

Fiction

1st Place (tie)

Exacting Retribution

by Steven Petherbridge

It was not necessarily out of a sense of charity or a need to help that Miss Martha rescued the poor wretched creature from the streets on a warm summer's evening in late June. It was more loneliness and a need for a companion, despite her having survived seemingly infinite years alone, that caused the old woman to reach down and pluck up the battered kitten as it tried in vain to scamper away.

She longed for a companion. She had for years she now realized as she held the tiny creature in her grasp. It seemed that outside of the small church she attended and the girls Sunday school class that she taught she had very little in the way of contact with others at all. She did little else beyond the realm of her church and her excursions around town seemed to have a business only attitude.

She didn't want people's charity or pity, and wouldn't stand for it for one minute. This had been made immediately clear during those trying days in the fall of 1977 after her husband, "Pastor Dan," had left town to begin a ministry in Kadoka, South Dakota. That the church secretary, Miss Earnstien, had also felt led by the Lord to go to Kadoka was never discussed in Miss Martha's presence. Nor was the untimely leaving of Pastor Dan, only one year out of seminary and four years into their marriage. The elders simply formed a pulpit committee as quickly and quietly as possible, and when the

Reverend Ellison and his fine wife and family came Miss Martha had remained in a position of leadership in the church all through their fifteen years there, just as she always had. It was the same through the ministries of Reverend Swidell and Reverend Kost, and it was the same yet today with Pastor Pragar on the pulpit each Sunday.

The little church had always been her sanctuary from the whispers she heard behind her back and the eyes that avoided hers as she walked about the little town. And when one of her little Sunday school girls asked, "Dint you effer have kids Miss Martha?" it was a question born out of pure innocence rather than the cruel spite exhibited by some of those about town.

"There there, now, my little one," she cooed as the disheveled orphan trembled in her grasp. As she held it up to inspect it a rear paw came loose and grazed her wrist, drawing blood. "Oh my, you little scamp!" she exclaimed in surprise as she pulled the paw back under the kitten and held it tight to her breast. "We'll just have to get you home and settled down before we look at you." And just like that, so it was, and soon the kitten was shivering beneath the florescent glow of her kitchen lights as she set it upon the counter. "I've no idea what to feed you, my dear," she said as much to herself as to the kitten while rummaging through her pantry, hoping something obvious would jump into her view. The animal had finally stopped shaking and was meowing and crying, so she thought that a good sign, but really didn't know what to do next. She'd been concerned initially upon examining the animal and having found its paw bleeding as well as its nose. "What on earth could have happened to you, you poor, poor dear," she'd whispered as she held it again close to her body. "A car?" she questioned, but then thought not, as surely the animal would not have fared this well. "A boot then, more than likely," she surmised, but declined to say out

loud as she hated even the thought of it much less to repeat it.

She opened a can of tuna, but to no avail. It seemed foreign to the small creature, and it could not be persuaded to eat. "Surely milk then," she reasoned, but again the animal refused, and Miss Martha began to weep in spite of herself. "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ," she repeated continually each time she began to wonder if her saving this animal had been the best idea after all. Although it was off the street and finally safe, it seemed somehow unable or unwilling to accept the help she so wanted to offer.

Finally, she went to the old medicine cabinet and took an eyedropper, rinsed it out as best she could with one hand as she dared not set down the animal just yet, and filled it from the cool streaming flow of the faucet. She put her hand around the kitten's jaw to keep it open and to keep its head from turning, and then with finger and thumb inserted the dropper into the animal's mouth as far as she dared. She gently squeezed the rubber top, and forced the water into the cat's mouth until it finally drank. "Sustenance at last," she thought to herself. Even if only in most basic form, it was still better than nothing.

They sat for a long time in the old chair in front of the fireplace's grand mantle, now cold and dark, listening to the steady swing and tick of the pendulum and the inner workings of the great clock standing in the hall. But as its soft melodious chime again reached her ear she began to realize that she could not hold this kitten forever and continue to do things one handed. She pondered the situation for a time, and finally came to an acceptable, although temporary solution. High above in the third floor attic where she'd not ventured for years was an old antique iron birdcage she had played with as a child. She'd never seen it with a bird in it, nor did she have any idea from where it had come, but it would be large enough to house this small kitten for now at least. Of this she

was almost certain, although she'd set neither hand nor eye on the relic since she was a child.

So up they had gone, up to the second floor where she had not ventured in years due to her age and declining health, and then finally to the end of the long second floor hall, back to where the maid's stairs lay now covered in boxes and bags. They stood looking at the old six panel door leading to the attic for quite some time as the old woman caught her breath. Their first night together, and already they had done more and gone further than she had in years. Having this sense of purpose made her feel alive and she resolved to face this final attic staircase with a resolute tenacity as she reached out and pulled open the ancient door.

As the humidity rose with each slow step she took, she lamented not recalling that the attic would still be smoldering from the heat of the day. She needed the cage however, and she again determined to obtain it despite what obstacles may befall her. The kitten had fallen silent, possibly aware of the precarious situation the old woman faced, as her creaking frame swayed from side to side, her hips and shoulders rubbing the walls as she slowly mounted the staircase. Finally, they reached the top and the old woman stood hunched, leaning against the wall. "It must be a hundred degrees up here," she lamented as she gave the kitten a reassuring pat.

There was a string dangling from a light somewhere, this much she remembered, but exactly where she did not. She clutched the kitten with her left hand as she extended her right hand in front of her, sweeping it about blindly until she finally felt the small string in her grasp. She gave it a tug, and the bulb cast its faint glow across the dusty relics for the first time in decades. She cautiously shuffled between the old trunks and furniture, and paused momentarily at a pile of theology textbooks stacked neatly on a spindled chair. Another string caught in her hair as she passed, and as she gave it a pull she saw the shape of the old cage covered by a drab cloth. She hesitated not for a moment, and pulling back

the cloth she found the latch on the door, opened it, and carefully slid the kitten in. She would rather have waited until they were back in the light of the kitchen before incarcerating the poor creature, but she feared she would not get them both back down unless she had both hands to carry the bulky cage.

The kitten again began to whimper as it swayed from side to side in the emptiness of the cage, but Miss Martha did not pause this time with words of comfort. She was intent on escaping the oppressive heat as she journeyed slowly back through the attic and then down the narrow staircase. The temperature seemed to drop now with each step of the staircase, and as it did her feeling of apprehension slowly abated, until finally they reached the second floor landing door. She closed it behind her and set the birdcage on the floor despite the kitten's meows of distress. Leaning against the old six panel door with her back as her head rested against it she quietly admonished herself. "Not wise old girl . . . not wise at all." But despite her palpitating heart and rushing pulse she felt a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. "We'll be alright now little one," she assured her pet as she bent down and lifted the cage once again.

Back down in the kitchen she lined the cage bottom with rags and tucked them up around the kitten until it could hardly move. She put a small bowl of water in, just in case, and covered the side of the cage facing the light with a blanket, as she had decided to leave the kitchen light on just this once to make it feel secure.

Miss Martha hadn't always been a church goer. In fact, prior to meeting Pastor Dan her religious experience consisted only of foggy memories of sitting on a polished pew between her parents. She'd liked the smell of the wood, she remembered that. And the way the light fell on her from the large windows made her feel warm. She remembered how her mother held her as the congregation rose to sing, and how her father poised the hymnal in

front of them, his voice booming out above all the others.

When Dan had asked her to accompany him to a service at the seminary he attended, she had gone without hesitation. She'd not been in a church since her mother's funeral, and as the congregation rose to sing, the smell of polished wood overcame her and she had remained seated. Dan hadn't seemed to notice. The woman standing next to her wore a long skirt that almost reached the floor, and as the congregation again sang the chorus, Martha had longed to reach out past the blur of her tears to clutch the folds of the skirt in her hands, but she did not. Finally, when the congregation again sat Dan noticed her tears and had given her a reassuring pat on her leg. "To the praise of his glorious grace" he had said, pleased that the Holy Spirit had moved her in such a way.

Mr. Harwell had not been as reassuring, however. Every time Martha would speak of Dan, or talk about where they had gone or things they had done Mr. Harwell's face would start to turn red and his moustache would twitch as he grumbled incoherently. It was not the fact that Dan was so religious, Martha had realized, as when she would attend church with other friends her father seemed not to mind at all. He would even ask questions about the service on occasion, but any mention of Dan in any context would redden his cheeks and ears and start his moustache twitching.

The only other times she had seen such reactions from her father had been on summer afternoons as a child when she would ride along with him and his partner Mr. Killian to "visit" contractors. Her father was in the construction supply business, and Martha would always wait in the car as they went inside to see people, but noticed that often when they returned to the car her father's moustache would be twitching. He and Mr. Killian would then speak in hushed tones until they got to the next site.

Martha had never considered it much, but as she mounted the steps to the porch hand in hand with Dan she saw it again clearly as her

father slowly rose from the ottoman and loomed silently before them. "We were married this morning daddy," she'd whispered, daring to look up for some sign of acceptance. Mr. Harwell had winced, as if stung by some unseen force, his moustache twitched, but he said nothing. "I . . . I guess we'll be taking my things from my room then, and . . . the glass figures in the front room . . . Daddy? Mr. Harwell had looked past them, to somewhere far down the driveway or to the other side of the street. "Can't you say something daddy?" Martha had begun to cry. Mr. Harwell's moustache had again twitched as he suddenly pawed angrily at his right eye. "Take what you will right now," he said quietly as he suddenly started across the porch and brushed past them, his eyes had been still fixed on something far away. "Then that'll be the end of it," he'd called back over his shoulder as he strode down the driveway.

Martha had stood silently and watched him walk all the way down the drive as Dan fidgeted nervously behind her. As her father disappeared into the alley behind Flannigan's garage Martha had turned back towards Dan, but he had already gone inside.

And so it went, days into weeks and weeks into months. They learned to get along and the kitten discovered all it needed to know about being a housecat so that, once trained, Miss Martha had put the cage aside and allowed it to roam the house freely. She had thought about taking it to the vet, but the bleeding paw and nose seemed to clear up almost immediately with her temperate care, so she saw no real need to.

She named her pet Obed, after the son of Boaz and Ruth from the book of Ruth in the bible, and as time went on the kitten healed and became healthy. Miss Martha was pleased with this, of course, but alternately, at the same time she found herself feeling an odd sense of disappointment. Admittedly she didn't know much about cats, and she did know that they were somewhat aloof and distant and not like dogs at all, but her cat seemed to be all of this

and more. It neither offered her affection nor sat with her as she had wished, and often if not most times it preferred not even to be in the same room with her at all. This hurt her, as it was not what she had expected at all when she had first taken the kitten in off the streets.

She had imagined long warm lazy afternoons sitting in the shade of the porch with the cat napping in her lap, but soon came to see that this was not to be the case. Early on she had realized she could not let the cat outdoors, as it seemed that its only clear desire was to get out. When she took the trash out, or prepared to step out for the mail, it was always there, prowling around her feet, waiting for the door to be opened. In fact, more than once it had actually made a dash between her legs, but luckily she had caught it by the tail just in the nick of time. "Little scamp," she had chided. "Where might you be off to?" She made light of it, but deep inside it hurt. More and more she got the feeling that the only time the cat wanted to be around her was when she was opening the door.

And then, inevitably, indubitably, it happened. She reached down for the fleeing cat with a cry as the trash bag fell at her feet, but she was too late, the cat was too quick, and then it was gone. She stood and looked at the spot under the hedge where it had disappeared for quite some time. Surprisingly she felt not sadness but anger, after all that she'd done for the cat, after all she had given it, that it would leave her like this the first chance it got. She turned sullenly and shut the door behind her, leaving the trash spilled on the back step where it had fallen.

Again days turned into weeks and then weeks into months with no sign of the cat. Miss Martha had long ago stopped putting food out on the back step, finally reasoning that if it ever did come back and find food outside it would never come in to be with her again. She'd considered getting another kitten from a shelter, but kept putting it off, telling herself that as soon as she did the prodigal would probably return, but deep down she knew that

it was because she feared being rejected a second time. The cat, she now realized, had been much like 'The Cat Who Walked by Himself' in Kipling's tale, without feeling for a master and tolerating her only for the comfort and shelter she may provide. It was an animal who, unlike the others, would not succumb and be ruled, an animal to whom all places were alike and who would wish to come and go as he pleased.

And so, it was a sad and lonely old woman who sat at the window each winter's day, and then on the porch through the spring and into summer with an empty cage beside her, waiting. Waiting for her bird that had flown the townspeople surmised as they passed on the sidewalk below her.

One of her birds had come back. Midway through the summer of 1980, scarcely three months after Martha had laid Mr. Harwell to rest, Pastor Dan had returned to Langdon, creeping down the same back streets he had left on. He had been gone only three years, but in that time he had managed to lose both church and secretary, and Miss Martha had received him coolly on the wide front porch in the heat of the late afternoon's fading sun. He had only dared venture onto this porch once before, and much like that first time he held his hat in both hands and kept his head bowed low, his well rehearsed speech almost imperceptible.

She let him into her home, into her father's house. Into the house where she had been raised, in the town where her Mr. Harwell had devoted his life to turning a small fledgling hardware store into a successful construction supply wholesaler.

Pastor Dan had taken a job at the supply offices city desk, offered reluctantly by her deceased father's partner's son, Mike Killian, and for a time they had gotten on quite well it seemed. They stayed alone and out of sight, high above the town in the old house on the hill, and even discussed having a child.

This was the only time since marrying Dan that she had been away from her church.

Pastor Dan had rightfully asserted that it would be a "needless distraction" for them to worship here in town, and as a result they had made the trip down to Edmore faithfully each Sunday together.

All had seemed well enough until that fateful morning when she woke with a start, the wheels of his old Rambler crunching on the gravel as it crept slowly down the drive. She didn't rise from the bed to look out the window, but instead turned towards the wall. Clutching her pillow, her eyes began to burn. "He's gone," she choked, as the tears began to flow, "that is if he ever really returned at all."

Late that afternoon, as the sun faded slowly into the western sky she was forced from bed by the incessant ringing of the doorbell. Mr. Killian had stood there, his hat in his hand inquiring about Dan with a stricken look on his face. "But where has he gone to Miss Martha?" he'd implored, his hands clutching his hat by the brim, tuning it in circles as he spoke. She told him that she neither knew nor cared, and when he got up the nerve to ask about the week's accounts receivable that Dan had supposedly collected, her answer was the same. Mr. Killian had then apologized profusely for bothering her, and after repeatedly assuring him that there was nothing more that he could do for her beyond the monthly dividend check from the supply office he had finally left.

Mr. Killian was the only person she spoke to about the matter, and she would never speak of it again. The very next week, when she returned to her church in town she was met with quick glances of indifference and embarrassed looks at the floor. This was tolerable, but the constant questioning about the matter so that it could be remembered in prayer was not, and Martha had finally resorted to snapping back in response and defense.

Now, as so many summers passed again into fall, and as the leaves once again began to swirl about her feet, the old woman found herself on the same street she'd traveled months ago when she'd stooped to help a poor

lost soul. It was colder now, and she didn't stop at this sacred spot like she had before in the past, and the wind seemed to cut right through her as she hurried by, but several minutes later and several blocks further along she did stop.

She stopped and stared in wonder at the ragged cat sitting on the edge of a low wall looking off into the street. "Could it possibly be?" she dared to wonder, and as the cat turned to look at her she gasped, "Obed!" She bent down and extended her arms, and the cat padded slowly towards her. She held him in front of her for a moment, and then pulled him to her breast, burying her face in his fur. "He was dead, and is alive again, he was lost, and is found."

She then turned and rushed up the hill towards home, where upon arriving she promptly put him up on the counter to inspect him in the light once again.

He was bigger, that was a fact, but not as healthy as when he'd run off. His coat had lost its fine luster and he walked with a limp she now saw as he jumped from the counter and padded as quickly as he could towards the back of the house. Miss Martha looked towards the dark hallway he'd disappeared into and fought back the hot angry tears that stung her eyes.

She went into the living room and prodded at the fire before putting on another log. She was using her fireplace much earlier now, and with much more frequency since she just couldn't seem to get the chill out of the old house, or her old tiring bones for that matter. She sat in her chair for what must have been hours wrapped in a quilt staring into the fireplace while listening to the monotonous sounds of the clock until a rapid scratching in the next room caught her attention. Miss Martha knew exactly what it was, although the cat had never done it before as far as she could remember.

As she got up from her chair, the angry tears began to flow as she crossed the room into the kitchen. "You want to leave me again!" she shouted as she reached down towards him. The cat turned and shrunk back towards the

door he'd been scratching, obviously surprised at this outburst. He then ran towards the middle of the room in a panicked retreat, but his limp had slowed him considerably. "What happened to you out there?" she cried as she snatched him up, this time by the scruff of the neck. "You've been hurt and starved and now half lamed, and you still would rather be out in the dark cold than here with me!" She started down the hall and then turned abruptly and headed back towards the front porch. The cat hung by the scruff of his neck, helpless and paralyzed as she shuffled through the door and out onto the front porch where the old cage sat on the floor next to the ottoman just as she'd left it months ago. She bent down and with a single deft swoop opened the little door with one hand and shoved the cat into the cage with the other.

The animal began growling, a low rumble from deep back within his throat, but she didn't seem to notice as they again entered the old house. The cage now seemed considerably smaller as the cat had grown, and it was a wonder she had even been able to force him through the door at all. He had most likely been injured in the process, but she was not thinking of this now as she crossed the front room back towards her easy chair.

"You dare to defy me again and again," she cried as she held the cage up to her face, shaking it as she spoke. The cat had begun to howl, a low mournful sound, surely more from fear than from spite. "I took you in, made you my own, and you rejected it all, you rejected me!" The cat shrunk back in the cage, trying to avoid her rant. "There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God," she murmured, more to herself than to the cat as she began walking in circles, shaking her head and mumbling almost incoherently. "The wages of sin," she muttered over and over again as she stumbled in circles before her old chair, the same chair where she had sat alone before the fire for so many hours and days, wishing and thinking of him. "The wages of sin." And then

abruptly she stopped, turned, and . . . lowering the cage from her gaze, now with hatred and malice towards the one she'd once loved, cast it upon the flames....

The next morning seemed unseasonably warm, and the old woman paused on the church steps and let the bright autumn sun shine on her face as she lifted it towards the heavens. "We won't have many more gorgeous days like this one," she thought to herself as she felt the warm glow on her skin.

Her Sunday school class went well that morning. Better than usual she thought, as the girls seemed very attentive during the reading about how god hears our prayers, and they had been eager to do their coloring activities as well. She was just leaning down to put away the extra crayons and paper when she felt a light tug on the sleeve of her blouse.

"Yes Mattie dear?" she asked in response as she turned and straightened upward.

"Mom says we hafta pray for Uncle Brad cuz he doesn't go to church," the child informed her. "An he smokes an swears too!" Miss Martha paused for a moment, considering this information as the child looked up at her with her small dark eyes shining.

"Yes, you do need to pray for him child," Miss Martha replied softly, her eyes narrowing until they were only slits. "You really do."



Penny Lam
Seedsower
Acrylic

1st Place (tie)

My First Execution

by Alyssa Pitura

It only takes between three to five minutes for a lethal injection to kill you. The deadly solution of sodium thiopental, pancuronium bromide or pavulon, and potassium chloride has to be released just right or else the dead keep on living. I have never seen anyone die before, but I will today.

I am on a pretty strict deadline today as this is the first female execution in Arkansas in over ten years time and my editor wants to print the story in tomorrow's edition. I still can't believe he picked me to cover this. Almost everyone in our office is out sick with the flu but my immune system is impeccable. Opportunities like this don't come around every day and I need to impress him, which is why I arrived so early at the prison in the first place. I pulled up just as the last rays of sunlight were slipping below the horizon. Signing in is a breeze when you have a press pass so it was not long before a guard escorted me to the execution chamber. My high-heeled pumps chattered along the cement floor sending loud echoes dancing along the walls of the narrow hallway. We did not have to walk far before we arrived.

I noticed the tiles on the chamber wall were a sickly shade of green and reminded me of the ones in the kitchen of my mother's house. I took a seat on the hard, brown chair and glanced up. Looking through the large, glass window in front of

me another room, similar to the one I was in now, appeared empty apart from one central chair. Eight straps dangled like snakes waiting to strike and reminded me an awful lot like the one in my dentist's office. I have to take very good care of my teeth in my line of work. I couldn't help but wonder if this window was one of those two-way mirrors that you always see in cop shows on television.

I shifted in my uncomfortable chair and heard the door to the chamber creak open. Turning around, I saw a tall, serious-looking man walking right towards me. Something about him seemed familiar; he just had one of those faces I guess. He took the seat to my right and his long, white coat brushed against my exposed toes. A slight, half smile crept onto his face—the kind people reserve for disappointment or sympathy when they can't quite find the right words to say. He must have known this was my first execution.

"So," I said turning to the man, "is this your first time too?" He looked rather startled; maybe I should have opened with 'Hi' instead.

"Sadly no, I have been to more executions than anyone should have to," he replied, a distant look of sadness in his eyes. "And who may I ask do I have the pleasure of talking to today?"

"Sorry, I'm Sophie Wells, reporter for the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette," I said offering out my hand. "May I ask, what is your relationship to Shellie?" I glanced at the clock which now read five minutes to eight.

He shook my hand and said, "I'm Shellie's doctor, Doctor Monroe." He paused and looked me in the eye before continuing. "You know, out of all of my patients, Shellie was one of the most

challenging, yet also one of the most enjoyable.”

I was confused; how could he possibly care? Not only did he deal with inmates on a daily basis but from what I had read and heard so far Shellie sounded like something else. It appeared that Shellie Swop personified everything I hated about Arkansas. She came from Almyra, a small excuse for a town where your cousin was also your husband and intelligence is a quality short in numbers. I came from a town much like Almyra, but I had big dreams and knew I was going somewhere. I got out as quickly as I could and Little Rock became my home. I felt sorry for Shellie in a way; she was a stereotypical piece of southern trash.

Just then Monroe glanced up at the clock, snapping me back to reality.

“Why do you say she was enjoyable?” I asked Monroe.

“Shellie has a good heart. She just ran into some hurdles along the way. Are you aware of her unique circumstance?” Monroe asked.

“Yes, pretty grim stuff,” I replied. I had read most of it in the press release and gathered the rest from sources.

The townspeople all said her daddy and husband Jackson were one and the same, always slapping her around and treating her like shit. Odette Hornfield, a lady from Almyra who used to help Shellie out, told me she was excited when Shellie finally had Megan. She would stop by to check on Shellie after the labor and everything seemed fine, until one day, about a month after she gave birth. Odette said Shellie started acting really strange, having all these mood swings, crying all the time, and that she would go weeks without sleeping or eating. Shellie refused to leave

the house so Odette tried to bring the local doctor, Bill Shepard, to see her. Shellie refused, but I spoke with Dr. Shepard and he explained that Shellie’s symptoms resembled postpartum psychosis.

About a month or so after Shepard visited, Odette said Shellie became convinced that Jackson was messing around on her with everyone in town. Another neighbor told me that Shellie even tried to get the police involved and pin the affair on the local slut Dorothy Andrews. From the sound of it, the whole town knew what was going on and it must have been embarrassing.

One day—October 3 as determined by the coroner—Shellie just had enough. She waited until Jackson was good and drunk. According to the townspeople, he liked to drink himself into a stupor every night after work anyway so she didn’t have to wait too long. Around the time he would usually leave to go fuck Dorothy, or would at least go to her house I mean. Who knows what happens behind closed doors right? It was around seven; she took an axe from out back and hacked him to pieces. The sheriff said the only thing left not resembling a package of ground beef was his face. She probably wanted him to watch her, not that I would know, but one has to assume these things right? There was another piece found, which was what tipped the police off to the deaths in the first place. Shellie, sick and twisted as she is, chopped off Jackson’s penis and sent it to Dorothy, with a note: “Yours with love.”

After questioning Dorothy the police remembered Shellie’s earlier hysterics and paid her a visit. They found her covered in blood, in her bed with baby Megan. Megan had been suffocated shortly after Jackson was killed. Unlike everyone else, Odette

actually thinks Shellie feels remorse for what she did and that her situation has helped her become a better Christian.

I could wrap my head around the husband, but the baby just didn't add up.

"Why do you think she did it? And why the baby? There aren't too many people out there who can kill an innocent child," I asked.

"Shellie was dealing with a lot of emotions. Maybe she did it because she was angry. Obviously she was convinced Jackson was having an affair with another woman. Or maybe because she felt like no one was listening to her and she needed to lash out to be heard," Doctor Monroe explained.

"That's bullshit though really. I mean we're all angry right? Hell, I've been angry before but we don't all go around chopping our husbands into a million pieces and smothering our helpless children," I was getting a little worked up. I felt like I had shared too much and quickly glanced up to the window to fix my hair. The reflection it gave was remarkable actually; more like a mirror than anything.

Monroe paused then asked, "Why do you think Shellie did what she did Sophie?"

I thought long and hard.

"Well from what I've learned about her, she doesn't seem like a violent person. I think she was helpless. That was the only thing she could control. She must have loved Jackson and Megan, regardless of how it seemed, and knew the world was to blame for their flaws not them. Maybe she was saving them." I paused. Did I just defend a cold-blooded killer?

"Do you think she is crazy?" I asked the doctor. Shellie's lawyers had tried

arguing insanity, but the jury ultimately decided she was mentally capable.

"What do you think?" Monroe inquired with that same sad smile on his face.

"I think it's a pretty great motive. But what do I know? You're the doctor right?" I said quickly.

"I think Shellie is a very sick woman. I don't believe she knew what she was doing when she killed her family. I think what we are doing here today is, in many ways, just as wrong as what she did. We are killing a helpless woman," he sighed heavily.

Monroe looked up to the clock. Eight o'clock. "So do you know what you're going to say," he continued.

"Oh, you mean for my article? I've been thinking about it all day and I think I'm going to stick to the basics rather than all the hearsay."

"That's probably for the best," said Monroe. He reached over and grabbed the back of my hand, giving me a slight squeeze. He offered me one last smile and said, "I think it's time."

Two men—one a large, African American guard, the other a scrawny looking Caucasian doctor—brought Shellie in. The guard began strapping her down and securing the ties on the chair while the doctor started an intravenous drip on Shellie. She looked like there was no fight left in her whatsoever; like there was no one there, inside I mean. Her frame was skeletal and her complexion sallow.

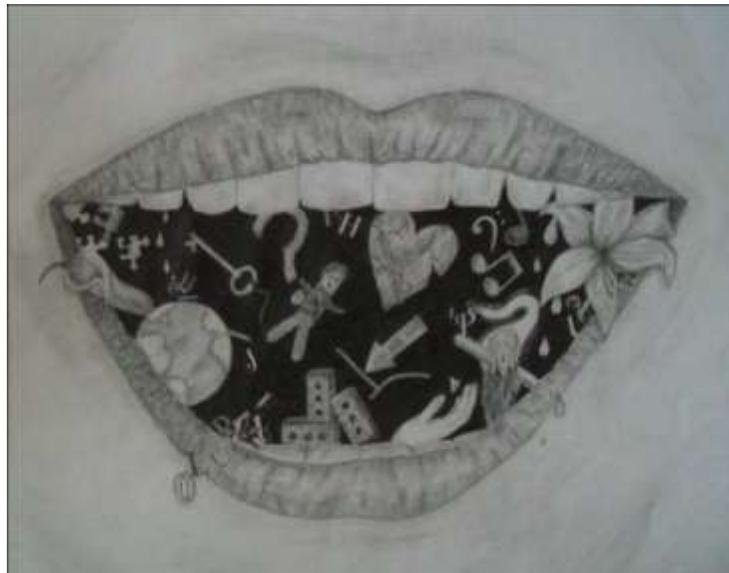
"You may now make your final statement," the scrawny man said.

Shellie just shook her head. Then, out of nowhere, something amazing happened. Shellie looked up and our eyes met. Out of all the people in the room she could have looked at she chose me. Those

eyes were sad and alone and I realized she was crying. My face felt damp as I wiped away my own tears. Maybe Doctor Monroe was right. Maybe she is sick.

At that moment the canisters started to release their toxins. It wouldn't be long now I thought. I started to feel quite funny, maybe even a bit drowsy. I really hadn't prepared myself properly for this after all. My hands and legs started to twitch. I made a mental note never to attend another execution. I put my head down and turned towards Doctor Monroe.

"Just close your eyes," he said, "it will all be over soon."



Angela Morford

Behind That Beautiful Smile

Pencil

Dreams of Love

by Angie Johnson

In the middle of the night, a young boy woke, interrupting a most pleasant dream. The young boy's name was Elijah. He had just dreamt of the most beautiful girl he could possibly imagine. Worried that he would forget what the girl looked like, Elijah quickly made a detailed sketch of the girl from his dream. He looked out his window and saw a single bright star in the sky. On this star, he made a wish. He wished that he would one day meet this girl from his dream.

Twenty years later, that young boy had become a man. Working as an accomplished scientist at a renowned lab in New York City, Elijah felt he had nearly all he could possibly want in life. However, he knew something was missing, but could not figure out what. Then, as he was walking to work one day, Elijah ran into someone. As he frantically apologized, the person turned around. Elijah stared in astonishment. That someone he ran into just happened to be the girl he had dreamt of many years ago.

When Elijah finally found his voice, he asked, "What is your name?" The girl from his dream, who had grown to become an even more beautiful woman, answered, "My name is Nola. What's yours?" He replied, "I'm Elijah." He glanced down at her left hand and was relieved at the absence of a ring. Elijah asked her, "I know we just met, but would you be interested in having dinner with me tonight? 6:30 at Red Lobster?" Nola contemplated Elijah's request, looked him up and down, and replied, "Sure, I'll see you there." As she turned to leave, Elijah sighed in relief and let out a whoop of joy as he continued his way to work.

When Elijah returned to his apartment after a seemingly never-ending day of work, he realized he only had an hour to clean up, get dressed, and travel halfway across the city. With only fifteen minutes until the date, Elijah hopped into his brand new Mustang and tore off. Unfortunately, the traffic was horribly congested, and he managed to hit every red light possible. When Elijah arrived ten minutes late and saw Nola waiting, he ran up and began apologizing profusely. "Nola, I'm so sorry I'm late! The traffic was terrible!" Nola smiled, thinking that a man from New York City who apologized for being a mere ten minutes late must be a good one. She said, "No problem Elijah, I've just been enjoying the background music, and now that you're here, we can find our seats."

After they had ordered, Elijah asked, "So, Nola, where do you work?" Nola replied, "I'm a third grade teacher at Normhill Elementary. What do you do?" "I'm a scientist at the Middleton Laboratory," Elijah answered. Their food soon came, and they continued to enjoy pleasant conversation as they ate. Upon finishing their meal, Nola said, "I'm sorry, but I really need to be going. I have several papers to grade before work tomorrow." "Oh, that's fine," Elijah replied, "I should probably get home soon, too. Would you like a ride home?" Nola grinned, thinking of how Elijah was such a gentleman, "Sure, I could use a ride, I live on 85th and 7th." She followed Elijah to the car, and when she saw it, could not help but smile at his tasteful choice in wheels.

At work the next day, Elijah could not stop thinking about Nola and the great time they had at dinner. He picked up the phone and dialed Nola's number. "Hello,"

said Nola. "Hi, it's Elijah," Elijah said, "How are you today?" "Quite well actually," Nola replied, "and how are you?" "Not bad," said Elijah. "I was calling to ask if you would like to join me for a walk and picnic in Central Park at 7:00 tonight?" Nola quickly scanned her planner and replied, "I just happen to be free tonight, and that sounds lovely." "Then it's a date," Elijah said happily. Nola rolled her eyes and smiled at the age-old line, looking forward to another evening with this charming man.

That evening after work, Elijah realized he would have to make a trip to the supermarket in order to prepare the picnic. As he was looking at the packaged lunch meat, he remembered that Nola had only eaten salad and soup at Red Lobster, making him wonder if she was a vegetarian. Deciding to stick on the safe side, he picked up some peanut butter and jelly along with the meat. Elijah hurried home with his purchases. After exchanging his stuffy work clothes for a comfortable pair of jeans and a t-shirt, he made both kinds of sandwiches. He tucked them into a basket along with a couple bottles of water, making sure to include a cozy blanket for Nola and him to sit on. Feeling satisfied with his preparations, Elijah took off for Central Park.

As Nola walked to Central Park, she wondered just how good this guy could possibly be. Was he for real? He met her at the "Imagine" circle and told her the Beatles were one of his favorite bands. She told him of her love for movies, saying that although she enjoyed all genres, romantic comedies were her favorite. After walking for a half hour, they both agreed that it was time to eat. While Elijah removed the food from the basket, he told Nola, "I wasn't sure if you ate meat, so I packed some peanut

butter and jelly sandwiches as well." Nola thought back to the night before and realized where he may have received the notion she was vegetarian. Touched by his thoughtfulness, Nola said, "Thanks! I'm actually not vegetarian, but peanut butter and jelly happens to be one of my favorites!" As they ate, alternating between interesting conversation and comfortable silence, Nola thought that this might just be the man of her dreams.

The following day, Elijah came to the conclusion that he wanted to marry Nola. He realized that with her, his life seemed to be complete, no longer missing a piece. So, Elijah called up the nearest flower shop and had them send a single red rose with a note to Nola's apartment.

By early afternoon, Nola was already wondering when Elijah would call. She liked him a lot, but was not sure about the "L" word yet. Then, she heard a knock on the door. Wondering who it could be, she opened the door just a crack. To her surprise, it was a man from the flower shop, holding a red rose with a note attached. When she opened the door wide, the man said, "Delivery for a Ms. Nola," handed the rose to her, and left. Nola breathed in the enticing aroma of the beautiful rose and then opened the note. It said, "Hope your day is as beautiful as you are! Meet me at the TheaterMax at 7:30! Love, Elijah."

Elijah spent the remainder of his day preparing for that evening. He decided that it was definitely not his lucky day when the first three stores he stopped at did not have a suit in his size. Finally, on his fourth try, he found the perfect black suit for the evening. Then, when he tried the local jewelry shops, he could not seem to find just the right ring for Nola. Eventually, he gave in and drove across town to Tiffany's. After an hour of

browsing, he finally found the perfect ring in the far corner of the shop. It was absolutely beautiful with its diamond center and surrounding circle of tiny sapphires. Elijah just knew that Nola would love it – if she accepted, of course.

Late afternoon, Nola was still trying to decide what to wear. Thinking it might be fun to dress up for once, she laid all her dresses out on her bed. The white one was too fancy, the colorful ones were not fancy enough, but the black one looked just right for the movies. Pleased with her selection, Nola began to get ready, singing along with the radio as she went.

Before they knew it, it was 7:30, and Elijah and Nola were standing inside TheaterMax at the popcorn line. “So what movie are we going to see,” asked Nola. “Well, since you claimed partiality to romantic comedies, I choose *Leap Year*. I hope that’s okay with you,” said Elijah. “I’ve been hoping to see that movie, sounds great,” exclaimed Nola. So, Elijah bought Nola her popcorn, and they went to sit in their seats. Throughout the movie, they held hands and shared several laughs. Unfortunately, a laugh near the end of the movie caused Nola to choke on her popcorn. Terrified of possibly losing the love of his life, Elijah quickly recalled the emergency response class he had taken a couple years ago and performed the Heimlich maneuver on Nola.

The piece of popcorn flew out of Nola’s mouth, and she soon regained her breathing. Wow, she thought, Elijah just saved my life. Nola looked down, and to her surprise, found Elijah on his knees. He reached up for her hand, held it, and said, “I must say that you are, quite literally, the woman of my dreams. Will you marry me?” Stunned, Nola thought about it, and

realized she had already started loving him. She replied, “Yes! I love you, Elijah!” As Elijah slipped the beautifully dazzling ring on her finger, Nola asked, “Did you say that you had a dream about me?” Smiling as he remembered, Elijah said, “Yes, when I was a young boy I dreamt of the most beautiful girl – turns out that she’s you.” Nola looked at him in astonishment and said, “I dreamt of you, too. I always wondered if I would ever meet you.” “Well, you did meet me,” said Elijah, “and for that I will be forever thankful.” The audience around them began to clap, making Elijah and Nola both blush. Elijah gave Nola a breath-taking kiss; they exited the theater, and rode off to their new future in Elijah’s shiny black mustang.

Perfect

by Andrea Lorenzano

Sterling is the perfect little town. Nestled deep in a thick evergreen forest, the town is protected from the dangers of city living. It’s quiet, peaceful. The residents are simple folk, friendly and good-natured. They’re perfect, just as perfect as their little town. But perhaps they’re too perfect.

If you were to take a walk through Sterling, you would notice something strange about the townsfolk. Everybody looks the same, down to the tiniest freckle. With all the residents bearing the same heart-shaped face, high cheekbones, and pointed nose, it’s as if somebody had taken a cookie cutter to the town. The girls all have the same long, curly brown hair held back by navy blue headbands that match their old-fashioned, turtleneck argyle dresses. The boys wear their hair in a short, clean cut that goes well with their navy

sweater vests and black trousers. But the similarities don't end with appearance; they all have the same mannerisms as well. Every smile, every laugh, every wink—it's all the same in Sterling.

Most considered this to be a blessing, but for Jennifer Michaels it was nothing more than a terrible curse. She was tired of looking like everybody else. She'd had enough.

One night, Jennifer did something crazy: she locked herself in her bathroom, refusing to leave until she was different. With a pair of scissors in her hand, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was beautiful, flawless, but it wasn't her hair. This was a doll's hair, a doll that had been mass produced and sold all over town. It sickened her to look at it, but she knew it would soon be no more. With a slight hesitance, she grabbed a handful of hair and held it between the scissor's blades. It fit so perfectly. Then, taking a deep breath, she closed the twin blades and sliced a chunk of her hair off. As she watched the hair fall to the floor, a smile spread across her face. Suddenly, she began snipping at her brown locks without restraint. Hair was flying all over the place as she attacked her perfect curls.

When she was sure that most of it had been hacked off, she gave her hair a final shake and threw her eyes back to the mirror, expecting to see a new girl in front of her. But she was horrified to find that nothing had changed. Her hair was just as long, just as curly as it had been before.

It had grown back.

Jennifer screamed and slammed her fist into the mirror, shattering the glass into a million pieces. She glared into the broken mirror as even the tiniest shards reflected that perfect face, that perfect face that

wasn't hers. It was like a mask, a mask that she wanted so badly to rip off. She gripped her face with her fingers and started pulling at her cheeks, but the mask wouldn't come off.

Desperate and devastated, Jennifer began to lose all sense of reasoning. She was determined to take off this mask, and nothing was going to stop her. So she grabbed a shard of broken glass and dragged it across her cheek, cutting deep into the mask. Over and over again, she slashed at her face until her vision became too bloody for her to see. As the tears rolled down her mangled, blood-soaked face, Jennifer crumbled to the ground and rolled herself up into a ball.

"I want to be different," she whispered to herself. "I want to be different. I want to be different."

Suddenly, the bathroom door opened and Jennifer's mother rushed into the room. A gasp escaped her lips when she saw the scene in the bathroom.

"Jennifer, what have you done to the mirror?"

"I want to be different," was all Jennifer muttered.

Her mother sighed and shook her head. "Jennifer, I know it's hard being a teenager."

She took her daughter's hands and helped her up from the blood-covered floor. Stroking the top of her head, her mother led her to the broken mirror and had her stare at her reflection once more. Jennifer's eyes widened in terror as her perfect mask smiled back at her.

"You're perfect, sweetie," her mother said as she kissed the top of her head, "just like everybody else."

Lines

by Sasha Miller

I'm in a room. It's an unfurnished room, aside from the two tires someone had placed as makeshift chairs by the cardboard box, a crude excuse for a table. The "furniture" had been pushed aside anyways to make room for people dancing; the people who wanted to sit just sat on the floor it seemed. Walking in I scan the room, trying to get a feel for my surroundings. Not wanting to go much further, I decide to stand by the wall next to the doorway. When I look down to check my text messages, knowing full well no one has bothered to text me, one of the guys dancing to the techno music bumps into me and pushes me into the wall; which, wouldn't have been so bad, had I not reached down to brush my jacket off and felt the cold chunky vomit that I had landed against. I can't begin to fathom why anyone would willingly come here, yet here I stand, jacket-less, with a beer bottle in my hand, attempting to fit in. Tired of standing there, I worked up the courage, and made my way into the party avoiding the broken beer bottles littering the floor.

Lucy told me it would be a surprise. I vaguely remember her saying "Oh, don't worry! It's going to be so much fun!" Never in my life have I been more surprised, that's for sure. I'd known for a few months now Lucy was getting into a bad crowd, I just hadn't realized how bad.

Earlier tonight, she had whined into the phone "Rebecca! You never have time for me anymore." I could see her pouting face in my head, having witnessed her use it to manipulate others around her so often.

"Luce, I don't know, I don't fit in with your friends these days," I said thinking

about all the new people that she had made friends with when I left for Spain over the summer. My family vacation had put a damper on our friendship, making it harder to see each other our senior year. Not only that, but our friends all seemed to have drifted away and got boyfriends, leaving us both alone, although Lucy seemed at ease with it.

"If you don't come out with me tonight, I'm done asking you to come out at all. Every time you say no, so what's the point?" Lucy asked. It was juvenile and she knew it, not that it stopped her. Regardless, I found myself agreeing to go, which brings me back to this disgusting room.

You would think whoever owned this place would be better off homeless. Surely they could use their table to live in and it would be more sanitary than this room. There had to be at least thirty people in the room, which surprised me, given the condition of the apartment. I'm terrified to step foot in the bathroom if this is the living room. The thing worrying me the most is the razor blade and the mirror on the table. There are slight traces of white powder on the mirror. The rest was licked clean by greedy souls, desperate for a high. Not only did the presence of the meth paraphernalia scare me, but so did the remnants of heroine needles and syringes. Nothing good had ever come from this room. I was fairly sure of that.

"Rebeccaaaa! I have to use the bathroom," Lucy wailed over the music. I found myself filled with indecision whether to stay in the living room, possibly the most sanitary portion of the apartment, or go to the bathroom and be subjected to more unknown horror. I chose the former, and Lucy stormed away.

Standing there all alone I felt out of place. With Lucy there at least I had felt somewhat comforted. My eyes started to wander around the room in hopes of seeing someone familiar to pass the time with until Luce got back. Everyone was caught up in their own worlds though, tripping on drugs I'd been warned about in awareness seminars at school; all but one boy, whose eyes seemed to follow me in my search for familiarity. I'd never seen him before, and it made me wonder if he was the one who owned this filthy apartment. Because of his blatant staring, and my never-ending curiosity, I decided to approach him.

"Are you going to stare all night, or would you like a Polaroid?" I asked, knowing how cheesy it probably sounded.

He looked at me like he had been expecting me to come over, which only irritated me more. "Sorry, I was in a bit of a daze, I'm Luke and you are?" the now identified guy asked with his green eyes smiling.

"Rebecca," I answered curtly. "So, is this your place?" I asked giving him a slow once over.

A slow grin spread across his face. He wasn't bad looking although you couldn't be sure through the smoke of the room. He slid over on the floor to offer me a nice piece of carpet, slightly less dirty than the one he moved to; how courteous I thought. I sat down, avoiding looking at the molding carpet I was sitting on, and we started talking. We talked about school, and realized that we both went to Jefferson, which made me wonder why I hadn't seen him before. I felt like I would have remembered those bright green eyes. Then we started discussing musical taste, and it turned out we both listened to The Cure,

although I liked the Gorillaz, and he thought they were too mainstream.

The next thing I knew, Luce was standing over me asking where I went.

"Here, obviously," I answered with a smile. She didn't seem nearly as upset as she had been when she left. In fact, she looked much happier.

"No shit Sherlock, who's your friend?" she asked with an easy smile.

Extending his hand up he replied, "Luke, care to join us?" He motioned to another piece of carpet. I scooted closer to Luke, causing our legs to brush against each other, in order to make room for Lucy to sit down.

"This is Lucy," I said to Luke with minimal enthusiasm.

"Lucy, Lucy, Lucy, what a pretty name for a pretty girl. It seems as if you have been having some fun without us. How dare you," he said playfully. I scowled at the floor, knowing how she always got what she wanted. Lucy just giggled, winking at Luke.

"Don't fret though. We can have even more fun," Luke said.

Luke then dug in his messenger bag, bringing out the all too familiar mirror and razor, but this time the mirror wasn't void of its counterpart. Luke had the drug as well as the tools. Confirming my suspicions of what exactly "fun" was, he held up a tiny Ziploc filled with a fine white powder, one I knew to be crystal meth. Lucy was getting excited; I could already see the anticipation shining in her eyes. Now that I looked closer, it was clear she was already tripping on something, judging from her blissful demeanor and glazed eyes, but that wasn't going to stop her from doing more. The only drug I had ever tried was weed, and I mean,

I liked it, but any other drug seemed like a bad idea, so I balked.

"This is a bad idea. We should leave," I pleaded with Lucy. She was too caught up in the drugs, not seeing what was so wrong about the situation, only seeing what she wanted to. Luke took my arm gently, trying to persuade me to calm down.

"Rebecca, it's not as bad as you think. Don't you ever want to escape everything? Don't you just want to be free from it all, just for a minute?" Luke asked soothingly. The beer had already made my decision making less than optimal. So we sat there and talked more about life, with Lucy there to butt in every now and then to offer her opinion. But the conversation was just drawn back to the meth.

He kept going on about it, about the high, glorifying it. I could already feel myself wanting it. I had thought about myself in this situation before, but I never imagined I would be swayed by peer pressure. By now all I could think of was how bad I wanted what Lucy had right now. She had exactly what she wanted, at least in her head, and it seemed so appealing. She was happy despite the fact that she was alone. I guess she wasn't alone, considering the fact that Luke seemed to have gotten a lot friendlier with her, once he noticed her "happy" state.

Just one line I decided. That's all I'm going to do; just enough to be free from worries and free from this room that I detested. One time won't hurt.

Luke handed the mirror to Lucy, "Ladies first," he said. She grabbed it with the ease of a seasoned veteran. She just helped reassure me that it wasn't as bad as I was making it out to be. She took the bag of white powder, poured a small portion on the mirror, and proceeded to scrape it with

the razor blade into three lines. When she was satisfied the lines were adequate, she took out a crisp one dollar bill, rolled it into a small tube, and held it up to the crystal powder. With excitement in her eyes, she held one nostril shut with her finger and snorted the line through the other one. She made it look easy; breathing it in like it was the most glorious feeling in the world. Really, when it was on the mirror, it looked so much like powdered sugar. It seemed harmless. After running her finger over the remaining traces of the powder and licking it clean, she smiled and handed the mirror over to me.

"It'll make you feel amazing Bec, don't be scared," she coaxed. Past needing convincing, I reached out and grabbed the mirror. She smiled. Luke moved closer to help hold the mirror while Lucy helped gather another line with the razor. She finished and handed the bill over to me.

"Just hold it up to your nose like you saw me do, and breathe it in. You've got this. You'll love it," she said. I grabbed the bill, rolled it with confidence, and held it up to the line. As I inhaled the powder, all I could feel was a painful burning sensation that made my eyes water. I sat back against the wall waiting for something to happen, and I wasn't disappointed. Within the first three minutes nothing about my life's problems seemed to bother me. I didn't care that Lucy was going to move in on Luke, nor that all my friends had left me for guys. It even gave me enough artificial bravery to go face the bathroom, having needed to go for the last half hour.

When I got to the bathroom, I walked in and saw the mirror right above the pedestal sink. Immediately drawn to my reflection, I walked straight to it and saw myself. I reached up and wiped away the

excess white powder that I now saw below my nose. I looked down at my hands, turning them palm up, fascinated by the lines. I ran my fingers over the individual lines of my right palm, wondering what a palm reader would say. I began to understand why everyone was doing this, as well as why it's called a high. Looking back up at my reflection, but trying to focus had become nearly impossible. Instead I relieved myself, and walked back out to face Luke and Lucy. Once out of the bathroom, my eyes darted from place to place, taking everything in again. This time it wasn't the disgusting apartment I'd first experienced, it was better. The music was pounding as much as my heart was now. I felt my body almost soar with euphoric pleasure. I never wanted it to end.

Then I noticed Lucy moving in on my new friend Luke, who had just finished two lines, obviously experienced in more than just women. She was already lying in his lap, looking up at him, playing with his hair coyly. I wasn't even upset that I had seen him first; she had always been like that, uncaring of anyone but herself.

"Luke, do you mind if I do another line?" I asked shyly.

He looked up to me and smiled, "Not at all doll." Luke lifted Lucy off his lap, much to her dismay, to reach for the Ziploc. While he prepared another line for me, I sat down next to him once again brushing against him. It didn't even occur to me to be bothered by the fact that Lucy had just been in his lap.

"Time to lift off sweetie," Luke said handing me a rolled up dollar and the mirror that had the line.

With a bit more confidence this time I grabbed the green tube, lifted it to my

right nostril once again, and snorted the line.

I waited in anticipation for the rush of euphoria I got the first time. It never came. Instead, it was replaced with the most horrifying feeling I've ever experienced. Inside my head, I screamed for help, shrill bitter screams begging for a way out of this, angry at being susceptible enough to do such a stupid thing in the first place. After the first line, I had been on top of the world and now all I could think about was the fact that my heart felt like it was about to rip out of my chest. But it was too late, the meth was already there and I didn't know how to get it out. I couldn't even think of the words to ask Lucy for help. She still was too caught up with Luke to notice my distress over it.

After sitting there in mute agony for another few minutes, my inner screams subsided, and I just felt calm. Everything blurred together and I was okay with it. Now this wasn't so bad, after the initial tweaking out. I was twitching now though, almost uncontrollably. And then...I just let go. Luke was right; all my worries were fading away. I felt like I was floating, despite the fact my body was clearly glued to where I was. In my head though, I soared. I wasn't even worried about being alone anymore. I couldn't understand why I'd never done this before, it was wonderful. I closed my eyes so not to be distracted by anything that might ruin this. And then I faded.

You know how they say your life flashes before your eyes right before you die? Well, I don't think that's true. It might just have been the meth that impaired my memory, deterring me from my life as an internal slideshow, but I really don't think it happens at all. How would you remember all of that in the last few seconds before

you die? I can barely remember what I did yesterday. All I can remember is Lucy's screams. She finally noticed.

The Forgotten

by Andrea Lorenzano

Closing time.

The librarian makes the final call, and a small group of children make their way toward the exit, laughing and giggling as they brag about the wonderful books they just checked out. But as happy as the children are, the books they carry are even happier. You see, to us books, nothing matters more than being read. Our dream is to have the words written on our very being absorbed into the minds of others. But times have changed. People don't need books anymore. They have movies and television. Why would they waste their time reading a book when they can watch a movie on the same subject in a fraction of the time? We are insignificant.

A small percentage of people still come looking for a book to read, but they only check out a tiny portion of the population here, and the rest are forced to sit on the shelves, gathering dust as they wait for their day to come—a day that may never come.

I am one of these books, the forgotten. I sit in the dark propped against the corner of my shelf in the history section, and I wait, perhaps in vain. My current condition is much less than it once was: my pages are torn and some are missing, my

once vibrant blue cover is now dull and covered in dust, the letters that make up my title are chipped and faded, my binding is loosening, and my spine is twisted out of shape. I'm falling apart, but I'm still hopeful.

Perhaps it's the memories that keep me going. There was a time, long ago, when I was checked out frequently. I remember the way the sun felt on my hard cover and the way the wind tickled as it gently rustled my pages. Times were good then. I felt alive and free. Now, all I feel is the cold oak wood pressing against my head and tail.

You know, I've never really understood why the fiction books get all the attention. We history books carry all the same elements: horror, adventure, romance. And it's all true! It isn't something some man or woman thought up or dreamt about. This happened to real people. To me, that's far more interesting than some made-up story.

Now, I'm not bitter, just frustrated. Sometimes I think I'm disappointing the tree that gave life to me. Perhaps the wood that created me would've been better off used as something else—like toilet paper—at least then it'd get some use.

No, that doesn't matter anymore. What's done is done, and I must meet my fate like the rest of the books here, whatever that fate may be. For some, it could be freedom. For others, the burning fire.

We are the forgotten, and we are waiting.