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# *Bayou Review*

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Spring 1992



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# *Bayou Review*

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Diana Hornick  
**Editor**

Christine Higgins, Alice Wolke  
**Assistant Editors**

Dan Jones, Lorenzo Thomas, Fabian Worsham  
**Faculty Advisors**

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## *Contest Winners* for the Spring 1992 issue:

Virginia E. Staat *A Night in Pagosa*  
**Short Story**

Tommy N. Thomason *Adjustments*  
**Poem**

*Bayou Review* awarded two \$50 prizes for winning submissions in the categories of poetry and short story this semester. A prize was not awarded for best essay, however, due to lack of published entries in this issue.

All published submissions were considered for the contest.

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# *Bayou Review*

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## A PET ANSWER

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Christine Higgins

Well, Cutie? What do you think?

Don't make that funny face. I sat in that chair for an hour and a half so he could do this to my head. You just *have to* love it. And, besides, I read in an article that most men don't want their girlfriends to wear the same old hair style. Well, *This* isn't the same old anything.

Most of the time I do wear hair on both sides of my head, but the stylist assured me that this would be the rage! Sweetie, I don't want to be thought of as homely or boring.

The guy I went out with last year didn't like my hair. He didn't say that, but I knew. He just kept leaning away from me and raking his hands through the hair at the sides of his head as if fixing his hair would make mine look better. That was painful. That's why I put so much effort into making this the best hairstyle ever. It took me 4 hours to find *the best* stylist in town to do my hair for tonight.

I think it shows off my makeup, anyway. Don't you? I bought the latest colors in shadow and blush just for tonight. The woman at the cosmetics counter guaranteed this makeup would be the smash of the party. I imagine all the other women going to the party will be wearing their best and I wanted to be absolutely sparkling. Do you think I sparkle, Hon?

The September issue of the magazine said that makeup colors and styles should be varied so people will find your face an artistic creation. I'm not lucky the way you are. You have such pretty color and shading in your face, like that spot above your whiskers. I have to use all this makeup. My face is more interesting this way, isn't it?

One of the guys I work with asked me last month if I was sick. He said, 'Valerie, your pale is pale. Are you ill?' I snapped back to him that I was fine, but hadn't had the chance to get my makeup on. He was so mean. Now I don't even go out of my bedroom

without it. That was just too embarrassing to live through. Thank heavens, I don't have to worry about someone thinking I'm too pale with this makeup.

That's right, sit there and purr at me.

How about my earrings, Tiger? I bought them yesterday from a woman who told me all her male customers love these and are buying them for their wives and girlfriends. That means they're obviously a good purchase. They were a little more than I usually pay for a pair of earrings, but I wanted perfection for tonight. They are perfect, aren't they?

I'm not a jewelry expert or anything. I really needed the help of that salesman in the store. You know, he told me that I needed earrings as vibrant and eye catching as my dress so that I would be balanced. That was great advice, and it meant a lot to me. He's such a nice man. All he wanted to do was help me make a good impression.

Oh yes, speaking of the dress, what do you think? I hope you like it since it took me two days, 73 miles on my car, and 104 dress shops to find it. I wanted a red dress since men think red is more exciting. And the taffeta and lace just looked so pretty in the store. I just couldn't leave it behind. And besides, this date is important.

I'll bet the other women have talked to each other about their dresses so each one knows that no one will be wearing their dress. I don't have that luxury, so I had to look for something unique. This dress isn't an original, but it is unique. I don't think anyone else will be wearing it. I especially like the slope of the skirt hem. Isn't it great the way it balances out my hair?

My mother helped pick out the dress for the date two years ago. I'll *never* let her help me again. There were *two* other women at the party wearing my dress and people were *laughing* at me. I made my date take me home immediately. He didn't think anyone was laughing, but by the time we got back here he was



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Christine Higgins

as angry as I was.

You know...I never did hear from him again.  
He must have been as embarrassed as I was.

I see this sloping hem has you looking at my legs. Do you like what you see, Honey? I bought the sheerest black hose I could find, and I managed to get the lines in back straight in only ten minutes. That's fast! I bought these hose because a friend of mine said men think these are the sexiest.

Ooghgg! Keep your claws out of my hose!  
You'll ruin my whole date and cut my legs.

This guy that I met at a bar told me that he only dates women who are *built*. So I decided to start some building of my own. Don't you think I'm a good architect? I think my legs have improved a lot since I

started working out, don't you? What do you think of my shoes? They're real snake skin with a 4-inch heel. Don't they make my calves look great?

I don't wear flats. They remind me of the shoes my mother wears. I can't afford to look older, yet. My mother thinks I'm trying to break my neck wearing these shoes. Isn't that the silliest thing you've ever heard, Sugar?

You know, you haven't done anything but sit there staring at me with those big black cat eyes. You're supposed to be encouraging. Here I am hoping this date will be wonderful, and I'm nervous. You're no help at all.

Oh! There's the doorbell! I wonder what he's wearing to the bar-be-cue?

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THE STRANGER

Ron Luster

He wore a cloak of satin black  
His steed the shade of night  
He rode up from behind my back  
My hair stood up in fright

He laughed aloud when I had turned  
My eyes were opened wide  
His image on my memory burned  
I could not speak, I tried

For fear had struck me paralyzed  
And struck my voice quite dumb  
But no one could have heard my cries  
If voice to me had come

I thought I'd die upon that path  
I couldn't even pray  
But I was spared the stranger's wrath  
He turned and rode away

The hoofbeats echoed in my mind  
The demon disappeared  
And as I stood there for a time  
Recovering from my fear

I shivered as my blood ran cold  
My body it felt drained  
A feeling, new to me, took hold  
I'll never be the same

# THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CATHODE RAY AND DAYLIGHT

*Brian A. Pachuca*

And there was movement just as the day  
began to creep its way over  
the easterly gait of indigo  
whose pallor began to fade  
and ebb to light  
exposing desolation  
and ruin in streets and canyons  
where all but a few  
crawled from hiding  
only tentative footsteps  
stir the still  
and the rolling treadmills  
rumbling  
and scraping soot tarnished bones  
over the earth...  
...and primeval edifices lingered in legends  
proclaiming new found wealth and blooming  
flowers of everlasting insurance and the  
ideal life going from one city to the next

railroads clattering to life with centipedes  
of burning stacks steaming into the flat earth  
where time festering like weeds devours the  
meshes of tempered rusty tracks and fills  
the gaps and cavities with lead and ore  
enamel

the hollowed husks of financial failure  
stare paralyzed from the roofs to the  
foundations  
whereas  
the designated smoking area was empty of  
smoke

but not so the movement of strangers  
as they sat in comfort chairs  
and ate from dispensable bags  
the maroon in these couches seems  
to breathe infidelity for anyone  
who sits and rests with ease

a television hisses and sputters  
turning and twisting imagery-the curving  
hues-and the swirling colors of flesh and  
matter  
reflecting another world  
parallel to our own.



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## DEATH SO BRIGHT

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*Chau Nguyen*

The journey so endless, so long  
To escape from war  
What we did not created but mere rescue for life and soul  
The sea so rough, so salty  
No obstacle too huge, no barrier so bitter  
Can stop the rush in search for peace  
The hunger so harsh, so grim  
The cries so silent, so mute  
The tears so wet, yet dry  
The hopes so dim, so dull  
To see death as a means of tranquility and more

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## FEAR

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*Nizeur*

Through the breaking glass  
is where I see you.

You are there everyday,  
in my dreams,  
in my shadow,  
and  
in my fears.

It is you, the one  
that won't let me sleep.

You are the one that follows me  
everywhere I go.

You do it with your mind and soul.  
You, you may not do it physically,  
but I know.

You creep up behind me  
when I least expect it.  
It is that, that I fear.  
The fear of not letting go.

It is the fear of the unknown.  
The fear of falling in love, perhaps?

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## ATTACK OF THE HUNTER

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*Ron Luster*

The sign read, 'Only one left, don't miss this chance to own a cuddly ball of fur.' Now Joe had owned cats before. He knew they could be bothersome sometimes. Still, he remembered how nice it was to come home to a little someone who was happy to see him walk in the door after a hard day of slaving over ledgers and balance sheets. So what the heck. He pulled the car to the curb, walked over and looked into the box.

Inside that box was one wide-eyed, lonely kitten. She (as it turned out) was almost orange in color with blue eyes and a tiny pink nose. She didn't make a sound, just peered up from her cardboard nest with a questioning expression. Joe took the cat and got the box as a bonus for solving a kid's "last kitten" dilemma.

On the way home, she only meowed once. 'This,' Joe thought, 'is going to be a great cat.' No complaints, so far, from either of them. Into the apartment they went, Joe and... uh oh, no name. "Well I think I'll call you Fluff," Joe said to his new roommate as if she could understand the words.

Fluff and Joe became great friends over the next few weeks. Litter training was a snap. She seldom cried and was content to spend nights and work hours in the utility room. When Joe came home, she watched TV on his lap or on the couch next to him. The only time she cried was when he entered or left the room or when she was hungry. What a great cat, right?

Well, one day Joe decided to install a brand-new Hunter ceiling fan. Fluff displayed her usual nonchalance until he turned the fan on and stood back to admire his handy work. Suddenly, this docile feline became a cat possessed. She first stood there on the couch, back bowed as if she was preparing for a fight in the alley. Then, she began to run around the room never removing her eyes from the whirling blades turning above.

It was obvious that Fluff was not going to accept this intruder into her peaceful life. Weeks passed and every time the fan was switched on, so was Fluff. Instead of quietly lying in front of the TV, she would pace and stare, stare and pace. Not only that but sounds came out of this tiny animal that you'd not expect from a species domesticated for thousands of years.

Joe made up his mind that the fan was going to stay and the cat was going to have to live with it. Fluff didn't see it that way. One evening as Joe looked on, she jumped from the back of the couch to the top of a nearby bookcase, where she crouched as if she were stalking her prey. As it turned out, that's exactly what she was doing.

After watching the fan turn for three or four minutes, that little "hunter" leapt through the air and made a perfect four-point landing on one of the blades of the other Hunter. She clung there for about two revolutions before being catapulted toward the wall. Yes, she landed on her feet: first against the wall and a picture hanging there, then on the floor below just next to the same picture.

Realizing that her adversary above was much more powerful than first estimated, she retreated under the couch. Coaxing her out of hiding was not an easy job. She dug her claws into carpet, couch, and Joe before being extracted.

After that day, it was obvious that Joe would have to choose either cat without comfort or comfort without cat. On the sign he made he wrote 'Only one available. Don't miss this chance to own a cuddly ball of fur.' He made sure that her new home had no ceiling fans.



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## DREAM SEQUENCE: OBSIDIAN

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*Nhan Nguyen*

The broad, paper-thin black strip rustled in the wind, tapering into transparency, like tremulous cloth tongues that flutter in mockery. The silky, azure water grew silvery as the sun escaped, and the ivory moon slid across unseen wires. The dark sky, in its silent, frigid beauty, chilled me as I tried to brush the moonlight off my shoulders. I cautiously walked upon the surface of the pristine liquid mirror, careful not to disturb its fragile tension. On the other side, shadowy fish quietly gazed at my feet, rising and descending in slow motion above them. Everything here moved in slow motion, it seemed: the nightingale flew as if tethered, slowly being released as its invisible (or perhaps black) rope grew in length; leaves fell as if they were feathers.

One thing that did not seem slow was the music. The thin, crisp air became various shades of violet as melodies whistled like piccolos through the

holes in the wind. Musical gusts of air breathed in the distance, never approaching nor departing. Glistening waves lapped idly against smooth stones, their notions creating strange measures that could be heard if one strained to listen to them.

Amongst the trees was enveloping darkness, and music distorted as it splashed against it. It was quite bright out in the open, however, thanks to the moon. I took a fan out of my pocket and unfolded it as I entered the dark woods. As I moved the fan back and forth, its sandalwood blades brought forth light and sound, briefly exposing sleek creatures fleeing to a dimmer spot. Sculpted by the flowing breeze, ebony demons glided into the night, their thin, red eyes glowing intensely in departure. Polishing an already lustrous marble taken from my pocket, I tossed it into the water, and a shower of fine black hairs flew into the air. Before I closed my eyes, the water froze, and the lake became a large, glossy block of obsidian.

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## MIRAGE

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*Nadeem Altaf*

Imagine, Imaginations running wild and free  
Flowers in all the colors possibly  
Clear skies with stars placed nicely  
Beauty on earth for eternity  
Youth for everyone as long as it can be  
You and me, in a garden imagined by me  
Moonlight on your face, stars in your hair  
I the only one to see, how pretty you really are  
Me and you sitting on a cloud of roses  
Red, pink, yellow arranged as it should be  
No sadness or pain forever be  
Hand in hand, talking love for world to see

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## JACKSON SQUARE

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*Adia Kilpatrick*

Alone I stroll through Jackson Square.  
Then resting on a grassy chair,  
I slowly sip the scented air.  
The wind is gentle, the day is fair  
an atmosphere of beauty rare.  
Thoughts of you drift everywhere.  
The sunlight plays on childrens' hair.  
On yonder bench, an elderly pair  
of ladies grumble as they glare  
at hands caressing young legs bare,  
and complain about the clothes girls wear.  
Panhandlers beg for coins to spare.  
Lovers kiss while old men stare.  
It's hard not to laugh, but I don't dare,  
for deep inside I know I care  
for those who neither receive nor share.  
Life has its sorrows, I was there,  
watching sad movies in Jackson Square.

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## UNSPOKEN

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*Adia Kilpatrick*

Is music less lovely  
without any words?  
Your soul hears the answer  
sung sweetly by birds.  
Your mind may not know,  
but your heart understands  
the truth in my eyes,  
in the touch of my hands.  
You ask of my feelings.  
Why have you not guessed?  
Those three words, unspoken  
are being expressed!



### *Jeff Parmenter*

Bob sat down in front of the television in the hotel room and popped the top on the first of today's six. Killing time before the night's show was always a bummer. You couldn't do anything, like see a movie, because that crazy band manager, Jeff, was always paranoid about losing track of you. He'd read the riot act to whoever disappeared...even for a minute. But this was Bob's last week with this bunch. He'd decided that a week ago. 'Enough of this shit,' was the exact phrase he'd spoken to himself. Getting razzed about the girls was one thing, getting his ass chewed about mistakes on stage was another.

Settling back into the pillows on the bed, he thumbed the remote and listened to the screen pop and crackle with the static electricity that always accompanies the first minute of a TV coming to life. Closing his eyes and rocking his head back, he took the first long, cool pull on the can of beer and heard his name spoken...not loudly, but definitely his name. He looked around the room and confirmed what he already knew...he was alone. Shrugging his shoulders he figured that he had heard someone outside talking and...but that's not right, he heard it clearly and close by. A chill crossed the skin on his arms and raised goose bumps there.

"Baa, I'm going batshit in this town. I'll be out tomorrow and be done with this damn room. Two weeks in any hotel will make anyone a little loony."

The television screen flared into life, but the picture was wrong. Not snowy or rolling, but something like one of those 60s oil and water mixtures that were so popular as backdrops. It took a moment to realize this wasn't normal. About the time this registered, the TV spoke his name again, and with it the oil mixture formed the letters one by one. The voice was bubbly, as if it was speaking through the goo on the screen. The voice came not so much out of the speaker as out of the walls of the room. His mind said 'Get out,' but his body wasn't listening to his mind. It was listening to the low musical sing-song of the voice from the television.

The forgotten beer in his hand fell to the bed and spilled cold liquid on the crotch of his shorts,

breaking his trance. He jumped up in surprise. Picking the can up he glanced at the TV as Vanna White was sensuously turning letters and laughing, as if she had seen him drop the cold beer in his lap.

"Shove it, Vanna," he muttered. He considered giving her some suggestions where, but the matter at hand took precedence and he grabbed some dry pants to put on.

Having attended to his problem, he walked over to the cooler to get a fresh beer. Pulling the can from the ring holder he picked up the remote and sat in the chair near the TV. Taking another deep pull, he checked for laughing Vanna but saw the bubbling gook again. It was changing colors and pulsing. Looking at the can of beer to see just what he had bought, the voice bubbled, "It's not the beer Bob." Then, like a con-man hooking his mark it continued, "Come over here Bob; let's talk." There was a grin in that voice. A grin that suggested secrets and pleasure and more. Bob fought for a breath, and thought 'This is crazy; I'll do no such thing.'

Powerlessly he rose to his feet, unable (unwilling?) to stop himself. As he reached for the knob on the set, he had a fleeting image of himself being pulled into the screen and disappearing. Yet, he couldn't stop himself.

As his hand was about to touch the set, Kelly, the drummer let herself in and slammed the door to the room cursing. "That damned manager," she said, breaking the spell and leaving Bob standing there like a department store mannequin, hand outstretched.

"Did you hear me Bob? Dammit to hell that asshole Jeff wants me to wear this negligee on stage for Chrissake! The nerve!" Noticing Bob standing by the set she stopped in mid-stride and asked, "Bob, are you all right?"

"Hunh? Did you say something?" he said, confused.

"Bob, why are you standing there? Posing for Vogue, perhaps?"

"No," he said coming back to himself. He peered at the screen closely. A veil of something



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*Jeff Parmenter*

slippery had formed on the glass.

"I was... thinking about somebody I used to know," he lied. Vanna cavorted on the screen.

"Right," she huffed. "Time to suit up pal, show's in half an hour. I hope for your sake you're not too far into the bag," she said, indicating the can in his hand. "See you backstage," she called through the connecting door, walking into her room.

"In the bag my butt," he muttered, walking to the trash can. Dropping the beer can in, he turned to the TV and considered. This was some weird shit. Should he stick around to investigate or should he get dressed and get out?

"Hell, I gotta half hour still. I'm gonna looks jes once more," he said in his trademark lazy southern dialect. Crossing the room to the screen he stopped cold. It was again spelling his name in that unspeakably vile slime on the screen, but now he could smell it too.

"Yes, it sure is some weird shit, ain't it Bobert?" the TV gurgled, reading his mind. "Come on; let's talk about it. Just step over here and give it a feel Bobby-boy." The multicolored stuff was now oozing from the

cracks of the cabinet and dribbled down the front of the desk the TV sat on. It hung in ropey streamers like spittle and hung a moment before finally plopping on the carpet.

His eyes grew wide and his brain registered the whole sight as the speaker shot spittle toward him, sticking it to his shirt. 'This really isn't so bad,' he thought as the goo crawled up to his face. Running was useless he somehow knew, and the foul odor was replaced by a rich, earthy scent. In a moment he was completely covered by the clear, warm goo and he felt so fine...sooo fine.

"Bob, where the hell are you!" Stomping into the room, Jeff saw no sign of Bob and cursed under his breath.

"Asshole said he wouldn't quit till after tonight. Jesus, where am I supposed to come up with a decent lead man on ten minutes notice?" Still swearing, Jeff turned to the television to turn it off...and saw a most remarkable thing.

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UNTTLED

*Christopher S. Times*

To the morninghouse I do go  
To greet the day

To become a new person and  
To know that I am God's own

Today, I go to the morninghouse  
To pray my way

To God's hand, that He might accept me,  
To know that He is God, and He alone is my strength,  
To be alone with my Lord, yet be filled with His holy  
presence

To be a Christian, and to love God with all my heart

To the morninghouse I go  
In hopes that I might meet you there  
And that together, we might meet the Lord in prayer.



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## LADY OAK OR SHADY LADY?

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*Laurel L. Grandstaff*

You are standing near the small garden area at the entrance to the Albert Thomas Convention and Exhibit Center at Bagby and Capitol. The blackbirds, cardinals, blue jays, and mockingbirds (State of Texas birds) flit through the air, singing as they go, as if they had no cares. You are just beginning to examine the landscape when you hear a tenor voice exclaim, "How lovely she is." Startled, your head jerks to the left, and your eyes glimpse the speaker,...a sky-blue eyed, tall, thin, partially bald, middle-aged, immaculately dressed man in a navy blue wool business suit, snow white shirt, and shades of blue paisley tie exactly centered on his bosom...definitely American...the accountant look of several major Houston accounting firms.

Within a split second of the first remark, a baritone voice exclaims, "Yes, she is! And she's so well preserved!" Speedily like a flash of lightning grabbing a tree, your eyes grab the image of an average height, slightly chubby, well-dressed man in a London-tailored gray tweed suit, standing in highly polished black shoes. His straight black hair is center parted, and his elongated, but well filled out, face carries a neatly trimmed black beard. Around his olive colored eyes are crinkles caused by amusement as he adds, "Certainly, it's difficult to believe huh pawst! Is she Lady Oak or a shady lady?"

Then, you realize this American businessman and his English counterpart are talking about the fine old oak tree you came here to see! You forget the men as you think of the things you've heard about the "old hanging tree."

She's a famous Houston landmark. Some historians believe this tree is 400 years old, the oldest in Houston. If this is true, she has seen lots of history. The earliest days of this strong plant with gnarled, dark brown trunk crowned with innumerable emerald green leaves that glisten like jewels in the sunshine are legendary. But it is well documented that she has stood before a house on four lots, three courthouses, and the Albert Thomas Convention Center. As each of the first four buildings was replaced, the constructors protected the tree, leaving it unharmed.

It was about to be killed in 1964, but luckily

saviour Councilman Lee McLemore asked architect Thomas Bullock to rearrange his convention center blueprints to save the old oak. Bullock left intact a basement wall of the old courthouse to keep from damaging the tree's root system. And the Houston Parks and Recreation Department appropriated money with which to buy food and water for "Lady Oak."

As you gaze at this industrious tree which has been cleaning the air around itself since it sprouted its first leaves, you begin to visualize exciting events in its past life.

It's March 31, 1837. Houston's first grand jury is meeting under a rugged shade tree. It brings in three indictments.

The jury dismisses Whitney Britton's assault and battery case as a triviality. And jury members say John T. Beall just killed a man like they would "in similar circumstances," so they call it "justifiable homicide." But the jury is terribly outraged at James Adams! He has to pay back the \$295 he had the audacity to steal and also the notes he abstracted! And now, the sheriff is lashing his bare back! One, two ... 38, 39 times! Oh! How awful! Two men are helping the sheriff brand the letter "T" in his right hand! This "thief" insignia will always go with him!

The vividness of your imaginary scene jars you momentarily, but then you remember that in 1992 a jury still gives a much stiffer penalty to a man who robs a convenience store than to one who beats and rapes a child or murders another human. And some of our people dare to mention the "attitude" of the Republic of Texas jury!

Then, you recall hearing that not all murderers went free in those days. You see a crowd gathering. Women in bustled gowns and men in knicker-type pants, ruffled shirts, and high boots mill around the huge oak tree. Most of them are murmuring, talking, or cursing. Now, there are 2,000 to 3,000 outraged people! And not one person is crying!

Two murderers are to be murdered...hung on this old hanging tree. One is John C. Quick, a gambler who killed a man he gambled with. The other, David Jones, killed a fellow soldier, Mandrid Wood, of the



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*Laurel L. Grandstaff*

New Orleans Grays. Both are said to be hardened men, but Jones, despite his gray uniform which connotes bravery, is obviously shaken; his eyes bulge in fear! Yesterday's newspaper said he nearly blew out his own brains after being sentenced!

You wonder how Quick can still address the public with no sound of remorse in his voice, "No, I'm not sorry I killed the cheat!" In his black suit with multi-colored brocade vest, he faces his "future."

It's 2:00 p.m. The men are being hung opposite one another. Thirty-five minutes later, and the tree's limbs are relieved of two dead bodies! Neither murderer had struggled!

This scene revolts you, and your thoughts return to year 1992 where crude hanging is no longer in vogue, but electrocution is. It's faster and less messy. And the general public does not watch the gruesome event. But it is especially interested in what the "condemned" chooses to eat before he is eliminated!

A heavy breeze blows through the old oak's leaves and presses on your brow, causing you to notice how the tree's branches spread way out over the courthouse lawn. Many of the branches hang so low that they appear to be inviting children to climb onto them.

This triggers your imagination and it transports you into the early 1900s where prisoners are hung inside of the courthouse, and the old oak is no longer used as a gallows but has something better to do...making children happy!

A young 12-year-old boy calls to his 10-year-old brother, "William! Look at me!" And he proceeds to hang by his feet from a swinging branch. William yells back, "That's good, Allen! Now, you watch me!" And he hangs by one hand from a very steady, gnarled branch.

Soon, Allen stops swinging, climbs down, and goes around back of the courthouse. Eventually, he runs back excitedly exclaiming, "William! I just saw a man hung! Let's go tell Dad!"

Both boys run across the street to Repsdurph Tent and Awning Shop. Before Allen reaches the doorstep, he yells, "Dad! You remember that rope you sold to the sheriff yesterday! I just saw a man hung by a rope from a scaffold inside the courthouse!"

You are startled out of your daydream! "Sorry! Need to rope this area off! Got to care for the tree. Orders from the Parks Director," a workman almost shouts, and you begin to realize just how important "Lady Oak" is to Houston.

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RECYCLED HEARTS

*D'Ann O'Brien*

Yes, son, there were cities here.  
Cities? They were masses of people.  
We found things when we dug.  
The people were said to have small  
    hearts.  
But, you won't have to worry.  
    We've invented plastic.



## A NIGHT IN PAGOSA

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Virginia E. Staat

George tapped the brakes, slowing the car to a crawl. The center line, barely visible in the onslaught of rain, was his only means of bearing. It was an incredibly black night, and the darkness had long blocked from view whether the edge of the cliff was to the left or right. In his headlights, the rain reflected like thousands of thinly-forged daggers.

"It never rains like this in Texas," the old woman said as she wiped moisture from the passenger window with a white tissue.

"Of course it does," he adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses, leaning over the steering wheel a bit more. "It's just that the roads are flat and straight. You don't have to worry about falling off a damned mountain at home." He stretched his aching shoulder muscles forward.

"I suppose I should be glad it's not snowing," she turned to look for headlights behind them. "There's just nobody out here, George."

"We're okay," he reached to squeeze her hand, "You're cold." He fumbled for the heater control. "Surely these Rockies have a motel hidden in a curve somewhere. As soon as we find a place, we'll stop."

"Why did Carrie have to marry someone from Colorado, George?" she sighed. "She could have stayed near home if she'd married Scooter."

"But I thought you liked Eric," George chided.

"Oh, I do," her voice small. "But just think what he's doing to my baby tonight."

"Now, Cecile," his voice trailed. "Ssh ... it's a weather report." He turned the volume to blaring, the announcer's voice drumming around them.

"It's not going to let up," she moaned.

"We'll find a spot soon. We must be close to Pagosa Springs by now."

She fiddled with the radio tuner, trying to find a station without static. He used his wadded handkerchief to wipe the window. He felt more than

saw that they were turning down the mountain, winding slowly through the dark tunnel of night.

As they rounded a curve, lights began to flicker between pine limbs. "Thank God," he breathed. "It's a motel."

He drove in the gravel drive and up to the lighted office. "I'll go in, Dear. You need to stay as dry as possible."

"I'll be all right, George. Don't slip," she said.

He dashed from the car to the entrance, hearing a clanking cowbell as he pushed open the glass door. The balding man at the desk barely glanced at George, instead shifting his pants higher on his big belly. "Newlyweds, heh?" he said with a wide, knowing grin, raising his entire forehead as he spoke.

The girl crept a little further behind her husband. Her eyes had the look of a dove just before flight. The young man shadowed her under popping fluorescent lights. His voice almost cracking, he whispered, "We'll make Boulder tomorrow, Sweetie. I'm really sorry."

"That's Room 23. It's just up this wing. Three doors from the end." The manager stared openly at the girl. "I could walk down there with you," he offered.

"We'll find it," lips narrowed in impatience, words completely enunciated, the young man's jaws hinting of a beard.

"Just trying to help; it's up to you," the manager shrugged. "Uh, what can I do for you, mister?" not quite looking at George, smiling again and exposing a gap between his yellowed front teeth.

"Well, I'll take the second-best room, since you gave your honeymoon suite to these youngsters." George nodded toward the couple. "There's two of us also. Do you have anything?"

"Night, now," the girl gave George a relieved smile. Her husband quickly draped his raincoat over



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*Virginia E. Staat*

their heads, yelling a thank you when George caught the door from slamming back on them as they rushed into the night.

Both men watched the couple sprint to their car. The manager snapped his fingers, rolling his eyes, "Boy, I'd love to be in his shoes tonight."

George brushed the water droplets from his sleeve. "Do you have anything?"

"Sure. Why don't you take Room 32. Just fixed the air conditioner in it. It's just up this way." He jiggled through several sets of keys, keeping his eyes on the young couple's car.

"Great," said George. "I can't tell you how wonderful it was to find this place. We've been on the road through six hours of this mess and ..."

"Yea, we always get lots of folks in bad weather," the manager interrupted. "That'll be 28 bucks. Cash or charge?" He paused, frozen momentarily as he held out the key, to watch the couple's car turn up the drive. "Boy, I'd love to have 20 minutes of free expression with that one. How 'bout you?"

"Just down this wing?" asked George, pulling bills from his wallet.

"About half way. The number's on the door," the manager plunked down in a spindle-backed chair. He leaned heavily into the chair, balancing against the wall on its two back legs. He picked up a half-smoked cigar and turned to a baseball game blaring on the little black-and-white television under the counter. "Check-out time is eleven," He said, not even looking at George.

George hunched his shoulders, shading his glasses as he rushed to the car. The rain was still pounding steadily as he slid in beside Cecile.

"If the manager's any indication," he said breathlessly, slamming the car door and catching the tail of his raincoat. "I doubt this place is top quality, Dear. He's...how should I say? A bit less than

refined," George, shaking his head, looked back toward the office.

Cecile was arranging a plastic rain bonnet over her silvered hair. "At least we can rest. We'll get up early. Maybe we'll make Amarillo before tomorrow night?"

"If this weather lets up, you can bet on it. And I promise a dinner out, okay?" He peered through the rain-streaked window, looking for room numbers. "Ah, here it is. The bright green door, of course."

"That's a horrible color for a door, George," she shuddered.

"Let's just hope the room isn't color-coded to match," he smiled as he picked up the make-up case, pulling the travel bag from the back seat. "Will this be all we need tonight, Dear?"

"I think so," she stuffed a tissue box under her tweed coat. "I guess we'll just have to run for it?"

"Let me open the door for you first. Then you can come in." He handed her the umbrella, then dashed out of the car, fumbling keys from his left hand to right. On opening the door, the sour, musty smells and darkness made him hesitate a moment before feeling for the switch. He flicked it on, lighting a narrow room with multi-shades of green shag carpet and a stained olive-green spread on the double bed. Chipped paint hung in olive-green blotches on the wall.

"Oh, dear, it does match the door," Cecile hiccupped as she stood in the doorway behind him. "Looks like there's a bit of a leak in the ceiling, too." She pointed a thin, crooked finger to a depressed spot in the yellowed ceiling. "Better put a wastebasket under that, if we can find one."

He watched as she shuffled about, inspecting closets and the bath, hanging wet clothes on a wooden, straight-back chair to dry. "I asked for his second-best," George shook his coat out before handing it to her. "He gave the suite to some newlyweds."

"Newlyweds? Oh, my. I seriously doubt



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Virginia E. Staat

they're much better off than we are, poor things," she said, picking up her bag. "Anyway, it looks reasonably clean. What an awful way to start a honeymoon! I'm going to get dressed for bed now. I'm tired as can be."

He tested the bed, then turned the covers down, thinking of the young couple and the comments of the manager. Then he thought of Carrie. Maybe she was just now slipping into that lovely gown Cecile had proudly shown him. George fidgeted with his bow tie, finally unclasping it, slipping out of black shoes. Lying back across the bed, he snapped the tie clasp...open and shut, open and shut. He began to imagine the neighboring newlyweds on their first night in these dim surroundings, trying to make the best of putrid greens and leaky ceilings. He rolled to fluff the next pillow.

"It'll be good to lie down," Cecile's voice cracked as she came from the bathroom.

George sat up, blushing, jerkily running his fingers beneath his glasses to rub his eyelids. He stopped mid-movement to watch as she walked toward him. She was dressed in a pink nightgown, sheer from wear instead of design. He could see the darkness of her nipples under the thinning garment as she rumbled through her cosmetic case. Close to him now, he reached to touch her pendulous breast. His own movement surprised him, and he quickly drew his hand away before she noticed his intention. "I'll go change now," he muttered, thrusting hands into his pockets.

They were both restless as they tried to sleep, tossing to find a comfortable position on the lumpy mattress. The steady drip from the ceiling to the metal wastebasket was echoed by rattling window panes. Cecile turned, nestling her thigh against his. George moved away, his body tense.

Infinitely weary, he floated in near-sleep to the newlyweds down the hall, and then drifted to a laughing, younger Cecile, pale shoulders bare, a blue-

plaid blanket, the sweet smell of clover, and hard ground.

Suddenly he was a boy again and in Theodore's house. Out of the bath came Mrs. Sagebil...stark naked. He remembered her startled scream. Yet now, she dropped to her knees to hold him. He saw the rippled, marbled stomach and her huge, marshmallow breasts. He struggled, suffocating against her embrace. He squirmed free and ran, swinging tightly around the stair railing, hearing her laughing. He pressed his hands over his ears, but the laughter was in him, inside his head, filling him to bursting.

He ran on and on, up rugged wooden stairs, running an eternity it seemed, his legs burning, lungs stinging, stomach churning. The stairs were endless and rotted, rickety and narrow. The laughter suddenly died and now, grown up once again, he turned the corner up his street and fell, gasping, to the ground. He looked up to see his glorious old oak tree scorched and lifeless. He choked a sob, but was somehow distracted from his immediate grief and drawn to his bedroom window. He picked slowly through the bushes to straddle azaleas, crimson red with blooms, peeking through the shadowy window. He could not see. He wiped the window with his sleeve. His stomach wrenched. His body quivered. The window became blacker, unpenetrable.

The scene dissolved to Carrie clouded in angel white, cradling her tailless, yellow cat. He was drawn from her into blackness, a treacherous, squalid tunnel. George reached for his daughter, but felt his free fall, his cheeks slackening against the force of the drop, his chest collapsing. The cat hissed, and Carrie's cheek was ribboned, dripping bright red with blood.

The dream vanished, and he sucked in a breath. A rush swept him. He felt scraped inside, rolling to his back, burying apparitions, listening hard at the wind. He tossed, squeezing his eyes shut,



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*Virginia E. Staat*

settling on his side, counting drips from the leaky ceiling. A loose button on the mattress bore into his shoulder. He thought of ripping back the sheet to tear the button completely off. But Cecile was snoring ever so softly now; he would not wake her. He tottered on his side, hemmed between the button and Cecile's warmth.

He didn't think he had slept again, but the pounding on the door startled him so, he knew he must have dozed. The pounding came again, and George tossed back the blanket. Cecile sat straight up, drawing the covers about her.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he shouted at the door, and to her, "Stay put."

He opened it with a tug. There stood the manager, sheepishly hiding under his black umbrella. "A surprise for the newly ...," he stopped short, tilting the umbrella back just enough to look at George in blue-striped pajamas. "Uh, I ... well, I just wanted to give this, uh, wine. I mean, I thought the newlyweds were in this room."

George smoothed his thinning hair. "You mean, this *is* the best room in the house?" Cold drips of rain spat on his bare feet.

"I ... well, no ... I mean, yes. Of course. You see, I fixed the air conditioner in here. It really made a loud racket." He screwed up his face, "Folks said they could hardly sleep. I really goofed. Sorry. Uh, I've got to deliver this wine," he shuffled his weight, juggling the bottle under the umbrella. "God, it's Room 23, not 32."

"Well, since it's me that you woke up, why don't you give us the wine? I'm sure those poor kids have been asleep for hours now." George leaned against the door sill, almost lightheaded as he realized the extent of the manager's dilemma.

"George, who is it?" They both looked up to find Cecile teetering a little, wrapping her quilted housecoat tightly about her. "Is something wrong?"

"The manager has been kind enough to offer us some wine to help us sleep, Dear. No doubt, his conscience must have been bothering him about that horrible mattress."

"Uh, well, yes'm," the manager shifted, reluctantly delivering the bottle into George's awaiting hands.

As George gave the bottle to Cecile, she took it hesitantly, "Why, thank you. But isn't it a little late?"

"Now, Dear. Why don't you go pour us a glass? No cork screw's necessary?" He tilted the bottle in her hand. "A screw top. Appropriate. Hurry back in now ... you'll catch your death in this dampness." George felt the thick knot in his stomach dissolve. He leveled his eyes on the manager and said dryly, "Give 'em a break. Can't you get your jollies some other way than picking on those kids? Just let them be." He slammed the door with a thud on the speechless manager. "Goodnight."

"I never!" he said, shaking his head. "What are you doing, Cecile?"

Opening the umbrella, Cecile waved it about, "There's a leak above the toilet."

"Not exactly Caesar's Palace, heh?" he smiled, shuffling across the carpet to dry his feet. "I'll hold that for you."

"Promise not to peek?" her voice sing-songed as she handed him the umbrella.

"I promise," George said. He waited until she looked at him, "Would you like to have a little wine afterwards?"

"It's been a long time since we had wine at bedtime," she hesitated, then reached to turn George's collar back in place. "Oh, I don't see why not. We're not going to get much sleep tonight anyway."

They looked at one another for a long moment, her hand still resting on his chest. Then he saw her smile a smile he hadn't seen in years.



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## UNSEEN CONNECTIONS

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*W. Lee Gay*

He turns from his office to look out the  
High-rise window and sees from  
the corner of his eye...

A man, in a skyscraper  
Across the street, returns a  
Casual glance from window to desk.

Across the chasm there is a connection.

There is an unseen bond,  
Tight but transparent, like a delicate spider's web,  
A bond unseen but not unfelt.

When the shadow of consciousness  
Is lifted, gossamer lines are revealed, connecting  
Strangers in office towers.

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## CONSTRAINTS' LAMENT

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*W. Lee Gay*

Driving down the farm-to-market road  
Near Kerrville, around dusk,  
Suddenly on the grassy roadside  
There appears, a fawn.

Lying injured by a passing car,  
It flails its legs desperately in the night air  
And helplessly torn, unable to  
Stop the suffering, I drive on.

And now as our relationship breaks apart,  
It seems that there must be something,  
Anything I can do...and yet  
Knowing better, I leave.



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## A PICTURE ON THE MANTLE

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*Jerry S. Dworaczyk*

Her eyelids were winning the battle with her will to keep them open, but Carrie found the strength to sit at the edge of Shane's bed a few more minutes while he tried to decide which set of pajamas he wanted her to order through the *Sears* catalog. Through wrinkled eyebrows and a slightly noticeable yes or no nod, a mask of indecision clung to his face as he flipped the pages. As she sat there in silence, her partially open eyes were fixed on her thoughts and not on the page in front of her...thoughts that whisked her away to the master bedroom where a cottony soft pillow awaited her in a room filled with the scent of lavender potpourri.

Shane's sister, Melanie, sat up in her bed reading the latest issue of *Teen* magazine. Leaning against the headboard with feet bouncing to the muffled sound of music escaping from headphones, she felt as if she was the only one in the room.

"Earth to mom...Earth to Shane...hello, is there anybody in there?" she asked while waving her hand in front of their eyes.

"I...must have dozed off," said Carrie trying to focus on her watch.

"Shane let's resume tomorrow. Maybe by then you will have made up your mind," she said while yawning and stretching to reach the catalog Shane was reluctant to give up.

After dimming the light in the kids' room, giving the sandman his cue, she started down the hall. Charlie would be getting ready for bed about now, and as she turned the brass knob to the bedroom door, she sensed a slight tension in the air the minute she walked in. She wanted to initiate conversation, but past experience reminded her that whenever he was quiet, it would be best to leave him alone.

Adjusting herself into the warmth of her down comforter, she noticed that he was fast asleep and beginning to snore uncontrollably. Her efforts to stifle the pig-like noise failed, so she plugged her ears

with cotton balls, rolled over and within minutes her snore echoed with his.

Shane cautiously crawled through his bedroom as if on a safari tracking his prey through the vast savannas of Africa. His attire was unlike that of a professional hunter; it was attire Carrie picked up at a catalog store a week after his choices were narrowed to two.

Clad in animal print pajamas depicting scenes of tigers in various poses, Shane inched past the air conditioning unit in the hallway. Over its steady hum, he could hear familiar noises coming from behind the door to his parent's bedroom.

"What do you mean I ignore *you*?" shouted his father. "You walk around the house like if I'm something your trying to avoid stepping in!"

Carrie rolled her eyes and tried a different approach.

"Charlie, it's getting to where you look for things to complain about the minute you walk through the front door. Then you eventually wind up talking about everyone and everything that bugs you at the plant. Maybe if we talked about something else, our conversations would be a little more civilized," she complained.

Changing her tone to one trying to search for answers, she continued, but she could see that their conversation was going nowhere fast. He stood at the foot of the bed, with his hands in his pockets, staring a hole through the fish tank. Through the imaginary opening, he envisioned himself riding the gushing stream of water to the pale blue carpet frantically hoping someone would save him as he lay struggling and helpless.

"...Charlie you've become so hard to please lately. The past couple of days you've managed to find something wrong with almost everything I do. What have I done that's making you so hard to live with? Have I said or done something wrong?"



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*Jerry S. Dworaczyk*

After pausing to catch her breath, she searched his face hoping to find a hint of sensitivity and a possible response. Instead, he avoided eye contact and sat down at the foot of the bed with his head in his hands.

"Carrie you know I don't like to argue. So why do you insist!?" he said as he looked up briefly.

"Maybe if you would argue a little we wouldn't be putting each other through this hell. Charlie I can't take much more of this," she said with tears in her eyes and finality in her voice. "It's ripping us apart...you've never acted like this before."

He ran the palms of his hands down his face and looked up into her watery eyes. As eyes full of rejection met eyes filled with desperation, he slowly rose to his feet.

"I can't take it either Carrie," he said in a low voice, "but right now, I'm tired and I'm going to bed."

"Charlie, can we just talk a few m..."

Reaching for the door, clutching a pillow and blanket, he quickly opened it and walked out.

'Why ...why is it so hard to talk to her!?' he thought as he slammed the door.

A few feathers from an Indian headband Shane fashioned in kindergarten spiraled to the hardwood floor. The breathe of life for a struggling, helpless fish stood on the other side of an oak door, but other than the steady hum of an electric air pump and bubbles breaking the surface of an aquarium filled with tropical fish, she stood in silence.

Shane quickly backtracked his steps to his room.

Shane's nightly excursions started with a cookie and milk mission to the kitchen a few days earlier. Shortly after the first shouting match between his parents, he asked his dad (between a mouthful of chocolate chip cookies) why he was carrying his pillow and dragging a blanket to the living room.

"My back has been bothering me lately son," said his father. "The sofa allows me to sleep a little better."

He knew it was something other than a sore back, yet trying to ask his father to explain was like trying to confess to Mr. Chambers that he whacked the ball through his patio window last summer.

As long as he could remember, his mom and dad had always slept together. He would often saunter into their bedroom about 9:00 and tuck them in just as they did for him when he began sleeping in a bed instead of a crib.

'I wish I could tuck them in tonight; maybe it would make them feel better...maybe I could read them a story...,' he thought as his father plodded into the living room and spread the blanket out over the sofa. With a consoling look on his face, he appeared at his father's side.

"Want some milk and cookies dad?"

"No, I'll pass...late-night snacks have been giving me indigestion lately."

"Want to see what's on the tube?" said Shane with a wide-eyed smile as he reached for the remote.

"I think you should go to bed now; 7 a.m. is going to come awful early," said Charlie rolling onto his side and closing his eyes.

Shane paused halfway down the hall, looked over his shoulder and then to the tile floor as he leaned against the wall.

'He didn't even kiss me goodnight...'

He wanted to ask him about the argument, but the words wouldn't come. They were stuck in his throat behind a lump as big as a golf ball. After his eyes quickly filled with tears, he relied on instinct to lead him to the door of his room.

Charlie always pulled himself off the sofa as the morning's rays began their predictable climb over the horizon to illuminate a picture nestled among dried sunflowers on the mantle. Carrie snapped the picture



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*Jerry S. Dworaczyk*

as Charlie swung out over the Guadalupe River and Melanie and Shane pelted him with water balloons. The twisted, surprised look on Charlie's face, and the laughter permanently captured on the kids' faces, hinted at cherished yet now forgotten times.

Carrie had previously agreed to wake him before sunrise so the children wouldn't see him on the sofa and start asking questions. He was running out of excuses to tell them and so was she, but it didn't take them long to figure out that something was off kilter and causing their parents' relationship to crumble before their eyes.

Shane carefully closed the heavy wooden door to his room.

"SSShane..." hissed his sister as he turned to his bed. "You're supposed to be in bed. What are you doing up?"

Startled, he jumped for his bed and pulled the jungle scene comforter over the curly locks of his head. He slowly lowered it to just below his eyes then peered into the direction of his sister's bed next to an enormous window on the far side of the room.

Against the backdrop of a window flooded with moonbeams, she sat with her hands in her lap. All he could see was her silhouette and a few branches of a weathered pecan tree dancing with the wind outside her window.

In a hardly audible voice, his lips quivered as the comforter sagged below his face.

"Mom and dad are fighting again."

Melanie pushed her quilt aside and eased out of bed. She knelt beside him and wiped a tear with the back of her hand as it trickled down his cheek paving the way for more to follow. As the moonlight bounced off of his glazed eyes, she noticed a pale shade of gray instead of the usual vivid blue.

"Mom and dad are having a rough time right now," said Melanie.

"But why...why do they have to yell at each

other? They never smile anymore...don't they love each other? Dad has been sleeping on the sofa for a long time now; why doesn't he sleep with mommy?"

As he looked into her eyes with the expectation of an injured puppy, she felt her own swell and fill with water. Her throat ached as she struggled to find the words to answer him.

"Sometimes people let things build up inside them, and after a while, all that bitterness finds its way out. People begin to say things before they think about what it is they are saying, and before they know it, one argument builds on another and they find themselves fighting about things that they never would have fought about before."

Noticing his usual attentiveness to whatever she had to say, she continued.

"They try desperately to protect their pride, and instead of apologizing or admitting that they are wrong, they often shut the door to communication."

"Maybe you should try talking to mom and dad, sis? Maybe they will understand," he said while rubbing his eyes.

"Me? Talk to them? The other day I tried to voice my opinion about something on the news and they looked at each other as if I had body odor. To them my opinions don't matter...to them, I'm just a teenager who doesn't know anything except how to make them miserable."

"I think you know a lot, sis. Mrs. Stenworth told me that you were the best student she ever had."

"Well...Mrs. Stenworth should take a closer look at you. You're pretty special yourself!" said Melanie as she reached under the covers and tickled him until he almost squirmed out of bed with laughter.

After giving him a kiss on the forehead, she climbed into her bed and stared into the night sky through the half-opened window. The sadness of the moment coincided with the helpless look of the old pecan tree. And after a while, she slowly drifted off to



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*Jerry S. Dworaczyk*

sleep. The night would bring fits of uncontrollable tossing and turning for everyone.

Shane was out of bed at twilight scrambling around the room. He spotted what he was looking for and darted into the bathroom only to emerge a few minutes later with a tightly folded sheet of notebook paper between a clenched fist. He looked up and down the hall for signs of life, then quickly scrambled to the living room.

Melanie forced herself out of bed and was wiping the night's sleep from her eyes while trying to avoid the piercing glare from the bedroom light.

"You're up early Shane. Can't wait to get to school?" she said as she caught a glimpse of him racing down the hall.

Without responding, Shane looked to see if his dad was on the sofa. Making his way to the kitchen, he put his hand on the back of a chair and stretched until he was on the tips of his sneakers so he could peer around the kitchen wall to the hall leading to his parents' room. All was quiet with the exception of the shower and an electric razor trying to drown out the cursed, persistent screams of an alarm clock out of control. He quickly took the crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and gently placed it in his mother's open purse on the breakfast bar. Stopping for a split-second at the counter to reach into a heart-shaped cannister for a fistful of chocolate chip cookies, he sprinted for the door.

"I've set up an appointment with Dr. Riverstone this Saturday."

"What did you do that for?" said Charlie as he tossed the razor into the vanity drawer.

"I thought he might be able to give us some suggestions on how we could cope with some of our problems," she said while leaning against the bathroom wall with her hand on her hip, blocking his exit.

"What problems...Is he a shrink?"

"Charlie he's a marriage counselor! Will you promise me you'll go?" she said looking into his eyes for confirmation.

"I don't know...maybe," he hesitated, "it depends on how I feel between now and Saturday."

The flushed look on Carrie's face began to fade to disbelief and then quickly glow with excitement as she watched Charlie leave the room. She finished getting ready for work, and as she left the room, there was spring in her step. The wait for Saturday would seem extremely long.

A sparrow landed on a rose bush near the kitchen window with its morning meal pinched firmly between its beak and watched her every move as she packed a picnic basket and set it on the kitchen table. Carrie started for the kids' room to tell them that she and Charlie would be gone for a few hours and found Shane and Melanie playing with the Nintendo as she entered the room.

"Good morning space cadets," she said cheerfully. "When Dad and I get back, would you guys like to go to the park for awhile?"

"Is that what that basket is for on the kitchen table? Are we going on a picnic Mom!" said Shane grinning from ear to ear.

"We sure are. I thought we could go to the park by the beach. You know, the one on Gulfview."

"Can we go swimming?" said Melanie taking her eye off the TV screen for the first time since Carrie entered the room.

"You can go swimming; we can play frisbee or whatever you want," said Carrie.

"Are you coming today or tomorrow!?" yelled Charlie as he poked his head around the front door.

Carrie gave Shane and Melanie a quick kiss and a hug and then left the room. As she hurried down the hall to the front door, the spring in her step was still evident.



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Jerry S. Dworaczyk

Melanie jumped to her feet with anticipation to answer the front door. When she opened it, a somber looking police officer asked her if her name was Stillmon and if she could come in. The other officer waited outside.

"Sure, come on in. Is there a problem?"

"Is your name Melanie and yours Shane?"

"Yes," said Melanie with a troubled look on her face and anxiety welling in the pit of her stomach.

"Can you two come with me? Your mom and dad have been in an accident," said the officer waiting for an answer so she could look away and brush aside a tear.

Melanie quickly grabbed her purse and motioned for Shane to follow, but he stood there in shock.

"C'mon Shane!" cried Melanie reaching for his arm and pulling him toward the door.

In what seemed like an eternity to Shane and Melanie, the speeding patrol car arrived at the hospital emergency room with lights flashing and sirens blaring. Grabbing him by the arm once more, Melanie set her sights on the emergency room door and ran as fast as she could, but Shane tripped and fell. Their aunt and uncle were already on their way out of the emergency room door when they saw the patrol car drive up. They arrived just as Shane fell and quickly helped the two hysteric children into the hospital.

As night began to descend and a steady drizzle distorted the view out of the window to the emergency waiting room, Melanie sat with Shane cuddled in her arms. He reached for a tissue and brought it to Melanie's face as they looked into each others' puffy eyes.

"Why...why mom and dad?" wept Shane as Melanie reached to stroke his cheek.

Their tears had flowed continuously since they left the patrol car hours earlier but began to

subside as they held each other and looked out the rain-streaked window in the waiting room.

She didn't have an answer for him.

Shane's fist clamped tightly around his mother's purse. Slowly relaxing his grip, he reached inside and carefully pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. He unfolded it and began to sob uncontrollably.

"They...didn't even get to tell...each other they were sorry...so they...could be friends again...," sputtered Shane in tears as he let the note drop to the floor.

Melanie eased him into the chair and picked up the note with trembling hands. As he sat there sobbing, her eyes scanned the page:

*"Dear Mom and Dad,*

*Sometimes people let little things build up inside them until those things want to climb out. When those things can't get out, people fight and make each other sad and mad too. Then, their pride is hurt and won't open the door so they can be friends again. Mom and Dad...will you please tell your pride that everything is okay and to open the door so you two can be friends again?"*

*Love you a bunch,*

*Shane*

She carefully placed the tear-stained note in her mother's crushed purse. Taking Shane's limp hand in hers, they slowly walked out of the waiting room and into the awaiting dawn of another day.

As golden rays confidently marched over the horizon, they suddenly found themselves struggling with massive, rolling clouds of black and gray. Gazing through a rain streaked windshield, with thoughts just as muddled, the two orphans kept their eyes transfixed on the hospital until it appeared to dissolve under an unrelenting, pounding rain.



## THE SUN IS MINE

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*Drew H. Beeson*

Sheltered by its glowing grace  
I feel warm rays penetrate my window

For a moment I am at peace with myself  
Left to ponder my earthly role

Brightly lit corridors open in my mind  
Heaven is just above me

All the secrets of life are hidden somewhere in the light  
I can hear them being revealed to me in a language unknown

Afternoon shadows can no longer be restrained  
My daily fears again return to me

Slowly the still fire will soon set  
But will once rise again

Shine on me great sun  
Shine on me.

## ADJUSTMENTS

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*Tommy N. Thomason*

We get used to darkness.  
Dark places, dark hearts.  
We get used to darkness.  
Our eyes adjust.

We get used to darkness.  
"Execution style," the paper said.  
We get used to darkness.  
"Give me the sports."

We get used to darkness.  
"Ten thousand homeless...and a freeze tonight."  
We get used to darkness.  
"When does 'Cheers' come on?"

We get used to darkness.  
Dark places, dark hearts.  
We get used to darkness.  
Our eyes adjust.



## THE TABLET

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Tammy L. Wilson

The three old women shared the same room. The three beds, made up with the same starched white sheets and the same light blue acrylic blankets, were lined up against the same beige wall. There was a window on one side of the room with bars and heavy glass panes. There was a steel door on the opposite end with a deadbolt that locked from the outside.

The room was dark, save the dim light from the moon that tried to break through the bars on the window. The three old women lay in their beds, staring at the ceiling.

The steel door suddenly bolted open and a big black woman entered the room. She irreverently flicked on the light.

"Rise an' shine, Miss Dolly! Your salvation be here!" The three women clutched their eyes. The fluorescent light was blinding, especially at such a late hour.

"Miss Dolly! I say your salvation be here!"

The woman in the first bed began to tremble.

"No! No, please! I don't need your salvation! Let me be! Please go away!"

"Come on now, Miss Dolly. You're gettin' yourself all worked up in a tizzy. It ain't that bad, and you know it."

"I will look at the light of the sun, this last time! I wish from that blue sky the white wolf of lightning would leap, and burst my skull and my brain and like a burning babe cling to these breasts. Ai! Ai!"

"Ah, c'mon. Don't be doin' that, Miss Dolly. You're gettin' yourself all worked up again."

"She's reciting the first act of Medea! Let her be, you ingrate!" the third old woman shouted from her bed.

"Now Miss Wallace. You shush your mouth."

"I *said* she's reciting the first act of Medea! Let her be! Have you no appreciation for the arts! Have you no culture? Have you no..."

"Leave her alone, Sarah. It's no use," the second old woman softly said as she watched on with

fear.

The first woman tried bravely to continue her recitation.

"I did not know I had visitors...Women of Corinthe: If anything has been spoken too loudly here, consider that I believed I was alone; and I have some provocation. You've come, let me suppose, with love and sympathy, to peer at my sorrow."

"Miss Dolly! I ain't come here to do nothin' but give you this Tablet to read. You need to read this. You know you do."

But the first woman continued, "I understand well enough that nothing is ever private in a Greek city; whoever withholds anything is thought sullen or proud. Undemocratic, I think you call it."

"I've always loved Medea," whispered the second old woman. "A tragic story, but truly one of courage, don't you think Sarah?"

The third woman nodded and whispered back, "One of courage, indeed."

"Now you quit with the Medea stuff, Miss Dolly! You quit it and you read this Tablet! Miss Dolly! I got my job to think about!"

The black woman impatiently grabbed hold of the first woman's arm and shoved the metal Tablet in front of her face.

The woman screamed and reeled in the bed like a captured tigress.

"Now you read this or else!"

The old woman tried to turn away, but her eyes suddenly became transfixed on the Tablet. The words had been carefully etched in the metal plate and were illumined by the florescent light. She began reading and her body turned limp. The other two old women turned away and looked at the steel door, but the first kept reading and reading and didn't stop until she had read the whole thing.

"There! Now ain't that better, Miss Dolly? Ain't that much better?"

"Yes," the first woman said in a strange weak



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Tammy L. Wilson

voice. "Yes, that's much better."

Then the black woman turned off the light and walked out of the room. She bolted the steel door behind her.

Silence fell on the room as the moon disappeared behind the clouds.

"You know there's no way out, don't you, Sarah?" the second woman said to the third.

"I'm praying that someday there will be," the third woman said.

"You can pray all you want, but they won't let us out. We're over 70, or have you forgotten?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten."

"No, of course you haven't forgotten. After all, we're reminded of it every day! Every hour of every day, every hour of every day, every hour of every day they come and they bring that Tablet."

The third woman's face contorted in pain.

"Yes, the Tablet."

"The Tablet," the second woman repeated bitterly.

Then, again the room was silent as if the women had uttered a holy word. But the silence was filled with fear and pain, not reverence, filled with memories lost and futures denied, filled with hopelessness and despair and loneliness...most of all, loneliness...

Late the next morning, the big black woman opened the steel door and brought in two trays of oatmeal. The first old woman had died in the night and early that morning two young interns had come and taken her body away. The other two old women sat up in bed and ate their oatmeal while the big black woman changed the dead woman's bed.

"I'm gonna miss ol' Miss Dolly. She be sayin' some of the strangest things, but she be as sweet as honey, that lady. What was that she was always quotin'? Hmmm? What was that thing?"

"Medea," the third woman said.

"Oh yeah. She be quotin' that stuff from that play and what's that about anyway? Miss Sarah, what's that play about?"

"It's a Greek tragedy about a woman who lost all she had to another."

"Hmmm. Hmmm. Sounds like one pitiful woman."

Then the black woman gathered up the sheets and walked out of the room, leaving the door open behind her. The third old woman finished her oatmeal while the second old woman sat staring at the empty bed, her eyes filled with tears.

"It just doesn't seem right," the second old woman said. "To have lived on the outside all your life, giving and laughing and loving; and then to suddenly have nothing...no one..."

The woman in the third bed grinned a sarcastic grin, took her napkin and wiped her mouth.

"What do you mean 'no one,' my dear? Why we have *everything* we could possibly want inside!"

She took a deep breath.

"Ahhh! Just smell that air! That wonderfully fresh, suffocating, inside air!"

"Dear me," the second woman put her hands to her mouth as if she was going to be sick. "We're dying in here, Sarah! We're dying!"

"Stop it!" The third woman turned sharply and pointed to the second old woman. "Stop it! Don't speak of it! Don't speak of dying again!"

"I'm sorry, Sarah."

She wiped her eyes with the edge of the sheet and tried to change the subject.

"You know; Sarah. I...I've been thinking. I've been thinking that when my children come again...I've decided that when they come, I...I...I just need to show them. I...I need to show them that I'm still full of life! I just need to show them I still have something! I can still dance at Murray's ballroom, you know. I can still



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*Tammy L. Wilson*

dance with the best of them!"

"Yes, Gwendolyn. I know you can. You can do anything you put your mind to."

"I can still dance, Sarah."

"Of course you can, Gwendolyn."

"No, Sarah! Really, I can! I can because I'm young!"

The third woman smiled.

"I can still dance. Don't they know that I can still dance? Look, Sarah, watch me dance!"

"What?!"

"Just watch me. You just watch me!"

And she suddenly pushed the tray of oatmeal to the bottom of the bed and slipped the covers back.

"Gwendolyn, don't! You're going to fall!"

But the old woman got up out of the bed, ignoring the third woman's plea and put her feet on the hard cold floor. Her legs were the legs of a fawn, and she stumbled this way and that way, trying to find a place where she could stand.

"Please Gwendolyn! You're going to hurt yourself! Don't!"

"I must, Sarah! Can't you see? I must!"

And then she let go of the bed and carefully walked to the middle of the floor as if she were on a tightrope; she balanced. And then she stood straight up. There, in the middle of the floor, she began to dance, a strange sort of tap dance, with no taps and in slow motion.

"Look Sarah! Look! Watch me!! Watch me!! I'm dancing!"

The third old woman looked on and began to cry.

"Oh Gwendolyn. Dear, dear, Gwendolyn. You hope in things that never will be. You make your own truth, but it never will be."

And within a few seconds, an alarm sounded and there were loud voices outside in the hall.

"You are NEVER to leave that door open,

Minnie! Do you hear me?"

"But Miss Connors, I was a' comin' back! I was! I was changin' the sheets, and I had me a handful when I walked out, and well, I just didn't have a free hand to lock that door!"

"You better find one next time, Minnie! Or you'll be finding yourself without a job! They get one wiff of this outside air and all hell will break loose!"

The black woman and a tall, slender woman dressed in a white uniform entered the room. They both stopped short when they saw the second old woman out of bed...dancing in the middle of the floor.

"Ahh!" the slender woman gasped.

"I told you, Minnie. Didn't I tell you? Look at her. Up and out of bed like she belonged there! Get me the Tablet!"

Minnie headed out of the room.

"I'm dancing!" Gwendolyn said. "Can't you see, Miss Connors. I'm dancing! See, I don't belong in here! I belong out there!!" She pointed toward the window.

"Come, come, now, Mrs. Smith. You just got some bad air, that's all. Here, let me help you back into bed."

"No! I won't go back there! I won't!"

"Mrs. Smith. Now I know you're upset, dear, but you need to be in bed. No one wants you out there. Everyone wants you to be in bed!"

"But Miss Connors, I like it out there! I don't like the bed!"

Then she broke away from the tall slender woman and ran to the window.

"I want out! I want out!! I want out!!!"

Minnie then came running in with the Tablet. She handed it to the tall slender woman.

"Now Mrs. Smith, I want you to read this Tablet."

"No, I won't! I won't! Sarah! Sarah! Tell them! Tell them I need to be outside...I need to be



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*Tammy L. Wilson*

outsid...I need to be out...."

Her voice quietly trailed off while her eyes were unwillingly drawn to the words of the Tablet. She read the words and then slumped in a heap on the floor.

When the darkness settled and the moon's light quietly slipped through the bar-clad window, the tall, slender woman escorted a young man into the room where the two old women slept in unsettled silence.

"She's in the second bed," the tall woman whispered to the man.

"Like I told you, her violent outbursts are becoming more and more frequent. We thought perhaps you could...help."

"Of course," the young man said.

The tall woman smiled and then walked curtly out of the room. The young man walked to the foot of the second bed and carefully set his briefcase on the floor beside him.

He was a tall, slender, good-looking man dressed in a business suit, with monogrammed shirtcuffs and a rose on his lapel. The briefcase he had so carefully placed on the floor was black leather with numbers etched in metal plate on the front.

He stood at the foot of the second woman's bed like a statue, partly in the shadow and partly in light. He said nothing for a long while, but just stared at the old woman as if she were a rare piece of art.

"Mother," he finally whispered. "Mother."

The second woman bolted straight up in bed. "Anthony? Anthony, is that you?"

"Yes."

"Oh Anthony!"

She held out her arms to embrace him, but he remained motionless at the foot of the bed.

"Anthony? Come closer. I...I can't see you, dear," the old woman begged. "I...I want to see you! I...I...I want to touch you."

She stretched out her old and withered arms as if she were drowning.

"No," the young man sharply said.

She stared unbelievably for a moment and then slowly put her arms down and turned her face toward the window.

"They told you about what happened today?"

"Yes, Mother."

"It was actually quite funny, you know." The old woman giggled like a schoolgirl. "I hadn't been out of this bed for, oh, I don't know how long, and it felt so good to be up and about...and dancing! Oh, Anthony! To be dancing again! Just like I used to! Oh, you should have seen me, son. You should have seen your mother! You would have been so proud. I know you would have. And I think that now you surely realize that this place is not so good for me...that I need to be on the outside now because I can still do things...I can still dance...I can still dance, Anthony! I..."

"Mother!" He paused and then spoke very slowly. "We need to speak of other things."

The old woman's smile fell from her face and the sparkle in her eyes eclipsed.

"Of course, darling," she said cynically. "Of course, let's talk of other things. You can ask me how I'm doing, and I can tell you I'm doing just fine. And you can tell me how you and Ann and the children are doing, and I can tell you how I'm doing just fine. And you can tell me how the world out there is doing, and I can tell you how the hell in here is doing just fine."

"Stop it."

Then suddenly the old woman bolted up in her bed.

"They're killing me, Anthony! They're killing me!!"

"Shhhh!! Stop it, Mother! Stop it!"

Then he immediately picked up his briefcase and ran to the side of the old woman's bed. He bent down to open the case, and the old woman grabbed his arm.

"Do something, Anthony! Do something!"

He tried to pull away, but the old woman clung to him.



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*Tammy L. Wilson*

"Let go of me!"

The sleeve of his suit seemed to melt in her grip, and he could almost feel her cold, bony fingers against his flesh.

"I said let go of me!"

He dropped the briefcase and with his free hand he reached around and tried to yank the old woman's hand from his arm.

"There's nothing I can do!" the young man cried.

"Yes there is! You can get me out of here!"

"No!" He peeled her hand away from his arm and threw it against the bed. Then he backed away and picked up the briefcase.

"Now, Mother," he said in the same voice he used to speak to his own children. "Listen to me! It's not the same world out there anymore. You don't know what you're asking for! Things have changed! Things aren't like they used to be when you were young. People don't dance anymore. People don't dance! They don't sing! They don't care about the same things that you do! You're different, don't you see? You're a foreigner in a foreign land! You don't belong outside! You don't belong!"

The old woman stared at the young man in disbelief and then slowly and painfully whispered, "Medea..."

"I'm sorry, Mother," the young man continued in a mechanical tone. "I had to tell you the truth."

Then he swiftly opened his briefcase and took out a Tablet, an exact replica of the one she had read only hours before.

"Here. Read this, Mother," he reassuringly said. "It'll make you feel better."

"Oh, Anthony," the old woman cried. "I have so much inside."

"I know, Mother. That's why it's best that you stay here. You have everything you need inside."

"No, that's not what I meant. I meant..." The old woman feebly pointed to her heart, but the young man took no notice.

"Here you go. Now read this Tablet, Mother, and let's not talk of dancing or living on the outside again."

The old woman sighed a sigh of defeat.

"Yes, Anthony. Whatever you say, dear. You know best."

Then she took the Tablet and turned to where the moonlight struck the bed. She began to read. Her body was trembling. Her mouth was dry and chapped, but she read and read and read until she had read the whole thing.

When she had fallen into a deep sleep, the young man took the Tablet, efficiently put it back into his black leather briefcase, and quickly walked out of the room.

The door closed. The deadbolt echoed its message throughout the room. And the woman in the third bed turned toward her sleeping friend and silently whispered goodbye as she watched the color from the old woman's face disappear with the moon...

The next morning, the third old woman sat in the room eating her oatmeal alone. The second old woman had been taken away, and the room was emptier than it ever had been.

Minnie opened the steel door.

"It's time, Miss Sarah. It's time for your readin'..."

"How old are you, Minnie?" Sarah asked sadly and calmly.

"Me? I am 33 today, Miss Sarah! It's my birthday today!"

"Well, happy birthday, dear."

"Thank you, ma'am."

The black woman took the tray from the old woman and wiped her face and hands.

"Have you ever read the Tablet, Minnie?"

"Me? Lord God, no! I don't know nothin' about readin'..."

"Maybe I could teach you. I used to be an



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Tammy L. Wilson

English teacher, you know.”

“Well, split my britches! I never knew that!”

“Would you like me to teach you?”

“Teach me to read?”

“Yes!”

“Oh no, Miss Sarah. I don’t think that’s such a good idea. Miss Connors wouldn’t like that none too well. See I been workin’ here in this place for fifteen years now, and I been askin’ Miss Connors every day to teach me what those words say; but Miss Connors, she don’t look too kindly on me knowin’ how to read. She says she likes to keep me in my place.”

“And you think if you learned to read, you’d be out of your place?”

“Yessum.”

“Who decides, Minnie? Who decides what place is your place? Miss Connors?”

“Oh no, Miss Sarah. Miss Connors just goes by what it says.”

“By what *what* says?”

“Why...why...the Tablet, Miss Sarah! The Tablet.”

She took the Tablet and placed it on the old woman’s lap. “Now take this and read it, Miss Sarah.”

Then Minnie walked to the window, peered outside through the steel bars, and waited while the old woman sadly took the Tablet...

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I’D DO IT ALL AGAIN

Kerry E. McGee

Alone, again, I sit and comb  
through times together spent  
with men professed of love for me.  
Their feelings came and went.  
Where, I wonder, are they now  
when loneliness descends?

They promised to take away the emptiness,  
make sure the hurting ends.  
Would they be here by my side  
to comfort and to hold me  
if, for them, I’d made my life,  
their choice it was to mold me?

Did my need to find myself  
scare them all away?  
Or, was it meant, for me, to learn,  
from this my own true way,  
that finding me  
would cost so dear  
in terms of love and men?  
Small price to pay to find myself.  
I’d do it all again!



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