

FIRST PRIZE

Dandelion Smiles

Crimson Shadows had tried to ignore the lump, even though she knew she shouldn't. She had hoped it would go away, and it even almost seemed to a few weeks ago, but she knew it was back now, or maybe it was just more prominent. Cancer just wasn't something that could happen to her, even though it had invaded and interrupted her mother's and her father's lives. It wasn't something that fit her life theme. She always came out unscathed. Even if things went wrong, they always worked out in the end. Crimson never had a breakup she didn't initiate or a job change she didn't control. She had great friends and always had enough money for anything she needed. But now, she found herself in a hospital room waiting to see an oncologist who would decode the mammogram, ultrasound, and biopsy she had undergone. There was still a chance it wasn't cancer. But not a very big chance.

Two medical people entered the tiny conference room. One of them realized that Crimson was terrified and prolonged the agony of not knowing by offering Crimson some water. "Just tell me," blurted out Crimson bluntly.

The woman's eyes met her eyes. Crimson saw a hint of tears in the sombre look, and she knew, just as the woman said, "It's cancer."

That was just over six months ago.

Crimson passes a hand over her bald head—a few long wisps of what used to be her hair, only a tiny promise of new hair at the back of her scalp. The chemo was gruelling. Too bad it didn't totally annihilate the tumours. She has a horizontal scar where her right breast and lymph nodes used to be. Friends and family have been trying to call her and come over, but she doesn't want to talk to anybody. She has to get her head and her heart around her situation. Crimson feels betrayed, by her body and herself. Anger courses through her chemo-inflamed veins. She has nothing in common with these people anymore. They're healthy; she's broken, eaten away by cancer, cancer treatment, and cancer surgery.

Crimson dons her headdress and draws on her eyebrows. She hasn't figured out how to stick on false eyelashes, so the lash-less look will have to do. Maybe the two or three remaining eyelashes heavily mascara'd are enough to give her the semblance of still having lashes. She has to go out and get some groceries, but more than that, Crimson wants to get some air. And even more than that, she needs to feel human again, as if she belongs to the world and the world belongs to her. She wants to do mundane things such as buying groceries and taking walks instead of seeing doctors, having toxins shoved into her body, getting blood work done, and having vitals taken and body parts chopped off.

The air is fresh with spring. Crimson breathes it in deeply and tries to shake off the heaviness in her soul. Ahead of her toddles a little boy holding a bright-yellow dandelion in his pudgy little hand, chortling as only toddlers do. "Look, Daddy, it's Mommy!" he says, smiling proudly and pointing at Crimson. Crimson looks away nervously. The father, following closely behind his son, looks at Crimson and must wonder what his son sees in her that reminds him of his mother. He whispers to his son as Crimson passes them.

That little boy doesn't think anything's wrong with me, thinks Crimson, and then another, more-chilling thought enters her mind, Or, maybe the mother has breast cancer too.

A robin scoots past Crimson and pounces on a patch of grass, pecking at it furiously and purposefully until he produces a plump writhing worm out of the dead earth. He flies off with his prize.

Crimson can't help smiling, then laughing, then crying. Her cries are loud and plaintive on the quiet little street. Then she feels a tug on her sleeve. Through tear-filled eyes, she sees the little boy looking up at her. "Don't cry, lady," he says earnestly. His big, bright,

hazel eyes are warm and welcoming. “Here, you can have my flower.” He hands her the dandelion.

Crimson smiles. “Thank you.”

by Melanie Flores

Toronto, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

Invention

"If you don't know, invent something," I was told. So, I invent local history, the store's history—history of merchandising for the tourists.

I'd been in BC just six months when the local tourist attraction, the Strong Store, established 1905, needed a "tour guide" to talk to the tourists about the store, about the early days of Aquatal, about folklore of the time. My grandfather used to be a general merchant; he established a prairie village store in about 1911. I used to frequent his store as a boy in the '40s and '50s. I knew a lot about a pioneer store. I was hired.

Our Strong Store in BC was equipped with historic artefacts and sold antiques, souvenirs, and the stick candy of an earlier era. The long counter had a weigh-beam scale and rolls of wrapping paper. Set up on an old wooden barrel (I called it a cracker barrel), was an old checkerboard. I soon convinced the management that it would look more authentic if the disks weren't plastic and if we could find some old wooden chairs. We sawed some tree branches into little disks and painted them black and red. I even sandpapered and smudged them to look old. It was great to invent stories of how the Petoan and Grandford men, from old-time families of the community, gathered in the store on Saturday night for a weekly checkers tournament. Who knows? Some of it might even have happened.

I have been told that the community has no Stronges, Petoons, or Grandfords, pioneers after whom streets were named. I have read the only community history of the district of Longview, which includes Aquatal. I've also read a lot of historic fiction. So, I am free to fictionalize—*If you don't know, invent something.*

One day, I was regaling the tourists with the history of the Strong family and of the store, mostly true stuff with some augmentation to add interest. A young gentleman wanted to know what besides the store was left of the Strong legacy and whether any Stronges still lived in Aquatal. I made a pre-emptive strike. I noted that the Stronges had made their fortune in Aquatal, it was true, but had moved on when their twelve children were all still at home.

"How large was their fortune?" he wanted to know.

I prevaricated, "Oh, they owned most of the real estate west of Strong Street, with farmland to the hinterland as far as horses could travel the trail in those days."

"And when did they move? Where are they now?"

"The early '70s," I hypothesized. "Back east to Ontario." I was on safer ground now. I had read about Ontario origins.

Then he wanted to know how long I had been involved in the history of Aquatal.

"To tell the truth," I said, "I'm a relative newcomer—only lived in Aquatal thirty years."

"To tell the truth," he exploded, "the Strong family had no fortune, and they went to Alberta. And there were probably no horses in this town by the 1970s."

I hemmed, "Did I say horses in 1970? I meant the Stronges left in the 1970s. You seem to know a lot about the Stronges. How do you know? Who are you?"

He announced, "I'm Peter Woods, grandson of Abel Strong . . . from Alberta, not Ontario, where he taught me to play checkers. My dad told me of how little is known of the Stronges at Aquatal. And how most of what we think is true is simply legend."

"Well," I countered, "I'm Bert Wedge, nephew of Mrs. Strong. Next thing you'll tell me is that checkers never happened in this store or that you are a better checkers player than I."

"Bet I am too."

"Okay, you're on."

We sat down at the checkerboard and had an audience standing about, just as it must have looked fifty years ago.

"My grandpa taught me to play," he said again, proudly.

“So did mine,” I retorted.

We took turns jumping opponent disks till I saw that we were quite evenly matched. I invented an obscure rule: “Did you know that a king can jump two disks even if there are two spaces between?”

“Isn’t that Russian rules?” he asked.

“Nah, checkers is checkers,” I said. He hedged but acceded.

I jumped his two and went on to win. “Did you know that your Grandpa Strong was often called on to referee at checkers matches?” I asked.

by Alvin Ens

Abbotsford, British Columbia

THIRD PRIZE

Rainbow Convenience

The door of the heaterless POS squealed open. It wouldn't feel much different getting out wearing her already wet coat and cheap shoes. She would get a little bit colder. Wetter.

What the fuck? A little more slush.

Halfway to the slanted cement steps, she heard a whisper. "Hey, bitch." Soft and low and intimate, as if he were beside her in bed. A cold stone corked her breath in her chest, and her forward motion stalled. She dropped her gaze then checked the darkness beside the convenience store. Nothing.

"Hey, bitch."

It was the voice of someone who thought he knew you. Maybe the kind of man who would slap your ass as he walked by and give half a smile. The kind of man who would flick a lit smoke at your feet to get your attention. She had been surrounded by them always—the garage, the track, in bars. An unfortunate connection to her family. They seemed to smell the grease that she wouldn't touch. They seemed to think she would like to be with them.

"Hey, bitch."

She broke her inertia, forward to the low-rent storefront, plastered with faded local milk ads and a Players "open" sign, and all the other cheap advertising. She forced herself to keep her eyes focused on the door, wishing for a bit more light from the single weak outside light. *Get inside. There's at least one human in there. And heat.* The light would show the bruises, but in a place like this, nobody cared—or at least they didn't ask.

"Hey, bitch."

It echoed inside her head. The sound of it felt like an unwanted arm over her shoulders, pressuring her to move where he wanted. The weight sucked away her will. Not for long.

She pushed the door open, and breathed in the warm, normal interior. Eyes down, she moved towards the magazine rack to get calmer, to get away from the counter where a man with an unruly beard didn't bother to lift his head from the newspaper. Her eyes skipped over magazine headlines that snagged her attention: "Ten Sneaky Tricks to Please Your Man in Bed," "Lose Ten Pounds This Week," "The Family Pleasing Menu for Your Winter Weekdays," "Relaxation at Work," "Make Your Relationship 100% Better." "The Weight" . . . these stories were written in a foreign language. Ellie would laugh with her about these titles. She would understand the joke.

"Hey, bitch."

A shaky draw of the too-warm air. She turned to the back of the store, not seeing the scuffed tiles with broken corners or the grotty mounded buildup around the fixtures on the floor. Hot chocolate was comforting, like home. She needed something warm to keep her awake. Something for the drive ahead—and away.

"Hey, bitch."

She took the thin Styrofoam cup from the sputtering machine and paid for the drink.

"Will that be all?" The tone was boredom with a shot of disdain. He'd seen this before. He let his eyes drift past her, returning to the crossword, worked in pen.

She wished for a moment he would see her, ask whether everything was okay.

At the door, her reflection looked back, drops and streams of rain dotting her pale, sad face. The car wasn't far, but she steeled herself. Rain, slushy puddles, gusts, dark, and more of the same tonight.

"Hey, bitch."

She slammed the car door, locked it, and settled the cup in the dirty holder. There was a blanket in the back seat, beside the grocery bags bursting with socks and underwear and practical shoes and the old suitcase. She wrestled herself out of the damp coat and wrapped

the dusty grass-specked blanket over her shoulders and turned the key. As she put the car in gear, she glanced at the edges of the storefront and thought she could see the light glancing off a bit of movement—or maybe not. She pressed the gas.

by Kimberley Aslett

Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Cold Coffee

The loud ringing of the alarm clock on the bedside table startled Matthew awake. Despite the voice in his mind that urged him to remain in bed for a few more precious moments of sleep, Matthew slowly let his eyelids flicker open.

“Good morning, Bill,” Matthew mumbled as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. “Rise and shine. You can’t sleep all day.”

Matthew rolled himself out of bed and groggily walked over into the bathroom. He was still quite tired and wouldn’t have minded crawling back into bed to gain a few extra winks, but even he knew that he had to get up and face the day at some point. Besides, a nice, long shower would do him some good. It may even help him wake up.

Matthew walked into the kitchen freshly washed, clothed, and ready for the day. Even though he was still longing to roll back into bed, the shower had helped. He walked over to the coffee pot and began to make his usual brew. He remembered how much William had said he liked it the first time he had made coffee, even though he was just using the instant packaged stuff. He had enlisted Matthew to prepare the morning coffee every day after that.

The morning routine was pretty set with the two of them. Matthew would wake up with the alarm, and he would then wake up William. Matthew would shower first, and while William was in there, he would get the coffee ready for when he came down. Then they would sit together and drink their coffee, sometimes with a little bit of chatting, but more often, they would just sit together in silence, fine just sitting together.

Matthew was shaken out of his reverie as the machine beeped indicating that the coffee was ready. Matthew poured the steaming drink into two mugs and carried them over to the small table. He placed one mug in front of the seat opposite him and placed the other in front of himself as he sat down.

“There you go, Bill,” he said as he took a sip from his own cup.

For a while, Matthew just sat there staring at the empty seat in front of him, almost expecting something to happen. But it didn’t. It never did.

Matthew felt the tears begin to stream down his face, and he had to use all of his might to stop himself from sobbing.

“Bill, . . . why’d you have to go?” he whispered through his tears. “Why did you have to disappear?”

Matthew stayed there for a while, just letting himself cry, but he had to stop eventually. Life goes on—or at least that was what everyone kept telling him. And he guessed they were right, but it wasn’t the same. It would never be the same. Not alone. Not without him.

Once Matthew felt as though all of his tears had been spent, he stood up and took his own coffee and poured it down the sink. After, he walked to the front of his home and grabbed his coat. He looked back into the home that had used to feel so happy and warm when William had still been around. Now, it just felt dark and empty.

Letting the numbness replace his sadness, Matthew left the house and returned to the real world, where he had to move on—as life always did. Matthew did not bother to go back and clean William’s mug; it would remain on the table for the rest of the day—as it always did.

It would remain there until it went cold.

by Giulianna Keir
Mississauga, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

All before Breakfast

Leena awoke to the sounds of blue birds chirping outside her window. She turned to look at her clock radio to see that she had once again awoken before the crack of dawn. *Ironic*, she thought to herself as she silently slid out of her tousled bed and threw her favourite robe over her worn-out pyjama set. She hadn't been to work in over two months and still couldn't shake these early mornings. Ordinarily, she would jolt awake to the buzzing of the radio, but these days, she found herself waking up earlier just to have a few minutes to herself.

Gliding into the kitchen, she switched the coffee pot on while her old cat, Minou, curled around her legs. Together, the duo settled on the old, threadbare sofa, and Leena flipped through channels until she reached her favourite twenty-four-hour news station. She had about thirty minutes left until her twins came crashing around the house, and she was determined to make the most of it.

As the faint aroma of coffee hung in the air, she drew her gaze to the outside window. No surprise there. Where normally the city would be coming to life around her, all noise had come to a halt once the city was in lockdown. "My, things have changed," she mumbled to herself as the first rays of sunlight hit her face.

Oh, indeed, how the world had changed. She remembers it clearly: the confusion, the madness, and then the utter devastation. As a single mother, she knew hard times, but as a cashier for a company, being deemed "unessential" was beyond breaking the bank. Unemployed, she was now forced to stay home, joining millions in the effort to lower the number of cases—every case being a life: a mother, father, sister, or brother. . . .

A sudden crash turned her attention to the oak door of the girls' room, and she knew her minutes alone were numbered. She pulled herself up from the couch to wander mindlessly, again to the coffee pot happily gurgling along. In that moment, she heard the giggling, tell-tale signs of an early morning stakeout by her girls. Like detectives on the case, the youngsters thought they could sneak a treat if their mother weren't up. But those days were gone. With the only adult in the house not working, all incoming items are weighed by need. With her miserable savings drying up by the day, the government assistance was what had been keeping dinner on the table for her small family.

The girls tumbled out of their room at that moment, and her uneasiness was gone in an instant. Sleep still in the corner of the girls' eyes, they collided into the ottoman, a tangle of arms, legs, and long dirty-blonde hair. Nothing seemed to stop the tenacious attitude of a nine-year-old girl, especially in the middle of a pillow fight.

Leena watched the girls carry on, going unnoticed by the preoccupied youngsters seemingly in a wrestling match fit for the Olympic stage. In the heat of the moment, they had completely forgotten their spy mission to grant full attention to winning this game. Just as one's foot was about to collide with the other's elbow, Leena blurted, "Enough!" Catching the girls off guard, they released each other immediately. She sidled up between the two girls, both out of breath from such physical exertion, while innocently seizing a plush pillow from the loveseat on her way.

While it was just six-thirty in the morning, Leena radiated love for her girls, and they knew it. The trio tossed pillows around jokingly for a few minutes until all were exhausted, and Leena was in dire need of coffee.

Although it was an early morning, like many before, Leena took a moment to realize her silver lining. Never again would she have her girls at this age, and she recognized that she must appreciate every spy mission, pillow fight, and tea party along the way. There might be a tornado sweeping the world, but for this moment, she was safe in her little home with her daughters, and that was always a great way to start the day.

by Claire Poulin
Atikokan, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Remember to Call

“Don’t worry, you can come stay with me in a few weeks. I just can’t come to visit, you know; something’s come up with Molly’s work. . . . I’ve gotta go—”

The line clicked, and the dial tone was as stale and reassuring as the empty promise. Her son loved his excuses. She’d learned not to ask because he always had one ready.

Linda didn’t want to be a burden, and in fact, she could think of a million other things she would rather be. She hated to admit it, but certain things were falling out of her grasp. Like the milk she had bought on Monday! It was strange to her that it could spoil so quickly. Even stranger was that she’d found the carton next to her mugs in the cupboard.

Some days, she suspected that there was someone coming into her apartment just to wreak havoc, maybe a poltergeist—if poltergeists enjoyed misplacing milk cartons and laundry. She had asked her son to come over to check, because she was starting to get a little spooked. It wasn’t easy living on her own. There were bills to pay and floors to sweep, and she needed to remember to buy more milk.

Linda scurried around her apartment. She puzzled over a couple of envelopes from the phone company but couldn’t figure out why they would send her two bills with different amounts. She added “Phone Bill” to her planner; she’d call the company after she’d cleaned the apartment.

The sun had set by the time her home was organized again. Her stomach growled, and Linda realized she hadn’t eaten all day. She’d just been too busy. . . .

Retreating to the kitchen, she shook her head as she found a book inside one of her pots. This was why she had to reorganize; things were just appearing in all the wrong places. How this could have ever happened in her apartment, she didn’t know. Deciding to make some oatmeal, she thought to herself, *Might as well eat breakfast for dinner.*

She reached for her milk, which she’d conveniently put next to herself on the counter, and a fleeting thought passed through her mind. It lingered like an itch you just couldn’t reach, but she pushed it away—it was probably nothing.

A strong stench hit her. Her milk! How could she have forgotten that it was spoiled? She sighed and turned to her fridge for something else to eat, settling on some soft carrots. She heard a sizzle and realized she still had the stove on, bumping her head on the fridge door as she turned too quickly.

“What a mess!” Linda said in frustration. It’d been a long and tiring day, and she looked forward to going to bed.

Linda woke up on the couch, rubbing her neck. She figured she must have dozed off watching something on the TV. Sunlight was casting shadows across her floor, and Linda realized she must have slept well into the day. She went to pour herself a glass of cold milk.

She couldn’t find her favourite glass and had to make do with a teacup. As she drank, she thought she should call her son. After all, she hadn’t done so in quite a while. She looked at the paper next to the phone, punching in the numbers that were so familiar.

He picked up on the fifth ring, “Mom? What is it now?”

“Hi, dear, did I catch you at a bad time? I just wanted to see how you were doing; we haven’t spoken in so long,” Linda said.

Her son hesitated, and Linda wondered if something were happening.

“Mom, this is the third time you’ve called today, don’t you remember?”

The question stung, and Linda was indignant. She most certainly had not called him three times, and she was angry that he would lie just to avoid her. She rebuffed his prying questions and hung up; she didn’t need to hear his excuses for not coming by to visit.

It was another busy day, and Linda was trying to orient herself with her planner. The words “Phone Bill” floated up at her, and she couldn’t remember who Bill was. She figured if it were important enough, Bill would call her. She picked up the phone to call her son instead.

The silence on the line was as reassuring as the excuses she knew she would be hearing. But his phone never rang.

by Shannon Tang

Vancouver, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Broken Wings

I love to step on the fairies. There is an uncensored joy that tickles my soul when I press down on their tiny bodies with my foot until the spine-breaking crack echoes up to my ears. Pleasure lingers as I continue to push the fairy into the dirt, twisting my ankle back and forth until the gauzy wings tear off and the body lies broken.

This invariably brings forth my younger sister, Kisma, who will cry and hammer her small fists into my chest, wailing, “Why, Shavon? Why are you so cruel?” Then falling to the ground in a heap of linen and sorrow, she will gently pick up the small fairy doll and all its parts and press it to her chest in grief. At her obvious heartbreak, the pleasure of the kill disperses, and I am left staring down at the mutilated figure in guilty confusion. I never answer her question, as my reasons seem so petty. What can I say except that the dolls are everywhere, and I hate them so.

Father brought the first fairy to Kisma on her second birthday. It was only six-inches tall with shimmery purple gossamer wings. Its skirt was designed with the softest silver-dyed cotton with tiny beading at the waist. The corset was fiery red with braided laces tied tightly in the back. The doll face had a serene hand-painted expression upon it. It was too beautiful and too delicate for a toddler. I had wanted it for myself.

I asked Father if he had brought me one as well, and he had shaken his head. “Fairies are for my fragile, waif-like daughter. You, Shavon, are anything but. You are strong and sensible. You do not need to play in the fantastical world of make-believe.”

And so it would be that Kisma would get a new fairy doll for every birthday, and every Christmas, and whenever Father passed by a vendor who had a new crop of fae. I received black hair ribbons, fat cookbooks, and sturdy shoes. I was given household lessons, while Kisma learned to read. I was taught how to sew; she learned the flute. I was told not to cry when Mama died, and she was allowed her tears for years to come. While I dealt with the tedious everyday household decisions, she could be found dancing by the lake with the fairies. *Those stupid, useless, frivolous fairies! Why do I break them, she asks me! How can she not know?*

Today, I leave her lying in the grass, mourning her toy, and stomp my way back to the house. I ignore the calls to me from the kitchen and barely acknowledge the butler when he informs me that Father will be late and not to hold dinner. I climb the stairs to the second floor and enter my rooms at the end of the hall. My face is still warm with the mortification of mashing the beautiful fairy into the mud as I close and lock the door.

I can see Kisma through the window, still on the ground weeping tears for the dead. I shake my head at the silliness of it. It was a toy not a dog, or even a ladybug. I turn from the window and walk to the bed. Dropping to my knees, I pull the bed skirt up and over the foot of the bed. I reach under the frame and pull out the painted storage box I received for my sixteenth birthday. It is the most beautiful thing that my father has given me, with its gold lock and leather handles. It has a landscape of rolling, green meadows painted upon it in brilliant colours. The artist added sheep on the grassy hills and a shepherd sitting upon a rock watching the flock. It is exquisite. In the box, I have placed all the items that mean anything to me, including my mother’s hairbrush and a hastily written birthday note from a handsome travelling salesman who winked at me when he handed the box to my father.

Reverently, I unlock it and lift the lid. I gently pick up the single most precious item in the box: the purple-winged fairy my sister was given years ago—the first fairy. The one I stole and imprisoned, and whose face stares up at me with its tranquil expression that is both peaceful and haunting.

I hate the fairies because I love them so much.

by Judy J. Dettling
Clairmont, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Tooth Fairy

Cup of steaming tea in hand, I stepped up to my picture window and stared out towards the darkening woods just beyond my property line. The sun was setting, leaving fiery streaks of red, orange, and yellow across the tree line before fading into black.

“Snow.”

It was snowing. Thick white blobs fell heavily from the sky, hitting the ground in almost a bouncing fashion.

“That’s . . . odd.”

I rubbed my bleary eyes and stepped closer to the window. It fogged gently from the combination of my heavy breath and hot beverage. I squinted, and then gasped, stepping back and dropping my mug. Scalding tea splashed up my legs as the mug shattered and the shards dug into my bare feet.

“Teeth?”

It was hardly more than a whisper. Thousands of teeth littered my backyard. They were falling from the sky, piling up in such a macabre “Winter Wonderland” way.

I retched. It was impossible.

Wrapping my fuzzy robe around my shivering body, I stumbled to the door, almost in a daze. It swung open as soon as I even touched the handle, and I stepped outside. My once beautiful, secluded backyard and garden, backed by woodland, were now something straight out of a serial-killing Tooth-Fairy’s wet dream. It looked as if every tooth there was human, and there must’ve been tens of thousands of them.

Something moved out in the woods, catching my eye. Not fully in control of my body, I stepped out into the yard to get a better look at the trees. As soon as the first crunch of teeth beneath my feet reached my ears, I leaned over and vomited.

Stomach acid seared my throat, but that crunch echoed in my ears, and I could still feel the teeth digging into the soles of my feet.

Stomach empty, I opened my eyes, still holding my knees. All I could see were bloody, vomit-covered human teeth surrounding me. Nausea and dizziness overwhelmed my shock, and I fell to my knees with a disgusting crunch.

“I . . . am in Hell.”

On hands and knees, I puked again, teeth worming their way between my fingers. I could hear faint crunching and grinding of bone with every retch and cry.

It wasn’t until I opened my eyes again that I saw a shadow of a figure behind me. I heard the crack of something hitting my head before I felt the excruciating pain radiating through my skull to my teeth.

Teeth. . . .

I had passed out.

Teeth. . . .

What had happened?

Teeth. . . .

Why does my head hurt so much?

Teeth. . . .

Why am I so cold?

Teeth. . . .

Teeth had fallen from the sky. . . .

I opened my eyes. I was in my yard. All the teeth were gone.

“Ow. . . .” It sounded so muffled, so wrong.

I touched my face. Bloody, swollen. All the teeth were gone, including my own.

by Sayde Coffill

Campbell River, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Opportunity

Pain. . . .

Stuart tried hard to ignore the burning fatigue in his legs as he hit his dummy with a bone-crushing smash, digging in deep to push it as far as it would move. The sweat was pouring down his forehead from under his helmet, and his legs were on fire. He didn't care. He wasn't going to blow this opportunity. Tryouts for the varsity football team were going to go on for the rest of the afternoon, and Stuart knew where this could take him. Coach Foster blew loud and long on his whistle. The players stopped banging the hell out of their dummies and looked his way.

"Okay, boyos!" he yelled. "Gather 'round!"

Stuart and the rest of the players jogged towards the sideline where the coach was standing.

"All right," the coach started, "I want two teams. We're going to do some scrimmages, and I'll be switching you up position-wise as we go. Johnson, Rowan, you guys are the captains. Get it done."

The two captains went on opposite sides, and the players were divided up. Stuart took his place. His main position was quarterback, but he knew he had to show up everybody in all the positions the coach put him in.

First play of the game, he set up a beautiful long bomb to his wide receiver. "Nice pass, Johnson!" the coach yelled out. "Let's run another one."

"All right. Teddy, I want you to head to the left and spin around fast to the right. I'll find you! The rest . . . give me some cover! Let's do it, boys!" Stuart clapped his hands together and got behind his centre. The snap came, and Stuart fell back looking for Teddy but keeping his other options open. There he was. Not quite yet. He didn't see to his left that Tom, one of his blockers, had slipped on the turf, leaving him wide open. Two offensive players were coming at him. Stuart reared his arm back for the pass and was hit hard with a shattering crunch.

Where am I? What happened? So much pain. . . .

The coach ran over to Stuart's prostrated form. "Johnson? You okay?"

Stuart opened his eyes and moaned. "I think so. Someone, help me up!" One of his teammates grabbed his hand and hauled him up onto his feet. "Can you make sure that *someone* gives me cover?"

"Sorry 'bout that," Tom apologized. "Slipped."

"Uh-huh. Well, please try not to again. I value my skin!"

The next morning, he saw he had made the team. He was on his way to a promising football career. He graduated with a scholarship to Filmont University and got the star quarterback position on the Diamondbacks. They made it to the championships their first year. This game was going to be huge. Scouts from every NFL team were going to be there. He had to show his best stuff.

The last minute of the game, the Diamondbacks were trailing by five. This was it. The last play of the game. On the snap, Stuart fell back, avoiding the opposing team's players, looking for an opening. There! Stuart saw a receiver fading back for the pass. There he goes, almost in the open. Fading, fading. He's—

Fading?

Why I am I fading? So tired. Why am I so tired? Come on. . . .

“. . . come on! Stay with me!”

Stuart threw the pass, and it flew high and far. It's going, going—

“. . . gone. He's gone. Son of a bitch." He sat back and rubbed his eyes. "Time of death, 4:35 p.m."

The ambulance driver looked in the rear-view mirror at his partner. "Did the school call his parents?"

"Yeah. They are meeting us at the hospital. Son of a bitch," he muttered again. "He's just a kid."

"It was a freak accident. He just got hit the wrong way from two different angles," the driver said.

"Not going to be much consolation to his parents." He pulled the sheet over Stuart's face. "You can turn off the siren now."

by Darrell Corbel

Virden, Manitoba

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Interview

“We are at the final stage of the interview, with one final question,” the panel moderator spoke and leaned in with his fingertips together. “Why should we take such a chance on you? The data tells us that others have, and the results have been resoundingly—well, negative.”

The candidate stilled her hands in her lap and looked at the implacable jury before her. “It’s the quantum scrutiny that seems to do it. Something about the ‘me’ in other universes that forestalls my chances, my employability. I’m uniquely qualified for this position. I have an unblemished work record. Your company needs someone like me. Your company needs *me*.”

The quantum interview, basically a reference check across the known parallel universes, had killed the candidate’s chances on two other occasions. The universes weren’t perfectly synchronous. This Earth, for example, was somewhere in the middle. Wealthy employers had the benefit of quantum hindsight (or foresight?) for candidates such as her. She pondered her apparent character flaw that caused her to fail so spectacularly.

No. Those parallels weren’t her. She was her own person. Right?

Another jurist spoke up: “In one iteration, you embezzled trillions of shareholder dollars.” The jurist rifled through a stack of papers. “In another, you committed corporate espionage with our most innovative blueprints.” She pushed up her glasses and aimed her steely gaze at the candidate. “And here, here, and here,” alternately looking down and stabbing the document in front of her, “you were completely mediocre. Again, why would we take such a chance on you?”

The candidate took a breath. She had been preparing her rebuttal for some time. Since her last failed interview. “What about my parallel who saved this company from bankruptcy? And the one who exposed those same crimes by others, thereby saving the company’s reputation and stock market strength?” She reached into her attaché and pulled out a thick file. “That’s right. I hired my own quantum investigator. I don’t think any of my other parallels took the initiative to do that. But you would know if they had, correct?” The panel’s silence was her answer.

“I could go on about how it is inherently unfair to judge a person by her parallels; there are circumstances in every situation that will not be the same in this world. But instead, I would like you to see that I care about my reputation, I have an excellent business acumen, and I could do great things for this company. You could be the quantum hindsight that other worlds use, moving forward. Just think of how that will shore up your parallel holdings.” She reined it in, sensing she was becoming aggressive.

The lead jurist leaned back in his chair, looking bemused. “You hired your own quantum investigator . . . that must have been . . . staggeringly expensive. A one-shot deal, likely. You aren’t the first candidate to find the quantum scrutiny to be unfair. But it is the system under which we operate. Under which all corporations operate. It’s the new paradigm, offering us the benefit of others’ experiences, and it gives us the opportunity, at a cost, to benefit our parallel holdings down the line. It’s elegantly utilitarian,” he mused. “You’re right,” he continued, leaning back again, “none of your parallels has ever hired her own quantum investigator. But we will be able to divine the ripple effects. We will take all this information into account while we deliberate. Please wait outside,” he said with a dismissive gesture at the door.

This was new. Good. Typically, these panels were already decided. She nodded in assent as she unjacked from the interview and winked out of the module. She moved around her spacious home. The lead jurist had been correct—hiring a quantum investigator was staggeringly expensive. She would know, with the cryptocurrency flooding her account for

the services she'd provided. After the disappointment of her previous interviews, she didn't *hire* a quantum investigator. She *became* one. And she also became a quantum fixer of sorts. An existential philanthropist. People deserved to have chances based on their own merits, not the merits or lack thereof of some nebulous parallel selves.

They would hire her. She was inventive. She had initiative. She was unlike any of her parallels before her. As she contemplated the closed loop of the company's self-fulfilling prophecy regarding its hiring practices, she leaned back and mimicked the lead jurist's bemusement. She had won. And she would burn them to the ground.

by Becky Hingley
Severn, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

A Place to Unwind

Welland McGrath sat on the dock and stared across the water. As if worn out from last night's storm, the lake's glassy surface sat motionless beneath the patrol of dragonflies and the stop-start traffic of minnows within. The early morning air carried an almost autumn-like coolness: an apology, perhaps, for the July heat wave that had recently passed. Welland had forgotten how to love these moments. For too long, tailored suits and stock indexes had kept the soft clay and fresh water from getting between his toes. And while the rental cottage had a way of taking knotted-up city lives and loosening them over sunsets and sangria, it had worked oppositely for Welland and his wife, Lauryn. They had actually come here and tied the knot back in 1975. Welland closed his eyes and, with a smile mapped over his face, gently leaned back and rested his body on the end of the dock where he and Lauryn had traded vows.

The two had always talked about returning to this idyllic summer spot. But, for many years, travel agents had sent them to Vegas and Disney World and every big, expensive fun park in-between. And it worked: they could barely hear the dull, chugging sounds of their everyday lives under all that added noise. In recent times, however, Lauryn's desire to return to cottage life had grown more urgent. Welland remembered the night she laid it on the line.

"We're going back," Lauryn ordered, tempering her bluntness with levity, "and, with any luck, that dock is still wide enough for the both of us."

"You calling me fat?" Welland patted his belly knowingly and slipped a reassuring arm around his wife. "It's decided then—we'll go this summer."

And with the exception of a few modern touches, that old rental cottage was largely how they remembered it. The faintly welcoming smell of sawdust as they entered the door, the old moose antler chandelier overseeing that log raft of a bed, the wine-barrel bathroom sink: nothing had changed. Taking Lauryn in his arms, Welland lifted her up and carried her out onto the dock with haste, just as he had carried her—kicking legs and all—back on their wedding day. Breathless from his sudden burst of vigour, he sat his wife down on the wooden planks. "Hope I didn't hurt you, dear!" Welland panted. "I'm getting too old for this!"

With that, Welland cast his eyes over the shining lake, beyond its crown of sand and conifers, and into the endless morning sky. They sat together in silence, as if even one softly spoken word might disturb the tranquil beauty painted before them. After significant time had passed, a purposeful grin took command of Welland's face. Quickly surveying the shoreline to ensure no one was watching, he leaned over to his wife. "No more waiting," he whispered, and no sooner had those words escaped his lips than his fingers started to inch their way over to Lauryn to slowly remove her top. Despite the unexpected advance, Lauryn remained completely still, receiving his trembling hands without resistance. Welland looked over his shoulder a second time but saw only an audience of sunbathing gulls along the water's edge. Welland's hands continued to do their work, all without a hint of hurry, unwinding and unwinding, until the cap of the metal canister was completely off, and a collection of ashes sat fully exposed to the cool northern air.

"I'm sorry I waited so long to bring you back." Welland's uncontained tears landed in big, overlapping droplets on the dock. "Please forgive me."

Welland dried his face with his forearm and rose to his feet, holding the can over the edge of the pier. Swallowing hard and closing his eyes, he managed a simple eulogy from his quivering lips: "Bye, my love."

And with a gentle turn of his wrist, Welland liberated the ashes into the lake. Like thousands of tiny birds released at last from a dark and hopeless cage, he watched them descend in a scattering cloud to bathe joyously in the sunlit blue.

When he finally left the dock, Welland turned his eyes to the large wooded area that crested the cottage. He seemed to recall a certain tall oak where he and Lauryn had carved their initials inside the shape of a heart. Welland was pretty sure it would still be in there somewhere and, barring the return of last night's storm, he had all day to find it.

by Tony Gryner

London, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Surrender to the Storm

At the edge of the precipice, I pinned the drunken man beneath my paws, unleashing an untamed howl to the raging wind. As I dragged him through the snow, he lay there unconscious, oblivious to the tangled torrents ensnaring us with its frigid breath.

“Jervais, heel,” Master cried, bursting out of the house. “H-he’s my father.”

“Every single time,” I barked. “*Why do you keep letting him drink when he hurts you every single time?*”

“Please, Jervais. Let him go. Why won’t you listen to anything that I say?”

I glared at the boy, growling when I saw the fresh, purple bruises blooming across his cheeks. I met his frightened eyes, reeling at the familiar expression.

“*Silly human! Why do you look as if I were the one who hurt you?*”

How often have I seen that same look when he cowered from his father? How often have I been haunted by his whimpers, whining at the sight of his limp body? How often will I wish to take his place, knowing I am too weak to help him?

“No more! I’m not a helpless pup anymore,” I snarled, tightening my hold on the man.

“*Please, Master. I don’t want you to be afraid ever again, trembling beneath your father’s whip. You’ll never have to hide your tears, smiling through your pain. No one will hurt you when I am here, so please rely on me.*”

As searing emotions pierced in my chest, an unspeakable rage overtook my senses. Before I knew it, I was possessed by an undeniable desire to kill, the thought chanting in my head.

“No, Jervais! No!” Master shrieked, struggling to pull me away. “After Mother . . . h-he’s the only family I have left.”

“*I can’t forgive him. I just can’t. Not when he’s hurt you so many times. . . .*”

Sometimes, I really wish I could speak the human tongue. I would scold Master so much that he would have no choice but to run away with me. We would escape to the forests where he first saved me from starvation, spending the rest of our lives hunting in peace—

Just then, the being beneath me groaned, stirring awake from his drunken stupor.

“Father! Thank goodness you’re all right!” Master gasped, choking back a sob.

“I’m sorry, Son. I was just going to drink one bottle, but I saw the cabinet and—” the man broke off, blinking in confusion when he realized where we were. “W-what happened?”

“You nearly . . . walked off the cliff, and Jervais . . . he, um, saved you.”

“Curse that liquor for making me do strange things! You’ve got to hide those bottles better. Thank goodness that dog of yours is so sharp!” The man grinned, scratching my ears.

I backed away, not knowing what to think. As I watched the humans laugh and embrace, I wished I felt a hint of remorse at what I had almost done, but I couldn’t help feeling empty inside.

Humans are peculiar beings, and I doubt I could ever understand them. Perhaps I was wrong to portray Master’s father as the villain, but what would that make me? Maybe I am no better than him, but I cannot fight the instinct to defend those I care about. Does that mean I am an evil, uncontrollable beast? As these reflections confused me, I could only think of one truth: Even if the whole world turns against me, I will still love and protect my master.

Howling my feelings to the zephyrs above, I stood at the top of the cliff, watching the currents waltz with the whirling snow. As it swept away the footsteps that I left behind, I felt my mind becoming as clear as the infinite, blue sky.

Forgive and live anew. That is what I must do. At that thought, a heavy weight lifted from my chest, setting me free.

“Jervais, come!” the humans called, holding open the door.

“*Yes, Master. I will obey.*”

Bowing my head, I surrendered to the storm, letting the future guide me wherever the billowing breeze blows.

by Mingmei Dang

Markham, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Zero Gravity

It was the moment. It felt so right to her. She picked up the scissors from the kitchen area and floated through the space shuttle. . . .

Something inside her snapped during the preparation on Earth, and it took control of her view. It was after the physical and psychological tests, after putting on her suit. She was walking up the stairs to the space shuttle, and something snapped. The crowd behind her was suddenly different, and her crew members gave off different auras. She's a scientist, she shouldn't believe in demons and auras.

But that afternoon gave her a reason to believe.

Hours after takeoff into the dark space far away from home, she was in the doorway of the bedroom where her fellow astronauts slept. Two of them were from her country. The sleeping bags floated slightly inside the rectangular pods like cocoons, and there was a male moving around a bit in his sleep.

You deserve this, you bastard.

It was years ago, but the pain still remains. She used to just disregard it, but she can't anymore. The things this man did to her were unforgivable. The scar could never heal fully, leaving her emotionally vulnerable to every little reminder. She felt that despite the reopening, she was close to being at peace. But that was a lie to herself.

His eyes were still closed as she pierced his heart with the scissors, using more strength than needed. His blood poured out in small balls, some the size of a cranberry. She tried to stop the flow, but his body was floating away from the force of the stab. Fortunately, he was going back inside his sleeping bag, and all she had to do was zip it up.

But now she had a new problem in zero gravity. Reality hit her as she snapped back to her normal self. Looking at her bloody hands, she could hear her inner voice screaming at herself: *How could you? How dare you? All this hard work, and now you will get arrested just because you couldn't control yourself.*

Then she replied to the voice: *Why didn't he control himself then?*

Silence took over the bedroom like a blanket, nothing seemed to move. Out of the window was the blue planet slowly turning, and she knew that one way or another, she was going to find herself back on Earth. But first, she must try.

Gripping the bloody scissors, she left the room, careful to use only her legs to navigate in zero gravity. She had to wash her hands, but being in space, her only option was wet towels. Where could she dispose of them?

The trash. The spaceship is the most advanced in the fleet, and the trash gets burned into energy as a way to save space and power costs. *The wet towels and scissors will be gone. Sure, the stab wounds will still remain but—*

A loud piercing scream travelled through the corridors. *No time to think, just do it!* She floated to where the wet towels were stored, carefully grabbed one, and wiped her hands furiously. The trash bin nearby had a chute to the energy generator, so after inspecting her face, hands, and body in the mirror, she threw out the scissors and towel.

The screams were followed by more sounds as she could hear her co-workers waking up. Part of her felt as if she would still be caught. After all, how could anyone explain the stab wounds?

Planet Earth continued to spin, and she decided to go back to the bedroom. As soon as she got through the doorway, the stressed-out chatters suddenly stopped.

No one was there. The sleeping pods were still closed. It was as if the past fifteen minutes had not happened. Everything was still.

But the view outside the window suggested that time did pass by. So what was going on? She knew that it would take about ninety minutes for the ship to orbit once around Earth. She could see South America, and she remembered that at the moment of stabbing, she was seeing the blue ocean.

Immediately, she felt a strong grip on her right shoulder, and she had no time to pull away. Turning around, she saw her co-worker staring at her, his body covered in pain but still alive. In that moment, she realized that justice is limited: a flawed human being deciding another flawed human being's fate.

Zero gravity had never felt so heavy.

by Dar'ya Heyko
Guelph, Ontario