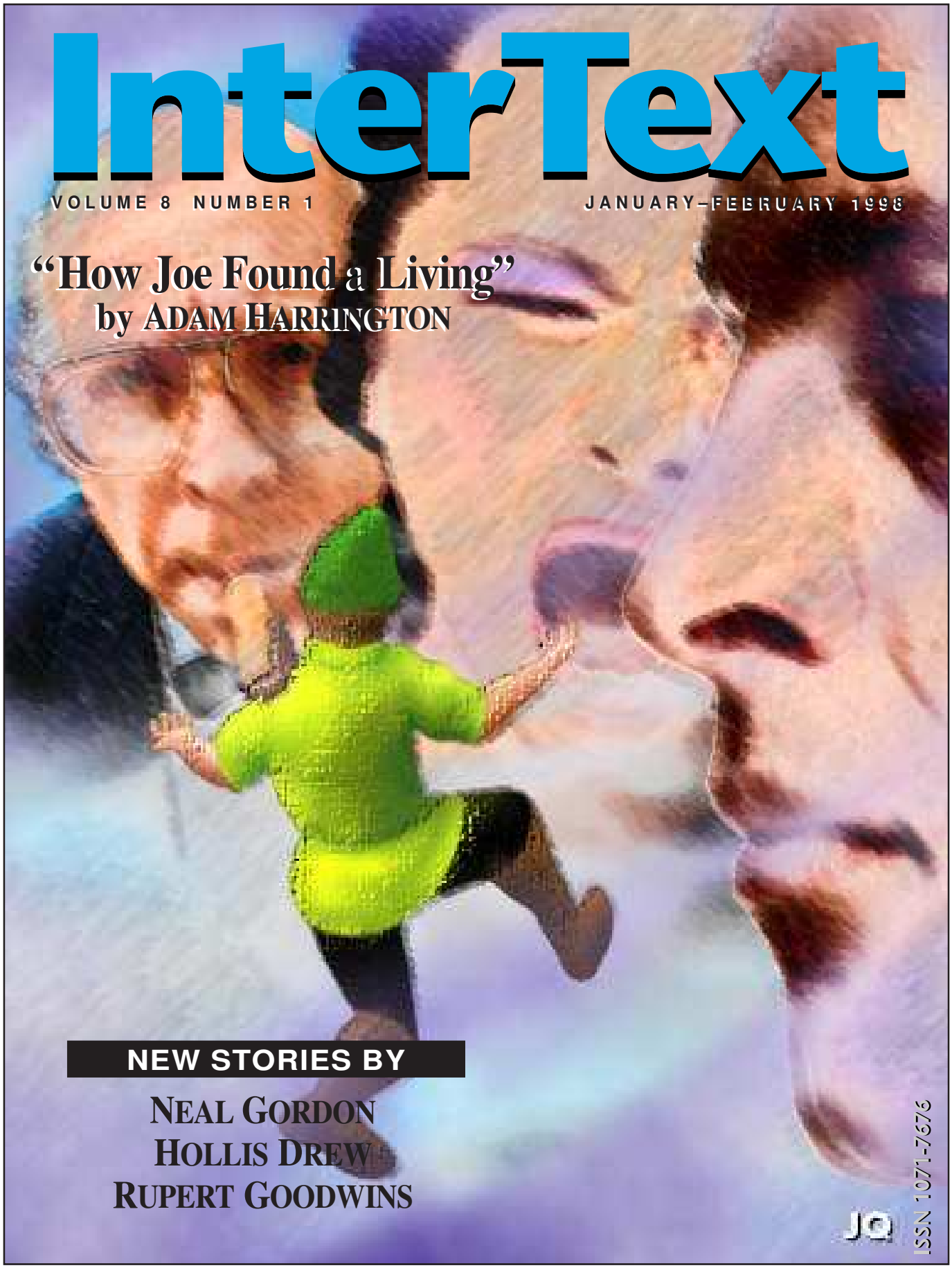
InterText

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 1 JANUARY–FEBRUARY 1998

"How Joe Found a Living"
by ADAM HARRINGTON



NEW STORIES BY

NEAL GORDON
HOLLIS DREW
RUPERT GOODWINS

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The Worse Part

NEAL GORDON

When does a relationship cross the line from being in trouble to being over?

"I'M GETTING ENGAGED, REY," LIONA SAYS, squeezing lemon onto her fried perch. She is a model, and her movements are fluid, without cessation. The effect is that she always seems to be moving. One movement becomes the next.

"But I thought that—" I start, but I can't think of what to say. We are in the diner on Ninth, doing what we always do afterward. Having lunch. What can I say?

"That I'd wait for you?"

"That you *were* waiting for me," I say leaning forward and trying to look at her. I have long since learned the difficulties in dating a very beautiful woman. Looking her in the eye is difficult at best.

Liona takes a bite of her fish and says, "Rey, you're sweet, and I'm glad you've finally made some decisions about Audra, but I'm not going to be monogamous with you."

I push the mashed potatoes around on my plate. The mashed potatoes I can look at. Homemade with lumps. The brown gravy is a mix, too silky not to be. "It doesn't sound like you have been," I say.

"No," she says and laughs, "but neither have you, if you think about it. Regardless, I'm not going to marry you, so there's no point in it." Then she adds, "This fish is delicious."

"Why not? We're good together," I say and manage to take a good look at her. Like always, I want to stare.

"No, Rey, we're fun together."

"Exactly," I say. She is wearing a baseball cap and T-shirt and jeans. Her informal dress helps. When she is dressed, I mean *really* dressed, it's like standing next to a person in a spotlight. Everyone sees you, but only as an afterthought.

"No, those aren't the same thing," she says. "We wouldn't be good together."

"What's the difference?"

"I enjoy you. You enjoy me, we have a fun time, but it's not good."

"That sounds hypocritical."

"No, it's not. It's the truth. How could I ever trust you?"

The waitress returns and fills our water glasses. She looks at my untouched plate and says, "Foodzallright?"

"Yes, fine," I say and stick a fork into the potatoes for her approval. She smiles and walks away. Liona is eating her fish and smiling at me. Everyone is smiling, dammit, and I am struck dumb by my own unhappiness.

Liona's teeth are as white as cow's milk, whiter than pearls. But it is her lips that call attention to her face. They are very thin and a color that I have never seen on another woman. The color of a peach, pink-yellow. I cannot look at them closely without feeling as I did when I first met her: that she is much too attractive for the likes of me.

"Have I ever lied to you?" I ask.

"Not that I know."

"Well, there you are."

"But you've shown me repeatedly how subversive you are if need be. We've been seeing each other for nearly two years." She rolls her eyes. Yes, much too attractive.

"You're saying that because I made a relationship with you while I was married, you can't trust me when I'm not?"

"Don't twist the words. Eat your food," she says, reaching over with her fork for a piece of my meatloaf.

I take a bite of the meatloaf. It is still very hot. Great texture. "Tell me what I can do to fix this."

"This isn't the kind of thing you fix, Rey. It's the kind of thing you recognize."

"But if there's a problem…"

"There isn't a problem. You're a nice, sweet man, and I'm very fond of you, but we can't be serious. Eat."

I look down at my full plate. The meatloaf plate here is large and I love it because I am usually hungry after Liona and I spend the afternoon together. It's like the sex awakens all of my other senses. It has always struck me funny that after sex with her, I invariably find myself having sex with Audra. I wonder what Audra would say if she knew that Liona was responsible for her orgasms for the last two years. Best bet is she wouldn't approve.

"You're saying that because I made a relationship with you while I was married, you can't trust me when I'm not?"

I begin to eat my meatloaf, but my heart isn't in it and I mostly stir things around to make it look like I'm eating, the way I used to when mom made liver or goulash. I feel the dull ache in my privates and I can't sit comfortably.

"Sore?" she asks, with a smile.

"Tired, I guess."

"Good," she says and I expect something more but she doesn't say anything and we eat in silence for a few minutes. I watch as Liona delicately picks through the fish and then takes each bite. With her tongue, she searches through the bite for bones, then gently reaches up, takes them out and sets them down on the plate.

Finally the waitress comes back to our table and fills the water glasses. "You no like the meatloaf?" she asks.

"It's fine, I'm just not as hungry as I thought."

"Itsa big meal. Want I should wrap it for later?" she says with a stray finger. "Maybe you have a late snack?"

"No, its fine, thank you."

"But you hardly eat nothing."

"It's fine, really."

"Suit yourself," she says and shrugs. "You don't want pie then?"

"No."

"Do you have any chocolate?" Liona asks. I look at her plate of fish bones. Sharp quills as white as her teeth that lie neatly stacked to one side of the cottage cheese ball with half a maraschino cherry on top.

"No, but we got Boston Cream."

"That would be great," Liona says and smiles and looks down.

"Skinny thing like you eating Boston Cream." The woman laughs and turns toward the kitchen.

I know Liona is a little embarrassed because I used to watch her put on her makeup when we first met. We had a ritual. I'd get the room and she'd wait by the elevator. We'd ride up together without looking at each other, then go to the room. We'd make love and then get into the shower and talk and talk until I could make love again. Then sex a second time, and another shower. Then she'd sit on the vanity and fix her makeup and I'd watch her. Married for seven years and I had no idea how a woman put on her makeup. Powder and base and then color in her cheeks, just a little. White shading stuff under her eyes and color over and then a pencil and then lipstick. It takes about fifteen minutes, all told.

At first she used to blush because she had never had a man watch her so closely and you could see the color underneath rise up like now. The amazing thing is, she doesn't really look any different after, she just looks more like her. Then we'd go out and have a meal, just like today. We've eaten in most of the little places in town a few times, I guess.

When the waitress brings the pie and the check, I am at a loss for words.

"You aren't going to get all weird on me, are you?" Liona asks, taking a bite of the pie.

"Weird? No. I don't think so," I say leaning forward and taking out my wallet.

"Do you understand why I can't keep seeing you?"

"Not at all." I start to count out the money for lunch.

"Because I want to have a real relationship."

I stop with the money and say, "I can have that," trying to look right at her, but I can't hold it.

"No. You and I couldn't ever be more than what we are now. Lovers."

"OK, I'll take it," I say, trying to make a joke.

"Rey, try to be serious for one minute. I'm telling you that this afternoon was the last time."

"Why?"

"Because I have never had to trust you to be faithful, and now that I would have to trust you, I know I can't."

"You mean that you can't be involved with me because we had an affair."

"Basically, yes."

"Super. Just brilliant," I say. I am so pissed I can barely put my wallet away, my hands are shaking so bad.

"Are you going back to Audra?" she says, wiping her mouth with the paper napkin from her lap. I watch as the last of her lipstick smears onto the napkin.

"I don't know," I say and she lifts her purse to her lap, opens it and pulls out her lipstick.

She starts to put it on and says, "I think it would do you good to be alone awhile." She puts on a deep red that hides her natural color.

"Well, that I will be," I say.

"Don't worry. I'll call you at the restaurant in a few days and make sure you're OK," she says. "Give me a kiss, then." She leans in, but turns her head when I go to kiss her, and so I only give her a peck on the cheek.

"Super," I say, leaning back in my chair.

"Be nice, Rey. It's not the end of the world." She stands and turns for the door.

"No. Of course not." I say, closing my eyes and leaning my head back, but the muscles in my neck stiffen like they are going to cramp.

OUT ON THE STREET, I'M ONLY ABOUT FOUR BLOCKS from my restaurant. I should go back and finish the afternoon list, but I can't do it. My car is there, though, and I know that if I go get it, I'll end up working. A restaurant is a black hole for time: you can never work too much. Always something to be done.

It's a beautiful day: fall is here. I decide to hoof it home. I can always get the car later, or have Carl drive it out to me. I mean, just because my affair and my marriage are falling apart doesn't mean that my restaurant is going anywhere, knock on wood.

I first met Liona two years ago. She walked into the restaurant one day while Carl and I were finishing the lunch shift. We'd sent the two line cooks home already and we were bullshitting and doing the afternoon list and the place was about empty and it was one of those hellish hot days that we get around here in August. Absolutely criminal weather, what with the haze and the bright sun making everything glare like hell.

I was up front, and she walked through the door and the light shone around her when the door was open. I can remember that Carl and I both stopped still. Carl elbowed

me, and I don't know, I had had another fight with Audra or something, and the business was going well and I felt cocky, and I knew that I didn't have a chance in hell the moment the door closed and I got a good look at her because she was so stunning. But I wiped my hands on the white towel looped through my apron's tie-back, and walked over to where she sat at the counter.

I turned over her water glass and filled it from the pitcher covered in condensation, and she picked up the glass and drained the whole thing. "Before you even think about a menu, you need a stick of gum," I said.

She smiled, her white teeth shining beneath those even thin lips. "I'm not much of a gum chewer," she said.

"But this gum is guaranteed to transport you directly to childhood," I said and reached into my pocket. I noticed that it was easier to speak if I didn't look directly at her, so I leaned forward onto the counter top with one elbow. "Fruitstripe Gum." I said and held out the package to her. I looked up into her blue eyes as she grinned and I had one of those moments. Religious. Angelic. Something. Carl walked across the restaurant toward the kitchen behind her, and I remember him waving his arms in the air and making the football referee's gesture for "injury on the field."

I watched her hands as she unfolded the wrapper and put the striped piece of gum in her mouth. "This gum is like fourth grade," she said and laughed.

"Told you."

"Why are you carrying around Fruitstripe Gum?"

"Too much free time," I said.

"It's awfully sweet,"

"The gum or…"

"The gum," she said and laughed again.

"Don't worry, the flavor only lasts about five minutes."

"Probably just as well," she said. "I came in for lunch."

"I think we can handle that," I said and nodded. The place was nearly empty.

"What do you recommend?'

"Do you eat meat?"

"It's awfully hot out," she said and looked past me to the windows.

"Something light?"

"And cool."

"Cold fried chicken and my own special potato salad," I said and stood up straight.

"Lemonade?"

"Definitely. My name's Rey."

"Sounds perfect, Rey."

"Save room for dessert," I said, picking up a serving plate, and walking back to the cooler door in the back of the dining room. When I caught the handle of the cooler, it was cold. "Hey, if you're hot, come back here for a second," I said.

She looked at me for a moment, then got up and walked over. I can remember thinking how beautiful she was, and noticing that I was itching my wedding ring finger with my thumb. As if I was turning it, but it wasn't there. I don't wear it to work because it gets too hot over the stoves.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Coolest place around," I said and pulled open the heavy blue door. On hot days, cool air rushes out of the walk-in cooler like a cold wind. I flipped on the light, said, "C'mon, you're letting the cold out," and went in. She followed and pulled the door closed.

"Heavenly," she said.

It's actually about 40 degrees. "Feels great, doesn't it?"

"Unbelievable."

I reached into the rack and pulled out the long tray of fried chicken I'd cooked off that morning. "I'm serving these tonight, but I'll make an exception. Which one do you want?"

She leaned past me, over the tray and pointed. "There," she said. I could see the goosebumps on her shoulders. I could see the fine freckles and short peach fuzz on the back of her neck.

She walked through the door and the light shone around her. Carl and I both stopped still. Carl elbowed me.

I took the tongs from the side of the rack and put the piece on the serving plate. "A fine choice. Potato salad's up front," I said and slid the tray back into the rack.

"My name's Liona," she said, stepping back and sticking out a thin hand to me.

"I was wondering how I was going to ask," I said, and shook her hand. It was cold. Her hands are always ice cold.

"I think I could just stand in here all day."

"Not in that dress. You'd catch your death," I said and walked out of the cooler.

She ate daintily and we chatted all the way through her meal. I gave her a piece of raspberry cheesecake I'd made the night before and asked her to go to dinner with me.

It was that easy.

MY HOUSE IS A BEAUTIFUL OLD VICTORIAN THAT Audra inherited. When we got it, you couldn't see across the living room because the ceiling sagged so badly. We've worked on it for almost our entire nine years. It's been a long haul.

I step up the stairs of the front porch and open the door. With my hand still on the knob, I hear it. I stand stock still for a moment, listening to Audra's groaning gradually

building, and I know from the tone that if I stand here for another five minutes or so, I will probably hear her make that noise she makes when she comes.

I step back onto the porch and look up and down the street for cars. About a block down is the Jensons' green Toyota. No one. I step back into the house and slam the door hard enough to shake the walls. The noise overhead stops. I hear moving feet. I drop my keys on the hall table and walk into the living room. The air conditioning comes on. The upstairs bathroom door closes.

In a moment, "That you, Rey?" comes down the stairs. It's Carl's voice.

"Don't come down or I'll kick your fucking ass," I say without raising my voice. I could use a drink, and walk over to the liquor cabinet and get a bottle of Jack Daniels from the shelf. I start to grab a glass and don't.

"Can we talk about this?" comes the voice of my closest friend.

"No. Crawl out the damn window and jump off the back porch. Jump off the fucking moon," I say and open the bottle and take a deep drink. My throat gags and I cough, but I take another.

"I'm coming down," Carl says from the top of the stairs.

"Then you'll be dead and I'll be in jail," I say, and I sit down on the sofa. I take another swig, bite back the edge of the whiskey, kick off my shoes and put my feet up on the coffee table. I hear Carl walk back across the upstairs, into the den and open a window. Then I hear him on the roof. It's about a twenty-foot drop. He'll probably break a leg if he jumps. I don't think he will; he's not the type. At some point, I will have to let him back in the house.

There is almost complete silence now, except for the sound of Audra crying in the bathroom. This noise is replaced by the sound of water running into the tub. I try to drink a few inches of the whiskey, hoping to avoid the entire discussion that I know will take place as soon as the water drains, but I can't.

Instead, I set the bottle on the table top, reach into my back pocket and pull out my wallet. I take out the thick wad of credit cards, remove the rubber band from around them, and start flipping them over, face down on the coffee table. I start at the top of the first row, dialing the number on the back. Mastercard. The water stops running into the bathtub.

"Yes, I need to report my Mastercard is missing," I say to the silky voiced young woman on the phone. "I seem to have lost my wallet this morning and I need to have this account stopped until I locate it," I take another drink, give the woman the required number, say thank you, hang up and dial the number for the Visa.

American Express, Diner's, then Macy's, Bloomingdale's, Penney's and the local store cards. I decide to keep the Sears card and the gas card. As I finish, the bottle is about a quarter gone, and I hear the water from the tub gurgling through the old plumbing. I dial the phone number of the restaurant.

"Mable's," comes the voice of the hostess.

"It's Rey, patch me back to Steve in the kitchen." I hear the bathroom door open above me.

"Right away, Mr. Colvain." The line clicks. I hear Audra start down the steps.

"What can I do you for, Rey," comes Steve's voice, our sous chef. I can hear the sound of the fan in the convection oven kick on. Cheesecakes must be in.

"I need you to finish the list, I'm not going to get back," I say and I watch as her feet and then legs and then robe appear through the railing banister.

"What do you want to run for specials?"

"I can't do this Steve, and I'm not going to be in tomorrow. Probably won't see Carl either. Can you just cover till tomorrow night?" Make no mistake, Audra is a beautiful woman in her own right. Red hair bunched up on the back of her head. I raise a hand for her to stop. She ignores me and walks into the kitchen.

"You OK, boss?" Steve asks.

"No, as a matter of fact, I'm fucking awful. I'll call tomorrow sometime."

"I'll cover it."

"OK then," I say and hang up the phone.

Audra walks back into the room with a large glass of Seven-Up. Her white robe is draped closed around her and she opens the liquor cabinet and fishes out a glass and a coaster. She sets the coaster on the coffee table in front of me, puts the glass on it, and sits down on the other sofa, pulling her feet up under her, knees together. Just like her.

"Are you planning to get a divorce, then?" I ask.

"I hadn't really thought about it."

"You should have."

"I should have when you opened Mable's."

"Don't make excuses," I say and tip an inch of whiskey into the glass.

"Pour some of that in here, will you?" she says and holds out her glass. I fill the top inch. Audra inserts her finger and half stirs it, then licks her finger clean.

"Did it have to be Carl?" I ask.

"It didn't have to be anyone. I'm sorry it was Carl."

"Is he the only one?"

"Yes."

"Are you lying?"

"No," she says, but I know her well enough that she could be if she wanted to. Of course, so could I.

I drink the whiskey without choking and set the glass down hard. Then I repour two inches, and sip at it. "Can you tell me why?"

"Not without making excuses."

"What can you tell me?"

"That I'm lonely."

"So you fucked my best friend? Jesus," I say and lean back on the couch. The couch is so deep that I am almost lying horizontally and I rest the glass on my thigh.

"No, I looked for someone who would pay me some mind."

"Fucking is a strange way to make friends," I say to the ceiling, letting my eyes close.

"Are you mad because I slept with him?"

"Didn't sound like sleeping," I snap, sitting up, and I can feel the alcohol now, making my head spin. Making me angry.

"Or are you mad because I slept with anyone?"

"Both. But him I have to work with, dammit. I have to look at him."

"I'm sorry about that," she says, and takes a drink of her drink.

"Do you love him?" I ask.

"No. No more than you do."

"What does that mean?"

"You spend more time with him than you do with me."

"I run a restaurant with the guy."

"And the restaurant gets all of your attention. Even now you called it before we spoke."

"Are you trying to blame this on the restaurant?"

"No. This isn't the kind of thing you blame on something, Rey. It's the kind of thing you recognize."

"Yeah," I say, stunned. I drift, closing my eyes, back to Liona and already her face is fading.

There is a long silence. I nod.

"I can't do this," Carl calls from upstairs. I spill my drink.

"Shit," I say, standing up fast.

Audra laughs.

I have to piss. "Would you deal with him?" I ask and walk off to the toilet.

Pissing, I look at the calendar. Today is St. Michael's feast day, September 30. My mom sent the calendar; I am long-since lapsed. Audra and I were married Catholic. That was about the last time I set foot in the church. I had enough from Catholic school. I can hear Carl climbing back in the window.

Saint Mike was the general in God's army of Angels, I remember from catechism class. He was made of snow. I guess the intended effect was that kids would think they were safe in snowstorms, or something. Or that he was like a blizzard to his enemies, everywhere at once. All it ever made me think about was how when you made a snow-man, you made a thing, but when you made a snow-angel, you made a space: a hole.

I am pretty drunk and I wash my face in the sink, trying to sober up a bit, but I can't get St. Mike out of my mind. Is what Liona and I had a real thing or just a space between Audra and me? I hear the front door close.

When I am back out in the living room, Audra is seated again. "Is he gone?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Am I supposed to go?" I ask. I start to pick up the credit cards.

"You don't have to," she says.

I stop what I'm doing. "Do you want me to stay?"

"If you want to stay married."

"We're married," I say, but the words sound strange to me. It's been a long time since I really thought about being married. All I've thought about for a long time now is getting divorced. I sit down next to her.

"Did it have to be Carl?" I ask. "It didn't have to be anyone. I'm sorry it was Carl."

"I don't want you to stay because you feel obligated," she says and puts a hand on my knee. She has beautiful hands, I remember.

"Marriage means being obligated," I say, but I can hear how hollow those words sound.

The house is dead quiet. In a whisper she says, "Then go."

I have wanted her to say those words for almost a year now, to let me off the hook easy. But when they come, I know that I don't want them. "No, that's too easy," I say.

"I don't want to fight," she says, pulling back from me.

I push my feet into the cushions on the back of the couch. "That's not the point. The whole point of marriage is that you can't just leave," I say, hoping that by saying the words I will believe them, make them real.

"Yes you can, I'll give you a divorce, if that's what you want," she says.

"No, it doesn't matter what I want. That's not the point. Sometimes being married is bad. But you don't just leave. That's not being married."

"You shouldn't stay if it's that bad. If you want to leave."

"No, you still have to stay. Right now is the *worse* part of 'for better or for worse.' This is just the worse part." I say, trying to convince myself.

"Will there be a better part again?" she says.

"I don't know. I can't say," I answer and just look at her. We sit a long time in silence. I try to remember the things that made us get married. If I can only think of them, then maybe we can have a better part again.

NEAL GORDON

Teaches at the Episcopal Academy in Philadelphia and works with the Working Writer's Group, a long-running critical group in the Philadelphia area.

Ox–Plum Road

HOLLIS DREW

We search for meaning in life's events; sometimes that search is fruitless.

ONE THOUSAND YEARS AGO, A HOLY MAN TRAVELing to Hangzhou in east central China surprised his rustic audience with the news that their local mountain had once stood near his village back in India. His followers quickly renamed their mountain "The Mountain That Flew Here." Today vacationing honeymooners visit this magical mountain to pray for prosperity and the happy arrival of sons.

MY FATHER, GUY WOODLEAF, WAS TWELVE WHEN HE chopped off his twin brother's finger with an ax. The year was 1930. Guilt, indignities, betrayal, and brutish circumstances were commonplace that year. Mrs. Woodleaf sent her twins into the henhouse early one Sunday morning to kill two chickens for lunch. Aunt Violet has always believed Shawn only intended it as a joke: He laid his pinkie upon the bloody chopping block while two headless chickens flopped around in the yard.

"I dare you!" Shawn said, sneering at Guy.

"I'll do it!" Guy said, then cocked the ax above his head.

A chicken rose and staggered blindly toward the twins. Guy jumped out of its path while Shawn hooted his youthful contempt. The chicken wobbled off in a drunken barnyard do-si-do before it kicked onto its side.

"Chicken!" Shawn chortled. He spit through his teeth like a boxer.

Guy raised the ax into the air and hesitated.

Shawn shouted, "Double-dog dare!"

Whack!

Shawn yelped sharply, grabbed his gushing hand, and dashed across the porch and inside the house with a torn expression of alarm and gutsy admiration for his brother's nerve etched across his face. It was one of the rare moments when anyone would see Shawn cry.

Guy had been born first. He had emerged thin and unhappy and vaguely introspective and, just like a dog or bear, rarely stopped to consider the universe outside the bankrupt impulses which would one day destroy him. The midwife was busy cleaning up when Grandmother launched Shawn into the womb of time like a slick melon seed flicked between her forefinger and thumb. The family claims he entered the world laughing. Shawn would become the wild child and, truth be told, his parents' favorite son. In time, because of his toughness, he loomed as big as the flesh-eating Minotaur. Their older sisters immediately adored the new twins and squabbled over who would bathe them and powder their bottoms and smear Vaseline upon their quaint nubbins.

The twins left school after finishing the eighth grade to farm with their father in the Mississippi River bottoms. Guy said he had enjoyed school some while it had lasted. Shawn didn't seem to really give a damn.

Most of the other young men from the bottoms left school with them: By then they could read and write, multiply and divide, and knew enough history to participate in a rural democracy. They quickly developed a respect for the lush geography that shaped them, and understood its selectivity much better than many who finished high school. While marginal crops and difficult field hands often left them exhausted, the yearning legclench of their women left them feverish and reverential.

Guy had been born first. He had emerged thin and unhappy and vaguely introspective.

They believed in determination and sacrifice, God and family and country, and that playing by the rules really mattered. Too emotionally distant to articulate well such deeply rooted passions, many of those tough plowboys could kill. They would soon make some damned good soldiers, those big glorious men.

Shawn was the first to tire of farming and joined the Merchant Marines shortly before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Each year at Christmas, Aunt Violet corners me between the chocolate pie and the banana nut fruitcake to whisper a solemn foreboding, since most Woodleaf men die so violently in their prime. (I admit to having wondered if my father felt a nasty twitch of what lay in store for him when the telegram announced Shawn was lost at sea.)

Then she closes her large doleful eyes, clutches her chest as if wringing aching hunger from tragic old memories, and repeats our family's long bloated epiphany:

Shawn died shortly after midnight below decks in an oil tanker torpedoed five miles off the coast of Texas in March of 1942. The family had desperately prayed that Shawn had managed to survive, and several brave plots were invented: Shawn had been a gifted Sunday-afternoon athlete who loved competition and bruises and glory; surely such a young bull could easily swim five miles in a calm sea.

But the War Department had sent the tanker's lone survivor, a badly scarred young sailor who had stood watch on the bow that fateful night, to assure the family

that Shawn had died quickly in his sleep. The young seaman had stuttered; and he had spoken sadly, and with great guilt, about his brave comrades who had died in their sleep, while he had been blown clear of most of the sizzling oil. Aunt Violet says she knew from the look in his one good eye, he wished he had perished with Shawn.

The ship went down quickly. "N-n-no, there w-w-were no s-s-screams; j-j-j-just the hissing of the s-s-ship as it s-s-sank b-b-beneath the wa-wa-water."

There was no more doubt about it: Shawn was gone.

Guy, married by then, had not waited on the draft, but had enlisted only a few days after Pearl Harbor. It was the right thing to do, just as it was the right time to be magnanimous, and he had felt only temporary disgust for the giddy town boys with the bright, coddled looks and smell of a vacation who had applied for military deferments as gentlemen farmers. After Pearl Harbor, I imagine he felt the same remote hunger he must have felt after quitting school; he listened patiently to the moral outrage of his crippled President, but also clearly understood with the rapid pulse of a hunter the gut-ripping realities of war. When the Army trained him as a medic, it was OK with him; he had often doctored the deep wounds of stubborn mules and careless black men. Then for several tedious months he had escorted shell-shocked soldiers to makeshift asylums throughout the South before he finally received word that he was headed overseas. That night he called for his young bride, Diane Rose.

Mother rode in an overcrowded train for eighteen hours to say goodbye to a husband she barely knew in an obscure hotel room somewhere in Kansas City. Her world had grown acute since Pearl Harbor. And, although she had been physically exhausted by her trip, she had fought back her tears to make their last night together special, just in case something unthinkable happened to Guy as it had to Shawn.

Guy had a secret plan. Since the last thing Diane Rose wanted was a child to raise alone, Guy had secretly snipped off the tip of his condom. Getting the beautiful Diane Rose pregnant made urgent sense to this laconic man more accustomed to the swoosh of a plow than the deep drumbeat of war.

Afterwards, she was outraged to discover Guy's cheap deception and thrummed her indignation to everyone in the family who would listen. But on that night my father wasn't moved by her anger and righteous tears; if a man was about to die in his prime, his wife should at least have a baby. So, like millions of other wartime brides, my mother discovered her husband was as capable of dishonesty as the next horny man.

"If it's a boy, name him Aaron!" he shouted to Diane Rose as his troop train pulled away from the loading platform early the next morning, leaving her shivering and anxious and alone in the bitter teeth of a February snowstorm.

It was almost three years before Guy returned home, exhausted by terrible visions on Guadalcanal and changed forever by the awful momentum of those years. While he served overseas, Grandfather had died from cirrhosis of the liver brought on by a bout with hepatitis, and Grandmother had moved off the farm and in with his sister in Clarksdale, Mississippi.

Wartime photographs of my father dressed in his sleek, green Army uniform show a serious young man with dark eyes and heavy eyebrows. His military hat is cocked back upon the top of his head. In those old photographs, which I love, he glows virtuous and ripping and timeless.

He soon found work as an automobile mechanic at the Ford dealership in Lazich and convinced Diane Rose they needed another child, my sister, Hanna. We rode with him when he died violently on a cold Sunday afternoon.

JANUARY THAT YEAR HAD OPENED WITH SEVERAL warm, vagrant days that promised much more than the month could deliver, then turned raw as an ice storm knocked out the electrical power for three bitter days. Many in bundled Lazich staggered before a surgical wind that cracked open their tired old bones. My father had just reluctantly agreed to serve as a pallbearer for a distant cousin whom he had not seen in years. Since it also meant hauling all of us over one hundred miles into Mississippi to sleep in a strange, lumpy bed, he saw little reason to feel honored. But, still, Minnie was family.

Hanna and I had raged like heathens at the cemetery that afternoon, and Hanna had almost pitched headlong into Cousin Minnie's open grave during a game of tag with our young Mississippi cousins. Our father snapped his fingers at our mother and pointed us toward our car, but Mother was too busy snuffing out her grief with a frilly handkerchief to notice. So, he marched us out behind a cedar tree and thrashed us with his belt.

When we returned, Cousin Minnie's casket had been lowered into her grave, and the funeral party was breaking up before the biting wind. My father tossed a handful of dirt onto the coffin as an earnest though feeble salute, but the coffin lid drummed back unkindly. Sullen gravediggers in heavy gray overalls and gray cowhide gloves tweaked their shovels impatiently in a mound of waiting dirt. It quickly became obvious he was just in the way.

As we meekly climbed into the backseat of our car, he mumbled to our mother, "The only reason God gives us kids is to humble us!"

He rushed us through Memphis and across the turbid Mississippi River. Shafts of filtered sunlight pierced the afternoon's eerie grayish-green cast. When we turned

onto a familiar narrow county road that lead toward our home in Lazich, I had regained enough courage to ask, "Momma, tell me again why it's called Ox-Plum Road."

Mother smiled. She had been blessed with charm and the gift of words. And even if she had granted my frequent requests and retold a story a thousand times, I always wanted to hear it again:

"Back toward that line of trees over there," she said, sweeping her hand to the open fields outside the car in a gesture so subtly defined each of us, even my father, turned our gaze to the distant line of leafless trees, "Two brothers once farmed several acres of land, land that had once belonged to their father, and before that to their father's father, and even his father before him." She paused to allow the sweep of such history to etch our souls.

"Being brothers, and naturally competitive, each brother wanted to make a flamboyant mark to win the hand of a young widow both brothers loved. The older brother had planted a prized plum orchard that almost everyone agreed made the best plum jelly in the county. Like a cider famous for its sweetness, the juice from these plums was unlike all others. Its crystal amber was described as something fit for the table of the gods.

"Well, the younger brother couldn't be outdone, and he cherished a stout ox, which he had lovingly raised from soon after its birth. Some said he loved this ox almost as much as he loved the pretty widow—and maybe even more than his brother loved his wild plums, if that was possible.

"Each fall, when he showed the ox at the fair, he always brought home a blue ribbon. Just as his older brother brought home blue ribbons for his plum jelly.

"Then one day something happened to the ox. Everyone had a theory. Some said maybe a swarm of bees stung it. Others said it drank poisoned water. Nobody really knew. But something happened to the ox, and it broke through a fence and raged throughout the plum orchard, where it destroyed all of the prized plum trees. The angry farmer, in a wild rage, then killed his brother's ox with an ax.

"When confronted by his young brother, the farmer, still reeling from anger at his losses, boasted of his deed. The two brothers then cursed the day the other had been born. The younger brother stormed off after swearing he would soon get revenge.

Late that night the ox's owner slipped through a window in his brother's cabin and killed his brother in his sleep. Some said he used the ax that killed his ox. Others said, instead, he strangled his brother with a strand of rusty wire.

"A mob of angry neighbors didn't wait for a trial, but hanged the younger brother from a large cottonwood tree that grew along this road. Then they burned his body and left him hanging for days as an example to others of how unchecked greed will spoil their hearts. And that's how this road got its name."

I fell back against the seat and thought about the sweet taste of wild plum jelly and how awful it would feel to be strangled with rusty barbed wire.

We were almost home when a large black car blocked our passage. I watched the other car hog the road. Strong gusts of wind buffeted it across the center line, then back against the hard gravel shoulder making it impossible for us to safely pass. Ox-Plum Road had been built many decades earlier down the turn-rows at the ends of long cotton fields; it was a dangerous road, which twisted and galvanized itself into a treacherous tangle.

My mother gripped the dashboard with her long, red fingernails, meant to mimic the long, sensuous nails of her idol, Bette Davis. "He's drunk, Guy!" Mother said, biting her bottom lip in annoyance while thrusting out her chin.

Hanna had almost pitched headlong into Cousin Minnie's open grave during a game of tag with our young Mississippi cousins.

"Nigger!" my father growled. He jerked impatiently at the knot on the wide tie I had chosen for him at Christmas.

I cowered against the backseat. Mother had once warned me to never use the word "nigger" around the "coloreds" because they could retaliate by calling me a "bastard." (Bastard?— something, no doubt, ugly, dark, and sticky as a goat turd; she had secretly whispered the word bastard with her lips pressed tightly against my ear.)

I kneaded the clay-colored corduroy upholstery of our car with my fingers and thumb and sniffed cautiously at the odor of my fear—a fruitlike dankness akin to that of the sallow dirt scoured from the depths of Cousin Minnie's grave; I glanced cautiously at my father's eyes reflected in the rear-view mirror. His coal black eyes snapped open, then blinked softly shut, just like a turtle's lazy crescent eyes do as it crunches the head off a water moccasin.

The absolute tone in his voice was the same one he had used earlier that morning when he had caught me looking up Aunt Sarah's dress from my hiding place under the breakfast table. (The day before I had overheard my father tell some men at the funeral home that it was a pity that Sarah had never remarried; she might be his sister-in-law, but he wasn't blind. The woman had some fine, long legs.) Kapop! Kapop! Kapop! The belt had slashed with

quirky authority across my butt. Don't cry! Don't cry! my father had warned.

I listened closely to the coupling of the accelerator, gear, and clutch—an ingenious mastery of an unforgiving machine. Mother gripped the strap on the passenger door. Her pinched expression showed the grim complicity of the rattled. Hanna played with the wide-eyed doll she had received for Christmas. An annoying bug when at her best, Hanna was too young to really matter.

My father retreated twenty yards. His jaw had stiffened into a scowling determination. His red-scrubbed mechanic hands gripped the steering wheel. Grease in the lines of his knuckles had been cast into braids of gray lace. His wonderful magic made the engine roar. Then he smiled at me in the rear-view mirror, a brief smile full of child-like conspiracy: *Watch this one, Spooner!* (Spooner was his pet name for a child who shoveled in his oatmeal at breakfast.)

The black car up ahead swerved slowly to the right. Father saw his chance and slammed the gas pedal against the floor. Our old Ford responded with such a splendid leap my father grunted eagerly. Then the other car danced back across the center line just as my father dug a hard left to pass.

Our cars brushed in a soft, clumsy kiss. Time crawled up in one long, insidious jiggle until I was thrown free. Our car sent up a great ball of white dust and gravel as it rolled beneath me. I could have easily reached out and touched the power lines nearby, but I remembered mother's warning that electricity could kill me. Then my face plowed into the hard gravel on the shoulder of the road.

The other driver backed his car to a stop beside me. A tall woman opened the passenger door and stepped out to tower above me. She was young, maybe seventeen or eighteen, and she wore a white letter sweater over a white blouse and black skirt. A gold letter D was sewn onto her sweater and three gold chevrons adorned one sleeve. Her long brown legs ended in a pair of tattered shoes. She wore no socks over her sharp ankles. She stepped cautiously toward me like a lanky, guarded bird.

I sat up with great effort. Needles of pain stabbed my face. I tried to stand, but my foot was twisted at a crazy angle and couldn't bear my weight. The abstracted face of the young woman stiffened, as if she was studying something quizzical or something unreal or something mighty troubling. She slapped herself sharply with both arms and rocked from her waist. She opened her lips to emit a low, painful moan. Then she pinned her bottom lip beneath her upper teeth as she moaned. She nodded slowly and rocked deeply—like old women in a trance sometimes do in a fundamentalist church service.

I reached up for her hand. "Help me," I asked. She quit rocking to pull me to my feet. I stood for a shaky moment, but fell back into the hard, loose gravel. She then walked toward the hunkered wreckage of our car. The battered hood dangled from the front of the car like an exhausted tongue. The front passenger door was ripped away. Dirt and gravel and strips of metal were pelted up and down the highway like silver jacks. Steam hassled up from the wounded radiator in marvelous frosty plumes. The rancid stench of gasoline hung low in the air. My father's right leg was pinned under the wreck.

Mother straddled my father's chest, and she reminded me of a mechanical bird in a carnival booth dipping for a shallow drink from the rim of a water glass. They seemed caught up in a game of roughhouse we sometimes played on the living room rug. She clutched his shirt below the collar. My proud Christmas tie was twisted behind his neck. "Wake up, Guy!" she shouted. "You've gotta wake up now."

The young woman who stood above them nudged my father with her shoe, but, like a cold viper, he didn't move. I glanced through the open door at the man in the front seat of the big black car. A faded cotton quilt had slid onto the floor of the car in a soiled heap. An old guitar was propped up against the front seat. Its long neck poked into the air, and the driver whumped it sideways with his arm as he leaned in my direction. "Come on!" he shouted through her open door. I flinched and glanced quickly away before he noticed me.

Then the man clumsily shoved open his door and stood with his elbow wedged against his car. "Come on! Quick!" It was the young woman and not me he wanted.

"They need help," the woman called. She pronounced it *hep.*

"Git yore black ass back in this goddamned car!" he shouted. He jerked his cupped hand across his chest.

The woman turned away. Her long brown hand floated down to gently touch Mother's shoulder. Mother looked quizzically up into the young woman's face. "He won't wake up," Mother said. She shook Father's shoulders again. "You've gotta wake up, Guy! You quit teasin' me and wake up!"

The driver lurched toward the young woman. She jerked backward when he grabbed her sweater and yanked her away from the wreck. He waved his big brown hand again in the direction of his car. "Hurry!" But he didn't sound as angry as before.

"Why?" the young woman persisted. She seemed drowsy, half-awake.

He snapped the heel of his fist against her shoulder and spun her around. "Do it now! Before somebody comes!" But the woman wouldn't leave.

The man stared past her for a moment deciding. He squatted beside my father and studied my father's face. My mother looked at the man but did not speak. The cold

wind whipped the man's dark flannel trousers around his legs. He breathed heavily through his nostrils, like something cornered after a long chase over high ground. He looked across his shoulder along Ox-Plum Road which stretched out toward Lazich. He rubbed his fingers anxiously across his lips. He stood quickly. I heard his knees pop. Then he walked past the wreckage of our car and stooped to lift something that shimmered brightly in the road. Then I saw it, too. It was the silver-plated pistol my father always carried in the car when we traveled.

The young woman stared at the pistol in the man's hand. "Whacha gone do?" the woman asked.

"Move!" he shouted at the woman. I crabbed backward from the edge of the road; I was really afraid of him then.

He stood for a long moment deciding. He glanced both ways down the long empty road. The young woman squealed and turned to run back toward his big black car. She turned and stood beside the open door with her hand pressed across her mouth. The man cocked the hammer on the pistol.

I heard it click—as solid as a lock snapping shut. My heart froze in my throat. I was young but I knew what my father's pistol could do: I had watched it shatter glass jugs from my father's well-placed shots, and, on a crisp autumn morning, drop a two hundred pound hog to its knees before a steaming washpot.

"Don't!" I shouted at the man.

The man jumped. Maybe he was scared, too. He looked at me. "Don't, mister," I said. "Don't hurt my momma." I rolled up onto my hands and knees. The hard gravel on the shoulder of the road dimpled my palms. He studied me carefully, then looked down at Mother. I thought he spent a long time thinking about what he must do. Mother hummed a tune that had been playing all week on the radio in our living room. The man uncocked the pistol before he dropped it into his coat pocket.

The man crossed the road in front of me and glanced down at me as he passed. The gravel crunched under the soles of his brown-and-white oxford shoes. I looked quickly away and pushed myself further from his car. When he reached the driver's door, he slid inside. "Hurry!" he said again to the young woman.

She shoved the guitar back upright and scrambled inside. The soiled quilt bunched up under her feet. The man slammed his door shut and hit the starter button roughly with his thumb. The engine groaned, then fired. The young woman looked over at me for the last time as the driver shifted into first gear. Then she closed the door as they sped away.

I cautiously pulled myself through the gravel until I reached Mother. She still rocked back and forth upon my father's chest, but with deeper, more agitated movements than she had earlier. My father's head rolled in my direction. I touched his huge, red hand. It felt like the chilled rubbery cap of a mushroom. His eyes were open, but had puddled into cold, black pools.

I heard a soft, thumping noise and turned to watch Hanna crawl though a crack under the front seat, which had been torn loose from its tracks. She pulled her Christmas doll behind her. She waddled over and sat beside me. Her gray bonnet had been twisted on her head. When I reached to straighten it, she slapped at my hand.

Hanna and I waited patiently beside our father, while the shrill, plaintive cries of a killdeer in a nearby field of cotton stubble arched neatly through the cold, green air. The bird screeched at us, as if through force it could finally be heard, then urgently raced away on some new mission.

It seemed as if we waited forever before help came. Then cars suddenly appeared on both sides of the road. People jabbered and tripped over themselves to glimpse or poke or caress. Someone in the crowd announced proudly that he had called the Law. Strangers stuck their bright red faces before mine and ordered me not to move with thick husky voices, like they were choking on milk, while others kept a safe, gawking distance between themselves and the wreck. Maybe they thought we were contagious, because they pressed their young children so tightly against their legs. "It happens just like that!" some old beetle-faced philosopher barked, loudly snapping her fingers to clarify the sweet brevity of life. I felt strangely excited and proud, like our family had done something clever enough to win respect from these strangers.

Mother straddled my father's chest. Wake up, Guy!" she shouted. "You've gotta wake up now."

A young schoolteacher from Lazich brought Hanna and me from the cold into the backseat of her car. She couldn't touch us enough with her tender fingers. Her husband revved his car engine, and the warm air from the car heater caused my nose to run. The teacher reached over the front seat and touched my face with a soft, silk handkerchief. She grimaced when she lifted it away. "Jesus! Sweet Jesus!" she whispered. The handkerchief was stained with blood.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry!" she said. "Do you remember me, Aaron? I am Mrs. Forshey, from school…" She smiled.

I remembered. She taught the older children in fifth grade. "What's wrong with my daddy?" I asked.

Mrs. Forshey glanced outside the car window toward the wreck. Then she glanced at her husband. "It'll be OK," she said gently while patting my hand.

I heard a thin wail skip across the fields like a flat stone across water, then grow with startling intensity as an ambulance pulled up beside the wreck. The crowd had reluctantly parted to let the ambulance through, then tightly pulled back in upon itself in order to see.

I searched anxiously through the weaving legs of the crowd until I saw my mother crumpled in the gravel at the edge of the road. She didn't look real but more like something hastily daubed onto canvas. Someone had tucked his suit coat around her shoulders to keep her warm. Several men were working to free my father's pinned leg, while a fat man in dirty overalls struggled to lift the car with a crippled jack that slipped down one notch for every two it gained. He finally motioned for the pressing crowd to move back.

"I want out," I said to Mrs. Forshey.

"Me, too!" Hanna piped up in sweet, hot mimicry.

Mrs. Forshey shook her head. "We must get you to a doctor, Aaron," she said. Her admonishment would have worked on the schoolyard, but not today. I grabbed for the door handle, but Mrs. Forshey gently held my shoulder. "You can't walk," she said. I struggled to break free. Hanna burst into tears.

"I'll carry him back," Mr. Forshey said.

"No, let me."

Mrs. Forshey reluctantly placed me at Mother's side. I reached out and touched her elbow. "Momma?" I asked. She slowly turned her face in my direction, then back at the men struggling with the car jack. Unable to resuscitate the old realities and unable to break herself free, she hummed softly, something playful and dreamy, but to herself, while the cold evening breeze whistled musically across the broken shards of our car's windshield with a faint, mocking lamentation—like the uncertain resonance of an aeolian harp.

Mrs. Forshey knelt beside her in the gravel. "Your children are with us," she said, pointing back over her shoulder to her car. "We'll take care of them for you, Mrs. Woodleaf." She reached out to touch one of Mother's hands.

"I don't have children," Mother said with an odd shake of her head. The words rose from the roots of her throat and crystallized into feathery white blossoms as they spilled into the air.

Mrs. Forshey lifted me back up into her arms. I struggled again but more weakly than before. This time she pulled me close to her chest. "We're going now," she said firmly. Mother looked away.

When we reached the car, Mrs. Forshey eased me into the back seat with Hanna. Hanna pointed a tiny finger at my face.

"Don't!" I said. I touched the torn flesh along my cheek, but quickly jerked my fingers from the gritty, zippered skin.

The late winter light had seeped deep melon hues across the evening sky. Although kind adults protected me, I knew my father was dead. But I was only seven. I was too young to comprehend how his death, like Shawn's, would soon become another gooey, wormy marker among the eternal mysteries of the universe.

HOLLIS DREW

Lives in Jackson, Mississippi, where he is gainfully unemployed. This story is based on the actual events of his life.

How Joe Found a Living

ADAM HARRINGTON

Who says they don't tell fairy tales any more?
The characters have just changed, that's all.

1. In which Joe leaves home to find his fortune.

ONE LIGHT AND BRIGHT DAY AS EXCITED SPRING breezes danced around the new green shoots in the meadow, Joe's mother hooshed Joe out of the house with the end of her broom.

"You're old enough to find a living now," she said. "Go to the town and get one."

Joe pulled on his boots and wrapped some bread, some apples and the money his mother gave him to carry through a rainy day in a red-striped handkerchief and tied it to the end of a stick. He slung it over his shoulder and set off for the town.

At the first house near the town he politely knocked on the door and stepped back with his hands behind him.

"Hello," said the fat man who opened the door. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a living, sir," said Joe. "Do you know where I can find one?"

"Not here, son, at any rate. Good day." He shut the door none too gently.

Joe picked up his stick and walked to the next house.

"Good morning sir," he called up to a thatcher patting down the cut straw on a barn roof. "Do you need any help? I'm looking for a living."

"Good morning to you, my boy. Have you any experience in thatching?"

"No, but I'm quick to learn."

"So are hundreds of others. I need an experienced thatcher—I'm competing against all the other thatchers in the area for speed, quality and price. I can't afford to teach anyone."

"Surely if no one is teaching thatching, when you retire there will be no more thatchers."

The thatcher shrugged. "That won't be my problem, son. Good luck finding a living."

Joe walked on to the next house, chewing a sweet grass stem and whistling.

"Good morning madam," he called over the garden fence to the woman tending her flower beds.

"Good morning young man," said the woman. "What can I do for you?"

"Please madam, could you tell me wherever and ever I can find a living?"

"Ooh, now you're asking," she said. "There's not been any of those in these parts for years. Why don't you try the center of town?" So Joe thanked the woman and walked to the center of town.

He came on a house with a few broken windows and in desperate need of paint.

"Good afternoon, sir," Joe said as the owner-occupier slowly opened the door. "I see that your house needs some renovation—would you be willing to hire me?"

"Only if it costs nothing," said the man, who was wearing a dirty vest. "This isn't the only house in town that's about to disintegrate. Nobody has any money to fix such things because very few of us have jobs. All the family's money is going on the mortgage. I'm sorry, but we can't afford you."

"Would you be willing to hire me?"
"Only if it costs nothing."

Joe then went to the town hall and found the director of public works.

"Good afternoon, sir," said Joe. "Your marketplace is awfully dirty—I can clean it for you if you like."

"That's very good of you, young man. Very public-spirited. There's a mop in that cupboard there."

"How much would you be willing to pay?" said Joe, who wasn't stupid, even though he wasn't from the ABC1 social group.

"Oh no, we can't pay. We don't get enough taxes anymore because nobody is buying or selling anything and nobody has a job. You can use the mop for free, if you want."

"That's not quite the point," said Joe.

"Oh well. The market will have to stay dirty, then."

Joe found a queue leading up to a grand old house near the market square.

"What's the queue for?" Joe asked a man at the back of the queue.

"The Duchess lives here—she's the only one with any money in these parts and she hires people to do things for her. She takes in ten people at a time and finds out who of them will do her work the cheapest. Sometimes she only has to pay a few pennies for a whole week's work."

"That's silly," said Joe.

"That's life," said the man, looking dejected.

"I'm going to find out why this has happened."

"Well," chorused the queue, "when you find out, come back and tell us please, 'cause we're in as mighty a high dudgeon about it as you are."

Joe sat on the steps of the market cross as the moon rose and wondered where to start. *The King is bound to know,*

thought Joe. *He has more advisors than you could shake a stick at.* He curled up in the doorway to a house and fell asleep.

2. In which Joe meets Blackberry the Squirrel.

IN THE EARLY MORNING HE SET OFF DOWN THE ROAD to the big city. He had to walk through the Dark Forest, which was so big that he had to stop in the middle to rest on a tree stump.

From within the tree stump came muffled protests. A squirrel popped through a door and squeaked up at Joe, "Get off my roof! Get *off* my roof! You're cracking the ceiling, you great oaf! I don't go 'round cracking your ceilings! Oh, look what you've done! Look *what* you've done! Deary me, deary *deary* me."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Squirrel," said Joe, hastily getting off the tree stump. "I didn't know squirrels lived in tree stumps."

"They don't usually, and the name's not Mr. Squirrel. It's Blackberry, and I'm a Mrs."

"Oh, I am sorry."

"Never mind. If you go and get some sticks about *this* long," and Blackberry gestured with her two front paws, "I'll shore up the ceiling. Bring some white mud from the creek and some grass too. Hurry *hurry!"*

Joe dashed into the woods to get the sticks, mud and grass for Blackberry. When he returned, she asked him to place the sticks inside the stump by shoving his hand through the front door under her directions of "Left a bit, a bit more, *stop*, right a bit, in a bit… that's it!"

"Why on earth do you live in a tree stump?" asked Joe.

"Some gray squirrels moved into my old neighborhood. Brought the tone of the entire tree down—they're not really the Oak type, you know. Don't get me wrong, some of my best friends are grays, but honestly, they are lazy, smelly thieves who have no sense of decency. They should go back where they came from, in my view."

"Where do they come from?"

Blackberry made a *brrrrr* noise as she thought.

"Not sure exactly. Somewhere down south, I think. What are you doing in this neck of the woods?"

"I was looking for a living, but to do that I need to find out why there aren't any left."

"If you humans lived like us animals then you wouldn't have this problem. None of us ever need to look for a living."

"Yes, but lots of you animals die in gruesomely horrible ways—disease, starvation, cold, being someone else's dinner…"

"That is a bit of a downer, I must admit. Where do you plan to go?"

"I thought the King might know why there are no livings left."

"Perhaps, but have you tried the famous Three Economists yet?"

"No. Where are they?"

"They live in the ever-so-middlest of the forest at the top of an Ivory Tower. They know everything, they say, and Kings and Chancellors come from all over the world to consult them."

So Joe and Blackberry, who said she needed a holiday, set off by hill and scented valley, down wide cart tracks, muddy paths and hidden greenways to the Ivory Tower. The journey went on and on, rather like most wanderings in fairy tales, and I won't bore you with it.

3. In which Joe meets the Famous Three Economists.

AT LAST THEY CAME TO THE TOWER AND CLIMBED the Ivory steps to the Ivory top where the venerable Three Economists sat reading authoritative books on the nature of economic strategies in the incredibly real real world in today's real world.

"Good day, venerable economists," said Joe, "I have a question for you."

"Let's discuss the fee first," said the first economist, who was smoking a pipe.

"Surely we can leave such vulgarities until later," said the second economist, who was bald but had a mustache.

"I really don't think that's the issue," said the third, who wore gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Let the boy speak," said the first economist.

"I suppose we ought to settle the fee first, actually," said the second economist.

The third economist tutted and rolled his eyes. "The boy manifestly has no money."

"Then he ought to go and earn some like the rest of us," said the first economist.

Joe tried to interject but only got to say "That's…" before the second economist interrupted.

"Perhaps that's why he's here. We've got no appointments until three this afternoon—why not entertain him for a while?"

"I agree wholeheartedly," said the third economist. "Except that I have an appointment at two."

The economists sat in silence watching Joe expectantly.

Blackberry nudged Joe. "Go on, then," she whispered.

"Ah," started Joe. "I would like to know why ever and ever there are no livings left."

"Easy-peasy," said the first economist.

"As plain as the nose on your face," said the second economist.

"Its far too complex to explain to a layman," said the third.

"The paucity of economic opportunity is a symptom of the decline of a fat, exhausted and overpriced economy in

which we have efficiencied ourselves out of a job. Consider: A bank that used to employ twenty cashiers now only needs two employees and a cash machine. This makes things cheaper for the consumer until such a point that the consumer also loses his job through mechanization. Hence a very streamlined supply side of the economy and eventually no demand, because everybody has been streamlined out of the supply side, which is the side offering all the jobs. My suggestion is that you become a machine, son."

"Nonsense," said the second economist. "We had boom-and-bust cycles before mechanization. It's part of the natural—possibly even invigorating—cycles of life and death, summer and winter, day and night. It happens and will continue to happen. Such factors as stock market crashes, unemployment, deflation of both economy and currency *et cetera* are but symptoms of this decline, not the cause. The cause is innate in the system—the cause *is* the system."

"Oh come on now," said the third economist. "The reason is that we, meaning us the country and us the business community, have built economic successes on ever-expanding credit. When the debts are called in, panic ensues because nobody can pay without calling in their debts. Everybody goes into a frenzy demanding debts and deferring payment of their own until they go bankrupt; confidence in the system is lost and investment slows, if not ceases. No investment, no business, no jobs. Added to this effect is the effect of allying our economy with Europe, whose economies run on different lines—when Germany decides to put up interest rates to encourage foreign investment to pay for their internal affairs, so do we, because we have to, to keep our currency at the tagged rate, benefiting creditors and damaging debtors until the debtors default and everybody goes bust."

"Does that answer your question, son?" said the first economist.

"Which of you is right?" asked Joe.

"We all are," said the second economist.

"But you all gave different reasons. You can't all be right."

"Economics is a very complex science, a multi-layered flow of variable interlocking currents which traverse the whole world," said the third economist expansively.

"Well, whose fault is all this?" asked Joe.

"Progress and capitalism," said the first economist.

"Nobody's. It's chaos theory in action," said the second economist.

"It's the government," said the third economist.

"So how are we to get out of this hole?" asked Joe.

"Move to the far east," said the first economist.

"God only knows. Wait for a change in the weather, I suppose," said the second economist.

"Oh, the usual, encourage the growth of business through lower taxes, firm currency control, a suitable interest rate and such," said the third economist.

"So it's going to get better, then," said Joe.

"I doubt it," said the first economist. "Our economies are overloaded galleons just waiting to capsize."

"Oh, it will, given time, but no one will know why or when," said the second economist.

"When the government pays back the legislative debt, undoing all the damage of the last few years and providing a background amenable to business," said the third economist.

"Which of you is right?" asked Joe.
"We all are."
"But you all gave different reasons!"

"It's not surprising that the King doesn't have a clue how to run the economy if he has you lot for advisors," said Joe.

"Harumph," said the first economist. "I am emeritus professor of fiscal psychology at the University of Bad Znuckensitzen, I'll have you know. Have you never heard of Europe's Ersatz TV economist? You know, I'm on *Drang nach Osten.* It's particularly popular with the Germans."

"I hold the Piaf memorial chair of Apology Negation at the University of Sansculotte, and they don't call me *Mr. Money, Our Economist Who's Friendly and Funny* for nothing," said the second economist.

"And I am senior advisor to Herr Doktor Doktor Doktor Gemeinschaft of Bank Swabia, Switzerland," said the third economist. "I have a regular program on Radio Ryokaplatz beamed across Scandinavia and the Baltic. So don't tell me my advice is no good."

"Thank you," said Joe, who was quite polite even when dealing with self-important second-raters.

As they descended the ivory steps Blackberry made a face.

"They weren't very useful, were they?" she said.

"Oh, I don't know. At least we know that *nobody* has a clue what's going on. Whom do you suggest now?"

"Let's forget about *why* this has happened. Why not find the famous Three Personnel Consultants and see what they have got to say about finding a career?"

"Where do they live?" asked Joe.

"They live behind a huge wooden door with gold leaf lettering deep in the forest which can only be found by following a narrow winding six-lane motorway which runs in a huge circle and is permanently clogged with slowly-shunting traffic, depressed husbands, hysterical wives and vomiting children."

"Sounds fun," said Joe, unconvinced.

4. In which Joe meets the Famous Three Personnel Consultants.

JOE KNOCKED AT THE DOOR BLACKBERRY HAD LED him to. On it was written *The Famous Three Personnel Consultants—Please Knock and Enter,* so Joe did. The Famous Three Personnel Consultants sat behind a leather-topped desk and all wore glasses and were bald, including the woman, though she wore a wig.

"Good morning," said the leftmost Consultant. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Well…" Joe started.

"Good, good," said the middlemost Consultant. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Not bad…" Joe started.

"Can I take your coat?" said the rightmost and most female consultant, the one who wore a wig.

"But I'm not wearing…" Joe started.

"Good, good," said the leftmost Consultant. He flipped over a notepad sheet and chewed the end of his pencil. "What experience can you bring to this post?"

Joe looked surprised. All three personnel consultants looked at him in the friendly-yet-expectant manner they had been taught to use, and which had driven their respective spouses to the verge of a violent divorce.

"I, er, er," Joe thought hard. "I know how to cut down apple trees."

There was a long and meaningful pause which was supposed to elicit further details from the interrogee. Usually this resulted in a stream of meaningless babble and the Consultants knew with satisfaction that they had managed to humiliate the quivering heap of pathetic flesh that lay damp and snickering in front of them.

"Ye-es," said the rightmost and most female Consultant lengthily, marking something off slowly and deliberately on her checksheet. "In what way do you suppose the skills of arboreal pruning can be *transferred* to the post of filing clerk and general dogsbody?" She stressed *transferred* because this was an In word and she really desperately wanted to be a fashionable Personnel Consultant.

"None really," said Joe in a fatal flash of veracity. "Actually, I came here to…"

"I see from your CV that you only scored 90 percent in your end-of-term spelling test ten years ago. Why was that?" said the leftmost Consultant.

Joe drew his brows together. "Um…"

"Don't you think you may be a little overqualified for this post?" said the middlemost Consultant.

"Too young?" said the leftmost Consultant.

"Too old?" said the middlemost Consultant.

"Too middling?" said the rightmost and most female Consultant.

There was another pregnant-yet-sympathetic pause. Joe was lost.

"No, I don't think so," he said.

They flipped their notepads and marked something down.

"I see you have done a lot of travelling," said the leftmost Consultant.

"A bit, here and there," said Joe.

"Aha! Do you really think you are ready to settle down now?" said the rightmost and most female Consultant with a doubtful-but-questioning set of the nose.

"That's good; it shows *initiative*," said the middlemost Consultant, using his most favorite word.

"Where do you see yourself in ten years' time?" asked the rightmost and most female consultant.

"I don't," said Joe firmly. There ensued another nail-bitingly firm-but-approachable pause.

"I see," said the middlemost Consultant. "We have five other candidates to see today. Why should we choose you?"

"Five thousand actually," said the leftmost Consultant.

"Five million actually," said the rightmost and most female Consultant.

"All of whom have years and years of exactly the experience we want, at least two degrees, are under nineteen years old, willing to work for peanuts and all the hours that God gives. They have no family, mortgage or social life and are driven only by the terror of poverty. What can you offer?"

"I've got most of those, except the experience and the two degrees," said Joe.

"We don't really need the two degrees, actually," admitted the middlemost Consultant, "but it appears a slightly less random method of choosing than pinning on a donkey's tail."

"What we really need is someone who has spent twenty years filing in gray steel cabinets and making five cups of coffee, two white only, two with sugar only and one with both every half an hour at 17 minutes past and 13 minutes to the hour except during lunch and who is under nineteen, and preferably pliant," said the leftmost Consultant.

"But that's not possible," said Joe.

"Ah, but you see, there are five million people out there to choose from. There's bound to be someone." said the rightmost and most female Consultant.

"Then they're lying," said Joe.

"I think *we* can tell a liar when we see one, young man," said the leftmost Consultant in some dudgeon.

"I think you misunderstand our purpose. You think we're here to *employ* people don't you?" said the middlemost Consultant.

"Well, aren't you?" said Joe. The Consultants laughed in the friendly-yet-pedagogical manner they had refined through their years of overvalued employment.

"Oh, no," said the rightmost and most female Consultant. "We are concerned with *not* employing people and when they are employed, with *not* sacking them. Out of the many options we have to pick the best. For instance, we have to glance through several hundred CVs for each post; the ones with spelling mistakes are immediately discarded. We don't have enough time to check any deeper."

"If you don't have time, how come you can check for spelling mistakes?" said Joe.

"We have time enough for that," snapped the middlemost Consultant.

"So you are being entirely negative in your search then?" said Joe.

"Oh, no, no" they chorused. "No, oh no." *Negative* was a deeply unfashionable word in personnel circles, like *luck* and *mistake*.

"We choose on the basis of instinct," said the leftmost Consultant. "You can't buck human nature. Our decision is made within the first three minutes of meeting the applicant."

"What, depending on whether they're pretty or not?" said Joe.

"I wouldn't put it *exactly* like that," said the rightmost and most female Consultant. The other Consultants waited politely for her to say how *exactly* she would put it, but she didn't.

"So what's the point in the pseudo-science of personnel if it comes down to basic instincts anyway?"

The Consultants shuffled uncomfortably. "We have to choose *some* way. I think we have more refined instincts than most and understand people better," said the middlemost Consultant.

"I beg to differ there," said Joe. "It's incontrovertible that some incompetents do get hired and some talented, hard-working people don't."

"But it's inevitable that some mistakes occur. We don't claim to be superhuman," said the leftmost Consultant.

"By that logic," said Joe, "air traffic controllers should be forgiven causing a few aircraft to collide. The difference is that air traffic control is an applied science with objective standards, and personnel is a load of baloney. To make matters worse, it's not merely a matter of a *few* incompetents in jobs and a few of the unfortunate talented out of work, it's thousands, if not millions."

Joe was now warming to his subject. "And those incompetents make the employment situation worse precisely because they're incompetent at running an efficient business. It often seems that the only qualification required to get a high-powered job is that you should be a self-seeking grasping liar with connections in the right places who is willing to acquiesce to any of the notions of your direct boss, however daft or fraudulent."

The Consultants licked their lips nervously. "I thought *we* were conducting the interview. You're not keeping to the commonly accepted standards of interview techniques," said the rightmost and most female consultant.

"Are you saying, then, that personnel selection procedures are no better than random?" asked the leftmost Consultant.

"Worse," said Joe. "Because the specifications on which someone is hired is uniformly arbitrary and *not* random. For instance you won't hire young women because they might get pregnant."

"Well, it's *possible,"* said the rightmost and most female Consultant a bit wistfully.

"You won't hire people over 50, presumably because only extreme youth is fashionable and, by definition, you will only hire people who can be totally at ease when under scrutiny—which indicates that the candidate is good at either job interviews or lying, and those who do not qualify are permanently unemployable."

The Consultants licked their lips nervously. "I thought *we* were conducting the interview.

"We have to use *some* method," said the middlemost Consultant.

"But does it have to be uniformly the same one?"

"We must keep up to date in the incredibly competitive world of today," said the leftmost Consultant. "In any case, if our procedures didn't work, nobody would employ us. Businesses aren't stupid, you know."

"But who checks? How can anyone check? You can't admit to a mistake because you want to keep your job too and no businessman is going to admit that all his staff were hired incompetently. Businesses can thrive without personnel departments, you know."

"But only small ones," said the middlemost Consultant.

"Is there any evidence at all that your recruitment methods are any better than random methods?"

There was another uncomfortable pause during which all three coughed nervously.

"Thank you for taking the time to come," said the middlemost Consultant.

"I'm afraid the post has already been filled," said the rightmost and most female consultant.

"I'm afraid we will have to postpone recruitment until next year. Do try again," said the leftmost Consultant.

The Consultants started marking things down on their checksheets and flipping notes backward and forward.

"That's it," said Blackberry. "Pretty useless, eh?"

Joe got up from the extremely uncomfortable squeaky swivel chair he had been sitting on.

"That's not so surprising, is it?" said Joe. "After all, it was people like this who recruited other people like this to run big companies."

As he left the office, a secretary passed him a note. "From the Personnel Consultants," she said, chewing her chewing gum noisily.

It read:

"To find a job you must:
Look for a job tailored to your experience.
Sell yourself.
(Your expectations are too high.
You have no self-confidence.)"

"But I haven't got any experience to tailor anything to!" said Joe. "And why should I sell myself? Isn't that just smooth lying? I've never claimed to be a salesman and never wanted a sales job. My expectation is just to get a job; is that too high? If I have no self-confidence, isn't that because I can't even fulfill the basic expectation of getting a job?"

"Don't have conniptions," said Blackberry. "That's what they want. They want you to feel it's all your fault because then they won't have to do anything about it. Let's try the three politicians."

"Politicians?" said Joe. "Oh dear."

5. In which Joe meets the Famous Three Politicians.

THE FAMOUS THREE POLITICIANS LIVED IN A BEAUTIful neo-gothic palace on the banks of a big river. Joe was directed down dark, wallpapered corridors, past wooden trifolium ornamentation and over-luxurious woolen carpets toward a broad double door behind which could be heard the sound of a convention of axe-murderers.

"Très William Morris," said Blackberry admiringly from Joe's pocket as she eyed up the dark green organic design on the walls.

"Ordah ordah!" shouted someone. The noise continued. "Oh, fer chrissake shut up! Shut up! *Shut up! Please!"*

Joe opened the door.

"Did so!" shouted a man in a suit.

"Did not!" shouted another.

"Dididididididididididididid!" shouted the first.

"Didndidndidndidndidn't!" shouted the other.

"I'll agree with anyone who'll agree with me," said a third.

"Oh, shut up," said the other two.

"I will not have such language…" started a woman with a blue rinse from the back of the playpen.

"Go stick it in your ear," said the first.

"Whaddayou want?" asked the second, facing Joe.

"A job, actually," said Joe.

"Well stop whining and go and look for one!" said the first, cursing as he dropped his briefcase and thousands of stock certificates slid out.

"See! See!" said the second. "You see what happens when you vote *his* lot in!"

"I didn't," said Joe. "I was too young to vote the last time. I wanted to know why I can't get a job."

"You bloody well get on your bike and look for one," said the first politician."

"I don't have a bike," said Joe.

"Then buy one."

"I don't have any money, and in any case employers don't just employ people who turn up on their doorsteps anymore," said Joe.

"Oh piss off, you whining git," said the first politician. "Get a job and get out of my face."

"I can't," said Joe.

"There's no such thing as can't. You just don't want to. You'd rather tramp to and fro across the country in an endless and futile search for a fictional excuse for not getting a job. I bet my *honorable* colleague opposite would oblige you with one of those," he sneered at the second politician. "You people make me sick. Don't you see?" He waved his hands around in an encompassing gesture. "We have created a meritocratic paradise. If you can't make it here, you can't make it anywhere."

"Piffle!" said the second politician. "Codswallop! As there is profit in employment, there has to be profit in unemployment. If you voted for me, the whole world would join hands and sing in peaceful harmony…"

"Tripe!" said the first politician. "Nobody believes or trusts you. The economy would collapse within days of you assuming power!"

"Only because you and your friends would sabotage it!"

"Doesn't matter *why*, it just would. Who'd trust you with a penny? You get in and I'm on a plane to Bermuda along with all my money. And as for you, young man," he looked at Joe, "there is no such thing as unemployment. There is merely an unwillingness to match one's self to the requirements of the marketplace. What do you want me to do? Cry? Piss off. I'm not interested."

"If we had been in power," said the second, "you wouldn't be in this state. Blame yourself."

"But…" said Joe.

You're not worth the breath it takes to ignore you," said the first politician. "Let's face it, you're an irrelevant whining scrounger with no money, no job, no vote, no prospects, no connections and no point. Goodbye. And as for you, you corrupt incompetent…"

"Who exactly are you calling a corrupt incompetent, you self-satisfied upper class oaf?"

"How *dare* you…"

Joe turned away from the playpen and made his own way out.

"They say that the incidence of suicide is on the increase," Joe said to Blackberry.

Blackberry shrugged. "You should have been born a squirrel," she said.

6. In which the gentle reader decides what happens to Joe.

SO WHAT DID HAPPEN TO JOE? WELL, THERE ARE A number of possibilities. Armed with your knowledge and experience choose from the following:

a) As Joe plodded dejectedly toward the center of town, a long black car pulled up. A businessman wound down the window from the back seat.

"Exactly what I've been looking for!" he said.

"Pardon?" said Joe.

"Do you want a job?" said the businessman.

"Well, er, yes," said Joe.

The businessman handed Joe his card. *Montague Twistleton-Smythe, Chartered Odd-Job man to the Astonishingly Rich.* "Be at that address tomorrow morning at nine. Twenty thousand a year. Company Car. Stock Options. All we need is your brains," he said.

"Wow," said Joe. "It's like a fairy tale."

"Either that, or you've finally lost it," said Blackberry. "Otherwise I wouldn't still be here."

b) Joe plodded dejectedly back into town to find the dole office.

"Help," he said to the official there.

The official sighed. "Are you now or have you ever been unemployed?" he said.

"Yup," said Joe, "and I'm broke."

"Well, find someplace to stay, and we'll pay you."

So Joe found the friends that everyone is supposed to have in the big city and persuaded them to let him sleep on the floor so he could get the dole. Then the landlady found out and he was kicked out, along with the rest of his friends, one of whom had a job and so could rent another place. Gosh, that was lucky.

Being an unemployed young male, no landlord would offer him a room, so in the end Joe had to give up and go home, where he lived for years and years until he had no spirit left and certainly had nothing to sell to the marketplace.

c) Joe plodded dejectedly back into town to find the dole office.

"Help," he said to the official there.

The official sighed. "Are you now or have you ever been unemployed?" he said.

"Yup," said Joe, "and I'm broke."

"Well, find a place to stay and we'll pay you."

"I see a fatal flaw in that plan," said Joe.

"Not my problem," said the official.

So Joe slept underneath a bridge until the police hosed his box into the river. He lived off handouts and whisky, indulging in the odd bit of theft and buggery until his brain had been pickled and he smelled so bad and looked so ugly that nobody gave a tinker's damn about what happened to him. Even the well-meaning liberals didn't bother wringing their hands in sympathy.

Mind you, all that whisky and dodgy crack had meant he could now converse with Blackberry the talking Squirrel. In fact, he saw her everywhere.

So next time you come across a man looking haggard and unshaven holding a whisky bottle in one hand tottering underneath a bridge and slurring "Ay! 'Vyer seen Blackbree, 'vyer, ay?" then do say hello from me, won't you?

ADAM HARRINGTON

Despite the impression you might get from his story, Adam Harrington is happily employed as a computer contractor in England. He has been a biologist, journalist, unemployed bum, bookie's clerk and unemployed bum again—in that order—and doesn't plan on retiring until his cold dead fingers are pried from the office doorknob.

The Year Before Sleep

RUPERT GOODWINS

Losing yourself in your work is fine,
so long as you remember to come back.

CECIL SPUN HIS WEB LAZILY, HOOKING IT BETWEEN branches and thorns, leaves and flakes of bark. It was early in the morning, and he was still too cold to shake off the waking sluggishness in his mind and limbs. He watched sun-slivered color glint through dewdrops, watched green translucence creep down shadow-dipped grass stems next to the bramble bush.

Eventually, the sun touched his head, then his back. His body warmed, the plump abdomen contracting and expanding as energy pumped through it. Gradually, the world around him grew and the thirty-two aches in his thirty-two joints melted away. He was alert now.

The web needed tidying. He tidied it, scuttling across it to a ragged corner, a sulking gap near the top, a clumsy anchor on a bramble bud.

That should do. Now, wait.

The dewdrops had gone by midday. Cecil sheltered under a leaf: it was a clear day and there was rather too much sun. One leg lightly touched a strand of the web; through it he could hear his prey distantly moving through the air. Always too distant, he thought. He wasn't hungry exactly, but he would be in a couple of days and he didn't want to have to move. Still time to wait.

The afternoon passed. One small blue fast-flying blur snapped into the web, but snapped away again almost before Cecil was out from under the leaf. He scrambled out to inspect the damage; there was a ragged hole that couldn't be fixed neatly. He did the best he could, and slunk back again.

Then, just as the sun touched the top of the scrubby trees at the far end of the clearing, he got a hit. He heard it coming: a deep, slow buzz that made him remember with pleasure a particularly succulent catch from weeks ago. With delight, he noted that the buzz was getting steadily louder. It must be heading straight for him, he thought, and then it was in the net. The twig he was on bent slightly with the impact; he was out in no time, cautiously circling the victim. This one wasn't going to get away.

It was trying, though. The web bounced and strained, vibrating with the prey's frantic bursts of motion. Cecil watched it warily: it didn't seem to be the sort with a sting, and he couldn't see anything too much like dangerous jaws. He checked the tension on the web: it was good. He could wait until it tired itself out a little more.

That took quite a long time, and the air was cooling before he tried a quick rush over the body. It was still buzzing, but quietly now, intermittently. One track of web over it, then another, then another. Then in for the kill: he bit, feeling his fangs make contact with the body, then through and into it. A pump of venom. A final twitch. He quickly mummified it with a single layer of web, then cut it clear of the holding strands before tumbling it over and over with his hind legs, weaving a thick, glistening cover. It was bigger than he was even before he finished.

Satisfied with his work, he dragged it back to his haunt under the leaf, sticking it carefully to the junction with the twig. Night was no time to do anything. He'd wait until morning, then consume his meal and think—yes, definitely—about moving to a new site.

"Come on, Cecil. You're no spider. We're no fly. Look up at yesterday's catch."

When daylight touched the world about him, everything seemed as it should be. Things to do formed in his night-slowed mind. Repair the web, or move. Eat. Yes, eat. He shuddered with slow waking, and made to move toward the waiting package.

He didn't move. He tried again; his complaining legs made the right aches, his body bumped away from the twig, but slumped back down again. His legs strained harder. Something was holding them fast. There came a colder thought, paralysing him just by the shapes it made in his head—wasps! He knew of them; the memory of them had always been there. Small things, predatory, always hungry, who flew at night and laid their eggs in living flesh, leaving it aware and immobile. Was that it?

"No, we're not wasps."

Cecil had enjoyed a long and successful life. He had survived many of the dangers that could wipe out the toothsome; had hidden and run, had outwitted most of the rapaciously hungry animals that would otherwise have added him to their list of meals consumed. He had seen three seasons, been flooded, baked, blown away by the wind and nearly frozen. Never, in all this, had he ever had a thought that was not his own. The shock of it held him tight as any bright-eyed mouse.

"Come on, Cecil. You're no spider. We're no fly. Look up, look at yesterday's catch."

He still couldn't separate out these alien voices from his own; but if a thought said "look up," you should look

up. He looked at the bundle of sticky thread on the twig. It was as he remembered it.

Except.

Except there was a neat hole halfway up, perfectly round. There was something dark sticking out of it, and a bright red thread ran from the hole to the twig. It ended up in a neat loop, encircling the twig and two of his legs, holding them fast together. Then it ran under his body. He couldn't see where it ended.

"That's it. Talk to us, Cecil."

The shock subsided. He thought back at the voices. "What are you? How are you in me? You are wasps. You will kill me."

"Not wasps. Friends. Cecil, we've been looking for you. We were worried."

"Friends. Worried. No, no, no. Wasps." Cecil hadn't ever thought much about what it would be like to be a living host to wasps. Not something to dwell on. But now he thought about it; it must be like this. Once the eggs were in your body, their thoughts must be in your mind. Made sense. Horrid sense. He wished he'd eaten the fly last night now. A last meal to keep him going a bit longer.

"Forget the wasps, Cecil!" The voice was louder. Sounded quite upset.

"…wasps…" he mumbled, trying to see if he could feel where the eggs were. Everything felt normal. The sun would be on him soon. Perhaps he'd have the strength to get to the fly then.

"It's not a fly! Oh, for heaven's sake…" There was an indistinct conversation. He caught the odd phrase: "How much more damage can we do? He thinks he's an orb spider, for…" "Well, why not?" Then it went quiet. Cecil waited, for sunlight or for death.

"Cecil. Cecil Sharpley."

The last word hit him as the sun touched his head. A burst of light, inside and out.

"Frederic." he said. "Cecil Frederic Sharpley. That's me."

"Well done! Cecil, this is Greerly. We're here to get you…" But his mind was filled with babble; he was quite unable to tell what was his, what was the voice. The noises merged, collided, fell apart. He felt his body vibrate, his legs pumping him up and down, escape the bird that way, escape the bird that way, escape…

Inside his mind, a burning. A man came awake. A thirty-seven year old man, warm, with a wife, with a fascination for arachnids. A man who made models, a man who wanted to make, who made, the ultimate field trip. A man who got lost, who forgot the way out of the field. A man who went to sleep, and woke up one day not as a man, who slept again.

Now he was awake. Just for a second. Just long enough to feel the spider body around him and, in the distance, a body that had been home. He felt the thorax with the legs sprouting from it bursting through his chest, the distended abdomen where his stomach was, the mess of fangs and eyes and hair merging with his warm, smooth, man's face. An excruciating ugliness that the sunlight could never warm.

Later that afternoon, an ichneumon wasp found the spider. It settled on the leaf above it, and carefully made its way down, antennae scanning. But the body was cold and had already started to decay. Unsuited for the purpose.

There would be others.

The wasp flew away.

RUPERT GOODWINS:

Large, shambling, ground-dwelling primate. Reclusive, but habitat thought to be restricted to temperate zones in North London. Feeding and mating habits: Obscure, and deservedly so. Evidence for existence may be found in PC Magazine UK, *and in a weekend diary on* www.zdnet.co.uk/news.