

Fiction/Drama

1st Place

Once Broken...

by *James Nyland*

The blow was almost sensed rather than felt. Its force flowed, broken, almost like a wave halved by rock many yards from shore, rolling in two parts over the old man, one physical, sending his body toward the muck of the street. The second mental, the thoughts in his mind breaking into many different streams like water on the beach. Flight. Fear. Escape. The journey. The hardship. His lost strength. That any blow could make him fall.

Of course, the cursed tablets didn't help any.

They'd come in a moment of heavenly brilliance, most certainly carved with his hands, but hands seemingly guided from above. They held words that would show his people the true way. A blessing to be sure, but carved out of the hard, heavy stone of that cold, barren, nub of a hill all the same. The initial elation faded, and the old man sat for some time, staring at the tablets, blinking the fatigue from his eyes, waiting. Surely, he thought, after his tireless efforts without shelter, little sleep, and nothing to eat, all sacrifices he gladly endured just to be the tool that brought these sacred words to the world, God would sweep him and the

tablets up in a wave of light to be brought back to his people in heavenly glory.....and comfort. But the heavenly trumpets never sounded. In fact the only sound to be heard was the occasional sigh or creak as the tablets sank a bit more into the earth. He stared, prayed, stared some more, and the tablets simply grew colder, oblivious, as stone always has been, to the concerns of short-lived man. After much time and much glaring, the old man accepted that no angelic chorus would be doing the heavy lifting. So, with what seemed to be his last bits of strength, the man pulled himself to his feet, laboriously threw the tablets to his shoulders, and headed down the mountain.

Within ten steps, his arms were aflame with searing pain. Twenty more and he began to numb from the shoulders down. By the time he weaved drunkenly into camp some time later, most of the trek down was lost in a mind swimming in a stupor of exhaustion. He stubbornly hung onto the tablets, but they drooped dangerously low to the ground, as if yearning to return to the soil. Feet shuffling, head bobbing, the old man staggered near delirium, thoughts muddled, eyes unseeing, pain gone. It was the best he'd felt since he went up that damned.....

One of the tablets jerked violently, as unseen hands attempted to yank it away. The mental haze broken, the man pulled away, clutching the stones desperately. His weak grip loosened, and the tablet slipped toward the unseen thief, so the old man swung his body away, hoping to wrench away through sheer bodily

force, and the momentum made him stumble into an altar. It spewed fragrant smoke and was topped by a carved idol....a bull or calf? The man tried to correct, but he lurched away, nearly tumbling, as more fingers clutched at his tunic. A swirl of sights and sounds....begging hands outstretched, a man and woman in a scandalously passionate embrace, a flaming pyre and the slash of a knife. Then he fell into a booth, there was an angry shout, the smack of a fist in his back, and he was down, mouth full of mud and God knows what else, the tablets strewn out into the muck of the walkway.

“Step in my stall again, old man, and I’ll feed you those stones!”

“But...I...I’m...” the words seemed to be mired in the man’s throat.

“Spit it out, old man. You waste my time!”

“Moses!” the name blurted out like the last cries of the goat that lay on the altar in the next stall. “I’m Moses!”

The younger man cocked his head, paused, and then without changing expression, he tossed the lukewarm tea he’d been sipping absently into the fallen man’s face. He reached out a calloused hand and scrubbed away enough mud to get a look at what lay beneath.

“So you are,” he finally said, sounding a bit disappointed. “We thought you dead.”

Moses numbly stared at the carnal scene that swam around him, unable to take in the reality of it. 40 days. He was only gone 40 days and look at the....

“Pick up your rocks, Moses, and clear my stall!” The vicious edge was back in the young man’s voice. “Others may have something worthwhile to trade.”

The implied threat cleared his mind, and Moses tried to comply, prying the tablets from the mud, only to find the corner of one broken off, gone in the sea of muck. Swiping at it as frantically as his exhaustion allowed, Moses read:

“Commandment number 11 – Make my world...” then....nothing. Moses’ mind swirled crazily. God’s holy word, not to mention days and nights of sleepless, freezing agony, lay broken and scattered under the feet of the passing mob, and Moses felt a desperate panic sweep over him. Everything else suddenly forgotten, he lunged into the walkway, groping, searching desperately. It had to be right here, if only...

“Old man!”

The menace in the young man’s words straightened Moses immediately, the threat within clearing his vision. He turned and saw the man’s hand move under his cloak. He caught the glint of sharpened bronze, and the flash of it was enough to bring Moses to his feet. Ten commandments...eleven commandments. At that moment, the distinction seemed finer than the line Moses’ well-being was hanging on. So, he weakly craned what was left of the tablets out of the mud, and lurched through the crowd toward where he last knew the temple to be, certain that the words he carried would set things right. They couldn’t, after all, get any worse.

Could they?

Fiction/Drama

2nd Place

Just One More

by *Tanner Beauchman*

Characters

Jim

Tina

Bartender

Woman

Kim

Bar extras

(Lights come up. Jim is standing center stage with a beer in his hand.)

Jim: Hello there. You are about to watch a play of my life. So I guess I should introduce myself. Although, I think an introduction is entirely unnecessary. You all have known me at some time or another. (Chuckles) I can tell by the look on your faces that you don't recognize me. You can call me Jim, (pause) and I'm an alcoholic. Now that you are aware of my problem I hope the beer doesn't make you uncomfortable. If it does then we have a problem, because this is the only thing allowing me to get through this. (Lights dim out)

(Lights come up and Jim is at a bar. It is a dark dreary bar and there are only a few people there.)

Bartender: You need another one?

Jim: Yep.

Bartender: The usual?

Jim: Why don't you give me a whisky-diet coke this time.

Bartender: Mixing it up tonight, huh? And what's with the diet coke?

Jim: I've got to keep this figure somehow. (Bartender goes to mix the drink and Jim scans the bar. His attention falls on a table of three girls.) Hey, do you know who those girls are?

Bartender: I've never seen 'em in here before. But I wouldn't mind seeing the blond in here again. That'll be two-fifty. (Jim hands him three dollars.)

Jim: Keep the change.

Bartender: Wow, must be pay day, huh?

Jim: You bet.

Bartender: Who knew there was good money in the gas business?

Jim: Well there is. Unfortunately for me it doesn't trickle down to the guy who pumps it for a living. (Tina, one of the three girls comes up to the bar to order a drink.) You have a customer.

Bartender: What can I do for you?

Tina: Two Zimas, and.....Katie, what did you want.

Katie: Just a coke.

Tina: A coke!

Katie: Somebody's got to drive home.

Tina: Alright. (To bartender) And a coke I guess.

Bartender: That'll be five dollars. (Goes to get the drinks.)

Jim: I'll get that.

Tina: Oh no, I can't let you do that.

Jim: Well, I'm going to. It'll probably never happen again so take me up on the offer. Pay day only comes so often.

Tina: Well, thank you.

Jim: It's my honor. (To bartender returning with drinks.) Here you go.

Bartender: Wow, since when are you mister money bags?

Jim: (To Tina) I told you I don't buy drinks that often.

Tina: (To Jim) Are you waiting for somebody, or are you flying solo tonight?

Jim: I'm captain of the solo flight.

Tina: Well, would you like to come sit with us?

Jim: I wouldn't want to ruin ladies night out.

Tina: Oh no, you wouldn't ruin it. Besides we have a rule. If an attractive man buys us a drink he should at least come sit with us.

Jim: That's your rule, huh?

Tina: Yep.

Jim: Well, I wouldn't want to break the rule. (Standing up) Unless of course the punishment included spanking.

Tina: (Laughs) Who knows where the night will lead, but first I should probably introduce myself. I'm Tina. (They walk towards the table)

Jim: I'm Jim. You know what? Before we sit down I think we should dance.

Tina: Are you serious?

Jim: Yeah. Why not?

Tina: There isn't any music.

Jim: People have always said I march to the beat of a different drum. It turns out I dance when there isn't even a beat. Come on just one dance.

Tina: What the heck. (They begin to dance and Jim starts dancing as if a fast song were playing. Tina just stands there.)

Jim: What's the deal? You don't wanna dance?

Tina: Not like that.

Jim: Well, if you're embarrassed we can slow dance.

Tina: That'll be fine. (They begin to dance, and Jim begins to sing.)

Jim: "*Strangers in the night.*

Exchanging glances." Wondering in-

Tina: What are you doing?

Jim: Singing. Does it embarrass you?

Tina: A little.

Jim: Well, I'm gonna keep singing so if you're embarrassed you should hide your face. My neck would make a great hiding place.

Tina: Like this. (Nuzzles her face in Jim's neck.)

Jim: Perfect. *Strangers in the night. Exchanging glances.* (Lights fade as he sings.)

(Lights come up only on Jim who is center stage holding his drink.)

Jim: Pretty smooth if I do say so myself. I guess you should know that was Jack talking. As in Jack Daniels. I've never been able to talk to women, but give me a few drinks and I'm Don Juan or Super Man. I guess that would make my Kryptonite sobriety. I'm the type of guy to ask you if it's alright to give you a kiss. You'd think some girls would respect that, but most of them just find it really lame. (Pause) Tina was different though. She found my shyness adorable. And when we'd go out and drink she found my artificial courage sexy. She had the best of both worlds. Dating me was almost like dating two guys. You probably see the problem here. Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde. (Lights fade.)

(Lights come up and Jim and Tina are seated at a table at the bar. Jim is very drunk.)

Tina: Are you about ready to go? (Looking at her watch.)

Jim: I think I need another one.

Tina: I don't think so Mister.

Jim: Just one more please. (Makes puppy dog face) Pleeaaaaassseeee.
Tina: Alright you can have one more, but that's it. You got it.
Jim: Why you got to be cutting me off?
Tina: Because you drink too much, that's why.
Jim: You eat too much. Do I tell you when to stop eating?
Tina: WHAT!
Jim: Wait, wait, wait. I'm just saying I love you for who you are. I don't try to fix you.
Tina: I don't eat too much.
Jim: I know, but I'm just making an example. BARTENDER! (Bartender shakes his head and comes over to the table.)
Bartender: What can I get you?
Jim: How about a whisky sour.
Bartender: Alright. That'll be two-fifty. (Jim digs in his pockets for money while the bartender goes to make the drink.)
Jim: (Counts his money, and holds the dollar bill real close to his face to see what it is.) You got a dollar.
Tina: I'm not paying for your drink.
Jim: Come on.
Tina: If you need money maybe you should work a bit more, huh?
Jim: I'm sorry my daddy doesn't grow money trees in his back yards like yours.
Tina: Money trees in his back yards? That's it. If you don't have the money for another drink you are cut off. (Bartender returns with drink.)
Bartender: Two-fifty.
Jim: Alright, let me tell you what. I got one and some change. I come in here all the time, you know that. Can't you help a guy out. (Tina shakes her head to not give the drink to Jim.)

Bartender: Sorry man. You gotta have two-fifty.
Jim: (Stands up and addresses the whole bar.) Alright, listen up. (Tina wants to crawl into a hole and hide.) I, Jim, need another drink, but it appears I have run out of currency. I need one American dollar. If I have to get on this here table and shake my bon bon like Ricky Martin (Rolls the R in Ricky) I'll do it, but I'm pretty inebriated. (says it in-briated) So for my safety please don't make me do that. What'd ya say.
Woman: Here is a dollar, but you're gonna have to earn it. (Gives it to the Bartender)
Jim: And what do I have to do.
Tina: Jim! We're leaving.
Woman: Hey, I paid a good dollar for an innocent dance.
Jim: Yeah sweetie. She paid a dollar for me. I can't disappoint her.
Tina: Jim, do you even hear any music?
Jim: Well, it looks like we're gonna have to sing. What do ya wanna hear?
Woman: Something slow.
Jim: Alrighty, (Woman and Jim begin to dance as Jim sings. The whole bar stares at Jim and the woman.) Strangers in the night. Exchanging glances. Wondering in the night. What were the chances. They would fall in love. Before the night was-
Tina: (pulling Jims arm) Jim, I'm leaving. I hope you realize you are making a complete ass out of yourself. (Storms off) And don't bother coming over to my place tonight. (Exits)
Woman: That was rude of her to interrupt our song.
Jim: (Bartender begins to clean Jim and Tina's table) Don't worry I got another one. (Laughs) Since my baby

left me. Bum Bum. I found a new place to dwell. Bum Bum. It's down at the end of lonely street at-

Bartender: Jim.

Jim: heart break hotel.

Bartender: Jim. (Louder)

Jim: Jeez, people. Can't you see we are trying to dance here?

Bartender: I think Tina forgot her purse.

Jim: Just leave it. I'll bring it to her.

(To Woman) Now where were we?

Woman: You were singing Heart Break Hotel.

Jim: You want me to continue?

Woman: I want to hear something more romantic.

Jim: Romantic, huh?.....Alright here we go. I've been really trying baby. Trying to hold on to this feeling for so long. (Dancing becomes more flirtatious) And if you feel like a do sugar. Come on. Let's get it on. (They kiss)

Tina: (Enters to look for her purse.)

JIM! I knew it. I knew something like this would happen. I leave you for one minute.

Jim: Then maybe you shouldn't have left me here, huh?

Tina: Don't you throw this back on me. I'm not the one sucking face with some bimbo I just met.

Woman: Bimbo!

Jim: Honey, she's not a bimbo. (To woman) You're not a bimbo. And it was just an innocent kiss. Besides you wouldn't suck face with a bimbo unless you're a lesbian honey.

Tina: (Furious) What? I'm leaving. If you wanna talk about this, hell, if you even remember this tomorrow give me a call. Have fun with.....Do you even know her name?

Jim: No, but only because I haven't had a chance to ask her yet.

Tina: Well you have a fun night with her than. (Exits as lights dim out)

(Lights come up and Jim as again center stage.)

Jim: Don't look at me like that. I didn't go home with her. We just talked. She bought me another drink and than I walked.....stumbled home. I thought a few glasses of gin could drown the problem away. I'm sure you've heard that expression before. Drown your sorrows or drown your problems. Well let me tell you, problems don't drown. They can tread water forever or at least 'til morning. I was hoping I would wake up and have no recollection of what had happened. At least then I would have an excuse. A poor one, but an excuse none the less. How could I do that? I finally find a girl who loves me for who I am, and I throw it all away by acting like someone I'm not. I took it pretty hard. How do you deal with losing the love of your life? I can tell you how I dealt with it. I drank. (Lights fade) (Lights come up and Jim is sitting at the bar and is really drunk.)

Jim: Hey, Bartender. Come here.

Bartender: (He is irritated with Jim.) What.

Jim: Why don't you pull me a shot?

Bartender: Pull you a shot, huh?

(Leaning toward Jim) I think you've had enough.

Jim: (Grabs the front of the Bartender's shirt and pulls him close.) I'll show you had enough! (Lets go of him and laughs) I'm just kidding, man. I've always wanted to do that since I've saw a cowboy do it in a movie. The cowboy rode off into the sunset at the end. So if you give me a

shot I'll ride off into the sunset like a cowboy.

Bartender: Alright. I'll tell you what. I'll give you three of my specialties on the house if you promise to ride off into the sunset like a cowboy.

Jim: Now that's more like it. You're a good guy. I'm sorry I grabbed your shirt.

Bartender: Here you go.

Jim: It's blue. Just like me. What is it?

Bartender: It's a Blue Dolphin.

Jim: Blue Dolphin, huh? Here we go. (Takes a shot. Woman waves the Bartender over to the other side of the bar.)

Woman: What are you doing giving him more shots. He can't function the way it is.

Bartender: Don't worry, it's just water with a little blue food coloring.

Jim: Hey, do you remember when you told me I'd had enough? Well watch this. (Takes the last shot.) Still going down like water.

Bartender: You sure proved me wrong. Why don't you ride off into the sunset now.

Jim: That's right, I said I was gonna do that.

Bartender: You sure did.

Jim: Well, I'm a man of my word. (Stands up, but falls straight onto the floor.)

Bartender: Jesus. (Comes around the front of the bar to help him up) Are you alright?

Jim: Just fine. If you could just point me to the sunset.

Bartender: You aren't going anywhere. Somebody help me out. (Bartender and the woman help him up and sit him on a chair.) Is there anybody we can- (Jim begins to fall asleep/pass

out.) Jim! Wake up. Is there anybody we can call to give you a ride a home and stay with you.

Jim: Yeah.

Bartender: Who should we call?

Jim: Tina.

Bartender: I don't think Tina wants to talk to you. Remember that's why you got so drunk in the first place. Who else can we call?

Jim: Call Tina.

Bartender: I'll call her, but are you sure there is no one else I could call?

Jim: No one else.

Bartender: Alright.

Women: Do you know her number?

Bartender: I've had to do this before. You watch him and I'll give her a call. (Walks behind the bar and says under his breath) I don't get paid to babysit. (Lights fade)

(Lights come up and Jim is center stage.)

Jim: Let's just say she wasn't too thrilled to come pick me up. She was even less thrilled to sit with me while I puked in her bathroom. You know, it's funny how things work out sometimes. My drinking pushed her away, but it took me getting really drunk to get us back together. She agreed to stay with me if I agreed to get some help. It took some doing, but I agreed because I loved her. Becoming sober was the hardest thing I've ever done. You think it would've been the withdrawals that got to me, but it was realizations. Being sober meant I had to see my life for what it was. I was a poor college drop out earning booze money pumping gas. Not really the life I had mapped out for myself. I gave sobriety a shot and with Tina by my side I succeeded. I did it because I loved her,

and it was her love that got me through it. I could tell she was still nervous that my problem would catch up with me again. I wanted her to trust me so I made a bold statement. I wanted to show her how comfortable I had become with sobriety. (Lights out)

(Lights up. Jim is no where in sight.)

Tina: (Storming in) Where the hell is he?

Bartender: Who?

Tina: You know who I'm looking for.

Bartender: Oh, you're looking for Jim.

Tina: Stop playing around where is he.

Bartender: He never comes in here anymore.

Tina: He called me and said he was coming here after work. He hung up on me before I could strangle him through the phone.

Bartender: I haven't seen him. If you see him will you tell him I'm happy for him? Although we might have to close up because of the business we've lost.

Tina: Don't get cute. Where is he?

(Jim pops up from behind the bar with a rose.)

Tina: What the hell are you doing back there?

Jim: Hiding from you.

Tina: You better be brainstorming for hiding spots once we get home. Cause when-

Jim: Tina I haven't had a sip of alcohol.

Tina: You expect me to believe that?

Jim: Ask him. (Points to the Bartender)

Bartender: It's true.

Tina: Then what are you doing in the bar.

Jim: So I could show you how far I've come. I can sit in here around all this without having a drop.

Tina: Why would you even risk it?

Jim: I wanted to show you I could do this so you wouldn't have any doubts when I did this. (Walks around the bar to Tina. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a ring box. Then he gets down on one knee.) Tina will you marry me?

Tina: (Pause) Of course I will. (Jim stands and puts the ring on her finger. They kiss than embrace while lights fade.)

(Lights up on Jim who once again is center stage.)

Jim: I know what you're thinking not the most romantic setting for a proposal, but I had to do it to prove to her I was done drinking. Sobriety was great. I went back to school and got a good job at a factory. Everything was going great. But.....who knew just one drink could mess it all up.

(Lights fade)

(Lights come up and Jim stumbles in.)

Jim: Bartender give me a drink.

Bartender: Jim, what the heck are you doing!

Jim: Some guys at the factory threw me a little bachelor party.

Bartender: Where are the other guys?

Jim: Well I told them I didn't drink, but they kept trying to get me to drink. I said sure one drink can't hurt. And after that one I said just one more drink. And I said the same after that one and after that one and after that one and-

Bartender: Jim, so what are you doing here now?

Jim: Well, there was this knock on the door. (Knocks on the bar) They opened the door and there was this chick cop standing there. She came in and turned on the music and started to dance if you know what I mean. I didn't think Tina would've been too happy if she knew I was watching naked woman dance so I came here. (Lays his head down on the bar and rubs the counter with his hand.) Oh, how I missed you.

Bartender: I don't think watching a stripper is your problem right now.

Jim: I know I have to get home some how.

Bartender: Well, I'm gonna call Tina. (Goes to the phone and starts dialing.)

Jim: No don't do that. She won't be too happy with me.

Bartender: (Dials the phone) Tina can you come pick up Jim. Yes, he's at the bar. I guess they threw some bachelor party for him. I'm really sorry. (hangs up the phone)

Jim: What did she say?

Bartender: She's coming to get you.

Jim: Is she mad?

Bartender: What do you think, Jim? Jeez, what are you doing? I know you love that woman and you are gonna throw it all away for this. You were doing so well.

Jim: Just because I drink doesn't mean I don't love her.

Bartender: You promised her.

Jim: I didn't promise her nothing.

Bartender: Are you that stupid. What do you think that proposal was? When you asked her to marry you that was the promise.

Jim: This shouldn't matter. She should love me for who I am.

Bartender: This isn't you. This isn't the person she fell in love with. Yeah

she may have fell for this side of you, but she fell in love with you. Can't you see that.

Jim: Pour me a drink.

Bartender: No.

Jim: Pour me a drink. (louder)

Bartender: I'm not going to serve you.

Jim: Why not?

Bartender: I'm sick of watching you ruin your life. I'm sick of being a part of it. Do you know how sick it made me feel the day you dropped out of school? Do remember that night? You got so drunk you pissed in the corner. Or how about the night you lost Tina. Do you remember that night? Better yet, do you remember the next night. You couldn't even walk out of this bar.

Jim: But she came back to me.

Bartender: You're right she did. That is why you owe it to her to stop drinking. She gave you one chance, and you were lucky to have it. If you love this women you'll do everything you can to fix this. If I was you, the minute she walked in I'd go kiss the ground she walked on and beg for another chance.

Jim: If I wanna drink I'll drink. I'm a grown up. I can make my own decisions.

Bartender: Look where that's gotten you so far. You need her.

Jim: I don't need anybody.

(Tina enters)

Tina: Jim come here. (She sits at a table. Jim goes and sits at the table.) What are you doing?

Jim: The guys got me to have one so I figured why stop there.

Tina: Why? Why would you throw everything away?

Jim: I can make my own decisions, and I want to drink. You can either pull up a stool next to me at the bar up

there, or you can walk yourself out the door. It's up to you.

Tina: You're propositioning me? I don't want to talk to you like this. We can talk it out in the morning. Let's go home.

Jim: I ain't goin'. Like I said you have a choice. You can belly up to the bar or you can walk away.

Tina: (Stands there for a bit thinking and then walks up to the bar.) Give me a beer.

Bartender: What are you doing?

Tina: I know what I'm doing. Give me a beer. (Bartender get the beer)

Bartender: Two dollars.

(Tina walks back to the table and sets the beer down on the table)

Tina: There you go. You have a choice. You can either put that bottle to you're lips or you can come over here and puts your lips to mine. But if you drink that beer I'll walk out that door for good. If you kiss me you have to promise to stop drinking. If that isn't a good enough reason for you to quit then I don't know what is.

(Jim looks down and then up at Tina. He looks right into her eyes then stands up. He grabs the beer and looks at it.)

Jim: Goodbye (Turns his back to Tina and drinks the beer.)

Tina: Jim!

Jim: I said goodbye.

(Tina runs out of the bar crying)

Jim: I'm gonna need another drink. Better yet just give me a whole bottle.

Bartender: You already have a drink.

Jim: I know that.

Bartender: Then why do you need another one.

Jim: It's gonna take a lot of liquor to forget her. (Lights fade.)

(Lights come up on Jim center stage)

Jim: I never drank in that bar again because they wouldn't serve me. But I found new bars to drown Tina's memory. I drank to forget her, but the more I drank the more her memory floated in my head. I'd drink thinking maybe I could stop thinking about her for one night, but instead I'd end up telling my story to a complete stranger. I know it makes them uncomfortable. Most of the time they don't even stay long enough to hear the whole story. So I would like to thank you for staying long enough to hear my story. But if you don't mind I need another drink. (Walks up to bar where there is a new bartender. The bar is completely empty.) Pour me a strong one because I don't really wanna think right now. (Bartender goes to mix a drink) Have I ever told you about Tina?

(Lights fade)

The List

by *Jessi Benike*

Sydney had known what she wanted in a man since she was ten years old. She didn't have a physical description or any ideas about what he would be interested in or what he would do for a living, but there were certain traits that an ideal man should possess and she refused to settle for someone who was less than everything she'd ever wanted. The list began in the fourth grade, after her first girlhood crush had broken her heart.

1. He will always play with me at recess.
2. He will not pull my hair when the teacher isn't looking.

It was a very simple idea when it began. She wanted to have everything written down so that she would not forget what she wanted when she finally met her prince charming. Soon the list began expanding as Syd began doing research to ensure that her list was perfect. She would watch every romantic movie she could get her hands on and add to the list traits she wanted and those that she definitely didn't want in her own love.

12. He will send me shopping with his credit card if I have no money for a dress.
13. He will not drop me on purpose when we go ice skating.

Sometimes she would forget about the list, allowing it to rest in the secret shoebox high on the top shelf of her closet, way in the back. But soon someone or something would touch her

in some way and she would borrow her mother's wooden kitchen stool to add another necessary item.

26. He will send me flowers at school with a note with no name.

As Syd grew up, the list grew up along with her. Before long, items like #17 – *He will always share his colored pencils with me* began to disappear from the list and be replaced by *He will not call me metal mouth*. She looked at the list at least once a week, constantly making sure that it was in line with everything her friends were telling her a perfect man should be. After she got a subscription to her first teen magazine for her birthday, the list got a complete reworking once a month so it would comply with the standards set by each new issue. At times, specific details were added about how he should be.

34. He will have brown hair, green eyes, and a dimple in his left cheek.
35. He will ask me to the Valentine's Day Dance (the one without parents).
36. He will kiss me during the last slow song we dance to and tell me how beautiful I am in my new purple dress.

Such details, however, were often counteracted later on in the list.

42. He will NOT have brown hair, green eyes, or a dimple in his left cheek.
43. He will NOT ask Kelly Walker to the Valentine's Day Dance.
44. He will NOT tell everyone that I look like Barney the Dinosaur in my new purple dress.

After Kelly Walker came over after school one day and laughed at the list, it was cast aside as a childish toy and remained unchanged for over a year. Even though she desperately wanted to amend it, Syd knew that she could not succumb to anything that would be viewed as childish in the eyes of Kelly Walker. So instead she kept the list in her head, making mental notes of things she did and did not want to put on it. The mental additions and deletions went on until she met Jake, and then she could wait no longer. One night, she attacked the list, completely reworked it until she knew it fit exactly the description of the man she was going to marry. She was older now, she thought, and even if the list had been childish before, it certainly wasn't now. She became proud of it once again (even though she still hid it high on the shelf whenever Kelly Walker came over).

Jake was a serious boyfriend. He wasn't like all those crushes and note-passing boyfriends she'd had in junior high. He was the real thing. Jake was a sophomore, and being a year older than her, he was incredibly wise in matters of the heart. He knew how to ask her to come to the movies with him the first time, and he knew just the right part in the movie to hold her hand. He didn't kiss her at the end of the night, saying that he wanted the first kiss to be special, so they should wait. When she returned from their date that night, she floated rather than walked to her room, where the list gained several new requirements.

53. He will be able to drive us to the movie himself, not have his parents drop us off.

54. He will always hold my hand when we watch a movie.
55. He will not kiss me on our first date, a first kiss should be special.

Syd's young heart saw the man of her dreams in Jake. He fit every item on her list perfectly, and if an item didn't exactly fit, it was changed or removed from the list all together. Her notebooks at school began to fill with hearts filled with *Sydney loves Jake* instead of notes about biology. Every thought in her head was about him, and she was sure their love would never end.

They had been together for almost two weeks, and still hadn't kissed. It wasn't that they didn't try, but they rarely had time alone without parents around. One Friday night, Jake said he was borrowing his dad's car for their date, and Syd knew that this was it. She put on her cutest outfit, without looking overdressed of course, and the new flavored lip gloss that she had purchased just for this occasion. She was also armed with several packs of gum in her purse, just in case. Jake pulled up outside her house and honked the horn. She shouted quick goodbyes to her parents as she ran out the door and down the lawn. There was Jake, waiting patiently outside the brand-new sports-car his dad has just gotten from the local dealer. He looked better than ever, in his baggy jeans and brand new white shirt. His blondish hair was gelled to perfection, and the stripe that ran across his shirt matched his green eyes perfectly. Standing there in the glow of the streetlight, she was sure he was her dream man. In her eyes, that

car was a white stallion and the keys that dangled from his hand were his shiny sword; he was her prince charming, come to rescue her and sweep her off her feet. Her heart beat faster as she climbed in the passenger's seat next to him. As they sped off from her parents' house, he looked over at her and told her how great she looked, and she made a mental note to add that to her list. 59. *He should tell me I look great, not beautiful, but great.*

Syd finally looked up at the road after being lost in her thoughts for quite some time, and it didn't look familiar.

"Hey, this isn't the road to the movie theater, is it?"

"No, no it's not," Jake replied with a smooth grin. "Tonight is a special night, so we are going someplace special."

He stopped the car, put it into park and looked over at her, expectantly. As she looked around, she thought to herself that this place didn't seem very special. It looked to her like just another field, though it was hard to make out the exact location through the fog. She could see a few trees close by, so she knew they must be near the lake, but she couldn't be sure exactly where. Jake's hand reached out and took hers softly and she knew the moment had come. She wanted to fight it, she hadn't been expecting this so early in the evening, and she wasn't ready. She hadn't had time to put on a fresh coat of lip gloss and chew two or three pieces of gum. Besides all of that, she didn't want to be kissed in a field in the middle of nowhere. This was not romantic. First kisses came on bridges under the stars, not in cars under a dense blanket of

fog. She tried to turn her head and tried to change the subject, but Jake turned her head back towards his.

"What's wrong, baby?"

"It's nothing, I... I... , I just think we are going to be late for the movie, that's all."

"Baby, we're not going to the movie tonight."

Syd didn't like the look in his eyes. There was a desire there that scared her and suddenly she wanted to be anywhere in the world but in that car with him.

"But, I really want to see it, can we please go? Come on, if we leave now, we can still make it in time for the previews. Let's just go."

"No, honey, I said we aren't going to the movie tonight. Why don't you want to be here with me? Why do you hate me?"

The anger was beginning to creep into his voice and his words were getting faster. He had let go of her hand and was now facing out his own window, looking hurt that she wanted to leave.

"I don't hate you, you know that. I really like you, I just wanted to see this movie, that's all. Please don't be mad."

"Well, why shouldn't I be mad? My own girlfriend doesn't even like me. Who is it that you want to be with, since you don't want to be here with me? Why do you hate me so much?"

"I don't hate you, please, just don't be mad. We can stay, if that's what you really want, just please don't be mad."

The tears were beginning to show now as she pleaded with him not to be angry with her. All she wanted was to be happy and for him to be

happy and for things to be perfect like they had been. This was not the Jake she knew, not the boy she had been going out with for the past few weeks. This Jake was scaring her, and she didn't know what to do.

"Well, you must hate me if you don't want to stay. If you really loved me, you'd want to stay here with me and do what I wanted to do. I always do what you want me to do, because I love you."

"Ok, Ok, I love you too. You're right. We'll stay. I want to, I want to stay here with you. I don't want to go the movie. That was a dumb idea, please let's just stay here, and not be mad at each other. Please?"

"Alright, baby, do you promise you love me?"

"Yes, I promise, just please don't be mad anymore."

"Ok, hon, I am not mad anymore. I just love you so much and I want to be with you right now. Not in some crowded theater, just us alone."

With these words he slid over on the seat next to her and put his hand on her face. She looked up at him with tears still in her eyes, and he took his thumb and wiped them gently away. His face came closer to hers and she felt her eyes close, as though she had no power over them but they had to be closed. As his lips brushed hers, she felt butterflies in her stomach, then as the kiss turned harder and deeper, that feeling turned to make her a little sick. She let him kiss her for a long time, afraid to do anything that would make him angry with her again. When he finally pulled away, she felt incredible relief that it was all over and now she could go home.

She stared straight ahead and waited for him to move back over into the driver's seat to take her home. But he didn't move. Instead, he reached over her and flipped the lever on the side of her seat, putting it all the way back into reclining position. She was so surprised by the sudden movement of the seat that she had no time to react, she just flew backwards with it. Before she knew what to say, Jake was on top of her, kissing her hard now. She was so scared. This was not the sweet, sensitive guy she loved, this didn't feel like how she thought she would be kissed. This kiss was hungry, and she began to realize exactly what was going on and knew exactly what he wanted from her. She didn't know how to react, didn't know what to do. She was so afraid of making him angry again. She decided to just lay there, let him do whatever he wanted to so he would still like her. She knew he wouldn't go too far. Or at least she thought she knew.

She sat straight up on her bed, crying and scared and unsure of where she was. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Syd realized that she was safe in the comfort of her room. She was unsure if what had happened was real or if it had all been a dream. She could still feel his body on top of her, so big and strong, not allowing her to move. She could still feel his hot breath on her neck. She looked over and saw the clothes she had been wearing that night in a pile on the floor and knew that it had been real. She still couldn't believe it and didn't know who to talk to about it, so she went back to sleep. The next night, alone in her room, she got down her list and added just one thing.

63. He will not want to have sex with me until we are married.

She put the list carefully back into secret shoebox, put the lid on it, and put it back on the top shelf. That was all she ever said about Jake. It was over.

Grave Greetings

by *Chantel Molina*

Edith awoke from her nap hesitantly. She could hear the excitement of children's voices coming from outside. She blinked a couple of times to brush the sleep from her eyes, and then rushed towards the window. Four children were outside on the street, playing a game of street hockey. Edith recognized them right away as the children from next door. They were always so rowdy when they got together to play on the street. Next time she saw their parents, Edith would talk to them about their children's ruckus. It's not that she didn't like kids and hearing them play with such enthusiasm. Edith just hated being startled out of sleep, especially when she was dreaming of her late husband. Those memories seem so far away from her now. Yet some seemed fresh, as if they had only happened yesterday.

Henry, her husband, had passed away just last year. She walked into the kitchen, slightly bent over from having rushed out of her chair when she did. Her body ached from old age. She wondered when it would be her time for her body to give out like

Henry's did. She knew she would embrace the day when death came for her. She didn't like being on her own. Sometimes she felt as if she were standing outside of her body, watching someone like her go through the motions of living. Sometimes she wondered if the aches she was suffering were not from old age, but from forcing herself to get out of bed each day to live another lonesome stretch of day. She filled a coffee filter with some decaf coffee and started the machine, and then grabbed the bowl of sugar. That wonderful sugar bowl was one she had received from her husband some twenty years ago. She began to giggle sheepishly at the thought. She could still remember the day Henry walked through the door with it in hand.

"Edi, my dear, where are you? I have a present for you," Henry shouted from the back door. Edith could hear his boots brush against the floor as he came through the door.

"I'm in the living room, working on some knitting," Edith yelled back with surprise. She wasn't expecting him back from work for at least a couple of hours. "I'll be there in a moment," she gasped as she started to put her work down.

"Quick, come into the kitchen," Henry proclaimed in an even more excited tone.

"Don't worry, Henry, I'll get there eventually," she yelled back as she walked into the kitchen casually, wondering the reason why Henry was back from work so early. Had she forgotten their anniversary? No, that wasn't for another month. Birthdays were also months away. It was Tuesday, a nothing special Tuesday for that matter. Edith's eyes widened as

she saw the monstrosity Henry held in his hands. It was round like her other sugar bowl, except a little wider around the outside rim. The color scheme was all wrong. The flashy blues and the orange brown trim combined with an olive green cover made her dizzy. Why would anyone ever pay money for that creation? She would let Henry state his case, and then let him down gently. He would understand that that sugar bowl would look nicer in the garbage than the kitchen counter.

“Remember how you were complaining about your sugar bowl being cracked and how you wanted a new one?” Henry asked energetically.

Edith nodded, not taking her eyes off the bowl.

“Well, you remember Tom from work, right?”

Before Edith could answer, Henry kept talking.

“Well, his wife made him do some cleaning. Wouldn’t you know, she refused to let him keep this wonderful thing.” Henry eyed the bowl with such admiration. “I knew you were looking to get another sugar bowl. It’s not the most beautiful bowl, but it’s not cracked.”

Before Edith could reply, he added one more detail.

“Plus, we all know the only beautiful thing that should be in this kitchen is you,” he said with a handsome smile crawling across his face. Then he gave her that sexy wink, which always made her surrender to his will. Edith could not say no to it now. Henry was so sweet and she knew he meant well. She hugged him assuredly.

“It’s not anything I would have ever gotten myself,” she said uncertainly. “Here, I’ll just put this behind the toaster as a sort of secret that only you or I know about. Since I am the one that is always in the kitchen, I should be the most beautiful object in it.” She smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek as gratitude for the bowl. She would keep it for a while, and throw it out when she got around to getting a new one.

Years later, Henry finally confessed to the sugar bowl being a joke. He brought it home because he wanted to see how she would react to it. He knew it was ugly, but played along as if it was the most wonderful present he had ever given her. Edith was so furious with her husband, that she pretended she loved the bowl from the very beginning. She was sure it matched some part of the kitchen, trying to keep her eyes away from the garbage. She kept the bowl in spite of him.

Now that he was gone, Edith could not bear to part with the bowl. It had lasted twenty years, and did not crack like her others. She played her fingers upon the smooth exterior. It really was a durable bowl, though not lovely in anyway.

The click of the coffee maker interrupted her thoughts. She grabbed her favorite coffee cup from the dish rack. It was just a plain blue coffee cup. She bought it after she had received the sugar bowl from Henry so at least something would match the bowl. She slowly poured the coffee into the cup, letting the steam rise up to her face. It felt nice, though it always fogged her glasses. She set the pot down and cleaned the glasses with

the sleeve of her blue, paisley-print dress. She brought the cup to the table when she was done. Edith heftily shoveled the sugar into her cup, remembering how Henry would always tease her because of the amount of sugar she dumped into her cup.

“You know, if you keep using that much sugar, we won’t be able to afford much else,” he chuckled at her teasingly. “I might have to get another job to contribute to your addiction.”

“I use that much sugar so we don’t need to buy creamer,” Edith proclaimed with her nose in the air. Then she gave a smirk, “plus if I didn’t use as much sugar, I would not be as sweet.” She stirred her coffee as Henry’s face brightened at her comment.

His voice faded from her mind as the tip of the spoon hit the bottom of the cup, making a slight high pitch noise with every turn of it. She took a sip as she thought of the task ahead of her, cleaning out the attic. She had been putting it off for over a year now. Henry and she had planned to clean that attic a week before he passed, knowing it was a horrible mess. Henry always joked that they could just move out of the house, sell it, and have it be the new owner’s problem or surprise, though she knew that they would never have done that. There were too many memories up there that belonged to only the two of them.

Edith finished the last of her coffee and climbed up the stairs to her bedroom to find a change of clothes. If she was really going to go through that attic today, she was going to do it in some grubby clothes. After she had changed, she crept toward the attic,

and pulled on the string to bring the stairs down. The stairs came down easily, easier than she remembered. She thought for a moment that Henry must have finally fixed it. She knew he always talked about it, but this was the first time she had a chance to test it. How she missed the way he used to go on about how he would fix things, but never get to them. It used to annoy her, but now the memory was like a warm blanket to her. She’d rather have that; never having Henry fix anything and saying he would, than to never have him in her life.

She sighed heavily as she mounted the steep steps. They were old, dusty, and protested with every step Edith took. She coughed as she entered the room. It was dark and ominous. The only light that came into the room was from a small window on the far left side. The dust encrusted window morphed the light to make the room look brown, like a sepia photo. She immediately grabbed for the light switch on the corner nearest her, and squinted as the light washed over the dusty room. There were so many objects in the room that she didn’t know where to start first. She scanned over the room and saw an old chest of drawers.

It had entered the room about ten years ago. It had actually been in their bedroom before it was retired to the attic. The decision to store the chest was made when Edith thought their bedroom was beginning to look cluttered. They had to get rid of something, and the chest was the most obvious item. She remembered that they didn’t even take anything out of it before they brought it up because neither of them needed anything out of

it. She thought of all the wonderful treasures that could be in those drawers as she strolled up to them.

Edith groaned as she sat on the floor in front of the old chest. She would start from the bottom drawer and work her way up. She made sure to grab an old box to throw away any old junk that wasn't needed any longer. She slid open the drawer with just a little bit of trouble because the drawer was heavy. She peered inside and saw old papers and other small boxes. Edith thought the papers must have been really old because time had given them a yellow tint. She sifted through them slowly as she put each one into the empty box. Most of them were old receipts from the hardware store or the mechanic. Henry loved to keep everything because he thought there would always be a use for them later. It's a wonder they had any space to move around in the house. Thank goodness for the attic or she'd never be able to have any company because of the horrible mess that would result. She found that there was nothing to keep in that first drawer.

The second drawer was the same, except that it contained Henry's old clothes rather than torn receipts as the first did. Edith quickly got up to find another empty box to put the old clothes in. She always preferred to be organized because it would make it easier for whoever came to pick up the stuff. Maybe she could get one of the neighbor kids to help her, if she paid them of course. Empty boxes weren't hard to find in that attic so she was quickly to the task at hand. She hesitated as she picked up one his shirts. It was a shirt she had gotten him for their first anniversary.

She had gone crazy trying to find him something special, with no luck for their first anniversary. What do you get a guy who has everything he ever wanted with need for nothing more? She'd started looking for a present two weeks before the day. It was finally two days away and she was still empty handed. She knew that Henry would have something absolutely wonderful for her, as he usually did. Finally, she decided on a shirt. It was practical, useful, and even special. It was a red and blue plaid shirt. He didn't have another one like it at the time, and was very pleased with the present. When they had married, their closet was filled with plaid button-down shirts.

Henry had worn the shirt so often; it had holes and stains all over. She could still smell him in it. She folded the shirt carefully and put it in the box, and continued on with the rest of the clothes in that drawer and the one above it.

The top drawer also had clothes in it. Edith quickly got up to get another box for the last of it. This drawer had her own clothes in it. Edith would have no problem getting rid of anything in that drawer because she had more than enough clothes down stairs. She gathered up old dresses and blouses and carelessly put them into the third box. She stopped when she spotted a piece of paper that had been folded up and carefully put in the bottom corner of her drawer. She didn't ever remember mixing papers with her clothes. She picked it up suspiciously, tossing the folded square sheet between her fingers. She was almost nervous to open it. She thought herself silly at the notion and

began to unfold the piece of paper slowly, as not to rip it. It too was old like the papers in the first drawer. Her eyes widened as she saw what the piece of paper contained. It was a letter from Henry to her, dated fifteen years ago. Henry must have hid the letter, hoping she would find it. Her eyes began to tear up as she read the letter.

January 20, 1987

Dearest Edi,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and spirit. I know I don't usually write you letters, but I mean to more often. I know you'll find this a pleasant surprise. I know that I've been working a lot and have not always been around when you needed me. I wish I could change everything. I want you to know that I love and appreciate you very much. I really don't know what I would do without you.

Hey, remember that time we went ice skating in the park? I'm sure you do; it's the only time we ever went. It was our first time on the ice that night. You looked so beautiful in that light pink house dress. I never told you that, but I want you to know that you looked like an angel. Even though the ice was covered with people, I felt as if we were the only two out there; or maybe it was an unconscious wish because I was such a lousy ice skater. Some time I am going to take you ice skating again. I promise not to take you down when I fall as often as I did that night.

Anyway, enough of memory lane. That's not what this letter is about! I am writing this letter to let you know that I love you. You know that already, but I wanted to make it evident. I loved you from that day I saw you in that crowded restaurant. You were with someone else, but I knew that we were meant for each other when our eyes met. I'm just glad you knew it too. Also, I wanted to ask you

out for a date. It seems kind of corny and silly at my age and the number of years we've been married, but I think we should go out. I'm going to be at our restaurant, the one where we met. I'm sure you must remember. I'll have five red roses. The sixth one is hiding in the drawer with this letter. So, seven o'clock...don't be late my love.

Love Always,
Your Henry

Tears streamed down her face as she read the last line. How could she have missed this note? It wasn't well-hidden. She took a deep breath as she rummaged her hand through the drawer. As written, there was a crumpled rose in the far corner of the drawer. It was dried and brittle from the fifteen years of hiding. In fact, not much of the petals remained. Time had crushed its beauty and torn its petals into tiny bits. She brought what was left of the flower to her chest and began to rock back and forth with it. She was so horrible to him that night. She doubted his love for her and accused him of having an affair.

Edith, fifteen years to present day, had been trying to locate her husband. She called his workplace first. No one was in the office, so she got the answering machine. Before it beeped, she hung up and started dialing Tom and all of Henry's other friends. No one had seen him for hours. She tossed up many thoughts in her mind. Could he have gotten into a car accident? Maybe some car trouble? Could he be having an affair? She tossed that thought around for a few minutes in her mind. She had always wondered why Henry was often at work so late all the time. Sometimes it

seemed like they were growing apart. He hardly even said “I love you” to her any more. When they were first together, there wouldn’t be a day that passed where he didn’t say those three powerful words to her. When he did come home, he was always so tired. They hadn’t been intimate with each other in over three months. She drastically tried to get that thought out of her head. Henry would never cheat on her because he made vows to always be with her. He must have stepped out of the office. Edith was sure of that idea. She would keep phoning the office until he came back to answer the phone.

Hours passed, and still no sign of Henry. It was 8:30 in the evening when he stepped through the doorway. He frowned as he saw Edith in the kitchen with the telephone in her hands. Before Henry could say word, Edith rushed over to him.

“Where were you?” Edith shouted out at him. “I’ve been calling so many people as well as your office. I’ve been worried sick. I even called the hospital looking for you. I was afraid you had gotten into an accident. You have no idea what I have been going through, do you? You walk in as if everything were fine. Don’t you frown at me; you better be listening to every word. What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I am really sorry,” he said in a soft voice, “I thought you would have...”

“You thought? You thought?! You never think about how I’m feeling! You come home late practically every evening. You expect me to cook you dinner and clean the house with a fake smile on my face.

How am I suppose to cook you a decent dinner when I don’t even know the actual time you are coming home? You tell me one thing and you do another,” she exclaimed, panting with angered excitement.

“You don’t understand. I have a perfectly good excuse for not coming home on time.”

“You never have a good excuse for not coming home on time,” she interrupted yet again. “What were you doing this time, some extra paper work? Maybe you went to the store to buy your own supplies for work. Hmm...maybe for a few hours, huh? I don’t want to believe this, but I have to know. Are you having an affair?” she screamed as she began to sob.

Henry’s mouth dropped open. “I can’t believe you would accuse me of such a thing. I would never have an affair, you know that.” His voice began to rise with anger now. “We’ve been together for too long for you to think that! How could you even doubt me? I love you so much. I would never jeopardize our relationship. I know that I have not been perfect lately. I never realized my coming home late affected you so much.” His voice began to quiver as he held back the tears stinging his eyes. “I’ll try never to do it again. I can’t lose you. Without you, I’m not me.” Henry could no longer hold back the tears with those final words.

Edith was wrong. She accused him of such a horrible thing. She should have let him explain, and not have gotten so angry without an explanation. She was sure he really did have a good answer for coming home late. She decided she was not going to ask any more about it. He was

genuinely sorry for his behavior. She hoped he would stay true to his words.

“I’m sorry,” Edith said with her eyes cast to the ground. “I am so sorry. I never meant to accuse you of that. I mean, I thought of it,” she said, fumbling with each word. “I shouldn’t have voiced it. I trust you, Henry. I love you and I’m sorry for getting so angry. Let’s not fight any more. Let’s just forget the entire night happened and cuddle in bed.”

With those final words, she ran to him and embraced his large frame. They cried together, but never said another word about it.

Edith remembered that fight well, and started to tremble with guilt. She should have let him explain to her about where he was that night. She didn’t mean to stand him up. She didn’t know about it. Since she never knew about the letter, she must have tossed her clothes aside in that drawer, not really looking for anything besides clothes. When the chest of drawers finally reached the attic, the note had been forgotten. Henry must have thrown away the other roses, thinking she didn’t care about meeting him.

“I didn’t know, Henry,” she yelled out, choking on her tears. “I didn’t know...” she whispered as her tired body fell to the floor. She curled up into a fetal position with the note and the rose held against her bosom. “I would have met you there,” she whispered into the floor. “I didn’t mean to get so mad... I didn’t mean to get so mad. Henry, I love you and I miss you so much,” she said as the tears slowly began to subside. “I love you so much.”

It was all too much for her, and she could barely breathe. A slight

pressure began building in her chest. She thought it must be caused by the dust, so she slowly rose to her feet. She could not clean anymore, afraid of any other surprises she might encounter. She grabbed on to the hand rail to the stairs, took one last look into the room, and turned the light off.

The tightness in her chest grew to a dull pain, and she began to grow short of breath. It must have been all that dust in the attic. Next time she cleaned, she would open a window. Edith thought the best thing for her then, was to rest. She walked slowly into her bedroom, and slipped into a gown, and pulled back the covers carefully. Where Henry would have slept, she placed his note and the brittle rose. She kissed both gently and she pulled herself into bed. She lay, looking at the ceiling, feeling the pain start to worsen. Perhaps she should call a doctor, she thought. She turned towards the note and the rose and decided a nap would do the job. If the pain was there when she woke, she would call a doctor.

“I love you Henry,” she said as her eyes slowly shut for the last time. She took a deep breath, letting it out gradually. “I promise Henry, I’ll never forget your love.” Edith quickly drifted away.

The Burlington Times

November 10th, 2002

Woman Found Dead in House by Neighbor

Yesterday Edith Scranton was found dead in her house. Paramedics say that she died of a severe heart attack.

“She died in her sleep, it looks like,” stated John Arlington, Washington State hospital. “We can tell that because there was no sign of trauma. Also, she was tucked in her bed. Other people stated that she had a sort of smile on her face. I think she knew it was coming.”

Edith Scranton was a woman in her early seventies. She follows a deceased husband, Henry Scranton of Ohio. Neighbors report that after her husband’s death, she kept to herself.

“I hardly ever saw her come out of her house,” said Mattie Sherman, the neighbor that found her in bed. “I mean, I never thought anything was wrong. So many people are devastated after they lose a loved one. I would assume that Edi (Edith) would have been the same. Henry and Edi were so close. They were the perfect couple. I was even jealous of their marriage. It’s such a shame that she’s gone. I wish I would have visited her more. I really meant to.”

Edith was known only by neighbors. With no one to bequeath their house to, it will go to the state. All furniture, including the house will be auctioned off along with other things on December 15th. The auction will be held at the county court house at 1pm.

Obituaries

Mary Stevens, 34, died November 9th She is survived by a husband and two children of six and ten. She was a teacher at the Earlington Elementary School. The funeral is to be held at St. Francis Church on November 11th, at one in the afternoon. A memorial service will also be held at Earlington Elementary School on November 12th at 10 AM in the school gymnasium.

Dennis Murphy, 55, died on November 8th. Friends and family will always remember the friendly giant as a generous care giver. He was a model citizen, caring only about others. The service for Dennis Murphy will be held at St. Teresa’s Episcopal Church, November 11th, at 3 PM.

Edith “Edi” Scranton, 72, died on November 9th, 2002. She was preceded in death by her husband, Henry Scranton, and her parents. She left behind no one. Neighbors will miss her dearly as they say she was a kind hearted woman who was the perfect wife for her husband. There will be no service; however, her body will be laid at Camelite Cemetery between two and three in the afternoon for anyone to pay their last respects.

The Car Accident

by *Bill Schlosser*

“Devon, can we stop at the next rest area? I have to go.” Sarah asked meekly.

“Again? You’ve stopped at every rest area from Fargo to Jamestown! Edgeley’s only another thirty mile. Can’t you hold it?” complained Devon.

“No, I can’t hold it!” exclaimed Sarah. “You know I have a small bladder.”

Devon remarked, “Yeah, it must be the size of peanut!” Devon looked over at Sarah and saw that she was disgusted with his remark.

“All right, I’ll stop again, but don’t take too long. We’ll never get home at this rate!” Devon said.

Devon Williams and Sarah Erikson, two recently graduated students from NDSU, were on their way home to Frederick, SD. They had just left Jamestown and were making good time, despite Sarah’s frequent bathroom breaks. They were in excellent moods. And why shouldn’t they be? It was a beautiful spring day in North Dakota, and the world was at their feet. All of their efforts from the last four years finally paid off. Now they both held Bachelor’s Degrees in Engineering. What more would they ask for? How would they have known that today would be the last day that they would see one another? A devastating event was about to occur. It would leave one of them in the hospital, and the other no longer among the living.

Over in LaMoure, Pete Wolff, a local Hutterite, was being helped out of a bar.

“Tanks for da help. I’m okay. Reaally. I’m finey!” slurred Pete. “I gotta go now. Gotta take tem cows to sell Wishek.”

“You mean, ‘take your cows to Wishek to be sold,’” laughed the bartender.

Pete just weaved back and forth and stared dumbfounded at the bartender. After nearly a minute, Pete turned around and stumbled into his semi. He was obviously drunk. He couldn’t walk, talk, or coordinate his movements. He reached for the ignition switch of his semi and missed. He tried again, and again he missed. On the sixth try he said to himself, “Since when do semis come wit tree ignitor swaytitchouses?!”

He finally got it right on the twenty-fourth try. He then somehow managed to put the semi into gear, get it moving, and maneuver onto Highway 13.

Having left the rest area ten minutes ago, Devon and Sarah were now only two miles out of Edgeley. They were busy discussing their plans for the summer, completely unaware of the danger that lay ahead. Devon was especially preoccupied with the plans he had made for Sarah. He purchased a diamond ring over a month ago and had decided to “pop the question” when they got back to Frederick.

Devon was so deep in thought that he didn’t notice that the black velvet box that contained the ring had fallen out of his pocket when he had hit a large bump on the outskirts of Edgeley. Sarah picked up the box and gasped as she opened it.

“What’s this?!” inquired Sarah excitedly.

Devon couldn’t grasp what had happened at first. He just kept driving, pretending that Sarah didn’t ask the question. Finally, he mustered all of his courage and asked Sarah to marry him. “I know that this isn’t the most romantic place to ask you this, but I guess it’s now or never,” Devon said with a shaky voice.

Devon couldn’t quite understand Sarah’s reaction. At first, a wave of joy engulfed her face. Then, as if on cue, her expression changed to one of fear. Her eyes became wide as saucers and she turned a pasty white color. Realizing that she was staring at something outside the vehicle, Devon turned and looked out the window just in time to see the semi racing at them. The last thing Devon heard was Sarah’s blood-curdling scream.

CRASH! The sounds of screeching tires, breaking glass, and crumpling metal filled the air. Old

Pete had managed to t-bone Devon’s new Dodge Ram at nearly 70 miles per hour. Unfortunately, Devon was driving and took the brunt of the collision. He was pronounced dead at the scene. Sarah suffered life-threatening injuries and was airlifted to Minneapolis.

Pete sustained a small cut to his forehead from a piece of glass. He went to trial and was found guilty of murder in the second degree and manslaughter. He would spend the next twenty years in prison.

Sarah survived her injuries but had to endure ten months of grueling physical therapy. The accident had taken her left foot, and the ability to have children. She will never forget that one moment of both joy and fear. One year after the accident she returned to Edgeley to the scene of the car wreck. There she left the ring Devon had given her, remembering the last day of her old life, and the first day of her new one.

Road

Photography

by *Lauryn Whitmer*



In the Green Room

by *Brandt Wolf*

Setting—the greenroom of an average sized community theater. It is about 30 minutes before stage time.

Characters

Gwen (the diva)

Ted (the diva's boyfriend/slave)

Polly (young stage manager)

Jonathan (minor yet experienced actor)

Darla (minor actor- mother of the bunch)

Christopher (minor actor-dunce of the group)

To start, the three minor characters are in the greenroom bitching about Gwen. She's late again. They are all putting on make-up and doing warm-ups. It is obvious that they get along well.

Jonathan Has anyone seen the reviews from yesterday's show yet?

Darla I think Polly's working on it. Let me fix your tie, dear.

Jonathan Well, I think you were marvelous, darling. This is the best touring theater cast I have ever been on, and I thank you for that, doll. (kisses her nose)

Darla Oh stop. (with a smile.)

Christopher We all did good. Except for...you know.

Darla She does the best she can, with an ego that size. (They all smirk)

Jonathan It's amazing her head can fit through the door! Is she even here yet? She is so inconsiderate! Who cast her anyway?

Darla I don't really know, but I have a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't for

the right reasons, if you know what I mean.

Christopher (ear next to entrance door) Keep it down! I think she's--

(The door bursts open as if it were kicked. The other actors scatter like mice to stage left. The diva enters. She is wearing sunglasses, a scarf and a very large ego is visible. Everyone else pauses for the effect because she expects it. She stalks into the room and is followed by Ted, who is carrying a bunch of bags and accessories.)

Gwen Where are my reviews? (in a very dramatic tone)

Ted Honey, I'm sure they're around here somewhere. I'll find them for you! I'm sure they're wonderful!

Gwen Of course, they always are. I want to see if this "local" critic is good or not.

(Gwen (w/ great pomp and circumstance) sits down at her dressing table.)

Darla I believe Polly is rounding up some reviews for us.

Gwen Us? My dear, when you have had as much experience as I have had, you can expect to have spreadsheets of reviews dedicated to you. Until then, you might want to put those expectations aside.

(Gwen begins to put on make-up. The rest of the cast takes a deep breath and Jonathan silently consoles Darla.)

Jonathan Don't worry about her, she is always like this. Sometimes you just have to take her with a bag of salt, and at other times a large amount of alcohol.

(In the meanwhile Gwen is ordering make-up utensils as though she is a surgeon asking for surgical equipment from Ted as though he is the assistant)

Gwen (Putting on make-up as Ted hands it out.) Foundation (applies

foundation while the others look on in astonishment) Mascara (applies).

Jonathan (Softly aside to others) Looks like Teddy needs an intervention.

Gwen Powder. (applies) (Ted gasps for air after a cloud of powder goes near his face)

Christopher Has needed an intervention. (They all smirk aside)

Gwen Lip liner #5 with the # 2 point. (Applies)

Darla (Sympathetically) That poor guy. He is so sweet, and she just walks over him.

Gwen Eye liner. (Pause) That's another lip liner you moron! Lip stick. (long pause) Ted, I need you to focus! The RED lipstick, not the coral pink fantasy!

Darla Do you think we should help him?

(Polly knocks at door and then enters carrying duffle bag, she sets bag down as the other actors pull her aside)

Jonathan Polly! Hey hon, so, any luck?

Polly Well, yeah, but I really don't think—

Darla Anything good at all?

Polly Yes! You all did great! But I'm a little nervous about, you know... (Ted rushes up to Polly obviously on a mission.)

Ted Polly! Thank God! We need to see those reviews, pronto! (He makes a grab for the reviews.)

Polly Ted, wait! You shouldn't do that!

(Ted waves her aside and starts reading. He does an obvious double-take when he begins to read Gwen's reviews)

Gwen (Screech) TED! (Ted drops the reviews and goes to tend to Gwen)

Ted (Obviously lying) Honey, Polly got the wrong reviews! (Shoves papers back to Polly, Polly drops reviews on ground, Ted rudely pushes her out the door, Polly exits) She's going to go get the right ones. (he wipes his brow w/ relief.)

Gwen That incompetent little buh—

Ted (Interrupting) Honey! Please! She's doing the best she can! She's never had the pressure of working with such a high-profile actress before!

Gwen As far as stage managers go, she is the worst. And of course she has never had the pleasure of working with someone of my profile. It doesn't get much higher (strikes a pose).

Ted Beautiful honey. (as he frames her with his fingers)

Jonathan Does she know she is horrible?

Darla I think somebody should tell her!

Christopher Lets make Ted do it! (They all chuckle. Polly enters the room, and goes to Gwen's divider.)

Polly Sorry the reviews are not in. You know how the local critics can be a little unorganized. Can I get you anything?

Gwen Does it look like I need anything?

Ted But your tea honey!

Gwen Oh yes my tea.

Polly Shall I fetch it for you Gwen?

Gwen You don't have to fetch anything for me. As far as I am concerned, you are dismissed (brushes her away as though she is a fly.) Ted, get the tea!

Ted Sure thing honey. Earl Grey or plantation mint?

Gwen No you fool, I only drink Oolong. If it's not imported it's not for me.

Ted I will be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail. I love you honey (leans over to kiss her forehead, she leans away in disgust.)

Gwen Are you gone yet?

Ted Sorry honey (rushes off-stage glowing.)

(Gwen continues to do vocal warm-ups and make-up)

Jonathan Does he know she has his soul?

Christopher She needed it to replace hers!

Darla You two are horrible! She never had one!

(They laugh hysterically as Gwen suddenly stops her warm-ups and looks at the group, she catches the group off guard by clearing her throat)

(Ted enters carrying tea, trips on Polly's bag spilling tea.)

Christopher Dude. He is so dead.

Gwen TEEDDDDDDDDD! Where is my God forsaken tea?

Ted (Scared as hell) Umm.

Polly It spilled, it was my fault Gwen, I am such klutz. I'm sorry.

(Ted, taken back)

Gwen Polly, if it weren't against the law in this pathetic state, I would disembowel you with a small kitchen utensil, and dispose of your body in the nearest reservoir.

(Polly looks at her shocked)

Jonathan (To Gwen) Now is that really necessary?

Gwen Listen here you twit. Do you know who I am, and what I do for this show? I am this show, without me you would be nothing. (Stomps away to her dressing table, followed by a confused Ted)

Christopher Dude. You're so dead.

Jonathan Does she realize she isn't even the main role in this production?

(They all chuckle)

Ted Would you still like some tea?

Gwen (Crescendos from calm to erratic) Ted, did I ever receive my tea? You ask would I like my tea. The answer is yes I would like my tea you insubordinate fool!

(Ted exits)

Darla She so has him by the (does a gesture)

Gwen (Screams) I HEARD THAT!

Christopher Dude. You are so dead.

Darla (To Polly) Do you know how the house looks yet?

Polly I'll go check on it. (Polly exits)

Gwen (As she walks over to the rest of the cast expecting sympathy) His lack of attentiveness is driving us apart! (Cast looks at each other dubiously)

Darla (Confused) His lack of...? He loves you!

Gwen (Stage sobbing) No, no...

Jonathan You've got him trained perfectly!

Gwen (Surprised and angry) Trained? I've had FISH that I could train better than him.

Christopher What kind of fish?

Gwen That's not the point, you reject! (storms off to her corner)

Christopher (To others) Dude, I just wanted to know what kind of fish it was. (shrug)

(Jonathan and Darla look at Christopher. Jonathan waves hand in front of Christopher's face. No reaction.) (spotlight on Gwen)

Gwen Nobody understands me. I try and I try. The harder I try, the more they pull me back. The more they can't see what I am destined to be. I don't belong here, with this crowd of mediocrity. I deserve better! I deserve more! I deserve to be on the big screen! I'll be the face of all faces, women will

want to be me, men will want to be with me. I don't deserve this! I don't deserve this at all. (head in hands on dressing table) (Ted enters with tea, spotlight off Gwen, rest of cast gathers around Gwen's divider)

Ted All we have left is the Earl Grey! Is that okay? It's just the right temp, and it's even in your favorite mug.

Look honey. (pause) Honey?

Gwen You know I don't deserve this. (Ted looks at mug) I am better than this. These fools are just holding me back.

Ted I know, I know honey. But to get to the absolute top, where you obviously belong, you need to deal with these sort of people (Cast looks at each other in disbelief) You just have to rise above them. Tea?

Gwen No I don't want tea you dupe! I want a cast that appreciates me, and realizes my talents. How am I ever to star with Nicole Kidman when I am here with this group of circus monkeys!?! (Jonathan acts as though he is going to give Gwen a piece of his mind, but the other two push him back stage right.)

Ted You will be with Nicole Kidman someday and I will be right there next to you. (Ted grinning, Gwen rolls her eyes)

Christopher Who is Nicole Kidman? (other two cast members look at him in stupidity)

Darla She was in "The Hours" (Christopher shakes his head vacantly with a glazed over look)

Jonathan "Eyes Wide Shut"? (Christopher continues to shake his head vacantly)

Darla "Moulin Rouge"? (Christopher's face illuminates)

Christopher (Confused) So she wants to be in a musical?

(Other are frustrated and laughing at him all at the same time.)

(Polly enters)

Polly Ten minutes to show time and only thirty-five in the seats.

(cast looks disappointed, Christopher still a blank look)

Christopher That's bad, right?

Darla Yes Chris, that's bad.

Jonathan Why do you think the numbers are down from yesterday?

Christopher (Stupid) Because not as many people came?

Darla Nice try Chris, my guess is the all too impressive reviews.

(All four look towards Gwen's divider)

Gwen (Ted standing right behind her) Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the best actress of them all? (pause) That's right, me.

(cast silently converses while Polly walks to Gwen's)

Polly Gwen?

Gwen This better be good. What do you want?

Polly I just wanted to tell you that it is ten minutes 'til show time.

(Polly attempts to exit)

Gwen And?

Polly I'm sorry?

Gwen The numbers.

(catches casts attention, they congregate on the other side of Gwen's divider)

Polly (trying to act stupid) The numbers?

Gwen The house numbers?

Polly Oh those numbers (under her breath) Thirty- five.

Gwen Only one- hundred and thirty five people came to see me today?

That's odd. I knocked them dead yesterday.

Polly I'm sorry Gwen, ummm, only thirty-five.

Gwen (Irate) Only thirty-five people, I am not going on for thirty-five people. Do you know who I am? There is no way I am going on that stage for thirty-five people!
(Cast mocking her in background)

Darla (To Christopher and Jonathan) Does she promise?
(Three chuckle, meanwhile Polly is trying to tip-toe out of Gwen's vicinity)

Gwen I hate that about this town, the people have no appreciation for my acting. Where are we anyway?
(Before anyone has time to say a location she interrupts) It doesn't matter where we are. Nowhere has taste anymore. The world is going to hell and I am the only one suffering from it. (Crosses her arms and pouts) I am not doing this show.
(Other three cast members smile with enjoyment)
(Polly crosses over to cast)

Ted But you have to do the show, you are the star!

Gwen It's so stressful, being the best.

Ted It must be, darling.

Gwen If you only knew. (Walks past Ted to the rest of cast and Polly) I'm not doing the show today.
(Gwen looks in opposite direction, posing. Cast makes signs that they are pleased then come to realization that she can't be replaced that easily)

Jonathan You can't just go out like this, we can't put on the show without you.
(Gwen pleased with his response)

Darla You are just going to quit on us? The show is in less than ten minutes!

Christopher (To Gwen) That's pretty low dude.

Gwen Low? LOW? You have no idea what low really is. Low is a star as talented as myself being thrown into a cast of nitwits such as yourselves. You disgust me.
(The three cast members walk away talking amongst themselves, Gwen and Ted retreat to her counter area)
(Light bulb goes off in Polly's head; she immediately darts off of stage.)

Christopher What just happened?

Darla Don't worry about it hon, we will tell you when you are older.
(Christopher looks at her pretending to understand)
(Polly Rushes back in holding some sort of documents)

Polly I got it!

Jonathan (To Polly) What is this all about?

Darla So is she going to do the show? It's almost time to go on!

Polly I don't know, it doesn't sound like it. But I have everything right here!

Christopher What is it?

Polly Her contract. If she doesn't do the show, she doesn't get paid, it's that easy. It's signed and dated, this is rock solid. She has to do the show!
(Gwen overhearing this walks out, snatches the contract from Polly and rips them in half and throws them up and the air)

Gwen (Prissy snort)
(Cast furiously looks on as she walks back to her area)

Christopher Does this mean she is not doing the show?

Polly (Shocked) I guess so.

Darla Jon, you should go talk to her.

Jonathan That will be a cold day in hell.

(Darla looks at Christopher)

Christopher I don't wanna talk to her, she scares me!

Jonathan I think that's what she wants, us to go beg her to do the show and I bet it's a sick way of feeding into her ego. She always has to have control over everything. She thinks she is some sort of a Diva. She is a joke.

Darla We can call her whatever we want to but it's still not getting anything done. She is obviously not going to do the show. We need to do something, but what? Should we call it off and hand out refunds?

Polly We can't do that. The people expect us out there.

Jonathan Well Polly, what are you going to do about it?

(Light bulb goes off in Darla's head)

Polly There is nothing I can really do about it.

Darla (Interrupting) Oh yes there is. (Group huddles, lights go off on group as it stays only on Gwen and Ted.)

Gwen I have them wrapped around my little finger. (Evil smile)

Ted How long do you think it will take before they realize how much they need you?

Gwen (Looking at her nails) I am surprised they held out this long. (Pause) Did you ever get me those reviews?

Ted (reaching for an answer) Ahh, no, they... ahh, they forgot. Yea they forgot to write them in the paper.

Gwen (Looking through him with a pause) That's odd. They have the best up and coming actress in the world, in their own home town, and they forget to write reviews?

Ted Yep, that's what happened.

Gwen My reviews are always outstanding. It's great being the best. (Lights off on Gwen and Ted and up on other group.)

Darla Polly, as a stage manager what are your responsibilities?

Polly Well, I make sure the props are in place before scenes, I take care of lighting cues, I make sure people are in their places, I help on book while the actors are learning their lines that sort of thing, why?

Darla You help on lines?

Polly (Not knowing where Darla is going with this) Yea, why?

Darla Would you say you memorize most of the lines?

Polly Yes. It comes quite easy for me.

Darla (Crossing her fingers) Do you have Gwen's lines down?

Polly (grinning) Yes.

Darla Do you have her blocking down?

Polly (smiling) Yes.

(Everyone in group has caught on except Christopher.)

Jonathan (Obvious gleam) Are you guys thinking what I am thinking? (Polly and Darla shake head "yes" conspiringly)

(Polly giddy with delight)

Christopher Yeah, without Gwen... dude we are dead!

(Jonathan slaps Christopher upside the head)

Jonathan (To Christopher) You doof, Polly knows Gwen's part.

Christopher (Still not getting it) So do I.

Darla (Holding Christopher by the shoulders) OK Chris, focus here. OK? (Christopher shakes head yes) Polly knows Gwen's part. (Christopher shakes head yes with a glazed over

look) Gwen doesn't want to do her own part. (Christopher shakes head yes again with same glazed over look) We can still go on with the show without Gwen even leaving the green room. (Christopher's facial expression does not change)

Christopher How? Dude, she can't do her part from the green room.

Darla (Surprised at Christopher's stupidity) Polly is going to do Gwen's part tonight.

Christopher OOOOOHHHHH! Why didn't you just say that in the first place?

(Rest of cast shakes their head in disbelief)

Darla Who is going to break the news to her now?

(Cast looks at each other, all kind of scared, until each set of eyes stop on a smiling Polly)

Polly (Cheesing out) I will do it.

(Polly walks over to Ted and Gwen's vicinity) Hello.

Gwen Have you come to beg for me to come back to your little group?

Polly No.

Gwen (Not listening) Because I am not going to go on for you guys.

Polly We don't need you.

Gwen Not for an audience that size.

Polly OK Gwen.

Gwen So there is no use in begging me. (freezes) What?

Polly Yea, we don't need you.

Gwen What do you mean you don't need me? You guys always need me.

Polly (simply) Nope. (Polly exits Gwen's area)

Gwen (To Ted) Did you hear that?

Ted They can't do that. You are the backbone of the show.

Gwen I know, it will simply fall apart without me.

Ted They will be back.

Gwen They always come back.
(Lights off Gwen and Ted, continue on cast and Polly)

Darla So you want a part? (Polly smiles) You are so in the show!
(Cast all happy for Polly)

Polly I know I know, ain't it great?

Christopher Dude, that's cool.

Jonathan I'm excited for you kid.

Darla What are we waiting for, we need to get you ready!

(In stomps Gwen followed by a confused Ted)

Gwen (To Polly) Where do you think you are going?

Polly Costumes?

Gwen Why?

Jonathan Hey, Gwen? Have you ever heard the saying "the show must go on?"

Gwen Yeah, but she is not part of the show!

(Polly growing frustrated)

Darla Oh, I beg to differ.

Gwen And what are you going to be doing?

Polly I am going to put on a show that you left for dead!

(Cast supports her)

Darla You left us, what makes you think you are still in?

Gwen Because I have a contract.
(picks up the two pieces of the contract in one hand) Right Ted? (While looking back at Ted for support Polly snatches the two pieces of contract and tears them in pieces, smirking while she throws them in the air) Well aren't we just the cute one here? (sarcastic)

Why, you are the cutest little thing since... me. You can't even begin to fill my shoes. You are nothing more than a bad laugh at a good joke.

Darla Gwen, she has already filled your shoes. She is picking up where you let us down. Hell, if it weren't for Polly, we would be exactly what you want us to be... nothing. But you want to know what's ironic, Gwen? You ditched us, now you are the nothing. Now you have nothing and will never amount to anything!

Christopher (A bit razzed up) Yea!

Gwen Do you guys realize that I am this show? Without me you wouldn't be here. Without me this show would have fallen apart already. I want to call you washed up, but that would infer that you had a prime. You are not even a has been, you are a never was.

Darla Listen, you see that mirror over there that you have spent so much time in front of? (Gwen does not react) I think you need to take a long hard look into that mirror and see what you are really made of.

(Cast members and Polly walk off stage shaking their heads and conversing)

Gwen What just happened?

Ted (Pause) (trying to sound sympathetic) You got replaced?

Gwen I know that, you lard brain! But they need me. They are going to come crawling back to me when the show is over and the reviews are in. The producer will probably even cancel the rest of our tour when she does as bad as she is going to do.

Ted Canceling the show--would that be a good thing?

Gwen Of course it would, then I will get the chance be with other actors that don't drag me down, I will be with people that really appreciate me, and recognize my true talents. I will be with actors that really need me.

Ted (Hands in pocket, long pause) Did you ever have a second plan for your life? You know, like if this acting thing falls through?

Gwen (Can't believe what he just said) A second plan? A SECOND PLAN? I'll show you a second plan! I am going to be the single greatest actress in the world and you are asking me if I have a second plan? How dare you Ted! No I don't have a second plan, do you think I need a second plan, Ted?

Ted (Trying to dig himself out of a hole) I was just asking, you know, to try and start a conversation, ha, you say we need to talk more.

Gwen When do I ever say that, Ted? (Heartless) Frankly I think we talk too much. You don't entertain me as much as you once did. I do believe we are growing apart.

Ted (Crushed) What do you mean?

Gwen I mean I am sick of you Ted. (Ted is speechless, Gwen looks in mirror and plays with hair) (Long pause) Don't just stand there you buffoon. (Ted walks stage left, as though he just witnessed the death of his mother)

Ted (Talking to himself) Sometimes I wonder if she really loves me, if she ever loved me at all. She mistakes my kindness for weakness and my compassion for slavery. Why do I stay here with her when there is a world out there for me? I am growing tired of being her slave and never being appreciated or even thanked. (trying to convince himself) But she needs me. She loves me deep down, I know it. I must stay; she needs me as much as I need her. I can't go on without her and she can't go on without me. We are made for each other.(Goes to talk to Gwen)

(Lights out on Gwen's section)
(Lights up on Door)
(Darla enters with Christopher on her left slightly behind her, Jonathan on her right parallel to Christopher hiding a newly fashioned Polly in-between the two guys)
(Polly struts new look, smiling uncontrollably)
Darla You look gorgeous!
Jonathan I have got to hand it to you kid, you clean up really nice.
Christopher (to Jonathan) Dude! She's hot!
(Darla slaps Christopher across the chest)
Polly (change in attitude) You don't think she is going to get upset with me taking her spot do you?
Jonathan She dug her own grave.
(Light off cast and on Gwen and Ted)
Ted Gwen, you didn't really mean what you said earlier did you? You know, about us growing apart from each other and you being sick of me and stuff?
Gwen Ted, I really am not in the mood for this. (Looks in the mirror) LOOK! LINES! You are giving me lines. Are you trying to ruin my career Ted? Because you are doing a damn good job of it.
Ted I never meant to Honey-
Gwen Stop calling me honey! I hate when you call me honey! I think you get some sick enjoyment out of torturing me.
Ted I'm sorry, I didn't mean to.
(Gwen storms past Ted as lights go on entire set.)
(Gwen stops when she sees Polly)
Gwen Well, aren't you little miss thang? Do you honestly think you can do what I do up there? You will feel the heat from the lights, then the

pressure of everyone looking at you, and then...CRACK! You will break down from all of the pressure! You will choke.

Darla Doubtful.

Jonathan Not going to happen.

Christopher She's got her game on!

Darla Are you guys ready?

(they make a circle of the four cast members, lock pinkies with the person next to them then chant)

All "One, Two, Three, Break a Leg!"

Jonathan OK let's go people.

(cast members exit through a door that has yet to be used)

Gwen They really did it. They really went on without me. (Commanding point) Go stop the show Ted, go tell them what a mistake they made! (Ted neglects to move, pisses off Gwen royally) I don't know why I ever pulled you out of the gutter Ted. I should have left you in the hellhole where I found you.

Ted (Contempt) You weren't very nice to them.

Gwen I was just trying to give them tough love, you know, to strengthen them up for the big show.

Ted Gwen, do you realize what you do to people? You walk all over them, every single chance you get and then expect them to adore you-

Gwen I just wanted them to love me.

Ted Nobody loves you Gwen. Nobody can love you. It's because you don't know how to love back. You don't care about people, you use them for your own little games to fit into your ego, (Gwen gasps) that's right, your ego, Gwen. I am surprised your head can fit through the door!

Gwen But Ted-

Ted Don't you "but Ted" me. This is the last straw. For years I have

worshiped you, I envied you, I was your slave, and worst of all... I loved you. I loved you Gwen. (yell) And you treated me like dirt! (Gwen falls to her knees) Oh get off of your knees. Better yet, stay down there, that's how you land your roles anyways isn't it Gwen? (Gwen's face in hands) You are a disgrace to me, to this cast, this production and to acting itself. I am leaving (storming off set) Good bye! (Gwen sees the previous day's reviews on the floor, reads them slowly, reaction on her face lets her know how good she really is)

(Lights out)

(Lights come up on cast entering from curtain call, cast is glowing)

(Gwen in the same place with a blank look on her face)

Jonathan We did great!

Christopher That was excellent!

Darla Wasn't that awesome?

Jonathan (To a modest Polly) You stole the show!

Polly Nah!

Darla Oh yes you did honey. You did superb.

Polly Thank you guys. I really mean it--thank you. I didn't think I really had it in me.

Christopher She is such a natural, I had to work to get this good (smiles sarcastically)

Polly (Joking) I am sure you did Chris! (Cast quickly straightens up as the local critic comes in from the stage area)

(Critic holding a brief case has a serious look on his face crosses over to Polly)

Cylas (Reaching out to shake her hand) Hello young lady. My name is Cylas Gram, I am the local movie and theater critic. (Cast intimidated, Gwen looks like she is going to cry) I just wanted to say you were a very advantageous addition to the cast. I thought your charismatic nature and grace in your stage presence was like that of Bette Davis. I would like to cordially raise the proposition to you as a cast to show a matinee tomorrow at three o'clock. I can guarantee that most of tonight's house will be back, and with the review that I am going to write up, the house attendance should increase ten-fold.

(Cast blown away by the idea)

Jonathan Can we have a minute to discuss it?

Cylas Yes, I have already taken the liberty of running it by your director. (Jonathan scurries the group together, they look at each other and shake their head "yes" simultaneously)

Christopher (To Cylas) We're all over this like flies on sh-

Polly (Cutting off Christopher) He means we will do it!

Cylas Great, I will get the word out about the additional show.

(Cast thanks Cylas as Cylas exits)

(Cast is very excited, converse about their performance as they exit)

(All lights go off except final light remaining on Gwen)

(Gwen looks forlorn as lights go out)

--END SCENE--

Braces

by *James Nyland*

“Incoming!!!”

Clark turned toward the call and saw nothing but swirling smoke, leaping flames, and blurred images moving through the dark. He didn't expect to see more, but the moments before impact, those moments when what was unknown seemed more frightening than what would obviously be, were always the worst, and he thought it better to at least attempt to see what was happening. Even as he searched the murk for what he knew he would never see, he brought his head down and his hands up, instincts attempting to protect what the conscious mind had forgotten. Clark opened his mouth to shout a warning to the others around him.....

And then the beer can hit him flush in the forehead.

It struck with a dull, wet, metallic thud and then bounced down into the dirt.

“Oh man, you moved right into it!”

Clark had started to bring his hand to his head, and stopped in mid motion. That wouldn't do. Not in front of Nellie. One show of weakness and Clark would be hearing about it for weeks. So, Clark simply continued the motion, bringing his hand up high and flipped Nellie the bird.

“What the hell is wrong with you, man?” Clark tried hard to include

both an edge of anger and complete indifference in his voice.

“You looked thirsty.”

The words seemed to sneak out of the corner of Nellie's mouth that was crooked up in a perpetual half-grin. Clark had never known that look to be missing from Nellie's face. As always, Clark's mood almost immediately turned. There was something about Nellie. Maybe it was his constant good mood. Maybe it was his look – height way out of proportion with his weight, graduated, rimless glasses that dominated his gaunt face, hair that always seemed to be blowing in a stiff breeze, even in a dead calm. *Maybe*, Clark thought, *I'm just easy to fool*. It was hard to tell. He simply had trouble staying mad at the guy, even when he was throwing cans of Budweiser at his head.

“Jesus, Nellie, you could've blinded me!”

Clark tried mightily to sound as pissed off as possible, but failed noticeably. Nellie simply shook his head and turned toward the bonfire. Clark fished the beer out of the dirt. It hissed like a snake, punctured by the rocks that covered most of the clearing, and he tossed it absently into the woods.

“This party is dying, man!”

Nellie's voice held the mournful whine of someone viewing something truly tragic, and he turned back to Clark, hands thrown over his head, with a look just as sad.

“It's dying.”

Actually, it had passed to the great beyond some time before, but was lingering right along the lines most of their keggers took. About three

hours of intense group drinking to kick things off. General mayhem, really, accompanied by the requisite loud music and stupid behavior. After an hour or two, the light weights started to filter out, stumbling to their cars and swerving their way home, leaving the folks who felt the fun wasn't over until the beer was gone and the sun was up. Their group. Their gang.

There was Bear; squat, wide, and incredibly strong. He was a lineman for the college football team. There was always a baseball cap on his head and two days work of beard on his face. His muscular frame was covered with a layer of fat, just enough to round him into something soft and comical rather than threatening. He was, as usual, drunk to the point of incoherence, and someone would soon have to be assigned to him to make sure he didn't wander off and pass out where he couldn't be found.

Rock was, of course, nowhere to be seen. Tall and blond, physically striking to the point of being pretty, Rock was never known to end a party anyplace other than the back seat of an available car or empty bedroom with a girl who seemingly had no problem with being used once and tossed aside. Everyone, except Janice, Rock's real girlfriend, knew about his little habit and yet no one thought worse of him for it, and at times, gladly covered for him. Clark himself had casually chatted with Janice, leaning on a doorframe, blocking her from entering. The conversation ended, Clark knocked twice on the door, and a rumpled Rock emerged, followed by a smiling, equally rumpled redhead. He still felt a bit bad about it, but if Rock asked, Clark

would probably do it again. He just couldn't tell you why.

Snake sat by the fire, intense, wide eyed. No one talked to him or strayed within ten yards or so. Everyone was at least a touch scared of Snake. When he was sober, he rarely spoke. His eyes radiated intelligence but they also masked something else. Anger? Hatred? Psychosis? Who knew? No one could look him in the eye long enough to pin it down. Most people quickly became slightly frightened and turned away. When he was drunk, whatever was inside him turned really ugly. He rarely made it through the evening without getting into a brawl, usually with whoever was handy, over nothing in particular, and he seemed to like losing as much as winning. Clark had literally carried him out of places more than once, dripping blood, eyes swollen shut, laughing like a maniac. That same intensity, if you could break through it, made him a friend of unquestionable loyalty. The others tolerated him because of Clark.

Finally there was Hughie. Always happy, always smiling, always the last guy standing. He could out drink anyone Clark had ever met and never actually get drunk in the process. When he came across someone passed out on the floor or in some corner, Hughie gently picked them up and carried them to a bed or couch. When underage girls, drunk past the point of good sense, draped themselves over older guys, Hughie peeled them off, got them dressed, and brought them home. Hughie was the resident "nice guy", and he currently sat by the keg, smile on his face, making sure even at this

point everyone paid for their cup and nobody stole the tap.

Quite the merry little gang. Clark swerved between disgust and joy every time he was with them, which was all of the time.

There was a crash of brush as Rock's latest conquest opted to get to her car through the darkened woods rather than walk half-dressed through what remained of the party. Rock probably should've guided her, but didn't. He instead walked out of the woods and directly to the keg, smoothing his hair and tucking in his shirt as he went. He held out his hand, and Hughie simply scowled and shook his head. Rock held out his hand again, shaking it, not used to being told no, and his voice started to rise. Hughie shouted back, and got to his feet. Snake, broken from his trance, rose from where he was sitting and started toward the argument, fists clinched, an odd grin on his face. Great, Clark thought, another fight. He slowly came to his feet, not really caring if he got there in time to stop what was coming but knowing he had to attempt it just the same.

"We're going across the river!"

Everyone stopped in mid-action and looked toward Nellie. Even Bear, three quarters of the way to a semi-conscious stupor, took note. It was March, after all. Crossing the river here meant wading through it, and although it was mostly open because of the swift current, it was icy cold.

Nellie stood, arms spread as if accepting a revelation, looking out into the dark.

Common sense would dictate that someone would object at that point, but of course, no one did. They didn't even ask why they were about to plunge into frigid, swirling water. Either Nellie's charisma carried the point for the moment or everyone was too drunk to care. The keg was almost dry, the party was over, and there was nothing else to do. Why not cross the river? The logic was crude but apparently flawless, at least to a bunch of guys most of the way through 20 gallons of beer. What they were crossing for apparently never occurred to them. So, they simply grouped together around him and walked silently to the riverbank.

The crossing was loud but uneventful. It would seem, Clark thought to himself with a silent laugh, that, despite being stumbling drunk, they could all handle trudging through the pounding current, but the cold water was a great catalyst for involuntary bursts of profanity. The louder the better. While the others splashed and swore their way across, Clark made a conscious effort to remain silent, allowing the shock of the cold water rushing against his legs to clear his mind a bit. They all clambered up the far bank, their pants legs freezing, their breathing reduced to stuttered gasps. The cold didn't seem to affect Nellie, though. He was, if anything, more excited.

"Right through these woods, guys", he said, starting into the brush, "This is going to be so cool!"

Already two steps in, Nellie was rudely jerked back.

"I'm freezing my ass off here, Nellie."

Rock had a firm grip on his arm and a look on his face colder than the stream they'd just crossed.

"What the hell is going on?"

"There's an old house right through here, man!" Nellie's eyes had gone a bit wild. "It's been abandoned since I was a kid, maybe lots longer! We can party there!"

"Jesus, Nellie," Hughie chimed in, good humor waning but still unable to be outright angry. "We can party back there. We've got a fire and..."

"We can wreck the place."

Suddenly, the mood changed. Bear came to attention, and Snake, previously hanging disinterestedly around the edges of the group, leaned in, listening intently, a malicious look crossing his face.

"What do you mean," Snake's voice sounded like the creaking of an old door, "we can wreck it?"

"It's *abandoned*, man!

Nobody's even been there in a long time. Like, the road to it is gone. All covered with weeds. We could tear the place down and no one would even know. Hell, they wouldn't care even if they did know." Nellie swung his arms around in an exaggerated arch, and his voice took on the same ominous tone as Snake's. "We can do whatever we want!"

That was all Bear needed to hear. He let out a bellow and crashed into the woods. Snake stood unmoving for a few moments. Then the corners of his mouth turned up into something much too sinister to be called a grin, and he turned to follow. Most of the others fell in line, seemingly by default. Clark lagged behind, fighting the urge to simply wade back across the river. He had no interest in destruction for

destruction's sake, but these were his friends. He would definitely hear about it the next day if he didn't join in at least a token way. He stood, torn, for some minutes, and then there was the crash of glass, and the sound of Bear shouting non-words of victory. Sighing, feeling slightly trapped, Clark headed toward the growing noise.

The teacup was delicate.

Etched flowers ringed the edge. Clark held it up to the window, rotating it in his hand, letting the moonlight reflect through the cut edges, amazed it had survived. A picture of a woman, sitting in a garden, lifting it to her lips, enjoying the fine weather and a warm cup of Earl Grey was just forming in his mind, when the cup was rudely snatched from his hand. Clark stood stunned for a moment as the last of the vivid mental image reluctantly fought its way out of his mind, and then was brought back to reality by the sharp snap of exploding glass. By the time he looked, the teacup was just a cloud of fine iridescent particles hanging in the air, and Bear was leaning down to the pile of jumbled glassware on the floor to pick up another projectile. A mason jar this time. He wound his arm like the cartoon image of a baseball pitcher, spinning it in windmill fashion several times, leg high in the air, and then launched the blue-green jar toward the wall. A bit more substantial than the teacup, but no less fragile, it exploded into thousands of razor sharp shards that ricocheted off everything in the room. There was a grunt of satisfaction.

Bear reached again, this time for an old medicine bottle, but Clark's hand stopped him short.

"That's enough, Bear"

Bear looked at him with the same dulled, unfocused look he'd had most of the night, but made no effort to pull away.

"Enough, Bear. Go upstairs"
Expression still unchanged, Bear pulled away and tramped heavily up the steps. Turning back to the pile of glass, Clark picked up the medicine bottle. The label read:

"Mayr's Wonderful Remedy. For ailments such as gastric dyspepsia, torpid liver, colic attacks, dizziness, constipation, and all other problems caused by poisonous accretions that derange the digestive system."

The pile held hundreds of them. Clark felt a knot forming in his stomach.

The noise upstairs suddenly swelled. Clark pocketed the bottle, a sense of urgency suddenly coming over him, and ran up the steps. As he came to the top, the wall to Clark's left suddenly exploded outward, and he was thrown to the floor. A large volume of plaster, thin boards, and choking dust landed on top of him. Rock and Hughie landed on top of that. They were having a great time, until Clark landed several hard kicks on both of them. They jumped up with a yelp, and Clark was on his feet immediately, a hard anger growing in his belly.

"What the hell are you doing?"
Rock and Hughie, despite the blows, stilled grinned, if a bit sheepishly.

"What the HELL are you DOING?!!!"
The smiles vanished. Rock and Hughie's demeanor became tentative, unsure. They both attempted replies at the same time and it produced a weak gibberish.

"Get out of here."

"But Clark, we're just..."

"I said..."

"But Nellie said..."

"LEAVE!!"

A smirk crossed Rock's face and he started to speak, but Hughie, apparently sensing something more than friendly conflict growing, grabbed his arm and pulled him away. They disappeared around the corner at the end of the hallway.

Clark slowly followed, gazing into each room as he went. Old photos, hanging askew. Pieces of furniture. Old cookware stacked in a corner. The bits and pieces of a family's life were strewn about this house, and Clark suddenly felt like a petty voyeur, sneaking peeks at something private and precious. Finally, he came to a larger room, one that seemed more ordered than the rest. Curious, he went in and found piles of girl's clothes. A tiny, delicate lace baptism gown. A larger frilly pink thing, with a bonnet. Everyday clothes. The sizes seemed to stop at what might fit a 10 or 11 year-old. Searching a bit more, Clark found a closet. He opened the door and found, neatly, almost lovingly arranged, sets of leg braces. From a tiny pair, so small Clark couldn't imagine them being of any use at all, they sloped upwards in size, until finally, like the clothing, they stopped getting larger. The biggest pair would about fit his cousin. Jerry was in the fourth grade. Clark picked up a brace and held it. It clicked in a noisy, metallic way as he slowly moved it. Feeling numb, Clark moved one hand into his coat pocket, and rubbed the smooth glass of the medicine bottle. One of hundreds. He raised the brace

and stared at it, Then looked to the pile of clothes. The understanding of what it all meant became clear, and he felt like he was desecrating a tomb.

“What’s up, bud? What’s your problem?”

Clark walked to the closet and set the brace down gently in the exact spot it had come from, and turned slowly, grimly. Nellie stood, hands on bony hips, the same half grin gracing his face. For the first time since Clark had met him, he didn’t find it the least bit funny or engaging.

“You trying to ruin our fun, or what?” Nellie’s voice was friendly but cautious. He obviously wasn’t sure what he was dealing with. Rock, Hughie, Bear, and Snake fanned out behind him.

“Let’s just go, Nellie”

Clark made no effort to leave. He stood blocking the others, as if guarding the room.

“We’ve just started, man!

There’s still tons of...”

As he spoke, Nellie had stepped toward the pile of clothes and reached out as if to pick up the top piece, an ankle length dress made from a dark green tartan plaid. Before his hand touched the cloth, Clark grabbed him roughly by the shoulders and pushed him away with all of his strength. Nellie flew backwards, hitting the wall with a thud, and slid breathlessly to the floor in a shower of fine dust. Everyone stood in slight shock, except Snake. Eyes wide and predatory, hands at his sides, he stepped into the room, over Nellie, and started to raise his arms toward Clark.

Who promptly clocked him right in the mouth.

Everything went dead still. The air, the sound, the motion were suddenly sucked from the room. Snake stood stock still for a moment, and then slowly raised his head to look directly at Clark, his eyes ablaze. He rotated his jaw, once, twice, and then a slight bump appeared on his cheek, and rotated around his teeth as Snake checked for gaps or blood with his tongue. The cool, practiced nature of it made Clark’s stomach sink, but he stood staring back, unflinching. They stood that way for what seemed like hours, motionless, until finally the lids of Snake’s eyes lowered slightly. His muscles relaxed, going almost completely flaccid, and his look changed to one of overwhelming sadness. Without saying a word, he turned to Nellie, picked him up off of the floor, and then slowly walked out the door. Hughie turned and went with them immediately. Rock held on a moment longer, and then he, too, turned and left. Clark listened as they walked down the stairs and heard the thud as they slammed the door. Clark let out a breath he suddenly realized he’d been holding for some time, gave one final look at the braces in the closet, and walked out the door. Standing by the building, he let the sounds of splashing and cursing die and disappear. Doors slammed. Engines revved. Gravel peppered the brush, and he was alone. He stood by the old house until the sun just appeared at the edge of the earth, feeling as free as he could ever remember. A warm breeze kicked up, caressing his face like a loving hand, and as he walked out, Clark was sure he was followed by a metallic clicking and the soft laughter of a happy young girl.

Brother

by *Anita Fossom*

Chad was frantic. “Have you seen Justin?”

“Half hour ago, I suppose. Uh-oh, where do you think he went?”

“Hey, turn down the TV; listen to me! Has anyone seen Justin within the last half hour?” Heads turned slowly towards each other as everyone waited for an answer.

Someone piped in, “Last I heard he and Sharon were talking in his bedroom. Are they still in there?”

“Nope, I saw Sharon leave alone, and I talked to Justin after that. They broke up and he was pissed off. He has been drinking all night; that didn’t help at all. He was talking suicide and shit like that and he went to the bathroom and – Shit! Did anyone take his car keys from him? If he left here and is trying to drive somewhere.”

Justin’s roommate Chad took off through the door to look in the garage for Justin’s car. A couple of other guys followed him outside quickly in search of their drunken friend.

Chad opened the garage door just in time to see Justin punching the rear window of his black Beretta, screaming, “FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!”

Chad noticed the driver’s side window had already been shattered when suddenly Justin’s fist broke through the back window, sending pieces of glass everywhere. His fist was bleeding and there were tears of hurt and anger streaming down his face. He saw his friends and screamed, “FUCK

HER! WHY? WHAT DID I DO WRONG?”

“Someone go call 911,” Chad insisted, holding his hand behind him in the air to tell his friends to stand back and wait.

He kept his distance from Justin as he watched his friend furiously punching at the already broken window. He was trying to stay calm, but his heart was beating rapidly. He had never seen his friend like this before and didn’t really know what to do. He only knew that he didn’t want to agitate Justin any more, and he knew that to do that, he’d have to keep himself calm.

“Justin, come inside. We’ll talk about it in the apartment, okay? We have to clean up your hand alright? Look, it’s bleeding and there might be glass in it.” He and another friend were slowly inching their way towards the Beretta.

“FUCK MY HAND! WHO FUCKING CARES? I DON’T CARE ANYMORE! I’M GONNA FINISH THE REST OF ME OFF ANYWAY, MIGHT AS WELL GO ONE LIMB AT A TIME!” He started walking to the other side of his car with his hand drawn back in a fist ready to smash another window.

“Let’s talk about it. What did she say to make you so mad?” Chad and his friend stopped on the driver’s side of the car, careful not to step in glass or touch the car.

“I don’t know. Fuck her!” He turned his back to his friends and leaned against the door of the car grabbing his fist. “She says she likes me, but she was talking shit about her ex and I guess she wants to fuckin’ be with him for some God forsaken

reason. I don't fuckin' care. Fuck that bullshit!"

"Well, hey, at least the woman talked to you about it first, right? She could have cheated on you with him or something."

"Shit! She probably had this planned the whole time. How do I know if she wasn't with him while we were together? I just met her a month ago."

"I introduced you to her. I know her better than that. I would have never set you up with her if I thought she would do something like that to you!"

"Well, fuck! She's still getting back together with her ex, so it doesn't fuckin' matter anyway!" The sounds of sirens were coming closer. "Are those shitheads coming here to get me?"

"Yeah, they are, Justin. We gotta get you to the hospital so they can take care of your hand."

"Fuck her!" He turned and took one more swing at his car and fell to his knees and continued to cry. The sirens were now right outside, and the lights were flashing through the garage door windows.

Chad went outside to meet the officers and show them into the garage. There were two officers, and the ambulance was just pulling onto the street.

"Are you the party who called in the drunk individual with suicide threats?" The police officer questioned.

"Yes, he's right inside the garage here. He's having girlfriend problems and decided smashing his car windows was going to be the answer. He broke two windows in his car with his fist, so he may need to go to the hospital. He is calming down a bit

right now, so he might come with you willingly. He gets pretty feisty when he is drunk, so we didn't want to take any chances with him."

"Ok. Let's step inside and see what happens. What is his name?"

"Justin Hall."

The policeman walked into the garage, "Justin? Justin, are you in here? This is Officer Johnson talking to you. Where are you?" He noticed the broken windows on the car and the glass pieces all across the floor and in the seat of the car.

"I'm right here." Justin stood up from behind the car. "I am fine, you can go home now."

"Well, Justin, I'm afraid I can't do that. I'm just here to check on you, maybe give you a ride to the hospital to check out that hand. What do you say?" The paramedic from the ambulance stepped into the garage quietly.

"It'll be fine. I just have a cut on it. Chad, tell him he can go home."

"I'm sorry, Justin; I agree with him. You better get that checked out; it's bleeding pretty bad."

"Here's the paramedic. The ambulance is right outside. Let's go out there and see if we can clean it up a bit." The officer's arm was outstretched with his fingers motioning for Justin to come with him to the ambulance.

"Hi, Justin. My name is Marcy. I'd love to have a look at your hand. There may be pieces of glass in it, and you might need some stitches. We need to clean that blood off of there so we can get a better look." She started to walk closer to him, and he lifted up his hand so she could look at it, all while keeping his eyes on the officer.

“Is this your car, Justin?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok. What have you been drinking tonight?”

“I don’t know. Beer.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

“What time did you start drinking this evening?”

“Psh.” Wade shrugged his shoulders, “Seven or so?”

“Yeah. We were watching the basketball game on TV.” Chad agreed.

“Well, Justin, we better take you to the hospital to get an x-ray okay?” Marcy concluded while cleaning off his wound.

“Shit. All right. Whatever.”

“I’ll come with.” Chad volunteered. “Let me go inside and grab our coats and his parents’ phone number. I better give them a call.”

“Ok. You both can ride in the ambulance. Since there won’t be any charges or anything, I am going to leave the rest to the hospital. You have a good evening. Thank you. You made the right decision to call for help.”

“Thanks for coming so quickly Officer...” Chad hesitated.

“Johnson.”

“Officer Johnson. Thanks again!” Chad ran inside and grabbed a jacket for Justin, and then one for himself. He was flipping through the phone book looking for the Halls’ phone number.

“I’ll be back later. Umm, I don’t think you guys should be here when we get back. I don’t think Justin will want to face you all. Sorry. Thanks for understanding though. See you guys tomorrow!” Chad sprinted back outside to the ambulance.

“Ready to go?” Marcy asked the guys.

“Yep.” Chad gave the okay, and the ambulance backed out of the driveway and through the streets of Fargo to the Merit Care hospital.

“Hi Patty? This is Chad. I am calling to tell you that Justin is at the hospital right now.”

“He what? Why? Is he ok?” Panic was evident in her voice.

“He’s fine. He’s getting an x-ray on his hand. It is kind of a long story, but he was drinking this evening and got into a fight with his girlfriend.”

“Oh no. Did he hit her? Or someone else?”

“Well, not exactly. He punched the windows out in his car, but he didn’t touch anyone else.”

“His windows? How did he do that? Oh my gosh! Should we come up there?”

“No, everything is fine. Don’t worry about him. He has settled down a lot. The cops and the ambulance came and got him. We are almost done here, and I am going to take him home. He is pretty tired.”

“So what happened then? Was he out there alone?”

Chad slowly replayed the story of the night to Justin’s parents. Like anyone’s parents, they were filled with concern and questions about how this could have happened. Forty-five minutes later, after playing twenty questions on how much he was drinking, what he was drinking, how much damage was done to the car, and what the fight with his girlfriend was all about, Chad finished up the

conversation with the Halls. He took Justin home from the hospital and the night was never discussed again.

Justin was a very popular guy in high school. He had a great sense of humor and made friends very easily. Although he was a smart kid, he didn't apply himself in his classes, and didn't get the highest grades. He just didn't care about school, so he didn't work hard at it.

Basketball, on the other hand, was his life. He practiced day in and day out, spending hours in the gym and on any open court he could find. He became a deadly three-point shooter and an agile defensive player.

Paige, his younger sister, watched him intently, dreaming of being able to play as good as he did. She loved it when they spent time shooting baskets together and playing games of one-on-one and H-O-R-S-E. He beat her every time, but she was taking note of his moves, and day by day, she was becoming a basketball player just like him.

Justin was part of a successful basketball team that had the potential to make it to state his senior year. He was a key player, making game-winning shots at the buzzer. He was a star and, best of all, Paige's older brother. She was proud of him. He seemed to have it all—friends, intelligence, personality, and athletic ability.

Finally, the championship game of Region 1 arrived. Justin didn't play up to par. He struggled making a single shot as his little sister watched his dream slip away. The team lost, and he was devastated.

Justin found a way to move on in life. He decided to play basketball at Valley City State University after he graduated. Once again, he struggled in school because he just didn't care. College just didn't interest him, but partying did, so he quit school after a year and half. He found a group of friends to play basketball with in a City League, but the dream of success had come to an end. He only kept playing because he loved the game.

He moved to Fargo to live with his friend Chad. It wasn't until then that the Hall family began to notice Justin's drinking problem. The first incident was an eye-opener for the family. In order to keep Paige from worrying, her parents kept the details of his suicidal threats from their little girl. All she knew was that Justin had gotten drunk and punched out his car windows. Her parents knew Paige would panic if she knew her hero was struggling to stay alive.

Justin moved back to Valley City, and although he didn't attend school, he seemed to be getting along much better. He found a girlfriend, and finally decided to propose to her. The family tried to put Justin's problem out of their minds.

At the same time, Justin and Paige were becoming closer. During her junior year of high school, Justin and his fiancé moved home to Oakes. As she had dreamed, her basketball skills were as good as her brother's. She was just as lucky, playing with another group of talented athletes, giving her the opportunity of a trip to the state tournament. As a junior, her team was 23-0, but they lost in the regional semi-finals. They missed their ride to the "Big Dance" that year. She, like her

brother years ago, was devastated, but he helped her through. She had another year to go after her dream, his dream: their dream.

The next year, Justin broadcast all the girls' basketball games on the local radio station. He watched his sister's success, and he wished he could be more like her. She had friends, she had success in athletics, and a great personality. But what he wished he had most were her morals and her strength to stand by what she believed. Through his drinking and confusion in life, he had watched her grow, and was waiting for her to become what she dreamed, and what he had dreamed for her, too. She deserved the best and he was going to do all he could to get it for her. Eventually, he broke up with his fiancé, so she was all he had left. The best gift he could give his sister was to broadcast the games and watch her and see her team succeed.

That is just what happened. The team succeeded, with Justin and Paige side-by-side. The team ended their season as the state champions without a single loss all year. And then the greatest moment of her life occurred. Justin finished his radio broadcast of the championship game and rushed to meet her on the floor. He lifted her up and they bawled for what seemed like an eternity. She had done it! They had done it! He just held her in the air and she knew he was so proud of her. She was glad he had spent so much time playing the game and teaching her all of the little things about basketball to help her succeed. She was glad he was a good example for her to have watched since she was a young girl.

The team arrived back to Oakes for a welcome home ceremony, and the emotions between Paige and her brother were still running high. Since he was the radio announcer, he was asked to give a speech at the celebration. He walked in front of the gym full of people and said, "If there is one woman in the world that I love," tears were welling up in his eyes, "It is her." He was pointing to his little sister sitting at the end of the row of girls in front of the crowd. With tears streaming down their faces, they hugged again to celebrate their accomplishment.

That was three years ago. During all of that success, he still struggled once in a while. He had punched out another window in one of his cars, as well as punching a hole in the wall in his apartment building. By now, Paige had learned of his suicide threat and was worried about his drinking habits. She didn't know what to do about it, so she just kept their relationship on good terms and tried her best to steer him in another direction.

She found that she was his source of life. She was the one that he could spend time with to forget about his problems. She didn't ask him about his personal life, but she always left it open if he wanted to talk. So far, he hadn't said anything to her, but he didn't have to. She knew. She knew he wasn't going to talk about his problems with her, but used her as his escape from them. She was his way of avoiding what was really happening in his life, so she did the best she could to spend all of the time she could with him, hoping and praying that he would see that life wasn't really so bad, and

for her sake, he could stick it out. They thrived on this for a long time. He was her hope, and she was his. It was a simple relationship that others could see through a blindfold.

“What are you doing awake, Sister?” Justin said to her through the crackle of his cell phone. It was after 1:00 a.m. and he was surprised to hear her voice on the other end of his call.

“I just got home, where are you?”

“Where are Mom and Dad?” He avoided her question.

“They are right here in bed.” She was on the phone in her parents’ bedroom, but stretching the cord into the hallway. “What’s wrong?” She could hear tension in his voice and he sounded shaken up.

“We were just in a head-on collision. Drunk driving.”

Her heart dropped. “Are you ok? Is everyone ok? Who was driving?” She started spitting out questions. Her mind was racing, and even though she knew she was talking to her brother, the reality hadn’t hit her that he was actually alive and okay. All she could think about was the question, “What if...what if he hadn’t been the one to call me? What if this was a hospital calling to tell me that my brother was in a bad accident and didn’t make it through?” She was starting to get teary-eyed as her heart started to pound again, but at an unbelievably faster pace.

“Everyone is okay. The ambulance is on the way. Scooter was driving his car, we aren’t too far from Devil’s Lake. I am the only one that is actually seriously hurt.”

“What happened? Were you guys drinking?”

“No, it was the other car. They pulled out in front of us, and took too wide of a turn. It reeks like alcohol though, and there are broken bottles everywhere.”

“What did you hurt?”

“Just my legs and my right shoulder. I smashed up against the front seat. Got kinda crunched, I suppose you could say. But the ambulance is almost here; I can see their lights coming. I just called to tell you guys we are okay. My cell phone is almost dead anyway, and we still have to call Lana, Scooter’s wife.”

“Ok. Well, call us later again. Let us know how things are. Thanks for calling, Brother.”

“Yep, I will. Talk to you later.”

“Bye.” She walked back into her parents’ bedroom and hung up the phone. Her mother sat up.

“What happened?”

“They got into a car accident.”

“What? Why didn’t you let us talk to him?”

“Everyone is fine, the ambulance was just getting there so he had to hang up. He said that he got crunched up against the front seat so his shoulder and legs are hurt. He said he would call us back again later on.”

“Was it their fault?”

“No, it was the other driver’s. They were apparently driving drunk and pulled out in front of Scooter and they hit head-on.”

“Oh my gosh!”

“I know, Mom. But just try to go back to sleep. That’s all I know. He will call again when they get home from the hospital, I am sure.”

“Ok, well, g’night.”

“G’night Mom.” She walked into her room, fighting her tears. What if she had lost her brother that night? What if that hadn’t been him on the phone to tell her the news? What if it had been him drinking and causing this accident? Her mind was flooded with ideas and “what ifs” when she suddenly stopped and bowed her head.

“Thank you, Lord, for giving my brother yet another chance at life.” And she laid her head down and slept peacefully until the phone rang again at six. She heard her mother’s side of the conversation from her room and could fill in the blanks for her brother’s responses. Her mother was asking the same things she had done the night before, even though she had told her mother the answers already, her mother just wanted to hear it straight from Justin. She heard her mom hang up the phone.

“Is he ok?” She yelled from her room.

“Yes. Nothing is broken; he is just really sore today. His legs are bruised and cut up. His shoulder is stiff, too. He is going to stay in Valley City for a couple days until he can drive home.”

“Ok.” And with that, she fell back asleep.

Paige was almost finished with her sophomore year of college. She often went to the Valley City Recreation center to watch Justin play basketball. He was part of a team from Oakes that traveled to Valley City to play in the City League since it was the closest available league. The two often planned for supper, either before or after the game. It became a ritual to

see each other every week and meet for supper.

As good as this arrangement seemed to Paige, it wasn’t enough to keep her brother on the right track. He had taken the weekend shift at his job at the local manufacturing company in Oakes, leaving the whole week open to fill with other activities. His schedule revolved around spending the nights with his friends and sleeping in until he was awakened by the noon whistle. Monday night he went to his friend’s house of the car races, Tuesday night he bowled, and Wednesday night was basketball with the guys. Getting drunk and then driving home completed each of these nights.

The guys had their fun at the bar. For Justin, it was more than just a night of fun. This was also his time to vent. If he had had enough to drink, and the right person was there to comfort him, he would confess that he was still contemplating that final answer. His friends knew he had a problem, and they tried their best to keep it under control. But in all reality, what could they really do? It was up to Justin to make that final decision to get help to stop drinking.

Everyone knew of Justin’s problem, but just didn’t know how to help. Paige was planning to do the best thing she knew at the time. She was planning to live with him for the summer when she came home from college to work. She just wanted to be there with him. She wanted to know that he came home okay each night. She was going to make it her responsibility to try and reduce his drinking and keep him out of trouble. She didn’t know how, but just by

living with him was the best way to start.

A couple weeks before Paige moved home for the summer, she went home for the weekend. After her trip home, she prayed every day for her brother's safety, as well as everyone else's.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this the Hall residence?"

"Yes."

"Hi, this is Officer Parker of the Dickey County Police Department. Sorry for calling you at such a late hour. We have your son, Justin, here at the police station. He has been cited with a DUI after driving his vehicle into a garage, causing a lot of damage. If you are willing to come up here and sign some papers and take him into your custody, that would be fine. Otherwise, we will have to take him to jail for the night until he sobers up."

"Yes, my husband will be right there."

"All right. Thank you ma'am. Bye-bye now."

"Bye. Mark, wake up." Patty turned on the light to get her husband out of bed. She looked at the clock; three A.M.

"Huh?" Mark pulled the covers up over his head to shade his eyes from the brightness of the light.

"Justin is at the police station, you have to go and get him."

"What? What did he do?"

"He got into an accident and hit someone's garage. He got a DUI. Hurry up! You have to sign some custody papers or else he will go to jail in Valley City."

"Send him to jail then!"

"Mark!"

"Well, he needs to learn sometime!"

"Mark, calm down. Get out of bed and go get him."

"I will go there and tell them to take him to Valley City then."

"Mark! This is your son you are talking about! Go back to bed. I will go get him then."

"I am up now. It doesn't matter. Come with me then."

"I will. He is coming home with us."

"Fine. We will see what happens when we get there." The couple put on some clothes and freshened themselves enough to be presentable and took off to the police station. The ride to the police station lasted only a few minutes, but seemed like an eternity in the silence. They pulled up to the front door in their van and shut off the engine.

"Now Mark, let's not get out of control in here. Just relax. It isn't going to do any good to start a fight with him right now. He's probably already gone through enough tonight."

"Yep," He got out of the van and she shook her head and followed him inside to the sheriff's office.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hall?"

"Yes, that's us," Mark answered.

"Could you step right inside my office here. Justin is back with another officer at this time."

"All right."

"I am only going to go through the charges that are going to be pressed. I will let Justin go ahead and tell you what happened and the rest of the events of the evening; ok?"

Patty and Mark both nodded in agreement.

“First of all, if you would like to have Justin go home with you tonight, you have to sign these papers. They just say that you will be responsible for him for the next six hours or so. This means that he won’t be going back to his own home, or out with his friends again tonight. Obviously no alcohol consumption or any other drugs will be taken in the time as well.”

“And if we decide not to sign these papers?”

“Mark!”

“If you do not sign the papers, which is totally up to you, then we will take him to jail in Valley City for the night.”

“Ok. I guess we will sign them.” Mark said reluctantly as he glanced at his wife.

“Ok, if you would just sign here on the line with the ‘x’.” Officer Parker pointed to the bottom of the release form.

“Now, as I mentioned on the phone, Justin has been driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs tonight. After he goes to his hearing, the court will decide his consequences, but this usually means his license will be revoked, and he will have to pay court costs as well as other fines. While he was driving, he ran his car into the side of another person’s garage. We have not yet located the owner of the house because it seems to be unoccupied at this moment, so the price of that damage is yet to be determined. He may want to call his insurance company to figure out how he is going to handle paying for the damage.”

“How much do you estimate it would be?” Patty was already concerned about where her son was going to come up with money to be paying for all of this.

“We noticed that he hit the side of the garage with a lot of electrical wiring of the house, so this will raise the cost of the damages. I would have to say it would be over a thousand dollars, but I am no electrician or carpenter, so don’t quote me on that. We also noticed his Explorer has some damage as well, so he will need to have that looked at by a mechanic.”

“Oh my gosh! How is he ever going to pay for this?”

“Well, I guess we will just have to wait until he goes to court to figure out all of the damage he has done and what consequences he will have to face, huh?” Mark just wanted to talk to his son, not a police officer.

“Yes. There isn’t too much we can do until the court releases a verdict. He will receive a notice in the mail of a court date. As for now, here are his car keys. You can take him home. I will go get him from the back room, if you could just wait right here in the lobby.”

Officer Parker rounded the corner to another room. Patty took a deep breath and let it out slowly and looked at her husband. Mark just stood there without expression waiting for his son to appear. To Patty, no expression meant anger was going to rise as soon as the two confronted each other without the public, or Officer Parker in this case, as a witness.

“Your parents have signed the papers and so they have full responsibility of you tonight. I advise you spend the night at their house and

stay out of trouble. Just go home and get some sleep. You can get your keys tomorrow and pick up your vehicle. Again, you will receive a notice of your hearing in a few days, ok?" Patty and Mark could hear the officer reminding Justin of the circumstances as the two men were coming closer to the lobby where his parents were waiting.

Justin walked coolly out to the lobby.

"Let's go." The look on his face did not mimic his walk or the way he talked. He had been crying, or maybe his eyes were bloodshot due to his drunkenness. His face was red, and he looked terrible. It was evident he had a rough night, and it was about to become worse. He had to face his parents.

"Thank you for coming in tonight. If you have any questions or concerns, give me a call. Take care. Good night." Officer Parker saw the family to the door and then returned to his office to finish up some of the paper work from the accident.

"Justin, what happened?" Patty was concerned about her son and his health. By now, his father had calmed down and was beginning to think about the consequences of Justin's actions in the past. The accidents have been getting worse and worse. Each accident comes a little bit closer to home; one of these days, his parents wouldn't be able to come to the rescue and it would be too late. That was the biggest concern of his father's at this point.

"Don't worry about it. It is my responsibility. I will take care of it. Just take me home."

"We can't take you home. You know that."

"Why not?"

"Justin, we signed the papers and we said we wouldn't let you go anywhere else but to our house."

"What am I going to do? Jesus Christ!"

"Look what you already did! Who knows what else you will do?" Mark piped in.

"I am fine. It happened about two hours ago already. I am not going to do anything. I just need to go talk to Cam."

"Justin, you can talk to Cam tomorrow." This conversation lasted from the time they got to the car, drove to the Hall residence, and then got into the house. They stopped in the living room long enough to relax and begin discussing the evening rather than fight about where Justin was going to stay the night.

Meanwhile, Paige was just arriving home from a friend's house. It was nearly four in the morning when Paige quietly walked into the house wondering why a few of the lights were still on. She entered the living room in the dark but heard the voices of her parents and her brother.

"Hi." She said hesitantly, suddenly concerned about what was going on.

"Hi, Sister." He was happy now. She still had no idea what had happened. She couldn't see his face and how bad he actually looked. The only clue she had was the slight smell of liquor on his clothes when she stood next to him.

"What's goin' on?"

"Take me to Cam's."

"Um, ok." She didn't really know what to say. She wasn't really

tired, so there wasn't a reason for her not to do it.

"Justin, you can't leave here." Patty reminded him. "Paige, Justin got in an accident tonight. He got a DUI and we signed papers that say he will be at our house. So you can't take him anywhere."

"I am fine. I just want to go talk to Cam. She will drive, I don't care. We will go find him, and come right back."

"Justin, don't make your sister responsible for you when you are like this."

"Like what? It is no big deal. Just let me go talk to him, and we will be right back. Let's go, Sister." She just stood there in silence looking back and forth from her parents to her brother. She wasn't going to be able to make the decision, so she just waited until someone did.

"Paige, you have to make sure you bring him right back. He has to come here; he can't sleep at his place."

"Yeah. No problem. Whatever."

"Justin, stay with your sister. Don't run away or anything silly like that because she would never be able to catch you."

"Mom! I am not going to go anywhere. I am going to sit in the car until we find Cam. I will talk to him a few minutes, and then I will be back. I am not going to jump out of the car. Jesus!"

"Paige, he has had a lot to drink. If anything happens, come back here right away and get us."

"Yep." She was getting mad; she couldn't imagine how angry Justin must be getting at the way he was being treated at that point.

"Let's go, Sister."

"Right behind you; my car is out back. See you later. I will bring him home. Don't worry." She reminded her parents. "Bye." Paige and Justin walked out the door to the car.

"So do you think Cam is just out driving around like usual, or what?"

"Yeah, I'm sure he is. He doesn't sleep at night because of his work schedule, so I'm sure he will be out and about. We will drive by a few houses first to see if he stopped anywhere." Justin was in a much better mood since he didn't have to play "question and answer" with his parents anymore. He knew his sister would just be quiet and let him figure things out for himself.

"Okey Dokey. To your house first." She pulled onto the street in their search for Justin's roommate. They drove by Justin's house, and then started searching the streets of Oakes without seeing a set of headlights on the roads anywhere.

"Go by PP's place."

"Where is that?"

"Keep going straight. Turn right into the trailer park."

"Oh yeah, I know where it is. Never mind."

"Sure ya do. Whoa, slow down, Sister!"

"Sorry, I forgot this was gravel! Yikes!" She laughed and he smiled as he held onto the car door to keep himself from falling over onto his sister.

"Hey, follow those tail lights. I bet that is him." She stepped on the gas to catch up to the car ahead of her.

“Yep, that’s him. Flash him.”
He was spitting out commands left and right, but she loved every minute of it. She felt responsible. She felt important because he trusted her. She was his escape from his parents and from his problems. It was a part of their relationship that she loved to accept.

“Flash him again. Follow him into the parking lot there. Pull up beside him so I can roll down the window and talk to him. Sister, this is the wrong side. I can’t talk to him from here. Now I have to get out of this nice warm car. Argh!” He shook his head in disappointment, but showed her a quick grin before he got out of the car. She opened up her door to go listen to their conversations. This was her only way to figure out information of what really happened earlier that night.

“You cruisin’ with lil’ sister tonight? Hi, Paige.” Cam gave Paige a wink and then continued, “So what’s up?”

“Shit. I left the bar; I was going to go over to BC’s, and when I got there I realized I was a block too far, so I turned, and Smack!”

“Yeah, I was mad when I heard you left the bar. I thought you had a ride. You told me you were going with Travis, so I left.”

“I don’t know what happened to them. I got kicked out of the bar so I had to leave.”

“What? What happened?”

“It was Brady’s twenty-first birthday, ya know? What is his name, the guy who got off from killing his parents in that accident,” Cam nodded to acknowledge that he knew who he was talking about, “Yeah, well, he kept buying Brady drinks and just getting him plowed. It pissed me off so

I told them to back off a bit on the drinks. We got into an argument and I shoved him onto the pool table. If anyone had any brains, that kid wouldn’t be drinking and the other guy should be in jail!”

“Ah, Justin. Why do you have to be starting shit like that?”

“All I did was ask them to back off, the other guy just got pissed at me, so I got pissed off too!”

“So anyway, who’s house was it?”

“I have no idea. Nobody lives there right now.”

“What happened when you hit it? I went over there after I heard about it and talked to Ben a little bit. He said you were pissed off and bitchin’ about everything.”

“Hell, yeah. I don’t know who was there, but they saw it happen. Some fuckers from down the street were outside smoking or something, and they came over and started raisin’ shit. The one kid thought I was going to pull a ‘hit and run’ and started yellin’ at me to call the cops.”

“Yeah, Ben said somethin’ about you sitting down in the driveway and yelling at this kid.”

“Well, hell. Of course I was going to call myself in. I knew what I had done. I didn’t need that fucker to tell me. I don’t know what the hell he thought I was going to do, back up my Explorer and take off? So I threw my keys in the grass and sat down and told him to call the cops. I said, ‘I am not going anywhere. I am too drunk to find my keys now anyway.’ I told him, ‘Go ahead, call the fuckin’ cops. I am going to sit right here.’”

“So who called it in then?”

“Shit, I don’t even know. I threw them my cell phone and just sat there. I was ready to fight that fucker though. He was pissin’ me off. He kept sayin’ shit and I was getting pissed. I had told him I wasn’t going anywhere, I don’t know what his deal was!” Justin’s voice was rising as he continued his story of the night.

Paige just stood there in the coolness of the night absorbing what had happened that night. She didn’t know what to say or what to think. Her mind wandered as Justin and Cam continued talking. He got kicked out of the bar because he got into a fight, he tried to drive and hit someone’s garage causing him to get a DUI.

She wasn’t losing respect for her brother. That wasn’t it. She was growing more and more concerned with his alcoholism. It was becoming more of a problem than anyone was willing to admit. He needed help, and maybe this was the way to get it. Maybe this

time, maybe this accident would straighten him out.

“Well, sister has to report me back to the ‘rents or they will flip out. We better get going.” She snapped out of her daze as Justin was wrapping up his conversation. She let out a big yawn and turned to get back into the car.

“See you, Cam.”

“Bye, Paige.”

“I will call you tomorrow.”

“All right, bye, Justin.”

“See ya.” He got into the car, “Sister, why didn’t you leave the car running with the heat on? Brrr!”

“I don’t know. Deal with it.” She laughed and returned her brother safely to their home. He had made it through another night of being drunk and out of control. The family slept peacefully at their house knowing he was okay, and hoping maybe this time—this time would be his final lesson on drinking.



In Peace

Digital Imaging

by ***Alberto Oseguera***

An Odd Proposal

by *Tanner Beauchman*

Characters

Ben

Rita

Cindy

Jay

(There is a dining room stage right, and a living room stage left. Ben is sitting on a couch in the living room. Cindy enters.)

Cindy: Don't look so nervous.

Ben: I can't help it. Every time I come here I get the impression that your mom hates me.

Cindy: You're a man. Of course she hates you. It's just her way of looking out for me, that's all.

Ben: I know but...

Cindy: Just relax and be yourself. Everything will be all right.

Ben: All right. Can I get a kiss?

Cindy: Of course. (They kiss) I can't wait to see the look on my mom's face when we tell her the good news.

(Rita enters the dining room with silverware, napkins, and wine glasses.)

Rita: Cindy, come in here and help me set the table. (Ben and Cindy go into the dining room) Come give me a hand, Cindy. Ben, since you finally peeled yourself off the couch, why don't you go get the plates? They're on the top shelf. (Ben exits) That's the first time I've seen him off the couch all day.

Cindy: He's just tired from the trip that's all.

Rita: Just the trip! Let me tell you something. That is just like a man to

sit and relax while women do all the work.

Cindy: I made him drive the whole way. I understand why he's tired.

Rita: Way to take charge. Is he going to bring those plates?

Cindy: Be patient. Give him some time to find them.

Rita: Can I ask you a question?

Cindy: Sure.

Rita: What are you two going to do now that you've both finished school?

Cindy: I don't know. I guess I haven't thought about it.

Rita: Do you love him?

Cindy: Of course I love him.

Rita: Does he love you?

Cindy: He says he does.

Rita: Let me tell you something. Men fall in love every twenty minutes. He may love you now, but twenty minutes later he'll be making love to a T-bone steak and a beer.

Cindy: Mom, I know you're bitter about what dad did to you. You have every right to be bitter. I know I would be if Ben ran off with another woman, but don't you think it's time to lighten up a bit?

(Ben enters with three plates. Cindy and Rita quickly stop talking and continue to set the table.)

Ben: Where do you want me to put these?

Rita: Hmmm, let me see.

(Sarcastically) The table would be a good place.

Cindy: Mother! Be nice; he is only trying to help.

Rita: Where do you normally put the plates when you set the table?

Ben: Well, I didn't know if you wanted them at our individual places or just set in the middle of the table. I just thought I'd check with you first.

Rita: Cindy, does he always ask how things should be done?

Cindy: Mother! He is trying to be nice.

Rita: I'm sorry, Ben. I shouldn't be so hard on you. All men should ask a female how things should be done. That way things would get done the right way. Cindy, will you go check on the lasagna?

Cindy: Sure. (Cindy exits)

Ben: Excuse me, Ma'am. Can I –

Rita: Don't call me ma'am. I'm not that old.

Ben: I'm sorry ma'am. (Quickly) I mean Mrs. Swanson.

Rita: Don't call me Mrs. Swanson, either. I wanted to change that name the minute he left me. Of course that costs money, and God knows he didn't leave any of that behind.

Ben: So you want to be called Rita?

Rita: No. You can call me God. (Ben stares at her with a blank face) Come on smile. I'm only kidding.

Ben: Can we go into the living room? I just want to have a word with you. (Heads toward the living room)

Rita: Just a word. I should only be so lucky. (Following Ben)

(Ben sits down on the couch and pats the seat next to him.)

Ben: Have a seat. (Rita walks past the couch and sits on the chair.) As you know, me and Cindy have been seeing each other for over two years, and I think she is the one for me.

Rita: Wait a minute! You think she is the one for you?

Ben: I know she is the one for me. That just came out wrong. I'm really nervous. I want to ask if you'd give me your daughters hand in marriage?

Rita: You want to marry my daughter?

Ben: Yes, ma'am. I mean Rita.

Rita: And how do you plan to support her?

Ben: Well, as you know we both just finished school. It was going to be a surprise, but I'll tell you. We both got teaching jobs here in town. I'm teaching kindergarten and Cindy is teaching fifth grade.

Rita: You are going to support her on a kindergarten teacher's salary?

Ben: I know there isn't a lot of money in teaching, but it's a very noble position.

Rita: There are plenty of noble positions that pay good money.

Ben: Teaching is my passion. I thought you'd be happy we were both staying here in town.

Rita: Are you kidding? Parents raise their kids so they can move far away. That way we have somewhere to go for vacation.

Ben: We're getting off track here. Listen, I love her and I know she loves me. I want to spend the rest of my life with her.

Rita: How can you guarantee me you won't sleep around and run off with your secretary?

Ben: Don't be ridiculous.

Kindergarten teachers don't even have secretaries. (Rita glares at him.) Not that I'd run away with one if one was provided. (beat) Just because your husband ran off with his secretary doesn't mean I'm going to do the same.

Rita: If you mention that again I swear -

Ben: Are you going to give me her hand or not? (Standing up)

Rita: She's a big girl; she can make her own decision.

(Cindy enters)

Cindy: What are you two talking about?

Rita: Ben just told me about you two getting jobs here in town.

Cindy: Ben! That was supposed to be a surprise.

Ben: I'm sorry, honey; it slipped out. Why don't you get that bottle of wine I brought to celebrate the good news?

Cindy: Good idea. I'll be right back.

(They watch her leave)

(The following lines are spoken quietly, but angrily.)

Ben: I'm going to ask her no matter what you think.

Rita: You do that, but when you're married and have kids don't expect me to come visit.

Ben: That's great. Can I get that in writing so if you ever show up I can throw your wrinkly butt out on the curb.

Rita: You take a good look at this wrinkly butt, because twenty years down the road Cindy's is going to look a lot like this one.

Ben: I planned to propose to her up in a hot air balloon, but I think I'll ask her over our little supper tonight so I can see the look on your face when she says yes.

(Cindy enters and the two smile at her as if nothing had happened.)

Cindy: It's great to see you two getting along.

Ben: Your mom was just telling me how excited she is to have us both in town.

Rita: Oh, yes, we were just talking about how I could visit you all the time.

Ben: Where is that wine? (As if he needs the wine to make it through the evening.)

Cindy: I left it in the kitchen. I thought we should wait and have it

with our meal. It should be ready now if you want to eat.

Ben: I'm starving. Supper can't come soon enough can it, "Ma'am"?

Cindy: Well, let's go get washed up.

Rita: I'll be right with you. I just have to make a quick phone call.

(Watches them leave and picks up the phone.) Hello. Is Jay there? Jay!

Will you come have dinner with us?

Cindy's back in town. Come on! This is very important. I'll explain it when you get here. Thank you! See you in a bit. (Hangs up the phone.) Cindy, when you come out grab one more plate.

(Cindy and Ben enter)

Cindy: Who else is coming?

Rita: Do you remember your good friend Jay? Well it turns out that when his dad died he moved back home to take care of his mom. Isn't that the sweetest thing you've ever heard?

Cindy: He moved back next door?

Rita: Yeah, and did you know he has his own dentistry practice? He's quite a catch.

Cindy: Depending on how you look at it. (Laughing)

Rita: I remember all those late night study sessions you two used to have. I could tell by your grades not a lot of studying took place. (Nudging her) Oh, and I remember that dance you two did for the spring concert. Do you remember that?

Cindy: I remember. Did you know Ben is quite the dancer himself?

Rita: (Ignoring Cindy's comment) You two practiced that forever. What song was it again? Oh yeah, I remember. "DA, DA, DA, DA, DA, DA, DA, Tequila". The Jazz band played, and you two danced. You were quite a

pair. It just baffles me that you two never went out.

Cindy: Jay wasn't the dating type.

Rita: Well it seemed that you two had a lot in common.

Cindy: We shared too much in common.

Rita: Have you ever met Jay?

Ben: No, I haven't.

Rita: He is such a great guy. If you and Cindy weren't together, I think I'd try to set the two of them up. Ben, you look pale.

Ben: I'm just a little tired.

Rita: It must be from sitting on that couch all day. You should've taken a break, and helped us cook.

Cindy: Mom, I told you he drove the whole way here.

(Door bell rings)

Rita: I'll get it. You two go and sit down at the dinner table. (Smiles at Ben as she exits.)

Ben: Who's this Jay guy?

Cindy: Relax, you have nothing to worry about. (Ben walks and sits down at the table, and Cindy goes to get another plate and the wine.) (Rita enters the living room with Jay. She brings him down stage.)

Rita: (Whispering) Jay, I know you and Cindy were pretty close. That is why I have a favor to ask you. Ben is going to ask Cindy to marry him tonight.

Jay: Really?

Rita: Shh. Listen, I invited you over because I have my doubts about him.

Jay: What do you mean, you have "doubts about him?"

Rita: I think he may be hiding a dark secret from Cindy. Will you help me find out?

Jay: I don't know.

Rita: Listen, I know you still care about Cindy. Please do this for her. Let's uncover his little secret.

Jay: All right, I'll see what I can do.

Rita: Great.

Jay: So you really think he's –

Rita: Come on; let's go. (Rita drags a very confused Jay into the dining room.) Cindy, look who's here.

(Cindy enters with the extra plate and the wine.)

Cindy: Hey, there. How have you been? (Giving him a hug.)

Jay: I've been doing great. You look fabulous.

Cindy: Thank you, you too. Oh, where are my manners? This is my boyfriend, Ben. Ben, this is Dr. Jay Wood.

(Ben gets up and shakes his hand and squeezes it hard to intimidate him.)

Jay: My, what a strong grip you have. (Grabbing his arm) Somebody works out.

Ben: So it's "Dr." Wood then, huh?

Jay: That's right. You should come in for a check-up. You can turn your head and cough and all that fun stuff.

Ben: I thought you were a dentist.

Jay: One can never be too thorough. (Ben gives a look of disgust.) Kidding, it was a joke, big guy. (Grabbing his arm again.)

Cindy: Let's sit down and eat. (Jay makes a point to sit across from Ben.)

Ben: I'll pour the wine before we begin. (Ben fills all the wine glasses and then picks up his fork and clanks it on his glass.) Before we start supper I have an announcement.

Rita: Ben, don't clank that glass. It's crystal for heaven's sake!

Ben: As I was saying -

Jay: Wow, real crystal! I don't think

I've ever drank from a real crystal glass.

Ben: Please, can I have your attention.

Rita: Ben, let's wait with this announcement. I'm starving.

Cindy: She's got a point, honey. Let's just wait with it. Let the dinner help build the excitement. (Ben sits down angrily. They begin to eat.)

Jay: This is great lasagna. Who made it?

Rita: My lovely daughter. Isn't she lovely? A man would be lucky to have a wife that can cook like this.

Jay: Well, I'm quite the cook myself. I make the best broiled salmon.

Rita: Did you here that? He's successful and he can cook. How is your dentistry practice going?

Jay: It's going great.

Rita: Dentistry, that's a "noble" position isn't it?

Jay: I like to think so.

Rita: And I bet you rake in the money from that "noble" profession don't you?

Jay: I do all right.

Rita: Did you know Ben is a teacher?

Jay: Really. What grade do you teach?

Ben: Kindergarten.

Jay: I have a lot respect for those in the teaching profession.

Rita: Oh, me too. They work with all those kids for little to no money. They're lucky if they can even afford a house.

Cindy: Mom, when I told you I wanted to be a teacher you told me it was a great field to go into.

Rita: For a woman, yes; but have you ever heard of a male kindergarten teacher? If I didn't know him any better I'd swear he was gay.

Cindy: Mother!

Rita: What? A grown man parading around with five-year-old children, doesn't that seem strange to you?

Ben: Listen, I like kids. There is nothing strange or gay about it. When I get married I hope to have lots of kids.

Rita: Well, then you might as well sign up for welfare now.

Ben: My father is a teacher, and we live a comfortable life. He even helped put me through college.

Rita: Must have been saving up those welfare checks.

Cindy: Mom, can we act like grown ups please?

(There is an awkward silence)

Jay: Ben, has anyone ever told you that you have beautiful eyes?

Ben: Umm, no.

Jay: Well, they are ravishing.

Ben: Thank you, I guess.

Jay: If that teaching gig doesn't pan out, I think you could be a model. You are a very good looking man.

Rita: He'll be the best looking man in the trailer park.

Ben: We're not going to live in a trailer park.

Cindy: (Getting up) Mom, can I talk to you in the kitchen?

(Cindy and Rita exit.)

Jay: You look really tense. I know what you need. You need a back rub. (Getting up)

Ben: No, that's all right. I'll be OK.

Jay: Oh, come on. I give great massages.

Ben: No really I don't....

Jay: Shh, don't say another word. Just let me work my magic.

Ben: I don't want a massage.

Jay: You may not want one, but you need one.

Ben: Really, just leave me- (Jay starts to rub his shoulders) Wow! That does feel good.

Jay: What did I tell you? Just relax.

Ben: Your girlfriend is lucky to get this all the time.

Jay: You can't give a good massage to a woman. There isn't enough meat on their bones.

Ben: Not unless you like them a little chunky.

(Cindy and Rita enter)

Cindy: What is going on here?

Ben: I was feeling a little tense so Jay was giving me a back massage. Rita you should get one. It might help you loosen up a bit. (Jay returns to his seat.)

Rita: I'll take a rain check.

Cindy: Mom, don't you have something to say to Ben?

Rita: Do I have to?

Cindy: Mom!

Rita: Ben, I'm very sorry for the way I've been acting. I'm just looking out for my daughter, because I don't want her to get hurt like I did. I just try to protect her from pricks like you.

Cindy: Mom, what did I tell you? Can we all just sit down and have a nice peaceful meal without all the bickering?

(They all sit down and begin eating.)

Ben: I'd like to make my announcement now.

Rita: This isn't bickering, but our food is getting cold. We slaved over the stove all day, can we at least be rewarded by eating a warm meal?

Jay: Yeah, why don't we wait a little bit? They deserve it.

Ben: Come on!

Cindy: Let's wait a bit, honey. The lasagna is getting cold.

Ben: Fine.

Jay: So are you two teaching here in town?

Cindy: Yep, I wanted to stay close to my mom.

Ben: I think maybe next year we'll look for jobs out of the state.

Jay: You'll get to like it here. Outsiders say there isn't much to do around here, but I can show you plenty to do. I'll take you out some night.

Ben: That sounds like fun. Do you play any sports?

Jay: I play a little racquetball.

Ben: We should play some night, and afterward go out for a couple of beers.

Rita: Beers, huh? Sounds like we have a drinker on our hands. We better move the wine to this side of the table before the lush can suck it down.

Cindy: Mom, I'm getting tired of this.

Rita: Well, you heard him. He likes to drink.

Cindy: He did not say that. I'm sick and tired of you treating my boyfriends like this. You've done this to every guy I've brought home. You try to find some fault, and if you can't find one you invent one.

Rita: I'm just looking out for you.

Cindy: Why can't you just stay out of my love life? (She storms off stage)

Ben: Look what you did. (Starting to get up)

Rita: Just sit down. I'll go talk to her.

Ben: Well, I don't think I'll be making that announcement tonight.

Jay: I'll listen to what you have to say. (Starting to play footsy with Ben)

Ben: Hey, that's not the leg of the table you're rubbing. It's my foot.

Jay: I know.

Ben: I think I should go check on Cindy. (Getting up)

Jay: It's been a rough dinner. Come give me a hug.

Ben: No, I'll be OK.

Jay: Don't be ashamed. Come here.

Ben: Really, I don't want a hug.

Jay: Once again you may not want one, but you need one. (Corners Ben and gives him a hug. Ben stands there stiff as a board. When he finishes his hug, Jay holds Ben by the arms and looks into his eyes.) I've been wanting to do this all night. (Jay goes in for a kiss, but Ben pulls away before they actually kiss.)

Ben: What the heck are you doing? Get away from me! Cindy, get in here!

Jay: Ben.

Ben: You stay away from me.

(Cindy and Rita come running in.)

Cindy: What is all the yelling for?

Ben: He just tried to kiss me.

Rita: He what?

Ben: He just tried to kiss me. It all makes sense now. The massage, the offer to take me out, the telling me I could be a model. He has the hots for me.

Jay: Don't flatter yourself. I don't have the hots for you. Trust me, you're not my type.

Ben: Oh, come on. You said it yourself. I could be a model. You want me bad.

Jay: I don't want you. Rita invited me over here tonight to hit on you.

Ben: What is wrong with your mother? You are a sick lady. You hate me so much you try to embarrass me by asking the tooth fairy to come hit on me.

Jay: Tooth fairy!

Rita: I didn't ask you over to hit on him.

Jay: Come on. She told me you had some big secret you were keeping from Cindy, and I should help her uncover

it. If that doesn't scream out "I think he's gay," what does?

Ben: Now I have some big secret? What the heck is going on here?

Cindy: Jay, how could you do this to me? I thought we were friends, and now you try to steal my boyfriend away from me. It was funny when you'd joke about it in high school, but this is just too much.

Rita: Wait a minute. You're really gay? What about all those late night study sessions you two used to have?

Jay: I'm not gay.

Cindy: Come on, Jay, don't you think it's about time to come out of the closet?

Jay: Really, I'm not gay.

Cindy: Jay, it's OK; we won't judge you.

Jay: Listen to me. I'm not gay!

Cindy: Jay, just say it. I know you're gay. Don't make me tell them about our study sessions.

Rita: What was going on in these sessions? Tell me you two were making out.

Cindy: Do you want to tell them or should I?

Jay: Fine, we styled each other's hair, and I painted her finger nails.

Cindy: Tell them the rest.

Jay: No.

Cindy: Tell them or I'm going to.

Jay: Come on, don't embarrass me.

Cindy: We pretended we were performing the song "It's Raining Men" for the school talent show, and we watched *Dirty Dancing* about 100 times to check out Patrick Swayze's butt. Of course that's when we weren't talking about boys.

Jay: Ok, that does sound gay, but really, I'm not gay.

Ben: That does sound pretty gay.

Jay: Really I'm not gay. I did it because I knew it was the only way I could get close to you, Cindy.

Cindy: What?

Jay: I did it so I could spend time with you.

Cindy: Why would you put yourself through that?

Jay: I loved you. You were popular and I wasn't. It was the only way I could get you to pay attention to me. I wanted to be popular, and being seen with you made me popular. Of course it didn't hurt that I made up stories about us to tell the guys in the locker room.

Cindy: So you were pretending the whole time?

Jay: I'm sorry I lied.

Cindy: I changed clothes in front of you.

Jay: Why did you think I had my legs crossed all the time?

Cindy: That's just gross.

Jay: I thought I was over you, but when I saw you again those feelings came rushing back. It made me jealous to see you with another man. When I found out he might be gay I tried to expose him to get him away from you. I wanted a chance to be with you.

Cindy: By pretending to be gay?

Jay: I know it sounds strange, but please look at it a bit closer. I put you above everything. Above my reputation and even my manhood.

Ben: What are you talking about? You've lied to her for years.

Jay: So I bent the truth a little.

Ben: Bent the truth?

Jay: Like you never lied to get a girl.

Ben: Actually, I don't think I have.

Jay: Yeah, right; I'm sure the girls just flocked to you when they found

out you wanted to be a kindergarten teacher.

Cindy: Jay!

Ben: I didn't always want to be a kindergarten teacher. I originally went to college to be a choreographer.

Jay: Let me get this straight; you wanted to be a choreographer, but instead you became a kindergarten teacher. You don't march in parades in your free time do you?

Ben: Now you're accusing me of being gay.

Jay: If the ballet slipper fits.

Rita: Guys, would you stop bickering?

Ben: You're telling us to stop bickering? Why? Do you feel left out? I don't think you've stopped bickering all night.

Cindy: Can we all please stop the bickering?

Rita: I have not been bickering.

Ben: Please! You've bashed my career choice, suggested that I'm trailer trash, accused me of being a drunk, and made up some story about some big secret I'm hiding.

Rita: That's not bickering; it's pointing out the obvious.

Ben: Why are you such a witch?

Rita: A witch!

Ben: Yeah, a witch. I wouldn't be surprised if you tossed on a pointed hat and started flying around the room on a broom stick.

Jay: Did you hear that? He called your mother a witch. I wouldn't stand for that if I were you.

Ben: Would you stay out of this? This has nothing to do with you.

Jay: Look how angry he is, Cindy. Come over here; I'll protect you.

Ben: What do you think you're doing?

Jay: Protecting the woman I love.

Ben: What? This is the first time you've seen her in years. Get away from her!

Jay: Look at him. I bet he's bi-polar or something.

Ben: Now I'm bi-polar! What is wrong with you people? You think I'm the one with the problem. My God, look at yourselves. Rita, you did everything in your power to protect your daughter just because you thought she'd get hurt like you did. I'm not your ex-husband. I wouldn't do that to her. She's a grown woman. Let her live her life. (Looks at Jay) I don't know what to say about you. You pretended to be something you're not just so you could get close to her. Look how close it's gotten you. You've known her for years, and she has no idea who you really are. Look at what you two have put us through tonight. Did you ever once stop and think that maybe she really loves me and wants to marry me? No. Instead, you did everything just to make sure I wouldn't even get a chance to propose tonight. Well, you can't follow us around forever. I am going to ask her to marry me whether you like or not.

Rita: Get out of my house!

Ben: Fine! (Starts to exit)

Cindy: Wait! Ben, did you say you were going to propose tonight?

Ben: (The following lines are not spoken romantic, but very casual.) Yes. I had the ring and everything. (Pulls out a ring box from his pocket.) I was going to get down on one knee. (Gets down on one knee.) Look you in the eye, and say I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me? But these two-

Cindy: Yes!

Ben: Yes, what?

Cindy: Yes, I'll marry you. (Ben gets up and gives Cindy a kiss. He takes the ring out of the box and puts it on Cindy's finger.)

Ben: Come on, let's go call my parents. (They walk off stage. There is an awkward silence after they exit.)

Jay: Maybe he has a point. We might have been acting a little foolish.

Rita: I guess I should let her live her own life. Let her experience this mistake on her own.

Jay: It might not be a mistake. They did look pretty happy together.

Rita: I just don't understand what she sees in him.

Jay: I know, I thought he was rude. You don't call your future mother-in-law a witch.

Rita: I know. And calling you the tooth fairy.

Jay: I forgot about that.

Rita: Do you still want to get him?

Jay: You know it.

Rita: Cindy! I need to talk to you. I just don't think you know what you're getting yourself into.

Jay: Cindy, I feel really bad about what happened and I want to make it up to you. How about you and I go back to my place, eat some pop corn, and watch Dirty Dancing. The freeze frame is much better on DVD. (Both of them exit and lights go down.)