

# Fiction

1<sup>st</sup> Place

## Dirt Poor

*by Rebecca Baltrusch*

Miss Ray said we were poor, the township was poor, the whole country was poor. I couldn't see it. All I saw was the dirt. You couldn't miss it, with it being farm country and all.

We were lucky. Dad had good dirt. Mom found work as a nurse. She had no dirt. Never again will I see such white shoe laces. Mom repelled dirt, and expected all of us to do the same. One day, I would get married and move with my spouse into a house of our own, and it better not have wainscoting. It wasn't worth cleaning between the cracks with a toothbrush every week.

We studied religiously, but we never stopped being kids. How could we? We had acres to play and grow in; we had cows, chickens, guineas, cats, and a big herd dog. We had each other. How could we be poor? We had everything we could possibly want.

I wondered if I would get in trouble that evening, or if Bob would. He started it. I was milking just like Dad expected when he squirted me. We always gave some to the begging cats, so I didn't get mad at first. I thought he just missed. I could pester him with it later. Then he did it again, and I caught him. I told him to stop, and went back to my own cow. When he squirted me again, I shot up, grabbed my pail, and dumped it over his head. Mom and Dad would miss it when they looked at what we'd separated, and Mom would notice our milky clothes. No reason to cry over dumped milk, though; I wouldn't see either of them until supper.

"Oooh. It smells so good!" I just opened the door. Aunt Megan loomed over the stove.

"Just finished with the bread. Make sure your windows are closed, I just killed all the flies."

"Right." I ran to my room and tugged my window to make sure it was closed.

"Doesn't it smell great?" Jenny appeared in my doorway. She still went to the nearby primary school, so she consistently beat me home this year.

"Yeah. Is your window closed?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go see if we can get Megan to give us the heels."

“Oooh, yes.” Jenny clapped her hands gleefully, then we rushed back to the kitchen to beg for the ends of the fresh loaf. “Aunt Megan!”

“Could we have the heels? Please?”

“No. Are your windows closed?”

“They are. Please?”

“No. We’re having it tonight.”

“Please?”

“No! Now, go outside or something. I have things to do.” Megan swept into another room. Jenny trudged outside towards the barn. I followed, but paused in the doorway. It seemed such a waste to let the warm heels cool down uneaten.

Vengeance gripped my heart and I stood there, a human door block, knowing full well that the flies would love the scent of fresh bread as much as we did.

“Laura! What in tarnation are you doing?” Megan grabbed her rolling pin and brandished it. “You little brat!”

Rolling pins were serious business. I sprinted, letting the door slam behind me. Megan chased me for a little while, but gave up quickly. That settled matters. If I had any chance of eluding trouble this evening, it had just vanished. I drifted over to the barn, sure Jenny was waiting for me there.

“That wasn’t very smart.”

“Probably not. But I can’t undo it. And besides, it’s tragic to let the heels get cold.”

“Yeah.... Now what?”

“I’m not sure. I probably can’t show my face inside until supper.”

“Fluffy’s kittens are a week old now.”

“That’s old enough to play with!”

“That was my thought. Want to see if we can find them?”

“Yeah.”

We slipped into the barn, watching for any living soul. Nothing. Then we hauled the ladder into place and slithered up into the hayloft. The hay still smelled vaguely of meadows. Our hay was soft like grass now – it didn’t have all the stalks it would have later, in winter.

It took a certain skill to find kitten nests in the soft hay. The mothers always buried them slightly, so you had to make sure not to step on them while you were digging. In addition to stepping carefully, you had to dig carefully. Mother cats panicked when their nests were disturbed. They made new nests and moved their little ones, so you had to find them again. I shifted the hay carefully, trying not to disturb it much. It didn’t often fool the mothers, though; maybe they could smell us.

Jenny found the nest this time. The kittens mewled piteously, barely able to see. Their tiny paws groped for footing in the slippery straw. We cuddled each of the six in turn, stroking and petting and scratching their little ears and chins, discussing names but trying not to get too attached. These kittens would spread out, chase mice, run afoul of farmers, ranchers, and their dogs. We couldn’t keep them long after they chased the straws we dangled and flipped for them.

The afternoon flew in the hayloft. I soon noticed the sun looming low and orange. “We better get in and washed up. Aunt Megan will call supper soon.”

“Sounds good. Let’s just bury the kittens again.”

“Right. Maybe Fluffy won’t move them this time.”

We quickly reconstructed the nest and crept to the edge of the loft. I scrambled down and stepped back for Jenny. Her pale face stared down at me. Why hadn’t she grabbed the ladder yet? She shouldn’t be looking straight down. She’d never done that before; she knew better.

“C’mon Jenny! We’re going to be late!”

“I-I can’t!”

“Of course you can! You went up, you can come down.”

“No I can’t. I’m too scared.”

“Just don’t look down.”

“It’s too late for that. I already did.”

“Okay, I’ll, um, I’ll come up and help you.”

I probably should have gone to get Dad, or maybe Bob or Jack, but I didn’t want to leave Jenny. She could have tried to get on the ladder and fallen. That would be my fault. I didn’t put her there, but it was my job to get her down. I climbed back up, stopping just before crawling into the loft.

“Will the ladder hold both of us?”

“I hope so. Here, turn around and give me your foot.” She flipped over and tentatively stuck it out. I gripped it firmly. “You’ll need to get closer to the ladder. Otherwise you’ll fall.”

“Don’t say that. I don’t want to fall.”

“You won’t. Just keep hold of the ladder, and I’ll put your feet on the rungs. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I slotted Jenny’s shoe against the rung, and she gripped the sides. I groped for her other foot, found it, and slid it to the next rung down. The ladder wobbled and creaked. Terrified, I clung to the hayloft braces. Jenny yelped. I had been stupid; of course the ladder wouldn’t hold both of us. Of course it would topple under our shifting weight. I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting to dangle and fall, bracing for pain.

It never came. Somehow, we had managed to steady the ladder. Of course. Even with our weight, the ladder couldn’t pull down the hayloft, and I had instinctively grabbed on either side. It still wobbled, though. I could feel Jenny trembling as she white-knuckled the sides.

“You have to calm down, Jenny. It’s perfectly safe.”

“No it’s not! I can feel it moving.”

“That’s because you’re moving it.”

“Then how can it be safe?!”

“Because it’s holding both of us just fine. It’s solid. It’s just not steady because you keep moving it.”

“So? How do I stop?”

“Just relax. You’re not going to fall. I’ve got the hayloft until you calm down, and the ladder’s not going to break under our weight.”

“O-okay.”

I stood there grasping the hayloft for what felt like forever. I couldn’t see out the loft gate to gauge time with the sun. Finally, I felt the trembling lessen enough to move. I slid down a couple rungs, then grabbed Jenny’s top ankle and tugged. She had it solidly planted.

“You have to let me guide your feet to the next rung down.”

“Why?”

“Do you want to stay up here?”

“No.”

“Then you have to move down. If you think you can do it yourself, I’m fine with that.”

“No, no. I’ll let you move me.”

“Thanks.” I tugged her ankle again; this time it detached from its rung and neatly fitted itself against the next unoccupied rung down. I repeated this process twice and realized she had stretched out full-length on the ladder. She needed coaxing to slide her hands down so we could keep going. With much coaxing and prodding, I eventually pulled her down to the barn floor.

“See? That wasn’t so bad now, was it?”

“I’m never going into the hayloft again.”

“What about the kittens? You’ll never go up to see them again?”

“I’ll wait until they come down to me.”

“But they’re not kittens then.”

“I don’t care. I hate that loft.”

“Okay, okay. Let’s go in and get washed up.”

“Right.”

All that waiting on the ladder made us late. Dad looked at me, and I could feel his disapproval, not only for the tardiness, but also for my earlier antics. That disappointment hurt more than any beating could. I figured I would probably get more punishment, but that wouldn’t matter as much. The guilt from letting him down would make me behave if anything would.

After supper, Bob and I had to round up the guinea hens and milk the cows again. Guineas were fun to chase but difficult to pen. They squawked and clattered and flapped, and rarely ran in the direction you tried to herd them. If a few scattered, you’d soon have the whole flock loose. None of us liked the job, but they had to be penned up at night so the coyotes couldn’t get them. Sweaty and exhausted, Bob and I eventually plopped down on the stools to milk the cows. Fluffy begged and mewed and pawed my leg until I squirted a stream into her mouth. I wondered how long it would take the other cats to get here, or if they would even come. This was good mousing weather.

“I shouldn’t have squirted you this morning.”

“No, you shouldn’t have. I probably shouldn’t have given you that milk bath, though.”

“Probably.” He chuckled, and I joined him. “Dad seemed more disappointed than mad.”

“Yeah. We’re probably supposed to know better by now. We *are* the eldest.”

“Yeah. We should be setting a good example.” We sat in silence for a while. “Ted’s bringing his wagon over tomorrow. We were going to lash it to the dog and ride it around the pasture. Want to join us?”

“Sounds fun.”

That night, after washing up, I snuggled down into my covers. The chill of fall bit the night. I stroked the quilt I had sewn with Mom’s help, remembering the special outfits that had created those scraps. It warmed body and mind. I said my prayers, reflecting on the day and anticipating the next. Miss Ray was wrong. Every day was a great adventure. We might not have had much money, but we most certainly weren’t poor.

# A Blank Mother

by April R. Faucett

Veronica worked the evening shift at a factory where frozen pizzas were produced. Frequently, she was paired up with Charles, a young man around her age, during the packaging process. She stood at one end and sent bagged pizzas through a vacuum packaging machine, and when they came out the other side Charles put them in specified boxes, with the correct number of pizzas, then sealed the box with hot glue and stacked the boxes on a cart. When the cart filled, it was Veronica and Charles' duty to wheel it up to a big freezer.

She worked the evening shift so her two young girls could stay home with their dad, Stewart, when he got off work instead of racking up a daycare bill they couldn't afford. Her girls were six and three; she was only sixteen when she had the first one. Stewart decided to move the family closer to the farm he worked on, which was how she ended up working at the factory.

Running late for work one day, Veronica ended up working in the production room because the packaging had already begun. As she rounded the corner, she noticed a space next to Charles.

"You late too, huh?" Veronica stepped next to him.

"Yep." He said as he looked to ensure it was Veronica. "Carla came home from work late again. I'll have to pick her up and drop her off because she won't leave work early enough for me to make it to work on time."

"Why doesn't *she* drive?" She reached up and grabbed a frozen, sauced pizza crust from a stack.

"She has to pay like two thousand dollars or something, for some old accident that she owes money on just to get her license back."

"Oh," she watched his stubby hands scatter cheese around a pizza crust. "Your brother still living with you guys?"

Charles looked at Veronica and sneered, "No, she made him move out a couple weeks ago. Pissed us both off."

Veronica studied his thick eyelashes and clean shaven face. He was much more handsome than her boyfriend. Probably a lot nicer too. "Why'd she do that?"

"Ohhh, because she needed something to complain about," he chucked a stack of pepperoni into a pepperoni tin in front of him.

"Sounds like you two aren't getting along too well."

"Yeah, sometimes I wonder why I even bother. How are your little ones?"

"Fine. Stewart's kind of being a jerk though," she admitted as she placed a finished pizza on a conveyor. "Last night I drove around for a little while after work, and when I got home the girls were hiding under the kitchen table, the TV was on and dishes were scattered all over. It was two thirty in the morning!" She raised her left palm in the air.

"And Stewart was sleeping then?"

“Yeah,” She watched his face out of the corner of her eye. “He probably didn’t even bother to get them to bed. No bath, no pj’s, he just does whatever,” she shrugged her shoulders.

“So they were watching TV?” He reached for another stack of pepperoni.

“Probably. Who knows.” She whiffed the spicy scent rolling off of him. “I don’t know what else to do, ya know? I have to work.” She pushed her glasses up with the outside of her wrist. “Did you see who was packaging?”

“Yeah, Jay will do anything to avoid making pizza. That’s why I wanna get here on time, so he’ll have to actually work,” he made eye contact with Veronica. She nodded slightly and looked away.

“Can’t Get You Out of My Head” came on a nearby radio and Veronica announced, “Oh, I love this song!” As she hummed along she thought that the song playing was ironic because she was always thinking about Charles.

“Well, I’m gonna go to the bathroom.” Charles wandered out of the room.

When he came back, she looked square at him, and after he got back to his spot she said, “So, how does Carla like working the morning shift here anyways?”

“She complains about being tired a lot. But, it works out well for us. Seems like she is always complaining that I didn’t do something or else I did it wrong.”

“I worked the morning shift for a little while.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.” He cocked his head when he looked at her.

“Hey, do you guys need a bed? My friend Jill is giving us her old one tomorrow so I need to get rid of our old one. It’s in good condition and everything.”

“Yeah, sure. Just stop over whatever time before work then.”

“Ok.”

Thinking about the rest of the night at work, she figured she would see if she could get a saucing station with Charles. “Well, I’m gonna go talk to Renee.”

After looking through the production room, she walked up to the break room and decided to check the bathroom. She took off her white shawl and hung it on the hook outside her locker. Glancing in the mirror as she walked by, she noticed how dark the circles were under her eyes. When she opened the door, her ears perked up.

“Did you see that girl today? Circles under her eyes dark as night! She was late too.”

Two heads jerked when she entered the room.

“You gettin’ enough sleep girl?” Renee inquired. “You look awful tired today.”

“Yeah, I heard you talking about it.”

“Well, have you seen those bags under your eyes?”

“Yes, thanks for reminding me. Anyways, I was wondering if you had the stations set up for tonight.”

“No, not yet. Why?”

“Well, since Charles and I both came late and we’re already standing at the end of the cooler, we might as well have a station there,” Veronica coaxed.

“Oh, I see. You just wanna stand by the cute one. Flirt a little. I see how it is,” she shook her head back and forth and placed a hand on her hip.

“Well whatever. I just thought it would be easy for you. We could even start early. You could get done at three in the morning instead of five,” the pitch in her voice rose.

“Yeah, ok, whatever. Get some sleep when you get home tonight. You don’t want Charlie checkin’ you out with those bags under your eyes, do ya?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

They walked out of the bathroom together and put their shawls back on. Veronica headed down to the production room and told Charles the plan. The rest of the night she and Charles worked together, talking about their problems in present life and laughing at some past instances.

After work, Veronica hung around and visited with co-workers until she was sure Charles went home. She drove by his apartment a few times before she finally went home. All she saw was a blue light shining from the TV. When she got home, the girls were actually asleep in bed. She crept into her bedroom and watched Stewart sleep. His mouth was cracked and drool drained out of it and his hands were together, placed in between his thighs. Even though he lay on one side of the bed, she reached over him, snatched a pillow and tiptoed back into the living room. Cozying up on the couch, she pulled the blanket off the top of the couch, draped it over herself and fell fast asleep.

“Hey! Get up. I’m leaving,” Stewart banged the couch by her shoulder. “Why you sleeping out here anyway?”

Squinting, she opened her eyes and scrunched her eyebrows. “You were snoring again.”

She reached for her glasses on the coffee table and then stood up. Heading down the hall, a little body emerged from the bathroom.

“Hi mommy!”

“Hi,” she replied to a little face smiling at her. “Cereal or toast? Or both?”

“Mmmm, can I have pannacakes?” Tiffany asked, walking towards the living room. “Bye daddy!”

“Bye. See ya after work.” He strode out the door and jumped in his car.

“No, we only have cereal or toast,” Veronica shouted from the bathroom.

While in the bathroom, she reached for her morning birth control pills and just stared at them. A feeling came over her and she thought about intentionally becoming pregnant and proclaiming it was an accident. After little consideration, she buried them in the garbage and went to wake Tammy, her youngest daughter. After she got Tiffany ready for school and dropped her off she drove by Charles’ apartment. When she got home, she showered, cleaned the house up, and made room for the bed her friend Jill was to deliver.

Jill arrived a couple of hours later, and Veronica rushed out to help her with the bed. When they finished, she asked for help loading her old bed into her pickup and told her she was giving it to a friend. Jill didn’t stick around to visit as usual because she said she was busy.



Veronica pranced to bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her baggy sweat outfit must be changed. Rummaging through her closet, she found a thin, white shirt and some holey jeans. She wore a hot pink bra underneath and let her long, wavy hair flow around her shoulders. Back in the mirror again, she examined her face. The dark circles were faint and she swept some lavender eye shadow across her lids before a spray of perfume. Then she hauled Tammy on her hip, loaded her into the car and drove up to Charles'.

On the way up to Charles', she wondered if he would notice her pink bra through the thin shirt; she noticed it when she looked in the mirror. Carla was much prettier and doesn't wear glasses, she thought, but also had fat legs. After parking on the street, she lugged Tammy on her hip and stepped up to the door. Charles answered the door dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

"Hey," he greeted as his eyes grazed downward. "Is that one of your little ones?"

"Yep, this is Tammy." She smiled because she watched his eyes migrate down to her chest.

"Well, come in and she can play with Becca while we bring the bed in."

She waltzed in and observed the family portrait hanging on the wall. Their smiles were big and their eyes shined. Carla and Becca wore red shirts while Charles and Daniel wore blue. A touch of jealousy cooled her. Stewart always refused to take a family portrait. Heck, he wouldn't even go into restaurants to eat with them as a family.

"We'll just carry it down to the basement, ok?" Charles asked.

"Ok." She led him outside and they carried the bed into the house. It took three trips.

"So, how are things today?" Veronica asked as they sat at the kitchen table. She noticed a little pile of clothes here and a stack of dishes there, toys scattered about the house and dust bunnies in the corners of the room. That Carla must be lazy, she thought to herself.

"I don't know. Our lease is up in a couple weeks and we got into an argument about it. She wants to move, I don't. I told her we don't make enough money to move right now, yet she insists we move because the rent is too much." Charles walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. "Hey, you wanna pop or glass of water or something?"

"Yeah, sure. A pop sounds good." A loud crash came from the living room and her head jerked. The kids giggled as they crashed toy cars onto the hardwood floor from the coffee table.

"So what do you think you're gonna do?" Veronica asked.

"Well, I'm not budging," Charles handed her a coke and sat down. "It's like she doesn't even care what I have to say. No respect. She makes me so mad that sometimes I wonder why I'm even with her."

"Are you guys intimate?" She pried, and locked her eyes on his and raised one eyebrow.

“Not for a long time,” he stammered.

“Well, that says a lot. Maybe you guys just need some time apart.”

“I don’t know. I do love her, I just feel like she doesn’t care about my opinions. I feel like all she wants is a free babysitter and someone to do her housework. And then, if I do something, it’s wrong. She even left a note taped above the sink in the bathroom, ‘please don’t spit all over the sink,’ can you believe that?”

“Hmm, maybe deep down she doesn’t know if she really wants to be with you. Sometimes I wonder if Stewart has regrets. I should get going. He might call before I go to work and if I’m not there to answer it, he’ll get pissed and call me every name in the book.”

“And you put up with that?”

“I guess so. I don’t know what else to do,” her shoulders rose and fell and she shook her head. She got up and walked into the living room.

“Come on Tammy, time to go.”

Tammy got up and trotted over to her.

“See you in a little bit I spose, at work.”

“Yep. Thanks a lot for the bed!”

“You’re welcome, and thanks for taking it off my hands. I didn’t have room for it and I wasn’t sure what I was gonna do. Talk to ya later.”

“Yep.”

Charles saw her out and stared out the window after he closed the door.

When they met at work a couple hours later, Charles walked into the break room where employees put on their hairnets and shawls, and Veronica was pulling her hair into a ponytail. Charles stopped in awe. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him come in and stop.

“Not late today, you’re doin’ good,” she remarked.

“Yeah. You’re hair is pretty long huh? How long you been growing it out?” Charles chomped his gum.

“I don’t know, probably like two years or something. Carla’s got short hair doesn’t she?”

“Yeah. She’s been talking about cutting it again too.”

“Well, see you down there.”

“Yeah. Hopefully in the packaging room and not the production room.”

Charles grabbed a hairnet and threw a shawl on. He dashed down to the packaging room and interrupted a conversation between Veronica and Renee. As soon as they saw him, they quit talking.

“Looks like we get to do all the packaging tonight,” Veronica said as she walked over to Charles.”

“What boxes do we need?” He asked as he followed her out of the room.

“Taco and Deluxe, I’ll help you bring them in.”

The rest of the night at work, Charles stared at the wall. Veronica noticed and teased him throughout the night. They shared pizza at supper break and towards the end of the night, she invited Charles to cruise around after work with her.

They talked and laughed while they drove around for an hour or so. Once they parked, he kept finding excuses to stay in the car and talk instead of saying goodnight. She leaned towards Charles on the armrest and looked up to respond to him. When he made eye contact to say goodnight, their eyes locked. He leaned down and closed his eyes while he pressed his lips against hers. Her arm snaked around his neck and she grasped the back of his head.

After half an hour of kissing, Charles climbed on top of her. She wrapped her legs around him and then searched to unfasten his pants. While he wiggled his pants down, she snuck out of hers.

When it was all over, Veronica sped away and Charles sat in his car. Charles slept on the couch when he got home. He couldn't sleep next to a woman he loved whom he had just deceived. It took hours for him to fall asleep. Since Carla worked so early in the morning, he didn't have to face her until later.

When Veronica got home she went into the bathroom, stripped her clothes off and cleaned herself up. She crept into the bedroom and slid under the blankets next to Stewart. She rubbed her leg against his and massaged his chest. Kissing his bare shoulder, she thought about Charles. Stewart rolled onto his back. She kissed his neck and worked her way up to his mouth. When he kissed back, she glided on top of him. Sliding his pants down, she squirmed around.

Charles and Veronica smiled at each other when their eyes met at work the next day. A few weeks went by and every night they drove around after work, usually parking at some secluded spot or another. Charles went home and slept on the couch every night, while Veronica crawled into bed with Stewart.

One night they drove around and Charles noticed she wasn't being her usual self.

"Is something the matter?" He questioned.

"Well, sort of."

"Stewart mad that you're moving out?"

"I'm pregnant," she boasted.

"Really?" Charles smiled and his shoulders dropped.

"I didn't know how to tell you. I wasn't sure how you'd react and all."

"Well, Carla and I are practically over. We have been for a long time. You know. When I leave though I think she's gonna flip out. She's been suspicious since I've been sleeping on the couch."

"I don't think Stewart will even care when I leave. All he cares about is himself anyway."

"I'll just write her a note and tell her since we can't agree about signing a new lease, I'm moving out. Then I won't have to answer to her really. Yeah, that sounds good doesn't it?"

"What about the kids?"

"I'll just drop them off at her mom's in the afternoon. What do you think you're gonna do about Stewart?"

“Ahhh, I think I’ll just tell him I’m not putting up with the way he treats me anymore and that I’m leaving. I know just what he’ll say too, ‘don’t let the door hit you ...’”

“Well, I’ll call you tomorrow to check in, see how things went.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, I just can’t believe it!” Charles reached over and rubbed her stomach then gave her a kiss goodbye and drove home.

The next morning as Veronica cooked breakfast, Stewart came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, rubbing her stomach.

“How’s my little linebacker doing this morning?” He kissed the back of her neck a couple times.

“Oh just fine.” She turned around, put her arms around his neck and kissed him. “Hopefully I’m growing a little boy for you this time.”

“Well, I’m off to work my little apple dumpling.”

“Love you. See you after work.”

“Love you too.”

She watched him climb in his car and wave through the window, thinking to herself that he’d never been so nice. She went about the rest of her day in a dreamlike state until the phone rang.

# Clinique is cliché

*by Dani Phares*

Gabriella was a daddy's girl. She was as fresh as a daisy and as dumb as a box of rocks. At the butt crack of dawn, she would frolic to and fro. She thought that make-up was the best thing since sliced bread. She would wear it from sun up to sun down. She never shared her make-up, for it was hers she would say. Her father said that blood was thicker than water and she should share, but she just could not bring herself to do it.

Once upon a time, Gabriella was beating around the bush and stomping through mud puddles, when Prince Charming rolled up in his caddy. Gabriella was caught between a rock and a hard place because she was not wearing any of her fantastic blue eye shadow. You know the kind that made her eyes shine like the sea. She began crying buckets because she knew that Prince Charming would get cold feet if he saw her like this. She quickly stopped, dropped, and rolled around. When Prince Charming asked her, "What's up?" She did not want to dig herself more into a hole, so she said that, "The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire!" Then she looked down and saw that her dress was caked in mud. She started to bawl. She was weeping so exhaustively that Prince Charming said, "Do not make a mountain out of a molehill, its only dirt."

"Thou does not understandeth thine words," she sobbed, "I was going to look gorgeous for our date, but now I shan't go. I am terribly underdressed and stanky!!" In a down to earth way, Prince Charming dropped like a hot potato and rolled around too. They gleefully rolled around all day until high noon. They both went to the watering hole and got their feet wet. As they were recovering from the escapade, Prince Charming said, "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes." Gabriella giggled and blushed. She said, "Well, you know me. I am full of piss and vinegar but I always seem to live it up." They both laughed and snuggled closer together. Prince Charming said, "You know, I heard it through the grape vine that you might actually love me. Is this true?" Gabriella smiled and replied, "I think your head is in the clouds." Prince Charming looked grimly at her and said, "Don't put all your eggs into a basket and tell me the truth." Gabriella pushed him away and was rising when he said, "Baby, I am sorry. Forgive me! I love you!" Gabriella fell back into his arms and she said, "I do, I do love you!"

They ended up buying a condo in Brooklyn. Prince Charming worked three dead end jobs just to put money on the table. Gabriella popped out seven children. All who were incredibly short, but in the end, they all fell into hot water when they fell for a woman with skin as white as snow.

# Who Says Vampires Aren't Real?

*by Stephany Wegenast*

"Rayne!" yelled a little girl's mother. "Time for school!"

In reply, a small voice called back, "Coming!" From the top of the stairs a little girl emerged and walked down to greet her mother. Rayne is a little girl age six and just starting kindergarten. She went to school the first day and was made fun of because she had a fascination with vampires, witches and many other mystical beings that everyone believed never and will never exist. For a whole week, she endured the torture from the other kids in her class, at least until Saturday finally came and Rayne got an idea. She decided that if she couldn't have any normal friends she would just make one up. So all day she drew what her imaginary friend would look like and thought of a bunch of names to name him, but she couldn't think of the right name for such a special friend. When all of a sudden she looked to her drawing of a man with hair black as night and dark blue eyes, with dark crimson-red clothes and vampire fangs sticking out of his smiling mouth and saw a glow of light so bright that she had to cover her eyes, but when she looked back at the paper, she found her drawing gone and just a blank paper. She looked everywhere until a mysterious voice came from her left, "What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for my new friend's picture," she replied not realizing who was behind her.

"Oh, well I don't see anything," he said.

Rayne turned around and came face to face with the new friend she had drawn, and after staring at him for a while did something no one in her position would expect. She ran at him and tackled him to the ground with a strong enormous hug that took the breath away from the unsuspecting vampire. "I'm Rayne! What's your name?" She asked as soon as she pried away from the twenty-year-old vampire.

"My name is Raven." Surprised that he already had a name, she asked, "Raven? Cool! I like it," she stated as she smiled a huge smile.

"Rayne are you alright in there?" her mother asked from outside her bedroom door.

"Yes!" Rayne replied. "I made a new friend!"

Her mother opened the door and asked, "Oh really? Who is it?"

The little girl didn't hesitate. "This is Raven," she said pointing to the man behind her.

"Who?" her mother asked in a confusing tone, because all she saw was a happy little girl pointing to thin air. "Where? Sweetie?"

The little confused girl pointed at Raven again, saying, "Right here, mommy."

The mother thinking that her daughter was just imagining things said, "That's nice dear. Time for supper."

The man behind the confused little girl said to her, "Rayne I'm your friend no one else can see me. Only you." The little girl turned to look up at the grown Vampire.

"Oh cool."

Rayne's mother turned around. "What's cool, dear?"

The girl turned and looked at her mother. "My imaginary friend Raven the Vampire!" she yelled in delight with the biggest smile the little girl could muster.

The girl's mother just looked at her for a while before asking, "Does Raven want to stay for dinner?"

The girl turned to Raven and asked, "Do you?"

The man looking down at the eager little girl answered, "Of course."

Rayne smiled and turned to her mother. "Yes, he would love to," she said with a huge grin.

After supper, Rayne and Raven went up to Rayne's room and played all types of games. This went on all weekend until Monday came. "Raven will you come to school with me?"

The Vampire looked down at the little girl and with a smile said, "Of course. Whereever you go I'll go."

The little girl smiled and said, "Cool! Can you suck the blood from all of my classmates?"

The Vampire, looking confused, asked, "Why?"

Rayne, replying with a sad face, said, "They are all mean and pick on me because I like Vampires and a bunch of other mystical beings."

The man smiled. "I can't do that but I can scare them up a bit."

Seeing that that's as close as she'd get to revenge, the girl said, "Okay, that'll work."

Rayne and her best friend went to school together Monday and every other day that there was school until Rayne was in second grade and they got a new student. Rayne and this new student became close friends, so close that one day Raven was no longer needed. Rayne had a real friend so Raven was called back to the same piece of paper that Rayne had originally drew him from. When Rayne came home from school and saw the drawing of Raven, she thought nothing of it but tacked it to her tag board and kept it forever.

"Mommy?" Came a little voice.

"Yes sweetie?" came the reply.

"Who's this?"

The mother of the little girl looks over at what her daughter pointed to, smiled and said, "That baby was my imaginary friend Raven. He helped me get through kindergarten and first grade. I'll never forget him. For he will always be with me in my heart."

The little girl looked up at her mother and asks, "Can I have an imaginary friend?"

The mother looked down at her daughter and looked back at the picture of her imaginary friend. With a shocked expression, for Raven's picture had just winked at her, she said, "Of course. Just draw your imaginary friend on a piece of paper and believe in your heart and they'll come to you. And will be there for you forever the closer you are."

## There is a first for everything

*by Dani Phares*

"Young lady, make sure that your little sister has her swim shoes!" I can still recall the shrill voice my mother used that day, reminding me that for some odd reason, it was my job to get my younger sister ready. I am not sure that there has ever been a family more dysfunctional than my family, maybe the infamous Baldwin brothers who cannot refrain from fighting in public one minute and are then seen hugging the next, but I am not sure. We scream at each other, we have been known to throw things at one another, and then comes the violence if one of us does not get their way. But that day, I remember that we did not fight at all. Sure, there was the usual grumbling about getting loaded up into the car, but not the high pitch scream that could shatter glass from my little sister or the incessantly stinging nail wounds that my older sister can inflict if she does not get her way. It must have been the anticipation we felt as we packed and loaded the car, but we were going camping and it was not the backyard camping that we had done before. This was to be our first family vacation.

The drive out to the lake was bumping and terrifying. I remember looking up at the enormous, lush, green pines that seemed to be staring down a little girl of only eight years. I was the one that got to ride with Grandpa in the lead car. My car carried my grandpa, my brother, and myself, but of course, I was not satisfied sitting in the back, I had to sit on my brother's lap. My grandpa is a cautious driver, always going far below the speed limit, but this time it was even slower. It could have been the winding uphill battle with the mountain to get where we wanted to go or it could have been the excitement that was careening through every part of my body. I think that is why my brother was holding on to me and not my seatbelt, because I am not sure it would have held me in. I got my just rewards though, I stuck my head out the window, to feel the cool breeze on my skin because the heat and excitement was becoming unbearable and that is when I swallowed a bug. His juicy squishy body hit the back of my throat as I realized what happened. I took an involuntary swallow and down he went. That shut me up right there and my brother said my face was a fairly pretty shade of green the rest of the trip. It was not the best part of the trip, by far.

Finally, after the long crawl up the hill and a few back tracking miles because of an oversight by my aging navigator grandfather, we made it to the cabin. Both my



younger sister and I jumped out of the cars and ran around the cabin, making sure that she checked for spiders before I came in. We then ran down the dusty gravel road to the recreation town, where you could buy all the amenities of home. There was even a pool table outside the restaurant. My dad would challenged me to my first game of pool that summer, and I am not sure if he let me win or if it was just ill luck but he sunk the eight ball after three turns. But before that would happen, we had to get the van unloaded and my uncle's boat set into the dock.

I can still recall the excitement that I felt my first time water tubing. The rush of adrenaline pumping through my already stressed veins was extreme but rewarding. I still feel the sting, like a thousand pins sticking into your body at one time, when I hit the water going at least 60 miles per hour. My little hands could not withstand the centrifugal force that the boat was producing while I was being pulled behind on the inner tube. My body rolled off the wobbly vessel and my body bounced of the water twice before I finally sank into the water. My uncle circled back around to pull me onto the boat. I was exhausted but satisfied until I actually realized that my body was shivering from the adrenaline that was pumping through it. They took me back onto the shore and I lay out on a towel to dry. I remember how the hot, setting sun baked my skin, for a while, it felt like a godsend, and then it just got too hot, like the humid summers of the South, described in the book I was reading at the close of my first day at the lake.



***Highline Bridge***  
Mary Kennedy  
*Photography*

# This is the Dark Lord's Office

by Geneva Rockeman

*Lights come up on a nearly empty stage. There is a coat rack on one side of the stage covered with long black cloaks, a fireplace where the door should be (a black cloth covers the mouth of the fireplace, but it is the main entrance and exit of the office) and taking prominence is a large, ornate desk, covered with papers, folders, coffee cups, random fruit, and a telephone. There is a bright red, tall-backed chair behind it. In the chair, and very much asleep with her feet up on the desk, is a young woman in a smart skirt, heels, and blouse. Her suit jacket is hanging on the coat hanger underneath the black robes. She could be snoring.*

*The telephone on the desk rings and the girl stirs slightly. It continues to ring for a moment before the answering machine picks it up – The girl's voice intones the following 'Brightly'.*

**Hello! You've reached the Dark Lord's office. His evilness may not be in at the moment but if you feel like you really, *really* need to leave him or his minions a message, please leave your name, number, next-of-kin information, and blood type after the scream. Thank you.**

*Machine emits high-pitched screech. Emma leaves message for audience to hear.*

**EMMA: *Hello love, it's Emma!!! I know you're probably asleep at the desk. Just wanted you to know I'd be over soon to take the cloaks to the dry-cleaners. If you get this before I pop in, would you be a dear and start some tea? OK, bye!***

*A moment passes and the phone rings again. The girl grumbles and kicks the telephone receiver off the machine with one heel. The phone continues to ring and she awakens, her hair in several different directions and her clothes askew.*

**LAURA: (*Grumbling*) Damn bewitched phone! (pulls her feet off the desk and picks up receiver, thoroughly livid) *WHAT?!* (*Deflates*) Oh, hello Charlie...what? (*checks watch*)...no, not the *whole* day...uh-huh...(starts digging through pile of papers. A few fall off the desk, she doesn't notice them) um, yes....Yeah, I have the invoice right here...no, wait, this one's dated two weeks back...(continues to dig)...wait!! Yes, OK, I've got it...uh-huh...No, says here that it's paid...yeah, thanks Charlie. (*EMMA enters through***

*the fireplace as LAURA replaces the phone*). Ridiculous. (*makes scrawling note on paper*)

EMMA: (*A young woman, Janitor of sorts. Converses, overalls, t-shirt, hair pulled back. She's very normal, always comfortable, moseys, never walks too fast.- half-hugs Laura from behind the chair*) Hey! What's up, doll?

LAURA: Not a whole lot. Haven't started tea yet.

EMMA: It's alright. I'll do it. Any new calls? (*retreating offstage*)

LAURA: (*calling after her*) Not too many...One from the plumber.

EMMA: Oh? What did he say?

LAURA: A little befuddled at the number of bones he keeps finding stuck in the drain downstairs.

EMMA: What? The storage basement?

LAURA: No, no, the old dungeon. You remember? When Master Cornelius went through his 'chinese water torture' phase?

EMMA: What was that? Last year?

LAURA: Two years ago.

EMMA: Why haven't we had problems with it yet?

LAURA: (*laughs*) We have! That's the pipe that goes through main drainage.

EMMA: Is that why the kitchen sink's always blocked up?

LAURA: (*hesitant*) That's one theory.

EMMA: How many bones did he find?

LAURA: Enough.

EMMA: (*coming back onstage with a dishtowel in her hands*) Really? I don't remember so many murders down there.

LAURA: There weren't. But you *do* remember that one drug-dealer?

EMMA: Uh-huh, from last year? Skinny Pete...something-or-other...or was it Dave?

LAURA: (*shrugs*) Well, Something like that. His buddies got a little miffed one night, followed him...You know how His Evilness gets when he's interrupted.

EMMA: (*tsk-ing*) Yeah. Gosh, I keep forgetting how stupid drug-dealers are.

LAURA: They are...remarkable, aren't they?

EMMA: Not my first adjective choice, but 'remarkable' works.

LAURA: Either way, we need to think up a story for Plumber Nervous McAntsy.

EMMA: Ugh. What do you plan on telling him?

LAURA: Haven't a clue. I'm kind of out of ideas. I already used up: 'old slaughter-house'. That one sounds too suspicious anyway. They start asking *what* was slaughtered...

EMMA: Yeah, I know how that goes.

LAURA: Maybe we could get Maurice to mess with him. Make him think he's crazy.

EMMA: I don't know. That could backfire.

LAURA: (*tosses EMMA a banana*) How's that?

EMMA: Well, somebody finding a crazed plumber, covered in blood –

LAURA: Only potentially!

EMMA: (*raises eyebrow*) Maurice is involved and the plumber isn't covered in blood?

LAURA: Alright. Point taken. Continue.

EMMA: Anyway, so a crazed plumber—

LAURA: (*supplying*) Covered in blood—

EMMA: Yes, exactly – he climbs through some manhole in the middle of town mumbling wildly about a 'dungeon of pain' and murdered puppies.

LAURA: I'm not even going to pretend *that* wouldn't happen.

EMMA: And people WILL think he's crazy, but it's just weird enough to make everybody harass us.

LAURA: (*groans*) Holy buckets. It'll be like Halloween all over again.

EMMA: (nods) Only, more dead puppies.

LAURA: Fewer dead police officers.

EMMA: We can only hope. (*Both girls stare at the ceiling – a gesture of weak hope*)

EMMA: But such is life. No matter how you get rid of Plumber's Crack I'm still going to have to clean up.

LAURA: It is your job.

EMMA: You're joking, right?

LAURA: What?

EMMA: Now you're going to pretend that we didn't get into the business of world domination with the expectation of free hours?

LAURA: \*mumbles\*

EMMA: What was that?

LAURA: Well, I actually was expecting nap time.

EMMA: Which you got.

LAURA: *uninterrupted* nap time.

EMMA: (shrugs) Hey, not my fault you're so picky.

LAURA: But it's been much worse lately.

EMMA: what has?

LAURA: the interruptions has—I mean, Have. Have been.

EMMA: And?

LAURA: It Has Sucked. In all tenses.

EMMA: Why?

LAURA: We're really behind in bills. (picks up stack of papers) Do you see these? Invoices from five weeks ago. And These? (Another stack on the floor) From two months ago. If we weren't stealing utilities and cable, I'm pretty sure we'd be behind in those payments too.

EMMA: We're behind? You mean, in debt?

LAURA: (scoffs) As much as you can be 'in debt' to a (reads off of invoice) black-market jell-o factory.

EMMA: We –

LAURA: Yes, we –

EMMA: And by 'We', you mean 'Us' –

LAURA: Indeed.

EMMA: We're in debt to a...

LAURA: Black-market Jell-o Factory.

EMMA: Lemme see that. (snatches invoice)

LAURA: Be my guest. There're *dozens* like it. (picks up another) This one is for the purchase of "Rubber Ear Muffs". (EMMA snatches this one) And there was another one I saw this morning made out to "Signora Brock Rudolf Heinzmenschtién." It doesn't say what the thing is, or what the company does, but, I'm gonna tell you right now, Emma, I'm really afraid to ask.

EMMA: You mean you don't know?

LAURA: (scoffs) Why would I?

EMMA: But you always do.

LAURA: Nope. Past tense. I always *did*. That was before Master Cornelius went into this 'power monger' circus of his. Now he won't tell anybody anything.

EMMA: But he tells Jess, of course.

LAURA: Not always.

EMMA: Good golly! If he doesn't even bother to monologue to his head minion, then what's the point!?

LAURA: That's what I said.

EMMA: And?

LAURA: He told me to “hold onto the arm, and stop asking so many questions.”

EMMA: What arm? There was an arm?

LAURA: Just a little detached one.

EMMA: Not that it’s any of my business--

LAURA: (brushing it off) An IRS agent.

EMMA: This was just a month ago?

LAURA: No, last April. We haven’t really been bothered since.

*PHONE RINGS*

LAURA: Just a sec, Emma. (picks up) Yes? This is the Dark Lord’s Office, how may I help you? (Snaps fingers at EMMA, wants something) Is that so? Oh, yes, I see...

EMMA: (low voice) Yeah?

LAURA: (whispers, covering phone) Are my boots still at the front door? (back into phone) And the cat was in the tree in the *front* yard?

EMMA: Your galoshes?

LAURA: (covering phone again) The ones with the rubber duckies.

EMMA: Yeah, they’re downstairs.

LAURA: (Into phone) I think I see him now, Mrs. Hansen. I’ll have someone fetch him down for you. (covering phone) Put them on and go feed the Tree.

EMMA: No! It didn’t. It wouldn’t!

LAURA: It ate the Hansen’s stupid cat again. (into phone) Oh, absolutely, Mrs. Hansen. Yes, I’m sure he’d *love* to come to tea on Wednesday. (covering phone) Go! Go! (into phone, as EMMA goes out the fireplace) mmmhmmm, definitely. Yes, well, I don’t know. Master Cornelius is very busy these days. (starts peeling banana) Indeed, well, I’m sure his mother is anxious to get a hold of him.

*Ruckus starts while LAURA is making ‘polite noises – “oh really? You don’t say...” etc.’ There is a great deal of loud banging and then EMMA starts yelling.*

*EMMA: (FROM OFFSTAGE) Get back! Evil fiend of satan! Get back to the abyss from whence you came! Back, back I say! (MORE BANGING) MORGRIM! Let the damn cat down!*

*High-pitched cat's yeowl.*

LAURA: Oh, it sounds like we might have found him, Mrs. Hansen.

*EMMA: I swear I won't feed you until Halloween! Think! Only sugary little kids to chew on, eh Morgrim!?! That's right. Let him down nice and slow...NO! Love of MIKE! Don't do that!*

*MORE BANGING*

LAURA: I don't think it will be too long, Mrs. Hansen...No, he just seems to be a bit reluctant to come down.

*EMMA falls through the fireplace, a shovel in one hand and a cat's collar in the other.*

EMMA: Laura!

LAURA: (taking in EMMA's condition) Oh, dear. Yes, he's just made off through the trees. He's heading for another house down the hill. I am terribly sorry. Yes, thank you Mrs. Hansen. Ok...OK, alright, bye! (bangs phone down in hurry to reach EMMA)

LAURA: What happened!?!?

EMMA: He ate it! (holds up ownerless collar) That stupid tree finally ate the cat!

LAURA: He always eats the cat. Then he spits the thing out again, and we hand it back to Mrs. Hansen who pretends not to notice the eye twitch it's developed.

EMMA: No, you don't understand, he *ate* it. One big crunch, and when he opened up there were just little kitty-bones left inside it. (Tosses collar onto the desk)

LAURA: That's impossible. He's grouchy, sure, but he's not malicious.

EMMA: Not malicious? (scoffs) He tried to eat *me*. Evil little *Shrub!* He grabbed the shovel and started jerking me about.

LAURA: That's it! That's all I can take. This house has gone completely insane and I am the one that always has to deal with it.

EMMA: Just you?



LAURA: Emma, really?

EMMA: What?

LAURA: You're interrupting my rant.

EMMA: Sorry.

LAURA: It's alright.

EMMA: Do continue

LAURA: Thank you.

EMMA: You're welcome.

LAURA: Where was I?

EMMA: House was going insane – Morgrim just ate a cat...

LAURA: Oh, right – (continuing rant) My boss never gives me any directions anymore, and the ones he does give me are either ridiculously garbled, make no sense at all, or are completely undoable! He wants me to organize our accounts...WHAT accounts? Does he really think I can find extra money hiding in the filing cabinet?

EMMA: Is there any?

LAURA: There *used* to be! It was the only way I was able to keep track of salaries. Neither you nor I have gotten paid this last month for a very good reason; THERE'S NO MONEY.

EMMA: I had been wondering about that. I didn't want to pry.

LAURA: You're a wonderful girl, Emma.

EMMA: If you've been having such a problem, Laura, why haven't you talked to Jess about it?

LAURA: (a little embarrassed) I don't know. I keep wanting to, but you know how she is about Master Cornelius, all protective and what-not. I don't want to upset her, you know?

EMMA: Understandable, but if he's backed you into a complete corner...?

*JESS crawls through the fireplace, jumps up and brushes herself off. A cheerful and fairly harmless-looking, pitch-black hair, wearing normal jeans, black rubber boots, a black hoodie, and dark, SLIGHTLY heavy eye makeup.*

LAURA: (seeing JESS) Well! Speak of the Devil!

*JESS looks about, startled.*

LAURA: No, idiot, you!

JESS: (momentarily relieved) Oh, yeah. Hi guys!

LAURA: I didn't make the tea. The arsenic was in it before I even touched it.

EMMA: Lies of satan!

LAURA: (laughing) Emma's trying to kill you!

EMMA: No! There's nothing wrong with the tea, I swear.

JESS: (Laughs bitterly) Well, poisoning the tea is going to be the least of our worries in a little while anyway.

*LAURA and EMMA pause, staring at JESS, giving her their full attention, wary, apprehensive. JESS seems unwilling to impart bad news, she picks up a piece of fruit and perches herself on one corner of the desk.*

LAURA: (*shares a glance with EMMA*) Jess? What exactly do you mean by that?

JESS: (taking a bite) Mean by what?

EMMA: You weren't taking tea seriously.

JESS: Wasn't I?

LAURA: Jessica...

JESS: (resigned) So, I have some bad news...

EMMA: Any good news?

JESS: Well, there is some news that isn't as bad as the first batch.

LAURA: No good news? I thought there'd be good news.

EMMA: This doesn't sound promising at all.

JESS: My, aren't we optimistic!

EMMA: Give us the 'Not as bad' news first.

JESS: Well, *that* batch of news...(Holds up an invoice) I know what these are for.

LAURA: (reaching for paper, JESS keeps it out of her reach) Really? You know what all these are for?

JESS: It depends.

EMMA: (reaching over JESS to grab invoice) You know why master Cornelius bought a "storehouse pallet of ramen noodles"?

JESS: (falters) Not *Exactly*...

LAURA: or what in the world we're doing with 2000 pounds of frozen peas in the meat locker downstairs?

JESS: Like I said...

LAURA: (annoyed) Well, you're no help.

JESS: Did you guys even *want* the bad news?

EMMA: (scoffs) Not if it's going to be *boring*.

JESS: What are you implying?

EMMA: You're boring.

LAURA: Actually, Emma, I think that's not implying anymore, that's more of a clear, declarative statement.

JESS: She's right.

EMMA: \*shrugs\* Ah, well. I'll go get the tea then, shall I?

LAURA: Do, please. It must be ready by now. (EMMA exits)

JESS: I would like to point out, however, that you guys SUCK.

LAURA: How's this?

JESS: (sulky) Well, I was kind of psyched to be the bearer of bad news.

LAURA: You know better than to start out with something so weak.

JESS: Whatever! You guys were totally into it.

LAURA: Before or after we called your bluff?

JESS: (splutter) My bluff!?!?! (LAURA pauses, blinks) Alright, fine. Be that way. (EMMA enters with tea tray, Teapot, 3 cups, biscuits)

EMMA: Tea, Jess?

JESS: Yeah, alright. (takes cup. During the next few lines the girls dole out tea and take seats, on the chair, the desk, and the floor)

EMMA: But are you actually going to tell us the bad news?

JESS: (loftily) Well, I'm not sure if you deserve it now.

LAURA: Come on! Out with it, woman. We've been waiting a full two minutes. That's a personal record for you.

JESS: Oh! Is it really?

LAURA: You know you want to.

EMMA: She's right.

JESS: (strained for a moment, before bursting out) ALRIGHT! (gasps) You've beaten it out of me.

*EMMA and LAURA continue to drink their tea, entirely unimpressed*

JESS: (Excited, yet again, by her news) You'll *never* guess what's going on tonight!

LAURA: (still unmoved) Won't I?

JESS: Never in a million years!!!

LAURA: Emma? You have any ideas?

EMMA: (mumbles around her cookie)

LAURA: I thought not.

JESS: Well!! Come on! Guess already.

LAURA: You've finally decided to let your natural hair color grow back out.

JESS: (thrown off) Ummm....no. Not really, no.

EMMA: Ooh!! You've finally decided to Marry Master Cornelius!

JESS: (Indignant) HEY NOW--!

LAURA: Aww! Isn't that sweet of you Jess. Are we invited to the wedding?

JESS: I Should say not—

EMMA: Are you guys going to have little evil-babies?

LAURA: Can you imagine, little tykes running around the dungeon.

EMMA: The pitter-patter of little feet on flagstone.

LAURA: On Sunday afternoons, playing jacks with the old knuckle-bones.

EMMA: Torturing cats and getting caught by the tree.

LAURA: (wipes at eyes) Just...so precious.

JESS: (Stands up) ALRIGHT! (shudders) Enough of that!

*EMMA and LAURA are chuckling, exchange a high-five. JESS attempts to shout over the top of them.*

JESS: You know what? I'm glad you won't let me tell you! Then it'll be a surprise!  
(Frustration building, she shouts) *I hope you're both happy when you're FIRED!*

*EMMA and LAURA stop short, surprised, confused, cookies in their hands.*

LAURA: (clears throat) Um, Jess, do you want to try that again?

EMMA: Yeah, I'm not sure I caught that.

JESS: Oh, and *NOW* you want to know! I just hope you remember this tonight –

LAURA: Alright! Fine Jess, You've got our attention. What in the world is going on?

EMMA: (hands JESS another cookie) Yeah! What do you mean, 'fired'?

JESS: (sulking, morose) Well, it hasn't happened yet, but (bites cookie) I mean, it's *going to*. It's going to be so...awful, and he'll be busy...and...and... (Pretends to Faint)

EMMA: Oh, holy, not again.

LAURA: Stupid minion mood swings (starts fanning JESS's face with an invoice) Jess! Jess, dearest, speak to us.

JESS: (moans) Oh, my life is over.

EMMA: Come on, Jess. It can't be as bad as all that.

JESS: I'm just *so* depressed...

EMMA: (to LAURA) wasn't she just 'psyched' a minute ago?

LAURA: You know better than to ask questions. (continues to fan JESS, pats her face and gets no response) Dammit. Now she's gonna be Emo all day.

JESS: It's just not *worth* all this...all the...drama.

EMMA: (rolls eyes) Jess. I have an idea.

JESS: It'll just be futile. Everything always is.

EMMA: No, this one's a really good idea.

JESS: (slightly lightened voice) Yeah? Really?

EMMA: Honest Nazi.

JESS: (sitting up) What's your idea?

EMMA: (fake, muted enthusiasm) Well, you tell us what's going on and we'll see if we can fix the problem.

JESS: (hesitant) Well...I dunno.

LAURA: I think that's a fabulous idea, Emma. How do you think these things up?

EMMA: I'm a Genius.

LAURA: Runs in the family, does it?

EMMA: (Shrugs) My mum's side.

LAURA: What do you think, Jess? Do you think it's a good idea?

JESS: I s'pose.

EMMA: Wonderful! What seems to be the issue?

JESS: Master Cornelius is taking over the world tonight.

*There's a moment of silence before EMMA and LAURA start laughing. Both fall on JESS, repeating some of her words back to her, impossibly garbled by their hysterics.*

JESS: (indignant) It's TRUE! He's planning on starting tonight.

LAURA: (gasping, giggling) What are we doing tonight, Brain?

EMMA: Same thing we do every night, Pinky!

LAURA/EMMA: *Try and take over the world!!!*

JESS: No! The frozen peas, the earmuffs, the...(grabs a large stack of invoices and shakes them at the girls) He's been planning this for a year! I don't know what in the world his plan involves, or what he's going to do, but it's Happening tonight!!!

LAURA: (gasping) Oh, wow. Jessa, Jessa, Jessa...lemme 'splain somethin' to you. Master Cornelius is evil, I allow this, everyone does, it's absolutely uncontested.

EMMA: I would NEVER contest it.

LAURA: But he's a nerd-bucket. He couldn't organize a decent world-domination plan if it threw itself at him, clothed in planner-paper and calendar pages—

EMMA: wrapped in chains –

LAURA: Yelling “Take me now”.

JESS: Yes! I know!

LAURA: Are you sure? I'm still not convinced that we're talking about the same 'Cornelius Harbinger Jr.'

JESS: I'm telling you, he's taking the new henchmen over to Grossby's park tonight to start the whole thing. He's taking the rubber earmuffs and that micro-wave-stereo thingy he got online last week.

EMMA: (Laughs) What's he going to do, *brainwash* them?

*The girls go silent, in horror*

LAURA: He's going to have a new band of henchman.

EMMA: Henchmen that are going to obey his every command...

LAURA: They won't mouth off...

EMMA: Won't laugh at his haircut...

LAURA: We. Are. So. Fired.

*Phone starts ringing – for a moment or two, the girls ignore it, still flabbergasted. The machine picks up.*

**Hello! You've reached the Dark Lord's office. His evilness may not be in at the moment but if you feel like you really, *really* need to leave him or his minions a message, please leave your name, number, next-of-kin information, and blood type after the scream. Thank you.**

*The girls don't listen to the message. The minute the machine 'screams' they fly off the stage in opposite directions – like "bats outta hell."*