

The Center for Arts in Natick

And Morse Institute Library

Present

2006 Short Story Contest Winners

April 27, 2006

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About this short story contest and tonight's story reading

This is the second year that The Center for Arts in Natick (TCAN) and the Morse Institute Library have sponsored a short story contest. We pursued this project with two goals in mind: First, to create a new outlet for the robust fiction writing community working in Greater Boston. And second, to celebrate that local writing talent with a reading at the arts center. Presented in this anthology are the fruits of this project in hard copy and the cause for this celebration. We were gratified to receive 55 submissions to the contest from all over the Boston area and beyond, with entries from Connecticut and North Carolina. Our panel of five judges read them all and selected the seven winners published here.

The organizers wish to acknowledge all the writers who submitted their work. We also want to thank Joan Craig, community relations coordinator at Morse Institute; David Lavalley, TCAN's executive director; story contest judges Laurie Christie, Art Jahnke, Amy Lawler and Karen Perkins; and members of the TCAN and Morse Institute Library organizations for their efforts in support of the contest and reading.

In the ever-rushed, multi-tasking and multimedia lives that we lead, it's easy to look at the pile of printouts that arrives at story judging time as a kind of mysterious burden: Where will we find the time to read all these things? What should we expect? But the judges soon learned that participating in an event like this delivered an unusual opportunity: we got to slow down. We had the chance to meet new people and learn about their lives. Reading fiction broadens one's sense of what matters, like the impact of war on a child, the complex nature of a particular marriage, and what a brother means to his sister. We know these relationships matter, of course; it's the power of well-rendered fiction that brings them to life, and a dose of vitality to the reader. It's an experience with a real payoff.

In the end, the judges as a group felt rewarded for having the chance to read stories we otherwise wouldn't have seen, and buoyed by the quality of the work taking place here. We hope you enjoy it, too.

Michael Goldberg
Story Contest Coordinator

Lost Boy of Passadumkeag

By Stephanie Gayle

In town they pointed me towards the woods, told me to park by the rock wall near the sign for Live Bait, Next Stop. Earl would be there, they said. Look for a red truck. He could direct me to the old Kinner place.

Why did I want to go there, they asked, as if it was their business.

Pictures, I said, holding up a camera for inspection. I lied of course. If I told the truth, that I am searching for the Lost Boy of Passadumkeag, they would assume I aim to add another story to the folklore of the tall, gaunt man with leaves in his hair and beard who howls at the moon. Or they would believe me crazy.

These people, with their nicotine stained fingers and squinting, suspicious stares could not respect the truth if I told them. I am searching for my brother, gone twelve years.

Earl's truck is where they predicted, its rusted grill pointed towards the forest inside which he hunts small game and fishes. Earl, they said, knows every inch of these woods. Has he seen the Lost Boy?

He spots me or hears my new boots trashing through the undergrowth. "Help you?" he asks, his voice loud in the big silence.

I walk towards his nasal syllables. "Yes, they told me in town you could point me towards the Kinner place."

He is older than I had expected. His gray eyes rest in pockets of wrinkles. White hair escapes his plaid cap.

"Follow the river back down a ways." He points to a urine colored stream that bisects molding leaves.

Is he joking? That, a river?

"House isn't far off." He chews his lower lip as if it is tobacco. My grandfather, who lived ten miles from these woods, called it chaw. He spat a thick, dark spray into a bucket on the porch. It made my mother clench and unclench her fists. Michael, my brother, used to whisper, "Watch her hands." Spit. Clench. Unclench. Spit. Clench. Repeat.

"Isn't much of a house. Only raccoons and such live there," he says. "People haven't touched the place for fifteen years."

No wonder. The tall, thickly settled trees allow little sun inside. Everything smells of rotting wood, of moldering flora, of death and decay. The air seems heavier, harder to breathe, though I might be imagining that. Some have accused me of possessing an overactive imagination.

He gathers his trap, its triangular metal teeth stained brown with blood, and picks up a fox at his feet. "Good pelt," he says. The fox hangs limply over his arm, as if its bones disappeared in death. Its tongue protrudes, hanging from between its mouth.

I have read accounts of animals chewing through their limbs, consuming bone, to escape such traps. Were I caught, I would lie on the ground and stare at my broken leg, unable to free myself, even at the cost of certain death. I wish I were different, or even able to imagine I am. At thirty I know myself. I would die in that trap.

Earl leaves, without so much as a good-bye. The small pockets of sunshine lend little warmth. I rub my arms. This is a fool's errand.

The papers made stories of Lost Boy sightings for eleven years. A local legend, unknown outside Maine. My mother whispered through chapped lips, "I think the Lost Boy of Passadumkeag is Michael." Her sharp hands clutched the tight sheets of her hospital bed, the one she would not leave until she died two days later. "Find him," she said, as if sending me to collect him from a neighbor's house. Find him.

My hiking boots are spotted wet. Earl's river has soaked every leaf and mossy bit of ground nearby. There is none of that lovely swish swish that comes of dragging your feet through autumn leaves, only the squelching sound of sucking mud.

I was able to print copies of all the old Lost Boy reports from

microfiched copies of the Bangor Daily News. The first was printed in April 1995, ten months after Michael went missing. Teenager Elizabeth Gross described the "lost boy" as tall, thin, and wearing ragged clothes. "His eyes seemed to glow in the dark, like a cat's." She spotted him at the edge of these woods. She claimed she and her boyfriend were driving home from the movies. I bet they were parked, making out and fumbling with each other's buttons and zippers.

That first report gave no specific detail that would allow anyone to identify the boy. Tall, thin, glowing eyes. That was all. Michael's eyes were green, like a cat's.

Pale mushrooms grow on a log. Their white fleshy caps and mottled bottoms look like misplaced fairy tale props. Poison awaiting a lost heroine. Me and my imagination again.

How could anyone survive in these woods for years? In winter, the temperature averages twenty degrees. My brother was sixteen when he disappeared and had grown up in a New Jersey subdivision. His survival skills included microwaving frozen dinners and belching the alphabet.

There were the summer visits to Grandpa who lived in Millinocket, at the edge of Baxter State Forest. Day hikes where we spotted caribou, moose, and, twice, bears. But we neither hunted nor gathered. Our visits were social, not practical.

Grandpa died a year before Michael vanished.

At first they labeled him a runaway, just another angry teenager who would return to his middle-class life. He had fought with my father. "No driving on weekdays," Dad insisted.

"You're an ass!" Michael had yelled, stomping upstairs, each step as heavy as he could make it. The slam of his bedroom door was the last sound I ever heard him make, the thunka thunka of the door rattling in its frame. It reverberates in my head far longer than it could have that night.

I thought he might have gone for a day or two. He got sensitive about being considered a child, didn't like being reminded that he was not, in fact, an adult.

He had money from his job delivering newspapers and cutting grass. How much? I couldn't say. Enough for bus fare from New Jersey to Maine? Sure. Enough to come here, to the same woods we had toured with our grandfather each summer before his death? Yes. Enough to live on for twelve years? No. No. No.

In 1997 there were three sightings, the first by teenagers, the second by an elderly woman walking her dog, and the third by the town librarian. It is her account that seems the least doubtful, and yet how could anyone believe such a creature existed? By this time the description of the boy has grown fantastic. He now sports a short beard and long hair, in which leaves

collect. His clothes are ragged in all their layers and he emits "a distinct odor of dirt and moldering leaves." That's the librarian's claim. It is this specificity that makes the tale both more and less believable.

The fall after Michael disappeared I entered college. I had planned to study archaeology. Sifting through the strata of soil, discovering artifacts to say who lived here and what they did lost meaning after it was clear he was gone. Seven months and not a word. Not a note or telephone call or a corpse. Nothing. I studied mathematics instead.

I continue to follow Earl's river, though I need not. The Kinner place was a local landmark to hang my photography story on. Yet where else would I walk? I suppose I could sit on a fallen log and wait, but for what? The Lost Boy?

Mom never said a word about him until she was in St. Katherine's waiting for cancer to take the little left she had to offer. Dad had died eight years earlier. His heart went. Mom never mentioned her theory to him. He would have shook his head and said, "Oh Helen, no. Not that. Please." After one year had passed, Dad never wanted to talk of Michael. Nothing could change his mind, not even those rare telephone calls from people claiming to have spotted him hundreds of miles away, people who had seen the Missing Persons picture. I envied my Dad's certainty that Michael was dead. Between my mother's hope and my father's resignation, I maintained the middle

ground, unsure what to believe, anxious he might be dead, worried that death might be kinder than what had happened to keep him from us for so long.

Birdsong drifts from above, a high, light chorus of wee whippet wee. Tilting my head I see a red-breasted bird calling into the dark forest of pines and firs. Here seems a likely place for mourning doves, not for this cheerful songster.

It took me six years to accept that he was not ever coming back. No one but Mom said differently: not the police who investigated his disappearance or my friends. Let him go, they advised. My mother's everlasting hope was understandable. What would she do if she thought him dead? She had to keep chewing her leg in that trap. It kept her going. She doted on him, her boy with the big, slouched shoulders. She saved the last slice of pie for him, pretending she wasn't, but I knew better. Kids usually do.

The ground is drier here, on this slight hill. Digging my feet into the soil and leaning my weight forward I wonder again what made my mother believe her son had become a forest legend, a bogeyman of the children of Passadumkeag. I asked her more than once, but she only said, "His face," several times and, once, "He loved those woods."

No he didn't. I swat at an insect whining near my face. Michael loved Grandpa and he liked walking with him, but love the woods? No. He felt at ease around mechanical things, always taking

apart toasters and alarm clocks. A spare screw or wire always remained after he had put them together again. It bothered me, his carelessness.

"Pick up your clothes!" I shouted at him. He left the neatly folded laundry Mom washed atop his bureau until he wore the clothes or they fell onto the floor and Mom washed them again. It angered me, his obliviousness to the care that went on around him, as if he lived in an eggshell or an acorn.

The orange maple leaves give me pause, leading me to thoughts of fractals. Fractals, with their self-similarity, can describe the irregularly shaped objects we find in nature. Fractals are recursively defined and infinitely detailed. Zoom in on a fractal section and you will see it has just as much detail as the whole fractal. Imagine the smooth pink interior of a Nautilus, curving, curving.

Picture my mind retracing my last day with Michael. Every section, like that of a fractal, infinitely detailed, from the morning when we ate breakfast: he a bowl of cereal and toast with jam, me an egg and a glass of orange juice. If we zoom in more closely we can see the hard yellow of the yolk crusting on the rim of the plate I refuse to wash because it is Michael's turn to load the dishwasher and Michael's long fingered hands clutching the car keys that will spark the fight between him and Dad.

The Kinner house surprises me. It seems to grow from the woods. The windowpanes

contribute to the illusion, reflecting dark, shadowy trees. The logs from which the house was built have grown gray and slope under a roof from which a stone chimney juts like an improbable top hat.

Michael used to dress up in such a hat and I would wear my rhinestone tiara and we would play King and Queen of the Neighborhood. I enjoyed lording it over the younger ones. Michael liked to hand out pennies and say, "There you go urchins!" in a hearty voice.

Nature has taken over the Kinner house. Vines ascend the rear wall and mold speckles the wet wood under the sink. A dark, fertile smell mingles with the ghost of fires long dead. Evidence of other visitors litters the floors: cigarette butts, candy wrappers, a few playing cards. All the items are wet, the cards covered with fuzz. No one has been here recently.

My footfalls sound loud against the moldering floor. I should return to the car before the sun sets, before it is night and I cannot find my way. I shiver, trying to imagine anyone living in these woods for more than a decade. Could anybody? Would anybody? He had no reason. After a day or two, his anger with Dad would fade, a compromise arrived at about the driving. What sixteen year old would choose the woods? What sixty year old would invent this tale to comfort herself in her last moments? What thirty year old would bother to investigate?

Someone who never let go, no matter what she told the others.

Defeated, revealed, I turn to go and gasp so hard my throat hurts. It's him! Michael. Outside! I run towards the window and see that the pale face with the open mouth is mine. That damn haircut.

He would not look like me. He would be a man, with facial hair and a prominent Adam's apple. The tears startle me, but not so much as that gasp did. I had believed then, perhaps not my mother's peculiar fairy tale. Not the Lost Boy for me, but something else. A boy gone missing but returned to his sister when she has no one else, in the witch's house in the woods. Hansel and Gretel. I knew my imagination would do me harm.

Outside I gather leaves and twigs, then pile them atop the ashy fireplace bricks. From my bag I draw the newspaper articles. "Lost Boy Spotted Near Creek," the top title reads. Ten months ago he was seen two miles away from here. The fisherman who reported the incident claimed the Lost Boy looked weak and was eating something that looked like tree bark.

No more stories. The photograph balances on the articles and twigs and leaves. In it Michael squints against the sun, his blue eyes all but closed, his hair curling about his ears just like mine now. He has his arm slung around my shoulder, having surpassed me in height the previous summer. The ancient top hat is cocked rakishly to one side. "Come here you little urchins!" he

cried before the photo was taken,
reliving our childish play.

When they brought him home
from the hospital, bundle in a
triangle wedge of blankets, I cried. I
was so happy to see him at last, after
months of waiting, of promises of he
will be here soon. The first sight of
his white fuzzy face, with its half-
absent blonde brows, made me
laugh. I kissed his skin, warm and
sweet and wrinkled like an
elephant's.

It takes four matches before
the twigs and leaves catch fire. The
photograph curls inward, as if

protecting itself. Soon the colors
burn to black char and the space
where Michael and I were is no
more. The fire dies fast, without
food to survive on.

Outside, the evening has
colored everything dark: navy air,
purple house, black trees. My feet
take quick, careful steps towards the
river, the way I came. I will find the
car and go home. There is no other
choice. The trap has sprung and I
cannot gnaw my leg any longer. He
is gone forever and I am alone, an
orphan of hope.

A Woman Like a Rock

By Thomas Griffin

Roger saw a man help his wife out of a red sedan. He recognized him as the man at the bank who had approved a home equity loan for him and Ellen several years before. The banker took Ellen's hand and pulled her toward him, and Roger knew they were having an affair. He was across the street from them, fishing in his pocket for a quarter for the parking meter, and he crouched behind the meter as though it could hide him, but they weren't looking in his direction. They went into a restaurant. Roger forgot about getting a sandwich and returned to his pick-up truck and drove back to the Demers' place, where he was building a stone wall to encircle the pond that the Demers had just had dug.

He got to the Demers', turned off his truck, and sat in the seat, worrying a peeling callous on his left hand with the thumb and forefinger of his right. There were calluses within calluses on Roger's broad palms and thick fingers. There were scars and cuts and dust trapped in the deep lines that traversed his palms like fissures in rock.

Roger didn't eat Ellen's supper that night. When his wife

asked what the matter was, he said he wasn't hungry.

Ellen was a big woman, tall and thick through the shoulders and arms, beautiful to Roger. She had frizzy black hair with flecks of gray and dark eyebrows and eyes whose expressions remained inscrutable to Roger, ten years into their marriage. She had dimples in her cheeks, even when she wasn't smiling. Roger liked to put his hand on the nape of her neck, which was soft and warm and smooth against his rough hands, and gently knead the ropy muscles that connected her neck to her shoulders until they relaxed and became more elastic, like bread dough.

Usually over dinner Roger would tell Ellen about a stone he had discovered in the woods, or a wall that was being stubborn, or steps that didn't fit. That night he played with his spaghetti and watched his two daughters eat. The older one, Roger thought, had a flair for stone, for seeing stone fit into places. She always liked going to his jobs. Roger loved his girls, the older one because she reminded him of himself, the younger because she reminded him of Ellen: dark, tall, hard to figure. While the first still liked to clutch her

father's shoulders and go for a piggyback ride, her sister resisted her father's rides and squirmed away when Roger tried to hoist her into the air. Playing with his food, thinking about his daughters, Roger couldn't remember the last time he had cupped Ellen's breast, or stroked her thigh, or felt her heft as she straddled his waist.

Roger looked awhile at the girls in bed. The older one was flat on her back, her hands gripping the quilt drawn to her chest. The younger one was submerged under the covers, her head burrowed under the pillow.

He came into the kitchen, where Ellen was sweeping the floor.

"I saw you with a man today," he said. "He was helping you out of his car." Roger was looking at the bristles of the broom.

Ellen kept sweeping. "I was here all day," she said.

Roger's heavy left hand clenched into a fist. He could imagine, in the most minute detail, his fist's slamming into his wife's angular face, the hand fitting between her high cheekbone and jaw, the give of the cheek under the impact of the fist. There would be blood on the linoleum floor, on the red and white checked tablecloth, on the white painted cabinets. It seemed inevitable to Roger, all this blood, as though all he had to do was wait for the small electrical impulse to skitter along the path from his brain to his hand, and the rest would happen just as he had seen it.

Nothing happened. Roger realized he had been holding his breath, and he let go.

"I'm going to sleep in the girls' room tonight," he said.

"If you do," Ellen said, "I'm leaving."

"Why won't you admit you were with that man?" Roger said. "I saw you. He helped you out of a red two-door. He gave us our loan a couple years back. He held your hand."

Ellen looked away and hunched her shoulders, as if to say, "Believe what you will." Then she probed with the broom under the kitchen table, though to Roger it looked perfectly clean there. She flicked the broom a few times, then pushed each of the four chairs tight against the table. A stray strand of hair had come loose and fell before her eyes, and she pushed it back with the heel of her palm.

"You want to hear about it?" she said. "I'll tell you about it." She was still holding the broom, now squeezing the handle with two hands. "His name is Frank. I'm not in love with him. All we do is have sex, maybe go out to eat now and then. We've done it five times, and I don't like it all that much."

Roger put his hands up like a policeman stopping traffic. "No," he said.

"In fact," Ellen said, rubbing the broom handle as if her hands itched, "I feel like shit afterwards. Sometimes I feel like screaming."

Roger had clamped his hands over his ears, but he could hear his

wife's voice anyway. He couldn't take his eyes off her hands, working the broom. He had an idea that she would rub the yellow paint right off the handle. He took his hands off of his ears.

"Do you know the last time we made love?" Ellen was saying. "77 days ago. 77 days!"

He grabbed her hands, not tenderly but with the intention of making her stop rubbing the broom handle. It must hurt, he thought, and it was true that her palms were hot and red and raw-looking. "Look at your hands," was all Roger could say.

Ellen made a sound that could have been a word, but it was nothing Roger could understand. She jerked her hands away from his and left the kitchen.

Roger finished the sweeping. He sponged the kitchen table, the counters, and the stove and stacked the last dishes in the dishwasher. He filled the container with detergent and began the wash cycle. He took the garbage out, then turned off the lights, and locked the doors. There was nothing more to be done but go upstairs to their bedroom.

It was dark, but Roger could tell that Ellen was on her side of the bed, and somehow he knew before he got in that she was still wearing her clothes, the comforter thrown over her. He took off his clothes, pulled on a clean Tee shirt, and climbed under the covers. He didn't know if she was asleep. Out of the blue he remembered a rock that he had thought he would tell Ellen

about, a long, triangular slab of granite shaped like a boat's hull, with a gently rising bulge in the middle of one side. It had reminded him of Ellen. It was speckled and grainy, with silver streaks in it and little depressions like dimples on either side of the bulge. The stone had been a perfect piece for a section of the wall surrounding the Demers' pond.

Roger started to talk, even though he didn't know if Ellen was awake and could hear him.

"I meant to tell you about this piece of granite," he said, and stopped. His voice was substantial in the dark, and its sound took him by surprise. So he spoke more lightly. "It reminded me of you. I found it at the Demers' place, sitting between two trunks of a tree. Boy, let me tell you, it wasn't easy getting that rock out of there. The trunks had sort of grown around it, like the tree was holding the rock and didn't want to let go. I had to throw a chain around it and get a back hoe to yank it out. It took awhile - I didn't want to kill the tree. Jeeze, though, it looks good in the wall by the pond."

He looked in the direction of his wife. Her back was turned to him, and he dangled his hand where he thought her shoulder was, but he didn't quite touch it.

The Demers wouldn't miss that rock one bit, he thought. Hell, they had plenty of stone over there. Roger could take Ellen's granite and bring it home. She'd see what he meant, about it looking like her. It would make a good garden bench.

Or just something to look at on a sunny afternoon. "I'm half-tempted to go get it first thing in the

morning," Roger whispered to his wife's back. "I'm half-tempted."

Garnier's Journal

By Jeffrey Kiplinger

The original French text and this English translation are submitted as a term project for Graduate English ENG 516, Theory and Practice of Translation. The original was published in the Canadian magazine *Sauvage* (Press Canicule, Montreal) in January 2005.

(Editor's note: Jean-Francois Garnier, a 22 year old experienced backpacker and freelance journalist from Lac du Pitou, about 50 miles northeast of Montreal, disappeared while on a weeklong solo hike in the Dry Wilderness section of New Hampshire's White Mountains in June 2004. He was declared dead after some of his personal possessions, including the journal bearing the following entries, were found in mid-July. Garnier's digital camera (mentioned herein) was found as well; but was damaged by weather and the images were unrecoverable. His physical remains were not recovered. The journal bears Garnier's name and address on the inside cover, and indicates it was begun on April 3, 2004. A number of leading pages are missing.)

June 1, 2004 7:00 PM

I am well and truly fucked. My last entry was written on my second day out, and I have now - I am having trouble writing this, it feels strange to say it - I have broken my right leg below the knee, a compound fracture; and I have been lying for the past twenty-eight hours partway down a slope below the Isolation Ridge trail, trying to regain my composure. I hope the writing will help.

I have done what I can for myself today. It's early evening and I will lose light soon. I slept little last night, after the fall. I tried today to prepare myself for a wait, but I am in a bad place, a little hollow beneath a wide spruce with large roots across the surface - little to recommend it as a bed, except that it was the only level space within easy reach. I cannot see the trail above, so tomorrow I will have to try to get closer to it if I want to have access to help.

I think I misstepped on a fragile edge of the trail. Going down my foot must have wedged behind a fallen tree or a rock - the instant pain was horrible, everything I would

have expected. At some point a tree blocked my tumbling, and I stopped. At first I hoped my leg was just badly bruised and scraped, as it was straight and in a relatively normal position; but then I saw the blood and I pulled up my pant leg to see the jagged edge of the bone, shiny and white beneath the shreds of yellow sinew and half-clotted blood, clearly visible through the thumb-sized rip in my shin. It was the most awful sight: I was so aware of it being mine, a hole to the inside of my body. I heaved and vomited, from the pain and the shock; and I think I passed out and lay back, which I think was good because it sent the blood to my head and not to my leg. I assume I cut no artery, or I would have bled out by now.

That was afternoon, and for a few hours I had cold sweats and sort of waking dreams. I cried a little, angry and feeling sorry for myself. When evening came I was cold, wet and shivering, and I dragged myself to my pack. This moving was not so bad as I feared. In films, the guy with the broken leg is in agony at the slightest movement. My leg has swelled so much inside my pants that the broken bone cannot move much. I think this is a lucky thing.

I wedged my pack below me on the slope so I would not roll, and got the sleeping bag out, unzipped and more or less around me. After dark I was able to eat a Snickers bar and drink some water, and I was warmer.

Today I am faced with more reality than I want. I have only

about a liter of water, and most of my food requires water to cook. So I am hungry and rationing the water, which is not so bad now but will surely get worse. I doubt anyone could see me from the trail, and I am not sure I could hear anyone walking by above. It's Tuesday, early in the season, and there are not many hikers in this part of the Whites. I cannot clean my leg, and I have no antibiotics. I have eight more Tylenol #3, and a dozen regular Tylenol, but I needed four of the threes to get through last night. I am worried they will make me constipated (a joke! See, I am not so bad).

I spent the morning trying to get to this tree, to my little patch of flat ground. I dragged my pack and crawled underneath the branches and fell asleep for much of the day, exhausted. I think that injury drains you mentally and emotionally. I woke an hour ago feeling better than I have a right to, rolled to my left and pissed downhill (I am marking my place like a dog!), and ate a little peanut butter, which I think may be the perfect food mix of protein, fat and sugar; and my last Snickers bar. I try not to drink too much, but I think my body really needs water. I smell very bad, very sour - maybe there is some component in pain-sweat that is really acrid.

June 2, 2004 7:30 AM

Last night was very bad; I was either awake hearing noises or having nightmares of things creeping in my apartment. I think I

cried out. When I scream in dreams, whether in anger or fear, I sound like I'm wailing; there are no clear words. I know this from Amy. In a nightmare it always feels like I am too afraid to make a sound - the most I can manage is an awful whimper, rising and falling like a dog's howl.

Today I will try to splint the leg and move uphill. I took two more Tylenol threes and ate some more peanut butter. I have about a half liter of water left.

3:00 PM

I splinted the leg with my hiking staff. I have bands of duct tape above and below the knee, from the tiny roll I've carried in my pack for years wrapped around a pencil stub - just in case! I guess this was the case. Around my thigh I tied a band of webbing cut from my pack. I cut off one of the shoulder straps and banded it, with its attached webbing and buckles, around my leg just below the wound. I cannot tighten it much, but I think the splint gives psychological support as much as anything. I took off the boot, worried that I would catch it on something while crawling.

I have also climbed back to the trail! It was not as far as I had feared; maybe 10 meters. I removed excess stuff from my pack and stripped out the frame, and I heaved the lumpy sack ahead of me as I crawled and dragged the bad leg along. It took less than an hour, being very careful of the leg.

I took a couple of pictures of myself, holding the camera at arms length. I took a picture of the leg, but I can no longer lift the pant leg to see the wound because of the swelling and the splint. I am very proud: maybe it's a stupid pride. I am proud to be surviving. I am so proud to write those words.

7:30 PM

It's almost dark. The leg throbs; it is swollen tight inside the crusted pant leg. I have only two Tylenol threes left. I took four of the regular Tylenol. I am tired and demoralized. I am very thirsty, and have only a few sips of water left. I have a candle burning because it's friendly. I set up a little camp; even my stove is set up, although there is not enough water to cook with.

I wish most for a good night's sleep. I am very afraid in the darkness; I think it's because I am unaccustomed to being helpless. I used to sleep fine in the woods. Once a bear came through my camp and tore up my food bag, and I slept through it. I had an awful time last night, waking from nightmares and listening to woods noises. I do not want to write about this now.

I think someone must find me tomorrow. The weather is good and hikers often start weekends early. I think I will be OK. I am only about ten kilometers by trail from Crawford and twenty from Bartlett.

June 3, 2004 7:30 AM

It's full light now. I think I was nearly attacked in the night; and

I have not slept since. I have never heard of wolves in the Whites, so I think it was feral dogs. I am very afraid. God, please let me be found today!

I woke to sounds on the trail at about three o'clock. I thought I heard breathing, panting, and I could smell something rank, like bear. I raised my head, trying to catch another sound, and there was a short growl. I rolled; my leg shifted, and I yelled out of pain and panic. I heard movement in three or four directions as they left. I was trying to breathe so hard, choking almost to get air, and my heart was beating BAMBAMBAM. My insides cramped up; I thought I might actually shit myself.

I did not know if they would come back. I think they sensed injured prey; maybe they smelled my wound. There was a little moonlight, maybe a quarter; enough to see shadows and dark shapes. I lit my candle, but that made it impossible to see into the woods, and I put it out. That was a hard thing to do. I wanted my cooking pots to bang together to scare them away, but I left them down below. Finally, I scraped the ground clear as far as I could reach and made a little pile of leaves and twigs in the center. I drenched it with stove fuel and kept my lighter in my hand and waited.

They came back near dawn. I didn't hear them - it scares me to think of that. I saw an animal materialize out of the darkness and move quickly toward me along the

trail, and another behind it. They looked like large dogs, and moved like dogs. I lit the leaves on fire, they flared up with a whoosh, and I saw green eye shine from three animals. I screamed at them. The eyes disappeared. In a way it was better than when they had first come - waiting to fight seems better than being wakened by teeth. But the waiting is in some ways worse: I am still shaking, from the adrenaline. I could not make the fire last; I did not have wood. But in a few minutes the sky began to get lighter. I do not think they will come back in the daytime.

My leg looks like a cooking sausage about to burst its skin. I think it is infected. I drank the last of my water and took the last Tylenol.

6:30 PM

I have done little today but wait for rescue that has not come. I slept some in the daylight. I have a strong fever, I am sure; and I am nauseous. The leg is very hot and hurts. My breathing is shallow and my heart beats very fast sometimes. There are no hikers. I am terribly thirsty. I don't know what else to do.

I tore the first sixty pages from this journal and made tight paper balls: more fuel for my fire. I have never destroyed a journal. I have wondered before, should people read them after I am gone? I do not think they should. I would like my father to destroy them all.

Sometimes thoughts are just thoughts, they are not really real.

I think the dogs will come again tonight. If not, then when I am dead. I cannot stay awake all night. I am so very scared, and also so tired maybe I do not care. Maybe it's not right for my family and Amy to know that. I have my little pile I can light quickly; but I cannot get any more fuel. I have only my pocketknife for a weapon.

To my family, I love you all. I am sorry for the things that have been between us, for all the small

and big things. I have been learning. It feels like a very long journey, and I was thinking I would have time to make things right.

To Amy, I love you more than I ever loved anyone. I wished for so many things. I will try to keep you with me tonight.

I am getting maudlin now and I am dizzy, and I want to stop with thoughts of Amy. I will try to write more in the morning. It will be dark soon.

Fire Drill

By Evelyn Krieger

My teacher wants to know where I learned so much about fire safety. I am standing beside her wooden desk. The classroom is empty, its silence coiling around my stomach.

I shrug. *Doesn't everyone know?*

"Well, Katy," she says, tapping her pencil. "You certainly impressed your classmates." She smiles. "When you get home today, be sure to tell your mother that you are the third grade fire expert."

Relief washes over me. "Thanks. I will."

As I walk the gravel path to my house, I repeat my teacher's words aloud, so I may deliver them, like a perfect gift, to my mother. This is a message she will appreciate. More than a one hundred percent on my multiplication test.

I open the porch door and hear the television playing Mom's soap opera. She is in the den, ironing a white sheet. The room smells of spray starch and steam. Her green eyes smile when she sees me and I know this is a sign of a good mood. Mom turns off the television and unplugs the iron. Then I tell her about the fireman and

the coloring book and all the questions I answered.

"That makes my day!" Her hug surprises me. Then her eyes narrow. "You know, parents need a class like that." She looks through me. "Maybe...I ought to suggest it to the PTA."

My gut tells me that this wouldn't be a good idea, but of course I don't say anything. "Can I have a snack?"

"Just like some people don't bother making a will or buying life insurance," Mom continues. "They think it's just not going to happen to them." She points her finger. "ABP. Always be prepared. That's my motto."

"I know, Mom. I told them."

What I actually told my classmates this morning was how you're supposed to check the alarms each month and change batteries every October. We have fourteen smoke alarms in our three-bedroom colonial. Until recently it had been thirteen, but Mom didn't like the number and put up another one in the basement for good measure. Dad said that was it; he wasn't buying anymore. What I didn't mention was the rope ladder under my bed.

Bethany Miller invites me to sleep over Friday night. My Dad says, "Fine with me." My mother has never let me sleep at anyone else's house, but now that I've turned nine I feel hopeful. I wait until I've seen her smile at least twice then pop the question.

She twists a strand of her copper hair. "I don't know her family that well..."

"Mrs. Miller went on the farm trip with us. Remember?" I plead. "Bethany's my reading partner. Please Mom. We're going to work on our book project."

I watch the decision form in her face.

"I suppose. Just be good. And *careful*."

I ride the school bus home with Bethany. Her mom helps us make homemade pizza and chocolate chip cookies. I notice that Mrs. Miller smiles a lot. Her calm body moves effortlessly through the kitchen. She lets me stir the pan of melting chocolate on the stovetop. Later, I call my mom to say good night. I do not tell her about my baking. She reminds me to review the house exits before I go to bed.

When Mom arrives the next morning, Mrs. Miller invites her in for a cup of coffee. Bethany and I sit on the living room floor dressing our Barbie dolls. As my mother enters the house, her eyes dart around the living room, then toward the ceiling. I feel the back of my neck grow warm. I follow my mother and Mrs.

Miller into the kitchen. I try to think of something to say.

"Bethany is learning to sew," I blurt. "She's making some doll clothes."

My mother nods. Her eyes are blinking. She sits down at the kitchen table, while Mrs. Miller pours coffee.

"So the girls got along?" Mom asks, eyeing the kitchen.

Bethany's mother looks surprised. "Oh my, yes. Your daughter is welcome anytime. We really enjoyed her."

I like Mrs. Miller's buttery voice. I believe she means what she says.

My mother sips the coffee from an orange mug. "You have a lovely home."

"Thank you. We're actually thinking of having the kitchen redone."

Bethany taps my arm, and whispers. "Come on, let's play."

"You know..." my mother says, "I couldn't help noticing that you don't have a smoke detector in the living room." She gestures to the kitchen ceiling. "Or in here."

My stomach somersaults. I can feel the air in the room change. I look at my shoes to avoid seeing Mrs. Miller's face. Bethany doesn't seem to notice and again tugs me back to our dolls. Mrs. Miller looks at me. I'm sure she sees my red cheeks. Her dark eyes seem to be sending me a message. Then she says, "Katie, why don't you pack up your things?"

In the car, I stare out the window. I let my silence slice the space between us. Mom drives slowly and questions me about Bethany's family. I answer in monosyllables.

"What's the matter with you?" she asks.

"Why did you have to *say* that? About the smoke alarms?"

She hits her hand on the steering wheel. "*Why?* Why did I have to say that? Because my daughter was sleeping in their home and they were not protected from fire. That's why!"

"They had them upstairs, Mom."

"You know very well that a fire can be raging downstairs before the upstairs alarms go off. And, if they are careless enough not to have smoke alarms downstairs, then what else does that say about them? Maybe they keep a handgun. Who knows?"

"It's only for one night anyway." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I regret them. I close my eyes. The car jerks as she pulls over to the curb and stops. She turns toward the back seat, her eyes glaring at me. Her voice comes out in a hoarse whisper.

"Just one night? Is that what you said?"

I know what is coming.

"That's all it took to kill your Uncle Kenny. One night at a friend's house whose parents thought it was okay to sleep in a basement with no exit, in a house with no working smoke detectors!"

I feel like blocking my ears because I don't want to hear this story again.

"Can you understand me? My only brother..." Her voice cracks. "My twin..."

I nod.

"It's my job to protect you, Katie." She shakes her head. "I just don't understand how people can be so careless."

"Sorry, Mom."

It has been a while since she mentioned Uncle Kenny. He died at fourteen, and although I never knew him, his ghost has lived with our family, hovering like a storm cloud, for as long as I can remember. Sometimes, alone in my bed at night, I allow myself to think about Uncle Kenny strangling in the thick smoke, his lungs burning. Then I thank God that my mother was spared, though I know a different fire still burns inside her. Even now, my palms get sweaty when I think about Mom holding my hand to the oven door. I must have been about three. *Hot!* She would repeat this warning until she believed that I knew it in my bones. *Don't play with fire. Fire hurts.*

The days grow shorter and colder. My mother's smile fades, as if she is holding her breath. I know that winter, in her mind, brings its own danger — space heaters, chimneys, fireplaces, and frozen shut windows. Then, the unthinkable happens. Right in our own town, near the organic farm. A fire sweeps through a home, killing three children. Sisters, with flower names.

Violet, Lilly, and Rose. I am glad I did not know them. The firefighters found the girls under a bed. While the church ladies bring food and start a collection, my mother drives my brother and me by the charred remains of the house. She stops in front of it, the car windows still frosty. My brother and I look past the blackened snow.

I think I can smell the smoke. I beg her to leave.

She turns toward Trevor and me in the back seat. I see her breath in the frigid air. "This is the power of fire. Never underestimate it."

"Can we go?" Trevor says, shivering.

In the weeks that follow, our town slowly slips from its sadness back into the routine of life. My mother stays behind on her island of silence. I know she has read every news story about the fire. I know she must be thinking about her Uncle Kenny. When she finds out that the wiring inside the walls caused the fire, she puts her head down on our kitchen table and cries.

I hesitantly lay my hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Mom."

She lifts her head, and wipes the tears from her face. "It's the hardest kind of fire to prevent. One never knows. And with the high winds that night...it moved so fast..."

A few days later, my mother has Firefighter Dave come to our house, the same man who had visited my class. He checks the smoke alarms, the outlets, the wires

to our lamps and television and toaster and washing machine. My mother twists her hair as Firefighter Dave delivers the report.

"Everything looks just fine to me. Exits are clear. Smoke alarms in order."

"What about the wires?" Mom asks.

"No problems. Nothing frayed. You aren't using extensions. Of course, if you've got concerns about blinking lights or shorting, you might want to call an electrician."

I am hoping that Firefighter Dave's good news will bring back my mother's smile. Instead, that night, from my bed, I hear my mom softly crying. My father's voice seems to be comforting her but after a while it grows louder.

"This is getting out of hand, Abby. It has been over two months. I know how much it upset you, but you're kids are *alive*. You're house is still here! Why are *you* in mourning?"

I strain my ears to hear my mother's reply.

"It's following me. Like a curse."

"What more do you want? We've taken every precaution in the book!"

"I want the electrician. Like he recommended."

"I told you I'm not paying for an electrician. We had a fire inspection and I know myself that the circuits work just fine. Their house was 75 years old, Abby."

I am mad at my father for not giving my mother what she wants. Who cares if it's a waste of money? As long as she comes back to us.

On Sunday evening my mother calls a family meeting. Trevor and I sit in the beanbag chairs around the coffee table. Mom and Dad sit near us on the rug.

"It's time to review fire safety," my mother announces as if we were about to play a game. "Having a plan means being prepared. And being prepared means you can make wise choices when there is no time to lose." She places two papers on the coffee table. "I've made a floor map of our house. This one is the upstairs, and this one is the downstairs."

Trevor leans over to study the maps. "There's my bedroom!"

Mom nods and from her sweater pocket pulls out a tiny boy figurine and places it in Trevor's room. "And here you are."

She hands me a girl figure, which I place in the outline of my room. Then, as Trevor identifies each area of our house map, Mom writes down the name with a black felt pen. My job is to identify the exits, which she marks with a red X.

Mom looks disappointed. "You forgot some important exits, Katie."

Trevor jumps in. "I know. The windows!"

My mother explains how thick smoke or fire might prevent us from escaping downstairs. We need to know how to open our windows

and yell for help. "And don't forget about the fire ladders under your bed."

We follow her upstairs. We take turns opening our cold bedroom windows. We study the instruction pictures on the rope ladder. We review, 'Stop, drop, and roll.' We practice crawling out of our room and down the stairs. Meanwhile, my father stands by, silently, his arms folded.

Later that week, Dad flies to Washington for business. Mom begs him to cancel the trip. He doesn't. My mother's fears seem to grow, until I think I might catch them if I stand too close. After she tucks me in at night, she turns of my bedside lamp then pulls the plug from the wall. She sits next to me in the dark and lets out a sigh.

"I'm so tired. I can't decide whether or not to leave the lights on downstairs. It's a good way to discourage intruders. On the other hand, it could be a fire hazard."

"Everything will be okay, Mom."

She pats my hand. "Sleep well, sweetie."

When I hear my mother's voice again it comes as if in a dream. *Fire!* I hear my door burst open. Her hand yanks my arm. "Katie! *Fire!*" I spring up from my bed, my eyes widening. I hear the window shade snap, then Trevor whimpering.

"Out the window, quick!"

No sounds escape my dry throat. My heart pounds me awake. My body takes over. I reach under my bed for the rope ladder. Mom

grabs it, hooks it to my window, and lets it fall.

“Katie! Out! Now!”

I am coughing. I need water. I feel my mother pushing me. The freezing night air hits my face then travels through my nightgown. She hoists me to the window.

“No, I’ll fall. I can’t—“

“Hurry! You can do it!”

I move down our brick house, into the night, my hands clenching the rungs. I am shivering, but I know we will escape the fire. When I reach the last rung, I jump to the snow-covered ground. Only then do I realize that my feet are bare. The porch light illuminates my mother and Trevor as they inch their way down.

“I’m scared!” my brother screams.

I fear the flames might catch them and I search the outside of my house. I cannot see the fire or the smoke. I stand beside the maple tree, shivering. Firefighter Dave will be here any second. I listen for the fire engines. But the night stays still. Mom holds Trevor as she jumps from the end of the ladder into the snow. I run to hug her and she pulls us close to her warm body.

“Oh, my God. My babies.” She is breathless. “We did it. I think that was just over two minutes.” Trevor is crying. She rubs his head. “We can go back inside now, sweetie.”

It seems to take all night and the next day for my body to warm up after our fire drill. In school, I sit in my desk while Mrs. Green points

to a big map of the America. She is talking about the Eerie Canal, but my mind drifts backwards and I hear my mother yelling fire. I wonder if any of my classmates have to climb out their windows in the middle of the night. When I think about that fire ladder my stomach churns. My toes still hurt.

When Dad hears about our climbing out the window, he tells me not to worry. There will be no more middle-of-the night fire drills. Even with this assurance, bedtime brings a rising panic in my heart. I wake in the middle of the night, certain that smoke is creeping into my nose. I try to call out, but my voice has vanished.

By the time spring comes, I have pushed the memory from my mind. Mom busies herself with renewing the backyard garden. One Saturday, she opens all the windows, and declares a spring-cleaning day. She promises Trevor and me ice cream cones if we get our chores done.

Mom starts by stripping the beds. Trevor dusts the back porch, while I am in charge of wiping down the kitchen cabinets. I climb the stepladder to reach the small cabinets over the sink. I wonder if Mom has hidden some candy in there, so I take a peek. Nothing but fancy teacups, and a small blue and red box, which I pull out. The bottom slides open, revealing dozens of long matches. So this is where she keeps them. I have never been allowed to light a match. I hold one between my fingers and study the

red tip. Here lies my mother's
biggest fear.

I step down the ladder,
holding the matchbox. I slide a
match along the side of the box.

Magic. I cannot take my eyes off the

growing flame. It is beautiful. When
the heat touches my fingertips, I
drop the match. I see it fall to the
rug beneath me, then watch it spring
to life.

Road Kill

By Kim Pones

Taylor passes by the office door on her way to the bathroom. It's one o'clock in the afternoon, and she's just now getting up. I catch her in my peripheral vision, and I swear The Bun has doubled in size overnight. It's roughly the size of a small village in Uganda, and I'm pretty sure I hear a little town government meeting going on in there, replete with gavels and roll calls.

It wasn't always like this. My daughter's hair used to flow gracefully behind her, long and thick and full of movement. It's near black with flecks of auburn sprinkled throughout in such a way that it's dazzling when the light catches it, like the shine of Veronica's hair in the old Archie comics. Over the past few months, it's morphed into what we've affectionately labeled "The Bun", neatly secured with no-rip elastics and off-black bobby pins. Two antennae hang straight down in the front, with the top smoothed back to reveal that dazzling Veronica shine. It's Spring now, so it's officially been six months. I'm in the upstairs office with my laptop open and work spread out on the desk in

front of me. The warm April sun streams through the skylight, and the one other window in the room is open to let the breeze in. I absent-mindedly chew my pencil eraser and stare out the window contemplating the last cones clinging to the massive pine tree in the yard. Until Taylor shows up, that is.

"Hey Taylor," I call, grateful for the distraction - I'm really not in the mood to write this report. "You wanna let me brush your hair today? It'll be fun." I've grown increasingly suspicious of The Bun recently. I haven't seen it free since Fall, and I'm worried about its health. And Taylor's.

"Mom, I need to talk to you about that." She catches me off guard - I wasn't really prepared for anything other than a no.

"Yeah . . ." I almost drawl, wondering where this is going.

"Well, see, it's kind of . . . well, knotted . . . but Brianna told me that happened to her once and you fixed it for her."

"Yeah, I remember that. It took me a bottle of detangler and about two hours to comb that out. I did it, though. I'm such a master at

that kind of thing.” I’m a master at combing hair? I say it like I have a PhD in microbiology.

“Well, okay. Let me just get ready, let me just think for a minute, and then I’ll show you.”

Now I’m scared. She has to think about this? It’s obviously worse than I thought. But I’m ready. I’ve been waiting – I’ve got two full bottles of No More Tangles, detangling shampoo and conditioner, and a drawer full of wide tooth combs and hair picks. I’m armed and ready for the battle of The Bun. It had to come to this eventually. The Bun had become an entity unto itself, separate from my daughter, and in time I knew one of us would regain control.

“Okay, I’ll just go ahead and get the shampoo and stuff, and I’ll meet you downstairs?” I’ve learned you have to be prepared to strike exactly when the iron’s hot. Prime example: Every day for a solid year, I begged my husband for a dog. He wasn’t a dog person, so it took real dedication. I bought dog books and magazines, and placed them randomly around the house. I dragged him to Petco to buy cat food in the secret hope that he’d see a really cute puppy wandering through the store with his master and fall hopelessly in love (with the puppy, not the master). He finally relented at about noon on a Thursday. By 3:00 p.m., we had adopted the last puppy at the shelter. They told us she was a Beagle, but she’s not. She’s a physically ridiculous freak of nature

with a nasty temper towards everyone but us. You get what you get, I guess. But I’m not leaving room for any changing of minds. Strike while the iron’s hot.

Totally in control now, I practically skip down the stairs to the first floor bathroom. I grab towels from the linen closet, and shampoo, conditioner and detangler from the cabinet under the sink. A couple of combs from the hairbrush drawer and I’m good to go. I clear the dishes from the sink and give the steel a quick scrub with Ajax. Leave nothing to chance – if she spots some gross leftover food in the sink, the deal might be off. Damn, I think of everything.

“Mom? Actually, can you come up here?”

I walk past my husband who’s sprawled on the couch watching the Eukenuba dog show (strike while the iron’s hot!), and stage whisper “She’s letting me do her hair!” He breathes an exaggerated sigh of relief and goes back to his show. “I’ll see you in a couple hours.”

Upstairs, Tay ushers me into the tiny bathroom. She lowers her head and looks up at me, her dark eyes reflecting the utter seriousness of the moment. “Are you ready?” the way she asks makes me pause. Ready for what? Wait a minute – do I really want to do this?

“Listen, Mom, seriously. I was too embarrassed to tell you this, but it’s been in a knot for a while, and you know how you told me that

if I didn't take care of it, it would turn into a dreadlock?"

"Yessss . . . " I'm tentative now.

"Well, okay, just don't freak out. Promise me you won't freak out."

"Tay, I'm *not* going to freak out." Why do I *make* these ridiculous promises?

Her eyes never leaving my face, she removes the no-rip elastics one by one, like an archaeologist unwrapping a mummy. One, two, three, four . . . ten. It's free. But instead of gravity gently unrolling the once waist-length tresses in a blaze of follicular glory, The Bun stays stubbornly in its semi-circular gel mold. My daughter lifts her head to look me full in the face. As her head lifts, The Bun hinges backwards and rests at the base of her neck like a Murphy bed – a flat mass parallel to the floor. I imagine the tiny town meeting participants jumping like lemmings off the diving board The Bun has now become.

I bite my lip to keep from gasping – or laughing – I'm not sure which. I struggle to keep my composure. I raise my hand, I think it's trembling, moving towards what used to be The Bun. I catch myself almost at the last minute.

"Can I touch it? 'Cuz I kind of have to see, y'know, what we're up against here." Ouch. That came out wrong. I have to be careful with her. For a long time, I really think that bun was her security – the only constant in her world. At her worst,

she woke sobbing, unable to muster the emotional or physical strength to face the day. Through choking sobs that wracked her body, she managed to explain in a strained voice that she didn't know what was wrong. She only knew that she didn't want to wake up. For the first few seconds of the day, she was okay. Then reality hit and she realized she was alive. She'd rather not be, she said. I fawned over her, knowing I had to protect her, knowing I had to keep her hanging on until she was better. I treated her like an invalid, a baby, and that's what she seemed to need. Or maybe it's what I needed. I took her everywhere with me, made her favorite foods, and bought her anything she expressed an interest in, which wasn't much. That was last summer. After many painful hours of therapy, she's much better, but I'm not. I'm still fawning. I'm still watching. I'm still scared.

"Okay, you can touch it. But I told you, Mom, so don't freak out." Told me? Told me when? Five minutes ago? Or was she sneaking into my room when I was sleeping and whispering in my ear "The Bun is a five inch wide dreadlock?" If she was trying for the subliminal angle, I totally missed it.

I don't bother to respond. I raise my hand the rest of the way, and gently finger The Bun, trying to assess its dimensions.

"Y'know what?" I'm regrouping – it's worse than I thought. "Okay. Let's just go downstairs and see if we can wash it.

We'll put lots of conditioner in it, and we'll see what we can do."

We walk past the living room where the hound group has just been announced as the next set of contestants in the Eukenuba dog show. My husband raises one eyebrow as The Bun ledge saunters past. I shoot a quick, angry glance in his direction. Don't make a scene, no comment, no nothing. He turns back to his show. He's good like that. He knows she's fragile. He was there.

In the kitchen, I turn the water on, testing until it's lukewarm, and Tay bends over the sink, The Bun flipping forward on its hinges. I squeeze half the bottle of shampoo into my hands and try to work through the mass of twisted wreckage attached to my daughter's head. No good. Change tactics.

"Okay, ummmm . . . let's go upstairs and just get started. Do you need some juice?" I'm fawning. I'm babying. I'm scared. "How about popcorn? Do you want to put a movie on, and you can watch it while I'm working on this?"

"Mom, you're so cute. I've got Crash Bandecoot. I'll play that."

In Tay's room, I'm on the bed with her seated on the floor in front of me. She's distracted by her video game, which is good. It gives me time to plot a strategy. I've laid a towel on the edge of the bed, and The Bun ledge is resting on top of it. I spray detangler on the mass, and start in with the comb. I'm trying desperately not to react back here, but it's slowly dawning on me that I'm *not* going to be able to do this.

There are bits of elastic and old shampoo in there, and it actually kind of smells. My hands are slippery from the detangling products, and I'm having a hard time hanging on to the mass of hair. I try shoving conditioner into the inner core of the thing, but I just can't keep my hold on it. Think think think. I can't tell her I can't do it. I have to fix it. The familiar burn of desperation starts to rise up through my stomach and into my chest. Taylor's beautiful, exotic locks cannot be forever stuck in this prison of tangles. I have to free them, and her, and me. I distractedly pick at the mass, buying time to collect my thoughts.

"Tay, I think I need to cut just a little bit, okay? Just to get the thing started."

"Okay, I figured you'd have to cut a little. Not too much though, okay?"

With the pointed end of a teasing comb, I poke a dime-sized hole through the center of The Bun in a futile attempt to get a little leverage. I manage to shove one end of the scissors in there, but to get them closed, I have to hold the handle with my right hand, grasp the blades with my left, and squeeze down on the tiny section I've managed to isolate.

"Dammit! Dammit I cut myself!" There's a perfect open triangle on the inner corner of my left ring finger where I've sliced through my own skin. Not the hair, though. I haven't sliced through any hair.

"Are you okay?!" Tay turns her head and gasps when she sees the blood.

"Yup yup, I'm fine." I lie, "All part of the mom gig. It's okay, let's just finish." I'm not fine. I'm in pain, and now I'm pissed. I didn't do this, after all. MY hair is long and shiny and healthy. I continue to tug and tear and snip at the aggressive little beast, until slowly, inevitably, I allow myself to admit that I'm simply no match for this wild thing. I have failed, and now I have to find a way to break that news to my daughter. This can't be happening. She needs me to fix this - *I* need me to fix this.

"Okay, Tay? Honey? Listen, ummm . . . I'm not going to be able to do this." There, I've said it. Not so bad. She drops her PlayStation controller to the floor and her head to her chest. Her hands fly up to her face, the tips of her fingers resting on her temples. Tay, please don't. Please don't cry. Let's just get through this. Let's just move on past this.

"So . . . let me just call the hairdresser and get you an appointment, okay?" No response. "Tay? Okay?" She whips her head around to look at me, the movement so startling my hand flies to my heart and a sudden gasp escapes me. Her large dark eyes are filled with panic and horror, tears threatening to spill over the lower lid. Her full bottom lip quivers, "No Mom! I can't!" she manages in a terrified voice. My heart stops. I haven't seen her like this since last summer,

and the memories of that time threaten to overtake me in an instant. My breath matches hers now, coming in quick little gasps. I'm dizzy, like I'm suffering the after-effects of an adrenaline rush. My mind is racing - think think think.

"Tay?" no response. "Tay? Taylor please!? Are you okay?" I feel the sting of tears forming behind my eyes.

"Mom," comes a squeaky little voice, choked with tears she's trying desperately to fight back. "Mom, please just leave me alone. Please?" gentle little sobs, "Please? I have to think." No. I can't let her think. I can't let her get too far away from me, from safety, from hope. I slowly remove the scissors from the bed. No sharp objects.

"Okay, but I'm just going to get the phone. Don't go anywhere, okay? Don't do anything." No answer.

I dash from her room to the office, and grab the phone out of its cradle.

"Tay? Everything okay?" I call. Nothing but muffled sobs. Okay, she's right where I left her. That's good. I sprint down the stairs and into the kitchen. Where did I put the phone book? Dammit! Dammit! Where the hell is it?!! I fling open the cabinet under the junk drawer. Aha! The phone book! Thank you thank you thank you! I sprint back up the stairs two at a time.

"Tay? How're we doing?" More muffled sobs. Okay. She's still in there. I poke my head around the

corner into her room. She's holding her head in her hands, her shoulders trembling with every little sob. My body aches to hold her and smooth her hair, to tuck her in with Baby Simba and murmur little lullabies until she falls into a dreamless, wonderful sleep. Instead, I flatten myself against the wall next to her door and sink to the floor, the phone book open in front of me. I flip through the pages until I find the heading - Hairdresser. Okay. This one looks good. Of course, my only criteria are that they're nearby, open, and sympathetic. I dial. One ring. Two rings. Three rings.

"Hello, you've reached Charisma Salon. Our hours are Monday through Friday, nine to seven, and Saturdays nine to nine . . . " No good, they're closed. It's Sunday. I dial the next number in the list. One ring. Two rings. Three rings.

"Hello, this is Deb at Deb's Hairtique. We're not available to answer your call right now. Our hours are Tuesday through Saturday, ten to seven, closed on Sundays and Mondays." Okay, don't panic. Feverishly scanning the ads, the tiny writing jumps out at me - "Open seven days a week." I dial. One ring. Two rings.

"Hello, welcome to Supercuts. My name is Amy. How may I help you?"

"Thank God!" I gush. "Listen, I have a fourteen-year-old girl with a hair crisis."

"Okay," sings the peppy Amy, "how can I help you?"

You can tell me that you can fix it, I think. You can tell me that my daughter will be okay. You can tell me that you know she's fragile, and that you'll come over to my house right now and fix my little girl. And her hair - you'll fix her hair, too.

"Well, here's the situation, Amy." I'm trying to befriend this chipper, happy little woman. She's a ray of hope, and I'm desperately clinging to her, to it. "She left her hair in a bun for about five months, and it's turned into a giant dreadlock."

"Five months?" Uh-oh, Amy's incredulous.

"Yeah, five months."

"Okay," good, she's accepting now, "so you want us to comb it out?" Oh, Amy, you have no idea.

"Well, I think it's a little beyond that. I just tried for the last hour, and I ended up cutting some pieces of it"

"Okay, so you want us to cut it?"

"Well, yes, but here's the thing. She's *very* attached to her hair. So you have to cut as little as possible. Do you have maybe a place where it could be a little private? She's fourteen, and she's really upset and embarrassed about this. So you can't ask any questions about how it got that way or anything, okay?"

"Okay," Amy's giggling now. Hey! Amy! **NOT** funny!

"Okay, so . . . oh, and whoever does it has to be really nice. Really kind. My daughter's kind of .

. . . well, she's a little fragile, okay? She's sensitive." Amy, please don't make me tell you.

"Okay."

"Okay. So what time are you open 'til today?"

"Four-thirty today."

"Oh . . . is that enough time?"

It's three forty-five now. That's probably not enough time, right? No, probably not. Well, is there a day or time when it's really slow? I can take her out of school."

"Well, usually Tuesdays are pretty slow. Tuesdays around ten in the morning."

"Okay, I guess I'll do that then. I'll do that. I'll bring her in on Tuesday. Thanks, Amy."

"Sure, okay, we'll see you Tuesday!" comes Amy's chipper response. "Have a good day!" Amy obviously is not grasping the severity of the situation. I want to call her back and tell her Tay's life has been hell for the last year. I want to tell her I can't bear to see my daughter cry because I don't know if it'll stop this time. My daughter may be drowning, and I'm desperately trying to save her. You don't know her. She's sweet and wonderful and kind and sensitive. She's lost so much - she can't lose this too. It's not just hair. I feel the sting of tears just behind my eyes, and I look up in a futile attempt to stop them. I see Tay standing in the office door.

"Hey, hon," I try to brighten. Whose pain is this anyway? She says nothing, and shuffles into the spare bedroom room across the hall. She sits down at the desk and turns

on the computer. I wait a second, then follow her in. I sit on the floor and pick absently at some clean laundry on the bed, watching her out of the corner of my eye, assessing her. She's staring with glazed eyes at the computer screen, black eyeliner in long smudges from her eyes to her quivering little chin.

"Tay, you need to talk to me," I say. I need for her to talk to me.

"Mom . . .", she turns her head to look at me, eyes now pleading, her voice thick from crying, "You know how sometimes people say they want to be alone and they really don't? They're really just saying it to be cool or something? Well, I really mean it," her elbow is on the desk, and she drops her head sideways into the upturned palm. "I just want you to leave me alone . . . please Mom." She's sobbing again. Instinctively, in one movement, I'm up and next to her, reaching for her shoulder. I'll catch you, Tay. I won't let you fall.

"Don't touch me. Please . . . don't . . . touch . . . me." I turn and head for the door, my heart breaking, a sob rising in my chest. For her? For me? I'm not even sure now. She stands up so quickly the chair falls over backwards.

"Don't just walk out on me, Mom!" she's yelling now.

I turn around, arms outstretched, palms up. "What do you want me to do?" my voice is a little too strained, a little too high-pitched, a little too scared. "You don't want to talk to me; you don't

want me to touch you. WHAT do you want me to do?"

"I just want you to hug me," in one motion, she's folded in my arms. Her head is in the little space between my shoulder and collarbone; she's sobbing, and I'm stroking her hair. "It's okay, Tay. It's okay." We stay like that for a very long time. A very good long time. We stay that way until she's cried out. She extricates herself from me and takes a deep breath. She rights the chair, and plops herself in front of the computer, letting her breath out in a sigh. She turns to me and giggles. Giggles?

"Y'know, I knew it was bad, Mom."

"Mmmm . . ." I'm on eggshells. I don't know where she is. I don't know where I am.

Yes, giggling, "Sometimes at night I'd try to take it down. I couldn't do it, so I'd pick it out into shapes, and I kept thinking I looked like Medusa. That's what kept taking me so long in the bathroom."

I breathe. Then I giggle, just a tiny little chuckle. She's looking at

me sideways, her face stained with tears and ruined makeup, a half-smile playing on her lips. Suddenly, she laughs – a full belly-laugh.

"And sometimes I'd play with it until I looked like the Statue of Liberty," she's howling now, an infectious belly laugh that makes me laugh with her. "Or Lisa Simpson!" We're cracking up, the two of us. "Like a dead squirrel stuck to the back of my head – I have road kill on my head!" she screams. That's it. The two of us, my daughter and I, double over with laughter, she in the chair and me on the bed, new tears, this time at the absurdity of life, streaming down our cheeks. We catch our breath almost at the same time. It takes a few minutes to recover, and we breathe deeply to regain composure.

"Are you okay?" I finally manage, just to make sure. I have to be sure.

"You're taking it way harder than I am, Mom. You really are. It's just hair."

Mink

By Katrin Schumann

The boy stumbled backwards. He hadn't seen the boot until it was right there, dangling almost directly above his head. Under his feet the bushes and crusty grass were a heavy tangle, weighed down with snow, and he'd been stomping through the woods with his head bent low. He'd looked up for just a second to get his bearing and there it was.

It was an unfamiliar-looking boot, hanging there, not at all like the ones Lotte's fiancé wore. This one was very old, the brown leather dull and cracked. It was neither black nor shiny, and there was mud on it, pressed hard into the treads. No one had bothered to polish this boot in a long time. You could probably not see your reflection if you peered into it. Dieter's boots, on the other hand, were so shiny they looked like black water.

Karl held his breath, and his chest swelled out. But the way the foot – the leg really – hung below the branch, well, it was too high for him to reach. And the other leg was obscured behind the body. He calculated quickly: go home and get a ladder... but that would be useless. He couldn't drag a ladder from Potsdammerweg all the way over

the creek through the thistle meadow into the snowy woods. And he wasn't supposed to be here in the first place. He thought about climbing the tree. But he wasn't very tall, and although he was a good climber – a great climber really, better than all his friends – he didn't think he'd make it up the slippery pine bark. Soggy wool mittens, unraveling all around the edges, had left his fingers cold and stiff.

Jamming his hands into the pockets of his flannel pants, he took a last look at the tree. It wasn't really the boots that interested him so much, it was the shining silk of the parachute. Ropes and shreds of silk were tangled up all around the man's torso. A big piece of silk hung in a creamy, billowing bundle among the green-black needles. Now *that* was worth getting. Karl imagined holding the material between his fingers, stretching it out so that it was perfectly smooth and soft. Earlier, he'd been cursing the unexpected April snowfall, but now he understood it had been the key to preserving this find. He'd have to think of a way to get back, to get some of that silk, before all the snow disappeared.

Karl hunched his shoulders and launched his body against the wind, toward home.

The kitchen smelled of wet rags. The family sat at a large butcher block table scarred with deep ridges, many of which Karl himself had carved into the wood – before his father took away the pocket knife. It was thistle soup for dinner again. Mama got half a potato from Frau Schlemmer and cut it into tiny chunks that rolled around on Karl’s tongue. He pretended they were lard, or meat. Papa sat at the table, the newspaper he brought home from the factory stretched out in front of him. He wore a black suit that Mama pressed every day until the material was stiff. He was the head of the big Siemens’ plant in Potsdam, an important man in town, and he liked to dress well. A thick, short mustache rested on his upper lip. Every now and then he would pat it with his napkin.

His mother sighed. It was a long, drawn out affair, and Karl glanced over at her. In the last few years her hair had gone completely white, like heaps of cotton puffs all over her head. “I tell you,” Mama said, settling her large flat bottom onto a chair. “Whatever they say, I don’t care. I know the truth and it’s bad. Really bad.”

From his father’s look it was clear he didn’t think this should be discussed now. But Mama didn’t stop. Her hands shook, and she

spilled some broth onto the table as she ladled it into Lotte’s bowl. All the little lumps of potato looked like baby teeth. “Where will we go? What about the factory?” Mama’s voice was rising. “Did the SS come again? Did they? You *are* telling me everything, aren’t you Otto?”

Karl’s father folded up the paper very slowly. His mouth sat in a straight line on his face.

“Eat your soup,” he said to his son.

Karl shot a look at his sister, hoping for some reaction. He always thought it funny when Mama got all worried and Papa would start doing things really *really* slowly.

But Lotte sat very still and looked ahead. She wasn’t looking at anything in particular. Her gaze was often sleepy and unfocused; Karl couldn’t imagine the boredom of living life like that, like being dead when you’re still alive. Even though Lotte was much older, she used to catch his eye all the time, giggling at the horrible food, jabbing him under the table with her clumpy, flat-heeled shoes. Now, with her hair tied back in a thick braid at the nape of her neck and her face as dull as dough she looked like his grandmother, not like a seventeen-year-old.

His mother slapped her hand on the tabletop to get his father’s attention. The thin band of her wedding ring was the only adornment on her large, reddened hands. “Otto, I’m sorry, but I don’t want you going to work anymore. It’s too dangerous. You hear me?”

Karl put down his spoon. He already knew what was coming.

"Children..." Papa said in a tone that meant *leave*.

On his way up the stairs, Karl pulled at the back of his sister's skirt. The fabric was very rough, tweedy and brown not unlike a bird's nest. Goosebumps rose on Karl's skinny arms. "Lotte?" he whispered. "D'you think the Russians are finally coming? Do you?"

She snapped her head around. "Don't *say* that, you stupid boy," she hissed at him. "You think Dieter is fighting for nothing? You think Dieter is going to fail?"

He didn't get it. Why was she always so angry - he hadn't even *mentioned* Dieter's name.

In his room, a small closet-like space off the main hallway, Karl sat down on the mattress and bit his bottom lip. Normally, he'd never bring out his collection while Mama and Papa were still awake. But his stomach felt so twisted up, his throat so dry, he knew that looking at it - touching his things - would make him feel better. He found his flashlight and switched off the overhead light. Prying up the floorboards in one corner, he took out an old potato sack and carefully emptied it onto the floor. His breathing instantly became more regular. Smiling, he picked up a small piece of fur.

This was a coup. A few months ago he'd snipped it off the

belt of one of Mama's coats that she'd hidden in the attic. Her best things were all up there, poorly hidden under piles of scrap. Everyone else in the neighborhood had long ago donated any items of value for the war effort, but this coat, this was really special. Mama had cried and cried when Papa told her to give it up. And then she'd lied, packing it away in a crate under a pile of broken chairs.

He held the piece of mink up to his cheek and slid it over the skin, back and forth. After a few minutes, he pointed the flashlight at his collection: a pair of silk underwear, so huge he could have worn them as a shirt; a bronze pin, like a crooked cross, that shone with a warm glimmer; the toe part of a woolen sock. There were pebbles of all shapes and sizes, and bits of glass wrapped in paper. He wondered absently if there was some way he could get a piece of his sister's skirt.

Just then, there was a huge crash in the kitchen. He stiffened momentarily, then threw a blanket over his treasures. Opening the door a crack, he checked to see if anyone was coming. Papa would take away Karl's collection in a flash, he'd promised as much when he caught him snipping off the laces from a pair of his mother's shoes.

"Otto!" his mother was yelling in the kitchen below. "Otto, it's over! Can't you see?"

There was another crash. "I can't do it! I've worked all my life in that factory! I won't, it's barbaric!" His father's voice was so loud, Karl

covered one ear with the silky piece of mink and the other with his hand. But he discovered that he was curious, and he inched the mink under his chin.

“ – breached the Oder. The Oder! You know what that means? It’s just a matter of time. Gleiwitz is gone. You have to listen to the SS, Otto, you have to...” The sound of crying filled the air, touching Karl with long wet fingers, pressing against his temples, cold and hard.

Then there was silence. The fingers disappeared, and in their stead, Karl felt only the softness of the fur against his collarbone.

“I will *not* say it again.” His father’s voice was steady. “The factory will continue to produce – it will be open until the Russians come and shoot me in the goddamn head! Do you hear me? I don’t care what the SS say. There will be no sabotage! None. Now, this is *war* and we *will* be strong. Crying does nothing.”

In the weightless, dry silence that followed, Karl imagined a bullet. New, unused. Not like the ones he found all the time in the huge piles of rubble. This one was cool to the touch. Smooth and shining. Sending a shiver along his finger and down his forearm.

The whole thing had started with Lotte’s fiancé’s boots. Dieter wasn’t even a teenager yet when the war had begun, but by last year things were getting desperate. The

day was overcast, but the sky was heavy with gray clouds. It was Karl’s birthday, March 6, and he was in the forbidden woods with his friends. They had made a mound of mud and stuck nine twigs in it, one for each year of his life. Magnus was trying to light a match from a pack he’d stolen. They heard a droning in the air, a sound altogether different than the one the British Lancasters made. The Lancasters came at night, but today – in broad daylight – the hum in the air signaled a dangerous change.

The children stopped in mid-motion and craned their necks upwards. The hum became louder and they all started running.

When Karl got home, so out of breath it felt like dust was stuck in his throat, he found his mother, Lotte and Dieter waiting for him. The bombs starting dropping like fat raindrops from the clouds. It was the *Ammies* this time, the Americans, bombing in the middle of the day. Everyone’s eyes were big and round with disbelief.

As soon as they all scuttled down the ladder into the damp cellar, Karl noticed the shimmer of Dieter’s boots under the flickering light of the candle. “Dieter!” he shouted. His mother shushed him (as though the enemy was going to hear him yelling in a basement!).

“Dieter,” he said again, more quietly this time. “You’re joining the *Wehrmacht!*” He crouched down in front of him. Reaching out his hand, Karl pulled his fingers over the

glistening black leather, from the heel to the very top.

Dieter threw his head back and laughed. "They're my father's," he said. "Mine have laces. But I get a real coat, with brass buttons on the lapels!"

Just under the knee, where the boot stopped, a zipper winked on the side of Dieter's pants. Karl let his finger drag over the edge of the boot and onto the zipper. The zip was hard, with sharp, bumpy edges like hundreds of tiny knives.

Inside his head, all the things that had been confusing and frightening began to shift around and slip into little pigeonholes where they rested, quiet and orderly. After they emerged from the cellar, Karl found the empty potato sack in the garden shed and began the hard but pleasing work of filling it up.

All night long he thought about the parachute. He knew there was no way he could get the boot home, though he liked the cracked look of the leather (it looked like earth to him; dry, dry earth, like you might find in a desert). But he figured if he could keep his fingers warm, he might be able to climb up the tree trunk and at least cut off a piece of the silk.

In the morning, his mother sent him off to school with Magnus and Heidi from next door, but on the way there Karl told them he had a secret mission and disappeared. He ran and ran as fast as he could,

stumbling through the undergrowth, clingy and wet now that the snow was melting.

There it was, the tree. The boot. The parachute. Yesterday he hadn't noticed the jacket, but today it was obvious to him. The man was a British pilot, the first he'd ever seen. At the collar of his jacket there was a fuzzy strip of fur. Dark and wet, but when it was dry who knew how wonderful it might feel.

He took a rope and threw it clumsily over a branch. After a couple of tries it snagged, and he pulled himself up, bracing his feet on the trunk. Turning his head slightly, he looked at the tangle of silk and ropes. He pushed aside some of the material, and it was then, as he caught sight of the expression on the man's face, that he thought for the first time about the fact that the boot, the foot, the leg, the parachute all belonged to a person. A person who was dead.

The air in his chest began to expand, like a balloon being pumped endlessly, until his throat became blocked and he began gulping for air. The man's face was gaunt, the eyes open, the gaze aimless just like his sister's had become once Dieter was declared missing in action. The man looked young, with dark hair and gray skin. The expression on his face was one of surprise, not horror or fear. Surprise at being caught in this awkward situation, with so much still to *do*. Karl began to choke.

He fixed his eyes on the man's collar, forcing himself to figure out

what kind of fur it might be that made small damp clumps like the back of a ragged cat. The longer he stared the better he felt. Tentatively he reached out and touched it with one finger. Though wet, it was as soft and silky as mink.

Karl's breathing evened out and he extracted a pair of scissors from the pocket of his jacket.

Among the rubble of burned-out houses in his neighborhood, bluebells began to push their tiny heads through the debris. Everyone had been talking about the Russians for weeks, but they still weren't here. Karl felt very optimistic. He fingered the snippets of fur from the pilot's collar that he carried with him at all times now, and raced home feeling as fast and light as a cheetah.

Lotte was sitting on the front steps of the house on Potsdammerweg when he finally got home. It was almost dark and he'd been dawdling with the others after school, hoping to hear more about the Russians. His sister's face as she sat on the stoop was impassive as usual, but she had two bright spots of red on her cheeks. "Have you seen Papa?" she asked him, as she fiddled with the edge of her apron.

"No," Karl said, putting down his satchel. "He's at work."

"No he's not," Lotte replied quickly, loudly, as though pleased to contradict him. "The SS shut the

factory today. They burned everything -"

He pushed past her and ran into the house. None of the lights were on, and the air was very cold. Taking the stairs two at a time, he raced into his room. The floorboards in the corner were pulled up, showing a gaping hole where his sack should have been. The cold air began to seep into his bones, making them feel like scraps of metal, screeching when they moved. He concentrated on breathing in and out slowly as he backed out of the room.

The attic was dark. In the bluish light that filtered in through the one tiny window, he made out a shape in the corner. As he neared, he saw it was his mother, curled on the floor. In her arms she held her long mink coat. By her feet was Karl's sack of treasures.

Karl stood, rooted to the spot. Mama was stroking the fur with one shaking hand. She didn't look up. Finally Karl dropped to his knees beside her. He reached into his pocket and took out the chunk he'd managed to cut from the dead pilot's collar. Leaning over her body, he put it to her cheek and began stroking the skin.

"Karlchen, he's gone," his mother whispered.

"Shh," Karl said, stroking, his face creased into a deep frown.

"The Russians will be here by tomorrow, for sure. And now we're alone."

Images flashed through Karl's mind. His father's shining skin; his sister's fat braid; the smooth, pale

skin of Dieter's hands as he pulled his boots off for Karl to try on. He thought of his pilot, the look of surprise on his thin face. He

wondered if the Russians would be wearing shiny black boots, or dirty laced-up ones, with German soil pressed hard into the treads.

Something to Hold on to

By Dawn Swann

One hundred and fifty people at 35,000 feet and each of us holds on to something. The woman in first class holds a five-dollar scotch in one hand, a book of the latest profound wisdom in the other. In the rear, a beautiful young couple holds hands. Somewhere in the middle, there's a man about my age with highlighted hair and a pressed suit. He is calculated urban cool with his dark sunglasses, but his fingers tremble on his lap. He holds onto his fear.

Fifteen rows back, just over the wing and a veritable ocean of jet fuel, I sit. And I hold on to my eight-month-old daughter, Stella. Actually, she holds onto me, having recently learned how to pull up onto buckling knees and wobbly rolls of baby fat. She's been practicing since we left Phoenix.

Stella is a good baby, maybe a great one as far as they come. What I mean by that is she wasn't born a diva. It's quite within my ability to keep her in toothless smiles and wide-eyed fascination. Some of my Mommy-n-Me friends complain of the witching hour, a period of time that begins in the evening and lasts till bedtime. They can't get dinner cooked. They can't put the baby

down. They can't sleep at night. Stella and I have never had any of those problems, but I don't tell the others that. They don't ask, either.

But as good as she is, as soon as we settle into the stretch of air over America's vast heartland, Stella unleashes her inner baby demon. We are sandwiched between the window on one side and a rather cantankerous looking old man on the other. I'm not sure if Stella is feeling a bit claustrophobic, or if she senses what is to come. They say babies and dogs know those kinds of things before the rest of us do

Now when I sit, Stella wants me to stand. When I stand, she wants to walk. When I walk, she runs out of knowing what she wants and we start all over again, clambering over the old man's knees to get back to our seat.

"Can't you do something about that baby?"

"Do you have any suggestions?" I usually don't answer a question with another question.

"Aren't you her mother?" he returns, refusing to be one-upped I guess. It's a rhetorical question. He turns his entire body to the aisle

leaving Stella and me a robust view of his backside.

Back and forth we go, over the knees and round and round for the better chunk of six hours. The only still passengers are sleeping passengers. Most are busy flipping through shiny magazines or erasing penciled in puzzles. Some stab away at their laptops or pack their ears with earphones, either the scandalously priced airline disposables or personal MP3 sets. One woman holds a tiny pink teddy bear that she strokes with peculiar affection. A young couple pretends to read *On the Road* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* but it's obvious by the jostling of the books that grasping the classics is not on the program.

The pilot's voice comes over the speaker system as Stella and I climb over the knees of the old man for which we earn a wheezy old sigh.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've begun our approach to Logan International Airport. Local time is 9:02 pm, temperature is a wet seventy-eight degrees. As those of you with window seats can tell, we are passing through a spectacular display of mother nature's fireworks."

I press my cheek to the porthole and try to see over the wing. Generally, I prefer my pilots to be more left brain technical, less right brain effusive, but he's right. Below us, the clouds like a Courbet oil painting, roll onto each other and form white caps. Streaks of lightning

begin and end before my eyes can focus on them. As much as I'd like to pull my window shade, I need to see the storm lashing below us. The fasten seatbelt light switches on.

"Ladies and gentlemen," says the pilot again, "it's likely that we'll be experiencing some moderate turbulence."

I pull Stella down to my lap and she bounces right back up. She snarls her tiny hands into my hair and wobbles around on my thighs. I wrap my arms around her back. We break the membrane of clouds as though they are made of pudding. Even though my brain knows that the cabin is pressurized, all my senses say the air changed; it's electrified. Stella pulls back to stare into my eyes, past all the viscous blue, black and white and deep into where our bond comes from. For a moment, I am overwhelmed by the life I see, the clarity I feel. But as the plane jars us, shakes us like we are in a snow globe, we break our eye contact. I pull Stella close to me again and gasp along with everyone else. I grip my armrest and brace my legs which is as ridiculous as pushing the "brake" on the passenger floorboards. I am afraid that the aircraft can't sustain this "moderate turbulence" and that we will crash down between the waves of air and break apart into a thousand pieces of flotsam and jetsam in Boston Harbor. Gradually the plane levels out. I lock eyes with the stewardess. On one of our voyages around the plane, she told us that she's holding a one-way

ticket to her retirement cottage in Boca. Right now the only thing she's holding is the rim of her jump seat. She gives me a practiced smile. I can't smile back.

Behind the locked door of the cockpit is the man behind the voice. The wizard, as it is, who holds the weight of 150 souls in the bend of his fingers, and he's back in control of the aircraft.

The door to the lavatory bursts open and the scotch-drinking woman from first class stumbles out. She's wild-eyed and splay-legged and she's shoved a satin eye mask up into her hair line making her look like a Yorkshire terrier. She shakes her head, throws up her fists, and lets out a very loud "Whew!" As if she'd just finished a 10K road race rather than been shaken up like a life-sized can of spray-paint. "Don't try *that* at home," she calls out and returns to her seat. We all laugh a little too long. We want to be on the ground but instead we've pulled back up, above the turbulent clouds.

Stella is quiet now; her head is on my shoulder. I stroke her hair. It's soft as kitten fur and smells like musky lavender baby soap.

The "fasten seat belt" light is still lit, but the steward and stewardess are up and checking seat belts and harvesting what's left of the passenger morale. When the steward passes us, he reaches down and brushes Stella's cheek with his thumb then continues down the aisle, touching every seat he passes. He pauses at the cool man. If the discreetly handed towel is any

indicator, the cool man has let go of whatever he's been holding.

The old man rubs his thumbs on his corduroys, which fascinates Stella. She sits down to watch.

The stewardess is already strapping herself back into her seat, so I know we are about to breach the cloud layer a second time. The steward is on his way back to his seat, but he stops next to us. "You'll be fine," he whispers. He's looking at Stella, but he's talking to me. I try to bury my face in Stella's back.

I brace for turbulence as we cut into the clouds but there is none. Lightning flashes from all directions and the overhead lights are dim in comparison. The clouds light up pink, lavender, and baby blue. Stella blinks and sticks two fingers in her mouth.

We drop below the storm. It's as if a curtain opens. Boston Harbor appears aglow with twinkling bright electric stars that seem to guide us on our way down. My heart aches with relief, and I press my palm against the porthole. But just as I begin to relax, without any warning, the plane falls out beneath me. We are plunging toward the harbor at a frightening speed. Lightning flashes, rain is streaks. The lights fail, and I hear the overhead compartments clicking open. Bags slide and crash to the deck. We are falling so fast that I can barely hold on to Stella. I can feel gravity ripping her away from me, trying to toss her to the ceiling, carelessly, like lost luggage. Every cell, every bone, every ounce of strength I possess holds her to me.

I wrap my arm all the way around her and grip the armrest to lock it in place. The engines scream. There's a pop, a hiss and suddenly the oxygen masks are dangling before our faces. I realize, with horror, that Stella and I have only one mask.

"Put the baby on the floor in front of you! Put the baby on the floor!" Someone screams above the din, "It's the only way!"

I held on to a lot of things in that long, falling moment. Fear, confusion, regret, disbelief. But most importantly, I held on to Stella. There was no freaking way I was going to abandon her on the floor.

I try to stop the panic but can control only a breath. And in that breath, I push Stella onto the old man's lap. She reaches out for me, her face reddens, her forehead wrinkles, her eyes squint and well with tears and her mouth opens. I hear her terrified screaming above the shouts and cries of 147 other people and my soul shatters. But the old man understands and his clumsy arms pull Stella close. Before I cover Stella's face with the mask intended for me, I kiss her on the cheek and brush the little wisps of fluffy hair from her forehead. I say, "Stella," and the name hangs in the air, golden. While all the other passengers brace for impact, I hold my tiny daughter's hand, and shelter the old man and the child the best I can.

* * *

The captain has done his best to land, but the wind shear nearly takes the plane from him. The DC10

lands hard, spins around on one wing and cartwheels over itself. The remains of flight 2834 are rocketing down the tarmac at somewhere around a hundred miles an hour sideways, but he can feel life back there, behind him in the body, and the feeling is hope quantified.

The cabin is alive with the shrieks of metal. The black of night intertwines with waves of flame. Shaking, jerking, skipping, and then silence long enough to be broken by the wailing sirens of fire trucks and ambulances.

* * *

When the call comes, Santos sticks a mint flavored toothpick in his mouth. He sees the plane drop from the leaden clouds like a spider from a web and he feels the familiar spike of adrenaline.

"Better take your Bayer, Boss," chuckles Fisher, loping to the yellow ladder truck. "This one might be too much for the old ticker."

"My old ticker trumps your slow brain any day, knucklehead." He smiles. The insults are the opening ritual of every call Santos and Fisher have answered over the last eighteen years.

Santos spits the pulpy fibers of his toothpick out the window of the truck and begins positioning his team before they even reach the wreckage. He's the details man, the pusher of the puzzle pieces, and the orders he gives over his two-way radio make the CFR operate like a single life-saving machine. The fire chief arrives in his red Jeep.

"Give me the situation," he says.

"It's bad but we've got it under control."

"Think you can raise the dead tonight?" The chief's words are also part of the ritual. A routine that brings order to the mind when the world is in chaos.

From the corner of his eye he sees a woman walk away from a seat that is no longer confined by the walls of the airplane. A man emerges from a bolt of jet smoke, and suddenly the tarmac is littered with dazed and traumatized passengers who've somehow clung to life against all odds.

"Looks like we can."

"Must be your lucky night."

The chief scratches the hair under his red CFR cap.

Firefighters and paramedics fan out, weaving between each others paths with the precision of ballroom dancers. The fires are smothered with foam and the jet fuel on the tarmac is soaked into absorbent matting. The survivors are moved down runway to a makeshift triage where their soot dried eyes are washed, their ribs are bandaged and their peanuts are vomited. Santos sees the news vans and feels their telescopic lenses scouring the scene from beyond the chain link fence.

A woman sporting a satin sleep mask wheezes by him. The sockets of her eyes are so black with soot that she looks like a narcoleptic bandit. She reeks of scotch and is borderline hyperventilating.

"Take slow, deep breaths. In through your nose, out through your mouth." Santos says, touching her elbow, guiding her to the triage.

"Yes. Deep, calming breaths," she agrees. "That's absolutely right."

"Looks like we'll catch the game after all," says the fire chief, a long time Yankees fan.

"Maybe."

There's a guy over by the triage whose trying to hide the wet patch on his slacks, and couple of kids who're about to become a scandal under the blue wool blanket someone had given them. Tomorrow's anecdotes. Suddenly a silhouetted figure appears from what's left of the plane, a late survivor, and if Santos hadn't been at his funeral twenty years ago he'd have sworn the figure was his own father. But as the silhouette solidifies, he can see it's just an old man carrying a baby girl. His eyes are fixed on Santos as he steps over a sparking electrical cable but it's the baby's quiet, almost regal stare that captures Santo's attention. He's not sure if what he sees is real.

"Am I hallucinating?" asks the fire chief, echoing Santos's thoughts.

"You in charge?" the old man asks.

Santos shrugs and nods at once. Beside him, the fire chief coughs.

"Here then." He tries to hand the baby over, but her arms tighten around his neck.

Santos sees the old man's chin tremble just a bit before he clears his throat.

Santos thinks about the salivating reporters over the fence. *Here's their story.*

"Come on then, pal." Santos says softly, placing an arm over the

man's shoulders and guiding him and the baby toward the triage.

"Her name is Stella," says the man.

"And she's not mine. I just," he pauses, looking back over his shoulder past the fire chief, past Fisher, into the remains of the airplane. "I just held onto her."

About the authors

Stephanie Gayle of Somerville ("Lost Boy of Passadumkeag") has had her fiction published in *Charles River Review*, *Edgar Literary Magazine*, *Ellipses*, and *Harvard Summer Review*. Her story, "Interior Design" was nominated for a 2005 Pushcart Prize. She is working on a screenplay.

Thomas Griffin of Natick ("A Woman Like a Rock") teaches English as a Second Language at Walnut Hill School in Natick. A married father of two teenaged sons, he's been writing stories for many years and was published in the literary review of the Seacoast Writer's Association in Maine.

Jeff Kiplinger of Mystic, Conn., ("Garnier's Journal") has a PhD in chemistry and consults with pharmaceutical companies. Although he's written fiction and poetry for several years, this is his first contest. He plays bluegrass banjo and is an occasional backpacker.

Evelyn Krieger of Sharon ("Fire Drill") is a reading specialist and writer. She holds a master's degree in education from Harvard University. She is the author of the book, "Developing Reading and Writing Through Author Awareness" (Allyn & Bacon). Her story, "Child of the Light" is slated to appear in *Lillith* magazine. Other writing credits include: *Family Fun*, *Writer's Digest*, *Teacher Magazine*, *Learning*, and the *Natick Tab*.

Kim Ponesse of Framingham ("Road Kill") is a student at Emmanuel College and an executive assistant at Boston Scientific. She derives much of the inspiration for her writing from the intricate relationships she shares with her husband, her three teen-aged children, and her pair of dogs.

Katrin Schumann of Dedham ("Mink") is a writer of fiction and nonfiction, an editor and ghostwriter. She has just finished a novel, "The House of a Thousand Eyes," a story of forbidden love and a family's search for identity that begins in East Germany during the final days of World War II, and ends in 1971 under the shadow of the Berlin Wall. Katrin studied languages at Oxford, journalism at Stanford and now teaches workshops on creative writing and memoir.

Dawn Swann of Framingham ("Something to Hold on to") juggles writing with motherhood, marriage and the mastery of one emotionally needy dog. Her work has appeared in *Long Story Short* and *Arable*. In addition to short stories, she's also working on her first novel.

About the judges

Laurie Christie of Natick is the Literacy Coordinator for the Morse Institute Library.

Michael Goldberg of Natick, a member of the TCAN Council of Electors, is a writer and editor. He works as managing editor of CSO Magazine.

Art Jahnke of Wayland is an assistant vice president and executive editor at Boston University, a former director of Web Editorial at CXO Media and executive editor of Boston Magazine.

Karen Perkins of Natick, is a Librarian Associate at the Morse Institute Library who served on the committee the "Natick Reads One Book" program - *Hoot*.

Amy Lawler of Natick is a freelance editor and writer and serves as the chairperson of the Natick Cultural Council.