



SUB~CREATION



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In association with



WhInklings



Editorial Team

Kate Henson

Kate is an existential crisis major with a literature concentration.

Joseph Abdelmelek

Joseph Abdelmelek joined the *Sub-Creation* team out of a passion for critiquing others' work. He hopes to one day write and publish his own works so that others can have a turn to be critical.

Emily Labutta

Emily Labutta, as a writer of mostly genre fiction, could not be more excited about the genesis print of *Sub-Creation*. As both a writer and a reader, she is currently working on a way to do both activities at once... a talent that has thus far eluded her.

Beth Potterveld

Beth got her M.A. in Exegesis from Wheaton in May 2011, and married a partical physicist the next day. The Tolkien Society was founded her last semester here, and she has actively participated in it ever since. When the club president suggested a writing club (the WhInklings) and a literary journal (*Sub-Creation*), she jumped at the chance to help make these a reality.

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Editor's Note

It's my pleasure to introduce you to *Sub-Creation*, Wheaton College's newest official publication.

With both *Kodon* and *The Pub* on campus, one might wonder why Wheaton College needs yet another publication, but *Sub-Creation* seeks to fill a real need felt among the Wheaton community.

Sub-Creation is for genre fiction, whether that looks like aliens or dragons, ghost stories or love letters. These are stories that some might summarily neglect because of those components, brushing past the fact that these very elements are where the story's message shines most.

Robots show us what being human means. White knights and dark lords help us clearly see what is good or evil in a muddled gray world. Superheros ask us what we would do in their shoes. Would you stand for justice if you had super-powers, and isn't that what you're supposed to do anyway?

I hope that you enjoy this first collection and that you will be encouraged to share your own sub-created worlds with us in the future.

Enjoy!

Beth Potterveld

PROSE

Sheri Leasure ('05)

Sheri Leasure graduated with her MA in Biblical Exegesis in 2005. After a few years teaching Bible in Mozambique, health problems brought her home. She now works in the Ethnic Ministries Department of the BGC and is working toward her Masters of Social Work at Aurora University.

Thomas Macolino ('17)

Thomas Macolino was born and raised in north-west Philadelphia. His hobbies include dressing up in a mask and cape and ticketing unregistered vehicles, teaching Wheaton's elderly how to use Apple products and ghost writing scholarly essays about the value of a liberal arts degree. He plans to graduate from Wheaton College in 2017, assuming his "cough syrup distribution" produces enough tuition money.

Emily Labutta ('14)

Emily Labutta is a senior double major in Philosophy and English: Writing, and is contemplating her future after Wheaton. Possible career options include getting a black belt in every martial art known to man, battling great white sharks, and building a time machine to go back and learn all the winning lottery numbers. She might also go to law school, but she thinks that sounds just a little too practical.

The Princess and the Almond Blossoms by Sheri Leasure

Before the time of Henry the Navigator and the great Discoveries, the Arabs took over the Algarve, the southern-most of what is now called Portugal. The conquest was led by an Arab prince, Ibn-Almundim. When the wars were over, he built his castle and settled down to rule near the village of Silves. Tired of war, he was content to mind his small governance and sought to maintain peace in the land. Though fearless in battle, Ibn-Almundim was shy. He desired to rule well, but his timid spirit made it hard to build friendships with his people. His subjects and servants thought he was distant and cold. Lonely, Ibn-Almundim poured himself into matters of state and spent his free time alone in his gardens. The garden was a vast array of flowers and small bushes, the Prince's favorites from his own land. But there were no trees in it.

One day from the far north a Duke and Duchess and their daughter Gilda arrived in grand style. They had come to see a famous breed of Portuguese horse, the *lusitano*. Gilda loved the outdoors and all wild things, especially horses. Much to her parents' amusement and concern, she spent her days outside exploring on horseback, even in the cold winters of her home. She was a spirited and spunky lady, quite the darling of her homeland.

Many have said that the prince fell in love with Gilda at first sight, but they are mistaken. At first neither Gilda nor the Prince was interested in the other. Gilda had eyes only for horses and the shy Prince was so intimidated by the newcomers that he could only awkwardly host them. He arranged for a servant to show Gilda the stables where she could choose among his steeds and ride to her heart's content.

After hours astride a beautiful horse, Gilda returned to the castle and left the creature with the stable hand. She walked back through the castle garden and was entranced by the unique flowers and small bushes. The Prince, having spent the day confined to meetings of business, entered the garden just after Gilda to rest his mind and spirit.

"I beg your pardon, your majesty," said Gilda, startled at his presence. "I was just admiring your garden."

The Prince smiled. "Admire all you wish, my lady. This garden is my companion and delight."

He guided Gilda among the plants and introduced her to them, for they were all new to her. It was there in the darkening garden where a mutual affection for wild things turned their affections also towards each other. Weeks later, when the Duke and Duchess returned to the north, they left without Gilda. She married the Prince and became Princess Gilda of the Algarve.

Though a foreigner, Gilda quickly endeared herself to the local people. She spent many hours riding about the countryside and nearby towns. The people of the Algarve were small in stature, with dark hair and chocolate-brown eyes. Gilda was tall

and slim with the blue eyes of the north. Golden-brown hair fell in waves to her waist and streamed behind her when she rode. Everywhere she went she was instantly recognized.

Of a friendly and gentle nature, Gilda would often stop by the river to talk to the women as they washed their clothes. She would pick up their children and place them on her horse and let them ride as she walked and held the reigns. As she rode through the towns she would stop to talk to the butcher, the baker's wife, the women carrying vegetables in baskets. Little ones would peer at her around trees and from behind stone walls and grin. Gilda would smile and wave and send them into fits of giggles. She spent that first summer quite happily in the sunny Algarve.

But as the summer passed, Prince Ibn-Almundim became busy trying to keep peace in the land. He had less and less time to spend with Gilda. The flowers began to fade and the Princess spent fewer hours astride her horse and more hours alone in the tallest castle tower gazing across the Algarve and dreaming of her homeland.

Winter in the Algarve is sunny but cool. Though it was mild in comparison to the frigid winters of Gilda's homeland, the Princess found herself possessed by a constant chill that had nothing to do with the weather. Though evenings were spent with her Prince in front of a roaring fire, the days grew wearisome to Gilda. Her hands were always cold, her nose and toes as well.

December came with wind and rain. "Why should it be so dreary but without the decoration of snow?" thought Gilda bitterly. She would stand

in her tower and remember ice-skating on frozen lakes and building pretend palaces of snow.

The Prince, who had never seen snow, was mystified by Gilda's homesickness. "Why would you long for something so cold?"

"It is cold," Gilda admitted, "but it is also beautiful. It turns the whole world white and muffles the sound of footsteps until the forests and fields seem to be resting in a quiet dream."

As winter passed, Gilda grew weak. Her cheeks, once rosy, were pale. Her smile was rarely seen. She spent most of her days in bed, waited upon by worried servants and visited by the anxious Prince. Nothing cheered her. She missed her homeland. She longed for a glimpse of snowflakes floating, flying, drifting, dancing.

News of Gilda's illness spread among the people of the Algarve. They worried and whispered together about what sadness might await the young Prince.

Around the middle of January something magical takes place in the Algarve. The *amendoeiras*, almond trees, long naked from the winter cool, begin to bud with flowers of pink and white.

Now the wife of the stable hand worked as a washerwoman. One day, after rinsing some bedclothes in a cold brook, she began to hang them on a clothesline stretched between two almond trees. Beneath the trees her youngest child sat playing with some fallen blossoms. The baby gathered the blossoms in her fat little hands and threw them into air. The wind caught them and swirled them around her chubby face, a few landing in her dark curls. She giggled and grinned. Her mother, bend-

ing down to pluck another garment from her basket, caught a glimpse of the swirling blooms.

"They look like snowflakes," she thought to herself, thinking back on the days of her childhood in the north, when snow would fall in the mountains and she and her brothers would play in it until their hands were numb with cold.

Suddenly she gasped, taken with an idea that knocked out her breath. She gathered up the baby and ran through the village to the castle, down towards the stables where her husband was grooming a steed. Hearing her calling, he left the horse and ran to meet her. After a few words' exchange he rushed to the castle to beg a hasty audience with the Prince.

Within an hour the villagers were gathered. The stablehand and his wife, commissioned by the Prince, explained with great excitement the plan that their child had inspired.

When the almond trees all over the region were in full bloom, a date was chosen. Throughout that day the people of the Algarve came to the castle. They came on foot and by horse and by mule cart. They came in pairs and as families and as whole villages. They brought with them Algarve snow—almond blossoms.

Careful not to strip the trees, they selected only a few buds from each tree of the thousands blooming around the country. As they gathered the buds into their pockets and baskets, something strange happened. A woman placing a few blossoms in a basket would turn to gather more, but when she turned around again, she would find the basket full. A child pocketing the flowers would find

to his amazement that his pockets were suddenly and inexplicably overflowing.

And so the people brought hordes of almond blossoms to the castle. Little children brought them slightly crumpled in their hands, skipping after their mothers, gathering those that fell along the road. Ladies in carriages brought them in the arms of servants. Men came in from the fields and left the flocks to gather flowers. Soldiers in uniform, priests and nuns and bakers and butchers fell into step together, crowding the road to the castle, almond blossoms swirling around their feet in a great cloud. Beginning at the walls they laid the blossoms thick on the ground around the castle. Layers of the pink-kissed carpeting stretched as far as the eye could see, across the road and into the fields and down the lanes leading seaward. The people stood knee-deep in white, crowded together in view of the highest tower.

Ibn-Almundim crept to his wife's bedroom and watched her sweet face, pale against the pillows. He gently lifted her into his arms and carried her, still dreaming, up to the highest tower. His heart was beating hard, not from the climb to the tower but from anticipation. He kissed her head laid against his shoulder and whispered her awake.

Gilda opened her eyes and smiled sleepily into the Prince's face. "I had a lovely dream," she told him.

"Awake, my bride," he said. "Leave the dream for a moment. I have something to show you."

It was then that Gilda noticed she was no longer in bed but in the highest castle tower. The

Prince set her gently on her feet by the window but kept his arms tight about her, for she was barely able to stand.

Gilda looked down upon the castle grounds blanketed in blossoms. "Oh!" she exclaimed, "Oh... it's true! I dreamed of it and now it's true—here in the Algarve, snow from my homeland!" Tears ran down her cheeks and she turned and flung her arms around the Prince's neck.

"My love, look closely, look again," he said. He helped her lean a bit out of the window, and this time she saw the people. This time she saw the pink tinge in the vast white.

"Almond blossoms...the snow of the Algarve," she said. "So many?"

"The people brought them and they multiplied to fill the grounds," said the prince.

Ibn-Almundim carried his Gilda down from the tower, waded out among the blossoms and set her down in their midst. She gathered them in her arms to her face where they caught her tears and kissed her smile and filled her senses with sweetness.

Quite suddenly she stood up, her face no longer pale but touched pink with health. On the arm of her Prince she strode into the crowd where they both greeted their people with *beijinhos*, cheek kisses, and handshakes and tears and smiles. From that day on, the people loved the shy Arab Prince and he loved them. They discovered him to be a wise and kind ruler and would bring him their troubles freely and find counsel.

The Prince ordered that hundreds of almond trees be planted on the castle grounds amidst his beloved flowers. But since *amendoeiras* take five

years to bud, each year for five years the people of the Algarve would gather blossoms from their own trees and bring them to the Princess. In the sixth year, on the day Gilda discovered the first blossom on one of her own castle trees, a celebration was proclaimed. The Almond Blossom Festival is still celebrated in Portugal to this day.

Routine

by Emily Labutta

Maximilian Culbern petered about his kitchen as the water boiled for his daily tea. At precisely two hundred and twelve degrees Fahrenheit, he would remove the kettle, pour the water into his white cup, and let his tea steep for five minutes, during which he would arrange three ovals of biscotti upon a tiny plate. Then, he would sit and wait to sit and drink.

Currently, Maximilian was washing dishes, an unlikely and unscheduled occurrence. The culprits had been created after last night's dinner, a delicious vegetable lasagna made of three year old noodles that would remain his staple of choice for the next few days, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The only exception would be his tea and his biscotti, at four o'clock, every afternoon.

With a sigh, Maximilian replaced the dishes in their designated spots. Just then, the whistle of the kettle called him to attention, and he twisted the knob on his stove to shut off the gas and consequent flame. A puff was the only complaint the dying fire gave, used to the routine.

The water splashed into the cup, settling at the ring around the white cup that had refused to vacate despite many scrubblings. Maximilian liked his black tea, and his cups liked to retain a mark of

their being used, even if it was by the same person in the same manner.

His tea and his snack ready, Maximillian proceeded to the small living room, adjacent to the kitchen. There, he plopped down to the floor with practiced ease that failed to free even a drop of the precious liquid in his cup. He had a couch, of course, but it was occupied and he always took the floor. In his stead, sat stuffed animals, dogs, and crocodiles with black noses and felt teeth sticking out, defending their territory.

The couch was not the only roost either. Bunnies grouped together under a chair set in the corner, and birds perched on every shelf available. Snakes curled around the table's legs, and though gravity would have kept them down, their great number amassed to let them ascend on the coils of one another all the way up. Possums and jaguars and elephants and kangaroos all stared out from their respective habitats.

No corner of fur threatened to pull upwards and reveal the cottony white fluff underneath, and any loose threads were immediately doctored by a swift and steady hand. Black noses and eyes of every color lay under careful organization in several drawers, as did replacement tails and ears. An animal impaired by the loss of one of its senses wouldn't last long in the wild; it wouldn't be fair to deprive them of an equal chance.

Maximilian sat contentedly as he sipped his tea, staring as unblinkingly as his stuffed animals save for a flicker every so often. No television set decorated any wall, and his bookshelves were already packed full with a commodity he found far

more valuable than printed words. Instead, he took a deep breath through his nose, his great nose, the nose that had exiled him indoors.

He didn't know why—he hadn't asked for such a curse surely—but Maximilian had found himself designated with an abnormally sensitive nose. From an early age he had been able to pick up on scents others couldn't even describe, let alone sense the presence of, and he had learned to keep quiet every time some unusual sensation tickled his nostrils. It wasn't much fun to ask what a smell was when no one else smelled it, much less when they began giving you strange looks because you asked it so often.

He quickly learned, too, that there were a good deal many unpleasant smells, much more than pleasant ones. Rotten mice first found his nose to prey upon, and the out of doors was a veritable battleground. From weeds to feces, the moment he stepped outside the combination of odors hit him as surely as a smack in the face, making every excursion an avoidable trip at best. However, as a child, no one had understood this. They claimed he was fussy, never suspecting that he sensed things they had not the capacity for. He was written off by countless psychologists as an attention-seeker, a boy trying to find originality and the ever-illusive uniqueness that all so desperately craved. He had stopped correcting them after a while, because they never started listening. He'd take a little less uniqueness if it were all up to him.

But as his explanations were ignored, so too were his complaints. Every wrinkle of his nose went unnoticed, until it became an offense to his

parents, punishable by the strictest of measures. It didn't help that when they sent him to stand in a corner, more often than not something was dead, dying, or stuck there. And so the agony continued as fetid scents impressed themselves upon his olfactory memory.

Yet once he turned eighteen, Maximilian fled his house with all the stuffed animals he had ever been gifted with. Though they provided vehicles for mold and mildew and other plagues, he had found the keys to cleaning them so that they were no worse to him than the smell of his own skin. And they didn't think he was crazy, not them. They sympathized with him, all the elephants and dogs and rhinos. A nose was a terrible thing, they all agreed.

He had moved into his present house through the generosity of his grandmother, whom most of his family agreed was an old coot, and they would probably give Maximilian a run for the same title once he reached the requisite age. Old coot though she was, his grandmother bought him a house and sent him a weekly allowance. Whether she believed his plight or merely sympathized that he believed in it, he didn't know. He tried to tell himself he didn't care.

So it was that for the last twenty-seven years Maximilian Culbern had never set foot outside. Outside was the realm of torture, and he saw no reason to seek it out now that he was not forced to walk to school or play with the other, filthy boys of the neighborhood. With his allowance he had subscribed to a grocery delivery system, though he didn't frequent their services any more often than he had to. Even opening the door to receive their packages could be risky.

He had arranged with the postal service, too, to have his letters delivered to a slot in his door rather than the mailbox he had called and paid a neighbor to cut down. He had paid them electronically, and kept up the requisite Christmas e-mails to his family by the same medium. And he was happy.

Then there was a knock at his door.

Maximilian jumped, spilling his tea. The hot liquid traced down onto his leg that had twitched, pooling to create a stain matching the one filling out the white carpet.

“Oh no,” he groaned. Both stains would be near impossible to get out, and even then neither article would ever be the same. He would have to throw both out.

Having so decided, he wiped his hands on his pants lest they drip on anything and cause him even more work. He was just unbuckling his belt—on which there was a spot of tea; it would have to go too—when he remembered the cause of the great unsettling. The knock.

It wasn't Thursday, the time for his grocery deliveries, and it was after the hours when the mail was delivered. He had already stooped to the ground once today to retrieve it, always a little flummoxed by the random piles forced in by the postal worker. With two taps on either side, the piles came together, from whence he sorted them from smallest to largest. Only then did he begin to look at the labels.

No one ought to have been at his door, but he had heard a knock sure as he had smelled all those smells that people told him he made up. He sighed, casting a furrowed brow at the stains. And he had just gotten new carpet too. This was what

happened when one broke routine, he realized, and decided that he would have a gate set up around his house. Those on deliveries could request his admittance, which he would all too readily give at the appropriate time, but all these other annoyances could be avoided. Who would knock at such an hour anyway?

Snatching the door open, Maximilian Culbern found himself staring in the face of a little girl, wet tears kissing her cheeks and snot from her nose threatening to do the same. She gasped at the sudden change of scenery, the plain front of the door having been replaced with the none too smiley face of Maximilian. Hair in pigtails flopped off of her head, unevenly stacked. Her pink dress, sporting an obtrusively large daisy on the front, had splotches of dirt pressed into it that would never come out, not even with scrubbing. The dirt had worked itself in between the threads and would stubbornly remain there, not to be persuaded out of its new abode.

"Yes?" Maximilian said.

"My mama and dada..." She tried again. "My mama and dadaaaaa," a cry once more pushed itself from her lips, bringing the company of more tears with it. A shaking hand raised to wipe away the damp stains on her face, but ended up merely smearing around the moisture so that no space remained free.

Maximilian sighed. This child had gotten lost, separated from her parents, at her own fault no doubt, and somehow that made her his responsibility. If parents could keep a closer eye upon their children, people who didn't want children and

made every attempt to avoid contact with them wouldn't be so plagued. Maximilian was entirely in support of the leashes and harnesses that could be clipped onto children.

Still, the black-haired girl cried upon his doorstep, and she wouldn't be any help in getting herself un-lost until she had calmed down. It just figured. Children, when they were most in need, were most unable to help themselves.

Stepping aside and opening the door slightly wide enough to allow the child to pass, he ventured, "Do you want to come in?" all the while praying that she would say no, shake her head, or somehow deny his entreaty.

She wasn't so kind.

At the slightest opening, the slightest hope that it might be meant for her, the girl darted in, almost before Maximilian had stopped speaking. Her mouth immediately opened in wonder, her mind momentarily distracted from her worries by the plethora of stuffed animals surrounding her.

Everywhere, every corner and every space that would have been open in another house, there were stuffed animals. With thousands of eyes and black and pink noses searching out this newcomer, it was as if the house took one collective sniff, the air shifting around the little, quivering, scared girl. Frozen, she stared right back at the eyes staring at her while she stood rooted into the ground and made it impossible for Maximilian to close the door.

Another sigh passed through his lips. He would have to coax her into motion and peace, and clearly the stuffed animals weren't helping. Not that they were for that. He kept a careful watch

on her hands—her dirty, wet, snot-covered hands—that they didn't stray to his collection. No, the best thing he could figure to help her, or distract her, was sweet, sugary food. All kids liked that, didn't they?

Trouble was, the best supplement he had for that sort of thing was his biscotti. She would have to have three, otherwise there wouldn't be the requisite three left in the box at the last rotation and he would have to open another box even sooner, throwing off the cycles for that box. There was a reason there were thirty-nine in the box, and that was because it divided into three, nice and neat. She'd eat three, and he'd just have to open his next box one day earlier, which meant he would have to call in for replacement groceries sooner than usual.

The girl couldn't know what distress she was already causing, but why couldn't she have picked another house to knock on? It was true that there weren't many around—one of the chief reasons Maximilian had liked it—but she could have made an effort to walk a little farther or find her parents on her own. Maximilian didn't see why he had to be involved. She was nothing to him and he was nothing to her. They were just strangers brought together by circumstance, strangers that would ignore one another in any other context, strangers doing hardly better than that as it was.

She wouldn't get any of his tea, that was sure. She had already made him spill it, and the rest in the cup was long past the ideal temperature at which to be drunk. It was as good as ruined.

Getting a plate, Maximilian arranged the proper number of biscotti and shoved the plate before the girl. "Here," he said. "Take it."

She obeyed, clutching at the plate as if it were life itself. But she kept her eyes focused on one big bear he had in the corner, a bear bigger than she was. He didn't like the way she looked at it.

"Eat," he commanded. What was wrong with this kid?

Obediently, she began gnawing on one piece, dropping to the floor as she did so. Her feet tucked underneath her body, cushioning her fall and her seat, and she rested the plate in between them. Then she held the staff of biscotti with hands that seemed to have forgotten they contained opposable thumbs, merely squeezing the fingers together and bending them around the treat like paws. Her steady munching barely snatched pieces of the biscotti; rather she seemed more prone to rubbing her teeth against the hard surface.

Maximilian willed her an appetite. If she didn't eat all three, he was going to have to throw the others out, and that was just wasteful. He couldn't touch them though, not after they had come so close to her. He could smell her bad breath, so rancid it practically emanated from her very pores, no matter where he was in relation to her.

"So," he started, then thought better of it when those wavering glowing eyes found his. Quiet was better, much better he decided.

He maintained the silence that the little girl seemed bent on keeping, mimicking her cues. Her eyes were red and puffy, as was her nose and the skin around her lips.

The biscotti wasn't performing its job well. Sobs eased themselves over, around, and any

other way they could force themselves to pass the biscotti trying to barricade them in. Ragged breathing, from both parties, was the only sound.

"Where are your parents?" Maximilian tried, hoping, without too much assurance, that perhaps the distraction of the biscotti would be enough to let her little mind focus on the true problem. She was where she didn't belong, his house, away from where she did belong, with her parents.

That and, if he didn't get her out soon, he was bound to end up misinterpreted on the news as one of those perverted men that kidnapped little girls, all for trying to do something nice. Not that Maximilian watched the news. It was a terrible program full of cynicism and despair, and, while usually true, he didn't need any more of that in his life. He could never be sure what order the stories would come in, and sometimes the sections got all mixed up depending on the available stories. No, it was too unpredictable. But other people watched the news, and he didn't want his neighbors getting any other ideas. They already judged him; he could practically feel their stares through the walls. They were nothing, of course, but their whispers could get around to the postal worker, or the grocery man. He needed them and would not be compromised by the whimpering of one little girl.

No answer rescued him from his plight.

"Where did you run from?" he tried. Silence.

"Are you hurt?" This elicited a series of short quick shakes of the head, flinging several tears haphazardly around the room, but no more. The little girl returned her gaze, steadily, to the bear in the corner.

Maximilian knew what he had to do. It was a conclusion that he had reached a long time ago but had been trying to avoid. Apparently unsuccessfully.

Bending in close, his face with wrinkles slowly working themselves into his yet malleable skin coming close to hers, he asked one more question. "What your name?"

She mumbled something, but it was as unintelligible to him as his decision to proceed.

"What?"

"Sarah."

"Okay, Sarah. Well, I'm Maximilian, but I think there's someone you'd rather be acquainted with, isn't there?" Her questioning face stared at his, but she didn't know to nod or refuse.

Once more, Maximilian removed himself from her height to the air he usually inhabited. He crouched, grabbed something in his hands, then turned back to her. With extended hands, but a mind still hoping Sarah would dash out of the door, he presented the big black stuffed bear to her, its arms stiffly reaching forward.

Immediately the biscotti was forgotten, and the plate might have broken in its fall had not the bulbous stomach of the bear slowed its descent and had Sarah's hands not been so close to the ground already. As it was, it slid down the black fur and clattered to the ground, all three pieces of biscotti following it. Crumbs fell in between the carpet's threads and made yet another mess for Maximilian to clean.

Sarah, meanwhile, had dissolved into an oblivion of both sorrow and ecstasy mixed into one

confusing mess so that she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was hard to cry when a giant teddy bear engulfed you in a hug you didn't even have to imagine, but she still dampened his fur with previous tears. The bear cleaned both them and the drips of her nose from her face better than her hand ever had.

Maximilian couldn't decide between emotions either. He knew he ought to be having conniptions at anyone touching the bear, let alone the mess of a girl that Sarah sought to imitate. Her soggy scent would take hours of cleaning to get out of the thick black fur, and even then, he might have to get rid of the bear. Either way, it would be irrevocably damaged. Yet he had welcomed such a fate; that meant he couldn't be mad at her, didn't it? And she had stopped sobbing, which was a good thing, a good thing that he had caused.

But he wasn't about to scare her back into crying, so he remained caught between opposite sides, one begging him to toss her outside the house, bear and all – such collateral damage would have to be born—and the other side demanding that he keep silent and let the little girl have her fill of the bear. Perhaps the bear liked it better that way too; Maximilian hadn't pressed into its squishy surface for a long while, as such an action was liable to ruin the bear's integrity, whether it gained cognizance of its plight or not.

Suddenly, with the alacrity of a falcon catching its prey and refusing to relinquish until one of the two contestants lay dead, a hand darted away from the fuzzy back of the bear and snatched up one of Maximilian's. The girl had a vice grip entire-

ly unexpected and irreconcilable with her image. Maximilian felt his fingers pushed together until the index and ring fingers came to meet each other, old friends, below the jealous middle finger. The pinky tagged along as a third wheel.

He returned her grip, if only to relieve the pressure on his own hand, which was slowly turning from tan to white. When she led him back to the door, Maximilian's breath caught in his own hope-filled lungs.

Maximilian readily obliged when they reached the knob that was too tall for her. Unfortunately, she hung onto the hand closest to the door, forcing him to employ gymnastics he was previously unaware of possessing in order to open the door. With a fair degree of grunting and stretching, he threw the door wide, not even caring what foreign, invasive scents entered. Sarah had already carried in a whole host, and he was well stocked with odor neutralizers.

Her exit prepared though, the girl refused to leave. Her feet seemed as if they had suddenly found quicksand within his otherwise immaculate house, save for the stain seeping into the carpet and the discarded biscotti on his floor. Hadn't he already done enough?

Maximilian, having otherwise paid religion of any and every sort no attention throughout his life, began begging any and every god he could think of for help. He attended to any supernatural presence that might be up, or around, or out there, just in case. He wouldn't have himself lose help on account of names and semantics.

Maybe the girl needed a little ushering. He nudged his hand forward, showing her the direction to go, but she only used that to take a couple steps and then stopped, still locked onto him. Another nudge merited the same, and gradually it seemed less and less like he was encouraging her outside and more and more like she was leading him into the not-so-great outdoors. When his foot scraped the lip of the threshold, he arrested the progress. He was an adult, damn it, and he would not be forced into action by a child.

Had he merely released his fingers, Maximilian would not have been able to struggle free from Sarah's grip. As it was though, he took her hand so tightly in his that the pressure on the back of her hand forced her fingers loose before he flung the entire offense away. In practically the same motion, he snatched his bear back, though he was careful not to hug it to himself. It would require several baths in disinfectant before that would be even a possibility to be entertained. Two big steps placed him properly within his house, and he closed his door but for a sliver he left open to look back.

Maximilian acted so fast and so fearfully that Sarah only had time to gasp before Maximilian was hiding behind his door once more, head peeking around the wood. When she realized where he was though, she didn't cry. She didn't restart her symphony of sobs, nor did a snuffle run anywhere near her nose. She only stared at him, her blue eyes deep lakes that threatened to drown him if he were not careful.

"Don't look at me like that!" he demanded. "You've had your sob; now go find your parents."

He stared right back at her as if she would rush back into his house if he blinked.

"I need you to find my parents."

"No, you don't. You got lost on your own, and you can get found on your own."

But she only stared at him.

This elicited another sigh from Maximilian. Apparently, all the gods in the universe had conspired against him to leave him in this plight—or they had simply ignored him, he couldn't be sure. Last time he ever tried their phone line though.

"Look, I'm not going to walk miles or anything," he said.

She said nothing.

"And I'm not giving you the bear."

The door began to creep open.

"I'm just with you until we find another sap to turn you over to. I have things to do, after all."

The door shut behind Maximilian Culbern as he took his first step outside in twenty-seven years and tried not to breath. Breathing required inhalation, a clever path all the terrible scents of the world had found to weasel their way into his system and torment him. He handed over both the bear and his hand, resigning to a march of misery. Soon, the scents would come.

They weren't as bad as he had remembered though, when he finally took a breath. Maybe his memory had failed him, but more likely, twenty-seven years had been time enough for the world to solve some of its problems. He was just glad it had finally clued in to the proper priorities.

Still, it wasn't all roses and rainbows walking outside. For one, he hadn't slipped on shoes,

for they had become a near obsolete commodity to him, save for one pair of cushy slippers. He remained convinced that each pebble was a thorn placed judiciously in his path, even when the many stops he demanded of Sarah revealed nothing of the kind of malicious weapons he imagined. Even the ground, where it hadn't been peppered with mines to be avoided, was rough enough on his poor, sensitive feet.

That, and he was starting to smell something. Without realizing it, he took another sniff, anxious to solve the mystery. He might say he had never smelled anything like it before, but he wouldn't rush into such a claim without better testimony. It got stronger as Sarah led him on. Almost as if she knew where to go, her feet fell confidently on the ground. It must have been because she had shoes on and didn't have to dodge the vicious rocks scattered overtop.

Then Maximilian noticed it.

A distance from his house, yet still visible were he to look out the window he never utilized, there was a "Road Closed" sign. An orange blockade decorated the road with its garish presence too, reinforcing the message conveyed by the black letters painted across its broad surface.

That was all how it should have looked, how it had looked for longer than Maximilian knew. One day the blockade wasn't there, and one day it was. He didn't make a habit of looking out of the window in the corner of his kitchen though, so he wouldn't know when it had decided to take up lodging on his street. Not that it was a problem for him; he didn't drive.

But now, its surface was ragged and slit, the wood popping out from the middle, intruding its plain grain on the painted outside. Pieces of the blockade had been flung from it, splinters of wood littering the surrounding road and coating it with orange snow. The blockade had been simple, one board held up by triangle props on either side, triangles that leaned in to the ground now that the center had robbed their neighborly support from one another. They tilted towards one another, trying to regain what had once been so present, so assumed. From their mangled bodies, Maximilian could make out "Ro ... sed." The rest of the words joined the pieces on the ground.

Sarah led on.

Maximilian, now transfixed, followed her without a complaint even in his mind. Curiosity, wonder, and fear tinged his thoughts now, and he even failed to consider whether the shards of wood might give him a splinter as Sarah led him on through its shattered remains.

Past the blockade, Maximilian was able to see what he never could have glimpsed from his house—a car sat hugging its headlights around a telephone pole, attempting, unsuccessfully, to become one with it. Its hood had become ruffled, allowing a steady thin line of smoke to escape. The rest of the car imitated the jagged crumple of the hood, crunching in on itself. Two white airbags filled the space in the front.

Suddenly, Maximilian gagged. He hung onto Sarah as he bent over, relieving his stomach of its daily allowance of biscotti. He knew the scent now, though he was right that he had never smelled it

before. He had smelled it in animals of course, in mice stuck in the walls of his childhood house, but never in humans. Death. Death mixed with smoke and burnt rubber. Sweat and fear and inevitability. Panic.

But his feet refused to move, for all that his brain shouted at him to run away. Then, inexplicably, he felt himself drawing nearer. Perhaps it was sick curiosity that moved him, or a simple desire to find proof for the denial he begged to be allowed to make. Maximilian knew—despite his inclination to reduce interaction with the machines as much as possible—that cars didn't drive themselves, and the release of the second airbag confirmed at least one passenger. Sarah had led him here, and he wondered at the gruesome scene the child was running from, glad at least that she had been able to run.

Maximilian looked down to query her, but, doing so, found no one by his side. The street was empty but for himself, the car, and his fears, and though he swung his head about, he saw her nowhere.

His captor and leader gone, he could go home. He could walk away, shut his door, and forget what he had seen. It wouldn't be hard. As long as he never looked outside his kitchen corner window, as long as he never found the shattered "Road Closed" sign with his eyes. A simple pulled shade would be enough to solve that.

A quiver shot through his nose at the thought, but it changed quickly to a wrinkle of disgust at himself. He was already out, wasn't he? He was already here. And, he told himself, if he didn't find Sarah's

parents for her, wherever she was hiding, she was likely to come back to his house with another knock and ten more annoyances.

Edging forward, Maximilian gasped at the scent that struck his nose, the scent emanating from the car. It was too late to turn around, for he could be sure that the putrescence had wrapped itself around him, clinging to him as surely as the fetid air he walked through. He might as well continue, so he did, stretching forward a hand and opening the driver's side door.

Never before had he so reviled being proved right. His eyes jumped over the poor man, the driver, to find what could only be his poor wife, the passenger. Mercy found him where it had departed from these people, and he didn't have to open the other side door to so discover the pair. It was no wonder that Sarah had come to find him, he decided, and he began to regret the voracity with which he had tried to bar her from his sanctuary. She was only a scared little girl after all, and he applauded the tears she had shed, a small number he now judged.

Then he gasped.

As he had withdrawn his eyes from the car, they had traipsed over the back seat. Laying there, neck slumped at an uncomfortable looking angle, was Sarah, one of her pigtails thrown off kilter by the tilt of her head. There could be no mistaking the blood on her shirt.

Maximilian stared at the body of the little girl, expecting her to open her eyes any second, cry and beg him to take her back to his house, a Herculean challenge he would readily undergo. But she

didn't twitch anywhere, not even her chest, which denied any ascension through the air, steady or otherwise.

Maximilian bowed his eyes, and found the teddy bear yet in his hands. Pulling it up to his eyes, he inspected it for the previous tear and snot stains that had streaked its fur but found nothing save the pristine condition he insisted that all his animals maintain. It wasn't even damp.

He would go back and call the police from his seldom-used phone, inform them of the situation. Maximilian became very grateful that his job was that of a mere messenger, not that of the person sworn to attend the message he would bring. He did not envy them their task, particularly the dragging out of that tiny, broken body in the back seat. Maximilian turned to go back to his house.

Before he departed the gruesome scene though, he ducked into the car once more and left a large black bear sitting on the seat next to a tiny little girl named Sarah.

Stranger by Emliy Labutta

I still remember the day it all started. Who couldn't?

I was playing outside with Ruthie, Sarah Ruth for long, just like any other day. I think we were playing dolls, but I can't remember any more. It doesn't seem important.

"Trudy Ann Walker!" Momma's barking voice cut out of the back screen door, down the two wooden steps with their peeling paint, and came to rest where we were. "You get yourself in here quick as a lick. And Sarah Ruth, get home to your momma; she'll be worried sick."

I didn't know why Ruthie's momma should be worried; truth is, I didn't think about it. All I knew was that when Momma used my full name, I came running. The rest of the time, I went by Trudy.

I dashed away from Ruthie, jumped the two steps and flung myself into the house. I was getting faster. Should I look happy or apologetic? I usually opted for a combination of the two, which lent itself to a lopsided grin that looked as if I had just stopped twirling myself around and around outside and was about to be sick. Thinking back now, I probably looked pretty dumb.

I got both of Momma's usual responses this time, a cuff of the ear and then one of those too-

tight hugs. "What were you doing out there, Trudy Ann?" she asked. "Don't you think?"

I wanted to say that of course I thought, that no one could get by without thinking, but I held my tongue.

"Well?" She was tapping her foot, a bad sign.

"I'm sorry, Momma." I said. "I didn't know Tuesdays were different from the rest. I'll be better next time, I promise."

"You pray to Jesus that there's not a next time."

I wondered how there could not be another Tuesday, but Momma was strong. If she didn't want there to be another Tuesday, there wouldn't be, no matter what Jesus did.

"We have a visitor in town, not just any visitor. They say he's," she hushed her voice, "he's green. They say he's a green man. Can a man be green? I don't know. But they say that's what he is. So listen, you stay back until we know more. You hear me, Trudy Ann? Stay back. Stay back until I tell you it's safe." She struggled to put on her jacket. The faster she tried to go, the more stuck she got. "I'll go find out the truth. You stay here and stay inside." She fixed me with her freezing stare then, making sure I couldn't move, and then dashed out the door. I'm sure she didn't mean it to do so, but it slammed behind her.

It was a little while before the ice Momma had placed around me started to melt, making puddles at my feet. First I tried wiggling. When I dashed to the right, I waited anxiously for the ceiling to come crashing about my ears. When it didn't, I knew I was safe. Momma must have been walking fast; she

would have to be pretty far for her power not to have a hold of me.

I ran right to my room, where on my bedside dresser was a journal and pen. This was a real journal. It wasn't like the journals some people keep, leather journals that let them feel like writers. Mine weren't fancy—they were the cheapest I could find. But above all, mine weren't empty.

I was a writer, and I was going to be a writer. A journalist, to be exact. How could Momma expect me to pass up an opportunity like this? I grabbed my tools and ran out the door before the house fell down around my rebellious ears.

Outside, the street that should have been littered with kids and bikes on such a Tuesday afternoon was empty. I imagined them all inside, stuck in their rooms or in corners, just waiting, and I could see the headline: Children Abandoned in Town-wide Excitement. Their mommas weren't as strong as mine, so they could have escaped, except they weren't as daring as me. They would pay for that now, and I would pay for it later.

I didn't go get Ruthie. Part of me wanted her with me—two are safer than one—but she wasn't the type to break the rules. I could never figure out why. Besides, sometimes a story is better when it's just you, your sweaty palms, and the scratching pencil trying to keep up.

As I turned the corner, I saw that I was not alone. Bustling with frantic energy, someone else was hurrying towards town. I jumped behind the nearest streetlight before she had time to see or hear me. From my very slim shelter I peered out at her, looking at her clothes, the sway of her hips, and

the swing of her arms. Nope, it wasn't Momma. But it did look like Mrs. Hinkle, so I wasn't safe. Adults looked out for adults, and kids looked after kids.

I wasn't about to give up though. I wanted to see this green man; I wanted my story. So instead I scurried from streetlight to streetlight, never too close, but never too far either, because then I wouldn't know where she was. Mrs. Hinkle didn't know it, but we played hide-and-seek all the way to the town center.

I heard the town center before I saw it. The rustling of people moving, the buzz of them talking, attacked my ears. Practically everyone from the town was there. Mr. Jonsir wasn't there, or at least, I didn't see him, but he was what Momma called a "recluse," which was somehow supposed to explain anything he did. I made sure I found Momma real quick. She was towards the front, of course, and pushing to get further in towards the town hall. That's where everything was happening.

"People, people," the mayor called, finally silencing the clamor. "We have," he paused, dramatically. This was the most excitement he had ever had, and probably would ever have. He cleared his throat and started over. "We have a visitor!" The roll of cheers and screams covered him again. Someone jostled me, and I almost fell. I guess they didn't see me, which I should have been grateful for because it meant Momma probably wouldn't either, but I wished they had looked down.

"People, people," he tried again, and calmed us as much as we would allow. He started delivering his speech. I should have recorded it for later, and tried at first, but he used words I didn't

know and my notebook became a collection of scratchings that not even I could read. It was unfair and I wished he'd get on with what I could understand. So did everyone else, I think. Who cares about words, no matter how pretty or big they are, when there's a green man behind the town hall doors just waiting to be unleashed?

What will he look like? I wondered. Green skin and hair, green fingernails and toenails? What if he has green eyes? Not just the little colored disk that everyone has, but the whole thing? What if he has a green tongue, and what if he has green spit? What will he look like?

The doors opened, and while I'm sure the crowd roared, it was like a vacuum had sucked all sense from me but sight. Out of the doors came a peaceful looking man. What did he look like? He looked like us. His eyes, normal, seemed kind and patient, the type that know everything but don't mind if you don't. He was taller than the mayor, but just about everyone except kids were, and even some of us. He took off his hat as he stood before the mass of people staring at him – normal hair, brown. He inclined his head towards us and held his hat in his hands, willing to wait until we had our fill, feasting our eyes upon him. He seemed quiet, but not meek, strong but not overbearing. The only thing different was his skin.

You could barely see it anyway. His face was free of the shadow of his hat, and he was in a short-sleeved shirt on account of the hot sun. Or, he had probably been asked to wear it that the crowd might get a better view. There wasn't much to see, and I wished I were taller.

That's when his eyes caught mine. I don't know how he found me in the rolling crowd; maybe he didn't mean to do it. But our eyes found each other, and for a strange moment I felt like we understood each other. It's too bad you can't put stuff like that in the newspaper.

Things were breaking up now and with a start and a twitch of my skin, I realized that Momma would be heading back home just like me. I pushed away from the crowd. Why wouldn't they let me free? No one seemed to realize the depth of the situation. I stumbled out, using my almost-fall to build my speed and kept going. My feet pounded along the ground just like my heart inside my chest. Momma would take the main road, so I had to take the winding back roads. I don't know if they're really longer, but they felt like it. I never knew how fast I needed to go, because I never knew how far, or how close, Momma was to me and to the house. I just ran as fast as I could.

When our house came into view, I risked the dash up the front steps. The ground didn't shake beneath me, and I couldn't see Momma anywhere. I was safe. I returned to my room since that's where she'd expect me to be, and I got out a book since that's what she'd expect me to do. I couldn't read—I was too excited—but that was okay. The outward show would be enough for my purposes.

As it turned out, I didn't need to run; Momma came back much later. She must have stayed and talked, pushing opinions. Momma was a big woman; it didn't take much for her to convince people. She didn't call me down until supper was being served and she needed my help setting the places

for her, me, and Papa. Papa had been at work all day; he was what he called, "just a business man." It sounded boring and I never knew what he meant, but apparently it meant nothing fun because he hadn't been allowed to go see the green man. Neither had I, but it didn't stop me and I wondered why he let it stop him.

"—and then there he was, just standing there, green. Not forest green neither. He was a bright green, shining green that looks like there's a light underneath."

"But is he safe, Momma?" Papa said. He called her Momma too. It was like she always was a mother, like there was no other way of thinking about her. Sometimes I wondered what Papa called her before I came along.

"Oh sure. He just stood there. He might be dumb, I suppose."

I saw Papa shake his head slightly, but he kept his eyes on his green beans and didn't say anything.

"We'll have to get to know him, show ourselves as friends. Trudy?"

"Yes, Momma?"

"You're going to help me bake him something on Friday. We can't go tomorrow because we won't be first, and if you're not that, people think you're buying favor. We'll want something unique too. Banana bread, zucchini bread—any type of bread is out. Let's see..." she trailed on, while Papa and I shared a glance and a grin and quietly munched our supper.

"Trudy!" Momma bellowed. "Trudy! Get down here!"

I tried to get out the rest of the sentence I was defacing the once-fresh page with, snapped the journal shut and dropped down the stairs.

"Here," she said, tossing an apron at me. "Baking day."

I tried to get the apron on right, but it wouldn't work. After ducking my head under its yoke, I worked the back strings together. It's hard enough to tie behind my back, and harder still because I thought I saw Momma shake her head at me. I pulled the strings until they were rubbing their ends, but the apron was still too big. It would have to do.

"Come here, Trudy," Momma summoned. "You want to help, don't you?"

I nodded; it was easier than explaining. I didn't want to bake, but I wanted to go to the mayor's house and talk to the green man. If this was my way in, I would do it. I put a smile on my face and got ready to get flour-y.

When we were walking to the mayor's house, I was jittery. Momma eventually took our gift—I don't know what we ended up making—from my hands, but she still had to keep telling me to slow down. It suddenly occurred to me how spread out all the houses were. I didn't know why we didn't live closer; we all liked each other, didn't we? And then it was up the steps, across the porch, and bouncing until Momma rapped her knuckles on the door.

We were met with a sigh and a short man who only came to Momma's shoulders. It was the mayor, and he didn't look happy to see us. Quickly though, he threw on a smile and joined us on the porch, pulling the door mostly closed behind him.

"Margaret! So nice to see you! And little Trudy too!" He made to pinch my cheeks but I placed myself halfway behind Momma's skirt and avoided him.

"Likewise, Mayor Walchet. We came to pay a welcoming visit to the green man." Momma wasn't about to be rude, but she would be direct. We didn't come to see the mayor and weren't about to pretend that we did.

"Well, uh, I'm not sure he can see you at the moment." The mayor phrased it like a question, like he was asking Momma's permission to be contrary. She didn't grant it, and he pulled out a thin handkerchief that he began worrying around his fingers.

"Can't see us at the moment? Walchet, you need to be teaching him the customs here. I don't know what he's been used to, but if he's staying here, he must learn how to properly interact with people."

"I assure you that..."

And then the grown-ups were talking, or battling, I'm not entirely sure which. Either way, it was boring. I didn't come along just to stand and listen to adults. I came to see the green man, to talk to him. I came to get my story.

I glanced up at Momma. She was far enough into the conversation that she had placed her hands on her hips. That was a bad sign for the mayor, who was still twisting the sorry cloth. With one more glance, I dove through the open door, and held my breath. Once I was sure their voices continued, I looked around. There was only one light on, far down one hall and behind a door. The yellow light lit up the crack of space by the door and

struggled to shine amidst the darkness pressing in. It looked so hopeful; I went towards it.

I didn't dare knock—that would be to invite rejection—so I placed my hand on the knob and slowly pushed my way in. I had to blink in the light, and the first thing I saw were books surrounding me on every side. Next, I saw the green man. Or, I saw the top of his head, the rest of him hidden by a chair with its back to me. I shouldn't say this, but I thought about running out. I had been so daring, but all my courage left me. I would go back, receiving nothing for my efforts except a light smack in front of the mayor and probably a beating later.

Then he stood up, and I froze. Maybe he had some of the same powers as Momma. He came closer and closer, until he stopped, squatting, right up close. "Hello," he said, and his voice sounded normal. "Did you want to read with me?"

I nodded. "I'm Trudy Walker. What's your name?"

He grinned. "I'm Timothy. May I call you Trudy?"

"Everyone does. Except Momma when she's mad."

"Well, I'm not mad, so I think Trudy would be just fine, don't you? Yes. Let's see about a book now." He reached out his green hand and I took it in my red one. We traced the walls, him suggesting books and me shrugging to each one. I didn't care what we read; as long as it was with him, I would read a textbook.

My shrugging didn't seem to be working for him though. "What do you like to read?" he asked.

Up 'til then I had forgotten that I came in for a story. This was my interview. "What are you reading?"

"Just *Crime and Punishment*."

"Do you read a lot?"

"I do now. I liked it before, but I would also spend time with my friends, my family."

"But we'd be your friends. Everyone's been coming."

"Oh they've been coming for the spectacle, not for me," he said bitterly. "If I was just another red man, no one would care. Not this much at least. Did you know you're the first person to ask my name? I used to see them, all the people that would come. But all they do is stare, and if they talk it's about themselves. I didn't used to be this reclusive, not on my planet."

"Why did you leave then?"

"It wasn't choice. Our planet, Temakthin, was imploding, and we had to evacuate. There must have been a glitch in my pod, because I didn't end up with the others; I got stuck here instead."

"Maybe we can get you off. If you tell us where you're supposed to be—"

"I don't know. The pods are pre-programmed, so no one needs to know except the engineers."

"Oh." There was nothing more to say to that. A pause stretched out and I felt my time slipping away and knew I should ask more questions and quickly—any moment Momma would burst into the room and drag me out. But I couldn't think of any more, which was odd for me.

I shuffled closer to Timothy and put my free hand on his knee. "I'll be your friend, Timothy. I'll come for you," I offered.

It happened so quickly that I didn't know what was going on at first, but suddenly I was in Timothy's arms and he was hugging me. I didn't mind; I liked it. He twirled so that my legs flung out, then he put me down. "I would like that, Trudy."

We smiled at each other, our teeth reflecting white on white.

"Let's get you back to your mother then," he said, but I shook my head frantically. Momma would not be pleased with me. Only after he had taken my hand again and made it clear that he was coming with me, did I agree.

The mayor and Momma were surprised to see Timothy coming out of the house, and even more to see me with him.

"Mayor," Timothy took charge right away, but his voice was still the warm, quiet smoothness it had been in the library. "I'm sure you know Miss Trudy Walker here. We have just become friends, and I will gladly receive her at any time. Mrs. Walker, thank you for bringing Trudy by. She was the best thing you could have brought."

"But I didn't give you my—" Momma began holding out what we had made, all coated in foil.

"The best thing," he repeated.

And that was it. We left with all the proper airs, but once we were out of sight, Momma started shrieking at me. She should have waited until we were out of earshot too. "Trudy Ann Walker! What were you thinking? Sneaking away from me, trespassing into the mayor's house, talking to the green man... You should be ashamed of yourself."

I thought the whole point of our going there was to talk to Timothy, and I wasn't ashamed. He

had smiled. But I kept my mouth shut and let her continue.

"You are a girl, a little girl! You can't just go wandering anywhere you want. This is an ordered society, and we can't all do what we want. You have to obey the rules. Well?"

"I'm sorry, Momma," I murmured. I had done wrong in leaving her, if nothing else.

"Oh you will be." Momma kept a tight grip on my hand all the way home. When she finished with my punishment, I couldn't sit down.

I started seeing Timothy once every week, sometimes more. Ruthie claimed I was replacing her, but it wasn't true. You can add friends without removing them.

Besides, Timothy was fun. When the mayor would open the door, I barely remembered to say hi to him. He wasn't who I was there for. Adults could be so boring to talk to. Timothy was old, but he was different. He didn't feel old. He didn't sound old. And he laughed.

That's what I enjoyed the most. No matter what we would do, we always ended up laughing, even more than Ruthie and I. I don't think either of us knew why, but that didn't matter. He was allowed to be him, and I was allowed to be me.

Momma began to complain. "What's so special about that green man, huh? Why do you spend so much time with him? Am I not good enough? I'll tell you he's nothing. Nothing, you hear? He just waltzes into our town like he owns the place. I still remember him standing there, bold and cocky, letting us cheer in his face. And people still do. Flock-

ing to him, just on account of his skin. Well anyone can be different. I can paint my skin and be purple, and what then?"

She paused, but she wasn't talking to me. This was one of those times when Momma had to rant, had to lecture me, and then she felt like she had solved all of the world's problems. All she had to do was get it out.

"I'm tired of him. He's just as reclusive as ever. He lets us do all the adoring, and never returns a thing. He's in there laughing at us, seeing how long he can live on our generosity."

It wasn't true. That wasn't what Timothy and I laughed about. And he had told me that he wanted all the attention to go away. He was waiting for the gifts to stop. He was waiting to be normal again, to be just another face in the crowd. His face just stood out too much.

"It's time he got a job, but even then he'd be favored. No matter what, he's going to be living off his difference, and it's not fair. Not if we can't have that too." Her anger at him spent, she turned to me. "And what are you staring at? Going to run off to your green friend, and tell him all that I said? Good! Give him my mind, and maybe something will change around here."

I left without a choice. I felt like a traitor when I raised my hand to knock, and prayed that no one would answer. It took a while for the mayor to come. Usually I could hear his voice piping through the door, promising his speed. He didn't say anything today, and instead I heard a dull shuffling behind the door. Finally, it opened up a crack.

"Yes?" said the mayor, but he didn't look like the mayor anymore. He was pale, and his hair was crazed. Something was matting it down in odd places. When he saw that it was me, he pretended everything was normal. He placed something on the table I knew was just inside his house—it looked like a gun—but he tried not to show me, and he opened the door further, but still not all the way.

Now that I could see all of his face, and the shadow from the door was gone, he looked terrible. There was dried blood on one corner of his face; it must have run down from the top where it was matting his hair. As I stared at him, he grabbed a bloody handkerchief off the table—he must have been using it to stop the flow—and tossed it to the side as if the sight of it would be too much for me. I was more worried about him.

"Mayor?" was all I could say. It surprised me that my voice came out soft and jittery.

"Trudy Ann." He shook his head. "Why did you come today? Did you have to come today?"

"Momma sent me."

"What do you want?" He sounded tired. The hit on his head must have done more than he was aware, because there was no reason for me to be at his house except for Timothy, my friend.

"Timothy." I went and got the handkerchief from the corner it had fallen into. He needed it, whether he realized it or not. Handing it to him, I asked, "But what happened to you?"

"Oh Trudy, they all came. All the people of the town. All of them save a couple. I didn't see your mother, Joe Garrier, Gina Pickerton, Reg Jonsir.... ah, a couple others. Only a couple others."

"But what happened?" I prodded again. The mayor didn't seem to have any concept of a proper interview, or good story telling. Maybe I'd just go ask Timothy.

"Stewart Mill knocked on the door, and I came. Why wouldn't I come? There was no reason not to. I started to say hi, and then he jammed a gun in my face. In my face! Well, what's a man to do then? There's hospitality, sure, but I didn't want to die. I didn't want to die!" His voice gained a high, unnatural pitch and he grabbed my hands. "Trudy Ann, what was I supposed to do? I didn't want to die!"

I tore myself away from him. I couldn't think. If I just found Timothy, he would tell me everything. He would fix everything. He would make it all okay again.

It seemed so far to the back library. On my way I noticed that the furniture, hall tables and the like, was overturned. There were some nasty tears in the wallpaper where it looked like someone had too much fun with a knife. I could hear the mayor shouting after me, but barely. "I'm innocent!" he claimed. "They hit me too!"

In the study, Timothy's chair was knocked over. I ran to it, and tripped over a book on the floor. I skinned my knees, but I didn't care. Timothy was gone.

"Where is he?" I whirled on the mayor with tears already streaking my face. My hands balled in fists, and I was ready to beat him until he told me. How could he let this happen?

"I don't know," he whined. "They hit me."

I ran away from him. What was going on? Had the adults really done that to the mayor and his house? What had they done to Timothy?

Mr. Garrier's house was the closest, and I didn't even think as I jumped up the porch steps and pounded on his door. The mayor had said he wasn't a part of the crowd. Mr. Garrier opened the door cautiously, but I couldn't wait to explain to him. I dashed in and wrapped myself around his leg. "Where's Timothy?" I cried. "Where's Timothy?"

Somehow he pried me off of him, but only to hold me in his arms. I wasn't a little girl anymore, but he held me up like a baby. I hid in the crook of his arm, wetting his shirt with my tears. Only when his soft, rocking steps stopped did I look up.

We were in the town center, and something was on the ground far away from us. Mr. Garrier put me down, but he kept a hold of my hand. I must have walked toward it, the shape on the ground, but I can't really remember. I was too far, and then I was too close. That's all I know.

I recognized the figure on the ground. It was a human, a green human. It was Timothy.

"No!" I shouted, dropping Mr. Garrier's hand and running forward. I sank to my knees by his form. He was too motionless. Why wouldn't he move? Pieces of his skin were scattered around his body, circling him like green vultures. Why was he in pieces? Why was he so torn up? I clung to his body, curling over him. Rocking back and forth, I whispered, "Why, why, why, why?"

Mr. Garrier answered me; I didn't know he was so close. "They were trying to take the green from him. Some wanted it for themselves. Others

just didn't want him to have it. All it took was a common enemy, a common difference."

I was sobbing. "But why hurt him? He didn't want to hurt anyone. He just wanted to be left alone."

He didn't have an answer to that. The wind came by and picked up some of the pieces of Timothy, flinging them about. I couldn't take it, but I couldn't move; I couldn't stop it. I felt wetness, and looked down. Timothy's blood had stained through my shirt.

It was red. He had red blood. I had never seen anything like it. Our blood was green, but his was red, like our skin.

I never washed my shirt.

Time Traveler Tuesdays

by Anna Jacobiec

Shawn started to call the visits Time Traveler Tuesdays, although he could never be sure which Tuesday Emily would come. When he got home from school, he did odd jobs his mom had assigned around the old house until he heard the back door slide open. Emily never knocked, having gotten used to what Shawn considered breaking and entering. He would have liked to be that adventurous, too. By the time she finished pushing buttons on his TV remote or poking inside the pantry cupboards, Shawn always stood at the kitchen counter next to the coffeemaker.

"I love the sight of you at your own magical machine," Emily said from the kitchen doorway.

Shawn started to shrug the comment off. After all, Emily had seen cooler stuff than coffeemakers in the future. But the longer he thought about it, the more sense it made that she cared about his technology, too. If he got the chance to travel two hundred years into the future and everyone had hover cars, of course he would be amazed. But if he followed that with a trip only ninety years into the future, where people only had jetpacks, he would still be excited.

Shawn turned around to pull out a chair for Emily. "Hey, do they have jetpacks in the future?"

"Do who have what?" she asked.

"Do people in the future strap flying machines on their backs?"

"Hmm." Emily drummed her fingers on the table. "Regrettably, not that I've seen."

Shawn sighed. "Well, if you ever hear about them, let me know."

"I never hear about anything." Emily laughed. "I have to stumble on everything I discover. Every time is so concerned with itself! No one talks about the past, at least not to me."

Shawn had to admit he couldn't remember the last time he had mentioned anything less recent than 1980 in casual conversation. "If you really want to, you can take some history lessons here. I've got plenty of homework we could do."

Emily waved that aside. "If my father wanted me to take lessons, he wouldn't have invented something that let me see history firsthand."

"Wait, your father *invented* the time machine?"

"What did you think? That I stole it?" She raised an eyebrow.

"But how did he—"

"No, I'm too offended to talk about it. You're done making coffee. Are you ever going to sit down and offer me a cup?"

Shawn opened his mouth, then closed it and rolled his eyes. "Fine, fine. But be careful or you'll hurt my feelings one of these days. I already don't believe you're here to learn about history; I'm starting to think you only come to this time for my mochas."

"I'm still not entirely sure what they are," she said, wrapping her fingers around the warm mug he offered, "but God bless you for them."

"Oh, come on," said Shawn. "You're from, what, the early 1900s?"

"1908."

"They had coffee in the United States by then."

Emily clapped the mug onto the table. "Excuse me? I'm Canadian."

He started to grin, his mind taking him back to his first glimpse of her. She wore the same fierce expression he'd always remember on her round, button-nosed face. Then the dust of his below-stairs closet had covered her; now the sunlight coming through the window haloed her long dark hair. Her curls were no longer tortured into a pompadour and a wide-brimmed straw hat. He had met her in full Edwardian garb, which fit her just as well as the period-appropriate words that came out of her mouth: "When has the deuced machine taken me now?"

Emily seemed lost in memories today, too. She smiled back at Shawn and looked down at her pale hands, callused from her rougher travels. The windowpane left lines of sun and shadow on them and his large brown ones folded opposite on the table. The way Shawn imagined her life—stepping sideways through time and finding oneself at a Beatles concert or the 2020 Olympics—it was perfect.

::

Shawn wondered if Emily had been too good to be true when she didn't show up for two weeks after that. He couldn't have dreamed up her first

three visits, though. He flat-out refused to think he had hallucinated, but if Emily was real, could she be the crazy one? She didn't talk crazy, not even in the mild way of the old men and women in the nursing home where he volunteered, but... time travel?

On the third Tuesday since Emily's previous visit, Shawn found her sitting on the spindly couch in the living room with her finger stuck in his mom's navy blue photo album.

"Most of these are you and your mom," she said, looking up at him. "Where is she now? Why are you always alone here?"

"I'm not always," he protested, "just when you come around. Mom works until really late."

"And your dad..."

Shawn blinked. "He's out of the picture."

"Hm, quite literally." Emily pointed back at the album and said, "I like this picture of you in crazy curls."

"It's called an afro."

"Don't blush. I said I like it."

"Er... thanks." Shawn awkwardly sat next to her on the couch. Now that he had come, Emily seemed ready to stay in one time for a while. She pulled her gold watch chain off over her head. Even if she did wear it like a necklace, it still looked like an ordinary pocket watch to Shawn. Sure, a few odd key-heads and knobs stuck out, and the face made of interlocking gears was lettered in Greek. But it didn't quite look like Shawn's idea of a time machine. If anything, it seemed more like magic than science.

"So what's your family like?" Shawn asked. "I'm still curious about your dad. He really invented

a time-traveling pocket watch?" He failed to keep incredulity out of his tone.

She tucked the time machine into her pocket. "Yes, he did. No need to sound so dubious."

"You've got to admit it sounds far-fetched."

"Oh, it's very human," she said more softly. "He was attempting to invent something that would turn back time to before my mother died."

"Oh." Shawn tried to think of something kind to say. "Well, in a way, didn't he succeed? With a time machine, he—and you—could visit her. Right?"

"Oh, he visited her. I'm just not sure..." Emily shrugged. "It doesn't matter. We've agreed that I should put the machine to better use by seeing new things."

"So your dad knows that you use it."

"I already told you I didn't steal it! Honestly, Shawn. Father gave it to me in the first place."

"Seems like a lot of responsibility for a teenage girl," he said, partly teasing but mostly still suspicious.

Emily lifted her chin. "There's precious little to occupy me at home. And no, that is not a statement of boredom. Academies for young ladies teach almost nothing useful, not by Father's standards anyway. Before he gave me the watch, he traveled himself. I'll be forever grateful for the things he learned about limits of our time. Now I get to learn, too."

"Like about racism?" Shawn asked pointedly.

"I think you had better tell me whether I've learned anything about that." She winced. "I certainly didn't think much about it until recently."

To be quite honest, Shawn kept expecting someone from the turn of the century to be more

racist, but this white girl was, at the least, no more obvious than the ones he normally talked to. Another thing that seemed too good to be true.

From the way Emily was looking at him now, with a wrinkle between her eyebrows, Shawn wondered if she knew he didn't quite buy her excuses. But the troubled, narrow-eyed look disappeared in the flash of her grin. "I'll be back soon," she said, tapping her fingers on the photo album. "I'll be back soon."

::

The last month of school was not so busy that Shawn forgot about Emily's "soon," but he did have a heavy workload. The later he stayed up conquering homework, the more likely he was to see his mom when she got home. She never seemed particularly cheerful about it. The Monday two weeks after Emily's visit, his mom interrupted his studies with the question, "You going to bed soon?"

"Hi, Mom. Yeah, hopefully."

She stood with her hand on his back, motionless, as if she was trying to listen to the wall clock tick. "I'm sorry you have so much work to do."

"I choose some of it. No one forces me to volunteer."

"I'm glad school will be out soon. You'll have more free time... It'll be easier."

Shawn sighed. His mom often responded more to her own thoughts than to his actual conversation. "If it makes you feel better, Emily might be back tomorrow." *Or she might not, like last week. If I can't believe she time travels, I have no reason to believe her promises.*

"Emily... That's the girl you met this winter, who goes to all the Renaissance Faires?"

"Uh, yeah, something like that." Shawn still wished he had thought of a better explanation. "I found out her parents aren't really around, so she pretty much homeschools herself. She just wears what she likes."

"Sounds lonely," his mom said. She added after a pause, "Well, anyone with that problem is welcome to stay here as long as she needs."

"Mom! I didn't say she was going to stay over!"

She swatted his head lightly. "Hold your horses. Neither did I. You just let her know, if she's ever tired of being alone, I said she could use the guest bedroom."

Shawn tried not to dwell on that. After all, his mom didn't know what she'd really welcomed by accepting Emily. But before bed, at school, and when he sat down to do more homework, Shawn began to think that maybe he didn't know enough about Emily, either. His Ren Faire explanation might have been crappy, but there was a reason it sounded more believable than Emily's own explanation.

Not too much later that day, Emily strode in and said, "Charlemagne," before he even looked up from the math problem he was working on.

Once again, he hadn't caught her arriving. Did she flicker in and out of existence like a hologram, he wondered, or had she taken a stroll from the nearest asylum?

He shook back the thought and put down his pencil. "How was that?"

"His empire was a bit damp."

"Coffee's in the pot if you need to warm your bones."

She sat down and peeked over the top of her mug as she drank, as if she was sizing him up. Shawn squirmed.

"I brought you something," she said after a few deep drinks of coffee.

"Is it a puppy?"

"Er, no."

"That's all right." The corners of Shawn's eyes crinkled. "I wouldn't want anything Charle-mangy."

Her chair squeaked on the wood floor as she pushed it back.

He stifled his snicker on the back of his hand. "Oh, come on. Don't go. It wasn't that bad."

"Yes, it was." Emily crooked a finger at him. "Do you want to see your real gift or not?"

At her instruction, the two of them began to spade the earth under the maple tree in the back-yard. The early May sun felt good on the back of Shawn's neck while they dug. Finally Emily cried, "I found it!"

He had to wonder how she had managed it, given the smallness of what she dropped into his palm. The silver coin depicted the profile of a laureled man with a long nose, large ears, and a rather flabby chin. *KAROLUS IMP AVG* was stamped onto the face of the coin.

"Charlemagne never set foot here." Despite his disbelief, Shawn's fingers closed around the coin.

"The gift isn't from the emperor personally, I'm afraid, but I did retrieve it from his period before burying it here."

He could feel the hard, unworn ridges of the edge under the dirt. "It's that old?"

"It's not, actually." Emily bit her lip. "I hope that's all right. See, I found your house when the

tree was still a sapling, but you weren't here..." She trailed off.

He accidentally let the silence become awkward before answering. "My mom and I only moved into this house a few years ago."

"Well, it worked out for the best. I used the tree as a place-marker for the coin, and this way we got to excavate it together."

He kept thinking about her having been here before him. Even though he had never climbed or swung from the tree in his childhood, he suddenly felt like a little boy.

Emily started to grin. "Do you see the point yet? As you said, Charlemagne was never here. The coin couldn't have just ended up here. Only I could have put it here in the first place. Now tell me truthfully: you never quite believed in my time travel until now, did you?"

Shawn blinked at her. Just this week—just today—he had failed to avoid the tangle of those thoughts. Did he believe her now? *This could be the moment. If it's real, not just wacky storytelling we joke about, anything could happen. I could do anything, go anywhere.*

Whoa, too much. Rather than face up to it, Shawn asked himself aloud, "What does pocket change prove?"

Emily raised her eyebrow. Shawn felt she was daring him, the boy whose only travels were from a usually empty house to school and a nursing home, to do something drastic. He cleared his throat and held out the coin. "Heads I wash my hands of this nonsense; tails you come back next Tuesday."

Emily just crossed her arms. In the time the coin took to flip, Shawn panicked. *Why did I do this? Can I take it back if—What if I don't see her again?*

He caught the coin and peeked inside his shaking fist. Tails.

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Emily did come back the next week, then on and off for about a month. By the time the heat of summer oozed into the old house, Shawn could reasonably expect her every week. In the absence of school, other kinds of work picked up, so Shawn wholeheartedly embraced the distraction of Emily's company. Today they kept to his kitchen.

"The forest swallowed time as soon as I stepped in," Emily said. "I could no more tell when I was than I could see the path. But something had made tunnels through the thickness, and I had to follow it. The ground was beaten hard, like a carriage rut, and if I tried to step off, the trees pushed me back. Red brick walls eventually rose up on either side, and I hoped that meant the path would take me somewhere." As Shawn expected, Emily jumped up from the table. She reenacted her prowling through the woods, bent over as if ready to pounce on anything that moved.

"I came to a door that the forest pushed right up against. You know, I thought the 'skyscrapers' in your time were smooth and tall, but I hadn't seen anything like these towers. People built them higher and higher because no one wanted to challenge the ground. The door seemed barely used. If you wanted to see what the forest really looked like, you had to be above, on their bridges stretching across the sky for... miles." For a moment, Emily's eyes grew dreamy.

"Where had you escaped to?" Shawn asked. The sense that all this existed somewhere, somewhere, made him whisper. He imagined having the freedom to travel with her and thought, *Yeah, that's what I'd choose*. To soak in a cathedral-like calmness instead of the busy loneliness of Wednesday through Monday.

"Inside, the walls looked like rough stone, but every few feet were ceiling-to-floor hangings called screens." She swept her arms to suggest a cavernous space and long, flat sheets. "They looked like black mirrors. One needed several high balconies to use the screens. I felt like a spider on a web when I stepped onto one."

"What happened when you touched the mirrors?"

"I merely observed. Everyone else had special gloves and smaller black mirror-screens they pulled from their coat pockets and put in slots around the building. Words raced across the long screen and flew into the little ones. In almost no time, people journeyed into the forest with whole pages and pages of books just in their hands. Can you imagine?"

Shawn thought for a moment. "Was this a library, Emily?"

She grinned ear to ear. "How did you know? I never would have guessed trees would grow too aggressive for us to use paper."

That gave him pause. "Aggressive? What, did they fight back against deforestation?"

"Why wouldn't they, once they found a way to?"

"Um, Emily? Are we dealing with science or magic here?"

"I've never been sure," she admitted. "The screen books seem like magic. They were like nothing you've ever seen."

"Right." Shawn grimaced. "Except we have those now. They're called e-books, but since you can't smell them or turn the pages, they're not real books at all." Shawn didn't read much apart from school assignments, but that didn't keep him from having an opinion. "They're the worst."

"Really?" Emily's animated hands dropped out of the air. She sat down slowly. "I thought they were beautiful."

Not cool, Shawn. He shifted his weight. "Can you tell me why they were beautiful?" he asked by way of apology.

She leaned toward him, biting her lip. "The books glowed, Shawn, shone like a star you could hold in your hand. When those people went out into the forest, they used words to light their way."

::

The next day and every Wednesday after it, Shawn developed a habit of humming "Drops of Jupiter" up and down the shiny-tiled corridors when he went to the nursing home. His volunteer supervisor asked him to stop, but he never realized he was doing it until someone complained. A more official warning seemed to be coming until, abruptly, the residents had a reprieve.

Emily missed a Tuesday. Shawn tried not to resent it—after all, even in the last month, she had never promised to come every week. He told himself it was just an error. She had overshot and ended up at next week. When she found out, she would look at him with round, dark-lashed eyes and

apologize... delicately squeeze his shoulder in sympathy... maybe even offer to steal him from this cage of a house.

Those thoughts helped until the weekend, when one of his favorite residents in the nursing home passed on. The man had been a poet, and Shawn never heard more commanding recitations of Virgil than his, despite the fraying of the man's vocal cords. Emily could have found some cheering token for the old poet, but he died before Shawn got the chance to ask.

The past never seemed deader. Ancient Rome might be back there somewhere, but here it was buried.

Even after seeing his red-rimmed eyes in the mirror, Shawn didn't want to sleep when he got home; he just wanted to talk to Emily, even more than he wanted to talk to his mom. He waited and waited, paced from his kitchen to the living room, climbed up the stairs and down again. Back in the kitchen, he slumped over with his head on his arm, soothing himself with the idea of Emily's dark curls and tiny nose and musical voice singing away his problems. The perfected image shattered when he heard Emily say, "What, no coffee today?"

He sat upright. The grief and frustration inside him pulled taut as something else snapped. "Make it yourself!"

"I don't know how." She shrugged and turned toward the door.

"Don't you dare," Shawn said through his teeth.

Emily turned slowly, and her expression had changed. "I was only teasing, Shawn. Surely, nothing is wrong?"

"Why wouldn't something be wrong? Life doesn't stop for me when you leave. I lost someone, and you weren't here. You didn't even notice, so why bother?"

She flushed, but let him finish.

"I understand you can't stay. You have other places to go. But do you ever think about what I do during the rest of the week? I'm not a toy you can misplace and find again when you feel like it." He could feel his blood rising, too. "What if I might like to come? You're not the only one who needs to escape!"

Emily's hand fluttered over the watch hanging from her neck. "The machine only carries one at a time."

"Then the answer is obvious." His voice strained. "Let me go. You won't have to wait for it long."

"It's not—it's not that simple. Have you ever tried to operate the controls? Finding one time is touchy. Half of my adventures are wrong turns on the way home."

"Then show me how to do it right."

"I've never tried to teach before!"

"Right, great excuse. Are you just here to show off? Am I the only sucker you got to believe you?"

She swallowed hard. "These Tuesdays are precious to me."

"Well, I'm not sure how many more I can take."

"I thought you understood," Emily said, eyebrows drawn together. "Not just the traveling, but the need for rest. You seemed happy to share that with me."

"I would be happy to change places."

"And never to see me again? Give you what you want or get out, is that it?"

"Just give me *something*."

Emily stood. "You were right when you said I have other places to go—such as my home. I think I've learned enough for one day."

"When you come back, will you do something about what you learned?"

"If I come back," she said.

Still in his seat, Shawn watched her walk away.

That night, he threw his pillow at the wall and pummeled his mattress. He tossed from front to back and side to side. His restlessness took him to the bathroom, where he sat on the cold edge of the tub and rubbed his face. Sleepless, he held his anger in fists.

::

When the back door slid open the next week, Shawn felt his heart jump, but not with relief. He had realized over the last six days (reluctantly) that some of his protests might have been too... loud. He had accused her of treating his life as if it stood still without her, but in some ways, he had done the same thing. Yet even now, still too angry to apologize, he only needed a peek over the top of yesterday's newspaper to appreciate Emily's beauty. She had tied her hair in a yellow ribbon and wore a blouse from 1880 or so with blue jeans. He wanted to ask where she had been that made her mismatch, but he wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

If Shawn did ask Emily anything (which he wouldn't), it would be, *Why did you come back?*

Given the way they had parted, he hadn't known whether to expect her. Now that she was here, he couldn't figure out her nervous energy. She huddled forward in her chair, plucking at the chain of the watch, which she no longer trusted in her pocket. Her body language was wary, like she had gotten lost in that wood again. They said nothing, but Shawn felt sure her words had all gone dark. She was no longer at ease with him. So why had she come?

Then Emily's eyes widened. She unceremoniously ripped the paper out of his hands and sprang to her feet, eyes darting across the page.

"Hey!" Shawn hadn't really been reading, but he flared up all the same. "What are you doing?"

Emily walked away without even a word this time, her hair falling loose.

Her departure carved an unwilling loneliness in Shawn's gut. Long after she was gone, he bent to pick the ribbon up from the ground. The silk looked like the stripe of a wound across his hand.

::

Emily hadn't come through the below-stairs closet in a long time. That was Shawn's first surprise when she burst out, with her curls knotted to one side and the sheen of sweat on her tanned cheeks. Ancient Egypt, probably. He could just imagine her out in the sun and the sand while he stayed cooped up in his creaking, humid house.

But he was so tired of arguing with her. What could he say?

"It's only Monday," he blurted.

She jerked as though slapped. Only then did Shawn realize the sweat was actually tear tracks.

"Oh gosh, what happened?" he said, just as she gasped, "I knew I shouldn't have come—"

Her curls flew as she whirled around and twisted jerkily at the keys on the watch.

"No—Emily, I'm sorry!" Shawn cried after her.

She slammed the closet door. When Shawn yanked it back open, Emily had vanished.

He spent the day in agony and slept even worse that night. In the past week, he had stayed awake certain she wouldn't come back. Now, grounded as always and unable to find her, he could only have her back in nightmares.

::

When he got home from volunteering on Tuesday, he discovered Emily drooping over the arm of his couch, her knees tucked under her and her head buried in her arms. The photo album lay open next to her. He thought she was sleeping, but when the floor creaked under him, she silently reached into her jacket and pulled out the newspaper page she had taken. Shawn tugged it from her fingers and unfolded it to see the forest-black words:

July 28, 2014

100th Anniversary of World War I

"You know the time I come from. Why didn't you tell me a world war was around the corner?" she asked, lifting her head. She must have tried to claw her tears off to leave such red streaks on her face.

"I didn't know you depended on me to tell you." Now that he knew why she had been so upset, he wished he could pause her until he found something helpful to say. "Are you looking for an answer?"

He hoped not. He didn't want to admit that he had been so happy to share her life that he had forgotten how many millions had died in her time. In light of that, he definitely wanted to forget how a single death two weeks before had almost made him swear her off.

"No," Emily said, to his relief. "I guess not. Not answers, not blame, not advice. Coffee, maybe."

He hesitated. "When you go home, to your real time, you'll have almost ten years before you have to worry about the war, right? I mean, you're from 1908, and we joined the war in 1917."

"Shawn, I'm *Canadian*. Canada joined the war a month after it began. One month!"

"I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

"Yes. For everything."

She paused for a moment, then whispered, "My father dies. Died. In the war."

"Oh, Emily."

Her voice shook. "I should never have been there."

Oh, no. "Tell me you didn't go into a battle." Please, *no*, he prayed with all his might, as if he could have saved her from the nightmares of PTSD by that alone.

"No, no, of course not. I—when I found out it happened, I had to see if he went and if he came back. But my house was empty after the war, and I found his grave. It just said 'Killed in Action.'"

"It's not your fault."

"That doesn't matter. Honestly, Shawn, I need you to give me coffee."

"Come," he said, finally feeling useful. He practically scooped her up and carried her to the kitchen, leaving the newspaper crumpled on the couch next to the open photo album.

It was when Shawn filled the coffee pot that Emily started dry sobbing, as if the sound of water running stimulated her need to cry. "He dies," she repeated. "He's dead and he'll always be dead. Do you understand what that's like?"

Her gulping for air alarmed Shawn. He set the pot down and knelt beside her. "I don't know if I understand, but I'm listening."

"Even if I go home to when he's alive, he's dead in the future, somewhere in France. I was wrong; nothing's ever past and gone and over. It's never yet to happen, either. It all happens every day and night, somewhen, and he'll die day after night after day forever and for every—single—day."

"And so will I. But you've always known that sometimes we're all dead. Everyone knows that we're all dead in the future, and don't exist in the past. That's even why your dad invented the machine—so he could go back. Why let it change things now?"

Emily burst out, "Because there's a difference! The vague knowledge that everyone you know will die someday, or will have died when you're traveling into their futures, is not the same as knowing exactly when your father dies before his time on a godforsaken battlefield with thousands of your countrymen!" She wiped tears off her face furiously. "Now I'm forced to think about it, and it's real. I'll see him covered in blood every time I look at him... Whenever he's living I'll remember how

he'll die in a war I didn't even know would come. And what's the point of seeing him in life if he's going to be dead everywhen else?"

Shawn hesitated a second longer, then reached out and tucked her between his neck and shoulder. He kept his grip loose enough for her to pull free, but Emily lay on him and shook. "You've got it all backwards. Shhh, shhh. No matter when you are, some part of him will always be alive."

He leaned his head against her. "That's what you find when you travel in time. It's how you found everyone else. Like me."

He could feel her chest rising and falling as she tried to catch her breath.

"I don't know if I can find him again, or even if I should. Whenever he visited my mother, he never said what it was like, but he came back looking so—hammered. Like it beat nails into him. He gave the watch to me because the ghost became too much for him. What if I'm too much like him to bear it?"

"You already use the watch differently than he did," he whispered. "Remember that first gift you gave me? You can bury the face of the king, but it will be unburied again. It'll look like new. You know how to do that much already."

Shawn measured the counts of Emily's breathing and let out his own sigh. She was calming down.

"Do you truly think I could go home, knowing this?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Do you want me to go?"

"I want you to get better," he said, "whatever that means."

"I've always thought you can't get better from death. I believe 'no cure' is in the description," she said with a shaky laugh muffled by his shoulder.

"See? Jokes. You're going to be just fine."

Her head shifted against him, roughing up her hair, as if she was nestling down in bed. Shawn couldn't help adding, "But, um, you know you can stay here if you want to. Right? I'm not a nurse yet, but I want to be, and I can help you with—whatever, it doesn't even have to be medical. You can stay with me as long as you need to."

"Do you want me to stay?"

"I..." When he had fantasized about escaping with her, he had never asked himself if she might stay. "I...I'm not important right now, all right? You?"

"All right."

::

Over the week, Shawn aired out the guest bedroom his mom had offered, brushed up on his knowledge of grief and loss counseling, and never once felt trapped. Maybe he had confused wanting to get away like Emily with wanting the young woman herself.

Unfortunately, only a few weeks ago he had all but lied to Emily's face that he didn't care about her companionship. If she had forgotten, it was only because she had found out precisely how her old life would fall apart.

So Shawn did his God-given duty and kept his thoughts to himself. One night he volunteered for a special late shift and only got to bed after 4:30 a.m. At about eleven o'clock on Monday morning, still

bleary, he tripped down the warped stairs to find Emily standing at the coffeemaker in a flower-print bathrobe, dark curls loose down her back.

"So. Day Seven, huh?"

She arched an eyebrow and plopped down at the table with crossed legs, all defiance. "Don't be alarmed."

"I'm not! Just... puzzled. I mean, you can even make your own mocha now," he added, trying to lighten his tone. He wanted her to know it was okay to tease him again; goodness knew she needed to be able to play around.

"Oh, the mocha is for you."

"Nice! Thank you." Shawn recognized the absence of a second mocha as his cue to fix one for her.

While she waited for her drink, Emily absent-mindedly pulled the watch out of the pocket of her robe. "I'll go home to visit my dad on Tuesday."

Shawn set down his mug and nodded slowly. So she'd found her courage. And she had called going home a visit, which made him wonder... Surely he could ask a question that didn't redirect attention to himself. "Shall I take it that you like it here?"

"The right to vote is an attraction," she said with a tentative grin.

He smiled back, but he sank a little heavily into his chair. "What about here? Right here?"

She turned the machine over and over in her pale hands like a rotating globe. "You know," she said, "I've been thinking quite a bit about—about what it's like to need someone who cares about time. That is, someone needs to care about your time, even when you're not together for all of it."

Before Shawn could ask whether that was an answer or not, Emily slid the watch across the table like a hockey puck. "I'm sorry it took a war to make me understand. You deserve—"

Shawn shoved it back to her. Their fingers almost touched, and he remembered that six days ago she had let him press her to his heart. "I'm not greedy for that anymore."

Emily's eyes flickered up at him, and he held her gaze. "Do you care about time?"

"I care about people," he murmured.

"Yes. Time doesn't matter if you're alone." She reached across the sun-striped table, taking his limp (and suddenly heated) hand in both of hers. "Do you want me to stay?"

"Yeah. Um, I do."

"Good."

The Umbrella

by Thomas Macolino

I looked up from my book as the boy with the umbrella stepped onto the bus. The umbrella was black, but with purple flowers covering almost every square inch of it. The handle was wooden, and painted black as well, carved into the shape of an inky question mark. There was no rain today. It hadn't rained since Monday, and the summer sun blazed in the humid sky. I couldn't help but wonder at this anomaly, this boy with the umbrella. My thoughts turned back to the last umbrella I had used, not so long ago.

The umbrella had been hers. It had been bright yellow. But even brighter was her smile, which made the umbrella seem drab and dull in comparison. It pulled you in with the irresistible force of a gravitational singularity, it demanded your attention, and you gladly gave it. It suited her. I remembered the laughter we had shared under the umbrella that day, the whispered words of love, and the kiss.

That was one day before she drove to New York to visit her parents.

Two days before the accident.

Eight before the funeral.

The bus jerked to a halt, almost throwing me out of my seat. The doors opened and the boy with

the umbrella stood up. His eyes locked with mine. He gave a slight smile, twirled his umbrella like a baton, and walked off of the bus. As the engine revved and the bus sped away from the stop, I turned and looked out the window at the boy. He had dropped the umbrella and had his arms wrapped around a girl. And her smile made the flowers on the umbrella look drab and dull in comparison.

What Happens in the Basement Stays in the Basement by Thomas Macolino

A single naked light bulb hung from the ceiling, struggling to hold the darkness at bay. Its harsh yellow light glinted off the rows of blades on the walls and the dark stains on the once-blue carpet. The only noise that could be heard was the loud clickity-clack of dice against the table.

"Seventeen plus five is...twenty-two! That's a hit!" Leroy pumped his fist in the air and looked around the room, his apple-cheeked smile covering the whole of his tiny face. "I did it!"

Luke reached over and socked Leroy on the shoulder with one large, calloused fist, "That's great dude, but you still need to roll for damage." He smiled kindly from his towering position over the younger boy.

"Oh yeah." Leroy hurriedly complied and reported the results to the room.

Four pairs of eyes turned as one to the end of the table, where a dark haired boy in jeans reclined in a black leather swivel chair. He wore a hoodie with the words, Don't Hate the Role Player, Hate the Role Playing Game scrawled in bold lettering across the front. The boy scribbled for a second in the notebook in front of him, tapped his pencil against the table, mumbled to himself, then turned towards the expectant boys. "Your flaming

greatsword pierces the Minotaur's armor and drives deep into his chest." The boy stood up and with a grandiose gesture, plucked the plastic figurine from the table. "It sinks to the ground, dead!"

The table erupted into whoops and high fives. Jasper let out a huff and leaned back in his chair, running his hands through the shaggy mane of hair that reached down to his shoulders. The face behind the veil of hair was lean, almost effeminate, with bright green eyes that never ceased to roam about the room. He looked over reproachfully at the boy in the hoodie.

"Geez, Derek, that battle took forever."

Derek rolled up his sleeve and glanced at his watch, "It only took thirty nine minutes, hardly forever—"

Suddenly Luke cut in, "And it probably would have gone a lot quicker if a certain barbarian..." He turned and glanced meaningfully at Jasper, "Hadn't kept on dropping his axe."

Jasper snorted, "Whatever dude, all your ranger did was kill a couple of goblins."

"A couple!?! I think eight is more than just 'a couple' and those goblins were trashing you. Whatever. I'm hungry, we got any pizza left?"

Leroy stood up so fast his chair fell over backwards. "Yeah! I think there's some pepperoni left upstairs," and he rushed out of the room, heedlessly knocking over a bottle of bleach and a mop on his way out. His apologies echoed behind him as he flew up the stairs.

Luke sighed and slowly stood up, careful not to let his head bang against the low ceiling. With one bulging arm he easily lifted the heavy, wooden

chair and restored it to its normal upright position, then went to go fix the scattered cleaning supplies. "So, what do you think of the new guy?"

Jasper shrugged, "He seems alright."

Tim (who had been quietly doodling in his notebook since the encounter ended) stopped and looked up, "He won't last." He paused and pushed his horn-rimmed glasses back up the ridge of his freckle-spattered nose from where they'd slipped. "They never do."

Then he cringed as the chorus of "Shut up, Tim"s drowned out his protests. The verbal beat down continued for a good two minutes. Then there was an awkward silence, during which they could hear the frantic movement of Leroy upstairs.

Luke sat back down in his chair and turned to Derek, "Jasper's right, though," he said, "That encounter took waaaaaay too long. This kid needs to speed up his turn. I've got a game tomorrow."

Jasper snorted, "Yeah sure, Mr. All Star Baseball Player here is gonna hit us another home run and save the game. How many do you have this year?"

Luke started up out of his chair, fist clenched, but froze at a curt reply from Derek.

"Come on, Luke." Derek said quietly. "Can we have one night when you two don't end up wrestling on the floor?" He then turned to Jasper, "Look Jazz, the kid's still learning the ropes. Remember how hard it was for you at first? Pretending to be a hero isn't as easy as it looks. Not to mention," he added with a slight smirk. "He's already doing simple math faster than you."

Jasper's faced turned bright red amid a chorus of hoots and jeers from Tim and Luke. He picked up and fired it at Derek's head, who ducked, laughing. "Look," Jasper said, "I'm not saying it's easy to pick up Dungeons and Dragons in one night. All I'm saying is that..." He paused, searching for words, "I mean, come on guys. We gave the kid a fighter character. All he has to do is say 'I swing at the monster,' roll the d-twenty to see if he hits it, then if he does, roll two little d-six's for the damage. And then you describe what happens. It's not rocket science."

The others all began talking at once. The air grew thick with phrases like "bull rush" and "power attack," and Derek started his own little soliloquy about the "strategy of proper tactics."

The clamor was put to an abrupt end by Leroy's return, and the argument was soon forgotten in the presence of Ed's Finest. As the boys munched on the lukewarm pizza, they discussed the events of the night. That night's role playing session had gone rather well so far. With the exception of Jasper's murdering an innocent old innkeeper and getting them run out of town by an angry mob, complete with pitchforks.

Jasper had defended his actions by pointing out that the last two innkeepers had been monsters and a preemptive strike was called for. "Besides," he added between mouthfuls of pepperoni, "After we kill this dragon, we'll have enough treasure to buy our own town. So who cares?"

The boys all nodded their assent and soon the pizza was finished and they all prepared to reenter the game. It was a simple enough process, the ta-

ble was cleared of greasy paper plates, and plastic cups filled with flat coke were set aside. A map made up of neat one inch squares was placed on the table, and Derek began to draw a bird's eye view of the scenery, talking as he went. And as he spoke, a type of magic began to flow...

...The musty room in the basement disappeared and in its place stood a dark cavern filled, almost to the roof, with gold coins. The teenagers morphed and grew, transforming into battle-hardened warriors, knights and wizards. And instead of a wall filled with replica weapons from famous movies, there now lay a massive dragon. Longer than a fallen redwood tree and covered in ruby scales, the behemoth glared at the puny intruders which had dared to disturb its home...

"I pull out my rocket launcher and shoot it."

"Leroy!"

"Sorry, just trying to lighten the mood. Fine, I guess I draw my greatsword and attack."

Derek sighed, "Alright guys, roll initiative."

...The dragon's thunderous roar shook the cavern as he breathed out a torrent of fire. The heat warped the very air and turned the gold coins into a heap of molten metal. The wizard flicked his hand and shouted defiantly, and the flames curved around the group as if parted by Moses himself...

"Good thinking, Tim. That fire could really have done a lot of damage."

"No problem, now if you would be so kind..."

...The slim elf next the wizard nocked an arrow on his long bow and fired an arrow at the dragon's face. The arrow clattered off of the dragon's scales but the elf was already firing again. And now

the other two would be dragon slayers were charging, heavy boots splashing through the liquid gold, one holding a sword etched in spidery runes that glowed with a faint sapphire light, the other an axe that crackled with dark purple fire.

The battle raged on, no side gaining the upper hand. Razor sharp claws and teeth flashed and were met by flaming steel, while arrows and dazzlingly bright spells flickered across the cavern and bounced off of scales harder than diamond. Then...

"Oh..."

"Oh? What happened, Derek?"

Derek looked up and met Jasper's eye, then flinched and looked away. He mumbled something under his breath.

"What?" Jasper said, "Speak up, moron."

"I said, the dragon scored a critical hit on you." Derek looked down and fiddled with the pencil in his hand, "I'm...I'm sorry."

Jasper reeled back in his seat. Then, he leaned forward and stared intently at Derek. "You sure?"

Derek looked back up, "Is your armor still twenty-two?"

Jasper nodded and swore under his breath. "How much damage did..."

"Forty-three points."

Jasper swore, and swore again, and again.

But before the stream of curses grew into a full blown tirade, Luke interrupted, "Wait, so...are you dead or what?"

Jasper's head snapped to attention and his eyes locked on Luke, the muscles under his right

eye twitching uncontrollably. "No," he said, "not yet, but I'm at negative eight. So someone'd better heal me in the next two turns before I bleed out."

The smiles on the other boys faded slowly. And Tim and Luke avoided looking Jasper in the eyes. Tim mumbled something about not having any armor, and Luke coughed,

"I'm sorry Jazz, but I used my last potion after that fight with the troll."

Jasper turned and looked at Leroy with wide, staring eyes. "Leroy, I know you have two more potions left. Come on, dude. "

Leroy paused, his lips pursed, "but if I give the potion while I'm fighting the dragon, doesn't he get a free attack on me? And I've been taking a lot of hits..."

Jasper gazed at Leroy, who began to shift in his seat, placing his hands in his lap then back onto the table. Finally, Jasper spoke in a calm, steady voice, "Leroy, if you don't give me that potion right now, I will come over there and smash your pea-sized head into the table until you choke on your own teeth."

Leroy jerked back as if he'd been slapped, he looked around at the others, pleading. But everyone else had just taken a sudden interest in the color of the ceiling, and didn't notice him. So Leroy turned back to face Jasper, "Okay, I'll give you the potion. You don't have to be so mean about it. It's only a game."

Jasper's face broke out into a smile that lit up the whole room. "Thanks dude, you're the best."

Leroy smiled back, "No problem." Then, he turned to Derek, "I give Jasper one of my potions."

Derek nodded and rolled some dice, "Okay, so the dragon attacks y—" He stopped midsentence, then looked up at Leroy, then back at the dice. "Leroy, how many hit points do you have left?"

Leroy shrugged and looked down at his character's stats, "Uhm, twenty-eight. Why?"

Derek looked up, all of the color drained from his face. "The dragon hit you for thirty-nine. You died."

Luke swore violently and stood up. Tim buried his face in his hands, while Jasper froze, just staring blankly at the wall directly in front of him.

Leroy frowned, "Well that sucks. I was kinda having fun."

Tim looked up from his hands at Leroy, "You died. You're dead now."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean for that to happen." Jasper spoke, in a voice barely above a whisper. "I'm so sorry..."

Meanwhile, Luke continued to intently examine the weapons hanging on the wall, like a detective surveying the scene of a crime, trying to find the clue he just knew was there, but couldn't quite see yet.

Leroy shrugged again, "It's okay, guys. No big deal, tonight was fun. I died, so what? Nothing to get upset about." He plucked the tiny piece of plastic that represented his character off of the board, as Luke selected a knife off of the wall and turned around, raising it high.

"After all, it's only a game."

POETRY

Anna Jakubiec ('17)

Anna Jakubiec taught herself to read when she was four, and the rest is history. She likes to think of herself as a hybrid of Elizabeth Bennet, Hermione Granger, and Belle from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. The highest praise she ever received was "I have never once seen you without your hands wrapped tightly around a book as if it were a swaddling babe."

Paramourtus

She flirted with death,
buried her face in his black windbreaker,
clasping his waist as if they shared a motorbike.
She breathed in his place, breathed in his scent,
and he reeked of musty stuffing in a childhood pillow,
ready to hold your head on a humid summer night.
She pressed until she felt his barren chest cave,
And she became as fearless as he tearless.

But, oh, when she tickled his ivory keys, he sang.
Didn't he music-make, ribcage uncaged
from a peek at the bones in her head when she
smiled?
Never grew old waiting for him,
not she. Bone is smoother than skin and
whoever said death doesn't play favorites
learned the game backwards.

Death flirted with her, using all the pillowed softness
of a child's tombstone.
Like an unseaming book his skull-sharp grin ripped
her free.
As a hearse pulled up to a last-page-papered parlor,
broken-drum-chested death won the game with
his queen.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

- We welcome submissions from any member of the Wheaton College community, whether student, faculty, staff, or alum. Only two pieces from any one author may be submitted per issue.
- For copyright reasons, we must limit our published selection to original characters and worlds only. Please, no fan-fiction or fan-art.
- While the journal's main emphasis is on fiction, we will also consider poetry, non-fiction, essay, and art for publication.
- The journal will only publish genre fiction. The genres included are:
 - Science fiction
 - Fantasy
 - Mystery
 - Action/Adventure
 - Horror
 - Western
- We are interested in any mix of these or similar genres. If your piece falls under a genre we missed, please contact us and ask about it. We will most likely welcome your story!
- Short fiction is preferred, but chapters of longer stories may have the opportunity to be published serially.
- Essays and other non-fiction submissions may be on these genres themselves, authors who write in them, personal experiences with genres, reviews of popular works of genre fiction, etc.
- Art submissions must have as their main subject something to do with the target genres. Please submit your work as a high-resolution PDF.

Deadlines

Submission deadlines are:

- Fall semester - October 31
- Spring semester - March 17

We will accept submissions at any point during the semester, but only those submitted before the above dates will be considered for the current issue. Submissions should be e-mailed as attachments to *SubCreation@my.wheaton.edu*. If your piece is too big for an e-mail attachment, simply contact the same address for further instructions. Please include your full name and Wheaton e-mail address with your submission.

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