

Corner Bar Magazine

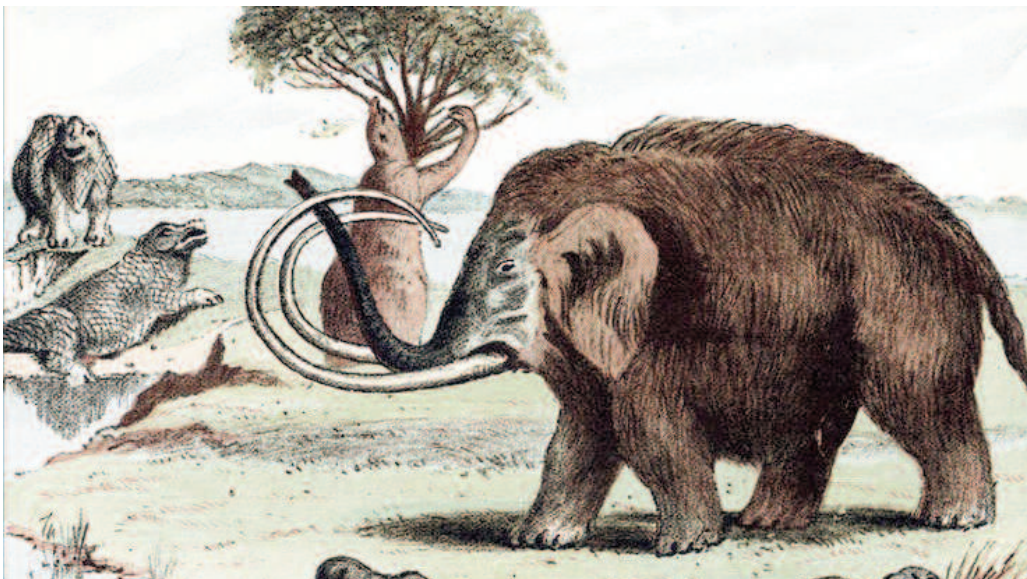
Volume 8 Number 7

Page 1 – FAMILY SECRETS by Julie Brandon. Julie Brandon is a playwright, poet and lyricist who lives in Downers Grove, IL. She’s also part of an improv group. Julie is currently teaching herself to play the baritone ukulele because that’s what all the cool kids are doing.

Page 9 – YOU SHOULD PROBABLY WASH THE DISHES by Margaret Roach. Margaret Roach lives in the Hudson Valley and is currently working on completing her master’s in library and information science. She enjoys writing about robots, musical theater, or whatever thing she finds amusing at the time. She has been published in her college’s literary magazine *The Mosaic*.

Page 20 – RESIDUAL by Kathy Lanzarotti. Ms Lanzarotti (she/her) is a Wisconsin Regional Writers’ Jade Ring Award winner for short fiction. She is co editor of *Done Darkness: A Collection of Stories, Poetry and Essays About Life Beyond Sadness*. Her stories have appeared in *(b)Oinkzine*, *Ellipsis*, *Creative Wisconsin*, *Platform for Prose*, *Jokes Review*, *Fictive Dream*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *New Pop Lit*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Dissections: A Journal Of Contemporary Horror*, *Dark Fire Fiction*, *Bone Parade* and *Idle Ink*.

Page 24 – OVER THE RIVER by Keigh Ahr. Keigh Ahr is a phonetic spelling of the initials for Ken Rogers, a resident of Northeast Ohio. His fiction has appeared in the *Permafrost*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, and the *Take Five Anthology*. His essay “Essential” was published in *Voices from the Edge*, a collection of essays by workers in front-line industries during the COVID-19 pandemic. While writing and reading are his favorite activities, he’s also fond of doing his own yard work, which he does reasonably well, and grilling, where his success has been decidedly intermittent.



“FAMILY SECRETS”

by JULIE BRANDON

When he died, their father had two requests. Had William known about them earlier, it might have been possible but by that time, the damage was done. He and his brother, Phillip, had been estranged for almost fifty years. William never fully explained what happened to Jeannie and Rob. He mentioned it in rather cryptic terms over the years, but no clear explanation was ever given. Truthfully, neither Jeannie nor Rob cared enough to ask for details. They had never met Phillip and felt no attachment to him. He was just another unknown aspect of their father's past. According to William, Phillip had moved away from their hometown forty-five years ago. He never returned, not even when his parents died. No letters, no Christmas cards, no contact at all. Basically, it was radio silence from the moment he drove away. For a long time, Jeannie and Rob believed he was a figment of their father's imagination. When they were young, they searched the trunks in the attic for some record of Phillip. All they ever found were pictures of William as a child and his parents. Once, Jeannie questioned Mary Ellen, their mother, about Phillip. She quickly told Jeannie to never mention his name again and refused to discuss it. In time, Rob and Jeannie lost interest in their

mysterious uncle until the morning the letter arrived.

It was unsigned and had no return address. The postmark was smudged and unreadable. As was his custom, William opened the daily mail at the breakfast table. Upon reading the unsigned letter, he paled and cried out. As he tried to rise from his chair, he stumbled. The chair crashed to the floor and William fell to his knees. Mary Ellen rushed to him and knelt beside him, murmuring vague soothing sounds. With a shaking hand, William handed her the letter whispering, “Phillip.” Mary Ellen read the letter in silence. She closed her eyes and reached for William's hand. “It's finally happened,” she said. Both Rob and Jeannie, who had come home for the annual summer visit, looked at their parents in surprise. Jeannie jumped up to help her mother back to her chair while Rob rushed to his father's side.

“Dad, what is it?” he asked. William put head in his hands and didn't answer. “Come on, Dad. Let's get you up off the floor.”

After righting William's chair, Rob gently grasped his father's elbow and helped him rise. William sat down heavily, still not speaking.

“Is it something terrible?” Jeannie

asked. William looked up at Jeannie and nodded.

“My brother Phillip is dead and it’s my fault.”

Mary Ellen shook her head. “Oh no, you mustn’t say that. He’s been gone for years. We don’t even know where’s he’s been living.”

“But I never tried to find him, did I?” William pounded the table with his fist. “I just let him go to save myself.”

Tears rolled down his cheeks. “It’s my fault, Mary Ellen. My fault.” Their mother stood up.

“No, William, it isn’t.” She walked over to him and held out her hand. “Come, dear. Let’s walk in the garden for a bit.”

William sighed and rose. He took hand and they silently left the room. Rob and Jeannie stared at one another.

“What the hell is this?” Rob asked.

Jeannie shrugged her shoulders. “I have no idea. To think, Phillip was a real person after all.” She tapped her spoon against her coffee cup. “Perhaps now we can get an explanation for his disappearance.”

Rob nodded. “Let’s talk to Dad after he’s calmed down. Agreed?”

Jeannie frowned. “I suppose that’s best.”

William didn’t join the rest of the family for dinner. When asked why he was absent, Mary Ellen merely said he was tired and needed to rest. Ron gave Jeannie a quick look. Their mother was uncharacteristically quiet throughout the meal. Once

they finished eating, she excused herself and went upstairs to her husband. Rob threw his napkin down in disgust.

“Jesus, they’re stonewalling us again,” he said.

Jeannie knew just how he felt. Their parents had never been very forthcoming. Most of what Jeannie and Rob know of their family history had been cobbled together from scrapes of overheard conversations throughout the years. It was frustrating to think that the answer to Phillip’s disappearance was known by the two people who didn’t want to talk about it.

“How do you suggest we go about it?” she asked. “Divide and conquer?”

Her brother sighed. “I guess the old way is the best way. I’ll tackle Dad and you work on Mom. Okay?”

Jeannie nodded. “We’re not going to make any progress tonight. I’m going to make some tea and read. I’ll see you in the morning.”

After his sister had gone up to her room, Rob sat on the back porch listening to the nighttime noises. The house backed up to the woods. When he was young, the nocturnal rustlings of small animals had frightened him. William had calmed his fears by taking him on nighttime hikes. Once Rob had seen for himself how the animals scurried away at their approach, he relaxed and began to enjoy the sounds. He smiled at the memory. He hoped that he could convince his father to share why he believed that he was responsible for Phillip’s death. It was time to put this particular family secret to rest. Upstairs,

Jeannie sipped her chamomile tea, her open book forgotten on the nightstand as she tried to figure out how best to approach her mother. Mary Ellen could be as stubborn and closed mouthed as her husband. Once a subject was closed, that was it. No matter how much Jeannie had whined as a little girl, her mother remained unmoved. Damn this secretive family, she thought. No wonder neither Rob nor she had long-term relationships. As soon as someone got close, they both scuttled off like frightened rabbits. She heard the door to Rob's room shut. She often worried that once their parents died, the two of them would end up living here alone. The lonely spinster and her oddball brother. Jeannie snapped off the light and tried to sleep.

The next morning, neither William nor Mary Ellen came down to breakfast. Jeannie was concerned.

"Something's wrong, Robbie. I just know it."

Rob sighed and continued to butter his toast. "Just ask Lena where they are."

Lena had been with the family for as long as they could remember. Sort of a housekeeper/cook/maid combination. Jeannie went through the swinging door that separated the dining room from the kitchen. Lena was slicing vegetables for that evening's dinner, her back to Jeannie.

"Lena, where are Mom and Dad?"

Lena continued her work. Jeannie remembered that she was going a little deaf and spoke louder. "Lena, where are Mom and Dad?"

"Why, I expect they're in their bedroom, Miss Jeannie. They sometimes have breakfast in front of the fireplace."

Jeannie thanked her and returned to the dining area. Rob was placidly eating his toast. Jeannie poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down. She began tapping her spoon against the side of the cup.

"Good God, will you please stop doing that?" Rob growled.

Surprised, Jeannie dropped her spoon into the saucer. She had broken the habit years ago and wasn't even aware she'd been doing it. She looked across the table at her older brother.

"You don't have to snap at me. Have you been able to figure out the best way to talk to Dad?"

Rob shook his head. He's been up most of the night and was tired and out of sorts.

"Maybe we should wait until tomorrow."

Jeannie stood up. If they waited too long, their parents would sweep the whole thing under the rug, never to be discussed again.

"No. It's now or never. I'm going up there this minute. They can't hide from us all day. Coming?"

Grudgingly, Rob followed Jeannie upstairs. When they arrived at their parents' bedroom door, they hesitated. As children, they were never allowed in the room unless expressly invited and even then, were made to feel like interlopers. Taking a deep breath, Jeannie tapped lightly on the door.

“Mom? Dad?”

There was no answer. Jeannie turned worried eyes to Rob. He gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. He knocked louder.

“Mom? Dad? Can we come in?”

No answer. Rob carefully turned the doorknob and opened the door. William and Mary Ellen were sitting in the Queen Anne chairs on either side of the small fireplace. Neither acknowledged Rob or Jeannie as they entered. Jeannie felt a shiver of fear. Rob approached their parents.

“We missed you at breakfast. Everything okay?”

William sighed and shook his head.

“Nothing will ever be okay again, son. I’m no better than Cain.”

Mary Ellen made an impatient gesture. She took a deep breath.

“William, how many times do I have to repeat myself? You are not responsible for your brother’s death.”

William gave her a small sad smile.

“Yes, dear, I’ve heard you each time. However, am I not my brother’s keeper? I should have followed him, searched for him. My life has been a fabric of lies.”

Jeannie stepped forward. This had gone far enough.

“Dad, unless you tell us what’s going on, how can we help you?”

William laughed. “My dear girl, no one can help me now. As Lena would say, the chickens have come home to roost.”

Rob snorted. His mother looked at him with disdain.

“You find this amusing, Robert?”

Rob sighed. “Of course not, Mom. It’s just the same old song and dance routine. Jeannie and I are adults and if there’s a problem affecting the family, we are fully capable of helping sort things out. You two don’t have to shoulder all of life’s problems alone.”

Mary Ellen and William exchanged a glance. Mary Ellen gave him a small nod. Jeannie and Rob sat down on the hearth rug and waited. After a few moments, William began to speak.

“The beginning of this sad tale started more than sixty-five years ago. You didn’t know your paternal grandparents. They died before your mother and I met. Such cold and unkind people. Neither were affectionate. My father was a strict disciplinarian and Mother followed suit. Phillip and I were born eleven months apart so in a way, we were more like twins. Mother even dressed us alike until we rebelled at age twelve. Father was very particular about with whom we associated, so we didn’t have any friends. We had each other.” William paused. “Our father seemed unhappy with our easy camaraderie and forced us to compete with one another to win any approval. At first, we objected to it, but that only made matters worse. If we refused, one of us would be beaten. It didn’t matter to my father which one of us he hit, so long as he sowed discord between us. In time, pitting brother against brother became the norm in our household. Slowly, our close relationship suffered. How could it not under such cruelty?” William fell silent. “When we were twenty

and nineteen, respectively, Phillip came to me with a plan. He had decided to run away from home and wanted me to come with him. I told him that he was a fool. We argued for quite a while. Finally, I told him to go alone. He made me promise not to tell our parents. I grudgingly agreed.” Tears welled up in William’s eyes.

Mary Ellen leaned forward and patted his hand. “Dear, you don’t have to continue right now.”

“If I stop, I may not have the courage. The children have a right to know the

truth.”

William glanced at Rob and Jeannie. “Even if they think less of me.” He bowed his head. Jeannie reached up and grasped her father’s hand. “We could never do that, Dad.” William blinked back tears. Rob was astonished. He had never seen his father lose his composure. After clearing his throat, William continued.

“Over the next few weeks, Phillip carefully planned his escape. He had been systematically hoarding any cash he could get his hands on. Our father held the purse



strings, and we were given a limited amount of pocket money. At first, he encouraged me to come with him but when he saw my reluctance, soon stopped. Although we had been forced to become adversaries, Phillip was my brother and I loved him. I was petrified at being left alone with my parents and secretly admired his courage. He kept waiting for the opportunity to leave and it finally came when our parents were to attend an event at the mayor's home. Neither of us had been invited. Phillip whispered to me earlier in the day that this was his chance. After our parents left for the evening, Phillip asked me to meet him at 9 pm by the fountain in the formal garden. He had stolen clothes from the stable boy to better blend in once he was in town. I begged him to tell me where he was going but he refused, saying it would be better for me not to know. After promising to send word soon, Phillip, my only brother, my only friend, walked out of the front gates and out of my life forever." William paused.

Jeannie looked over at Rob. As much as they disagreed, she couldn't imagine never seeing him again. William took a deep breath.

"My parents were unaware of Phillip's defection until the next morning. All hell broke loose. My father questioned me over and over. When he finally realized that I didn't know where Phillip had gone, he simply stopped speaking to me. Everything I said was met with silence. My mother spoke to me as little as possible. My life, which was unbearable, became even more

so. Every day I regretted not leaving with Phillip. And then the unthinkable happened. My parents were killed in an auto accident. My father had never changed his will. With Phillip gone, I was the sole heir to the family fortune including this very house." William smiled at Mary Ellen. "I was finally free to live a normal life. I was heady with the freedom. It was then your mother and I met. I convinced her to marry me and here we still are."

Rob frowned. "What about Phillip? Did he ever send word?" His father hung his head.

"There was one letter about a year after he left. Our parents were dead by then. He was somewhere in Oregon. I never answered the letter. Over time, I began to blame him for abandoning me. I lived in fear that he would return and claim his half of the inheritance."

"Mom, did you know about this?" Jeannie asked. Mary Ellen nodded.

"I did. Your father told me just before we married. I assured him that if Phillip ever came back, we would face it together."

William continued. "As the years passed, I pushed memories of Phillip further away. They were too painful, and I just wanted to forget." He took deep breath. "Around twenty years after my parents' death, I came across a letter my father had written to me prior to his untimely death. It had gotten swept up with other papers and I never saw it. In it, he requested that after his death, I find Phillip and any offspring he may have. He wrote that he intended to disinherit Phillip but just

couldn't do it. He also asked for my forgiveness. I was stunned and very conflicted. If I found Phillip, I would have to give up half off my inheritance. I found I couldn't honor either of these requests." William covered his eyes with his hands. "Now you know what kind of man I truly am."

Rob and Jeannie were stunned into silence.

"Who sent the letter?" Rob asked after a few minutes. "Can we see it?"

Mary Ellen walked over to the small desk in front of the bay window and retrieved the letter. She handed it to Rob. Jeannie slid over next to her brother and read it with him. Jeannie frowned and read out loud.

'Phillip is dead. We'll be there soon.' What does that mean? Who'll be here? Are we in the middle of a bad melodrama?"

William shrugged. "Does it matter? At last, I can stop living a lie." He stood up. "I do believe that I'm ready for some breakfast." He held out his hand to his wife. "Shall we, dear?" Mary Ellen took his hand, and they left the room. Jeannie and Rob stared at each other in astonishment. Jeannie stood up and stretched.

"This is unreal. It's hard to imagine our strait-laced father is so shady. And Mom went along with it! What next?"

Rob stared into the unlit fireplace. Things had certainly taken an unexpected turn. Jeannie walked towards the door. "Coming?" she asked. He nodded and they went downstairs to join their parents for breakfast.

The rest of the day passed quietly.

Mary Ellen spent time gardening while William read in the library. Rob and Jeannie drove into town, returning a short while before dinner. Dinner conversation was light and relaxed. It was obvious to both Jeannie and Rob that their father's confession was going to be swept under the rug, never to be discussed again. William and Mary Ellen took a walk in the garden after dinner and retired early. Jeannie joined Rob on the back porch swing. They sat in silence for a while. Jeannie sighed.

"I suppose all we can do is wait." She rose and stood at the porch railing. "I've never been good at waiting." The porch swing creaked as Rob stood up.

"I know but there's no hurrying things." Rob put his arm around Jeannie's shoulder and gave her a squeeze. "Don't worry, sis. It'll all work out. You should get some rest." Jeannie patted his hand and said good night. Once she had gone upstairs, Rob stayed out on the back porch long into the night.

Rob was the only one at the breakfast table when Jeannie entered the dining room. She looked at the empty chairs.

"No Mom and Dad again? Should we check on them?"

Rob shook his head. "Personally, I'd rather have a good breakfast first." He took a sip of his coffee. Jeannie sat down across from him and served herself from the covered dishes on the table. She and Rob heard Lena's heavy tread above as she made her way to Mary Ellen and William's bedroom. Suddenly, there was the sound of a heavy tray hitting the floor and a

woman screaming. Jeannie and Rob jumped to their feet and ran up the stairs. Lena stood weeping in front of the open bedroom door. Rob ran into the room while Jeannie comforted sobbing Lena.

“Miss Jeannie, it’s too terrible. How could they do such a thing?”

Rob backed out of the bedroom, his face pale. When Jeannie started for the door, he held up his hand to stop her. She had to see for herself. William and Mary Ellen were stretched out on the bed, fully dressed. At first glance, they seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Then Jeannie saw the empty pill bottles and note on the nightstand. Jeannie reached for her cell phone and quickly called 911. Rob closed the bedroom door and helped Lena downstairs. Once she was settled in the kitchen with a cup of tea with a splash of brandy, Rob joined Jeannie in the front parlor where she was waiting for the police. They sat in silence. The police cruiser came speeding up the gravel drive, scattering stones. Jeannie thought about how displeased her mother would be until she realized her mother would never be displeased again. Rob got up to answer the pounding on the front door and let the police officers into the house. After answering questions for what seemed like hours, the medical examiner transported their parents’ bodies to the local morgue. Lena’s sister drove in from the neighboring town to take Lena back to her house.

They showed the police the letter William had received and explained its significance. The detective had removed it

and expressed his condolences to them. He and the medical examiner agreed that it was a joint suicide. Finally, Rob and Jeannie were alone. Rob looked around the room.

“I guess it’s all ours now.” Jeannie nodded. “That was clever of you, sis. I’d never have thought about sending that letter.” He poured himself a drink from the liquor cabinet and handed one to her.

Jeannie smiled. “Our parents weren’t the only ones with secrets. Once I heard that those developers offered to buy this property and Dad had turned them down, there was only one thing to do. I knew it would send Dad over the edge.” Rob looked at his sister with admiration. “I looked for Phillip several years ago and found his obituary. I thought it may come in handy one day. Even though Phillip died destitute thirty years ago, he helped us get what we wanted.” She raised her glass. “A toast to Phillip, the ghost who got his revenge from beyond the grave.” They began to laugh. No one heard them in the big empty house except for the nocturnal animals who fled at the sound. ❖

“YOU SHOULD PROBABLY WASH THE DISHES”

by MARGARET ROACH

The Great American Android has retired from being an Android or at least, he told me that when I first met him. I do not understand how one retires from being themselves, but he said it with such confidence that no follow-up questions were asked. He spent a great number of years being America’s only android celebrity. You can understand why he was growing sick of it all. The way that he explained his years as a celebrity seemed like a great amount of work. In his nearly forty years in the spotlight, he hosted two game shows, married two women, wrote three autobiographies, was divorced three times, ran for congress in California, and had one season of a reality show on MTV titled “This is bolts!”. Nicknamed “The Silver Stunner,” the android became a popular figure in American culture as a sort of for-hire celebrity. He lacked meaning in the way that c-list celebrities do and that went against his very being. Most technology is created for a purpose. A vacuum is designed to clean, a microwave heats up food, and the internet lets people express themselves through mean anonymous comments. He was created with the purpose of seeing if humans could build an Android (and also build one before the Russians did). Being famous was

really the only thing left for him to do.

Maybe you saw him walking down Hollywood boulevard one day, introducing sound editing at the Oscars, or appearing in multiple ads for pharmaceutical depression medication (Even robots feel like they’re powering down!). I am sure that you’ve seen the Android before. He haunted our tabloid pages with countless scandals; my favorite was always the “dogfighting” scheme he tried to start with toy robot dogs, but he had many other scandals including reckless driving, shoplifting, and attempted solicitation. He was a daily fixture of the news unit until he wasn’t. Ten years ago, he disappeared from the public altogether. Most assumed that he had shut down or moved to a private island, but the “Silver Stunner” remains in the United States.

The Last Great American Android now goes by Brother Peter and lives on a farm in Maine with the Rattlers, a small religious group. The Rattlers are sort of like the Quakers if the Quakers loathed fun. The Rattlers do not drink, they are completely celibate, and they are anxiously waiting for the end of the world. At the time of this interview, Brother Peter believes there to be four days until the world ends because of what the Rattlers

call the Millenium Bug (they claim that name originated with them). The minute the clocks hit midnight, the rapture will begin, and he and two other Rattlers will be brought into heaven. There is no scientific proof that the world will end, but in our communication preceding this interview, Brother Peter was insistent. The Last Great American Android has refused all interviews until now because he didn't want the attention, but now that world is ending - why not?

He is surprisingly calm for someone with so little time left. On the morning I arrived, I found him standing in a muddy field feeding a donkey. He greeted me with a soft wave, and I climbed into the pen with him. It is not how I expected to find this marvel of engineering, but there he was holding a feed bucket for a crooked little donkey named Dimples. He shifts his hand, so his left palm faces up towards the sun and lets his curved fingers keep the bucket from falling.

"When they built me," he says softly to not disturb Dimple. These are the first words that he has said in twelve hours. The Rattlers participate in holy silence from 6 am to 12 am in order to consider their relationship with God. "They never thought that I would need to do things like this. Androids are meant to be built for equations and thinking. I had to teach myself how to adapt to things as simple as holding buckets." Dimple doesn't seem to mind this obstacle at all. Brother Peter pets Dimple with his other hand because the Donkey will not eat if he is not being

petted.

Brother Peter is not aware of the fact that he is magnificent in the morning light. Androids do not acknowledge things such as beauty or sunrises. The tabloids always like to call him things like "exquisite" and "captivating," but he never believed anything that they wrote. He certainly does not acknowledge himself as beautiful. I asked him about this and he scoffed saying that humans will find beauty in anything. The only true beauty, for Brother Peter, is in the divine. To himself, he is a lowly and ugly amalgamation of parts. His opinion of himself does not matter, because on this spring morning — he is magnificent. His long chrome limbs and exoskeleton reflect the light like a puddle filled with gasoline. His expression is peaceful. It is always peaceful. There is only so much that a thin line and two eyes made out of blue light can convey.

As Brother Peter takes care of the animals, his companion Sister Delilah prepares breakfast. In comparison to her companion, Sister does not feel magnificent. She simply seems human. We all know a person like Sister Delilah. She's the sort of woman who might organize a neighborhood barbeque, sit in the stands at a child's basketball game, or appear on video yelling at a shop clerk. She's a staple in America, but somehow she ended up here in New England making as much noise as possible as she walks through the empty house.

"It's not meant for three people," she says walking down a dark oak staircase in

need of waxing. “Back in the day, apparently they had a hundred people living here. Houses like this are meant to be lived in. We do our best to keep it nice, but it’s too big.”

As she makes breakfast, she hums a hymn. Not one of the Rattler’s hymns because those ones are dark and not things that are meant to be hummed, but a hymn from the church that she went to with her ex-husband for a short time. A band played in all their services with rock music that sounded like it could be on the radio until one listened to the lyrics and realized that the lyrics were all about Jesus washing away sins. Sister Delilah went a couple of times to this church before she was sick of everyone working there, but she missed the music.

I must tell you that she is breaking the rules by humming. Rattlers are only meant to sing together and during worship, but she is the only one who can hear the humming, and Sister Delilah never liked rules very much anyway, she tells me like she is telling a secret,

Breakfast is a gray meal for the Rattlers. The Rattlers are not supposed to enjoy food. Enjoyment is meant for heaven only so the food is purposefully bland. I cannot describe the taste to you because there is none. I can only describe the texture which is soft and sticky. Sister Delilah informs me that it’s full of vitamins. I do not believe her at all.

She walks into the kitchen where Brother Peter is already sitting at the large round table. She only brings one plate.

Brother Abraham, the third Rattler, is fed by a tube now and Brother Peter has never been able to eat. In their holy book, they place importance on sharing meals. The rest of the day is meant for preparation, but mealtimes are meant to be spent with each other. Rattlers are millions of complicated things, but they are not meant to be alone.

They pray together before she eats. Rattlers have only three prayers and this is something that they’re rather proud of. This is the happiest out of the three. It, of course, is about death because everything a Rattler does is about death. This prayer is at least about the celebration of death, the others are focused on the act of dying and the end of the world respectively. Death is the ultimate reward to the Rattler. The prayer reminds them of this fact, but it is hard to imagine that they are not reminded all the time.

“How was Brother Abraham?” Brother Peter says towards the end of the meal when Sister Delilah is eating the last few bites of the tasteless food. He sits with the posture of something mimicking a human. He places the bottom of his leg poles on the ground, keeps his curved back straight as it gets, and hands folded on the table where a plate should be.

“Still alive. He’s sleeping right now.”

“Good. He needs to rest. I’ll go check on him after we eat. He likes me to stay a long time and discuss the past with him. He forgets how to budget time efficiently and gives into excess.”

She grimaces at his voice. It is made

out of pulsating static and beeping tones that resemble vowels and consonants. It sounds like a radio trying to find the right station, but never reaching its goal. The longer a sentence, the more unpleasant it is. When given speaking roles on television, his sentences were always very short.

“You should try to enjoy moments like that with him. He just yells at me.”

Sister Delilah gets up from the table and brings her plate to the sink. She immediately begins to clean it. Rattlers do not leave behind messes. Jesus does not like dirty dishes.

“We’ll have time to enjoy things in heaven. These last couple of days are not meant for sitting and waiting. We have other things to do. I suggest that you go tidy up the chapel. People will want to come to the last mass.”

He gestures at me to come with him and I follow, leaving Sister to vigorously scrub at the dishes. After spending a couple of hours with Brother Peter, you will learn that he enjoys bossing people around. He is constantly telling others what to do. Within minutes of my arrival, he told me at least three things that I was doing wrong. He’s really very pushy about most things.

Most of Brother Peter’s day is spent doing chores, so most of my day is spent doing chores with him. I pride myself on being in good shape, but I quickly learned that it is extremely difficult to keep up with an Android. We spent most of the morning gathering eggs, sweeping the three

empty barns that the Rattlers own, shoveling snow from the night before, and cleaning. There is so much cleaning.

As we scrub the floors of the entryway, I finally get to ask some questions. For someone who agreed to be interviewed, he seemed to be irritated by every question that I asked him. Instead of answering my questions, he would give me an even harder task to do.

“Do you like being a Rattler?” I asked him. The first thing they teach you in journalism college is to ask the fun questions first then you ask the hard questions as it goes. Most of the time, interviews take place over weeks with multiple questions being asked after. This interview feels entirely rushed by the deadline of 12 hours, and the whole world is ending in a week situation really messes with asking follow-ups.

“It’s not really something you enjoy. It’s a duty or a calling. Would you ask a priest if he enjoyed being a clergyman or a soldier if he likes fighting for his country?”

I would ask both of these questions, but I keep pushing forward.

“Why did you become a Rattler?”

“I wanted something new,” he says. I expect him to say more. He doesn’t.

“So,” I say to him. “Can you explain to me why the world is ending?”

“That’s a bad question,” he says, not looking up from his work. “Everything has a natural end. Our founder, Maria Bell thought the world would end when human progress was finished. There’s nothing more left for us to do on Earth, so we

shouldn't waste any more time here. The Rattlers are waiting for the end of the world."

This is not the first time that Rattlers have believed it would be ending. Since 1902 there have been six times that they predicted that the world would end due to various technological advancements including the indoor toilet, radio, television, and Brother Peter himself. They have been wrong every single time. This particular apocalypse is caused by a new phone which will be hitting shelves next year.

"Isn't the end of the world a bad thing?"

"Maybe for other people." By other people, he means anyone who isn't a Rattler. We're all going to hell and he doesn't seem to feel that bad about it. "When the ground begins to shake and demons begin to spill out, the Rattlers will dance and be protected by the Lord. Me and my brothers and sisters will be perfectly fine. Our deceased will rise from their graves, and we'll all hold hands as we walk into heaven together. Have you given any thought to how you would like to spend your last days?"

An interviewer is rarely asked questions. We are meant to be observers, not the observed. It is also fairly shocking when an interviewee responds with questions. I do not have plans for the end of the world, because I refuse to believe that the world is ending. My New Years' Eve will be spent like any other - in the office watching the ball drop with the rest

of my coworkers. It will be a repeat of the last five years and I am rather looking forward to it.

I tell him this and he nods at me. "That will be nice. You'll have a very good view of the rapture starting. They'll want to start in a place with a big crowd."

I scrub the floor with Brother Peter with something that suspiciously looks like a toothbrush. Even though I scrub and scrub, no dirt comes up. Brother Peter doesn't seem to notice.

"Do you find being a Rattler exciting?"

"Do you find being a reporter exciting?" He said, "You ask such silly questions. I agreed to your request because you told me that you had interviewed a litany of world figures and assumed that you knew how to hold an interview,"

"The little questions are how you get to understand the subject, and no, most of my job is boring. It is hard and in moments like these, I find it increasingly tedious."

"We don't have time for the little questions," He said as he scrubbed at the floor so much that I worried that the bristles would break. "You need to just get to the point."

"Why don't you just tell me something that you would like to say?" I said even though it was a stupid idea. You don't get to understand a person by asking them what they want to say. Motives and secrets come out in the anecdotes and things said when the interview subject forgets about being interviewed. But I wanted something.

Peter had a lot to say as we scrubbed at the floor that morning, but none of it was terribly interesting. Still, I feel obligated to pass the message along in case the world is really ending and anything that he says is actually real. So, please remember - you are a sinner. We are designed to sin. The world is too filled with temptations not to sin. God has to be a forgiving man based on this fact. It is not too late for you, for us, to get into the car and drive to the Rattlers. You can be baptized, and you can be saved. Isn't that a lovely thought to take with you right before the New Year? Usually, this week is meant for nothing, but waiting for all of it to end. According to Brother Peter, if you would like you can try something drastic to completely change your life. We spent an hour on this. Brother Peter will never admit it, but it seems like he's worried about all of us - by us, I am referring to sinners. I think that most of us would fit those qualifications.

It was almost noon when the services would be starting soon. I find Sister Delilah sitting in the chapel reading the bible. The Rattler chapel is simple; there is no stained glass, pews, or altars. Visually, it does not look very holy. It feels more like a community room made out of folding chairs, gray carpeting, and dirty white tables. I sat down next to her and asked which part she was reading. She is not supposed to be reading at this time. Daylight is designed for productivity. Reading is meant only before bed or early in the morning before there are more important things to do. She does not enjoy

the Bible, but it is the only thing to read in the entire house. The Rattler's don't even receive any mail (Brother Peter throws any letters out immediately). Sister Delilah never thought that she would join a religious group, but she never thought much about the future as a child. She expected to grow up and be an adult, but she never thought of anything more than that. According to Delilah, her family is very wealthy and she never needed to get a job or do well in school. There was nothing to motivate her, so she did nothing. She married a man who traveled for work most of the time and had one child who was raised mostly by nannies. Family life didn't have much of an appeal to Sister Delilah.

Most people have interests; Sister Delilah had a television set. In the mornings, she would get up and sit on the couch all day watching one television channel. She would watch the news, then the local news, the news that no one cared about, two talk shows hosted by equally failed celebrities, children's programming, the five local news, the countrywide news, two thirty-minute game shows, four thirty-minute comedies, an hour-long drama that would be canceled after six episodes, and the 11 pm news. Then she would go to a luxurious bed. This was the only version of her day until one night - she saw a feature on the nightly news about Brother Abraham and wrote him a letter. Two weeks later, she joined the Rattlers.

"I joined the Rattler's because everything we do is intentional. We eat

with intention, we walk with intention, and live with intention. There is a reason to be alive when you are a Rattler. Everything we do inches us towards Heaven.”

I ask her if the end of the world is terrifying to her too. Before she answers me, she looks around to make sure that no other Rattler is around.

“Of course I’m terrified,” she says in a whisper. “They all told me that it isn’t, but I’m starting to find that hard to believe. The others haven’t left this place in twenty years. I’ve only been here six. I don’t really know if I want to die.”

“Isn’t a Rattler supposed to want to die? Like isn’t that the whole deal?”

“We’re supposed to want an ending. It’s two different things. Death isn’t death, but the start of our lives in heaven. It’s happy, but I’m worried about my kid. His entire life is built around sinning.”

Before I could ask her if she was really happy, the tourists start to come into the chapel and she immediately springs into action, greeting and talking to the tourists like they are old friends. They have services every day, but only weekend ones are open to the public. Tourists arrive in droves wearing linen shirts, long floral dresses, and sandals – every single tourist is wearing a pair of sandals. It is mid-winter.

“Oh, we just love the Rattlers,” A blond-haired floral attired woman says as she sits next to me. “I always feel so relaxed after coming to one of these. It’s almost like meditation.”

“Even when the world is supposed to

end?”

“Oh stop, the world isn’t ending. The Rattlers are always saying crazy things like that. I’m sure that we’ll be coming to the service next week.”

I, in good conscience, cannot recommend that you go to a Rattler service. Maybe if you are interested in organized religion, it will be fun. For a mildly hungover, atheist reporter - it is what I imagine the rapture to be similar to be (painful). A Rattler service is made out of one hour of praying, one hour of soft singing, and at the end one hour of silence. Brother Peter does all the praying in his garbled voice and Sister Delilah sings in her teapot-style soprano. It is the absolute worst. The tourists all seemed to enjoy it, however. In the end, refreshments were served, and they stood around talking with Brother and Sister watching over them.

“How do you want to spend the end of the world?” one tourist asks another. This is said in jest.

The tourists all respond with similar answers: with family, with friends, with a beer in their hands. All of the answers sort of meld together into what feels like one long joke.

When it’s all over, I ask the Rattlers how they would like to spend the end of the world. Brother Peter looks at me, or at least I think he does.

“We will not celebrate until it has actually begun so our normal routine will not deviate. Everything will be the same as always. The end of the world will take

place at midnight. We will be in our beds when it happens and awakened by the Lord.”

“You don’t sleep though.” Sister Delilah says. She is picking up cups that the tourist left behind.

Brother Peter doesn’t respond for a moment. There is a sound of clicking gears and air blowing. “I will still be awakened by the Lord. Come, Janice. You haven’t met Brother Abraham yet. He’ll be awake by now.”

We go upstairs to Brother Abraham’s room which is in the back of the house facing the small pond. Brother Abraham has been a Rattler for forty years, meaning that this is the third time the world has ended for him.

“Brother Peter!” He says as the android walks into the room, his arms are outstretched waiting for an embrace. Rattlers are not supposed to embrace, but they do anyway. Brother Peter presses the small blue line of his mouth to Brother Abraham’s forehead and sits in the small armchair that he has always sat in. “You’re slow today. I’ve been sitting here all morning.”

“I apologize, Brother.” It is physically impossible for an android to be not on time. Their bodies are made out of clocks and things that tick. An android can lie, however. “I lost track of the time. It won’t happen again.”

“Forget about it. We have things to do.” Brother Abraham says as he pulls a stack of letters for his nightstand. “Did you look at the applications?”

“Yes. I did. But I didn’t see much of a point to it since the world is ending.”

Brother Abraham ignores this comment. “I thought we had some promising applications – yes? I really like this one.” He slides over a letter. Both had some great qualities. Of course, ruined by the modern world, but no one is perfect when they first join.”

“I do not think they will be good fits. Smith admits to all sorts of immoral activities and he does it proudly. A Rattler needs to be shameful to get into heaven. Ms. Doe is far too young to make any decisions. She hasn’t even finished her education, maybe I can tutor her, but I am simply too busy for that. We shouldn’t have to take care of other people.”

Brother Abraham laughs at that statement. “Did I ever tell you what happened when we first read your application?”

Brother Peter shakes his head. Most of the time, Rattlers do not discuss what the world was like before joining. Their previous lives disappear when they join the Rattlers.

“I immediately tried to throw it out. I couldn’t even believe that an Android even had a soul much less one we had spent a year thinking was the antichrist. Sister Eve was the one who made me read it again and we agreed to give it a second chance.”

“Why did you pick me?” Brother Peter says. “If you thought I was such a bad choice then why did you let me come here?”

Brother Abraham shrugs. “I liked what

you wrote when you gave your reasons. All you wrote in that strange handwriting was *I want to try something new*. It seemed like you were being rude, but then I realized that you didn't need a better reason than that. And it worked well, you're our most faithful member."

The Android nods and Brother Abraham says, "It can't hurt to give someone a chance. Look at the letters again – then come talk to me?"

"I can try, but we have so much to do before the end." Brother Peter stands up. "I have to do some house repairs before tomorrow morning. One of the tourists told me there's going to be a snowstorm."

"Don't worry yourself preparing for the end."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Well - I just don't want you to get your hopes up," Brother Abraham says gently. He picks his words carefully. "I've been through this more times than you and I don't want you to be disappointed if nothing happens again."

"Are you trying to say that this isn't the end?"

"I'm not saying it isn't, but it might not be."

Brother Peter suddenly moves quickly towards the door and rips it open. Can an android be mad? Scientists have debated it for years - do they really feel emotions or do their circuits imitate what it is like to feel? I feel that Brother Peter was unquestionably mad at this moment, but maybe it's just me projecting emotions onto an object. It must be remembered

that's all he really is. An object. An object who stomps his feet and hunches up his shoulders.

Before he leaves the room, he tells Brother Abraham that instead of wasting his time on letters, he should be reflecting on his lack of faith and if he wants to continue even being a Rattler. Brother Abraham opens his mouth to speak, but the door is already closed. He will not get in another word.

We stand in the quiet hallway. On the red-carpeted floor, there are shadows of muddy boot prints and muddy circles. The wall is bare except for a portrait of Maria Bell. Her brown eyes watch us, sadly. There are ten minutes left until he will no longer speak to me. The sacred hours of the day are taken very seriously.

"Why did you join the Rattlers really?" I ask him.

"I wanted something new," he says.

"There has to be more than that."

"This is why I don't like the press. You ask too many questions."

"I don't have a good end to the story if you don't give me a reason. It won't make any sense." We walk through the empty halls. The house does not have electric light so most of the house is dark. I cannot imagine living in a house like this with its empty rooms and deadly quietness.

"That's the truth. I had done everything else that I could do – I was married, had all the jobs that you could possibly think of, and all the experiences that I could. This was a new experience; the end will be a completely new

experience. There has to be something more. I know that you find it strange that we look forward to the end of the world, but it will be a joyous thing. Janice, they tell me that an Android cannot be tired but I am exhausted. I want to go to heaven to rest. My entire life I have been awake. There is no difference between the days, they simply slip into each other - I want to rest."

"But what if it doesn't end?" I asked him. I think during my time spent with the Rattlers, he had never considered this fact. He looks at me. His pinpricks of eyes look dimmer than they ever had, and he makes a wheezing noise that sounds like an apathetic harmonica player starting a song.

"It will. We know that it will. They have me now and I did all the calculations. It has to happen eventually. It's just a matter of waiting and I've been waiting a long time. God likes patient things. It will end and my soul will be free," He puts his hand on my shoulder and pats it like he patted Dimple. "You should leave. It's a long drive back."

He walks me back to my car. I am hung up on many things that we have spoken about, so I try to fit them in. There were many important things that I should have covered like more of his past or the logistics of the world ending. We didn't talk about those things. Instead, we spoke about heaven.

"Can I ask you a rude question?" I said as we walked through the fields to where my car was parked in the distance. They want the abhorrent thing far away from

them.

"You've asked all the rest of them." He said in a tone that almost sounded like he was laughing, but he cannot laugh. That was not part of his programming.

"How do you know that you have a soul?" This is the question I wanted to ask the whole night, because frankly, I wanted to ask him all the terrible questions about his existence. I wanted to know all the things that the tabloids promised to tell me when I read stories about him as a child. What does the Android dream? He said that he dreamed of being human in 1983. What's his favorite meal? He doesn't eat, but he would eat his cereal brand if he could in 1986. In one of his last interviews before joining the Rattlers in the nineties, he was asked if he was smarter than humanity? He told them of course he was, and it was headline news for a couple of days because he was so ungrateful for being created. We can pretend that this is smarter or better than all of these other interviews, but it's all the same questions in the end.

"I don't," he said opening my car door. "It's no use worrying about it. I believe that in the end, I will be in heaven and I will be made whole. You can too - if you want to stay." He looked at me and I think that he looked happy. I hope he did. I thanked him for the offer and left him standing in the field. It was snowing.

The entire drive back to the city, I thought about the end of the world and how strange it must be to find comfort in it. There are so many more things that we

have left to do; that I have left to do. Let me selfishly talk about myself for a moment, because according to the Rattlers, this might be my last column. I have not been married even though I believe that I am someone who is destined to be divorced at least three times. I have never bought a house or lived somewhere without a roommate. I have not written something that is worthwhile. When I think about it, I feel that I have barely done anything at all. There's so much left. I want to run errands on Sunday morning with no fear that the ground will open up underneath me or nuclear bombs may fall at any minute. I want to read books that are subjects like the history of bread or romance novels that tell the same story over and over again and I want to not worry that I am wasting time on them. I do not want to learn. I want to enjoy. I want to sit at my desk and not write, but think about the act of writing and not feel guilty that I am wasting my time. I want the frivolity of time that is not running out. I want so many things and after spending a day with the Rattlers, I cannot help but be concerned that I will not have time to waste.

Good luck in the New Year, my beloved readers. I hope to see you then. ❖

“RESIDUAL”

by KATHY LANZAROTTI

The little toy sports car rested on its side on the street map rug during play time. When Riot dropped it to cross the room and topple the Lego tower Lucas and Noah had carefully built, Cora walked over and scooped it up.

Riot liked to pull her hair and once bit her so hard on her arm it left a perforated oval in her skin that bruised and faded in a time lapsed rainbow, from purple to blue to green to yellow. Cora tried to stay away from him after that.

Just a tiny green car. But, after one look, her heart strained within her small body and her four-year old brain was crowded with sunshine. Sunshine that glinted off the chrome bumper of the full-sized version of this car. That lit the leafy green paint to the color of a mid-morning meadow.

She needed to take a closer look. She lifted the car between a chubby thumb and forefinger. Ran a bubblegum pink fingernail over one vent quadrant tucked between the two bug eyed headlights up to the small circle on the hood, a V stacked on a W. It was too small to see or feel. But she knew it was there.

Because before she was Cora, when her name was Beth and she was a grown-up, she drove a car like this.

Her car hadn't had a roof either. She slid her finger down toward the black seats. The hard plastic was disappointing. So different from the actual creamy soft leather, the color of her mother's coffee after she added milk. Cora closed her eyes and could see herself when she was Beth. Her favorite floppy hat and big sunglasses, honey blond hair that hung well past her shoulders. Felt the wind gust around her. Smelled honeysuckle and fresh summer. Raised a hand to her head, felt the nubbly suede as she held the hat in place. Watched the wind left her hair up from under it, illuminated by the sun, an octopus reaching for the surface.

“Gimme that!”

Cora's eyes snapped open.

Her body rocked slowly to adjust to her setting. Primary colored letters on the wall. Posters of striped kittens and smiling pink tongued suns. She clenched her fist tighter around the car. Saw the mean squinted eyes of Riot. His dark hair stuck sweaty against his forehead, a meaty hand around her wrist.

“Girls can't play with cars,” Riot growled between clenched pebble teeth as he yanked at her fist.

“This is my car.” Cora tried to make him understand. “It's mine!”

Ms. Penny, the preschool teacher rushed over in her long floral dress that showed off the bump where her baby slept. She crouched with a grunt, her dark ponytail swished against her shoulder as she gently pried Riot's hand from Cora's wrist. She told Riot that the toys were for everyone. "And more importantly," she added. "We are nice to our friends, and we keep our hands to ourselves."

Riot flailed his arms in frustration. "She's not my friend!" he spat as he lowered his head and stomped away.

Ms. Penny rested a hand on Cora's shoulder with a smile before she stood up, clapped her hands and announced it was time to clean up the toys and get ready for story time.

Cora slid the tiny car into the flower shaped pocket of her crocheted sweater.

Cora walked beside her mother up and down the aisles at Target. Her little brother Sammy sat high in the red basket. He babbled into his sippy cup, dark eyelashes aimed toward the spout scored by his new teeth. Cora was a good helper. She got the napkins and a tall stack of paper cups for her mother. She felt her mouth fill as her mother put a powder blue box of cinnamon Teddy Grahams in the cart, along with little cups of applesauce and strawberry fruit leathers. Cora lined up her feet as she walked. Heel to toe. Heel to toe. The little toy car in her pocket made her sweater hang uneven and bounce against her side. She reached in, gripped the car then shook her head in frustration. She

was still in Target. Still Cora, a little girl with blunt cut hair and flowered tights. With a mommy fussing over toilet cleaners and a baby brother who laughed at his own feet. This always happened. Her time as Beth became a memory of a memory.

Stupid Riot, she thought as she watched the wheels of the shopping cart roll on the streaky floor. He ruined everything.

Cora woke up. She had to go to the bathroom. She climbed out of bed and crossed the room with heavy steps.

But instead of the bathroom there was only her dresser. Face to face with the little white stuffed dog she named Bobby. When she first saw him, on one of the Target trips, she immediately knew his name and begged her mother for him. When she held him close in the car on the way home, she could feel his little tongue on her face, cleaning up her tears. Saw him hop happily down a wide sidewalk crammed with people, his pink tongue out to taste the city air. Saw herself, Beth, reflected in a shop window, a cheetah spotted coat and long legs in chunky high boots. Her long hair, yellow in the sun, contrailed after her.

Here in Cora's bedroom, the back of the stuffed animal's head reflected in her flowered mirror. The little green car parked between its fluffy front legs.

When she was Beth, the bathroom was just a few steps from her bed. The floor crowded with clothes and books. When she was Beth, she wore silky dresses that looked like nightgowns but weren't. She'd

seen herself in the mirror, as she pressed and wiped a finger under her eyes to clear the dark smudges, brought her finger back smeared sooty black against long red nails.

Sleepy, Cora yawned in the mirror then walked down the hall to her own bathroom.

“Interesting placement,” the pediatrician told her mother as she inspected Cora’s feet. “See there?” She separated Cora’s toes. Right between the piggy who went to market and the piggy who stayed home is a dot. A birthmark, the doctor told Cora’s mom. “And she’s got a matching one on the other side.”

“Twinsies!” her mother said.

When Cora first saw the marks, she’d felt a pinch like when Dr. Shah gave her a shot. Smelled something harsh and bitter and vinegary. Saw the gentle glow of a candle in the dark. Smelled smoke and wax vapor.

After her checkup, Cora slid colored beads around a wire maze. The maze had been a lot more fun when she was younger. Cora didn’t know what had changed and she wasn’t sure she liked it.

Cora’s mother told the pediatrician about Cora’s nightmares, about how she sometimes woke up screaming.

The dreams were so bad Cora could only cry when her mother asked about them. A big grown-up man with a scary face and an angry voice. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her so hard she could feel her bones rattle. She cried a lot in these dreams and woke up screaming after

the man hit her. Hard.

Mommy had pressed reflective stars over her bed after the first time it happened. Most nights she tucked her into bed with her Squishmallow Calico cat and sang her to sleep.

It helped.

“Who names a kid Riot anyway?” Cora heard her mother ask her father later that night when she was supposed to be asleep.

Cora sat at the red table for alphabet time and practiced writing the letter B carefully in her book. Across the room Riot slammed his fist on the surface of the blue table. He was having trouble forming the bubbles on the right side of the stick.

Cora had trouble with her S’s. Even though Ms. Penny told her they were beautiful. The small loop on top of a bigger loop with a curlicue connected by a long tail, but they weren’t S’s. She called them a different name. A clef, and asked Cora if she took piano lessons. “No,” Cora said quietly and put her head down.

She still thought her S’s were better than the regular ones.

On the whole, letters were easy. Especially B’s. Once she even wrote Beth in the line for her name at the top of her paper. But she had drawn her E with four lines instead of three, so she crossed it out.

Cora was cozy in her pink bathrobe as she waited for her bath. Her mother dried Sammy off with a hooded giraffe towel, a blunt brown felt mane trailed down to the hem.

She wiggled her toes around and made the little marks disappear and reappear. Cora used to hate the bathtub. Hated the water. Once, when her mother lifted her up to put her in she screamed and kicked and lashed a fist out so hard she made her mommy's nosebleed. It was the sound of the water's violent pummel onto the water below. Her vision waved and distorted. She felt pressure on the back of her head as large fingers tangled and pulled at her long hair. Felt her eyes sting and her lungs burn as they expanded to capacity. Her eyes opened wide under the water. Fixed on a divot at the base of the tub filled in with rust and dirt. A black spot. A black spot. A black spot. Until it began to shrink against the white. Until it was gone.

Cora was happy when that memory faded for good.

Cora's mother talked as she changed the channels on the minivan's radio. "Top Forty" she said. "Nope! Commercials. No way! Classical? Uh-uh! Country? Big nope!"

The next channel. A guitar strummed a C Minor chord, an A and an E, followed by a weeping slide guitar. Cora could feel the ridged strings beneath her fingers. Could see her reflection, Beth's reflection, distorted in the side of the black body of a guitar. The bottom of her long braid bounced against her chest. She feels so happy, like she's floating away on a big rainbow balloon. She knew this song. She *loved* this song. She nodded in time.

"Nope" her mother said from the front

seat.

"DON'T"! Cora shouted.

Her mother looked up at her from the rearview mirror. Cora could tell from her scrunchy brown eyes that she was smiling.

The song continued to play.

"Didn't take you for an Oldies fan, CorCor!"

Cora could hear the happiness in her voice. She knew her mother would giggle about this with Daddy later. Her mother held up her index and middle finger in a V. "Right on! Sister Golden Hair!" She laughed out loud.

Cora lifted her fingers in the same configuration and aimed them back at her mother.

Next to her Sammy peeked around the shell of his car seat, smiled from around his blue binkie and showed off his fresh ruddy gums. He rocked from side to side with the beat.

Her mom giggled happily again from the front seat. Cora looked out the window, watched a goose come in for a landing. She kept time against her car seat with her Paw Patrol shoes. The lights on the pink and purple paw prints flickered with each tap.

In her head, Beth sang along. ❖

“OVER THE RIVER”

by KEIGH AHR

Reynaldo Garcia really did want to join the touch football game after Thanksgiving dinner, but he had a mystery to solve. “You kids have fun,” he said to the two boys standing next to his chair. “You don’t need an old man like me playing quarterback.” The boys showed only a moment of disappointment before racing back to the expansive backyard of their great-grandmother’s home. Reynaldo returned attention to the conversation at the far end of the long dining room table. On the left side of the table sat white-haired Bertrand Anderson, an accountant and son of Alice, the home’s owner. Sitting next to him was a woman named Sharon, whose annual presence at this holiday meal had become increasingly curious to Reynaldo.

“American politics operates on a pendulum,” Bertrand said, sweeping a hand over his dessert plate as he spoke with the confidence he displayed on nearly any topic, from gardening to government, physics to football. “We’ve swung over to an extreme this year, but political gravity will pull Washington back to the center, and within a year or two we’ll be back to the other extreme.” Sharon nodded and asked Bertrand to explain further. A petite middle-aged woman with ribbons of gray in her shoulder-length black hair, Sharon was

a friend of Alice. That was all Reynaldo, or apparently anyone else in the Anderson family, knew about Sharon.

Bertrand asked Sharon how she planned to vote in the next election; politics didn’t interest Reynaldo, so he chose to sit back in his chair and enjoy Thanksgiving’s savory aromas, lingering in the room like the echo of a symphony’s final notes. Reynaldo admired the Anderson’s tradition of having each guest prepare a side dish: an aunt’s garlic butter-nut squash risotto, roasted zucchini with parmesan and ginger from a cousin, the honey and cinnamon of an in-law’s sweet potatoes, and if there was too much cream in an uncle’s pearled onions its blend of nutmeg and red pepper was enough to compensate. Reynaldo was not fond of desserts but found his sister-in-law’s zabaglione irresistible, and the adults and teens who drank coffee said Reynaldo’s hand-roasted caracolillo had brought the long meal to its proper conclusion. After dessert, the two dozen guests had assembled into groups around the spacious Anderson estate, some watching television in the living room, others playing pool in the basement or Scrabble in the den, but the majority joining the annual touch football game.

The door to the kitchen opened, and Alice Anderson shuffled over to Bertrand. Grammie Alice's wrinkled face still beamed with friendship, her eyes sparkling with as much joy as ever. Yet Reynaldo noticed, again, how much more slowly she moved than she had last Thanksgiving. At Reynaldo's initial Thanksgiving dinner with the Andersons six years ago, Grammie Alice had refused any help with cooking the turkey and primary sides, but with each year she had gradually ceded her responsibilities to the point where she now only prepared the cranberry sauce. "Bertie, why don't you play pool," Grammie Alice said, patting her son on the shoulder. She glanced at Reynaldo and winked; Grammie Alice had pulled him aside when he arrived that morning and urged him to talk with Sharon. After what he'd learned – or, to be exact, discovering what little the Andersons had learned – about Sharon, Reynaldo was eager for this talk.

"In all my years coming here I've never had a chance to talk with you, Reynaldo," Sharon said after Alice and Bertrand exited the dining room. She then lifted a fork from the table and cut into a slice of pecan pie. "Grammie Alice tells me you're an interesting man. You're a professor at Miami University?"

"Chemical engineering, yes. And that would be the Miami here in Ohio, not Florida."

"Of course. And I understand your family is from Mexico?"

"My father's parents arrived in Ohio in 1935 from Mazatlán. Legally, let's get that

straight. As for my mother's parents, ask me no questions please."

Sharon swallowed her forkful of pie. "I overheard you speaking to the children earlier today about the Day of the Dead. You spoke with great passion."

Reynaldo sat back into his chair, and opened his arms wide. "Much like Thanksgiving, Día de los Muertos is a deeply meaningful day for families. Each year, we keep alive the memory of our ancestors. Family is very important to me, Sharon. Not only my parents' family, but the Andersons as well. I was hesitant to come to my first Thanksgiving here, but Nathan laughed off my apprehension, saying his family would accept me as openly as they had Nathan when he told them he was gay. And the Andersons have proven to be as generous and welcoming as Nathan said they were. They remind me of my uncle Matty and his family."

Sharon nodded. "How so?"

"Like the Andersons, the Flores have an honesty and gentleness that is heart-warming, yet also an unfortunate amount of naivety, even gullibility. When I was in college, uncle Matty met a man who claimed to be a distant relative. He befriended my uncle, and eventually convinced Matty to invest in his business. It was only when my aunt discovered this man's business didn't actually exist, that he had been lying to them the entire time."

Sharon laid her fork down. "What that man did was horrible. Did they ever catch him?"

"Unfortunately, no. Matty and his wife

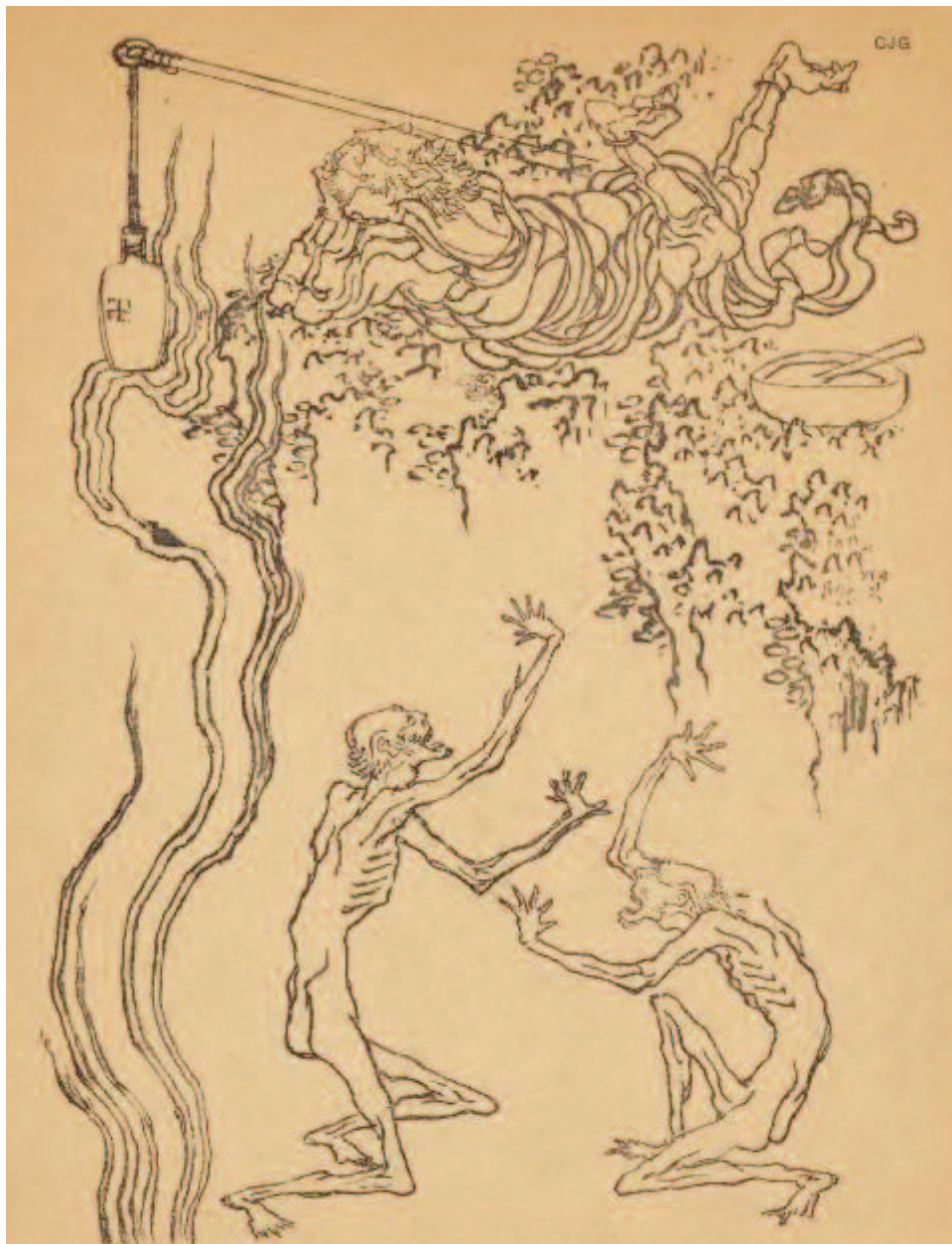
lost a good deal of their savings to that swindler.” The sound of laughing children clattered in from the backyard, as Reynaldo leaned forward in his chair. “You’re a friend of Grammie Alice, yes?”

“That’s correct,” Sharon replied. “We’ve known each other for some time. Since she knows my parents died when I was young, and I have no siblings or offspring, she’s been kind enough to invite

me to her family’s Thanksgivings.”

“Your home, is it in Ohio?”

Sharon laughed, then explained her work required meeting with clients all over the world. She owned condos in several places, one a couple of hours away in downtown Cleveland. “But none of my condos is what you or I would call home. My Cleveland condo’s actually rented out this month, which is not unusual. I’m stay-



ing this week at a bed and breakfast, just across the river.”

“I understand you work as an airline consultant,” Reynaldo said. “Which airline?”

“All of them. Whichever one needs help at any given moment.”

“And none of them needs help now? At the height of travel season?”

Billiard balls clacked against each other in the basement, as Sharon folded her arms across her chest. “Your uncle’s misfortune seems to have given you a healthy suspicion of outsiders.”

“There are several guests here today from outside the Anderson family,” Reynaldo said. “Yet each has a clear association – a co-worker, former roommate, fellow alumnus. You, however, are just... Sharon. A friend of Grammie Alice’s who, as I’ve discovered through my questions among the Andersons today, is never present at any other holiday gathering, or is even seen outside of today. Who Alice never mentions at any other time. Who always politely but firmly refuses requests for a phone number or email address. Who despite owning condos all over the world somehow manages to make her way to this remote area in Ohio on the final Thursday of November.”

To Reynaldo’s surprise, Sharon seemed neither upset nor defensive at his challenge. She pushed her plate forward. “I may not have the Anderson’s wealth but I’ve been very fortunate with my finances, Dr. Garcia. I’ve never asked anyone in the family for money.”

“But a talented and malicious person might want information, rather than money. And the Andersons are far too willing to share information that could prove useful to such a person.”

Sharon nodded, then sat back into her chair. “If it would set your mind at ease, then please, ask me any question you’d like.”

“Let’s start at the beginning. What’s your last –”

A sharp cry from the backyard interrupted their conversation. Reynaldo sat up quickly, and raced through the kitchen and then through the door leading outside.

###

Reynaldo ran up to a circle of children who had gathered around a small girl sitting on the ground. He nudged through the circle and saw the girl, whose right arm dangled limply at her side, being consoled by her mother, Nathan’s oldest sister.

“Mommy!” the girl cried. “I can’t bend my arm! It *hurts so much!*”

As the girl’s mother encouraged her to breathe, Reynaldo asked a series of curt questions to the children. He learned the girl’s name was Gail, and she was eight. Eager to join in the fun of the football game, Gail had reached to catch a pass, and her arm had been trapped between the colliding bodies of two other children.

Gail’s father pushed through the circle and joined his wife in comforting their daughter. “Daddy!” Rivers of tears streaked Gail’s cheeks. “Make the pain *go away!*”

The father stood, and began questioning the adults to see who had medical

knowledge. Reynaldo saw Sharon approaching, with Grammie Alice holding on to Sharon's arm. Stepping away from the children, Reynaldo ran his hands over his scalp. "How could I have been so thoughtless?" he asked. "I should have come out when those boys invited me."

After a quick explanation of Gail's accident from Reynaldo, Grammie Alice laid her right hand gently on his shoulder. "It was an accident, dear. There's nothing you could have done to prevent it."

"Not true. If I had been out here, I could have supervised the action, and made sure smaller children such as Gail stayed out of dangerous situations."

The brusque survey by Gail's father revealed no one with medical training beyond first aid. Grammie Alice also knew of no doctors or nurses in the surrounding area. Not wanting to wait for an ambulance, Gail's father then helped her daughter stand and said he would drive her to the nearest emergency room.

"If I may." Sharon approached Gail and her parents. "I could be able to help."

Gail's father grunted. "You've done this before?"

"I'm a volunteer on overseas missions, and work with children like your daughter all the time." Reynaldo was surprised her mission work hadn't been mentioned during his earlier investigation of Sharon's background, but was too anxious about Gail's condition to challenge her statement. The father waved Sharon forward, and Sharon knelt down in front of Gail and brushed hair from the girl's forehead.

"I need to touch your arm. Can you let me do that?" Grimacing, the girl nodded, and Sharon laid her left hand on Gail's bicep, her right on Gail's forearm. Sharon closed her eyes as her fingers glided and probed along the girl's arm. She then opened her eyes and stood, looking at the father.

"There are no broken bones. Gail has suffered what's called a nursemaid elbow; the force against her arm during the collision caused the radius bone of her upper arm to slip under the ligament connecting it to the humerus. It's similar to a separated shoulder. I've seen this happen to a lot of young children, and I know how to fix it."

"*Make the pain stop!*" Gail yelled.

Gail's mother shook her head. "No. I want her to see a doctor."

"The nearest hospital is a half hour away," Sharon replied, "and you wouldn't see a doctor if you went there. The experienced doctors and nurses will have the holiday off, and the emergency room will be staffed with interns and physician assistants. They'll follow procedure, taking X-rays of her arm and performing other needless tests. You could be there for hours, watching your daughter suffer, before someone concludes that what needs to be done, is exactly what I propose to do, right now."

"*Mom!*" Gail's cry made everyone around her shiver. "*Make it go away!*"

Gail's parents looked at each other, as their daughter sobbed between them. Grammie Alice then stepped forward. "Gail is in pain, and Sharon is a trusted friend. Please let her help my great-grand-

daughter.”

The mother turned to Sharon. “Could you make her injury worse, trying to fix her?” When Sharon shook her head in response, the mother leaned down and whispered in Gail’s ear. “Do what she tells you.”

Sharon knelt down again in front of the girl and asked for her arm. “Will you bend my elbow?” Gail whimpered. “That’s what makes it hurt.”

“You can keep your arm straight, but I do need you to twist it.” Gail sobbed as Sharon rotated her arm so that her palm faced the ground, then grasped the girl’s arm by the bicep and upper arm. “You’re going to feel a sharp pain,” she told Gail, “but it will go away quickly. I need you to relax your body as much as possible. Can you do that for me?” Gail nodded, her face contorted with pain and confusion, as Sharon drew in her breath and pulled on the girl’s forearm while pushing against the bicep.

Gail screamed with the horror of her parents’ worst nightmares.

The girl pulled away from Sharon’s grasp, stumbled backward two steps, and fell at her mother’s feet. She then blinked, and looked up. “Mommy... “

“What is it?”

Hesitantly, Gail bent her elbow. “It don’t hurt so much.”

Gail’s parents embraced their daughter, as the rest of the Anderson family gathered around them. Feeling ready to cry with relief, Reynaldo turned to Sharon, the only other person to hold back from the crowd

around Gail.

Over the next several hours, Reynaldo would question whether he actually saw what he believed to have happened next.

Sharon raised her fists to her chin and hunched her shoulders forward as if preparing for a crushing blow. He could still see her eyes, which seemed to illuminate briefly with a blue flame.

And then, for a mere moment, Sharon... vanished.

Reynaldo knew it was impossible, but he was certain she was there, then not there, and there once again, hunched over her fists and gasping as she stumbled forward, Reynaldo rushing up to catch her by the arm.

Gail’s father raced up to them and grasped Sharon’s other arm. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Sharon nodded. “Just... I’m a little light-headed.” She looked up at Reynaldo. “Water. I need... to drink some water.”

Holding her up by the arms, the two men helped Sharon inside, and eased her into an armchair of the living room. Her face had turned the color of cold oatmeal, and she seemed to Reynaldo to have aged a decade. Gail’s father then retrieved a glass of water from the kitchen. Sharon drank, and life seemed to blossom onto her face.

“Can I get you anything else?” Gail’s father asked. “Wine? Shot of bourbon?”

Sharon emptied the glass, and handed it to Reynaldo. “No thank you. I just need more water, and some rest.”

“What you did today, for my daughter. I cannot thank you enough.”

“You should give her some pain medication,” Sharon said. “Her elbow will ache for some time.” The father nodded, then excused himself to rejoin his wife and daughter outside. Sharon smiled as he left the room, then closed her eyes as her body relaxed into the chair’s cushioned back.

Remembering he still held the empty glass, Reynaldo went into the kitchen and refilled it from a dispenser in the refrigerator door. He then returned to the living room, only to find a vacant chair where Sharon had been sitting.

“Just wish I’d been able to say goodbye before she left.” Leaning over the kitchen sink, Reynaldo dipped his rubber-gloved hands into the soapy water and retrieved a platter too sensitive for the dishwasher, currently near the end of its second load. He had already dismissed Sharon’s apparent disappearance as an anxiety-induced delusion, and now regretted interrogating her prior to Gail’s injury. “Nobody’s seen her since we brought her back inside.”

“Sharon isn’t one for formal greetings or farewells,” Grammie Alice replied, sitting at a nearby table. “You never know when she will come, or how long she’ll stay. And she often leaves as suddenly as she arrives.”

“Sounds like you’ve known each other a long time.” Reynaldo rinsed the platter and set it in the drainboard.

“Oh yes, since I was a child.”

Reynaldo stopped, and turned to Alice. “Pardon?”

“Sharon was a nurse, visiting my

school, when I first met her. We’ve been friends ever since that day.”

Reynaldo blinked. He then took off his rubber gloves, and laid them across the drainboard. He dried his hands on a towel, which he threw over his shoulder, and sat next to Alice at the table. “I don’t understand. She doesn’t look...”

“As old as me?” Grammie Alice chuckled, as if her lungs were being tickled. “Don’t be embarrassed, Reynaldo. I’m past the age of taking offense.”

“You said she visited your school. When was this?”

Grammie Alice tilted her head back. “It was 1944, right after my grandfather passed. He had a heart attack and died instantly. He was in his eighties, like I am now, but had no history of heart problems or any other medical issues. He seemed too energetic to die so suddenly, despite his age. I was shocked, like everyone else in my family, and grieved for his death. Until the day of his funeral.”

“The funeral. What happened that day?”

“Nothing, really. Except for some reason, when I woke that morning I realized the sadness had left me. I wasn’t happy – peaceful, is the best way I can describe how I felt. More happy for having known my grandfather, than upset at losing him. But then we got to the church, and I saw my family. All those sad faces, and that weeping! People crying out during the service. I didn’t know the word at the time, but it was morbid, like they were enjoying their sorrow. It was all very confusing to me.

And a few days later, I met Sharon.”

“She must have been very young at the time.”

“Actually, she looked older, more tired than she does now. After she talked to our class about health, she came to me on the playground during recess. I’m not sure why, perhaps because she was so friendly to me, but I told her about my grandfather dying. She then asked if I had any questions, and I replied by describing how my family had acted during the funeral. I told her I didn’t want to be like them, so good at being miserable. Recess time ended, but before we went back inside, Sharon asked if I’d like to talk with her more, and I told her yes.”

The dishwasher completed its cycle and chimed its finishing signal. Grammie Alice told Reynaldo about her subsequent meetings with Sharon over the decades. Their encounters were always coincidental, Sharon greeting her after a concert, in a train station, or exiting a restaurant. Sharon was always in a rush, staying with Alice only long enough for a brief conversation.

“You’ve never exchanged addresses or phone numbers with her?” Reynaldo asked. “The two of you never write to each other, or call?”

Grammie Alice pursed her lips. “Never occurred to me to ask.” She then described a meeting with Sharon ten years earlier at an airport, immediately after Alice’s husband succumbed to cancer. She and Sharon were on different flights, but both had a long layover, giving them a chance for an extended talk. “This was in

October,” Grammie Alice said, “so when it came time for me to board my plane, I invited her to Thanksgiving dinner. And she’s come ever since, most years.”

“Most?”

“Yes. Such as six years ago, the first year you were here. If you remember, my brother Ethan passed that summer. And the year after that –”

“Nathan’s cousin.” Reynaldo raised a hand to his chin. “Leukemia, died the following January. Two years ago, a niece had drowned over the summer. And Bertrand’s wife, this year.”

“But if you’ll remember, there were two years in between, when Sharon wasn’t here.”

Reynaldo lowered his hand. “No one...”

Alice nodded slowly.

Reynaldo stood up swiftly, his chair tipping back and nearly falling. “You’re saying Sharon only comes for Thanksgiving when there’s a death in the family?”

“Reynaldo, my dear” Grammie Alice said, rising slowly. “All I want is for our family to accept Sharon as the dear friend she’s been to me. And for Sharon to feel she has something like a family.” She took the towel from his shoulder. “Now, let me help you empty that dishwasher.”

The sun descended below the tree line, and the holiday gathering of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, cousins, great grandmothers, grand-uncles, second cousins, third cousins once and twice removed, in-laws across multiple generations and family

names, invited friends and co-workers with nowhere else to go on this last Thursday in November, collected their coats and left in their cars.

Reynaldo lifted Gail onto his back as he escorted her family out to their SUV. Five minutes after her elbow was healed, Gail had said the pain had gone away completely, and she had been indulged with every available dessert the remainder of the day. Gail laughed as she rode on Reynaldo's back, her mother walking beside them, feet crunching into the soft gravel of Grammie Alice's driveway.

"Did you see Sharon leave?" Gail's mother asked.

"No," replied Reynaldo. He saw Grammie Alice's Volvo in the garage, next to Reynaldo's Lexus, with a Ford pickup belonging to Nathan's uncle parked in the driveway behind the Volvo. Those vehicles accounted for the host and all her overnight guests. The evening's moonlight was strong enough to give Reynaldo a clear view of the street, and he saw no cars parked by the curb on either side. "From what I understand, sudden appearances and disappearances are the norm for Sharon."

"That's a shame. She should have given us a chance to thank her. Isn't she Grammie Alice's friend?"

Reynaldo opened a rear door of the SUV, and Gail climbed down from his back onto her booster seat. "Going to Grammie Alice's house is like being in that song," she said, and then began singing: "*Over the river and through the woods...*"

"Grammie Alice definitely knows her better than anyone else in the family," Reynaldo said to Gail's mother. "But I doubt she knows how to contact her."

"Is Sharon really that difficult to reach?"

"*The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh...*"

Reynaldo shook his head. "Sharon's the type of person who generates more questions than answers." Gail's mother pressed for an explanation, but when Reynaldo offered nothing further she relented to her husband's request to begin the long car trip home. After embracing Gail's parents, Reynaldo stepped back from the SUV and waved to the vehicle as it backed down the driveway.

Returning inside the house, Reynaldo found Nathan's uncle sleeping on the living room sofa. After rousing and coaxing him down to a basement bedroom, Reynaldo was alone on the first floor. Nathan had retreated upstairs an hour earlier, not much later than had Grammie Alice, exhausted from the afternoon's feast. Reynaldo went into the kitchen and poured a glass of port, expecting to return to the living room and watch the end of the evening football game.

He took two steps into the living room then stopped abruptly, the port sloshing over the front of his glass and spilling onto the carpet. "You deserve an apology," Sharon said, sitting casually in the armchair where he'd last seen her. "But there was no way to prevent startling you."

Reynaldo pointed at her as more port

spilled from his glass. "Where the hell have you been?"

"That would take some time to explain, Reynaldo. Allow me to get away with saying I had become a center of attention this afternoon, and I have good reasons to keep a low profile."

"Then why'd you come back?"

"In the hope we could continue our conversation from this afternoon."

Reynaldo blinked. He remembered Sharon was Alice's invited guest, and while both her disappearance and reappearance had been sudden and unsettling, she had done nothing worse than being unaccounted for over several hours. On an end table next to her chair he saw a glass of port, similar to his own. Sharon was enigmatic, yet talkative; Reynaldo decided that engaging her in conversation could lead to a better understanding of her.

"My apologies for being so abrupt," he said, nodding at Sharon and then placing his glass on a coffee table in front of the couch. "As you observed, I was startled, and reacted out of fear." He sat, took in a hyperbolic deep breath, then exhaled. "On behalf of Gail's parents, allow me to thank you for helping that sweet girl this afternoon."

"You're welcome. No one should suffer when it's avoidable." She lifted her wine glass and drank, then lowered the glass to her lap. "You had a conversation with Alice this afternoon about me. She told you things that a man of science like yourself would probably find hard to accept."

Reynaldo hid his surprise. "She claims

to have first met you over seven decades ago."

"Indeed." Sharon ran a hand back through her hair and brought it forward, sifting through the gray until she found a lock of black, twirling it in her fingers. "I'm generally not vain, but please tell me you've ruled out the possibility of me being a century old."

"Memory has been shown to be highly fluid, especially for someone of Grammie Alice's age. Her memories of you must have overlapped those of other people she has known."

"A logical explanation, worthy of a man of science. But allow me to offer an alternative narrative." Reynaldo nodded in response. "Let's say the basic facts of the story Alice told you are accurate. That on Tuesday, the nineteenth of September 1944, your husband's grandmother, wearing a blue dress and black shoes, went to Ralph Talbot Primary School in her hometown of Weymouth Massachusetts on a clear day, with temperatures ranging from a low of 42 to a high of 68 degrees Fahrenheit. And on that day, a Nurse Ferry from South Shore Hospital visited Alice's second-grade classroom to speak on health, and later had a private conversation with Alice at recess. Does all that seem plausible?"

"Certainly."

"Would you also find it plausible for that girl's teacher, Tara Braxton, to call South Shore Hospital a month later and ask for Nurse Ferry?"

Reynaldo smiled. "Nobody at the hos-

pital knew a Nurse Ferry, did they?”

“Oh, they did find her name in the hospital’s records as a registered nurse. But oddly enough, nobody at the hospital remembered ever seeing her.”

“It seems this Nurse Ferry and you share an unusual talent.”

“Now let’s consider a more recent event, Reynaldo. This afternoon, when I helped heal Gail’s arm. Do you know what happened at precisely that moment?” Reynaldo shook his head. “A rhetorical question, because the Chinese government has yet to make an announcement. An engine on a commercial airplane exploded after taking off from Hong Kong, causing the plane to crash, killing all passengers and crew as well as several people on the ground. Two hundred and seventy-one people died in the accident.”

“A tragedy. But I don’t see how it connects to Gail’s injury.”

“It was the timing, Reynaldo. Setting Gail’s radius back into its correct position, without further harming her, required a precise amount of pressure at an exact location. This required my full concentration, and the focus on Gail created a... to use terms you can best understand, I experienced a temporary weakness.”

“So when the plane crashed,” Reynaldo said, suppressing a laugh, “you felt a great disturbance in the Force?”

Sharon glared back at him darkly, as she drank again from her port. “Perhaps we should move on,” she replied. “When we talked earlier today, you mentioned you still had a special place in your heart for

the Day of the Dead. May I ask why?”

Reynaldo cleared his throat. “When I was a child, Día de los Muertos taught me to accept the mortality of my ancestors. I learned to hold their memory in my heart at all times. It’s brought me much peace over the years.”

“Grammie Alice choose wisely then.” Sharon finished her drink, and set her glass down on the end table. “You are a skeptic, a true man of science, not given to superstitious beliefs. I’d never convince you by disappearing again, or performing some other miracle. You’d just think I was some eccentric lady adept at parlor tricks. Yet for all your rationality, you also hold onto values outside the realm of reason. I’m beginning to understand why Grammie Alice was so eager for us to talk this afternoon.”

“I wonder why...” Reynaldo paused, feeling his mind cloud from the port he’d been drinking. He rubbed his forehead, and continued. “From what Alice tells me, you’ve been the one most determined to continue your conversation with her over the decades. I’m curious, as to why.”

“To satisfy my curiosity, an inquisitiveness that arises from my job – my real job, Reynaldo. My work requires me to travel with many people, who are very talkative when they see me; they tell me their life stories, quite literally, until their journeys are complete. I never see any of them again, but I remember some of their tales. They leave me wanting to discover more about your world. And in the hope of gaining additional knowledge, I sometimes go on journeys of my own.”

Reynaldo yawned and apologized. The cloud in his head had become a dense fog, and he sensed he would soon be unable to keep himself awake. But he was determined to hear Sharon's story to its end, in spite of its growing absurdity. "This is how you met Alice."

"We first talked during one of your most violent wars, when the tales I heard from my travelers grew steadily more disturbing. It wasn't the time of greatest death - the European diseases that devastated the native peoples of the Americas were far more deadly - but humanity in 1944 seemed to have developed an insatiable appetite for slaughter and was on a path of suicidal destruction. I didn't understand this impulse, so I visited many people at this time, not just Alice. But when I spoke with her, I found her view of death remarkable, for a child. She didn't fear or welcome the end of life, but accepted its reality. And in the conversations I've had with her over the years, I've seen how that acceptance has fueled her determination to enjoy the life that's been given to her. Her life is limited, but her love of life seems to have no bounds. I admire her quiet passion, and while I don't know you well Reynaldo, you seem to be equally interesting. And I look forward to our next conversation."

A sound of shuffling feet echoed down from the second floor. By the weight and location of the steps, Reynaldo could tell his husband had walked from the guest bedroom into the hall bathroom. Sharon rose from her chair. "It's time for me to

leave. To return to my home, over the river." Reynaldo attempted to stand, but found he could not. "Don't be alarmed, Reynaldo. You'll fall asleep momentarily. One of my parlor tricks. You'll awaken in a few hours, then rise from the couch and go up to bed with Nathan."

Against his will, Reynaldo felt his head drooping. "Then... we'll see you next Thanksgiving?"

"Unfortunately, no. As I said earlier, I've drawn too much attention to myself today, so I'll let Alice know I can't make any more appearances here. You and I will have to find some other occasions for our meetings."

Reynaldo's chin bounced on his chest, but he forced himself to look back up at her. "Don't try to speak," Sharon told him. "And don't concern yourself about contacting me after tonight. I'll be able to find you. All you'll have to do is be less a man of science, and more the man who feels peace when celebrating Día de los Muertos." And on hearing those words, Reynaldo lost all power to keep his eyelids from closing.

Reynaldo woke with a start, and looked at the clock hanging above the doorway leading to the kitchen: 2 AM. He got up from the couch and stumbled in his sleepiness, his legs hitting the coffee table. He heard the wine glass wobble, and as he grabbed it before it fell, a memory came to him. He cleared his vision and looked down at the carpet where he had spilled his port. The carpet was clean, with only a

thin outline of red.

After waking in the morning, Reynaldo read a news story on his phone: *Plane crash in Hong Kong, 267 dead*. Reynaldo followed the story over the coming week, and on a

Wednesday morning nearly dropped his coffee when he read four additional bodies had been identified. ❖

END TRANSMISSION