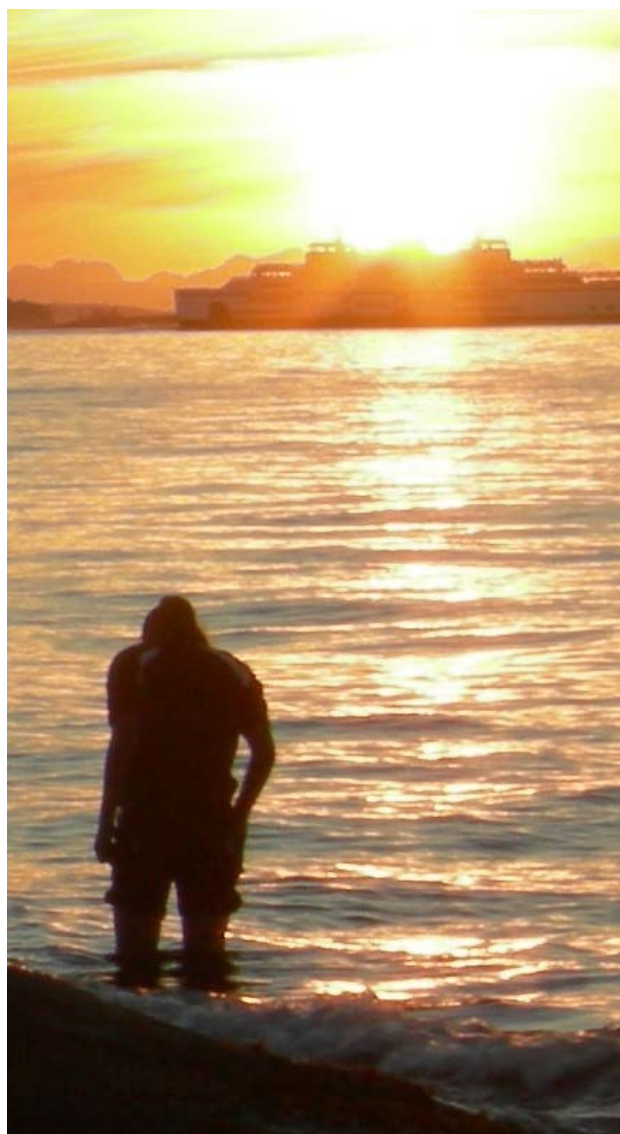


Sixty-eight Writes



Number 1, June 2007

Sixty-eight Writes

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Editor's Note:

This anthology was generated from submissions to a writing contest of the same name, held in School District 68, Nanaimo-Ladysmith, British Columbia, Canada. The primary goal of the event was to provide motivation for local high school students to tell their stories, and a forum in which to celebrate them. We are very grateful to all the students who took up the challenge, and delighted but not surprised at the talent and creativity they shared. The result is a diverse collection: from ironic fairy tales to coming-of-age dramas, and from the wholesale cruelty of disease and abandonment to intimate, personal stories of living, loving and dying.

The contest could not have happened without the generosity of writing professionals (listed below) who volunteered their expertise as judges, and of community sponsors (listed on page 33) who donated prizes and operational assistance. Their overwhelming support will allow us to run the contest again next year, so please stay tuned for another issue.

One reason we have been able to stretch the sponsors' dollars so far is by scrupulous penny-pinching, hence this anthology is primarily available electronically via email or via our web site: <http://www.members.shaw.ca/sixtyeightwrites>. Please feel free to print and/or distribute it far and wide – we are very proud of it.

*Nanaimo, BC
June 2007*

Judges:

Fiction

Keith Harrison, Author & Creative Writing Instructor, Malaspina University College.

George Szanto, Author.

Wendy Strachan, Educator & Founding Director of the Centre for Writing-Intensive Learning, Simon Fraser University.

Non-Fiction

Cale Cowan, Managing Editor, Nanaimo Daily News & Board Member, BC Press Council.

Frank Moher, Journalist/Playwright & Creative Writing Instructor, Malaspina University College.

Lyn Hancock, Author.

Fiction

I Remember

By Allison Tufnail

I remember the rain.

Always rain.

When I was 12 years old I saved up my allowance for months and months to buy a pair of suede boots. All the girls at school were wearing those boots. In the town where I grew up, it always rained. Always, except for the months of mild, clear weather called summer. No winter, fall, spring, whatever. Just rain... and then, not rain.

The very day I bought my boots, I just *had* to wear them out of the store. It was, of course, raining. Later, I remember staring down at my prized boots, polka dotted with water stains, ruined. Tears blurring my eyes, at that moment I vowed that as soon as I could, I would move to a city where it hardly ever rained, a city where I could wear boots.

“Fine, Abby,” my mother had said in exasperation, when I’d told her of my solemn vow. “I guess you’ll just have to leave first so you can figure out just how good you have it here.” I had sighed and rolled my eyes. Mothers think they know everything.

There was the sleepy grocery store where we stole five cent candies, the rusty, creaking playground and the muddy baseball diamond—the familiar settings of my childhood. Teenagers got into trouble because there wasn’t anything better to do. We would steal cigarettes and liquor from our parents to smoke and drink down at the old barn by the river. When we learned to drive we’d take out junker cars and run them ragged down muddy logging roads. Everyone swore that one day they’d get out of that town, but hardly anyone ever did.

In high school, I dated pretty much all the guys in town—which wasn’t a lot. The boys in our town were all the same, essentially. They all wore their Stanfields and steel-toed boots, drove pick-up trucks in varying states of shabbiness and worked for their dads. None of them were really anything special, they were more harmless than anything, but they helped to pass the time in an otherwise desolate town.

So I hopped around from neighbor boy to neighbor boy, but the real excitement came when a new boy came to town. In grade 11, a boy named Ty Gilmore moved down the road from me. He came from the city and wore sport jackets, baseball caps and drove a red '93 Camero. He didn’t know how to split and stack firewood and he had never been fishing or gone hunting. He was the complete opposite of every boy I’d ever known, and no one, even I, knew what to make of the new kid.

Ty Gilmore was in my math class and sat behind me. He’d ask me for help and then ask me out. I’d give him my most flirtatious smile, and tell him, ever so sweetly, that my mother had forbidden me to date anyone who drove a red Camero. He’d push his dark bangs out of his eyes with a mischievous smile and offer to pick me up on a bicycle.

Eventually, I said yes.

Our first date was on a Friday night, and he took me to see the month-old feature at the tiny town cinema. Then it was the next Friday, and the next Friday, and the next. Everyone in town went wild, gossiping about Abby Bernhardt and Ty Gilmore, driving around town in that red Camero. We would laugh and talk over burgers and cuddle through the movies we went to see. We would kiss on my front porch half an hour past curfew, before he’d ask me out again for the following Friday.

I could tell you that he and I fell in love—but that probably goes without saying. The gossip eventually died down when everyone found something new to talk about. Ty and I became inseparable. He would come over for Sunday dinner at my house, but I didn’t meet his mom for a long time.

Ty’s mother was a recovering alcoholic, and addicted to antidepressants. He mentioned this, quietly, to me as we sat on the hood of his car by the river. As he explained to me about the way his father traveling so much for work was so hard on his mom, and how she had gotten worse as Ty grew up, he spoke delicately, as if choosing each word carefully. I squeezed his hand and pretended not to notice the tears in his eyes, while hiding my own.

After that night, we didn't really talk about his mother. I didn't press the issue. We continued dating, burgers at the diner, movies at the little theatre, walks around the Park and Sunday dinners at my house. I never actually met Ty's dad, either. He was always out of town, it seemed—he was a writer for some American travel magazine based out of Texas. Ty assured me that I'd love him, and I told him I knew I would.

It was at the beginning of our senior year when all the chatter started about who was going to go to which university, who was staying in town to work, who was going traveling. I, clearly, had my sights set on a town with a climate devoid of rain, wherever that might be. Ty thought that he might want to go back East, where most of his mom's family was. Neither of us really knew what we wanted to do, but we spent hours sitting on the bank of the river where the kids in town partied in the summertime, thinking and talking when it felt necessary.

That was one of the nice things about Ty and me. We were in love to the point that we could actually be together and enjoy the comfortable, easy silence. That's how you know you've found someone special.

Eventually I applied at the University of Southern California, and to my surprise Ty did too. He told me that he'd rather be with me than family that he'd only ever met two or three times in his life. I got my letter first, and he three days later. I saved my letter and we opened them together—we both got in.

We were just so sickeningly sweet, so perfect. Everyone really just wanted to kill us, I knew it. But even the most perfect relationship must have its flaws. Five days before Senior Prom, everything fell apart.

Ty's dad, the amazing traveling man whom I'd never met, had now become the man who left his wife and son. Ty's mom, the recovering alcoholic reliant on antidepressants to get out of bed, had quickly fallen off the wagon and hit the bottle hard. We never made it to Prom. We went to the Pre-Prom picture session at the City Hall rose gardens, but on the way to Prom, Ty got a call from the neighbors, something about his mom. He wouldn't tell me what happened, but tried to keep a smile as he dropped me off at the gym, apologized and told me to have fun. I watched him drive away then called my Dad to come pick me up. Dad wasn't home, so I walked home in my cotton-candy pink atrocity of a prom dress, in my bare feet. I could never walk in heels.

So I didn't go to Prom. I wasn't that heartbroken. I still don't know what exactly happened that night, but I had a good idea. The night I walked home from my own senior prom, I found my mom

napping in her armchair by the window, book open in her lap. I kissed her gently on the forehead. Later, Ty called and told me everything was fine. I pretended to believe him.

Graduation was a blur. Great-grandma Julia flew out from Winnipeg, I got a stain on the hem on my robes, Mom cried when she couldn't figure out how to work the camera. Before the ceremony, Ty's dad called, and his mom asked who was on the phone. Ty lied, said it was a salesman and hung up without saying anything.

One of the boys who lived on a big farm had everyone over for the grad party, and his dad bought a keg. Ty and I drove together to the farm, which was a mile or so out of town. We listened to *The Who* on the radio, windows down. For some reason, Ty seemed a bit moodier than even usual. I had assumed that it was because of his dad's phone call earlier. I found out later that night, I was wrong.

I was sipping a beer, which I didn't particularly like, and Ty, a gin and tonic. Loud, raucous music was coming from the house, and some hooting and hollering. I said I needed some air, so we went for a walk outside.

We sat cross-legged on a grassy bank in front of the house. Ty was quiet. He was a bit of a quiet drinker anyways, which was one of the things I liked about him. All of the boys at our school were loud and obnoxious drunks just like their fathers. I reached over to him and tickled his knee cap. "What are you thinking?"

He leaned over to me and kissed me gently on the nose. "I love you, Abby," he said quietly. I knew that. "Since I moved here and met you, it's been a bit of a dream," he continued. I rested my head down on his shoulder. "You're a little bit amazing." I wondered if, even in the dark, he would be able to tell I was blushing. I didn't know why, but I knew there was something more. He took a sip of his drink and a deep breath. "Abby, I've been thinking, though."

I sat up, my head starting to spin a little bit. The beer, rancid as it tasted, was doing its job. "About..."

"USC," he began. "I don't know if I'm going to take my spot there this fall."

I sat up completely this time; and put my drink down on the grass beside me. I shook my head, as though I'd misunderstood. "What?"

"Abby, I don't think I'm going to go. I think I'm going to stay here, get a job, you know. University

can wait. It's not that big of a deal to me. I mean, I'm not even really sure what it is that I want to do yet, and that's a lot of money to spend on a year of school when you don't know what you want to major in..."

I could hear the lies dripping from his lips. He kept talking, trying to convince me, that this was what he wanted. Even through the buzz, I knew he was more trying to convince himself than me. I knew, probably better than anyone that Ty hated our town, hated what had happened to his family here. I knew it was a big deal to him. I knew the real reason for this but I didn't say anything. I couldn't stop him. My heart was pounding somewhere up in my throat as I put together the pieces.

"Okay...if that's what you want," I replied lamely. I remember the sound of the crickets in the pond across the field was deafening. I remember the stars were agonizingly bright, and the sky behind, insufferably black. I remember the grass was damp and I remember my hands shaking. I remember everything falling apart.

I remember him not meeting my eyes. I remember the way he looked, sitting beside me, and his face in the shadows of our graduation night. I don't remember if I saw tears in his eyes, but I felt them in my own. I don't remember how he worded it, how he avoided the point, but that was when I knew all we had left was the summer. It was that night of our graduation, when I knew. Although he didn't want to say it out loud—we both knew it was over.

So we had the summer. We never talked about the fall and what it would bring. We never talked about the real reason he wasn't going to be joining me at USC, but we both knew. I tried to meet Mrs. Gilmore again, but it wasn't a good day. Summer inevitably was going to end, and as each day slipped away, the fall drawing nearer and nearer, Ty began to slip away from me too.

It was a glaringly hot morning at the very end of August when I left for USC. Ty came to drop me off at the airport, and our goodbye was short and sweet. We both made promises under our breath as we hugged, that we'd write, send emails. We both promised that it could work, that I'd be back at Christmas, that I'd see him then. Neither of us cried. And when we hugged goodbye for the last time before boarding the plane, I'm not sure if either of us saw what was coming in the months ahead—the awkward phone conversations and forced emails that became

fewer and farther between as time went on. And if we did, we both pretended we didn't. It's a terrible feeling when you know that the person you love has just lied to you, and it's even more terrible when you know you've just lied back.

* * *

It was shortly after Christmas break in my freshman year that Ty and I called it quits. It had been three years since, and I was in my senior year at USC, majoring in Business and Marketing. I'd hardly spoken to him since, and even though I had dated a few other guys I still thought about him every now and then. Four days before I was to go home for Christmas Break, my mom phoned me. I had just come back from lunch, and when I walked into my dorm room, the phone was ringing. I kicked off my shoes, and ran to pick up the phone.

"Abby?" I immediately noticed that her voice sounded odd, a little strained.

"Mom? What's wrong?"

"Abby. I just heard the news and wanted to tell you before you came home..." I heard her take a deep breath. "Sweetie, I don't know how to say it."

"Mom, just say it." I said, not sure what to expect.

"Abby, Ty was killed in a car accident two days ago."

I left University the next afternoon so I could be home in time for Ty's funeral the following day. I hardly thought as I packed my suitcase, throwing into it the last minute Christmas presents I'd grabbed at the USC book store. As if my parents didn't already have enough USC mugs and sweatshirts to start their own store. I didn't think as I got a friend to drive me to the airport. I didn't think as I boarded the plane. I couldn't think. I remember feeling empty and I remember feeling like I wasn't really living—I was just going through the motions. I don't remember crying. When the plane landed in Vancouver hours later, as I was getting off the plane, I remember the gray skies and puddles. I remember looking down at my black suede ankle boots, with polka dotted water stains. I remember the rain.

Always rain.

Minds Apart

By Helen Lutes

“Good afternoon, Jake.”

“Afternoon, Mrs. Harrison.”

Jake Driscoll forced a smile for his elderly neighbour as he inserted his key in the lock and turned forcefully, muscling it through the half-rotation it required to open the way into his small apartment. She was a nice old lady, always cheerful, but he distanced himself from her. Always, she reminded him of his grandmother.

He entered the tiny foyer of the apartment and, shrugging out of his jacket and work belt, hung them both up on the peg by the door. His dusty boots he aligned neatly on the mat that sat under the peg. It was a habit he had picked up early on, the art of being tidy, in an effort to act out against his father’s stereotype of a man in some way. There was no smile at the memory, though, and he moved past that just as he had moved past Mrs. Harrison.

The light on his answering machine flashed rhythmically up at him, and he pressed play as he stepped into the matchbox bedroom off to the side of the hallway and stripped down to his shorts. His dirty work clothes were abandoned in the laundry basket that was hidden away behind the closet doors.

“Hey, Jake, it’s Ryan. If you’re not busy on Saturday we should head out for a beer or something.”

A long beep ended the message, and an electronic voice identified the time and date of the message.

As a second message began, Jake paused at the doorway to the bathroom and waited patiently.

“Jake, it’s Kale. I need you to call me, as soon as you get this. Please. It’s important. My new number is 756-6834.”

There were no other messages.

Jake shook his head. In the bathroom he turned on the shower and waited until it was good and hot before stepping in and bowing his head under the

heavy spray. He wondered why Kale would be calling him. There was no enmity between him and his brother, but at the same time it wasn’t as though they talked. Sometimes a Christmas card passed between them, if one of them was feeling particularly charitable. But Jake didn’t go to family reunions, Kale was too busy to spend much time setting up meetings for anything other than work, and neither of them felt they had much to discuss, anyway. So what was it that made Kale finally look him up and call him? Sighing, Jake shook his head and focused on the pinpricks of water that assaulted his skin. He didn’t want to imagine what it was. Later, he’d decide later whether Kale’s message merited a call or not.

He stood there under the spray for a good five minutes before he made a move to find the soap. Scrubbing off the sweat and dirt of the day, he then rinsed off and stepped out of the shower. The towel he wrapped around himself was clean and soft, and as he padded back into his bedroom and glanced around, he couldn’t help but smile to himself. He enjoyed the quiet. It was especially relaxing after a long day at the construction site, with the sound of the pounding of tools, the yelling of men and the grating of machines assaulting his ears from dawn until late in the afternoon.

Despite the noise, though, he loved his job. He loved the methodical work of measuring the height, spreading the mortar, placing and aligning the bricks, removing excess mortar and then starting all over again. Measure, spread, place, and scrape, over and over. There was a sort of rhythm to it that he zoned into every day. It was hard work but it was soothing in some way, and at the end of the day there was evidence of all the energy and sweat he had expended. There was a visible monument to what he had done.

Whenever he finished work on a building, he liked to be able to go back and look at it and say to himself, I helped build that. I was part of that.

With a satisfied sigh, he dressed slowly in a worn pair of jeans and a paint-stained yet otherwise clean t-shirt. A beer and a couple of pre-cooked hot dogs were retrieved from the fridge, and he ate slouched on his couch, shifting through the mail he

hadn't had the chance to go through from a week or two ago. Slowly, he worked his way through the stack from the bottom up. He was rather disgusted to find that the majority of it was junk mail, but couldn't say he was too surprised. He had never been one to get mass amounts of mail from anyone.

The newspaper came next, and he scanned over each article in a relaxed fashion, picking and choosing what appeared interesting enough to read more in-depth. It took him all the way through his two hot dogs and the beer to reach the obituaries; a good hour. The clock ticked along merrily on the wall, warning him it was almost time to begin getting ready for the evening out with Angelina, his girlfriend.

However, whenever he sat down to read the paper he always read or skimmed every inch of it. He figured he still had enough time. The obituaries were, as always, enlightening, amusing, saddening, and touching all at the same time. He was a few in when he saw it, and at first he scoffed at it as a coincidence. Driscoll, after all, wasn't a very common name but it wasn't unknown. Then his eyes settled unwillingly on the name that followed, and in disbelief he read the tiny paragraph.

DRISCOLL – Gary

April 15, 1935 – July 28, 2006

Passed away peacefully in his sleep, he is survived by two sons and a faithful wife. A service to be held on Tuesday, July 31 at St. Peter's Church, 301 Machleary Street, Nanaimo B.C.

It seemed years before he began breathing again, and even longer before his brain began to function, but it was probably only minutes, and then the wheels spun wildly as he remembered Kale's message.

"... I need you to call me, as soon as you get this. Please. It's important..."

Kale already knew about their father. But of course he did, Kale had always been dad's favourite; mom's, too, because he never upset dad. Kale was the good boy, who followed in his father's footsteps and had the right sort of emotions; he was the one who stuck around and took care of his parents. Jake was the ne'er do well who went his own way and had no respect for his family. Shaking his head hard, Jake quickly reigned in that line of thought. He couldn't do that, not now. There couldn't be any feeling sorry for himself.

Yet he sat there, helpless against the confused emotions that roiled in his chest. Why hadn't he been called before now? His father had died on Saturday. Today was Monday. That meant – he swallowed hard –

the funeral was tomorrow. Had his mother forgotten to call him? Been unable to open the phone-book to look up his current address and number? Ridiculous suggestions, all of them, he knew. They hurt less than the thought that clung to the back of his brain, though. The thought that spoke in his father's voice and said *she didn't want to phone you. You're not part of the family anymore.* Yes, it hurt the most, but it was also the most likely.

He made the best effort he could to remain emotionless as he walked blankly to the phone and picked it up. He listened once again to the messages. He punched in Kale's number dispassionately as his brother reeled it off for the machine. It was picked up on the third ring.

"Driscoll residence."

Jake opened his mouth but found now words could come out.

"Hello?"

"It's me," Jake finally managed to grunt.

"Jake!" Kale exclaimed. "Thank God, I..."

His voice returning, Jake sank into a chair. "How," he interrupted, stumbling over his words, "How did I not... Kale..."

In the wake of his disjointed sentence, Kale spoke again, his voice awkward. "You read it in the paper, didn't you?"

Jake didn't respond.

"God, I'm so sorry, Jake, mom told me she would take care of it; she said she'd call you. I didn't find out until today, she let it slip. I'm sorry. I tried to get to you. I thought I could reach you in time, since the obit just came out today and I know you get real busy with work and... I'm really sorry, man. I..."

"Kale," Jake finally broke in, his voice sounding as small as he felt.

"Sorry," Kale said again, guilt hanging off every word.

"I don't know if I'll... I mean, the thing's tomorrow, and I'm pretty busy. If I'd known before, I might have been able to... I'm pretty busy. Work and all... got a tight schedule..."

He trailed off again, letting the words fall into the silence and fade away. He wondered what the silence meant. Did Kale smell the lie? Probably. Did he

think it was disrespectful to the dead? Did he disapprove? Jake flinched at the sigh that suddenly sounded from the other end of the phone line.

"I understand, Jake," Kale said softly.

In the awkward silence that once again followed his words, the two brothers each knew the lie for what it was. Each felt the necessity of the lie; felt, finally, the reality of the strain their father had placed on the lives of his son. Felt the strain their father had placed on Jake, in particular, with his passionate avowals that no son of his was going to be a sissy schoolgirl, reading books and running cross-country. Sons of Gary Driscoll played football, hard and fast. They got good marks, but only because they were already smart, not because they spent nights at home studying. Jake's steadiness, his methodical way of doing things, had been scorned when he was a child, and so he had abandoned childhood at the earliest possible moment. It settled into the long-forgotten dust, along with any love or respect he had ever harboured secretly for his father. They were simply too different, too far apart.

Kale, older by four years and his father's son in every way except his heart, had watched, knowing what was happening was wrong but unable to stop it. It had been with some relief that he saw Jake disappear into his own life; his own apartment, his own friends... it was his hope that he could have both: his father, and his brother. He hadn't realised that in the end, one or the other was all he could have. Jake had, once again, been left out in the cold, and it had left a vast, empty space between them that even understanding couldn't seem to breach.

"Thanks," Jake finally said.

"So, maybe I'll see you?"

"Sure," Jake said.

Both knew the word was hollow, and both hung up with heavy hearts.

Jake felt somehow empty, as though he should feel something, anything, but... was simply incapable of it.

"I need another beer," he whispered to the still apartment.

The answer was the knock on the door, and he stood and answered it robotically. The smile that had graced Angelina's face faded the moment she saw his face, and her brow scrunched up in worry.

"Jake, what's wrong?"

"I don't think we should go out tonight, Lina. I'm sorry; I just don't feel up to it." Hard. Cold. Angry. That was always the way his father had wanted him to handle any weak emotions that might take hold of him. Despite his best efforts, he had fallen into it. He saw that now, after all these years; saw how he had been sucked in and made calloused by his father's wills, in spite of how hard he had fought to be his own person.

"Jake..."

"Not tonight, Lina." He pushed the door closed.

A spark of anger rose in Lina's eyes, and she shoved her foot into the door. "Hey, buddy, don't you dare lock me out!"

"Lina..."

"Jake, I'm warning you!"

"I just..."

She glared, brown eyes turned dark and stormy. There standoff lasted for less than a minute, and he felt himself sag wearily against the doorframe. "Lina," he whispered.

Her gaze softened. Slipping into the apartment, she wrapped her arms around him.

"What is it, Jake?"

He held on a moment longer. "My dad died."

"Oh, baby," she said softly, a sad sigh accompanying the words as she slipped her arms from around his waist to around his neck, and guided his head to rest on her shoulder.

Tears welled in his eyes; tears he hadn't thought he could possibly shed, not for anyone, let alone for the man he had hated for so many years. But then he realised, maybe he wasn't crying for Gary Driscoll; maybe he was crying for himself, and for Angelina, who had never wanted him to be anything but what he was. Maybe he was crying for all the things he had never had the chance to tell his father. Maybe he was crying for the power that had made him so different from the man who had raised him, in so many of the right ways. Maybe he was crying just because he could.

Whatever it was, though, he found that below the sadness, it felt good. Sometimes, he realised, you just needed to cry in the arms of someone who loved you.

Death of a Pomegranate

By Michelle Fries

Wednesday morning - I'm sitting at the kitchen table with coffee, contemplating a pomegranate. We've got guests coming over tonight, and so my room had to be cleaned last night. Clothes washed, secret things removed from under the bed, fresh sheets put in. It was late when I finally slept. Mother walks in. It's early and she's still in her nightgown. It's an old one, blue and frayed around the edges. She's washing her clothes too.

'Morning'.

I find it annoying that I have to muster up the energy to be pleasant so soon. Mother will sometimes tell me I need to see the light of day when I get up, that I'm too surly in the morning. I'm too surly at night too.

'Good morning'. I say, tearing into the fruit and not looking up. Her hair will be frizzed a bit from her sleep, something she won't notice or won't care. This has always bothered me.

'Do you have classes today?' Pouring herself coffee and sitting across from me. I look at her. I want to say that I wouldn't be up if I didn't but instead tell her that yes, I do. Chemistry and Physics. I remember that I got up every morning last week, classes or not. Sometimes it's worth it to hold your tongue.

'We've got company tonight so come home right after school.'

Looking at her blankly I nod. I'd rather not get into the topic of this particular company with her just yet.

I think she must know I don't want to talk. I begin picking at my pomegranate. The workers are coming tonight, those religious types that preach the gospel. They come to our houses, stay in our rooms and eat our food. Inspect our fruit at breakfast and sleep in our freshly cleaned house. Normally I'd book myself away for the evening but I know one of the workers and she's attractive. Perhaps not so much attractive as lovely, and perhaps not so much lovely as poised. Some might call it peaceful. I think I should have dinner with them. Appear with the family, for one evening at least. I'm not home very often anymore. Busy enough that I don't seem to notice this.

'Yeah. I know'.

Mother has poured herself coffee and is slowly drinking it - taking those little sips where you get more air than anything. Everyone calls it sipping, the noises, the little gestures you make when you're drinking something that's really hot, but that's just a diplomatic euphemism. I know all about those. Sweetening up the truth so it's more palatable - veiling things inside. Still I find it gross. I avoid looking at her though she's watching me. Inwardly I tense. Outside I just attack the fruit with more vengeance - picking apart all the little compartments and spilling out the seeds. They're such a pale red, and I wonder what the appeal is. So little fruit for so much work. With mother's eyes on me I know I should get ready for class but I'm thinking about the worker. She's going to ask her questions again. I imagine my own inspection.

'How are you?' Delicate little look on a delicate little face.

'I'm fine, good.'

'That's good. You're not too busy these days?'

Too busy for what, I wonder. Then I wonder what to say to that; Yes, I'm busy but no, it's fine.

'Not really' I say, shrugging a bit.

'It's nice when you can find a bit of peace in your life'.

I don't respond. Sometimes it's worth it to hold your tongue. She continues, launching quietly into a sermon in which she interrogates me.

'Peace is a wonderful thing, and isn't it an amazing gift that God has given us? He has so much he wants to offer us, all of us. Are you willing to share peace with God?'

Or something like that. I'm never satisfied when it's over. She's so quiet she doesn't need to be subtle, doesn't need to use diplomatic euphemisms.

Just smiles a bit, very still as she surveys whatever is in your eyes. Here's where I end up looking away, and where she waits for me to say something. Here some might produce a spiritual comment, talk about the miracle they've found in God, or the peace budding inside them. I remain quiet. I'm never satisfied when it's over.

It's always the same - picking into the compartments of my faith - foraging for the seeds. They never find very much, and I wonder what they see that they continue to search for more. Still, it's never seemed to keep them from trying. I wonder if they're so persistent with everyone. I've been told that faith can seem such a fickle thing, growing only in the right conditions. Like a pomegranate. Here it's too cold, or there's not enough water. There there's not enough sunshine, not enough shelter. With beginnings as precarious as these we must be careful to cultivate our seeds diligently. Water them daily with mixtures of submission and compassion, humility and love. Shelter them from doubt, and give them time to mature into

beautiful life bearing fruit. It's these conditions we must create, take time to nurture our seeds until they are fully ripe and then spread them.

I can never find it in me to tell them it's not there, these conditions they're looking for; I'm not like them. That I'm completely spiritually empty. Seedless. Less fruit than even a pomegranate.

'Honey, it's eight o'clock, don't you think you should get going?' She frowns at my ruined pomegranate, wasted fruit.

Yeah I think I should get going. I'm going to be late for my class. Chemistry, and I have a midterm to study for. I squish the seeds in my hand together - no longer interested in eating it. I'm not sure I ever was.

'Okay, I'll be home after three,' I say a bit vaguely, getting up to leave. I throw the pomegranate in the compost on my way out. I think I won't be home for supper tonight.

Whatever Floats Your Goat

By Myles Black

Once upon a time, in a far off land (predominantly inhabited by politically correct, social disability sympathetic Fairy Taleites) there lived three well-adjusted individuals known as the three Billy goats Gruff. This trio of level-headed brothers lived quite happily in the agriculturally stable environment of their grassy field, but while they were quite open to new neighbours of different racial descent, religious upbringing or potentially hazardous psychotic handicap, the goats lived quite alone.

Perhaps it was because of their isolation that they chose to travel, or maybe they felt that the lack of fellow citizens was a direct cause of their own unintentional tendency to force other goats thinking of settling in their fine meadow to drastically reconsider. For you see, two of the three Billy goats suffered from psychotic disorders. While they were not (as mentioned previously) potentially hazardous or dangerous in any way, they certainly had the capability to be very, very annoying. For whatever reason, the Three comrades had elected to cross the river into a much more satisfactory grazing ground. (Quite recently, the stable environment of their home had fallen into disrepair due to the fact that all three Billy goats had become fiercely depressed and had stopped grazing) It was visible that the grass was by far, greener on the other side of the river and who could object to two disabled little brother goats and one supportive older brother goat crossing from a life of reasonable living conditions to a richer, more suitable community.

However, no fairy tale seems worthy of republication without the crucial aspect of oppositional force. It seems that no matter how ahead of the times a magical land may appear in the absence of discrimination, there is always one individual who ruins it for all others. There is always one who perpetuates the almost non-existent flow of narrow-mindedness in a seemingly flawless society. Under the bridge that our heroes would inevitably traverse lived the text-perfect example of one such individual. His name was Dabby, and he was a troll. A big, mean, scary, scary troll.

This was at least, how Dabby liked to present himself. He didn't much like people and chose not to associate with them. He had once been a respectable

troll in his old swamp. He had written a book on Troll life entitled, "Trolling for compliments: A theological insight into the modern monster". It was widely acclaimed. But behind the success, Dabby was a sad, lonely troll. He was not a stranger to mood swings and intrusive periods of hypermania, and finally, after a particularly unpleasant night of self deprecation, he left his swamp dwelling, moved to the dark, unsanitary niche beneath the river bridge and fervently painted a sign for his new front door that read, "Scary, scary Troll. Bigger off." It was here that he remained, in complete seclusion, until the day that three self-righteous Billy goats came trumping over his bridge.

The first Billy goat's name was Wilbur Goat Gruff. He was very small and very frail. He had not one hair on his long, bony goat chin and very little self-esteem, but he was confident as he stepped onto the wooden overpass that the riches of majestic agriculture lay before him. "Tap tap tap" went his little goat hooves on the bridge. Underneath, the old Troll Dabby was bathing himself, an action he performed several times a day because he felt like doing little else. As he removed orange grit from his fingernails that had accumulated from the many pretty, magical fireflies that he had squashed into oblivion with his ugly Troll hands, he heard the distant "Tap tap tap" that our little friend Wilbur was making, and took it as a personal offence. He leapt from his bath, now filled with unsightly brown Troll water, wrapped himself in his lovely purple bathrobe, and stepped outside.

"Who's that tapping on my house!?" Dabby bellowed, searching around frantically for someone to be foul to. Wilbur's heart rate increased substantially and he froze in little goat shock. Wilbur Goat suffered from a terrible case of Panic Disorder and liked to keep himself in a controlled, stress-free state. It took him a minute or two to calm down.

"It is I," Wilbur answered in the tiniest, high-pitched voice a goat ever had, "Wilbur, from over the hill."

Dabby looked up at the far side of his bridge. Upon seeing Wilbur Goat, he seemed very taken aback.

“Oh,” he said in a grumpy tone, “It’s a little goat. Your voice is so small, I thought it belonged to this snail here.” Dabby motioned to a spot on the ground at his feet, where a quaint looking snail was resting. The snail beamed at Dabby, obviously surprised and full of glee at having his presence noticed in the company of giants.

“I was hoping to cross this bridge, so that I may reap the benefits of cultivation and unspoiled farmland in a lush, unblemished meadow.” proclaimed Wilbur.

Dabby snorted in disgust. He picked up the snail, which began smiling and gushing in a most flattered way, obviously honoured, before Dabby gave a slight grunt and hurled the alarmed little gastropod into the river, where it skipped three times and then dropped to the murky bottom.

“No one crosses this bridge!” he yelled, “Especially not a snivelling little fur ball like yourself!”

Dabby then called Wilbur something that would have absolutely no place in the Fairy Tale world and, if he had been around to hear it, would have made the snail cringe. Wilbur jumped. His heart rate increased again and he began sweating profusely. He was having a terrible panic attack. His miniscule brain could not fully comprehend the magnitude of this profanity, but for the sake of this story, let us say the word was something along the lines of, but not necessarily, “Jerk”.

“Oh please don’t hurt me mister Troll,” cried Wilbur, “I have an older brother and he is much bigger and juicier than I am. Surely he would be the best to eat.”

Dabby considered this for a moment, then said, “No, no, little goat. I do not wish to eat you. I simply wish to prey upon your mental dysfunction so I may feel better about myself.”

“But my older brother is much more dysfunctional than myself, I assure you.” said Wilbur nervously. “If you wait just a little longer, you can find out for yourself.”

Dabby the Troll seemed content with this and let Wilbur Goat pass. He then went back into his house to wait for the older, more impaired Billy goat.

Not a full minute had gone by before Dabby heard a peculiar sound on the roof of his house. This sound was not a tapping, but more of a, “sweep-clunk, sweep-clunk”. Dabby opened his door briskly, ready for a good old verbal bashing, when he saw the second Billy goat on the far side of his bridge. This goat’s name was Billy, the Billy goat, Gruff. It was a name that had

haunted him through twelve years of Goat School and a half-year of Goat College before he dropped out for medical reasons. He was taller and more developed than Wilbur Goat Gruff, and had several hairs on his fuzzy goat chin. As he came closer, Dabby realised he was muttering incoherently and almost constantly licking himself. The sound, as it so happened, was caused by a tissue box on each of his medium sized goat hooves. The sight of this Goat made Dabby inexplicably disconcerted.

Dabby cleared his throat loudly. Billy Goat Gruff stopped muttering and looked up at the large, hideous troll. He licked himself once more and then said, “Oh, h-hello g-g-good sir. Lovely d-d-day”. Dabby hawked up a big troll luegey, threw his head back, and spat right up into the air. The spit curved upward, hung in mid-air, and then fell at Billy the Billy goat’s feet. Billy stepped back in utmost horror. He shrieked and started hurriedly pulling tissues from the box on his forward left hoof, a feat which would have been difficult with a normal hoof much less one encumbered with a package of Kleenex, and held them up to his mouth. He breathed in and out quickly, hyperventilating for at least two minutes before, to the troll’s surprise, he passed out.

Dabby looked around, clearly embarrassed, and hoped that none of his fellow trolls were watching him as he revived the shaky goat with a handful of water in his face. Billy leapt to his feet, sputtering and choking out the words, “Not clean! Not c-c-clean!” At this point, Dabby’s urge to bully someone had grown immensely, but he couldn’t help but feel sorry for this strange fellow.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked. He had meant to say this in a nasty way, but it came out softer than he had intended which made him feel rather sick.

The stammering Billy Goat Gruff finished spluttering, licked himself clean and said, “I’m Obsessive Compulsive. I c-can’t s-stand unsanitary cond-d-d-ditions.” He started pulling more Kleenexes out from his...shoe, but Dabby the Troll slapped them out of his hand.

“Stop that!” he said, “Now listen...” but Billy then shrieked so loudly that Dabby had to cover his ears.

“D-d-d-don’t kill me Mister Troll! Please! I have an older brother. I’m sure you would...”

“I’ll take your word for it.” said Dabby, pushing the middle goat along the bridge. Billy looked a little scared at Dabby’s big hand on his shoulder, but said “Thank you. Th-thank you Mister Troll, s-s-sir.” and went on his way.

This time, Dabby didn't go back into his house. Instead, he calmly waited at the side of the bridge for the larger, possibly more dysfunctional older brother of the two little goats. Whilst he waited, he entertained different ideas about what the next goat's malfunction would be. Oh, he was such a nasty, ugly Troll. He was chuckling to himself about this amusing interaction when the third Billy goat came trotting down the path. He was by far the largest goat Dabby had ever seen. He had large, sharp horns that curled menacingly. His hooves were like tree stumps and he was chewing on the bumper of a horse-drawn carriage. As the enormous goat reached the bridge, he spat out the bumper and stared at Dabby.

"Hello," he said in a strong, steady goat voice; "I was hoping to cross this river to the other side. Is there a fare to pass here?"

Dabby bit his lip and said cautiously, "Uh, no. No Mr. Goat. No." He smiled weakly. It was the single most difficult and painful thing he had ever done. His mouth actually throbbed with pain. He quickly relaxed into a frown again.

"Have you seen two little goats?" asked the older brother, looking towards the horizon.

"Umm... yes. Yes, they were here, and thenthen.....they left."

"Well then, I'd best be off. Thank you, mister...."

"Dabby."

"Yes, alright then. Thank you."

The big Billy Goat Gruff trotted over the bridge with his large hooves and was gone over the grassy hill.

Dabby grumbled to himself and walked back down to the door to his house. He opened it, and who should be sitting on the coatroom floor, but the quaint little snail he had thrown in the river. Sopping wet, breathing heavily and wearing a look on his face that seemed to say, "What the hell was that all about?"

"Oh,...heh...heh...It's you," said Dabby, quite startled by his presence, "Um...what are you doing here?"

The tiny snail said nothing, but put two slimy fingers to his mouth and gave a comparatively loud whistle. Dabby gasped as suddenly, thousands of snails and slugs burst from behind his bathroom door and descended upon him with alarming speed. He tried to run, but he slipped on something that was unmistakably snail slime and hit the floor hard. The little gastropods covered him with their slippery bodies, all yelling the same thing. Now, a snail's voice is very faint indeed and a slug's is no different. But Debby the Troll heard them quite distinctly as they all chanted in unison a word that was something along the lines of, but not necessarily, "Jerk."

My Dresden Church

By Anna Bunce

The square is crowded, colorful people squished shoulder to shoulder, bathed in the brilliant light of a midsummer sun. The heavy swaying rhythm of a German folk song mingles with chattering of the crowd and the distinct scent of coconut sunscreen fills the air. In my palms I hold the soft but sweaty hand of my greatest of great-grandchildren. "Oma, I can't see..." White blonde piggy tails bounce like springs as big blue eyes stare up into mine. Before I can answer her father has scooped her up, letting her settle on his skyscraper shoulders where her blue eyes can drink in the unveiling that hordes of people have come to see. Like the child I can't see either, all my years of growing now useless as age slowly shrinks my size, but really I don't need to see past the bobbing sea of summer hats. I can remember in near perfect detail the church of my childhood, after all these years finally rebuilt. While today is all about rebirth, the memory that strikes me more at this moment was that late October morning when I woke to find my beloved church in ruins, its broken stone spilling over the desolate square, while dust, the seasoning of war, peppered every surface of the city.

The early sun hung low, framed in the broken church window, its frosty rays illuminating the ragged shards of colored glass still clinging to the window frame. The deep cherry reds and indigo blues seemed to be the only color left in this grey world of stone. In the course of a single night the commanding church had disappeared and all that stood in front of me now was a mound of unrecognizable rubble. Rising out of the ruins two opposing towers prevailed, the rock solid body between them having been blown away by the howling planes that haunted the night skies. The church's former glory had not been forgotten by the towers who endured the destruction that lay around them with the dignity of all the German people. Now, the towers and the mound of stone that lay at their feet were all that was left of the church I had known so well.

As the sun rose higher in the window and its streaking rays stroked the dark rubble, I could see the shadowy shapes of people. Some like me simply stood, scattered about the square taking in the destruction while others knelt where the cascading stone met the street. I began to walk slowly, my pace picking up as the decay drew me in. Soon I was at the base staring up at the mound, the towers having now disappeared behind the church's rubble. Expanding silence overtook me, as if the church were taking its final breath. The tense anticipation of the final exhale hung, suspended in the air, waiting to collapse upon itself. Out of the mist a young woman appeared beside me. She threw herself down on her knees with an unrestrained thud and her arms flew out in front of her as delicate puffs of dust rose where she lay. I watched her curved back jerk and fall as each breath turned into waves of wracking sobs while her fists pounded dully against the cobblestone. Her loose copper hair flowed over her shoulders winding its way through the soot, bravely reaching out as if to save the stone and cowardly curling away from it all at once. Abruptly she jerked forward, rising to her knees; she turned to look at me. Her hopeless blue eyes were icy from the tears that had muddied her pale face. Our moment ended with an abrupt blue blink as she set to work on the stone. Her short dirty nails dug into the ruins as she pulled at a chunk of stone. An anguished growl escaped her as she pried it free and lobbed it over her shoulder. It cracked against the pavement splintering into a hundreds of pebbles that skipped from one cobblestone to the next. Ting. Ting, ting. They fell like pearls slipping from my mother's broken necklace that night the brown uniforms had burst, unannounced into our home.

The silence of the square was deafening. Who knew that in the absence of buzzing planes and the ricocheting thuds of bombs as they ripped apart buildings, silence could be so loud? My labored breathing seemed to be the only sound left in the

square, but if you strained you could hear the gentle grieving melody that mingled among the cool mist. The shallow raspy breathing of others was punctuated by dainty hiccups of heartache woven into the wailing ribbons of the wind. The fine dust that had blanketed the square like a dirty lace veil danced on the morning breeze teasing my nostrils with every sooty breath I took. The frigid cold and soot stung my nose and dry throat, pinching my face till my eyes began to water. Through my watery eyes I watched as my breath clouded the scene, wheeling puffs that hung like stale smoke and then dissipated into the thin mist. My tears spilled over, rolling down my cheeks and into my mouth where the salt relieved my tongue of the stinging tasteless dust. The comfort of my tears allowed an unexpected relief- I was alive after all.

My soul now possessed by faith I began to climb, stones slipping beneath my feet, falling like the spirits that lay crushed beneath the church, the town. I kept going, my hands digging into the gaping cracks that lay between the worn stone, fine dust filling every wrinkle of my palm, every life line, every love line. With each breath the dust filtered in, sitting dully in my mouth, numbing it with its grit. As I climbed my inexperienced hands soon learned to feel the differences: smooth worn marble, raw brazen concrete, and on occasion a feathery splinter of jagged wood. Each hand and foothold was vigilantly tested but as my anticipation for the summit quickened my hands grew careless. I stumbled as a holdfast gave out, sliding down the heap like a broken doll. Every ragged edge of

stone caught some part of my body, poking me long enough to leave a bruise but not enough to slow me down. Pebbles rolled beneath me escorting me on my descent. My cheek grazed the coarse stones and eventually I began to slow. Finally stopped, I pulled myself up, suddenly aware of the warm blood flowing down my cheek like tears. As the thick blood hit my lips I licked it away, satisfied and surprised by the salty tingle it left on my tongue. Brushing the blood away with my clammy hand I continued, my eyes never leaving the peak. As I reached the summit I turned back, looking down on the people scattering the square, too far up to tell if it was me they were staring at or the ashen remains of the church. Dancing shivers trickled down my spine like chilled fingertips as I watched the people. Did they dwell on the destruction of the past or the future of the country as the sun shone down on both? I tilted my head to the faint warmth of the sun, already past caring about their impressions. I had risen from the ashes and now if only I could capture this faint ray of hope my future would be bright.

I had hung onto that bit of hope I found that day, as I stood atop the church with the heavens shining down on me. It had propelled me through the complexities of life and led me back here, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in tow. The crowds finally part and we push forward, my breath disappearing as I see the church. Whole again it stands, proud and commanding, nothing like the broken mass of rock that had sat in its place for so many years.

The Tale of Tales

By Davin Sandvar

Delm was a family man, he worked 5 days a week and he had weekends off which he spent with his family. His children were named Hakram and Illbod but unfortunately they were ghosts. He couldn't ever hug them or give them pats on the back. Oh how he longed to feel his children's skin. Delm went to church on Sundays with his family and always prayed. Late one night Delm and his wife Craw'kin were sleeping in their master bed when they heard a ruckus in the other room. They woke up and went to their children's room. To their horror the children were gone! They started panicking and searching.

They sounded the town conch shell and everyone in town came running to the meeting tree.

"Citizens of Rahabony, I bring horrible news. Our children were stolen in the middle of the night." Gasps were about the crowd. "Will any of you be brave enough to go on an epic journey to save them? There will be a handsome reward involved." Two centaurs dashed out of the crowd at that very moment.

"Oh Delm we heed your pain and worry, that is why me, Killamo and my companion J-Dawg will help you." Without even waiting for a response the two centaurs were off. They trotted into the crimson forest scouting and calling the ghosts.

Killamo and J-Dawg reached a dark part in the forest where there was almost no light at all. They were just about to settle down and take a short rest when out of nowhere a blinding arrow skimmed the cheek of J-Dawg's face. Gasps were about the centaur. They looked out into the woods and saw the glistening eyes of a pirate with multiple arms. The pirate stepped out of the bush and looked at the two centaurs. He was a rugged looking pirate, he looked as if he'd fought many battles. He wore a tattered rag for a shirt and had a belt with miniature caged parrots.

"I, Captain Blood, challenge you centaurs to a fight to the death." The centaurs hesitated.

"His power level is immense," whispered Killamo to J-Dawg. "I wonder how strong he is."

Before they could answer, Captain Blood flew into the air and started firing death parrots. The centaur leapt out of the parrot's way; Killamo wasn't quick enough and got struck down and killed instantly. J-Dawg hurled himself over behind a tree. The image of Killamo lying on the ground in greatest defeat angered him. He had never fought a battle on his own before and now he had to, to save his life. Captain Blood's eyes were cold and lifeless, the sweat dripped down his face like an amateur waterfall after a rain storm. He started flying straight at J-Dawg; all four arms were extended out in a death lock. J-Dawg crafted a shield out of the nearest tree to him and reflected Captain Blood's charge. Captain Blood ricocheted back. J-Dawg grabbed the arrow out of the tree and threw it back at Captain Blood; it didn't hit him but it slew some deer behind him.

Captain Blood laughed, "Ha ha ha ha, Now I think it is time for me to tell you my secret." He stopped and there was an epic pause. "I am Immortal. I can not die." J-Dawg's eye's widened and he realised that that's why Captain Blood's power was so high.

"Why are you doing this, Captain Blood?" "What have the centaur breed done to you?"

Captain Blood fell silent. He put his head down and started to weep. "When I was a young scallywag I lived out on Centaurion Island." "I went to an all centaur school. I was the only four armed pirate going to that school." He wiped his eyes and continued. "All of the centaurs used to call me 'stupid arms' and 'four guns' and 'quad extremity face.'" The weeping turned into a bellow of sadness. "I never wanted to be a villain, but one day a powerful wizard came to me and asked me why I was so sad. I told the wizard about the centaurs and how constant their abuse was to me. The wizard promised me magical powers and immortality in exchange for being a villain for the rest of my life." Captain Blood stopped crying; looked up with a hint of

peace. J-Dawg went over to Captain Blood and put his arms around him.

"It's going to be ok Captain Blood, I know a guy that knows a guy. All you need is a spoonful of crime fighting."

"Thank-you J-Dawg but we aren't done here yet," Captain Blood went on. "The ghost children are in a cage underneath the surface of the earth. I sold them to the rock people for parrot money. We're going to have to bargain with the rock people and get them back."

Captain Blood jumped gaily onto J-Dawg's back and they rode off to the entrance to the center of the earth. The entrance to the center of the earth was near the shoreline of the ocean. It was a vast rock wall with a doorknob and it looked very, very old. On the side was an inscription: sdaghTheyahnOidhoafn[slll Lsojtnej Hsoutnofko Koufh.

"What language is that?" Asked J-Dawg.

"It's Arabic Elven."

Captain Blood took out his translator parrot. It cleared its throat and began reading. "The inscription translates to: To enter the door of the center of the earth you must first find a key." The parrot then exploded.

"Great! Where are we going to find a key to the door to the center of the earth?"

A loud screech sounded out throughout the land. "What was that!?" asked J-Dawg.

"It's the Guardian of the Sea... Tommy," Captain Blood announced in a small voice. Then out of nowhere a giant fish flopped onto the shore.

It murmured in a bold fish voice "The key is inside of me, you must venture in and find it, but you must wear these blindfolds for there are things inside of me... things that your eyes could not comprehend that would cause your mind to explode." Captain Blood and J-Dawg put the blindfolds on and entered the fish's mouth. The mouth was a damp place and there were torches along the side. Every once and awhile there would be a deep sound throughout the fish along with a cool breeze. The two adventurers could hear sounds around them, little voices and noises of ungodly creatures. Captain Blood took out one of his map parrots.

"The key seems to be located in the stomach of the fish."

J-Dawg gasped. "How are we gonna get thurr!?" Captain Blood pointed in the general direction. They ventured through the fish for 10 days without any rest. They ate the fish walls when they were hungry and cooked it with the torch fire. They found the key in the depth of the stomach where it was covered in gross stuff. "Victory!" screamed J-Dawg. The fish heard him and puked them out of its stomach. When they arrived outside they saw that the fish had died. It died helping them. Captain Blood mounted upon J-Dawg gaily and they raced over to the entrance to the center of the earth with their key.

They inserted the key into the key hole and the door opened. It was very dark but luckily Captain Blood had an illuminating parrot. They set out along the eternal staircase for the rest of the day. They reached the bottom of the staircase into what seemed to be a chasm. They decided it would be best to set up camp and head for the center tomorrow. J-Dawg took the nearest boulder and made a rock tent. Captain Blood took out a fire parrot and they huddled by the fire. Captain Blood and J-Dawg exchanged stories. Captain Blood told J-Dawg of the time when he was a young pirate and how he used to be Captain of the Leslie Neilson S.S. Death Ship. J-Dawg told Captain Blood of when he used to be a human but he ran into a horse really hard and became a centaur. He used to be in the CCDST, Cool Centaur Death Squadron Tribe and would raid villages and stuff. They decided they should rest up and hit the rocks.

During the night there was a stomping in the boulders by the tent. Captain Blood opened his eyes and smelt the air around them. "*Smells like rockmen,*" he whispered. J-Dawg was also up and had a worried look on his face. The two adventurers crept out of the tent and looked over head. There was a Rockmen Gang heading for their tent and they looked pretty ticked off. Captain Blood looked at the rockmen, and then J-Dawg; they both nodded in synchronization. They walked calmly over to the rockmen in the field. The rockmen halted and there was an epic stare-down. It lasted a solid 10 minutes when finally J-Dawg passed out from the intensity. Captain Blood reached for his parrot belt and readied one behind his back waiting for the rockmen to make their move. The rockmen started charging at Captain Blood screaming in bouldertongue. Captain Blood flew into the air and created a swirling windstorm. One by one the rockmen got sucked into the tornado until they were all gathered like a flying bunch of rockmen in a windstorm. Captain Blood's eyes widened and a fierce look took control of him. He grabbed the end of the tornado and hurled it through the earth down into the lava core. He then mended J-Dawg's look wounds.

"What happened to the rockmen?" J-Dawg asked in a recovering voice.

"I took care of those loser babies no problem," he went on. "Whenever in doubt, make a tornado and put things in it." The two companions went on to the end of the internal chasm.

Within a couple days they reached the town of Boulderdon. They decided to go to the local tavern and get a drink. They strutted into the tavern and everything stood still. All of the rock creatures turned towards them. Captain Blood and J-Dawg took a seat at the bar. "One rock ale and a rock martini on the rocks for my good chum here."

The barkeeper glared at both of them. "We don't serve your kind down here; I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Captain Blood's eyes disappeared. "Me and this here J-Dawg have been traveling in this crappy rock place for days and we can't even get a drink? Fine, we'll leave."

"No Captain, that's what they want us to do, I say we show them why they call us dangerous slappy log mice." Captain Blood nodded at J-Dawg. He took out two invisibility parrots and handed one to J-Dawg. They ate the parrots and turned invisible. They began wrecking the bar. They kicked over the tables, threw the glasses against the walls, killed a couple rockfolk and broke all of the rock windows. Most of the rockfolk were gone now and they were finished with their destruction. They exited the bar and stepped outside. Their invisibility was faded now. The ground started to shake. Captain Blood lost his balance and fell over "What in the world is that?"

"Judging by the magnitude of the shaking I'd say it is a giant angry rockman." Just then a giant figure came out from behind a building.

There was a long loud lyrical rock toned voice. "I am Judith, king of Boulderdon, I hear you two have been causing trouble amongst my kingdom and I would like you to leave before something unfortunate would have to happen to you."

Captain Blood did not stir. "Funny, I was just about to ask you the same thing."

"So that's how it's going to be!? Very well!" The rock king started to head over to them.

Captain Blood looked into the eyes of the rock king. His eyes were angry but he knew the rock king was a passionate leader with a mind of peace. Captain Blood bulged his chest out and let in a breath of air... but the air didn't stop. The intensity of the wind became so tremendous; debris left and right was flying

into Captain Blood's mouth. More and more miscellaneous debris tumbled into his oral cavity, eventually the wind got so powerful that the rock king was clinging on the side of the wall trying to escape his fate. It was no match for Captain Blood's amazing sucking power. The rock king's fingers slipped one by one as he tried to hang on for dear life but it was no use. The final finger slipped off the wall and he went swirling into Captain Blood's mouth. Somehow Captain Blood managed to swallow him whole, like a python eating a buffalo.

"You really are an amazing guy aren't you Captain Blood."

"Yeah, I can do anything but we'd better head out before the rockops find us." Captain Blood hopped gaily onto J-Dawg's back and they set out for the center of the earth.

The center of the earth was very near now and both of the adventurers could feel the heat rising intensely. The two adventurers were very close, they could smell the center. It smelt of hickory bacon and Windex. They finally arrived to a door which said "Center of the Earth." They opened the door and walked in. The heat was so intense now that they were sweating everywhere on their bodies. Captain Blood took a sip out of his beverage parrot and passed it to J-Dawg. "We're almost there J-Dawg, the ghost children should be up this way." They walked a bit more and made it to a clearing. In the middle of the clearing was a cage with two ghostly children and sitting near the cage were a bunch of gypsies. Captain Blood's only weakness was gypsies. He fell to the ground instantly at the sight of them. The thump he made turned the gypsies' attention that way. J-Dawg crouched down to aid Captain Blood but there was no hope in his awakening, he just couldn't handle gypsies. J-Dawg stood up and started toward the pile o' gypsies. "Listen here Gypsies; I need dem kids back so I can return dem to thurr rightful ghost owner."

"Too bad, we need these ghost children for our energy," replied the fattest gypsy.

"Yeah without these ghost children, we can't do anything," said a raspy throat cut voice.

J-Dawg peered at them with his three eyes. "Alright then I'm just going to have to take them back with force." He grabbed the nearest air and created a sword. The gypsies all got up and pulled out their weapons. J-Dawg charged at the group, sword in hand, eyes glaring. He then blacked out in savagery. All he could remember from then on was the spirit of Killamo and him fighting side by side against the gang of gypsies.

Captain Blood arose from his slumber. “What in the world happened here!?”

“I owned some gypsies and canned them for later,” J-Dawg said confidently.

“Well let’s get these ghost children back to Delm and we can back to our daily lives.” Captain Blood strapped the kids to his back and gaily hopped onto J-Dawg’s back. The two adventurers headed back to the surface and to Rahabony.

Brave

By Kellen Loewen

This is ridiculous. What am I doing? I don't belong here – what was I thinking? I should be up in my dorm. I should be studying.

The lights dimmed as I thought this, the wide expanse of the gymnasium floor grew cluttered with the student body. Streamers lined the walls like hapless band-aids. Knowing that my class and I had sweated a few pints in here just yesterday disgusted me. And because those stupid girls had talked too much, Mr. Hughes had made us run surplus laps. Twenty-five of them. Last place. Now, packaged in ribbons and disco balls, the school gymnasium imparted a new kind of torture upon the collective. *I'm doomed*, I thought.

The sides of the gym had been lined on either side. The Bathurst boys were on the left and the army of us on the right. Yes, then it had felt good that we girls, communally, were afraid. But then others began to break the line, cascading until more and more weeded themselves from the wallflowers.

This is ridiculous. The music rolled in, and I knew it was over. My dress was useless. I tugged at the hem, looking out into the sea of couples. *How do they do that? How do they just dance?*

And then I knew the truth. Boys were not for dancing. Girls were not for befriending. Had I brought with me a girlfriend with which to attend the event, maybe I would be braver. Maybe I would appear prettier to them. But I knew I didn't want that. I didn't want a girl friend. Girls were stupid.

I told myself I had come here for some real conversation, to meet real people – people that didn't talk about hair or dresses. Or boys.

This is ridiculous. Leave it to adults to take us children in the most awkward, uncomfortable stage of our lives and put us into the most torturous, embarrassing, awkward situations with all the other embarrassing, awkward people. The chaperones must be laughing at us all beneath their watchful eye - laughing at the girls and boys who dance at arms length apart, the couples that can't bear to look each other in the eye, the boys that watch their clumsy feet as they shuffle awkwardly about. And the girls so nervous, they can't stop talking. I know I would be laughing.

And then there are the older girls and boys, already well acquainted with one another, magnetized to each other on the dance floor. *Where do they get off dancing like that?*

How is it that I can understand so much of their buffoonery, yet I cannot just be one of them? *I just can't let go*, I tell myself, *even here, of the wall.* Reflecting back to past school days, I remembered the desolate classes, the empty cafeteria, dozens of false flickers of hope. What was wrong with me exactly? Beneath the pink, blue and white strobes of light, we all looked very much the same.

The song changed to the slow romantic kind, and I released the hem of my dress. I looked up. Through the gaps in the crowd, I saw them on the boys' wall: the other wallflowers. They were the short ones, the skinny ones, the pasty-white ones. It was so easy to point out what was wrong with *them*. But how could I impartially judge what truly separated them from me? From what I could tell, what we had in common was minimal: We were not dancing. We were not with friends. And we were all thinking the same thing: *Just dance. Just dance with me. Idiot!*

But it seems we are all waiting for the other to come. And it will never happen. *I will never happen. Idiot.*

I did not like this kind of music. I did not like how hot the lights felt, especially in a saran-wrap dress. I did not like the way that it felt as though everyone in the room was both staring at me, and ignoring my presence. I didn't like anything about that kind of environment, yet I persisted. For some reason, I, like the Bathurst wallflowers across the gym, felt that, somehow, the laws of life would bend for me. We believed that there was always something to happen – something to break the ice of our lives, someone to pull us out of the depths and into the light. How could I lurk in the shadows, yet suffer beneath the heat of the spotlight?

This is ridiculous. The slow song continued. I knew it was over. It was over from the beginning. I didn't belong there. I should have stayed up in my dorm, studying. *I'm losing my mind. I'm putting the spotlight upon myself.*

Everything was too much; I was overwhelmed. Or, perhaps deeply I was underwhelmed by my

exaggerated expectations. Regardless, I had to get out of there. I pretended to head out to the washroom. Passing the open door, I stopped as I saw two girls standing at the sink chatting, excited and happy. They noticed me and, too, stopped, glaring at me. I tried to

smile feebly, but could not muster a flinch, feeling like the idiot I was. All the music had died. All of the lights had faded, taking the shadows with them. I shook my head and went up to my dorm and studied.

Diary of a Philosophical Fifteen Year Old

By Suzanne Ouellet

May 24th, 2003
4:38pm

There is a new girl at school. She is absolutely gorgeous and I hate her. I was so close to catching Dylan's eye! I swear, today was the day that it seemed like he was actually going to work up the nerve to come and talk to me in Math class, and then this beautiful girl comes out of nowhere and suddenly it's like I never existed. She's stolen the spotlight from me. Not that I was exactly in the spotlight in the first place...and now I can no longer stand being in that class. I sit in the corner of the room, which used to be great because it gave me a nice view of Dylan, but now that the new girl's desk is right in front of Dylan's, I am forced to watch Dylan watch her. Watch her flick her silky hair, Dylan's eyes following as the sun's rays come in through the window and change her hair colour from a rich brown to an auburn gold. I sound pathetic. My life is pathetic. Please, somebody tell me that I'm better than this. That I am not forced to eternally watch a boy who, let's face it, is never going to want me the way I want him. Why can't I move on? Why is this so hard? And why wasn't I blessed with beautiful people genes? Damn, I wish I had a boyfriend.

8:05pm

My life is a continual spiral downhill. I now have zero dollars in my bank account. My last five bucks went towards the new edition of Cosmo magazine. Funnily enough, the main article in it is on "How to Win Back Your Man!" so maybe I'll actually learn something useful in this one.

May 27th, 2003
3:42pm

Exciting news happened today. Apparently, Kevin likes me! I've never actually noticed him before, but today my friend pointed him out to me in the hall, and he's actually not that bad. I don't think I would ever have noticed him if my friend hadn't pointed him out, but still. He's a guy and I'm a girl right? Now, all I have to do is let him know that I'm interested, and I'll pretty much have a guy, guaranteed. Maybe now I won't have to think about Dylan so much.

May 28th, 2003
5:58pm

Today was one of my more depressing days. Math was absolute torture! Dylan and the new girl are flirting like crazy. She's not even that pretty. Her hair is like straw from being ironed so much. I can't believe Dylan likes her. It's pretty sick, actually.

7:04pm

Just got a phone call from Kevin! Apparently, he found out my phone number from Sarah (who gave it to him without even asking me first!). We have plans for this Friday night, at his house. It should be fun. I'm actually a little nervous. I hate admitting this, but I've never been with a guy before. I'm so inexperienced! Hopefully he doesn't notice. I'll reread all my Cosmos to see if I can get some tips (that now maybe I'll actually be able to use). I wonder what I should wear. I'm debating on my skirt with a lace camisole and a jean jacket. Like sexy, but not too sexy. I am even going to get a Brazilian bikini wax. I'll die if my mother ever finds this out. I realise that it sounds like I'm putting way too much effort into this, and we probably won't even go that far, but I just like to keep my bases covered (because you just never know what might happen).

* * *

Kevin picked me up from my house and drove me to his. We talked a bit on the way. He seemed like a pretty nice guy, but thinking back on it, he was a little creepy too. I couldn't stand his lips, which he kept licking because they were so cracked and dry. After we arrived at his house, he led me to his room. The covers were thrown over the bed, as if at the last minute he had attempted to make the room look somewhat respectful. Clothes were thrown haphazardly on the floor, and I spied a large stack of pornos under his bed. Suddenly, I didn't feel so good. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea. I didn't know what I was planning to do exactly, I had pretty much been open to anything before, but I didn't even know Kevin.

"Do you want to sit down?" he asked.

“Yeah that would be great, thanks.” I sat on his bed, which was filled with lumps, and he turned on the television to an action flick.

“This is my all time favourite movie.” He jumped back onto the bed beside me, slyly putting his arm around my shoulder. Maybe I was getting nervous for nothing; this didn’t seem to be too bad. But after only about ten minutes into the movie he started shifting around and turning to look at me. Suddenly I felt his hand on my leg. He started leaning towards me.

“I feel sick,” I said. And now I really did feel sick, and bolted from the bed and to the bathroom. At least in the bathroom I could actually think. Why was I even here? I mean Kevin seemed okay and everything, but he certainly wasn’t the guy for me. There would be more guys in the future, and was it really worth it to waste my first kiss with a guy I didn’t even like?

Coming out of the bathroom, I felt a little better, a little more grounded. At least now I knew where I stood.

“I think I’m ready to go home,” I said to him, looking downward. The complete silence during the car ride home was very awkward, but I was just grateful to finally be out of that house.

“Thanks for having me over.” I said, as he pulled up in my driveway.

“Yeah, no problem.”

Looking into his eyes, I saw that he looked a little hurt, and also even a little confused, but at least I wouldn’t be hurting him more by leading him on.

“See you at school,” I said, giving him a quick peck on the cheek before making my way towards the front door.

* * *

Have you ever woken up one day to find your entire perspective on life changed, and suddenly you looked at everything a little differently? That’s pretty much what happened to me the morning after my “date” with Kevin. Suddenly, I felt a little more assertive, and a little more confident. I was still only fifteen years old; I didn’t need to rush into a relationship with any guy just so I could say that I had. Even though I had only spent about twenty minutes at Kevin’s house, those twenty minutes were enough to make me realise my own self worth. Now, when I listen to my friends talk about their first experiences with boys, good or bad, I’m not nearly as jealous as I was before. Because before, I couldn’t wait to have a boyfriend, and now I realise that you really don’t need a boyfriend to have fun. I mean, sure, if you love the guy, it can be great. But it’s just not worth it to put so much time and energy into someone that you don’t even respect, or who might not even respect you. God, this sounds incredibly corny, but live your life how you want to live it, not how you think others might want to live it. Go skinny-dipping at midnight, camp out under the stars, do anything that you’re absolutely terrified of doing. Because isn’t that part of what life is all about, testing ourselves and surpassing our limits?

Non-Fiction

The Constant Battle

By Paul MacIntyre

The room around his bed was the same as usual. The blue curtains covered his window completely, his cloudy fish tank bubbled away in the corner. His parents were in their bed, ten steps away. There was no reason to be upset. No reason to worry. There was never a reason to worry, yet David was tense with fear. His stomach ached like never before. Perhaps it had hurt this badly in the past; perhaps it hurt much less than the countless times he was sure he was sick. However, this time was real. He was sick. There was nothing worse in life than throwing up. Like an airport security employee, his mind moved up and down his body looking for pain. Proof that he was indeed ill. Even as he was doing this, David wondered why he wanted to make his worries worse. Why did he concentrate on the faint aching in his chest? It was almost certainly nothing. Still, there was a possibility that the almost un-noticeable pain under his ribs was a sign, along with the knotted pain in his stomach, that he would soon be throwing up everything in his stomach. He couldn't take the pain anymore. He sat up in bed hoping for some release. Unfortunately, his stomach screamed back at him to lie back down. He obeyed.

The room around her bed was the same as usual. The blue curtains covered her window completely. At her right, her husband's chest rose and fell gently. Yet, Teresa could not sleep. The regular, drowsy drone of the house at rest was broken by the dissonant gasps of her child in his room ten steps away. She knew that he was not sick and that everything would pass. Still, she felt tortured by his pain. There was nothing she could do to ease his mind, in fact, his counsellor had specifically ordered her to stay out of David's constant battle. Re-assurance would only worsen the problem. His sighs began to quicken, before they suddenly stopped. Teresa looked over at her husband. His chest was still, his eyes were open.

David was going to throw up. His stomach was at the point of bursting. As if water were filling up a glass, he felt a deadly mix of adrenalin and panic

quickly rise up within his torso. His legs were too hot, his waist was too cold, and his stomach ached as if weighed down with lead. David felt like he was drowning as the liquefied panic filled up his neck and reached the top of his head. His breathing stopped. He wasn't allowed to ask for help. He had to do everything alone. The liquid dripped down the back of his neck.

Teresa held her breath, listening. She wished she could help her little boy. She remembered the day that she had taken him to the doctor and lifted his small frame onto the physician's table. The pediatrician checked David over, before shrugging his shoulders and saying that he was just tense.

Predictably, the dry, pathetic voice called out for Teresa. She turned to her husband who was already speaking.

'Leave him alone. He needs to do it himself,' grumbled William.

Feeling torn between her motherly instincts, her worry about upsetting her husband, and her guilt about blatantly disregarding the counsellor's orders. Teresa lifted the comforter off of her legs and stumbled into her son's room.

He seemed so small in the double bed that he laid in. The baby blue sheets were black in the dark. Everything can look black with the lights turned out. Teresa sat next to her son. His entire body was shaking; his hair was slicked to the side with sweat. She took his hand. It was frigid and clammy. His body convulsed with tension.

'Dave, you're anxious,' she whispered. 'You need to calm down now.'

'I know,' he croaked. 'But it feels so real. My stomach is killing me. I really feel like I'm going to throw up.' The words escaped his mouth as quickly as possible.

'If I get a bucket, will it make you feel better?'

'No,' David blurted. 'Don't say that, you'll make it worse. Just stay here.'

Together they sat trying to defend themselves against their relentless invisible foe. While David was struggling with his thoughts, Teresa looked around his room. His blue curtains covered his windows completely, his cloudy fish tank bubbled away in the corner. Finally, she decided to break the silence.

'David, you need to get a hold of this. What did Dr. Leanne tell you to do? Do your breathing. You are not sick.'

'Mom, I feel sick.'

'Of course you feel sick. You always feel sick. You have an anxiety disorder, David. Everything is in your mind. You feel sick because your tummy is all in knots.'

She brushed her hand under his damp covers and felt his stomach. It was rock solid.

'Do I have a fever, mom?'

'You know I'm not supposed to do this kind of thing.'

'Please mom...'

Teresa sighed and put her hand over his sticky forehead.

'Fine,' she said.

'Are you sure?'

'Positive. David, you have an anxiety disorder! You always feel sick, yet you never seem to realize that you are doing this to yourself! All of this is far worse than actually throwing up.'

Teresa's face grew hot. She was tired of pain. She was tired of seeing her little boy suffer. Everyday chores that should be routine were constantly invaded by their black cloud. Little boys should be able to go to a friend's house without fearing disaster. Constantly bullied, constantly tested. Obsessive behavior.

'Stop it now,' she snapped. 'You have to get over this. I love you, but you need to get a hold of yourself. You can't spend the rest of your life afraid to do anything because you feel sick. We can't go through this every night.'

She rose from her son's bed.

'Be brave,' she whispered as she reluctantly walked the ten steps back to her room.

David's face was contorted with frustration. He looked at his window. Blue curtains completely covered the glass. His eyes drifted along the smooth cloth, along the waves and nuances of the fabric. Where the curtain ended, its faint shadow began. It was never there in daylight. David wondered if anyone else noticed the ugly grey. Its presence was uninvited, invasive. David closed his eyes. Why did he focus on the shadow? After all, the curtain was the reality. David turned away from his window.

Always In DarknesS

By Maria Wilde

Merciless potholes jostled the small car as it gradually moved along the un-manicured, dirt road leaving behind a momentary dust trail suspended in mid air. Oblivious to the uncomfortable ride, I stared out the tinted window completely absorbed by my new surroundings, a country half way around the world from home. Here in India my seventeenth birthday was about to be celebrated.

My host family was taking me to an AIDS orphanage where we would share the birthday cake resting steadily in my host sister's, Pravalika's, hands. India has the largest AIDS per capita in the world; 3% of the world's AIDS population resides in this state of India, Andhra Pradesh.

Dusty haired children roamed the streets, half adorned in shabby articles of clothing; their parents at stop lights asking for any morsel of change or food from rushed commuters. I watched in amazement as a family of five sped past on a motorcycle, honking and skillfully weaving through the impossible maze of traffic. Vehicles maneuvered around traffic barriers, people, and docile cows lying in the middle of the street, lending an aura of peace to the whirling city life. Lone wanderers staggered on, their worldly possessions slung over their backs. Street vendors wheeled their trolleys of produce and fruits stacked in ornate pyramids. Men selling hot tea in miniature plastic cups walked through the masses of people yelling, "Chai, garam chai."

After driving for what seemed a minute, but was in fact thirty, the car eased to a stop on the bare earth parking area as I simultaneously reached to unbuckle the seat belt. Finding none I laughed, shaking my head at old habits. The lack of seat belts, among other safety policies in India, make North Americans appear incredibly over cautious.

Out of the car, I observed the walled compound where some people spend their whole lives, however long or short that might be. Stationed to the right was a run down, white washed building, labeled the adult's wing. To the left was situated the children's wing in the same sort of structure. A well used play set stood motionless in the dead summer breeze beside a tiny fenced off garden containing flowers, dried from countless heat of the day exposures. On the wall of the building was a sign with peeling, black letters that read: 'PHOTOGRAPHY IS PROHIBITED.' I followed my hosts solemnly to the children's wing; I didn't know what to expect having never seen a person stricken with AIDS before.

Leaving the brightness of outdoors, I gave my eyes a second to adjust to the room that's only light came from the open entrance and a few relatively small, dusty windows. To my utter surprise we found gathered in front of us twenty-six, well-looking children varying in age from three to thirteen, smiling at their unexpected visitors. A good two-thirds of them were on the younger end; I wasn't keen on letting my mind dwell on why that might be. Ramgopal, my host father, announced the purpose of our visit to the children and the ladies caring for them. There was pin drop silence as he gently pulled the chocolate truffle cake out of its box. Even in the dark I could make out the children's eyes widening at the sight of this delicious treat.

Given a short knife and instructions, I pressed the serrated blade into the soft, spongy cake. The moment I finished the first slice, as though it were a cue, all the children started singing, 'Happy Birthday,' to me; it was a different version I had not heard, which included the lyrics, "May God bless you." Listening to the melodious sound of children's voices blended together in song and seeing them all gazing up at me, my heart melted. It was the sweetest, most sincere birthday song I had ever received. With the help of my

host mother, Nandini, and Pravalika we cut enough pieces to go around.

The children waited so silent and patiently as we distributed each piece of cake. Every child politely said, "Thank you," and promptly sat down cross legged or kneeling on the cement floor, and began eating, rather skillfully for someone so young, with their right hand. Among the sitting children lay a boy of about six on his stomach with his head turned away from us. His friend desperately tried to nudge him awake using enticing words to any child's ears such as, "cake," and "chocolate," but to no avail. I didn't want to allow my thoughts to linger on the reason he couldn't muster the strength to enjoy this treat with the others. The little boy in no way even stirred during the remainder of our visit. A women working there set aside a piece of cake for him in the fridge.

Glancing around the undersized quarters I noticed a framed picture of Jesus Christ leaning against the wall on top of a tall, wooden cupboard. Following the height of the cupboard I could see the low Styrofoam ceiling had lived through better days. On the faded paint wall ahead of us hung a simply framed, slightly lop-sided, solitary photograph of all the children in a close group outside by the playground. I looked down at the base of the wall on the same wee ones caught in time in the photo; I couldn't help think how precious they were and how heartbreaking was their suffering from such a horrible, incurable disease. This light deprived place is where they will always be in this world.

As mere infants these children had either been found abandoned or left by their family alone on the doorstep of this AIDS orphanage. Once the parents learn that their child is an AIDS victim they want no involvement with their babies whatsoever and would leave them on the side of the street or in the slums, vulnerable to the danger of weather, stray animals and other people. The gracious folk working here take in everyone and anyone who comes to them for help or who is left in a weak state on the front steps. I could

never imagine not knowing the love of a parent. The emotions I felt erupting within me for these children were indescribable. A haunting liveness lingering in their dark, brown eyes made me wonder if they have any hope. I knelt down with out stretched arms and tenderly pulled two children into an embrace wishing that I had a dozen arms to hold and hug them all.

Still on my knees, I asked a little girl wearing a frilly white dress with cherry red, dotted flowers what she was called, "Ap ka naam kya hai?" Her gaze diverted to the floor while she shyly introduced herself; her petite, coffee brown hand slid easily into my palm as we shook hands. Shaking her hand and a few others I realized they were all wearing what seemed to be hand-me-down clothes that were one or two sizes too big. Rising to my feet, two arms pursued me as I stood up. I bent downward and lifted the child eagerly reaching up to me. Positioning him on my right hip, Pravalika performed the same movement with a little girl. I felt myself growing attached, even in this short visit.

Seeing my host parents step outside from the corner of my eye signaled that it was time to leave. Pravalika and I lightly placed the children we were carrying back on the cool ground and said our good byes as we reluctantly strolled to the only entrance and exit of the building. Re-entering the end of monsoon heat and mid day sun I brought my hand to my brow shielding my eyes, which had become used to the dim interior of the children's wing. Hearing high pitched voices behind me, I turned around and waved back at the smiling faces ensconced in the shadow of the doorway. As I walked towards their tiny, traffic-savvy vehicle with my host family I looked again one last time at the waving children, determined to remember their innocent faces. Those precious children in India gave me the most profound birthday celebration I had ever experienced. With each year to come, as I turn a year older I know I will reflect on those beautiful children who may not have seen their next birthday.

Life after being an Only Child

By Alycia Wolosesky

"I'm pregnant!"- These are the words my mom yells to me after I've unwrapped my last present on my eleventh birthday. After being an only child for eleven years, I realize that the wish I made as I blew out my candles came true. I was finally going to become a big sister. Soon after I heard the news, images of baby bottles, diapers, and a plethora of noisy toys flooded my mind. Where will the baby sleep? Will it like me? How old will it be when I get married? These are all certain questions I began to ask myself constantly. As months past, my concerns faded more and more as everyone prepared for the arrival. My room that was once filled with a loft bed and computer was now painted sea foam green with a jungle print border. In the corner sat the rocking chair which had been handed down for four generations. Just glancing into the room made me realize my life was going to change, but I still did not know if it was for the better or the worse.

The day was March 25, 2000. It was a crisp spring morning as I walked outside to our new van. I never understood why my parents got a van, they both hated them but I guess they had to compromise because we needed the space. As soon as I buckled my seat belt I got an eerie feeling when I peered into the empty car seat.

"Why is the passenger seat wet? Nicole, did you leave your swimming stuff on the chair again?" my over due mother asked me as she sat down.

"No mom I didn't have swimming lessons yesterday," I replied.

"Honey, there's water going down your leg! I don't think school is on our schedule today sweetheart," said my dad.

I've never seen anyone run in and out of our house as fast as he did that day. Especially when he was carrying: a suitcase, camera, blankets, and pillows. Before I knew it I was the one carrying everything as my dad carried my mom to the nearest wheelchair into the hospital. After entering through the Emergency doors the only thing I was thinking about was how busy the hospital really was. Other than being born, I've never had to make any trips to the hospital. There were nurses hustling back and forth from each curtained

unit, the doctor's pagers beeping like mad in every corner, and the ambulances that pulled up every few minutes with severely injured patients. I was nervous to be where I was but anxious to see what was going to happen next.

"Nicole, please pass me the suitcase. You can take the blanket and pillow and go back to sleep in the waiting room. It's going to be a very long day," said my dad.

It wasn't until noon when I finally awoke. I felt lost and in a haze. I walked up and down the hallways for ten minutes until I saw a familiar face. My grandma and grandpa were there to greet me warmly and congratulate me as I was becoming a big sister. They also updated me with my mother's progress. Apparently, she was only dilating three centimeters. Not knowing what that meant, I could only nod my head in agreement and assume that that wasn't very far into labor.

One thing that I realized as I was in the hospital, was that the food was not very great and did not have much flavor. I was in the midst of eating my bland roast beef and mashed potatoes when my father came running through the swinging doors.

"It's a Boy! It's a Boy!" he shouted. By this time, there were twelve family members all waiting to hear the news. I've never felt so close to everyone around me before. We all gathered to hug and cry together—tears of joy of course. Even though my father came to tell us the news, we had to wait for another hour before we could visit my mother. The persistent questions that had faded away seven months ago began to pour into my head again.

My grandparents were the first to enter the room. I followed closely behind them. My grandma, Leanne, held my brother and cradled him very gently in her arms. I paid close attention to her form as I've had no experience holding babies before. With my father by my side, he helped me gain confidence and assured me that I was doing it properly. As soon as my brother opened his eyes and locked them with mine, I knew right then that our relationship would only grow as

time went on. After he had been passed around like an expensive vase, my father pulled out the camera.

“Cheese!” he said with a large grin on his face.

“Hey dad?” I asked. “What’s his name?”

“Well it’s a name that your mother and I have been thinking about for a very long time. His name is Zachary. Zachary Jordan Richards. Do you like it?” he asked.

“I do,” I answered. “It suits him already.”

The next day, we packed our belongings and set out for an exciting trip home as a new family.

During the ride home, my parents continued to talk to me and ask me questions about how I was feeling. Honestly, I was still feeling nervous, but I didn’t want them to know.

“I’m happy,” I replied. “Knowing that I am able to be close with someone else in our family besides you two is kind of a relief. I know he can’t talk right now and won’t be able to for a while, but he can still listen to me, and soon enough I’ll be able to listen to him.” Sitting there in silence, looking at my brother Zachary helped me realize that at times, even the smallest gifts in life are the best ones to have.

A Harmful Super Store: Wal-Mart's Impact on Local Communities

By Megan Jones

Recently I returned to my childhood home of Port Alberni, BC, a small town on the coast of Vancouver Island, and upon my arrival I was devastated. The beautiful forest, *my* forest, the one with the many secrets and hidden treasures, the one my friends and I had enjoyed exploring, was gone. The great tidal wave of consumerism had come and it had washed away a piece of my childhood, smoothing the uneven surface of my memories into an enormous expanse of black pavement. Sitting proudly atop this sterile environment was a shiny new Wal-Mart.

This Wal-Mart is only one of the thousands that mark the soil of many small towns across Canada and the United States. Although many rural towns welcome the "Super Low Prices" superstore with open arms, Wal-Mart brings more hardship to these communities than prosperity. Not only does Wal-Mart ruin local economies by destroying businesses, it exploits employees and degrades a community's green space.

The local economy in every town that Wal-Mart grabs at with its greedy fingers is suffering. Local businesses just can't compete with Wal-Mart's 'Super Low Prices' policy. Even though Port Alberni was a small town, it was an interesting place to live because of its diverse economy. Many different businesses lined the main street, appealing to all sorts of different customers. But since Wal-Mart made its big move, I have been told that many of these businesses are suffering; some even are forced to close, my once favorite bakery included. A study of Wal-Mart's impact on small and rural towns in Iowa showed lost sales for local businesses ranging from -17.2% in small towns (pop. < 5,000) to -61.4% in rural areas, amounting to a total dollar loss of \$2.46 billion over a 13-year period. A similar study, this time done in Maine, showed that Wal-Mart captured an average \$7.8 million from local/family businesses in their host towns during the first year of operation. Independent businesses are important to a local economy because they promote diversity and put money back into the community. When one makes a purchase from a local business, the money spent is going to help a fellow citizen from town

who will return the favor by buying into other community businesses or programs. When one makes a purchase from Wal-Mart, the money spent goes towards an international business that manufactures mainly in sweatshops overseas, which of course has no benefit to a community.

One might wonder why Port Alberni would want the monstrosity that is the Wal-Mart store/parking lot to replace one of the few areas of green space remaining within the town's limits. The fact is, the city council was easily persuaded by Wal-Mart's claim to "kick start local communities" by supplying the population with more job opportunities. Yes, Wal-Mart does offer jobs to locals, but the jobs they create are few, low paying and with little or no benefits compared to the jobs created by the local merchants who are put out of business. A study performed in 2002 revealed that an average worker at Wal-Mart makes only \$13,861 dollars a year, \$10,539 less than the yearly income made by the average Canadian. This hardly seems fair when in 2002, Wal-Mart made \$6.6 billion dollars in profit. Wal-Mart keeps their staff expenditure to a minimum by paying low wages, the average is \$9.16 an hour, and offering little or no health benefits. Wal-Mart gives health benefits to full-time workers only and, after the part-time cut off at Wal-Mart was increased from 28 to 34 hours a week, less than 45% of workers actually receive company health benefits. An internal memo released from Wal-Mart stated that co-managers must "increase the percentage of part-time Associates in stores and increase the number of hours per Associate." If these are the type of jobs that Wal-Mart creates for a community, it is worth making room for this super store?

When Wal-Mart paved over this section of forest in Port Alberni, it destroyed more than my childhood playground. A variety of plants and animals have been put out of their homes and the nearby salmon spawning creek suffers due to toxic run-off from the Wal-Mart parking lot. This is only a fraction of the damage Wal-Mart inflicts upon their surrounding environments each year. Environmental

officials have complained that the silt being carried off from thousands of Wal-Mart construction sites pollutes lakes, rivers and drinking water. In 2001, Wal-Mart paid \$5.5 million (\$1 million civil penalty and \$4.5 million to establish an environmental management plan) for violations at construction sites in four states. Still, this made no impact on the super store. Wal-Mart continues to fail in taking the steps to clean storm runoff despite constant pressure from environmental protection programs across North America. Environmentalists are also concerned about the placement of Wal-Mart stores. Natural green spaces and farmland are extremely important to a community. They provide a refuge for wildlife, a break from a town's growing urbanization and rich soils for growing crops. When Wal-Mart takes over these areas, all of these benefits are gone and the community is left with an ugly, living and breathing monster that won't rest until it gobbles up the remaining natural resources.

Port Alberni will always have a special place in my memories as my country home. I played in the creek on the weekends, explored in the woods with my friends and enjoyed the occasional treat from my favorite bakery. To know that the addition of a Wal-Mart may threaten these unique experiences for future generations in my home town disappoints me. There is no need for a Wal-Mart in any town and some may go as far as to say that it sucks the life out of a community. The businesses destroyed are many, the "opportunities" it claims to create are exploitive and short lived, and the damage done to the environment can never be recovered. I can only hope that Port Alberni will surprise me and stay true to its country roots, although I know this is unlikely. I also hope that other towns will think twice before accepting a Wal-Mart into their community, considering all the arguments listed in this essay that show Wal-Marts do more harm than good.

Notes on Contributors:

- Myles Black** Grade 11, Nanaimo District Secondary School.
- Anna Bunce** Grade 11, Nanaimo District Secondary School.
- Michelle Fries** Grade 12, Nanaimo District Secondary School. Third Prize (Fiction). Michelle says she is “just another small girl searching a bit for some truth. My writing, when it materializes, is inspired by the many good books out there that call on us to look at our ordinary selves and see something startling.”
- Megan Jones** Grade 11, Woodlands Secondary School. Megan has been writing ever since she was 6 years old, when she wrote a gripping story about a Zebra named Zebra.
- Kellen Loewen** Grade 12, Dover Bay Secondary School.
- Helen Lutes** Grade 12, Wellington Secondary School. Second Prize (Fiction). Helen will be attending Malaspina in the fall for the Criminology program and hopefully a few creative writing courses. She loves reading, writing, and playing basketball, all of which she has done for many years and hopes to continue doing for many more.
- Paul MacIntyre** Grade 12, Nanaimo District Secondary School. First Prize (Non-Fiction)
- Suzanne Ouellet** Grade 12, Nanaimo District Secondary School. Suzanne will be going on a Rotary exchange to Brazil next year. She is currently in Grade 10 piano, and hopes to continue her education in both Music and Science at Malaspina when she returns from Brazil.
- Davin Sandvar** Grade 11, Wellington Secondary School. Davin tells us, “I like to write stories for Jesus. When I grow up I wanna be like Chris Angel. I'm 16 and consider myself pretty cool. I have about 52 street credits and hope to write for D-Trump”.
- Allison Tufnail** Grade 11, Nanaimo District Secondary School. First Prize (Fiction). Aside from writing, Allison loves to play volleyball, run, read and dance. She hopes to attend UBC after high school to study Creative Writing and French.
- Maria Wilde** Grade 12, Nanaimo District Secondary School. Second Prize (Non-Fiction). Maria is currently on a ten month long Rotary Youth Exchange program in India. She loves to read, write, draw and enjoy God's beautiful creations around her by going for walks, bike rides and swimming.
- Alycia Wolosezky** Grade 12, Dover Bay Secondary School. Third Prize (Non-Fiction). Alycia enjoys writing, but also has a passion for sciences. In the fall of 2007, she will be attending University of Calgary where she hopes to fulfill her career goal as a pediatrician.
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