InterText

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"The Smart Bomb"
by RICHARD K. WEEMS

PLUS STORIES BY

MARCUS EUBANKS
REDMOND JAMES
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First Text

JASON SNELL

SINCE WE LAST SPOKE…

ONCE UPON A TIME I WROTE one of these columns every month, "whether I had anything to say or not," as I said in the most recent one. That was more than a year ago, and plenty of things have changed since then.

When last I wrote, my wife and I were looking for a new place to live, because she and I had both undergone job changes and we needed to be closer to where she worked. Not only have we made that move, but we've moved since—this time, to a house we bought a couple of months ago. I'd call buying a house a major life change, and that's just the most recent one.

When last I wrote, my professional life was in a bit of turmoil. My previous employer, *MacUser* magazine, had merged with its archrival, *Macworld.* The resulting magazine (also called *Macworld)* was still my employer, but I can tell you that things were mighty rocky. You'd think that two organizations with so many similarities—they covered the same topic, were both monthly magazines owned by large computer-magazine publishing companies—were pretty much alike. But, in fact, the two magazines and their cultures couldn't have been more different. It led to lots of personality clashes, culture clashes, pain, and suffering. When my uncle (whose company underwent a major business merger a few years earlier) warned me that this merger business wasn't ever easy, he wasn't kidding.

Now I'm feeling a bit more stable at *Macworld,* running the magazine's features section. It's a kick to get paid to do what you've always done as a hobby, but it's still enjoyable to branch out and do things that don't involve writing *about* technology—that's where *InterText* and my other online publishing project, TeeVee, come in.

There have been some other momentous changes in the world around me, too. Our friends Adam and Tonya Engst, the publishers of *TidBITS*, had their first child, Tristan, in January. In addition to being famous for *TidBITS* and his *Internet Starter Kit* books, Adam wrote two stories for *InterText* and still writes for me at *Macworld* on a semi-regular basis.

Another longtime Friend of TeeVee—his stories appeared in our first few issues, he wrote key material for our "theme issue" back in 1994, and he's one of the people who pitch in with TeeVee—is Greg Knauss. Greg and his wife Joanne also had their first child, Thomas, in January. I guess January's a big time for babies!

IN ADDITION TO EXPLAINING WHY I HAVEN'T written a column, the other popular *InterText* column topic is asking for volunteer help. And I don't want to disappoint on that side, especially since we can always use the help.

InterText is run entirely on a volunteer basis. Nobody gives us money. Geoff Duncan and I edit *InterText* out of our interest in doing it, and not because we're getting kickbacks from some shadowy investor. It's been that way since we started this eight years ago.

But as I've said, times change. Neither Geoff nor I have the time to spend on *InterText* that we did eight years ago. We've gotten some great added help over the years—most especially the *InterText* submissions panel, which has been ably led by the generous and wise Joe Dudley. The submissions panel, if you weren't aware, is an ever-changing group of people who receive every single story submitted to *InterText,* read them, and give each story a rating. The work of that group helps the story-selection process immeasurably, acting as a reality check for me and highlighting stories that they feel really deserve to be seen by *InterText*'s readers.

Lately that panel's active participants has dwindled quite a bit, so I'm using this part of the column to actively recruit new members. If you're interested in wading through a large volume of story submissions—35 per month, on average—mail `editors@intertext.com` and let us know. Be warned: this isn't an easy job. There's a lot of mail, and to be brutally honest, there are far more weak stories than good ones in the pile. But if you have the time, the disposition, and an inclination to help out *InterText,* we'd love to have you take a crack at it.

Likewise, I'd like to appeal to the writers out there to submit their stories to *InterText.* As always, we still can't pay our writers—that *no money* thing again, and I'd pay them out of my own pocket if it weren't for this nasty mortgage payment of mine. But I firmly believe that *InterText* offers a level of exposure that most Internet publications can't provide, and it's my hope that people around the Net see publication in *InterText* as having some value—as the members of our submissions panel know, it's not as though we print every story that people send to us. Far from it.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of our readers, and encourage that you recommend *InterText* to a friend. We publish the magazine in many forms—on the Web, in printable PDF and PostScript versions, and even portable PalmPilot and Newton books. There's an *InterText* edition for everyone out there!

This week Jason Snell is the features editor at Macworld *magazine. In what passes for his spare time, he edits* InterText *and TeeVee (*`www.teevee.org`*).*

Cinderblock

MARCUS EUBANKS

The role of a doctor is to save a patient's life.
Even if that struggle is futile.

IT'S ANOTHER LATE AFTERNOON AT WORK, ALL OF us rushing around like mad to get things done so we can sign out to the on-call team and get home. Service on the Intensive Care Unit makes for pretty full days—not necessarily breakneck pace all the time, but you go directly from one task to the next all the same, with very little downtime.

My part of the team is composed of three individuals: an upper-year resident; an intern; and me, the medical student. There are three such groups making up the unit team as a whole, in addition to the critical-care nurses and assorted medical techs, without whom the whole works would come to an abrupt, grinding halt. If you do the math, it works out to three or four caregivers for every patient, twenty-four hours a day. The whole circus is overseen by the Attending and the Fellow, who somehow manage to give us enough slack to run things on our own while managing through some arcane trick of omniscience to know everything that transpires even as it goes down.

The three of us are working our way through the litany of routine afternoon tasks when news comes down from The Powers That Be that we're getting a transfer from an outlying hospital. Word is that the hit will be a 27-year-old shooter with right-sided endocarditis. In itself an infected heart in an intravenous drug user is no big deal. It's serious, don't misunderstand, but not good reason in itself for transfer to our facility.

The catch is that her course has become complicated by septic emboli to her lungs, which changes the picture dramatically. With all those nasty bacteria in her blood and lungs producing their various toxins, she's developing full-blown ARDS, the adult respiratory distress syndrome. ARDS is bad news—your lungs suffer some sort of insult which causes the exchange surface to stiffen and swell up, and you die by slow suffocation.

There's also a brief mention that she might have suffered a miscarriage, but it's unclear if anything has been done to address that aspect of her illness. We're told that her boyfriend was recently diagnosed HIV positive. Before we even see her, it's sounding like a really ugly scene.

Some hours later, she actually arrives at our hospital. We meet her on the helipad only to discover that she's in the process of dropping her pressures, her sats, and you can bet her level of consciousness. At the time of her arrival she is very nearly in cardiac arrest. We manage to get her to the unit, bagging her all the while, blowing huge volumes of pure oxygen into her lungs with a blue plastic squeeze bulb about the size of a rugby ball. The air goes from the squeeze bulb through a large-bore tube which passes through her mouth and into her trachea.

"What's her name?" I ask, and amidst the confusion someone from the transport teams shouts, "Carmen." "Okay, Carmen," I tell her, leaning over her face so she can see me. "Try to relax and let us breathe for you."

She looks terrified out of her mind, eyes wide and jumping around crazily as she attempts to comprehend what is going on. Her blood pressure remains dangerously low, and we consider starting a norepinephrine drip.

We meet her on the helipad only to discover that she's in the process of dropping her pressures, her sats, and you can bet her level of consciousness.

Norepi's interesting stuff—it's the heart of the rush you get when you nearly fall from a great height, or you come close to killing someone in a blind rage. It does lots of funky things to your body, among them cranking your blood pressure through the roof.

We get the drip hung just in time for her to start to recover on her own. IV's started, lines working, numbers improving, then the magic word: *Oops.*

"Oops what?" I say, looking up quickly at the nurse who uttered it. "What do you mean, 'oops?' "

"Well, I just flushed your new IV with norepi," she says, looking sheepish. I look over at the monitor, and the flickering amber numbers there make the fact abundantly clear. It's okay, though—Carmen is young and resilient. A couple of minutes later her blood pressure backs down out of the stratosphere, and she's looking sort of all right.

All right is relative, though. She's awake and terribly frightened, but she looks sick. Even though she's very weak, her reflexive efforts to fight us are starting to become an impediment to our various interventions. It soon becomes apparent that we're going to have to put her down.

Her lungs are in sorry shape indeed, you see, and it turns out that our standard ventilator—which is a marvel of flexibility and clean design—simply lacks the brute power to develop enough pressure to inflate them. Her convulsive attempts at breathing are ineffective but are

still enough to badly confuse the sophisticated computer which runs the machine, making the problem even worse.

In other words, for us to be able to manage her dire status we will have to paralyze and sedate her. We give her a bolus of a close relative of curare, and add in a whopping huge dose of one of Valium's myriad offspring. She drifts away from us in a pharmaceutical haze, rapidly becoming oblivious to the gross indignities we are committing upon her.

THE BOYFRIEND TESTED HIV+, BUT WE'RE TOLD that Carmen's serology came back negative.

She has children.

She also has stiff, horribly damaged lungs. Over the course of time, bacteria from her skin have gained access to her circulation by way of the needles she uses to inject smack or coke or speed or whatever it is that she likes to shoot. Generally speaking, getting a couple of bacteria into your bloodstream isn't such a big deal. You and I probably become transiently bacteremic every time we brush our teeth vigorously; a few bugs making their way from traumatized gums into our blood. Our immune systems laugh at this small invasion, effortlessly clearing it in moments.

Carmen, on the other hand, has been injecting her circulation with nasty skin bugs in rather large numbers, and has been doing so for quite some time. The critters have taken up residence on the valves of her heart, causing the edges to heap themselves up into little septic mountains. Not only has this rendered the valves useless because they no longer fit together cleanly, but it seems that chunks of septic tissue have broken loose from them to seed her lungs. The bacteria make toxic products, and her own immune system only compounds the damage by trying to kill them off. Immunological warfare is a bloody business: your white blood cells make toxins of their own, all the better to kill with. The problem is that these products are indiscriminate, damaging your own lung tissue as easily as the foreign bacteria.

"Her lungs are about as flexible as cinderblocks," the Attending tells us one morning on rounds. He is a man of wry wit and an astounding fund of knowledge. The discourse has turned to the perils of high-pressure ventilation, and the woefully few ways of mitigating them.

A little later, the team is gathered together in one of the reading rooms in the radiology suite to review daily films when the radiologist stops in startled amazement. He turns to look at us with big eyes, his quick repartee momentarily derailed.

"She's going to pop," he intones, pointing at an x-ray. "Look at these lung bases, here and here. She's a-gonna blow."

The Attending shakes his head ruefully at the rest of us. He'd told us the same thing upon her arrival a couple of days ago, when he and the Fellow first started jacking up the pressures on the ventilator.

FORTY MINUTES AFTER ROUNDS, THE GRIM PROPHESY is fulfilled. Carmen's lungs, after fifty or sixty hours of being subjected to pressures they were never meant to see, develop holes—at least one on each side. High-pressure jets from these holes cause rapidly growing bubbles of air to collect between the outer surface of the lungs and the inner surface of her chest wall, causing her lungs to collapse. The result is that her usable gas-exchange surface is acutely diminished, and the amount of oxygen entering her blood falls precipitously.

We have been expecting this, and so the tools are ready, hung from the wall at the head of her bed with thick white bands of silk tape. The Fellow pokes holes in her chest wall with scalpel and hemostat, one on each side. We thread long, flexible tubes through these holes into the offending bubbles, and the air from her thorax comes rushing out in a long quiet sigh. With the next gasp of the ventilator, her lungs reinflate.

Even with the chest-tubes vented to suction ports on the wall, some of the air escaping her lungs tracks its way through the various tissues of her chest. After a while it starts to show up on the daily x-rays, throwing her musculature into dramatic relief. I can actually feel it when I touch her. When I push down lightly on her skin the sensation returned is that of hundreds of little bubbles popping, which is exactly what is happening. The air begins to track its way down her arms and, grim though it sounds, Carmen begins to take on the appearance of an inflatable toy.

A COUPLE OF NIGHTS LATER WE DECIDE THAT another vascular access might be prudent, so I take it upon myself to obtain one. She's a difficult stick, what with years of sclerosing her veins with the impurities in the drugs she injects, but I somehow manage to get a good line on the second try. Instead of taking pride in my growing skill (or exquisite luck, in this case) I walk away feeling queasy and ill.

One of the things you try when you have a hard time finding veins is slapping lightly on the patient's arm, as it often makes them stand out a bit more proudly. I try this on Carmen, and it sounds and feels exactly like slapping an air mattress, or one of those rafts you rent at the beach. I do it a couple more times than I really need to, just to convince myself that it isn't all in my head.

CARMEN CONTINUES TO POP HER LUNGS OVER THE next few days. First two tubes, then three. Next she has

four. She's starting to look like—well, I don't know what she looks like, other than a very, very sick young woman. Metaphor seems inappropriate. I wander into her room late at night when I'm on call, just to look at her. With the sheets freshly changed and drawn up to her chin, I can almost forget the lines and hoses and the insistent cycling of the ventilator. With a bit of imagination I can almost see what she might look like in quiet repose. I can't quite make it, though, because of the trache tube protruding from her throat (placed yesterday so we could get the breathing tube out of her mouth) and because of the feeding tube running into her nose (which I so carefully placed, and then taped just so, so it wouldn't place undue pressure on her nostril and leave a scar) or the fact that she's swollen up, literally turned into a balloon by the subcutaneous air.

I walk into the room and peer into her face, wondering what surcease from the world her drugs gave her. I look at her, appalled to see someone my age so horribly, direly ill. Carmen is going to die. I know it. We all know it. I catch myself speaking to her softly, telling her to hang on, and then I feel like a complete and utter idiot. We're giving her enough sedative to crush a horse. She's so completely snowed under all of our drugs that I might as well be talking to myself. When it comes down to it, I guess I am. The fact that I've become a parody of the worst medical dramas ever written isn't lost on me either.

Carmen doesn't so much have lungs anymore as gills. She lives by passive membrane oxygenation, just like a fish. We blow oxygen-rich air into her trachea, it passes over an exchange surface, and then out the chest-tubes into wall suction. The ventilator, a custom European model, hisses continuously day and night sounding like a pathologically pissed-off Kimodo Dragon on amphetamines.

ONE AFTERNOON, ABOUT THREE O'CLOCK, HER SATS start to drop again. We end up bagging her with the blue squeeze bulb while someone calls the Fellow. He rushes into the room, stashing his coffee on the sill outside.

"I think she's dropped a lung again," I offer.

"Well jeezus, it doesn't take much of an intuitive leap to figure that out," he says. "The question is where to go in." He is tired and frustrated, having been up all night with someone who had just undergone a lung transplant. He continues, speaking more to himself than anyone else. "Aw man, what an incredible disaster. Talk about a train wreck."

We get the stat chest x-ray, not to prove that we've blown another hole in her lungs somewhere, but to give us an aiming point. Not too many minutes later we have the information we want, and we start prepping her for her fifth tube.

"Pretty grim prognosis, huh?" I ask in a dazzling burst of medical-student brilliance, while helping him to set up the sterile field.

He gives me a ludicrous look, then glances quickly upward as if appealing to the heavens for self-restraint. "Yeah. Like she has a prognosis. Sure."

He looks down again, continuing to scrub her skin with antibacterial soap. "Do you know how many people there are out there who have survived lung damage like this?"

I shake my head.

"None. Zero. Big ol' empty set."

Carmen is going to die. She doesn't so much have lungs anymore as gills. She lives by passive membrane oxygenation, like a fish.

The conversation in her room has become increasingly macabre in the last couple of days. Various medical students and residents from other services filter in and out, some just to marvel. Word of Carmen has spread, and we take a sort of perverse delight in relating her clinical course to gawking bystanders.

Placement of the tube is quickly done, as the fellow doesn't bother with an anesthetic, reasoning that she's so heavily sedated that she can't feel anything—more deeply unconscious than the most profound sleep. This same reasoning has loosened our inhibitions about talking in front of her. Her numbers start to get better, and she goes back on the vent.

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER THE SURGERY RESIDENT comes by to place yet another chest tube. We could do it ourselves, but the surgeons do more of them, and often have better luck getting the end of it exactly where it needs to be. He brings his own instruments, and thus is far better equipped than we are when we place the things emergently. He takes time to prep her skin very carefully, then sets about numbing her up with studied thoroughness. One of my classmates points out that the painkiller isn't necessary, as Carmen is getting enough sedative every hour to make any one of us sleep for days. The surgeon looks up briefly, then goes back to work as if he hadn't heard. He works quickly and efficiently, and gets the tube exactly where we want it. He also meticulously re-bandages the other chest tubes.

I've been trading patter with him throughout the process, and with uncharacteristic bitterness he curses the poverty and ill education which seem to coincide with IV drug use. We speculate back and forth simplistically as to whether a stronger and more coherent family life could

prevent this sort of thing, and dream up scenarios of parading kids from nearby high schools through her room to convince them that it can happen to them.

CARMEN NOW HAS SIX GOOD-SIZED HOSES radiating from her chest, three on each side. The water seals gurgle to themselves quietly, adding their commentary to the symphony of sound coming from the assorted machinery which is keeping her alive.

I'm on call, and around eleven o'clock I wander into her room to see how she's doing. To my complete and utter horror, she's moving her arms and rolling her eyes in pure abject terror.

"Carmen, honey—calm down. We're here. It'll be all right," I say, at a loss for anything less trite. I call for the nurse, and he rolls into the room with his trademark swift grin.

"I await your bidding, O wise one," he cracks, then stops cold when he sees why I called him.

"Can we crank the sedative up to forty an hour?" I ask him.

"Yeah, no problem," he says, becoming pure efficient business even as he adjusts the drip. He knows that he can't really take orders from a medical student, but he also knows that neither the resident nor the fellow will give him strife for doing the Right Thing. Carmen is trying to talk to me as I stand there holding her hand, but her words are voiceless because we've put the tracheostomy tube where it belongs, below her vocal cords. Still, I can make out what she's saying almost word for word, and a wave of sympathetic anguish courses through me. The increased dose of sedative takes effect, and she slips away from us once again. We adjust the paralytics, and then I creep off to stare at a blank expanse of wall, unseeing.

"Carmen woke up last night," I tell the team the next morning on rounds. "She was trying to talk to me." I am strident and depressed, speaking in short staccato sentences.

"This means she was probably light on sedative all day. It means she probably felt every goddamned thing we did when we put that chest tube in her. That what we were doing amounts to battery. It also means," I stop and stare at each person on the team in turn, "that she probably heard, and quite likely understood everything that was said in her room yesterday."

My voice is thick. The chief touches her hand to my shoulder quickly, and the Attending looks desperately unhappy.

"This is why," he says gently, "we shut the paralytics off briefly every day. So we can ensure that our patients are appropriately sedated." He doesn't need to say anything more.

A COUPLE OF AFTERNOONS LATER, THE CHIEF TELLS me to round up my intern and resident and meet the team downstairs to look at x-rays. I find them in the lab and drag them with me to the radiology suite. There we are ten minutes later, wondering what happened to the rest of the group. The entire intensive care unit team is supposed to be reviewing this morning's films with the Attending and the Fellow, but the three of us are the only ones there. I try to page two different residents and get no answer, which is most unusual; the internal medicine types here tend to be pretty good about answering their beepers. They steadfastly refuse to respond, though, and so I sit doodling on the side of a metal rack with a grease pencil meant for marking on radiographs.

In a fit of black humor I crack, "Maybe Carmen coded."

My intern grins quickly, then retorts with a vaguely worried look. "Nah, we'd have heard 'em call it overhead."

Several interminable minutes later, we grow tired of waiting and decide to venture back up to the unit to see what could have delayed the rest of the team.

Sure enough, there are seven people in Carmen's room, and someone's wheeling in the code-cart even as we arrive.

"Glory be," I think to myself, stunned. "Yesterday's addled medical student is today's clairvoyant."

I STEP INTO THE ROOM TO SEE ONE PERSON bagging her, another doing chest compressions, and two more—one at each of her inner thighs—with long fat needles and very sharp knives. They are probing with the needles deep in the fold of skin where leg becomes groin, right at the edge of her pubic thatch. The team needs large-bore vascular access, and they propose to put a long snakey tube into one of her femoral veins. Their task is complicated by the fact that every time the Fellow pushes on the center of her chest, her whole body moves. Paradoxically they need him to continue because his compressions are the only thing that cause her femoral arteries to pulse, and they need to know where the artery is if they're to find the vein that runs alongside it.

Codes are dangerous. Obviously they portend Bad Things for the patient, but they can also be actively unsafe for the medical team. There's this crowd of very rushed people, many of whom are wielding needles, scalpels and the like. One unexpected move and someone other than the patient gets cut. These days that cut can be a death sentence; there are lots of nasty infectious bugs who'd love to have a nice relatively healthy host to grow in, and they're all collected en masse on used cutting surfaces hoping to jump ship.

THIS IS THE KIND OF CODE THAT NEVER GETS portrayed in television medical dramas. You know how it works on TV: there's a person with paddles in hand, punctuating the strident dialogue with pulses of controlled electrical fire. The patient convulses dramatically, and then wakes up to thank the team for their heroic efforts.

Carmen's heart isn't in one of the shockable rhythms. The paddles stay ensconced in their little electrified slots. We're just pumping on her chest, getting good vascular access, and giving her potent drugs. No one shouts out, "Clear!" or pleadingly implores the patient, "Come on, damn you, don't quit!" Instead it's the quiet urgency of folks trying to do their part of the job, knowing full well that in this case it's almost certainly a futile pursuit. There are no raised voices, no desperate thumps on the chest. Just protocol.

Drugs get pushed, and everyone looks at the monitors. The House Chief, who's directing the process, asks that CPR be suspended momentarily to check for a pulse, and to everyone's astonishment, there's one to be found. One of the residents is counting out in clear high tones each time she feels it, "Pulse—pulse—pulse—" We continue bagging her, forcing air into her broken lungs with the blue squeeze bulb. We continue to follow the prescribed protocol of drugs.

Carmen's heart is beating slowly but regularly and we're starting to wonder if she might actually be able to pull out of it. Then the resident who had found it to begin with announces, "I've lost my pulse here." Ten heads swivel to look at the electronic heart trace on the monitors and the House Chief pauses for a second before she says, "Re-start CPR, please."

Thirty-five minutes later, we've run completely through the algorithm, and continued considerably beyond it. In spite of incredibly aggressive effort on our part, the numbers on the monitor continue their downward trend, refusing to level off for even a few moments.

"All right," the Chief says quietly. "Let's call it. Any objections?" The room stands mute. We're done. We slowly step away from the bed, reluctant to stop even though we know full well that there's nothing more we can do.

SOME TIME LATER, ALL THE LINES AND TUBES ARE removed and the linens are changed. The curtains inside the huge transparent panels which demarcate each room are drawn. I duck past the curtain to step completely into the room and find that it's totally unfamiliar in its absolute silence. No gurgling water seals for the chest tubes, no crying sigh of the ventilator, nothing. Just pure August sunlight pouring in through plate-glass windows. There she is, calm, and I can think of nothing. Her parents aren't going to come and see her before she goes to the morgue. They only visited once while she was still alive. Her dad tells us on the phone, "Nah… I saw plenty of dead people in 'Nam."

I can see through the glass that it's a stunning day out. The air is heavy and damp, and when I drive home I'll have to roll up the window on my side of the car so neighborhood kids don't drench me with water from the hydrant they've opened. There's exquisite cold beer in my fridge. I take a last look at Carmen, wordless, and step out of the room to finish up my afternoon.

MARCUS EUBANKS

Is an ER doc in a big hospital in Pittsburgh. His *InterText* stories have twice been selected to appear in *eScene,* the Best of Net Fiction anthology.

The Smart Bomb

RICHARD K. WEEMS

You ever have one of those days?

GLASSES PERCHED ATOP MY EXPLOSIVE WARHEAD, I fold the morning paper over itself and await still my morning brisket to reheat. I wish ill things upon this toaster oven, with its sluggish nature and lack of even the slightest sophistication. Still, I will not have a microwave in the place—such a false fear it is, its radiation harmless though always trying to hum a facade of disaster.

Roaches crawled about inside the door of the microwave I once had (aptly named Norman). They thrive on those silly little rays; they sprouted new legs and growths and clambered happy as you will when the interior light came on.

The ones in uniform, milling about in the crawlspace just outside my window, listening to me through devices taped up in every niche of my little home, interrogating my discarded orange rinds with microscopes for the residue of secrets that were shredded when this project got started—they are documenting my every move.

07:45:38.2: *removes glass, subsequently rubs eye.*

07:45:43.1: *looks down approx. 4.7 cm to left of left leg to linoleum floor. (The spot there from last night's pasta?)*

They chatter like insects, their proboscises clacking with delicious regularity, when I make the slightest move contrary to their computerized itinerary.

The news is the same every day—hell, hand baskets, etc. I am growing convinced that the newspapers are recycling the same pictures using microbit technology. The smiles, for sure, look all the same.

There is little more to do than await the completion of the brisket and look out the window. A fine view—I look out into the steel box that encases my abode, its walls a little over a foot from my window. The uniformed ones wriggle along with their gadgets of measurement and detection. When they need to peek through my window, they don plastic eyeglass frames with rubber nose and bushy mustache attached. Either they don't want me to be able to recognize them when I get out of here (and get out of here I must, eventually—what good is imprisonment without any hope of release?) or the noses are some kind of olfactory enhancement device used to confirm what can only be determined by smell.

In any case, they're taking notes.

Every day there is also a visit from Dr. Corn—a nice man with a nice name, though prone to questions. His arrival is always preluded by a buzz from the uniformed ones. They scatter from sight when Dr. Corn opens the door to come in. Dr. Corn too dons the false eyeglass/nose/mustache apparatus, though it seems to create discomfort in him while he sets up the chessboard. He always adjusts the apparatus as though it doesn't fit right.

"They haven't yet adjusted the arms on those things?" I sit back and cross my arms the best I can over my cylindrical chest.

"Standard issue," replies Dr. Corn. Self-consciously, he pushes on the end of his nose.

"I could probably take a stab at it myself," I say. As small and scrawny as my hands are—not designed for any kind of heavy manual labor, apparently—they are quite useful for glasses. Instinctually, I seem to know that I would be good at opening small doors, letting myself in through relatively small hatches, disengaging alarms.

The phone rings. I am hesitant to answer. It is always some formula they want me to solve, or a voice quiz they want me to respond to.

"That would be wonderful," Dr. Corn says, a slight smile as he studies the board, though a move hasn't been made yet. "But I'm afraid I'd never find the same pair again. They pile them all into a bin we're supposed to take from on our way in." He then immediately looks about in a worrisome manner, as if he might have revealed more than he was supposed to.

The phone rings. I am hesitant to answer. It is always some mathematical formula they want me to solve, or a voice quiz they want me to respond to.

Since Dr. Corn is here, I decide to comply and I pick up the receiver. A prerecorded voice tells me:

Assess and transfer graded simulation, in order of security necessity, the following items:

—F-22 modeling/simulation and test concept development

—Joint Advanced Distributed Simulation (JADS) Joint Test (JT) support

—Electronic Combat (EC) OT&E test concept assessment and development support for B-1 DSUP, F-22, B-2, and F-15 TEWS

—Nuclear survivability support for MILSTAR and Global Positioning System

—B-2 Data Reduction and Analysis System (DRAS) development and implementation

—Automated Software Evaluation Tool Set (ASETS) development and implementation

—Air Force Operational and Logistics Information Systems (IS) test planning and execution support
—Cheyenne Mountain Upgrade (CMU) OT&E planning and execution

Just to get them away, I tell them all I know, the words coming out more by rote, it seems, though I'm sure I've never spoken them in that order.

Funny: Do memories have footnotes?

Then, as always, comes the series of questions, all 163,482 of them, asked in that same monotonic manner, the long sequence of stuttering tones with which I answer in kind, answering their queries again in nanoseconds flat.

"Most adequate," says Dr. Corn. He moves a pawn, to his misfortune. I see victory in 36 moves.

I begin my assault. "A wonder how often they forget all that," I say. I wonder for a moment, as Dr. Corn makes his next, predictable move, if I should offer the poor man some sympathy, a chance to extend the game a bit further for fun's sake, but this idea is consumed immediately by a series of fail-safes and lockouts.

I will beat Dr. Corn in 34 moves. Now 33.

Dr. Corn advances a bishop. 32. "They forget nothing, Beauregard, my son." (Such an endearing term, this, and it gives me pause.) "They are merely testing you." 31.

"And why do they continue to test me…" 30. "…when I get it all right every time?" 29. 28. 27. 26, 25. 24. 23. This must be a good question to keep him preoccupied so long. He takes a moment to choose his words before he makes a studied, brilliant posture—impressive, though futile. 22.

"They must know that you can give the information in a moment's notice," he says. 21. He makes his move (20) with prideful deliberation. 19. "They must know that at any time, any given moment, all your circuits are intact and ready to carry out your orders." There is a hint of futility now, and now we're down to 18. Now 17. It must be tough for him to keep a raised chin as I bang out moves that counter his thoughtful constructions.

He ponders again. 16. 15, now. He deliberates before 14, his finger pressing on the top of his poor, doomed knight's head for a good, full breath before lifting it. No more knight: 13.

"But there is nothing to forget," I offer. "My memory sits in one place at all times, in the corner of my sight, it seems, useless until I'm given orders to retrieve it, and then it rolls out by no will of my own, a stream I can only sit back and watch as it flows exactly as it has every time before. I can't see where any errors would occur in such a system." 12. 11. Dr. Corn shakes his head—he's become far too much into his game. Like the other times I beat him decisively, he is taking it all too personally. This is just a game, after all. Perhaps what bothers him is that I hold no respect for him as an adversary.

"We must be sure, Beauregard," he says, studying the board for some hope of escape. The only one he has is the only one I allow. 10 and 9.

"You don't test the toaster oven," I accuse. "Damned thing. I'm nowhere near a brisket right now, and I starve."

"Patience, patience." Dr. Corn is far from consoling.

8. 7.

They have no power over me. This realization is clear and shuttering. A million circuits become available to me, switches and digits the uniformed ones and Dr. Corn hoped I'd never see. All the same, I understand their fear, understand their reasons for holding so much back, all this power I can feel brimming inside of me. I pity them.

Dr. Corn cannot have seen the change in me. He sways not an inch form his posture of near-defeat-but-not-giving-up. What an image of him it will be to have burned into my memory. 6, with 5 right behind.

"All in due time," Dr. Corn mutters.

He has no idea.

4. 3.

RICHARD K. WEEMS

Is a writer out of southern New Jersey. His work has appeared in Mississippi Review, Pif Magazine *and elsewhere. Occasionally, he can be found on the FM airwaves, making a lot of noise in honor of his father.*

The Waterspout

REDMOND JAMES

A man, a woman, an apartment.
And a spider.

He was large, Boris was, right from the day he walked on all quavering eights into our lives. I'd never cared for them. Large spiders, that is. I'd been victim, since birth or before, to what one somber pre-teen specialist had termed a "primal aversion," this specialist being of the school that *phobia* was a term apt to debilitate its bearer, particularly when hastily applied at a tender age. My father forthwith—against the advice of this professional and the stout objections of my mother—went out and purchased a medium-sized tarantula, which he placed in my hands as I sat at the kitchen table. And there I held it, for a period of one hour, on seven successive evenings. On the eighth evening my father killed it, dropped the hairy, mangled carcass into the tall kitchen trash can, and proclaimed: "That's that."

He was divorced by my mother one year later, although I can't say with any true certainty whether these kitchen sessions had much, if anything, to do with it. It would have been one year to the day, this divorce, had 1976 not been a leap year.

The small ones—again, I mean spiders—I've mistrusted just as keenly as the large. This despite their limited size, or perhaps because of it. Small spiders are fleeter of foot and, I don't know… *sneakier* somehow, fuller of the sort of mischief that's likely to end up as a bite on your finger, involving swelling, stitches, necrosis. Amputation, maybe. They fidget and scamper at the first sign of trouble, at the slightest little disturbance.

You can keep your eye on the big ones. We did.

I hate cliché very much. I do. We named the spider Boris. Convenience, as I'm sure you don't need me to tell you, provides a frequent and powerful counterweight to most kinds of prejudice, taste, morality, blah-blah. And I guess the girl had a vote, too. She saw him first.

"I don't know about you sometimes," the girl said.

It was a Monday night, that much I remember. Not even dark yet, and much too early in the week for her to be already not knowing about me. Oh boy, I thought, and here we go.

"If you're thinking about raising the subject of Katy's wedding," I said, "that conversation is over."

"So you'll decide when conversations are over?" she said. "That's good," she said. "Send in the grown-ups."

I didn't say a thing. Not another thing. And as I was being proud of myself for resisting the bait, I began slowly to be ashamed of myself for considering it that. Resisting, I thought. Is that what we're supposed to be proud of on our Monday evenings? It was perhaps in the spirit of such gloomy self-reproach that I got up off the couch and went to Martha, who had repaired, hufflike, to the balcony.

Small spiders are fleeter of foot and… *sneakier* somehow. They fidget and scamper at the first sign of trouble.

My intention upon rising was to put my arms around her waist as she stood at the rail, to extend the familiar calumet whose precise message had never been clearly defined in three years of togetherness and three months of sharing a roof. At times I guessed the offering to be many things—concession short of apology, pardon minus absolution, comfort without verdict—and perhaps the ambiguous nature of this frequent gesture might have been considered a symptom, if not a yardstick, of the lightly submerged ambiguity of our general situation. My intention, at any event, was to place arms about her waist from behind, drop my head to her shoulder, and gaze over the backyard trees while calm breathing and perhaps sensible thought found its way back into our pressed-together bodies. I stepped out onto the balcony and paused, awaiting my chance, but Martha had the kitchen rug out over the rail, and was abusing it with profound and unrelenting vengeance. When the dust began to tickle my nose, I went back inside.

Martha eventually followed me in, but she didn't replace the rug in the kitchen. Instead, she draped it over the back of a chair so that her hands could be on her hips when she said:

"It's the fact that you won't even talk about it."

"I will talk," I said. "It's only that I won't have the *same* talk about it over and over again. If there's going to be something new about it, we'll talk about it again."

"She's one of my oldest friends."

"You've mentioned that."

"She's only going to have one wedding."

"I'd adopt a wait-and-see stance on that one," I said, and we were off and talking about it again.

Our apartment, at that time, was like most others leased in Atlanta to people just starting out. With kitchen, bath and bed, there were five rooms altogether, if you counted the balcony as a room, which believe me, we quickly did. Such a layout is nice in winter months, when the timid central unit doesn't have much airspace to contend with in spreading its warmth. But it has its

downside, let me assure you, when other manners of heat arise, and you feel the scarcity of airspace then, too.

"Why can't you do this for me?"

"If you're going to have a sudden wedding," I said, rubbing my face slowly and deeply, and not for effect, "You have to expect to pay the price in attendance. Who ever heard of a six-week engagement?"

"It doesn't change the fact that I should go."

"Go," I said. "You probably should. But *that* doesn't change the fact that I have one, count it, one vacation day to last me the next seven months."

Martha made a noise, up into the air of our small living room. I heard it over my shoulder; she was perched now, hands very likely still on hips, in the narrow space that joined our living room to our bedroom to our kitchen, a snatch of carpet that in a generous moment an unscrupulous realtor had once called a hall. The carpet masked the sound of her foot tapping, if her foot was in fact doing so, as it was in my picture of the girlfriend behind me, hands on hips.

I am a creature who takes to staring when I cannot walk away; a long unbroken gaze is my number two recourse mechanism. I am not a fighter, but neither am I a wall-starer, and for these reasons I took at this moment to the window, and thus, by default, to Boris.

Unbidden squatter of our living room's sole window, Boris the spider met my gaze from the still center of his small universe and looked back at me with interest, or he didn't. Only he knows for sure.

Boris had by now been with us for a week. He was as much a part of our place and our life as other trivial unexpectations that found their way into our home from time to time and lingered thereafter: leaky faucet, single mudprint, unopened mail. I had noticed his web one morning before work, and in the time it required to take my shower and affix the day's neckwear, Boris had risen from his slumber and assumed what was to become his daily lookout.

Situated with prominence and disregard, Boris commanded an enviable view of the property. He had shown what I considered both singular arrogance and admirable cunning in choosing his spot. As he sat fat and prim on his roost in our window, he was at once the proud, consummately visible centerpiece of our limited view, and the safest tenant in the entire building. Defended on one flank by the glass, on the other by the screen, this interloper finally—and crucially—enjoyed the ultimate security of his host's previously-mentioned, debilitating phobia. Martha shared her fellow host's terror. She promptly grimaced, and named him Boris.

"We're not keeping him," I said, to this naming.

But Martha, frocked in the white of her hospital lab coat, had already assumed the privilege of the glass wall's protection, and despite her fear, was peering in close and curious.

"But he followed us home," Martha said.

When she tapped on the glass with her fingernail and smiled at the shimmy this effected in the creature, I began to suspect that her fear was a superficial thing, a thing perhaps confessed out of kindness in the midst of some past, forgotten spider-crisis, to make my unmanliness less compelling.

And so for a week we had watched our Boris, and so I watched him now. His big spider legs were placed with careful precision, each extended in perfect protracted symmetry to display the quiet beast's full magnificence. He was smaller than the tarantula of my youth, I reflected tonight, but he was a different breed, a sleeker model, and if you added a coat of fur and a modest spare tire to his abdomen, he could have been a rival. And, I noticed tonight, he was growing.

There was quiet above and around me; Boris commanded my field of vision.

"Is this a stand you're taking with me?" she said, behind me. "Add something new if that's what's keeping you quiet."

I watched the spider's reaction, which was nothing at all. I wondered if he heard us through the spotless safety glass.

"Or is it maybe," the voice behind me wondered, "is it just that you're afraid of weddings?" She wrung her hands, I thought, if such things make a sound. "Are you *that* anti-marriage?"

I rubbed my face without taking my eyes off the web in the window, and it was a good long moment before I answered.

"We're going to have to do something about this Boris," I said.

LET IT BE KNOWN THAT I NEVER TRUSTED BORIS; although he never gave offense outside of his very presence, I think any glimpse into my youth is enough to explain my misgivings. I was under the impression, for two days at least, that it was this inborn or inbred bigotry that accounted for the careful eye I kept on the spider, until on Wednesday afternoon as I sat gazing at the web, the truth of the matter dawned clear as a bell: I was waiting for him to eat something.

Would he wrap his victim in sticky thread, I wondered, once my mind had been made aware of my purpose and cleared to wonder. Would Boris take great relish in the slow art of secreting his deadly entangling lines, sinister glee in their gradual, painstaking application to the still-breathing, terrified meal, eyes wide and paralyzed in his web? How long would he wait to sink his fangs, inject the fatal kiss of his venom? How long would he dance about

the corpse, then gloat over his dinner before the grisly ritual of final consumption slowly began?

"Eat, you monster," I said to the glass, inches from my face. "You're not fooling anyone."

When I came in from work on Thursday the blinds were down, but only on the one window and for some reason this perturbed me. Martha's lab coat was draped over the arm of the couch. I walked to the window and drew the blinds to mid-level, exposing Boris. He seemed fatter since this morning, but there were no crumbs on his plate, no napkin. He sat very still at center-web.

"Did you drop the blinds?" I called to the other room, which produced Martha, who mimicked my voice with impressive skill as she appeared.

"How was your day, dear?" and she clucked her tongue, stood there.

We had lasagna for dinner—my favorite and hers—and the meal was quiet except for when it was loud. A two-volume standard is dangerous in apartment dwelling, Boris, I thought in the general direction of the window.

It gets like that sometimes, Boris thought back at me and I grimaced at him. You think you're so smart, I thought, and let it go at that.

Of course I didn't offer Boris any of the lasagna, but I thought perhaps I might, him thinking he was so clever and all. There, I could say to him, watching him chew. That's what a favorite meal can taste like when mention is made of a friend's fast-approaching wedding at some point between the pouring of the wine and the passing of the Parmesan. The fact that the mention is not, as it may turn out, about this pre-doomed topic, but about something entirely unrelated, and yet still resultant in the bi-volume tenor of the atmosphere, dear Boris, I could say, makes the dish all the more bland, as you can see.

Eat, Boris, if that makes you grow. Try, while you're at it, to remember the love beneath it all, remember how much you love your meal, remember why you built your web here in the first place. Eat and remember and try not to cry, friend. And keep the talking to a minimum, by all means.

WE WENT TO DINNER THAT SATURDAY NIGHT AT Pano's downtown, and had a very nice evening, as we are very capable of doing. It's a night like this, Martha said after we had danced one number and started a slow second, that makes me wonder why either one of us would want to do anything else. It was true that we were having a very nice time, and in a way, in the way she had put it, she was absolutely right, so I smiled and didn't say anything. Slow numbers allow the quiet anonymity of long gazes over the shoulder, and I didn't know if she was waiting for an answer or if we were just still dancing. Back at the table, anyhow, I asked if she'd like another drink and she said let's have one at home, and I smiled and she smiled.

At home I opened the champagne—a six-dollar variety that feels at ease in our refrigerator—and poured two glasses in the kitchen and brought them to the couch. We sipped and kissed for a while, and she smiled after each small kiss and I was careful to taste the soft, dry tingles of the champagne that lingered in each corner and wrinkle of her lips. We sat with our heads together and gazed at where the log fire would have burned low in a nicer apartment than ours, and when I felt her breath come close in my ear I turned on the couch and we kissed for real. We made love sitting up, Martha in my lap with her soft small legs folded back on top of mine. She moved very slowly, rising and settling and I held close to the backs of her shoulders and kept our cheeks pressed gently into each other. We ended together, with little more than a sigh and a gasp—one of each—and I knew the source of neither. Her chin and her face in my neck, we sat that way for a long time.

"He transfixes you," the girl whispered in my ear. I didn't say anything and then she said, "Are you looking at the spider?"

Her breathing settled in and became soft, regular after a while, and I smelled her hair, pushing a bit of it out of my eyes. Across the room, Boris the spider was crawling slowly, picking a meticulous path from the center of his world down along one of its many rays; I watched his progress over the rim of my champagne flute.

"He transfixes you," the girl whispered in my ear. I didn't say anything and then she said, "Are you looking at the spider?"

"Boris is going to bed," I said. Then, "I've noticed you watching him, too."

"I can see him in the mirror," Martha whispered. "Right now. But it's only just motion."

Still she sat on my lap and still I held her. It was warm in the small apartment.

"He's our pet," I said. "And we don't feed him."

"He's very happy."

"I hope so."

"He's our pet," she said.

I WILL ADMIT THE TRUTH: HE TRANSFIXED ME. US. She was just as guilty, and she watched him as I did.

Who can say why certain things capture us? Maybe it's nothing more than a simple matter of what is thrust in

front of us. And he was that, Boris, full in our face. After a while the existence of our spider began leading away from curiosity and into the more serious realms of preoccupation: fixation, a pre-teen specialist might say, and I would be inclined to agree with him. As the weekend bled into Monday and Tuesday, I noticed that my ponderings at the window were steeped more in feeling than in thought. It seemed to me, as the new week took shape, that we were drawn back to the window not so much by the extreme close-up of nature and savagery anymore, but by the binding curiosity of people who habitually tune in. We are programmed—in the womb, I'm convinced—with a deep unending hunger for what happens next. What would be our spider's fate?

Through it all, or through most of it, I thought, even in the naming of him and the fanciful conferment of his pethood, we both wanted him gone. Glass or no glass, I keep the demons of my youth dear and close at hand. But still… he *was* ours. It was our spider trapped in there, and he had chosen us in the first place, hadn't he? He could have gone anywhere. Even as the days passed and he started looking weak—he still had shown evidence of neither crumb nor napkin—he was still ours and wasn't it better that he be our dying Boris than lost somewhere out in the strange, big world, away and alone?

But still, still, on the other hand… What's one to think when, upon stopping by for coffee or to borrow a cup of sugar, one chances to glance at the window and notice a three-inch arachnid holding brazen, uncontested court? I was conscious that the fallout of such could be particularly traumatic for a housekeeper, as Martha—though she put in sixty hours more often than forty at the downtown hospital—had titled herself. And this, in effect, is what really put the ball in motion, I'm sorry to say.

We had known about the party since well before Boris' time. The six couples we knew, more or less, or nodded to at the pool or had dinner with once or twice, had marked their calendars and would be spending one Saturday evening with us, and this coming up was the Saturday. With the two… with the *three* of us. And this is the thought that struck Martha just in time, hard, on Thursday afternoon.

"There's going to be a spider in our window," she said, rather clinically, by my appraisal. "For the party."

It ends, was my first thought, tinged with light regret; surely no prominent sitting spider, however ferocious or dear, could expect to withstand the dawning of this terror. I thought, well, that's it, the enchantment is over, and maybe it would have been, but for the fact that our mutual distaste for close negotiations with eight-legged things remained in fast effect. This was the second thought, which oddly soothed me, and when it dawned on Martha soon thereafter, it caused her to pace and pace and pace.

I suggested that we draw the blinds for the party.

"That would look ridiculous," she said.

And then the idea struck. Not brilliance, perhaps, but a good showing of ingenuity in the face of acknowledged personal limitation, I thought. Of course, yes, I liked the idea more the longer I held it in front of me, unlike my father's tarantula. It was too good to pass up, and moreover, imperative not to, given the state of our phobias. Laugh at your baldness, my father had told me at a distressingly early age, particularly in front of your buddies. Because you're going to be bald, son, and you won't be able to hide it from anyone.

Of course. We'd get someone drunk at the party. Take on the big spider. You man enough to open that window? You man enough? Come on, tough guy like you. Drunk guts, we used to call it.

As Saturday arrived and aged and began to fade into its inevitable twilight, we dusted, we spread the table, put out napkins and toothpicks, vacuumed twice, at least, and we did not draw the shade. As the preparations wound down and the fridge door rattled with each bottle-laden reopening, as the lights came up and the pillows were arranged on the couch for the backsides of our friends, I avoided the window and was reluctant to meet Boris eye to eye.

My thoughts were fixed on Trevor Nayback, stocky and athletic, advertising guy with a big laugh, my prime candidate for Liberator. He was forever challenging and re-challenging me to tennis and "hoops" and backgammon, a boaster when victorious, a back-slapper when he lost. Trevor with the big laugh reveled in his malehood such that I figured spiders would be no trouble for him, perhaps even a particular delight, some remnant glimmer of glee from a boyhood spent reveling in his malehood. Upon his arrival I greeted him with a large smile and an arm around his shoulder that made me feel like an old ad man myself.

Of course he and Cindy arrived first, and of course I said nothing about Boris, but after the rest of the arrivals and three or four rounds of expensive, green-bottled Dutch beer and music and the grilling of the bratwurst and hamburg and a few more green bottles all around and more laughs and a consistent incline of general merriment, all he would say, upon the big revelation and the focus of the room's collective attention on the small window and its big trophy, was: "Jesus."

"That's a spider," he added, moments later, as punctuation, or to announce that he'd retrieved his breath.

"You're not afraid of a spider, are you Trevor?" Martha baited, as I prepared to take voluble offense to this on his behalf.

"Jesus," he was laughing, and going back into the kitchen for another beer.

He made fine conversation, did Boris. Exceptional, really; his introduction elevated what had heretofore been a humdrum party. He gave good squeal, and even danced a few numbers when prompted, which was frequent; hands not holding green-bottled beer had a habit of finding the glass for a curious tap. The joy was such over this unique diversion that I stepped back for a moment and just watched it. Curious eyes, little smiles, and as I've mentioned, I believe, squeals. Look at him crawl, and where did he come from, and how long, did you say? My good gracious. I began to wonder, as this circus played, about these people and their pets, and I began to wonder, with all this glee, why it was that more people didn't go out and buy spiders for themselves. Why did it seem that only loners and crazy people kept snakes in big aquariums, fed them mice and watched them eat? Snakes were being mis-marketed, somehow, to the marginal characters who lived in basements or with their parents or both, and why? They'd be such hits at parties.

But no, I reminded myself, there's more to it than just parties. Snakes and spiders are monsters and enemies, freaks, they belong to loners who don't mind a lifetime and a kinship spent looking through glass. Dogs and cats are what's for normal people.

But for the evening, for our gala, the nice folks delighted in our good Boris. They even began, at Martha's devious prompting, to wonder about the glass, the real necessity for it, you know? But proud Trevor Nayback was stout in his position when the challenge was hinted around, laughed over, taken up as entertainment, and finally laid down.

"Come on, tough monkey," I laughed.

He shook his stubby head.

"Your spider," he said, drunk, but no guts. "Your problem."

I called him all sorts of names, a tack to which he is particularly vulnerable, but no joy. Others joined the fun, seeing my strategy, wondering loudly what kind of man he could profess to be, sacred of a little spider and all. He was laughing through it all, and then the tide of challenge turned to Nathan Farb, a virgin accountant from the other building, slight of build and given to fits of almost girlish giggles. He demurred so emphatically that I suspected the room had turned on him just to see what, if any, emphatics were hiding in this little creature. Satisfied, and perhaps a bit alarmed, the temptations turned back to steadfast, burly Trevor.

It had started raining just after dark, lightly at first, but then it picked up, and by now was coming in memorable fashion. It was hard night rain, solid and loud against the roof, the kind that makes you feel like there's no one else out there. As the beer disappeared and the laughter grew louder inside our bright, isolated cocoon, I started to fear that somehow Trevor would summon the courage or fall victim to the bravado and make a move on the spider. He would trap Boris in a cup, certainly, and with a daring bolt to the door, would cast the spider into the maw of this ferocious night, whereupon my great fear would be realized, and the mighty wind would catch the thrown spider and blow him back into our apartment before the door could be slammed and the party could resume.

"How did he get in there?" asked Gina from downstairs, after a tap and a smile of appreciation when Boris refused to shimmy.

Screams would result, and a general scattering, and when peace was restored, we'd be stuck with a ruined party and a renegade and at-large Boris, casting about invisibly on the dangerous side of the window glass and none too pleased at having had the peace of his evening and his world so very much upended.

I let up immediately on the name-calling.

The party settled when it became clear that the spider would not be dislodged. Still, talk came back to him, petering off somewhat, until it came at about the rate of the now-only-occasional taps on the window.

"How did he get in there?" asked Gina from downstairs, after a tap and a smile, it seemed to me, of appreciation when Boris refused to shimmy.

"How do pests get anywhere?" answered Robert, beloved of Gina, and I laughed.

"My theory," answered Martha, looking at me as I laughed, "is that he was just a baby when he stumbled inside and made what he thought was a good home, but then he got too big to get back out."

I didn't stop my laughter but when it was over, which wasn't long, the smile did not linger on my face. Martha's eyes were still on me, just so, and just like that, I wanted another beer. I went for it. As I opened the fridge and rummaged through what was left, I knew almost immediately that I didn't want that beer. What I wanted, and I felt it more than knew it, felt it very deeply, was for the party to be over and for it to be tomorrow, without the interim having to be gone through, the quiet clank of clean-up and just us there with Boris and no party anymore.

Out in the living room, someone else had tapped the glass. I heard it over my shoulder.

"Well, then," this someone else pondered, "if he's so hungry now, and it really looks like he is, what was he eating all along in there that got him so fat?"

"That's a very good question," Martha said.

IT WAS MONDAY MORNING WHEN THE FLYER WENT around at work. I guess, cradling the benefit of aftersight, it couldn't have come at a worse time, but nonetheless, my copy of dull corporate mimeograph stationary arrived at my desk before I did, and alerted me to the imminence of the jovial, light-spirited, and all-but-compulsory company picnic. As a rule, I am not a fan of such corporate joviality, to say nothing of my stand on compulsion, but I am a dutiful attendee. I am responsible and slowly becoming a grown-up, with all that this entails, kowtowing not excluded.

And fool that I am, I brought this newsflash home with me, if not the actual flyer, and broached the subject with, again I am here referring to my crystal-coated, post-dated gift of insight, remarkably dim-witted expediency.

"The company picnic?" the girl said with deceptively soft incredulity. She didn't say 'you've got to be kidding me,' but of course she didn't need to. The three words she *had* spoken said it clearly enough, and I immediately cowered, suddenly keenly aware of my bluntness of bearing.

Martha had enjoyed a taxing Monday of her own, and certainly the likeliness of this hadn't figured into my planning either, if, indeed, anything else had.

"I don't expect you to come," I said weakly, knowing it was too late for even weakness of voice to bail me out. "I was just saying is all. They're having it."

"The fact that you would even ask me," Martha said, warming up, warming loud. "Just that you could say it with a straight face."

And off we were.

In my recognition of stupidity, I adopted what I thought was a conciliatory, or at the very least, retreating manner, and I was exceedingly willing to let the matter drop, and perhaps it was this feeling of surrender at the outset that caused me to warm to the offensiveness of her *not* letting it drop, and allowed this spark of misstep to blossom into the healthy conflagration it quickly became. 'I said I was sorry' was the thought that propelled me deeper into my burgeoning combative spirit, even though I was pretty sure I hadn't, actually, or literally.

Of course the subject of impending nuptials in far-off lands arose rather handily, and the comparison of earlier conversations of same to what I had just dim-wittedly proposed, and at the first mention of this, my cornered eye sought the refuge of our trophy in the window. I beheld Boris from across the room, his peculiar shape hoisted dead still in the center of the intricate web, and I remembered, and wondered yet again, at what a spark he had infused into our drab weekend party. What fun and excitement, what curiosity and theorizing, what dull trouble. I gazed at the window without seeing him, only thinking and wondering.

It had been Cindy Nayback, of all people, who stood longest at the window, a thoughtful finger holding her chin in place, quiet for a change. It was Cindy whom I had approached as she stood in such reflection, and Cindy, of all people, who had turned to me with sadness in her eyes, a solemnity quite sobering amid the squawk and giggle that otherwise stormed in the room regarding the object of her apparent concern.

"Fear not," I smiled to her, beer in hand. "Trevor is holding firm about not adopting the beast."

"It's tragic," she said to me, and Cindy Nayback's face certainly said tragic.

"What's this?" I said, ever the happy face, ever curious.

"His whole little world," she sighed. "Doesn't this strike you as sad? Look at his web, and the beauty of it, and all the care he took. Doesn't it seem a tragedy for it all to go to waste?"

"He's living in his mansion," I pointed out.

"But so what?" she protested. "It's an empty mansion. What's the use of building something so beautiful between a window on one side, and a screen on the other? It may look pretty to us, but what good is it to him?"

I thought about that then, and I thought about it now. What good, indeed? I wondered—and hoped, a little bit—if maybe Boris got out at night. If he walked along the waterspout outside the window cruising flies, if he snuck across the carpet to the kitchen and made use of our fridge. If somehow he wasn't enjoying his stay, thriving perhaps, and living not solely for the amusement of his hosts and their occasional drunken window-tappers.

It was thoughts such as these that gave rise to my protest when the beer-laden crowd, thinned out a bit since the passing of midnight, began to wax philosophical, and the squeals of spider-fright had given way to considerations of our Boris' overall well-being. Martha was of the status-quo camp.

"He's safe," she said to the couch group. "What more can an animal of the wild wish for? From behind the window, he can watch the world and it can't touch him."

"But he's trapped," I heard my voice raised, elevated to cut through the nods of agreement. "Nice view from the web, but he can't touch anything."

Martha looked at me and shrugged, and so did most of the others who lingered, it seemed. This was the part of the evening I had wished to skip past, and yet here I was, talking loud to be heard.

It seemed odd to me then, but such perhaps is the odd way of the world, that two such similar statements could not only sound, but actually be, so dissimilar. Weren't we, someone pointed out, in effect saying the same thing, and arguing not over the consequences of the situation,

but over what there was to look for in a situation itself? Sure, I had said. That sounds like about it.

"I don't believe you can sit there and even ask me to come to some company picnic after the way you've exposed your unwillingness to participate in my life," Martha said. Exposed my unwillingness, I thought. Is that what I'd done? "I can't believe you're going yourself," she continued, snapping out each word like a little hook with no discernible barb, "with the way you cherish your vacation days."

The picnic was going to be held on a Saturday, as is every picnic that is not held on a Sunday, and I figured she realized this, of course, but still, I almost had to mention it. Instead of mentioning it, however, I yelled.

"*Just say no,*" I belted, standing, turning in her direction but directing the command at my feet, an arm held out in emphasis. "Just say no and that's that. That'll be the end of it. I asked you a yes or no question, and that's all I want. Say no and we'll stop talking."

Martha was quiet for a moment as I stood with my head down and my stop hand still held forward. I'm a smart enough man to know it was a dangerous quiet. Martha took a small step toward me and folded her arms, if they hadn't been folded already.

"You're too selfish to even see that you're selfish," she said, soft now but with an edge to it.

"That's more syllables than I was looking for."

"Listen to you, goddammit," she yelled. "You're too wrapped up in your own little world for it to occur to you that you're not even a *subtle* hypocrite. You could at least try to be *subtle* about it."

"If you want to go, I'll check the box," I said, without a single notion of why I still held onto this, "and there'll be enough potato salad for you. If not, I'll check the other box. They're just looking for a commitment from who's coming and who's not."

"Commitment?" She stressed the word so hard that it shattered like a single syllable of crystallized outrage. "You want that from me? You're too afraid of commitment to even let a spider live in peace."

"What?" I looked up now, flushed full, I felt my eyes wild. This was genuine bafflement, with which I don't fare well. I repeated myself, as I do in such cases.

"The party," Martha said, dragging into this mess our little Boris, the solitary unified link between we two, of late. "You wanted him out."

"Out?" I said, and repeated. "Out? We both wanted him out. We both said…"

"You went nuts about it," Martha cried. "He's fine there and you like him there and you still went nuts about getting him out."

This was beyond me, but things being beyond me and racing past my grasping arms rarely stops me from flailing wild hands and shouting my curses as they zing by.

"That spider should be out in the world," I yelled. "Living, mating, not sitting here distracting us. He's got to be about the most ridiculous spider in the world. Other spiders laugh at him, I know they do. Sometimes I hear it."

I promise you this, I wasn't laughing, and Martha didn't seem any more likely to do so than I. And it didn't slow her down, nor me, this spider-laughter from off in the rain gutters or the trees or the dark corners of my dementia, wherever sneering rivals lurked. We yelled blindly onward, it came fast and easy now.

To the summons of this most thunderous of all window-thumpings, our stout guardian of the window and the web offered no reaction.

"What's wrong with Boris?" she wanted to know. "He's got his web and his fortress. He can see out in any direction."

"He's trapped," I answered. "What good is his web?"

"He's safe from wind and rain and…"

"He'll *starve!"* I screamed, pounding the glass.

And I saw her eyes on the window, below where the butt of my hand had struck it, and I turned to look at what she was seeing. And that's when we noticed, yes, it was true. To the summons of this most thunderous of all window-thumpings, our stout guardian of the window and the web offered no reaction. The glass still rattled, and the silk mesh vibrated in silence beyond, and in the middle, our reduced black housemate remained inert and unharried, swaying only with the faint reverb as his perch settled to. When the storm had subsided, one black leg hung free from its handle, and with the most concentrated, most laborious and slow-motion effort I have ever felt the agony of witnessing, this dangling leg braced and steadied its weight in precarious balance, then hoisted itself, trembling, to its previous point of attachment. We stared at the obvious, struggling truth spread before us, and she didn't have anything to say to that.

He *was* starving, or worse.

I had just been trying to win the argument. Now we were faced with this.

"We have to yell, for this," I said quietly, before I really knew what I was saying, or what, if anything, I meant. The voice felt funny in my throat, unraised. It felt like nothing more than breathing after what had come before.

We stared at the glass and didn't say anything, and I remember noting, even as the moments passed between

us, that we didn't look at each other. We kept our eyes on the glass and we probably sighed or panted or took turns doing both, and when finally I leaned back down and tapped the glass again, Martha said, "Don't wake him."

It sounded like something one would say of a child, a dear-darling little trooper who was tuckered out and whose ice cream would wait until morning. As such, I ignored it, thinking too with some annoyance that Martha was refusing to see the real difficulty here. I leaned in very close and watched the aging spider. His retrieved limb clung weakly to where it had managed to regain its grip. Nothing moved. I tapped the glass with the end of one finger, hoping, just perhaps. I frowned and tapped. Tapped it again. Rapped it with knuckles.

IN THE MORNING, WELL… IT WAS AS WE EXPECTED. Through the misty blue haze of the window's western exposure, it was clear that Boris' late withdrawal, at some time after our own departure for bed, had not been of his own design. The web had been vacated and was clear of all obstruction, save the single black leg that had been so painstakingly lifted and reapplied in the final struggle of our late pet. The frightful appendage did not dangle free, but had enmeshed itself within several strands of the web itself, presumably during the last gasp and fall that had deposited the balance of the spider in the bottom of the inner sill. My eyes followed the likely path of descent and came to rest on a balled-up, thoroughly pitiful shell of blackness directly beneath the leg and the window lock.

Martha came to the window and stood beside me, and I felt her gaze joined with mine upon the remains of our strange and much embattled houseguest. Despite our attachment, and the austere sobriety with which we now attended this anticipated revelation, I stood there not knowing, and in honest truth, doubting, whether either one of us would be enough of a grown-up to open the window and dispose of him properly.

I left the window first, and Martha shortly followed, and as we moved in the kitchen and the bathroom, retrieved the *Journal-Constitution* from outside the door and settled into the silent commencement rituals of our Tuesday, I thought it both odd and entirely predictable that a word had still not passed between us. In the queerly easy silence I thought I could still detect the raised and angry voices of last night singing in the shadows that resisted the arriving day. It was this chorus, I reflected, this screaming that had driven us to take our first intelligent look at the spider situation in a long time, the screaming that had shown us how far gone the poor guy really was.

I heard the tap turn and the water start to run in the bathroom, then the hiss and low scream of the shower and then the rattle and splatter of Martha's displacement in the stream. I went back to the window and gazed, not down into the sill, but out through the web and into dawning day. No, I thought now. It hadn't been the screaming so much that had made us think. Thought had lurked long beneath the screaming, and had finally broken through in the quiet moments after, in the still, very quiet calm while we had gathered our wits and our breath and had begun to wonder, not about the next point of debate, but about whether there was any point at all. I was quiet now, as I had been then, and my eyes now, as then, moved slowly across the window and down until they rested on the black crust, inert on the wood. Under the muffled rush of the downpour in the bathroom, it was very quiet in the apartment, and I felt the quiet keenly as I stood looking at the web, the window, the little monster. Looking hard at the little monster.

WE BOTH WENT TO WORK ON THAT MIDSUMMER Tuesday. Despite our disappointment or unrest, there was a world outside that screen that we belonged to, as much as we belonged to the world inside that window and the window belonged to us. I thought about Boris during the day, from time to time, on a coffee break and during an endless stretch of meeting in which my department head took issue with the staff's generous creativity in abiding by the company lunch policy. I'm sure Martha thought of him, too. When I arrived home she was standing at the window, purse still over the shoulder of her lab coat, and she turned to me and smiled and we embraced.

It was a long hug and we tightened it several times before we let go and when we let go we looked at each other and laughed. To my mild surprise, we did the admirable thing and opened up the window and disposed of the unpleasant remains.

And despite our attachment, any fondness we held or other emotion that might have come into play over Boris' tenure in our lives, the pain of his departure was neither profound nor lasting. We watched a movie that night, a comedy, and we laughed. The death of Boris had been that of a spider. Despite anything or everything else, it was the death of only a spider, and this happens every day, and our Boris, for what little or lot he had once been, was today nothing more than a discarded ball of twisted black appendage, presumably legs, for the most part. These things happen, like I said, every day.

It was a few months later that the red-and-green flyer went around at the office and proclaimed the glad tidings of another season's non-compulsory, compulsory event. Martha's friend had wedded and honeymooned and, in great likelihood, divorced, by this point, but still I held little relish for the task that awaited me at home. I told her about the Christmas party that very night, in fact, and Martha said, very coolly but clearly, that she didn't think

so this year. Too much at the hospital and so forth. I nodded and was glad the task was behind me.

And it's fine, really. Whatever. Christmas party. Those corporate goofs are dull anyway and I hope others won't interpret this as spite, but let's see if I show up at the St. Jude fundraiser come Memorial Day.

FOR THE SAKE OF THOSE WHO WONDER ABOUT SUCH things, I still resist spiders, I still hold them suspect in my heart. My foot does not falter amid decisive plunges which end with a squish and a sigh of relief. I won't hold a spider close, I won't touch one if invited, and if one should chance to walk across my hand as I lie in bed or sit on the patio, I don't stifle my shudder, my cringe or my revulsion. But I don't back away, either, I don't scream and I don't cry, and I think that's all my father had been trying to get across.

And likewise, for the sake of those curious, my father's premonition of his son's precocious baldness, sadly and surely, is slowly coming true. I laugh when I have it in me.

REDMOND JAMES

Is a medical writer in Atlanta, where he explains things to his dog Dean Cuyler, who is only one year old and not very well informed. A lifelong croquet enthusiast, Mr. James' personal dream is to one day compete at the sport's highest level, whatever that may be.

Chicken Bone Man

ANNA OLSWANGER

Sometimes Man's Best Friend helps Man in ways He can't even understand.

THE KID I HANG AROUND WITH IS A WONDER FOR playing the piano. So one morning I'm sitting outside under the breakfast room window listening to him gab to his sister Gertie about the Vaudeville Revue down at Loew's Palace. In between eating up quite a few slices of his old lady's toast and jelly, Berl says, "Read the part again about Princess Rajah and her snakes."

Gertie rattles the newspaper and acts like her valuable time is being wasted. "It says here that Princess Rajah, the headliner act in the Vaudeville Revue down at Loew's Palace Theater, charms her snakes by playing an old-timey rag number on the piano."

I happen to know the kid is planning a career for himself with regard to the piano. So when Gertie takes a quick breather from opening her face, I say through the screen, "Hey, kid, it just so happens I'm friendly with a frosty blond by the name of Hortense in the dancing dog act that's playing the Vaudeville Revue. You want her to get you in stout with the management? I figure she goes woofle-woofle in the right party's ear, you're a shoo-in at the next Amateur Night auditions."

"Jerry's driving me crazy with his barking," Gertie says to Berl. "I bet it's his mange. Rub him down with coal oil."

That Gertie's a pill. How am I supposed to show my mug to Hortense if I'm covered in coal oil?

Now, Fast Eddie is a mouse acquaintance of mine who makes his home in the first balcony at Loew's Palace. He tells me what comes off regarding the kid and his sisters Gertie and Dippy the night they bust along to the Vaudeville Revue. It goes like this:

The four of them, Fast Eddie included, get settled into their seats in the first balcony where they're sopping up the cool. The Palace has a sweetheart of an air conditioning machine. Then the orchestra starts in on the overture.

That Gertie's a pill. How am I supposed to show my mug to Hortense covered in coal oil?

The screen rolls down for the picture part of the bill, and Dippy says, "It's a shame about vaudeville being on the downswing because of moving pictures." This crack doesn't sit too well with the kid. Like I told you, he's got his sights set on pounding the keys in vaudeville.

When the noggin of John Barrymore, the famous film star, flickers across the screen, Dippy sighs, "Gosh, he makes the goose flesh come out all over me." The kid tells

her, "It's just the refrigerating system." This puts the lid on Dippy. So does noticing Fast Eddie one seat over, because next thing, she faints.

Dippy rouses herself in time to clap an eye on Czinka Zann, Cymbal Virtuoso. Eddie, who by now is keeping a low profile under Dippy's seat, says this Czinka Zann doll sounds to him like she's dropping pots all over her kitchen floor.

The next act is the headliner's spot. Out comes Princess Rajah, the dame with the snakes. I see her sideways from where I'm standing in the alley making conversation with Hortense. The Rajah dame looks like she's stuck gold coins all over her best nightie. She lets loose a half-dozen snakes from some hat boxes, and by the end of her act, these snakes are slithering up and down her arms in time to "Moonlight on the Ganges." You ever hear "Moonlight on the Ganges" played in ragtime? Well, if anybody asks you, it's got plenty of steam.

After an all-doll pig act by the name of Paulette's Pork Chops closes the show, the kid and his sisters and me hop a ride home on a streetcar. I sit by the back step where the driver can't take a squint at me.

"I wonder what Princess Rajah feeds her snakes," the kid wonders out loud.

"Mice," says Dippy, who's clearly holding a grudge against Fast Eddie.

"Chickens," says Gertie.

So by the time we get to the turnaround at Crump's Feedstore, the kid's putting together a ragtime number about chickens for Princess Rajah to use in her act. He's pouring out words by the bucketful:

I don't like soup bones in my soup,
or ham bones in my ham.
When the coffee's makin', don't fix me bacon.
I'm the chicken bone man.
I don't want rabbits in my hair,
or sardines out of the can.
Gimme what'll cackle with a crunch and a crackle.
I'm the chicken bone man.

I immediately stake the kid to some valuable advice. "Kid," I tell him, "you don't want your old lady listening in on this catchy tune. She might get the idea you're having truck with ham and bacon." In other words, the kid's Jewish. He's not supposed to feed himself up on pork. This is all right with me because I don't like looking in my dinner plate and wondering if one of Paulette's Pork Chops is looking back at me.

The kid, who's always thinking of my welfare, tells me to put a lid on it before the driver cocks an ear. Then he announces to Gertie that he's playing his "Chicken Bone Man" number at the next Amateur Night auditions and doesn't she want to come along and be the singing half of the act.

Gertie gives him the chill. "You know I'm training with Miss Stoots to sing in opera."

Dippy puts in her two cents. "Piano players end up being bums." Now, this is coming from the mouth of a doll who spends her nights soaking up Rickenbothom's Rejuvenating Cream while flopped across the living room sofa.

I don't say anything back, though, because the streetcar is rattling back and forth on the tracks so hard it's making my teeth rattle with it.

The next day I'm going ploppity-plop down Faxon Avenue at the kid's heels. "Kid," I say to him, "I've been doing some thinking. What if this Princess Rajah dame's snakes eat dogs? You think those bums would take a bite out of Hortense?"

The kid blows away like we're playing tag. Sometimes he doesn't see the serious side of life.

We stop at the home of Miss Irma Stoots, a dame with a music studio joint on the premises. This is where the kid and Gertie take their lessons. It's the kid's turn this afternoon. I sit on the back porch and listen through the screen door to the Stoots dame counting *one-two-three, one-two-three,* while the kid plays right along, not missing a note. The thing about the kid is, he can talk a blue streak and play the piano at the same time.

"I'm writing a special number for Princess Rajah to use in her snake act down at Loew's Palace," he tells Stoots. "You want to hear it?"

"Forget the snake act, will you?" I call through the screen.

The dame wants to know how she's supposed to hear anything, what with me and the kid talking nonstop.

The kid goes right on bending her ear about how it's an old-timey rag number he's writing. "Of course, what I'm really swell at turning out is the blues," he tells her. "That's because Willie Bates, my mama's wash woman, teaches me all the latest blues numbers from the Daisy, the Negro vaudeville house down on Beale Street. Say, you want to hear me play 'Kate-er-oo, Kate-er-oo, You're a Big Stinkeroo?' It's a hot blues number I wrote myself."

"Berl, dear, you're talking nonsense," she tells him. "You know I'm grooming you to accompany your sister Gertie on the concert stage. In fact, I'm letting you accompany her in our recital next Wednesday night."

"But they're holding Amateur Night Auditions next Wednesday night down at Loew's Palace!" the kid says. He starts banging out notes, none of them one hundred-percent.

"Keep your wrists up, dear."

Anybody can see how sorrowed up the kid is over this recital business. I stick my snoot against the screen and

tell the dame, "Sister! It's a dirty trick you're pulling on my pal. The minute you set foot on this porch, you're dog food!"

That night I'm in the kid's front yard turning around a few times under a hydrangea bush. I'm about to plop down and call it a night when I happen to catch sight of the kid through one of the upstairs windows. I see he's opening drawers and yanking stuff out. I figure he's planning to take it on the lam, maybe soon, which gets me jumpy. I yell out, "You're not packing up to take a little vacation, are you?"

Feibush, the next-door neighbor, opens a window and says, "Somebody shut that dog up." Also, the kid's old lady pokes her noodle out the kitchen window and tells me I'm keeping the neighborhood awake.

"All right, kid, we'll talk about this later," I mutter, only I'm talking through my hat because I know in my bones later is too late.

I don't waste a minute. I step along to the side of the house where I sniff the kid's old lady through the kitchen window cooking jelly. I stake her to some of my valuable advice. "It's about the kid we both know and love dearly," I say through the screen. "He's taking a run-out powder. That is, unless you hop over to where the Stoots dame lives and tell her to lay off the opera dodge."

"Berl!" she calls up the stairs. "It's Jerry's mange again. He's going to bark all night unless you go outside and doctor on him."

I see I'm dealing with a hard-hearted dame and that I'm going to have to get the kid out of this hot spot myself. When he opens the back door, I say to him like this, "Excuse me, kid," and without so much as saying *boo* to his old lady, I'm running between his legs and grabbing an opened pot of Dippy's rejuvenating cream off her dresser.

The kid comes busting in and says, "Jerry, you better scram before Dippy finds out you're in here."

My mouth being full, which saves on conversation, I mumble, "Don't worry, kid, I'm already taking the breeze."

Now, this is how I come to be copping Dippy's pot of cream.

A while back, the kid, who knows what he's talking about in these matters, gives me the low-down on Jewish spooks. "Jerry," he says, "you ever seen Dippy when she's got that rejuvenating stuff on her face? It makes her look like a *dybbuk.* That's a Jewish spook."

So I'm in the backyard rolling this tidbit of information around in my head and smearing some of the stuff across my own mug. When I see by the moon that it's coming on late, I step along to the side of the house where I get a whiff of Gertie inside getting her forty winks. "Gertie," I call through the screen, "you awake?"

As soon as I hear her flopping around in her bed, I wish her a hello from the spook world and say to her like this, "Gertie, your ever-loving brother Berl is a big topic of conversation back where me and the other spooks put up. Here's the low-down. He's all wrong for you in the opera dodge. Now, unless you want some *dybbuk* such as myself paying you a house call every night, you better get yourself another sucker to accompany you on the piano." But before I get all this out, Gertie starts screaming her head off.

"You ever seen Dippy when she's got that rejuvenating stuff on her face? It makes her look like a *dybbuk.* That's a Jewish spook."

"Mama! Papa! There's a peeping Tom outside my window! I said, Maaaamaaaa!"

Well, I see right away why the Stoots dame is planning to put Gertie on the opera stage. She can hold a note, indeed. What a pair of lungs!

"Gertie," I say, "you don't have to get so busted up over it. You'll find some other sucker to take the kid's place."

Feibush, the next-door neighbor, opens a window and says, "What's going on? Can't somebody shut that dog up?" So I beat it before Dippy comes to her window and sees where her rejuvenating cream walked off to.

The next day I'm sitting on the front porch listening to the kid plunk out his "Chicken Bone Man" number on the piano. He's pouring out new words by the bucketful:

I don't like T-Bones in my tea,
or lamb chops on the lamb.
I won't ad lib with a barbecue rib.
I'm the chicken bone man!
I don't want oysters on the shell,
or frog legs in my hand.
I jut my chin and I dig right in.
I'm the chicken bone man!

Dippy comes hopping into the living room. "Berl!" she shrieks. "You want to wake up the dead, not to mention Gertie? You heard what Dr. Adler said. Gertie's got a bad case of laryngitis!"

I advise Dippy to go off and pour a dose of her old lady's jelly down Gertie's throat.

"Be quiet, Jerry," she says on her way out.

Then I stick my snoot up against the screen and say to the kid like this, "Kid, it's too bad about Gertie losing her voice after all her first-rate screaming last night. It seems

she's going to be out of circulation for a while. The way I figure, you won't be accompanying her in any upcoming recitals. So what do you say you cancel your vacation and the two of us form a dog-and-kid act for next week's Amateur Night auditions?"

The kid takes a squint at me through the screen.

"Picture this," I tell him. "I come popping out of a hat box like one of the Rajah dame's snakes. I slither around, thanks to a little coal oil, only not too much. I don't want Hortense giving me the chill. I sing your catchy "Chicken Bone Man" number and the next thing you know, we're getting serious attention from all the dolls at the Palace!"

By this time, the kid can't help but notice the top-notch way I'm thumping my tail to the beat of "Chicken Bone Man."

"Jerry," he says, "you're about the most talented dog I ever met. Mama says so too. She can't get over the way you scared off the fellow nosing around Gertie's window last night. She says you're a bigger hero than Rin-Tin-Tin!"

Of course, I don't dicker with the kid, or his old lady either, on this proposition. I start in singing the words to "Chicken Bone Man," the kid accompanies me on the piano, and Feibush, the next-door neighbor who's got no taste in music indeed, opens his window and says, "Somebody shut that dog up."

ANNA OLSWANGER

Grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, and has made "the home of the Blues" the backdrop to many of her stories. "Chicken Bone Man," set in the Jewish neighborhood of Memphis in 1927, won the 1997 F. Scott Fitzgerald Short Story Contest, and appeared in the premiere issue of Lonzie's Fried Chicken: A Journal of Accessible Southern Fiction and Poetry. *Anna's nonfiction, including interviews with editors and writers, has appeared in* Women's News of the Mid-South, Preservation Foundation*, and* Jewish Family & Life*. She lives and teaches in Baltimore. Her limited edition book* Shlemiel Crooks *is forthcoming from Tabula Rasa Press in Seattle.*

Audio versions of the song "Chicken Bone Man" are available on the InterText *Web site at* http://www.intertext.com/v9n2/chicken.html. *"Chicken Bone Man" song Copyright 1958 Berl Olswanger.*

Need a little pick-me-up? Here, have some helium.