PEN IN HAND

The Biannual Literary Journal
of the Maryland Writers’ Association

July 2019

Editor: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
(Gandharva raja)
Copyright 2019 by Maryland Writers’ Association

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission from the author.

*Pen In Hand* (PIH) is the official literary and art publication of the Maryland Writers’ Association, to be published biannually in January and July. Maryland Writers’ Association is dedicated to the art, business and craft of writing. Founded in 1988, MWA is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization.

Maryland Writers’ Association
9466 Georgia Avenue, No. 91
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Donations are tax-deductible.

ISBN No. 9781081723453

Editor: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
Design: Eileen Haavik McIntire
Contents

Guidelines........................................................................................................ 4
Message from the Editor ............................................................................. 5
The President’s Message........................................................................... 7
Conversation with Dan Fesperman...................................................... 9
Poetry........................................................................................................... 14
  good evening, baltimore by Jessica Rock
  First Turning by James Fielder
  Second Generation American by Marissa Michel
  The Button Box by Barbara Mischke
  chimborazo vs. everest by Cliff Lynn
Poetic Form: Haiku and Senryu by Gandharva Raja....................... 21
Short Stories/Flash Fiction....................................................................... 23
  The Magic Bean Coffee Roastery by Bob Matthews
  Invisible Girl by F. J. Talley
  Momma Likes My Hair Straight by Marissa Michel
  Thief by Carol Westreich Solomon
Memoirs/Personal Essays........................................................................ 50
  Running the World by Janet Ruck
  Fashion and Other Textiles by Victoria Clarkson
  The War Brides of 24th Street by Frances Munn Roberts
  Lark Lore by James Fielder
Mystery....................................................................................................... 67
  The Hardboiled Caper by Millie Mack
Young Adult............................................................................................... 76
  Is Not the Rain Beautiful? by Julia McCormack
  The Rare Medium by Julia McCormack
  Porcelain Blue by Nina McCormack
Play in One Act: Redial by Gandharva Raja.......................................
Guidelines

Pen In Hand is the official literary and art publication of the Maryland Writers’ Association. It is published biannually in January and July.

Submission deadline for the next issue of Pen In Hand is November 30, 2019. MWA members and young writers are encouraged to submit poetry, sci-fi, flash fiction, short stories, drama, mystery, memoirs, creative non-fiction, personal essays, photographs/Art. Submit to penin-hand@marylandwriters.org or tkbasu@verizon.net

Please follow the following submission guidelines:

• Use black type only
• Submit only in Times New Roman font
• Use font size 12 for the manuscript
• Leave 1 inch margin on top, bottom, left and right
• Place title of ‘story’ two double spaces below top of page.
• Center title
• One space below your title place your name
  • Indent first line of each paragraph 1/2” inch
• Single space between period and new sentence
• In general, dialog should be double spaced and in quotation marks.
• Insert approximate word count at the end of your manuscript (except poetry).
• One double space below the end of your manuscript, include a brief Bio. The Bio should be limited to your literary works and interest, publications and awards.
• Art/photograph must be original. If not, permission to reprint must be obtained by submitter.
Message from the Editor

‘Running Free’... As we celebrate Independence Day, July 4, 2019 we ask, as we do each year, what is independence, what is its limits, how far do we go to preserve it, what is the role of democratic institutions, how do we erase the thin boundary between freedom and ennui/anarchy? What is the writers’ role in keeping the word ‘freedom’ burning in our hearts and alive in our newspapers, social media and the Halls of Congress?

Independence Day is July 4th; Freedom day is 365 days a year; add another for 2020.

“Running Free” is the act of basking in the light of freedom. It is the ability and license to say, do, write without censure so long as we are within legal bounds. “Running Free” is freedom of action, freedom of assembly, of conscience, of contract, of speech, of press, of thought, freedom of trade, of ownership, and freedom of worship. Freedom is fenced in by the law of the land.

We live in a democratic society where the rights of the individual are respected. But Freedom is never Free.

To keep “Running Free,” the citizen, the writers and the press must remain vigilant and be prepared for disobedience if the times call:

“Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves.” —Henry David Thoreau.

Respect for each other ensures liberty.
“I am an American; free born and free bred, where I acknowledge no man as my superior, except for his own worth, or as my inferior, except for his own demerit.” —Theodore Roosevelt

**Liberty comes with responsibility.**

“Liberty,” boomed Wednesday, as they walked to the car, “is a bitch who must be bedded on a mattress of corpses.”—Neil Gaiman

“Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it.”

— George Bernard Shaw

**What we write as authors, as journalists, as critics matters.**

“But words are things, and a small drop of ink, Falling, like dew, upon a thought produces That which makes thousands, perhaps millions think.”

—George Gordon Byron

For me “Running Free” is to travel with speed to find unknown nooks and corners unencumbered by my iPhone, my keyboard, the channel changer and my shoe-polish kit. I want to run without inhibition, without self-doubt. I want to run with the wind and go where it takes me. I have not lived my dream.

“Live not for Battles Won.
Live not for The-End-of-the-Song.
Live in the along.”

— Gwendolyn Brooks

Enjoy your freedom; share it with others; there is plenty to go around.

—Dr. Tapendu K. Basu

PS: I thank Penny Knobel-Besa for allowing me to use her inspiring photograph “Running Free” for the cover of July 2019 Pen In Hand.
Message from the President

Diogenes, an early Greek philosopher of the Cynic school, was known for holding up a lantern in people’s faces and claiming he was looking for an honest man. I may not carry a lantern, but I’m always looking for is a good conversation. Apparently, so are you.

That’s what many of the conference evaluations indicated. They used the term “networking” but what they meant was more time built into the schedule to talk informally with their writing colleagues and maybe with an agent. The conference committee is hard at work planning next year’s conference, and they’ll be figuring out ways to increase opportunities to meet, greet, and talk with one another during the two days.

I’m looking forward to that because you can’t find a more interesting group of people for conversation. Writers in general are imaginative, intelligent, thoughtful, skilled, and have varied interests. Of course writers were welcomed at the intellectual salons in Paris and London.

Haven’t you wished you could have joined the group at the Algonquin Hotel in 1920s New York City? They called themselves the “Vicious Circle” but we know this witty little group as the Round Table. I’m told you needed to wear armor to protect yourself against the barbs. Here’s a list of “charter members”: Pierce Adams, columnist; Robert Benchley, humorist and actor; Heywood Broun, columnist and sportswriter; Marc Connelly, playwright; Ruth Hale, freelance writer who worked for women’s rights; George S. Kaufman, playwright and director; Dorothy Parker, critic, poet, short-story writer, and screen-
writer; Brock Pemberton, Broadway producer; Harold Ross, The New Yorker editor; Robert E. Sherwood, author and playwright; John Peter Toohey, Broadway publicist; and Alexander Woollcott, critic and journalist.

Perhaps you wished you could join the ribaldry at the Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, a pub in London, with Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Oliver Goldsmith and others of his crowd. The pub is known for its literary associations. Regular patrons also included Charles Dickens, G.K. Chesterton, Mark Twain, Alfred Tennyson, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and P.G. Wodehouse.

What’s going on here in Maryland? Is there a Round Table in Baltimore? A favorite pub writers favor in Cumberland? Or Salisbury? Annapolis?

MWA’s chapters offer members a program and time to network at least once a month. Can we make something informal happen, like a kinder Round Table in a local pub or restaurant in our town or neighborhood? What do you think?

—Eileen McIntire, President
Conversation with Dan Fesperman

Dan Fesperman is a tall, elegant, unassuming man who lets his controlled low voice command attention from the listener. I sat down with Dan at the India Palace Restaurant in Cockeysville to discuss his many ‘political-historical’ thrillers, his writing style, his career and what is important to him as a writer. The owner, Chanchal came by and assigned a table where we could talk without drawing unwanted attention.

We ordered from the sumptuous buffet laid out by Chanchal and his chef. I noticed that Dan counted his calories as he counts his words; he is not a foodie. Small bites of food matched his measured speech. I have never seen a man who can resist the temptation and eat only half a samosa, those delicious puffed pastry filled with lightly spiced potato, peas and peanuts. While my energy is consumed by gastronomic excess, Dan’s energy is used to keep the neurons on track. I myself, like His Earnestness, confess that I can resist everything except temptation.

Baltimore is justifiably proud to have Dan Fesperman as one of its celebrated and accomplished writers of fast paced thrillers. America’s involvement in past wars, the war on terror, the network of
espionage is in the background of a number of his intelligently spun history-based thrillers. Dan’s wife, Liz Bowie is a journalist. They have been married since 1988. Their children, Emma and Will, have graduated from college. Dan and his wife live in Baltimore County. Apart from writing, Dan is a boon to the travel industry; he is an avid gardener who is not afraid to get his boots muddy. Here is what he said:

Tapendu: You are an accomplished and successful author. Your genre is ‘thrillers’ based on historical events. You may be dubbed the “Spy Novelist”. In 2016, The Letter Writer was selected as one of the top ten Crime Novels by New York Times.

Dan: Yes. History and war zones captivate me. In extreme circumstances humans are pushed to the extreme and forced to make choices they would rather avoid.

Tapendu: Berlin comes up in several of your novels. In The Arms Maker of Berlin Nat Turnbull journeys to Germany following several cryptic clues on the trail of the mysterious Kurt Bauer, the billionaire with a secret past. What interested you in Berlin?

Dan: I was in Germany, in the American Sector of Berlin between 1993 and 1996. After WWII and the partition of Germany and Berlin, the place was a hotbed of intrigue.

Tapendu: Then, or in any time thereafter, were you working for the CIA?

Dan: As a journalist, I was aware of some of their activity, but I never belonged in the organization.
Tapendu: Okay. No CIA. But where do you get this wealth of material I found in your books about covert activities including that of the FBI and CIA? Your account of Allen Dulles and his espionage ring in Bern, Switzerland, during and immediately after WWII is simply captivating.

Dan: I have been in Germany several times. I spent three years in Germany, and then there is research. Research is critical to writing.

Tapendu: You have several other thrillers, among them, Layover in Dubai, The Amateur Spy and The Double Game.

Dan: I have traveled to many countries besides Germany. As a journalist I worked at the Fayetteville Times, Charlotte News, Miami Herald and The Baltimore Sun to name a few. Baltimore editors sent me to cover the Gulf War from Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. During the Bosnian wars, I was sent to cover the Europe Bureau. Travels to the Middle East influenced The Amateur Spy.

Tapendu: That is an impressive life experience as a journalist. Any other?

Dan: In the wake of 9/11, I was assigned to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Tapendu: Journalism set you on the track to writing intriguing spy thrillers. Apart from fascinating novels and great writing skills, what else catapulted your career?

Dan: Getting in the good books of Sonny Mehta, Editor-in Chief and Chairman of Knopf Publishing, has helped. He has been very supportive.
Tapendu: Fortune favors the brave. Your books have interesting twists. I don’t want to give your story away, but you were magical on how you handled the story of Liesl in The Arms Maker of Berlin. To be successful you have to work hard. Do you write every day?

Dan: Every day for several hours. There is no substitute to working by the seat of your pants.

Tapendu: Besides your extensive travel and experience as journalist, where do you get the details of history that make your books so informative as well as interesting? Let our fellow MWA members know where you go to dig up messy and not-so-messy truths?

Dan: Right here in Baltimore, we have the National Archives at College Park. A very rich environment for research. There are many sources; you just have to go and dig, as you say.

Tapendu: Moving along to another thriller...In Safe Houses published by Penguin you go from a farmhouse in Eastern Shore back to Berlin, the city of intrigue. Your agent is Henry Mattick who has worked for DOJ. Helen Abell, an ex-CIA operative is murdered. You resisted using Nat Turnbull, the historian and sleuth in The Arms Maker. You do not wish to create a Hercule Poirot?

Dan: That would be boring.

Tapendu: I must say although there is death and dying in your thrillers, there is very few eviscerated bellies, slit throats and gaping wounds in your novels. Not much blood on the carpets. I like that. Good taste.
Dan: I am not big on gory details.

Tapendu: You have written many books and they have been translated in eleven languages if I counted right. Which thriller is your favorite?

Dan: It is always the last one...

Tapendu: Thanks, Dan. Keep writing. I want to read the next best one that will follow your last best one.

Have you read MWA’s latest anthology? *30 Ways to Love Maryland* Available at Amazon.com
good evening, baltimore
by Jessica Rock

good evening,
beautiful baltimore,
you salty siren,
you pretty port,
good evening!

sparkling stars shining high above,
like pin-holes through luxurious velvet,
wrapping us in your warm embrace.

your honorable history is palpable
in the cockeyed cobblestones
and sidewalk-shucked oysters.

ghosts roam your saline shores,
remembering a life long ago,
yet not so far away.
a shimmering, star-spangled city,
built with blood, sweat, and tears…
so, for that, I say:

good evening,
beautiful baltimore,
you salty siren,
you pretty port,
good evening!

**BIO:** Jessica Rock, a member of MWA, lives in Fell’s Point and writes poetry.

First Turning

*by James Fielder*

He sat at the head of the black walnut kitchen table
that still wears the marks of his huge forearms,
Dad was late that evening and still smelled of fresh earth.
The khaki shirt showing its pressed crispness
soiled only by the hard work of the day.
Today was the first turning of the big field,
an easy turning as plowing standards go
as the earth was eager for refreshing.
Yet, today stirred in each of us that knows,
the earth’s longing for that annual pilgrimage
of new beginnings and great hope.
The first long trip cutting the dark line across the field,
turning precious green into fresh soil,
as the letting needed to be straight with the right depth for all the
other cuts yet to follow.
The first furrow brought a cloud of ancient white seafarers
eager to follow the plow and work the fresh turnings.
Their quest was both loud and persistent as it
had been a year since their last deep-squirming feast.
They pronounced their takings with boisterous celebrations:
“Seagulls screaming kiss her, kiss her”.
I remember watching my father’s hand scoop fresh earth
in a seamless move press the earth into a small ball of wonderment.
With one motion he smelled the earth’s textures
and smiled a gambler’s dream
as if knowing that the earth was just right this year for the taking...

**BIO: James Fielder:** a prose poem by James Fielder, Secretary of
Education, Maryland, whose poems have appeared in *Pen In Hand*
and in a chapbook, *Unspoken Reflections.*

---

**Second Generation American**

*by Marissa Michel*

I. I only know of scrapbook memories, faded pictures and the cre-
ole flowing from your lips, you say the sticky sweet of dous kokoye
remains on your hands for a while
keeps you stuck to the streets where the vendors are
the candy is smooth like the cooking oil heating on the shelves of
Marcía’s corner store your memories are like the flies buzzing by
those windows,
inches from your grasp
and you frown at the ones that escape you
II. You tell me you are losing your mind
and laugh in the empty spaces
where you can’t remember what home was like *Assimilation*

III. We eat stewed oxtail at dinner
give thanks to this land of opportunity
try to plant ourselves, seeds of broken fruits try to taste that sugar
once again

You tell me we should go back one day

At night I float in the chasm between two unfamiliar lands and won-
der which is home.

**BIO:** Marissa Michel’s interests are in slam poetry, and flash fic-
tion. She has been awarded twenty-one Scholastic Arts and Writ-
ing Awards in categories including poetry, short story, and personal
memoir. She has also been the recipient of a national silver medal for
humor, in the Scholastic Arts and Writing Awards.

**The Button Box**  
*by Barbara Mischke*

It served its purpose when
It conveyed fruitcake to the recipient
The red tin with a Christmas scene atop
Might be recycled next year with homemade cookies
Or it might become the most useful of tins; a button box

It has served its owner by sheltering
Pins, needles, thread, snaps and hooks, pieces of elastic, and, of course,
Most importantly: buttons
With two holes or four holes, or a small shank on the back
In every color and size the buttons harbor the stories of the family

Large buttons for coats that only exists in black and white photos
A tiny button cut from a fragile garment belonging to a baby
A military button that survived a war
Buttons from a house dress or a favorite dressy dress
Other buttons saved because they would be needed… someday.
And after everything else is emptied one might find
Garters for garter belts that have long been tossed out
And then there are the little beaded baby bracelets with a family name… one pink and one blue

I look at the things I have sorted and smile
Mom never purged this container, just kept adding to it
It was insignificant until she needed a needle and thread
Or perhaps a matching button

She probably never pictured anyone taking interest in this tin
The most unlikely of places to be interesting.

However, I find myself touching it all with my fingers
Knowing that she had touched it all with her fingers
Knowing the box contains only the things she had
Saved for one reason or another

My sister took the empty box
And I have some of the contents that mean something to me
The needles and thread went to the Good Will
And the remaining buttons were given to a friend who does crafts

Nothing was thrown out because
Mom’s button box contained only what would be needed someday

**BIO: BARBARA MISCHKE**, secretary of the MWA north Baltimore Chapter, has won second place in the Baltimore County Silver Pen Writing contest and has been previously published in *Pen In Hand*.

**chimborazo v. everest**
*by Cliff Lynn*

mount everest is magnificent, and tall?
sweet georgia brown, is she ever!
29,029 feet from sea level
a towering sideways palindrome
and considered by many
the prominentest point on the planet

everest is no joke

ecuador’s chimborazo, meanwhile, is ranked a
yawn-inducing 17th in altitude at 20, 564 feet
but her peak is the farthest earthly point from our planet’s center
and the closest point to the moon
as an added bonus, chimborazo is a volcano
eat that, everest!

sergeant heilman, united states marine corps
entered a bloodless cage match v. corporal arroyo, united states army
in jalalabad, afghanistan
over which should be considered the highest point on earth
utilizing science, heilman argued everest
while arroyo, with the passion of a ghost pepper
(and the volcano) championed chimborazo
plus, he kept breaking into spanish
which none of us savvied
in my book, it was all arroyo

there will come a day when one’s stature is measured
not by feet and inches, or centimeters from the ground—boring!
but by our proximity to the lunar surface
little people will pound their little chests in pride
as their numbers soar

my six feet of altitude
will become 238,899 miles, 5274 feet
arroyo is five feet, 7 ¾ inches today
but tomorrow he will come in at 238, 899 miles, 5274 feet, 4 ¼ inches
forget sea level, the people want the moon

the people want—chimborazo.

**BIO:** Cliff Lynn’s poems and short stories have been published in various magazines. In the July 2018 PIH issue the format of his poem was changed during printing. The poem is being reprinted.
Poetic Forms/Haiku and Senryu

by Gandharva raja

To appreciate Haiku, and similar poetic cousins, it is essential to understand Buddhism, and in particular Zen Buddhism, as practiced in Japan. About 600 years before the birth of Jesus in Nazareth, Siddhartha Gautama, a Shakya prince born in the foothills of the Himalaya, left his kingdom to find mokksha or emancipation, from the miseries of the human condition: sickness, senility, pain and death. He found enlightenment after years of meditation under a pipal tree in Eastern India. Buddha taught the four noble truths:

that all life is inevitably sorrowful
that sorrow or Dukkha is due to craving
subdue craving to attain release from Dukkha
disciplined moral conduct and meditation frees one from the cycle of suffering.

The great Maurya Emperor Asoka (273-232 BCE) sent emissaries to spread the word of Buddha outside the boundaries of India. By the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, Buddhism in Japan had acquired an indigenous flavor. Zen Buddhists believe ‘every man has a Buddha-nature, and to realize it, he need only look within. Self-understanding and self-reliance are the keynotes of Zen’. (William Theodore de Bary)

By stressing the direct view of nature and natural phenomenon rather than its interpretation, Zen has a profound influence on Japanese art and poetry. The question and answer form of dialogue between Zen Master and pupil is exemplified:

Is the earth round?
I see the sky.

The answer is not logical, but intuitive.

Haiku and related forms may be considered an outgrowth of Zen Buddhism.

The Haiku, an unrhymed tercet, consists of 5,7,5 syllables in lines one, two and three respectively. When the tercet inquires into the nature of the universe, it is a Haiku. Senryu designates a tercet with the identical external form which inquires into the nature of man. As it evolved Haiku dropped all glosses, comments or elaboration. It became a poem based on image, emotive utterance with characteristic condensation, spontaneity and a seasonal element.

Here are two Haikus from *Notes in my Knapsack* (Matsuo Basho 1644-1694), the preeminent Haiku master, edited by Robert Hass:

How admirable!
to see lightning and not think
life is fleeting.

Felling a tree
and seeing the cut end -
tonight’s moon.

Though the American Haiku has evolved, these tercets are drawn with a painter’s brush. I for one would love to fall asleep where the plums have fallen, where the butterfly rests on a temple bell, and...

The night-sound of geese
below the dimly lit sky -
count the falling stars.
It was 6:30. Dinner was ready. But Andrew hadn’t gotten home from work yet. He might not be the most responsible person, but he was usually pretty prompt about getting home after work.

Emily had tried out a new recipe for dinner, stopping to pick up the ingredients at the new organic grocery on the way home from work. Having both turned 25 last fall, Emily and Andrew had agreed that it was time to start acting more grown-up, like real adults. Moving out of that basement apartment just off campus and buying the condo had been the first step. Cooking healthy dinners and sitting down together to eat was another step.

Seven o’clock came and still no Andrew. Dinner was getting cold, but Emily couldn’t eat. She was worried about Andrew. The neighborhood was kind of sketchy. Their condo unit was in a new building in the old downtown section of town that had seen better days. The neighborhood was supposed to be redeveloped as an arts district. There were going to be funky new shops and eateries, and artists’ studios going into the abandoned storefronts. But the redevel-
Pen In Hand

development was moving slowly. Their building was the only new construction. And there were still plenty of empty storefronts and vacant lots filled with weeds and trash.

“dinner is ready. where R U?” Emily texted Andrew. She waited, but there was no response. She turned on the TV and picked up her new copy of Arts News magazine to take her mind off Andrew’s whereabouts.

Finally, around 9:00, after several more unanswered texts, Emily’s phone buzzed. It was a text from Andrew. “oops SBTA 2 b late. on my way om.”

Emily replied “u ok? Where have u been?”

“Magic Bean, lst trk of tym.”

The Magic Bean, that damn coffee shop again, Emily thought. Andrew was spending way too much time there lately. She didn’t understand the attraction of the place, not that she had ever been there. It’s not like Andrew was one of those coffee snobs. He was happy with Maxwell House or 7-11 coffee. Jeffrey, their upstairs neighbor, had told her that the place was run by “a tall, skinny thing named Sybil or Salome, or something. She wears these long, bright sundresses - really low-cut, showing off way too much cleavage.”

Andrew walked in the door ten minutes later. Emily was in the kitchen warming up dinner in the microwave. “Hi, Emmy-poo.”

“Andrew,” Emily scrunched her face trying to look stern. “Where have you been? I was worried. You know this neighborhood worries me, especially after dark.”

“Sorry, Sweetiekins,” he bowed his head, sheepishly looking up at Emily. “I was at the Magic Bean.” He shrugged. “I got off work a little early. I thought I would stop by on the way home and get a little writing done. I had a new idea for my book. A dream I had last night. About this little village. Welcoming a newcomer.”
Andrew had been a literature major in college. He had taken a year off after graduation to write a novel that he had been planning since high school. He spent nine months writing it. Then the next three months looking for a publisher. Emily had finally talked Andrew into getting a job. “Some time away from the book might do you both some good,” she had told him. He reluctantly got a job with the university’s IT help desk, where he had worked part-time as a student.

“Once I got started this afternoon,” Andrew continued, “the words just kept flowing. And if it hadn’t been for Jeffrey coming in, I might still be writing. He was looking for Christopher.” Jeffrey and Christopher lived upstairs from Emily and Andrew. Christopher had been the one that had introduced Andrew to the Magic Bean. “Jeffrey seemed pretty upset with Christopher. Missing dinner, ‘again’ he said. There was a little scene. That’s when I noticed your texts.”

“Speaking of dinner,” Emily sighed. “Sit down. I just heated it up the microwave. It’s a new recipe I found.”

“No dinner for me,” Andrew shook his head. “I had one of Sylvia’s Jamaican meat pies.”

Fall rolled around, with the beginning of a new semester at the university. Emily was an assistant manager at an art supply store near campus. The beginning of the semester was always a busy time at the store. Emily had to work late every night and all day Saturday, leaving Andrew to mostly fend for himself.

Andrew spent this time mainly at the Magic Bean. He pretty much went there straight from work, grabbing one of Sylvia’s Jamaican meat pies for supper. And he spent most of the day on Saturdays at the Magic Bean. He told Emily that he was really making great progress on the rewrite of his novel. There was a group of writers who hung out at the Magic Bean, giving it a creative, literary vibe.
By the end of September, the new semester rush had died down. Emily’s boss told her to take some time off. “It’s Thursday. Nobody comes in on Thursdays. Take the rest of the day off.”

Emily was surprised when she got home and Andrew wasn’t there. After all, it was Thursday, and Andrew teleworked on Thursdays.

Maybe he’s just out to lunch, she shrugged. He’s been going on and on about that coffee shop’s meat pies. I’ll just surprise him and join him for lunch.

Andrew had said that the coffee shop was down the alley just before Jefferson Street. Walking down the hill towards Jefferson, Emily stopped when she got to the alley.

She cautiously peered down the alley. It was littered with dumpsters and tipped over trash cans. And that noise - were those rats scurrying in the weeds and piles of trash?

There was a red, green, and gold “Magic Bean Coffee Roastery” sign hanging over a door about 20 feet down the alley. Taking a deep breath, Emily made a dash for the door.

Quickly stepping inside, she was hit by the strong aroma of freshly ground and brewed coffee. “Eww,” she shook her head, “it smells like burnt rope.”

As her eyes adjusted to the dark interior, she saw Andrew sitting at a table at the back of the shop. He was hunched over his laptop, typing away like mad. A couple of coffee mugs sat next to him.

“Andrew,” Emily gave a little wave, heading to his table.

Andrew looked up, quickly shutting his laptop as Emily sat down. “Emmy, what are you doing here?”

“It finally quieted down at work and the boss gave me the day off. I thought we could have lunch together.”

“Um,” Andrew looked past Emily, towards the counter lined with gleaming black and red coffee makers and grinders.
“Hello,” a tall, willowy woman with long straight black hair seemed to glide up to the table. “I’m Sylvia. And you must be Emily?” She placed a hand on Andrew’s shoulder. “Andy’s told me all about you.”

Emily looked at Sylvia, then back at Andrew. He was staring into the plunging neckline of Sylvia’s tropical print sundress. A gold necklace with deep green stone sparkled deep in her cleavage. I guess I see Andrew’s attraction to this place, Emily sighed.

Looking back at Sylvia’s face, Emily was caught by her eyes. They were so green and so deep, it would be easy to get lost in them.

Emily shook her head and turned back to Andrew. She leaned over the table and said in a low voice, “Andrew, come on. Let’s get out of here. Let’s go get some lunch. How about that barbecue place you like near campus?”

Andrew looked back down at his laptop. “I’m sorry, Em. But I’m really on a roll right now. I don’t want to stop and lose my momentum. And I’ve already eaten. You should try one of Sylvia’s meat pies.”

Emily confronted Andrew when he finally got home that night. She let him know that he had been spending way too much time down at “that, that woman’s cafe”.

“Coffee roastery,” corrected Andrew. “And her name is ‘Sylvia’. And she’s really nice, Emmy, really supportive.”

Emily said that she was afraid that Sylvia was getting in the way of their relationship. “And, now that we have this two-bedroom condo,” Emily stifled a sob, “I thought we could start talking about a baby.”

Andrew sat up, his eyes opened wide. “Baby? You’re not . . .”

“No, I’m not Andrew. Not yet. But I thought . . .”

Andrew sat back and stared past Emily.

When Andrew didn’t answer, Emily couldn’t hold back her sobs.
“Andrew. I thought we both wanted a family. We agreed to wait until we were settled. And now, we both have good jobs and we have a nice condo.”

Andrew took a deep breath and put his arm around Emily’s shoulders. Later that night, while lying in bed together, Andrew agreed that he would cut down on his time at the Magic Bean. And they could start talking about a baby.

And Andrew did spend less time at the Magic Bean. He started coming straight home from work and eating dinner with Emily. Except for Thursdays. He changed his hours at work so that he could work 4 ten-hour days, with Thursdays off. They became his writing days. He spent all day Thursday at the Magic Bean, leaving the condo at his usual “go to work” time, and not getting home until 9:00 or 10:00 at night. And he spent most of the day Saturday at the Magic Bean. Emily wasn’t sure if he was really spending any less time down there, with that Sylvia and her low-cut dresses, but it seemed like he was making an effort.

A couple of months after their talk, Emily came home from work and was surprised not to find Andrew at the dining room table working. It was Tuesday, Andrew’s new telework day.

Emily noticed an official looking letter sitting on the dining room table. It was from the university’s HR department. Emily’s stomach dropped. Jeffrey had told her the other day about Christopher getting fired. According to Jeffrey, Christopher had been going to “that witch’s den - that Beany Magic, or whatever, writing that gibberish he calls ‘poetry’”, instead of going to work.

Emily picked up the letter and saw the words “Notification of Probation” in bold letters. Probation? Emily skimmed the letter. The phrases “lack of attendance”, “unexplained absences”, and “non-
compliance with telework agreement” jumped out.

“Damn it, Andrew!” Clutching the letter, Emily stormed out the door.

She almost ran down the hill. When she got to the alley, she took a couple of deep breaths to try to get her emotions under control. “You better not be in there.”

As Emily burst through the door of the Magic Bean, she saw Andrew over in the corner, typing away.

“Andrew,” Emily glared at Sylvia standing behind the counter as she marched over to Andrew. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be at work?”

“What?” Andrew looked up, blinking, trying to focus on the person in front of him. “Oh. Emily. Hi.”

“Hello, Emily.” Emily hadn’t noticed Sylvia glide up next to her. “Can I get you something? A nice iced latte?”

Emily didn’t acknowledge Sylvia. Sitting down, she clasped Andrew’s hands. “Andrew, it’s time for you to come home, now. Jeffrey told me about Christopher losing his job. And I saw that letter. Probation? You don’t want to lose your job, too?”

“Emily, just let me finish this chapter. I told you about these weird dreams I’ve been having? Sylvia thinks it’s just what I need for a new ending.”

Putting her hand on Andrew’s shoulder, Sylvia peered into Emily’s brown eyes. Sylvia’s green eyes were sparkling and her amulet was swaying slowly back and forth. Softly, she said, “I’ve been reading Andy’s work. It’s really quite good. And this new stuff, with the tribal ceremony, is just so powerful. It really reminds me of my experiences in Jamaica, when they welcomed me to the tribe.”

“Listen, you hussie!” Emily stood up, glaring into Sylvia’s green eyes. “Stay out of this! This is between me and my husband.”

“Come on Andrew,” Emily continued to glower at Sylvia. “Let’s
Andrew didn’t look up. He stared at his laptop. “I don’t know, Emily. It just doesn’t feel right. It’s just not me. All this stuff - the help desk, the condo, the ‘growing up’. And now, a baby?”

Emily sighed and slumped back into the chair. “But Andrew.” Emily paused and took a couple of deep breaths and closed her eyes for a few seconds. “I thought we agreed. I thought you wanted all that too.”

“I don’t know, Emily.” Andrew glanced up at Sylvia. “I thought I did. But really, I just want to write. And it’s going so well, here. It feels so right. Like that year I took off right after graduation.”

“Andrew. Maybe I have been putting too much pressure on you. But we can work things out. We don’t need to have a baby, just now. But, we need to talk. It’s time for you to come home, now.” Emily slowly rose from her seat. Turning towards Sylvia, she muttered “witch!” Standing up straight, head held high, she strode out the door and back home.

Sylvia watched the door close behind Emily. She sat down in Emily’s chair and clasped Andrew’s hands. “Andy, it’s really up to you. But your writing is going so well. And you seem so happy here, with our little Magic Bean literary family.”

Andrew looked up at Sylvia’s eyes and gave a small shrug. “I don’t know, Sylvia. Maybe I should go. I really love Emily. And I thought that I wanted all those things. But there is just something about this place. I come in here, get my cup of coffee, and I just feel so, so at ease.”

“Whatever you think is best, Andy. For you, and your writing.” Sylvia stood up. “Let me fix you a cup of coffee to help you think. I’ve got some beans that I reserve for occasions like this.”

Sylvia went into her office and brought out a small box. Andrew
watched as Sylvia reverentially brewed a cup of coffee using grounds from the box. Sylvia carried the steaming cup over to Andrew, carefully cupped between her two hands. The way she carried the cup, followed by Christopher and the other writers who hung out at the Magic Bean, reminded Andrew of those dreams he’d been having.

“Andy, you’ve been through a lot today. Try this. It’s made from my special beans, the ones blessed by the village Obeah man. Drink up. And then you can finish up that dream scene. It’s really powerful. And you know, it reminds me of Chris’s latest poem.”

**BIO: Bob Matthews** is a member of the Annapolis chapter of MWA. This is his first published short story. He has taken multiple classes with the Writers Center in Bethesda. His writing is primarily character driven short stories, often dealing with middle aged and older characters, and sometimes including a touch of magical realism.

**Invisible Girl**  
*by F. J. Talley*

I decided against having a going away party, though it’s not like anyone would know what to say at one, anyway. That happens when you’re invisible.

***

I became invisible years ago as the middle child. My brother earned all kinds of accolades, and my little sister, the performer, got lots of attention. I was steady though and never got into trouble, which lead to my becoming even more invisible, but I didn’t know it then.

College was fine, though unexciting. I attended our community college for a year and a half before transferring to the university seventy-five miles away, far enough away to live on campus, but close
enough to go home if I wanted. I looked forward to going away for
school, assuming it would be easy to make friends and become more
visible once away from my family. It didn’t work. Transfer students
often find it harder to fit in, and while I had a few friends, we were
only friends by convenience or circumstance, and once we graduated,
we lost touch within a year.

My first job was as a financial analyst at Seven Mark. I enjoyed
the job and rented a tiny apartment across the river. Financially,
things were great: on the friend and personal life front, not so much.

Even going out for lunch was a chore. I remember a typical event
when Linda, the unofficial leader of the financial analysts, suggested
we head out to a new lunch spot together. She included me in the in-
vitation, which I appreciated. We got a big table at the restaurant, and
after ordering drinks, Sue and I visited the ladies’ room. When we
returned, they told Sue that they had called the waiter back for her to
order, and when the waiter returned, he took Sue’s order, then turned
away. I thought something must have called him away and waited for
about a minute before calling him over.

“Sorry,” he said. “I didn’t see you there.” Really? I’m sitting
right next to the person you just took an order from. But that was
typical, and no one else at the table even realized it. They smiled that
nervous embarrassed smile that people get, then returned to not see-
ing me.

Over time, I became accustomed to my invisibility, and while
invisible to my supervisors, they couldn’t argue with my results. After
three years, I transferred to the analysis and investments office twenty
blocks away. I arrived on my first day and checked in with Human
Resources. Since I still worked for the same company, you’d think it
would have been smooth, but no.

“I speak to the head of our analysis team frequently, and he’s
never mentioned you,” the HR director said. “So this is a surprise, but
welcome to analysis and investments!”

Her perkiness annoyed the hell out of me. Something else about being invisible is that you learn to enjoy it. It becomes so much a part of who and what you are, you’re uncomfortable in the limelight.

When I checked in with my new supervisor, she racked her brain trying to remember if she knew me. After a time, she decided it wasn’t worth worrying about, and led me to my new work station, my first semi-private office.

I didn’t expect the situation to be any better in terms of my invisibility, and it wasn’t. During an important strategic discussion meeting, I raised my hand and my boss, Barb, called on me.

“Yes?”

“It seems to me,” I began, “that if we put together some standard asset allocation packages, like five—we might make it easier for our customers to understand what we’re suggesting. Right now, we’re spinning our wheels trying to explain every aspect of the allocation process and it confuses them.”

My boss nodded her head, and said, “Mm hmm.”

Then she turned to another person with a raised hand. What I suggested wasn’t rocket science, but I thought it rated more than “mm hmm,” but no matter.

Ten minutes later, Leah suggested creating standard asset allocation packages, that sounded exactly like what I had said earlier. My boss’ reaction was different this time.

“Good idea, Leah! That wouldn’t be hard for us to put together, and it would help us…”

I wanted to throw up my hands, but I doubted it would make no difference, so why bother? Just me being invisible again. I swear to God, if Leah got a promotion for this idea I’d scream.

I wasn’t invisible only at work. At the local deli, I always took a number even when no one else was waiting. More than once, I was
the only other person in front of the counter, and the clerks served
the person who came up after me not noticing I was already standing
there.

“Sorry,” they’d say. “Were you standing there the whole time?”
No problem, guys: I’ll just take a number and make it easier for all of
us.

I suppose there might be a good side to being invisible, though I
couldn’t see it. Perhaps if I was robbing a bank, the police might walk
right by me, but with my luck, they’d see my gun floating by, arrest it
and take me along as an accessory.

The only time I felt visible was during one-on-one interactions,
such as when I worked on a project with another person. Those times
were special since we all crave human interaction. That’s also the
only time my boss recognized or said anything personal to me. Barb
was an interesting lady. She had worked for Seven Mark for twenty
years. Tall and statuesque, she could walk into any room and own
the place. And while I might admire her in some ways, she was also
vain and manipulative. That had little to do with me, but everything
to do with how she treated the people she could see. One man in our
department, Mark, was nice to everyone there and performed well
with the investments he managed, but never well enough for Barb.
She kept putting pressure on Mark until he became more aggressive
and started making mistakes. Barb stepped up her rage until she fired
him. When we divided up Mark’s accounts later, we discovered he
was the most successful member of the team even toward the end,
and we wondered why she would fire the best person who worked for
her. We concluded that her ego couldn’t allow someone as successful
or competent as she was around her.

She was vain in her personal life, too. One day she brought by
this absolutely stunning man to the office and announced they were
engaged. He was charming and very nice to the staff. I even over-
heard the two of them talking about setting their wedding date. But just two weeks later, Barb took a three-hour lunch with another good-looking man, and I overheard her say he was her “boy toy” who she planned to keep on the side after she got married. So while Barb left me alone, I neither liked nor respected her.

Something we all did that wasn’t kosher by our company’s standards was sharing passwords among the staff. That wasn’t even legal, but sometimes we’d be working on a project together and rather than apply for limited time and access passwords from IT, we shared the passwords during the project, deleting them afterwards. That’s what we were supposed to do, and most of us did. And I tried, I really did. But when you grow up with little because you’re the invisible child, you keep everything. That’s why I lived in such a small apartment, because the size prevented me from becoming a packrat. So I kept all their passwords and could access the accounts at will. This came in handy when someone needed help on a project, but I just enjoyed having the power of people’s passwords, not that I planned to do anything with them: until I learned about Barb’s boy toy and how she planned to screw over her fiancé.

The day I struck was typical: people racing around with some few of us, usually me—as the eyes in the middle of the storm. Barb left earlier on that day than usual, and I always stayed later, and with almost nobody around to see, I logged off my computer and entered Barb’s office. I got into her computer with no trouble, since she kept her passwords carefully organized, a system I had cracked months earlier. I logged in, made a few minor changes, and logged out. Afterwards, I gathered up my things and headed for home.

And like the system for washing your hair is “lather, rinse, repeat,” all I had to do was to repeat that action four or five more times when Barb was out of the office, using her logins and password. Three of those times were in the middle of the day, but if you asked
people where I was, they would swear they hadn’t seen me but “she must have been at her desk like always.” The last time I logged in, I arranged for the first series of transfers from the other accounts then pressed “go.”

It all came crashing down a month later. We came into work to a wall of people from the Securities and Exchange Commission telling us we wouldn’t be working that day, while they seized computers and everything else. At home, I amused myself by following the story on the news. Barb denied everything, but she couldn’t deny her logins, her computer, the IP address and her sole access to the accounts. She also couldn’t tell the authorities where the money went after the first transfer and where it was now, which made getting a reduced sentence unlikely.

When we got back to work, things were different: they were much pickier with passwords than before and the manager who replaced Barb was very no nonsense. Not much changed for me, though; I was still invisible, but I made a few changes. For one thing, I wore brighter clothing. I bought a nice scarf as a present to myself a few weeks after we got back and another woman complimented me on it. That was the first time she ever spoke to me outside of a meeting. I was so flustered, I barely managed a “thank you,” before excusing myself, embarrassed.

Being noticed was very different and a bit unnerving, but I decided I didn’t hate the attention so much when I controlled it. Since then, I’ve diverted some money to accounts I can control and made a few more changes, including looking for another job. I had a good record and results at Seven Mark for six years, so I was ready for the change.

Maybe at my next place, they’ll actually see me.

BIO: F. J. Talley’s work has appeared in the anthology for Creatures, Crimes and Creativity on two occasions, and his short story “By the
River” was selected for inclusion in the 30th Anniversary anthology of the Maryland writer’s Association. F. J. is also the winner of the 2019 Award for Fiction from the Gulf Coast Writer’s Association, and his novel, *Take Hart* has been named a finalist in the 2019 Next Generation Indie Book Awards in the category of First Novel: 70,000 to 90,000 words. He is an active member of Sisters in Crime, Crime Writers of Color, and the Maryland Writer’s Association, and lives with family on the Western Shore of the Chesapeake Bay.

**Momma Likes My Hair Straight**  
*by Marissa Michel*

The red rod is sizzling. Flames heat up every groove of the old, rusty metal comb. A snake charmer of sorts, the smell of smoke wafts through the air. It slithers past the broken fridge with the flickering light. It escapes under the squeaky, dirty wood door that leads to a dusty barren yard. By the stove sits a tall, black stool and a small, bright yellow plastic chair. Outside the birds entertain the stars with lullabies, interrupted too often by the cries of sirens dashing by.

In the living room, the laughter of actors, emanating from a small outdated TV, fills the room. On the floor, a few stuffed animals try to hide a little girl behind their fur and plastic, painted eyes. Nails, broken from too much biting, nervously tap on the cold, linoleum floor. Maybe, if she can disappear, the wires on her head will too.

From the kitchen, her mother calls impatiently. The words assume their usual position in the little girl’s head. She stays frozen in place. She tries hard to freeze time with her.

The mother calls again, now even more impatient. Feet fill the dents they’ve made in the linoleum, tracing the path from the kitchen to the living room.
Already standing, the girl wavers in her mother’s presence. She walks slowly behind her mother, grasping an old stuffed toy that now drags along the floor. She is staring at the long, straight black hair which flows almost effortlessly, like a river bed with only a few rocks, from the top of mother’s head to her big, swinging hips.

Sitting in the yellow chair, tears stream down the girl’s face. With her eyes closed, the girl can’t see the ocean leaking from the creases in her momma’s eyes. Wrinkles made of dark chocolate bore deep into her skin. A face wearing fatigue and sadness, that hasn’t worn a different expression in a while.

“Momma, it hurts!”
“I know baby, I know.”
“Momma, please, it burns!”
“I know baby, I know.”
“Momma, why?”
“Baby, just think how good your hair will look when we’re done.”

Pacing alongside the brick walls of the school, the mother’s feet hurt inside her new heels. She is gripping the application form tightly. She walks into the admissions office, and nervously signs her name in black.

A few weeks later, the interviewer asks a final question with a warm smile.

“So, what do you think is most unique about you?”
“I like my hair.” The girl replies. “But Momma likes my hair straight,” the girl adds, mostly to herself. With that, a timer goes off and the woman grabs a bright blue folder from her desk. Brushing her plaid skirt, as she stands from her leather armchair, the interviewer says: “Well, it was nice to meet you Melanie.” Melanie smiles her gap-tooth smile and says “Nice to meet you too.” Just as momma taught her.

Mother smiles. A broad, tooth and gums, kid-on-Christmas-
morning kind of smile when the acceptance letter arrives in the mail. “Baby, come here!” yells mother. The girl runs into the living room, her feet covered by fluffy little slippers. She jumps excitedly onto the soft couch where her mother is sitting, the room aglow in the warm orange light of the fireplace.

“You got in baby!”

“Yay!” squeals the little girl.

Then Melanie, now a mother, stands up and notions for her daughter to follow. Walking past the family portraits in the hallway, the little girl asks:

“Momma, do I still have to?”

“Yes baby,” mother replies instantly.

The little girl then walks in silence. Staring at her momma’s long, black hair which almost flows effortlessly behind her.

They enter the kitchen. A burning, metallic smell welcomes them. The smell is nearly obscured by the scent of fresh flowers and a rose candle burning on the kitchen island. On the marble countertop sits the snake charmer. Melanie grabs the sizzling red comb and sits on the cushioned blue chair. The little girl takes her place on the small black stool. A life-like doll is squeezed tightly by the girl’s little hands. Outside, the birds sing lullabies to the stars. There are no sirens to disturb their song. As salty tears fall down the little girl’s face, mother tries not to cry. Mother likes her hair too. But people like it straight.

**BIO:** Marissa Michel’s interests are in slam poetry, and flash fiction. I have been awarded twenty-one Scholastic Arts and Writing Awards in categories including poetry, short story, and personal memoir. I have also been the recipient of a national silver medal for humor, in the Scholastic Arts and Writing Awards.
Becca was working the front register at CVS the first time she saw the blur of a short figure in an oversized Washington Caps hoodie vanishing out the exit with a pack of Skittles. One and done, she told herself. No need to alert the manager. But the second time, as she was shelving skin creams, she managed to glimpse the same figure and the delight in the boy’s smile as he escaped with his Skittles. On both occasions, he was alone--no older brother or sister nearby, no mother or father at the prescription counter picking up antibiotics. He looked about seven, an age when a kid shouldn’t be visiting stores on his own. And the fact that the snatching had happened twice with the boy all alone suggested that he was used to being unattended and that he would likely try again.

Still, Becca hesitated to tell the manager, or even to alert her good friend, Enrique, the senior cashier. They would be forced by store policy to contact the boy’s parents and who knew what they were like—maybe they beat their kids with belts. Were two packs of Skittles really worth a beating? After all, she reasoned, how much profit was CVS losing on a $1.49 package of candy?

If someone else caught the boy the next time—like the scowling cashier who was perpetually angry at her own kids—the boy would be reported, that much Becca knew. She remembered when her mother, temperamentally similar to the scowling cashier, threw her out for borrowing cash from Ericka’s wallet a couple times to help out her ex-boyfriend. Her mother had called her a thief, as if borrowing money without permission from your own mother and intending to pay it back eventually was criminal. If only her mother had sat her down for a calm talk, Becca wouldn’t be sleeping on the futon in Enrique’s apartment.
On the other hand, Becca reasoned, the boy shouldn’t go unchecked in his actions. First candy, next a package of batteries, then a tablet from the electronics shop next door. By ignoring his impulsive candy grabs, she could be contributing to a life of crime, or at least a stay in the juvenile detention system. Both candy incidents had happened midday—about noon—probably on a half-day of school, as he took a detour home from nearby Shadyside Elementary. Maybe next time she could give him some Skittles with an understanding that the candy swipe had to stop. That night she pulled up the public school calendar online, identified the next half-day, and circled the date on her own calendar.

* * *

Becca recognized the faded, misshapen red hoodie before she saw the face. It was swallowing the boy, making him smaller and more fragile than his cunning suggested as he hung around the candy display, watching and waiting for a line to form at her register.

“Hey,” she called out. “Kid, is this yours?” She pulled a package of Skittles from her pocket and waved it in his direction.

He turned away and started to run toward the door, but she moved more quickly and blocked his exit, her hand outstretched with the candy offering. He reached for it, but she yanked it back.

“I’ll pay for the Skittles if you promise not to snatch anymore candy from the store.”

“What if you’re not here? If somebody else is up front?”

“Then you wait until I’m here another time. I’m trusting you not to take anything else. Besides, if someone else catches you, they’ll call your mother.”

“Don’t live with her anymore.”

“Well, they’ll call whoever you are living with. And all bets are off then.”

“Huh?”
They’ll call the police if you keep doing it.”
“I’m very fast. They’ll never catch me.”
“Then you don’t know Enrique. He used to run track in high
school. Kid, this is an easy decision. Don’t make it hard. Skittles
when I’m here. Nothing when I’m not. And no punishment.”
He nodded and reached for the candy, ripping open the pack-
age and stuffing pieces in his mouth before they could be reclaimed.
Whas your name?” he asked with the sweetness filling his mouth.
“Becca. What’s yours?”
“Jamal.” His dark fringed eyes sparkled as he smiled, pastel
saliva dribbling from the corner of his mouth. “Where’s Enrique? The
man who’s so fast?”
Becca pointed to a short, thin guy at the pharmacy register at the
back of the store.
“Doesn’t look like a runner.”
“He still runs on weekends. You should see his calves.”
But before they could finish their conversation about honesty
and stealing, Enrique’s voice boomed over the intercom, “Becca to
the front register please.” And just like that, Jamal was gone.

* * *

“Do you want me to lose my job, or do you want me to fire
you?” Enrique demanded as they rode home shoulder to shoulder in
his Corolla, which he’d bought from his aunt so he’d have reliable
transportation. Becca could tell something had been boiling in him all
day, his required CVS smile having been replaced by a half-frown.
They were friends, good friends, roommates—on the same wave
length most of the time, but now the harshness in his voice reminded
her of Ericka.
“You can’t be wandering away from the register. Leaving it
unattended invites anyone to come up and open the drawer. Thieves
watch for moments like that. And what were you doing anyway giv-
ing that kid candy? It’s not a Halloween promotion day. The last thing we need is little kids hanging around the store begging for free candy. By the way, you owe CVS $1.49. The manager gets angry when the candy inventory doesn’t match the sales receipts.”

Becca said nothing. She had no place else to live at the low rent Enrique and his boyfriend were charging her, especially while she was saving for summer classes.

“Promise me you won’t step away again like that. You’re my best friend, Becca. But it’s my job to enforce CVS rules.” His voice had become softer, almost pleading.

“I promise,” she said. “By the way, I don’t steal. I put the money in the register and rang up the sale.” She silently reminded herself to put $1.49 in the drawer the next morning.

That night as the heater hissed and rattled, Becca fidgeted on the wafer-thin futon, feeling each fragile slat as she thought about Jamal, who seemed as rootless as she. Only he was seven with his permanent teeth just popping up, and she was twenty—earning her own money, taking college classes, strong enough to get herself out of a bad relationship with Stone, who she sometimes missed at night when she heard Enrique and Owen in the bedroom. Why was a kid wandering on his own like that? Did anyone care where he was or what was happening to him? If Skittles made him happy, didn’t life owe it to him?

When Enrique was in a better mood, she’d explain, and he would understand. But at breakfast Enrique let slip that CVS would be downsizing soon, that the receipts didn’t justify the salary expenditures, that they couldn’t reduce the professional pharmacy staff, that the manager was under pressure himself, that Enrique was doing his best to protect both their jobs.

She squeezed his hand. “Don’t worry about me,” she said.

***

It was a Saturday morning, not when she expected to see him.
At first Becca didn’t even notice him amidst the gaggle of noisy kids being prodded past the toy section toward the pharmacy counter by a round woman with wiry hair. But when he called out, “Hi, Becca!” her heart pumped so fast that she forgot to scan her customer’s chips.

“Hi, Becca,” he shouted a second time, then dissolved into a spasm of coughing as the woman jerked his hoodie. “No playing around, Jamal,” she ordered. “You’re the one who needs the medicine.” He turned and waved enthusiastically as the woman dragged him along with the rest of her crew. Becca offered a half-wave, then turned to her customer, an older man who stopped by regularly for corn chips and pain patches.

“See you soon, Becca,” the boy yelled from the back of the store.

Becca handed the man his bag, making sure not to crush the chips. She remembered her deal with Jamal--free Skittles if she was there, no snatching if she wasn’t. Relieved that Enrique had a big crowd at the pharmacy counter and that no other customers were in her line, she reached over the counter, plucked a pack of Skittles, and surreptitiously tossed it across the freshly waxed floor like a hockey puck until it rested just shy of the exit. Jamal, who had been staring at her, dashed toward the skidding candy, slid in like a goalie to retrieve the package, and triumphantly jammed colored candies into his mouth.

“Jamal! Where’d you get that candy, boy? Are you stealing again? And now you’ve gone and tore it open. Do you think I’ve got extra money to waste on candy? You walk over to that girl and give her back what’s left of that stuff. Then you promise to pay her for what’s missing when you earn it. You heard me, Jamal. Get your tail over there.” The woman was now standing over the boy and shaking her finger at him, as if she were shaking his little body.

The gaggle of kids had followed her and were laughing. “Ja-
mal’s done it again!”

“She gave me the candy.” Jamal was pointing at Becca. “She promised me.”

“Stop your lying. Give her back that candy if you know what’s good for you.”

By then Enrique was walking toward the commotion, close enough to hear every word, approaching the woman but glaring at Becca, who shrugged her shoulders and whispered the word, “Sorry.”

“I’m not lying. She tossed it on the floor so I could get it.” Becca wanted to tell the truth, but how do you explain to a furious woman that you were giving her boy free candy without having her think you’re a pedophile?

What was left of the candy pieces tumbled to the ground, rolled under the display case for Mother’s Day gifts, and buried themselves in dust balls. The other kids dove to the floor and wedged their hands beneath the case, shouting their color preferences. As Enrique’s focus shifted toward the squirming craziness on the floor, Jamal scowled at Becca, then zipped out the front door.

“Damn that boy!” shouted the round woman.

Enrique raced out the door, in track team mode, and Becca knew what would come next: Enrique would catch Jamal in seconds and return him to the woman, who would deliver another loud lecture, and Becca would be out of a job and off the futon. But before she could feel victimized by fate and her own stupidity, a car squealed in the front lot and horns blared. Shit! she thought. Who had she killed—the boy or Enrique? And for what? Candy that was no longer edible.

* * *

She had become an accomplice in Jamal’s candy hustle. Maybe her mother was right that she was a thief at heart. But when she hugged Jamal’s warm body in relief that he was safe, her heart swelled, as if he were her little brother. The round woman pulled Ja-
mal away, and he jutted his defiant chin in rebuke while she explained her actions to his disbelieving caregiver. Becca longed to enfold him again in her arms and give him the love he deserved, the kind of love she’d imagined as a child. His cough and leaky nose made him even more vulnerable, more in need of caring, not punishment.

Thank goodness, no one had been killed, not even injured. Enrique and the boy were sweaty and angry, but nothing that wouldn’t right itself soon. The squealing car and blaring horns had been warnings to the wild boy racing between cars in the parking lot and to Enrique sprinting after him. And now, she realized, warnings to herself as well. Enrique, who had been promoted to head cashier for good reason, calmed the woman long enough to offer profuse apologies on behalf of the store, along with discount coupons and candy for each of the kids, even Skittles for Jamal. Then Enrique dashed to the pharmacy to hand-carry the medicine to the seething woman just as she loaded the children into her van, giving Jamal—the last to board—an extra shove and two butt-swats.

During the handover of the free medicine, another courtesy of the pharmacy, Becca managed to write her cell number on a piece of paper and slip it into Jamal’s hand. “If you need help,” she whispered, “call me.” It was the least she could do. She imagined what would happen after the woman and the kids were behind closed doors. The woman’s anger at Jamal had been palpable throughout the entire scene—from the moment they’d entered the store, to the moment they’d finally buckled up in the van. Becca would never forgive herself if Jamal got smacked around because of her careless generosity, especially with him so congested, maybe even feverish. She waved at him as the van backed out of its space, and she thought she saw him stick out his tongue as they pulled away.

Enrique eyeballed Becca as if he had something important to say, then shook his head. “Sweep up those Skittles,” he said. “Then
“Sorry,” she said again, something she had said much too frequently in recent years. She watched as he took over the front register and used just the right words to apologize to the people waiting for service, forcing a smile but looking defeated, as if her failures had become his as well.

Back at Enrique’s apartment, she jammed her CVS jacket into the trashcan and released her curls from her work-required scrunchie. As a parting gift to her friend, she washed and dried the breakfast dishes still in the sink, cleaned the bathroom shower so none of her hair clogged the drain, and restored the futon to pristine condition. Then she packed her clothes in her duffle bag and rested her pillow from home next to the luggage, just as she had done three months ago when she moved from the room she had shared with Stone. She owed Enrique and Owen half a month’s rent, and she would repay CVS from her paycheck for the medicine and candy. She also owed Enrique a face-to-face, a chance to give her hell—not just for her initial carelessness but for lying when she told him not to worry.

And she owed her mother, too. She’d never paid back the money she’d taken to help out Stone. It hadn’t seemed like much each time she’d slipped a twenty from her mother’s wallet, and her mother’s oversized rage had convinced Becca that repayment wasn’t deserved. Was it too late to slip an envelope with the money into her mother’s mailbox?

“I was getting worried,” she told Enrique when he stepped through the door at 7 p.m. She’d been waiting for hours, so long that she’d made and unmade temporary sleeping plans three times.

“I’ve been meeting with the manager and other stuff.” Enrique collapsed on the leather chair and propped his feet on her duffle bag, saying nothing about her carefully organized belongings.
“And?” she asked.

“The boss is letting you go, Becca. I tried, but with the downsizing, . . . .”

“You didn’t need to try. It was all my fault—the whole mess. Is your job safe?”

“For now. He liked how I handled the mother and the police officer.”

“The police? You called the police on Jamal?”

“Hell no. The police came by about you. What were you thinking when you gave the kid your phone number? The woman was convinced you were some kind of pervert out to harm the boy. She called Social Services, who called the police. It took me and the manager an hour to explain what really happened and what a nice girl you are and how generally reliable. . . . “

“The police?” she said as a cold chill swept over her.

“What did you expect? An officer’s outside the apartment in his squad car, doing a background check on you.”

“Oh, shit, shit, shit.” She buried her face in her pillow, hoping to block out the reality she’d created. Everything was unraveling, and for this latest catastrophe, she couldn’t blame her mother or Stone.

“I’ll be out of here tonight,” she told Enrique as she lifted her face. “You don’t deserve this.”

Then Enrique was holding her tight in his sturdy arms, like she’d held Jamal, squeezing her as if his hug would quiet all the junk swirling around inside her. “You may have fucked up,” he told her, “but you’re not going anywhere.”

She rested her head against him and breathed in his spicy aftershave that Owen liked so much and the detergent fragrance of his work jacket that she’d laundered yesterday. This “staying business,” which had never happened before, felt both unsettling and wonderful.
BIO: Carol Westreich Solomon taught writing to High School students in Montgomery County; and adults in corporations and government agencies. Her YA novel *Imagining Katherine* was designated a 2016 Notable Book by the Association of Jewish Libraries. Her work has appeared in *Lilith, Little Patuxent Review, Persimmon Tree, Jewish Fiction.Net, Pen in Hand, Poetica, Bethesda Magazine*, and the *Washington Post*. 
In one thick bold stroke, I drew my life starting line when I was eight years old. Each morning, my mother dropped me off at school into the throng of second graders who had already gathered. All were decked out in the St. James Elementary School colors. The girls wore maroon jumpers over beige blouses, festooned with short, puffy sleeves topped off with Peter Pan collars. This was the uniform of the day, all day, including gym. The boys wore white shirts and skinny maroon ties. But they were able to change into gym shorts, so they didn’t have to get their “school clothes” dirty.

A frisky and energetic kid, I was at my best jumping through waves at the Jersey Shore, riding my bike down hills with the wind whipping through my hair, and running with wild abandon. Ah, these were freedom! Yet, the message transmitted to me early on, despite the fun documented on family home movies, was that I didn’t have much freedom to be anything other than what society decreed. My Catholic school uniform asserted that I was a girl in a world that devalued me and placed boys on a pedestal. I couldn’t hide from the expectations it imposed. Luckily, I shed its oppression at the end of each day when I pursued extracurricular physical activities that
involved my legs. They could carry me places that society wouldn’t let me go.

There must have been a moment when I questioned the “girls don’t excel” rule. Likely that was when I decided to let my legs be my guide. So, when my mother dropped me off in the schoolyard in the morning, it was my time and place to shine. As soon as my family’s green Rambler turned the corner, I would say: “Who wants to race?” a challenge directed only to the boys.

I always ran as hard as I could. The stakes were high. My reputation was the prize. My self-esteem was riding on the results of the race, each day. I doubt I thought that at the time. In my eight-year old view of the world, I saw my natural-born talent as a way to have fun and be free.

My heart would leap into my mouth with my soul on display as I flew down that 60 meters of blacktop, my friends cheering. There was a sense of the forbidden occurring right there in the parking lot. “Janet’s running again.” I was a rebel who dared to stand up to the norms that conspired to keep me grounded and humble. My stride, like the cheetah I imagined myself to be, proved it.

I won every day. I was aware that it was taboo. After all, my garb was proof that I was not permitted to be equal to boys, let alone reign supreme. But why would I deny my legs their power, just because society denied me status? And the victory was all the sweeter, because I flaunted my prowess in my uniform. That’s what happens when girls don’t get gym clothes.

It was 1960, the same year the FDA announced it would approve the first contraceptive pill. For decades, Margaret Sanger, birth control activist and nurse, had battled ridicule and rigid laws, had even gone to jail, in pursuit of a simple, inexpensive contraceptive that might change and save women’s lives. It was another step towards
freedom for women -- the ability to decide if they wanted to be pregnant. As a fast eight-year old I was unaware that the world of girls was changing with that announcement by a federal agency.

Events began to swirl to uplift women’s freedoms. In 1966 Roberta Gibb became the first woman to run the Boston marathon. Her application had been rejected, because it was believed that women were incapable of running 26.2 miles. Undaunted, she hid in the bushes near the start until the race began, and then jumped into the race. When she finished, it was obvious that women possessed the ability to run. For three years (1966-1968) she was the first female finisher of the race. She says she ran for the love of running and nature; jogging through the woods, she visualized Diana, the Roman goddess of hunting. Running helped her “get back to the archetypes.” Now 73, she still runs every day and says that she has always followed an “inner guide.”

In 1967, Kathrine Switzer identified herself as KV Switzer on the Boston marathon application and was issued a bib number. Once she was revealed to be a woman, officials tried to physically remove her from the race. Jock Semple, a race official, jumped off the press bus and ran after her.

“He grabbed me ... threw me back and he said, ‘Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers,’” Switzer recalled. “And he tried to pull my bib numbers off.” Her boyfriend pushed Semple away while Switzer continued — her offense was simply running as a woman.

Fifty years after that first Boston marathon Switzer raced it again at the age of 72, finishing just under 25 minutes slower. “My message to young girls is that you can do much more than you ever can imagine,” Switzer said. “The only way you can imagine it is to do it. To take the first step. And if you take the first step, you can then take three steps. And then you can take 10. And someday maybe you can
run a marathon. And if you can run a marathon, you can do any-
thing.”

Landmark legislation enacted in 1972, Title IX of the Education
Amendment Acts, opened the door for women to compete athleti-
cally, and to run where and when they wanted. It stated that no one
should be excluded from participation in any education program or
activity or be discriminated against based on gender under any pro-
gram or activity receiving federal assistance. Advances continued to
be made for women legally and socially.

As a 60-year-old, I decided to return to my first darling, running,
and ran in my first half-marathon. Many sweethearts spanned the de-
cades between my eight-year old self, when I had wings on my feet,
and 60, now an aging woman in a society that worships youth. Yet,
the heart of that second grader beat in the body and soul of this 60-
year old. It was long past time for me to get out there and challenge
myself physically. I ran for the fun and exhilaration of it.

Finishing that 13.1-mile run was my greatest accomplishment.
As if 52 years of pent-up energy fueled my legs and my passion, the
thrill was a shining moment in my life.

Enter the year 2019. Many of the strides we’ve made as women
are under assault. The right to choose. Roe v. Wade. Planned Parent-
hood. The first Women’s March held in 2017 brought people together
from all over the world – seven continents and 82 countries -- to
shine a light on where we’ve been and where we’re headed if we
shrug off this onslaught against our rights. Some of those marchers,
hearkening back to the dark ages and emboldened by the dimming
light of the present, carried signs that read: “I can’t believe I still have
to protest this sh*t”.

We’re running, marching, and fighting like girls. It’s what will
keep us moving forward. I’ve been preparing for this all my life. I’m
ready. We’re ready. And, as we’ve shown throughout time, we are
unstoppable. We’re not slowing down. No matter who tries to block our path.


**Fashion and Other Textiles**  
*by Victoria Clarkson*

All of the little girls in my working-class neighborhood gathered together with their Barbie dolls; multiple Barbie dolls. Each Barbie had a wedding dress, sundress, evening dress; a cheerleader sweater, a tennis ensemble, a funny equestrian hat, suitcases full of clothes and hundreds of teeny weenie plastic heels in primary colors. I never understood the concept of changing clothes. Much to my relief, I was quickly banished from Barbieville, because I knew that Ken was a sissy and that silly, pink convertible would never be able to stand up to GI Joe and the Tonka trucks in my back yard.

As the only girl in a family of three children and much to my mother’s dismay, I was a tomboy. She jokingly referred to me as her third son. Not sure if she was joking or if that was her attempt at a jab. My mother went to her grave heartbroken as her dreams of me in a pink tutu and ballet slippers or as a Rockette at Radio City Music Hall went unfulfilled.

It was excruciatingly painful for me to wear a dress. “What if I have to suddenly hike the Appalachian trail…on a windy day?” The smallest piece of jewelry made me feel as though I was wearing a 5
lbs. cow bell.

I am no slave to fashion and quite ignorant of fashion protocol. I thought J. Crew and American Eagle were rock bands and who knew that Anne Taylor is actually Richard? I love beautiful clothes as long as someone else is wearing them, I can admire from afar. Shiny objects on a woman’s wrist always captures my attention and four-inch heels with leopard spots are hot, but I would never wear them. What if I have to run? Durable clothing and quality boots are a must-have in my closet.

Which brings me to the apocalypse and rebuilding. Just as the 2008 crash introduced the “new economy”, I believe doomsday will introduce a new appreciation for textiles. When Bounty is no longer available at our local grocer, we may be forced to think about our overflowing closets and textiles in a whole new way. My soft, satin blouses could never be the new “quicker picker upper” but my cotton t-shirts are soft and absorbent.

As I become more and more aware of basic needs during any potential doom; I see my possessions in a new light of what is multi-useful and what is not. I am going to need rags, lots of soft, absorbent rags to replace the demise of Charmin, Puffs and Band-aids. I have stopped giving away old clothes that can be re-purposed and old shoes that can be re-used. Old towels and sheets that I used to give away are now a part of my stockpile.

I purchased a sequin gown and matching heels for a Halloween costume years ago; I am still contemplating its usefulness. Maybe I could make my mother happy if I wore it in lieu of the pink tutu and ballet slippers.

**BIO: Victoria Clarkson** has spent the last 25 years writing for newspapers and magazines and she has written for *Pen In Hand* January and July 2018. Her blog “Confessions of a Prepper Gal” tells the story
of her humorous attempt to prepare for doomsday. She is currently the president of MWA’s Annapolis Chapter.

The War Brides of 24th Street

by Frances Munn Roberts

Hollywood and World War II ran together in flickering shades of black and white. It was 1942, and the only battles we’d experienced firsthand were on the silver screen. In the dimness of the Centre Theater, my sisters and I sniffed our way through pockets of Kleenex, while Greer Garson and Ronald Coleman taught us to be brave and infinitely patient. Our duty, as we saw it, was to adapt valiantly to the absence of fathers, sons, husbands, and brothers. To this end, the women on our block dedicated themselves to the exasperating art of waiting.

Our widowed boarder, Lucille, waited for a better paying job so she could rescue her children from the financial security of their grandmother’s cheerless household. And my mother waited for a crisis significant enough to jolt my father out of his Don Quixote fantasies and into acceptance of a better paying job as a bookkeeper. Since that meant giving up his post as a coastguard policeman, turning in the pistol that helped him forget his rejection by the Army, it seemed as unlikely as the surrender of the Japanese from whose warplanes we taped our window shades shut so we could read during mandatory blackouts.

But the women who electrified my romantic imagination and fed nosy neighbors a feast of fabricated tales were the wives and girlfriends who littered the white marble steps of 24th Street. Perched like exotic birds, in breezy rayon dresses and boxy, open-toed high heels, they waited patiently for the return of their warriors. Thou-
sands of our boys were stationed in London and New Zealand, while others stormed wide sandy beaches in the South Pacific, or lurked on iron-gray destroyers poised to strike Nazi submarines rising from the murky deep. When they returned – if they returned – the women would give up their front step musing and begin happily ever after in earnest.

To my mother, viewing their fresh faces from the house on the corner, these women offered an endless pool of inexperience, hungry for comfort and advise, ripe to fall under the spell of her lyrical southern drawl and relentless hospitality.

Fearing it might be in poor taste to approach newcomers from the front steps, Mama relied on the one person who spoke daily with everybody in the neighborhood. Bernie ran a combination grocery store and butcher shop on the first floor of the house nearest the alley. He smelled of rump roast and sawdust sprinkled on the floor to soak up grease spills in the back, where he sliced meat with long slender knives and wiped his hands on the bib of his apron, more blood-stained than white before the day was half done.

Rotund and good natured, Bernie was also Jewish, yet he never burdened customers with the plight of relatives trapped in Hitler’s Germany. Instead, he concentrated on easing the lives of his customers, adding an extra slice of cheese when weighing it for a widow whose husband had been killed in combat. Of late, he’d taken a special interest in Hazel Burnett, a willowy, freckle-faced blonde from Kansas who’d ridden a Greyhound bus all the way to Baltimore, hoping to find employment as a stenographer. From the bus station, she hailed a taxi to the YWCA to rent a room. One week later, in total violation of her contemplative, mid-western upbringing, she married the cab driver, Stanley Polanski, and set up housekeeping on 24th Street.

“Are you sure you want to spend all your stamps on sugar?” Bernie asked, after Hazel handed him her ration book.
“I’m baking Stanley a birthday cake. Wish I could afford vanilla,” she sighed, turning to gaze at a nearby rack of McCormick condiments.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Bernie made his way to the far end of the store,

where my mother waited patiently for chicken stew parts while I gazed at the flat, black fisheyes scrutinizing me from their icy crypt. “That cake ‘ull be little more than moldy crumbs by the time it reaches Stanley,” Bernie mumbled, slipping an extra wing into my mother’s pile before wrapping and handing it to her. “He’s a machinist’s mate on a freighter off the coast of Hawaii.”

Mama smiled, knowingly, and ambled back to where Hazel stood admiring a stack of miniature brown bottles. “I’m Claudia Dunn. I couldn’t help overhearing. I have half a bottle of vanilla and you’re welcome to a teaspoon for your cake.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly…” Hazel stammered.

“You mustn’t let formality stand in the way of neighborliness - not with a war going on.”

“Well, if you’re sure you don’t mind…”

As we followed Mama past the narrow row of red brick houses, Hazel casually mentioned that she lived over Bernie’s store, on the second-floor front.

“Then you must know the tenant in 2-B,” Mama commented, a marked quickening in her voice. Even Bernie was at a loss to provide specifics about the reclusive girl upstairs. The most he knew was that her features were decidedly Asian and she’d been seen on more than one occasion getting out of a taxi in the fading light of a corner lamp-
post. Not many women on 24th Street could afford a taxi, and fewer still, to Mama’s way of thinking, had any business being out after dark. Even more suspicious, the postman had been spotted delivering a large white envelope with a foreign return address to her door. What if she were a spy, an American Tokyo Rose, primed to sabotage the war effort with Japanese propaganda?

“Here we are,” she said cheerfully, leading Hazel down the hall, stepping over my sisters playing jackstones on the cool linoleum floor. They jumped up and followed us into the dining room, eager to meet the newest of the young ladies my father sarcastically referred to as “Mama’s gossiping chicks.”

“Don’t pester Hazel,” she cautioned, courtesy being at the top of her list of godly virtues. “Do you have children?”

“No ma’am. Stanley joined the Navy a few days before we met and shipped out right after the ceremony. But we plan to start a family as soon as he gets back.”

“Four is the most practical number,” Mama stated flatly, astonishing my sisters and me, since she constantly complained that having four children made her old before her time. “Did I hear you correctly? Did you say you’d only known your husband a few days before you married him? Wasn’t that a bit impulsive?”

“Most people would probably say so, but there’s something about Stanley – a kind of take charge, man about town that’s irresistible. It was my first time in a city of any size, and I was scared to death. He picked up on my apprehension and drove me free of charge to see everything from the nearest Lutheran church to the Baltimore Savings and Loan so I could deposit the eight hundred dollars I spent four years saving. If it hadn’t been for Stanley, I’d still be hold up at the YWCA, trying to get up the nerve to introduce myself to the other girls.”

“But what do you know about his character, his family background, political orientation? He could have an ex-wife and six
children he’s struggling to support on a cabdriver’s salary.”

Hazel accepted the cup of steaming black coffee Mama placed in front of her. “I know he goes out of his way to be helpful and his taxicab is spotless. I know his parents migrated from Poland to escape the Nazi onslaught, and he was raised and educated in Dundalk, where he drove the nuns crazy with his constant chattering. Actually, I find that kind of endearing. And I know he smells of Old Spice and shaves every day. My mother always told me a clean-shaven man has nothing to hide.”

“I can’t believe she turned you loose in a city full of sailors with only that to go on. Don’t you think it’s an odd coincidence – his signing up and leaving for combat immediately after talking you into marrying him?”

“That just proves he’s more patriotic than practical. There is one thing that bothers me,

though. I’ve asked him several times, but he hasn’t told me exactly where his ship is anchored.

I have a million things I want to write and tell him – not to mention all the questions burning a hole in my head. And I need an address to mail his birthday cake. He was pretty sure they were headed for the Hawaiian Islands, but every time he tries to pinpoint his exact location in a letter, the military censors black out the words.”

“Surely they don’t suspect a nice girl from Kansas of consorting with the enemy…unless they found out you live down the hall from that Asian woman in 2-B. I’d send a letter to President Roosevelt if I were you. He always takes the side of the people. He’ll help you find Stanley. Getting back to that birthday cake…” Our ears perked up.

“What are the chances it will make it all the way to Hawaii in one piece?”

“Not very good,” Hazel admitted.

“Lord knows I’d be the last person to offer unsolicited advice,
but you might consider baking a cake and inviting several friends to sign a card for Stanley. A handful of friendly greetings would be far more welcome than a box of stale crumbs.”

“Vous’re probably right, only I haven’t had time to make any friends.”

“What on earth are you waiting for? Oh well. Nothing so wrong it can’t be rectified. Just leave everything to me.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t…”

“It’s no trouble,” Mama said, determined to be accommodating. Not wishing to seem ungrateful, Hazel murmured “Thank you,” and stirred a spoonful of sugar into her coffee, handing the bag to my mother.

“Never look a gift-horse in the mouth,” Mama grinned, letting the fine white granules trickle slowly into her coffee. “To Stanley,” she said, lifting her cup.

“To my Stanley,” Hazel echoed, in a voice less certain since following Mama home from the store.

***

Lila was the most exotic of the cloistered ladies who hovered around our dining room table during those lonely, drawn-out years. Her blazing red curls were swept back by vibrant silk scarves, accenting her Pacific blue eyes and changing her complexion from warm rosy to ethereal ivory, depending on the color she wore. Lila dabbled in the paranormal and claimed to have contacted Harry Houdini in a séance on the tenth anniversary of his unintended death.

Lila was the only one of Mama’s devotee’s still single. She and Garret Cummings had been in love since the 8th grade, but Lila, for all her pull with esoteric forces had been unable to talk him into marriage. Her explanation to Mama was, “He’s been obsessed with the fear of losing a limb since the day he joined the Marines and I made a casual comment about protecting his vulnerable Capricorn knees.
Doesn’t he know I’d love him all the more if he came back wounded?” In the end, Lila succumbed to the blind faith of one whose reasoning resided in the cosmic clouds, where the alignment of planets was more likely to get her down the aisle than the most logical argument. After all, she was born in the sign of Libra, where marriage is a virtual certainty.

**BIO: Frances Munn Roberts**, is a MWA member. Her debut novel, *The War Brides of 24th Street* is based on actual events growing up in rowhouse Baltimore during World War II. It is a family saga and war chronicle combined, at a unique time in history—the tail end of the Great Depression and World War II.

---

**Lark Lore**

_by James Fielder_

I think it was January 1958 just about three months before the last March snows. When it snows in March in Maryland, it is usually a swift moving cold front that drops heavy wet snow. The January weather was as usual, grey sky with thin cloud cover and very piercing damp cold with light wisps of snow blowing across the farm fields. I was attending the Harford County Bird Club meeting with my Grandmother that evening. This meeting was always held in the historic Presbyterian Church located in Churchville. Churchville was an aptly named small rural village with a single crossroads and several churches each over 100 years old, the Presbyterian Church was the oldest. The explanation from my father, a farmer, was you needed a lot of churches to pray in if you are a farmer. Churchville also had the Tharpe and Greene Feed Mill and the Walter G. Coale farm implement dealership that’s all.
The Bird Club meetings were quite intriguing for a third grader who was just beginning to learn the art/science of bird watching. I was eager that evening to make my very first bird report to this respected group. Individual reports came at the end of the evening meeting and were the time for a member or guest to report a first-time sighting of a newly found bird species. The club meeting always started with the invited subject-matter expert providing a short lecture. That night was to be a special treat because Mr. David Smith was to show a short film on nesting blue birds. Mr. Smith was a nationally renowned nature photographer who worked for National Geographic and had developed the technique for filming inside a nest of hatchling birds.

The meeting proceeded as expected with the agenda and then the introduction of Mr. Smith; he had brought some visual aids to explain his filming techniques. The techniques included how to find a suitable nesting site for filming and how to be very careful not to disturb the nesting pair. The critical part was how to shoot the nest’s inside with subdued lighting. All this took about 20-35 minutes before we actually got to see his film of the blue bird eggs hatching and growing into fledglings.

Once the film was finished the overhead lights were turned back on. There was a period of discussion with questions and answers. My anticipation grew as we were nearing the time for the individual reporting.

The first report was of a sighting of a potential nesting pair of Red Headed woodpeckers. Although the Red Headed woodpeckers are not on the endangered species list, the population is reportedly in decline and hard to find.

The second reported sighting was of a pair nesting Bald Eagles, an extremely rare sight. This report caused quite a stir in the gathered crowd as we all knew that Bald Eagles were on the endangered
species list. David Smith became excited and interrupted the older
woman’s report to explain that at the federal level there was high
concern about the decreasing ‘birds of prey’ population. He went on
to explain that since Harford County borders the Chesapeake Bay that
we should have a number of nesting eagles, our national symbol. He
stated that evidence produced during the early research indicated that
the widespread agricultural use of the pesticide DDT was the primary
cause of the decreases in the bald eagle population. Eagles are at the
top of the food chain and when the eagles eat the fish they accumu-
late a high concentration of DDT in their bodies, then their egg shells
are too thin and break during incubation. Mr. Smith announced that
there was hope that DDT use would be banned by the U.S. govern-
ment. DDT was banned in 1972, and the bald eagle population has
rebounded. “In 1963, fewer than 500 pairs of bald eagles were found
in the lower 48 states. Since that time their numbers have increased
ten-fold, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.”

Another woman was called upon for the third report which was
about the expansion of the black vulture population in the Darlington
area. WOW! Even though I had raised my hand each time volunteer-
ing to give my report, I was not called upon. My Grandmother said,”
Stand up and raise your hand and speak loudly when you are called to
speak.”

Finally, Mr. Smith saw me and said; “looks like we have a very
young boy who has a report.” So I stood up as tall as I could, even
though I was small for my age, and said that I had seen a flock of
horned larks several times on our farm. Mr. Smith grinned and said,
“Young man, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but you certainly are
mistaken as horned larks have never been reported east of the Missis-
sippi River, you probably just saw some other songbirds.” I started
to protest as I knew what I had seen—grandmother grabbed my red
flannel shirt by its long sleeve and pulled me down and said, “Sit
down and be quiet.” Mr. Smith looked right at me and said, “Reports of first sightings are taken very seriously and that I needed to be more careful with my identification. He said,” Bring us some proof and make sure that you get real close-up and get a good shot so we can see the bird’s markings and features, both male and female.

I was very disappointed and embarrassed about being ridiculed even humiliated in front of the group, yet at the same time I was very committed to proving that I was right. The next meeting date in February was announced and the club adjourned into the back of the room to enjoy some refreshments. I especially liked the home baked chocolate chip cookies with a Dr. Pepper.

The next three weeks went by slowly as I carefully laid out my plan for the next bird meeting. My every other day visit to the field above the barn produced the same results, horned larks feeding on seeds and lots of them. The larks were easy to spot as they forage differently in small flocks walking and running looking for seeds on the bare ground in the wheat stubble. The other birds were hopping about or flying in short spurts as they fed. All the birds were easy to see. There was no snow and it was too early for the grasses since the last snows were yet to come.

The male and female horned larks were not only distinctive in their feeding habits but also in their colors and markings. The male wore a yellowish mask on his face and had two prominent black feathers that stood erect on his head and looked like horns. That’s how the species got its name—the horned lark. Their light songs carried a unique melody making it easy to identify. So now I knew where I could find these birds when I needed them for Mr. Smith’s proof.

The February bird meeting arrived as planned at the Churchville Presbyterian church and I attended again with my grandmother, who was the previous club president. The February speaker was talking
about the Osprey. The Osprey’s migratory flights, nesting and feeding habits and local sightings which would occur upon their return in March. He also talked again about the DDT issue and the similar impact that it had on their thin egg shells as their diet was primarily fish from the Chesapeake Bay.

The reports came next with an update on the red headed woodpeckers, the bald eagle pair and the vultures. Again it was my turn to report. My grandmother smirked as I stood up and Mr. Smith called on me for my report.

I said that I had seen a flock of horned larks everyday on our farm. He laughed loudly and said, “I told you last time that they have never been reported east of the Mississippi River. “I said, “Yes they are here, and I brought you proof.” He said, “OK, bring it up here and show me.” I walked quickly (but it still seemed like forever) to the front of the meeting room and stood in front of the table.

I emptied the contents of my paper lunch bag onto the cloth covered presentation table. Mr. Smith, jumped to his feet, gasped loudly and grabbed his horrified face. He said, super loudly to the crowd, “Oh my God, I meant shoot a photo not the birds.”

I had carefully arranged on the display table a male horned lark with the yellow mask and a female horned with no mask.

After that meeting, no one doubted my word on what I had seen.

**BIO: James Fielder:** a prose poem by James Fielder, Secretary of Education, Maryland, whose poems have appeared in *Pen In Hand* and in a chapbook, *Unspoken Reflections.*
MYSTERY

The Hardboiled Caper

by Millie Mack

It had rained all day turning into a dark and stormy night. It didn’t matter what the weather was doing. I was sitting in my car watching my client’s warehouse. I’m Rex Maxwell, private investigator.

Without understanding the full implications of his actions my desperate client took money from the town’s biggest loan shark, Benny Hanson. My client? No, I’m not going to tell you his name because you would recognize him. He’s well known in the neighborhood. A good employer, a good family man.

My client did his best to make the loan payments, but with Benny’s outrageous interest rate my client quickly fell behind. Benny called in the loan. When my client said he couldn’t pay, Benny offered an alternative plan.

“I got another way you can pay off your debt,” Benny said to my client. “Nobody gets hurt.”

His way out was to torch my client’s warehouse and collect the insurance money.

“I get paid and you have money left over to start again,” Benny said.

Knowing Benny, I was sure he would figure out a way to take the entire insurance settlement leaving my client with zero.

My client was an honest man. I like an honest client. He decided
not to take Benny’s offer. Now you know why I was sitting alone in a cold car for hours. I was trying to keep a warehouse from turning into a pile of ashes.

I wasn’t totally on my own. I told Lieutenant Rogue at my local precinct what I was doing. Contrary to what you read in pulp fiction stories and watch in film noir movies I keep the police informed of my activities. Especially when it involves something this serious.

You see the hands of the police are tied until an actual crime is committed. The police were relying on me to stop a crime. I was relying on them to save my butt, if I needed help.

So, I sat in my car getting cold. Yeah, tough guys get cold, but I couldn’t take a chance on running the engine to keep warm. Instead, I grabbed a tatty car blanket from my back seat. The blanket wasn’t the greatest, but it was free. Hey, a free blanket is a free blanket. I got it while being paid to watch a guy at a sports event, but that’s another story.

If the cold wasn’t bad enough, the dropping temperatures caused a heavy fog to roll in from the harbor. It was becoming more difficult to see the entrance to the warehouse. I was debating whether to move closer when there was a tapping on my window. I practically jumped out of my trench coat.

I rolled down the window and said, “Fancy seeing you here. I thought you were waiting for me to call if there was trouble.”

“I just happened to be in the neighborhood. Thought I would stop by and see if anything was happening,” Lieutenant Rogue said.

“Yeah, like I believe that. Hop in. No sense getting wet,” I said.

“I assume you’ve disabled the light if I open the door.”

“Yes.”

Rogue slid into the seat awkwardly because he was carrying a large thermos.

“Brought some coffee. Thought you could use something warm,”
he said unscrewing the top on the thermos and pulling cardboard cups from his pocket. “You may not need this coffee with that fancy blanket you’re snuggling with.”

“I’ll take the coffee. This blanket ain’t worth…”

“No, need to say more. I have the same giveaway. I won’t ask how you got your blanket because I know you don’t go to sports events.”

I took my first sips of the hot, very hot coffee. It would have tasted better with a slug of aged bourbon. Unfortunately, my bourbon was in the desk drawer at my office on the other side of town near the docks.

“Anything happening?” Rogue asked.

“Not yet.”

“You’re sure it’s going down tonight?”

“My client was told to get out of town tonight and wait for a call. He was also told wherever he went to do something so people would remember he was there.”

“In that case, I guess we wait,” Rogue said as he shifted in his seat to get comfortable.

After some idle chit chat about recent changes in the upper ranks of the police department due to corruption, Rogue and I sat quietly. We didn’t have much in common except for trying to nail bad guys. This created a mutual respect for what each of us did, but I wouldn’t say we were friends.

The rain continued to pound down and although I couldn’t see his eyes, I was pretty sure Rogue was taking a little cat nap. I was doing my best to stay awake.

I stared at the darkness for such a long time I didn’t know if my eyes were playing tricks on me. Then I saw it again. A slight flicker of light for a split second.

“Hey Rogue,” I said as I deliberately allowed my elbow to jab
“What? What’s happening?” Rogue stretched as he sat up.
“I’m seeing a light moving towards the door of the warehouse.”
“Could it be a reflection?” Rogue asked.
“There’s no light out there to create the reflection.”
I started to open the door of my car.
“Wait a minute.” Rogue said. He spoke into the radio attached to his jacket. “Heads up guys. Looks like the torch is going down,” he said. “Maintain radio silence and wait for my signal to move in.”
I left the car first and was several feet in front of Rogue. My footsteps were muffled by my soft soled shoes. I didn’t hear Rogue. Was he covering my back or not?
I didn’t head towards the light but ran to a nearby dumpster where I had cover. That’s when I saw him. He was dressed in black. He carried a fuel can. I needed to wait until he went inside and started the process. Otherwise he could claim he was out for a walk with a gas can.
I was amazed how quickly he entered the warehouse. Oh, wait, ignore that comment. Benny probably gave him a key. I waited, then followed. I carefully opened the door and made sure there was no sound as I closed it. Where was Rogue? I stood in the darkness trying to see what the guy in black was doing.
There he was. He was at the top of the staircase leading to a loft. He was placing a cloth string in a pile of cardboard boxes. Then he descended the stairs dragging the remaining string. The gas can was next to a generator. I watched as he attached part of the cloth string to the gas can and the other piece to the motor on the generator. Then he loosened a wire on the generator. He would create an electrical outage as he left the building forcing the generator to come on and a spark caused by the lose wire would set the entire building on fire.
“Hello, Torchy. Looking for a match,” I said as I poked my gun in his back.

“What, huh, hey,” he mumbled as he turned to face me. “Maxwell, what are you doin here?”

“Why Torchy, I’m waiting for you.”

I heard a sound behind me. I thought Rogue finally showed up. Then I saw the smile on Torchy’s face. I kept my gun pointed at Torchy but turned my face slightly. I had a quick glance of Benny Hanson before he threw a punch aimed at my jaw. He missed. He caught me on the side of the face below my right eye. I was stunned but I remained in control of my gun.

“Hold it, right there,” Rogue said.

Finally, he shows up. A few seconds difference and I wouldn’t have this pain in my face.

“Nice job Rex. Nothing like catching the bad guys red handed,” Rogue said. Then added, “sorry it took me so long, but I had to get the troops lined up in case we needed back-up.”

For just a moment I couldn’t help wondering if he held back long enough to let Benny Hanson slug me. I didn’t have time to think about it as the rest of the officers arrived.

“Let your client know we’ll need to get a statement from him tomorrow. For now, you’re free to go.

“I’ll let him know,” I said with a brave face that was starting to swell.

I left the warehouse and headed for my car. I only got a few feet when I was confronted on the street by a tiny, thin man. A man I could take down with one quick punch. Except I was tired and it wasn’t worth the effort. Besides I knew him.

“Squint, what are you doing here?” I asked.

Squint was a snitch I occasionally used along with a lot of other folks including the police. We called him ‘Squint’ because of the way
he screwed his eyes into little slits when he talked. Not seeing his eyes made it tough to know when he was telling the truth.

“Nothin’ much. I mean maybe a wo…word,” he stammered.

“Yeah, I’m waiting.” I still gave him my tough guy demeanor, so he didn’t try anything stupid. I wasn’t in the mood for stupid.

“This guy told me to tell you ‘it ain’t over.’ He’s said he’s out to get ya.” The slits were tiny as Squint spoke the last sentence.

“And who might this guy be?” I asked taking a step closer.

“That’s all I know. Because you treated me fair, I thought I’d pass this on.”

“Well, that’s just great. Without knowing who this guy is, not much I can do,” I said. “You got nothing else for me?”

“He did say, if you want more information you need to go to Hill House. You’ll get all the answers there.”

I heard a door slam. I turned to look at the warehouse. Rogue was outside, watching as the officers brought Torchy and Bennie out in cuffs. He gave me a thumbs up.

“Hill House. Isn’t that abandoned?” I asked as I turned back to Squint.

He was gone. Quick as deer picking up an unfriendly scent, Squint hightailed it down the street.

I wanted to go home and put some ice on my eye, pour a double aged bourbon and get some shut eye. I also knew that couldn’t happen. I would stay awake wondering who was out to get me. Who sent Squint with the message?

Hill House was a huge mansion and the former home of Thomas Hill one of the city’s founding fathers. Over the years multiple people tried to save the house from demolition. The last group who bought it converted it into a conference center. The last I heard they were having trouble getting bookings. Maybe it was because the house was also said to be haunted. I headed my car to Hill House.
I hid my car in a wooded area off the main drive and walked to the house. Yeah, I knew it was a trap. But this was the only lead I had about who was out to get me.

The solar lights along the drive made it easy to find my way. I was impressed with amount of outside renovations which included new windows, doors and siding. Hard to believe it was abandoned once again.

I stood at the front door for several moments assessing the situation. Everything was quiet. Did Squint give me wrong information?

I pulled out my set of skeleton keys, but on a whim, I tried the door. It was open. I entered a dark room. The entire area was lit by two “Exit” Signs and a small night light at the end of a long hallway.

I started down the hallway when I thought I heard a sound above me. I decided to follow the sound. I unbuttoned my trench coat and extracted my gun from the worn leather holster that kept it secure against my ribs. The floorboards on the steps quietly moaned as if not wanting to attract too much attention to their age.

Slowly I went, step by step, taking plenty of time to listen. Was that a shadow I saw near the top? No, it couldn’t be. It must be my swollen eye playing tricks.

I finally reached the top step, I stopped. This time I knew I heard something. I turned my body to face the sound. My right eye was completely swollen shut, and I needed my left eye to see.

All the doors on this floor were closed, but I could tell the noise came from the last room. I checked my gun to make sure it was loaded and ready to fire.

I heard a slight buzz above my head and looked up to see a red dot. It was a security camera. That’s odd. Cameras still running in a closed location. Was I being watched?

I switched my position, so I was tight against the wall hopefully out of the camera’s view. I would be ready if someone suddenly
opened the door and came out shooting. I waited. I stood for what seemed like forever hearing only the sound of my own breathing.

This was ridiculous. I couldn’t stand here all night. I slithered along the wall towards the door. I reached the door and placed my hand on the doorknob. Oh well, here goes.

I opened the door. I was blinded by continuous flashes of light. It was not lightning. I could see something large that was on fire being pushed towards me. I positioned my gun ready to shoot as soon as my adversary became clear. Then the shouting began and echoed through the large room.

Wait! I saw someone I knew. My gal Maxie was walking towards me with a big smile on her face.

“Put that gun away before you hurt someone,” she said as she planted a wet kiss on my lips. The kiss was so nice it almost took away the pain I was feeling in the rest of my face.

“I fooled you good, didn’t I?” Squint couldn’t wait to run up to me. “You really thought you were in danger, didn’t you?”

“Yeah you fooled me good, Squint,” I said putting my gun back in its holster.

“We were worried about you. Once you got to the second floor, we lost sight of you on the cameras,” Maxie said.

“I was being a detective and not taking any chances on who was waiting for me.” I put my arm around Maxie’s waist and gave her another kiss.

I saw the source of the flames was a cart with a huge cake and what seemed like hundreds of candles. Maxie handed me a drink, my favorite aged bourbon along with a knife. Don’t worry, the knife was for the cake.

“Happy Birthday,” came in unison from the people in the room. I began to recognize familiar faces. It wasn’t such a bad day after all.

What? What’s the matter? Oh, you’re disappointed I didn’t get
attacked by another bad guy. Well get this. Even a PI, deserves some cake after a hardboiled day.

**BIO: Flo McCahon/Millie Mack** is president of the Baltimore Chapter of MWA. Flo, using the pseudonym Millie Mack, writes the Faraday Murder Series featuring amateur sleuths Carrie and Charles Faraday. She also just completed her first culinary mystery for her new Irish Bistro Murder Series. In addition to her books, Millie writes a blog about mysteries at https://www.milliemack.com. The blog features mystery authors, detectives, and techniques. To challenge the reader’s mystery knowledge, there is an assortment of mystery puzzles.
Is Not the Rain Beautiful?

by Julia McCormack

Is not the rain beautiful?
The way it makes you shiver just from looking at it
It can be ephemeral or lasting, but you can always see its effects
hours later
The soft drumming it creates, is like a jazz beat – forever replaying in
your mind
It has its allure and prejudices that affects everyone variously
Put on your sweatshirt and let it stick to your skin – the water

Is not the rain lovely?
It does not just go tap tap tap
The rain can make its own unique rhythm
The rushing gush of water soaks your feet
squishing its way around mud and grass
making that queer but satisfying squelching sound
Is not the rain beautiful?
“Sitting atop a horse Willa stared at the large stone building called a castle. ‘Wow’, she breathed, ‘So this is where the king’s wedding will take place.’ She looked down upon her horse Heidi who just shook her mane in indifference. Willa laughed and nudged her to get going. She was excited to see King Fitz but more importantly her friend Avery, the son of ---”

“That’s enough of stories Noah. The Mingle Hour has ended,” said Wise Liam firmly but kindly.

“Aw, come on ‘Dub L’ a few more minutes.” complained Kevin, “It’s only once a week. I haven’t been able to spend time with my U buds since last Sunday.”

“Kevin. You are an extrovert. They are undetermined. You guys are lucky to even see each other so frequently.” They looked at each other confused. Wise Liam took a breath and sighed. “What I mean is that, outside of the Persona Academy, Mingle Time is only held once a month for two hours.”

He looked at their faces and he could see their panic – panic that he knew came from the fear of separation for so long.

“Come on, Kevin you have to get to your public speaking classes. You know that Wise Zoe does not like to be kept waiting. Besides, Noah and Frances have their biannual persona tests.”

Everyone left the school garden and went his or her separate way. Noah and Frances had their tests in neighboring rooms in the Health Building, so they walked together. As they turned the corner, Noah anxiously wondered whether there would be results, after years of disappointment. Frances stopped at room 59 and Noah walked a few more feet to room 60. They looked at each other and exchanged
Noah stepped inside to find Wise Becca waiting for her. She looked up from her tablet to observe her.

“Sit down Noah. Because your results were inconclusive using the old techniques, we are going to try some different response tests this time.” Wise Becca stood up and retrieved another tablet from the gray desk drawer.

Noah eyed the tablet. “What am I going to do?” she thought. The tablet wasn’t anything special. Most of the adults had one to monitor students. It seemed like the tests were going to be easier than before. The last time the testers gave her a polygraph, sometimes they told her to lie, other times she told the truth. The hardest one was testing Noah’s endurance to temptation. She was timed to see how long she could go before playing with a tablet laid in front of her. Wise Becca handed her the tablet.

“You will see two pictures. Pick the one that appeals the most to you. When you finish tell me.”

It seemed simple enough. After she finished speaking Wise Becca reverted her attention to her tablet. Noah sighed and began her trials. The number of pictures kept coming quickly. Fifteen minutes later she finished the test. Noah was free to go. After informing Wise Becca, Noah left.

* * *

By the time Noah arrived at the dorms Frances was already there. She walked over and sat down on the bed with Frances.

“How was it” Noah asked her.

“Fine. They said my results looked promising.” Frances may have been a year younger than Noah, but she exerted a calming presence and knowledge beyond her twelve years.

“I’m worried Frances. No one has ever stayed an Undetermined this long and I’m turning fourteen soon. And when I do The Trine are
going to have to do something about me.”

Noah felt much better after talking. She picked up a comb and began brushing Frances’ hair. Frances had frowned at the mention of the Trisector’s leaders. There was one of them to represent each sector. The Engager was from the extroverts, the Diplomat from ambiverts, and the Muser from introverts. They usually don’t come out in public often, but there have been instances when something or someone had to be taken care of.

“Noah, there is always hope even when the road ahead is dark. Besides I heard that these new tests are supposed to be better. You could be an ambivert. They are known to be uncommon and hard to classify.”

For the rest of the day Noah went through her classes with a feeling of hope and anxiousness. By the time her History class ended, Noah was exhausted from all her emotions. She skipped the one-hour free time before dinner, and took a nap. Noah woke up just before the dinner bell rang, and headed towards the U – Cafeteria.

Kids were still trailing in when she arrived. After grabbing a plate of carrots, grilled chicken strips, and cookies, Noah sat next to Frances at the end of a long table. They didn’t talk much throughout the meal. Mealtimes were always quiet for them. It was a time to think; to think about your future, your parents, and whatever troubled your mind that day.

Afterwards, they went back to the dorms to take their shifts in watching the eight, nine, and ten-year olds in the playroom. The Wise had an hour break from the children at seven p.m. everyday. It was the older children’s job to monitor the young ones during this time. There were many things to keep them occupied: books, blocks, and materials to create art.

Noah’s favorite was Cody. He was ten years old and had the cutest green eyes. Cody always loved stories just like Noah. He called
her, “No” and wrote her poems. Whenever Noah read a story, the kids flocked to her like magnets. Their favorites were Trine Travels and the Persona Academy Chronicles, but most of all they liked Noah’s made up stories.

Frances preferred to teach them basic facts, which received mixed reactions amongst the children. She would incorporate math into games, and encourage the kids to build. This hour was a special time for both of them. This is where Noah first met Kevin and Frances.

Frances had been nine years old and Kevin and Noah were assigned to watch her group. For the first two days it had been awkward, but they began to enjoy each other’s company. Soon, a week the three of them became close friends. They continued to see each other frequently for two years until Kevin joined the Extroverts and Frances joined Noah with the other Undetermined.

At 8:00pm the bell rang, and they had 30 minutes to get to bed. They herded the children next door and cleaned up the room before going to wash up for bed. The rest of the girls were in bed by the time Frances and Noah entered. All of the girls lived one large dorm, but they were separated by level. The Undetermined were on the fourth floor, and they slept in one room.

* * *

At 7am the morning bell rang telling them that they had 30 minutes to get ready for breakfast and class. Noah rolled over in her bunk and looked at the other girls waking up. Frances was still asleep. She looked peaceful, even though she didn’t show it Noah knew that she struggled with the question of her parents; it was something most kids didn’t learn. It was good to see her looking peacefully in that moment.

Noah groaned as she heard the showers turn on. Slowly she got up and shook Frances awake. When that didn’t work Noah whispered
in Frances’s ear “I know of a pearl with golden locks and a silver mind that is flaunted when she talks.” Immediately, Frances’s hazel eyes opened.

“Did Cody write that?” she croaked.

Noah responded with a proud smile, “Yes. He’s something else, huh?” Her face grew serious, “We’ve got to get ready. Almost everyone else has gotten up. Today is the biannual announcement of our Placements. This is my last chance before I turn fourteen.” Noah swallowed hard and wiped her hands on her pants.

Frances’ face softened, she suddenly swung out of bed and rushed to get ready without a single word. Noah went to wash up.

* * *

The cafeteria was buzzing with excitement and emotion this morning. The smell of eggs, yogurt, and oatmeal lured the Undetermineds to the buffet line in the back of the hall. Frances and Noah shuffled into the long line to get them breakfast, and they sat down for biannual announcements. Twice a year, the Trine came to the Undetermineds breakfast to announce their new recruits. Each kid receives a Persona cloak: Extrovert - green, Ambivert - blue, and Introvert - purple. Today, the Trine sat in their usual spots. Wise Cory stood up and cleared his throat. The talking died down immediately, and students hurried to their seats.

“As usual, today we have some people who have been sorted. I will now let the Trine announce their new members.” Wise Cory stepped away from the podium and let the Muser come forward.

“I am glad to announce that we have four new introverts. Amren Gregory, Lillian Cracker, Frances Lafayette, and Cory Lei.” Frances and Noah looked at each other with disbelief. Frances and the students stood up and walked onto the stage. Wise Cory handed them each a purple cloak and introvert pin. They sat down in some of the chairs behind Wise Cory. The Muser went back to his seat, and the
Engager stepped forward. Noah was glad for Frances, but felt lonely, as the only Undetermined left among her friends.

“I am glad to announce that we have five new Extroverts: Luca Hernandez, Amira Hesse, Iris Dale, Jaron Levine, and Julia Pinkey.” Once again the former Undetermineds walked up to receive their cloaks and pins.

Then something happened. The Diplomat stood up. As far as Noah could remember, there had never been any Ambiverts. Kevin had said that no Ambiverts had been sorted in two years. Noah’s stomach turned over.

“I am glad to announce that we have one new Ambivert. Noah Hook.” Noah was stunned. She struggled to get to her feet. Walking slowly to Wise Cory, Noah wiped her hands on her pants. As the cloak was pinned around her neck, Noah’s blood stopped rushing. She could hear whispers from the crowd. Most of them were about the lack of Ambiverts. But others were about her age, and the unreliability in her testing.

As Noah went to sit down, she got a glimpse at Frances. Noah caught Frances’ attention, who then smiled at Noah. It took Noah a second to process Frances’ joy. Noah wasn’t joyful. She was afraid, afraid because she was the first ambivert in two years, afraid because Frances and Kevin were sorted as different personas than she was sorted.

All of the kids walked out of the cafeteria and into a large room. Wise Cory and the Trine followed them. Noah’s eyes flitted to the Diplomat. The Diplomat’s pale blue eyes offered no comfort, only scrutiny. Wise Cory asked them to be seated.

“You will continue the rest of your day as an Undetermined. At 7:30 tonight come here with all of your belongings to move to your new dorms. Before you leave, go to your Trine leader for your schedule.” He spoke in a monotone voice, and then stepped back. Noah
stood up with the rest of the kids. She walked over to the Diplomat. Her schedule was thrust at her with coolness and a little contempt. Noah saw that half of her classes were Extrovert and the other half Introvert. She sighed. At least she could spend some time with Kevin and Frances. One thing caught her eye. One time per week she would have meetings with the Diplomat to discuss anything of consequence. Noah kept walking to the door along with the other children.

“Noah Hook, stay behind for a minute. You too, Frances Lafayet- ette, remain.” Wise Cory said. Frances and Noah looked at each other and shrugged.

“Noah, seeing as you are the first ambivert in two years you will be alone on the third floor. If you know anything, feel free to come to me or any of the Trine.” He said this as he gestured to the adults standing behind him. Noah shivered a little, and shifted in her uniform, but just nodded. Wise Cory turned his attention to Frances.

“I have heard that you would like to know about your parents.” Frances glanced at Noah. Noah shook her head, no. Wise Cory noticed their exchange. “It was not from Noah that I learned this information. To satisfy your questions, they names are Frank and Andrea Lafayette. They also are introverts. Here is their file.” He went to give it to Frances but pulled back at the last second. “Just remember, I am only giving you this information to prevent any emotional trauma. If this distracts you from your studies I will take it away, move them, and restrict your Mingle Hours.”

Finished with his speech, Wise Cory wiped the sweat off his forehead, and signaled for them to go. All the while the Trine had carefully monitored Noah and Frances. With that dismissal, two young protégés set off on their two distinct, but intertwined futures.

---

The Diplomat’s heels clicked on the stone floor as she walked into her office. Her crisp blue uniform matched the walls of her of-
The Diplomat sat down at her desk and brought up a file on the screen.

It read Project: The Ark: There has been a steady decline in ambiverts amongst the population. The statistics have been alarming enough that action must be taken. After many years of testing a solution has been found. A certain number of babies will be programmed from birth to be ambiverts. First subject is currently active in the Tri-sector. The subject is unaware of the chip programming her personality. Subject’s name is Noah Hook.

The Diplomat leaned forward and lifted her spidery fingers to type. She simply wrote: The Ark has set sail.

**BIO: Julia Q. McCormack** is a 15-year-old from Silver Spring, a sophomore at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C. during the school year 2019-2020. Julia writes poetry, short stories, including flash science fiction, and complex riddles. She enjoys cryptography and Greek Mythology. This year, Julia earned a silver medal in the annual National Medusa Mythology Exam. Julia has previously published in the *Pen In Hand*. She hopes to be a professor of classical literature or mathematics one day.

**porcelain blue**
*by Nina McCormack*

ocean blue
they flicker with kindness making small waves in my chest
two cerulean seas glittering as the sun beams down
their depths unknown
yet familiar, distant memory
a languid shape frozen in time
waiting—
dive down to those sapphire orbs
for an imprint on my eyes, mind, and heart

**BIO: Nina McCormack** is a Junior at Sidwell Friends School in Washington D.C. In addition to writing poems and short stories, she enjoys reading books, playing lacrosse, and spending time with her family.
In a small square den, Manuel, a young man, is seated on a loveseat set against the back wall. A narrow passage is visible through the open door in the center of the wall on the right. Set against the wall on the left is a chair. On the end table between the loveseat and the chair there is an old-fashioned ornate landphone and a porcelain figure of a clown approximately 10 inches high. On the coffee table in front of the love seat, an i-Phone sits on top of a stack of magazines. As Mona, Manuel’s wife, enters the den through the door on the right the i-phone begins to ring. Manuel picks up the phone, listens to a voice briefly, then turns off the phone.

Mona: I hear things…
Manuel: I hear you.
Mona: Don’t hear me. Listen to me. Don’t ignore me!
Manuel: I never do, especially when you say nothing.
Mona: Funny! Funny you should leave your phone lying around on the coffee table when you have something to hide. Becoming absent
minded aren’t you? I hear your phone ring. I answer it thinking it is your office looking for you. As soon as I say hello, I hear a click. I am cut off.

**Manuel:** Maybe it is the State Farm guy in Khaki. I have n-o-t-h-i-n-g to hide.

**Mona:** Last evening the phone rang, the usual Marimba tone. I saw you lying on the sofa, the phone smug against your ear, and a big smile on your face. When you saw me, you pretended to be asleep.

Manuel: Mona, I am sleepy now. *(Closes his eyes, opening them from time to time to glance at Mona).* I am very sleepy.

**Mona:** *(Picking up the clown from the side table and turning it around in her hand while looking at Manuel)* My husband!

*(Manuel picks up a magazine from the coffee table, turns a few pages, puts it down, and picks up another does likewise with it. He squares his shoulder and faces Mona.)*

**Manuel:** How was work today?

*(Mona does not answer. She is in another world. Manuel shifts uneasily on his sofa. He picks up a third magazine, and hurriedly turns the pages glancing at Mona from time to time. The scene is frozen for thirty seconds. Then Mona stirs as though she is startled out of a trance. She puts the clown back on the side table and looks at Manuel. The phone begins to ring – Marimba tone. Manuel does not answer it.)*

**Mona:** A week ago, I was coming to the den with a cup of coffee for you. With hazelnut, the way you like it. I stopped at the door when I heard you say, “I want you more than anything else. I will jump off a bridge if…” I walked in. You repeated, looking straight at me, “I
want you more than anything else. If you ever leave me, I will jump off a bridge. And then…”

**Manuel:** I had heard your steps. I grabbed you and I carried you in my arms to our bedroom and we made love.

**Mona:** Afterwards…

**Manuel:** I fell asleep.

**Mona:** …you fell asleep.

**Manuel:** In deep sleep…deep as my love for you.

**Mona:** Afterwards did the phone ring again?

*Manuel picks up a magazine and pretends to read the magazine intently.*

**Mona:** *(repeats in a louder, sharper tone)* Afterwards did the phone ring again?

**Manuel:** I fell asleep. I cannot say.

**Mona:** After you fell asleep, I came back to the den.

**Manuel:** I wouldn’t know. I was asleep.

*(Manuel appears to be engrossed in an article in the magazine. He steals a quick glance at his wife. Mona stands up, looks curiously at Manuel. Slowly she walks to the side table and holds the old-fashioned telephone handset next to the clown’s ear. She then places the handset next to the cell phone on the coffee table. Mona walks out of the door towards the corridor, and having crossed the threshold abruptly turns around to face her husband.)*

**Mona:** The phone rang. I picked it up. She said, “Manuel, why did you hang up?”

*(Mona turns her back to Manuel. She stays motionless at the threshold.)*
Mona: For God’s sake, why did you say you would jump off a bridge? Is she worth it?

Manuel: Did I say that? (a thirteen second pause) I was talking to you. What I meant was…(a six second pause) It is a way of saying, I can’t live without you, Mona.

(Mona exits. From the corridor we hear her voice) “You can’t live with yourself. (after a brief pause, in a firmer voice) You are free to jump”.

BIO: Gandharva raja, aka Dr. Tapendu K. Basu, is a member of the American Academy of Poets. He is the author of August 29: How Kabir H. Jain Became a Deity; Epic Mahabharata: A Twentieth Century Retelling; and Hoofbeats: A Poetic History of the United States. His novel, The Nisha Trilogy, was produced as a Bengali movie, Tadonto (investigation) in Tollywood. He has completed his parallel novel, I, Kanishka, which awaits publication. He is a member of the Baltimore Chapter and editor of Pen In Hand. His website is gandharvaraja.com.
MWA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President: Eileen McIntire
Vice President: Amy Kaplan
Treasurer: Mark Willen
Secretary: Denise McCuffin
Membership Chair: Flo McCahon
Conference Chair: Flo McCahon
Communications: Jim Brewster
Program Chair: Katherine Melvin
Newsletter Editor: Joanne Zaslow
Pen In Hand Editor: Dr. Tapendu Basu
Teen Writers Coordinator: Christy Lyons
Member at Large: Mary Patrick
Website Chair: Angela Dale

CHAPTER PRESIDENTS

Annapolis Becky Shiles
Baltimore Victoria Clarkson
Carroll County Kelly Phillips
Charles County: Karen McIntyre
Cumberland: Gregory Larry
Frederick County: Kari Martindale
Howard County: Suzanne Forest
Lower Easter Shore Stephanie Fowler
Montgomery County Stuart Ullman
Prince Georges County Deidra McGee