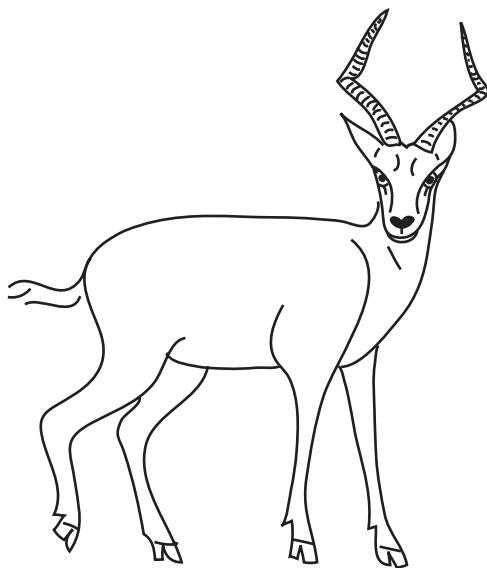


THE SHORT STORIES



FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

A Heedless Escape

To properly characterize an individual requires a special talent, and one that is not too often come by in this neck of the woods. We instead revert to simplicity—we define and delineate between our neighbours using their palette of inimitable habits. Although still widely known, mine is less obvious than most. I haven't been unpleasantly cursed with a twitch of the eye, like Ms. Baker from down the street, nor do I feel obliged to promenade through Brachenwald Park each Thursday morn', as does old Phillip Sawyer—dressed always in his most flamboyant colours to ward off gnats and no-see-ums. Instead, the habit that has come to epitomize me skulks within my head, concealed deep within its tomb of bleached bone and layer upon layer of grey pulposus tissue.

Now, having never pondered these thoughts before, it is exceedingly difficult to explain things in such a way that you might possibly understand. Everything I see, hear, touch, or taste, I condense back down to its origin of chance. I calculate; I do not feel. I suppose you could say I am more mechanical than I am human (and, indeed, many have said this). To me, the result of a coin toss is not governed merely by fifty-fifty odds, but rather by the sloppiness of the human hand, and by the slight shift in the centre of its mass as the coin's cumbersome head's face tends to pull itself to the ground. So you see, just like a coin, I am flawed. Call me what you wish, but at least my eye doesn't twitch.

On the day that changed my life, I am almost certain that chance was overlooked. As God flipped his coin to determine whether my mother lived or died, I saw her last breath draft up towards the heavens and knock His shiny token from its sacred and predestined axis. And although she got her wish, I still feel slighted by fate for leading me on in such a horrid way.

For the past six years she had been drinking heartily; assaulting her liver with the bottle—and yet she survived, because I willed it so. She survived her train accident, her kidney failure, and her trip down the stairs. Hell, she even survived my endless phone calls and the ridiculous post cards I would send, even though we were never more than a good twenty-five minutes apart. After all this—after all this goddamn living—she couldn't survive the hole she blew through the back of her ear with the forty-five she discreetly kept loaded beneath the kitchen sink, right next to her most-prized bottle of Irish whiskey.

You know, she was smiling when she died. *Oh, how beautiful!* you are probably thinking to yourself. *How picturesque!* But let me assure you, it was not beautiful in the least. She knew she had bested me. She had finally proven that she could escape my constraining arms and this knowledge was deeply gratifying to her; it left an eternal smirk across her face. And as the restless souls of the dead perpetually exist to haunt their wrongdoers, so did my mother's lifeless grin. Now, do you remember that I told you I am quite the unfeeling creature? Not a tear did I shed when she passed. Not one. I expected this, of course, but what frightened me was the entire neighbourhood's indifference; nobody was surprised to hear that I had not wept. I am certain that many wondered why it could not have been me instead. "At least her problem was curable," I imagine them saying. "That there boy's messed for life."

Fifty-seven people appeared for the funeral, including myself and my "estranged" father (who eagerly preferred this adjective). Most attendees I had never met; they had known my mother as a child or as a young adult—in her "better days." Sickened was I by these devils who lined up for a shot at the microphone to share one of their pathetically trifling memories.

It became, as it always does, a contest of weeps and snots, and of hiccups and retches. Really, their pities ought to have been reserved for themselves. Theatrical bastards.

In the weeks to come, I practised demonstrating my sadness before a full-length mirror. The few undrinkable possessions my mother had owned were formally handed over to me. Among them was a taxidermy badger. It smelled faintly of apathy and cheap whisky.

by Kaleb Wagner

Lancer, Saskatchewan



SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

Before the Polar Bears Were Extinct

I turn east along the waterfront and head into the city. I hate this daily trek to the Institute but, as I am constantly told, my work is very important. It's possible mine is the team that will find the solution. I doubt it, and if it's true the research assistant likely won't get any credit.

My mask is scratchy on my cheeks but I daren't take it off until I'm inside, and I still have a good ten-minute walk. Everyone walks now—a swirl of faces, or rather eyes, above the scratchy masks, their mouths concealed, making smiles difficult, and greetings muffled.

Back before we used up all the fossil fuels we would have been driving cars, listening to inane morning programs on the radio, and honking our horns in irritation at someone who lingered at a stop light, sipping their coffee.

I don't remember cars, but my mother, at the end, became obsessed with dwelling on the past. She spoke of a time when almost everyone had a car, when there were still live fish in the Great Lakes, and you could catch a glimpse of blue sky through the smog, even here in the city. A time before the ice caps retreated—before the polar bears were extinct.

My mother said she saw a polar bear once as a child. Only in a zoo, of course. But still, when I was little, I thought it was a joke. A real polar bear! It was like saying you'd seen a T-Rex. Even now, I only half believe it.

As I near the Institute, things get busier. There are protesters in the street, as usual. They think we're not working hard enough to find the solution. Unlike those of us who work here, they still believe there is a solution.

I must look affluent, in my suit and shoes and clean mask, because somebody stops me and asks me for water. They don't seem to understand, I don't get any more water than they do. Fresh water went from being a natural resource, to a commodity, to a life-sustaining substance rationed out equally to everyone. You can't even buy it any more, or if you can I don't know where, and I wouldn't be able to afford it on an assistant's salary.

Someone draws alongside me. It's my colleague, Marley. I recognize her twinkling eyes above her mask. How she keeps smiling when she does the same work as I do, I will never figure out.

"How's it going?" she asks, as we push forward together towards the door of the Institute.

"Not dead yet," I reply. It's a private joke—one that gets less funny day by day.

We pause before the door and exchange a glance. As usual, many of the protesters are wearing worn and dirty masks. Some have children with them. As usual we each take a breath, remove our masks, and hand them to the neediest looking, before ducking inside.

"We're not going to be able to do that much longer," says Marley. "They're going to have to ration masks soon, even for us. They don't have the resources to just keep making them."

"They're not that effective anymore, anyway," I point out with a cough.

"Neither is the air circulation in this building," says Marley with another cough.

We take the stairs to the second floor. The old elevators are still there, but using what precious electricity we can generate for such things is out of the question.

"I'm thinking about moving up north," says Marley.

I smile. I love her kooky little schemes. "Up north?"

“Yep, they say that if you get far enough out of the city there’s still enough sunlight for reliable solar power. They say in Temagami you can still get TV.”

“You cannot,” I say, almost laughing.

“That’s what they say.”

We pause at the door to our respective labs. We are on separate teams. Marley is still working, somewhat optimistically, on pollution reduction and alternative energy, while I am working, rather ambitiously, on artificial biospheres and space colonization.

“It’s a long way to Temagami,” I say.

“You’re right,” she says, “and they still have winter up there.” She shivers.

“Maybe today’s the day,” she says, as she slips through the door of her lab. She is talking about the solution and, in spite of everything, her optimism is comforting.

by Karen Banes

Port Sydney, Ontario



THIRD-PRIZE WINNER

Suspicion

I was very young when I realized my mother was trying to kill me. I remember that first attempt when she asked me to get a jar of dill pickles from our basement. I was an obedient child so I headed for the steep stairs. She held the door open as I went by. I hated the basement because I believed a lion lived in its dark depths. I imagined it hiding behind the furnace waiting to devour me. As I reluctantly reached for the switch to shed light on the stairwell, I felt the closing door give me a gentle nudge. Screaming, I grabbed the rail trying to stop my momentum but lost hold and landed forehead first on the cement floor. I was very afraid. The lion might have heard me. I reluctantly turned my gaze upward to see a sandal-shod foot tapping near my aching head.

“Marie,” my mother asked, “Are you hurt?”

I looked into her staring eyes while tears bubbled out of mine. “Yes,” I whimpered.

She grabbed my arm and jerked me to my feet. I swayed as I tried to stand without vomiting. I was nauseated by the pain that beat at my skull. My mother bent low to examine me and softly fingered the trickle of blood oozing from somewhere over my eyebrows. She sighed as if in disgust. The next thing I recall, I was being dragged into the bathroom upstairs where I was plunked onto the closed toilet seat. Out came some scissors.

My mother covered my bruised forehead with carefully cut bangs and advised me, for both our sakes, not to tell my father.

New hints appeared every year. One day in a heavy rain, I hurried from school, thoroughly soaked by the time I reached our house. The back door was locked. I squished to the front. It, too, was locked. I hammered my small fists against the door. No one came, but I could hear the radio playing the soap opera my mother listened to each afternoon. Why didn’t she open the door? That night, I lay for hours fevered and sweating in my bed.

Another time, I sliced my hand on a broken cola bottle. The cut was deep. I ran home in panic as red fluid made a trail behind me. The euchre club was in session so Mother told me to lie down in my room until they left. The blood kept pouring out. I was a Girl Guide and remembered tourniquets. A belt around my arm stopped the bleeding. When the ladies were gone, I found my mother with her feet up reading a magazine. It was then I faced the facts. The woman wanted me dead. Her plans for me were not my plans for me. She kept trying to persuade me to become a chef like she was although I wanted to go to university. She once bitterly told me her dreams to see the world ended with my birth. Travel, money, was the aim, and murder the game.

There was no time left. I was in my sixteenth year and soon out of high school. If I refused to be an apprentice cook, my life was hanging by a thread. What was she scheming? There had to be a plan. My mother was a smart woman. What were my strengths? What were her weaknesses? It was a true cat-and-mouse situation.

Along came my birthday. A party banquet was set up with a three-tiered white cake beautifully decorated by dear, deadly Mommy.

“When you have finished your special treat you must eat the first piece for luck,” Mother beamed. “But now, here is your favourite: steak and mushrooms. *Bon appetit*, sweetheart.”

Guests were digging in. She licked her lips as she took a fork, closed my fist around it, and then sat in the chair beside me. Perfect!

While she was telling everyone her wish to finally see Europe, she was distracted by a friend who had been there. The woman held my mother's fascination long enough for me to switch our meals. She chewed each morsel with delight as her strong molars made delicious grinding sounds. I ate my own dinner with a touch of fear. My mother smiled happily as my plate emptied.

When her eyes began to roll, I smiled back. She was, after all, a gourmet cook.

by Kathleen Rockey (76 years young)

Windsor, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Judah the Maccabee and the Ultimate Victory of the Toiling Masses

Somebody behind Max said, “It’s bloody cold in here. You’d think Steamfitters Hall would be warmer.” Somebody else uttered a sibilant shush. Then a figure emerged from the division between the two halves of the curtain. A white spotlight framed him in its bright nimbus. It was Lehrer Gottgetreu, the principal of Michael Minkowsky, and Max’s Jewish history teacher.

The upshot of his address was that the main speaker was hopelessly detained that evening and would be unable to appear. He begged the comrades’ indulgence and trusted that there would be no demand for a return of the price of admission, since every penny was needed to help re-elect the Labour-Progressive member for Montreal’s Cartier riding in the spring general election. Red Wein would make amends by attending the Chanukah play at Michael Minkowsky and distributing certificates of merit to deserving children.

On the afternoon of the play, Max and the other seventh-graders taking part could barely contain their excitement. A dress rehearsal was scheduled after lunch. Max played a priest of Zeus whom Judah the Macabee, the hero of the Chanukah story, slays for defiling the temple. It was galling that he had no lines, but only grimaced ferociously when Judah denounced him for sucking the blood of the common people.

“Thou foul pretender, oppressor with snake’s guile, selling the masses opium with a smile.” These were Lehrer Gottgetreu’s words. He had written the play in Yiddish rhyming couplets. Lehrer Gottgetreu had quite a reputation as a poet of the vernacular.

The boy who played the Macabee was arrayed in a fiery wig and beard in tribute to the man of the hour, Red Wein himself. Having declaimed, he thrust his wooden sword under Max’s armpit and ran him through. Max writhed in agony and fell to the floor. But it was inconceivable that a priest of Zeus, an enslaver of the proletariat, should die speechless. “Do not think you kill us with one blow,” he groaned histrionically, “My Fascist brothers will avenge this throw.”

Lehrer Gottgetreu’s pudgy cheeks turned an interesting shade of puce. His blubbery lips opened and closed several times before recognizable words emerged. In a choked voice, he spluttered, “Throw? What is this throw?”

“Like overthrow,” Max explained. “Not bad, huh? I made it up myself.”

Words failed Lehrer Gottgetreu. Instinct took over—the instinct of the outraged dominant male. Max had hardly regained his feet when he was almost knocked flat again by a stinging backhander to the side of his mouth. “Impudent dolt!” the poet-playwright bellowed, spittle flying in a shower of wrath. “The likes of you thinks to collaborate with the likes of me on a work of art? Out with you, out, and don’t show that foolish face of yours here again without a written apology.”

Despite this injunction, that evening, Max made his way backstage unobserved through a side entrance of the auditorium. The house was full and all eyes were focused on the champion of the movement, Red Wein, MP for Cartier riding. The redhead was at the top of his form, working the crowd in a juicy mama loshen. Lehrer Gottgetreu and the rest of the comrade teachers hung on the words of their standard-bearer. With an unerring political touch, the candidate drew the parallel between himself and the redeemer of the victimized plebs in that ancient land of long ago. “The liberator we celebrate in the beautiful play staged by these lovely children tonight has always been my model,” he announced. “Truth, integrity and the unremitting fight against injustice and exploitation of the weak, those are my watchwords. And now, on with the show!”

Up went the curtain. The downtrodden peoples of Hellenistic Judea revolted against their parasitic masters, striving to regain the means of production. The defiled temple was the outward symbol of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Judah the Macabee and his worker-peasant forces raised the flag of revolution and swept away the Seleucid class enemies. To

cap his triumph, Judah slew the cowering priest of Zeus. The boy went down without a murmur. From his place in the wings, Max shouted in stentorian tones: “Do not think you silence me with one blow. My socialist brothers will avenge this throw.”

A stunned silence followed, then a confused murmur. Laughing wildly, Max fled for the exit, realizing that a written apology in blood would no longer satisfy Lehrer Gottgetreu.

by Marvin Rabinovitch



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Air Con Orchestra

It was seven in the evening. He didn't need to look at his watch to confirm this, but he did anyway, just to be sure. He always had to be sure.

The air conditioning that rumbled in the background for the past twelve hours had just shut itself down, leaving an eerie silence to descend upon the entire second floor. He never noticed the background music played by the A/C until it was gone. He knew its routine well, coming in most mornings before it started, and staying well past the time it had left the stage in the evenings. He was also present on Saturday mornings when this symphony was completely absent, as the Air Con Orchestra did not play on weekends.

As he looked at his watch, he felt a slight sickness in his stomach fuelled by a growing resentment for his environment. His career had consumed him. He was a loyal subordinate and he hated himself for it.

But this job, this life, was safe. There was safety in the routine of it, in the structure of it. He had detested deadlines when he had started working here, but quickly grew to love them. The certainty of them. The finality of them. His life for the past five years was deadline after deadline after deadline. His deadlines were his only goals . . . his purpose.

Now, as he sat there, staring at the florescent glow of his screen getting brighter in the darkening evening like a lonely lighthouse at dusk, he realized he didn't care anymore. He didn't care about the unfinished report in front of him, his boss who only spoke to him when they got stuck beside each other at the toilet urinals, his coworkers who only ever wanted to talk about their "wonderful" children, he didn't even care about his paycheque, his pension. . . . All he cared about in that moment was a need to survive. He was drowning here. Minute after minute in this symmetric mess of desks and partitions, computers and chairs, water coolers and fake plants, life was being beaten out of him. Each additional hour was like a right hook connecting flush with his clean-shaven face.

He had to leave. Now.

He had to leave and never set foot in this building ever again. If he did not embrace this moment, bear hug this final realization, then he knew he was finished. He would work here forever, awaiting retirement with weakened, bated breath.

He began to shake. *Am I really going to do this?* he thought as he slowly rose from his grey office chair. His hand moved towards the mouse, before he stopped it mid-air. He wanted to delete emails, shut down his computer, and neatly file his papers away. But he was afraid that if his hands touched any part of his desk, they would become irreversibly stuck and he would be trapped here forever.

Suddenly, as if he didn't mean to do it, he grabbed his jacket and began to wrestle with it as he strode towards the stairs, eventually finding the right arm hole and pulling it quickly around his shoulders.

He reached the stairwell and with a swift kick, the door flew open and clattered against the wall, its echo reverberating down the stairs, guiding him towards freedom. At full pace now, he grabbed the hand rail and barrelled down the cold concrete steps.

Finally, he reached the emergency exit. Without thinking about anything except moving forward, he burst through the small aluminum door, setting off a loud screech. With the alarm pulsating in his ears, he allowed his body to stumble to the ground, his hands impulsively shooting out in front of him to break his fall.

As soon as he hit the pavement, he began to throw up. For over a minute he remained on his hands and knees, allowing his body to rid itself of all the sickness built up over the last five years. With each heave he felt better.

As quickly as his vomiting had started, it stopped. He wiped his mouth and stood up. The evening sunlight washed over him and warmed his face as he turned towards the sky. He could hear the sirens of the emergency services intermixed with the alarm now. But there was

no need to panic, no need to wait around and explain. He would never be back here again.
He was finally free.

by Liam Kelly
Edmonton, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Hot-Dog Tree

When I was four years old, I planted a hot-dog tree in my backyard near the shed. I wish it had only been yesterday, that way I would have known to say “Goodbye.”

We were having a barbecue—Dad, Mom, and I. Dad was cooking, Mom was inside, and I was running back and forth between them. It was October and our lawn had been covered in a carpet of leaves—yellow to copper, with every shade in between. “We have more trees than I can count,” Dad said, a feat I attempted several times, losing track as I ran out of fingers. As I raced back and forth, the leaves crumbled underfoot, leaving behind a trail of broken colours.

Rock and roll poured out of an old radio. Every once in a while a voice would interrupt the music with a football score. Each time, my dad would stop and listen. I would stop too.

“Tell your mother I’m ready,” Dad said.

I disappeared inside and returned with a tray of wieners.

My hot dog was made just the way I liked it: plain. Wiener and bun. Period. Sometimes, when I visited my mother as an adult, she would make me one just like that, but it never tasted the same. When she wasn’t looking, I would add a little mustard.

Then it happened. I watched in slow motion as the wiener slid from my bun onto the ground with a plop! Any other day my dad may have simply picked it up, brushed it off, and popped it back in my bun, but not that day. Instead, he simply said, “I was hoping that would happen. Now we can plant a hot-dog tree.”

I stared at him. I had never heard of a hot-dog tree, but he sounded serious.

“I used to have one when I was a boy. It was over by the barn.” I knew he was talking about the farm. “Do you want to plant one?” Dad asked, picking up the wiener. “A hot dog has to come from somewhere.”

I followed my dad across the yard. I remember thinking how tall he was. Handing me the hot dog, he grabbed a shovel, and quickly made a hole in the ground.

“Drop it in,” he said. It didn’t look like any seed I had seen before, but I did.

He handed me the shovel and without a word I covered it with dirt.

“I just about forgot,” he said, dashing off. He returned with a can of orange pop.

“Fertilizer!” he said, “a little for the hot dog and a little for us.” He proceeded to pour orange pop over the wiener and then pass me the can.

Funny how a person can remember one thing so clearly and the next can be such a fog. One day my father was planting a hot-dog tree with me in the backyard, and the next day he was dead. I remember it like it was someone else’s story. It’s hard for me to tell which memories are my own.

There was a funeral. I remember being sad and cold. I cried. There was a woman with hair so blonde it shone. She sat beside me and held my hand. I didn’t know who she was.

It was a nearly a year later I remembered the hot-dog tree. Actually, I hadn’t remembered it as much as I stumbled upon it. I tripped and as I was getting up I noticed something growing at the centre of a small patch of bare earth. For the rest of the day I busied myself with the plant.

“What were you doing, sweetie?” my mother asked later.

“Nothing,” I lied, uncertain why.

I watered that plant every chance I could. Every once in a while, I would even sneak a little orange pop out and pour it over the plant. Eventually, I realized it wasn’t a hot-dog tree, but by then tending to it had become somewhat of a habit and I continued to water it. I even brought it a little orange pop from time to time.

By the time I was a teenager, we had a fair-sized tree in our backyard near the shed.

My mother passed away a couple of months ago. I never told her about the hot-dog tree. To this day, when I open a can of orange pop . . . I smell leaves.

by Kevin Inkster
Bon Accord, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Hired Girl

He wouldn't suckle. She pressed his hard, hairless head against her cloth blouse to no avail. She very slowly undid her blouse revealing a cotton undershirt. She struggled with one hand to lift the undershirt and then pressed his head against her aged, drooping breast. He didn't cry. He couldn't, as he was just a life-sized baby doll.

The care aide approached and gently removed the baby while covering the old woman up. She told Cora that lunch would soon be served and the baby needed a nap now. Cora did not have the strength to resist but wondered why the hired girl was not attending to her main duty, which was preparing and cooking for the threshing crew. They should be coming in soon. Her husband, Jack, and son, Carl, would be among them. She tried to speak to the hired girl but all that came out were guttural sounds.

Many years ago, she, herself had been a hired girl. She was thirteen and it had been her first job. She worked as a housekeeper for a farming family in Saskatchewan. She married one of the farm hands, at age nineteen, and produced her only child, a boy, at age twenty. Prairie life was hard work and hard times.

Daily there was bread to be made, twenty loaves at a time. Washing clothes and hanging them to dry, with sheets freezing hard in the winter. The hired girl had to help her get them back into the house. Trying to keep the house clean, with a constant parade of men in and out. Cooking three meals a day on a wood stove. The heat of summer coupled with black flies and mosquitoes. The years rolled on.

Her son grew up and became one of the working crew. Even then, she yearned to hold him and rock him in her arms like the days of old. Fragments of fickle memory.

The hired girl was finally serving lunch. It seemed to be a kind of soup. It certainly wouldn't do for the threshing crew. She must speak sharply to that girl! A spoon was held to her lips, she opened her mouth and swallowed.

Suddenly, she was very tired and slumped sideways in her chair. The hired girl pushed the wheelchair to her room.

The door opened. The room was filled with light. She could see the wheat fields, in all their golden glory. Her husband was stepping down from the tractor and, yes, there was her son climbing off the combine. He smiled at her. She ran towards him with outstretched arms and in so doing pitched forward from the wheelchair.

The season of harvesting had come full circle.

The care aide pressed the alarm button.

by Gail Prior (69 years young)
Penticton, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Tick, Tock

Suicide watch. What if the name were literal? I picture the chain from a gold watch, with a little man hanging off its end by a tiny golden noose. The image makes me laugh, but I know it shouldn't. It isn't funny. Only crazy people would laugh at something like that, and I'm not crazy.

Still, the laughter is trapped in my body. It shudders through me, trying to escape. I slide down the wall until I am sitting. Tucked in a corner of the room, I brace myself, hugging my knees to my chest, trying to keep my bones from rattling apart.

As the spasms settle, I touch my forehead to my knees and close my eyes. This is comforting. The room is so white it burns my eyes, but the blackness feels refreshingly cool.

Slowly, I begin to rock from side to side. The rhythm is like the soothing waves of the ocean. *Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh.* I like the sensation of my shoulders gently grazing the two corner walls, although each contact causes the itchy fabric of my clothes to irritate me.

The sound is like a heartbeat, I think. I can picture my heart, contracting and relaxing with the constancy of a clock, sending my blood speeding through my veins and arteries. I can see the little blood cells, lined up in crowded masses, jumping forward and stopping, like traffic.

It's nice to think about what's going on inside me. It's so complex, yet at the same time, my insides seem much simpler, much safer, than the world around me. Inside, everything makes sense.

I don't remember what cells and molecules look like; my science teacher's sketches were too atrocious to be memorable. DNA, however, I can see. I can picture those little sticks of, well, whatever DNA is made of. . . . They're always red and blue in the images I have seen, so maybe they're made of tiny slivers of blueberry and strawberry liquorice. The slivers are all connected in their organized up-and-across pattern by little white globes; I guess they might be round marshmallows. Imagine if, at the base of it all, people are just made up of sugary treats. Maybe that's why primitive people were cannibals, and we only stopped nowadays because we realized how unhealthy it is to eat so much sugar.

I can feel a chuckle resurfacing, so I quickly return to my mental image of DNA. I rotate it in my mind, looking at it from all angles. It's so methodical. It's sort of like a twisted ladder. . . .

Then, just like that, my peace is shattered.

A ladder I should have been holding. Her scream as she fell. Her body on the pavement like a tossed marionette. Her hair plastered to her skull by the blood.

I jump up, screaming and holding my ears, trying not to hear her shriek again and again. I run over to the wall and bang my head against it as hard as I can to block out the sound. I strike my head harder on the padded wall, hoping for stars to block the image of her broken body and glazed eyes. Anything not to see her. Anything not to see my poor, dear, dead mother.

The attendants rush in; I can see their white coats flapping in my peripheral vision. They grab my elbows and drag me away from the wall. I struggle, but soon I feel the prick of the needle. They lower me gently to the floor as I lose control of my muscles.

The peaceful, soothing blackness begins to return, as my blood cells, jerking their way through traffic, spread the sedative from my toes to my brain. I count the seconds as I fall unconscious, picturing a huge grandfather clock counting them off with me.

The grandfather clock has a man swinging from a noose inside its glass case. A suicide grandfather clock. My laughter dies at the back of my throat as I fall unconscious. . . .

by *Eliane Drijber*
Fisherville, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Number Seventy-Six

Nash is driving 180 clicks through the Okanagan to find some pie. A bit slow, but he has a lot of time. He keeps it in four-gallon jugs in the trunk of his car, along with a bottle of scotch his brother Zebulon gave him. Four-million-year-old scotch. Zeb buried it the morning Jesus was crucified and told Nash where to find it. He dug it up the day the world ended. Took a swig, watched the sun go nova, and went home.

Everyone calls it time. It's an illegal substance, but the time crime division can't touch Nash. He moves too fast. He always has enough time to get away. It's fuel for a time machine. It's made from the dense stuff the universe turns into at the end of the Big Suck. You could use the stuff before the Big Bang, but grab the wrong handful and you have shit that's gonna turn into the Sun. And then you're mixing it with liquid Einsteinium and Hyprofen and you can go anywhere—but the Earth's gone. No smokes, no scotch, no girls. Just time.

He collects that stuff and brings it back for processing. Gets a good cut and a lot of contacts in the black market. So he's usually high. Like now. He's swerving off the road because he likes the feeling of motion. He imagines his brain sloshing from side to side as he cranks the wheel. He laughs, hard, his eyes closed, tearing up. He opens the windows to get the feeling of the dust on his face. It hurts but it's okay. It feels fast.

The diner's right ahead. The sign says it serves the best apple pie in North America. It actually does. Something to tick off The List. It's a game he and his brother play—a scavenger hunt. Ride a dinosaur, score at a Beatles' concert, eat a slice of this pie. Easy ones, but he likes to get those over with before going to do the tricky ones like starting a war. Or Cleopatra.

The diner's small. No A/C. Probably not invented yet. Faded photos of fading starlets. Men in trucker caps and wrinkled shirts, stubble, or aviator shades, drinking coffee and talking about the dustbowl and hockey. A waitress, young, not quite pretty. He finds a seat at the bar and winks. "Afternoon, cupcake. Thought I'd stop for something sweet. How about you?"

She tries to smile but it comes off a sneer. "You want something from the menu, mister?" He shrugs. "Apple pie."

She pushes a slice across the counter to him. Its crust is thick, flaky, a deep golden brown. Big apple chunks permeated with brown sugar and rich spices. It's still hot from the oven—no microwaves yet. He tries to get some Coke but the waitress just gives him a bill and the finger, so he eats the pie. It's so good he's euphoric, delirious; his vision's blurring. It makes him warm and sleepy and he passes out on the counter.

When he wakes up, he can still taste the apple pie, but now he's in a cell and he can't feel his body.

"Morning, princess." It's his voice, almost. Looks like him too. Sitting on a cot with cheap beer, a cigarette, a sandwich. Hair's a little darker. Zebulon. "Nice of you to join me."

"They got you?" Nash croaks. "How?"

"I screwed up. Organized a coup on Mars, got caught up with the locals."

"Dumbass. So how'd they get me? I didn't screw anything up."

"Trap. The diner was packed with plainclothes."

"How'd they know I'd go there?"

"You were predictable. You do the easy ones first, and there were only a few left."

"What, how'd they get The List? How'd they know what I'd done?"

"I just told them where to wait for you," Zeb says, "in exchange for a two-four and this damn fine ham and cheese."

"Son of a bitch," Nash glares, "sold me out. I'm going to kill you."

"Look, I just needed to get you in. I didn't have any other way to call you. Sandwich is a nice bonus, though. You remember number seventy-six?"

"No, you eidetic freak."

"Bust out of a prison."

"That's what we're gonna do?"

“It’ll be fun. C’mon. Either we both check it off, or we both rot.”
“Hell, I’ll do it. You have a plan or what?”
Zeb grins. “We will. And it’s gonna be brilliant.”

by Fraser MacGillivray
Victoria, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Just Two Men

They were just two men who lived together at the end of the street. A corner house with an imposing hedge guarding its borders. Walter and Robert. Walter, polite and dignified. A retired professor, perhaps. A “gentleman” we would have called him in bygone days. Always a soft hello over his hedge. His partner, Robert, slightly older. Prickly when he spoke, when he did speak at all.

Just two men who lived together. Ten years since they’d arrived and still strangers to us all. What they did behind their luscious hedge was their business. We tried not to care. Why should we? Times had changed and so, I’d like to think, had we. At least, most of us had.

A quiet street. Tall, leafy maples shading century homes. Asleep in winter, alive with children and gardens and ball hockey come spring. Neighbourly in a Stephen Leacock, feet-up-on-the-porch sort of way.

Just a sleepy avenue with two men who lived together in the corner house, minding their business while we minded ours.

The Andersons arrived that spring. Carl and Joyce. Carl, fifty-something, early-retired from General Motors. Greasy and irksome. A fan of four-wheel drives and snowmobiles and anything else that made noise and fumes. Joyce, lovely and lithe. The men on the street peered over their sunglasses when she strolled down the sidewalk. Pretty Joyce.

They moved into the old Williams’ house. A solid two-storey home with a neatly trimmed yard and a magnificent maple. A huge hedge down one side. Walter and Robert’s hedge.

The Andersons were new to a world of meaningless porch talk with folks who minded their own business. Still, they eventually fit in. It was a malleable street.

Carl and Joyce were neighbourly in a what-are-you-up-to? and what-are-they-doing? sort of way. We didn’t mind. It takes all kinds to make a world and so it was in our world. Walter and Robert at the corner, Carl and Joyce next door, and the rest of us minding our business.

The June barbeque had become a tradition on the street. One house hosting and the others chipping in. Cold beer and overcooked burgers and underdone talk. Carl and Joyce insisted on hosting that year. “Sure, why not,” we responded. “Great way to get to know your neighbours.”

We weren’t overly surprised at the absence of Walter and Robert. They kept to themselves and never socialized. Nevertheless, we had to ask the question, itself somewhat of a tradition. Joyce had already figured out the street response. “Well, we left a message. Guess they’re busy.” Carl only sneered. *Those queers, not in my yard.*

Carl’s disgust for the residents behind the big hedge seemed to consume him as the summer progressed. There were rumours of altercations in the rear laneway. Carl, cigarette and beer in hand, smirking. Walter and Robert, stepping over the refuse that materialized by their garden gate. Robert, prickly Robert, could only hold his tongue so long. It was rare for Robert to converse with anyone, but a verbal confrontation was another matter.

It was just another summer’s eve. Sultry. A soft breeze rustling the maples. Carl, in the laneway, depositing his workshop scraps. Robert, storming from the back kitchen. Shouts and pushing and paramedics racing up the laneway.

“A massive coronary,” they said.

“He was dead before he hit the ground,” said his brother. His younger brother, Walter.

We learned more about Robert at his funeral than we had while he lived. They were brothers. Widowers. Walter, looking after Robert, his older brother. Robert, with a history of heart problems.

Two weeks later a for-sale sign appeared on the lawn of the corner house, the one with the huge hedge. Houses didn’t last long on this street. A month later the moving van arrived.

We stood on the porch and waved as Walter drove down the street for the last time. Walter waved back. So did the pretty woman sitting next to him. Pretty Joyce. Carl's Joyce. Seems that Walter and Robert hadn't kept to themselves as much as we had thought.

by David McLeod
Peterborough, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Lucy's Gift

Lucy had a beautiful smile.

Lucy, without her smile, was not a beautiful girl. She had brown hair, brown eyes, and brown freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. She wasn't fat or thin, tall or short. Her features were pleasant enough but not striking. She was on the whole quite forgettable.

But no one could forget her smile.

Once, when Lucy was a teenager, she left the field chasing a foul ball. It landed at the feet of an old man sitting on a park bench feeding the birds. She ran up to retrieve the ball, and as he passed it to her she thanked him and smiled. "What a beautiful smile," the man said to her, not letting go of the ball. He stared for a moment, long enough for Lucy to feel uncomfortable, but she continued to smile. Finally, he shook his head in wonder. "You could get through life on that smile alone," he said, letting go of the ball. Lucy smiled again, feeling that the compliment had been a gift.

Later that year, her father left home and never returned. Lucy, at a loss as to what to do, remembered the old man's words. She smiled at her mother who asked if she was all right. She smiled at her teachers who inquired when her grades began to decline. She smiled at her boyfriend who insisted he longed to comfort her, and be with her. She smiled when the doctor told her she was pregnant. Lucy kept smiling. *After all*, Lucy thought, *I could get through life on my smile alone.*

She smiled when her boyfriend went off to university, and that smile made it easy for him to never look back. After all, Lucy could get by on her smile alone. She smiled at her mother and her mother's new boyfriend, as they explained why she could not bring a baby into their house. They were relieved that she understood, and knew that with that smile she would do just fine. Lucy smiled as she quit school in order to work full-time.

Lucy smiled through her first contractions, and again when she at last felt her child leave her body. Lucy held her breath until she heard that first cry, then lay back and closed her eyes. When the nurse placed her baby girl on her chest Lucy couldn't help but smile down at her. She named her Grace.

Lucy had been warned that the first few weeks of motherhood would be challenging, but she found them easy. Lucy kept Grace by her side during the day, and placed her bassinet beside her bed at night. Lucy learned to read Grace's wants and needs, and before she could voice them Lucy would have her snug in her arms, smiling down at her beautiful baby. Grace never cried and Lucy felt lucky.

There were moments every day, however, when Lucy would anxiously study her daughter. Eyes that started out a murky blue slowly turned to brown. Stiff black hair lightened quickly to downy brown fluff so that when mother bent over daughter their hair mixed and mingled as one. Lucy felt some relief as she searched for freckles and Grace's skin remained milky white.

One morning, Lucy looked over to find Grace awake, staring up at her mobile. When Lucy bounced the butterflies with her hand, Grace jerked her tiny fists in the air and smiled for the first time. Lucy caught her breath and clutched at the side of the bassinet.

What a beautiful smile Grace had.

Lucy felt her smile fade as she looked down at her daughter. Fighting the instinct that told her to keep smiling, she allowed her face to crumple into ugly tears. As the mobile stilled and her mother cried noisily beside her, Grace began to cry as well, quietly at first, then louder. Lucy waited until Grace was wailing before she rose to pick her up. Lucy sat down in the rocking chair with Grace, their tears mixing and mingling with their hair.

“I’m sorry,” Lucy whispered to her baby girl, “but I will not have you think that you can get through life on your smile alone. I won’t let you.”

by Kelly McLean
Aurora, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Traditions

On Christmas Eve, wrapped in dirty woollen shawls, my ancestors bounced over rugged snowy trails by horse and buggy, travelling deep into the king's forest, where my great-grandfather, wielding an axe he hammered out with his own hands, hacked at the base of a towering evergreen and watched it fall. The family dragged the tree back to their cottage, erected it using stones to ballast the base, adorned it with hand-stitched angels, homemade toffees, and tallow candles. Standing before the tree's flickering candlelight, my ancestors surely felt the glow of God.

The gunshot rings my ears the way only firing a rifle from inside the cab of a truck can, like someone's smashed a board across my head. The rotten-egg smell of spent rounds churns my stomach. My better instincts tell me to run: *Just grab the handle, throw open the door, and jump out.* But I'm sandwiched between Darcy and Barn in the front seat of this old pickup, ploughing through a foot of fresh snow, travelling deep into the government green zone.

"Man, you wasted that sign, bro'," Darcy snaps his head side-to-side, grinning at Barn. His energy level is disturbing, like a cheetah on speed. His fingers tap the steering wheel with impatience. He blasts the horn for the sound of it.

Even though every road sign we pass already looks like Swiss cheese, Barn fires at them. "Target practice, Dude." His rifle is like an extension of himself. A third arm.

Darcy hands me another beer, painkiller for the kettledrums pounding behind my eyes. The frozen landscape rolls by. Hills lush with evergreens, the undulating land descending towards marshes, rising again to spruce groves and lodge-pole pine—the distinctive look of northern Alberta I've come to admire since my arrival in the spring. "How're you liking our tradition so far?" Barn tips his beer over the gorge of his open mouth, the last dribbling foam creeping over his outstretched tongue. He tosses the empty out the window.

"I guess it's a touch peculiar," I say. "Your tradition, I mean."

Darcy laughs. "Your high-brow talk kills me, Dude."

I'm from the city, a fact these boys never forget. Darcy and Barn work at a hog farm. We met in the tavern at the hotel. I told them they smelled like death. They laughed and said I wouldn't fit in until I smelled like death. They consider me a project.

Every year, Darcy and Barn collect Christmas trees for their block, a service for which they expect no remuneration. They carry a dozen trees home to a hero's welcome.

"Right here," Darcy says. "I see some good ones." He slams the brakes, the truck skids sideways in the snow. I dig my fingernails into the seat. He cranks the wheel, but the truck doesn't respond. The pickup glides to a stop before sliding over the shoulder. "Thought we were going to lose it there." Darcy grabs another beer, snaps the tab. He hits me with a broad grin.

We throw open the doors and spill out onto the snow. Barn grabs a fistful of white powder and throws it at me. "Can't make a decent snowball," he says.

I trudge to the edge of the forest. Each footstep is an effort in the heavy snow. I look around. The evergreens are small and straggly—serious Charlie Brown trees. "Some good ones this year, hey, bro'?" Barn staggers through the snow. He flips his empty over his shoulder.

I shrug. "Where?"

"Whaddaya mean where?" He points up to the top of a hundred-and-fifty-foot spruce tree. "There. That one's *frickin* perfect."

Before I can call into question the impracticality, not to mention irresponsibility, of cutting down a two-ton evergreen merely to harvest the top six feet, Darcy fires his rifle. He's so close the concussion hammers me and for a moment I'm liquid. I crumple into the snow.

I look up at the tree Darcy has shot. Eight feet down from the top, the trunk is a mess of splinters. Barn crouches to his knees, steadies his rifle and fires the kill shot.

The top of the tree tumbles down to the ground in an avalanche of green and white.

“I’ll be damned,” I say, because really what do you say in this situation?

As I help drag the tree back to the truck, I think about traditions and how they change. I look back at the towering decapitated spruce tree and wonder what my ancestors would have thought.

by Judd Hampton
Dixonville, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Way to a Man's Heart

A sign outside Mom's Kitchen Restaurant read, "Today's special: All you can eat," and named a price I hoped was metric. But, I was hungry, so I went in.

Besides all that, I kind of liked "Mom" and thought, or at least hoped, the feeling was mutual.

In no time Mom returned with a dish of what I suppose was a reasonable facsimile of stew, though I can't say for sure since I'm somewhat colour-blind, which may have been to my advantage in this case. Maybe stew had been a mistranslation from some foreign label. And the portion allotted me didn't tax the soup bowl's volume either.

Still, as she placed it before me, she said cheerfully, "Here you go!"

I just had to ask, "That's it?"

"That's it," she replied triumphantly.

"No," I continued. "I mean, this is it? And, if this is it, what is it . . . the appetizer?"

"No. That's it."

"But your sign says 'All you can eat.' Trust me," I said, "I can eat a lot more than this."

She replied, "No doubt. But you trust me. That is all I'm allowing you to eat so that's all you can eat."

Wondering if this was a joke or a trailer for a soon-to-be-released nightmare and being a normally non-argumentative sort, I decided to play along with whatever was going on. I dug in, noting the fine china pattern through the thin gravy while wondering if there were enough calories to give me strength to get to the convenience store down the street after this was all over, or if I'd collapse from malnutrition during the attempt.

When I was done, shortly thereafter—very shortly thereafter—she came to take away my plate, snatching it away from me as if it were something precious. "Had enough?" she asked.

"Well . . .," I replied, "I guess I am trying to lose a little weight, but. . ."

"I certainly hope so," she remarked.

"Ah, Mom," I said. "Is this about the dance the other night? I'm sorry."

There had been a dance at a mutual friend's wedding reception and I'd stepped on her foot and she'd commented that her health insurance didn't cover dance injuries.

Then came the capper:

She said, "How much have you lost? What do you want to weigh?"

"I've lost ten pounds," I said. "I want to weigh a hundred and sixty."

"Well, what a coincidence," she said. "I'm trying to lose a hundred and sixty!"

"But," I protested, "you don't weigh a hundred and sixty, so how can you lose that much?"

She smiled at me sweetly. "You," she said, "are the hundred and sixty pounds I'm trying to lose!"

The convenience store down the road has a great cooler full of sandwiches. They're more expensive than anything at Mom's Kitchen.

But you can eat all you want.

Did I mention they're a lot friendlier?

by Jon Estes

Wildwood, Alberta