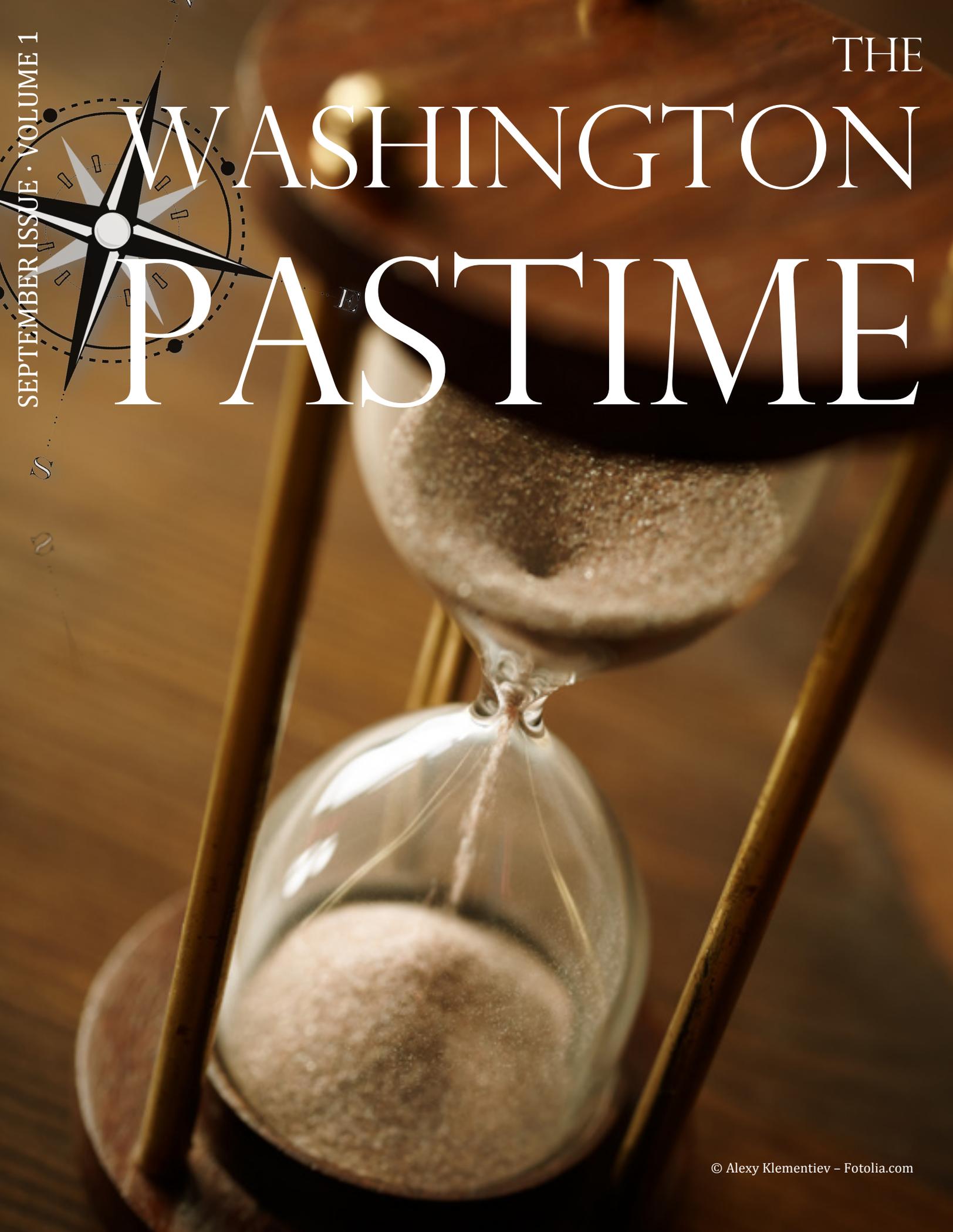


SEPTEMBER ISSUE · VOLUME 1



THE WASHINGTON PASTIME

ABOUT THE WASHINGTON PASTIME

In 2010 a study from Central Connecticut State University found that the Washington DC Metropolitan area was the most well read urban area in the United States. But Washington, DC did not have a professional publication representing its stake in contemporary American literature. The Washington Pastime was founded as an electronic and print publication based in Washington, DC committed to publishing the best in literary and genre fiction.

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**SCAN ME TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE WASHINGTON
PASTIME LITERARY CONTEST!**

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the September Issue of The Washington Pastime! I would like to thank the authors that have contributed their work for the September 2011 Issue. It is my pleasure to have their work featured here. This issue revolves around the concept of *time*. There is too little of it. Have you noticed? For our authors, *time* can refer to the rise and fall of an idea or memory, a mid-life crisis, the lost chance to make things right, or the inevitable long-term changes *time* seems to draw out. These stories will make you laugh hard and reflect on your own *time*. Enjoy.

There are major updates to share this month, most notably the launch of The Washington Pastime mobile website. Stories can now be read on smartphones, tablets, and other smart devices on the go, and with ease. Enjoy the latest issue on your daily commute, during those long flights, and when you just need to get away from it all.

Our main website has new articles under the Author's Resource section to include How to Write Flash Fiction, Historical Fiction, Urban Fantasy, and Writing: The Nuts and Bolts. Check them out!

I would like to take a moment to introduce Laura Bolt and Crystal Maitland, two new editors on our team.

Laura Bolt is a writer, editor, and journalist. A native of the Washington DC area, she has a B.A. from George Mason University in Religious Studies, where she specialized in mysticism, religion, and society. In the summer of 2011, she completed a certificate in Professional Writing and Rhetoric, also from GMU. While her focus is on literary non-fiction and experimental, literary, and surrealistic fiction, she enjoys reading in any form. She formerly worked as a writer and reporter. Currently, she writes for Washington City Paper.

Crystal Maitland is a writer living in Annapolis, MD. She has a B.A. in English with a minor in Creative Writing from The George Washington University, Washington DC. She spent a year abroad in England, where she attended graduate school at Queen Mary, University of London. In September 2010, Crystal completed her degree and in December of that same year, received an M.A. in English Studies: Writing and Society, 1700-1820. Although very eclectic in her literary tastes, she has an affinity for urban fantasy, dystopian, and magical realism literature. Her fiction writing influences include folklore, fairy tales, and ghost stories from all over the world.

We are accepting submissions for The Washington Pastime Literary Prize. We encourage authors to take part in this contest, as you could be the winner of up to a \$500 prize; and could be published in both our magazine and The Washington Pastime Collections anthology. For more information, please see page 21 or visit us online.

The Washington Pastime thanks you for your support, and encourages you to donate on our Support Us page so we can continue to provide for the quality writing you desire, and the high-level professionals you deserve.

Please enjoy our September 2011 Issue, and please come back to see us.

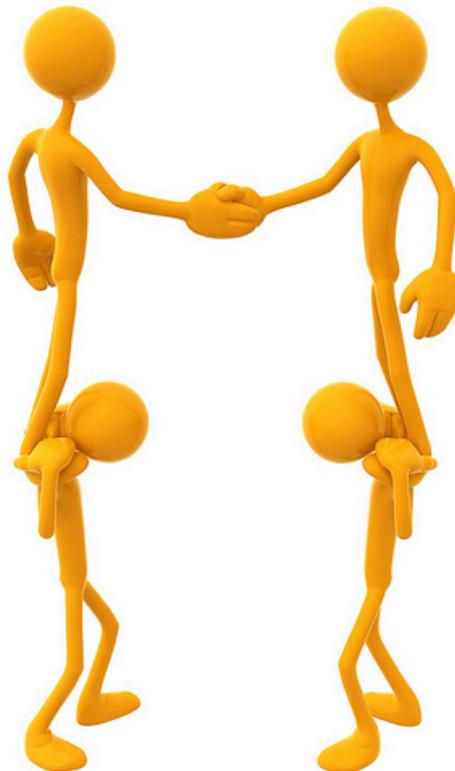
Paul Karaffa
Founder/Editor-in-Chief

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IN THE REMAINING LIGHT

Literary Fantasy by Rodney J Smith

Hailstones pinged off the car like bullets. Thick rain blurred the outside night. In the windshield reflection, Jarrod could see his nephew trembling in the front passenger seat. “Hey, Travis!” he yelled from the back, trying to distract the boy. “Show us that bar of gold again!”

Travis hoisted his trophy proudly for Jarrod to see. The miniature football player gleamed as headlights filled the back window.

“So, now that you’re a big star,” Jarrod continued, “how about lending Uncle Jarrod a few—”

Tires squealed. Metal crunched. Glass shattered.

Someone hit them from behind and they went into a spin. Jarrod grabbed at the sleeve of his screaming nephew; it was all he could manage in the chaos.

A second car plowed into them, and his head hit the parcel shelf. They lunged across two lanes of traffic, missing another car by a coat of paint before mounting the curb.

A telephone pole ended their momentum.

Jarrod’s reeling senses settled to find cracks streaked down the nose of the car. He barely registered the surreal view before the car broke apart, tearing along those lines as though it were made of cardboard. He fell out the bottom, and hit asphalt that was tearing along the same fault lines.

As reality tore asunder, a black chasm appeared below.

Jarrod couldn’t even process what was happening, let alone formulate a response. Travis, seat and all, stared back at him in terror, as a crack snaked its way underneath him.

Jarrod’s hand caught only air as Travis fell into the abyss. The boy’s scream was cut off the instant he disappeared.

Jarrod turned to find the driver’s seat, holding his brother Ash, but that was gone, too. All around, the world was collapsing into the dark.

“Ash!” Jarrod cried. “Travis!”

Only the thunder replied. Its vibration shook the piece of asphalt he was clinging to. He leaped onto what was remained of the sidewalk as it too disappeared.

There was no sign of his brother or his nephew. There was no rain now, only thunder, echoing in the endless black.

Even the sky was gone.

Where the top half of the telephone pole had fallen, the world beyond the horizon had fallen with it, a chunk of it removed as though it was simply painted canvas. In its wake, an archway of light now burned in the endless black.

The sidewalk tilted, beginning its own slide into oblivion. Jarrod dashed blindly into the glare. His hands found a thin metal gate. He clung to it, fearing the ground here too would be gone in seconds.

The bright light hid whatever lay beyond, but from somewhere ahead, the squeals of playing children drifted to his ears.

The fracturing sidewalk collapsed. He threw his weight against the gate. It swung open, and he stumbled into the light.

The glare retreated into a rich blue sky. A midday sun cast a golden sheen over play equipment, basketball courts and classrooms.

Jarrod could only stare. This wasn’t just any schoolyard; this was Brooks Elementary. A place he hadn’t set foot in since he was twelve years old.

He’d emerged from the groundskeeper’s shed. The simple red barn was nestled in a wall of high shrubbery, which had marked the boundary of the children’s play area. Above, the sky ended abruptly above the bushes, like a sheet of blue paper. Beyond that line, there was more darkness.

Nearby voices drew his attention from that terrifying sight.

“Go on, I dare ya!”

“Aww, gross!”

“He did it!”

A group of boys, all wide eyes and grins, were gathered around an upright stick — one end of which had been stabbed into a dead rat.

“Here,” one of them forced his way to

the front. "Check this out."

Jarrold recognized the boy's dusty blonde hair and acne blossoms. "Rashy", they'd called him.

He wasn't the only familiar face. All of these boys had been fixtures in the neighborhood when Jarrold was growing up.

Rashy grabbed the stick and swung it overhead, rat impaled atop like a Roman standard. The others laughed, ducking and weaving. The rat came loose, hitting Jarrold square in the chest.

A large coagulated smear marked the point of impact.

"Eww!" sounded the chorus.

"Look!" One pointed at a quivering glob in the mess. "Yuck! AIDS!"

The boys fixed Jarrold with the stare reserved for the schoolyard condemned: a mix of morbid pleasure and concern for their own proximity.

"AIDs!" Rashy concurred, waving the stick in Jarrold's face. "You've got AIDS now!"

The school bell rang. The boys shuffled away, laughing.

Rashy had been the school's worst bully. One year in particular, he'd made Ash's life a misery. When it was brought to Jarrold's attention, he'd offered Rashy some assistance with that acne — by flushing the punk's head in the boys' toilets.

But that was over twenty years ago. Rashy had grown up like the rest of them, moved off into the world. He might even be dead by now.

Maybe he is, Jarrold thought. Maybe we all are.

Every child was headed for the main hall. Jarrold moved that way too. The rat remains covering his shirt parted the sea of students like he was Moses. Every other face that recoiled in horror was another blast from the past.

As he entered the building, thick aromas rushed to greet him like old friends. He stopped to savor them: the chalk; the glue; the clay cooking in the kiln.

The spell broke right there. He was too far from the art room to smell the kiln.

All the smells, in fact, were too strong. They were all gross exaggerations.

The first classroom erupted with his arrival, the children inside reacting to his shirt. And at the head of the class, was a sight that made Jarrold sure he was dead.

The disapproving face of Mr. Walker -- a man who'd died before Jarrold was old enough to drive -- was the proverbial straw.

Someone launched a pencil eraser from the back of the classroom. It hit Jarrold in the face, knocking him off-balance. The damn thing had been the size of a tennis ball. Booming laughter shook the walls.

He fled the room. In the classroom opposite, every student was out of their seats, leering faces trained on him as he made his escape. Their delight was so bright they were shining.

He steadied himself on the stair rail outside.

On the far side of the schoolyard, the calm blue sky ended in another wall of black. Despite the clear weather, thunder still barked somewhere in the distance.

Were doctors, at this moment, fighting to save his life? Or was he still in the back of Ash's car, bleeding to death while the storm raged on?

Either way, where the hell was he now?

Brooks Elementary grew more suspicious under closer scrutiny. The buildings were at subtly weird angles: widest at their base, narrowing as they rose. Their scale was ridiculous, too. They looked over a hundred feet high. Beyond the school grounds, there was nothing but the empty black. The school's library looked like it balanced on the edge of a cliff. He headed there next.

The doors wouldn't open. They weren't locked — there weren't any locks, in fact — they just wouldn't open. They couldn't be forced, either. He pressed his face to the glass. Inside, the library was bare. No desks, no shelves...not even a back wall.

He crept around the corner. The library was little more than a front wall, a few feet deep, like a prop on a movie set. Beyond the

fused doors, there was only a sheer drop.

He retreated with careful steps, lest the ground beneath him prove just as false.

He found more of the same on the other side of the main building. It too was only half there, just wide enough for the two classrooms inside; beyond it, another cliff-face overlooking the abyss.

Excluding the way he'd come, there was only one other option: the old fence behind the bicycle shed.

He could see it from here, its high palings like a row of crooked dinosaur teeth. Everyone had been terrified of that fence. The head-high grass obscuring the property beyond had fueled countless schoolyard rumors about the horrors lurking on the other side. Any ball lost over that fence was one you just learned to live without.

Standing at its base, he found its size as exaggerated as everything else. At first glance, it was a faithful re-creation of the original. But this fence was really just one large piece of wood, sculpted to look like many. The grass on the other side was still as tall as cornfield stalks.

He could hear something beyond that grass: more children laughing; electronic blips and beeps. He slipped through, wading carefully into the grass. He felt more confident about the ground underfoot as the sounds drew closer.

He emerged into a large, gloomy hall filled with arcade gaming machines. Dull lighting cast a muted-gold ambience. Electronic sound effects and the buzz of excited kids swirled around him. Coins clinked in slots. Flippers banged in pinball machines. Explosions burst from speakers.

He recognized the hall immediately: Pepperoni Pete's Pizza Parlor.

Two boys mashed the buttons on the nearest game. He recognized them, too — Corey and David, his best friends until separate high schools had steered them all into new lives.

"Damn!" David hit the machine.

"Hurry up and get back in!" Corey said. "I can't finish it on my own!"

"Can't," David replied, and pointed at another game. "Those guys finally got off Double Dragon. I gotta get on it before someone

else comes."

"Come on! Just one more life!"

David skipped anxiously, torn between the two. The vacant Double Dragon won.

"Ah, shit!" Corey growled. "I died!"

More of Jarrod's childhood friends weaved in and out of the rows of games. They were all in freshly ironed pants and tees; hair neatly parted or gelled up in spikes.

"Hey, dude," Corey winked at Jarrod. "You wanna play Altered Beast with me?"

The air was heavy with a weight Jarrod could feel. The lights, the smells and sounds, were all so thick his skin prickled from their physical touch.

He'd fled one past only to stumble into another — his tenth birthday party.

Corey stared with an expectant smile.

"Sure," Jarrod muttered, falling in beside him.

Corey thumbed some tokens into the slot. "I got it," he winked again. "Get ready!"

Jarrold made a show of working the controls while eyeing his surroundings. "Corey?" he whispered. "Are you okay? What's going on here?"

Aside from Double Dragon, where David now stood motionless, none of the other machines were actual games. The designs on their sides were incoherent splashes of color. The video screens Jarrod could see from here were just flickering white light. Other boys stared at those blank screens with vacant eyes, working the joysticks in random jerks. Boys even further away were catatonic, their limp hands inactive at the controls.

"Rad!" Corey yelled.

Jarrold's in-game character had apparently achieved a power-up. Aside from that animation, this game was only slightly more functional than the others. It was caught in a loop. Their characters traveled only a few frames before starting back at the same spot. Jarrod's player dispatched the same two zombies continuously, whether he worked the controls or not. Every time he claimed the power-up, Corey gave another 'Rad!'

"Corey?" Jarrod hissed. "Do you know where you are?"

The boy gave him a cursory glance, but no indication he'd even understood the question. He remained engrossed in the game.

Corey — if this was Corey — was too tall. His head reached just above Jarrod's shoulder — impossible for a boy of nine or ten. The other kids were the same. Their adolescent faces strange atop exaggerated bodies.

Even the game machines were too tall. The controls were above Jarrod's waist; he could never have reached them as a ten-year-old.

Jarrod backed slowly away from the machine. Corey paid no attention.

Jarrod scanned the rest of the hall. Like the school, there were omissions in some aspects, and exaggerations in others.

At the far end, a large archway opened onto the adjoining restaurant, where his family would be right now, if this replica were complete.

The restaurant area was also ridiculously huge. There were at least one hundred tables. Rows of them stretched to walls so far away they were hidden in shadow.

People as lifeless as the zombies in the game area, filled the seats. The gloom obscured their features, for which Jarrod was thankful — from here their faces looked like incomplete clay sculptures. Like the game machines, their clothes were a vague blur of color, as though glimpsed from the corner of the eye.

The stage was lit. Pepperoni Pete and Friends, the animatronic band, were in full swing. Each stood over seven feet tall, as intimidating now as they'd been in childhood.

The monkey on keyboard — the scariest of the group — had center stage. His mouth flapped randomly, while his arms jerked in robotic spasms above the instrument. As children, he and Ash had been convinced that monkey was alive.

Its plastic stare fell on him now.

Jarrod put more distance between himself and it, feeling silly as he did. The empty eyes stayed with him, the head turning to follow as he weaved between the tables.

He didn't feel so silly now as he hurried

along.

One table was lit up, as though by spotlight, though there was only darkness above. The people seated at it glowed in the golden light, their streamers and party-hats as bright as rainbows.

Beaming brightest of all was his mother.

She was young and vibrant: untouched by the disease lying in wait just a few years away.

The birthday boy had his back to him, but the denim jacket confirmed who it was. There was a time when Jarrod had worn it every day, everywhere. Mom used to joke that it was actually painted on.

Little Jarrod wrestled wrapping from a birthday gift. The cellophane caught the light, casting rich hues across the table. Everyone edged closer with electric anticipation.

Jarrod already knew what was inside: Optimus Prime and Megatron, the Transformers action figures that went down in family history as the greatest present he'd ever received.

"Awwweesome!" Little Jarrod cheered.

Mom pointed at Optimus. "That's from Mom and Dad." She looked beyond the table to where Jarrod stood, smiled right at him. "And Megatron is from Ashley. He used his own allowance!"

"Unreal!" Little Jarrod held the action figures up. They glimmered with a light of their own. This younger version of Jarrod was, thankfully, too taken with his gifts to notice anyone else.

Jarrod stepped around the table to his mother. "Mom?" He took her hand. "Do you know where you are?"

Her plastered smile remained unbroken. "That's from Mom and Dad," she pointed again. "And Megatron is..."

"No," he shook her gently. "This already happened. A long time ago. Don't you remember?"

Confusion flashed behind her eyes. She glanced at the other parents. They had similarly confused stares.

"Mom, try to think! How did you get here? Do you remember?"

The kids at the table cheered. A man had appeared in a Pepperoni Pete outfit, a plush pig costume with a full-head rubber mask sporting a large snout and grin.

Chris, the class clown in his day, threw a couple of fries at Pete. One landed on the small felt hat stitched to the top of the mask and stayed there, much to the children's delight.

"Chris!" the parents scolded.

Pepperoni Pete shrugged good-naturedly and danced a jig.

"He wants more!" Chris yelled.

The boys launched more fries. Mom and the other parents frowned, but did nothing.

"Mom, look at me." Jarrod had to force her to turn. "Do you know how you got here? What were you doing, before the party?"

The same confusion fell across her face. There was painful discomfort in her eyes. He let her go.

The guilt he felt at distressing her quickly gave way to anger. Someone, or something, was responsible for this. His eyes scanned the group, and settled on the only stranger at the table: the one in the costume.

He grabbed Pete by the suspenders. "Who are you?"

The pig turned his plastic smile on him, but said nothing.

"What is this place?"

He shoved the pig. Pete offered no resistance, made no effort to break his fall. The mask tilted up to regard the fist Jarrod brandished over him.

"Speak!" Jarrod threatened.

Nothing.

Jarrod kicked Pete, a good shot that should've hit the kidneys. The pig regarded the site of the impact with silent calm.

Jarrod hauled him to his feet. "Tell me! Now!" He yanked at the mask. It came away easily. The headless costume froze.

The mask was empty.

He reached a trembling hand for the pig's shoulder. The body teetered like a knocked statue before hitting the floor. The stage show ended instantly, like piano music in a Western.

The robotic band and the party's guests all stared at him. Most looked more confused

than scared. Some, including Mom, were staring at Pete's empty suit in terror.

The storm was closer now. In the sudden silence it was apparent. The thunder sent slight tremors through the building.

Mom's wide eyes shifted to the back wall of the stage. It wobbled as the tremors increased. "Wh—what's happening?" she stammered.

"Mom!" Jarrod took her arm, encouraged by this development.

"Who are you?" She recoiled, as if only now seeing him for the first time.

"There's no time," he said, keeping hold of her. "But I think we need to get out of here. Now."

"Get your hands off me!"

"Mom, please, you've got to trust me."

"I'm not your mother!" she squirmed in his grip, entreating the other partygoers for assistance. "Get away from me!"

"It's me, Mom! Jarrod!"

Her eyes hardened, the mother sensing a threat to her child. She broke free, pulling Little Jarrod to her side. "Leave us alone!"

Jarrod wanted nothing to do with his eerie replica, but turning his back on Mom wouldn't be so easy. He couldn't be sure she even was his mother — but the possibility, and the fear in her eyes, made leaving her behind not an option.

There was another consideration strengthening that resolve: he hadn't seen her like this in years. She'd withered away in an armchair, separated from her family by a body ignoring her brain's commands.

But here she was, in her prime, restored by some power. Whatever brought them all here had given him a shot at the ultimate do-over. This time he wasn't helpless. This time he could reach her.

He took a step toward her. "Please, look really close. Aren't I familiar? Don't you recognize me, not even a little?"

"No." She almost spat the word, but the frown that followed suggested she wasn't so sure.

Thunder exploded overhead like a shotgun blast. The entire building was rocked to

its foundations. A chorus of screams sounded beyond the stage's back wall.

Mom had Little Jarrod tucked behind her, forgetting the older one in the ensuing panic. Her terrified eyes ricocheted between the screams and the invisible storm growling in the utter black overhead. She rushed off, hoisting Little Jarrod over her shoulder. "Ashley!" she screamed. "Ashley, where are you?"

"What's wrong with those people?" one mother shrieked, pointing at the nearest of the blank-faced patrons. Its face was a basic sketch of humanity, as blurred as the clothes it wore.

The thunder seemed to have snapped the birthday guests out of their asinine states. Their frightened eyes devoured their surroundings, as if only now they realized how strange this place was.

The next clap of thunder came from somewhere beneath the restaurant. A thick crack sliced across the stage, cleaving the band in half. Torsos and instruments rolled.

The tear fractured the stage's back wall, too. The upper half collapsed and crushed what was left of the band. As the second half fell, the scene beyond was revealed: a grand ballroom, filled with screaming wedding guests.

It, too, was collapsing. A widening crevice in the floor had split the venue in two. The halves were tilted like a broken, sinking ship, sending tables, chairs and people into the chasm. The wedding guests were climbing each other to escape, many turning their efforts in the direction of the hole that had just appeared between the ballroom and restaurant.

Generic, incomplete people like those filling the restaurant filled the ballroom too. They seemed oblivious to what was happening, tumbling like crash-test dummies into the rift.

The large fractures consuming the ballroom snaked into the restaurant. Jarrod looked back for his mother, but she'd disappeared among the crowd spilling in from the ballroom. As he sought her among the faces whizzing by, a fresh panic seized him.

There were familiar faces here, too: old neighbors, family friends.

Even his father rushed by. Twice.

First, the barrel-chested man Jarrod remembered from his earliest years stormed by. Not far behind him came the older, frailer Dad he now visited every Sunday. He looked just as scared and confused as Jarrod.

Before Jarrod could even consider getting across to him, he was bowled over by another version of himself. This Jarrod, circa his junior or senior year at college (he had that god-awful haircut), lingered just long enough to mirror Jarrod's horrified stare. Then the younger man was gone, joining the stream of bodies fleeing the earthquake.

Where the ballroom had stood moments before, there was only black. Now the restaurant floor, bit by bit, was disappearing over the side of the precipice.

The crowd was rushing headlong to the furthest wall. There was light in that direction; faint cracks of it were appearing as the wall surrendered.

It wasn't the only way out. Cracks were appearing in every wall now, as the restaurant shook to the tune of the rolling thunder. There was fresh scenery beyond those walls. And people were escaping into it.

Jarrod glanced back for his father. The crowd was full of 'Dads' now, as well as 'Moms'.

And '*Jarrods*' -- scores of them, all different ages, peppered throughout the stampede.

One Dad fell nearby. He struggled to get up while others trampled over him. Jarrod moved to help him, but thought better of it after colliding with another version of Dad almost identical to the one underfoot.

Which one was really his father? Was anyone in this whole damn nightmare real?

No, he decided. They're all fakes. Just like this place. It's all one big lie. And I have to get out.

He slipped into the rushing tide and fought his way to the nearest crack.

He could see a living room on the other side, lit by the warm glow of a Christmas tree in the far corner. Even with its strange angles he recognized this room, too. He and Ash had

rushed into it every Christmas morning.

He fought his way over the tangle of bodies squeezing through the crack. Every face he pawed at was another Mom, another Dad. Grandma and Grandpa. And even more doppelgangers of him.

He fell into the living room. He could see the top of the kitchen entrance, but he knew he'd never reach it. The crowd's weight pressed down on him like a trash compactor. And judging by the heads filling that doorway, the kitchen was just as full.

Nearby, a younger Dad stood on a sofa, clutching a very young Jarrod in his arms, his wide eyes sweeping over the eerie parade.

Unable even to turn his shoulders, Jarrod exploded with claustrophobic panic. "Fuck off, you freaks! Let me out! This isn't real! None of you are real!"

"We're as real as you are!" a gruff voice scoffed to his right.

The speaker was an elderly version of Jarrod. The cane he clutched was unnecessary here, with the mass of bodies keeping him upright.

"No..." Jarrod shook his head. "No. This is all some sort of... this — it all started with the crash! I must've... something has happened to me..." He couldn't muster any conviction in his words. Pinned in by so many bodies — many of which were identical to his own — he was, for the first time, unsure of himself.

"Crash?" Old Jarrod frowned. "What... on the way back from Travis' game?" Old Jarrod appraised him, nodded. "Yes, the pileup. No, that's old news, I'm afraid. We all walked away from that. Though, I never did get rid of the whiplash."

"What... you're the real... me?"

"I thought so, at first," Old Jarrod sighed. "But there was another, even older than me. Several others, actually. And then I stumbled across my — our — funeral."

"What's happening?"

"It's all coming to an end," Old Jarrod said grimly, casting his eyes up at the emptiness. "All of it. Because there's no one left to remember."

"Remember what?"

"This!" Old Jarrod traced an arc with his chin, indicating everything around him. "Us! We're all memories, kid."

"What? No. That's..." Jarrod tried to deflect the old man's words with a shake of the head. His unsettled gaze absorbed the sea of faces around him: the many he recognized; the many he didn't...

And the absence of one face among them all. The one he hadn't seen anywhere, not in the entire ordeal.

He looked back at Old Jarrod, the cold realization slipping like ice down the back of his neck. "Where is Ash?"

"When the world came crashing down, the first place I stumbled into was a room in a nursing home. There was a woman there, sitting beside an empty bed. She just kept soothing me, promising she'd be there when the end came. Then that room fell, too. I escaped again, and again, finding only more of these half-built stages, each of them filled with people treating me like I was Ash. That is, until their particular thread started to come apart."

Jarrod opened his mouth, but had no more words for protest. He saw it now: the way he'd been greeted, the roles he'd been expected to play; the way these places were built, with their off-kilter, imperfect dimensions.

The way they'd been remembered.

"We're just the things at the end of memory lane," Old Jarrod continued, as though confirming the thought. "The place Ash visited during reverie. But now he's dead. Or dying. So we must, too."

"Why?"

A series of thunderous claps sent concussion waves through the house. Cracks spread like spider-legs across the walls.

"Because he created all of this!" Old Jarrod yelled over the fresh screams. "Without him, there's no one keeping us alive!"

A quarter of the living room fell away, taking all the people on that side with it. The remaining walls toppled like sheets of cardboard.

The floor broke next. It separated into a handful of islands, those people caught between plummeting into darkness.

Jarrold clutched his arms to either side of him as his own island see-sawed. All but one of the other islands tilted and sank. Across the way, Old Jarrod was among a handful of people to go overboard as a dozen or more tried to fit on a piece of carpet wide enough for three. Their screams cut off the instant their heads went into the black, like a television muted.

There were other islands visible beyond the fragments of the living room, a handful of ravaged structures bobbing out there in the endless dark. Like the one Jarrod clung to, each was lit by some inner glow — a dull, fading golden light.

One of the closest was a flight of stairs leading nowhere. A pair of teenagers clung to its rail. Jarrod fancied he recognized the male, who shot a terrified glance his way. It was Travis.

He'd grown into a handsome young man, Jarrod noted with regret. There was much of Ash in that face.

The staircase toppled sideways. The light went out before a cry had fully formed on the young woman's lips.

It was Jarrod's island that lurched next. He made for the center as a chunk broke off the side, fighting off a pair of men each trying to claim that safety for himself. They fell over the side and winked out of existence.

He and the only remaining person fell to their knees and clutched the edges of the carpeted raft. They watched as another chunk of scenery expired in the distance, the dark swallowing all aboard.

"What happens to *us*?" the one beside him squeaked.

It was another teenage Jarrod. Holding the youth's terrified gaze was like staring into a mirror across time. The younger was wearing the tattered football jersey he'd clung to even longer than the denim jacket of his childhood.

His first kiss had been in that jersey.

No. Someone else's first kiss. A man who had already lived and died.

Where was that man now? Did his spirit live on, in some other realm?

And what of he and his companion here, clinging to these last shards of light, this imprint

of a moment long since passed?

Where were they to go?

The carpet began to split, surrendering in snapping fibers.

"No!" Jarrod begged the fabric, trying to pinch the fibers back together. "No-no-no-no-no-no-no..."

He was vaguely aware of the teenager beside him making similar pleas.

The floor groaned, shifting slowly but surely apart. The sound was like a cannon firing in the relative silence.

The light went out.

THE PANIC

Literary Humor by Aidan Ryan

It wasn't amnesia. I remembered everything -- my name, my wife's name, my kids' birthdays, and all the twists and turns on life's long and winding road that had led me to where I was and what I had become at that very moment: forty-two years old, an investment banker, showing the first signs of gray; a nice home in the suburbs, a lovely wife, two adorable children, aged five and eight; a dog named Marlon, a sail boat named Lucille, and a slight paunch from lack of exercise. The question wasn't who, what, when, where, or even how, but *why*.

Some might call it the onset of a mid-life crisis. Others might write it off as the last remnants of a half-remembered nightmare, a panic carried over from a dream into the cool AC dawn of reality. I honestly don't know what to call it.

In fact, I can't say that I know much of anything anymore, or at least I don't know anything for certain. The one thing I do know is that when I woke up that Monday morning, next to the sleeping form of Laura, my once-ravishing and still-beautiful wife, I felt extremely cold. I wondered if someone had turned up the air conditioning during the night -- perhaps one of the boys -- but I soon realized it wasn't that. The chill wasn't external, but internal; it was coming from somewhere in my lower chest or upper stomach -- perhaps the pancreas. As I turned to look at Laura's sleeping figure, the chill turned into a bone-biting cold. Just who the hell *was* this woman anyway?

I tried to calm my breathing. I knew who she was. Of course I did. She was Laura, my wife of sixteen years, thirty-eight years old, a real estate agent, president of her book club, a die-hard fan of Anita Shreve and Jodi Picoult, a slight germaphobe and a decent cook. But why her, why me, how exactly had we ended up chained together by twenty-four carat bands of Holy Matrimony?

She stirred, blinked, looked into my panic-stricken face.

"Good morning, honey," she smiled and blinked again, showing off the first signs of crow's feet in the corner of her eyes.

I stared back, my mouth a cavern several inches in diameter.

My God. I was trapped. I was trapped in bed with a woman I didn't know. Well, I did know. Sort of. I knew her. I even knew why I had married her -- she was pretty, I was handsome, or at least I had a strong chin; she wanted three kids, I wanted two kids, she said that was alright; she liked Devo and I said they were alright. Those seemed like logical-enough reasons to marry a person. So then what was bothering me? Why did I feel so cold?

Then it hit me. I never liked Devo at all. In fact I hated Devo -- I found "Whip It" particularly irritating -- and I had only told her I liked the band so that she would sleep with me that one time at Marty Humple's Fourth of July party.

Without responding to her saccharine morning greeting, I threw the sheets off my numb legs and leapt out of bed. That wasn't a figure of speech -- my legs were, inexplicably, actually numb, and I crumpled to the floor like a chronically imbalanced action figure. I was up in a minute, though, and with sensation returned to my legs, I hurried downstairs to make myself some coffee and caffeinate myself out of this waking nightmare.

I found my children, Oliver and Bentley, already in the kitchen pouring Aunt Jemima's over Eggo waffles -- or was it pouring their Eggo waffles over Aunt Jemima's? -- and I stopped short. Something seemed odd, off, out-of-place. They were my children, of course, my sturdy boys, my pride and joy, the fruit of my loins -- look, Oliver has my nose and Bentley, though he more closely resembles his mother, will probably inherit my paunch and my bad knees. They were mine, yes, but something about them seemed off...

Of course! Their names! Oliver and Bentley, Bentley and Oliver, just what the *hell* had I been thinking? I'm a conservative man, at least socially; I live in the suburbs and I drink Bud Light -- Bud Light Lime only when I'm feeling adventurous. So why hadn't I named my

sons Jack, Jimmy, Mark, John, Steven, Patrick, or Humphrey? Although I had never realized it before, Oliver reminded me of that damn cartoon kitten, and Bentley sounded like a name you'd hear on "16 and Pregnant." Why had I chosen these ridiculous names? More importantly, why did I know *anything* about "16 and Pregnant?"

"Morning, Dad!" the boys greeted me in unison. I let out a pitiful squeak and lurched out of the kitchen. Not knowing where I was headed, I stumbled into the living room. The panic gripped me like a straight-jacket; though I had never experimented with drugs any harder than weed and the roofie my college friends once slipped me as a joke – oh, and that one time that I took one-too many Codeine after my knee surgery – I supposed that this was how Hunter S. Thompson felt as he stumbled around Las Vegas in a psychedelic daze. I couldn't walk straight, my vision was blurred, and all the colors of the room swam and blended together like an impressionist painting left out in the rain – not that this last effect was really all that dramatic: my wife had taken care of the decorating, and the carpet was taupe, the walls were white, and the Venetian blinds were either eggshell or ecru – I can never tell the difference.

Somehow I made it to the front door, which I swung open with a clumsy heave. I stood there, clad in Ralph Lauren pajamas, and stared dismally at the sight before me.

There, parked in my driveway, sitting there smug and unashamed, was a minivan – and not even one of those sleek ones that tried to pretend like it's a semi-respectable SUV – a fucking minivan.

I put a hand over my mouth, wondering if I had just said "fucking" aloud in front of the boys.

Of course I remembered buying it. I remembered the smarmy dealer, remembered picking out the color, remembered nodding sagely and agreeing with everything he said – "Hmm, yes, highly functional" and "Oh look, honey, a built-in Blu-ray player!" But *why?* *What* had I been thinking?

It seemed to be mocking me with its unappealing high-capacity bulk. I looked back, and it had turned into a unicorn.

Actually that part isn't true. It was still a minivan.

Reeling from the smart of my own poor taste, I turned and stumbled back towards the kitchen, towards anything, towards some familiar household item that I could unreservedly call my own. My wife appeared in the door to the kitchen, smiling with just a hint of concern.

"Honey, is everything alright?"

I stopped short. No, everything was most certainly not alright.

"I never liked Devo!" I screamed, and ran up the stairs, away from the subdued tones of the living room and from the subdued – one might even say "dulled" – attractiveness of my wife's pale face, away from my two syrupy sons and their absurd names, and most of all, away from that goddamn minivan squatting in my driveway.

Upstairs, in the hall, I was breathing fast and my head felt very heavy and light at the same time, as if I needed first to lie down and then float out of my body, up and up into sunny suburban skies.

The very air seemed to be made of impossible questions, which threatened to suffocate me like Carbon Monoxide. Why had I married Laura? Why had I chosen such embarrassing names for my children? Why oh why oh why had I bought a minivan? Were the blinds eggshell or ecru? What made them Venetian? And what was so great about Devo anyway?

The coldness was becoming unbearable now. I shivered involuntarily. My life seemed to be coming apart at the seams. I suddenly wished that my minivan actually *had* been a unicorn – less practical, yes, but at least it wouldn't be a sign of my defeat as a man and as a human being. And grass had to be cheaper than gas, I was sure of it.

The cold was getting worse. These sporty Ralph Lauren linens just weren't enough. I needed a coat, a hat and gloves. Or at least a

Ralph Lauren robe. I lurched forward, still dizzy, trying to make it to the bedroom. If only I could get back in the bed, hide under the sheets like I was six years old and afraid of the dark all over again, fall back asleep, and when I woke up, maybe the world would make sense again, maybe the house would be a comfortable sixty-four degrees Fahrenheit. Maybe the Panic would pass like a mental kidney stone, in a mighty exertion of equal parts pain and relief.

Maybe.

I tripped just outside the door and clutched the wall for support; my head came to rest next to the thermostat on the wall. Shivering, exhausted, my eyes fell on its LED screen. The temperature read forty-nine degrees. My eyes widened. That was much too cold. The mid sixties was my preferred range; high fifties would even be acceptable on an August afternoon. But forty-nine was virtually Arctic. One of the boys must have snuck into the hall and lowered the temperature in the heat of the summer night. I raised a weak hand to the touch screen, tapped the up arrow several times, and then sank down to the floor.

Slowly, the house warmed, and my panic subsided. It had been the thermostat after all. Things started to make sense again. My wife was still quite attractive, and would probably remain so until it didn't matter anymore, anyways. I married her because I loved her, or because I thought I was getting old and all my friends had already married – I can't quite remember. Oliver and Bentley were alright names; they made the boys stand out, and added to my arsenal of small-talk subjects for backyard barbeques. I didn't mind the colors in the living room; I should have known better than to worry about window treatments, after all. And I had to admit, Devo had some catchy songs.

Yes, it looked like everything was going to be alright. But I decided then and there that I had to trade in the minivan – there would be no compromising on that issue. I still, to this day, can't quite remember why I bought it.

TREMORS

Literary Fiction by Dave Ervin

I did just as your mother said. I got a drink, just one, and drove around. I needed to clear my head, cool off. I must have been on the road a couple of hours, aimlessly circling the city, my head full of white noise and things I should have said. An unsettling feeling washed over me and I remembered when I was young and played a joke on my brother. I turned his stereo all the way up and then unplugged it from the wall. When he came home the first thing he did was plug in his stereo, and the sudden blast of noise literally tripped him back over his chair. I know now why my subconscious conjured that memory: it was preparing me for a similar jolt. I wanted desperately for everything to be all right between your mother and I, but deep down I felt something had happened that couldn't be fixed. There was a sense of detachment to the whole evening. It was unlike any argument we had had before; there was a sort of finality to it. This thought was like that stereo blast - it filled my ears and shook my body into a frenzy. I made a u-turn, ran a red light and reached the house in five minutes. I charged into our unlocked home, fearing the worst.

The house was dark except for one light seeping through the crack in the kitchen door, conspicuously closed. My shoes rapped against the hardwood floor, the sound filling the room. I stopped and listened to the sounds of the house, looking at that crack of light, frozen. The refrigerator buzzed off. The AC kicked on. Outside, crickets sang relentlessly. The din of silence telling of an empty home. I felt outside myself, watching my legs carry me through the kitchen door to the table, my hand picking up a note, going in and out of focus. The words read aloud in my mind, off-screen, as in a movie.

I never loved you. I'm sorry.

Six words. Six words for six years. I sat at the table, impossibly still except for a small tremble in my left hand – the hand that held the letter. I thought of the spoon in your mother's

cup. I thought of the way an earthquake is often portrayed in the movies: starting with the smallest of tremors, almost a question, a curio shelf rattling in the next room, a tremor that quickly escalates into a nightmare of toppled bookshelves, blasted windows, exploding pipes, a collapsed ceiling burying its victims beneath a pile of rubble and fallen walls.

When I opened my eyes I stood up, pushed in my chair, cleaned the refrigerator, organized the pantry and scrubbed the floors.

THE PAW

Horror Fiction by Shawn Proctor

Dad waited until our car had left the turnpike before he told me the bad news about my mom's surgery. "The doctors couldn't save her hand," he said. "They had to replace it with something else."

"With something else," I repeated.

White fuzz covered my dad's unshaven face. He smoothed the front of his hair, which reminded me of withered grass. "That's right," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, squinting in the morning sun, which was bright and hot against my face. Dad had left me overnight at my uncle's house, just so he'd know I was sleeping in some familiar place, instead of the hospital waiting room.

He reached for coffee then wiped beaded sweat from his chin instead. "They opened her arm and the cyst was worse than they expected. Cancer actually. The doctors came out in the middle of the night, after ten hours of surgery, and said they had already spoken with her. I needed to sign a consent form right away to do a transplant." Dad glanced at me and turned back to the road, where shimmering heat rose over the cars. "Lee, they had to use the hand and wrist of an orangutan. She wanted something natural, not some prosthetic."

I smirked. Since I was named for Lee Majors, the Six Million Dollar Man, he should have said her arm was bionic. *That would have been a much cooler lie*, I thought.

I was twelve years old. The only apes I had seen were in the city zoo, trapped behind Coke-bottle-thick glass. I had heard a scary tale about a monkey's paw at summer camp, but it didn't scare me at all. As if I would believe that my mom's hand was cut off and in its place was a shriveled and inhuman limb. I said, "You know, people shouldn't mess with fate. That's what the moral in 'The Monkey's Paw' was—"

"It's not a monkey's paw!" he shouted, veins in his neck creating a blue "y." He shook his head as if arguing with himself. "It's not as bad as you think," he said. "You'll see. It's not."

We had to park the car in the lowest level of the garage and take the elevator up to the lobby, where a giant board marked the progress of surgeries like arriving and departing trains. Dad looked at the number he'd scrawled on a slip of paper and held it up. "2214—that's her. She's been moved from the recovery room, finally."

He led me through a maze of pale green hallways, lit with sickly fluorescents, and I tried to imagine her hand the way it might be. Black, rough fingers that stretched too long under orange, matted fur. "An orangutan. She has black hair though," I said.

He must have been pleased because dad stopped at a vending machine and bought me a soda and another cup of coffee for himself. I tapped the lid, cracked open the top, and drank.

"It would have been terrible if they had given her a gorilla hand—too strong. She has had trouble holding spoons with the ape's awkward fingers," he said and smirked. "A gibbons would have been more ideal, but the hospital has limited organ donations. We're going to have to trim the fur when we get home, you know. Some fell out. A lot didn't."

A doctor came out of her room and dropped a clipboard into a slot on the wall. When he saw my dad he came over and shook our hands, his palm soft from so many washings. "Well, this must be the son I've heard so much about. Lee, your mom can't stop talking about you. Going to be an astronaut when you grow up?"

I nodded. "Mars mission," I said without thinking. It had been my dream ever since I'd heard about the international space station and eaten the freeze-dried ice cream at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum.

"You're very brave then," the doctor said and kneeled. "Can you be brave when you see your mom, too? She needs that."

Dad tossed his coffee cup into the garbage. "How is she?"

"She's resting, but awake. You can go in if you want."

Part of me wanted to see her hand, to study every stitch and seam of flesh that would become gray scars. I wanted to hold the new hand and let her know that I would always be her son, even if she had changed. The rest of me, though, was revolted and hoped to never see it. How could I go to junior high with a mom whose left arm was half animal? I slipped around the edge of the doorway into her room.

“Lee, I’m so glad to see you. How was it with your uncle?” she asked. “Come here.”

Her arm was concealed by the comforter and I crossed to her side quickly, away from the arm, in the hope that I could avoid even a glimpse. “I missed you,” I said. It wasn’t a lie, not exactly.

I stood near and kept looking into her eyes, hoping that my expression conveyed concern rather than fear. I didn’t want to look down. Still, I could feel its presence on the other side of the bed.

“How are you?”

“Sore. Better though, especially since they fixed my arm.” A sadness like sparks of electricity flickered across her face.

Dad sat in the chair near the window. “It’s good to be together again,” he said.

Mom moved toward me, the bandaged hand on the other side of the bed reaching out. “Yes, I could use a hug,” she said and slid her hand over my back. I could feel the rake of long fingers through the gauze.

I recoiled at their touch—the hand fell away and hit the table. She screamed in surprise and pain.

“Lee!” Dad yelled.

“Sorry.”

She panted, gathering herself. “It’s OK,” she said finally. Mom pulled me close. “Hush now.”

I forced a weak smile. The thin fingers closed around my neck and stroked my head. Fur as coarse as a hairbrush touched my cheek. I shuddered and closed my eyes, trying to push away the feeling, a sensation of rough skin scraping my ear. I opened them again, just for a moment, and fought back a wail as my eyes passed over mom’s bandaged arm: copper

circles of blood stained the cloth, and dark, cracked nails jutted out like tree bark.

Everything’s OK, I thought. Everything’s OK.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rodney J. Smith is originally from Melbourne, Australia. Most of his stories are dark or surreal, filled with people and places that aren't quite right. For more of his work, visit rodneyjsmith.com.



Aidan Ryan is a student of English and Creative Writing at Canisius College, in New York. His poetry and fiction has appeared in Tangent, Full of Crow Quarterly, Grey Sparrow Journal, and Jersey Devil Press. Links to these publications and to his previous work can be found at www.aidanryan.com.



Dave Ervin is a writer and High School teacher from Mansfield, Texas, and has been most recently published by Journal 236. He has a Master's Degree in Creative Writing from Boston University, and enjoys spending time with his family, reading and watching baseball.



Shawn Proctor received a MFA in creative writing at Rosemont College, where he was nominated for Best New American Voices and earned the Creative Writing Award for most outstanding thesis. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Our Haunted World: Ghost Stories from Around the Globe*, *Think Journal*, *Storyglossia*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, and *Mississippi Crow*, among others, and was a finalist in The Delaware Beach Life Writing Contest. He is currently finishing his first novel.



THE WASHINGTON PASTIME LITERARY PRIZE

The Washington Pastime awards outstanding writing in literary and genre fiction. First prize is up to \$500 (or up to \$250 for the Promising Young Author program), publication in The Washington Pastime, and in The Washington Pastime Collections Anthology. Second prize is publication in The Washington Pastime, and possible publication in The Washington Pastime Collections Anthology.

Deadline for submissions is December 31, 2011. Winners will be announced by March 1, 2012.

Prose are limited to 15,000 words. Submissions that exceed these limits will be disqualified.

Students/friends/colleagues/relations of a judge are not permitted to enter submissions.

To be considered for the Promising Young Author category you must fulfill one (1) of the following criteria:

- 1) You are under the age of 18;
- 2) or, you are a high school student;
- 3) or, you are currently enrolled in a college/university; AND you have either not been published or have been published no more than two (2) times with no payment.

Entry fee is \$10 per submission. For the Promising Young Author Prize, the entry fee is \$5 per submission. We regret that there can be no refunds or substitutions for withdrawn work. Due to administrative costs, if no entry fee is received, manuscript will be placed with general submissions. The entry fee must be paid online through PAYPAL.

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Please read through the guidelines on The Washington Pastime website and submit.

We look forward to reading your work!

The Washington Pastime Staff