North Carolina State University with a degree in psychology and from Boston University with a degree in counseling. Most of her stories, including this one, are set in her native North Carolina. She is newly married to her best (or worst) critic, and is in the midst of writing her first novel.

"Take those gray glasses off, Twilight." He leaned across their laps and kissed her, briefly and firmly, and Twilight felt the same flyaway feeling that he had given her when he had first read to her.

The next day, they did not meet. Mr. Carpenter had a staff meeting after school. The next time they met, everything was as if normal, but Twilight could not look into his eyes without tasting his lips.

In her journal, she dared write *I love you*, then crossed it out. She wasn't sure she knew what love was. She knew what Lawrence thought about love, and Shakespeare and Donne and Dumas and—but those were only theories.

As the prom approached, Twilight held herself above the excited conversations about corsages and dresses and post-dance plans, but there was only so much that one person could ignore. She began to feel herself deflating, and could almost hear the whooshing noise of air escaping.

"I have something for you." As when he said that the first time, Mr. Carpenter appeared proud of himself. But rather than handing her a book, he gave a package of a wadded brown bag. "Excuse the wrapping."

Twilight opened it to discover a pair of cheap sunglasses. The lenses were covered with red construction paper. At her quizzical look, he shrugged sheepishly. "Rose-colored glasses."

Twilight felt so naked and frightened, but she managed to croak, "Thank you."

He reached to embrace her, a warm bearish clumsy hug, and she felt herself melting. Then from behind her—

"*Excuse me*. Mr. Carpenter, may I see you in my office?"

She turned and he looked up to see the principal, Mr. Walker, obviously furious, and as Twilight stood and gathered her things, he held out his hand to escort her from the room. She noticed Mr. Walker kept his hand above her shoulder, as if she would burn him. Twilight stayed to watch the two men walk down the hallway, Mr. Walker's stride meaningful and angry, Mr. Carpenter's determined and proud. Mr. Carpenter did not look back.

At home that night, Twilight dialed Ethel's boarding house. She was shocked to hear her voice tremble. "May I please speak with Mr. Carpenter?"

"Is that you, Twilight Cooper? You have enough nerve! If you had the sense to keep a low profile, you might escape with a clean nose!"

"May I please speak with Mr. Carpenter?"

"I don't know if you should."

"Put him on the goddamn phone, Ethel!"

Twilight heard the gasp of shock, then the indignant sniff, and the clattering of the receiver. Minutes later, Mr. Carpenter answered the phone, sounding so meek that she was frightened. She clutched the solidity of the telephone to assure herself that the earth was steady beneath her.

"Twilight, you shouldn't be calling me."

"I wanted to see if you were all right."

"I will be. Twilight, please."

"But—"

"It will be all over town tomorrow, thanks to Ethel."

"I don't care."

"Twilight, I don't think you understand." He sighed, an old man sound. "They think I seduced you. That we—"

"But we didn't!"

"That doesn't matter. Twilight, if I don't leave quietly, my teaching license will be revoked, and I will be charged with statutory rape. Do you understand what that means?"

"But you didn't touch me!"

"I went too far, and that's all that matters."

Twilight felt a burning in her chest that welled up in her throat. "Don't they know you can make love to a person without ever touching?"

"At least I taught you something." He sounded sadly pleased.

"Please… Wilson."

"*Twilight.* No. Promise me you'll get out of Mason. When you graduate and have the money, leave. Go somewhere where you can think and breathe and love. Then write me and tell me you're doing well."

Twilight was strangling.

"Promise me."

She managed to gurgle, "I promise."

"Twilight, do you know that time right before you drift off to sleep, when every worry and every need comes crashing in on you?"

"Yes."

"I want both of us to be able to face all those demons in the dark, to be able to face ourselves in the dark, and be able to sleep. Do you understand?"

"But—"

"Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Then make that your goal. D. H. Lawrence said 'I want to live my life so that my nights are not full of regrets.' I want that for both of us, and my leaving quietly is the only way. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Twilight. For everything. I shall think of you every time I read Lawrence. I am so glad I made him come alive for you."

"Wilson—"

"Be brave."

Dial tone. Twilight listened to this last remnant as long as she could, willing this lifeline to bring him back.

ANNE SAW A CHANGE IN HER DAUGHTER EVEN BEFORE she heard the rumors. Twilight held her head high, not with her usual oblivion, but with defiance and pride and

he saw her in town, he would not speak, but he would wink or wave or smirk in a way that made Twilight feel naked, unprotected.

One day in late February, Mr. Carpenter called Twilight to his office. "I have something for you," he insisted, and when he quite proudly presented a paperback, Twilight blinked dumbly at him. "Go on, take it." She did, and turned it over. *Lady Chatterley's Lover.* She looked up at him, her expression a blank question. "I'm not allowed to teach it in class. The school board turned me down flat. But I believe that good, strong minds should never be kept from strong words and unsafe novels. It's yours. To read, I mean. And if you like"—and suddenly he seemed shy and uncertain—"we can discuss it when you're done."

Twilight simply nodded, staring at the ornate words on the cover that spelled out the title. She felt somehow as if she were standing on the precipice of the rest of her life.

She devoured the novel in two days, reading it around chores and schoolwork. She found the sexual imagery as foreign as Grandma Cooper's religion, and she told Mr. Carpenter so.

"No, no, it's not strange, it's beautiful. Here—" and he took the book from her and opened it and began to read, and Twilight was filled with such a delirious warmth at his words, the feeling of good alcohol as it slides down your throat and burns in your belly.

" 'And this time his being within her was all soft and iridescent, purely soft and iridescent, such as no consciousness can seize. Her whole self quivered unconscious and alive like plasm. She could not know what it was. She could not remember what it had been. Only that it had been more lovely as anything could ever be. Only that. And afterward she was utterly still, utterly unknowing, she was not aware for how long. And he was still with her, in an unfathomable silence along with her. And of this, they would never speak.' "

Warmth and emptiness spread to her appendages, her finger and toes filled with numbness and feeling. Twilight felt as if she would break apart into a million pieces and disappear. And, as his blue, blue eyes looked into her own gray, she knew that he read her mind.

Days passed, then Mr. Carpenter slipped her another book, this one also banned from the Mason library: *Lord of the Flies.* Book by book, discussion by discussion, Mr. Carpenter introduced Twilight to a world that Mason would never allow to pass over its borders.

Twilight wrote in her journal, huddled over the page, the pen, and the flashlight in the dark of the room—

Did you ever think I would be so happy ?

—and she was filled with righteous indignation, with the most wonderful *Itoldyouso* feeling.

I showed you.

Once, when they were arguing over some minute point in Milton, huddled together as always in that little cubicle off the classroom that was deemed his office, Mr. Carpenter stopped and asked, "Why is your name Twilight?"

"My mother chose it." Twilight stared at him as if he were dense.

"No, Little Miss Literal. Why?"

"Because I see the world that way."

"No one could accuse you of wearing rose-colored glasses," Mr. Carpenter responded, but through shrewd examination she decided he was speaking from gentle affection, not criticism. This made her as uncomfortable as criticism would have, and she felt defensive and flushed. Mr. Carpenter nodded as if it all now made perfect sense. "'Through a glass darkly,'" he murmured.

"How did you know?" Twilight was startled into an open response.

"Of course, that's not exactly what it means, but it's appropriate. The entire verse refers to the relation between the body and soul."

That became their next topic—Twilight devoured Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, Descartes under Mr. Carpenter's guiding hand.

Twilight felt herself free from Mason's bonds. She would walk down the street and silently taunt passers-by: I read what you ban, I think about what you decry, I question what you hold sacred. And she felt almost a sexual rush being in the presence of a Mason authority—a city council member, a school board member, a teacher, the principal—and knowing that she had escaped from their prison, that she had outfoxed them.

As February became March, Mr. Carpenter and Twilight met almost daily in his cramped office. Their arguments grew to have an intimate nature, and Twilight felt herself becoming possessive about him. As close as they became, two subjects remained off limits: the Cooper family and college. The Coopers did not have the money for college, and though Twilight had squirreled away every penny from her job at the grocery store, she did not enough money yet. Application deadlines came and went, and Twilight gritted her teeth.

One day over Tolstoy, Mr. Carpenter suddenly asked, "Going to the senior prom?"

Twilight examined him, the glint of the light off of his glasses, his shaggy blond hair. She knew every pore in his face, every wrinkle in the knuckles of his hands, yet she looked at him as if he were foreign.

"Of course not."

"What do you mean, 'of course not'?"

"You still don't know Mason yet, do you? We have a caste system as strict as India's. I'm one of the untouchables. To date me is to risk excommunication."

Ethel continued. "Yes, I know. Charming young man, too. So handsome. And you know it's rare that a young man would want to teach. I mean, women have limited paths, but a man—"

Rosemary spoke again, and though Twilight tried, she could not hear the woman's words. Mrs. Smith boasted a much softer voice than poor squawky Ethel.

"Well, yes, I guess you're right, but it would be different if he was older." Twilight wondered where Ethel supposed older male teachers came from, if sixty-year-old businessmen suddenly got the urge to teach Algebra to pimply-faced junior high kids. "Or at least married," Ethel continued.

"Well, there's still time for that," Rosemary said, speaking more clearly. And Twilight silently praised her: *Atta girl, Rosemary, project that voice.*

Ethel grumbled. A gossip had more fun if the recipient of what-might-turn-out-to-be-scandalous news agreed with her. The conversation dwindled as the women began to speak of the upcoming church bazaar, and Twilight tuned them out. A new man. A teacher. Probably the lower grades, and probably a math teacher. Twilight wished she had caught his name.

The next day, her English teacher, Miss Turner, did not show. After ten minutes of no supervision, the class was becoming restless. Twilight read her book and ignored them, until she heard a deep voice above the din.

"Excuse me. I didn't realize that a teacher's absence was permission to run amuck."

The class grew silent, staring at this man, the young face that could have passed for one of theirs. He dropped his briefcase on Miss Turner's desk with a loud thump that even startled the unshakable Twilight. "My name is Mr. Carpenter. I have been assigned to this class for the rest of the semester. Miss Turner will not be returning."

Twilight, by carefully listening to Ethel, had learned that Miss Turner was now resting comfortably in Raleigh, in a bed in a minimum security ward of Dorothea Dix hospital. She had had some kind of "nerve thing," according to Ethel. Twilight figured it must have been a nervous breakdown and wondered if it had been student-induced.

"Old Turner's gone loony," one of the boys in the back called out, and there were uncomfortable giggles throughout the room.

Mr. Carpenter fixed the room with an icy stare. "I will not have such talk in my classroom. You will show as much respect to Miss Turner as you will show to me. If any smart-aleck thinks he can best me, then he may leave right now. I will not play a game of wills with this class, and anyone who attempts to rattle me will find his own cage rattled. Is that understood?"

Twilight knew Mr. Carpenter had been briefed well; Miss Turner's seventh-period British Lit was widely known to be the worst bunch of seniors ever in one classroom together in the history of Mason Senior High School. Twilight, who never demeaned herself by complaining, had not approached any administrator about switching classes. She chose simply to rise above the rest of the class and therefore ignored them as she did almost everyone else.

As the bell rang, Mr. Carpenter raised his voice to call Twilight to his desk. Gathering her books, she slowly moved toward him and stood before him, clutching her belongings to her chest.

In February Mr. Carpenter called Twilight to his office. "I have something for you," he insisted, and presented a paperback. "Go on, take it."

"I have had the chance to read some of the papers you wrote for Miss Turner."

He paused as if she were supposed to speak, and Twilight stared him down. "You have a lot of talent. Frankly, I was wondering what you were doing in this class. You could have taken Honors."

"There are just as many Neanderthals in Honors as in here," Twilight replied coolly.

Mr. Carpenter, to her surprise, grinned. "Fair enough. You may go. I just wanted to let you know you had been noticed."

"I would have preferred to have been overlooked." Twilight fixed him once more with the gray beams of her eyes and turned, leaving. She listened with satisfaction to the sound of her own heels clicking down the hallway. Hopefully that confrontation had settled things and he would let her go back to her world, reading during class and dutifully turning in *A* assignments.

Her luck would not have it that way.

Twilight found herself arguing points with Mr. Carpenter during class, arguing theme and intent and characterization until her pale face reddened and she thought her chest would burst. Shocked by her atypical behavior, her classmates gave her a wider berth than usual, unnerved by this change in the status quo. These confrontations drained Twilight, sapping her strength. Mr. Carpenter, on the other hand, seemed charged by these challenges, energized. His eyes would flash and the corners of his mouth would quirk. Twilight often wondered if he provoked her deliberately.

Fall became winter, and still Mr. Carpenter poked and prodded at Twilight until she was forced to participate, forced to respond with more than cool dismissal. When

down Highway 40. When asked by annoyed policemen and her bewildered mama and exasperated Ruth, Twilight shrugged. Didn't matter how she got there. Only Grandma Cooper agreed with her. "She's home safe, ain't she?"

And Anne supposed she was, although her scrutiny of her daughter increased in intensity. Over the next couple of weeks, she watched her as if watching a stranger, as if examining a paramecium under a microscope. Her clinical thinking about her flesh and blood didn't disturb her; how else should someone think about their kin?

And so Twilight grew, doing as she pleased with the calm belief that that was the way it should be, bewildered by others' reactions to her willfulness. She did not comprehend how someone else could decide how it was proper for her to behave. She lived in the world behind her shadowed face and steely eyes, and no one had ever been invited inside. No amount of force parted those doors, either, though Ruth bullied and cajoled. Anne simply watched, her hound-dog eyes testimony to her child's strangeness. Grandma Cooper kept a wide berth around Twilight and only reacted if the girl was disrespectful toward her. No one had the right to be disrespectful to their elders.

As a teenager, Twilight was fascinated by the physical difference between herself and the other Cooper women. Grandma Cooper was tall and thick-boned, exuding an air of strength. Her gray hair still held hints of its former ebony color. Her skin was dark and tough from years of sun and hard work. Ruth resembled her mother, big and sturdy and dark. Anne was paler but in all other ways was Ruth's daughter. All three had bright green eyes, while Twilight's were gray. Twilight was thin, all angles and bones, and small. Her heart beat within her chest like a fluttery bird, and if she looked in the mirror after removing her bra, she could see the movement of its wings underneath her skin. Her hair was white-blonde-gray, and she seemed fragile, breakable next to the workhorse women of her family. Yet wire and steel and bone reinforced her, and she would not break.

Despite the differences that could only come from genetics, Twilight never asked about her father. The Cooper understanding was that she had no father, and even after she learned the facts of life from Becky Carlson, the perky snubnosed cheerleader in her American Lit class, Twilight did not ask from whose sperm she had come. It really did not matter. Twilight, as she watched children in town with their daddies, knew relating to a father would be as foreign as committing that act that Becky had whispered about, to be hot and messy and sweaty and connected to another human being. Those things, sexual acts and fathers, were for other people. Twilight was meant for different things.

Twilight also differed from the other Cooper women in temperament and desire. She shunned Grandma's Bible, Ruth's relish for housekeeping, Anne's longings, for something better, something bigger. She could feel her eyes glass over when Anne talked of the big city or Grandma quoted Bible verses at her.

But one day, when Twilight was fourteen, Grandma's religion penetrated. Twilight had once again aggravated Ruth to the point of rage and had ridden the wave of Ruth's loud words into the living room, where she found Grandma Cooper seated on the couch. She was hunched over the Bible in her lap, rocking. Twilight started out the front door when Grandma's words stopped her.

" 'Through a glass darkly.' "

Twilight turned and fixed her steely eyes on Grandma. "Excuse me?"

"You see the world as those who have not found God, in shadow."

"Yes, yes I do." Twilight disappeared out the door, not hearing or not caring to hear the admonishment in Grandma Cooper's words. As she walked down the dirt road that extended from the Cooper house into Mason, she twisted the words around in her head. Yes, the world did seem dark to her, but wasn't it, truly?

TWILIGHT MET A MAN WHEN SHE WAS SEVENTEEN, the chance meeting being the catalyst that would start her motors, that would start the propulsion that would move her far, far away from the Cooper land, from Mason, from the South. His name was Wilson Carpenter, and she first caught wind of him in the drug store after school one day in the fall of her senior year. She had stopped in for a soda and was seated at the counter, reading William Blake, when she heard the voices of Ethel Milton and Rosemary Helms. Ethel was nothing but a nosy busybody, but Rosemary was Reverend Helms's wife. So Twilight listened, pretending to read, and heard them talking about "that new fellow."

"Just moved in last night," Ethel was saying. Ethel owned the town's boarding house and so was usually the first to meet any newcomer, since Mason did not boast a hotel. Twilight supposed Ethel's nature and the job had drawn together like magnets. Gossips were well suited to live among the hub of the town's happenings and in fact were happy no place else.

"Only brought one suitcase. Small little thing. And so I asked him if he was having the rest of his things sent and do you know, he said there wasn't any more. I mean I know men aren't the same about belongings, but really. One suitcase!"

From her seat, Twilight could hear Rosemary's murmur, and she strained to listen.

Facing Myself in the Dark

CARLA BRUMBLE

Teachers can open young minds to new ideas.
That's what makes being one a dangerous proposition.

On April 1, 1957, Anne Millicent Cooper gave birth to the only child that ever managed to survive the toxic environment of her womb. As she sat in her hospital bed, aching, tired and drugged, holding that squinched-up piece of human flesh that was at once all-Anne and not-Anne, she searched her daughter's face for some sign. Grandma Cooper always said that a person had their name written all over their face, and a wrongly given name was a tragedy that could twist someone's personality into improper and disastrous proportions. After the horrible events of November 1963, Grandma Cooper claimed that Lee Harvey Oswald's mother hadn't read his face right and so was to blame for the events that had led him down the path to assassination.

Anne sat, cranky from exertion, and marveled at the fact that her baby had not yet cried. Even when the doctor had whacked her a good one to give her breath, the baby had merely hiccuped with dignity and slowly turned from blue to pink without a sound. Even now the baby lay quietly, her steely eyes focusing on Anne with such intensity that it gave her the creeps.

Years later, when Grandma would scold Anne for naming that changeling baby wrong, Anne thought back to that Fools' Day and remembered the grayness that belonged to the baby's face, as if the sun had set and impressed shadows over her features to leave a darkness that never lifted. That shadow had moved Anne, when presented with the birth certificate, to carefully print Twilight Cooper. No middle name. No father's name.

Anne had killed three children. Least, that's how Grandma Cooper had seen it, though she'd never actually used the word *murder.* Three children, all boys, had been conceived, nurtured, then poisoned by some agent in Anne's blood. As Anne sat numbly before the doctor while he explained the situation again, sat wearing a sanitary pad and belt in order to stop the gush from her uterus, she envisioned some thief, some spy, sneaking around her body, hiding in shadows and ducking out of sight until it saw its chance and pounced upon its prey. She was impressed by its cunning and tenacity. She did not mourn for these sons, sons that would have grown big and strong and masculine. She didn't see the need.

So once Anne had her Twilight, she and her baby and her mama and her grandma settled back into their house, on the outskirts of Mason, North Carolina, and tried to ignore the stares and whispers. Nights, Anne would sit by the window, listening to the radio, and wish for the big city, where a person could get lost in the crowd. Who would know who the bastards were? Grandma Cooper said the word *bastard* referred to those who used it, not those at whom it was aimed, but Anne noticed that Grandma stopped going into town in the company of her family of women after Twilight was born.

Grandma seemed slightly afraid of Twilight, as did others. When she grew older, Twilight could enter a room and the waves would part as they did for Moses. Grandma would stand in her kitchen, scrubbing the dishes and watching that spook child do her homework at the table, but if Twilight looked up or spoke, Grandma would avert her eyes.

Twilight was born with that witchy color of blonde-white hair, which silvered as she grew. Anne read up on hair colors and dyes, but Twilight simply shook her head as if that dismissed the subject. Anne supposed it did.

Anne's mama, Ruth, was the only person in all of Mason who was not the least bit afraid of Twilight, who could look her in the eye, could tell her *no*, could raise her voice to her. Then again, Ruth wasn't afraid of anybody, said fear was a waste of time that didn't serve anyone except them that wanted to be feared. Anne wondered if that included her daughter, if Twilight liked the effect she had on others. Anne never had the nerve to ask, and Twilight never offered.

That shadow had moved Anne, when presented with the birth certificate, to carefully print *Twilight Cooper.* No middle name. No father's name.

When Twilight was ten years old, she left home. She and Grandma Cooper were watching a game show, and Twilight simply got up from the couch, crossed to the front door, and left. Grandma didn't bother to sound the alarm until the next morning, when Anne went to wake Twilight for school.

"She ain't here. Ain't no sense calling for her."

"What? Where is she, then?"

"Walked right out the door yesterday afternoon."

Grandma Cooper sounded so calm that Anne almost forgot to be upset. "Where'd she go?"

Grandma Cooper shrugged. "Didn't ask her."

And somehow, that almost made sense.

Twilight was found the next day in Smithfield. Somehow she had managed to travel more than twenty miles

First Text

JASON SNELL

HOW'D WE GET HERE?

FIVE YEARS AGO, WHEN WE started *InterText,* I'd been using computers for a long time, but the Internet was new to me. At the time, the Net was the equivalent of a small town — it was really easy to be the only person doing something on the Net, and if you *weren't* the only one, you knew all the other people who were doing what you were.

These days, it's hard for me to keep track of what *I'm* doing, let alone what the other people doing what I'm doing are doing.

I'm not sure if you've noticed, but this Internet thing has really exploded recently, and just about everything involving *InterText* has exploded with it. We were there early on, and as a result we've touched all sorts of places in the ever-expanding Net.

On a personal level, my participation in the Internet just keeps expanding. When it started, *InterText* was the sum total of the time I spent publishing online, but now it's just a small fraction of that time. First off, my "day job" involves both covering the Internet in print and running my magazine's heavily-traveled Web site. That means that my working day involves editing, writing, and posting information to the Web, as well as operating a large Internet mailing list. (It turned out nicely, wouldn't you say, that I'm able to get paid for skills I developed in creating *InterText?* You may want to point this out to me the next time I mention how altruistic I've been in doing *InterText* for free all these years.)

On top of that, I'm involved in several independent Web sites, including the fan site for one of my favorite rock bands and *three* sites featuring original writing on various topics — all in addition to *InterText* itself.

How busy I've become is one reason that, with this issue, we're inaugurating an *InterText* submissions committee, which will be evaluating all story submissions made to **submissions@intertext.com**. In addition to the eyes of Geoff, Susan, and myself, I'd like to welcome four people who responded to my request for help from two issues back: Joel Baker, Rod Johnston, Morten Lauritsen, and Paul Tekverk. These four are helping us evaluate the large number of stories we read in order to choose the very best for *InterText.* I'd like to thank them for rising to the challenge. (If you're interested in pitching in with evaluating story submissions or some other aspect of the magazine, drop us a line at **editors@intertext.com**.)

I'm not the only one who's been changed by *InterText,* of course. As I've mentioned before, Geoff Duncan has fallen full-bore into the Net (though he was headed in that direction before *InterText*) as the managing editor of *TidBITS*, where he writes and edits, in addition to managing a massive mailing list.

And just a week ago, I got a real taste of how *InterText* has made minor contributions to many other areas of the Net. On the cover of a recent *U.S. News and World Report* I saw a photograph from the book *A Day In the Life Of Cyberspace.* The photograph was of Carolyn L Burke, the author of a Web-based diary. As you may have read in our fifth anniversary issue, Burke had her first experience with electronic fiction in *InterText.* It all worked out well, and she went on to become a bit of a celebrity—and it all might've happened if *InterText* hadn't been there. But it's nice to think that we might have played a small part in the chain of events leading to that cover. And who knows how many other events we may have affected?

In the old days, on the old, small-town Internet, we might have known. Now all we can do is wonder.

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InterText

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by HOLLIS DREW

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RUPERT GOODWINS
WILLIAM TRAPMAN

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JQUAN