

Pen
& Pier
Presents

Reverse Tropes

Reverse Tropes

An Anthology

A short story anthology series

Edited by - Joe Gremillion, Rowan L., Ute Orgassa & Michelle Dornish

Layout by - Michelle Dornish

Letter from the Editors,

Inspiration and Motivation: These two qualities that every writer needs can also be difficult to come by. The writers in Pen & Pier know this all too well. We strive to keep our writers inspired and motivated through community and through regular writing prompts.

This May we attempted a longer writing challenge, tackling tropes and flipping them on their heads. We gave our writers a list of common Reverse Tropes and challenged them to write unconventional stories. Some writers even came up with their own.

This anthology is a collection of their creative efforts. If this anthology is successful, we plan to have more in the future. Enjoy the collected works of our writers, and may you find inspiration in them!

Reverse Tropes Used in this Anthology:

- **Fake Amnesia**
- **Academic rivals**
- **Too many beds**
- **Accidentally kidnapping a mafia boss**
- **Nursing Home Au Pair**
- **True hate's kiss will break the curse**
- **Soul Mates destined to kill each other**

Table of Contents

Fake Amnesia

<u>Lost Memories</u>	4
<i>Barbara Miller</i>	
<u>Who is Jennifer?</u>	10
<i>Ute Orgassa</i>	

Academic Rivals

<u>Friends Forever</u>	14
<i>Katie Bonn</i>	
<u>I Think We Went Too Far</u>	25
<i>Rowan L.</i>	

Too Many Beds

<u>Toddlers vs Bedtime</u>	28
<i>Michelle Dornish</i>	
<u>Woeful Circumstance Be Damned</u>	32
<i>Ute Orgassa</i>	

Accidentally Kidnapping a Mafia Boss

<u>The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly</u>	35
<i>Kyle Combs</i>	

Nursing Home Au Pair

<u>Love Knows No Boundaries</u>	41
<i>Barbara Miller</i>	

Table of Contents

True Hate’s Kiss will Break the Curse

A Kiss at the End 53
Joe Gremillion

Soulmates Destined to Kill Each Other

Cursed Valentine 59
Michelle Dornish

Pen & Pier Mission Statement 70

Lost Memories

By Barbara Miller

She stood there at the sink, her hands submerged in the scalding, soapy water as she scrubbed the crusted-over, almost scorched, bottom of the frying pan that had held dinner only an hour before. In another part of the house, she could hear the children laughing and the chattering of her husband and his brother, their voices distinct, but indecipherable as they were well out of sight. Not that she would have seen them anyway as she gazed sightlessly out the window, her hands burning while she scraped her knuckles painfully on the hidden sharp knives within that had been used to slice the steaks that were bereft of their usual pleasant taste in the back of her throat.

Normally the sound of her children's laughter would bring a smile to her face. However, it felt like she hadn't truly been happy for months now. When was the last time she enjoyed being with her family? It seemed like all that she did these days was clean up after them. It never failed, every time she walked into a room, there was another mess of toys, fallen food, or spilled water all over the floor where it had been cleaned only ten minutes before.

Another round of laughter from the dining room hardened her heart even more. Why was she the only one in here? She had been the one to do most of the work, okay, her husband had grilled the steaks and she had assured them that she would join them as soon as she was done cleaning the kitchen when they offered. They could have insisted though. They could have done more than just clear the table and scrape the food into Tupperware. The kitchen was big enough. But no, she needed a moment of quiet. Like always, though, those rare moments of stillness seemed to do more harm than good as she was left alone with her spiraling thoughts.

When she finally closed the dishwasher and set the four-hour timer, she stood there once again, leaning on the bright granite countertop, her head bowed and taking deep breaths. Her work was done, but she wasn't quite ready to join the rambunctious group that had moved from the dining room to the swingset and patio chairs outside.

"Honey, are you done? Do you need any help?" Her husband's voice floated through the sliding glass doors behind her.

"I'll be right there! I just finished up," she called back. Slowly, she pushed herself up to stand up straight and forced a small smile on her face. Turning, she saw her daughter climbing on top of the railing of the play structure, her balance teetering on being disastrous. Lunging forward, she stretched her hand to the glass doors when her foot slipped on an unseen puddle of water lying in wait. The last thing she saw as she fell was the panicked expression on her husband's face through the doors.

Upon her return to consciousness, she was greeted by stark white walls. She tried to turn her head, but quickly aborted that attempt as it began to throb and she saw spots dance along the sterile confines of the room she found herself in. Closing her eyes, she waited for the pain to recede, and ever so slowly turned her head before opening her eyes again. Ignoring her head, she squinted and realized that she was in a hospital room. Beside the narrow bed with lifted rails like a crib, was a complicated machine covered with wires which steadily beeped as it followed a cresting and falling line depicting her heartbeat.

Besides the machine, there was nothing else in the room other than an empty hard-backed chair. Closing her eyes, she relished the tranquility of her surroundings. There was no dinner to cook, no messes to clean, and no children screaming as they fought or played. There was only the beep-beep-beep that kept a steady rhythm that never faltered and soothed her troubled soul. It was a reliable beat that she knew would never change. And if it did, she wouldn't have anything more to worry about anyway.

Her peace was shattered when the door opened and she saw her husband and children waltz in with all the grace of an incoming hurricane. "Honey, you're awake!" Her husband exclaimed as he saw that her eyes were wide open and looking at her visitors. There was a blank look in her eyes and her brows were furrowed as she regarded the two minions who jumped into the bed beside her, burrowing themselves into her sides, making her headache spike.

She knew that her husband expected her to say something, but her peace had been shattered, and she didn't know what she could say that would bring it back. Her heart hurt with the loss of the quiet stillness that had prevailed before their entrance.

"Honey, are you okay?" Suddenly, she knew just what to say to bring it back.

"I'm sorry, but who are you?" The man's face changed in an instant from intense worry to overwhelming shock.

"You don't know who I am?" She shook her head and he turned back to the door. Finally, he would leave the room and take the little whirlwinds with him! Instead, he just poked his head out the door and then returned to her side. "I am your husband. Do you remember our children?" Again she just shook her head, refusing to answer verbally. The kids beside her were uncharacteristically still.

"Mommy?" Her boy asked quietly, completely different from the normal seven-year-old ball of defiant energy.

"Hmmm," she hummed noncommittally. She was actually finding it very difficult not to wrap her arms around their little bodies and assure them that she did remember them. Stronger, however, was the urge to push them away from her and cause them to fall off the bed. She did neither however and was grateful for the distraction from the arrival of the doctor in the room.

"Well, young lady," he said in a friendly tone of voice, his eyes only on her. "They said that you had a hard fall and I am glad to see that you have woken up. How are you feeling?" The woman winced as she was reminded of the pain in the back of her head.

"I guess I am doing all right, my head just hurts horribly," she answered.

"She doesn't remember us!" Her husband butted in, his voice high-pitched and completely unlike his normal tone.

"Is that right?"

"I am afraid so, doctor." She figured it would be better to not say too much. Besides, it was hard to think at the moment.

"Well, I am surprised that you lost your memory as you really didn't hit your head that hard, but it isn't all that uncommon. Your memory loss should only be temporary."

"Can we give Mommy medicine?" Her son sounded so concerned as he asked this. "I always feel better when Mommy gives me some."

"Well, young man. I'll order an MRI and we'll take a picture of your Mommy's brain, just to make sure there isn't more damage than I thought. If it comes back with no problems, then you can all go home. Make sure to make an appointment with your primary physician."

"I help?" her daughter interrupted.

"You sure can! When you guys get home, try to help Mommy get familiar with things again."

"How long will it be before she gets her memory back?" Her husband asked.

"The brain is a tricky thing, and memory even more so. It could take hours, it could take weeks. I am afraid I just don't have an answer for you."

If it was possible, her kids clung even more tightly to her and her husband sat down beside her, taking her one free hand in his and clutching it as though he were drowning. Silence followed as the doctor noted something on his clipboard and left the room.

* * *

She was now sitting up in her own bed at home, staring into the mirror that hung on the wall across from her over the large dresser. She really didn't recognize herself anymore. There were large bags under her eyes, and her normally frizzy, unruly hair hung limp and lifeless. As soon as they had gotten back from the hospital, she told her family that she was tired and her husband helped her to the bedroom and into bed. She couldn't sleep though. She finally had the quiet she wanted, but she was so unsettled, there was no peace to be found in this coveted state of existence.

Suddenly, she heard the door click open and she saw her uncharacteristically subdued son walk quietly to her side of the bed. "Mommy?"

"Yes, what is it you need?"

"Can I sit with you?" She took in a deep breath before nodding silently. He quickly clambered up into the queen-sized bed, as if not wanting to give her a chance to change her mind. "Mommy?"

"Yes?"

"Why don't you 'member me?"

"I don't know."

"You don't 'member dance parties in the living room?" She shook her head.

"How we play at being an old man and you tuck me into bed with a kiss?" She stayed quiet.

"You know what my favorite thing to do with you is?"

"No, what is it?"

"I love going on adventures with you. Remember the big bridge and we got Ben Ice Cream? Or when we went to Germany? Oh, the submarine was really fun!"

He fell silent then and she grew thoughtful. It had been a while since she had been on a big adventure with him. The thing was, when she thought back to those times, all she remembered was the hard part. The long plane trip on the way back from Germany when he had been bored of all the things they had brought and was very restless. The long rides in the car. But they had a lot of fun as well, just the two of them. She also remembered the Golden Gate Bridge. He didn't want to walk on it, but they drove over it and had Ben and Jerry's ice cream close to Pier 41.

She looked down at her boy and saw that he had fallen asleep, a look of contentment on his face. It was at times like this that she remembered why she became a mother in the first place.

* * *

The next day, she found herself in the easy chair, staring at the TV, even though its screen was black and no sound emitted from it. Her daughter crawled up to sit with her without a word. Normally, the rambunctious four-year-old would have been leaping into her lap from the chair next to her.

This little girl that cuddled up beside her looked like her daughter but didn't act like her. Instead of jumping enthusiastically on top of her, her daughter draped herself over her, nuzzling her nose into her mother's cheek with enough pressure to make it hurt against her cheekbones. After a moment of this, she pulled away and gave her a big, wet, sloppy kiss before burying her head in her shoulder.

She just wrapped her arms around the little girl. She remembered many hours reading books in the library or going from flower to flower on short hikes to the park. It was hard to remember these times when the worry over her daughter's sensory-seeking behavior overshadowed every interaction they had. Closing her eyes, the two drifted off to sleep together.

The next evening, she finally felt like she could get off her butt and go into the kitchen. She hadn't been since coming home. Now though, she was starting to feel more like herself and wanted to make dinner for the family. It wasn't anything special. She had defrosted a pound of ground beef in lukewarm water and now she was stirring chopped

onions and mushrooms in a pan, ready to begin building a simple spaghetti sauce. She hadn't realized that her husband had come up behind her until his arms wrapped themselves around her waist.

"Are you feeling better?" He asked quietly.

"I am."

"I have realized in the last few days that I don't tell you how much I appreciate you. I do, though. Without you, nothing would get done. I am not just talking about cooking meals and cleaning the house." Hearing his words, she set down the spatula and turned around, raising her head to look him in the eyes that were a good foot above hers.

"What do you mean?"

"I know that the kids can be a handful and you don't get enough breaks. I work a lot and it seems I am gone more than I am home. You get the kids to their doctor's appointments, their activities, and everything in between. I am so thankful for you, I couldn't do it on my own. I think we need to try to find more time to be together. I am not just talking a couple of hours for dinner, but a whole day at a time."

She nodded. "I have started to remember today. I would really like that. I miss spending time with just the two of us."

"I love you, I hope you know that."

"I love you too. I love our kids and I have enjoyed getting to know you all over again." Their kiss was sweet, without a hint of romance, and just perfect. It was a new beginning and she didn't regret faking amnesia.

Barbara Miller is a wife and mother of two adorable children, a boy and a girl who love to keep her on her toes. A devout follower of Christ, her first published work was a Christian devotional dedicated to helping the parents of young children entitled *How To Love Your Preschooler*. She recently published her first fictional work, a gold rush adventure inspired by a true story called *The Call of Gold*.

In her free time, she loves to explore new places with her children and go on long hikes and bike rides. Along with being a Cub Scout leader for the last two years, she also volunteers her time at church teaching preschool Sunday School.

Who is Jennifer?

By Ute Orgassa

It didn't look so bad at first. The accident. It was just a millisecond. But when the ambulances came and carried everyone away it started to look worse and worse. So many stretchers and collars, flashing lights and harried paramedics. The last thing I saw was someone coming towards me, flashlight in hand.

The hospital bed I woke up in was uncomfortable and the overhead neons were blinding my eyes. Looking down, I saw a thin blanket covering my body and out of it my arms, pale and covered with tubes. Needles sticking in me. A look to the side confirmed what a weary feeling in my nether region suggested. I was hooked up to catheters as well. There was another line to my nose, but thankfully, I did not have any tubes down my throat. I felt around my body for pain and found myself in that peculiar place of numbness that suggests pain just around the corner, or hidden underneath, separated only by a sheer curtain of chemistry. I was definitely hurt.

The machines next to me changed their tunes as I was still blinking myself into existence. Several people in PPC rushed toward me. Nurses, those were nurses. One of them introduced herself and asked me a barrage of questions. Did I know where I was, did I know my name, did I know what date it was, did I know who was president, did I know what happened?

I tried to answer, but something stopped me. I wasn't ready. I was too broken. I shook my head. The nurse smiled at me.

"No worries, you have time. You were in a bad accident. Do you want me to orient you to time and place?"

I nodded. She was the nicest thing that had happened to me in months, years. She told me the date. Three days. I had lost three days in the no man's land of trauma, surgeries and recovery. They had fixed internal injuries, they had brought me back at least once, they had done a bunch of transfusions and they had also found my wallet with all the information necessary to bill my insurance. That part was taken care of.

I listened as they repeated my own name back at me. I nodded when they wrote it down for me and I repeated it like a name that was given to some comic book character, not me. I didn't want to be me. Not anymore. They insisted I relearn my name, so I did.

The police came a few days later, when the doctors deemed me stable. Two officers with dour faces made it into the now shared room and closed the curtain around me. As if that would muzzle any of their words for the other patients around me. I didn't think these strangers in the beds next to me were too lucid to understand what was said and in any case I didn't care, but the gesture of closing the curtain amused me. The officer closer to me took my smile as a good sign.

They introduced themselves, more names I decided to forget. The older one sat down on the only available chair, scraping it closer on the floor.

"Mrs. Jenson, Jennifer. We are sorry, but we have some bad news for you. And we would like to ask you a few questions. We heard from the doctors that you have memory issues. But we need you to try to tell us everything you do remember."

I nodded. Then I stopped him. "Mrs.? The nurses only ever used my first name. Am I married?"

"Oh dear," said the standing police officer.

"Well, yes, um, you were married. The bad news we have is that your husband and your husband's brothers died in the accident you were in. All four of them didn't make it. You are the only one who survived that collision."

"I had a husband and brothers in law."

"Yes, you did."

"I don't remember them."

"Do you remember anything about the accident?"

"No. Do I have children?"

"No, you do not."

"Good, I don't remember any."

The officer sighed and handed me a card with his contact information. "The doctors say that your memory might come back in time. If you remember anything, please contact us."

Two days later my sister showed up. I was so flabbergasted that I almost forgot not to remember her. The hospital must have done some serious digging. She came flying at me.

"Jenny, oh my God, I haven't seen you in ages, I am so glad they called me, how are you?"

How am I? I thought. My body is healing. I haven't had the courage to look at my soul yet. I focused on my sister. Thought of her definition of ages. It had been four years, two months, seventeen days. But I couldn't tell her that. I didn't know her on the outside. I just asked her, "Who are you?"

She was taken aback, but rallied. "They said this could happen. I am Kathrin, your sister. They were hoping you would remember people from further back."

"You look a little like me," I replied. That made her smile. Kathrin, the careful one. Kathrin, who told me again and again about red flags and bad vibes and having lifelines. Timid Kathrin who saw right through all the charm and the promises and the hollow assurances. I should have listened to her. But I was in love and she was the little one, nagging me on my way to freedom and love. Of course I didn't listen to her.

She was soft and careful with me in the hospital. The way the nurses were. The way a human being ought to be treated. I promised myself to build a new relationship with her. One that was better than what we had.

The scariest day before my release into my sister's care came when Steven's parents insisted on seeing me. Kathrin and the nurses before her had done everything to avoid that confrontation, but Connie and Bob found a way. They stormed the room in their black clothes.

"Jennifer, how could you abandon us?" They wailed. "Jennifer, come with us. We need to keep Steven's memory alive. Jennifer, you belong to us."

But I didn't agree. I didn't flinch either, which was the harder part. I just told them, "I don't know you." My sister and the orderlies did the rest. I went home with her.

And this is where I'll stay. I am not ever going to tell anyone that I remember every minute, every last second of that car ride. That I was not afraid to die, even hoped to do so. That I ripped the steering wheel into a collision course with that boulder. That I feared we went too slow to do enough damage. And that I reveled in relief when I heard they had all died. All four of them. Considering the hell they had put me through, it was the outcome they deserved. That, and me forgetting everything about them.

Ute Orgassa was born and raised in Germany. She now lives with her family in the Bay Area. Her short stories have been published by Shortwave Media, Haunted Word Press and Alternative Milk. Her play *A Different Track* premiered at the 2023 Fringe in Barnstaple, UK and is currently produced by Awkward Pigeons Theater.

Friends Forever

By Katie Bonn

The Thursday night study group had grown such that we could no longer meet in one of the tiny study rooms. We had begun reserving the large conference room in advance. I had stopped trying to learn everyone's names, but that night Nick was a new face in the crowd that I was immediately drawn to.

It was clear that he was the most gregarious person in the group. Everyone loved him from the get-go. He had kind eyes, a warm countenance that put everyone at ease, and a smile that made me forget about anything troubling me. He'd look at whomever he was talking to like they were the only other person in the room.

In a sea of murmurs and scattered conversations, he cast his smile around the room like a loving patriarch at Christmas dinner. His eyes locked on mine and I was sucked in.

He opened his mouth as though to speak, but was interrupted by the sounds of the meeting being called to order. It would be weeks before I'd earn the opportunity to talk with him, but meaningful interactions began that very first encounter. My comments were met with encouraging nods. No matter how obscure, every joke I cracked ended with a conspiratorial look passing between us, as if we already had a database of inside jokes between us. It wasn't until two months later that we began to speak one-on-one and developed, what most would consider, an actual friendship.

Fever and cough had assaulted me, keeping me home for over a week, despite the impending midterms. I was lying on the couch, flipping through channels, unable to concentrate enough to watch a show, but soothed by the company of the voices when a buzz from my cell caught my attention. Someone was texting from an unknown number.

Hi Claire, I hope you don't mind Joshua gave me your number. I noticed you weren't at the study group tonight and wanted to make sure you're doing ok.

Strange. I had no idea who it could be. Another buzz.

This is Nick, BTW.

My heart jumped.

Hey, thanks for checking in," I replied. "I'm doing alright. Just have a really bad cold. Maybe a mild flu. I'll probably be back next week

I'm sorry to hear that. Can I drop off some soup or something?

That's really kind of you, but I'm ok.

I wrote back, then remembered with a pain in my gut that my cupboards were nearly bare after a week of hibernation. I didn't feel right asking someone I barely knew to pick up dinner for me, but moving away for grad school had left me with minor acquaintances and no close friends in town. As strange as it was, Nick already felt like a confidant.

As though he'd read my mind, he wrote,

Are you sure? Joshua said he hasn't seen you on campus all week. I wouldn't want you to go hungry just to be polite.

My stomach grumbled and my chest flushed with gratitude.

I took a deep breath and wrote back.

You're right. I'm being polite. Truth is, I don't have much left that I should actually be eating right now. Unless Oreos and vodka are an ancient cure for the flu.

LOL Send me your address. I'll be right over.

I don't want to get you sick, though. This shit is nasty. For real.

No worries, I'll leave it outside your door and back away slowly. ;-)

I smiled to myself and sent him my address. Twenty minutes later, there was a knock at the door and a buzz on my cell a few seconds after that.

I left it at the door and I am safely out of infection range!

I opened the door and peeked out into the hallway, but just as he'd promised, he was already gone. At my feet sat a takeaway soup container and a foil-wrapped bundle inside a plastic bag. I brought it inside, grabbed a spoon and sat down at my kitchen table. My stomach growled in anticipation.

The steam rose off the soup in curly wisps. I inhaled deeply and felt my sinuses begin to clear. Turning to the foil bundle, I peeled back the layers to reveal a small sourdough round, still warm as though it had been freshly baked. I nearly cried with gratitude.

Our friendship continued like that for months. We didn't spend a lot of time together in person, busy PhD candidates that we were, but we spent the evenings texting about this upcoming paper or that exam, comparing notes on the various clinical psych seminars and research opportunities.

When I told him that I'd landed the coveted McKnight research position months earlier, he congratulated me and swore up and down that no one deserved it more than I did. When he told me that he'd transferred to this university mid-year because his mom had fallen ill, we spoke about her cancer, how much he loved her, and how afraid he was of losing her.

Come the end of the term, I had a meeting with Professor Jones, the research head in charge of the McKnight grant that would sponsor my research position. He said in his email that we needed to finalize the terms. I had been under the impression they'd been finalized months back, but I didn't think much of checking in again considering the amount of time that had passed.

When I arrived at his office, he asked me to shut the door and have a seat. A grave look on his astute, academic face, he launched into questions I was sure I'd already answered.

"I need to confirm that you are committed to this position. You have no other applications currently pending?" He laced his fingers and placed them on the desk in front of him.

"No, I informed all other teams to withdraw my application when I accepted this position with you." I answered without hesitation.

"And you didn't receive any other offers before then that you have yet to decline?" He stared directly into my eyes as though he were trying to find something there that I might not be revealing.

I sat up tall and attempted to meet his intensity.

"I did receive an offer from the NSF before they'd had a chance to withdraw my application, but I turned it down as soon as I'd accepted this one." I did not waffle. I did not balk. I had been told many times about the fortitude required of women in academia and I wasn't about to crumble so soon out of the starting gate.

He looked down at his laptop and scanned the page.

"I have an email here indicating that you might not have the commitment to this position that I'd previously assumed."

"What?" I glanced down at his laptop reflexively. "Who is it from and what is it in regards to?"

"I have been informed that the NSF received an email from you this past week asking if the position was still available to you." With his face still pointed down at the laptop screen, he looked up at me over the rim of his glasses. I couldn't help but feel like I was back in junior high being scolded by my teacher.

I insisted that there had been a misunderstanding and reassured Professor Jones that I was all in without a doubt. He seemed to accept my assurances, but there was a definite breach of trust.

Immediately upon leaving his office, I slipped in my airpods, and rushed out of Elliott Hall and down the marble steps.

“Hey, what’s up.” Lydia, my best friend since junior high, answered after the first ring.

We may be thousands of miles apart now, but she was still my oldest, most trusted friend, and the first I’d talk to when discombobulated. I relayed the conversation I’d just had with Professor Jones as I rushed down the street, hoping to make it in time for the study group.

“And you didn’t send that email?” She asked. “Like, you’re not saying that you sent an email that was misinterpreted. You’re saying that you did not send that email at all, right?”

“Right!” It came out louder than I’d expected. Pedestrians near me glanced over, their faces filled with a mixture of concern and annoyance. I lowered my voice. “I don’t get it. I really don’t understand what is happening.”

“Claire.” Lydia’s voice had turned serious. “Someone is attempting to sabotage you.”

“What?” I ran up the steps into the library, glancing at my watch. “Why would someone even do that? Or How? How would someone do that?”

“Sweetie, you are so—” I could tell she was searching for the right word, “—you are so considerate and kind. It’s what I really love about you. You know that. But it also means you can be...kind of naive, y’know?”

“Now maybe isn’t the right time to be patronizing me, Lydia.”

“I know, I know, but just listen. This is important and I can tell you’re in a hurry. You told me that that fellowship was in high demand right? That it looks amazing on your resume. That you can likely get whatever postdoc placement you want after a fellowship like that, right? So clearly there’s a lot of competition. What happens if you lose the fellowship? or turn it down?”

“Um, well...” I glanced at the elevator, changed my mind, and booked it up the stairs. “I guess the next person in line gets it.”

“And who is that?”

"I have no clue."

"Can you find out?" She allowed a split second of silence before she demanded. "You have to find out, Claire. There's your culprit."

"That's insane, Lydia! Who would do that?" I was stage whispering now as I neared the study room.

"It might sound insane, but it's the only thing that makes sense at this point. Think about it. Someone had to put in effort. Possibly a lot of effort, to spoof your email. They'd need to have a motive. And that's the only motive that makes sense."

"You read too many true crime novels, Lydia! Anyway, I gotta go. Sorry to be so abrupt. Love you!"

"Love you too, Claire. And hey, think about it, ok? Bye!"

I had reached the conference room just as the meeting was about to begin, but I needed a minute to gather myself. I stashed my phone back into my pocket, took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then peered around the door jam, scanning for a seat. There was an empty chair next to Nick, who was digging in his bag on the floor to his right.

I crept in quietly, so as not to disturb the meeting, and came up to the chair on Nick's left, intending to slip into it unnoticed. But as I gently pulled the chair back, it must have startled him. He glanced over his shoulder at me and for the most infinitesimal moment, he met my smile with the most violent expression of disdain I had ever seen. It was such a shock that I recoiled. I had time only to blink and the look on his face was replaced by his usual warmth.

"I saved you a seat." He leaned over and whispered with a smile.

I internally shrugged off the trepidation I had felt and settled into the seat.

"Thanks so much. I just had the worst afternoon." I whispered back as I hunched over and laid my books on the table.

He shot me a look of concern.

"I'll tell you later." I mouthed back silently as the meeting was called to order.

The next morning I requested another brief meeting with Professor Jones. Maybe Lydia was right that I was being attacked by the next person in line for the fellowship, but I had no idea how I could prove it. Still, something shady was going on and ignoring it wouldn't make it go away.

He had seemed mildly surprised when I'd requested another meeting so soon, but Professor Jones was his usual professional self when I settled across the desk from him.

"So what is it you wanted to talk with me about today?" He asked with a polite smile as he laced his fingers and placed them on the desk between us.

"I've been thinking about that email that I did not send and it occurred to me that there would have to be a reason for someone to put the effort into spoofing my email. Would you be able to tell me who is next in line for the fellowship?"

His smile faded and he leaned back into his chair, pressing the balls of his hands onto the edge of his desk.

"I'm sorry, Claire. That's confidential information." He studied me with a concerned look on his face.

"I understand," I said, nodding. "I had assumed that would be the case."

I knew that there wasn't more to be done, that I was expected to thank him for his time and get up and leave, but I couldn't pull myself out of the room.

"I just wish I knew who would do this," I added, "It's so...disconcerting."

The professor examined my face for a moment and then sighed deeply.

"This isn't the first time there's been drama about this fellowship. Now that I know, I'll be sure to talk with you in person regarding any concerning written communication." He then gave me a weighted look and added, "Can you excuse me for a minute, I need to run something next door. I'll be right back."

I was certain that I did not imagine he nudged his laptop in my direction. As soon as the door clicked shut behind him, I stood and slipped around the desk. Open on the screen was a spreadsheet with names. The title at the top of the document read, "Mcknight Applicants 2024-25." There in the number 2 position, right below my name, I saw it. My breath caught in my throat. Nick Porterhouse.

The room began to spin around me and I thought that I was going to be sick. I returned to my seat and held my head in my hands. I heard the door handle turn and the creek of the door opening.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

I nodded, still fighting back tears.

I stood outside my apartment waiting for Nick. I had texted him asking if he had time to talk.

"I'm near your place. I'll swing by." He'd replied.

Ten minutes later he pulled up in an old Chevy Tahoe. He rolled down the passenger window and leaned across the center console.

"Where do you want to go?" He called out.

"It's so nice out, I figured we could go for a walk." I forced a smile.

He hopped out and fell in step next to me on the sidewalk.

"What did you want to talk with me about?" He flashed me his warm smile and I wanted to believe that he had nothing to do with the fake email. I wanted to smile back, tell him it was nothing, that I just wanted to chat and enjoy a lovely stroll on a warm spring day. It would be so easy to let it go. The first attempt to sabotage my position had failed. Maybe it would never happen again.

In my mind's eye, I forced myself back into Professor Jones's office, to feel again how it felt to be betrayed by someone I had trusted. I turned to look at Nick. Even though everything in his expression conveyed loyalty and friendship, the cracks in his facade were expanding. The look of disgust he had given me at the last study group flashed into my mind. Now I understood it.

"Someone spoofed my email and sent a message to NSF asking if the position was still available." I looked over at him and scanned his face for anything that would give him away.

"Claire, the same thing happened to me!" He stopped walking and turned to me, his eyes wide and the sincerity palpable in his voice.

Was it possible? I wanted so desperately to believe him.

“Your email was spoofed too? Who did they email?” I asked

“Professor Jones over at McKnight. He told me that it looked like an email from me and it said that I no longer wanted to be considered.”

I studied his face again. There was no trace of a lie, but it didn’t make sense. I had asked who was next in line. Wouldn’t the professor have told me if he was aware that the same thing had happened to Nick?

“Hey, let’s take a drive. There’s something I want to show you.” He clapped his hand gently on my arm and nodded back toward his Tahoe.

“What is it?” I asked as I followed behind him.

“I was doing a little bit of digging,” He called over his shoulder, “and I think I may have figured out where the emails were coming from.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he called out as he circled to the other side of his SUV. I pulled the door handle and opened the door so I could hear him. “I think we should bring it to the Prof. We can’t do anything about it on our own. We have to go through university channels.”

I climbed in and pulled the door shut behind me. The engine turned over and we were on our way toward Elliott Hall.

“So how did you find out that I’m next in line for the McKnight fellowship?” He asked.

I almost answered right away but caught myself. I turned and examined his face. He glanced over at me. He was still the same cordial, friendly Nick, but something was off.

“I didn’t say that I know you’re next in line.” I kept my eyes locked on his face.

He nodded, but didn’t say a word.

Behind him, I saw 14th Avenue come and go. He was still headed down 4th St. This wasn’t the way to Elliott Hall.

“Where are we going?” My voice was quieter now despite my effort to keep it strong.

He turned the vehicle onto the entrance ramp to the freeway.

I reached into my pocket and felt for my phone.

“Don’t try to call anyone.” He said. The smile was gone from his face. “It’s too late.”

I knew as soon as I pulled it out he would be able to wrestle it away from me. I moved my fingers slowly around the surface of my phone trying to figure out how I could make a call without removing it from my pocket.

Before I knew what was happening, his right hand lashed out, grasped my hair, and slammed my head into the window. A bright light flashed in front of my eyes. I crumpled against the door, unable to remember where I was. When I came back to my senses, there was a throbbing pain in my right temple and I had no idea how much time had passed.

“You’ll stay still if you don’t want that to happen again.” came a matter-of-fact remark from the driver’s seat.

My head hurt, but my thoughts were clearing. I peered out of the window. We were still on the freeway so jumping out was not an option. There wasn’t a lot of traffic around us, but I could see some cars on the road. I reasoned that, if I could put up enough of a fight, I could get him to crash into a side rail or at least swerve enough that it would get the attention of the other drivers. Then I might have a chance that someone would call the police.

I slumped against the door and pretended that I’d given up. Then I waited for my head to clear a little more and watched the road for my best opportunity. Finally, when I noticed a sharp curve in the road ahead, I knew it was my time to act. As the road curved, I leaped across the console, grabbed the steering wheel in both hands, and yanked it hard.

The car careened toward the curve and I was thrown against the passenger door, then back toward him again as he overcorrected, wrenching the vehicle away from the concrete sidewall that lined the curve.

“Bitch!” I felt searing pain across my scalp as he grabbed a fistful of my hair again. My cheek and eye slammed against the dash repeatedly and then everything went dark.

When I came to, it was still dark. I heard a sound like metal scraping dirt and rocks over and over. I smelled earth and blood. My left eye was swollen shut, but I was able to make out a blurry figure nearby. I tried to lift myself up on my elbow. What little I could see around me began to swim and swirl. I dropped back down and bile rose in my throat.

I felt my friend grab my ankles, drag me across the ground, and then heave me unceremoniously into a pit. I grasped at the loose soil around me, kicking my feet in a futile attempt to gain traction, but my body just would not obey. I filled my lungs and forced out a scream, but all I heard was a muffled groan.

“Quiet now.” I heard Nick murmur in that soothing voice that had become such a comfort to me. “I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

It was the last thing I heard as my friend bid me farewell with a sharp pain to the back of my skull.

Katie Bonn is a San Francisco Bay Area writer who enjoys exploring relationships between people and with themselves. She had an essay published many years ago in Brain, Child online magazine and then decided that was enough of putting herself out there for a while. Current projects include a couple of mostly complete middle grade novels and one for the middle-aged about a woman’s quest for purpose after a life of domestic servitude.

I Think We Went Too Far

By Rowan L.

Of course, this was not entirely his fellow teacher's fault, and he was capable of admitting that—at least internally. Though, seeing the FBI face off with the mafia boss his colleague had apparently kidnapped for a career day talk certainly placed far more blame at his feet. "How did you kidnap a mafia boss, exactly?"

"My mate, Cindy, said her brother was a very successful business man," explained Adam with a grimace. "I swung by his office and effectively dragged him out while explaining that I needed him to do an amazing career day presentation. I did not realize 'successful business man' was code for 'illegal empire kingpin'. Though, in retrospect, I should have been somewhat suspicious given the number of times she's referenced someone being murdered in passing."

Both of his eyebrows shot up. "And you just presumed that was normal?"

"I thought she was being sarcastic." Adam rolled his eyes. "Sarcasm is Cindy's first language. I didn't realize she was capable of speaking plainly."

"Even about murder."

"Especially about murder!" Adam looked at him with worry. "Drake, you can't believe that I would intentionally bring a mafia boss to a 4th grade career day presentation!"

No, he didn't. "I don't believe even you would be that foolish." Truthfully, everything would have been fine if he hadn't brought his brother-in-law's FBI agent cousin.

"I was just furious that you had an FBI agent of all people coming to speak to your class!" Adam threw up his hands. "How is anyone supposed to beat that?"

He winced and cleared his throat a bit. "I might, er, have misrepresented that slightly. Greg isn't an FBI field agent, he's a clerk in the legal office."

Adam froze, staring at him for a moment before they both jumped as a man started shouting through a bullhorn. Lovely. At least there were no students or staff trapped in the building—that was the one saving grace of the day. And really, that already made this better than the ice cream cake party clusterfuck from a few weeks ago.

“So, are you telling me that the mafia boss who barricaded himself inside my classroom with your career day speaker is holding a bloody law clerk hostage rather than, say, a trained agent?” Adam was aghast. Rightly so.

“Yes.” This ... really did have the potential to end badly. His sister was never going to let him live this down.

Silence passed between them for a moment before Adam finally turned back towards the school with a heavy groan. They watched as a team of FBI agents hugged the walls of the school before pushing their way inside. The man with the bullhorn continued talking to the only two men still in the building. Whatever he was saying was too garbled for Drake to hear—presumably the two men inside could. Hopefully. Otherwise the mafia boss might well shoot Greg out of irritation. Though that would be a rather poor choice, at least as far as he could see it would be. He had never been in a hostage situation before though, so perhaps shooting your only hostage was a power move of some kind.

“I think Mary might be the best teacher in our grade.” He glanced at Adam for a moment, then they both looked over to where Mary was standing, glaring at the two of them. Clearly, she knew whose fault this was—but most people likely did. The water balloon fight in the hallway had highlighted their rivalry long before the ice cream cake incident.

“She has never caused an active hostage situation. In fact, she always has control of her class.”

“And her students do love her.” Adam had a point there—her students behaved.

Glancing back towards the school, he watched a few bright lights flash through the windows inside. Shouting and a few gunshots followed, more yelling ensuing. It was a moment before he saw the FBI drag the mafia boss to his feet—one of the agents gave the ground crew a thumbs up. “Your friend is not going to be happy you got her brother arrested.”

Adam grimaced. “I’m not certain how close they are. Cindy is derisive when he comes up in conversation. She might love me for it—she jokingly told me that she wanted to take over his business. Presuming it was not, in fact, a joke, I might have just created another mafia boss.”

Silence fell again. The mafia boss was led out, followed by a team of FBI agents and Greg, who appeared unharmed. Fortunately. His sister would still be angry, but at least he hadn't gotten her husband's cousin shot. The crowd was starting to disperse when he caught sight of the principal marching towards them. She was ... definitely unhappy.

Drake hummed. "Thank god for tenure."

Adam nodded. "Thank god for tenure."

Rowan L. is a writer in San Luis Obispo County.

Toddlers vs. Bedtime

By Michelle Dornish

"Tonight we end this battle, once and for all," Mom growled, cracking her knuckles as she entered the room.

"Mommy, I'm not tired," the toddler whimpered in an elongated whine.

"Doesn't matter, because tonight you are staying in bed!" Daddy shook his finger, wagging it in the toddler's face. The room was dimly lit by a single nightlight in one corner and by a glowing red sound machine against the opposite wall. Beside the nightlight, the music was already playing, the same "Night, Night" album that played every evening at 8 pm sharp. The weary parents stood shoulder to shoulder, already arms crossed and tense, though it was only 8:05. The nightly battle may have just begun, but the parents were worn from the endless war against bedtime, and more than a little afraid that they were on the losing side of this war.

But tonight they had a special weapon, one which just might end the war. Once.
And. For All.

"Mommy and Daddy love you very much," Mommy tried hard to use her gentle sweet voice, but tension was already sharpening her tone.

"You are safe and we are right next door," Daddy sighed heavily, not even trying to soften his tone anymore.

"But my tummy is hungry!" the toddler screeched.

"You had a tangerine and a piece of bread, that's enough till morning." Mommy crossed her arms again, after tucking the toddler in and handing him his love.

"But I am thirsty!"

"And you have your water right here!" Daddy snapped, slamming the sippy cup on the side table again.

"But I need a story," with a whimpering tone, his lip out and quivering. But Mommy and Daddy are already heading out the door of the bedroom.

"We already read your bedtime stories, a lap story and a bed story. It's time to go to sleep!"

"It's already past your bedtime, buddy. Sleep so you can have a fun day tomorrow!"

“What's after my sleep?” the toddler asked, always ready with another delay question locked and loaded. But Mommy and Daddy have already answered this question three times, so they shut the door with an assertive click and shouted through the door.

“Bedtime little gentleman!”

The quivering lip turned into a whimper, a sob, and the crocodile tears started to flow. He cried, he sobbed, he wailed. But no matter how loudly he cried, Mommy and Daddy did not open the door again. That's fine, he could get out of his bed now! Big boy beds meant no bars to keep him down.

The toddler rolled over to try and plant his feet on the floor, but the moment his feet hung off his bed, a whoosh! And a click, and suddenly another bed shot out from under his bed, clicking into place right next to his bed. The toddler, eyes wide, pulled his feet back in shock. He flipped quickly onto his hands and knees, his hand reaching out to push on the magical bed that popped out of nowhere.

As far as he could tell, this bed was just like his bed. It was just as long, the sheets were the same shade of light green with little white hearts. His new bed even had a soft blankie like his white blankie, though this new blankie was heart pink. The toddler rolled over with an excited giggle, rubbing his face into his pink blankie, it felt just as good as his white blankie and smelled the same too.

As he got used to his second bed, he suddenly remembered his goal. He needed to get to his door and open it, because mommy and daddy wouldn't come to him, so clearly he had to get to his door to make them understand that he did not need to go to sleep. He wasn't tired!

The toddler bounced across his second bed, scooting on his butt twice until he got his feet over the edge of the next bed.

Whoosh! Click.

A third bed! Same as the other two, with identical sheets and a new soft blankie, this one a pale yellow like a baby duck. The toddler whimpered, because this time the bed

pushed out so far into his room that it shoved the rocking chair —the chair mommy sat in when reading him his bedtime stories— closer to the door. Meanwhile, he was still getting further and further from getting onto the floor.

Ever the problem-solver, the toddler turned around and decided if the side of his bed was not going to work, then maybe the head of his bed was the direction to go. With a grunt, the toddler stood on his bed and swung his legs over the head of his bed. He started to hang his feet down, grunting and groaning as he reached his toes as long as they would stretch, trying to get closer to the ground before letting go.

The moment his toes were at level with his mattress, a familiar whoosh, click came and ANOTHER bed came popping out, but to the left side of his room now. There was a crunch as the bed pushed directly into his dresser.

Undeterred and stubborn, the toddler started frantically climbing and scrambling every direction he could think of. But no matter which way he went, he was met with the same result.

Whoosh! Click.

Whoosh! Click.

Whoosh! Click.

Every time his little legs reached for the floor, he was met instead with another bed, just like his. The same pale green sheet and the same fuzzy blankie, but every time a different color. He now had a sky blue, forest green, fire engine red, lilac, and beige blankie to match his original white blankie. All soft and cozy, all smelled faintly of laundry soap and mommy, all with the power to put him to sleep if he tried to cuddle with them too long.

Now as he grunted and huffed on the most recent additional bed, he looked around his small bedroom and was horrified to see that every inch of his floor, from wall to wall, was bed after bed after bed. All together, there were WAY too many beds.

“Mommy!” the toddler sobbed loudly in frustration. He couldn’t make it to his door and even if he could, the doors went all the way to the doorway. If he tried to open his door now, the door would open and bump into yet another bed.

“Honey, it’s time for bed,” Mommy’s muffled voice came from the other side of his bedroom door, “Nowhere else to go but bed, buddy,” and the sound of shuffling feet as she headed to her own room next door.

Utterly defeated, the toddler rubbed his puffy red and tired eyes, before curling up on his bed. He rubbed his face into the nearest blankie, the soft blue one the same shade of daytime sky. Mommy and Daddy had won this round. A big yawn broke out, stretching his mouth as wide as it could go as he nuzzled into his blankie. The toddler closed his eyes, dreaming of being like Spiderman, with the ability to climb over walls.

Michelle Dornish is a special education teacher by day, and a writer by night, usually after bedtime. She has published one short story in the SLO NightWriters Anthology. She specializes in fantasy novels and short story fiction. She lives in San Luis Obispo with her husband and her three year old son.

Woeful Circumstance be Damned

By Ute Orgassa

"Finally, we arrived. My whole backside is numb," said the nobleman. "Same goes for my feet," responded the girl.

They left the horse with the stable boy and turned to the Inn. Twilight was turning rapidly and the building was illuminated brightly as happy sounds of customers made their way through the approaching night.

"I still don't know why you didn't want to ride with me."

"Because a saddle is not made for two and your poor horse was having a hard enough time as it was."

"Well yes, it's not the best horse."

"You could have walked too, at least for a while."

"Walking is not something I am fond of. Now don't you roll your eyes."

The girl made her way to the Innkeeper lady at the bar. It took some doing, getting past the crowds clustering around the trestle tables. The nobleman followed timidly. He steeled his voice when he arrived at the bar.

"We need a room for the night and two meals."

"Food I can do, and drink too. Rooms are all booked out. All I can give you is two places in the commons."

"We'll take that," said the girl.

"Better pay for it," replied the Innkeeper. The nobleman did. "Find some place on the benches, I'll bring you your bowl and your pint."

The nobleman did not enjoy his dinner, but still had to agree that it filled him and was better than not having any dinner at all. This whole journey had been disappointing. Getting lost had been embarrassing and his finances had seen better days.

The only good thing had been the girl. She had agreed to lead him home. And she was lovely to look at. He liked her. He liked her a lot. He even thought that she might like him too, at least a little. So far she had evaded his maneuvers to be in close proximity. Reminding him that she was only his guide for payment and nothing else. But this night, he thought, held another chance for his advances. He was hoping to share a bed.

Innocently, of course. Just out of necessity. No other reason, no siree.

The girl promptly went up to the common room after dinner and he followed. It was one story up from the dining room, just as big and just as loud. There were people all over and the nobleman could not believe his eyes, there were beds everywhere. Almost every inch of that room was covered with beds. The walls had beds with ladders, there were only tiny walkways between all the beds in the middle of the room and most of the beds were already occupied. The nobleman counted over 30 beds before he lost interest in counting. Men and women, children and old people were getting settled in for the night. And the girl had already found herself a bed next to many other women in the room. She pointed at him now.

“Go find yourself a cot, will ya? It is lights out soon.”

“But this is not what I had in mind. Why are there so many beds?”

“This is the common room,” she said.

A man laughed. The nobleman sat down on this thing she had called a cot. It was not even as wide as his shoulders, hard as a board and still managed to sag underneath him. He was instantly uncomfortable and got a good whiff of someone else’s digestion right into his nose.

“I do not like this at all.”

“Heh, the fellow doesn’t like it,” another man said. “Can’t even tell the difference between a bed and a cot,” a woman replied. “Best he holds on real tight to his things,” joked another. “Bet he’s wanting for some privacy and his servants,” said an old man. “Oh poor fellow, maybe we should sing him a lullaby?” said a woman from far up in a bunk. Folks were tittering and smiling towards each other. The girl was hidden away in a sea of these crude people.

“Shouldn’t we stick together? He asked in her direction. “If you’re next to me I know you’re safe and at least I could keep you warm?”

“Oh I will be plenty warm on my own,” she replied. The other people laughed some more. He did not like them. He wanted to vanquish them. Smite them. Wish them all away. But he had no power to do so. He was no wizard or hero. He was not even that important of a nobleman. He had no sway or influence. He was just a man lost to woeful circumstances and bad luck.

He tried to get comfortable on the rectangle of framed burlap provided to him and felt instantly itchy and as far away from sleep as he had ever been. Once the lamps were turned out, it got worse. Now he was wide awake in the dark. And then the snoring started all over the room. The nobleman swore to himself then and there that he would never go to sleep again in a room with more than two beds. And he laid to rest the thought of ever getting close to the girl.

Ute Orgassa was born and raised in Germany. She now lives with her family in the Bay Area. Her short stories have been published by Shortwave Media, Haunted Word Press and Alternative Milk. Her play *A Different Track* premiered at the 2023 Fringe in Barnstaple, UK and is currently produced by Awkward Pigeons Theater.

The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly

By Kyle Combs

Brooklyn, New York, 1985

Marcus stepped into his grandmother's room, the hum of medical machines filling the air. The room was dark, with a sliver of sunlight creeping in through the window.

"Hey, Mom, it's time to get up and take your medicine," Marcus said gently.

Donna, sounding grumpy, replied, "They're over there on the nightstand."

Marcus fumbled through empty pill bottles before finally finding the one he was looking for. "Is it this one, grandma?"

"Yes, honey. Can you give me two, please?"

"I only see one in here. Do you have another bottle?"

"No, sweetie, that was the last one. I'll be fine with just one. Give it here."

"Grandma, you need your heart medication. Take this one, and I'll try to get some money together to get you a bottle by the end of the day. I promise.

"Oh, my son, don't worry about me. You need to be more concerned about what you're going to do with your life."

"You're all I have, Grandma. I can't lose you."

"Better to lose me than to lose yourself. Now get going, or you'll be late."

"Okay, grandma. I love you, and I will get your medication no matter what."

"Okay, son. Have a good day."

Marcus headed out the door into the freezing morning air. As he walked his usual route to the bus stop, he saw his friend David rolling by in his beat-up truck.

"Yo, David!" Marcus called out.

David looked around and spotted Marcus. "Aw sh*t, what's good? Where are you going?"

"Work, bro; you already know that."

"Hop in. I got you."

"Thanks, man." Marcus climbed into the truck, grateful for the ride.

As they drove, David asked, "So, how's your mom doing?"

"Not so good. We ran out of her pills this morning, and I gotta come up with some cash quick, or I'm screwed."

"Hey man, if you ever need extra cash, I could always use some help."

"I told you, man, I don't want to live that life."

"Suit yourself. Have fun working these two jobs."

"I'll be fine."

David pulled up to Marcus's job, a warehouse. "Call me if you're ever interested, man. You won't regret it."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

Marcus walked into the tall metal building with three loading docks and a few windows. Inside, the warehouse was brightly lit, with shelves and shelves of drill presses and assembly lines. Marcus made his way to his boss's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Richard called out.

"Hey Richard, I know you're a busy man, so I'll get straight to the point. I need an advance on my check. You see, my grandmother is sick, and she's out of medication. If I can't get it by tonight, she might end up in the ER. If you could please help me out, Rich, you know I'm good for it."

"First of all, it's Richard, and second, we just can't do advances. I'm sorry; there's nothing I can do. It's company policy; my hands are tied."

"Nothing you can do, huh? Alright, Rich, I'll get back to work. Thanks for your time."

Marcus left the office and continued his day assembling drill presses, thinking about how life kept kicking him down despite his efforts to do the right thing. As he worked, Richard called out to him.

"Marcus, go out back and sweep the docks, will you?"

"Yeah, no problem."

Marcus made his way to the docks with a pushbroom and started to sweep away the trash and dust. Suddenly, he saw David's beat-up truck coming into the parking lot and pulling up to the docks. David parked and got out.

"David, what the hell? You're going to get me fired, dude."

"Relax, bud, you're going to want to hear this."

"And what's that?"

"Remember Luca the Bulldog?"

"Yeah, the complete lunatic."

"Yeah, well, that lunatic has an opportunity of a lifetime you don't want to miss out on."

"And what kind of opportunity can Luca the Bulldog give me?"

"Ten thousand dollars in cash, that's what."

"Yeah, right. I'd have to kill someone for that."

"Nothing like that, man. All we have to do is drive with Luca, pick something up, and drop it off."

"Then why does he need us? He can go alone and keep that money."

"Don't you get it, Marky? He needs some backup, you know?"

"Backup for what?"

"If you were delivering something worth a lot of money, wouldn't you want backup?"

"Yeah, I guess I would."

"So, you in or you out? 'Cause we gotta go now."

"I'm in. I just gotta make something up for my boss."

"Alright, I'll be out front."

Marcus made his way back to Richard's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," Richard called out.

Marcus walked in. "Aw, you again. What's up?"

"I gotta take off early. My grandmother's feeling ill. I have to go check on her. I might need to take her to the ER."

"Oh my gosh, yeah, go check on her. I hope everything's okay."

"Thank you," Marcus said, grinning as he walked away.

Marcus made his way to David's truck, and they headed to Luca's house, a project in Brooklyn. They pulled up and saw a big, tall man dressed in all black coming out of the building. He made his way to the car and signaled for Marcus to roll the window down.

“Park around back. We’re going to take my truck,” Luca said.

“Alright, I’ll pull around,” David replied.

David parked near Luca’s truck, an all-black four-door F-150. Luca got in his truck and signaled David and Marcus to do the same. They made their way to Little Italy, to a butcher shop. On the way, Marcus asked, “So what is it you’ve got to drop off that you’re getting so much money for?”

“Geez, guy, what’s with all the questions? Just know you’re getting paid,” Luca snapped.

They pulled up to a somewhat busy butcher shop in Little Italy. Luca said to Marcus, “I’m going to park in this alley over here. You get in the driver’s seat, and I’ll be back.”

“Alright,” Marcus replied hesitantly.

Luca exited the truck and headed towards the butcher shop. Marcus got in the driver’s seat. They waited for a minute or two, then saw Luca running back with a man at gunpoint. They get in the car, and Luca shouted, “Drive, drive!”

“What the hell is this? What’s going on?” Marcus asked, panicking.

“Shut up and keep driving,” Luca ordered.

As Marcus drove, he noticed the man in the back seat was none other than Don, the boss of all bosses.

“Did you just kidnap the Don?” Marcus exclaimed, fear gripping his voice.

The Don, seething with rage, hissed, “Yeah, and when I’m through with all of you, your own mothers won’t be able to identify you.”

Luca slapped the don. “Shut up and be quiet.”

Luca barked an order to Marcus, “Drive to Valley Water. It’s the perfect spot.”

Marcus hesitated, then replied, “Alright,” with a suspicious look.

On the drive there, Marcus asked David, “Did you know about this plan the whole time?”

“Yes, Marky, but I knew if I told you the truth, you wouldn’t have gone through with it. Think about your grandmother, man. You can get her medication and the surgery.”

“And you’re okay with killing this guy for money?” Marcus asked, incredulous.

Luca interrupted, "Tell your friend to shut up before he ends up like the Don over here."

At that moment, Marcus thinks to himself, a man with such greed and a sociopathic friend, what he has gotten himself into.

As they pulled into a dirt lot covered with trees, with not a person in sight, Luca dragged the Don out of the car. Marcus and David followed. Luca turned to Marcus.

"Now, I don't want you going to the police after this, talking about how I killed the Don. What's going to happen is you're going to shoot him in the head, so I know you have no reason to go to the cops."

"And if I refuse?" Marcus asked, his voice shaking.

"You'll end up in the lake with Don here. That's that."

"Well, I guess you give me no choice," Marcus said, extending his hand. "Give me the pistol."

Luca handed Marcus a .38. Marcus shakily gripped it. David, trying to reassure him, said, "Come on, Marcus. Do this, and we're paid, man."

Marcus thought about the greed driving these men and his own desperation. He turned to David, a look of sadness and resolve in his eyes. "I'm sorry, David."

Marcus shot David in the chest. Luca began to run, but Marcus turned and fired three more times, twice in the torso and once in the leg. Luca fell to the ground, still alive. Marcus walked over to him. Luca, gasping, asked, "Why, Marcus? We had a deal."

"This isn't the deal I made," Marcus replied, and he shot Luca in the head.

Marcus then walked to the don, who was tied up and visibly frightened. The don, expecting the worst, asked, "Why did you save me, my son? You could have killed me, got your money, and some power."

"You looked like a man who could use some saving," Marcus said simply.

"There's nothing more precious in life than loyalty. Why don't you come be my commandant? I need a man I can trust with my life," I said proudly.

"I'd be honored, Don, but I'm sorry to ask you so soon, but I need a favor." Marcus said reluctantly

"Anything, my son, you just name it," the don said sincerely.

"My grandmother is ill; she needs her medication, but I have no money. You see, I just need a small loan, and I'll get it back to you as soon as possible, I swear," Marcus said desperately.

The don chuckles. "Aw, my son, as my commandant, you get anything you want. I have the best doctors in the state. Tell me what your grandmother needs, and I'll have it delivered to your place in no time," the don says happily.

"Wow, I don't know how to thank you," says Marcus.

"You already have Marcus," she says joyfully.

Marcus and the don climb into the old truck and start heading down the rode. As they are driving, Marcus thinks to himself how he never thought he'd live a life of crime, but he thinks about his grandmother and the power it gave him after he pulled that trigger. He knew he couldn't live the agonizing life of a normal guy; he has now become Marcus the commandant.

The end.

Kyle Combs is a writer in San Luis Obispo County.

Love Knows No Boundaries

By Barbara Miller

The council elders had finally been pushed too far. The stress of keeping the tribe's most precious secret and cleaning up after a bunch of shape-shifting teenagers made being on the council much more demanding than any of them had anticipated. They had all believed that when the blood-suckers left, things would calm down and become peaceful once more. They had been wrong.

Of those in the know, Paul Lahote had given the elders the most amount of grief. Without other supernatural beings to test his limits against, the volatile young man had to find other outlets for his anger. The council didn't know what to do with him. They assigned him anger management classes, but he refused to go. Even Sam, the pack alpha, wasn't able to make Paul listen. The alpha confessed to Billy, that Paul was close to breaking his ties with the pack and was able to ignore commands that weren't of a life-or-death nature. So when his latest bout of rage-driven insanity put two boys in the hospital and threatened to expose the wolf pack, the council snapped.

"Paul, you must learn to control your anger!" Billy Black, chief of the Quileute tribe, was in fine form as the delinquent stood before him. "We have let you get away with your deplorable actions for too long, always excusing your behavior. We are sentencing you to 40 hours of community service to be carried out at the retirement home here on the Reservation." Seeing the young man about to protest, he added: "Sam already knows about this and has agreed to minimize your patrolling schedule to evenings only to accommodate this punishment." Paul looked around at the rest of the council, all of them crammed into Sam's living room with the rest of the 17-strong pack. Despite its cramped quarters, the living room was chosen for this confrontation, as it was the one place where they knew they could corner the active wolf and get him to listen to them. Other than meals, no one quite knew where Paul spent his time.

Having delivered their verdict, the council left the home, leaving his fellow wolves to deal with the developing temper tantrum of the most volatile wolf. Sam and the rest of the pack looked at Paul, none of them daring to say a word for fear of triggering a fight. Finally, the alpha took a deep breath and let it out in a long exhale which spoke volumes towards his state of mind.

"Paul, your community service starts tomorrow. Jared will take over your morning shifts, and you will take over his later ones."

"How is this fair?" Paul burst out, all of his anger raising his voice and producing a deep growl that reverberated through the home. "None of the rest of you get punished for your tempers!"

"None of the rest of us attack normals," Jake answered. "Except for those turned at the end of the war, none of the rest of us have uncontrolled outbursts, either."

"You haven't had the life I have! You don't understand how difficult it is!"

"What I understand, is that you don't want to. You don't attend the classes, you don't do the meditation exercises the rest of us do." Jacob rebutted. "What I understand, is that other than us, everyone on the reservation and in Forks crosses the street when they see you coming because they don't want to be anywhere near you. They fear you; not because you are a supernatural being, but because you have no problem doling out violence when a situation doesn't call for it."

"I never resort to violence when I don't need to!"

"Yes," Sam thundered over them. "You do! People are going to be insulting, that is human nature! Cruel words are never to be solved with your fists! You give them ammunition for their tongues every time you react in the way they expect! You will do your community service, Paul! That is my final word. Now, all of you take off. It is almost dinner time, and Emily and I are going out."

"Wait, no food?" One of the younger wolves whined.

"Out!"

Paul found himself in a small, cramped office at about nine in the morning the following Monday. "Mr. Lahote, I presume?" The lady before him was middle-aged with graying black hair and deep blue eyes. She was a good foot and a half shorter than him, but her very presence spoke of authority. "My name is Sandra Brown. I am the Activities Director here at Live Oak Residency and I will be overseeing your community service. Now the people here are to be treated with respect at all times. You are not to yell, scream, hit, or generally be nasty to anyone within this building. If you are, then you will be kicked out and your hours will not be signed off for the day. Is this clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Paul said through gritted teeth. The message was loud and clear: Be nice or you will have to work in this hell-hole that much longer.

"Now, the first thing I am going to have you do is to help serve meals. We serve lunch here in two shifts: From 11 to 12 and 12 to 1. You will also help clean up after, like a waiter at a diner. We will go from there and see if you stay longer." With that being said, Mrs. Brown led him to the kitchens where he was given a net cap to cover his hair and was tasked with bringing in the plates from a storage room and stacking them up on the end of a large counter. It was mindless work, especially as he set out silverware and cups at all the place settings in the dining room. Luckily, unlike a diner, the tables were not crammed closely together and he had no problems with colliding into them due to his bulky stature.

When service began, Paul was told to bring a plate to each resident, which he did with a silent grumb at first, focused on the task before him. After setting the last plate down, he went to the back and stood along the wall, out of the way of the workers. From his vantage point, he could see out the serving window at the residents slowly eating their meals. He hadn't paid attention to the old people when he was serving, but now he had nothing to do, but to watch them.

Paul had never really known someone of the older generation. Sure, he'd seen a couple on the street, but they looked very healthy and not in need of assistance. He had never known either set of grandparents. His mom wasn't from the reservation and had abandoned him and his dad when he was about 9. His father's parents had died before he was even born. These residents, however, surprised him. Many of them were fine eating, albeit a little slower than the average person. There were many, however, whose hands shook so badly, that they could only bring a fraction of the food on their utensils to their mouths. There were even two, who had nurses sitting next to them, feeding those who were unable to do so themselves. Paul had never known that there were residents on the reservation in this much need of help.

Curiously enough, Paul's temper started to calm down as he began to bring out the meals to each resident during the next shift. There was one lady in the corner he was told explicitly to skip as she had special dietary needs. The lady, Mrs. Elsa Carmichael, turned

out to be 91 years old. She was a little old lady with snow-white hair and a multitude of deep-set wrinkles, distracted only by the small wire-framed glasses perched on her nose.

"Lahote, would you please take this plate to Mrs. Carmichael?" David Ataera, the head cook, asked as the last plate went out. Nodding, Paul took the offered tray and made his way to where the lady sat in her customary chair in the far corner of the room.

As he sat the tray down in front of her, he hesitated for a moment. "Thank you, young man." She said looking up at him.

"You're welcome." He replied as their eyes met. In them, he saw wisdom, compassion, and curiosity. He could spend all day looking into her eyes. Crap!

Sam navigated his way through the hallways in the pitch dark, not needing to open his eyes to make his way to the kitchen. He made his way to the refrigerator and grabbed a homemade banana muffin from within. He was already chewing through the mouthful of the sweet treat as he closed the door and turned toward the living room couch when he saw a shadow move slightly from the corner of his eye, almost causing him to choke at the unexpectedness.

"Who's there?" He demanded through his fluffy mouthful, swallowing as quickly as he could.

"What is it like?" Sam relaxed at the sound of Paul's voice. This wasn't the first time his fellow wolf had shown up unexpectedly. It was the first time that Sam hadn't heard him come in.

"What's going on, Paul?" He asked, flicking the light switch and flooding the room with bright light from the fluorescents, causing both men to blink and squint at each other until their eyes adjusted.

"What is it like?" He repeated.

"What is what like, Paul? You'll have to be a little more specific." Sam was starting to get worried. He had never seen Paul so subdued before. It was like a different person had invaded his body.

"What's it like to imprint?" The question hit Sam like a sledgehammer to the chest. Imprinting was the one topic that he avoided like the plague unless he had to address it. It was simultaneously the best thing that ever happened to him, as well as the one thing in his life that had been the most difficult to bear. With a heavy sigh, he took the plunge.

"Did you imprint, Paul?" The question was asked with resignation. By this point, all of the older wolves had imprinted, and even one of the newer ones had. It had been inevitable that Paul would meet his match as well.

Paul, however, did not reply.

"Well, when I met Emily, the world seemed to fade away. All I saw was her. Contrary to popular opinion, however, it was not love at first sight. The imprint does not make you fall in love with someone. Instead, my personal opinion is that it points you to the person who is able to understand you the most. Someone who is able to accept you for who you are with no prejudice. Jacob is a great example. He is not in love with Renesmee in the traditional sense. However, they are great friends. Will it turn into more? Who knows? But for now, they are content with who they are and where their place is in the world."

Paul remained quiet. Sam could see his brows were furrowed in concentration, clearly thinking about what Sam had told him. Sam could feel that there was something going on. He had never seen Paul this introspective and quiet before. Usually, even if he wasn't saying a word, the surly wolf would be fidgeting, his hands or his feet, or shifting his seat. He just could not sit still. Now, however, it was as if he had been replaced by a statue, the only thing moving was the wisps of his hair that were starting to get a little long. They were only moved due to the ceiling fan that Sam kept constantly on to try to keep the house at a bearable temperature for himself and his pack.

"I met someone," Paul's voice suddenly pierced the silence. Sam didn't reply. He knew that the best way to get information would be to let Paul tell it at his own pace. Otherwise, the other wolf would just clam up and run. "I didn't see her at first. There were two shifts, all of them old. Did you know that some of them can't even feed themselves?" It was a bit difficult to follow Paul's train of thought, but Sam was sure that he was talking about the older residents. Sam had never seen an elder that couldn't feed themselves. Growing up without a father and with a mother who was more absent than present would do that. Unfortunately, it was a childhood very similar to Paul's.

"Then the second shift came and there she was. It was towards the end, I had the last plate to be served and she took it with a silent grace that I wasn't expecting."

"What! You don't mean..." Sam was speechless, was Paul truly implying what he thought he was?

"Yes, Mrs. Carmichael, 91 year old lady, is my imprint."

Paul marveled at how calm he was as he got ready for his next shift at the home. The ever-present anger that had plagued him since shifting was gone, leaving behind a void that he oddly didn't know how to fill. Who was Paul when the anger that he used as a crutch throughout his life was gone? He didn't dwell on these thoughts for long though. Shaking his head, he found his abandoned shoes that had somehow made their way under the couch and set off down the road. He didn't have a car and had never needed one before. The weather was gloomy, but dry and perfect for a stroll through the Olympic Peninsula.

When he reached the Nursing home, Paul remained calm, even as the cooks in the cafeteria sniped at him for burning the bacon. (They hadn't even asked him if he could cook, they just shoved the spatula in his hand and expected him to know what to do). He didn't react when a resident spontaneously flung her arm at him as he passed by, causing him to drop the tray of three plates to the floor. He just nodded in acknowledgment of her apologies and hurried to clean up the mess before resuming his delivery duties. He was so unlike himself, that he could hear a couple of the orderlies whispering behind his back. They wondered why he was there and if there had been a mistake. Their most humorous theory was that he had been body-snatched by an alien.

As he had done the day before, Paul served every resident but one on the second shift.

"I am ready for Mrs. Carmichael's tray," he told David at the window when the rest were eating. As he carried the meal to the back of the room, Paul felt nervous. What would she say? What would she do? What would HE say to her?

"Thank you, young man," were her simple, but heartfelt words. He stared at her for a few moments as she turned her attention away from him and began to eat her simple, rather bland looking meal. Paul wracked his brain for something to say, to strike up a conversation with the imprint that had been chosen for him.

"Can I help you with anything else?" He would have smacked himself in the forehead for his lack of brilliance if he hadn't been trying to make a good impression.

Mrs. Carmichael paused, with her fork in the air, and looked up at him. She searched his eyes for something for a moment before a brilliant smile lit up her face.

"As a matter of fact, I could use the company," she answered. "Please, sit." Paul looked around at the rest of the staff. None of them seemed to be moving with urgency or staring at him, so he tentatively folded himself into the smaller chair across the small, square table at which she was the only one seated. "What is your name, young man?"

"Paul," he answered gruffly, but without a bite to his normally surly voice.

"Why are you here Paul?"

"Got in trouble." She continued feeding herself for a few minutes while looking directly at him. Her eyes searched his and it felt as though she were searching for his soul within them.

"Why did you get in trouble?" Her question startled him. He was so used to everyone knowing who he was and going out of their way to avoid him. It was strange meeting someone who didn't have any preconceptions of him.

"I get in a lot of fights," he explained. "I guess they thought that working here would change that."

"Hmm," she said, thinking a bit as she started in on her dessert: a small bowl of what looked like moldy green jello. There was no way that Paul would ever eat that. His imprint, however, hummed with pleasure as she daintily slurped it up. "You don't seem to be angry now."

"I don't feel angry. This is the calmest I have felt for as long as I can remember," Paul replied in wonder.

"What made you so angry?"

"Everything."

"Why is that?" Paul looked at her. No one had ever asked him that. She was done eating now, her utensils were set side by side on top of her plate which had been pushed to the side. Her hands were folded on top of each other on the place mat in front of her and her face held a curious expression.

"Why do you want to know?" He couldn't understand why she wanted to talk to him. No one, not even his own pack mates, ever wanted to know anything more about him other than to find out whether he could swap shifts with him.

"Paul, I have been through a lot in my 91 years, more than you could ever imagine. There is nothing more important, however, than speaking with you right now at this very moment."

Paul was flummoxed. "My mother left when I was five," he blurted out. "My father stayed, but even though he came home every night, the drink was more present than he was." His imprint didn't say a word, she just watched him with those bright brown eyes of hers, unmindful of the wisps of long white hair that were escaping her braid and falling into her face. Seeing that she was still listening and no pity was etched into her face, Paul felt almost compelled to continue.

"I really don't know why I am so angry. It just is always there, boiling in my gut and ready to explode as soon as someone looks at me as though I am shit on the bottom of their shoe. . . Oh, pardon my language ma'am," he apologized as soon as he realized what he had said.

The lady just laughed. "Son, I have heard, and said, far worse in my time! Just because I look like a decrepit old hag, doesn't mean that I am a prude." Paul was so taken aback at her words. He really didn't know what to say to that. Her laugh was probably the first he had heard that was not in a mean-spirited sense, but because he had said something genuinely funny to the person.

"Young man, I know nothing about you other than your first name. However, from the way you hold yourself, I bet that you are strong, not just physically. Obviously, you are, but also in disposition and tenacity. You could have easily fallen into a bad crowd, or started drinking your father's stash. You didn't, and that is an amazing thing."

"I never would have. I saw what happened to my father. He drank himself into the grave."

"I am sorry to hear that, Paul."

"After that, it was all that the tribe could talk about. My deadbeat Dad who took an innocent into the watery grave with him when he crashed into her car and they both went over the cliffs. The thing is, Mrs. Carmichael, I can remember when he wasn't that way. The memories are faint, but I remember him bandaging my knee when I fell off my bike. I can remember him telling me the tribal legends at bedtime. He was a great man who fell into some hard times when my mother left." Paul paused here, the memories of when he was very young playing like a silent black-and-white film before his eyes.

"I guess I am so angry because, not only did the rest of the tribe forget about who my Dad really was, they also forgot about me. At 15, I was left alone to fend for myself. I guess they figured that I was old enough to stay in the house by myself, but I wasn't old enough to drop out of school to get a full-time job to pay for food, gas, and electricity. That was the one thing that my father had been able to do well before he left. Until I graduated from High school and got a job in construction, I lived in the dark and had to learn to hunt to get food. That is why I was so angry. I had been abandoned three times: by my mother, my father when he checked out mentally, and the tribe when they decided that I wasn't as important as Sam Uley, whom they catered to and brought homemade casseroles to on a weekly basis when his mother died."

Mrs. Carmichael was quiet for a little while, her eyes closed. Paul watched her, wondering if, instead of listening, she had fallen asleep. He had heard that that was something old people did a lot. Just as he was about to get up and take his leave, her eyes shot open.

"Paul, what happened to you was not okay, and I wish I could change it. The fact is, the past can't be erased. What matters, however, is what you do with your future. People are always going to talk about things they don't understand. People are always going to look away when they see something they don't want to. There are many ignorant asses out in the world, my boy. Just as there are good people who care who you just haven't let get close to you. Isn't there anyone in your life that you can talk to?"

"Just you, ma'am. Everyone else avoids me, which makes me angrier. I guess I can't win for losing. My alpha, I mean Sam, is all about control. He tries to keep everything peaceful, but this leaves little freedom of action or thought. Jake doesn't spend all his time lurking around anymore, which is a blessing, as he is the agitator, the rebel. Things should be his way or the highway. I used to get on well with Jared, but really, he just wants to keep the status quo and won't give his own opinion on anything. The others just stay away from me, like they are afraid of me."

"Young man, it is time for me to head to my bed, but I want to leave you with this bit of advice," The lady across from him said, hiding a yawn behind her dainty hand. "You can't live your life by what others do or think. You have to live your life for yourself. You will find that people are always going to try to push their opinions onto you. What they think you should do, what they think you should say. In reality, it is you who have to make those decisions. Your opinions and actions are the only thing that matters. You are the only one who controls your happiness. If you don't like your life as it is now, change it!"

Mrs. Carmichael got up and left the table then, leaving behind a wolf who was deep in thought. When he left, no one stopped him and the walk home was full of possibilities for the future.

Paul had his head bent, chin touching his chest. Before him, a lone grave sat nestled against a backdrop of spruce trees. Just like in the nursing home all those years ago, her resting place sat on the edge of the cemetery, away from the crowd. The dirty off-white tombstone read: Peggy Carmichael, 1900-1991. Nothing else, it was simple in its delivery. Paul thought it did her a disservice, his imprint had deserved more, but he hadn't had a say in it at the time.

"Daddy?" Paul turned his head to see his five-year-old son standing next to him staring at the tombstone. "Is this her?"

"Yes, Tim. This is where my imprint lies."

"What was she like?"

"I didn't know her for long, only a couple of days, really," Paul answered. "She changed my life though, and for that, I will always be grateful."

Paul remembered the day after their fateful talk. He hadn't actually been scheduled to work, but he had shown up anyway to see the woman who had made such an impact on his life. He showed up for the second lunch shift, but she wasn't sitting at her normal table.

"Is Mrs. Carmichael alright?" He asked the director, Sandra.

"Oh, you were talking with her for quite a while yesterday, weren't you? I am sorry to tell you this Paul, but she passed away last night." Paul ended up leaving the home in shock. Sam hadn't known what to say when he told him that afternoon. The hardest part of it all was that there hadn't been a memorial or even a funeral. She had been buried quietly with no one other than the nursing staff the wiser. Paul hadn't had a chance to say goodbye.

The pack had watched him closely for the next week. They all expected him to keel over and leave this mortal plain, but instead, Paul sat in Sam's living room, deep in thought. He analyzed his life, remembered dreams long forgotten, and thought about the advice that his imprint had left him.

The next day, almost exactly four days from the moment he had imprinted, he and Sam were sitting in said living room, and Paul had come to a decision.

"I am leaving, Sam," he told him.

Sam nodded his head. "That is probably a good idea. You need a break. How long will you be gone? Perhaps Jared could go with you."

Paul shook his head. "I am not coming back, Sam." Sam was in shock.

"What do you plan to do? The world will not be as understanding of your anger issues as the tribe is."

Paul snorted in derision. "Understanding? Don't make me laugh. Anyway, I haven't felt an ounce of anger since I met her." Sam was shocked and it showed on his face. "She gave me some advice and it is time I started to live my life, Sam. The bloodsuckers are gone, there are no other threats. Besides, the pack is so large, that even if one did come back, they would be no match for us. One missing wolf won't make a difference.

Sam scrunched his face in thought. "Alright, Paul. But please, keep in touch. You are always welcome back here in the Uley home." Paul was grateful for the sentiment, but as he left the little house in the woods, he had no intention of ever coming back.

And now here he stood, with his son at his side. "Daddy, I'm bored. Can we go to the cliffs?" It was Tim's first time on the Reservation and Paul hadn't intended on ever bringing him here. It had been 7 years since he had left, and he had seen so much of the States, traveling all the way to Florida where he met Tim's mother. The tribal lands called to him throughout his struggle to find work. He struggled to raise his son after his wife died of cancer when they had only been married a year. Standing here in the cemetery, he felt like he had come home.

"Why don't we visit a friend first, Tim?"

"You have friends, Daddy?"

"Yes, you'll love Sam." Walking hand in hand, father and son walked toward an unknown future, full of hope and homecoming.

Barbara Miller is a wife and mother of two adorable children, a boy and a girl who love to keep her on her toes. A devout follower of Christ, her first published work was a Christian devotional dedicated to helping the parents of young children entitled *How To Love Your Preschooler*. She recently published her first fictional work, a gold rush adventure inspired by a true story called *The Call of Gold*.

In her free time, she loves to explore new places with her children and go on long hikes and bike rides. Along with being a Cub Scout leader for the last two years, she also volunteers her time at church teaching preschool Sunday School.

A Kiss at the End

By Joe Gremillion

The young Half-Seer Cassandra was many things: beautiful, wealthy, courageous, witty. Distressed, she was not. Helpless, even less so. So when Sir Dallister Burnheart received a summons about a quest that mentioned her name, his first instinct was to crumple the paper and throw it to the nearest fire-breathing dragon — if any still lived in the realm.

But one does not ignore the Council of the Kingdom, so he tugged on his mud-stained dragonskin boots, threw a dragonhide cloak over his shoulders, prayed for safe passage, and stomped up to the castle.

The Great Hall once had been the scene of grand balls and dances. Today, it was home to fifty people who lay groaning on beds of straw. He passed the horrid sight with haste, nose and mouth covered, and climbed a circular staircase to the space above. Between the rooftop and the throne room was a low-ceilinged chamber where the real business got done. Three people sat at a round table, the remains of meals hiding among mounds of paperwork like villages nestled in alpine valleys.

Impactus was a stout, bald man whose keen eye and sharp wit had dulled with time. But when he raised a hand, the other two people hushed with respect.

Moiety, the Half-soothsayer, hunched to Impactus' left, shivering inside a voluminous woolen shawl that hid everything below her bloodshot eyes. To Impactus' right was Lord Dapper, Master of the Crown's Coin, whose immaculate attire lived up to his family name. Burnheart stomped to the table and plopped into an empty chair. "Well?" he demanded.

"It's not about slaying dragons," Impactus said.

"Good, because I'm retired," Burnheart replied.

"It's about Cassandra, the vision, and the curse."

Moiety said in a muffled voice, "I have seen through the shifting sands of time and dimension —"

Burnheart rolled his eyes.

“Yes I have,” she snapped, dropping the façade. “I’m allowed half of one every year. Cassandra has the other half and neither of us may know the whole vision. We were saving it for something dire, like this lingering curse upon our kingdom.”

Burnheart leaned forward. “Grand. What will break the curse, then?”

“I have foreseen that a kiss at the end with you.”

“Nonsense,” Dapper muttered. “When has a kiss ever caused magic?”

“I said it would end the curse, and our True Visions do not lie,” she said with her nose slightly raised. “We pray that you will see the complete vision when you meet Cassandra. She awaits your arrival.”

“Fair Cassandra waits for me, and a kiss will lift the curse?” Burnheart licked his lips.

Lord Impactus cleared his throat. “Understand that the Crown will reward you handsomely for your effort, Sir Burnheart.” He cast a look at Dapper, who frowned.

“No, I shall not need the Crown’s coin. For the good of the kingdom, I shall do my duty post haste,” Burnheart replied.

“You accept the quest, then? Find Cassandra, give a kiss, lift the curse?” Impactus asked.

Burnheart stood at once, wincing at a pain in his hip, broken in a hunt years ago, and visions of the lovely lady in his mind. “I shall not rest until I find her. Although the search may tax even my tracking skills — dragons leave larger trails than humans —”

“She’s at the far end of Irony Canyon,” Impactus said. “You know the old caverns?”

“Ironish Canyon, my lord,” Burnheart corrected. “And yes. Many a dragon I have slain among those stony mountains ... but it’s strange. Quests often offer more challenges.”

“Let’s hope this one is easy, because the kingdom depends on your success. Go now, and fare thee well.”

Burnheart blinked. “Now?”

“The curse is killing our populace,” Moiety snapped.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have taunted evil wizards,” Burnheart said.

“He’s not evil!” Dapper cried. “He’s just misunderstood —”

Impactus raised his voice. "Go forth, Sir Burnheart, and save the kingdom with a kiss at the end."

And go forth Burnheart did. He passed the great-hall-turned hospital, the real hospital overflowing with cursed victims and their stone-like skins, to the royal stable.

Burnheart's horse had died two years past, so he asked for a new one and had to wait because the stable was understaffed. Half their people had succumbed to the curse. He rode through town on a horse as gray as his beard, and the rising sun revealed the grisly truth: Stone statues of former denizens cast long shadows through the cursed town.

"Kiss Cassandra, lift the curse, get paid, return to quiet retirement," Burnheart reminded himself, and spurred his horse towards the rising sun.

The valley was less than a day's ride. Before he reached the eastern end, he recognized old, familiar, and unwelcome signs: snapped trees, scorched grass, a smell of ash and blood. Dragon! I knew it couldn't be so easy! he thought. Soon his trained ear recognized a recurring rumble. Judging by the charred remains of cattle scattered about, the beast was sleeping off a good meal.

And there, before the dark caves where he'd slain many similar foes, lay a great green dragon. It sprawled across the hard-packed dirt, wisps of smoke issuing from its long nostrils with every snore.

Green dragons — Arbor Pulla Terrore according to the field guide he'd written for younger hunters — weren't the hardest to kill. But they weren't prey to take lightly. So he dismounted from the borrowed horse (which was happy to tremble from a safe distance away inside a grove of sturdy oak trees), unsheathed his sword, and crept forward.

"Good evening, Sir Burnheart."

Burnheart jumped. From out of the cave strode Cassandra, her clothes travel-stained but her gentle, round face as lovely as ever.

He put a finger to his lips but she said, "Don't worry, it won't wake." She held up a flask. "Sleeping draught."

“Well done, then, lovely lady,” he said, and lowered his sword. “I’m told you have the other half of the vision that will save our kingdom”

“Let’s pray so. Split visions are often confusing until assembled. How sad that I may never know the full truth of my inner sight,” she said. “For if we Seers ever learn the full truth, the vision would evaporate like mist come morning”

Burnheart waved his hand in a gesture that said, get on with it.

“In my vision, the act you commit is one of true hate before the sun sets this very day,” she said.

“Don’t you mean, true love?” he asked.

“Don’t tell me what I saw,” she said.

“Of course not. But I don’t hate —”

She held up her hand and looked away. “Do not tell me or the prophecy will fade and the curse will consume our kingdom!”

With a grimace he turned to the dragon and contemplated the predicament. While he certainly disliked the beasts, he didn’t hate this particular one. He’d long since slain the dragon who incinerated his wife and child, and he had nothing against its bones. But Burnheart didn’t earn his reputation as a world-famous dragon hunter without half a brain — or so he told himself. He didn’t hate the dragon. He certainly didn’t hate Cassandra. He glanced at the grove of sturdy oaks ... no.

He removed a glove and scratched his head. “What do I hate these days? The curse? Change? Watered-down beer?” he murmured too quietly for the Half-Seer to hear. Perhaps she got the gist, because she decided to walk further from him, the dragon, and the cave opening

The cave! Something he hated must lurk at the end of the cave! Like ... bats! Or lichen! Or people who conflated stalactites with stalagmites! One of them *clearly* had a C, the other a G! He clenched his fists, gritted his teeth, stamped his foot ... but Sir Burnside the Dragonslayer couldn’t get worked up over spelling quirks. In truth, he wasn’t sure of the difference either ... and he certainly didn’t hate himself.

Had the two Seers misinterpreted their halves of the whole vision? Cassandra was about twenty paces away now, and was facing the other way, arms crossed across and head slightly bowed. She knows something. What am I missing?

“What if I hated the kiss itself?” he mused, rubbing his chin. “No, I would fear more than hate. What fool would put his bare face on a dragon’s mouth? Do dragons even have lips? And yet — wait, she did not say mouth.’ She said a kiss at the end.”

Burnheart turned his gaze from the dragon’s head to its haunches, shuddered, and looked back at the cave. They were at this place for a reason. He wondered if something worse than bats and etymology lurked within Yes, that must be it. He must follow the cave to its end.

A great, wet force from behind knocked him flat. He gasped as his armor dented into his back and drool pooled around him.

“PAH!” roared the dragon. “That was DISGUSTING!”

Burnheart rolled onto his back, groaned, and saw Cassandra walking back towards them. The dragon curled its sinuous neck around to look at her. “If you were lying to me —”

“I was not. The curse is lifted. On behalf of the kingdom, I thank you.”

“What!?” Burnheart shouted. “No one said the dragon must bestow the kiss!”

“No one said the dragon-slayer would either,” the dragon retorted, and spat flames from its nostrils. “The deed is done, the curse is lifted — Half-Seer, begone and leave me to my payment.”

“You tricked me! That was no sleeping draught!” Burnheart shouted, jabbing an angry finger at Cassandra the Half-Seer.

“It’s wine. I’m going to need a drink,” she replied sadly. “And think, sir. Would you have volunteered to accept a dragon’s kiss?”

“I suppose not,” he grumbled. “And as the beast said, the deed is done. No doubt my armor will rust from slobber —”

“Beast? Beast!?” the dragon bellowed. “How dare — why you little — of all the — you’re the beast!”

“Childish insults do me no harm,” he replied, still struggling to get up. His sword was pinned under his leg

“Burnheart, Dragon-slayer!” the dragon bellowed. “You’re the beast who killed so many of my family and friends! I hate you!”

“Oh,” Burnheart said as a creeping dread chilled his blood. “Half-Seer, what exactly did you offer as payment?”

The end

Joe is a writer, hiker, and photographer in Arroyo Grande, CA. As a 12-time NaNoWriMo participant, his stories have grown more elaborate and ambitious over time. His current novel series began as an exercise in twisting sci-fi tropes before taking on a life of its own. When he’s not writing, Joe enjoys leading hikes and photography. See his work at www.joephotos.art

Cursed Valentine

By Michelle Dornish

Check name, Peel backing off the double-sided tape, and stick. Repeat. I glance at my watch, worrying my lip a little. There are still 42 minutes left until A-block students arrive on campus, but with 155 cards to deliver, time is of the essence. Of course, I thought ahead and that is why there is already a strip of double-sided tape on each student's envelope. I just have to peel and stick, I got this!

There are still five minutes left before A block when I tape the last of the cards to the last of the sophomore lockers. The halls are not empty anymore, but the kids walking around now are the studious, dedicated sort. They have full schedules and an agenda for the day, and none of them care much about what others are doing around them. No one takes notice of me or what I am up to. That is until,

"Sammy!" a familiar, high-pitched voice calls out from the end of the hall. A ball of energy that looks like she is half made of hair, a long and unruly mane of bouncing golden-brown curls, is heading my way. Before I can turn properly to greet her, Tru is colliding into me, arms wrapped around me and crushing me with a hug that was so tight, I am pretty sure she is holding onto her wrists on my other side.

"Happy almost Valentine's, bestie!" Tru squeals, directly in my ear. I chuckle though, because I know PDA is Tru's love language, just like "acts of service" is mine. I can not begrudge my best friend what fills her heart, any more than she would ever stop me from handing out my 100+ cards. That is why we had been best friends since PreK, even when most kids our age had grown apart or spread out over the years. We accept and embrace one another, just as we are. We are a constant –Sammy and Tru.

"All done with your covert cards?" True "whispers" although Tru's lowest volume is still loud enough to reach either end of the hall, so I do a quick double take, left and right, to make sure we are alone, before smiling at my best friend.

"Just finished, I see you actually made it on time today. Two minutes early even?" I smirk, fake incredulity coloring my tone.

"OH man, you're right, we should get a coffee from the student cafe to celebrate!" Tru says, linking her arm in mine as she turns toward student government class.

“That would make us late though, thus defeating the purpose of the celebration,” I tell her, patting her hand with mine, my smile wide and easy on my face. Tru is one of the few people I feel this easy with. I never have to try too hard to make Tru feel happy or loved. She has so much of that energy with her naturally, at all times. It is like soaking in a relaxing bath to be with her. A true stress reliever.

“Truth, but I do need caffeine!” This she says as she is practically bouncing at my side, her head barely clearing my shoulder, but as she walks there is so much pep in her step her head keeps coming level with mine, then back down again, with each step.

“I’ll treat you after student government,” I say, patting her hand again, almost as if my calming touch could actually keep her tethered to the ground. I should know better by now.

“Bet!” She squeals, laughing as we enter the class and take our seats.

The rest of pre-Valentines day went pretty well. I noticed a few different classmates seeing their cards and the small smiles of appreciation that came with their individualized messages. I was touched even more to see a few of them walking around to class with their cards and spotted a couple of my cards had made it inside of some sophomore lockers, pinned to the door next to their BFF photos and celebrity cutouts.

Coming home that afternoon, I knew that I am feeling good about how my school Valentines had gone. But of course, this was only a warm-up for the *real* event. Making Valentine's a special day for my friends and classmates may have been a hobby of mine for the last 10 years, but making my mom feel special on Valentine's Day is a lifelong passion of mine!

I don't have any memories of my dad. He left for Afghanistan when Mom was pregnant, but never made it home. He stepped on a landmine on a backroad between run-down villages. A hapless victim in a needless war, as our administration is finally willing to admit. Thanks for the realization, but unfortunately for us and many other military families, the damage has already been done.

My mom has been single my entire life. She seems happy enough. She loves her job and she loves me. She is always the first to say she would not change anything about her life, but I have difficulty believing her. Maybe this is why I have made it my job to make her feel loved and special every Valentine's Day. As my autonomy and abilities have grown, so have my aspirations. My breakfast in bed used to be a raw pop tart, but now I have evolved to strawberry scones with some fresh squeezed orange juice. And this is just the opener.

We are sitting down to dinner and before I can even tell Mom about my successful card delivery operation, Mom says, "You know you don't have to plan my whole..."

"Before you even get started, I hope your schedule is cleared, Mom. Because from the moment you wake to the moment you go to sleep, I have you scheduled!" I say, holding up my hand, a wide smile on my face.

"Sammy, one of these days you need to think of getting your own love life going, you know?" My mom says, an exasperated sigh on her lips, but I can see her smile behind her rolled eyes and I know she is excited.

"You first," I say, a challenge in my eyes.

"Yeah well, not everyone can be a heartstopper," Mom sighs again, a wistful look in her eyes. Mom has told me the story of meeting Dad many times, and she always says the moment their eyes met, her heart stopped in her chest, and that was how she knew she was in trouble.

"Yeah, well, I haven't met one of those myself yet, so I guess we are both just picky and unwilling to settle," I say, taking a big bite of my cheesy pizza from our favorite delivery place.

"I suppose so," Mom says, smiling as she picks up a second slice from the box, the cheese stretching all the way till the slice is on her plate. Mmmmm gooey goodness.

"Just..." Mom drifts off, and I can tell she is working hard to try and word this carefully. There is that wrinkled line in her brow that sometimes comes out when she is worried about me.

"Just spit it out Mom," I smile, my tone more comforting than challenging.

Mom sighs, then spits it out, saying it quickly like ripping off a bandaid, "Promise you are leaving yourself open to love, okay? The right person, they will see you. And they will love you, as is," she reaches for my knee and squeezes gently. We were sitting side by side on the couch with our annual Valentine movie, *The Princess Bride*, playing softly in the background. At this opportune moment, Buttercup and her one true love, Wesley, are sharing their first kiss. The love story at the start of the movie is the best part. Before any horrible things could befall them, before death and corrupted men in power, could come between them. When it is just the two of them on the little farm. I always wondered at this point in the story why they ever bothered to separate. The story could have ended there and it would have been perfect.

What would I give to have a Wesley of my very own? Someone who is my true love. If I had them, I would never let them go. That I am sure of. Only disaster waits for lovers who separated, this I had learned in stories and in life.

I nod my head, smiling gently as I swallow my mouthful of cheese and bread, then squeeze my mom's hand on my knee. "I promise," I say softly.

The next day goes just as planned. Scones and orange juice in bed to start off the day. A bike ride to the weekend farmers market, with breakfast burritos already paid for and set aside so they would not sell out before we got there. Finally a sunset stroll on the beach to cap off the day. At least, that's what I tell my mom when we arrive at the sand. I did not tell her what is waiting at the end of our stroll. The sounds and lights call to us long before we can see the details of the pier. I watch my mom's face light up.

"How did I not know that this was happening?" Mom gasps, a wide smile on her face as she takes my hand and starts pulling me along toward the fair.

"Because you are wonderfully oblivious and I made a point to keep it hidden from you," I say, happy that the surprise had been kept so well.

We climb the wooden stairs that take beachgoers from the sand to the pier, the sounds of the fair growing louder, until Mom and I get to the surface of the pier and we are smack dab in the middle of everything, with laughter, screams of joy, popping and slams from the carnival games, and a metallic clack, clack, clack from the few carnival rides available.

“Come on!” Mom tugs on my arm and we are running down the rows and rows of carnival games. We always go to the winter and summer carnivals and it is one of my favorite things to do with my mom because something about the setting makes her act like more of a kid than me. Even when I was pretty small, I found it funny to see how my normally calm and put-together mom became a little girl at the sight of a carnival game or a Ferris Wheel.

We played a few games, each of us winning a couple of stuffed animals and one large inflated fish that almost looks like Dory from Finding Nemo. We are slowing down, almost running out of games which of course means it is time to hit the rides, but then Mom stops at a booth that we have never seen before.

We’d been attending the two annual carnivals at this very pier my whole life, but I don’t ever remember seeing a tent like this one. It is like a miniature circus tent, with mostly purple canvas on the outside, with a few pink and blue swaths on the sides. The opening is shadowy, but there seems to be a flickering light inside, almost like a candle. There is a single hand-painted sign over the open flap, black letters in a messy scrawl on white cardboard,

Come and Learn your Fortune. if you Dare!

“This is new,” Mom says, a smile already clear in her tone of voice.

“I don’t know Mom,” I frown, honestly this place looks like a bigger scam than the carnival games.

“Non-believers have nothing to fear from the cards,” a soft, misty voice drifts out of the opening.

“What about an open-minded potential convert?” Mom asks, already stepping toward the opening.

“No, Mom, come on. Let’s get on the swing ride!” I beg, trying to pull her hand back, but she slips her hand free and steps inside the tent.

“Come on, Sammy! It will be fun!” Mom calls back, already out of sight.

“More like a waste of time,” I grumble under my breath. I am feeling tense, my fists clenched inside my crossed arms. I feel as if my body is coiled tight, ready to spring into fight or flight at any moment. Nothing about this tent screams dangerous, just corny. However, I can not shake this feeling, that has the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

I rub my arms to try and make the goosebumps there smooth out as I enter the tent behind my mom, who is already sitting at a small round table. There is barely enough room for a large crystal ball and a pair of long-fingered, bony hands, covered in rings and wrists jangling with golden and silver bangles.

The woman attached to these hands could not have been a bigger stereotype if she tried. She has long, dark curly hair so big that it makes up half the size of her head. She pushes her hair back to reveal her eyes, which are overly large and round in her face. They seem to be the most prominent feature on her face by far. She has a gold hoop hanging from each of her ears, and one small gold hoop pierced through her left eyebrow. When she smiles, which she seems to do with every word she speaks, she shows some gnarly, yellowed smoker teeth that had not seen a dentist in more than a decade.

“Ah, a lovely son you have,” the mystic woman says, smiling up at me as she gestures to a tall stack of pillows as if she expects me to have a seat there.

“They are nonbinary actually,” Mom says quickly, saving me the trouble.

“Of course they are, but biologically male, yes?”

“Does it matter? Does your Crystal ball read differently based on gender norms?” I ask sharply. A con artist is what I had been expecting, but a bigoted con artist is a step too far.

“Sammy!” Mom scolded, she was always trying to have me take the high road. But how was anyone going to learn if I always did that?

"It's okay. I didn't mean to offend. There is a custom, in my country, that the cards are read by gender. By which I mean, a woman reads the cards for a woman and a man reads the cards for a man. Otherwise, it is bad luck," the woman smiles again at me and something about her tone makes me believe her. She sounds too spacey to be malicious.

"Welp, guess that means a no for me," it's just as well, I wasn't really into this anyway.

"Or, you can be read by anyone," Mom rubs my shoulder and I know she is trying to be supportive. She has never once made me feel wrong for my gender identity, but there are times when it is clear, she doesn't *really* get it.

"Shall we read the crystal? Or would you prefer the cards?" Although my mom is still sitting in the only real guest chair, the fortune teller's eyes are locked on me as she fans out a deck of navy and gold cards with strange figures on them.

"No thanks, I'm just here with her," I nod toward my mom and turn to look at the astrology charts on the walls of the tent.

"No, no! You should do a reading!" Mom stands up and practically pulls me into the chair. I wasn't expecting her to be so forceful, so I sort of fell sideways onto the side of the chair. Both the mystic and my mom seem to take my clumsiness as acquiescence.

"Excellent, my dear, what answers would you like about your future?"

"I dunno, what college I might get into?" I mumble, my mind blanking for a moment.

"Boring! Tell them about their love life!" My mom flings herself on my shoulders and shivers with her excitement.

"A popular choice," the mystic shuffles her deck then places the entire stack on the table between us.

"Now, wait a minute..." I try to say, my body feeling tense again, and my stomach twisting uncomfortably.

"Please cut the deck. Twice."

I sigh and do as I am told until there are three stacks in front of me. It really doesn't seem like anything I say matters at all.

The woman starts waving her hands over the cards, muttering under her breath, then her hand seems to float over each deck, waiting to be pulled one way or the other. She finally lands on one of the decks and draws a card, flipping it down in front of me on my left side. She quickly flips the top cards from each of the other stacks and places them center and right. She does all this with her eyes closed, and only when three strange cards are facing me does she open them.

Immediately the woman gasps, her lip trembling and her eyes wide with horror. This is not the look you want on someone's face when they are reading your future.

"What?" I say softly, then immediately curse at myself for being sucked in. This whole horrified act was probably to scare me into believing this was all real. But the woman's voice becomes harsher and she speaks in a stunted voice as she chants the following words:

*"Like a rose that blooms in the shadow of decay,
A truer love they never knew, but time will betray.
A future plan is woven with threads of pure light,
But their lives will unravel, lost to eternal night.*

Her eyes become unfocused, rolling back in her head and fluttering repeatedly as if she were in some kind of trance as she speaks. When she is done with the verse, she seems to snap forward, and her body slumps. There are a few beats of silence and I realize mom's nails are digging painfully into my shoulder. Before I can ask her to stop, the mystic snaps her head back up and gasps, coming back to herself all of a sudden.

"My dear, this fortune. It is...an unpleasant one," she shakes her head slowly, and before I can snap something pithy like well no duh, she starts to explain. She gestures to the first card, on my left side.

"Lovers, and they face you upside down," she moves down the line and points center, "The Upright Tower, which always spells disaster, and finally," her hand points to the last card, "The Hangman, also upside down. Together, these cards spell a disastrous first love for you. I see a friend, your best friend, turned into love..."

“But, my best friend isn’t...I like boys and she...” My face fills with color as Tru’s happy face fills my vision. Tru is not my true love, she is not my Wesley. She couldn’t be.

“This is part of the problem. Your love story will cause unbalance in the relationship and it is doomed to be one-sided, at first. However, the moment your love is mutual, it will also turn deadly. You will be forced to choose, her life or your own. I see...possibly death for you both if this is not resolved.”

There is silence in the tent once more as I shake my head, tears leaking out of my eyes. Because some part of me thinks this is why I was scared and anxious. I knew, on some level, that only bad news waited for me in this tent.

“We are done here, Sammy,” my mom sounds uncharacteristically harsh as she pulls me from the tent, without even leaving a courtesy tip for the devastated mystic woman. That is almost as upsetting as the fortune itself. The poor woman truly looked upset at having to tell me this horrible piece of news. Would she look so sad, even now as we left without paying, if she did not believe that what she was telling me was sure to pass?

I leave the tent in a daze. I can hear my mom muttering some comforting denials to me, but her body is shaking against mine as she takes me by the shoulders, pins me to her side, and walks me out of the tent and further, out of the carnival altogether.

“But, we didn’t even go on any rides?” I mutter numbly, my lips feeling as if they were frozen. I can feel them moving, but they do not feel fully attached to me or my mouth.

“That’s okay, I’m kind of tired. Let’s go home, watch a movie or something,” Mom squeezes me gently and I know she is smiling at me with that little wrinkle in her brow. I don’t even have to look at her closely, I can hear the worried wrinkle in her voice.

“Sure,” I say numbly, but nothing feels real to me. I am thinking of Buttercup, how harshly I judged her for letting Wesley go. But maybe, no matter what you do, true love does not run smoothly. Maybe the people in our family were cursed to lose their loves by violent means?

Before I know it, I am in Mom’s car and she is driving us home. My body is with Mom, but my mind is millions of miles away. I keep playing the weird poem over and over

in my head, a tragic, death of love poem. *Like a rose that blooms in the shadow of decay,* My love is doomed from the moment it blooms. *A truer love they never knew, but time will betray.* A true love, like I have always dreamed of. If the Princess Bride is to be believed, true love is a rare and beautiful thing, but of course, mine is cursed. *But their lives will unravel, lost to eternal night.* So, lost to death. the symbolism is simple enough to interpret. Could all of this really mean me and Tru? That is perhaps the worst part. I always felt attracted to men before. I always saw myself seeking a Wesley, but could it be that Tru is my true love?

As if to force the issue to a sudden head, as we pull into the driveway I see a familiar head of wild, copper curls bouncing off of our porch, heading toward the passenger side of the car to greet me. She holds a bouquet of roses so large, they are almost as big as she is. The roses are a deep shade of crimson. The color of passion. The color of blood.

I open my car door and step out, my face a flat mask. Tru is bubbly and bouncing until the moment she sees my face. Her brow furrowed in a too-familiar worried wrinkle. My heart twinges painfully as I realize that Tru is like my mom in many ways. Wasn't that a saying, that people always end up marrying their parents? is this another sign that we were cursed to end each other?

"Sammy, is something wrong?" Tru speaks in a soft, serious voice. Which is how I know I must look truly upset.

I just shake my head, "You shouldn't be here." I speak in a flat voice, unable to put feeling to the words, because the only feelings are horror and anger, neither of which Tru deserves to have unleashed on her. She had done nothing wrong.

"I wanted to...give you something," Tru sounds nervous suddenly and I look at the roses, a new meaning behind the red roses occurs to me. They are the color of roses you give a partner, not necessarily the right color for a friend.

"I've been wanting to tell you, for a while now really..."

"No," I whisper, too quietly. She can't hear me. I stumble one slow step toward my front door, my eyes locked on Tru's in horror.

“You can’t do this...no!” I shout, unable to explain myself properly. I know she will take this all wrong, that this rejection will hurt her in all the wrong ways for all the wrong reasons. However I can not configure the words into a more intelligible response. I can not explain myself properly. My brain is barely functioning at this point. I can feel my heart pulsing painfully in my ears, it feels like my heart is in my throat, and it makes it even harder to speak.

“I’m...I’m sorry, I didn’t think...you would be so...upset,” Tru sounds so confused and of course she is. I have never spoken so harshly to her, but still, I can barely speak and all I know is her confession will only lead us down a path of suffering and death.

“Go away Tru!” I shout and by now I am at my front door. I slam the door in her face, feeling as if my heart is already breaking at the thought of hurting my friend. But better a little broken heart now. I would much rather a little heartache now to a potential death later.

Was this fate something I could escape with a slammed door? Was there any way to avoid our destiny? I feel my phone buzzing away, jingling loudly in my pocket. I don’t need to look at the caller ID to know if it is Tru calling. I sink to the floor, head in my hands, and sob. Love is all I have ever dreamed of and now, now my dream is sinking rapidly into a nightmare.

Michelle Dornish is a special education teacher by day, and a writer by night, usually after bedtime. She has published one short story in the SLO NightWriters Anthology. She specializes in fantasy novels and short story fiction. She lives in San Luis Obispo with her husband and her three year old son.

Pen & Pier: Mission Statement

Pen & Pier is a social writing group that fosters accountability, camaraderie, creativity, and growth among authors of many levels and interests. Based in San Luis Obispo County, we are an eclectic group of writers who work in many different genres such as urban fantasy, science fiction, historical, and memoirs. We work in a variety of formats such as novels, short stories, and screenplays. Our members' experience levels range from "I just bought a blank notebook" to "I published another story this week."



At Pen & Pier...

- Weekly meetings
- Frequent special events
- Regular writing prompts
- Accountability check-ins
- Online conversations
- Informal critique sharing

Learn more at

Pen & Pier.com