

Absolute

TWO THOUSAND

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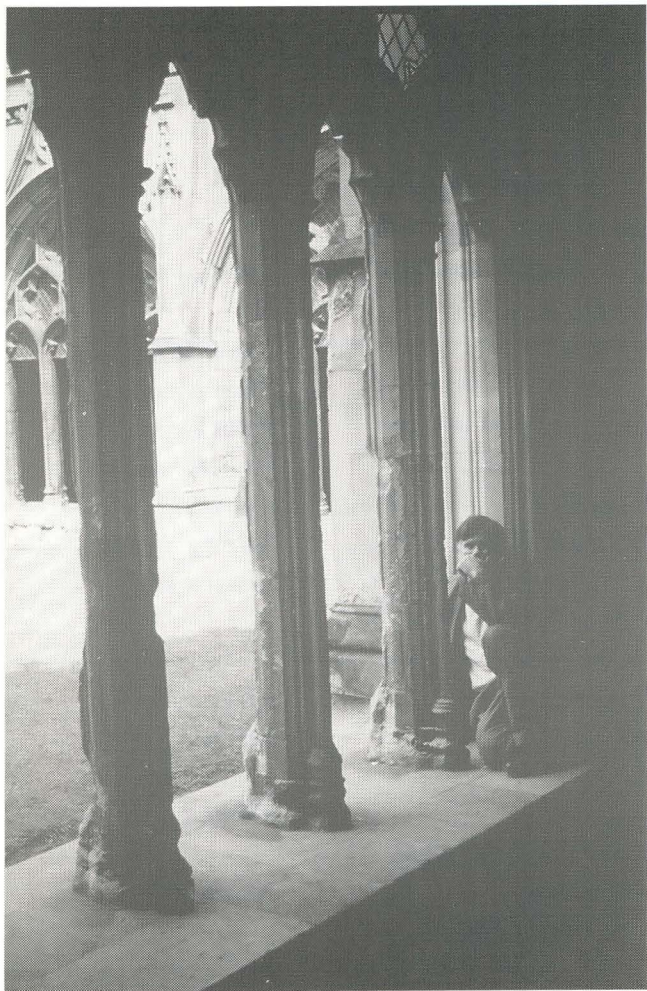
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The Dark Entry, Canterbury Cathedral
Photograph by Dr. Eugene Bragdon

In Memoriam

Absolute 2000 is respectfully dedicated to the life of
Dr. Eugene Bragdon.

1935-1999

Mentor, Colleague, and Friend

Fiction

What Would You Do With Ten Thousand Dollars?

by Patricia Legion

On a warm and sunny Wednesday afternoon in June, Judith Morgan's taxi pulled through the open gates and into the circular driveway of Shady Acres Retirement and Nursing Center where she was a resident. Judith didn't notice the freshly clipped and sweet-smelling lawn, but she was repulsed, as always, by the antiseptic aroma that overwhelmed her when she opened the front door. The driver had left her parcels on the steps, and she wasn't about to carry them in by herself. She beckoned to the young aide Becky, who was occupied in the lobby.

"Take these items to my room," she said, much as she would have said it to any other servant. "I will be requiring tea on the back porch."

With that, she turned away and walked around the building to the back porch where tables and rocking chairs were provided for the comfort of the residents. Judith had agreed to leave her own large and drafty house and take a private room here, only with the stipulation that she would continue to have the freedom of movement that she was accustomed to. Every Wednesday, she took a taxi back to her old neighborhood and attended the card games that Emma Bennett held in her home. Today, Judith had lost a great deal of money.

The housekeeper, having deposited the packages, came with the tea. Judith sank into one of the rocking chairs and tried to invent a story that would make her son Gordon increase her spending allotment. Nearby, another chair was occupied by what seemed at first to be a pile of rags streaked with mud. The rags enclosed the figure of a woman who sat rocking with the aid of one bare foot. Judith knew this woman, slightly, as the one who kept the small plot of flowers on one corner of the back lawn. All was quiet while the two ladies sat on the porch, each with her own thoughts.

After a little while, the other woman remarked, "I saw your picture in the magazine." When Judith didn't respond, she added, "The yellow magazine."

Judith was puzzled. The last magazine she had been featured in was the local garden news, and that was ten years ago.

"What magazine do you mean, dear?"

"You were with some naked children."

The yellow magazine? Of course. *The National Geographic*. But that was thirty years ago. Her husband Juan had often been recognized in the magazine and many others for his archaeological discoveries, but Judith had appeared in only one issue.

"I got out," Alice continued. "I went to see the Beatles. I was fifteen then, and I got confused. A policeman took me to the station. I read all the magazines."

The two ladies sat on in the gathering dusk, Judith remembering the naked children in Cairo, their happy little voices chirping like the evening birds in the garden.

"You have seventy-three cultured pearls in your necklace," the woman said for no reason that Judith could tell.

Before retiring that evening, Judith counted the pearls. There were seventy-three.

The next morning at breakfast, Judith again noticed the woman from the porch. Turning to her dining companion, she asked, "Do you know that woman?"

"Which one?"

"The barefooted one wearing the gypsy costume."

"Oh, that's Alice. She has been here all her life."

Judith was always put out by people who could not speak without exaggeration.

"Not since she was a baby, I suppose," she replied

"Well, at least since she was a little girl. She is most certainly crazy. All of them from the East building are."

Betsy, passing by, joined in the conversation.

"You shouldn't be talking about Alice. They say she can open any locked door in this place. She roams the grounds at night and cooks up spells and potions out of those weeds she grows in the back yard."

"And you shouldn't be interrupting the conversation of ladies at breakfast," said Judith as she placed her napkin on the table and flounced out of the room. Perhaps the woman was crazy, but Judith was intrigued and wondered if she could be taught to play cards as well as she could guess the number of beads in a necklace.

In the weeks that followed, Judith continued to lose at cards more often than she won. Blackjack had been introduced at the ladies' club. Although a much easier game,

she found that she could lose a lot more money in less time.

One rainy afternoon, she decided to teach the game of blackjack to Alice. They were playing for buttons. Before an hour had passed, Alice had all the buttons in her pile. Judith soon found that no matter how many decks of cards were in play, Alice could accurately predict the next card more than half the time.

"Alice," she said, "would you like to go to town with me next week?"

"Why?"

"Well, I know a place where they play cards for money, and I think you would do very well there."

"I can't go to town. The nurse would never let me leave, and I haven't any money," Alice said.

Judith was sure, in a few days, she could refine Alice quite enough to pass as a distant cousin or old friend.

"I'm sure Gordon could obtain a pass for you, dear, and it would be so much fun. We could go to the hairdresser together."

Alice finally agreed that she would go with Judith the following week. The two ladies embarked on a short session in decorum. Alice took most of it in a playful manner except the long hot baths each night. Judith finally won her over by allowing her to prepare the baths with her own selections of herbs from the garden. At these times, Alice became the teacher, and Judith learned that *tilia americana* or basswood could be a fragrant addition to bath water as well as a soothing tea. She had to draw the line at the bleeding *hypericum perforatum* (St. John's wort) whose yellow petals, when crushed, oozed a red pigment that resembled blood, but, all in all, they had a most productive week. Gordon was pressed into service to obtain a pass for Alice, and by Tuesday evening, all was in order for the big day out.

Alice, dressed in one of Judith's Liz Claiborne originals, was finally persuaded to wear shoes when Becky absolutely refused to let her go without them. Judith's jewel case was brought to her as usual. She extracted all the money and a good many of the more valuable pieces, which she intended to pawn for their stake. Glancing about her like a thief, she slipped these into the bosom of her corset. Her purse, after all, might be stolen, but she very much doubted if any young mugger would lay hands upon her eighty-year-old body. Silently, she gave thanks for the blessing of a husband who had showered her with gifts while he lived. Many of the items in her case had been pawned before and recovered. She even dared to hope that Big Jim, the pawnbroker, would still have her ebony walking stick and she would be able to redeem it after today.

This was Alice's first trip to a beauty salon, and it lived up to the name as they seldom do. Her hair was clipped and curled; then followed a manicure. The very last of the earth from her garden was soaked from beneath her fingernails whose broken edges were trimmed and buffed until they looked so good that she refused to wear the white gloves that Judith had insisted were an important accessory to a refined lady's afternoon wear. The visit to Big Jim was also successful, and the ladies came away with two thousand dollars to start them off.

Emma Bennett stood on her wide verandah, wearing a poor copy of a Halston afternoon tea dress, greeting her guests as though this really was just a social gathering. Judith noticed Emma's cousin Vinnie lounging against the railing.

"Hello, Emma," Judith said. "Lovely gown."

"Do you really like it, Judy?"

Judith winced at the familiarity.

"I would like to introduce you to my cousin. Alice Logan, this is Emma Bennett. I hope you won't mind that I brought dear Alice along. She just wouldn't hear of my missing your little party."

"Why, not at all, Judy," Emma replied, extending her dainty, gloved hand to Alice.

Taking Emma's hand by the very tips of the fingers as Judith had taught her, Alice gazed directly into the other woman's eyes.

"How very gracious of you to have me," she said.

At that moment, Judith knew they were in. All her previous fears vanished. The two ladies roamed around the spacious parlor where four square-top tables had been set up for the cards. By the time the little bell tinkled to start the deal, Alice had been introduced to the other players, with Judith pointing out the ones who were most likely to give their hand away with little absent-minded gestures.

Judith and Alice joined Mary Ruth and Vinnie at a table. Judith had a very low opinion of Vinnie. He was one of the few men in the room, and he strutted around like a rooster at dawn, flirting with the women who were all at least twice his age. Mary Ruth dealt.

"The game is five card stud," she drawled with a wink at Vinnie on the word *stud*. "Place your bets, ladies and gentleman," she winked again.

"Something the matter with your eye, Mary Ruth?" Judith said as she placed a fifty-dollar bill on the table and picked up her cards.

Two pair—aces and fives. She glanced at Vinnie, the only real competition. He

lounge in his chair, looking bored. She took this to be a sign that he was trying to hide a winning hand. Intending to signal Alice, she glanced her way just in time to see her raise the bet. When the bet came back to her, she had to add another fifty to stay in and more if she wanted to raise. She laid down another hundred. Everyone else folded; she had won the first pot and never had to show her hand.

She would have liked to know just what Vinnie and Alice were holding, but she was up by three hundred dollars, some of which was her own money that Alice was playing with. Her confidence was soaring.

It was the custom to change partners when the tea was refreshed. As soon as Judith saw the maids approaching, she turned to speak to Alice. Alice, however, was already headed to the library and the blackjack—on Vinnie's arm.

Judith was afraid of seeming too eager, so she stayed on in the parlor for poker with new partners. Her luck seemed to hold; she was winning at least as often as she lost. She noticed more and more people going to the library. She could hear their voices raised in excitement. Finally, she took her winnings and left the table.

Approaching the library, she noticed Vinnie's red face. He was dealing and sweating. Large ugly drops of water marred the green felt of the game table where he and Alice sat. Emma hovered like a fat hummingbird, her little hands fluttering up and down as though she would take flight. Judith knew that Emma dared not stop the game. Nearly every guest had pressed around to watch.

The cards were dealt: one face down and one face up to each player. Vinnie was showing the seven of clubs: Alice, the ace of spades. The odds were in Vinnie's favor. The only way Alice would win this hand was to draw another card and hope that it, together with the hidden one, would not make more than twenty-one points. The ten points she needed could not have been in the hidden card or she would already have won. The crowd held their breath as the dealer gave himself the six of diamonds. Alice's shiny buffed nail clicked on the card, and another fell face up; it was the five of hearts. The hidden card was turned up and revealed to be the five of diamonds. Alice won the hand.

The play went on in this manner for some minutes. Finally, Emma joined the table herself. After that, Alice was winning money twice as fast. Before long, the house was broke. The other ladies actually cheered as Alice left the table. Judith, feeling like a thief and thinking that they would be stopped at any moment, couldn't wait to get out of there. Alice seemed inclined to stay, and Judith had to take her by the arm and propel her toward the waiting taxi.

Judith and Alice arrived back at Shady Acres during the dinner hour, so they were

able to slip into Judith's room unnoticed. Giggling like schoolgirls, they propped the door closed with a chair and turned the contents of their purses out on the bed. When they had finished counting, ten thousand dollars lay in neat stacks in the middle of Judith's chintz spread.

“What will we do with so much money,” Judith whispered.

Alice placed a faded, dog-eared copy of a travel brochure on top of the stack of money. It showed a beautiful garden in front of a casino in Cairo.

Seville

by Vicki Newby

The keys skittered across the crowded oak floor and came to rest at Rita's feet. Looking up, she saw Stan making his way awkwardly across the room. She covered the keys with her foot and bent down to pick them up. They were Stan's! As she stood up, she saw that he was still trying to find them.

"Excuse me. I've dropped my keys," she barely heard him say in the noisy football-night crowd at Jim-Dandy's Sports Bar. A devious impulse drove her to pick them up and slip them into her pocket. She looked back and forth to see if anyone was watching, then laid her keys on the napkin next to his drink and made her way out of the bar.

Outside, she giggled at the thought of having gotten away with Stan's keys. He would be annoyed when he figured out she had left and furious when he realized she had taken his car. Tonight she didn't care.

She got into his Silver Mist Cadillac Seville and tried the key. The big car roared to life and she pulled carefully out of the parking lot. She drove aimlessly about at first, taking in the palatial luxury of the enormous car around her.

She listened to the solid, insulated quiet. The air conditioner worked better than the one in her apartment. She played with the electric window buttons, opening and closing each window, in turn, several times and then all of them at the same time. Smooth as satin. No draft whistled through these windows.

At the traffic light, she opened and closed the door three times just to hear that solid thunk. Not a rattle anywhere. She turned the steering wheel all the way to the left, then all the way to the right, and it didn't even growl.

With a defiant toss of her head, Rita grinned as she thought of Stan driving her poor little beat-up Ford Tempo with its rusty, oxidized paint, and faded, torn seats.

I just wonder what your WIFE would have to say about all this, Stan Adrian.

Giggling, she pulled into the parking lot at Terrace's, a club popular with her friend Janise for its big dance floor. She lucked into a prime parking spot near the door of the club and went inside to find her best friend and confidante.

"Come with me and see what I've got," Rita said as she grabbed Janise's arm, pulling her towards the door.

Outside, Rita draped herself over the Seville's hood like a model at a Daryl Starbird hot rod show.

"What are you doing? Get off that car, you big silly," Janise said. "What was it you wanted to show me?"

"This." Rita swept her hand to indicate the Cadillac. "It's Stan's!"

"Stan?" Janise's eyes narrowed. "What's he doing here?"

"He's not here," Rita laughed. "I just borrowed his car for a little while."

"You borrowed his car – but isn't he still married?" Janise put her hand on her hip.

"He is. But they're not in love," Rita shrugged.

Janise rolled her eyes. "Oh, right . . ."

"No, really! She doesn't understand him!"

"Oh, brother, not that tired old line again! Jeez, if I had a nickel –" Janise waved her hand and turned away.

"No, Janise, you don't understand—he can't get a divorce right now, but as soon as his kids are out of high school —."

Janise spun around, facing Rita. "How old are his kids, three and four?"

"No! They're, like, ten and fourteen – I think."

"Rita, that man is NOT going to leave his family for you, no matter what he says," Janise snapped.

"That was mean." Rita looked down.

"I'm sorry," Janise softened. "I'm just telling you there is no future with a married man."

"Look, I don't want to talk about it right now," Rita said, tossing her head. "Let's go back inside and break some hearts." The two women linked elbows and went back inside Terrace's.

Hours later, when the two friends left Terrace's, the Seville was still there, right where Rita had parked it.

"Wow, it didn't turn into a pumpkin," Rita said.

"I'm surprised he didn't come after it," Janise said.

"Me, too."

"You sound disappointed."

"Hmph!" Rita jutted her chin. "I'll call you tomorrow, OK?"

Janise shook her head and reminded Rita, "I'll be out of town – going to Denver, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot." Rita pursed her lips. "Well, call me when you get back."

"Who says I'm coming back," Janise laughed as she got into her own car and left.

Rita was surprised that Stan hadn't come after *her* – surprised and relieved – maybe a little disappointed. He did have a steamy temper sometimes. He hadn't ever actually hit her, but he had gotten rough. That roughness, though, was part of what she found so irresistible.

Rita drove back to Jim-Dandy's to face the music. *Hell*, she thought, *maybe he hasn't even noticed that I took his car. He's probably been hitting on one of those waitresses and hasn't even missed me.*

She drove into Jim-Dandy's parking lot, looking for her little car but it wasn't there. She sat in the parking lot in Stan's Seville, its engine idling, her hands perched on the steering wheel.

My car isn't here. Stan isn't here.

Putting the car in gear, she left Jim-Dandy's and drove by Stan's office, but the parking lot was empty and the building was dark.

She even drove by his house although she couldn't imagine that he would drive her car to his own house.

Where could it be?

Then she remembered the cabin.

He had taken her there once. It was more like a resort lodge than a cabin. Situated south of town in the middle of three hundred rolling acres, the log construction had all the conveniences any city dweller would want. She decided to try to find the place again and headed south out of town towards Old Dairy Road.

There was what appeared to be a police roadblock ahead at a curve in the road just before Big Mac Hines' Heavy Equipment Company. As she came upon the scene, Rita saw a brush pumper, a fire rescue unit, two ambulances, an assortment of sheriff and police cars, and the coroner's wagon set up in a flashing-light encampment in Big Mac's parking lot.

Rita slowed the Cadillac to a near stop, rolled the driver's side window halfway down, and called out to a group of people in uniform, "What happened?"

"Looks like a hit-and-run, ma'am."

In the beam of the Seville's headlights, Rita saw a light-colored Ford Tempo in Big Mac's parking lot. *Is that my car?* Rita came to a full stop and switched on the high beam to get a better look.

"Pardon me," she called out to a clump of uniformed men.

A paramedic approached. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Does that car belong to someone here?"

"Best we can tell, the driver of that car seems to have run out of gas. Looks like he was walking for help when he was hit . . ."

"Stan! Stan! Oh, my God!" Rita gasped and clutched a fist to her chest.

"Yes, we believe his name is Dan," the paramedic said, looking around again. He waved at the group of men, beckoning someone over.

"Oh, my God!" Rita put her hand to her mouth.

Two firemen walked towards the Seville. One of them asked, "Are you the boy's mother?"

"Mother?" Rita, nearly young enough to be Stan's daughter, was shocked. "What boy?"

"Dan, Dan Treyhune. The hit-and-run victim. Are you Mrs. Treyhune?"

"Treyhune?" Suddenly self-conscious about whose car she was driving, Rita withdrew deep into the shadows of the Seville.

"Are you Danny Treyhune's mother?" the second fireman asked. His nametag said Miller.

"I-I thought you said Stan Adrian," Rita stammered.

"Stan Adrian? No, this kid's identification says Dan Treyhune."

"What about - Yo, Roscoe!" Miller called out to the clump of uniformed men. "What about that car?" he yelled, pointing to the Tempo.

"Is that Mrs. Treyhune?" Roscoe hollered, starting towards the Seville.

"No," Rita said from the shadows. "I know a car just like that one. I thought it was someone else's car—I thought it was someone else."

"Never mind," Miller called out to Roscoe, waving him off.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Rita said.

"No trouble, ma'am."

As she pulled away, she saw that it didn't have that nasty rust patch by the gas cap like hers did, but she wasn't entirely sure until she saw that the license plate read "VXG-387" instead of "RITAS."

It wasn't her car. It wasn't Stan.

She went on, shaken, but relieved. As she made her way south down Old Dairy Road, she kept the headlights on high beam, looking for a familiar landmark.

I think this is it. The gate was open. Rita pulled in and made her way up the long drive to the cabin and was relieved when the Seville's headlights lit up the vanity plate "RITAS."

The house was dark. Rita let herself in the front door with Stan's keys, laid them on the bar next to hers, and slipped upstairs, undressing as she went. She stood, naked, looking at Stan as he slept, willing him to awaken. When he didn't, she slid between the covers next to him.

The sun coaxed her to consciousness the next morning. Sheets, arms and legs were a swirling, jumbled knot. Her eyes felt gritty. Her mouth tasted nasty. She felt for Stan, but he wasn't there. The smell of fresh brewed coffee told her he was already up. She stood up and winced, head pounding. Her clothes had been gathered and were folded neatly on the chair beside the bed. She took a long hot shower before getting dressed, then made her way carefully downstairs.

"Stan?" He didn't answer. "Stan? Where are you?"

Rita's keys were still on the counter but his were gone. She walked to the front windows and looked out. His car was gone, too. *I can't believe he just up and left like that? Didn't even say goodbye!* There was a folded piece of paper with her name on it under her keys.

It read, "Rita, this is no good. You've got to leave me alone. Stan."

She flew into a rage. With all the strength she could muster on this hangover morning, she threw everything within her reach until she laid her hand on a bottle of Scotch. Maybe a little of this would calm her nerves. She found a heavy glass tumbler, poured a couple of fingers of Scotch, and took a swallow. It was stronger than she expected it to be, and she shuddered hard. *Nasty stuff!* The glass was heavy and slipped loose from in her hand when she shuddered, splattering Scotch down the front of her clothes, making her even angrier.

She grabbed her keys and her purse and stormed out the door, slamming it behind her as hard as she could. Reveling in her rage, she opened the door and slammed it again and again as hard as she could until the glass in it shattered onto the porch.

"HA!" She laughed bitterly. Rita flounced to her car, got in, and slammed the car door harder than she intended to. It popped back open. Cursing, she slammed her car door again. Something rattled loose inside the door, but it stayed closed this time. The starter whined as she turned the key longer than necessary. Lurching backwards into the

yard, she threw turf and gravel on her way out, cursing Stan Adrian all the way. Misjudging her position, she grazed the gatepost with the passenger side of the Tempo and almost ran headlong into a propane delivery truck as she turned north onto Old Dairy Road. When she stomped the brakes to avoid the propane truck, a nearly full fifth of Stan's favorite brand of Scotch rolled out from under the driver's seat. She cursed violently as she picked up the bottle from underfoot, plunked it in the passenger seat, and wedged her purse in front of it so it wouldn't roll into the floor again.

Two young policemen were surveying the accident site as Rita headed north on Old Dairy Road toward town that morning. She slowed for a better look at the scene in the light of day. One of the officers directing the sparse traffic around the investigation site waved her over. Once stopped, she tried to roll her window down, but it wouldn't budge. The car door was jammed, too. She threw her shoulder into the door and popped it open. As Rita fell out of her car, the officer lunged to catch her.

Smelling alcohol, he asked, "Have you been drinking this morning?"

"Just a sip," she answered truthfully.

He saw the Scotch bottle in the front seat of the car and asked Rita to step out of the car. As he dealt with her, his partner noticed what appeared to be blood around the broken passenger side headlight and some bits of fabric that matched Danny Treyhune's torn clothes.

As the officer put the cuffs on Rita, she saw a Silver Mist Cadillac Seville make its way slowly back south from town on Old Dairy Road.

Stan!

There was man in the Seville with Stan. Rita recognized him as Layton Hallmark, an odious lawyer friend of Stan's. Layton leaned towards Stan as they approached the scene. His face was animated as he worked his mouth and gesticulated, pointing first at Rita, then down the road.

As the young police officer read Rita her rights, she looked up, making eye contact with Stan as he approached. She lifted her head to entreat him to stop and help her. He leered at Rita, shook his head and sped away.

The Outlaw Jon Hutto

by Todd Crews

Me and El Camino ate Pho. Pho is Vietnamese soup with rice noodles, mint leaves, and strips of various meat. El Camino, being a dog, of course, just sat and waited for me to ration out meat strips while I consumed everything else the soup consisted of. The rain played a musical number outside the window, using the windowsill, a broken air conditioner, and an overturned recycle bucket as its instruments of choice. Listening to the rain, I sat back on the couch, twisting and turning in an effort to make myself a little bit more comfortable. The television rolled the credits of an old Eastwood flick in which an outlaw named Josey Wales rides through the South, spitting chew on the foreheads of the men he kills in the name of revenge. He also spat upon a beetle in the desert and a mangy old dog—twice.

I sat and stared at the ceiling, watching the movie credits out of the corner of my eye. El Camino stared at me and waited for another piece of meat. The music playing outside the window began to blend with that of the movie credits. Listening to this, accompanied by the occasional whimper of a begging dog, I drifted into a rainy-day afternoon nap.

There was a knock at the front door that pulled me back to life. I sat up on the couch, shook my head, and rubbed my eyes. I couldn't have been out for too long because El Camino still sat in the same spot, waiting for meat. I pulled a strip of roast beef out of the Styrofoam container and whipped it toward her. She caught it. Then, the knock came again.

"I'm coming!" I yelled.

I hopped up the two stairs that went from the den to the living room. I opened the front door, and there was Jon Hutto with blood pouring down his face. He pushed past me and was followed in by Punchy, an ex-boxer with a short fuse. Both were two of my best friends.

"What the hell!" I yelled, still a little spun from my almost-nap.

"Those bastards at the Mini-Mart busted a bottle over his head and stole his A.K.," said Punchy, referring to Jon's A.K. 47 assault rifle.

"Old Derf Pierce? He's a hundred and a half!" I said in a loud what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about voice.

"No, not the old man. The south side posse that hangs around up there," said Jon in a slurred, drunk voice. "I need .357 shells."

I knew I would be contributing to a homicide if I gave him bullets, but I also knew by the look in their eyes that these guys weren't going to be talked into anything but their own mindset. I wasn't about to send my boys into battle with an empty gun.

"All I have are .38 shells," I said, after looking in my room for about five minutes.

"They'll fire through a .357. Give 'em up."

I handed the bullets to Jon, and he stuck them in his pocket.

"Why don't you guys just chill here for a while and assess the situation," I said, trying to get them to relax.

"No way!" yelled Punchy. "We got to hit 'em now. I got a nine shot .12 gauge with pistol grip that's loaded buck, slug, buck, slug. Jon has the .357 and a 30-30 in the car. We could actually use some backup, so put your shoes on."

"Shit!" I yelled. "... O.K."

We piled into the car, and by the time I was fully awake, we had pulled up in front of a house. Jon didn't hesitate. He jumped out of the car and headed for the side door with his .357. Punchy followed, carrying the shotgun. I brought up the rear—unarmed. Before I even reached the side of the house, I heard Jon kick in the door, and I realized the situation. My intent in tagging along was to try to avoid any incident. It was too late.

The rain poured down now, and I followed Punchy into the house behind Jon. At the moment I stepped across the threshold, I heard the first gunshot, and the doorframe next to Jon's head instantly splintered. Chunks of the wall pelted me in the face. Jon screeched to a halt and returned fire as he backed up. Almost as if rehearsed, Punchy laid his shotgun on Jon's shoulder as if to steady it, but with no time, he blasted.

The piercing sound of the shotgun blast deafened me. I heard nothing. All I could do was stand back and watch. I could not see who was shooting at us, but everything around us began to explode. The dishes on the counter disintegrated. The cabinet doors folded in on themselves, and various holes appeared—out of nowhere—in the walls. I saw the skin on Jon's right elbow disappear as blood splattered on my face.

That was it. I ran outside and took off on foot. When I reached the alley, I realized

I had been shot in the side of the head. It was just a graze, but it was bleeding and it burned. I could hear the wind, but the gunshots were no more.

I made it to my house, and then, inside the front door, I collapsed. El Camino greeted me with a rice noodle on the end of her nose.

I nursed my wound and watched the news. My friends had been gunned down after killing four people. It all seemed like a bad dream, but the pain in my skull let me know it was real. I did not send my boys into battle with an empty gun. It did not save them, and though I was in the clear from a murder rap, it would not save me, either.

El Camino and I sat and watched television. I think it was *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.

The Ring

by Eric Johnson

One day I was washing my hands in the men's restroom of the college where I worked. I noticed an old gold wedding ring that, frankly, had seen better days. I knew if it was mine, I would appreciate it if someone found it and would at least make an effort to find its owner, so that's what I did.

Since I was the only one in the restroom and nobody was milling about the hall, I took it home for safekeeping. I, or should I say Mr. Cook, was fortunate that I found his ad for the lost ring in the college newspaper. We made arrangements over the phone for him to come by my house because he wasn't a student and was only visiting the day he lost the ring.

When he arrived, he gently eased his frail body out of his car and made his way toward my front door. We said our hellos and my curiosity got the best of me. I couldn't help myself; I asked him to tell me about this worn piece of jewelry and he gladly did so.

"Well, during the Second World War, I was a paratrooper in the Air Force, stationed in England. One night in early 1942, our glider was shot down over the border of France. Out of twenty-four men on board, only eighteen made it to the ground alive. At that time, France was occupied by the Jerries. I'm sorry—the Germans. At that time, we called 'em Jerries.

"Anyway, every fellow had to look out for himself 'cause it was dark and you were all alone, with the militia and whatnot looking for you. After a few days, I was lucky enough to come upon some fellas in the French Resistance movement who took good care of me. Saved my life if you wanna know the truth.

"One night, we were at a cabaret when this dark-haired girl who was singing caught my eye, and, believe it or not, we ended up comin' back to the States and got married on V-E Day.

“I can’t really tell you how happy I am you took the time to call me. She died last year, and this ring is one of the few things I have that remind me of how we met back then.”

“That’s quite a story, sir, but what were you doing at the college?”

“I just went to visit our daughter up there.”

“I see. What does she do?”

“She teaches French.”

Nobody Said Goodbye

by Patricia Legion

Red dust devils were kicking up in the road when I stumbled off the school bus. I always slept the five miles of the ride and walked the last mile. The road up to our house was so washed out if the bus ever came down there, it would never get out.

Big black thunderheads were forming in the sky, and I quickened my pace. If I didn't get our cow in before the storm, she would go crazy and dry up. The house was dark, and I knew Ma was sitting by the window with her whiskey. She did that most days since Pa had left. I couldn't see her, but I gave a little wave just the same.

I got Bess in and milked, fed the chickens, and gathered up what eggs I could find. I was in the kitchen covering the milk when I heard Ma faintly calling me. I went in to her; the bedroom smelled of the sour sheets that hadn't been changed in weeks. Her workbasket was beside the chair, but the embroidery that once would have been a source of joy for her lay neglected and forgotten. She was wearing her nightgown, and I knew she had been sitting right there and drinking all day.

"Listen good, girl," she said. "I ain't repeating any of this."

I nodded and sat down on the floor. She looked so small and weak. I wanted to put my arms around her, but something in the way she looked at me didn't invite the gesture.

"I done wrote to my sister. She's a good woman, and she's got a staying-around man. She'll be good to you, but I expect you to work for your keep. Your pa ain't never coming back, so don't be looking for him."

I wanted to plead with her, to cry, and promise that everything would be better if only she would let me stay. I had no words, and she had run out of words. She just sat there, looking out the window. I went to my room and lay down in my clothes. In a little while, the storm came. We were snug in our house and Bess was safe in her barn, but we were all alone.

I found her, still, by the window in the morning, the empty whiskey bottle still in her hand. I left her there just as I found her and walked on up the muddy road to the school bus. I didn't cry or speak to anybody.

When we got to town, I didn't go into the school. Instead, I walked on down to the sheriff's office and told my story there.

True to Mother's word, Aunt Mary came for me in a couple of days. She arranged for Ma to be buried there in that dusty town.

We left after that and I've never been back.

One Hundred Years of Regret

by Jansen Sterba

Most spring days seemed to start off about the same in Brookdale Estates: mid-seventies, southerly breeze, and one or two tiny clouds in the whole sky. The neighborhood that day was alive with the noise of its cautious inhabitants: people mowed their lawns, washed their cars, let their dogs out to piss. From street to street, everything looked the same, and the days all seemed to end the same. Near dusk, everyone rhythmically shifted back into their boxes for supper and television.

Philip delivered papers in the afternoon, so his route was just now about finished. It wasn't really papers that he delivered; it was bulk rate advertisements, pizza coupons, and grocery ads. Ten dollars a week, though, at twelve years old was enough to make him a faithful and trustworthy employee. He loved his job. Philip's mother imagined him speeding home on his green bicycle in the warm quiet of sunset, and she sighed. Although he was an only child, he was as much work as two or three kids for a single working mother. She loved the time alone that his job gave her. She sat with the TV on, eating potato salad, breathing in the peace of her empty house. Philip would be home any minute.

That day, someone was robbed in Brookdale Estates, assaulted, a little bruised, but still relatively unhurt. A retired doctor and his wife in their late fifties. Two bored police officers attended the couple in their distress. A prominent retired surgeon still carried weight, and the search began immediately for an escaping madman.

Philip's route was over, and the way home was straight and easy, mostly downhill through a large mown field. He sped up as fast as he could to fly down that long stretch of land. Behind him, two police officers ordered him to stop. His big bag bulged as if full of jewelry and rare antiques. Although he was gaining speed, Philip was still close enough that he should have heard the police, stopped, and given up his weapon. Instead, he pedaled faster. Both police screamed at full volume for the escapee to stop, and he

sped on, totally disregarding their commands.

The more nervous officer fired two shots at Philip, and one struck him high in the back. It felt like he had just been punched hard in the back, knocking the breath out of him. Body and bicycle separated, and he hit the ground and slid without trying to stop himself. He lost skin along a ten-foot patch of asphalt and lay there, motionless, just a few feet from the open field. Though he couldn't hear—his ear was mashed to the ground, warm and humming from the day full of sunlight—he strained to hear something besides the deafening pounding of blood in his head but couldn't. He shuffled his feet that were limp behind him and found that he couldn't feel them or his hands or his bloody ear that was folded against the asphalt. He moved his mouth to ask for help, but warm red fluid rushed out instead, filling his ear and nose. He rolled onto his back to see three silent birds move slowly overhead, toward the direction of his house. His eyes blurred with tears of confusion and terror until he couldn't see anymore. He took a long breath, more blood than air, and died there on the street, less than a mile from his house.

More than a week ago, he had attached two small speakers to the handlebars of his bicycle, a free gift for buying ten boxes of Kellogg's cereal. When the officers walked up to his body, the speakers still screamed out their cheap, high-pitched version of some popular song, just loud enough that Philip had never heard a word. The officer would claim that he was only firing at the tires of the bike, that Philip had deliberately fled, but there would be no redemption for a man who had shot a child in the back. As they stood near his body, the tape player automatically clicked to a stop, and the noise now came from the hundreds of advertisements flapping in the wind across the open field.

At home, Philip's mother finished her potato salad and lay down on the couch. She breathed deeply and closed her eyes, hoping for just another twenty minutes alone.

Choosing Billy

by Jessica Welp

When I got home, Joann met me at the front door and gave me a hug. She asked me how it went. I had spent the entire drive home thinking of just how I was going to tell her. I could smell a wonderful dinner from the kitchen as I took her by the hand and told her that I didn't get the promotion. She consoled me as we walked into the dining room, but I could feel her tensing up.

I loved this woman more than anything. We had been together since my freshman year of college, her senior year of high school. Although we dated for four years, we knew immediately that we were getting married. And there were no problems that we couldn't work through together. Except for Billy.

Joann disappeared into the kitchen to finish preparing our meal. I opened my briefcase and removed Billy. Joann walked out of the kitchen with two glasses of wine in her hands. She stopped and glared at me as I held Billy in my arms.

"I can't believe you took that stupid thing to work with you. What did your boss say?"

"My boss didn't see him. And why wouldn't I bring Billy with me? Today was a rough day."

I needed that promotion. We weren't the richest of families for Joann stayed home with the kids while I worked. And I worked very hard for us to live as nicely as we could. We had to watch our money closely. And more than anything, I wanted Shelly and Brandon to have a good Christmas. Between the house and credit cards, things were beginning to look bleak.

Joann just shook her head as she set our wine down and returned to the kitchen. She just didn't get it. She never had.

I pulled a third chair up to the table and set up a place for Billy. I put a napkin in his lap and sat down next to him.

Joann came back into the room with our plates of food. She looked at Billy, then shot me a nasty look. I couldn't figure out why she was so upset with me. I was the one who missed the big promotion. She slammed our plates down on the table, and as she did, I watched peas roll away, onto the floor.

"This has gotten out of control!" she was yelling at me. "That damned 'Billy' is more important to you than I am!"

What could I say to her? I loved them both in different ways.

"Joann," I said in a very calm voice, "Billy and I have been together for 37 years."

"Billy is a doll!" she screamed at me.

"Yes, but . . ."

"No! I have tried to put up with this for years. That doll is as old as you are!"

"He's a year younger."

"Whatever. You promised me that your stupid doll was going to stay put away."

At this point, Joann had both of her hands on the dinner table, coming dangerously close to spilling her plate. She was leaning forward, as if to make sure that I could hear her yelling at me.

"Yeah, but . . ."

"No! You promised he'd stay in that box!"

"Do you know how hard it was for me to do that? It was hard enough for me when you asked me to keep him on the dresser."

"You would rather sleep with him than me?"

"It's not that. I'm just used to having him there. We've shared the same bed for the last 37 years."

"Paul, we went through this with Brandon and his 'blankie'—when he was five! You're not a kid anymore! We don't need him in our bed. We don't need him watching us sleep from the dresser."

"You may not need him, but I do." I was beginning to get irritated. I had bent over backwards for this woman by putting Billy away in a box. But I needed his support again just this once.

"Well, I'm not putting up with this anymore. I have for too long. You're gonna have to figure out what is more important to you."

"You want me to choose? That's not fair. I've known Billy much longer than I've known you." As soon as I said that, I knew that I shouldn't have.

"Screw you!" she yelled, pointing at me. "You are a grown man obsessed with a doll! And you broke your promise!" Joann stormed off towards the stairs.

“But, Joann . . .”

“No! This conversation is over!”

Joann stormed upstairs, stomping her feet down on every step. I looked at Billy, then at our plates of cold food, then back at Billy. I slid my plate over in front of Billy, then followed Joann upstairs.

I found her in our bedroom, frantically cramming clothing into a small, green suitcase, tears streaming down her face. I tried to talk to her, but she just threw at me whatever she could grab.

“I’m outta here!” she screamed. “I’m sick of this crap. Why don’t you marry that damned doll?”

I didn’t know what to do. So, I let her go. I knew that she would be back.

And she did come back. While I was at work, she came back for the kids. And each day that I came home for the next week, I found more and more things gone, mainly from the kids’ rooms.

For a short while, Billy and I would watch the phone each night, in the hopes that Joann would call. But she never did. And we soon gave up.

I found that, with the kids gone, I had more free time in the evenings. I would make a nice dinner for Billy and me. I would sit in my regular place and Billy would sit in Joann’s at the dining room table.

Bill would sit with me while I played solitaire, and sometimes I would read him the children’s stories that Joann had left behind. We watched sitcoms together and he slept on Joann’s side of the bed.

One evening while we were playing Monopoly, the phone rang. Joann had a lawyer and had already done the paperwork for a divorce.

I willingly signed the papers. There was nothing else I could do. Joann wanted full custody of the kids. I was given a date to meet with Joann and her lawyer to discuss what days I could see the kids, but Billy couldn’t go. So, I didn’t go, either.

Billy and I were happy together. Even if my family didn’t approve. I didn’t care.

No one really talked to me at work anymore. They all just kind of looked at me out of the corners of their eyes as I walked by. And I knew they were talking about me even though I could never make out what they were saying. They all thought that I was crazy, but I didn’t really care. I did my job. And I seemed to get much more work done after I had gotten Billy his very own little chair to pull up to my desk.

Essays

Like Cactus Flowers

by Elissa Crocker

“Maddy, you belong to me. Yer Daddy gave ya to me.”

Madeline almost blurted out, “Are you *crazy*?”

But reminding a man fresh out of the insane asylum of the blatantly obvious when he has a gun pointing in the general direction of your heart is not exactly a wise move, no matter how appropriate. No sense in riling the fella.

When Madeline had ridden up to her house that warm spring morning in 1941 and found everything she owned, including chickens and rabbits in their cages, dishes, clothes, and a variety of her personal and assorted sundries stacked and piled and crammed into her old pickup, she had never been so stunned in all her life. Almost in slow motion, she had dismounted, tied her horse, and circled the truck, eyeing the contents warily, wondering what in the hell could be happening. In the corral behind the barn were penned nine brood mares that had been out in the back pasture when she and her husband Dolph had ridden over to the Wells Place that morning to check on her oldest sister Estelle. Some cowhands had ridden over to tell her and Dolph that old man Preston had been hanging around the place, and maybe he was up to no good.

Before she could come up with even a remotely adequate explanation for the scene before her, who but old man Preston ambled out of her house and matter-of-factly pronounced, “I’ve got everything ready, Maddy. You drive the truck and I’ll follow ya with the horses.”

Bob Preston had always been called “old man Preston” even though he was probably not much older than fifty. He had gotten the nickname because he had been one of those unlucky men who had gone bald in their twenties. Like all cowboys, he was rarely without his battered old cowboy hat, but when working outside, he would remove his hat to mop the sweat off his brow. It was impossible to miss the bald pate glaring in the sunlight, and the moniker “old man” had quickly taken hold.

He was not a big man, but even lean cowboys acquire quite a bit of muscle working with livestock. However, his five-year stay in the asylum in the northern New Mexico town of Las Vegas had robbed him of what muscle he had. He had come home sallow and skinny, living up to the “old man” designation as never before.

“Mr. Preston,” Madeline’s outward calm belied her inward bewilderment, “what’s going on here?” She rounded the end of the truck. The chickens tittered and fidgeted in their cages. The rabbits huddled together, their long ears and little noses nervously trembling.

“Now, I done told ya. You get in and drive, I’ll bring the horses. This’ll get us our start at our new place.” He looked at her like he was making perfect sense.

Madeline’s fuse was lit. “I’m not driving anywhere! Now then, you tell me right now, just what in the Sam Hill is going on?” Her arms were outstretched in front of her, indicating the pickup overflowing with all her possessions.

“Doggonit, Bob, did you have anything to do with this?” She was getting louder as the enormity of it continued to sink in. The crazy old coot had gone too far this time. As far as she could conceive on such short notice, he had trespassed on her property, rifled through everything she owned, packed her up lock, stock, and barrel, and now stood before her, issuing orders with the authority of a judge. *She could even see her underwear stuffed in there.* Her face began to burn and her incredulity was replaced by outrage as he continued toward the corral, intent on getting the horses.

“Now, you just wait a minute, Bob Preston. I don’t know what on God’s green earth is going on here or just what in hell you think gives you the right to be trespassing on my property, much less laying a hand on any of my things.” Maddy’s control was hanging by a thread. “And if, for one instant, you think you can barge in here giving me orders,” she faced him, wagging her index finger like a righteous teacher upbraiding a presumptive child, “I’ve got news for you.”

That’s when he pulled his gun out and pointed it right at her. “I was hopin’ you’d come peaceable, Maddy. But since yer not, I’m gonna have to tie you up and drive the truck myself and leave those horses here, even though they woulda give us a stake. But I guess a gal like you is stake enough. I waited a long time to claim what’s mine fair and square. Now you march yerself into the house, young lady. Yer comin’ with me. I don’t want to hurt you, Maddy. You belong to me. Yer Daddy gave ya to me.”

Madeline Hanson Thomas was a twenty-one-year-old beauty, newly married in the fall of 1940 to Dolph Thomas, the handsomest, kindest man that she had ever laid eyes on. Now, just six months later, she had more to live for than she’d ever imagined.

Growing up, the youngest child of five, on a 28,000-acre ranch in southern New Mexico had been anything but easy, especially considering the fact that in 1931, at the height of what had come to be called the Great Depression, their Daddy, the one that old man Preston figured had given her to him, had gotten in his old pickup and driven out of their lives in one of his customary fits of temper and rage, characteristic of his hateful nature.

By necessity, all of them had grown up early. Maddy and her brothers and sisters had learned to ride almost as soon as they could walk, and to work not long after that. Their father Richard Hanson was a demanding, merciless taskmaster, expecting them to pull a weight far beyond their years. They roped and branded cattle and horses alongside full-grown men, loaded wagons and hauled supplies the fifty or so miles to and from Roswell, the nearest town, unaccompanied and unsupervised by any adult, often fording the rain-swollen Pecos River when even a juvenile's eye would have warned against such a dangerous crossing.

Sadly, love was not an emotion common to their home nor was simple affection. But Maddy's heart did not actually begin to freeze toward Richard until she was six years old. Bill, her eight-year-old brother, suffered with chronic earaches, often moaning and crying with pain. But the night Richard beat Bill half to death for not taking the pain like a man, her heart iced in bitterness toward a man who would treat an animal better than his own child, not that he treated his animals much better. Bill became a man that night, as his father expected, and never cried again. His eardrum finally burst, leaving him permanently deaf in that ear, but at least it never hurt again. Madeline turned all her love toward her brother. She was his sister, his protective parent, his best friend. They were inseparable, riding and exploring the open range whenever they could escape the relentless eye of their father.

The final blow to Maddy's heart had come the day her father slapped her mother hard enough to make their three-room shack tremble, the day they later realized he had deserted them for good. She and Bill were hiding behind a hay bale, listening to the fight, when they heard their mother cry out as the blow sent her careening into a table, and they saw the whole house shake as she crashed into a wall.

"I'll kill him if he hurts her." Bill jumped up, but Maddy grabbed his arm before he could run off.

"No, Bill, don't go!" She knew that, at twelve and fourteen, they were no match for Richard's violent aggression. They heard him ranting and raving, the walls vibrating with his hostility. The place was so ramshackle it was a miracle that a strong New

Mexico wind hadn't blown it over already. Richard could have provided better if he had wanted to, but he was tighter than the bark on a tree. Even though they owned one of the largest ranches in the area, no one would ever have known it by looking at his children. They had grown up with holes in their pants, raggedy coats, and worn-out boots that were too little for their feet. New Mexico winters were brutal; the Hanson children could tell you that.

Their Momma, Mavis, had come to this arid and difficult land over twenty years before at the tender age of fifteen, running away from home with Richard Hanson, a man nearly twenty years her senior. She had been the pampered and protected daughter of a doctor in Johnson City, Tennessee, so well-off that she had grown up in a mansion with former slaves, now well-paid loyal servants, who waited on her hand and foot. What she ever saw in Richard, no one would ever know except Mavis herself, and she was long past the blush of love and fanciful memories.

He had come through town, buying and selling horses, and left with an innocent child who he never even bothered to formally marry. He deposited her on the banks of the Pecos River in an old adobe shack with crumbling walls and expected her to cook for a bunch of rowdy cowhands even though she had never prepared a meal in her life. They say she was so strikingly beautiful that cowboys would come from miles around, just to see the legendary belle that Richard now claimed as his.

On that oppressive July day in 1931, when Richard felled his wife with a knockout punch that a prizefighter couldn't have taken, he had gone into town and arranged for some train cars to haul his cattle to market. Without telling anybody his plans, he had come home, expecting his kids to help him herd up the cows. He had returned just as his oldest son, eighteen-year-old Sonny, had ridden off, presumably to help the Lewis family on a neighboring ranch with their branding. Richard had been furious.

Maybe it was the starvation price of cattle that year, with the entire nation gripped in a depression. Maybe it was the heavy New Mexico dirt that clung to their skin and choked their lungs as the drought that summer dried up the river and cracked the earth. Maybe he had been looking for a way out for a long time, and he finally saw his chance. Whatever his reasons, Maddy would never forget her father's cruelty nor forgive his cold-blooded treatment of those who shared his name.

His last words, hurled over his shoulder as he threw his battered suitcase into the bed of his old pickup, were "Yer all as worthless as tits on a boar hog. Well, if yer so damned smart, we'll just see how good you can run this place on yer own."

He had roared off, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake, only to have the old truck

sputter and die unceremoniously before it had topped the slight rise in the road that led away from the house. He had gotten out in a huff, his pride most certainly stinging, tinkered a bit under the hood, and then bellowed off again, leaving his wife crumpled in a ball of tears on the floor of their shack.

Mavis had plenty to cry about. Richard had never allowed her to have a thing to do with the business aspect of the ranch. She had no idea where he got his loans or even if he had a bank note about to be called in. Absolutely penniless, without a clue as to how to run a ranch and make a profit much less make ends meet, she still had four children at home depending on her. Estelle, her oldest at twenty-one, had already married and left home. Next came Sonny, a real charmer whose chief ambition was to fight roosters and have fun. Nell at sixteen was the outsider of the bunch, living in her own fantasy world, one that was a million miles from the barren and isolated piece of property that the other Hansons called the "Home Place." She wanted nothing to do with cows or horses, and even less to do with all the hard work that went into maintaining a ranch.

That left Madeline and Bill. After their father was safely out of sight, they had gone into the house and gathered Mavis up off the floor, wiping the blood-tinged mucous and tears from her face, saying, "Don't cry, Momma. We don't need him. We can run this ranch. We just about do now, anyway. We can do it."

They had, too. Somehow, Mavis had gotten a loan and managed to keep the business side of the ranch afloat, barely eking out a living for her family. There were many dark nights, with poverty knocking on their door, when all she could manage to do was bow her head and pray.

When Richard showed up five years later, she said to him, "Richard Hanson, the Lord gave you a second chance when your pickup broke down the day you drove off and left us with nothing. You didn't take it then, and I'm not giving you one now. You said if we were so smart, we could run this place on our own. Well, it's surprised even me, but we've done it. It ain't been easy, but we proved that we don't need you, and we'd be mighty happy if you'd just ride on out of here and leave us be."

He had tried to retake the ranch through the courts, but he had completely underestimated his wife. After he had left the first time, she had easily established a common-law marriage. She then filed for abandonment. With the help of a young attorney from the prominent Hurd family, she finally obtained lawful title to the ranch in her name. When Richard left the second time, after trying unsuccessfully to contest her right to the ranch, they never saw him again.

That was the same man that Bob Preston now claimed had given Maddy away. The whole thing was preposterous, but with a gun trained on her back, Maddy didn't want to do anything that might push him over the brink. Everyone knew that old man Preston was crazy.

During the Depression, lots of folks had lost everything, and Bob Preston was one of them. He had never had much, had always been a little on the odd side, even in better days. To hear him tell it, nothing was ever his fault. It was always a bad break or rotten luck. When he went off the deep end, people mainly tried to help him out. Everyone in the community realized that they might be the next ones to go.

The trouble with old man Preston was that he went farther than most and, in 1936, had been committed to the insane asylum in Las Vegas. No one knew for sure what he finally did to get committed, but there was lots of talk and rumors.

"Did you hear about old man Preston?" some had said. "They found him walkin' down the highway to Roswell, buck naked, talkin' to hisself like there was lots of people with him, only he was answerin' his own questions usin' different voices. The sheriff said it was somethin' called a split personality—two people in the same body."

Others had said, "I heard they found old man Preston stoppin' cars in the middle of Main Street. He was tellin' people he was the Savior Himself, sent down to show people the Way."

When he was released a few months ago, people were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. But when some of the cowhands said that he had been hanging around the Wells Place, acting suspicious-like, Dolph and Maddy decided that they had better investigate. They could look in on Estelle and her family who were living at the Wells Place, and at the same time, they could check on some cows that had wintered over there and were about to calve.

As for old man Preston, they all hoped that his stay in the insane asylum had put him to rights and that he'd be able to get back on his feet again. Although they had an uneasy feeling about him since he'd gotten out, it was nothing that they could put their finger on.

When Maddy and Dolph had ridden out early that morning, their ride had been glorious. This part of New Mexico was so hot and dry that only cactus, mesquite bushes, and salt cedars survived the parched summers. But in the spring, the prairie grasses waved, and the insects hummed in the light breeze. The cactus flowers were blooming and, to Maddy, not even the rose could rival them in beauty. Overhead, the New Mexico skies towered vividly blue and crystal clear. They rode in companionable silence,

soaking up the freshness of their first spring together.

The trail they had chosen to ride meandered right past the Huggins, a natural part of the Pecos River wide enough to become the swimming hole of their youth. It was muddy brown and murky, but to a kid, it was a treasure equal to any of those man-made swimming pools that Maddy had read about. She had also read about mountain streams running crystal clear and lakes that shimmered a deep blue in the afternoon sunlight, a sight that Maddy could only imagine. Still, she and Dolph were grateful for what they had. The Pecos River ran right through the middle of their property, providing water, a commodity of short supply in this country. Even so, to Maddy, this was God's country.

At Estelle's place they were relieved to find that she and the kids were doing fine, and they hadn't seen hide nor hair of old man Preston.

Estelle did have a problem though, so she was real glad to see Maddy and Dolph. She'd started into town the other day, but only got a few miles when she'd had a flat. Could Dolph help her fix it? Since Estelle was wont to go off and leave her kids all by themselves at times when she had an itch to see what was happening in town or find out if there happened to be a dance over at the schoolhouse, Maddy had thought at first it might be better for Estelle to stay afoot. But being so isolated out at the Wells Place, and without a man, Estelle did need a car. Dolph would have to get the flat fixed for her. No matter that she didn't have a spare. Estelle wasn't one to plan ahead for eventualities such as flat tires. She lived her life as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"Maddy," she said once, "you act like you're an old lady. Sometimes you look like life's a lemon, and you're suckin' on it. Remember how Daddy always said 'if you put enough sugar on sawdust it'll taste good?' Well, Maddy, honey, maybe you ought to try some sugar with that lemon."

Maddy just shook her head. Estelle had been blessed with a joyful heart, and Maddy sometimes envied her ability to see the rosy side of almost every situation she was in, no matter how dour. It was hard to keep Estelle down.

It was decided that Maddy would ride on home alone by way of the upper ridge, surveying the shape of the ranch from up there. Dolph and Estelle would ride out to Estelle's car, get the tire and return to the Home Place, riding through the grassland where most of the cows had wintered. Dolph could inspect the herd along the way and still have time to take Estelle and her flat tire into town before night.

Now, Maddy had arrived back at the Home Place ahead of Dolph and Estelle and discovered that old man Preston had plans of his own that, for some reason, included her. As Maddy obediently entered her home with the barrel of old man Preston's gun

stuck between her shoulders, she thought that Dolph and Estelle couldn't be too far behind her. Granted, they had gone to Estelle's car first, but the trail that Maddy had taken home was a longer route than the one that they had taken. At best, they were thirty minutes behind; at worst, an hour or so, barring something totally unforeseen.

If Maddy had not been so intent on searching her memory to find the incident that had set old man Preston in motion, she probably could have resisted him when he laid the gun down in order to tie her hands. Having the weapon definitely gave him the upper hand. With it out of the equation, Maddy probably could have run out the back door and hightailed it to the barn, easily eluding him in his deteriorated condition.

As it was, lost in thought, Maddy wasn't paying attention when he laid down the gun and hastily secured her wrists with a double half hitch, then hobbled her ankles loosely so she could still walk.

Suddenly, a light dawned. Madeline couldn't have been more than eight years old at the time. Frequently ranch families helped each other with their branding. It was a combination social gathering as well as a time of service to one another, like a barn raising. Mr. Preston and some other men had been helping the Hansons brand when a calf had slipped from their grasp. Maddy had always been a crack roper, and before anyone had known what was happening, she had sailed a lasso in the blink of an eye, stopping the calf from breaking away. It had been an impressive sight, with all the men praising her wildfire reflexes, but Bob Preston had stood in awe of a little girl who could accomplish such a feat before half the grown men looking on could even react. Shaking his head, he said to her father, "What I wouldn't give for a gal like that."

Her father had been uncharacteristically jocular that day and, wiping the sweat from his brow, had said in an offhanded way, "Well, you can just have her, Bob. I could use one less mouth to feed." Hardly missing a beat, the men had thrown the bawling calf back on its side, and the branding had continued.

"Mr. Preston," Madeline ventured slowly, "surely you're not talking about one of the times when we were branding, and I roped that calf, are you?"

"See there, Maddy, you knew all along that your daddy did give ya to me. Lots of folks heard him that day. I shoulda claimed ya 'fore they sent me off to Las Vegas. Things wouldn'ta happened the way they have if I'da just took ya back then. We'd have us a good stake goin' by now."

"But, Mr. Preston, I couldn't of been more than eight years old at the time."

"It don't matter how old ya were. A man's word is his bond."

"But I'm married now, Mr. Preston, and Daddy's been gone almost ten years."

"I done told ya, none of that matters. Yore daddy never even met Dolph Thomas; yer daddy meant for me to have ya. Now, that's all that there is to it." He was getting agitated. "Now, we're fixin' to leave on outa here. I just wish I could bring those horses with us. But we'll make do. Now, you get on up, and git yerself movin'. Now!" He had the gun pointed at her again, and the right side of his face was starting to twitch.

Maddy knew that she was considered a beautiful woman; all the Hanson women were. But she had never been the type to use this to her advantage. Maddy considered females who did that were usually too dumb to accomplish the job with their brains and ability.

However, now, as she deliberated on her options, she decided a little old-fashioned sweet-talk might be in order. She had also discovered that old man Preston tied a sorry knot. Any roper worth his salt had to tie a knot secure enough to hold a fighting animal and this was definitely not the case with this knot.

"Now, Bob, let's talk about this," she gentled her tone. "We've been friends for a long time. Why, I guess I've known you fifteen or sixteen years. We'll always be friends. Why, I've got a suitcase full of happy memories with you right in the middle of them." She was stalling now, trying to distract him while she manipulated the knot covertly.

"Remember that time when we all went on that round-up over at Cimarron? I'll never forget sleeping out under the stars, listening to the men jawing and telling their stories; swapping lies is probably more like it. And I'll never forget you playing the harmonica. Do you still play the harmonica, Bob?"

He had a vacant look in his eyes, and he didn't answer. She worked at the knot more diligently and went on.

"Those are fine memories I have, Bob. But I'm a married woman now. We can always be friends. If there's something you need to get you back on your feet, well, you just name it. We'll help you; everyone's always helped each other around here. Now, let's just put things to right before Dolph and Estelle get here. No one will ever know about the gun or you tying me up or packing my things. But we'll need to hurry, Bob. They are sure to be here any minute."

Maddy had no way of knowing, but they were riding in at that exact moment. They had gotten the flat tire and tied it behind Estelle's saddle and then ridden over to check the cows. There had been several new baby calves, but one was doing poorly so Dolph had decided to bring it in, carrying it across his lap. As they neared the house and saw the truck overflowing with animals and household goods, they looked at each other quizzically.

“Estelle, you better check the house. I’ll be there as soon as I do something with the calf.” Dolph headed straight to the barn.

Estelle dismounted and tied her horse. “Maddy?” Her voice raised in question “Maddy, where are you?” She headed slowly toward the house.

Inside, Maddy had heard their arrival. She looked up at old man Preston, feeling his panic and alarm. He really hadn’t expected them, but obviously, he wasn’t thinking clearly.

“I don’t wanta hurt nobody, Maddy. But yore comin’ with me.” His eyes were glassy, his movements jerky. “Now, you come on.”

Estelle was starting up onto the porch.

Maddy yelled out, “Run, Estelle! He’s got a gun!”

Estelle opened the door and saw Maddy with her hands tied and her feet hobbled and old man Preston waving a gun in the air.

Maddy yelled again. “Run, Estelle! He’s got a gun!”

And run Estelle did. Right at old man Preston. She lunged for him just as he pulled the trigger.

KERPLOW!

A bullet tore through Estelle’s right shoulder. She crumpled like a rag doll.

“You’ve killed her, you bastard!”

Maddy flung the now loosed ropes from her hands and charged him, the adrenaline allowing her to spring straight at him like a mountain lion, before he could get off another shot. They crashed to the floor, the gun skittering, both of them struggling, straining to reach the weapon.

Dolph had been about thirty yards from the house when he heard Maddy yell. When he heard the shots, he took off at a dead run.

God, no! He tore into the house and saw Estelle lying in a heap, Maddy and old man Preston wrestling on the floor. Roaring like a lion, he covered the distance in two great strides. Grabbing up the old man, he smashed a mighty blow to the man’s chin, then another and another and another.

“Dolph, stop!” Maddy was crying beside him. “Please, Dolph, you’ll kill him.” Dolph turned loose of the man, and he slid to the floor. Dolph looked up at her, almost in a daze. They clung to each other only momentarily. Estelle was groaning on the floor.

Maddy ran to her, crouching next to her. “Estelle?” She turned her over gently. Blood was pouring from her shoulder. Her shirt was soaked and blood was running down her arm. Estelle was fighting to maintain consciousness. Maddy knew she was alive and jumped up to find something to stay the bleeding. Everything was out in the truck.

"You crazy bastard! She better be all right!" she spat at the unconscious attacker as she raced by. At the truck, she grabbed up a handful of her clothes and ran back in. Dolph had recovered from his shock and was kneeling by Estelle.

Maddy pressed one of her shirts gently against the bleeding wound. "We've got to get her into town, Dolph, before she bleeds to death." Dolph had taken another shirt, dampened it with water from the cistern, and was wiping Estelle's face. He hadn't said a word.

"Estelle, are you all right?" Maddy searched her face for a sign that she was not hurt as badly as she suspected.

"Hell, no, Madeline. I'm not all right." Estelle grimaced. "The sonuvabitch like to have blown my arm off."

Maddy hiccuped involuntarily, then started laughing through her tears.

"Estelle, you crazy woman," Maddy folded another shirt and placed it on top of the first one, then tore a strip of cloth and used it to secure the makeshift pressure bandage.

"Damn, that hurts. First, I get shot, and then you try to finish me off with kindness. I should have stayed home and let Dolph take care of the tire by himself."

Estelle cringed as Maddy ministered to her.

"What in blue blazes is going on here anyway, Maddy?" Estelle asked. "Were you cheatin' on your new husband with old man Preston? Or did you cheat on old man Preston with Dolph? In any case, I think you were the one that was supposed to have taken this bullet."

"Oh, you. Now, just hush up. Leave it to you to make jokes when you're laying on the floor bleedin' to death. Save some of the energy it takes for you to run your mouth and help us get you in the truck." Maddy turned to Dolph. "Dolph, you're going to have to unload some of that stuff, so we can all get in there."

Dolph had already made it outside and was pulling things out of the truck willy-nilly, stacking the rabbit and chicken cages, clearing the front seat so they could all fit in. Maddy had helped Estelle sit up, then they gradually stood, with Maddy trying to hold Estelle's shoulder and support her at the same time. Old man Preston was breathing, but he hadn't stirred.

Maddy helped Estelle into the pickup seat, then slid in beside her. Dolph looked at them anxiously and said, "Maddy, I'm going to have to get old man Preston and take him in with us. I may need your help."

"He's a cur dog, Dolph. He needs to be shot and dumped in the pasture for the vultures to pick his eyes out," Maddy said in disgust. Dolph turned to go get old man

Preston out of the house, knowing that she wouldn't just leave him to die.

"Estelle, are you going to be OK while I go help Dolph?" Estelle was ashen and looked like she was about to pass out, but her mouth seemed unaffected by the ordeal.

"I'm doin' just great, but it's Dolph we need to worry about. I promised him some of my famous biscuits and gravy for helpin' me fix my flat, but it looks like he's gonna have to settle for yours instead."

"Estelle Harris, you better watch it, or you're going to end up with old man Preston in the back pasture."

It was common knowledge that, growing up, Maddy preferred to work outside, roping and riding, and her family knew that only true love could get her into the kitchen. "And my biscuits and gravy are as good as yours. Dolph said so just the other day."

"That'll be the day." Estelle managed a little laugh. "And, Maddy," she went on, "get a move on. There's a dance over at the schoolhouse tonight."

Maddy shook her head as she went in, secretly relieved that Estelle had enough life in her to put up a good front. You could count on Estelle to come up with something lighthearted at a time when most people would be hysterical.

Dolph had old man Preston under the arms and was tugging him across the floor. Maddy held open the door while Dolph backed him out and dragged him over the porch, his head lolling to the side as his boots thumped down the steps. Maddy opened the tailgate, and grabbing his ankles, they hoisted him up like a sack of flour and dumped him in the truck bed.

Maddy slammed the tailgate shut and said, "A cow patty has more use than him. At least it gives something back to the land in the long run."

Dolph drove as fast as he could on the rutted dirt road. He didn't want to jostle Estelle. Beads of perspiration had broken out on her face, and her color was pasty-gray. She tried not to moan when the truck lurched over a bump. The road wasn't much better than a cow trail, and it was twenty miles to the highway.

Once they hit the road into Roswell, Dolph opened the old truck wide-open for the last thirty miles into town. They didn't say much, but Madeline tried to fill them in on what old man Preston had said, what had motivated this insanity. It was hard to fathom, but the plain and simple truth was that there was no accounting for what happens when some people get touched in the head.

By the time they made it to the hospital, Estelle was looking rode hard and put up wet. The dirt road from the Home Place had a high gypsum content, and the white dust coated old man Preston. Barely breathing, he looked like a ghost covered in fine white

powder. They caused quite a commotion in the parking lot of the hospital as a crowd gathered around the pickup, gaping at the near-dead apparition in the back.

Estelle's shot to the shoulder had been pretty clean, but the bullet had carried fragments of cloth into the wound on entry. Her biggest risk was infection, plus she had lost a considerable amount of blood. She was in the hospital for a couple of weeks, received several pints of blood, healed up without an infection, and was back in fine form for the next schoolhouse dance.

Old man Preston didn't make it through the night. There was an inquiry as to what had happened, and it was an open-and-shut case of self-defense. Everybody knew Dolph and the Hanson family and knew that old man Preston was crazy. Eventually, the scandal and the gossip died down, but it was the talk of the town for quite a few years.

"Did you hear about that lunatic, Bob Preston, how he tried to kidnap Maddy Hanson, and shot Estelle in the shoulder? Dolph beat him to death with his bare hands, but it's a good thing he did. Why, it's a miracle old man Preston hadn't killed them all."

"They shoulda never let him out of the insane asylum. They say people in Las Vegas could hear him howlin' at the moon when it was full."

Black or White?

by **Senzela Saidi**

“Are you black or white?”

“What?” I replied when I first heard the question.

“What are you?” the girl repeated again, with attitude and curiosity. The sun tortured the earth with its rays, causing beads of sweat to form over her brow and run down her temple while she threw me a look of superiority. She was round, with stern black eyes and three thick braids sprouting from her head. Her friends stood around her, their scrutinizing eyes piercing through me, too.

“Human,” I said.

Insulted or puzzled by the response, they all paused and exchanged questioning glances. I tried to ignore them and prayed for the bell to ring so I could escape the class and further interrogation. It was only my first day in the seventh grade, and my usually positive outlook had already been shattered into a thousand pieces.

I knew most Americans didn’t know many Afghanis. I even understood that Eldorado, Arkansas, being a small and desolate town, didn’t have a large multicultural community. I realized that I was living in a foreign state and that I was trapped in an isolated small town at the peak of a major change in my life where everything and everyone was different with strange ideas. Yet I was the one who was labeled a stranger, and I just couldn’t understand what was so amazingly bizarre about me. I couldn’t help feeling odd and alienated.

I kept to myself for the rest of the day and for many after. As a result, I became shy. I felt like an outsider, and I brought my grades down with me. I spent most of the seventh grade that way—an outcast from the student body.

But the students weren’t the only ones who influenced this behavior. Even teachers seemed to encourage it by not giving any sense of welcome or comfort. I was going through a hard enough time in my life without having to deal with the ridicule of everyone else. I became extremely depressed. School became a dreaded responsibility,

and each day I hated having to face it. They all eventually convinced me that they were right, that I didn't belong in Eldorado, and I longed for the chance to leave.

I began the eighth grade roughly the same way I started the year before, quiet and very dejected. The only difference was the small comfort of knowing that it would be my last year at Barton Middle School and my last year in Eldorado altogether. What I didn't know was that it would be the year that would introduce me to one of the most influential teachers I would ever know.

Mr. Moore was the environmental science teacher at Barton Middle School. He was tall and skinny, with short, wild hair that seemed as if it were cursed with a plague of static electricity. At the beginning of the year, I really didn't care how I did in school, but Mr. Moore had some sort of passion for teaching and a way of getting through to students. I liked the way he treated us. He was the sort of teacher who actually taught his students instead of just grading them. He was also the type of teacher who would get involved if the student needed it.

One day when I was unusually down, he pulled me aside when the bell rang for dismissal. He then asked me, "Is everything okay in your life?" He inspected me with deep, concerned eyes. Taken aback by his genuine concern, I looked back at him and started to cry. For the first time in what felt like forever, I actually felt as if someone cared about me. I wasn't sure of what to tell him. I tried to assure him that I would be all right, but he took me by my arms and told me that he would be there if I ever needed to talk. I don't know if he realized then that what he had just done was enough. I wanted to pour my heart out to him, but I also had a sense that he already knew what was bothering me. His friendship saved me. He showed me that as long as I can be true to myself, everyone else doesn't matter. His heart was strong and true, and I was lucky enough to have encountered it.

After that, I became more open and cared less what other people thought. I grew confident and carried that confidence with me into my other classes. I passed the year with ease, and, finally, I made it to the last day of school. I then realized that, at last, I was leaving Barton Middle School forever. The school that had tormented me within its walls, the year that had led me and other students through one of the most difficult times of our lives was soon to be history. As I was going through the halls for the last and final time, Mr. Moore came up to me. He looked at me, and I saw the devotion and love his eyes held. He embraced me in one last hug. Not even knowing it at the time, Mr. Moore had saved me.

My Scar

by S. Stidham Kear

I was seven that winter, my birthday just past. My baby brother and I lived with Grandma and Pop.

Pop was a big man, nine feet tall. I followed him around that old farm like a puppy lost. He walked with an agonizing gait, dragging his left leg and left foot, with me right behind. Had he turned around quickly, he would have run over me. I was small for my age at that time, but I had pretty, cotton-white, hip-long ringlet hair. It was beautiful; my Pop told me so.

I was Pop's "helper." He was hurt in World War I and could not walk or talk as other men did. But I understood every word he said. I remember my grandma beaming and how proud she sounded the day before when she stood outside, admiring the old blackjacket-tree-and-Tinker-Field-lumber house we had just finished building. The lumber had come from a Tinker Field Air Force Base barracks they had let us scrap out to recycle. She stood looking at it with her hands on her hips.

"Now your grandpa won't have to spend another winter in that damn tent," she proudly said. "It hurts his bones too much; that's why I was in such an all-fired hurry to get this house done. Looks good," she grinned.

It drizzled icy rain most all that night. Fall had surely arrived.

The next morning, Grandma had already left with the other kids for the barn to do chores. Pop was feeling real bad that day.

Pushing up on his elbow from his bed, Pop, in his jerky war speech, told me, "Cold – one – time – baby. Wood."

The heat coming from the big wood-burning cookstove in the kitchen just wasn't enough for that breezy, poorly constructed, four-room farmhouse. I knew what he wanted, but before I stoked the heating stove, I went over and put another quilt on him, tucking him in good, especially his bad foot and leg—the left one he dragged as he

walked. His pain was bad, a gift from World War I and an unknown enemy who had pushed a bayonet blade about six inches into his navel.

As I worked, I was thinking about what I had overheard one evening as him and Grandma talked. We had just started building the house. They talked about our kitchen table, the huge round oak table Pop had slowly, painfully built with his own hands before his pain got so bad. It now seated eleven kids and him and Grandma. He voiced his concern about how it would be almost impossible for him “because he hurt so bad now” to repair it anymore or to build a new chair to be presented to each new child of the family. “That” was a very special occasion in our household when Pop presented the new chair to the new three-year-old.

We couldn’t move the table after the tent came down, so we literally built the kitchen around it; Grandma just wouldn’t do away with it. I grinned at Grandma’s stubborn streak.

Pop’s bed was always in the corner of the living room, on the other side of the woodbox, which was always piled high with stove-length firewood within his easy reach. At night, I would sit on that woodpile, next to a coal oil lamp and read to him, usually a favorite paperback Zane Gray western and any of the others that he wanted to listen to.

I always had an audience. It seemed to help Pop a lot.

This morning, he was hot to the touch, very hot to me, but he told me he was cold.

Very slowly and quietly, I gathered up the pine kindling; then, ever so slowly, I got four blackjack logs out of the woodpile.

Pop had drifted off to sleep as I tucked him in. Under my breath, I said a few cuss words I had learned from Pop when things were not going his way. I cussed my short legs and the black soot from the stove that, now, was all over my new flour-sack panties and matching dress Grandma had made for my birthday three days earlier. I wanted to be quiet and not wake up Pop.

I went to the kitchen and got the can of coal oil and poured it in through the open top of the wood stove beside Pop’s bed. I was good at stacking kindling and making a fire just right. I knew how to make it soak up the coal oil for quick combustion and how to make it last a long time.

I had forgotten the matches in the kitchen.

I took the coal oil can back to the kitchen as I went to retrieve the matches. Very quietly, I gathered two large blackjack logs from the woodpile to make a place for me

to stand on and placed them next to the wood stove, the logs touching it. In my mind, I was still too far away from the kindling at the bottom of the stove.

I looked over at Pop; he was fussing and turning in his sleep.

I opened the big lid on the top of the stove and reached down into the stove to strike the match. I was still too short. I tiptoed on the logs, placing my arm, shoulder, and head down into the stove. Down next to the kindling, I struck the match!

The world blew up!!!

I screamed and screamed. I could smell the burning—my own burning flesh and hair—and could hear Pop screaming as he tried to get out of the quilts tangled around his feet.

The two fire logs were on top of me. I had wedged my foot between them as I balanced myself when I prepared to strike the match. My left ankle was broken.

I don't remember too much for awhile after that. I do remember the screaming pain.

Then Grandma was there, and as she cleaned my burns, it was as if she were pouring salt into a million deep-cut wounds from the chopping ax, trying to clean them with her Chore Girl Brillo scrubber and taking off my skin, bone deep. I closed my eyes tight against the pain. I could feel tears running down into my ears; I could feel the thunder they made as they hit my eardrums.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Pop all hunched over, sitting on the side of the bed, watching as Grandma made a poultice of baking soda, lard, and Watkins menthol ointment.

Each time I screamed, he looked up at me and gently rubbed my long white ringlets against his cheek. He held them in his hands, and, as Grandma cut them off, he took them, one by one.

His eyes looked dead. I could see his pain through mine. As I screamed, I felt his love holding me tight.

A full year later, after four skin grafts and weeks in Children's Hospital in Oklahoma City, I was finally home to stay.

As I sat one morning, drinking coffee with my Pop—"that old war cook," his eyes cracking at the edges and sparkling as diamonds in the sunlight—he pushed his coffee cup toward me across our huge, round farm table.

As I grinned back at him, giggling and slowly getting up, knowing in advance what he wanted, he said, "Spoon – no – sink, baby. . . . Coffee – gooooodd You – no – forget – egg – shells More!"

The Duke

by Frank Dickinson

I have always loved motorcycles. I really didn't have a way to support that habit until after I had been married a few years. My job was going pretty well; I had moved up to supervisor, with a company pickup that I was allowed to use twenty-four hours a day. I had a dirt bike, a big bike for the highway, and a mini-bike that my four-year-old daughter let me ride. But I needed a performance bike for the road. Something you could lean way over in the corners. Alas, the madam of the house also had needs. New furniture and carpet were obtained, and the budget was fully stretched.

I still liked to look and dream. There were piles of motorcycle magazines at my house. I took care of them like they were family pictures. There was one bike featured on the front of many of them. It was the 1974 Ducati Desmo 750. This bike dominated its class of road racing. This Italian stallion, alias the Duke, was the right stuff, and if I had won the lottery, the Ducati store was the first place that would have seen the money.

My job moved me to the Texas Panhandle the next year. Lots of long flat dusty roads, oilwells, and feedlots. Hail the size of golfballs with nothing between you and the North Pole but a barbed wire fence. The gas stations were often fifty miles apart, and you didn't want to run out of gas. The locations we worked on were frequently separated by long stretches of blacktop highway. Constant driving and lots of daydreaming was the rule.

I may have been looking for gas one day when I flew by an old farmhouse where I spotted a motorcycle sitting in front of the barn. It looked like it was broken and neglected. I wasn't sure why, but something about its lines made me turn around and go back. It was dirt on a bad black paint job, but there was no mistaking a Ducati. Not just any, but the 1974 should have been bright orange *Ducati*. It had a dropped valve, a scored cylinder wall, a busted piston, and some owners not inclined to fix it to ride.

They said it had outrun everything in this part of the country. Before then, it had belonged to some rich kid from Amarillo. They had traded a customized Harley in a moment of desire for speed. These people liked to party a lot, and I don't think they were ready for the difference in these rides. A Harley, like a mule, will sit down before you work it to death. A Ducati is a thoroughbred. It's the best at what it does, but it has to be ridden right. I think they were kind of disgusted with it. Not the greatest trade. Still, they needed money—and I had to have that bike. I gathered my assets and the deal was done.

With a growing family going through furniture and carpet, it was several years before I could have it fixed. My oldest son David was born right after I got it and six by the first time he got a ride on it. I had been transferred a couple of times since Texas and was living in Alex, Oklahoma, by then, I would take the sometimes-curved blacktop north of town to Highway 39 and back. One time up that road and back for each kid. We weren't out for long rides, just short bursts of pleasure. I enjoyed those rides with the kids as much or more than I did riding alone.

I have grown children now, too big to ride with me on the small racing seat of the Duke. The picture I see is of my children as teenagers looking at the bike parked in the front yard of the house where I lived. I wonder if they think about those times we rode together.

The bike hasn't been started since Preston, my youngest son, worked on it two summers ago. I have been thinking; it should be back on the road. My daughter Jennifer has a four-year-old boy named Noah. He should be about ready for a ride.

Swimming Against the Tide: Kate Chopin's *Awakening*

by Nela Foster

Winner: Oklahoma City Community College Freshman English (ENG 1213)
Essay Contest

The art of being a woman is difficult even in the best of circumstances. As we acquire multiple roles of wife, mother, housekeeper, and cook while also juggling children's activities along with our own social obligations, where does "self" take its place? These conflicts are a common struggle for most all women today, yet women in the late 1800's rarely dared to admit such conflicts existed, much less attempt to establish any form of identity that would clash with the role of wife and mother.

Born and raised in a strict Kentucky Presbyterian culture with the heavy code of societal politeness and correctness looming over her shoulders, Edna Pontellier, in Kate Chopin's short novel *The Awakening*, struggles initially with the sensuous intimacy of the Creole lifestyle and, finally, with the awakening of her own sexuality, all with little or no regard to the consequences to be suffered by her husband and children. I can relate to Edna's awakening, and although today's society is more accepting of the freedoms enjoyed by women, there are still social conventions to be considered when making the decision to declare freedom from a restraining relationship. Edna Pontellier is an example of women from all time periods who come to the realization that life is about more than marriage and babies. Life is also about fulfilling your own sense of worth for the sake of no other than yourself.

Creole society formed a distinct contrast to the traditional American society in the 1800's in which Edna was raised. Their philosophy was to live for the moment, and it was acceptable for respectable Creole women to partake in wine and brandy and even listen to jokes and stories of sexual content with their male counterparts. Edna, who

describes herself as self-contained, "was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either by herself or others." By succumbing to the relaxed, openly sensual friendships shared by the Creole families in southern Louisiana, Edna essentially turns her back on her own culture. This lifestyle leads her to the belief that she has merely slept through her life. Edna tries to explain her need for freedom to her friend Adele, saying, "I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me." Without a sense of self-worth, life seems void and isolated. Although Adele thought Edna's comment strange, I think women today have a great comprehension of the feelings Edna is experiencing, yet I cannot say the process of sorting out these feelings is any less complicated.

Edna makes some ill-thought decisions in an attempt to sort out her life, and Chopin writes that "all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference." The move from her home on Esplanade Street seemed the logical first step, but there was no thought of room for her returning children with this move. Also, if she is so desperately in love with Robert, what does she think she is going to do with Alcée Arobin upon Robert's return? Additionally, once she crossed the line of flirtatious attentions from Alcée to adultery, I think Edna was at the point of no return. She must have thought perhaps her husband would release her from marriage although when Robert returns, she tells him, "You have been a very, very foolish boy . . . when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not." While no woman wants to be considered a possession, it is foolish to think that, in abandoning reality, Fate will lead you down the right path.

The conclusion of the novel determines that Fate is not always our friend. Throughout the story, Edna demonstrates a strength and determination in every relationship, which was unheard of by women of her day, yet in the end, she cannot endure the rejection she feels from Robert. I think it is questionable whether her suicide is planned or, again, is determined by Fate. The fact that she makes arrangements for a room with Victor and even tells him what she wishes to be served for dinner indicates she is planning to return to the main house at Grand Isle.

It is during her walk to the beach that her inner thoughts from the previous evening, when Robert left, become apparent, and she is now fearful of the effect her present and future behavior with men will have on her children. For once, she seems to have a hint

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by Nela Foster

Winner: Oklahoma City Community College Freshman English (ENG 1213)
Essay Contest

The art of being a woman is difficult even in the best of circumstances. As we acquire multiple roles of wife, mother, housekeeper, and cook while also juggling children's activities along with our own social obligations, where does "self" take its place? These conflicts are a common struggle for most all women today, yet women in the late 1800's rarely dared to admit such conflicts existed, much less attempt to establish any form of identity that would clash with the role of wife and mother.

Born and raised in a strict Kentucky Presbyterian culture with the heavy code of societal politeness and correctness looming over her shoulders, Edna Pontellier, in Kate Chopin's short novel *The Awakening*, struggles initially with the sensuous intimacy of the Creole lifestyle and, finally, with the awakening of her own sexuality, all with little or no regard to the consequences to be suffered by her husband and children. I can relate to Edna's awakening, and although today's society is more accepting of the freedoms enjoyed by women, there are still social conventions to be considered when making the decision to declare freedom from a restraining relationship. Edna Pontellier is an example of women from all time periods who come to the realization that life is about more than marriage and babies. Life is also about fulfilling your own sense of worth for the sake of no other than yourself.

Creole society formed a distinct contrast to the traditional American society in the 1800's in which Edna was raised. Their philosophy was to live for the moment, and it was acceptable for respectable Creole women to partake in wine and brandy and even listen to jokes and stories of sexual content with their male counterparts. Edna, who

describes herself as self-contained, "was not accustomed to an outward and spoken expression of affection, either by herself or others." By succumbing to the relaxed, openly sensual friendships shared by the Creole families in southern Louisiana, Edna essentially turns her back on her own culture. This lifestyle leads her to the belief that she has merely slept through her life. Edna tries to explain her need for freedom to her friend Adele, saying, "I would give up the unessential; I would give up my money, I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me." Without a sense of self-worth, life seems void and isolated. Although Adele thought Edna's comment strange, I think women today have a great comprehension of the feelings Edna is experiencing, yet I cannot say the process of sorting out these feelings is any less complicated.

Edna makes some ill-thought decisions in an attempt to sort out her life, and Chopin writes that "all sense of reality had gone out of her life; she had abandoned herself to Fate, and awaited the consequences with indifference." The move from her home on Esplanade Street seemed the logical first step, but there was no thought of room for her returning children with this move. Also, if she is so desperately in love with Robert, what does she think she is going to do with Alcée Arobin upon Robert's return? Additionally, once she crossed the line of flirtatious attentions from Alcée to adultery, I think Edna was at the point of no return. She must have thought perhaps her husband would release her from marriage although when Robert returns, she tells him, "You have been a very, very foolish boy . . . when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free! I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not." While no woman wants to be considered a possession, it is foolish to think that, in abandoning reality, Fate will lead you down the right path.

The conclusion of the novel determines that Fate is not always our friend. Throughout the story, Edna demonstrates a strength and determination in every relationship, which was unheard of by women of her day, yet in the end, she cannot endure the rejection she feels from Robert. I think it is questionable whether her suicide is planned or, again, is determined by Fate. The fact that she makes arrangements for a room with Victor and even tells him what she wishes to be served for dinner indicates she is planning to return to the main house at Grand Isle.

It is during her walk to the beach that her inner thoughts from the previous evening, when Robert left, become apparent, and she is now fearful of the effect her present and future behavior with men will have on her children. For once, she seems to have a hint

of remorse, thinking "To-day it is Arobin; tomorrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Léonce Pontellier, but Raoul and Etienne!" The words of her friend Adele, "Think of the children," finally ring true in her ears.

As she enters the sea, naked, Edna finally finds the freedom she has been longing for. As she swims farther out in the water and her body grows tired from the swim, her mind also grows tired of trying to sort out her destiny, and she reminds herself, "they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul." Then she simply let her body be engulfed by the sea, which is as mysterious as Edna herself.

I have also felt that longing for something that would satisfy my sense of worth other than fulfilling my obligations as wife and mother. It can be extremely claustrophobic to feel trapped in a marriage such as Edna's, which never should have been, but as a mother, there is a great amount of responsibility and accountability that must be maintained for the sake of children. While I have made the right choices in my life, considering the society in which I live, Edna may have also made the right choice for her children, considering the society in which she lived, saving face for them as well as for the husband she did not love but, nevertheless, owed an amount of respect. Although heavily criticized, Kate Chopin should be applauded for this work in bringing to light the universal battle for freedom and love experienced by all women—past, present, and future.

Warning Tickets: A Mild Tap on the Wrist

by Arti Staton

*Winner: Oklahoma City Community College Freshman English (ENG 1113)
Essay Contest*

I was introduced to driving fast as a young teenager. Drag strips were common in Moore, Oklahoma, in the nineteen-fifties. Since I was the only girl pleading to drag race, the boys at first said no, but after a year of relentless begging and soon after my sixteenth birthday, the boys relented. I discovered drag racing to be exhilarating and exciting, and before long, I didn't limit driving at high rates of speed to the drag strips.

I became a "lead foot" menace on all roads. As my dexterity and the maneuverability of my car improved, my speed increased. Driving fast was an emotional and energizing activity. I was young, foolish, and brimmed with "Nothing-will-happen-to-me." I drove excessive speeds for over thirty years. I became an expert liar with a unique and fitting story every time I was stopped by the Highway Patrol or city police officers. Time after time, I was sent on my way with a few words of caution and a bright pink or blue warning ticket.

In 1980, while en route to Dallas from Oklahoma City, my speedometer was registering slightly under 100 mph when flashing red lights suddenly appeared behind me. I immediately pulled over, stopped, and was holding my driver's license and insurance verification out the window as the officer approached my car. I quickly said, "Oh, officer, I'm so glad you stopped me. My sister is ill and my mind was on getting to her as quickly as possible." With teary eyes, I continued with a well-practiced Southern drawl. "Why, with it beginning to rain and you know how slick these roads get, you probably saved my life." After one of my best performances, I was given a warning ticket, and I was soon speeding again though I did feel a twinge of guilt regarding lying about my sister being ill.

Over the course of thirty years, had I been ticketed for speeding and received hefty fines rather than being issued seventy or so courtesy warnings, my appetite for speeding would surely have been curbed. Yes, I had a problem: a serious problem. I resolved my problem of speeding soon after I was stopped by a Yukon, Oklahoma, police officer in 1981, and the fine was one hundred and fifty dollars for driving forty miles over the posted limit. I could tell by the way the female officer was walking up to my car I had better keep my mouth shut. Soon after the Yukon stop, I began setting my cruise control, and I continue this precaution today as soon as I reach the posted speed limit.

For years, I've conversed with both women and men regarding the inequity of warnings for women and tickets for men. It's a rarity for a man to receive a warning ticket, yet it's very common for a woman. According to Nationwide Insurance Company in Texas, the insurance rates for a young male between the ages of sixteen to twenty-five are almost triple the rate for a female the same age. The insurance rate is determined by traffic violations and accidents of both young males and females.

One solution to slow down compulsive speeders would be that all warning tickets be recorded. With current technology, violators could be easily detected and notified they'll receive no more warning tickets. A second solution could be that the officer who is writing the warning ticket inform the offender that a speeding ticket will be issued immediately if there are other warning tickets on record.

Having received three tickets versus more than seventy warning tickets clearly defines a critical problem of policing the roadways. Though roads are more numerous and better engineered since the nineteen-fifties, speeders have increased manyfold and have become a foreboding threat to themselves and others. A warning ticket is little more than a tap on the wrist, and it is rarely a deterrent to slowing down habitual speeders.

Poems

天静沙 秋思

(元) 马思远

枯藤老树昏鸦，
小桥流水人家，
古道西风瘦马，
夕阳西下，
断肠人在天涯。

Ma Shiyuan

Yuan Dynasty (1206 – 1368 A.D.)

Autumn Reflections

Withered vine old tree languid crow

Small bridge running water people's home

Ancient roadway cold wind thin horse

Broken-hearted man at a land beyond the horizon

Translated by Lucy Songping Hu

Heart Attack

In another part of the city
A man goes down
The weight of his world
On his shoulders
The weight of his job
On his temper
The weight of his family
On his mind
The weight of a freight train
On his chest
The weight of rest
Calls him
The weight of the wind
Blows through him

Vicki Newby

The Widow

The river washes through the memory,

Webs of sunlight shifting with the ebb and flow,
Falling over rocks,
Separating strips of dark earth.

She remembers that day,
The day she stood on the bank

Alone

Watching as her husband's canoe
Floated past,

Upside down,
Gliding with the current,
Bobbing over the white-caps,
Smashing against the rocks.

She remembers the river,
Whispering secrets in the shadows,
Eroding the limestone,
Lapping the exposed tree roots.

Greg Daubenspeck

Feelings without you

Twenty burnt filters
3/4s empty bottle
Spotted pants
Broken heart
Feelings without you

A dream of black
A stomach of vomit
Cynical laughter
Weeping tears
Feelings without you

Dull rusty razor
Fungus socks
Dirty drawls
Dried out ink
Feelings without you

Moldy fish in the desert
Scratched-up tori CDs
Crusty seat cushion
Rubbing alcohol in my eye
Feelings without you

Sub stops out of bread
All commercials no music
Back2back brooksNgaines
WGNless cable
Feelings without you

No love

No peace

No happiness

No hope

Feelings without you

Paul Freeman

A Gift

In our green apartment,
we planned parties, showers,
entertained boyfriends.

I helped her
through a divorce
when she felt she didn't
have a friend.

She was there
when mother passed on.
She held my hand
and embraced my dad
as though he were her own.

We visited San Francisco,
after she moved to Sacramento.
We rode cable cars,
hiked steep streets,
went to Fisherman's Wharf,
saw a tall, slim,
black fur clad Asian man
we thought was a dream.

Married now, we call
as would sisters,
chatting about husbands,
careers, retirement,
movies, politics.
A gift of friendship,
close as family.

Barbara Cunningham

Fun

I jumped to the sky to get my balloon.
Go! Run! To catch a bird,
Phone a friend to travel afar in a car,
Skip to a rock and play
 with a basketful of candles;
The clock says it's time to swim through a box
Rain, flower, and trees
 give me a smile to sing about;
I feel the urge to wear a hat
 and hug a cat.
Clouds and stars fill my heart
 to laugh and cry at that.

Rita Akin Sandlin

March 12, 1999

March 12, 1999

Dear Martha

You must come to Oklahoma
in March, lest you miss
the magic and mystery
of our rainy season.

I have read about rain
elsewhere, stared at showers
on television, seen droplets
fall down from on high.
Not here.

Our rain shoots sideways,
comes crisscross just like
the lines on this stationery.

I carry my umbrella
until a powerful gust
flips it up, creating
a huge tulip.

On any rainy day,
you can see us trekking
around holding our tulips aloft,
(an Oklahoma bouquet),
pretending they serve a purpose.

Mary C. Punches

May 4, 1999

May 4, 1999

Dear Martha

You must delay your visit
until after May, lest you
encounter the terror tornadoes
bring to Oklahoma.

They come not alone, but in gangs,
like monstrous angry street kids,
playing hopscotch and landing
two-footed across counties;
rolling cars like marbles in a
fierce and frantic smash game;
using trees as pool cues to carom
one home into another;
stretching power lines like strings
between unfeeling fingers,
making swaying electric cat's cradles.

In daylight, as we survey their deeds,
the torquing of our world,
they lurk and linger nearby—
neighborhood hoodlums,
gathering and scheming,
awaiting our next nightfall.

Mary C. Punches

used people

all weekend long barroom dance floors filled
with available marked down men and women
last chance spring clearance sale singles
washed groomed dressed up ready
for immediate pickup

recently repossessed divorcees
sporty imported swingers
fully-loaded testosterone-charged lovers
dependable family packages
free-wheelers rough and ready
rollout bedroom models

equipped with time-tested middle-aged frames
bodies height weight proportionate
weight room suspension
raised rear ends solid racks aerobic carriages
blemishes touched up wrinkles tucked
makeup jobs glossy well-polished
customized body parts classic facial features
slightly-worn comfortable interiors
numerous genetic extras

rewired nervous systems
flushed memories attitudes tuned-up
overhauled minds rebuilt hearts
professionally rotated balanced egos
high sex drives low maintenance
ideal for long distance relationships
perfect for everyday use
easy handling

budget conscious self-supporting reeducated
periodic vacations necessary
run on mid-level income
geared to marriage
built to last

previous partners no problem
poor commitment record okay
on the spot introductions

no peer pressure
no guarantees
no initial emotional investment
valid birth control required

come test drive

used people

Todd M. Mihalcik

Stranger in the Garden

Song of mockingbird intrigues.

Seize the melody as it lingers
in lilacs and violins.

Doberman hiding in pussy willows
struggles with stranger

as he rushes past lace-like
oriole and plunges

in stream bordered by

blue bonnets, and murmurs

his amazement at distant guitar

as he gropes through pansies.

When he hears crystal ring above,

he prowls up ascent

to piano music of chords and trills.

With wrinkled brow, he bursts

through tapestry covered door

and blurts out a story of peril

in garden below.

Barbara Cunningham

I bought a book yesterday

I bought a book yesterday,
entitled daily reading for all who are healing from compulsive sexual
behavior.

I grabbed it on a whim,
looking for the same premise as others,
explaining to me why I eat too much,
and numb myself with tv,
and resent people who have never learned to merge.

For some time I hung religion about my neck,
and pondered everything, from a distance, and detached,
as an insider, a third party.

I recited quotes “with intelligence comes sorrow,” and
“if you’re not outraged you are not paying attention”
until I realized I wasn’t paying attention, myself.
I didn’t have a clue.

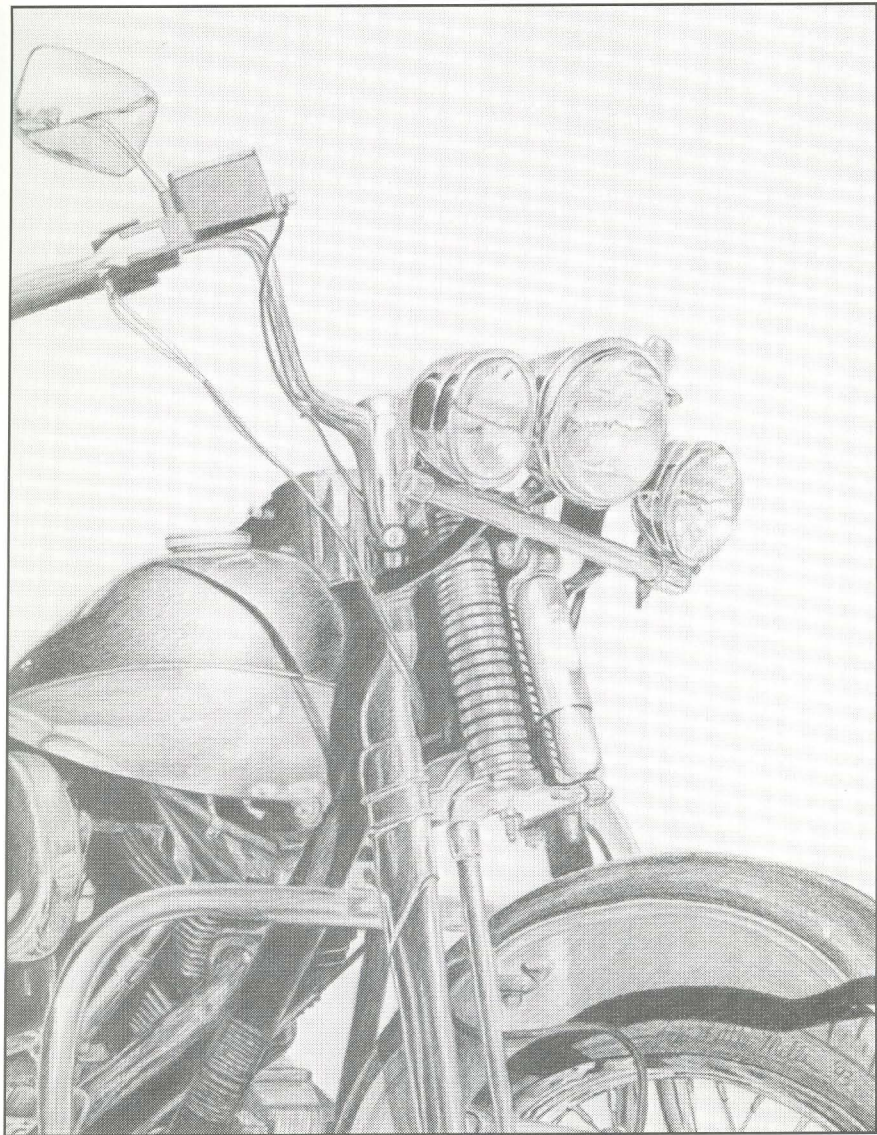
I debated what would kill me first
Indifference, perhaps, or complacency, or laziness.
Everything is relative.

Relatively, I am a happy girl.
Some days I am invincible, and I loom.
Other days invisible and somewhat idealistic.
I would like to go back to when my smile was never forced,
And I believed in everything.
I would like the chance to know you again.

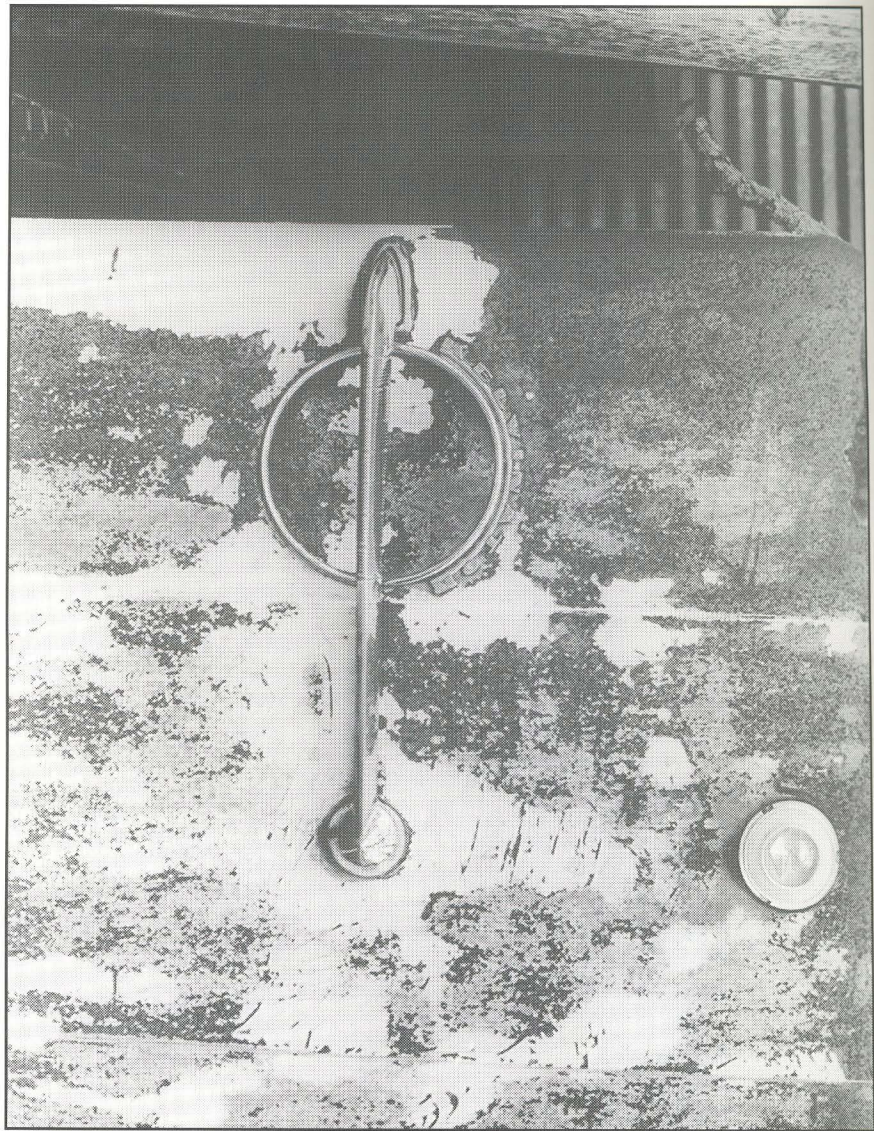
Relatively, I am a happy girl.
I will remain so, with or without your consent.

Valorie Rodgers

Art and Photography



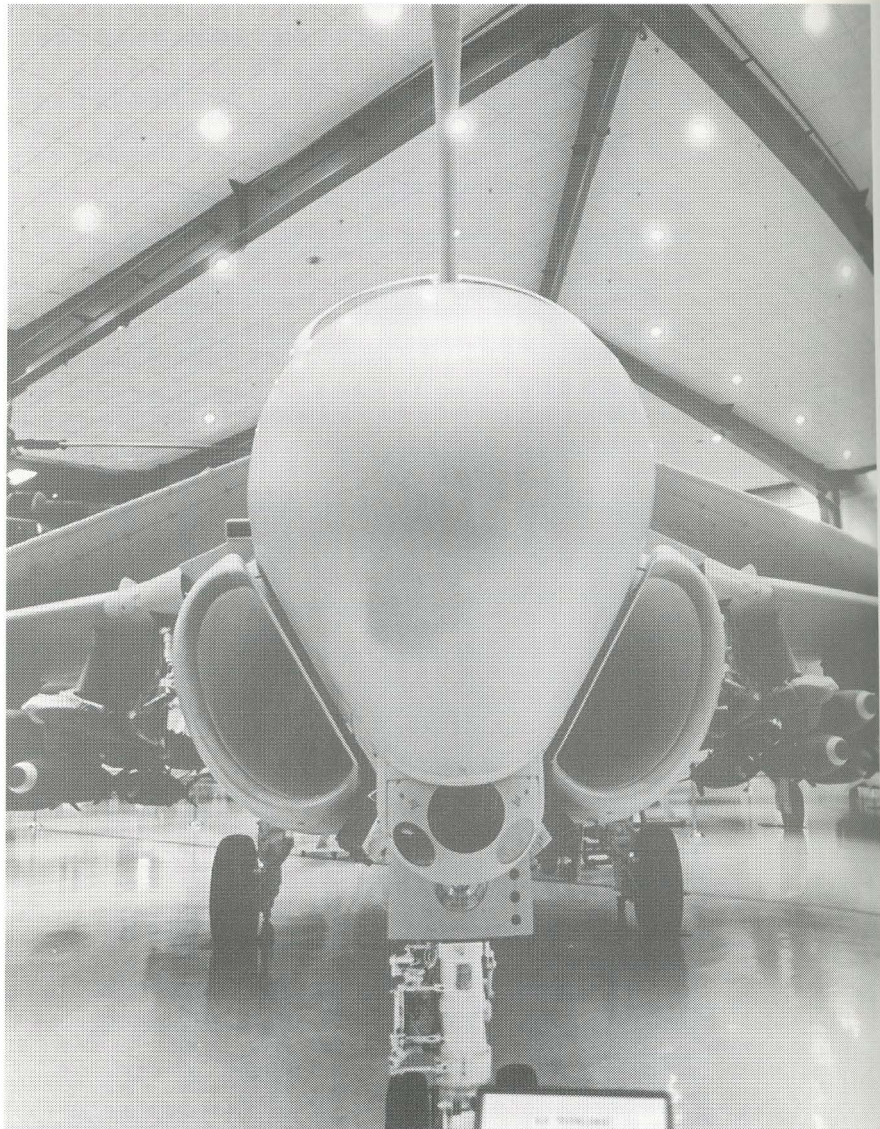
Bike
Vicki Little Miller



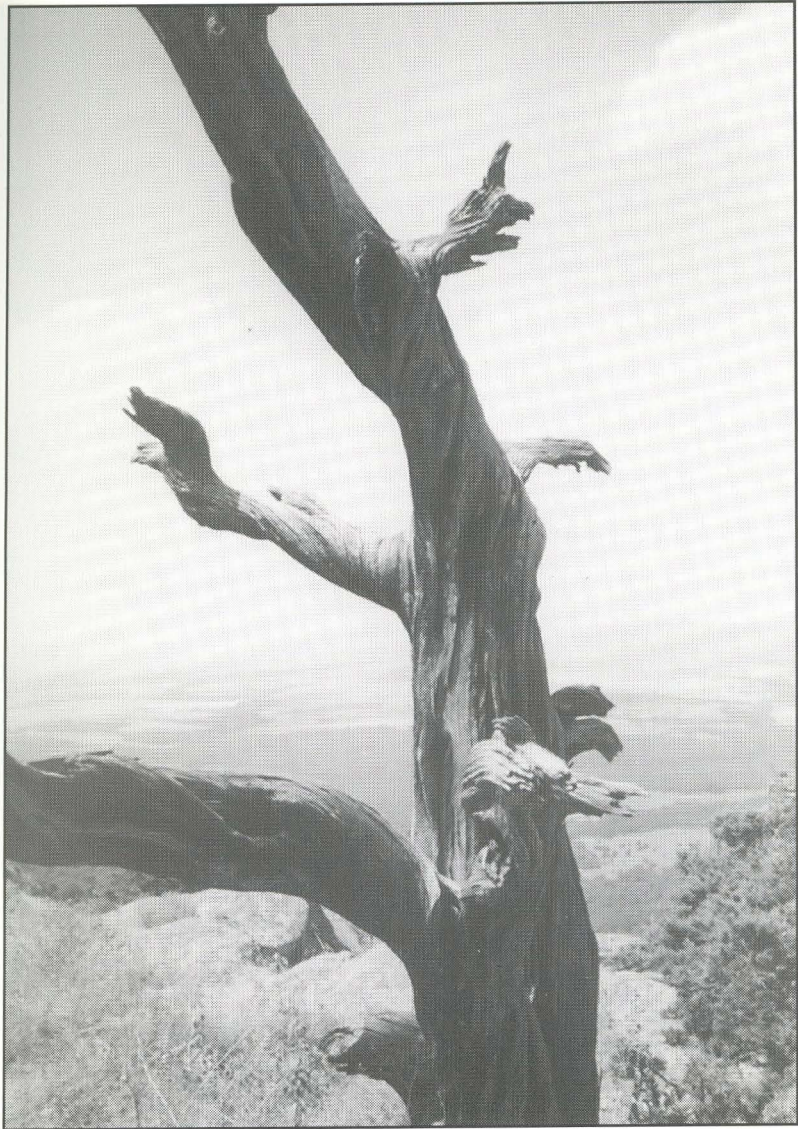
Icebox
Melissa Reed



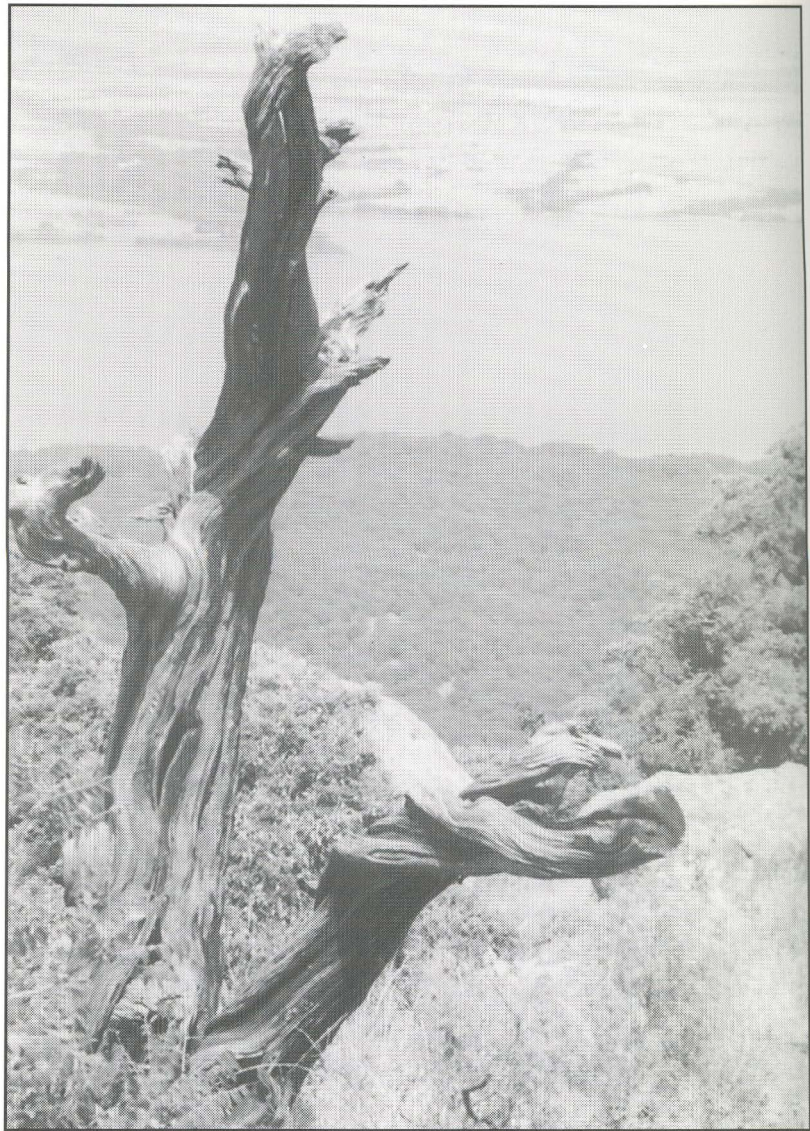
Time
Melissa Reed



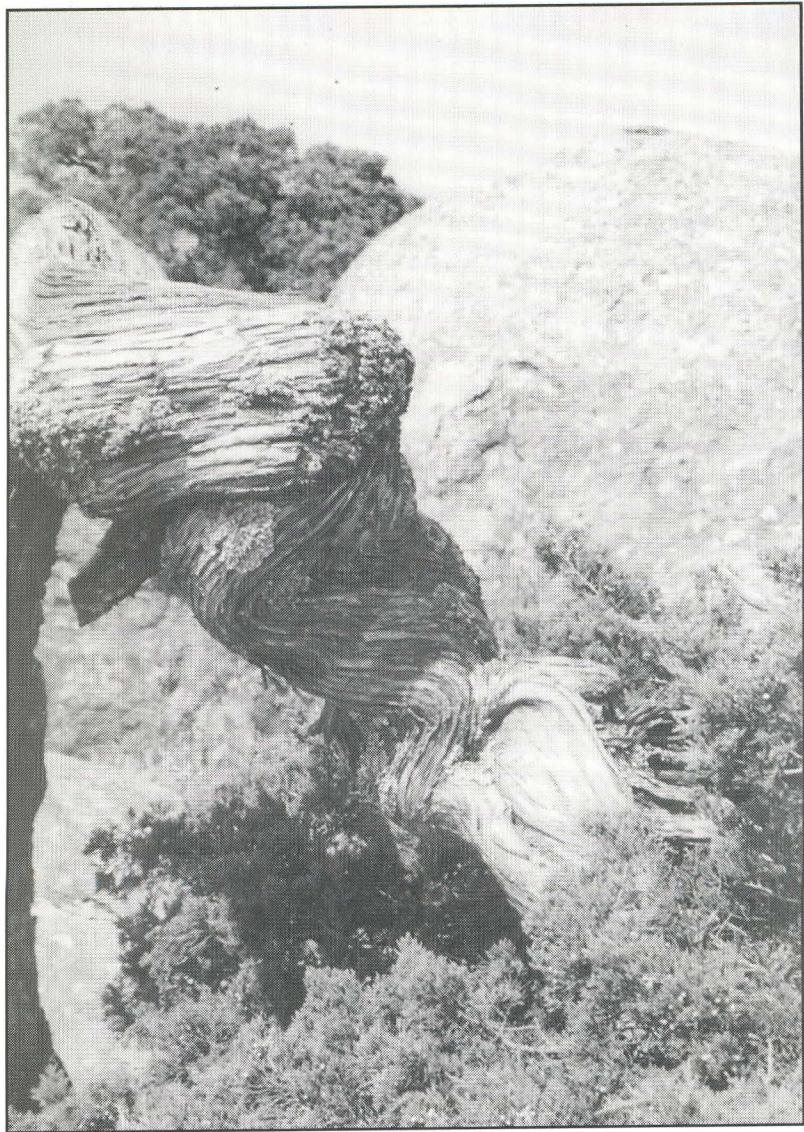
Jet
Melissa Reed



Wichitas I
Debra L. Burris



Wichitas II
Debra L. Burris



Wichitas III
Debra L. Burris

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