

Lumina

Fermilab Creative Writer's Club Anthology

The 2nd Edition - November 2003

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the 3rd annual writing contest winners

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Welcome

[Fermilab Creative Writer's Club](#) was founded in April of 1997. It exists to support, encourage and advance the personal writing of its member authors. The main focus of the club is reviewing and commenting on member authors' work. From time to time, we also do some writing exercises.

FCWC conducts an annual writing contest. It is open for all members of the Fermilab family and winners are awarded prizes. In this edition we are publishing the winning entries of [Writing Contest 2003](#). Entries were judged in the category of Poems, Short Stories and Short Short Stories.

Paul Nienaber is a guest scientist on the MiniBooNE neutrino oscillation experiment at Fermilab and has been here since 1992. **Dan Pasholk** has been working at Fermilab for two years as a senior designer-drafter on the High Field Magnet project. **Greg Schuh**, a 22-year-old student of Music Education at Indiana University is son of Keith Schuh, a Fermilab employee.

We are also publishing the result of a short writing exercise along with some more works of our members.

Hope you enjoy reading them as much as they have enjoyed writing them. Your feedback, as always, is welcome.

Dinker Charak,
[Editor](#)

New Muse

Paul Nienaber

Who'd have imagined
Such twistings of nothing
Could deftly encipher
The toilings of sunfire,
A universe rising?
More swiftly than lightning
Could limn an unmaking,
A sowing anew?

Screams

Daniel Pasholk

The Moon was still up on this July 17, 1969 morning. My Uncle lifts me up and says, "Oberth, today we launch the Saturn five Moon rocket."

"Moon rocket." I said, my first words in English.

I lived in the German town of Pennimunda, near an old secret rocket test site. My father would say, "People are afraid of new things and things they don't understand."

I'm going to start 3rd grade summer school today and not be afraid of anything.

The school bus takes me to school and Trudy is there to greet me. She's from the foreign exchange student program and can speak both English and German.

Trudy pushes on the school door, but its locked. She checks her watch and says it will be five more minutes.

I ask her, "How far away is the Moon rocket?"

She says, "Twenty miles. And you can feel the ground shake when it blasts off. Now wait right here." and goes to try another door.

Some boys were listening to us speak in German. One said, "You're in America so speak English."

"Nein," was all I could say and I shrugged my shoulders.

Watching war movies and hearing war stories about the Nazis must have made them more afraid of me than I was of them. Now, here I was, a new thing, right in front of them. I remembered seeing images of burning children. The chimneys of the concentration camps carried screams of death.

The boys gathered into a circle around me. I called out, in German, "Trudy where are you?"

The circle got smaller.

Someone help me. Oh, good the bus driver is coming over.

The bus driver yells, "All right yea bloody little savages, leave the boy alone." The boys turn to him and obey.

I push pass the boys and run into the open playground.

Then I hear a little girl crying. She accidentally fell down. The bus driver orders, "Halt, bring him here boys."

The boys start running after me.

"Trudy, where are you?"

The playground is all fenced in. It's a high fence, as high as a chimney. I run along the edge of the fence looking for a gate. There is no gate, only the corner. Now, I jump up high. My fingers grab through the chain links. Somebody's latched onto my leg. I kick at him.

The boys pull me down and with my back against the corner of the fence; I clench my fists, squeeze my eyes closed shut, throw my head back and scream. "I've done nothing wrong!"

Screams of death echo the past.

Suddenly the ground starts to shake. I open my eyes and look straight up to see a flame streak across the sky.

"Moon rocket," I say.

All the boys look up.

Then one boy asks, "You know about rockets?" and continues

"Hey everyone we're missing the blast off!"

We all go inside to watch it on TV.

Choices

Greg Schuh

So Tom had actually left for real. The email sent from him explained everything. He wanted to pretend that he was doing something noble, adventurous, and liberating; but Justin knew differently. Justin knew that Tom was, above all, a true coward. He was leaving everything behind for a chance to escape, duck out, succumb to the desire to give up. Justin snickered as he read the email, confident in his superiority for the first time in many years. Then he closed the laptop, chugged his mini-espresso, and headed off to work.

It took him almost an hour and a half to get to the office. He drove a Lexus SUV and took major highways. On days when the traffic was bad he swore he could jog to the office faster if he wanted to. This, surprisingly, would actually be true, if it were not for the many buildings in the way. Justin often wondered why he did not jog or bike in to work. But then he became conscious of the soft leather seat underneath him, the watered-down soft rock playing on the radio, and the fine mist of synthesized arctic wind the vehicle exhaled through the registers in front of him. And he became conscious of how much bigger and fancier his car looked than the others moving at a healthy crawl of five miles per hour down the interstate beside him. He had not rode a bike or jogged since college. He contented himself with stationary bikes and treadmills at the Club.

His secretary was always there first. He never knew how this was possible, but then again he never bothered to ask. She was a half hour early every day. She left home early to beat the rush. She figured she'd rather read for a half hour than waste her time in traffic. This was Lisa – and she was not a friend of her employer.

Justin's official job description was Human Resources Efficiency Consultant. He helped other bosses figure out how to most effectively fire obsolete workers. This is not, of course, how he thought of his work – but it is how Lisa thought of it. Lisa was ashamed to be working for Justin, but she tried very hard to forget about being ashamed.

She got the job through Tom, a man whom Justin thought of as his best friend – but who was in essence really his only friend. It is hard to label someone as “best” in any way when one has no basis for comparison. This is not to say that the two were not friends, but Justin had always had mixed feelings for Tom. Tom was a different sort of man, and always had been. He never had a steady job, never tried to make any serious money. He spent most of his spare time hiking or indulging in what Justin thought of as adolescent philosophizing. Justin thought that his friend had always had a distinct fear of commitment, and that he was too chicken to really face the world as it was. While growing up, Tom had always been the most able, the most intelligent, the most active, and the most

promising. Yet somehow he had never managed to find his niche in the world. Justin had always felt a somewhat vague sense of satisfaction from this – from knowing that he had won in the end.

And today this feeling was clearer than it had ever been before. Tom had gone – dropped everything and left for an indefinite amount of time on an indefinite adventure through the mountains of western Montana. Justin saw it as a personal triumph, though he had truly done his best to talk his friend out of it. The world had finally defeated Tom's spirit and Justin was happy. Tom had been talking about doing this for years, and it had finally happened. He had printed out the email Tom sent him. He whistled a happy little tune as he strolled past Lisa's desk and set the email down in front of her. She did not glance up from her book.

Justin set his case on the chair across the room, plopped down in the chair behind his desk, flipped on the computer, and spun around to stare out the window. This was his morning routine. He would sit there looking out over the vast city for the better part of an hour. Lisa knew this routine quite well; she knew that she was not to schedule any appointments during this first hour. She knew that she was not to enter his office until 9:45 at the earliest. And she knew that if anyone called, Justin was in a meeting until 10. All Justin's clients knew that he took no appointments before 10, and yet somehow he always seemed to be in one. This was only one of the many reasons for which no one really respected him. Justin knew this of course, but did not care very much about getting respect from the kind of people who felt the need to hire someone else to fire their employees for them.

He stared out the window, and usually did not think of anything. He did not wonder at the intelligence, vision, and pride that had made the great city possible. He took it completely for granted, as most of us do. This morning was different though – he was thinking of Tom. He was thinking of the only person he'd ever met who did not take the city for granted. He wanted to be happy that Tom had given up, but somehow it did not feel genuine. Underlying his sense of victory there was a faint twinge of bitterness, as though somewhere deep inside he knew that he was only trying to fool himself. As though he really knew that this was Tom's single greatest accomplishment. Justin knew that it was foolish to dwell on this, but somehow he just could not help himself.

Tom has always eluded him. There had always been a sense of awkwardness in his character – but it was the kind of awkwardness that makes you feel as though the inconsistency was in yourself. He'd always felt drawn to Tom, as most people did. The man had natural charisma and a strong sense of leadership. Tom could do almost anything he tried to do, but would rarely try. His chosen vocations did not seem to make very much sense when taken as a whole. He had worked in steel mills, and service stations, yet he had a law degree from Yale. He was an excellent athlete, musician, and architect – yet he would give up each of these just when he began to earn recognition for doing them. As far as Justin knew, he had never actually practiced law.

But what bothered him most about Tom was his damn self-assurance. Tom would quit anything the minute he was asked to do something he didn't like – and

somehow he got away with it. Justin had told him a thousand times that everyone has to do things they don't want to do. Tom would just laugh at him in a funny way – the way one laughs at a child when they say something ignorant but harmless. Tom was the most selfish person Justin had ever met, yet somehow through serving himself he always seemed to do more good for those around him than Justin could ever manage through all his charity and volunteer work.

Justin's face was fixed in a frown as he sat thinking. Gradually his thoughts lost coherency and he was left staring as he did every other morning. Eventually he sighed and turned back to his desk. He checked his messages. There was one from his ex-wife; he deleted it without listening. There was one from his daughter – she needed a ride home from school. He sent an email to one of the interns, telling her to pick up Ann at 3:30. He was supposed to pick his daughter up once a week, he never had. But Ann and his new intern Debbie had gotten to be good friends. His daughter bothered him – she was too much like her mother.

Lisa came in at 9:50 and told him his schedule for the day. It was going to be a good day – he would not have to leave the office. His appointments came in and went out – accompanied by a ceaseless string of phrases like “of course, whatever you say, anything you want”, and “whatever works best for you.” Justin loved his job – he sincerely felt that he was providing a much-needed service to the business community. Most of his clients did not feel good about needing his services, and Justin knew it – so he spent much of his time trying to make them feel better about coming to him.

Just before it was time to go home Lisa came in once more and announced that she would be quitting at the end of the week. Justin tried halfheartedly to talk her out of it, but in truth he was a little relieved seeing as how she was not really a good secretary.

“May I ask what, if anything, the problem was?” he asked her.

“I can't stand being a part of this system that you're in.”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?” He was annoyed by this answer.

“You're entire business revolves around people too cowardly to stand up for themselves. You bend over and take it from the clients to make them happy, they bend over and take it from you because they are too chicken to fire their own workers, and the workers bend over and take it from both of you because no one has ever taught them that they should not have to.” She said it calmly, without malice or anger. Her tone was infuriatingly flat – a scientist observing a reaction she had hypothesized.

“Get the hell out of here!” he shouted at her.

She gave a small, mocking smile, turned, and went out. His answer showed that he could not argue with her, and she knew it. She had worked for Justin Gage for three months. She took Tom's email with her when she left. Justin had forgotten about the incident and what it revealed less than five minutes later.

It did not take Justin as long to get back home, but it came close. He was always in a horrible mood by the time he parked his SUV in the garage. His

home was huge, meticulously clean, and well kept. This was due to the efforts of the two illegal immigrants he employed to keep it that way. The house was everything a successful young businessman's house was supposed to be, as almost everything in his life was.

He walked through the vacant rooms, slowly stripping off parts of his suit. He left them as they lay – Maria would pick them up for him when she came the following morning. His servants had learned long ago to never be present when Justin got home from work. Dinner was waiting for him in the kitchen, but he had no appetite tonight. That would sit as well, and Maria would pack it up the following morning. She said she threw the meal away when he did not eat, but he suspected she brought the food home to her family. He did not really care.

His evenings were usually spent watching TV, nursing a steady stream of rum and Coke. Typically this routine was broken only by either the fortunate presence of a woman, or the unfortunate presence of his daughter. In the first case, the TV was forgotten in favor of the bedroom – in the second the rum was forgotten in favor of just the Coke. He liked having women over to his home, if only because without them he was forced to compensate in other ways. He did not like having his daughter over to his home – she was pushy and asked unsettling questions. She was twelve years old now, and understood completely what it was her father did for a living.

He sat in his favorite armchair in his living room, staring blankly at the bright, pretentious images on his flat screen TV. He was thinking of the last time Tom had been in this house. It had been the first time he had been there as well – more than a year ago, when the house was fairly new. Tom had visited at least once all the homes that Justin bought – and there had been many. Justin bought houses in neighborhoods where land values were rising. He sold them back for profits and bought new ones. He rarely lived in one place for more than three years.

Tom had looked around the home in that oddly amused sort of way that he always assumed. Most of Justin's belongings were still in boxes – he liked to see his stuff in boxes; he looked forward to the time when it would all take up three trucks instead of just two.

“It's certainly a lot of space,” he had said.

“That's for sure,” Justin replied, “Couple hundred square feet more per floor than the last one.”

Tom just smiled and shook his head. He lived in a three-room apartment, with bare walls and minimalistic furniture. He believed in simplicity.

“You're sure you can actually fill this house?”

“Guess I'll just have to get more stuff,” Justin had said with a grin. It was the battle cry of his generation.

He knew that Tom had never approved of his home, and he had always told himself that he didn't care. But somehow Tom's approval – on the rare occasions when he'd earned it – meant more to him than almost anything in the world, though he would never admit it. They had sat together in the living room – watching a football game. After a long while Justin had to ask the question that was burning in his mind.

“You don’t like it do you – you don’t think it’s right.”

“It’s not a matter of right and wrong,” he said – never looking away from the game. He said it calmly, and as though he had been expecting the question all night.

“How do you mean?”

“It’s silly, and a little naïve actually, to try and place moral judgments on material possessions. Only people can be right or wrong, not things.”

“Ok. So, do you think it is wrong of me to want bigger houses, and more things?”

“Not at all. However, just because you did not make a wrong decision does not mean you made a good one. See Justin, essentially, all we really want is to be happy. It is foolish to believe anything else. We want to surround ourselves with things that make us feel good and safe. People that are unhappy are very fond of saying that money does not buy happiness. This is a false statement, but in order to buy happiness you must first learn what it is that makes you happy. If you don’t know what you want to buy, you will of course end up with something that does not work.”

Justin was angered by the flat, disinterested tone in which this was delivered. And he resented the implication that he had not figured out something that Tom had. After all, it was his life that appeared to be much happier and much more successful.

“You mean to imply that I’m not happy here?”

For the first time Tom looked over at him, and it was a stern glance.

“I don’t think that personal happiness is your priority. You are buying image instead of happiness.”

“Well, of course I’m buying my image! How can one appear to be successful unless it’s in comparison to those around you?”

To this Tom did not answer, but Justin knew it inside himself without being told. He knew that it comes from inside, and that for Tom, his appearance and image to others didn’t make a lick of difference. He could not feel anything for Tom but spite. How can someone be contented when everyone around him believes that he is a failure?

I must be losing my mind, Justin thought. I’ve wasted almost my whole day thinking about trash like that. He passed off the incident as just one more in a long line of strange moments and conversations that proved Tom’s superiority complex. Their friendship had never been the same afterwards, even though nothing had changed about Tom. Justin felt like he had gotten a reprimand he did not deserve.

He did not think of Tom for the rest of the night. He lay back in his chair, sipping at his drink. During one of the commercials he crunched some numbers in his head. He figured that after state and federal taxes, he had made about eight hundred dollars during the day, and the most difficult part of the workday was the ride to the office. He smiled with a sense of pride, thinking that if nothing else, a good measure of a man’s success was how much money he could make doing nothing.

When his shows were over and it was time for bed, he was a little tipsy – as

always. He had trouble falling asleep without the help of the alcohol. He brushed his teeth and clambered into bed, deciding to shower in the morning. He lay motionless in his bed, thinking over his day. He thought of the long, tedious drive to work, the pointless, pride less job, the insolent secretary, the angry ex-wife, the estranged daughter, the boring evening, and finally the drug-induced stupor with which he ended his day. I'm just a regular guy, he thought, with a regular life. I'm living the American dream and I have the chinks to show for it. He has no right to criticize me. Look at my life, he thought with a smile; it speaks for itself.

Justin fell asleep in the blank contentment reserved for those who have just found the loophole in reality.

Far away from the great city, deep in the mountains of Montana, Tom was also turning in for the night. He had slowly savored his dinner of noodles in a chicken cream sauce, and then cleaned himself meticulously in the river, downstream from his camp. He'd packed all his belongings up carefully, and strung them from a tall lodge pole pine, to protect from the grizzlies. He crawled into his tent and snuggled up inside his sleeping bag, and thought of his friend far away in the East.

He wondered how Justin was doing, and wondered, as he always did, why he just never seemed to understand. Tom did not feel pity for his friend; he had always felt that pity was an emotion that only the weak could feel for the fallen. He knew that Justin had the strength to change, but he did not have the will. He thought back on his day, and how he spent his life.

He was exhausted after an extremely long day of trudging up and down mountains. He had two days of food left, and three days till the next town. He had six dollars in his pocket. He would have to work for his food once he reached the town. He smiled, thinking of how exciting it was going to be to trade his skills in the next mountain town for the money he'd need to travel for the next month. He'd lived like this before - it was why he'd developed the basic industrial and survival skills that he had. He knew there'd be something for him to do - there always was.

Tom fell asleep in the self-assured contentment reserved only for those who know they are capable of living happily in the present, knowing that his legs and his mind would see him through the next day.

With Apologies to James Thurber

David Boehnlein

In 1939, James Thurber published what is probably his best known short story, The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, in which the mild-mannered protagonist imagines himself in a variety of heroic roles. One role that Thurber overlooked, however, is that of a high-energy physicist and so, with apologies to the late Mr. Thurber (and physicists everywhere), I have taken it upon myself to expand Walter Mitty's horizons. This story, of course, is a work of fiction and any resemblance of its characters to any real person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. - DJB

Professor Walter Mitty strode into the control room to find a group of baffled-looking physicists studying complicated graphs on computer screens and staring perplexedly at the control panels of the world's most powerful atom-smasher. As one, they looked up as Mitty surveyed the group with a cold, gray eye. A white-haired man in the center of the room put down a computer printout and exclaimed, with evident relief, "Mitty! Thank Heavens you've come!" The speaker was none other than Dr. Leno Letterman, the Nobel prize-winning director of the National Atomic Laboratory. It had been in this very control room that Letterman had discovered the tiptop quark, for which the atom-smasher was now named.

"I found the preliminary reports most intriguing," Mitty replied. "What does Corny make of them?" Mitty was referring to the laboratory's brilliant but eccentric theoretician, Dr. Cobb, who was known throughout the laboratory as "Corny". Cobb's theories of subatomic particle transitions through suppressed dimensions, such as a fifth, sixth, or even seventh dimension that Einstein had overlooked, were gaining favor among the scientific avant-garde, but still had bugs to be worked out.

"Oh, he's seen them," Letterman replied, "but he's just as mystified as the SUDSY people." The theory of Super-Duper Symmetry, or SUDSY, postulated a set of mirror-image particles for every known subatomic particle and was the chief competitor of the Extra-Special Dimensional theory. At this point an attractive, dark-haired woman spoke up in a beautiful contralto with a slight Italian accent.

"The data do not make any sense, Dr. Letterman. I am hopeful that the Professor, he can help to interpret them." She turned her large brown eyes on Mitty.

"If I am not mistaken, you are Dr. Belladonna DiBologna," Mitty replied. "Your published papers on SUDSY are very edifying."

"I am very pleased to meet you at last, Professor Mitty."

"*Enchanté*", he replied, kissing her hand in the European fashion.

The man sitting next to the Italian physicist, whose squarish face held a pair of shifting eyes and an upper lip with an unpleasant curl, spoke next. "Glad you could come, Mitty," he said in drawling voice that lacked sincerity. "We just installed the dyspepsium in the detector this morning and the data rates have been skyrocketing ever since. It's a bit anomalous, but I think we can work it out."

As Mitty arched his eyebrows, Dr. Letterman intervened. "I believe you know Rodney Rogers, our expert on radioactive dyspepsium?"

"We've met." was all Mitty had to say.

A computer suddenly chimed and a multi-colored chart appeared on the screen. The physicist in front of it studied it a moment and looked up. "Great Scott! The R.O.P.s indicate the V.F.B. amplification from the M.U.X. can't keep up with P.M.T.'s. At this rate we'll be S.O.L. P.D.Q." Mitty recognized Worthington Bruce, the world-renowned expert on experimental instrumentation.

Mitty looked squarely at the director, who seemed to know what he was about to say, though no one else dared to say it.

"Dr. Letterman, it is my opinion that we must make an access to the experimental area immediately."

"But the Tiptopatron is still running, er, it will take time, uh, to prepare." Rodney Rogers was pale and starting to perspire. "We ought to wait until tomorrow."

"Great Scott, man!" exclaimed Bruce, "the dyspepsium is decaying as we speak! With this D.P.S. rate, can it last until tomorrow?"

"Rodney, what's the half-life of the dyspepsium isotope you installed?" asked the director.

Rogers swallowed hard. "Seventeen hours."

"Then it can't wait until tomorrow." The venerable scientist slowly rose, painfully stretching his limbs, and took a deep breath. "If only I were a younger man, I . . .". He turned to Mitty. "Mitty, will you lead access party into the enclosure?"

"Gladly. I'd like to have Dr. Bruce along."

"I'll come. I'd like to put a D.V.M. on the Q.I.E.'s."

"Dr. DiBologna," Mitty continued, "your knowledge of SUDSY might help to provide an insight, but I must caution you that there may be some danger involved. The hazard analysis shows . . .".

"I have read it. Even so, I will go with you!"

"And I'll need someone who knows how the dyspepsium is installed."

"Rodney will go with you," said Letterman, scowling at the man who seemed to be trying to make himself invisible.

Mitty surveyed his team with an appraising gray eye as each gathered the items they would need for the hazardous and technically complex access to the experimental enclosure of the Tiptopatron. Worthington Bruce filled a small toolbox with arcane instruments, Belladonna DiBologna collected her notes, and Rodney Rogers assembled the heavy dyspepsimeter. Mitty slipped a single item into the pocket of his lab coat and led them to a massive steel door. His voice rang "We're going through!" and he pushed it open, leading his team of

scientists forward toward the Unknown. The door swung closed behind them and for a moment, the only sound that could be heard was the faint *ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa* of the world's most powerful atom smasher. Bruce took out an instrument that Mitty recognized as a "woodchuck", a radiation sensor named for the creatures purportedly used as radiation monitors in the lab's early days. It was quiet for a few moments as they proceeded down a long, dank concrete corridor, when suddenly, the Tiptopatron went *ta-pocketa-pocketa-queep! pocketa-queep!* and the dial on the woodchuck glowed yellow.

"The radiation monitor!" shrieked Rogers. "It's going berserk!"

"Get hold of yourself, man!" snapped Mitty. "The radiation levels aren't dangerous - yet." The admonition did no good. Rogers' eyes rolled in panic as he screamed "We've got to get out!" and it was clear that he meant to bolt with the dyspepsimeter and leave them there. Quick as striking snake, Mitty lashed out with a right jab that landed squarely on Rogers' jaw. He staggered backward as a horrified feminine gasp and an exclamation of "Great Scott!" echoed down the access corridor. Rogers shook his head and his eyes came to focus on Mitty as if seeing him for the first time.

"Th-thanks, Mitty," he stammered. "I - I needed that."

"Any time." Mitty replied. "Are you able to continue?" Rogers nodded weakly and Bruce exclaimed "Lucky you didn't K.O. him. Lead on." Mitty turned to the delicate Italian physicist, whose limpid brown eyes were shining up at him. "With you, Walter, I am not afraid."

They reached the experimental hall without further incident. There the huge particle detector sat at the focus of the Tiptopatron's beam. The squat mass of lead shielding surrounding the dyspepsium was flanked by rows of spiraling glass tubes through which colored sparks floated upwards, with an array of cables, wires and fiber optics coiling toward an array of steel racks in a complicated series of cable-tied bundles. Mitty took it in at a glance and reached for the intercom to the control room. "Leno, I need full power to the low-beta modules!" Turning to direct his colleagues, he barked "Bruce, deploy the voltage controls! Rogers, insert the dyspepsimeter probe! Belladonna, set up the mass plot for 132.7 Giga-electron-volts!" As they set to work, the Tiptopatron went *ta-pocketa-queep-queep* and the woodchuck dial glowed red as Rogers called out "Mitty! The probe is jammed! What shall we do?"

"Great Scott! We can't repair that without an L.I.M. and there isn't one nearer than the D.A.B.!"

"Stand aside!" called Mitty as he strode toward the detector, taking from the pocket of his lab coat the object he had placed there earlier, a Swiss Army knife. He opened a peculiar-looking accessory on the knife and used it to adjust some set screws on the face of the detector near the probe, then strode to a nearby rack to make some adjustments with yet another accessory. "Now," he called out, switch the polarity of the magnetic field!" Bruce and Rogers were too stunned by the unexpected command to move, but Belladonna siezed a large switch with both hands and pulled with all her might. *Queep-queep-queep!* echoed throughout the hall as the glow from the woodchuck faded and the mass plot glowed brightly on the computer screen. Every gaze was riveted on the

figure.

"Great Scott! The D.P.D.T. is A.O.K.!"

"Can it be?" murmured Rogers.

"Walter! It is a SUDSY signature - but inverted!"

"As I suspected. Corny was partly right, as were you. It is the Super-Duper particles that make the extra-dimensional transitions."

"Mitty," gasped Rogers in awed astonishment, "you've discovered SUDSY and Extra-Special dimensions in one blow!"

The next month's meeting of the Nobel committee in Stockholm would now be a mere formality. As they returned to the control room, the joyous chant was spontaneously taken up: "Mitty! Mitty!" Belladonna cheered him silently with her shining brown eyes, as Leno, Corny, Bruce and the entire staff all called out his name. Even Rodney Rogers' voice seemed to stand out, calling "Mitty! Mitty!"

"Mitty!" Walter Mitty opened his eyes to see Rodney Rogers standing in front of his desk, looking rather annoyed. "Mitty! I've been asking you about that quality plan I told you work on two weeks ago. Isn't it done yet?"

"Er, no, but it's coming along," Mitty explained. He hated working on quality plans. "You see, Worthington wanted some documentation on . . .".

"Well, finish it up soon! That's a very important document to have in our files."

"Yes, I'll have it soon." said Mitty to Rogers' back. Rogers was out of the office almost as soon as Mitty had begun speaking. He took the unfinished plan out of a drawer and placed it on top of a growing stack of paper on his desk. The stack was no longer neat, in fact it was more of a mound, becoming a mountain.

Mitty adjusted the hood of his parka and gazed upward at the snow-covered crest of Mount Everest with a cold, gray eye as he told the sherpa, "I'll be going without oxygen."

Every Breath I Take

Bakul Banerjee

The latch on the wrought iron gate is worn smooth with many years of use. I cannot help myself but rattle the latch twice. It used to be the signal to my mother to let her know that I was going out. This childhood habit came back to me, even when I returned after gaps of many years. My mother is not here anymore to acknowledge me with her booming voice. At least, it was booming to me. For the first time, she is coming to see me, not my mother, nor my sister. I know that because my mother died some years ago and my sister moved away. My childhood home is resting silently behind me draped in various shades of magical twilight. " I will be watching you, I will be watching you ...", the song, that I heard a million times, is floating out of my living room. Waiting for Akashi is also another habit of mine that I cannot shake. She is coming after all these years. Just like that. I did not have to ask her to come. I am not dreaming, I hope. Yet, why am I afraid to pinch myself?

She called last evening wishing to return the books that I loaned to her father. She mentioned something about discovering them while cleaning out his papers. She wanted to come here. I suggested visiting her, but she would not let me. It is exactly five o'clock now. She appears around the bend of the road right before the bridge, floating through the cool light of the evening. Punctual as always. Sitting high up in the mountain, my little town in a quiet corner of India is already in slumber. The winter solstice is not very far away. It rained earlier. The town is bathed by a peculiar wash of ultramarine blue after light of the sun. Hills around me are catching occasional orange gleams. About an hour ago, the already weak sun disappeared beyond the dense fir forests standing tall around the town.

I did not expect her phone call. She took down precise directions to my home, although she remembered the general location. Careful forever, she verified the details. She is walking briskly. Her purse is dangling by her side. She is clutching the books under her arms. This business of carrying books - will it ever end for her? I am glad that she asked the car driver to wait beyond the corner by the river. Navigating familiar streets of her childhood by herself is just her thing to do. She is hesitating now, deciding whether to take the main street or the side street to the right. Both streets are equally narrow now. If I could, I would yell at her signaling to come my direction. But, my vocal cord is jammed. Not a single word is coming out of my mouth. Through out my life, same thing happened every time I tried to talk to her. In her presence, I could only manage to shake out fragmented sentences. At this distance, she will not be able to see my waving anyway.

There is something oddly familiar about her navy blue cotton sari with golden border. I have not seen such saris for years. Didn't she wear the same

sari, the last time I saw her with her mother? That was years ago. Wasn't I in my late teens then? She was only a couple of years younger to me. So long ago, it was. Her father, my mentor, was energetic and alive then. I always felt a need to be near him to talk things out. I pretended to visit him. Or was it just to see her? It was a sunny morning. Akashi was getting ready to leave for college. Just like all other days, before I could talk to her, her mother executed her familiar interception. I was trapped and led into her kitchen where she prepared the morning meal. It was her method of keeping me away from her. Akashi smiled at me briefly, but kept moving through the few rooms. Soon, she left the house to catch the bus for college. At that point, I said, "Auntie, see you later." and rushed out to follow her to the bus stop. As always, I kept a safe distance from Akashi. Akashi's mother was watching me from the porch, while scanning for her neighbors watching me. I knew it even without looking back.

She is crossing the old bridge over the perky mountain stream. A tall, steady, figure draped in the blue is moving through the silence through the deep purple shades hovering around tiny wooden homes and shops lining the street. Fluorescent shop lights are making her face invisible. The air is pure and rarified. Timid light bulbs are popping up around the hills. It is like the Christmas decorations of my far-away home in the northeast corner of America. No, it is not really like Christmas. It is like the open-air fall wedding I attended last fall. Yes, it was held at a park by the ocean. Like that evening, the autumn air is saturated with many expectations.

The feel of the curves and wiggles of the old street hugging its way through the surrounding hills always remained a happy memory to me. Her confident walk through these curves is making the battered street glorious. I can tell that she is not making eye contacts with anybody. It is not the custom here. Young girls, in groups of twos and threes, are passing her by. They are always busy, either buried in deep discussions or in giggles, nothing in between. Her walk, with long strides and head held high, is also out of place here. In her sturdy, comfortable shoes, she came up the hill effortlessly. She is only about one hundred yards away from me now. Just inside the gate, my legs are shooting roots through the cement block. I need not walk behind her anymore.

Sunlit mornings witnessed many brief moments of my nearness to her, particularly. The bus stop near the old bridge was my favorite haunt. It was the easiest place for me to capture her. The scent of the sandalwood soap lingered around her. But, her scent from the last day stayed with me for all these years. The fragrance of sandalwood was overpowered the smell of the starch and burnt metal from the golden border from the freshly ironed blue sari she was wearing. Akashi was all mine, but my vocal cord was not. It is best that I forgot the nonsense I told her.

The background behind her is coming into focus. There are some newer homes, probably built after tearing down the old building that became unsafe to live in. The street is dark now. The air is cleaner than ever before. Yellow dots of the streetlight are getting brighter.

I played her mother's games of interceptions well. Beyond the boundaries of her mother's home, I followed her everywhere. For years, I followed Akashi to the

bus stop. She acknowledged me with her easy grace whenever I managed to make any eye contact with her. Now, Akashi is at my door and following me. I can touch her thoughts behind her smiling face. But, why the gap is not becoming any shorter? I feel my face fracturing into smiles of thousand pieces. I wonder why it hurts so much! My legs feel like those sturdy columns holding up the veranda but cannot carry me any more. In freeze frame, we pass through the gate silently. The dim florescent light from the living room is spilling into the dark hallway. The sparse living room is piled up high with books and magazines, spilling everywhere. Why am I seeing my living room through her eyes? It seems the books are jumping out the shelves.

Akashi is hovering over me and talking faintly. I am horizontal now. I can only see her lips moving faintly. She is slowly opening my palm, placing the books on it. Old bindings, with various degrees of termite damages, are falling apart. "Sorry, many overdue books. What will be the fine?" She smiled again. The faint scent of burning metal mingled with the perfume of sandalwood soap is choking me. The refrain from the music is becoming intense. "I will be watching you ..." My blue shirt is becoming all mixed up with her blue sari. All the blues in the world are swirling into a giant bluish silver blanket. It is definitely the standard reflective kind of hospital blanket. "Every breath you take...." That is my music. Somebody is screaming, "He is not breathing! Get a new machine here, quick! This one is not working." "Must be the wire! It is smoking!" The blanket is getting unbearably heavy.

What's in a Dream

Cathy Voit

Last night I dreamed of death again
the men who died I've never known
wielded weapons I've never owned
and lived in foreign lands, yet when

the bullets broke and found their mark
and figures fell to scar the streets
their bloodied brains lay at my feet
in death my kinsmen, cried my heart

Death's path I knew would cross my own
so fast as one 'fear driven' can,
in dread of Death, I ran and ran
till haven reached, at last, a home.

In haste I entered, closed the door
then stopped and stood to breathe relief
which caught within my throat with grief
when seeing there upon the floor

were strewn the skeletons and skulls
of those who'd sometime run before
and thought, "there's safety in these walls"
And thinking this, they closed the door.

Broken Sword

BW Worthel

T'Jaelle Clearbrook lazed against a rough-hewed oak table by the tavern's crackling fireplace. Her broken sword glinted from its shadowy place atop the dark granite mantelpiece. The warmth of the fire made the halfling drowsy. Too many late nights, she knew, but that was a tavern owner's curse. She breathed deep; the fragrance of freshly cut oak and pine still tinged the air. Her eyelids closed. Unconsciously, she fingered the rough scar that ran from just below her right ear down her neck.

Then Gilby, her partner in the tavern, grunted. His head popping up from behind the polished walnut bar as he muscled a large barrel of southern ale up from the cellar.

Her round face flushed with embarrassment, as if caught doing something forbidden. She reminded herself of her work, but instead stared at the sword. She longed to touch it, to strap it at her waist, to feel its weight in her hand. The sword was more a part of her life -- her old life she reminded herself -- than she had ever realized. The broom she held felt awkward in comparison. The pile of dirty sawdust that surrounded her hairy feet seemed even stranger. Her new life wasn't what she expected. "Three months," she said, shaking her head. "Three months and I'm still sweeping sawdust."

The thick oak door opposite the bar opened. A brisk winter wind sliced into the room, blowing her sweepings away.

Sidney Treebottom and his two boys rushed in from the cold and the door clanked shut. Its iron latch slipped snugly into place leaving the wind, gusting coldly out of the north, beating for entrance.

"You ought to let me build you a double entrance, T'Jaelle," said the old halfling. He and his boys hung their sawdust-covered coats on pegs set in the wall near the door. "It gets mighty cold in these parts, if you remember." Treebottom raised his eyebrows, took out a scrap of cloth, and blew his nose. "I can do the work now, before more snow falls, and you can pay me later."

"Thank you, Sidney, but no." She wanted no debts. Or, was it that she just didn't want to finish the tavern?

“And you still haven't named the place.” Treebottom scratched at his tightly curled white beard. “How 'bout the Story Tale Inn.” Treebottom smiled and his boys nodded enthusiastically. “You do tell a good story.”

T'Jaelle grinned and swept the dust off the top of her feet. She stood the broom in a corner behind the bar.

#

As evening drew on, the tavern grew noisy and crowded. Coats and wraps lay on the stairs leading to the unfinished second floor. T'Jaelle and Gilby hustled back and forth trying to keep flagons filled and the fire blazing.

“More than last night,” said Gilby as he passed.

“And more than the night before,” answered T'Jaelle, hiding the relief she felt. She was a little surprised with herself. I could have built this tavern anywhere in the lands of King Gladstone, but there's a comfort in being among my own kind after all these years.

“It's the stories, you know,” Gilby said as he passed again. T'Jaelle stopped. “Your reputation is already growing. See those strangely dressed knobs in the corner. They're from the Iron Hills. That's a full day's walk from here.”

Her smile disappeared. A childhood fear returned, one that hadn't troubled her for years. Gilby never really understood. Her parents had been killed during the last goblin raid before the creatures were driven out of the Iron Hills. Afterward, she lived with friends of her parents.

She remembered their kindness, their gentle ease. Especially since she got into trouble so often because of the tales she told. At first, the stories she made up were about her parents. She tried to keep them alive in her mind and so the stories were tolerated. Later, she made up stories to help hide her own fears and loneliness. Then, as she grew older and bolder, she told other stories, fun stories, fantasies, stories of dragons and goblins, of kings and princesses.

Often, the heroine of her stories was herself or someone like herself, much to the dismay of the shire elders. They said her stories were little more than lies, and that she was a bad influence on the other young. She thought they were angry because she had spurned their sons. They were all fine boys, but they all wanted the same thing. “I just don't want to settle down,” she had told them.

She remembered that last story, the one that got her expelled from the shire. It was about the Goblin King of the north. He had stolen into their shire and took the Elder Byhill's silver goblet. The goblet, she explained during the story, was magical, but only she and the Goblin King knew. A passing wizard had taught her how to sense these things, she explained. As an end to the story, she acted out how she had killed the Goblin with a kick to the knee and a dagger through the neck. Then from a pocket inside her cape, she produced the goblet. “And here's Elder Byhill's goblet,” she said proudly. All her listeners gasped in amazement.

“Lies,” said the village elders who had silently crept up behind her to listen. “Lies,” Elder Byhill cried, “to cover for her stealing my silver goblet! Lies and thievery.”

As the tavern sounds brought her aware, those words echoed in her thoughts. I was young, she thought to herself. And maybe I did make myself the story heroine a few times. And maybe I did steal that old earhair's goblet, but where was the wrong? I didn't intend to keep it.

"I tell you it was great," came a shout above the noise from a nearby table. "She told a story about a boat that wanted to become a fish," and a roar of laughter followed.

"And the night before it was about a thief from Prentor who became a king," called another voice, and more laughter.

T'Jaille smiled, a smile that possibly only Gilby might have noticed -- a smile that was more with her brown eyes than anything -- the feral smile of confidence. I'm no longer a child to be thrown into the wilds by some fool old earhairs who can't tell a prank from a real crime.

The tavern door opened and a group of older halflings marched in. Elders. They stood there with the wind slapping their long blue coats against their legs.

"Shut the door!" she snapped at the silent shire elders. The numbing wind blew through the room, stilling everyone's conversation as much as her shout did.

Feolder Byhill motioned with a jerk of his head. Two elders pushed the door closed.

"Well, Byhill, have you come to try some of my fine southern ale or just to block the doorway?" She mimicked the same tone the great bard Randolf used while playing the fool to King Kelly of Prentor. Of course, Kelly was the real fool. Feolder looked disturbed. His bushy gray-black eyebrows twitched and his thin-lipped mouth grimaced. Too thin for halfling lips, she thought. She almost laughed as she watched him search for something clever to say, shifting his weight from one furry foot to another.

"Yes," he finally answered. With a dark look from Feolder, a table near the door emptied. The halflings picked up their drinks and found other seats or moved to the bar. He took a stool and sat at the end. The others filled the benches on either side. "Some of your fine southern ale," he ordered. Gilby clinked down empty flagons from a tray.

Feolder studied T'Jaille. "Southern ale means that you have deliveries, deliveries that bring men to our shire."

"Yes, but my tavern is on the edge of the shire. Deliveries pose no trouble."

"Men always bring trouble," he sputtered. Many in the tavern grumbled their agreement to this statement; some coughed just to hear their own voice. A few brave souls, who sat quietly at nearby tables, took quick sips of their drinks to hide their silence. The wood in the fireplace settled. A sizzling log cracked sending a bright ember bouncing across the stone apron; its strong fume of pine smoke mixed with the smell of spilled ale.

"Men have often passed through the shire without making trouble. My tavern won't bring any more of them here."

T'Jaille and Feolder stared silently at each other until Gilby brought a pitcher of ale and filled the elders' cups. Feolder turned to his drink, brownish

foam bubbling down the side of his cup. “No, your tavern won’t, but your stories might!”

T’Jaelle’s smile went thin. Her breath escaped in a short sigh. That little-girl fear crept up like a hungry wolf stalking its prey. The room felt suddenly hot, very hot as her fears dogged her.

She step backed, angered that Feolder had said such a thing to her, but even more angered at the instant of fear she felt. Her hand unconsciously grabbed for the sword she no longer wore. Feolder's eyes widened. He leaned over and whispered to Elder Avery. Her hot temper flashed. She wanted to smash this old earhair in his smug face. She wanted to show him she wasn't someone to be bullied.

A voice popped out of the crowded room, “How about a story, T’Jaelle?” Soon this voice was joined by a whole chorus of voices chanting, “Story, story!”

“Story, story,” the crowd continued chanting. Then she recalled something familiar about that first voice and looked for Gilby. He appeared from behind the bar with a tray of empty cups and tried to avoid her stare. As he was trying not to watch her, he tripped sending the cups and tray clattering to the floor. A moment latter Gilby peeked over the top of the bar. Everyone in the tavern, except for Feolder, broke into laughter and catcalls.

T’Jaelle couldn’t help herself and laughed out loud. That cunning knobhead.

Gilby smiled. He hurriedly filled her silver flagon, gathered her pipe and tobacco pouch, and took it all to the small round table by her rocking chair near the fireplace. She stood with fists clenched on her hips. Everyone clapped. Gilby smiled again. She winked at Feolder, who grimaced in return. She made her way through her cheering customers who were banging their cups and sloshing ale on the tables, on their feet, and on the floor.

As T’Jaelle approached her chair, the room hushed. Their eyes grew bright with expectation. Here's true power, she thought, and smiled broadly. “Well,” she said, relaxing into her chair and taking her pipe. “What sort of story would you like to hear?”

“Something funny,” answered someone.

“A love story,” called out someone else.

“How about a story about you,” shouted Feolder from the back of the room, “or, how about a story about your sword?” he said pointing up.

She followed his glance towards the sword. A faintly glowing mist surrounded it. There's a story to tell there, she thought to herself. Not a story I’ve ever told, but a story I know well. She sat quietly for a moment and listened to the crackling fire, listened to the stories it told in smoke and flame and ash.

“This story is called Nob and the Evil Wizard.” She sat back and took a sip of her ale. The story took life and began to beat like a small, trapped bird wanting to fly. But she held it still, taming it like something wild she'd put through its paces. When she was sure she felt the story from beginning to end, she took another sip of ale and let it fly.

#

Many years ago in the southern kingdom of Lekchester, King Gladstone ordered his son to marry the Princess Mayflow. The marriage was a political convenience. Its offspring would merge the two strongest families in the southern realm and strengthen the kingdom.

Prince Sandor, though an obedient son, wasn't pleased. His life was his own and he enjoyed it that way. "Father," he pleaded. "If I marry this princess, I'll be forced to settle down." He paced back and forth in the throne room as he spoke. "If I'm forced to settle down, who will rid your lands of the goblins that attack us from the south? Who will keep the evil wizard from storming out of his mountain fortress? Who will protect your people?"

But the King had heard this all before. The evil wizard was only a bedtime story to scare children and the goblins never left the mountains. "You will marry the Princess Mayflow and you'll at least act happy about it! She and her entourage will arrive here in a fortnight. You will ride out to greet her." The prince dropped his head and sat on the bottom step below the throne.

"Don't look so sad," the king said. "She's beautiful," he continued, trying to gauge his son's interest. "She's brave," his son's long face lengthened even further. "And her dowry should interest you -- it's the Sword of Lowlands."

This truly did brighten Prince Sandor's spirits. The magical Sword of Lowlands was a relic of the old Empire, a gift of the powerful wizard Egon to the king. Prince Sandor, who was the most skilled swordsman in the kingdom, could see himself regaining the honor and glory of the old Empire with the sword.

Now, far away to the south another was also interested in the Princess Mayflow. High in the mountains where the winds blow cold and some solitary passes stay choked with snow all year, the evil wizard, Relech, sat watching a shallow pool of water as it iced over. "Yes," he croaked, "Yes, I see. You've done well bringing me this news, my little goblin."

The cringing goblin straightened. "Master," it hissed and crept closer. The wizard threw back his heavy grey hood, exposing his balding head. His small pointed nose and his weasel-like dark eyes flicked back and forth over the pool. He puckered his small, gash-like mouth and blew on the slowly forming ice.

"Ah," the wizard said and held his pale, mummified hands over the ice. "Faga, faga, misafaga," he mumbled. Soon, an image of the Princess Mayflow and her guard appeared.

"The Princess is coming near, so near. If I can capture her, maybe I can force her father into trade for the Lowlands Sword." The goblin cringed at the sword's name, long a goblin's bane. "Her father would have no choice." He laughed. "With the sword in my possession, I would no longer be trapped in these mountains." He glared down at the goblin that had inched his way closer to peek into the ice. "Go," he said so forcefully that the goblin scurried for the door before another word came. "Go, and bring me the Princess, alive! Kill the rest."

The early morning sun stretched the long shadow of Prince Sandor and his horse half a league back across the Geroth plain. He rode hard and alone, and the leagues flew by as the sun rose. By noon he was splashing through the sluggish Mioppy River. As the sun turned orange and hovered over the distant

west, he entered the low foothills that reached out from the southern mountains like the limp hand of a dead man.

It was at the tip of the third finger that he found the Princess Mayflow's slaughtered caravan. Enraged, he searched among the dead soldiers and servants. He found wagons filled with blood-splattered silks and satins but no trace of the Princess. But there, in the middle of a great circle of dead goblins, he saw the kneeling body of the princess's champion. In his bloody hand was the Sword of Lowlands. Sandor gently took the sword. The man's sharp exhale, visible in the cool evening air, paused as though eyeing Sandor, and then rose quickly to the heavens; his body slumped to the ground. Sandor raised the sword in salute. He leaped upon his stallion and followed the goblin trail into the mountains.

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T'Jaelle had, during the story, inched forward on her wooden rocking chair until she was sitting unmoving on its very edge with her elbows on her knees. She smiled and rocked back. The movement made one of her listeners kick off his bench, spilling his drink. Others gasped as though they hadn't been breathing. She took a long drink of her ale and re-lit her pipe.

Gilby ran from table to table collecting coppers and re-filling flagons, replacing empty pitchers with full ones positioned behind the bar.

T'Jaelle watched as each table was served. She watched Feolder, who seemed impatient. But for what? she thought. For more ale? or more story? She had glanced at him during her tale and he did seem to be listening, although he tried hard to appear aloof and disinterested. He kept looking at her sword in disbelief. Inwardly, she laughed over what must be his discomfiting thoughts. Is that the Lowlands blade? Could it possibly be?

She caught Feolder's eyes as they shifted from the blade to herself. She smiled as their eyes met. He jerked his head away and took a drink too quickly. The ale sloshed up his nose. He hacked and coughed as another elder slapped his back. Nervous laughter flitted through the room. The cold tension caused by the elder's presence broke. The room warmed as her patrons laughed and muttered to each other.

Gilby finished his rounds and nodded to her from behind the bar. T'Jaelle took a sip of ale and began a slow rock. The wood grated on the granite apron of the fireplace. She blew a smoke ring that mushroomed as it drifted away until it hit a ceiling beam and dispersed, and then she continued.

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Prince Sandor rode into the southern mountains. He rode hard following the goblin trail.

Elsewhere, deep in the mountains, an odd group of companions stood at the rock-strewn base of an ancient fortress. Its imposing grey walls erupted from the living stone. Olaf Undingun, a dwarf, swore softly under his beard. "No human could have built this. Impossible."

"They were an ancient race and they had wizard help," said Kenton, a tall swarthy human with a scarred left eye that seldom looked in the same direction as his right eye.

“Suppose there's any of ‘em left?” asked Bullock, a red-bearded bear of a man.

Kenton frowned at the big man, “Look at this place, Bullock. It's been eons since anyone's been here. Look at the walls, they're falling down. Use your head!”

“So what we do, Kenton?” Bullock snarled back. “Just walk up the winding road and bang on the front gate?”

“You fool! I didn't say no one was there, just not the mountain warriors who built the place. There's probably goblins.”

Bullock smiled. “Good.”

Kenton shook his head in disgust. He pointed at a wet, rusty streak that snaked up the rock cliff. “There's a sewage hole up there, and that's how we'll get in.” He pulled a coil of fine silk rope out of his pack. “Well, come on Nob,” he said to the young halfling who was the fourth in their group. “This is your job.”

Nob stared up the cliff, unable to guess how far up he'd have to go. He remembered how he'd boasted, “I'm the best rock climber in all the northern hills of Prentor.” Now Nob wished Kenton hadn't believed him.

Sighing, Nob hung the rope over his head and arm, reached for a handhold and pulled himself up. “Well,” he reached for another hold, “If I live through this it'll be a great story.”

Painfully slow, he clung to cracks and crevices, inching his way up the granite-layered rock. Sweat trickled down his nose. The sun was a crimson color on feather-like clouds in the west when Nob pulled himself onto the slim ledge bordering a small, iron-grated cave. He sat panting, wondering what was beyond the foul-smelling bars. His arms trembled with fatigue. He tried to grab a loose rock with his fingers, but they cramped and the rock slipped away.

Nob grabbed another pebble, this time cupping it in his hand. He tossed it at the iron gate. It clinked off a bar and dropped inside. “No magic,” he sighed thankfully. The iron gate, though rusted, still looked strong. Nob grabbed the bars and yanked to make sure of its sturdiness.

“Caw,” came the startled cry of a raven as it dove out of the cave. “Caw, caw,” it screeched, flapping and fluttering around Nob's head. He hung onto the grating, eyes pinched shut and shoulders hunched to protect his neck. One of the raven's wing feathers touched his ear and his roughly cropped hair. Chills prickled their way up and down his spine. The raven circled twice then flew off to the east squawking its displeasure. Nob shivered and opened his eyes. He tied one end of the rope firmly to the grating and let the other end drop. Soon the rope stretched taut and the knot he had learned as a child cinched up.

Olaf climbed up and steadied himself on the ledge. He wrapped a thick black string around one of the iron bars and pulled it back and forth. Nob stared in amazement as the bar slowly turned red and the bitter smell of hot metal swept past. Olaf grinned and blinked his eyes.

“Look out below,” Olaf hollered as the bar fell free. It clanged off the cliff. A shrill sound echoed back from the mountains to the north. “I guess that wasn't a good idea,” he whispered to Nob. Nob, whose heart beat like a snared rabbit,

said nothing. He sat very still and watched the valley below swirl in a black nothingness. As the peaks sparkled in crimson, he pledged, "Never again."

After the others had climbed up, the dwarf lit a torch. He led the way into the foul-smelling mountain hole. Both Kenton and Bullock struggled through the passages bent over. Bullock often had to turn sideways and drag his pack to squeeze by. The tunnel branched off several times, but the dwarf led confidently, always following the largest passage, always heading deeper into the mountain.

He stopped when the torch flames snapped brighter. Its smoke curled and drifted up a slimy, moss-blackened hole. Bullock took the torch. Kenton took one of his pouches and sprinkled some sparkly-dusty thing on Olaf.

"Verti flu," whispered Kenton.

Nob's mouth suddenly went dry. Magic.

"Estica -- verti flu," said Kenton again, reaching out as if to pick up the dwarf. Olaf slowly floated up the hole. Kenton groaned, holding his arms out while sweat dripped off his nose. The smell of hot metal momentarily replaced the damp stench of the tunnel and then a rope dropped through to the floor. Kenton climbed up, followed by the grunting Bullock. He stuck tight once and Kenton grudgingly used some of the magic dust to break him free. Nob came last.

Olaf took the torch. "North," he said and stomped off. The sputtering of their torch and the scuffling of their boots on damp, sandy stone mixed with the splatter of distant dripping water. Olaf skirted a rusted machine that was taller than Bullock and three times as wide. Rotted, musky chunks of wood lay scattered around like leaves fallen from a tree.

They reached a rough stone wall, blackened with age-old soot. Wide stairs angled up along the wall into the thick darkness. As they clopped up the stairs, a muffled, high-pitched wail knifed into the cavern. It ended abruptly. Nob gasped, choking off his own cry.

Kenton sniffed the air. Nob's heart beat wildly. Why don't we just leave, he wanted to say. Nothing is worth this.

From far up the stairs came the squeak of rusty hinges. A stark gush of light flooded a landing. An old man wearing a dust-grey robe stepped out. His sparse white hair sparkled bright on his head, like snow on mountain tops, with dark caves where his eyes should have been. He folded his pale hands in front of himself like a priest. A raven flew through the door and sat on his shoulder. Kenton mumbled something and a ball of flame shot out. It exploded in a shower of red and blue sparks an arm's length away from the old man.

The old man laughed and, at a flick of his hand, a thousand torches ignited. The cavern's floor rippled with waves of goblins. The old man laughed again and the raven cawed. Goblins poured through the door and down the stairs. "You think I don't keep track of my fortress?" he said. "It's a shame you'll see no more of it than my dungeon."

Olaf cursed and charged up the stairs swinging his axe. Bullock met the other surge with his sword. Nob drew his dagger but kept to the middle near the wall, out of the way. Kenton sprinkled dust from a pouch on himself and floated away, abandoning his companions. The old man on the landing made a

chopping motion. Kenton fell like a drunkard into the goblins and disappeared. Olaf stepped back awkwardly. His head dropped from his shoulders, separated from his body, and bounced down the stairs striking Bullock's leg.

Nob spied an empty iron torch holder on the wall above. He jumped, caught hold and pulled himself up. Bullock cried out. A goblin grabbed Nob's right foot. He kicked free only to have another hand grab his left foot. His fingers were wrenched free and he slammed to the stairs.

A goblin straddled Nob's chest and pressed a serpentine dagger against his neck.

"Stop!" yelled the old man. Nob held his breath. The old man, who now towered above him, wiggled his fingers. "Bring the halfling," he said.

Though obviously disappointed, the goblins carried Nob's limp body through a long hallway and up twisting stairs.

The goblins put Nob on his feet and roughly tied his hands behind him. A door scraped open and a cold wind slapped his face. He stood on the edge of a gigantic flagstone parade ground. To the north, towering cliffs disappeared into the night sky. From the base of the cliff ran a high curtain wall, strengthened at intervals with buttressed square towers. It circled around until it hit the cliff again, which formed its back wall. The wall sheltered many buildings. In the center of the parade ground rose a lone grey tower. The goblins dragged Nob to the old man who stood near the tower. His back was turned, but Nob saw a small red book in one hand. The old man's other hand rippled back and forth above the bashed and crumpled body of a human woman.

Nob stood transfixed as the woman's long brown hair floated with the wind across her once-beautiful face.

The wizard stared hard at Nob. He smiled and said, "Why do you hide what you really are?" Then he laughed.

#

T'Jaelle laughed, baring her teeth and tilting her head like a wolf yapping at the moon. She flipped her head so her waist-length brown hair tumbled over her right shoulder. She usually kept it tied in a ponytail hidden under her cloths, except for rare moments like now. Mouths dropped open and eyes, fearfully wide, reflected the bright fire. Even Gilby, who knew her and the tricks she used to sell ale and take breaks, stood baffled and still.

She sat back and drank her ale, setting her empty flagon on the table. The drink soothed her throat. She was getting hoarse from the many parts she played. Then she laughed her own quiet laugh.

Gilby woke from his trance and rushed for his pitchers, but he had gotten caught up listening to the story. He'd never filled them. Clanking all the pitchers together, he called for the Treebottom boys to help him serve. He filled the pitchers from the keg and soon the boys were hustling between tables, collecting money and spilling as much ale as they poured.

T'Jaelle played with her pipe, puffing out sweet herb smoke in bluish clouds. The image of Princess Mayflow appeared to her as she stared at the pipe's long, gentle curve. There was nothing gentle about the way the Princess

had lain sprawled on that cold parade ground. T'Jaelle shook the image out of her mind. She drew on her pipe until the herb glowed and crackled in its bowl.

The room was quiet. Feolder stared down at his flagon, fingers prayerfully clenched. Are you praying for me? she wondered, or are you praying for yourself?

Gilby filled her cup and lingered for a moment, regarding her long straight hair. She raised a questioning eyebrow at him. Yes, her dark brown eyes replied, most halflings have tight curly hair and straight hair is rare, but no halfling has hair as long as mine, nor as beautiful.

The fire snapped loudly and T'Jaelle motioned for Gilby to turn around. The whole room ogled them like stage-actors in some dramatic scene. She snickered as Gilby swallowed hard and backed away.

She sipped her ale, blew a cloud of smoke in the air, and pictured the wizard's tower. She remembered the rasp of her shoes on the iron spiral stairs as she climbed to the top floor, and how the wizard snapped a cold leather collar around her neck. And she remembered the wizard's room, how orderly everything was, how precise, how unlike anything she expected.

She rocked back and steadied the picture in her mind.

#

"What do you want from me?" The young halfling Nob asked, amazed to be standing unguarded and untied. The old wizard, who was leaning over a leather-bound book that covered a table, looked up.

"Humans are so unpredictable, don't you think?" the wizard asked in a low, even voice. He sprinkled green powder into a jar and stirred. He grimaced. A sickly sweet smell like that of perfumed unwashed bodies filled the room.

Nob studied the tower room. Two open windows faced each other across the room. One looked south into the mountains and the other faced the starry northern sky. She wondered if the princess's body still lay below.

In the center of the room was a circular stairway leading down. They were alone, just herself and the wizard. She darted to the stairs, but before she had gone five steps the leather collar around her neck constricted and she fell to her knees, struggling for air.

"Ha! See. I knew you'd do that. Though the stairs were an uncertain exit, you knew the window was certain death." The wizard held his thumb and forefinger pinched tightly together. Nob's eyes bugged and she tore at the collar. "Yes, I guess that's enough." The collar released.

Nob's lungs burned for air and she gasped for its coolness. She lay on the stone floor coughing, her fingers wrapped around the collar, afraid to let go. The wizard knelt beside her. His skull-tight skin and dark, cavernous eyes showed an unconcerned calmness. His cold, mummified hand held a black ceramic cup.

"Drink this and I'll tell you what I want from you."

Nob took the cup and sniffed at it. Her eyes watered. It smelled minty like evergreens but also bitter. She thought about throwing it in the wizard's face and overpowering him. He was weak; she had noticed how his hand had shook when he handed her the cup. The collar tightened.

"Ah, another lesson."

Nob, who had moved only slightly to ready her leap, settled back to the floor.

“Yes, non-humans learn more quickly,” he said as he stood. “Now, drink the potion!” Nob poured the fluid down her throat quickly. It burned her mouth like cheap wine.

“The woman who jumped from my window was Princess Mayflow. I wanted to bargain with her father for the Lowlands Sword, but she thought I had other plans.” A little goblin rushed into the room and whispered to the wizard. The Goblin looked frightened and clung for a moment to the wizard's side. The wizard pushed him away and walked to the window, peering into the darkness. “Pity I can't see the sword,” he said. “If only my goblins had retrieved the sword when they captured the princess, none of this would have been necessary. They're good at following orders, but . . .” The faint clash of arms and goblin screams rose to the tower. “Out,” he shouted at the little goblin. The creature crawled, then ran for the stairs. “Apparently, Prince Sandor has the sword now and is fighting at my gate this very moment.”

Nob, who had heard of the prince, hoped that he would win through the goblin ranks and save her. She remembered the king's knights, so shiny and brave, as they rode through the shire toward the Iron Hills. Then her stomach knotted and pain swelled through her body. All her hopes vanished.

The wizard watched intently. “The princess is dead now,” he said, “so you must be my princess.” Nob's tunic ripped away and fell to the waist as her shoulders broadened and her waist narrowed. She clenched her teeth against the pain. Her breasts grew large with reddish-brown nipples. The collar dropped to her chest like a necklace as her neck slimmed and lengthened. Her hips widened and her legs grew long and lean, and she struggled while her britches painfully tore away. She pushed the long brown hair away from her face. Her arms and hands turned delicate, graceful, and her skin colored a creamy white. The wizard helped her to her feet. She stood unsteadily, like a newborn fawn, afraid to take a step. The world had shrunk. Her clothes hung tattered around her waist and ankles.

“Put on this dress,” ordered the wizard. “The prince would be very displeased to see you naked.” Suddenly, Nob felt embarrassed. Blood rushed to her face. Her heart fluttered madly. As the old wizard leered at her, a fire of hatred engulfed her fear like dry kindling. Rape wasn't known in the halfling world, but she knew it existed for humans. The fire flared. Awkwardly, she threw on the faded blue dress, struggling with distant hands and shaky legs.

“Good,” the wizard said, “very good.” He turned back to the window. “You're to play the Princess Mayflow. You'll help me in relieving the prince of the Lowlands Sword. If you do, I'll release you and the prince unharmed. If you don't...” The wizard drew his thin dry lips back into a sneer. The collar tightened. Her neck, now thinner and weaker, collapsed like a reed. “If you don't,” he repeated, “this is how you'll die -- despite what happens between the Prince and me.”

Nob fell to her knees, glaring at the wizard.

“Ah, you doubt me? Yes, I can see it in your eyes.” The collar loosened and dropped again to her chest. Nob drank the air in sucking gulps. “Then I give you my word,” he said. Suddenly, a smooth red stone appeared in Nob’s hand, blood red and warm.

Nob had heard of this ancient wizard’s pledge and knew it couldn’t be broken if she accepted. She pursed her lips. “I accept,” she said in a hoarse voice, that was higher and softer and not her own. The hard surface of the stone turned into a bubble of pulsing blood, which she popped, staining a small spot on her hand red. Now, if the wizard broke his word, his heart would burst in the same way.

“It will be up to you to convince the Prince Sandor to give me the sword and save both your lives.” The metal stairway rang out. “Ah,” he said, “I believe the prince has come at last.”

Nob watched the stairway. Up strode Prince Sandor, son of King Gladstone. His coal black hair was slick with sweat. His intense blue eyes and grim smile spoke of death. Blood dripped from many rents in his mail and hauberk. He slowly scanned the room, and when he saw her, he frowned sadly. Nob felt compassion in those eyes, compassion that somehow reminded her of her stepparents.

And then, she saw the bronze Sword of Lowlands. It was smaller than she had expected, leaf-bladed and with no guard. But then its magic protected the wielder. She wept, knowing how she must deceive him to save her own life.

The Prince, hearing her sobs, shouted “For the King” and jumped at the wizard. The blade struck short and flashed blue. The Prince reeled back to catch his balance. And though the blade never touched the wizard, a drop of blood appeared below the old man’s eye and ran down his pale cheek.

The wizard raised a trembling finger and lightning crackled at the Prince. The sword absorbed much of the magic, but not all. A puff of flame burst from the young man’s left shoulder, spinning the young man around. Prince Sandor gritted his teeth and leveled his sword for another attack.

“Stop,” called the wizard, pointing at Nob. “The princess is in my power and I will kill her if you attack again.”

“Your death will stop any killing,” the prince said sharply, and leaped towards the wizard.

“No,” cried out Nob, her collar constricting. “No,” she pleaded.

Sandor stopped in front of the wizard. The air buzzed as though alive with angry bees as the sword’s magic met the wizard’s power. The prince backed slowly to Nob, keeping his sword pointed at the wizard, and kneeled slowly. He took her up and cradled her in his other arm.

“He’ll not harm you or I,” she coughed out. “He wants to strike a bargain.”

“Yes, a simple trade,” the wizard spoke up. “The princess for the Lowlands Sword.”

“You’re misled, Princess. The very moment he has the sword, our lives would be forfeit.” Sandor’s gaze softened.

“No, he's given me his word, his blood oath,” and she raised her bloodstained hand. Desperate, she pulled Prince Sandor close and gazed deeply into his fierce eyes. She lightly kissed his lips.

Prince Sandor helped Nob to her feet. She felt a strange twinge at his touch.

“The Princess will be released, unharmed?” asked Sandor.

“As I've said.”

Prince Sandor started for the old wizard.

“No, no!” he said, shielding himself. “Give it to the Princess. Let her bring it to me! I don't trust you.”

Nob took the Lowlands Sword. And though she was now bigger than a halfling, her arm no longer had the same strength. The sword hung straight down at her side; its carved wooden grip magically adjusting to her hold. The buzzing around the wizard stopped. She inched forward to hand him the blade. The fire inside her raged. Humans are unpredictable, she thought.

Her collar squeezed tight. Her vision blurred. Her inner fire exploded as passion added its volatile vapors. She lifted the point of the sword and plunged it at the wizard's blurring shadow. The sword jerked out of her hand with a sharp ring. The world went from grey to red to black, and breath seemed no longer important.

She prayed the prince was alive. Somewhere, she heard a voice. She thought a god must have heard her prayer. It eased her mind. She stopped her struggle and surrendered to the blackness.

When Nob awoke her face and hair were sticky with blood. Prince Sandor was pressing something to her neck. It stung. “I'm sorry Princess,” he said thickly, “I couldn't let you die. I slashed the collar with the sword. The collar fell free but I cut you deeply.”

“What happened?” Her voice felt fuzzy and odd.

“The wizard smiled when you took the sword. I worried that he had tricked you and both of our lives were lost. He let down his magic shield. But then his smile changed to amazement when you stabbed him. He exploded like a tree hit by lightning and the sword broke.” The Prince kissed her cheek and said softly. “Don't die. My father had said you were brave. You are the bravest woman I've ever met. I've only just found you.”

For a long moment, Nob wished she could remain the Princess Mayflow. She would even have bargained with the wizard, but she felt the changes begin. “I'm not Princess Mayflow,” she rasped out. “I'm just a foolish halfling the wizard used to trick you. The real princess jumped from the window to her death, trying to escape.” Pain racked her body and she blurted out, “Please don't hate me, my prince.”

When Nob again woke she was cradled in Prince Sandor's lap. He pressed a damp cloth to her forehead.

“I'm sorry,” he blushed “You shrunk out of your clothes. I dressed you in a goblin's tunic.” Nob wanted to look, but it was too painful to lift her head. The Prince seemed embarrassed. “What's your name?” he asked.

“My name is...” she faltered, stopped and then reached up for the prince's hand. “My name is T’Jaelle Clearbrook.”

#

Feolder jumped up and rushed forward. “Lies!” he yelled out. “She stole the sword. I've heard that the human king searches for her and the sword even now.” T’Jaelle jumped up and swept her sword off the mantel. She landed feet spread, crouched, ready. Feolder gasped.

The sword caught flickers of the firelight. Fragments of rainbows, like broken glass, cascaded around T’Jaelle.

Two of the elders grabbed Gilby and one put a dagger to his neck.

“Give me the sword,” demanded Feolder. “And Gilby won't be hurt.”

“No. While I have the sword, I'm positive that Gilby won't be hurt.”

Feolder batted at the sword's rainbow sparkles as though they were gnats to be slapped away. His mouth dropped open. “You can't kill me.” He looked nervously around as the tavern's patrons encircled him, the elders, and T’Jaelle.

“If you give me no choice,” she said coldly, though she wondered what her real choices were. “I think the problem is between you and me, Byhill. Not with Gilby or anyone else.”

Treebottom jumped on a table and shouted, “Byhill, you just wait a moment. T’Jaelle's done nothing wrong! What do you think you're doing?”

Feolder drew a long dagger. T’Jaelle struck down, flicking it easily out of his hand and to the floor. She kicked it away. Feolder's eyes opened wide. The one elder holding Gilby dropped his blade and retreated. Gilby broke free of the other and stood beside T’Jaelle.

“What was this all about, Feolder?” T’Jaelle asked, “Why do you want the sword?” she said leveling her sword at him.

“I...I had heard the king was looking for you, probably because you stole the sword,” he stammered. “I thought he might reward me for capturing you.”

T’Jaelle laughed. “You old fool. Sandor is the king!”

Feolder turned pale.

“I'll save you the trouble and visit him myself,” she said. “Maybe this spring. I'm sure he'd love to hear this tale. But in the meantime --” She handed her sword to Gilby. She grabbed Feolder by the collar and dragged him to the door. She tossed him out into the swirling snow. The rest of the elders filed out on their own. “-- maybe it's time for a change here, too.”

The brisk wind seemed refreshing and clean. It woke her in a way she hadn't felt for years. She tracked Gilby behind the bar. He filled a flagon and drank. Then, for the first time, she noticed his emerald green eyes. As everyone stood watching, she pushed the door closed. Its iron latch clanked shut, and her long brown hair settled softly over her shoulders and down her sides.

The Writing Exercise

Bakul Banerjee, David Boehnlein and Dinker Charak

There were three participants in this exercise. Each of them started with writing down a sentence. As soon as they were finished, they passed on the paper to person next to them. The next person added a sentence to passed on page, trying to build up on the earlier sentence(s). In all, that paper was passed six times. On the fifth pass, the writer was asked to conclude the developing story and on the last pass, the person who wrote the first sentence got to give the work a title.

Below are the unedited results of this exercise. Do keep in mind as you read them that authors had just few minutes to think and write the next sentence and add an interesting twist.

The Tradition of Watermelons

The picnic was going on in the full swing.

No pun intended, of course, but the smaller children were calling out to the adults for a push on the swing set as their older siblings arched energetically.

No pun intended again, but the older siblings were behaving as if they were so old that they lacked the energy to join the fun.

Or, maybe they were waiting for the potato chips or trying to extract some money from their parents to go for the canoe ride.

Be that as it may, the time had come to gather everyone from both families for the climax of this annual tradition that kept them close - cutting the watermelon.

As the grandmother sank her knife into the melon she was reminded go the day when she was a child and when on a similar gathering her grandmother had told her that as she watched the grown ups and children do their own thing and yet have a common strand of family run through them she always knew the family would last as long as (in her infectiously humorous style) there were watermelons!

A Sweet Technique

The new boss watched the group carefully as he was introduced, hoping to learn something fundamental about each person present by whether they chose a hard

or soft candy from the dish at the center of the table, or ignored it altogether.

He knew he had new spark of talent he was hoping for when he saw one of them look long at each candy before he chose the one he wanted as compared to others who ran their fingers through the dish, undecided!

The smartly dressed woman with black hair, in her early forties, stayed away from the candy dish altogether.

Although it seemed a trivial basis on which to decide, his instincts had never failed him before and he decided at once that the choosy man focused on detail and the aloof woman, who was taking in the larger picture, or so, it seemed, would be the leaders on the new project.

It was then he noticed how closely the two were watching him and each other, trying best not to be caught doing so and realized however different their responses to the candy dish had been, they were all driven by the same passion for patience and thoughtfulness as he was.

“I hope you won’t mind, but when I was growing up, there were no candies around, and I never developed a taste for it,” the woman said clearly, putting a huge damper on the selection strategy, he learned in the last management training course he had attended.

The Inevitable Realization

“Have you seen my wallet?” he asked.

“No,” Lisa replied irritably as the fear welled up in her heart, “You should really do something about your forgetfulness!”

“It is only a ‘senior moment’,” he replied, but Lisa wasn’t so sure and she thought for the hundredth time about calling a doctor.

He read her thought and felt a surge of irritation inside him on being microscopically examined by a hypochondriac wife.

However, he thought, “Where is that wallet, anyway, and for that matter, why do I need my wallet and was I going anywhere?”

Their eyes met and each with fifty years experience of the other, could read the fear behind the irritation, killing the impending argument as they silently said, “I will stand by you, come what may.”