

Bards and Sages 2007 Legendary Horrors Writing Competition Finalists

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Selection A: A Gypsy's Gift to Lucas by Richard Deal

The fiery orange and red streaks disappeared into the indigo sky as the sun dipped below the tree line. My husband Herb and I stood the porch of the little cabin we'd rented watching a deer graze in the wiry, brown grass. We had driven to Brevard in the North Carolina Mountains from Orlando to pick up our seven year-old grandson, Jake. He'd been at camp the last two weeks. His session ended on a Sunday, the second week in July. So we drove up on Friday for a mini-vacation. Both retired, our summers, along with the rest of the year, were free.

We found a place online called Sapphire Woods Luxury Cabins. Two hundred a night, but you got what you paid for: central air, hardwood floors, grill, satellite TV and Internet service—even a computer. “This isn't exactly roughing it,” Herb had said when he first walked into the cabin.

I bought Herb a new digital camera for his birthday three months earlier. The new camera had more pixels or something, and he saw the deer as another subject to add to desktop folder of fuzzy photos. The camera swung from the strap over his shoulder as he lumbered down the hill, ducking behind a grove of dogwoods. In his white polo and bright yellow shorts, he couldn't have stood out much more if he would've been wearing an orange road cone on his bald head. He was six-two, weighing close to three hundred pounds—all on a fifty-nine year old body. Herb stepped on a dry branch and a loud crack resonated across the field. The deer yanked up its head, ears erect, listening. I thought for a second Herb had spooked the thing and it would run. The deer looked around in all directions, tail twitching. But it didn't move.

Herb leaned out from behind a scrawny pine, thicker than the tree himself, holding the camera at eye level, adjusting his glasses. A flash erupted from the camera and sent the deer running. Herb studied the camera as he labored up the hill. Once on the porch, he plopped down in one of the two wooden rockers. “Not a bad shot, huh,” he said, struggling for breath. His cheeks were pink, forehead sweaty. He handed me the camera. I looked at the display window. The animal's head was crooked slightly to the left, both antlers in full view.

“Yeah, that's not bad. Ready for the cover of Field and Stream,” I said.

He rubbed his belly, saying, "I'm hungry."

"We passed a supermarket a few miles back on the way in, but you didn't want to stop."

"I wanted to take some pictures before it got dark."

"Well let's go now, before it gets too late."

We drove out to the store and bought sandwich stuff, and I picked up a medium priced Cabernet for myself. Back at our cabin, unloading the bags, I asked, "Turkey or Roast Beef?"

"Little bit of both—oh, and some cheese." Herb picked up his camera from the counter, studying it. He reached into his shirt pocket, wrinkled up his face, and stuck his hand in the pockets of his shorts. "Did I give you the lens cap?"

"I don't think so."

"I bet it fell out of my pocket in the woods." He walked towards the door, peering out the picture window. "If the moon's not full, it's close," he said. I glanced out the window in the kitchen. An eerie, opaque glow beamed through the trees.

"Probably still need a flashlight though," Herb said.

He began looking through the cabinets, noisily yanking open drawers. I grabbed a head of lettuce and a jar of mayo from the plastic grocery sack. He found a toolbox under the sink and pawed through it. "Check this thing out," he said. He stood up, holding a plastic grill lighter. He pulled the trigger on the red handle and a flame leapt out of the black metal cylinder. "This'll work."

Herb stuck the lighter in the pocket of his shorts, digging through a grocery bag, pulling out a bag of pre-cooked shrimp. "I'll just make a little snack to take with me," he said. He pulled a fork from one of the drawers and loaded four shrimp onto the tip. He swiped his camera off of the counter and headed out the door.

I began assembling our sandwiches. Fat free mayo on his, and I was leaving off the cheese. Herb had been diagnosed with diabetes three years back and had to watch his diet as well as take insulin shots twice a day. Still, he just couldn't kick the junk food. I noticed he'd hidden some Oreos in his suitcase.

I had just pulled the cork out of my wine bottle when I heard a low roar outside the cabin. It sounded like the lion at the beginning of those MGM movies. Then another. I walked to the door and switched on the porch light, standing behind the screen door, feeling uneasy. I couldn't see much past the driveway. I heard the popping and cracking of twigs, and then a thick crash followed by a loud squeal, almost a yelp. "Herb!" I yelled. "Herbert!"

Herb emerged from the woods, shirt ripped, glasses hanging askew. The moon shone bright enough that I recognized the red stains on his shirt. I turned around and snatched my cell phone off the countertop. I was relieved to see I had service. My hands shook as I dialed nine-one-one. I grabbed a towel off the counter, stepped out the door, and hurried down the hill and met him with the towel, phone pressed to my ear. Herb took the towel and wrapped it around his arm. "Bear," he said, staggering up the hill to the cabin.

"Nine-one-one emergency, can I help you?" the voice on the line said. I stuttered, trying to explain what had happened. I was transferred to the local authorities. I told them my husband had been attacked by some wild animal, maybe a bear. I gave them our location, following Herb up the hill.

Herb tried to sit in a rocking chair. I cupped my hand over the phone and said, "Get inside, what if that thing decides to come back!"

Once inside, Herb sat on a bar stool, grimacing, breathing heavily. He peeked under the towel. I verified our location one last time and hung up the phone. I said, "The man on the phone told me the ambulance would be here in just a few minutes."

"Thought I was a goner." Herb said, rather calmly.

I was in a near panic. Herb didn't notice. He looked back under towel at his wound. I floated around the kitchen like a hummingbird. I searched the pantry and found another towel. I gave it to Herb, just in case.

I had some Band-Aids in my suitcase and a bottle of hydrogen peroxide, but I didn't think it would make much difference. I sat on a stool beside Herb and tried to calm myself. I took a few deep breaths. Herb frowned, "I think my camera got smashed." I didn't know whether to smack him or laugh. His arm had nearly been ripped off and he was worried about his camera.

I heard the faint sound of a siren. I walked out on the porch. As the siren grew louder, through the dark trees, I saw a red strobe. The ambulance pulled in behind our Volvo. A man and a woman jumped out. They hustled up the stairs. "He's inside," I said, pointing out the obvious. The woman was carrying an orange box.

I looked up the drive and saw another set of headlights approaching. A dark-colored SUV pulled in beside the ambulance. The words Animal Control were written on the door. A man got out and walked around to the back of the SUV, opened the back hatch and took out a rifle.

He walked up the hill. "I hear y'all had some trouble with a bear tonight," he said.

The man ascended up the stairs, rifle slung over his shoulder old West style. He was a thin man with a thick beard and an even thicker Southern accent. "I'm Ben. I'm with the Park Service."

I stared at the gun on his arm. He shook his head, "This is just a big ol' dart gun. It doesn't kill. Just puts things to sleep."

"Kill it if you want," I said. "I don't want it coming back."

He smiled. "We'll take care of it. We've got some folks out there right now looking for that thing. Now the bear grabbed your husband, right?" Ben glanced over my shoulder at the medics working on Herb.

"I wouldn't say *grabbed*, but the animal did *attack* my husband," I said. "I'm Nancy Chenowith and that guy in there with the bloody arm is my husband, Herb." I told the man about Herb losing the lens cap and me hearing the roar.

"Can I talk to you husband real quick?" the man asked.

"If it's ok with the medics."

The radio on Ben's hip squawked. He picked it up and mumbled something into it. I followed him inside. The medics had cut off Herb's sleeve and put a large white patch across his shoulder. "He gonna pull through?" Ben asked, fastening the radio back to his hip.

The woman looked up. "Just a few puncture wounds and some scratches. It's not nearly as bad as it could've been. Probably won't even need stitches. We're going to take him in to start a rabies battery, though." The woman looked at Herb and said, "You wanna tell them what saved you?"

“Food!” Herb exclaimed. “If I hadn’t taken that fork full of shrimp with me, who knows...?” he smiled. His glasses sat lopsided on his face. The left lens was cracked.

“That bear was after your shrimp?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” Herb chuckled, “I don’t think so. I finished off those shrimp before I made it down to the woods. I was leaning over with the lighter in one hand and fork in the other, looking for the lens cap when that thing started growling and jumped on my back. Must’ve been down there waiting on me. I fell down on my knees. The camera flew out of my pocket and the flash went off. It grabbed my arm—the one holding the lighter. I jabbed that fork into it as hard as I could. I felt it go weak, sort of collapsed on me, howled or whatever. Then it just kind of ran off.”

Ben looked puzzled. “How big would you say it was?” he asked.

“I didn’t get a good look,” Herb said. “Standing on its hind legs its was taller than me, and I’m over six feet.”

Ben shook his head. “Man, that’d be a big bear. We have black bears here in the forest and they usually don’t get that big. I’ve lived in this area all my life, been a ranger for almost ten years. The biggest bear I’ve ever seen was just a bit over four hundred pounds. If it was a bear taller than you, it’d probably weighed somewhere close to six. Not sayin’ it couldn’t happen, it’s just odd. It’s just amazin’ that a bear would run off after you stuck it with a fork. Musta got it in the eye or nose, somewhere tender. I’ve seen bears shot a close range and just stand there lookin’ at ya. The big rascals don’t flinch. It’s hard to believe a fork would send one runnin’ off, hollerin’ like you said.”

Herb snorted out a laugh and said, “Maybe it’s allergic to shellfish.” Both medics laughed and I smiled.

Selection B: Night Tales Not Told by Brian Pettera

“...And so America, this is Trent McDonough, *Good Myths and Good Night*.”

The tall, handsome news anchor stood and stretched while the credits rolled. Trent smiled good heartedly at the applause from his crew. Hot and muted spotlights clicked off in order, as the gaffers closed down the news set. Sitting on the edge of his massive desk, he unclipped the microphone from the inside lapel of his blue Armani suit. Along with his job as weeknight anchor for the KWBC news network, Trent was also the weekly host of *American Myths*, one of the network's most popular weekly news magazines.

“Good one, Trent,” one of the cameramen exclaimed. “Who would have expected a ghost in the Grant Park sewers?”

Trent could only shrug his shoulders and smile, as the man walked away chuckling to himself. Trent paused to wipe a trickle of sweat from his brow. The soundstage’s air conditioners were working overtime, and still could not keep up with the glaring heat of the set's spotlights on another one of Chicago’s sultry summer days. Happy that another week of the news mag was in the can, the various members of the crew would soon be scurrying home for the weekend, back to their real lives, and away from the manifestations of myth and legend that were the foundation of the show's forum. Trent glanced at his watch; he was ready to begin work on a piece that airing just before the quarterly sweeps next month.

"Trent, your special guest is in Interview Room B. The cameras and audio is already set-up."

"Thanks, Bob," Trent replied. Robert Leeder was American Myth's Senior Producer, and coincidentally, Trent's best friend. "I'll be there in five. I just want to wash up, and check my make-up."

"Right. Trent? Who the heck is this guy? I couldn't make out his face very well when he showed up in my office, but I know one thing, he really gives me the creeps. He's wearing a black trench coat, a big floppy hat, and dark sunglasses. He looks like a reject from *The Darkman* set."

Trent smiled at him. Putting his arm around his shoulder, he walked him off through the stage's exit into the hallway beyond, "I can't really tell you much about him, Bob. What I can tell you is that this interview is big, real big."

Bob stopped in the brightly lit hallway. He glanced up and down the empty passageway, making sure that no one was within earshot, "Come on! Give it up Trent! I'm your producer! If anyone has a right to know who this guy is, it's me. This doesn't have something to do with Bigfoot does it? Yeah, Bigfoot! You finally got someone to find the big furry guy didn't you?"

Trent tried to calm down his easily excitable producer, "All right! Calm down! It's not Bigfoot, but it is big. Huge. The thing is, we have to keep this confidential for now." Bringing his voice down to a whisper, Trent leaned closer to his colleague, "The guy in Interview room B is The Boogeyman!"

"Who?"

"The Boogeyman!" Trent said smiling.

"Yeah right!" retorted Bob. "If you aren't going to tell me, fine, but don't screw with my head!"

"No, really, I'm not kidding!" A note of stubborn defiance had entered Trent's voice now. "This interview is with The Boogeyman. THE REAL BOOGEYMAN! You know, the guy your mother used to threaten you with when you were a little kid, the mysterious haunter of dreams who dates back untold ages! Have I ever lied to you?"

"Well no, but..."

"Didn't I get that exclusive with Santa?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

"Wasn't I the one who had the shot drinking contest with the Leprechaun King?"

"Well, of course, but..."

"And who was it that got the only interview with the Queen Mother after Charles and Dianna finally split up for good?"

Bob gave in grudgingly, "It was you. Okay, okay you've been able to get the tough ones before, and that interview with the ghost of Elizabeth the First was a real plum, but The Boogeyman? Let's just say, for the sake of argument that he does exist. How would you get an interview with him?"

Trent winked at his friend, "Sources."

"Sources?"

"Deep sources, dark sources, some of those sources that I can't tell you about."

"Trent!" Bob's voice took on an undercurrent of frustration, "You didn't do anything dangerous to get this interview did you?"

Trent laughed while putting his hands up to ward off the waving hands of his

friend, "No, I just sent him an e-mail message on the Internet. He has his own web site."

"You're joking," replied an astonished Bob.

"Nope. Trust me. No one was as surprised as I was when it turned out not to be a hoax."

Bob didn't know what else to say.

Selection C: Reawakening by Kyle Patrick

Miguel Sanchez was dead. Not many people knew that yet. I knew it because his body lay on the table in front of me. I could see the bullet holes in his wet muscle shirt, which used to be white but was now stained crimson with blood. Both arms were inked from shoulder to wrist. If you knew how to read them, the tattoos told a story. The name of his wife and kids. Where he was born. How much time he had served. That he had once killed a man.

"Double crossin' pendejo!" Paco said. He paced back and forth, muttering in Spanish and English. He was agitated and had a right to be. Two hours earlier, Miguel had tried to kill him on his own yacht. Both men were members of La Revolucion, a violent Mexican prison gang that was currently undergoing a change in leadership. The two men apparently were not backing the same capitán.

"What are we waiting for? Huh?" Paco shouted. I looked over at my husband, Shannon.

"The knots are good," he said, guessing my thoughts.

"Tight?" I asked.

"Katy, what do you take me for? Of course they're tight. You have the list?"

The last question was directed at Paco.

"Right here," Paco said, patting his shirt pocket.

"Give it to me," Shannon said. Paco pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to him.

"So, y que? What now?" Paco asked as Shannon brought me the piece of paper. "How does this work?"

"It's like I told you," Shannon said, walking toward Paco and motioning toward the door. "We wait outside while Katrina does her thing."

Paco stepped back and shook his head.

"No. I don't like it. I wanna hear him. I wanna hear it from his own pinche mouth!"

"That wasn't the deal," Shannon said. "We told you the rules. If you don't like it, we'll walk away right now."

"Then maybe I just shoot you, huh?"

Shannon shrugged as if he didn't care.

"Suit yourself," he said, "but then you won't find out who put the hit out on you. Only Katrina can do that."

"How do I know you won't, like, make up a name?" Paco asked, wavering.

"Don't worry. You'll hear him confess. In his own words."

Shannon pointed toward me. I reached into my black medical bag and pulled out an iPod, which I set on the table next to Miguel's head. The bag was just for show, to

create the illusion that what I did was . . . medical, scientific--when in reality it was. . . . What? I didn't know what it was, but it wasn't scientific.

Paco stared at me and Miguel for a few seconds, licked his lips, and shifted his weight uncertainly.

"We're professionals," Shannon said. "You'll get what you want. You'll get your money's worth. Trust me."

Paco nodded reluctantly.

"Okay, okay. Just don't fuck with me."

Paco walked out the door with Shannon right behind him. Shannon paused and looked back at me.

"You okay?"

"Fine," I said. "Just another job."

Just another job. Just another corpse to raise from the dead.

I looked down at Miguel's face and remembered the first time I had awakened somebody. It had been an accident; it had been my own mother. I was 17 when she died at the hospital. Dad took me into the room to say goodbye, but I blubbered so much that I couldn't talk. I grabbed my mom's hand and squeezed, as if I could force her to wake back up, as if she were just asleep. I begged God for a miracle, for a sign that she was still alive. I remember thinking: What I wouldn't give for her to be alive again so that I could tell her that I loved her; so that I could tell her that I was sorry for all the things I had done wrong. What I wouldn't give. . . .

I shook away the memory and focused on the job at hand. I checked the knots that bound Miguel to the table even though I knew Shannon had already checked them. I had to be sure, though. Those knots meant the difference between life and death. My life and death.

Satisfied that the knots were secure, I laid my hands on Miguel's forearm and closed my eyes. I searched with my intuition until I found what I was looking for: a kind of emptiness inside his body. The black gulf where his soul or life force used to be. An emptiness that longed to be filled again. I opened myself up to that longing, and my chest tightened up. For a half second, it felt as if my heart stopped beating. Then, a wave of warmth radiated from the center of my body. It swept up to my shoulders and down into my arms. The muscles throbbed as a series of spasms worked its way down to my hands. My fingers started tingling painfully, as if there were small electrical discharges shooting from my hands and into Miguel's flesh. The pain escalated until it felt like both arms were on fire, but I held on for several more seconds. The more energy or life force that I lent to Miguel, the longer he would stay awake, and I needed enough time to get the answers that Paco wanted.

My mind wandered back to that moment in my mother's hospital room, as it often did when I awakened somebody. How lucky I had been! When I had felt the muscles in my arm convulse, and the sharp sting of electricity in my fingers, I had jumped back in surprise, letting go of my mother's hand. Doing so probably saved my life. The contact between us was so brief that she only had enough spark to sit up before collapsing back onto her pillow. If I had held on to her hand a second or two longer, or if I had stood closer to her bed, she would have sunk her teeth in my neck or shoulder and tried to rip me apart.

Miguel's body started trembling beneath my fingertips. I could feel the muscles in his arm straining against the rope. I opened my eyes and saw that Miguel's head was thrashing back and forth. A second later, a wave of dizziness swept over me and I leaned heavily against the table. The bitter taste of bile rose up in my throat. I waited until the sensation subsided and looked at Miguel's eyes. Those black, dead eyes, just like my mother's when she had awakened. There was no emotion there, like shark eyes, but I could feel his hunger. He wanted to feed. He wanted to tear into my flesh and drink my blood. He pulled and strained against the ropes to get at me, but the ropes held.

I opened up Paco's piece of paper and pressed the record button on my iPod.

"Miguel, do you hear me? Do you understand me?"

He arched his back as he struggled against his ropes. He made a growling noise in his throat and gritted his teeth.

"Sí!" he groaned, his voice scratchy and dry. He yanked with both arms, but still the ropes held.

"Listen to me, Miguel. Do what I say. Stop moving. Stay still."

Miguel's body relaxed but he breathed heavily, huskily. For some reason, the dead always started breathing again when they re-awoke, even though they didn't need the air. Even the blood they longed for wasn't necessary to them. They didn't need to eat or drink, or sweat or piss or shit. It was all just reflex, habit, instinct.

"I'm going to ask you some questions, Miguel, and you will answer me. You understand?"

"Sí," Miguel grunted.

"Good. First question." I glanced down at the list. "Who ordered you to kill Paco?"

Selection D: The Secret by Charlotte Mielziner

The original book, movie and many other versions of my history make it sound like my moment of rebirth was blasted by the tremendous energy of lightning with my creator pounding my chest, dramatically screaming to the heavens, "Life! Give my creation life!" but the reality was quite different. The good doctor, may he rest in peace, gave but a few hundred volts to my system and then for weeks later, a tiny spark of electricity equal to that of a normal human body ran through me, steadily feeding my physiology with the signals it needed to mend the myriad connections.

How much luck merged with skill in the doctor's success I can still barely fathom. That I am a compendium of over twenty various parts all found with blood type O+ still amazes me. The fact that none of my incisions became septic and circulation was restored to each part must be credited to his obsessive cleanliness and attention to detail. This infinitesimal level of probability actually happened.

Now we will finish the refinement my creator would have given me if he could. Your work in reconstructive plastic surgery is nearly as legendary as the good doctor was in reanimation and regeneration of inanimate tissues. I enjoyed your paper on advancements in non-steroidal therapies for scar removal.

You're quite welcome.

Please allow me to babble on as you work, it takes my mind off the procedure. I get so little chance for polite conversation. Perhaps this is why most surgeons would prefer their patients under sedation.

Thank you...you're too kind.

Consider my left hand, the fingers smooth and long, nails arched and thin; a sensitive hand well meant for the arts, music or sculpture. Compare it with my right, with strong, thick fingers, age spots, callused palms and a curious scar on the ring finger. This is the hand I use for, well more menial tasks.

In the beginning, consciousness came slowly. What I remember is pain, all encompassing white hot pain. It racked my body and pounded me with its only reality. Imagine needing to scream and having no mouth. How long did I lay on the table unable to move, to voice my agony? It seemed like eons; as long as it takes a waterfall to etch away the threshold to a picturesque cascade. Be reassured, what your laser scalpel is inflicting on me now is not even a prick from a rose bush.

My first recollection other than pain feels as recent as if it were yesterday. I heard music. I became aware of someone standing over me, assessing my vitals, quietly making notes and humming the loveliest song I've ever heard. I felt the brush of a cool, wet cloth on my face. The hands holding it were gentle, even loving. I fought through a fog of confusion for awareness.

I opened my eyes and slowly focused on my creator. To me, he was beautiful, soothing my pain and lifting my head to sip some cool water. Even though I was as massive in size and strength as you see me now, I was helpless in his arms. He tended to my needs in those next weeks with the care of a lover. He was my universe, my light, all things good came from him.

My brain began testing its new connections, synapses firing and signaling movement. I began stretching, flexing and contracting my limbs and my creator was there by my side. Coordination and balance had to be learned anew. The doctor celebrated my first halting steps like a proud parent. I wanted to please him with greater accomplishments.

His wretched little assistant, perhaps the next most famous hunchback since Quasimodo, limped through the laboratory incessantly. Remember, at that time research such as this was not only illegal, but considered evil, diabolical. Today, cutting edge research has the backing and protection of drug companies more powerful and influential than governments. In this society, malpractice suits pale in comparison to being burned at the stake by an angry mob. I, his greatest success had to be kept secret from the world and this scheming, greedy assistant was the only one who knew.

Selection E: Dogged by Die Booth

"Nice brooch."

"It's a hatpin." Tessa lifted her lapel to look at the pin spiked through it, the sharp end stuck into a cork-filled silver cap. "It's antique. My Aunty Dora gave it to me."

"Pretty."

Tessa's smile slanted, "She said to always keep it on me when I went out in case any of the boys I went courting with got too frisky." Tessa poked Ralph in the ribs, gently. "So I could give them a quick *jab* with it." Ralph lifted his arm around her. His smile made the corners of his eyes crinkle.

"I better watch myself then, hadn't I?"

They kicked up leaves as they went, the rich autumn ground smelling of mushrooms. Crisp sunlight fractured through the stark tree branches and fell in shattered patterns on the forest floor. They walked through the bright spots, breathing in the shadows. Tessa felt watched, watched by a hundred pairs of woodland eyes. It wasn't a bad feeling.

"What was that?" Ralph stopped, so suddenly that Tessa shunted into him. He held out a warning hand.

"What was what? I didn't hear anything."

"There's something in that bush."

Tessa started to laugh.

"You are *such* a chicken! It's a bird."

"No... I can see it, it's got fur..."

"Then it's a rabbit! What are you expecting, bears?"

The thick scrub of holly rustled again, and even Tessa jumped. She'd never seen real holly with berries on until they'd gone on that weekend break. It seemed fictional almost, magical like Christmas. The early berries shone like beads of blood.

"Oh no, it's bleeding, I can see it..."

Ralph walked on, cautiously. He picked up a stick and used it to push back the waxy green foliage.

"Bloody hell, it's a dog." He dropped the stick and delved in. Tessa heard a pitiful whimper. When Ralph half coaxed, half dragged the dog out, she saw rescue centre eyes in a scrawny grey face and a nasty raw patch on the its ribs. The dog shook as Ralph patted its head.

Tessa said, "Has something gone for it?"

"Now who's being paranoid?" Ralph tried to urge the dog around to get a better look at the wound. "Might have, but I can't imagine what. Might have been a fight with another dog? Probably just fell or something and did it on a branch." The dog whined. "Poor thing, I wonder where his owner is?"

"Has he got a tag?"

"Hang on... yeah. Yeah, there's a phone number. 'Penny' - she's a girl. We can call them when we get back, get them to pick her up tomorrow."

The holly moved once more, further away, but Ralph didn't seem to clock it. Tessa shivered. Suddenly, the unseen eyes seemed to be watching too closely. The interlocking branches overhead etched pentagrams on the cold blue sky.

"I think we should get back to the house." She said.

Selection F: The Yard Sale by Norma Lehr

The blades of Fred Griswold's knives flashed brightly in the early autumn sun as he arranged them first by size, then artistically, on the worn card table set up especially for his collection. He rubbed the engraved oak handle of his grandfather's knife between his thumb and forefinger, picked up a chamois hanging from the edge of the table and used a corner of the cloth to give a final polish.

Stepping back, he eyed the metal arc on the table with the sharp knife points creating a center. After a satisfied squint over the rim of his glasses, he shrugged and his arms dropped to his sides as a wave of regret washed over him. The thought of parting with his cherished family collection depressed him.

"It's nearly nine o'clock, Fred," Kate called from the kitchen door, wiping her hands on her yellow apron. "Everything set up and ready for your first customer?"

Fred glanced over his shoulder at his wife. "Hope so."
Kate smiled and held up a white plate filled with cookies. "Planning on making a few pennies on the chocolate chips fresh from the oven. Folks seem to get hungry when they shop." She headed toward him. "Want to try one?"

Fred shook his head as he took a quick inventory of the various household items Kate had so neatly set out on a long collapsible table in the driveway. And on two more card tables set up on the grass. "You know my knives will be the first to go," he lamented, shooting her a sorrowful look.

Kate set the plate of cookies down and placed a hand on Fred's shoulder. "You don't have to sell them, you know. We can easily pack them and take them with us." She looked up at him but he stood with his eyes closed.

He patted her hand before he edged away and strolled down a few feet by the rock garden. Away from her perceptive stare. "We made the decision to get rid of things we weren't going to use anymore, didn't we? You're selling memories too. That's got to be difficult."

Kate gave a long look around, her eyes resting on a hammered aluminum pan she had used many times to roast a meal for the family when they were all home. "Yes, it is," she said taking a deep breath. "But I won't be using that green pot over there. It's way too big for anything I'll ever cook again. Haven't used it for at least three years. No sense holding on to a lot of old memories. Besides in Arizona we won't be eating big meals. Not in that climate." she caught up with him and took his calloused hand in hers. "We should be able to get by on very little."

Fred knew in his heart she was right, and nodded in agreement.

"What about the coat?" Kate continued. Her voice quivered. "Did you decide to sell it?"

Fred dug his hands into the pockets of his sweater. "Have to." His voice lowered. "No sense keeping the coat if I don't have the knives." He turned and his wife's face drained of color.

"You're absolutely certain?" Kate said, crossing her arms in an attempt to warm herself. "You'll never use it again?"

"In Arizona?" He laughed a strange high note as he rubbed his ear. "There's no winter there."

Kate looked thoughtful. "But I've known you to wear it occasionally during the other seasons. I remember...."

Fred wished she would stop. He knew all too well what she remembered. But he also knew what he must do. “We don’t have a son or grandson to pass it down to. The girls would be insulted if I asked one of them to take it. And our son-in-law?” Fred squinted. “He’s a timid sort.”

“What about Susan?”

Their granddaughter’s pretty face formed in his mind. “What would she want with it? She’s just a little girl.”

Kate shrugged. “You never know. Times could get hard. Someone in the family might need it in the future. That’s why your grandfather gave it to you, wasn’t it?”

“But I wanted it,” Fred burst out. “I begged him to give it to me.” He shot Kate a knowing glance. “And be glad that I did. We would have had some rough times without it. The coat came in handy many a bleak winter when sales were down. Real estate can be a tough business, or don’t you recall.”

“I know, I remember,” Kate said softly, shaking her head. “We had some rough times. Raising our family wasn’t the easiest. That’s why I thought maybe you could leave the coat back here with one of the kids. It’s been in your family for a long time.”

Fred calmed down as he listened. Kate had a way of soothing him when he got nervous. “There’s a time for everything,” Fred said slowly. “I’m retiring. Now’s the time for someone else to reap the rewards of that great coat. The girls won’t use it. It’s got to go to someone who appreciates it. Recognizes its beauty. Understands the magic. I’ll be looking for that some one today. I’ll know when I spot ‘em.”

Selection G: Spirit Night by Jeremiah Donaldson

June 1868

A stone rolled under his boot, and Private Ned Johnson fell. The knees of his blue uniform pants ripped and rocks tore his dark skin. His palms were shredded as he tried to stop his forward momentum. He half succeeded and kept his face from digging into the ground. For a few seconds he lay still, straining his ears for any indication that the thing on the mountainside was in pursuit, but could only hear his pulse thudding in his ears.

The cougar’s scream had erupted out of nowhere while he tried to approach the Apaches’ campsite in the darkness. In itself, it meant nothing was wrong. Cougars were well known to roam New Mexico Territory, as all the soldiers at Fort Bayard knew. But the cry sounded again, and again. Then the noise of a furious row filled the air. The cougar moaned in pain and anger. Whatever it fought, fought in silence. With one final outcry that was so filled with sorrow that Johnson shuddered, the cougar fell silent and the loudest wolf-howl he had ever heard reverberated across the mountain. The hair stood on every part of his body. Something crashed through the undergrowth to his right, he panicked, and had bounded down the path toward his horse.

He felt foolish as he brushed the dirt off the front of his faded blue uniform. The night was again silent, and the cloud covering the face of the full moon drifted to the side, giving him enough light to examine his wounds. They were superficial, but the greater insult was that his rifle lay somewhere on the path behind him. Like the Colt revolver in the holster at his side, the repeating rifle had cost a pretty penny. He couldn’t just leave it.

He glanced downhill. His horse was just visible next to a large rock, and the others hadn't arrived yet. He'd known it was a bad idea to split up, but with so much ground to cover they didn't have a choice. Corporal Barnett and a new recruit named Hallow had gone into the valley to check out a cave while Johnson scouted up to the ridgeline. But he'd found the Apaches instead of a cold camping site. Could have been worse, the Apaches could have found him.

He looked up the path. Skid marks in the rocky, dirt path marked where he'd fallen. No one would have any problem tracking him. He pulled his Colt Army revolver from its holster and cocked the hammer. He worked his way up the path, looking for his rifle. Within a few moments he was dusting it off and making sure that nothing had been damaged. The weapon calmed his nerves.

Had the Apaches heard? Probably not, since I still got a scalp.

With a little luck, the uncanny howl had distracted them from the sound of him blundering down the path. He inched his way through the brush and climbed onto a rock overlooking the depression where the natives had camped, but they had gone. Johnson squinted. The embers from their fire still glowed red, the light just touched the blankets laid out around it. He lowered himself to his chest and froze. They must have realized someone had found them and either left or were going to ambush him.

A cloud blocked out the moonlight, and Johnson was grateful.

I'm in over my head. Gotta find Barnett.

A movement in the bushes behind him was loud in the silence of the night. Johnson eased himself up on his toes and fingertips to turn himself around. Rough, wet panting came from the darkness. A twig snapped. Something hard scraped on the rock.

Johnson eased the hammer back on his rifle and rose to one knee.

Damned bear. Should have known. What else would take on a cougar? The wolf howling was just coincidence. Or the Apaches were making the sounds as cover. Either way...

The bushes rustled again as he stood up. He could sense the movement of something large and graceful at the base of the rock.

The rifle kicked against his shoulder, and he automatically levered another shell into the chamber. He pulled the trigger for a second time before realizing that it wasn't a bear illuminated in the muzzle flash. Nor was it an Apache sneaking up on him. It was bigger, and let out a roar brimming with rage as Johnson's second slug tore into its shoulder.

Johnson staggered backward in surprise, and dropped his rifle when his boot heel caught on the rough surface of the rock. Massive claws racking on stone warned him it was coming. He drew his Colt just as moonlight pushed aside the darkness. He wished it hadn't.

The thing was taller than his healthy six feet even while on its knees. Thick arms were knotted with muscles that seemed as if they should have burst through the thickly furred skin that contained them. The hands ended in claws half as long as his Bowie knife. Fresh blood covered them, as well as most of the thing's forearms. It launched itself toward Johnson with its hands open, ready to drag him into a mouth so wide it seemed to encompass everything from the throat upwards.

He fanned the hammer of his Colt with the palm of his left hand as he leapt backwards. Two of the bullets opened wounds in the roof of the gaping mouth, but the

other four missed or had no effect. The thing staggered and dropped to all fours. It growled and shook its head.

Johnson turned and jumped off the front of the rock.

The intelligence that burned in the yellow eyes of the wolf-faced beast wasn't natural! What had the Apaches-

He hit the ground hard and slammed his right shoulder into a boulder as he rolled. His arm went numb and the revolver dropped to the ground. No matter, he didn't have time to reload the six cylinders anyway.

His lungs burned and his legs wobbled as he ran, but just ahead was the edge of the depression. The treacherous mountainside lay beyond.

The night turned black as the moon was obscured again, and Johnson had to make a leap of faith as he started downhill at breakneck speed. Almost immediately, the tip of one boot got hung on a rock and he spilled forward onto his face. He slid on his stomach for what seemed forever. His hands found nothing to halt himself with and only pulled loose more debris. Dirt filled his eyes. He didn't see what knocked him out.

Slowly, he realized that he was on the ground. His face was buried in rubble collected at the base of a boulder. He tried to move, but his body protested being bothered with such things. A ringing filled his head. Something grabbed his shoulder and rolled him onto his back.

"Barnett?" Johnson mumbled. He opened his eyes, but dirt blinded him.

Hot, moist air drifted over his face and something licked his cheek once, twice, and a third time. A cold nose touched his chin.

He tried to get to the knife on the left side of his belt, but his right arm was still numb and his left was trapped under his non-responsive body.

A hot tongue licked his throat and the form above him stood. Another howl shook the night and cleared the ringing in his ears.

The beast growled and dropped onto Johnson's chest.

His breath escaped in a gasp, ending the scream building in his throat.

He barely felt the teeth as they tore into the sides of his neck, but he heard the crunch of his spine being bitten in half, and felt the jet of incredibly hot blood splatter his face as it pumped from his severed arteries. The world rolled as his head turned to a different angle once it wasn't held in place by a neck.

The last thing he heard as his thoughts faded was the beast lapping blood from the pool around his head.

Selection H: Three's Not Company by Art Carey

There were five of them, which was two more than I had expected. Not that I was surprised. I had never tried to summon demons before. But five? That was overkill. Still, I'd gotten the three that I wanted: Beelzebub, Moloch, and Cerberus. I hadn't counted on Lilith and Belial.

They stood impatiently in the circle drawn in chicken's blood on the floor, jostling for room, elbowing each other. Well, I'd drawn the circle for three, not five.

"I'm afraid that I won't need all of you," I said, "only Beelzebub, Moloch, and Cerberus."

Lilith whirled, emerald eyes blazing in a swirl of raven hair. “No! No!” she spat. The large serpent coiled about her waist appraised me with grave-dead eyes and hissed ominously. Belial looked confused.

“Demons Lilith and Belial be gone,” I said. Lilith opened her mouth but the words were lost in an implosion of light and she vanished. So did Bilial.

“That’s more like it,” said Moloch, his calf’s head swiveling as he studied my tiny apartment. He scratched his jaw with long, tapered claws. The examination didn’t take long. I am an impoverished graduate student working on a doctorate in

English at UCLA. My apartment is a one-bedroom closet with a breakfast-study-entertaining nook sandwiched into an aging second-floor walkup in Santa Monica. I survive on a graduate assistant grant, supplemented by tutoring freshman students consigned to bonehead English classes.

“What mean you with us, mortal,” roared Beelzebub. He blew some composition papers that I had been grading off the kitchen table and rattled a window.

“Not so loud!” I warned. “The landlord lives under me.”

Drawings of demons didn’t do Beelzebub credit. He loomed well over eight feet, with a swollen face that looked as if he had run into a hive of angry bees. Raised brows like small tents accented coal-black eyes. Two bat-like wings, folded neatly, added to the otherworldly picture. Well, that was reasonable. After all, he was from another world – the nether world.

Cerberus, on the other hand, couldn’t seem to get it together. Those three ugly heads rising out of a serpent’s body argued with each other constantly. “Free me from the circle!”... “No! Make him tell us why we’re here first! ...“Will you two stop!”

“Not so fast,” I said. “No one’s going anywhere until you agree to help me with a problem.”

“Demons don’t help mortals with problems,” sneered Beelzebub. “Demons create problems.” He smiled darkly. “Or devour them.”

Selection I: Zombie Maker by Tim Kane

Everything drenched in sugar. The air. My clothes. My damn food. Everything. It’s gotten so that I can’t take a breath without suffering that honeyed taint. It hangs in this stagnant atmosphere like a curse, clinging to me. It would drive me mad if not for Marguerite, a sweetness in her own right.

A portrait of her sits by my desk where I can see her always. This, however, is an incomplete satisfaction, like a half smoked cigar. Her visage teases me until I cannot stand the torture and must take out my frustrations on a slave. Not until she is mine, here in this house, will I be mollified. That is why I have brought this nauseating man into my presence. He can bring to me my Marguerite by the only means left.

Were it not for his blonde hair and European good looks, I might have taken the man for a native. His skin has darkened from spending many afternoons in this tropical sun. He smells like they do, as if rubbed in grease. Perhaps there is some mixed blood in him. He must an ounce or two to have learned their dark arts. He is a zombie maker.

The man does not speak. He stands mutely before my desk, refusing even to sit. This is intolerable. Now I must stand too. Ah, but I notice he is not without some culture. A cigar is nestled into his jacket pocket. His eyes track me as I round the desk and there is no reaction when I take it. A little dull-wittedness is good in a servant, but too much can ruin us both.

The wrapper is dark as ink and oily. A Don Francisco, well within my tastes. I snip it and put a flame to the tip. The cigar lights with little effort and burns evenly. I draw at it leisurely so as not to spoil the well-matured flavor. The taste is tart, with a hint of cinnamon and coffee on the lips. I close my eyes and savor each inhalation. Heaven. The only thing capable of drowning out the stink of sugar.

The man stands still, as only a true idiot can. I dearly hope that he is capable of performing adequately. I tell him to sit, and then round the desk to my chair. The cigar will not leave my hand, spending most of its life between my lips. If this man chooses to be mute, then I shall not waste the moment standing about dully. I notice that when I sit, he does so too. At last! The man is not a statue. Perhaps now he has learned to speak.

“Tell me, can you do all that I asked of in my letter?”

The man nods. My God, does he even have a tongue? I have half a mind to pry his mouth open and look for myself, but I am stayed by a single glance at Marguerite’s portrait.

“I want her.” I shoot my hand out, one finger stabbing at the portrait. I have no idea why I am being so melodramatic. Perhaps it is the cigar. It has ignited my passion. The girl is mine. I wooed her. I paid for her. They think they can strip her away under the feigned excuse of piety?

Enough. I look this man in the eye, and ask, “Can you give her to me?”

He nods again and reveals a scrap of paper, which he deposits on the table between us. What is this, I wonder. A letter for what he cannot say? I take the scrap and read it. Oh my, it is the price of his services. I feel the need to laugh, but manage to suppress it to a smirk. The figure is, of course, outrageous, and that is perhaps why he chose to write it. In his mind, a sum so large might get caught on the tongue.

“Of course,” I say, eyeing the paper once more. It is perhaps one year’s worth of my profits, though that is of no concern. I won’t pay it. Not after I have Marguerite. Let this simpleton think what he likes. I will never pay twice for something that is already mine. And certainly not to some island witch-doctor such as this.

Bare plastered walls surround me. There is only a sliver of a window that lets in only the sunlight. Even in the day, candles light the room. I cannot imagine living in such a place. Even this visit has made me recoil in distaste. But soon my Marguerite will be freed of this all. Free to do as I tell her.

Selection J: Mud Hollow Bridge by David Hart

In southwestern Wisconsin, nestled among the tree covered rolling hills, lies the village of Mud Hollow. This town was aptly named as it was founded in the crook of a wide bend of the Mud River, which twists its way through the countryside. Beginning at the East end of the village runs a narrow cobblestone street which was originally laid in 1859. This

antiquated street meanders in a long, upward sloping semi-circle through the heart of the business section of the village. This street not only is the path to businesses of Mud Hollow, but is also the life line of the village as it connects to the opposite side of the Mud River via an old, wooden covered bridge. This road and bridge today remain the sole infrastructure connecting this village to the rest of the world. The villagers of Mud Hollow have maintained the village as closely as they could to its original construction. In fact, most of the town is registered with the State Historical Society and thereby required to maintain the village as it was originally built, and in an effort to maintain the village as true to original the strict zoning laws of Mud Hollow prohibit the building of any other road out of town.

Despite Mud Hollow's isolation, and the fact that there never have been any major highways running by Mud Hollow, the village today finds itself thriving on tourism and art festivals. That the town continues to thrive comes as no surprise to the artists and shop owners who have resided in Mud Hollow. They understood the simple beauty of the village and the surrounding hills and forests, not to mention its quiet lack of hustle and bustle.

Originally founded by Swedish and Norwegian immigrants in the early 1800's, the town grew as lead miners burrowed into the surrounding hills and were able to load ore on barges, which eased along the Mud River to the Mississippi. Eventually the demand for the ore of this village diminished. Trains began running further west and were able to bring ore to developing cities much more quickly and efficiently. And since no train tracks were laid through Mud Hollow, the mining industry eventually died and most of the miners were forced to leave the village to find work.

There were a good number of people who refused to leave, however. They worked at area farms and markets, eking out livings as they could, secure in their little quaint, cozy village connected to the rest of the world by only the covered bridge.

As the story of Mud Hollow goes, during this time of local unemployment some of the villagers began carving statues out of wood. Before long an annual contest bloomed allowing the unemployed miners to display their other talents of Scandinavian heritage. Many of them carved creatures of folklore, trolls in particular. The winner of the contest would have his troll statue on permanent display in the village. This contest became an annual event and to this day this contest continues to be held annually on Labor Day weekend, drawing a crowd of thousands from around the country. Over the years one hundred, fifty-three winners have had their statues placed on what has become a rather statue crowded main street of Mud Hollow.

But I have learned first hand this story goes much deeper than its superficial cover of the festival the residents would have you believe. I first went to Mud Hollow four years ago after learning about the festival in a newspaper article. And since I am not one for large crowds and wished to stroll the troll-lined streets and visit the art galleries and antique shops without the distraction of so many other visitors to this picturesque village, I arrived a week after the contest had been decided and the large crowds had left until the following year. It was a late morning in early September when I arrived at the Mud Hollow Bridge. The bridge, a narrow single-lane structure, stood as if a sentinel greeting all who were to cross the wide, deep Mud River, subtly announcing one was about to enter a place of rare beauty and antiquity.

I pulled off to the side of the road to take a couple of pictures of the old wooden bridge. Large trees, a mixture of hardwoods and softwoods, bordered the river and

encroached upon the bridge along the riverbanks. A sweet aroma of wild flowers lingered in the air as the late morning sun streamed through the rich green leaves reaching from the trees that lined the Mud River. As I strode forward I could not help but notice a rather large opening in what was otherwise a solid line of trees. Curiosity of this apparent anomaly compelled me to walk forward along the road to the north corner of the bridge. From there I could see a massive stump jutting out of the ground, standing about a yard high. I was astonished by the sheer size of the massive stump and cautiously crept along the moist, spongy top of the Mud River embankment for a closer inspection. The shrill chirping of frogs scorched the swampy mud odor that permeated the air along the rivers edge. The stump was truly colossal. I estimated it to be over six feet in diameter and was certain I could lie upon it and comfortably stretch out. The stump reached out over the embankment and dropped off like a cliff wall reaching down to the cattail crowded shore. As I stood atop the stump an eerie silence befell my surroundings and a stifling anxiety crowded my chest. My breath quickened as my ears reached for any unexpected sound. I felt like a mischievous child who had been caught trespassing. I could find no sound reason for this feeling; however, I quickly descended from the stump and retreated to the bridge.

After having taken several pictures of the bridge and impressive stump I slowly drove on to the single lane of wooden planks which lined the floor of the covered bridge. The mouth of the bridge was plenty large enough for a car, but it looked like a hazardously tight squeeze for trucks delivering goods to the village. I held my breath and made a wish as I crossed; a silly superstition I learned from my grandparents many years ago. Upon creeping through the other side I found myself entering on to the main street of the village. The old cobblestone street was encroached by many well maintained shops, and of course the troll statues, which surprisingly gave the street more of a cozy than crowded feeling. I followed the street as it curved up hill to a large round-about on top where I found the Mud Hollow Hotel. Surprisingly, there was ample space for parking in front of the hotel. After having parked, I grabbed my duffle bag and took my first steps in Mud Hollow.

Perhaps it was only my anticipation of exploring this unique village, but a festive energy seemed to linger in the air as I entered the hotel lobby.

“Velkommen,” greeted a smiling, grey-haired man who stood behind the rich, dark old, hand-carved wooden counter. I told him of my reservation. In response he opened a laptop computer and checked the ledger. After typing a quick note he produced my key and proceeded to lead me up the incredibly ornate stairs to my room. Everything in the hotel seemed to be made of intricately carved wood. I had never seen so much painstaking craftsmanship like it before.

The room was warm and cozy with a decorative wooden dresser and a full size bed complete with hand carved head and footboards. After assuring him the room was very much to my liking I inquired of the best restaurant for lunch. He directed me to the tavern across the street. Eager to begin exploring the village I dropped my duffle bag on an overstuffed chair in a corner and followed the grey-haired man back down to the lobby.

From the hotel I crossed the quiet cobblestone street to the tavern. On the steps next to the entrance stood a statue of a short, fat troll with a cartoonish, smiling face. The troll held a sign reading ‘The Thirsty Troll’. I grinned as I pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped into the dim, artificial light of the tavern.

I found the interior of the tavern, like the interior of the hotel, to be made of intricately carved wood. There were several patrons scattered about the tables having lunch.

At the far end of the bar were four men speaking in low voices with the bartender. They ceased their discussion and watched me as I pulled up a barstool at the opposite end of the bar so as to keep my distance and not to interfere with their talk. After several moments a subtle anxiety began to mount within me as they continued to quietly watch me. Finally, they returned to their low mumbling and the bartender walked over to greet me.

“Hi,” he said with a smile. “What can I get for you?”

I ordered a pint of beer and asked for a menu. He brought me the beer and the menu and told me he would be back in a bit. Then he returned to mumbling group of men at the end of the bar. After a few minutes the men broke up their discussion and began to leave. The bartender made his way back to me to take my order.

“Are you ready,” he asked.

“I think so,” I replied, but had only narrowed my choices down to a few items. “What do you recommend?”

“The fish fry is good,” he replied without hesitation.

“Great,” I replied, relieved to hear him suggest a meal I was already considering. “I’ll do that.”

“Okay,” he said with a smile and took the menu as he went to place the order.

As I sat at the bar sipping my beer, silently admiring the woodwork surrounding me while I casually debated how I would spend the rest of my afternoon, a few more locals came in and occupied random tables and booths. The bartender waited on them with casual familiarity, joking with them as he went. Eventually my food came. The fish fry was an excellent suggestion as it could very well have been the best I have ever had. I took my time, savoring each bite of the buttery, beer-battered Perch. I was about half way done with my meal when another local entered the tavern and clumsily wrestled himself on to a barstool a few seats down from me. He was unkempt with matted dark-gray hair and a ragged gray beard.

“What can I do for you, Greg?” the bartender sighed with an air of disgust.

“I’d like a beer,” the man replied with the slightest of slurs.

“How ‘bout some coffee?” the bartender countered as he stood before the man with his arms crossed. “Looks like you’re already half in the bag.”

“Come on now, Chuck. I’ve got money this time.” The disheveled man pulled a crumpled twenty dollar bill from his pant pocket and tossed it on the bar.

The two stared at one another in silence for several moments.

“You sure you don’t want coffee instead?” the bartender suggested again. They stared silently at one another for a few moments more. “Christ,” the bartender muttered and shook his head. “Alright,” the bartender finally conceded. “One beer and then you go. And don’t cause any trouble.”

“I won’t cause no trouble Chuck.”

The bartender brought him a pint and change. The man crumpled the bills and shoved them into his pocket, and then he fervently chugged a couple of mouthfuls from his pint. I tried to mind my own business as I continued with my meal, but the disheveled man kept looking curiously at me as he quaffed his beer. His inquisitive stare was rather unsettling and finally I had to set the last of my meal aside and looked back at him.

“Are you an investigator or reporter?” he asked in a low voice with a slight slur as his eyes shifted from side to side.

“Neither,” I replied tentatively, not feeling very eager to engage this man in conversation. “I’m just here to see the sights.”

With raised eyebrows he nodded. “You came at the right time, friend.”

I am not certain it was what he said; most likely it was the way he said it, with open, truthful eyes trying to keep a particular knowledge silent, but a minute curiosity stirred within me. “What’s that?” I encouraged him to expand upon his statement.

The bartender approached quickly with a wrinkled brow and angry eyes. “Is he bothering you?” he asked me while pointing at the disheveled man.

“No,” I shrugged and shook my head slightly. I was a bit startled by the bartender’s aggressiveness and was at a loss for further words.

“The trolls have taken another baby,” the bearded man said loudly and quickly.

Selection K: Stranger by Oren R.S. Meyer

The day Joseph Burnbaum came to town was the day of the annual Linden Ridge Parade. The whole population turned out to see the fire squad drive by in their polished red trucks and the 4-H Club from the high school ride their tractors and horses down the street. The mayor even came by in an open-top car, waving at everybody. I heard later from Patty, the owner of the Mountain View Hotel downtown, that when she got back, there was a guy waiting for her at the lobby door. He had a real fancy car and a nice suit, and he introduced himself as “Mr. Joseph T. Burnbaum.” She thought he was a salesman, but he didn’t try to pitch anything, he just asked if there were any rooms available. She gave him #6, and he thanked her and went inside.

The first time I saw him was at Martin’s Market on Hagler Street. I was in there to pick up some fresh lettuce for the salad that my wife Karen was going to fix for dinner when he came wandering into the produce department. He didn’t have a cart or a basket or anything, and I thought that his choice of a blue three-piece suit and expensive-looking black loafers was a little much for just a grocery store trip. When he came close, I cleared my throat and said, “Hello there.”

He just kind of looked at me and didn’t say a word. He had this half-smile that made me wonder whether he was really happy, but I couldn’t tell. For a second, we did nothing but stare at each other. I thought his eyes were intimidating. I couldn’t tell you why, but it’s just that whenever I looked right into them, I felt like I was less of a person than him. Anyway, I finally stuck out my hand and said, “I’m Mark Berry. Pleased to meet you, Mr. ...” I knew his name, but I wanted to see what he would say.

He smiled real big and said, “Mr. Joseph T. Burnbaum. The pleasure’s all mine.” He took my hand and shook it. My goodness, he had some grip! I thought he was going to pull my arm off.

I said, “So, you’re new in town?” I guess he’d been there for almost a month.

“Yes, you could say that.”

“What brings you to Linden Ridge?”

“I’m actually here on business.”

“What sort of business?”

“To put it simply, I help people.”

I thought that answer was kind of strange, so I asked, “And how do you help people?”

“Oh, in a variety of ways,” he said as he waved his hand about in the air. “In a way, I’m like a handyman.”

That sounded fine to me. “I guess you and I are in just about the same line of work.”

“Really?” He looked surprised. “What do you do?”

“I’m the town doctor.”

He kept right on smiling and said, “Ah, a fellow public servant. Now, that is wonderful.”

We talked for a few more minutes before I excused myself so I could take that lettuce home. I felt better after I’d had that talk with him. He seemed like a pleasant enough fellow.