

"Writing is like a self portrait. The more words on the page, the more I see myself."
~ Bonnie Watson

"My writing gives me a second voice which says things I otherwise wouldn't share."
~ James Garrett

"I write because I represent so many people who may not write, and I want the rest of the world to know that "we" write. By we, I mean, Christians, blacks, women, southerners, under 40s, childless people, etc., etc., etc. Everything that I am and every group that I represent, gets a voice when my pen hits the page."
~ Nedra Smith

"Writing gives me an outlet for the random thoughts that distract me in my daily life. Things that sound ridiculous or insane in everyday conversation somehow are acceptable on the printed page."
~ Greg Smith

"I write because I read and I read because I write. It's kind of a 'chicken and the egg' thing. After all, an imagination is a terrible thing to waste."
~ Denise Golinowski

Mining The Muse

Anthology 2007

The Collected Works of
The Chesterfield Writers Club

Mining The Muse
Anthology 2007
The Collected Writings of
The Chesterfield Writers Club

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Dedicated to our good friends

Ron and Maryann Ferland

who encouraged and supported so many of us.

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Introduction

The Chesterfield Writers Club was started on June 19, 2005 in the back of the Little Professor Book Center (off Iron Bridge Road in Chesterfield, VA). Ron and Maryann Ferland, the owners of the family bookstore, started the writer's club as a service to the community. Originally, we met on the third Sunday of the month at 2pm. The Ferlands had already started a Writer's Workshop – a monthly meeting and instruction on how to write well and get a book published. The Chesterfield Writers Club was their second attempt at a monthly meeting where writers could collaborate and learn from each other.

When Ron and Maryann started the Chesterfield Writers Club, they made it clear it was a group that was to be developed by and for the writers. Their hope was that a democratic group would be more successful and persist. Maryann approached me to be the facilitator since I had been a regular member of their Writer's Workshop.

The format stands as it did early on: Once around the table for introductions and welcome to new members, then a discussion of the current state of our projects, discussion of resources (books, web sites, conventions), a group discussion of any topic that surfaces, a workshop on some writing topic, and a review of pluses and minuses about the meeting and how it can be improved for next time.

Sadly, in June of 2006, the Little Professor Book Center went out of business. This left the Chesterfield Writers Club with no sponsor and no place to meet. We quickly found a new home, meeting third Saturdays at noon at the Central Library on Lori Road. The group has met there consistently for the last year and a half.

One of the great benefits of being sponsored by Little Professor was the constant stream of new members the bookstore brought in. Without the ongoing supply of new writers the membership took on the responsibility of attracting new members. Everyone pitched in making fliers, posting them in

local libraries, starting online blogs, creating a Meetup.com group, and advertising in newspapers.

In June of 2007 the group met and discussed what we might try to keep ourselves motivated to create new works. Pamela K. Kinney suggested writing an anthology of our collected works. The group enthusiastically agreed and everyone set out to write new stories. The goal was to create 128 pages of new material and publish it on Lulu.com. We all phoned into a conference room weekly to report our word counts and published them in our online forum at <http://writersclub.us>.

Today, the Chesterfield Writers Club has 30 members and an average attendance of 8 members per month. We count among our members such successful local writers as Pamela K. Kinney (“Haunted Richmond”) and Sally Norcus (“Eleventh Summer”). We continue to be a “group of new and experienced writers from all genres” striving to meet our Mission Statement - “To Help Each Other Create A Publishable Work.”

This anthology is the culmination of 6 months work by the members of the Chesterfield Writers Club of Chesterfield, Va. The works are not assembled in any particular order. Inside, you will find works of fiction, prose, poetry, short stories, flash fiction, children's stories, and works for adults. We hope you will enjoy reading it as much as we have enjoyed creating it.

Greg Smith
Facilitator
The Chesterfield Writer's Club
December, 2007

Mining The Muse

Denise Golinowski

I have been a self-proclaimed "scribbler" since childhood. As soon as I read Little Women, I aspired to become a modern day "Josephine March." Many a tree has been sacrificed to the Muse over the years with countless starts and stops along the way. In 2000, I decided to get serious about writing. I joined a number of writing and critique groups including the Chesterfield Writers, which I joined in 2007. Each group has helped me learn the craft and, hopefully, improved the quality of my writing. I have one completed novel manuscript stashed away deep in the back of the closet where all "first" novels belong. I designated 2007 to be my Year of the Short Story. I set myself the goal of getting my brain wrapped around the short story form, completing three short stories, and having one of them published by the end of the year. This year's anthology proved to be a real motivator and helped me achieve my goals--in these pages you will find, published, my third and fourth completed short stories. I hope you will enjoy reading my two contributions as much as I enjoyed writing them. Thank you, Chesterfield Writers!

One of Those Days

By Denise Golinowski
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By the time Teresa Forester had squeezed into her black pants and dropped the hem of her blouse over the humiliating bulge, the school bus had already picked up the neighborhood kids. On a normal day, Teresa passed the bus just as it turned into the neighborhood, so, no surprise, she was going to be late. Again!

The ragged end of a broken fingernail caught on her new blouse. "Damn!"

Teresa raised the offending fingernail for closer inspection and then fished around in her jewelry box for a nail file. She stashed the cheap cardboard files all over the house for just such occasions, but, of course, today, she could not find a single one. She resorted to nibbling at the tattered nail when a simple white plastic button with black lettering caught her attention.

She had bought it a few months ago at one of those trendy metaphysical shops downtown as a joke, but today it seemed appropriate. More than appropriate, prophetic. She snatched it up, pinned it into the fabric over her heart and headed downstairs.

Late or not, she had to have coffee!

In the coffee shop, over the screech of the steamer and the voices of the staff calling out their cryptic orders, a nearby conversation caught Teresa's attention.

"God! I hate this time of the month! The bloating, the cravings, the irritability! It's ridiculous!"

"I know. I finished off an entire bag of Baby Ruths I bought for school lunches last week."

Teresa turned her head just enough to catch a glimpse of the two women behind her. One, a willowy redhead dressed in designer jeans and a tweed jacket, stood in front of a display of coffee mugs. Just to the other side of her, a brunette in a camel jacket and black slacks browsed through an arrangement of travel mugs and flashy water bottles. Both of them held coffee cups in perfectly manicured hands.

Theresa curled her fingers to hide her chipped, and now bitten, nails. No rush hour frenzy for those two, no hectic 'kids to school, get to work on time, hope the cat hair doesn't show' routine--no way. They might have just stepped out of the pages of *Cosmopolitan* instead of being a pair of overly-endowed, physically and monetarily, soccer moms.

They think they've got it bad? They have no idea.

The redhead picked up a large fuchsia cup and glanced around. Her gaze settled on Teresa and she smiled as she held up the cup.

"How much is this?"

Teresa glanced down at her light green blouse, then back at the woman. The staff of the coffee shop wore dark green aprons. You would think a woman with that kind of fashion sense could tell the difference, but no. The redhead wagged the cup as if it would help jog Teresa's memory and Teresa shook her head.

"Seventeen ninety-five," called one of the girls behind the counter.

The redhead Teresa dubbed "Tweedledumb" nodded and turned to her friend, now Tweedledee. "Wouldn't this go great in my breakfast nook?"

Teresa pulled a drinking straw from a nearby holder and waved it at Tweedledumb.

#

An enormous purple spider dropped down from the ceiling to settle on Tweedledumb's immaculate French braid. The creature began to navigate its way up the coiled hair.

Tweedledee picked up one of the aqua cups and turned to show it to her friend with a smile of anticipation. Her tanning bed tan turned a bit gray when she noticed the palm-sized arachnid standing on her friend's head. The aqua cup fell from her fingers as a glass-shattering shriek burst from her lips.

"Tiffany! You've got an enormous spider in your hair!"

"What!" The fuchsia cup joined its aqua cousin in pieces on the floor as Tweedledumb danced around on tiptoe, flailing her hands over her hair. "Get it off! Get it off!"

#

Not fair to the spider, Teresa thought and flicked the straw once more. The two women now stood discussing the fine points of mixing or matching the

Technicolor cups and saucers, oblivious to what had, or now had not, just happened.

"Café mocha," called out the girl behind the espresso machine.

Teresa slid the straw back into the stand beside her and picked up the tall white paper cup with its matching sippy lid and logo-embossed protective sleeve. The scent of mocha-flavored nirvana wafted from the tiny opening in the lid.

The girl behind the machine glanced at Teresa's shoulder and grinned. "Love the button."

Teresa smiled. "Thanks." She turned and headed for the door.

As she approached Tweedledee and Tweedledumb, Teresa saw Tweedledumb brush her hand over her French braid several times in a distracted way. The third pass earned a slight look of puzzlement from Tweedledee. Teresa left the shop with a tiny smile on her face.

By mid-morning, the caffeine high had disappeared and Teresa could feel her nerves starting to frazzle. The list of items on her computerized to-do list scrolled off the screen and she had made no progress on the stack of items in her in-box.

"Teresa! The copier's jammed again," a masculine voice called.

Teresa bit back a retort as Dustin Weller stuck his head around the corner and peered into her office. A college graduate and top salesman, Dustin could negotiate million dollar deals but could not manage to make a single copy without sending the copier into a conniption fit.

"Did you check the monitor to see where the jam was?" Teresa asked.

He smacked his hand on the doorframe and winked. "No time. I've got a presentation in thirty minutes. I'll use the other one. Just thought I'd let you know before someone else."

Teresa's red pen jabbed the air between them and Dustin held up his hands.

"Hey! At least I didn't just walk away from it."

#

His expression shifted from teasing to puzzlement as his hands lowered to his chest. He held them back out in front of himself and stared at the blood smeared across his palms. Blood oozed out of a hole in his designer silk shirt and trickled down his chest.

"What in the hell?" His voice matched his expression, confused and shocked.

Teresa looked into Dustin's dazed baby blues. "That's for nothin'; now do somethin'." It was one of her mother's favorite quips.

Dustin leaned against the doorjamb for support. "Was I shot? What's going on?"

#

Okay, that was a bit too much, Teresa thought and gave the red pen another flourish before she dropped it into the pencil cup. She pushed herself away from her desk and walked toward the door.

As she passed Dustin in the doorway, she patted his shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it."

Dustin smirked as he followed her into the hallway, his hand rubbing his chest absently. "Thanks, Teresa. You're a lifesaver." He spun on his heel and headed toward the other unsuspecting copier.

"You can say that again," Teresa said to his retreating back.

Dustin had proven himself the master of the art by once more creating a paper jam as massive as rush hour on the interstate. Crumpled paper lodged in every possible joint of the machine, wrapped itself around the fuser and tore to tiny pieces in the most inaccessible sections.

By the time Teresa had fished out every errant scrap, her hands were covered with toner and her pulse was playing "Wipe Out" in her temples. She slammed the front cover shut with a satisfying thud and marched toward the bathroom, the reassuring hum of a copier in warm-up stage following her down the hall.

"Of all days to wear a new shirt," she muttered as she held her hands out from her clothes and eyeballed her cuffs. So far so good, not a spot. Now, if she could just get her hands washed and back to her desk without interruption, maybe she could do some of her own work.

Muttered cursing floated out of one of the offices as Teresa approached. The words "damned cursor," "slower than molasses," and "server" made the hair on the back of Teresa's neck begin to rise. The bathroom was just beyond the doorway in question and Teresa tried thinking light thoughts as she attempted to tiptoe past the open door.

Jane Arlington's voice slashed out of her office to cut off any hope of

escape. "Teresa! My computer's messed up again."

Shit! Teresa held up her toner covered hands and waggled them suggestively. "I've got toner all over me. Be right back."

"I've got a wet-wipe in here," Jane said, pulling a box out of her drawer as she pushed back from her desk. "I've tried everything and Mr. Parker is waiting for me to e-mail him the report."

Teresa stifled the urge to scream and tromped into the office as Jane vacated her seat. The wet-wipe eliminated the toner, but the residue left Teresa's skin itchy. In fact, her whole body felt itchy, like her skin was trying to crawl off so it could wrap itself around Jane's hovering body and smother her.

Jane continued to prattle on about the unreliability of her top-end computer. "I'm thinking of requisitioning a new computer," she said. "This one's always crashing on me."

Ever think it might be operator error, Teresa thought as she tried some of her best tricks to "un-stick" a PC. At least she's got one manufactured in this decade.

While Jane's non-stop commentary vibrated up and down Teresa's spine, Teresa finally resorted to control/alt/delete and clicked on Restart. She picked up a pen from Jane's blotter and twiddled it through her fingers.

"That's your big fix for everything, isn't it?" Jane concluded.

"What?" Teresa glanced up at the other woman as she leaned over the back of the desk chair to stare at the screen.

"Restarting. You always restart the PC."

"Did you try it before you called me in here?"

"No."

The pen flipped directions.

#

Jane flew through the air toward the back wall of her office. The woman's grey eyes grew enormous with shock until she hit the drywall, then her eyelids snapped down like the window shades on a storefront at closing time. She slid down the wall, her designer suit bunching up around her thighs as she hit the floor. She tipped over onto one side and her head hit the filing cabinet to set the files inside the drawers rattling like papery chimes.

#

Now, while that felt very satisfying, it just would not do to incapacitate the owner's assistant at such a crucial moment. Teresa twisted the pen once before she put it back on the blotter.

The monitor screen lit up as she did. The words "That's enough of that, young lady!" flashed across the screen before the computer manufacturer's trademark logo and Teresa winced. Teresa should have known her little tricks would trip her magic teacher's radar.

Anticipating the formal reprimand she would receive later, Teresa sighed and focused on the task at hand. A few keystrokes and the PC purred like a kitten over a catnip mouse.

"Next time, try that first before calling me," Teresa said, as she stood up.

"Thanks," Jane said as she slipped into the chair. She glanced at Teresa's button, a slight frown crinkling her forehead for a moment. Then she laughed. "Oh, got it! Funny." She turned back to her computer and Mr. Parker's report.

Teresa's gaze flickered to the wall and she stifled the urge to laugh. When she reached the office door, she looked back to see Jane rolling her shoulders, as if she felt stiff or sore.

I should say so, Teresa thought as she headed for the bathroom.

When Teresa finally reached the bathroom sink and began lathering up her hands, she looked into the mirror. Even though her mentor did not find Teresa's morning activities amusing, the sight of the white button with its black slogan brought a grin to Teresa's face. After all, they had all been warned.

The plain block lettering said, "I've got PMS and a Wand, Any Questions?"

Pass the Happy

by James Garrett
Copyright © 2007 James Garrett

Laughter never faced extinction.
Sadness never drowned a floater,
riding on his wave of happy.

Though sorrow, in unbidden visits
came with grief and claimed its moments
none could ever find a pocket
in the fabric of my soul.

For soon enough, and often sooner,
Darkness passed and I again reclaimed my station
Riding on the wave of happy.

Driven by the sound of music
Filling ear with sound so lovely,
And the laughter which behind me
Pushed the waves that rolled and crested
Giving purchase to this floater
Riding on his wave of happy.

Bonnie Watson

As a young girl, Bonnie used to dread writing for her school projects. The task of creating draft after draft of handwritten material was draining. Yet that all changed when she received her first computer. Writing seemed all too easy, and soon short stories were streaming across the screen in a matter of minutes. She eventually found her niche in the medieval fantasy genre, and relentlessly works on her beloved characters and endless ideas.

Bonnie's background in illustration has earned a small reputation with several authors. Her works have been published in the form of book covers, such as *Patterns in Silicon*, *Whispers of Glory*, and *Songbirds are Free*. Aside from her commissions and storytelling, Bonnie works as a full-time Graphic Designer and currently resides in Richmond, Virginia.

"It takes time to get known in the publishing and art world, but I have faith in my work."

www.geocities.com/wisdomnovels

The Portrait

By Bonnie Watson
Copyright © 2007 Bonnie Watson

She watched him take the bright white canvas and set it on the easel, then jars of water, the brushes and palette. She watched him open his bag and finger through small containers of paint. Carefully, he picked out several tubes and squirted them all on his palette. He mixed the vibrant colors together, increasing value or dulling according to the portrait he was about to paint: a little girl.

“What are those?” she asked, her round face curiously looking at some of the smaller paint containers in his bag. “They’re so bright!”

The artist chuckled and held one up for her to see. Handwritten on the side of the jar were the words “weed-whacker brown.”

The child peered inside the bag. There were colors such as “sunburned nude crimson,” “shetland brown,” and “sweet peaches.” She giggled as she read the names.

“These here are special paints,” he told her. “I only use these when I’m completely finished.”

“Will you use them on me?” she inquired, and he nodded.

“Now hold still,” he said, and began to paint.

First he put down alizarin crimson for her rosy cheeks, a dab of yellow ochre for the skin tone, and a touch of white for highlights. Payne’s gray was the color of her long lashes that cast a deep shadow over her ultramarine blue eyes. A gentle mix of lavender and zinc titanium white created the folds in her dress. Lemon yellow sunshine flowed around her delicate form, while a glazed background of viridian green foliage faded behind her.

At long last, he stepped back to admire his masterpiece. It had been nearly two hours of nonstop painting, and he was both exhausted and proud.

“Would you like to see your portrait now?” he asked as he slid the easel around so she could see herself.

It was a beautiful likeness, as though it had the ability to breathe all on its

own and step off the canvas. She could have reached out and touched a leaf, sure that it was real.

She stood, but found herself unsteady. Her legs felt weak and her joints ached of arthritis. She looked down at her white dress, now tattered and dusty like she had been sitting for years without moving. Weeds entwined her legs. She reached out a hand to him, then shuddered at the protruding veins from under her thin skin. Her jaw dropped in a silent scream, and then she crumbled into a pile of dust at his feet.

His smile never faded as he scooped up the dust into an empty jar, then looked at the portrait. One hand rubbed his chin as he squinted to examine it, unsatisfied.

“Something’s missing,” he said to himself. “Ah, here we go.”

Adding some water to the dust, he stirred it around in its container until it turned a rich green. Then, with the faintest touch of the brush, he applied a few dabs of paint over the portrait.

“Perfect.” He stepped back.

Satisfied with his work, he rinsed his brushes and poured the remaining water out. After tucking them neatly into the bag, he pulled out a pen and crudely scratched on the jar “old hag’s green.” The jar of newly formed paint was placed next to his “shetland brown,” and zipped closed.

With the bag held in one hand and easel and canvas tucked under the other arm, he calmly left the scene. The only things that remained were a few drops of paint and a dusty piece of white cloth.

The Butterfly Tree

by James Garrett
Copyright © 2007 James Garrett

In the very smallest cottage, in a village by the sea,
lived a kind and gentle lady, just as sweet as she could be.
Her daughters both had married, and both had moved away.
so the lady, out of boredom, worked her garden every day.

She grew a lot of simple things, like beans and corn and peas,
but she also tried experiments with many kinds of trees.
She started with a pork chop tree...very hard to do,
but she really liked the flavor, and so she planted two.

Another tree grew peaches, already in the can,
another spicy applesauce, which gained a lot of fans.
One grew eggs, and that of course, let all her chickens rest,
but the tree that grew the butterflies, she loved the very best.

So though she cared for all her trees, (the liver tree not much)
her butterfly tree was special and she treated it as such.
She'd cover it in winter, and sing to it in spring.
it's leaves all shaped like butterflies with colors on the wings.

It bloomed all through the summer, but when autumn came to call,
the butterflies, like all the leaves, would wither, die and fall.

One year before the season's change could strip the tree limbs bare,
she thought she'd travel 'cross the seas, to see her daughters there.
The next day, in her garden, came a sight for all to see.
she'd clambered up the ladder to the high point of the tree.

When she reached the top she stopped, then spoke a secret name.
and as she did all the leaves real butterflies became.
their wings all flapped together and the tree began to rise.
The last seen of the lady, she was flying 'cross the skies.

Nedra Smith

Faith: A minister's daughter, Nedra Smith became a Christian in 1987. She has taught Sunday school, coached Bible bowls with her husband, and written mass inspirational emails for loved ones, including "God is Rich," a New Year's resolutions essay, and a recent mini-essay, "Author Known to God."

School: Nedra attends John Tyler Community College. Her poems, "Solo in the Concrete Wilderness," and "I Was Here," appeared in JTCC's Sherwood Forest Literary Review in 2006 and 2007. The 2007 edition also featured her short story, "Faith, Good Feng Shui, Great Karma, or Whatever." Her article, "Lewis Visits Tyler," ran in the February 2007 issue of Tyler Ties (the faculty newsletter), and covered author William Henry Lewis' campus visit.

Work: Nedra has worked as a mail carrier, flea market vendor, warehouseman, and school cafeteria lady...among other things. In June 2006, she helped write the claims support staff manual for the Virginia Workers' Compensation Commission. She served the agency for nearly five years, before leaving in November 2006 to focus on her dreams.

Nedra Smith dreams of juggling a triple career as an author, craftswoman, and creative writing instructor. To find out more, visit Nedra's blog, Ink Recitals, at www.inkrecitals.blogspot.com.

Asking

By Nedra Smith
Copyright © 2007 Nedra Smith

**Cleavon X. Reynolds
City Limits Children's Home
6141 North Lincoln Avenue
Richmond, VA 23225**

**Miss Bainbridge
Lee Middle School
4004 Forest Hill Avenue
Richmond, VA 23225**

I wished I didn't have to be out of school for the winter break. All of the other kids in Miss Bainbridge's sixth grade homeroom class had bragged about going someplace else for Christmas, and I wished I had somewhere to go, too.

There were only two more days left until school was going to let out, and I would be forced to stay in Richmond at the Children's Home where I'd been for as long as I could remember. Even Shameka Gray, the fat girl with the nappy hair who sat in front of me, was leaving to visit relatives in Virginia Beach. The dorm mother on the girls' side had taken special care to make sure Shameka's hair was combed, before this lady, who looked like a taller skinnier version of Shameka, came to pick her up after chapel yesterday.

That meant that today at the bus stop, I'd be the only one from the home to get on the school bus. Mean old Shameka wouldn't be there to protect me from the teasing.

It was still early and I could hear ice tapping at the window beside me. I reached under the bed for my flashlight and pen. By mistake I grabbed my

new journal, too. I touched its spine and smoothed my hands across the soft brown leather.

I didn't believe in Santa Claus but I believed in Miss Bainbridge. She knew how to make me feel special without laying it on too thick.

Tuesday, December 18, 2007

Dear Miss Bainbridge,

Thank you for the leather journal.

It is the best Christmas present I have ever had.

I hoped Miss Bainbridge didn't think *I* was laying it on too thick. Yesterday in chapel, the preacher, Mr. Nelson, said to ask and you shall receive. The least I could do was to ask. If I didn't, I couldn't blame anybody but myself.

I overheard you telling Mrs. Robinson that you were going to take a trip to Washington, D.C. for Christmas. I remember you showing us the video of the Capitol. You also told us that you met the first President Bush, when you were in high school.

I wanted to say more, but I needed to cut to the chase.

~~Can~~ May I come with you?

You are the best and nicest teacher I have ever had.

Please say yes.

I figured that was enough. I didn't want to push my luck by asking her for what I really wanted. If she said yes and I got to go, it would be much easier to ask her to adopt me later.

Thank you again for the journal.

Yours truly,

Cleavon Xavier Reynolds

I heard the dorm mother on my side waking up the preschoolers down the hall. I slid on my slippers, and tiptoed to the closet, careful not to wake Mervin, my “retarded” roommate who rode a different bus to a different school. I pushed my big coat on over my Spider Man pajamas and crept just as quietly to the door. Mervin snored that loud snore that happens just before he wakes up. I knew he’d tell on me if he saw me dressed to go outside.

The dorm mother was busy fussing at one of the new little boys who still can’t walk, and from the smell of things, hasn’t been potty trained yet. Her back was to me and she didn’t see me slip down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs I almost tripped on one of the Christmas boxes that I am sure contained a generic holiday gift for one of us kids. I jumped out of the mother’s view and pushed the package under the tree with the other boxes where it belonged. I was right. It had in black ink the words, “From your friends at the First Avenue Church,” and in blue ink with a different handwriting, the name “Mervin Hughes” had been scrawled. I wanted to look for “my” gift, but I didn’t have time.

I went to pull the door and it was locked. I’d forgotten that there was a security alarm on the door. I’d sat on the steps more than once and watched the adults punch four buttons, but I didn’t know which ones they’d pushed. I could hear the dorm mother still fussing.

I knew she was the morning shift mother and she probably had to have the same code as the nightshift mother and the janitor, Mr. Pegram, and all the other grownups I’d seen punching buttons. I just didn’t know the code!

I looked down at my envelope, which was already sealed, stamped, and ready to go. Grownups were always talking about how they wanted their lives to be simple again. I peeped out the window in front of the Christmas tree at the two mailboxes. The blue one, which I hoped to use was on the corner covered in ice. The home one was also dripping in ice, but it had our address numbers 6141 on it.

I looked back to the stairway, where I could hear Mervin crying because the dayshift mother didn’t wake him up right again. I stood on my tiptoes and pressed 6-1-4-1. The box quietly beeped, beeped, beeped...until I thought to press the red “Enter” key. I heard a click and I pulled the door open. The wind blew what felt like needles on my cheeks.

“Cleavon Reynolds, get back in this house!”

I looked back at the dorm mother who was dragging one of the kindergartners by his shirt. I’d come so far. I pulled my hood up and stepped out onto the fuzzy “Welcome” mat.

“Cleavon! Weatherman *say* school closed today!”

The wind blew the door open wider and I didn’t bother to turn around and pull the door closed. I stepped onto the icy concrete and slid down the handicapped ramp. My feet were getting soggy and were hurting from the walk across the icy grass. I decided not to put the envelope in our mailbox for fear that she’d make me take it out, and I wouldn’t get to mail it. I walked the ten extra feet to the blue mailbox, yanked the door open and stuck my wet letter in.

“Boy, what is wrong with you!” The dorm mother had come out after me in a red rain jacket and her own slippers. She grabbed me by the hood and pushed me back towards the house.

I didn’t resist. All I could think was that this time next year I’d be living with Miss Bainbridge on the other side of town.

When we got to the door I realized I had to pee, and we were locked out.

“This don’t make *no* kind of sense! It’s almost Christmas, and *you* tempting Santa Claus!”

I looked up at the dorm mother as she banged the door and yelled at me. Finally Mervin came to the door and the dorm mother said some words I’m not supposed to say.

“Well don’t stand there looking stupid! Get in here!”

So I didn’t. I peed from the welcome mat to the stairs.

It didn’t dawn on me until later that day when I had to stand in the corner for all my trouble that Mervin must have figured out the code.

The Paper Boy

By James Garrett
Copyright © 2007 James Garrett

*On my front porch the paper rests.
(I saw the news on CBS)
So there's no rush to bring it in,
Except for ads it's pretty thin.
Plus, the news is there online,
Fresh each hour...real time.
Now I'm older, it's just noise
That took the jobs of paperboys.
I carried papers long ago,
A speeding bike, a careful throw.
No hard throws and none too fast
(I knew the price of window glass)
Up each day before the sun,
Sunday papers weighed a ton.
On Saturday I'd spend the day,
Make the rounds, collect my pay.
Even mornings wet with rain
I'd pedal like a man insane.
Ride through puddles just for fun.
Watch the sky and hope for sun.
And though I wore no badge or crown
On early morn, I owned that town.*

Matthew Killorin

Matthew Killorin is a native of Savannah, Georgia, where he spent most summer afternoons in the 1970's raiding convenience store comic book racks. Over the years, he maintained a fascination with the super-hero genre, especially with the characters created in the 1960's and '70's. The spectacular success of films based on Marvel Comics© characters, starting with 1998's "Blade"©, inspired him to begin writing about his favorite genre.

In addition to the super-hero genre, some of Matthew's other interests include ancient civilizations, future technology, and cryptozoology. His future writing projects include short fiction, essays on pop culture, and a compendium of super-hero films from the 1930's to the present.

Matthew lives in Chester, Virginia and works for the Virginia Department of Health. He can be contacted at Matt.Kllrn@yahoo.com.

Armor

By Matthew Killorin
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Somewhere over Ohio
The near future

Time until intercept, six minutes forty-five seconds.

“Understood, EXO, continue audio alerts every sixty seconds.”

Acknowledged

Even though I'm still fifty kilometers away, the heat signature of the big Global Airlines scramjet appears as a glowing orange and purple outline on my infrared scanner. As I approach from the south I can imagine Veronica inside the plummeting aircraft, terrified, wondering if I was on the way. Yeah V, I'm almost there, but I'm about to attempt something that's probably gonna kill me, you, and everybody else aboard that plane. Somehow, I knew it was going to end like this. As I rocket over the snow covered Ohio farmland, I think back to that day when my life changed forever. I can't help sensing the wonder of it all- how one decision lead me down a path that I never imagined. I was given a choice that only a few people in history have been given and I wonder if the world is any better for it.

River City, Virginia
Six months earlier

It was a normal Friday night. I got home from my job at the River City Health Department, brought in the mail, and sat down the bag of groceries that I'd picked up on the way.

“I'm home,” I shouted up the stairs to Veronica, my wife.

Felix, our cat, nearly tripped me as usual, as he weaved in and out of my legs. I glanced at the time displayed on the microwave. Seven-o'clock. Just in time for my favorite CFN show. Being the news junkie that I am, I flipped on the countertop TV just in time to hear tonight's topic.

“I’m Fox Hunter and you’re in the Crisis Room. Coming up, new video from Simon Savant warning of major attacks if his demands are not met. Also after the break, I’ll have a live interview with The Wraith on the response of the Super-...”

“Hey stranger, you’re home late.” Veronica said as she came down the stairs as she was pulling on a faded River City U. sweatshirt.

I hit the mute button on the remote and tried to lip read the rest of the teaser.

“Yeah, I know. There was another TB scare at the high school. That drug resistant strain that’s going around is making my life pure hell. Spent seven hours interviewing sixteen year olds to see who was exposed.” (My co-worker, Leon Winfield, and I had spent all week investigating a tuberculosis outbreak in River City. I’m an epidemiologist and he’s the laboratory supervisor.)

“Mm, sounds like a fun way to spend an afternoon. Well, forget about it now. I was just about to make some coffee. Want some?”

“Sure, why not? Hey, what were they talkin’ about just then? Have you heard anything about this new threat from Savant?” I asked, as Veronica hunted for the coffee pods in the fridge.

“Not really. It’s just another stupid alert that nobody cares about. I think this time we’re at level orange, or amber, or something.”

I pulled a box of Mrs. Smith’s peanut butter cookies out of the grocery bag and continued watching CFN. Hunter was asking The Wraith how the Super-hero Federation planned to secure all the major cities from a possible attack. The Wraith was one of the old school capes that still hid his civilian identity. After decades of patrolling the most crime-ridden areas of New York, no one knew who he was or where he came from; and no one had the guts to ask him.

I always thought The Wraith was the coolest super in the Federation; mainly because of his costume. It was a simple smoke-colored full body suit and mask constructed out of some type of light refracting material. Supposedly, he could alter the molecules of the suit at will, making him impossible to distinguish from his surroundings. I guess you could say he became invisible, which I’m sure came in handy in his line of work. Some people swore he could also teleport huge distances, just materializing out of thin air. Combine all that with a savage hand-to-hand combat style and he was one of the most lethal non-flying supers on Earth.

“Why do you even care, anyway?” Veronica asked, handing me a steaming

mug of coffee. “There hasn’t been an attack in years, thanks to the capes.”

She was right. Ever since we contracted out national defense to the Federation, Savant could only issue empty threats.

“Savant’s gonna get lucky one day and slip something by the capes. They can’t be everywhere at once.”

“Okay, Billy, you’re starting to get way too depressing. I can tell you’re in one of your moods. Besides, I see you forgot my soy milk again. Guess I’ll have to go to the store anyway.”

“Sorry ‘bout that.”

“That’s what I get for sending a guy to the grocery store,” she laughed. “Be back in a few minutes.”

As Veronica grabbed her keys and said goodbye to Felix, I hit the sound button again to catch the last couple of minutes of The Wraith’s interview.

“...and Fox, I want to assure my fellow citizens that the Federation is able to respond to any national security threat, be it internal or external. In fact, I personally met with the President this morning and gave him my word that we will find and destroy Savant very soon.”

“There you have it, ladies and gentlemen; tough words from one of America’s legendary super-heroes. Thank you, Wraith, for taking the time to talk with us.”

“Anytime, Fox.” The camera stayed on The Wraith in order to catch his “fade out”, that two or three seconds when his suit seemed to flicker on and off like one of those antique video screens with a bad input signal. One second he was there, and the next it was as if someone flipped a switch, and he was gone.

“Cool,” I said to Felix, who had jumped onto the counter and was letting me know dinner was late with loud purrs.

“I know...I know. Turn off the TV and get you somethin’ to eat.” As I pulled back the lid from the can of his favorite dish, “Seafood Medley”, the phone buzzed and I tapped the speaker button. The ID screen let me know it was Leon, from the office.

“Hey man, what’s goin’ on?”

“We got a situation that just ruined my night. Turn on Channel 12 and you’ll see what I mean.”

“Lemme guess. Some kid tested positive for TB, right?” I said, as I

dumped Felix's foul-smelling dinner into his bowl. So much for a peaceful night of channel-surfing, I thought. There was a brief silence on the other end and finally Leon just said, "Not quite. Meet me down at the port ASAP. I'll give you the details on the way."

On my way to the River City Port, Leon told me that sniffer devices that were installed to detect chemical weapons had gotten a hit on one of the huge container ships being off-loaded. It was long-feared that Savant would smuggle one of his narco bombs into the country using one of the hundreds of shipping containers that go through the port every day. We've had eight false alarms so far this year. Chances are this is just another waste of time. The ultra-sensitive sniffers were probably set off by a broken bottle of drain cleaner damaged on its trip from China. Still, the Health Department, Police and Fire and a half dozen other first responders had to check it out. Since Leon and I were on the Hazard Response Team, that meant us too.

I pulled into the port about twenty minutes later. After the guard scanned my ID and got a fingerprint confirmation, I drove through the gate. I could see Leon waving me over to the makeshift command post. Big, military grade generators were powering banks of flood lights that lit up two acres of asphalt like it was high noon. The incident commander had already established a 200 meter perimeter around the suspicious 12 meter long, steel container. A small, autonomous robot was making its way up to the container's door. As I ran up to the command post, a NSA (National Security Administration) agent tossed me a respirator and a NBC suit. I took that as a bad sign because NBC stands for nuclear, biological, or chemical- these babies are the military version of regular civilian Hazmat suits.

"Here, put this on," he said. "We're still not sure what we're dealing with."

Must not be drain cleaner this time, I thought, what with all the high level security and safety measures being employed. Another NSA agent was barking orders through his facemask amplifier.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the NSA has assumed command of this incident. Do not cross the perimeter and under no circumstances remove your equipment until the "green" signal is given. A super is on the way to assist with transport and disposal of the container. "

Leon looked over at me and whispered, "This is way above my pay grade, dude."

I just shook my head. "Hey, if I gotta be here, so do you."

We all huddled around a monitor to watch the robot's progress through its onboard camera. We could see its articulated arm reach up and unlatch the heavy steel doors.

"Let's get a good look at what we're dealing with," the incident commander said, as the grainy image of the big box's interior came into view.

As soon as the doors swung open we heard a muffled boom and the container lifted a good half a meter off the ground. A loud hiss starting coming from inside of it and we could see a putrid-looking, yellowish cloud billow out. The cloud rolled towards us and we took off running toward the nearest building- not completely trusting the workmanship of our government issued respirators.

Everybody was thinking the same thing. Savant had finally managed to detonate one of his narco bombs on American soil. If that's really what it was, thank God we stopped it before it was shipped into the city.

As we were running for cover, Leon happened to look over his shoulder and pointed to an object approaching low on the horizon. "What the hell is that?" he yelled through his face mask.

It looked like a tornado but that was impossible. The sky was clear and there were no storms forecasted for the area. As it drew closer I could make out a human form flying above the whirlwind. "I think our help just arrived, people. It's Vortex!"

Yeah, even from half a kilometer I recognized the green and yellow costume of Vortex, an elemental who was as beautiful as she was powerful. As most people know, an elemental is a super that controls a natural force, in her case, air currents. Vortex had the ability to create a tornado that ranked F3 on the Fajita Scale, enough power to lift massive objects. By manipulating air currents she could also fly as easily as a leaf is carried along by a strong breeze.

She stopped about 30 feet above us and hovered over the crowd. "Got here as soon as I could, folks. I'll take the container to an altitude of eight kilometers where it should dissipate harmlessly."

This was the first time I'd seen a cape in action and I was practically frozen with awe. Tall, with shoulder-length auburn hair and an athletic figure that looked chiseled out of marble. She was exactly what I expected a superhero to look like. I couldn't help thinking, even with all the crap going down around me, that they were the best humanity had to offer; noble, selfless, and incorruptible.

She swooped down and landed on top of the container. Standing with her feet shoulder-width apart, she raised her arms skyward. Instantly, a tornado about forty meters across began lifting the school bus-sized object, and her along with it, into the air. Slowly, it lifted off the ground, the force of the swirling wind kicking up dust and nearly knocking me over.

About five hundred feet off the ground, something went horribly wrong. Either Vortex was overcome by the poisonous cloud or the sheer size of the giant metal box was too great. Whatever the cause, she lost control and she and the container crashed to the ground. For a few seconds, we were all stunned and couldn't believe what we just witnessed. The crash site was obscured by the yellow cloud still pouring out of the crumpled container. Somewhere in that crushed and crumpled heap of metal was Vortex. Everybody started yelling and barking orders at once, trying to figure out what to do next. This was a first for everybody. Even the NSA guys were arguing about what their policy was in the event of a super-hero disaster.

Finally, I'd had enough. "What are we waiting for? Somebody do something! She'll die out there!"

I ran towards the crash site and was about to hop over the barricades when one of the cops grabbed my arm and tried to stop me. "Don't be stupid," she said. "We don't know what that stuff is out there or if these respirators are even effective against it. She's probably dead anyway. I don't care if she is a cape, nobody could survive that fall." I twisted out of her grasp and ran out to the container. The area was still blanketed in a thick yellow haze that swirled around my feet. I found Vortex under a piece of twisted steel. She was unconscious but had a pulse. I didn't see any blood but I was afraid to move her because of the chance of a spinal injury. I carefully lifted the debris off of her. She'd been exposed to the chemical cloud for way too long and she needed some oxygen, fast. I did the only thing I could think of. I took off my respirator and put it over her face. Within seconds, everything went black. The only thing I remember was the sound of voices getting closer and hands lifting me onto a gurney.

I was in the hospital for a week. I couldn't remember much about that night at the port. All I knew for sure was that the narco bomb had induced a partial paralysis in my lower body and I could barely walk. Everyday tasks were now major ordeals. The future was starting to look pretty bleak. That is, until I had a visitor late one night.

"It was about 10:00pm and I was just waking up from a deep sleep. I'd been told that for those lucky enough to survive a narco bomb attack, severe,

mind numbing fatigue was one of the more troubling after effects. Anyway, I was still pretty groggy but I could sense that I wasn't alone in the room. I looked around and saw nothing. Veronica wasn't in the recliner next to the bed. I guessed she was down in the cafeteria getting a snack. Outside the room, the nursing staff was changing shifts.

"Billy, don't be alarmed. I'm here to help you," said a low, calm voice off to my left side.

"Who the hell said that?" I whispered. I didn't call for a nurse because I thought I might be having another hallucination (another unpleasant side-effect of the gas). Last night, I was convinced monkeys were stealing my food. But, then my hallucination materialized in the form of The Wraith. OK, no monkeys this time, just teleporting super-heroes, I thought.

"Crap," I muttered to myself. "I've gotta get them to double up on my meds. I can't deal with this anymore."

I reached for the call button to ask for my nurse but something very real reached out and snatched it out of my grasp.

"Please, I only have a few moments before your wife returns, and as I said, I mean you no harm."

I finally realized that I wasn't imagining all this. As crazy as it seemed, The Wraith, The Wraith was visiting me in my hospital room. I glanced out the glass panel separating my room from the busy nurse's station and I figured out how he was able to enter unnoticed. His dark gray costume shimmered in the low light and seemed to go in and out of focus every few seconds. Apparently, the rumors of teleportation were true because no one could have simply walked by half a dozen nurses.

"I understand you're tired and confused. The effects of Savant's narco bombs can last several months. Consider yourself lucky to be alive, however."

"You really are the uh...uh..."

"Wraith. Excuse me if I dispense with introductions. You apparently know who I am and I know much about you, Billy Bowman."

"What're you doing here?"

"You've been chosen."

"Excuse me?"

"I've been sent by The Federation to offer you the chance to join us."

“Oh is that all? You mean become a cape?” I was exhausted, but that didn’t prevent my cynical side from emerging.

The Wraith suppressed a smile. “That term never ceases to amuse me, but yes, that is precisely what I mean.”

“You’re crazy. I don’t have any powers, unless you count the power to spot a bad practical joke when I see it. I don’t know who’s behind this but I’m not fallin’ for it.”

“Nurse,” I tried to shout, but it came out barely above a whisper. My throat was still burning and felt sandpaper from the fumes I’d inhaled.

The Wraith continued unfazed. “Irrelevant. Many of us did not possess extraordinary abilities at birth. ”

“So you can create super-heroes whenever you need replacements?”

“It’s not quite that simple, but yes, if an individual possesses the inner qualities we seek, we can endow that person with other extraordinary abilities.”

“Lemme guess. You wanna play around with my DNA or inject me with some super steroids?”

“No. I’m afraid we’ve had too many, shall we say, negative outcomes with such invasive procedures. You’re familiar with brain machine interfaces, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, sure, BMI. I’ve heard about it. You mean controlling devices with brain waves. Allowing paralyzed people to turn on appliances with just a thought, stuff like that.”

“Yes. Those are the most rudimentary applications of BMI technology- the uses most civilians are aware of. However, unknown to all but a few is the research the Federation has conducted over the last two decades. After countless failures, we have finally fulfilled the dream that many have had for so long with the creation of the EXO 020864. With this technology, we can enable humans to control complex systems utilizing physical and mental inputs.”

“OK, I’m happy for you. But why are you telling me all this. I mean, I appreciate you sharing and all, but I have other stuff to worry about right now, if you know what I mean,” I said, nodding in the direction of my nearly useless legs. “Besides, aren’t there enough guys like you already?”

“Not as many as you might think. Our numbers have been depleted in

recent years. Many of us have been killed in battles with Savant and his forces. Unfortunately, Savant possesses technology that neutralizes many of our powers. We need others who are willing to take up the fight. Therefore, you have been chosen to be the first to wear the EXO 020864. If you accept, of course.”

“What is this “EXO” thing you keep talking about?”

“EXO is the codename we have given this secret project. We have combined the neurotechnology of BMI with an artificial intelligence and ballistic armor to create an exoskeleton that gives its wearer superhuman abilities. These abilities give any wearer of the EXO suit power equaling that of Class A super-heroes such as The Defender. This suit, which as I said, we refer to as EXO, amplifies the wearer’s muscular output a hundred times. Essentially, it removes the physiological limits of performance that nature has placed on you. For example, a normal individual wearing EXO would be capable of lifting well over five metric tons and surviving a direct hit by a Sentry missile. Even in your present weakened state, we see no reason why these performance standards can not be met. We are willing to supply you with this suit; with some caveats, of course.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me, right? You’re gonna just give me this for no reason at all? I’m just a nobody from River City. Why me?”

“The reason is obvious. Among all those present at the port the night of the attack, you alone risked your life in order to save one of us. Vortex would have surely succumbed to her injuries if you had not acted. The Federation always finds a way repay a debt so great. You would not be the first to be rewarded in such a manner. While the vast majority of us have come to possess our powers either through natural processes or as the result of man-made accidents, the Federation has bestowed superhuman abilities on a select few civilians in the past.”

“OK. So, lemme get this straight. As payback for helping Vortex, you’re just gonna give me some kind of super suit of armor?”

“Yes. We believe you have the inner qualities we seek, whether you realize it or not. However, there are some restrictions you must be aware of.”

“Oh, here comes the fine print.”

“First, the exoskeleton not only responds to physical input, it gets progressively stronger as your emotions intensify. Therefore, a fit of anger could prove disastrous for people or property anywhere in your vicinity. Next, you must never use the suit for personal gain. The Federation would mete out a severe punishment for misuse of such a valuable resource. Finally, be

extremely careful in protecting your civilian identity. There are people who would stop at nothing to acquire this technology. Even Savant, with his vast technical knowledge, is not capable of producing an exoskeleton this advanced. Now that you've heard the "fine print", are you willing to commit yourself to this immense responsibility?"

I took a deep breath and looked at the picture of Veronica on the night stand. So many things to consider. How long would my injuries keep me disabled? Would she be willing to stay with a guy that can barely take care of himself, much less a family? Sure, I knew she loved me, but she didn't bargain for all this. How 'bout the Federation? Did they know the "real" Billy Bowman? How I wasn't the most reliable guy on earth. How I usually bail at the first sign of trouble. And they expect me to battle a maniacal terrorist bent on death and destruction? But, if I turn this offer down, could I go the rest of my life wondering 'what coulda been?'

The Wraith stood by my bed, waiting for my answer. After what seemed like an hour of silence, I had an answer- the only possible answer. I turned and looked The Wraith dead in the eye and just said "Where do I sign?"

To be continued in the
Chesterfield Writers Group
2008 Anthology

Our Life

By James Garrett
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Hard to tell for constant motion,
where journey ends, or next begins.

Time will move, in seamless fashion,
towards what life may lie ahead,
and cause to fade shared memories
of a life unimagined.

Greg Smith

Greg Smith works by day as a computer professional and plays in an improvisational comedy troupe by night. Improv requires him to create scenes in four minutes or less – which is a perfect dual to writing flash fiction (stories of 500 words or less). Greg is also a father to two teen-aged daughters who have taught him that advice is often received better from a chauffeur than a dictator. Influences on his work are Philip K. Dick, Isaac Asimov, Gene Roddenberry, Rod Serling, Jay Ward, and the Zucker Brothers. Greg wishes to thank his mother for her creativity and his father for his reason.

The Beauty Reaper

By Greg Smith
Copyright © 2007 Greg Smith

“Don’t move, you might disturb it.”

Reginald Leguizamo aimed his camera at the Titan Arum: a 98-inch tall flower that was as pungent as it was beautiful. Silence fell over the studio as Leguizamo held his breath and flashed a shot of the flower in full bloom.

“This flower will bloom only once in its lifetime, and then for just a couple of days. I have just captured the moment of its greatest beauty – it will never again look as wonderful as it did at that moment in time.”

Leguizamo stepped down from the stepladder. “I am known for my ability to capture beauty at its height. I have photographed the most beautiful women in the world at the very zenith of their glory.”

Jonathan Willis nodded quietly and stepped forward. “Yes, that is why ‘Popular Talent’ magazine has sent me. I’m here to take your picture for our upcoming issue.”

Leguizamo pointed his camera at a large white box in the corner of the room and pressed the ‘Send’ button.

“Because my subjects never again look as beautiful as when I photograph them, I have been named ‘The Beauty Reaper.’ Isn’t that delicious?”

Six glossy proofs spilled into the tray of the photo printer. A nearby lackey scooped them up and shuffled to give them to the master photographer.

“Yes, beautiful. Follow me!”

With a wave of his hand and a flourish of his cape, Leguizamo floated through a door and into a long corridor. His entourage followed close behind and Willis brought up the rear.

Along the corridor walls were portraits of the most beautiful women Willis had ever seen. They were organized chronologically, 1988 through 2006 – 19 years of increasingly superior work.

The group burst into another studio bustling with activity. At the center of it all was a smiling, sparkling woman who Willis recognized as the current

reigning Miss Terra, the beauty pageant winner. Several lackeys were touching-up her makeup, prepping cameras and lighting.

“Quiet! Silence everyone!” Leguizamo clapped his hands smartly. “Now, let me have a look at you.”

The Beauty Reaper unclasped his cape and strode to the woman. Shy and intimidated, she averted her gaze. Leguizamo stopped within an inch of her face. He examined her skin from her head to her fingertips, inhaling her essence as he did so.

“Yes, the time is close, very close.”

He walked to Willis. “Would you like to get a picture of history in the making, my young man? Then watch me and take your photograph just as I snap the picture of this young beauty at her peak. It will be so delicious!”

Willis twitched the corners of his mouth in a subtle smile and nodded his head. As Leguizamo walked back to his camera, Willis took aim.

There was absolute silence while Leguizamo picked up his camera. He fixed the gaze of his lens on the beauty and held his breath until the perfect moment. There was an audible ‘snap’, lights flashed, and it was over.

Leguizamo sent the picture to the photo printer in the corner of the room and six glossies spilled out. The lackey brought them to him. He devoured the image with his eyes. “Yes, yes it is the most beautiful work I have ever done.”

From the center of the room came a small voice: “Sir, may I see?”

Leguizamo handed one of the photos to Willis and another to the lackey. With a voice dripping in menace he told the lackey to let the girl have a look.

“Watch this, my young pupil. She will be in awe of her own beauty, as even she has never seen herself like this. Then she will realize that she’ll never be this beautiful again. And like the Titan Arum, her brief bloom will begin to close.”

The woman accepted the picture and smiled with delight. Willis compared the woman he was looking at now with the one in the picture. And as the master photographer had predicted, the original was infinitesimally less beautiful than the copy.

Miss Terra was thrilled with the results. She looked the photograph over from top to bottom. At the lower right corner she saw a crest. Leguizamo smiled as the dawn of recognition crossed her face. She whispered, “You’re

the Beauty Reaper?”

Leguizamo turned to Willis. “That is the moment I live for. That is why I do what it is I do. Now, young man, let’s have a look at your wonderful work. Send your photo to my printer.”

Willis pointed his camera at the box and pressed the ‘Send’ button. The lackey brought the glossies to the men and retreated. Leguizamo looked at the photo and admired it at length.

“Very well done, very good indeed! I must say this is the finest portrait of me I have ever seen. What was your name again?”

Willis smiled ever so slightly as he held out his hand. “I’m Jonathan Willis. They call me ‘The Talent Reaper’.”

James Garrett

James Garrett was born in Ontario, Canada in 1947. Ten years later the family moved to Bedford, Virginia where James attended the local schools and graduated in 1965 from Liberty High School. The following spring he volunteered for service with the U.S. Marine Corps, serving in Vietnam in 1968-69. After stints with National Airlines and Piedmont Airlines James was hired by the then-fledgling cargo carrier Federal Express (now Fedex). He enjoyed a successful twenty-eight year career with the company in a number of roles, living in seven different states, Canada, and Brazil.

James had not written in over forty years but, now retired, he has written eight children's picture book stories, numerous poems and, most recently, lyrics for country music songs. He has one daughter and two granddaughters living in Lynchburg, Virginia. James and his wife, Johanna, now reside in Richmond, Virginia

Grampa Jim Saves the Calendar

By James Garrett
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“Pride can cause a whole lot of trouble,” Grampa Jim told his granddaughters.

They were spending the weekend with him while their Mom and Dad went to a wedding out of town. They always had fun when they stayed at his house. Grampa Jim didn’t have many rules so the girls got away with a few things like staying up late and having anything they wanted for lunch. Today it had been pizza and hot dogs with milkshakes. When they finished cleaning up the kitchen they ran out to the porch where Grampa Jim was already sitting in his big wooden rocking chair.

“Story time,” they both yelled at once. That was the other good thing about going to Grampa Jim’s. He always had a story to tell and the girls loved to hear them. Today he’d promised to tell them about one of his adventures. He’d decided on which one, took a last slurping sip of his milkshake and began.

“When you look at a calendar it looks pretty simple, but it’s hard work and one year there was quite a commotion. February was in the middle of it, but it wasn’t all his fault. One of the other months had been teasing him, calling him “Shorty”, because he only had 28 days. February had never worried about this before. All the months were pretty much the same was what he had always believed, but now this teasing hurt his pride. And pride, like I said before, can cause a whole lot of trouble.”

“It was not long after that when the months had their regularly scheduled meeting.

They got together every year, usually in spring, to plan out the coming year. Although the calendar looks pretty simple it actually takes a lot of work. For starters, they have to make sure they have the right number of days to last through the year and they have to make sure there are enough of each particular day...enough Fridays, enough Tuesdays, and so forth. Then they check to see that if one month ends on Tuesday that the next begins on Wednesday. Finally, they must each make a list of their holidays and see that they’re correctly shown on the final version of the calendar.”

“This one year, the one with the trouble, they had all checked in to the hotel on the day before their meeting. When they checked in, the hotel clerk gave them a packet of information, including the room number for the meeting. So far, it looked as though it would be smooth sailing again this year. It didn’t take too long before they found out they were facing a serious problem.”

“The next morning after breakfast (most of the months had room service) the months took time to check for messages, then headed for the meeting room. January had arrived earlier to set up the room. Since he was the first month it was his responsibility to make sure they had plenty of coffee, a tray of pastries, and pitchers of ice water for every table. The room was bigger than they needed. The months liked it that way because they could spread out and have a lot of room to work. January finished his checklist, walked around putting worksheets and pencils on all the tables. After that he walked up to the podium, checked the microphone, and took a roster list out of his briefcase. He put the roster sheet on the podium and took out his mechanical pencil. He’d check off the months by name as they came into the meeting room. He made a mark by his own name...he knew he was here. Four months came in together and sat at the first table. March, April, May and June, he said to himself as he marked them off. Glancing up from the roster he saw that July had arrived and taken a seat at the furthest table. He always sat alone because he was independent. August and September, who were always seen next to each other, walked in and sat at another nearby table. January made two marks for them.

Now there were eight marks. Just as January finished adding up the marks, in rushed October, November, and December. They were the last to arrive every year. He made three more marks, then totaled them up again. Wait a minute, he thought, that’s only eleven. There are twelve months in the year so somebody was missing. He saw that February was the missing month.

“Has anyone seen February?” he asked the group.

“Not in months,” yelled August, making everyone laugh.

January ignored him. He reached for the phone and dialed February’s room.

February answered on the first ring and quickly told January he wasn’t coming to the meeting and he didn’t care to be in next year’s calendar. Then he hung up. January was rattled. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Trying to come up with a solution, he thought about Grampa Jim. I’m sure he could help us, he thought, I’ll call and see if he’s willing to take this on. He called Grampa Jim and was thankful to hear him answer his phone.

“Hello Grampa Jim,” he said. “This is January. The months and I are here in town for our annual calendar meeting and I’m afraid we have a situation. Could you possibly come to the Big Shot Hotel? We’re meeting in room 234.”

“I’m on the way,” Grampa Jim told him.

After hanging up the phone January told the months what had happened.

They quickly became very agitated and started hollering questions.

“January, what are we going to do? We don’t have any spare months and there’s not enough time to train a new one. Why, we’ll be lucky if we have a calendar at all.” yelled an obviously angry July. Many of the others were clamoring for a response too.

It was beginning to look as though January would lose control of the meeting. Just as he was about to inform them that Grampa Jim was on the way, the door opened and he walked in. Seeing the crowd gathered around the podium, Grampa Jim headed over.

“Months,” January began before Grampa Jim could speak, “this is Grampa Jim. You may have heard about his great success resolving that problem with the days of the week. He’s agreed to help us with this problem.”

“Well, no offense to Grampa Jim,” said July in a tone which did sound offensive, “but he’s not dealing with a bunch of days here, we’re the months!”

“Mind your manners July!” January shot back. “We all know how stubborn February can be. He won’t settle for a month-to-month talk. Let’s give Grampa Jim a chance.” There was a little more grumbling but no one argued against the idea so January again dialed February’s room.

“Quit bothering me!” snapped February as he picked up the phone. I already told you I don’t want to be in your stupid calendar any more.

“Wait! Wait!” January cried. “Grampa Jim is here and wants to discuss the issue. Won’t you please come down and at least meet with him?”

“I’ll talk with him,” February agreed, “but I’m not coming down there. He can come here and we’ll meet in my room...just the two of us.”

Grampa first sat with all the other months for a few minutes before heading to February’s room. He asked them all what they knew about the situation but they were all in the dark except August who wore a guilty look on his face. When Grampa Jim noticed this and called it to his attention August quickly broke down.

“I think I might know something,” he admitted. “February was very angry with me not too long ago. I was just kidding and I called him “Shorty” I was just kidding, you know?”

“Well, it helps to know that.” said January. “It certainly sounds insulting enough to have caused this reaction. You and I will talk later.” he told August.

Grampa Jim rose and told them all he’d call them if he needed them and he promised to come back as soon as he knew something. Some of the months looked sad, some of them looked shocked but they all looked worried. This didn’t bother Grampa Jim. He enjoyed a challenge and he had a lot of self-confidence.

It took just a few minutes and he arrived at February’s door. He knocked and called out but there was no answer. He knocked again, harder and called out once more.

“O.K., O.K., don’t break the door down,” February snarled as he opened the door.

Grampa Jim apologized but told February it was just because he was anxious to find out what the problem was. He asked if it had anything to do with August.

“My problems are much bigger than that,” February replied. “That guy’s a jerk but I have to admit, he made me stop and think about my situation compared to the other months.”

“Well that shouldn’t be a problem,” offered Grampa Jim. “All of you months make about the same kind of money, get the same weeks off, have a shot at being promoted to a year next time there’s an opening...”

February’s face began to turn red. It was easy to see he was becoming angry.

Grampa Jim wondered if he was helping or making the situation worse.

“Don’t try to persuade me on this,” February practically shouted back. The facts are on my side. I admit being a month is a great job but don’t forget I earned my way here. I was voted Day of the Week several times when I first joined the calendar, and you know that I was Week of the Month almost as often once I got promoted to that job.”

“Your record speaks for itself.” Grampa Jim agreed. He liked February and was very impressed by his work history. “That makes it even more unthinkable that you’d want to quit now. Why it just wouldn’t be a year without February. It would be like chicken noodle soup without the noodles,

like a banana split without the banana,

Like an omelet without the eggs, like a cheese burger without the cheese, like a ...”

“O.K. enough already!” February interrupted. “I get your point. But you need to get mine as well. I want more days! I want them now! I don’t plan to be in the calendar if I don’t get them.”

“Well, I’d have to admit I don’t get your point,” said January. “As we’ve discussed, you’ve been fairly treated with promotion opportunities, you make a good wage, you have a future here. I mean, does that sound so bad?” Grampa Jim replied.

“You’re not hearing me,” February said. “I expect to be an equal in this partnership and right now I’m not. Here’s an example, there are 365 days in the year, right? Now, if we could add a thirteenth month (and I know this has been discussed) we could have 12 months of 29 days each year and rotate the one extra day each year. Or we could give January, February, March, May, July, September, and November each 30 days,

Then give April, June, August, and December 31 days each. That would total 365, the exact number of days per year,” he finished.

“Well, let’s put that aside for a moment,” Grampa Jim said. “Are there any other issues that we need to talk about? Anything else you don’t think is fair? (Grampa Jim really did want to know, but he asked this question to buy some time. February was a lot smarter than he’d known and he needed to think of a response to that number of days idea.)

“I’m surprised you have to ask,” February responded. “You know that not only are the other months bigger than me but they’re more important too!”

“February, you’re really confusing me on that one,” said Grampa Jim. You get the same size page as the other months and, if there’s artwork on a particular calendar it’s always consistent in quality month-to-month. Where does this “importance” notion come from?”

“Let me give you a rundown,” February asked him, “I think that will make it very clear to you.” He started as Grampa Jim nodded his agreement. “January is where it all starts. He goes first every year, he has a lock on New Year’s Day, The first day of the year, the first week of the year, the first month of the year...It’s really too much, yet he also gets Inauguration Day when it comes up every four years. Now look at March. He’s got St. Patrick’s Day. What a fun day! Everybody’s Irish, everybody’s wearing green, there are televised parades from all over the globe! That should be enough but then he also gets

the first day of spring and, in some years at least, he even gets Easter.”

“Well,” Grampa Jim interrupted him, “you have to remember he’s a big month.”

“You’re making my case.” February told him. Please let me continue.”

“Of course, go ahead.” Grampa Jim agreed, thinking February was making some very strong and valid arguments.

“April,” began February, “the month for romantics. Remember “April in Paris?”

Well, even if you don’t remember there’s something else you never want to forget...

April Fool’s Day. Now can anyone imagine starting out your month with anything more fun? People spend a lot of time preparing for April just to have some tricks ready. And people spend a lot of time preparing during April too. Preparing their tax returns. That is a critical day all over. The amount of money moving that day is staggering. Now that’s an important month

“Hard to argue,” was all Grampa Jim said at this point. “Go ahead.”

“May...flowers blooming. Mother’s Day and Memorial Day, Simply add up the number of mothers with the number of veterans and their families and friends and you get an idea how much attention goes to May. June follows with Flag Day, Father’s Day, and the first day of summer. I’d call that a recipe for success. And another big success is right on its heels. July brings Independence Day on the 4th. Firecrackers, sparklers for the kids. Fireworks shows for the family. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of Americans attend a cookout that day. The entire country has the Stars and Stripes flying and red, white, and blue bunting decorateds porches and fences.”

“What about August though?” Grampa Jim asked, “I can’t think of any big holidays like that in August,”

“Don’t even try that,” said February. August may not be holiday-heavy but it’s one of the most favorite months of the year. Coming when it does makes it the number one choice scheduling a vacation. That late in summer you’ve already gotten tanned and ready. The weather is milder than July, so trips to Disney, Universal and other theme parks are at the height of their popularity. Who doesn’t love a month when they have vacation?”

Grampa Jim was tempted to speak but he glanced over and noted that February still had a hard look on his face. Better let him finish, he thought.

“Then comes September who, by the way, seems to get more than his share of the good weather. He gets Labor Day which is just huge for the working class. Up steps October with Columbus Day (only the guy who discovered America!) and Halloween.

I tell you, there isn't a month that doesn't crave Halloween... scary movies, fun costumes, too much candy... What a time! As we get close to year's end November shows up.

Election Day, Vetertans Day, the Marine Corps birthday, what a trio. Not only that but he also gets Thanksgiving Day. It's only the favorite day of the year to assemble family for a day of fellowship, great meals, and fun. One of the biggest picture-taking days of the year and one that provides a lot of memories. I have just one thing to say about December...

Christmas. Unbelievable in many respects, most notable not for gifts but for peace and love. That's it, Grampa Jim. I think you'll agree that I (February) am just a small, unimportant month in comparison.”

“Well February,” he began, “I believe I've got this figured out. The problem is not so much what you think about the other months, it's what you think about yourself.”

“I don't get it,” said February, “what do you mean?”

“February,” began Grampa Jim, “you're correct in your remarks about the other months. They certainly are important and I can't argue that they don't have more days than you, because they do. I think you're just not giving yourself enough credit. First, there are two reasons I'd think it a mistake to change your size. Number one, you're the only perfect month. You have a precision the others could never achieve. You fit on the calendar better than any other month. You are four weeks which, after all, is the very definition of a month's size. Believe me, the other months might throw their weight around but secretly they'd love to be in the shape you're in. Number two, we just can't reassign days to different months. It would mess up all year to year comparisons and worse it would really upset people who had birthdays or anniversaries on the days that were moved. Now, besides that, I want you to think about this. You have Presidents Day which is one of the most historic holidays we observe. You also have Groundhog's Day and that gets you on the news throughout the world. Finally, you have Valentine's Day.

Lovers of all ages would argue that it's the most important holidays. I'll bet if you ask Mrs. February she'll tell you the same thing.”

“You know something Grampa Jim,” February said, “when I came in here I was sure I was right. You've helped me understand this a lot better. Thank

you.”

“February you were right,” declared Grampa Jim, “you just didn’t focus on your contribution because you couldn’t see past being jealous of the other months. Now you know they should be equally jealous of you. Thank you for letting me talk with you about this! I hope we’ll get together again soon. Right now though, I think you have a meeting to attend.”

February walked over to Grampa Jim and stuck out his hand but Grampa Jim brushed it aside and gave him a great big hug then sent him on his way.

When February returned to the meeting room the other months all stood up and cheered. They welcomed him back and August even apologized for the teasing. The group got down to business, completing their work that afternoon with a calendar that they unanimously agreed on as being their best calendar ever. That night they held their annual dinner party where they spent a good part of the evening telling each other how important they all were. January bought them all black shirts. On the back, in gold letters

They read “WE ARE THE YEAR”

Unfortunately, Grampa Jim was unable to attend the dinner. He’d received an urgent call from the crayon company. Some of the colors weren’t happy with their place in the box.

But then, as Grampa Jim says, that’s another story for another time.

The Perfect Haul

By Denise Golinowski
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Every year, my best friend, Mary Ann Singleton, and I listen to everyone going on and on about their costumes. And every year, we just had to shake our heads. Everyone knows the main objective of Halloween is the candy.

Forget the chintzy costumes and mediocre make-up. Spare me the scary stories and screamer movies. As for all the decorations--I mean, how many ways can you carve a pumpkin? It's all about the candy.

"So what's the plan, Lizzie?" Mary Ann asked as we scuffed our way home through piles of fallen leaves, gold and red and brown.

"Don't know yet," I replied, shifting my backpack from one shoulder to the other. "Can you believe what Mrs. Gentry gave us for homework? That's so lame."

Mary Ann snorted. "Yeah, thought an essay about our Halloween costumes was a cute idea, didn't she?"

I rolled my eyes and kicked an offending pile of acorn caps out of my way. "Listen, come over after dinner and we can start making plans. Halloween's just three days away."

"kay. See ya." Mary Ann turned off at her sidewalk and I continued up Sturbridge Lane by myself.

Halfway between Mary Ann's house and ours was Mrs. Saunder's house. Every year she put out a Halloween display that put the Christmas Tacky Light Tour to shame. Illuminated pumpkins and ghosts, tombstones set cock-eyed, and a huge blow-up black cat mushroomed overnight on her lawn. Strings of lights with little jack o' lanterns, bats, ghosts and skulls swooped from limb to limb on the cherry tree. At least six hand-carved pumpkins squatted on her steps, empty-eyed, until darkness.

Now, don't get me wrong, I like Halloween decorations as much as the next person. And Mrs. Saunder's were the best in Holly Hills Subdivision. The problem, as I saw it, lay in the fact that the more money adults spent on decorations, the less they had to invest in decent Halloween candy. It threatened a kid's unalienable right to her post-Halloween stomachache.

At dinner that night, my mom started her pre-Halloween harassment. My brother and I were struggling through our dinner of ketchup-topped meatloaf, instant mashed potatoes and Brussels sprouts when she began.

"So," she said, putting down her fork and resting her elbows on the table. "Whatcha gonna be for Halloween, Ty?"

My twin brother, Ty, short for Tyrone, set aside his fork with enthusiasm and launched into a loud and long description of his costume. All the details, all the gushing and extravagant gestures would have made a Hollywood costume designer proud.

Bored, I pushed the Brussels sprouts on my plate farther apart hoping it would look like I had eaten some of them. I knew my turn was coming and I dreaded it almost as much as I did the yucky miniature cabbages. Were Brussels sprouts related to cabbage, I wondered? They sure look like them.

"And you, Lizzie?"

My fork skittered across the open space on my plate. I looked at my mother and shrugged. "I'm thinking a hobo."

"Again?" Ty's voice dripped sarcasm. "Can't you come up with something original?"

"Oh, like the 'Johnny Depp' look-alike thing is original," I sniped. Ty's eyes flashed as he drew a deep breath but my mother slid into the breach.

"Hobos are a good solid standard," she said in her best peacekeeper voice. "As are pirates, Caribbean or otherwise." She picked up her fork again as her glance dropped significantly to my careful arrangement of Brussels sprouts. "Is Mary Ann coming over tonight?"

"Yeah," I replied, piercing one of the disgusting things and popping it into my mouth. At least chewing saved me from having to talk, even if it was a Brussels sprout.

Ty took advantage of the break to start on Mom about the next football game. He was a tight end on the subdivision football team and had been promised a spot on the starting line-up this week.

My eyes glazed over as he and my mom became wrapped up in athletic jargon. I piled some instant potatoes over the smallest Brussels sprout. Maybe if the spread out routine didn't work, a disguise would.

#

Mary Ann and I kept careful notes about our Halloween hauls every year. We ranked the neighbors on a scale of one to ten with a ten being those who gave entire handfuls of chocolate goodies and a one being those who tried to palm off things like carrots in cutesy jack o' lantern goodie bags. Talk about an oxymoron, with the emphasis on the "moron."

"Patty Hamilton said her mom bought six bags of little bitty candy bars," Mary Ann reported, her black and orange notebook open in her lap. She had decorated her notebook with stick-on pumpkins and candy corns.

"Good." I flipped open the pages of my standard composition notebook, unadorned, and jotted down the information. "I talked with Jimmy Tasse and they're giving out chewing gum." I winced as I remembered that this would be Mary Ann's last Halloween before braces. "Sorry."

"That's okay. This year, I'm ranking that a seven," Mary Ann said with a grim smile. "I'm planning on chewing gum every day until I get my grill."

I nodded. "Smart thinking." I tapped the page with my orange pencil dotted with hump-backed black cats. Okay, I felt a little nod to the holiday was in order. "What's the attack plan this year? Circle starting from our houses or outside working in?"

"Well, last year, I think Mrs. Pettus held back a little when she saw how full our bags were," Mary Ann said. "And she was giving out home-made fudge."

"Yeah, that sucked. Why don't we start there? Even if she's doing store-bought this year, we'll be ahead."

Mary Ann nodded. "So, it's outside in."

#

On Halloween night, Mary Ann and I, dressed as hobos, ditched Ty and his pirate crew immediately. Actually, it was pretty easy. They all raced off into the darkness shouting "yo ho ho" and "avast ye matey's" at the top of their lungs and brandishing their fake swords. The distant screaming laughter could only have come from unsuspecting first and second graders.

Rolling our eyes, we headed in the opposite direction. Mrs. Pettus's house stood at the far end of Holly Hills. We passed a lot of kids chasing from house to house but we held to our plan. We had learned that patience and experience paid off in mega poundage.

"You two always look so cute in your little hobo outfits," Mrs. Pettus cooed as she dropped a plastic wrapped three-pack of cookies so fresh they were still warm into our empty bags. She glanced down at our open bags. "Not much yet, eh?" And she tossed in an extra package each.

"Thank you, Mrs. Pettus," we chorused and moved on.

Our carefully planned route took us down Westchester Avenue, which included a by-pass through an old folks' subdivision. We could count on the grey-hairs to dump handfuls of goodies into our bags. The haul made all the sickeningly sweet comments about our costumes, how big we were getting, and how polite we were worthwhile.

"They're really the best," Mary Ann said as we paused on the corner of Westchester and Pleasant Valley to consider our options. "Think we should swap out at Grammy's?"

Mary Ann's grandmother's house was just around the corner and we usually stashed some of our stuff with her. Mary Ann's grandmother was cool. Mrs. Singleton understood the whole Halloween thing. Everyone knows a sagging goodie bag earned more treats than a full one.

I hefted my bag up and down and nodded. "Yeah. We've got the rest of Westchester and then Park to do."

With our first load safe and sound, we moved on. Westchester and Park were lined with ten's. Ty claimed it was 'cause the people there were show-offs with their fancy foreign cars. I don't know about that. All I really cared was that they seemed to prefer giving out all the name brand candies and then some.

The only problem was that they did practice a bit more portion control than the old folks. By the time we finished Park, our bags may have had all top end stuff, but nowhere near the quantity.

"Not bad, really," Mary Ann said as we headed up Autumn Ridge Road.

"Yeah." I eyed Autumn Ridge and the scattered front porch lights. "I really don't know why we bother."

Always the optimist, Mary Ann smiled and headed for the first lit porch. "Hey, every little bit helps."

Autumn Ridge Road had never been very good to us. Most of the folks did not have kids and seemed to have forgotten what Halloween was all about. Very few houses sported lights, only a few porches had jack o' lanterns and the empty street just made me depressed.

Most kids passed it by, but for some strange reason, Mary Ann always insisted we do it. Skipping Autumn Ridge would put a big empty bite into our territory and I think it was her way of keeping things neat and clean. But the tiny additions to our bags just did not seem worth the effort in my opinion. Also, the Porters lived on Autumn Ridge, the true low point of our Halloween every year.

This year, the Porters maintained their bottom-of-the-heap ranking with another carrot attempt. They tried to soften the insult by adding little packages of ranch dressing like you get at the salad bar, but really! Vegetables, even holiday-colored, just marked them as the densest folks in the entire subdivision. No wonder they didn't have kids.

Our duty done, we collected our stuff from Mrs. Singleton's and headed into the home stretch--Sturbridge Circle, Sturbridge Court and Sturbridge Lane. Mom said that Sturbridge Circle and Sturbridge Court got those names because the only way to get to them was from Sturbridge Lane, but I think the folks dealing out street names just got lazy.

Most of our friends lived in this part of the neighborhood and their parents pretty much understood the rules. We raked in plenty of bite-sized candy bars, oversize lollipops, and chocolate. Mrs. Tasse surprised us with chewing gum and chocolate, shooting her up from a seven to a ten.

Almost everyone had given up by the time we reached my house. The shouts and screams had faded away and we had not seen a single person in forever. But porch lights still shined on the last few houses and by this time, folks tended to unload as much of their leftover candy as they could. You know we took full advantage of our end of the evening status.

The scent of hot chocolate and popcorn greeted us when we trudged into my house, exhausted but proud, as we lugged our bulging bags. Ty and his buddies were camped around the television, their bags open and piles of empty wrappers glittering in the TV glow.

Mary Ann and I settled behind the coffee table in hopes of keeping our stash safe from marauding pirates. We crossed our legs Indian-style and cradled our bags in our laps while Mom poured us hot chocolate.

"So, let's see it," Mom said as she put two mugs on the coffee table.

With a flourish, Mary Ann and I upended our bags. A torrent of treats spilled into our laps and overflowed onto the carpet.

"Man!" Ty shouted, jumping up to peer over the table at our take. "Did you two mug a couple of first graders on your way home? I didn't get half

that."

The other guys launched onto their knees, craning their necks to get a look.

"Wow!"

"Way to go!"

Mom sighed. "Guess it's gonna be another profitable year for Dentist Bob."

Mary Ann and I slapped palms and then began fending off Ty and his crew's attempts to trade, beg or steal some of our haul.

Yeah, like I said. It's all about the candy.

The Funeral

By James Garrett
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WE BURIED AN OLD FRIEND TODAY
SUCH A SHOCK HE'D PASSED AWAY.
THE PREACHER SAID A TIRED PRAYER
CONSIGNING HIM TO JESUS' CARE.
MOST OF US WENT TO THE WAKE
ATTENDING FOR HIS WIDOW'S SAKE
ALL HAD ANECDOTES TO SHARE
ABOUT OUR FRIEND, NO LONGER THERE.
AND ALL THE STORIES, DON'T YOU KNOW
CAME FROM MANY YEARS AGO
OUR LATE FRIEND WAS WHEELCHAIR -BOUND
AND SO WE SELDOM CAME AROUND
FOR ALL OUR FACES, WET WITH TEARS
WE HADN'T SEEN THE MAN IN YEARS
IF YOU'VE AN OLD FRIEND SUCH AS MINE
CALL OR VISIT, SPEND SOME TIME.
FOR SOON ENOUGH YOU'LL HAVE TO SAY
WE BURIED AN OLD FRIEND TODAY.

Charles Nagel

Charles Nagel was born in a small town in Northwest Ohio. While getting his degree in education, he dabbled in writing, acting, and musical theater as hobbies. As a teacher, Mr. Nagel realized his goal as a writer, self publishing a novel in the process. Currently, he is using his talents and loves of music, art, reading, and writing in the Chesterfield library system. Although his favorite genres are political thrillers and mysteries, he divulges in reading different works of fiction and non-fiction to obtain perspectives on characters he will use in his next work of fiction.

Prepare

By Charles Nagel
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How does one prepare for something we have no control over? Prepare how you are going to react. What you are going to say. How you are going to respond to the gaggle of well wishers. From personal experience, you can never prepare enough for something inevitable. No matter how many self-help books you read, no matter how much advice or soul searching you desire, there is no possible way to prepare yourself or your family.

When my father told us that he had cancer, we were told to prepare. Prepare for devastation, prepare for immediate changes, or prepare for the worst. There was no way that my mother, brother, sister or I could know to what extent we could prepare for. My father, a recently retired professor, realtor, auctioneer and local historian, was known by many in the six county areas in Northwest Ohio. He had the knack of making friends with everyone, of making everyone, regardless of education, seem important. Educating everyone of the rich culture offered in the area where he grew up was his ultimate goal- be proud of who you are and where you came from.

He did not prepare though. As he grew sicker daily, my mother discovered that his life insurance was non-existent, enough to pay for his funeral and nothing more. He had three mortgages on his house, unbeknownst to my mother, which was already on the verge of bankruptcy. He didn't prepare for the financial security of his wife, children and granddaughter, living for the day and not for the future.

Dad was not one for yearly checkups either. If he felt sick, he would use hand me down tried and true recipes his mother and grandmother had taught him. He would dare go to a doctor because his stomach was upset. Treating it with crackers and milk would be better for him and cheaper. His privacy of how he was really feeling flourished into full set colon cancer that could not be treated.

Being his son, I did the opposite, I prepared myself. I would visit Dad in the hospital after the initial colonoscopy, preparing myself mentally on the task of becoming head of the household and keeping the family together. I knew of the forthcoming bankruptcy that was threatening my mother's home, calling on friends and family members for favors. I prepared myself spiritually, knowing that he would leave us soon, although I prayed tearfully

the day would never come.

The doctor who operated on my father was as inconsiderate as could be. He informed my mother that there was no way he would recover from the surgery and that she must prepare now, nine months before he died, for his funeral. In my mental preparation to be strong for the family, I spoke to the doctor in private, confronting him about his negativity. His response to me "your father is a big man and we can't sew up back up all the way..." which meant that the doctor purposely left a gaping hole in my father that would get infected, reaching every other part of his body.

Doing my own research, I found a cancer center in Toledo, Ohio that was to have a better survival rate than the doctor and hospital could offer. I informed my mother that in order for my father to have a chance of survival, he must go there. She agreed. Phone calls were made as dad recovered in his hospital room. We were again told to prepare for the worst.

After the call to Toledo, Dad's insurance company waited seven days, the failed surgery festering, for him to be able to be sent to the cancer clinic. Ruminating on what this meant to Dad as the patient, I stayed with him for three days straight, making sure he wasn't in need for anything. When arriving in Toledo, the head cancer doctor asked why he hadn't been brought in sooner. Mom replied insurance thought it was best. Dad's scar festered and spread through his body, slowing deteriorating cells and organs.

Mom was told to prepare once more, for Dad, being bedridden for so long, was not able to take care of himself properly. Hospice was the best choice after his stay in Toledo. No one thought what would be the best choice for my mother. As mother conducted her daily hospital ritual, I stayed home and made sure things were in order. The bank was already asking for past due payments. Everything had to be in order to prepare to move. I was asked to go through Dad's things to get rid of things he didn't need, as instructed by mother. I was also instructed to help go through pictures, antiques and mementos, placing them in boxes in the garage.

As my father moved into hospice, we knew we had to do everything we could to keep him comfortable. He was losing weight and his memory rapidly. Mother was loyal to his bedside. She was preparing herself with loving memories of a husband she was losing. Every moment counted. Every memory was to be a positive one, although we were all fighting back tears.

Every time I visited Dad, I felt he was preparing me for what I must do in the next few months. We did not discuss the possibility of losing the house; we knew it was a fact. The house was going to be foreclosed as soon as my father would die. The bank manager, being a friend of the family, decided this

would be the best for everyone involved. My father wanted me to make sure I would be taken care of, that my future would be promising, that I could get away.

His appetite waned with every visit. He would offer parts of his meals, which we politely refused. When he did eat, it was soft digestible items like pudding, mashed potatoes, water, and jello. It was hard to see him get like this. It was even harder trying to help him with his colostomy bag, which had a sickening stench of death.

Months passed. Prognosis came that Dad had a few weeks to a month to live. I had to prepare for where I was going and what I was going to do with my life. When he had his first surgery, I sent a manuscript out to be published. Now, my manuscript had been accepted and a street date was discussed. I knew I couldn't live in Ohio anymore. The reason I came back was losing his fight for survival. My friend in Virginia told me I could come live with him after my father's death. Being twelve hours away, I tried to negotiate with friends in Michigan, but Virginia came as the best chance for a new beginning.

As the family pastor was called to offer spiritual counseling to my father, my mother asked me where I was going to go when all this was over. I told her Virginia, with no idea on how I was going to get there. My car, being passed down in the family, liked to break down on the way home from my fifteen minute commute. Daily phone calls were made to friends in Virginia to prepare them for my moving, which was approaching sooner than anyone had expected.

As odd as this tragedy was for my family, a very good childhood friend was experiencing a similar dilemma. Her father was feeling ill one weekend and rushed to the University of Michigan cancer ward. As they opened him up to diagnose how far the cancer had spread, they discovered there was not a place in his body without cancer. There would be only a few weeks for him to live, not months as I had with my father. Being grief stricken, I offered my love and support to her, her family doing the same for mine. It was too ironic that we would lose our father within weeks of each other, which bad things were happening to good people. When her father passed away, I was the first to find her, cried with her, and told her that this bond between us would never part.

We never told Dad about his friend's death. Mom thought it would be best not to mention events like birthdays, as she thought he would get himself too worked up and die on such occasions. We treated every day as if it were Father's Day, not grieving for him when we were in the room, but celebrating that he was still with us, even if it were for a little while longer. When we all

were there, we took turns, holding his hands, fluffing his pillows, reading current events to him. People not in the room could cry, could talk about death, but in the room, there was no stress, no talk of foreclosure, no talk about moving. It was to be cheerful in that room, colored in Dad's favorite color, sunshine yellow.

Ultimately, the day came. My brother and mother were visiting as I had to work. My mother recalls my father was voraciously eating, his memory being impeccable, and knowledgeable of everything going on. I remember this was the way her father and mother were before they passed. Everything took a turn for the better. Visiting Dad for five hours, she was tired and told him she would see him later. As I got home from work, I made my daily phone call to Dad. The nurse answered the phone, asking for my mother, who had just left ten minutes prior. She informed me that I needed to get to the hospice area with my mother as soon as possible because father had recently passed away. No preparation could fight back the tears flowing from my eyes. No preparation could help me express the fear, the shock, the hate, the love, all the emotions that overwhelmed me at once. I called my mother on her cell phone, where she made a hasty return to my father's side. She found him with a smile on his face, looking out the bay window at the birds and lake area.

His funeral was quick and quiet. Memorials were made at the college where he taught. Preparations were on the way to take the home that Dad had worked so hard to provide for my mother. Preparations were made to move her into an apartment four miles away to avoid memories. Preparations were made for me to rent a truck to get my things to Virginia.

We are always preparing for the unexpected. Preparing helps us be stronger, to think about how we can handle the unpredictable future. No matter how hard we prepare though, we must also learn to take life as it happens, to live for the future. Truly, tomorrow is another day.

Love-Hate

By Nedra Smith
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One

“You shaved your head.”

Keith involuntarily touched his head at his wife’s blunt assessment. He stepped back to let her in the door. “I needed a change. How was your mom?”

“Crazy,” Zondra shrugged. “Are the girls ready?”

Keith noticed the pain in her eyes and resisted the urge to pull her into a hug. He grabbed the hall table for support instead. “Would it help you to talk about it?”

“Look, I’m tired. I’m ready to go. Are they ready?”

Keith bit his tongue to avoid commenting. “Look, Zondra, when you have a chance, I want to talk to you.” His face burned as Zondra brushed past him to the bottom of the steps to call their daughters. “I *need* to talk to you.”

She waved her hand in the air, dismissing him and opened her mouth. Before she could speak, the stairs squeaked and a small pair of feet bounded down towards her.

“Mommy! Mommy! Look what I made!” Their younger daughter, Cadence, rushed down the steps barefoot toting a twig and mum creation she’d made earlier.

Zondra bent to kiss Cadence’s brow. “That’s nice, baby. Where are your shoes?”

Cadence frowned. “Upstairs, but Mommy—”

“Go back upstairs. Get your shoes *and* your socks, and—”

“But *Mommy*—”

“What did I tell you about ‘buts’?” Zondra stood and crossed her arms.

Cadence pouted and dropped both her arms, causing the craft to scrape the

floor. She muttered defiantly, “I don’t remember.”

Zondra bent again and held the child’s chin in her hands. “Girl, don’t make me have to *help* you remember. When you ‘but Mommy’ me, you’re in danger of having Mommy whip your butt.”

Cadence rolled her eyes.

“Straighten up that face. You know I’m in a hurry.” Zondra sighed. “Give me a kiss.” Cadence planted a perfunctory peck and Zondra stood to her full height. “Now go back upstairs. Put your shoes on. Tell your sister to put hers on, too. And—”

“I already got *my* shoes on, *Mom*.” Keith looked up to see their older child, Maya, enter the foyer strapped in her backpack, and carrying Cadence’s bag and shoes.

“It’s *have*,” Zondra corrected.

Keith watched as Zondra and Maya did their usual stare down. He chuckled at the seven year-old mini-diva’s attitude, which was almost identical to Zondra’s. Zondra glared at him and turned back to Maya, with a raised eyebrow.

“What happened to *Mommy*? Where’s my kiss?”

Maya held Zondra’s gaze and shuffled across the hardwood floor towards her mother. Zondra stuck out her cheek and tapped it with her finger.

While too many seconds went by, Keith took the bag and shoes from Maya, and sat on the steps with Cadence in his lap. “Little girl, one of these days we’re going to teach you to tie your shoes.”

Cadence giggled and patted his scalp. “Just like you *tached* me and Maya to cut your head?”

Keith nodded, smiling both at Cadence’s words and at Maya’s finally calling a silent truce by kissing her mother.

When he was done, Cadence jumped down from his lap and interrupted the tender moment. “Mommy!” She tugged at Zondra’s white apron with the words, *The Cornbread & Cake Company*, embroidered on it in purple. “We cut Daddy’s head off!”

“No we didn’t. We just helped him shave it, stupid.” Maya corrected.

Cadence immediately burst into a whine, replacing Maya in Zondra’s arms.

“Don’t call your sister stupid, Maya.” Keith said.

Maya folded her arms. “Well she says stupid stuff.”

“No, I don’t.” Cadence whined even harder into Zondra’s apron.

“Watch your mouth, Maya.”

“But Mommy, she—” Maya’s mouth hung open at Zondra’s glare.

“No ‘*but* mommies’ tonight.” Both girls’ eyes widened. “Get in the van. We have to get up early for church tomorrow.”

“But...aw, Mommy...” It was Maya’s turn to whine and pout. She leaned against her mother and fought with Cadence for the spot at Zondra’s center.

Zondra kissed both girls’ heads and faked a growl. “If you two don’t get in that van now, I’m going to bite you both.”

Her girls giggled and growled back.

Zondra watched Keith at the hall table. Her smile faded. “Go outside now.”

Cadence broke free from the group and ran to hug Keith. “Bye, Daddy.”

Maya ambled over to Keith and wrapped herself in his other arm. “Daddy, are you going to church with us tomorrow?”

Zondra put her hand on her hip and waited for his response.

Keith kissed his daughters and looked back at their mother, a woman who was just as beautiful in the batter-stained apron as she was ten years before on their wedding day. “I don’t know, Baby Girl. We’ll see.”

“Oh, Daddy, please.” Cadence whined.

Keith kissed both girls again and stood releasing them both back to their mother.

“Maya, make sure Cadence’s car seat is right.” Zondra held the front door open and watched until both the girls climbed into the safety of the gray minivan.

Zondra grabbed the doorknob and stared back at him, her hand still on her hip. “Thanks for keeping them. I know it was the last minute.”

Keith’s stomach tightened, aware that once again, Zondra hadn’t spoken his name. “They’re my kids, too, Zee.”

She turned on her heels and opened the door. “Bye.”

Keith hopped the three feet between them and closed the door, holding it closed with both his hands. At six feet tall, he towered over her by seven inches. “Zondra,” he said, as if that one name as a word said everything he needed to say.

Zondra blinked. She quickly snaked her neck back to put some distance between their faces. “I know you’re not trying to kiss me.”

Keith stepped back, closing his eyes. “Uh, no. I just want to talk to you. I need to talk to you...about us. I’ve been trying—”

“Us?” Zondra’s face hardened and her nostrils flared. Just as quickly, she laughed and her eyes watered. “I *know* you don’t want to talk to me about ‘us.’ ‘Us’ don’t have nothing to say to you.”

“Zondra, you don’t under—”

“No. I understand everything that came to my office yesterday.” She shook her head. “*Messenger*, Keith?”

“Zondra, I—” He stepped closer and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Keith!” She cried. “Keith,” she said much lower. She let her tears fall.

“I will *not* lose my mind over you.” She looked at him with his mouth open and his own eyes brimming with tears. She shrugged one shoulder at a time out of his grasp and wiped her own tears with the back of her hand. “I read every word. I don’t need to hear any more.”

Zondra turned her back to him and walked to the door, leaving Keith standing with his hands in his pockets again. She opened the door, and stared out at the shadows of their daughters in the mini-van. “You want a divorce. You’ll get your divorce.”

Keith watched as his soon to be ex-wife descended the steps of the porch and climbed into the van. Once the van was out of the driveway, and the tail lights disappeared, Keith closed the door.

He looked to the ceiling and let his body slump down the back of the door to the floor. “God,” he whispered. “I don’t want a divorce.”

Two

Stalking wasn't the Silas way.

But a stalker is exactly what Keith Silas felt like the next day, loitering in the paneled vestibule of the Monacan Road church.

As a child, he had helped his father build the addition, which extended the church's frontage by four yards. Its construction allowed the congregation to install additional restrooms, so that people wouldn't have to walk in front of the whole congregation to use the ones behind the pulpit.

The October wind whistled through the hall, even though the door was firmly shut. Keith was glad he'd worn his black leather jacket into the aged structure.

Through the windows of the double doors to the worship center, Keith heard and saw the slim, gray-haired minister pacing across the pulpit.

Keith finally spotted his family sitting on the right side of the auditorium, midway down the aisle, taking up most of a pew.

"I'd hide out here, too, if I were you," a baritone voice boomed from behind.

Keith jumped at the sting of the slap on his back, nearly falling over from the brusqueness of his brother-in-law's bear hug.

Jamiel Hendry thumped the side of Keith's head. "I see you stopped waiting for your hairline to come back. Welcome to the club, Bro."

Keith laughed at Jamiel, who'd been bald since college. "I had to do something, man. I was losing my mind. I mean turning *thirty* has been...brutal! My whole body is falling apart."

"Thirty? You're almost thirty-one, kid. Is that what this is all about?"

"What?" Keith looked puzzled. He peeked back into the window at the sound of the congregation standing and singing.

"Danita told me what you did to Zondra on Friday." Jamiel shook his head. "Of all places for her to get those divorce papers...her *office*, man?"

Keith leaned against the double doors, and looked back in at the worshippers. "I-I figured it was better than sending them by the house with the girls there."

Jamiel sighed and opened the doors. "Come on inside, kid. Maybe a few

minutes of church will help you get your head together.”

The last time Keith walked the entire aisle, it was in the opposite direction, ten years before on his wedding day. Today, he half-lagged beside Jamiel to the row where his family stood. His father, Avery, nodded, still singing. His mother, Winnie, gave him a plastic “I only love you because I’m your mother” smile, and poked Keith’s twin sister, Danita in the side. Danita frowned.

When they got to the pew, Jamiel squeezed pass Keith’s daughters to stand next to Danita. Keith stood in the empty space next to his daughters.

“Hi, Daddy!” Cadence squeaked.

Keith pulled on her ponytail and tapped her sister, Maya. “Where’s Mommy?”

“She’s up there,” Maya answered, pointing towards the pulpit.

“I can’t see her, Daddy. She said we couldn’t go with her.” Cadence whined.

Keith sighed. He knew what he had to do. As he turned to leave the aisle, his daughters grabbed his sleeve. “No, girls. Stay.”

“Please be seated,” the minister said.

The rustle of people returning to their seats was the only sound as Keith made his way to the front of the church. A line of people stood holding hands and waiting to speak into the microphone.

Keith spotted Zondra in a gray turtleneck dress, holding the hand of an elderly woman who stood next to her. When the older woman realized that it was Keith approaching the group, she leaned forward on her cane and tapped Keith’s leg with it. She pulled his arm and forced him to stand next to his wife.

Zondra stiffened as he took her hand. Keith looked down at her, not hearing the others’ prayer requests, and barely hearing the occasional encouraging murmurs from the congregation. He inhaled her signature peach perfume.

Smelling her reminded him of better times, times when his love for her was surer.

He wanted to hold more than her hand. He wanted to kiss her as they stood in the very spot where they’d promised to stay together for the rest of their lives. Keith felt Zondra remove her hand and was forced back to the present.

She could have used her other hand to hold the mike, he thought.

Zondra sighed as though she'd heard him. It was her turn to speak. "Good morning, church," Zondra croaked.

Keith's heart split, hearing Zondra on the verge of tears again. Last night's tears had been one of the rare times he'd seen her cry in their twelve years together.

Standing so close, Keith felt Zondra's trembles. He was afraid to do *anything* to comfort her, because he feared she'd find a way to lash out and make him look like a fool in front of the whole church.

Please God, he prayed silently. *Please God, what?* The other voice in his head goaded. *Please God, I don't know. Just, please God.*

Keith looked at Zondra. Her shudder grew and she raised her hand to twirl one of her curly auburn braids. Keith knew that Zondra was nervous because it was the only time she touched her hair in public.

"Church," Zondra started again.

A few worshippers murmured, "Lord, help her" and "That's alright, Sister," to encourage her. Even the elderly woman who leaned on a cane to Keith's right, said, "Speak, Child." It was always like that when church members got up to solicit prayers.

"Church, I want y'all to pray for my family." Zondra clutched the microphone with both hands, and struggled to sniff back her tears.

Keith stood stiff, restraining himself from touching her

"Pray for me as a woman...Pray for my mom...again. They had to commit... put her back in the...hospital. Y'all know she has...issues... She doesn't know Jesus."

An older gentleman in the crowd called out, "Help her, Lord."

Keith felt Zondra's quiver again. Without thinking, he put his arm around her. For a brief moment her shoulders went slack. Then they stiffened again.

"Pray for me as a mother...that I can treat my kids better." This time Zondra's snuffle was uncontrollable. She groaned in her tears and dropped the mike.

"Mommy, don't cry!" Cadence had broken free of Maya's hand and run down to the front of the auditorium.

Maya followed, hissing. “Cadence, come *back* here.”

In moments, both girls wrapped their arms around their parents and formed a circle worthy of a Hallmark card. Keith felt Zondra elbowing his rib. He couldn’t have let go if he tried with the two girls crushing them together.

The minister retrieved the mike. He reached inside his suit jacket for a handkerchief, and dabbed sweat from his forehead. “Pray for ‘em, y’all.”

He passed the microphone over the girls’ heads and held it in front of Keith. “Speak, Brother Silas.”

Keith choked. He looked out at the assembly of nearly three hundred faces.

He took his arm from Zondra’s shoulders and grabbed the mike. “Uh, brothers and sisters, my whole family needs prayer. It’s mostly because of me.”

He ignored Zondra’s gasp.

“Most of you know that Zondra and I were supposed to celebrate our tenth anniversary in May. We didn’t. About a year ago I turned thirty. I lost my mind.”

“Sure did.”

Keith looked over to his family’s pew at Danita who had spoken.

“Anyway,” Keith continued, “I thought I needed to *find* myself.”

A few women grunted. Keith looked at his wife. Tears soaked her face. She held Cadence in the crook against her hip, and stroked the afro puff atop Maya’s head.

“I was lost...I still am.” Keith coughed back his own tears and cleared his throat.

“I need forgiveness...I need...” He couldn’t finish.

The minister, Brother Eldridge, took the mike, flipped it off briefly and said, “I want to see both of you in my office after service.”

After the last request, the preacher got on his knees at the front of the aisle and prayed. During the prayer, Keith stole glances at the flock, at everything. He stared at all the couples bowing their heads together the way he and Zondra used to. He surveyed all the bowed heads of the far too many single mothers present.

Keith met his twin sister's open eyes and the stares of a few children who were also guilty of the small "sin" of looking around during prayer.

He didn't care. He had nothing more to lose for being caught open-eyed. He was already at the point of being totally lost. He had to be. He didn't have Zondra.

Three

Lately, it seemed that much of Keith's life took place in hallways rather than in actual rooms. He stood alone in the dark hallway behind the pulpit, listening to the baptistry water heater and to the decreasing muffled voices in the auditorium. He waited for Zondra and the preacher. He'd seen her send their daughters home with his parents.

This hall was bordered by two other hallways that lead to the doors to the auditorium. Every few minutes one of the doors to the side halls opened. Keith would perk up hoping for Zondra. After several sets of footsteps, none of them Zondra, he forced himself to relax, and he leaned against the wall.

In this part of the building, Keith roasted in his leather jacket. He took it off and sniffed his underarms at the very moment a slow pair of footsteps tiptoed near.

Zondra's peach cologne assaulted him. He dropped his arms. "Hi."

He watched her mouth twist to keep from automatically responding. She walked up to the minister's closed office door and jiggled the antique knob.

"I already tried it. It's locked."

Zondra pointedly looked at her watch, ignoring Keith.

"Wouldn't it be something if the preacher doesn't show?" Keith chuckled alone. "Remember our wedding day? We thought Brother Eldridge wasn't going to show up? He was an hour late, but we got married."

Zondra put her hand down and shifted her black all-weather coat to her other arm. She wasn't going to answer. She moved to the opposite side of the hallway, crossed her arms, and stared straight ahead.

Keith groaned. He was tired of trying.

He was tired of being last on Zondra's list. Everything came before him: their daughters, her business, her mother, even the IRS. He knew all of them were important. All he wanted was a piece of her. If she'd talk to him, he

could at least get a scrap.

He didn't want to blame the chasm on *Cornbread & Cake*. He knew that the catering company Zondra and Danita operated had been Zondra's dream for years. Yet, ever since Cadence's birth four years before, when Zondra finally opened shop, Keith felt pushed to the back burner. He was proud of her success, but he didn't like being left out in the cold.

This was the first time he'd been alone with Zondra in far too long. The heat pump quieted. Keith no longer heard people talking in the auditorium.

He studied his wife. It was crazy. He knew that she knew he was staring.

He paced the length of the hallway, stopping at each of its intersecting hallways. Each time he passed her, he held the stare from each end of the hallway, hoping to force her to look at him. He did this a few times until finally, he stopped in front of her.

She flinched, but refused to look away. It was as if she was telepathically saying, *You'd better move, because I'm not moving.*

Keith smiled down at her. He could be crazy. What did he have to lose? Okay, he had everything to lose, but what difference did it make in this moment?

"I don't bite, Zee. Last night I told you I wanted to talk to you, and you got all upset because you thought I was going to kiss you."

Keith could see that Zondra's amber eyes were wet, and that she tried not to blink.

Keith leaned closer, hearing nothing but their breathing. He leaned as close as he could. Only Zondra's crossed arms kept him from getting any closer.

Maybe it was a reflex. Zondra's head tilted, giving him better access to her lips. His mouth seized hers, but he kept his hands to himself. "See, I told you I don't bite."

Keith stared into her darkening, watery eyes. He was afraid to do anything else. Maybe Zondra was right. Talking wasn't what that they needed to do. He lowered his head and took over her lips. He closed his eyes to keep his own tears from falling.

Then he felt pain.

"Ouch!" His eyes flew open, and he snatched his lips from her. Zondra laughed at him as she wiped her mouth of the blood she captured in the bite to

his lips. "What's wrong with you, woman?!"

He wiped the blood on the sleeve of his pullover long-sleeved shirt. "Zondra?!"

Still laughing, Zondra grabbed a tissue from her purse to dab the blood from his lips. Keith pulled away and walked to the end of the hall, bumping into Brother Eldridge.

The suspicious minister eyed the pair. He unlocked the door to his office and motioned for the two of them to sit in the leather wingback chairs across from his desk.

Zondra still laughed hard, and braids fell in her face. Keith continually wiped his mouth, shaking his head.

Wesley Eldridge looked like a black Mister Rogers as he took his time placing his Bible and notes on his desk. He changed from his tan blazer into a ratty brown sweater from the coat rack next to the door.

Pictures of the minister, his wife, and their three sons lined the shelves of one of the bookcases. Keith spotted a cap and gown picture of Wes, Jr., his former classmate. Sitting there, Keith realized that it had been almost a year since Wes, Jr.'s death.

"This life is too short for foolishness." Wesley Eldridge, Sr. sat down behind the desk. Zondra quickly sobered, and Keith sat up straighter. "What happened?"

"I bit him. I didn't mean to do it so hard, but he makes me so...Ugh!" Zondra gripped both arms of her chair. "I mean, Lord, forgive me, but the man gets on my—"

Brother Eldridge shook his head. "No. What happened to you two?"

Zondra rolled her neck towards Keith. "He--" she began when he said, "She--"

"Let her go first." Keith needed Zondra to say all the things she hadn't said since he'd moved out the year before.

"How *selfless* of you," Zondra hissed. She leaned away from him.

"See! *That's* what went wrong, preacher." Keith ran his palms across his scalp. "We can't have a decent conversation without her placing the blame on ___"

"Oh, I *know* he isn't blaming me. He moved out. He filed for divorce. I

don't—"

"Wait a minute!" Wesley Eldridge slammed his hands on the desk and shot to his feet in one motion. "I just *said* that we don't have time for foolishness!"

"He has time," Zondra muttered.

"See what I mean? The woman doesn't know what she--"

"Quiet both of you." Brother Eldridge walked around to the front of his desk and sat on the edge of it, between the two of them. "This was a mistake."

Keith's pride withered under the minister's look. *God, help me.* He leaned back in his chair and stole a glimpse at Zondra, whose reddened face was covered with beads of sweat. *If only I could calm her down,* he thought. *I could get her to talk to me. I could let her know I didn't mean to--*

"Actually, it's my mistake for starting this meeting off on the wrong foot," The minister whispered. He reached for their hands. "We didn't pray."

Keith bowed his head and swallowed the tears that threatened to reappear.

He felt the preacher's hairy knuckle in his left hand. Keith extended his right one to Zondra. It may have been thirty seconds or eternity. Keith still waited.

"Sister Silas?"

Keith felt an upward breeze as the leather of Zondra's chair squeaked. He dropped the minister's hand and looked up to see a tearful Zondra putting her coat on.

"I'm sorry, Brother Eldridge." Zondra bolted towards the door. "I can't do this now. I can't hold his hand. I don't even want to look at him. It's too hard."

Keith opened his mouth to speak, but the minister signaled for him to wait.

"Please, before you go, Sister. Let's give the Lord a minute."

"I—" Zondra shook her head, and folded her arms. "I don't want to—"

"Just one minute, Sister. Nobody has to hold anybody's hand."

Keith leaned forward in his chair with his elbows on his knees and his chin smashed against his clasped hands.

"What's one minute compared to the rest of your lives?"

When neither answered, the minister continued. "Please, Sister, have a

seat.”

After another eternity, Zondra sat back down, still wearing her coat.

“Lord, we come to you this morning for Keith and Zondra. Lord, we know—”

The digital jingle of *Amazing Grace* interrupted the prayer. Keith opened his eyes to see Zondra smothering a chuckle.

“Uh, Lord, we know—”

The jingle grew louder with every ring.

“Give them grace, Lord. Uh...”

The ringing stopped.

“Thank you, Lord. Touch the hearts of these two people. Wrap your loving arms around them. Build them up where they’re weak. Bless their *children*, Lord.”

Keith took offense at the reference to his children. His parents had already guilt-tripped him about the effects of the separation on his children. He didn’t want the minister to do it, too, through this prayer.

“Make them *think* about their children, Lord.”

Keith wanted this prayer to be over. Surely more than a minute had passed.

“Touch them, Lord. Touch their *children*, Lord.”

The digital *Amazing Grace* interrupted again.

“Oh, Lord, you know their needs.” The louder ringing helped the preacher wrap it up. “Thank you for your...grace. In the name of Jesus, we lift this petition. Amen.”

Keith looked up to see that Zondra’s eyes were still squeezed shut.

“Excuse me, y’all. That’s my wife...Grace.” The minister leapt over to the coat rack and pulled his cell phone from his blazer. He looked from Zondra to Keith. “Comfort your wife, Keith. Excuse me again.”

Keith watched the minister flip the ringing phone open and step out of the office, closing the door behind him. He dropped out of his chair and kneeled beside Zondra’s. “Are you okay, Zee?”

Zondra’s hands buried most of her face until she finally burst into laughter

and tears. She faced Keith. “I’m going crazy.”

“Shhh...No.” Keith took a chance and stroked her shoulder.

“There’s a padded cell for me next to Mama’s.”

Keith took Zondra’s face in his other hand. “Shhh...that’s crazy talk, Zee...” He bit his tongue when Zondra flinched. “I’m sorry. I mean...”

“I’m not fighting the divorce.”

“Zondra, I don’t want—”

“Keith!” she cried. “What do you want from me?”

“I’m so sorry.” He cupped her face in both of his hands, catching her tears in his palms. “I never meant to hurt you, Zondra. I don’t want to lose you.”

Zondra visibly swallowed. “You left me.”

“I missed you, Zee.”

Zondra pulled Keith’s hands from her face. She rose from the chair and secured her all-weather coat. She turned her back to him and reached for the door.

“Zondra, please don’t leave.”

“Why shouldn’t I? You did.”

Keith got off his knees and stood to his full height. He turned Zondra to face him. “I shouldn’t have. I love you. I never stopped...wanting you.” He leaned to kiss her.

Zondra raised her hand to block his kiss. “Hold up! Is that what this is about?”

“Zondra, I—”

“Because if this is about sex, you *know* I was too busy.”

Keith dropped his hands to his side. “You were too busy for three years.”

“I was not!”

“Yes you were.”

Zondra slapped him. “You selfish child! I had a baby! I gained all this weight. My mother had a breakdown! I was trying to start a business! How dare you think about sex at a time like this?!”

Keith held his jaw, but smirked anyway. "I didn't bring up sex, Zondra, but since you did..."

The office door creaked open, and the minister stepped in. "I'm sorry I took so long. My wife...needed comfort. You know we're coming up on the anniversary of Junior's accident."

"I'm so sorry, Brother Eldridge." Zondra kissed the minister on the cheek. "Give Sister Grace my love."

She turned to face the hallway, her back to both men.

"I'm sorry, too, preacher." Keith meant his words, but his eyes remained glued to Zondra's back. "Zondra?"

Her shoulders moved, so he knew she heard him.

"Zondra, it was never just about sex."

Zondra crossed the threshold into the hallway.

"It was about you," Keith whispered. "I needed you, too." He swept past the minister and hugged Zondra from behind. "I still need you. I want to make this right."

"And?" she whispered.

"I want to be a family again." He kissed the top of her head.

"And?" she repeated.

"I...I'll call the attorney tomorrow and have him withdraw the papers."

"And?"

What other 'and' could there be? Keith wondered.

The dim light in the hall hit the wedding ring that Keith had never taken off. He peeked over Zondra's shoulder to see if she still wore hers.

"What?" She asked, noticing the pause in Keith's promises.

"Where's your ring?"

"What?"

"Your wedding ring?"

Zondra turned in his arms to face him, puzzled. "What? It's at home."

"Oh." Keith's heart sank. Maybe the shiny halo had been a false symbol

of hope.

“It doesn’t fit anymore. Remember?”

“I didn’t remember that.”

“I couldn’t wear it after I had Cadence. Why?”

Keith shook his head. “Never mind, Zee, uh, Zondra. I just want to be your husband again, whatever it takes.”

Zondra’s face softened. “Do you *really* want to take that bumpy road again?”

Keith looked back at the minister, who had changed back into the tan blazer, and turned the lights off in the study.

The minister smiled. “Y’all, lock up.”

Keith watched the minister disappear down one of the side halls. *Amazing Grace* jingled again just before the back door closed.

“Do you, Keith?” Zondra repeated.

Keith pulled Zondra closer. “I love the way you say ‘Keith.’” He kissed her hair.

“It’s not gonna get any easier...Keith,” she murmured. Zondra couldn’t hide her smile, even under her furrowed brow. “Do you *really* want to try this mess again?”

“I do.”

Keith kissed Zondra’s brow until the wrinkles disappeared. “Let’s go home.”

Ben & Bear

By Greg Smith
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Ben woke with a start. It was Saturday, a special day. Special not only because it was the day he went to Zern's Farmer's Market, but today was Mommy's birthday. Ben had just enjoyed his fifth birthday last month, so he knew how excited Mommy must be. Ben had to find her a perfect gift. Something just right to surprise her.

Ben tore off his PJ's and pulled on his favorite blue overalls. He slipped into a pair of white socks and sneakers. He fished around in his dresser for his favorite red and white-striped tee shirt. He checked his reflection in the mirror and ran a comb through his wavy red hair. He stood there, gap-toothed and grinning at himself. He was ready for Mommy's special day.

He glanced over at Bear, sitting on the dresser. "Good morning, Bear!" said Ben. Bear smiled back in his Bear way. "Today is Mommy's birthday, and we're going to get her something special!"

Ben's Grandmother had given Bear to him on his first birthday. Since then, Bear and Ben were inseparable. Bear held Ben's hand as he learned to walk. Bear listened intently while Ben learned to speak. Bear even waited patiently while Ben sat on the potty. Everywhere Ben went, Bear was sure to follow.

Ben pulled Bear down from his usual spot and ran to Mommy's room. "Wake up Mommy! It's your special day!"

Mommy raised her head from the pillow and looked at Ben. "Good morning, dear," she said in a sleepy voice.

"Mommy, are we going to Zern's today?"

Mommy dropped her head back to the pillow. "Yes, just as soon as I get up."

Ben went back downstairs and got his breakfast bowl and spoon from the dishwasher and put them on the table. He put Bear down next to them so he could watch. Ben got the cereal from the under-the-sink cupboard and the milk from inside the refrigerator door. He fixed himself a bowl of cereal and sat down to eat. "Here, Bear," he said as he held a spoonful of Fruit Loops under Bear's nose. Ben always shared his breakfast with Bear, they were

bestest friends. Bear liked Fruit Loops, but much preferred Honey Combs.

Mommy appeared just as they finished breakfast. Ben was excited, “Are we going to Zern’s now?” he asked.

“Yes, Ben,” she smiled, “we’re going to Zern’s. Let me find the keys and we’ll go right now.”

Ben loved to ride in the car. It was a big white one. He rode in a special seat in the back and Mommy drove in the front. Mommy always strapped Bear in with the seat belt, so he would be extra safe. “No fooling around, Bear,” whispered Ben. “This is an extra special day today – we have to get a present for Mommy’s birthday at Zern’s.” Ben could tell Bear understood, because he had his serious face on.

Ben loved Zern’s. He and Mommy went there every weekend. There were shops everywhere, and all the merchants knew Ben. They were like family. He would run from shop to shop and each vendor would give him a sample – fruit from the produce man, sweets from the candy lady, on and on all day as he ambled from shop to shop.

Today, Ben had no time for treats, he was on a mission. Mommy went to do her shopping. Ben marched off with Bear to each shop in turn. He looked on every shelf for something special for Mommy, but everything looked ordinary. Nothing was good enough for his Mommy on her special day.

Just as Ben was giving up hope, he turned a corner and spied something he’d never seen before. The doorway was covered with a long black curtain. And just to the side of the curtain was a very tall, very gray and wrinkled man. Ben asked him who he was: “I’m Mr. Withers, the photographer,” he said, “and this is my photography studio. I opened it just this week.”

“What’s a pho-to-graph-er,” asked Ben.

Mr. Withers did not smile as he spoke, “I take pictures.”

Ben thought about this. “Pictures? Like of little boys? Like as a gift for a Mommy’s birthday?”

Mr. Withers replied, “Yes, I can take your picture.”

“What a wonderful gift,” thought Ben. “a picture for my Mommy.”

Mr. Withers looked coldly at Ben, “How will you pay?”

Ben hadn’t given this much thought. He never had need for money before. He slowly started checking the pockets of his overalls. They were all empty except for the front pocket, it had a button and some lint. Ben thought hard --

he didn't have anything of value. Except...

"I have this," Ben said as he held Bear out for the man to see. Mr. Withers slowly reached out a spiny hand and took the bear.

"Hmmm..." he drawled, "it's a fine bear." He turned Bear over in his hands and inspected him with great interest. "He's clearly been loved quite a bit."

"Oh yes," exclaimed Ben, "he has. He is a really good friend and is quite good for when you are sick and need company. He listens to everything you say and never yells at you or nothing," Ben explained.

"So, you would trade this fine bear for a photograph of you, for your Mother's birthday present," Mr. Withers asked.

"Yes. He is a good bear. He is worth it!"

"Fine," said Mr. Withers. "But, a deal is a deal. Once we take the picture, there is no trading back. Do you understand?"

Ben didn't have to think twice, "Oh, yes. This will be just right!"

Mr. Withers sat Ben down in a chair and handed the bear to him. "We'll take three pictures, a serious picture, a happy picture, and a silly picture. Then you pick the one you like best."

Ben sat very straight and tall for the serious picture. For the happy picture he held Bear in his lap and smiled broadly. And for the silly picture Bear sat in the chair and Ben sat on his lap.

Mr. Withers disappeared into the back room to develop the three pictures. He brought them out to Ben. "Which one do you like best," he whispered.

Ben studied them carefully. He wanted to pick the best picture for his Mommy. He decided not to use the silly picture, because mommies don't need something silly on their special day. And he put aside the serious picture because a birthday is a happy day. That left the happy picture, which was the best picture of all.

"I'll take this one," said Ben.

Mr. Withers looked the picture over with an appraising eye. "Yes, that is a good choice," he said slowly. He slid it into a picture frame. He lifted a small vial of cleaner from the shelf and sprayed the glass. He wiped all the fingerprints off of it so it was very clear. Finally, he wrapped the present with birthday paper and handed the picture to Ben.

Mr. Withers picked Bear up from the chair and held him briefly. Then, he held Bear out to Ben.

“I believe this is yours,” Mr. Withers said slowly.

Ben looked at Bear a long time. “No,” Ben said finally, “a deal is a deal. Bear has been a good friend to me. Now it’s time for him to be a good friend to you. Thank you, Mr. Withers.”

Mr. Withers placed Bear on the shelf. Ben walked through the curtains and out of the store.

#

When Ben returned home with Mommy, he was very excited. “Mommy! Mommy! It’s time for your birthday!”

Ben’s Mommy smiled, “Oh, Ben. Let’s do this later. I have to get these groceries unloaded.”

“Oh, no Mommy! I have your present right here! Come sit down,” Ben grabbed her hand and led her to the rocking chair. Mommy laughed as she sat down.

“Here, I got this for you!”

Mommy took the gift in her hands and smiled. “Ben, this is so sweet! What could it be?” She unwrapped the gift and admired it from top to bottom. Ben’s happy smile, his favorite overalls, the red and white striped shirt, and the ever present Bear. “Why Ben, it’s wonderful! How ever did you pay for it?”

Mommy looked up from the picture of the little boy to see her fine young man, standing proud, smiling, with empty hands in back pockets.

At the Wedding of a Friend

By James Garrett
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Early evening, Saturday.
Groom is there, bride on the way.
Ceremony starting soon,
the organ playing wedding tunes.

Though my own heart's long been taken
this betrothal reawakens
Thoughts I had so long ago.

Perfect unions cannot happen.
too much self in all of us.
Have we not though, loved each other,
shared a life of faith and trust?
If God ever matched in heaven
then He matched the two of us.

Evening of this Saturday,
you stand lovely by the door
I am tearful as I watch you
And could never ask for more.

I see the groom...looking nervous,
just as I was on our day.
The bride's father, laughing, crying,
gives his little girl away.

We sit through the ceremony
as our own we both recall
thinking that, for all the changes,
we've not really changed at all.

Late in evening, Saturday
Wedding ceremony through.
While it lasted we had whispered
spoke again those vows we took,
were renewed, as is my spirit,
when into your eyes I look.

Pamela K. Kinney

Pamela K. Kinney is an author of published horror, Science Fiction, and fantasy fiction and poetry and the nonfiction book, *Haunted Richmond, Virginia* published by Schiffer Books. Also as Sapphire Phelan, she has published erotic and sweet paranormal/fantasy/Science Fiction romance. She lives in Chesterfield, Virginia with her husband, Bill and their cats, Ripley and Bast. You can find out more about her and what she has or will be coming out at her website: <http://FantasticDreams.50megs.com>, also her blog at <http://PamelaKKinney.blogspot.com> and MySpace at <http://www.myspace.com/PamelaKinney>.

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She admits she can always be found at her desk and on her computer, writing. And yes, the house and husband sometimes suffers for it!

Prey

Pamela K. Kinney
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The creature was hungry, but he hung back in the shadows of the alley across the street. Not having fed since he went into hibernation for a year, he spied the couple leaving the X-rated movie theater. Eagerly, he tailed them.

He probed the woman's mind. Found out how they both loved each other, but that her newly wed husband wanted to take their relationship to the next level. He wanted to do a threesome, just like in the x-rated movie they'd seen tonight.

How perfect, thought the creature. I'll give them a threesome they'll never forget.

He darted into a pitch-black alley, leaped the six-foot fence that dead ended it, and sped around the block until he arrived at the corner of the next street before the couple did. With a smile, he greeted them.

At first both were hesitant, suspicious of the stranger. Using his glamour, he bespelled both, making them think he was completely human. They talked and he eased them into believing he was trustworthy. The couple offered their apartment for the tryst when he mentioned how he'd always wanted to have a threesome sexual encounter.

The small apartment was in a red-bricked building. Large oak trees nestled against its walls and the full moon shone down on it, watching. He followed them up the stairs and watched feverishly, hungrily, as the man unlocked the front door. They rushed in, slamming the door shut behind them. Once in the bedroom, everyone tore their clothes off in their eagerness to get to the sex. The husband threw himself on the bed and waited.

The creature did the female first. Fear in her eyes, she saw his fangs as he opened his mouth wide, but didn't have enough time to scream as he grabbed her and sank them into her neck, draining her dry. Dropping her wasted body to the floor, he leaped onto the bed and grabbed the naked man before he could escape, biting him.

But as the creature began to swallow the man's blood, he realized his mistake. The man too, was an unnatural being like him. He had married the human woman to use her to lure prey to him. Prey like him.

Poisoned, he died in the man's arms.

I'll have to get rid of Mabel's body and find a new female to be used as bait.

The creature would appease his stomach—for now. But it took more than his favorite kind of prey to keep his hungry belly happy.

With relish he began to tear at the creature's flesh with his fanged tongue.

I Was Here

By Nedra Smith
Copyright © 2007 Nedra Smith

I've never carved my name into a desk.
I never sprayed graffiti.
My shadow is but temporary
So I press this pen to this page
To say,
I was here.

When I am dust,
and my casket is rust...
and nobody knows where I am except for a faded stone marker...
when I'm not even a memory,
but an unheard-of ancestor to my great-great-great-great
grandchildren...
when everything I've written is yellowed and crumbled...
May my ink still shape some words, and may the world
be aware
that
I was here.

See you next year!