

# FIRST PRIZE

## Dragonfly

HER BODY HAD BETRAYED HER. They both felt the overwhelming sadness that comes with the magnitude of such a loss, but he would never truly understand. He didn't feel the guilt she felt. He didn't blame himself for the loss. He didn't want to scream at his body, beg it for an explanation as to what he had done wrong. He didn't spend his nights lying awake, thinking back on those six months and all the things he could have done differently to prevent this.

No, this was a special kind of guilt reserved for her because it was her body and her job. It was what she was born to do. She had been ready and excited to take on this challenge. She had spent hours researching how to care for herself, how to prepare her body. She had followed through on all the recommendations meticulously, but in the end, it wasn't enough.

When they first found out, they were beyond excited. They had been working towards this for months, each month seemingly longer than the last. Each futile attempt chipping away at their hearts and their hopes. Then, just when they were ready to give up, preparing to take a break from the constant disappointment, . . . there they were. The two little red lines that had taken them just over a year to produce.

The first three months after finding out were terrifying. They were so scared it was all a dream, and that at any moment they would wake up and realize it was just the two of them and always would be. They kept the news to themselves, refusing to let the world in on their secret. It all felt too fragile to let anyone else in.

They say once you've made it through the first three months, you're safe, and there is a less-than-one-percent chance of loss. So, when they made it to that thirteenth week, they finally allowed themselves to breathe. They shared the news with their loved ones and began preparing the house for their new addition. They spent hours online looking for just the right items, refusing to let the room be anything other than perfect. Ultimately, it was just that, perfect. They finished it quickly, eager to finally have something positive to pour their energy into.

Once finished, she found herself being pulled to it daily. She spent hours rocking back and forth in the unreasonably expensive rocking chair that had taken them ages to agree on. Spent hours imagining all the possibilities the future would bring and all the memories that were soon to be made. Some days were spent in silence, other days her voice echoed throughout the room.

Then, it happened.

All those possibilities, all of her visions . . . ripped away.

When they returned from the hospital, she thought she would never be able to set foot in that room again . . . but she had been wrong. Whereas the rest of the house felt empty, that room somehow radiated promise. She spent an inordinate amount of time in her favourite chair pretending everything was okay and conjuring happy thoughts. Her fantasies always made things worse, but she couldn't stop—couldn't let go of all the “could have beens.”

He tried to put an end to it. Begged her to let him clear out the room. Let him take down the decorations and dismantle the furniture, but she wouldn't let him. She would cry and scream and lock herself inside for hours, drowning out the banging on the door with her delusions and refusing to let him in. He tried to spend time in the room with her. He invited friends and family over to draw her out. He attempted to persuade her and even bribe her. But it always concluded with her back in her chair, alone. Eventually, he gave up, not knowing how to help someone who didn't want to be helped. They spent the following months like strangers, living together but not being together.

In the end, he left, no longer able to stand the daily heartbreak. He hoped she would see it as a wake-up call, hoped she would snap out of it and beg him to stay. But she didn't. She

barely registered what he was doing or saying. And so, he left her where she had been for months, sitting in her chair, rocking back and forth, sad eyes and a small smile, lost in her dreams of a future that would never be.

*by Danelle Cavallin*

Limoges, Ontario

# SECOND PRIZE

## Battery Charge

YOU QUICKEN YOUR STEPS towards the only vacant bench in the city square. Surrounded by soaring glass skyscrapers gleaming in the afternoon sun, you sit down and reach into your handbag for the tuna sandwich you've packed for lunch. Seldom do you come here; most often, you're at the firm's satellite office in the suburbs. Today, though, you've been asked to come to head office to—what? All you know is that the new CEO plans on doing things differently.

An unbroken calm hovers over the square. In the middle of a bustling metropolis, time is at a standstill. Beside the stone fountain shooting up occasional spurts of water, a busker crouches down to put his guitar back in its case. Old men play cards at picnic tables steps away from a vendor sizzling sausages on a food cart, while those clad in business attire appear far removed from the minutiae of their work. You lean against the bench's hard wooden back and cast your eyes between two office towers, admiring the Victorian architecture of a row of restaurants and pubs across the street.

Then, you see him.

Your father, seventy-three years old with a shock of thick white hair framing his still handsome face, has just exited a pub called Boyz Place, its flashing neon sign clearly visible from where you sit. He's with another man—younger, bald, muscular. Laughing, their fingers are interlocked. Your father frees his hand to put on sunglasses and a Panama hat then looks around. *He doesn't want anyone to know.* They cross the street then walk between the buildings towards the square, swiftly approaching your bench. You sit, transfixed.

If you spring up to leave, he might notice you. Instead, you subtly shift your body and turn your head away from them, remaining lifeless and stiff like a mannequin in a store window.

Your father laughs as he walks by and says to the man, "Gerald, you crack me up. If only we'd met years ago." Never before have you seen your father so at ease, so light on his feet as they head towards the fountain—so *happy*.

Shock gives way to a blizzard of thoughts; a whirlwind of conflicting emotions assails you as you watch them sit down on the edge of the fountain. You gaze at your father, in profile. Laughing, nodding his head, the back of his hand brushing against Gerald's knee. Silent anger for betraying your mother, now ravaged by Alzheimer's, soon morphs into sharp pangs of jealousy. The more your mother's mind has abandoned her, the closer you've become to your father. Somehow, you thought you were the *only* one he'd confide in, the only one he'd unveil his innermost thoughts to. But he's kept *this* from you. And Gerald? You doubt your father keeps anything from him, his apparent lover.

Yet, an odd sense of relief creeps in. The more you watch your father sitting rapturously next to Gerald, the more you understand. Though your mother no longer recognizes him, he insists on looking after her at home. "She's not going anywhere as long as I'm around," he often says. He's still deeply in love with her, still fiercely devoted to her. *So what*, you think, *if there's another side to him, a secret side?* It doesn't matter; he's there for your mother—and you. Rarely does he complain, nor does he want to be lionized for selflessly tending to your mother's every need.

Still, he's human. He can't mask the extraordinary strain of the past three years from anyone, especially from you. All he wants is a day to himself once a week to "get a change of scenery, recharge the battery." Usually it's on a Tuesday—like today. If you're working and can't be with your mother, Miriam comes over. She's your father's most trusted caregiver. He wouldn't dare leave your mother with just anybody.

Your father casually looks around the square, still revelling in Gerald's company. Suddenly, he removes his sunglasses and fixes his stare in your direction. He tenses up, the bright smile vanishes from his face. You sit there peering down at the ground, hoping it's not you he's looking at, and silently berate yourself. *Why didn't I leave when I had the chance?* You don't want him to be flooded with guilt, you want him to know that it's okay, that he needn't worry about being judged.

When you look up, they're no longer there.

**by Scott Hallarn**

Toronto, Ontario

# THIRD PRIZE

## Unnatural

IT WAS HOT THAT DAY on the open prairie. Down along the walking trails that snaked out past the old, tired town, the air was less insufferable. It was not a matter of shade, at this dusky evening hour. There was a stillness in the air, heavy set with the windless heat. Mosquitoes droned and birds chattered in chorus from their shadowed tree branch perches, as the woman and her dog passed below on the path.

Winding along the edge of the creek, the vegetation dropped, revealing a sloping, grassy coulee. The sun had just set, leaving a glowing halo in its wake, orange as a dentist's lamp. The evening sky, by contrast, was a gentle ombre of greys and pinks, precious metals of the heavens. The stars would be out soon.

They reached the long, black bridge traversing an old, crumbling spill gate whose waters fed the tepid stream. The dog halted, pulling on his leash, and the woman corrected with a firm tug. It was always a battle of wills to cross this bridge.

"Right here, Beau," for that was her name for him, the gold letters embossed on his shiny, black tag. "Good dog."

Her hand slipped lower on the leash, signalling her intent to her faithful companion. They laboured along. He pulled, she reassured, step by step, until they were across. She smiled at a lone fisherman below, but he was distracted by his rod. It didn't look like much was biting tonight.

The world seemed quieter, drunk with the unnatural heat of the day. There was not the usual incessant thrumming of teenage drivers racing down the long, lonely highway that snaked along the trail's southern edge. But a group of birds somewhere ahead was raising a ruckus. Perhaps a murder of crows?

Beau raised his face to watch her, pink tongue rolling, as if he had sensed the joke and laughed along. They crested a small rise in the pathway and discovered a congregation of birds, cawing and squawking in tandem. No crows, but those incorrigible magpies and their frustrated neighbours—some small sparrows or starlings she didn't recognize. They startled and dispersed at her approach.

Two deer heads popped up, ears twitching, black eyes darting, taking a few hesitant steps in separate directions before bounding along further south, their white tails whipping back and forth. Beau whined at their retreat, and she patted the top of his head. They would see them again. The deer either didn't understand, or didn't care, that they were simply running towards a different part of the same path, one that continued its journey on and around until it fed back into itself in one eternal, oblong circle.

Perhaps it was cool enough now for a short jog? She picked up her pace, Beau matching the new speed, but the air, still pregnant with the heat of the day, seemed to burn in her lungs. After a few minutes, she thought better of it and resumed her natural pace.

But then her feet began to slow. They were passing the spot. Two small, simple, white crosses sat between the asphalt and the water—one crowned with a dog collar. The woman approached it with reverence, kneeling in the warm grass.

Someone had come. Someone else had stopped here, to think, to grieve, to remember. She couldn't know. But a single peony lay at the base of the cross, its cream-tinted petals beginning to droop. Peonies were her favourite flower.

She sensed the warmth of salty tears running down her cheeks, and she brushed them away with the back of her hand, Beau nuzzling her face in his kind attempt to help.

What was it about this place that affected her so? With a deep sigh, she pulled herself upright and continued on her walk with her beloved pet. She would pass it again soon. Maybe next time, an answer would come—a memory. An encounter with the one who left

the peonies. Maybe. Or maybe she would kneel again, wipe away the same wet tears, and then continue on her same eternal loop, over and over.

A shiver ran through her spine, drowning out the unnatural heat of the day.

This is the case of all ghosts as they pass the place of their death—the juncture between knowledge and uncertain memory.

For it is not they who haunt us.

But we who haunt them.

*by Amanda Thomson*

Magrath, Alberta

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Eating Crickets

THE FIRST TIME I ATE A CRICKET, it was against my will. My brother and I were rambunctious kids with buzz cuts, who spent summer nights playing tag in the woods. Always quicker, he could outmanoeuvre me. But once, while teasing me, he inhaled deeply and unexpectedly swallowed a firefly. Howls and hoots of laughter tumbled out of my mouth. Finally, it was my turn to ridicule him. While he wheezed and sputtered, I prophesized, “It’ll be like a light sabre when you pee!”

He quickly regained his composure and pounced. Pinning me down on the twigs and dirt, he threatened fierce retaliation. His left hand clamped on my jaw. His right hand snatched a squeaking cricket at rest on a wet, dead leaf. He rammed both items into my mouth. The more that he squeezed, and I resisted, the more I haplessly chewed and swallowed. Wiry antennae and brittle bug legs tickled the roof of my mouth. There was a tiny burst of guts and the bitter grit of soil. Then it was my turn to snort and cough while he guffawed at me. It was much more traumatic than tasty.

The next time I ate crickets was unknowingly. After graduation, two buddies and I went backpacking through Thailand. Once the chaos of Bangkok streets had our heads pounding and our pockets picked, we explored the island of Phuket. There, turquoise water tickles the skin and beaches stretch postcard perfect. Most evenings, tourists and locals alike congregate at the night market where beer and snacks are cheap and plentiful. We sat on the sand, slurping and crunching, while buskers strolled from group to group breathing fire. Thin local men would gulp and spew mouthfuls of kerosene, using little Bic lighters as igniters. It seemed a toxic way to make a living, but it earned them loud applause and generous tips.

I thought we were munching from sacks of hot, spiced nuts. It could have been greasy, fiery popped corn because tiny shards or kernels kept sticking in my teeth. A few glugs from litre bottles of cheap Chang beer solved that problem. My prankster buddy and his xenon flashlight exposed the nutty morsels were actually fried black crickets! I couldn’t spit them out. I’d be ridiculed or offend the locals. So, I kept on chewing and swallowing the soy-sauced bugs. We all washed them down with so much beer we suffered throbbing “*Changovers*” the next morning. Fried crickets are actually rather tasty, and in Southeast Asia, they’re as copious as chips are in the West.

The last time I ate crickets, I drank them. It was in Denmark, and it was on purpose. I sell geothermal energy systems to European companies now. I tinker with vintage racing bikes and spend weekends whizzing through rural landscapes. Last Saturday, a fellow cycling enthusiast and I playfully collapsed on the side of a road. Drenched with sweat and stinging from sunburn, she tugged open her bike pack and dared me to “try something new.”

“Some cyclists load up on carbohydrates,” she began. “Others suck seaweed or electrolyte drinks, but I’ve found something supercharged!” Anja handed me a stubby glass bottle, which I presumed was organic apple juice. She advised me to shake it well and then began guzzling her own. Haphazardly, I inspected the stout jar and the cricket silhouette on its label. “Wait! What does *Femten Farekyllinger* mean?”

“*Femten* is fifteen, so it’s made with fifteen crickets.” Anja licked her lips and grinned at me expectantly. The beverage resembled cloudy urine and blended the savoury flavours of apple and ginger with dried, ground crickets. I chugged the whole bottle, belched loudly, and instantly felt refreshed.

“Crickets are pure protein,” Anja continued, “packed with nutrients like iron and vitamin B12. Don’t be nervous. It’s very good for you.”

Memories made me smirk. “Oh, I know all about it,” I assured my Danish friend. “I’ve been eating crickets all my life.”

*by Maria CampbellSmith*  
Ottawa, Ontario



# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Memory Banker

CHANCES ARE PRETTY GOOD you're not going to like me. Not one little bit.

My name is Edgar Hardley the third, and I'm a second-generation pawnbroker on our city's east side. I'm your cash man. Now you'll have to forgive me: this shop is a mess, and, if a customer walks in, I might have to step away momentarily.

Anyway, we used to run the family business out of that two-storey building on Amhoute. Real dump of a place now. You might remember turning your PlayStation 7 into rent money or hocking your grandmother's gold at my daddy's shop (God rest his soul). But things have changed since then. Nowadays, I don't want your stuff: it's worthless to me. The real value is in the memories associated with your stuff. And the memories of the people who gave it to you.

I know what you're probably thinking: back up the truck a minute. Hell, let's back it right up to the year 2042, when Memory Mining Technology (MMT) was a breakthrough for Alzheimer's, stroke, and concussion patients. MMT made it possible to reattach memories that had been stolen by disease, trauma, or too many shots of Forty Creek on a Saturday night. Science proactively harvests your memories and then transmits them to your brain on demand. Think of it like a backup server. Your brain and the central database shake hands via Flashtooth technology, and, Bob's your uncle, you're in business. But here's the kicker: if you deposit your memories at the Memory Bank of Canada—or America, or Hong Kong, or wherever—those memories are treated like currency. And just like good old-fashioned paper money, they're legal to transfer, illegal to copy, easy to steal. Throw in latency concerns, plus the debate whether organic memories are more lucid than memories accessed telepathically, and it's not so cut and dried, is it?

Now, here's where I come in. Once the technology went mainstream, I opened my own private Memory Bank called The Recollection Agency. Essentially, you borrow money against your memories. Now, only the big MBs are licensed for long-range signal transmission, so all I do is store your memories. And it works like my dad's old pawn shop: you repay what you borrow plus interest, I release your collateral. Simple as that. Of course, the collateral I'm talking about is the stuff they used to say money couldn't buy: memories of your wedding day, your honeymoon in Cancun, or the time you met Coldplay on their fiftieth anniversary tour.

Goddamn it, you'll have to excuse me. I have a customer coming in. And wouldn't you know, she's in tears. Hang on a second.

"Oh my god, Edgar. . . . I was here for a memory pawn three months ago. I can't believe I forgot to roll it over. I've been freaking out all morning . . . it's under Jacobs. . . ."

Let me look it up. . . . Memory ticket 4390DV8. Oh yeah, I remember you. You borrowed a grand against the birth of your daughter to fix your '53 Tesla Model Z.

"Oh my god, that's it. How much do I owe to catch up on my loan?"

Unfortunately, Miss Jacobs, this isn't showing as an active loan. Must mean it was deleted when you didn't come in for your July interest payment.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME RIGHT NOW? Do you know what it's going to be like to have no memory of my daughter being born? I can't believe this is happening! I CAN'T FUCKING BELIEVE IT!"

Listen, lady, business is business. My hands are tied. My only option would be hooking you up to RAMbo over there and deleting the memory of how you're feeling right now. I know it's not going to bring your daughter's birthday back, but it'll numb the sense of loss. That's all I can do. And that service will run you fifty bucks plus tax.

"I HOPE YOU ROT IN HELL, YOU ASSHOLE!"

And there she goes. Sorry about that. Now, because you overheard a confidential transaction, I'll have to link you to ol' RAMbo and delete the memory of our last few minutes. Hold still, and the Flashtooth tool will do all the work. You won't feel a thing.

Okay, back to my story. Where did we leave off again? Oh yeah, the name is Edgar Hardley the third, and I'm your cache man. I'm a second-generation pawnbroker on the city's east side, and, chances are, you're not going to like me. Not one little bit.

***by Tony Gryner***

London, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Riding Bikes

THE KIDS HAD FINALLY RETURNED. It was a lonely off-season at camp, without the kids. He loved riding on their handlebars, down hills and around corners. He always rode on the handlebars of the kids whose hair flew free in the wind. He would put his hands just so, near their brakes, and he would press here and there, as the speed of their indiscriminate wheels demanded. He flew with the kids at site 61 for the week they were there. Soared with the kids at site 42. They were at camp for a whole month! He rode the park with them, exploring its roads and pathways. He sometimes managed to steer them towards the painted rock. The children would read the words and then start riding again. When the day wrapped up, he would join the family campfires. Listen to the stories, blow on burning marshmallows. In recent years, he'd marvel at all of the new ways to craft a s'more. But some things did not change. Like campfire stories and snuggling up in sleeping bags.

Oh, how he loved it when the kids returned to camp. It always seemed like such a long time between summers. And there was that summer no one came. That was an interminable time. The longest of off-seasons. But the kids were back now. Riding bikes and swimming and fishing. Sometimes he would sit on the beach and watch them swim. A lonely lifeguard. He willed them to remain within the marked boundary. If they got into trouble, he would gently, insistently, buoy them up until their parents saw their struggles. His beach hadn't had a drowning since he had been there, he was proud to admit, not for over thirty-five years.

But it was the bikes that he loved. He was seven years old, fresh off training wheels. His first big-boy bike. Streamers on his handlebars, he would ride and ride. Ride the trails, ride the roads. Freedom and kinship had existed in those pedals. As they did now with these new kids. His kids, with their fleeting friendships. The faces of his kids would be caked with grime by the day's end, as his had been. Riding bikes from dawn until supper time. All through the park. Through the stop signs. Over to the painted rock.

At night, at the campfires, he would gravitate to the rough and tumble baritone of dads, to be sure. But in the gloaming, it was the mothers who drew him. The mothers who had tirelessly fed their brood, washed them and put them in pyjamas, and were now ready to tuck them in. The mothers caring for their little ducklings. He was mesmerized, enamoured of those mothers. When they snuggled their little ones, he would sit on the other lap, or hang over a shoulder. Revel in their softness. Listen to deep heartbeats in their burgeoning bellies. When it was time for stories, he would snuggle in and listen, rapt. His favourites were the adventure stories. Pirates and treasure. Stories of little boys who never grew up. This was sacred time, these evenings with the mothers. Off to bed in tents or in trailers. There were more trailers now than there had been before. But it didn't matter. The mothers were the same. Soft love personified.

It made him think of his own mother. Gentle and caring. Crouched over him on the park pathway, awash in a keening agony. A red bloom on his temple, crusting over hair that had blown free in the wind. The painted rock shortly thereafter placed in that spot, with a memorial of flowers and teddy bears and streamers. Once, he saw someone who looked like his mother with a boy who looked the way he had looked, putting a clean new teddy bear beside the painted rock. Salted resignation haunting her eyes and face as she hugged this boy, this *doppelgänger*.

He saw them again, but this time the boy was older, and the mother was stooped and grey. And later, once again, he saw them. This time it was just the boy, a man now, with a little girl of his own, on a little bike with training wheels and streamers. The little girl's hair did not blow free in the wind, but the boy rode with her anyway. He watched over her while she swam. And he hoped to see her again. Until then, his kinship was between those handlebars. Riding bikes all summer long.

*by Becky Hingley*  
Severn, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Out of the Darkness

JOHNNY CROUCHED ON THE MUDDY BANK, hidden behind a thicket of willows in the fading daylight. He gazed at the pewter-grey waters of the marsh where mist began to form above the surface. He searched the reed-cloaked shorelines for Papa's canoe, dreading to see it glide into view before the darkness of the forest crept out over the water.

He could hear Mama in the house up the bank from the landing. Mama had been drinking, so he had slipped away to avoid her, not for the first time. Mama had come to look for him but hadn't found him and now was banging pots and tin plates in anger. He was in for a whupping, but with luck, Mama would pass out and Papa would come home late. He could sneak back into his room through the window and avoid the beating.

The evening mist thickened, crept around him on either side, nosed up the bank, slithered in behind him. The house and its sounds were gradually hidden by drifting wisps of mist. Far off to his right, he heard a beaver slap. He peered in the direction of the sound, thinking it might be Papa who had startled the beaver, but saw only shadows in the shifting mist.

He left his sheltering willow and, concealed by the swirling haze, ventured farther from the house towards his favourite hiding place near the beaver house. He knew the shoreline well. Whenever Mama wasn't watching, he had played, fished, watched birds, or skipped rocks all along this stretch. It looked different now, strange and unfamiliar. As he crept along, trees and shrubs loomed out of the mist, startling him.

A blackbird flew out of the reeds nearby, crying her *cherk! cherk!* of warning. Startled by the sudden noise and rush of wings, he fell off the bank. He landed hard in the shallow water and felt a jolt of pain. He tried to sit up, but his arm was caught and movement made it hurt even worse. Breathless from impact and pain, he panted and lay still against the bank.

He smelled blood. Carefully, he reached his free hand to the pain and felt the sharp point of a beaver-gnawed stick poking through his arm. Once he had caught his breath, he started to cry.

He remembered stories Mama had told him of the wendigo that would call the name of the person it was coming to eat. She had told him of ghosts and spirits in the marsh that led people off to be lost and drowned.

He heard a soft splashing and the shushing sound of something moving through the water off in the swamp. He thought he heard it call his name. He bit his lip and gulped, trying to stop crying so the wendigo and the ghosts wouldn't hear him.

Shivering from cold and fear, trying to be small and quiet and invisible, he lay waiting for whatever would come out of the darkness to claim him.

*by Thomas Gray*  
Leduc, Alberta

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Family Man

CLAUDETTE JIGGLED AND RATTLED THE KEY in the unfamiliar lock. Finally, she was able to push open the front door. Walking through the tiny entry, she set down her overnight bag in the living room. So, this was it—Walter’s home away from home in Regina, which for some reason he had never wanted her to see.

Empty beer cans were stacked on end tables and lying overturned on the grimy carpet. A pizza box sat on the coffee table on top of a thick coating of dust. Moving into the kitchen, she found unwashed dishes and pots covering almost every square inch of the crusted countertops. A line of mouse droppings led to the cabinet under the sink where, judging from the stench, a garbage can must have been left unemptied.

Disgusted, Claudette walked back to the living room, took a book from her bag, and sat down on the stained couch to wait for her husband.

Within minutes, she heard someone else struggling with the sticky tumblers. Odd for Walter to have trouble with his own lock. But when the door finally opened, in walked not Walter but a woman about her own age, also with a suitcase. The newcomer seemed surprised to see Claudette. Looking quickly around the squalid living room, she said, “You must be the cleaning lady.”

Claudette shook her head. “No, I’m Walter’s wife. I’m here waiting for him to get back from his last business trip.”

“Well, there must be some mistake,” the visitor replied. “I’m Nora Wiems, and I’m Walter’s wife.”

“I don’t know about you,” said Claudette, “but I’m talking about the Walter Wiems who lives in Red Deer and sells crops insurance all over Saskatchewan.”

“And I’m talking about the Walter Wiems who sells crop insurance in Saskatchewan but lives in Winnipeg.”

The truth about Walter hit both women at the same time. Claudette leaned back on the couch, suddenly feeling faint. Nora, her knees wobbly, sank into what must be Walter’s recliner, worn and sagging from too many years of supporting his ever-expanding belly.

“We’ve been separated for the last two months,” Nora explained. “I knew he’d be in Regina this week, so I decided to come and tell him I was willing to take him back and try one more time.” She gave a rueful laugh. “Obviously, that’s not going to happen now.”

Nora glanced at the cluttered room. “Have you ever been in his mother’s house before?”

“No, he always had some excuse as to why I couldn’t come. He told me his mother had died the year before we met, and he was going to keep her house to use for his Saskatchewan trips. I found this extra key in his dresser, and since it’s our tenth wedding anniversary this weekend, I thought I’d come and surprise him.”

“Same story he told me,” Nora said. “I had a copy of his key made a few years ago in case there were ever a reason to meet him here.”

She looked at Claudette more closely. “Do you have any children?”

“No. He said he couldn’t have kids because of a motorcycle accident years ago.”

Nora snorted. “He told me it was because he had mumps when he was twenty-one.”

“Did you know that he has a sister living in Calgary and one in Edmonton?” Claudette asked. “They made my life miserable every time they came to visit with their whiny kids.”

“No way,” Nora said. “He told me he was an only child and that his parents were both dead . . . he really needed me to heal his loneliness. If only I’d known then what I know now.”

Both women sat numbly, reflecting on their long, wasted years with Walter. They started at the sound of gravel crunching in the driveway. Their hearts beat faster as they

contemplated what they would say—perhaps *scream* would be a better word—when he walked through the door.

The key turned smoothly this time, but it wasn't overweight Walter with his fringe of fading red hair who appeared in the doorway. It was a plump teenage girl with coppery curls, grumpily trying to shove two suitcases with Toronto airport bags ahead of her.

Her mouth dropped open, and her eyebrows shot up at the sight of Claudette and Nora.

“What are you doing in my grandma’s house?” she screeched. “Has something happened to Daddy?”

*by Donna Quick* (80 years)  
Spruce Grove, Alberta

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## A Helpful Gesture

I STARED AT THE WOMAN in front of me. Her face was tired, and her hair, even pinned up as it was, looked dull. The only thing that shone was the golden N that hung on a chain around her neck, a one-year anniversary gift from her husband seven years ago.

“You should smile, maybe it would help,” I said, the woman’s lips moving in sync with my own. It was awful that Craig never washed the bathroom mirror. Maybe that’s why my reflection looked so foreign.

“What was that?” The bathroom door creaked, and Craig walked in with his hands working to set his tie. He didn’t look at my reflection in the mirror, he looked at himself. He worked his hand through his hair and, noticing a red smear on his collar, wet his thumb and began dabbing at the stain.

“I was hoping you’d have cleaned the bathroom while I was away.”

“I did the laundry.”

“What laundry? The basket’s still full.”

He looked over to the basket that was quite full indeed. The violent blue splash of towels poked out from the basket. He looked behind him, into the bedroom, his face momentarily showing a panic I didn’t want to understand. “I washed the sheets. The bedsheets, didn’t you notice?”

“You never wash the sheets. When we moved here, we made a list, so we could stay on top of things. We agreed to divide and conquer. I take care of the laundry, and you clean the bathroom. Why the change?”

“I thought it would be a nice thing to do, dammit! I don’t have time for this—” He waved his hands around the room. “Charlotte is picking me up soon. I have a board meeting that will go late.”

He stormed out of the bathroom, leaving me staring at the spit-splattered glass. I heard a coffee pot slam down on the kitchen counter. The clock on the wall showed a full ten minutes before Miss Green, Charlotte, was due to arrive. *Since when did he start calling his boss by her first name? And why would he choose this week to start washing the bedsheets?*

I followed him into the kitchen, finding him staring out the window at the setting sun, the long winding driveway disappearing into a crop of pines.

“I was in Atlanta all week. Surely you had fifteen minutes to clean.”

His shoulders were straight, and he wouldn’t look at me. He sipped his coffee, keeping it near his lips in case I spoke again.

“It’s beautiful tonight, isn’t it?” I asked, hoping for a response, any response. I hated having him leave the house angry.

“You want me to mow the lawn, don’t you? Is that what you’re trying to get at?”

“No! I just. . . . You used to say I was beautiful too.”

“Jesus, Nila. I can never please you. But you know what, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

A silver car appeared in the driveway. Craig tossed his mug in the sink, the edge chipping as it hit the ceramic bowl. I reached out to him, but he slipped away, swearing under his breath.

He opened the door, and Miss Green was standing there, smiling. Her smile fell when she saw me at the kitchen sink, and her hand moved to slip the gold chain necklace beneath her collar, the diamond-studded C now hidden beneath the fabric of her dress. “Evening, Nila. Sorry to steal Craig; the board is pretty eager to meet tonight.”

“Come on, Char, let’s go.”

I watched them make their way to her car, Craig opening the driver's side door for her. She had her hand on his arm as she ducked into the vehicle. *It could be nothing, I could be crazy. It's not as if we fight often, do we? Not often enough for him to. . . . No, he is a good man, a good husband. He did the laundry, after all.*

**by Ashley Haynes**  
Campbellville, Ontario



# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Last Call, Evelyn

I STARE AT MY COMPUTER SCREEN, the blinking prompt mocking me. It's been an hour, and I have yet to type anything for Evelyn's eulogy. Sighing, I swipe the tears from my face.

Evelyn was my best friend. She was my maid of honour; my daughter carries her name as tribute to our friendship. She was as important to me as my own blood. But I was never going to be as important to her as the booze.

*"Evelyn, I am sorry your mother died and you believed that the alcohol was the only thing that could numb the pain."*

*"Evelyn, I am sorry you believed him when he told you that you were unworthy, when he told you that you did not deserve any better."*

*"Evelyn, I am sorry I believed you when you told me you loved me—because you never did. You only ever truly loved the bottle."*

I can't get past the anger phase. Her death just feels like another betrayal. She died of heart failure—caused by years of alcohol abuse.

The incessant *ding* of my cell phone drags my attention away from the grief and anger. Word has now gotten out that Evelyn has died. People who haven't thought of her in twenty years suddenly feel the need to reach out and share their sadness.

Picking at my nails, I try to form the right words. There is no point in lying; in the last twenty years, Evelyn had alienated all of her friends and family. She ran away with Nate to a northern boom town where she just continued to fall deeper into that bottle until she was unrecognizable. Once Nate was bored with all of his head games, he left her. Obviously blaming her for everything. Pushing her further into her addiction.

What a complete and utter waste of a life Evelyn had led. She was dead, and there was absolutely nothing but a boss at a low-end restaurant and a couple of bartenders to mourn her passing. She had been beautiful, smart, and funny. People loved her; they were drawn to her. Then they figured out the booze was the only loyalty she had, and she had no intentions of ever doing anything with her so-called life, except to spend it looking for the next party.

The worst is that she had a lot of opportunities that she just ignored. I have to believe this must have been the life she wanted—because she worked hard to keep it. People need to find an excuse, a reason, blame it on the disease, blame it on mental health. I don't believe any of that; this woman kept a job, a home, cared for her pets, she just did it all while being drunk—all the time.

My phone rings, flashing Shasta's picture on it.

"Hi, Shasta." I keep my tone polite.

"Nancy, have you got the eulogy written?" Shasta barks at me.

"No, I am not writing her eulogy." I have no intentions of sugarcoating it and celebrating her life that was cut short by alcohol abuse.

"Please, Nancy, you are the only one who has even spoken to her in the last ten years," Shasta whines into the phone.

"Maybe you could give me an idea of what you want it to say," I demand.

"Me? I can't be expected to do everything! If you can't be bothered then neither can I." The phone beeps as the line disconnects.

Rolling my eyes, I remember why Evelyn had ended her relationship with her sister. It didn't excuse Evelyn's hiding from the rest of her family. She missed out on graduations, weddings, babies—all the beautiful things.

She insisted on staying in her dirty little town dabbling in drugs and partying. When the party invites stopped coming, she just started dating men ten years younger than her to stay in the scene.

Laying my fingers on the keyboard, I take a deep breath:

*“Evelyn . . . everybody loved Evelyn. The boys all wanted to date her; the girls all wanted to be her. Her friends were loyal to her; she was in eleven wedding parties and the godmother to four children. Evelyn was beauty and joy.*

*“But her decisions took her away from us.*

*“Evelyn took a drink, the drink took a drink, the drink took Evelyn.”*

I end it with an Irish proverb and email it to Shasta.

Wiping one final tear from my cheek. “Last call, Evelyn.” I say my final goodbye.

***by Cynthia Cassidy***

Abbotsford, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Cook Never Starves

HE'D NEVER COOKED BEFORE. Well, not really. Some eggs, some toast. Oh, and pancakes for the kids. Cooking was Anya's forte. She loved them all, and she expressed it through the tasty ingredients she poured into the meals she prepared, making everyone eager to the table.

He was always ready to initiate the appetizer, though . . . clasp her from behind where she would stand over her creation at the stove. He was careful to give her just the right suggestive nudge, undetected by the naïve eyes of their two children. She was plump and round, in a modern-day Kardashian style, and he let his hands take in their fill.

"There's more where that came from, Darius," she'd giggled. "You know the cook never starves." It would be a meal the two of them would share later. Alone.

He stepped back and headed to the table, shifting his appetite to one side; he sat down, placing his napkin across his lap to hide his hunger.

He watched her as she sprinkled her magic blend of herbs and spices—her "secret ingredients," she called them, into the roiling broth in the pot on the stove. There wasn't a recipe left untouched by her talents, and her savoury soup became a frequent entrée once the German troops had arrived in Poland. Food was scarce, but Anya always stretched what little they had into a mouth-watering meal.

He looks down to the pot on the stove before him, where he stirs the stock with a large wooden spoon. He looks around at the other men in the kitchen who work quickly under the gaze of the armed soldier, their eyes on careful watch for any sign that the guard might find fault with their work ethic. The price to pay is high. Two new short orders were added this morning.

He hits replay, and the scene with Anya plays again in the movie theatre of his mind. It plays reel to reel—as in movie reel to real time. As Anya sprinkles her homemade herb d'Provence into her soup, Darius's hand crumbles a smattering of dried greens into the meagre meal before him. This is all that is permitted for inmates of the camp. The officers' meals have already been prepared and served, a fine presentation of bratwurst and *kartoffelpuffer*, a German potato pancake. The inmates' meals could consist only of what was left over from the officers' dinner, some ingredients scraped from the unfinished plates into the pot that Darius now coaxed into resembling a soup. The broth would later be separated from the ingredients, and each would be carefully rationed to inmates for lunch the next day. Dinner consisted of any leftover bratwurst along with a small piece of *kommissbrot*, German black bread, size dependent upon how much the soldiers left after filling their pockets to go home. Often, only rotten produce or meat was available to make the watery composition that was less than filling and aggravated the widespread dysentery, resulting in diarrhea among the prisoners.

Darius carefully palmed a potato peel into his hand and waited for the right moment to push the morsel into the cuff of his sleeve. There it would stay until he was required to roll down his sleeves for inspection at the end of a shift. With a deft sleight of hand, he would transfer the peel behind the sewn-on badge of his striped prison uniform. Only two or three peels could be hidden this way without drawing attention. The pat down included only the pockets and cuffs—never the badge. Despite the risk, Darius had spent hours painstakingly distressing some of the threads that joined the badge to the fabric below. The threads on top of the badge remained intact, successfully hiding the small, secret pocket he'd created. It was there that he would pilfer the peel, which would supplement the stingy diets of those who desperately needed it.

Darius remembered the day he began working in the kitchen. It was after his arrest for refusing to forfeit their home to a German officer's family. First, he'd worked transporting

the belongings from the trains to the Kanada building—named after Canada—a land of plenty. “Who can cook?” a sergeant bellowed from the front of the line, and he had instantly remembered Anya’s words.

“I can!” he heard himself shout out. And he thrust his hand high in the air, hoping to be seen from the back of the long line.

*by Lois Kelly*

London, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Two Slow Dancers

“I WISH I HAD MET YOU in my youth.”

Cigarette smoke swirled around us, our hands linked and raised just below our shoulders as we danced, two-stepping around the ballroom. The green light twinkled like the kind of disco ball found in faint memories of my teenage years. Our worn leather-soled dress shoes hardly made a sound on the tilted floor, certainly not over the generations-old music that was playing or the casual chatter floating around.

I turned my head to look at my partner, a man whom I had been dancing with for the past two meetings. An old, patriotic melody began to sound from the metal speaker, the singer’s voice like rain on a tin roof. “Yeah?”

The person I’d come to know as Weizhe, a smaller man never without the slight of stubble, smiled easily, bending his head in agreement, inching a bit closer to me as we swayed. “Things might be different for us now.”

I shook my head dismissively, knowing it wasn’t true. If I had met him years ago, I’m sure it would only have broken me more to leave him behind when we eventually had to grow up—aging out of this phase, which had never really been a phase. “Are you sure about that?”

Weizhe nodded, thin lips pulling up slightly to create a dimple in his cheek. “Things would be different for me. I know that much.”

I hummed, adjusting my grip on his rough hand, which had been slipping away. Smoothing my thumb over the wrinkles in it, I wondered if his skin had looked any different twenty years ago.

“I wouldn’t have married her,” he continued, breaking through my silence. The hand of his on my hip began to pull me closer. I let him, wanting to press our faces together and “accidentally” brush his lips with mine. His voice lowered a tad as if he were telling a secret only for my ears. I barely heard him over the noise in the dance hall. “I would’ve run away with you.”

I looked down at the shorter man, meeting his eyes, a deep colour like that of ground black pepper, and seeing light in them, smile lines on either side. Even though he was getting into his fifties, just like me, his hair was still youthful and long—albeit a little grey. Letting go of his hand momentarily, I used my index finger to brush a strand behind his ear. “You wouldn’t have.”

I took his hand again, and he squeezed it affectionately, standing on his toes and bringing our swaying to a still. His chapped lips brushed against my ear just enough to give me butterflies. “I would’ve. I would’ve followed you anywhere, Liu.”

A lump formed in my throat at this, though I tried hard to ignore it. I missed him even though he was right there.

Perhaps it wasn’t him I missed, but the life we could have had if it had not been for the circumstances around us. If it weren’t for our families, for the government’s law criminalizing us, for the stigma that still lingered around two men in love that had only been in China since the early twentieth century. I mourned the love we could have shared if only we had met in a safer time. Now, it was too late. Anyone could see the age on our faces.

As if making up for lost time, I pulled him closer, felt his forehead fall to my chest as his arms tightened around my waist. I set us back off into the waltzing motion.

“Would you have run away with me, Liu?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I held him close as the song ended, and we unfurled from each other.

When the question had sat in the air long enough to go stagnant, I spoke again. “I should probably get home.” He nodded, sensing my rejection. If I had been a better man, I would have told him the truth. I would have told him I loved him.

Instead of seizing with bitterness like chocolate warmed for too long, he gave me a forgiving smile. He had all the charms of his youth still about him. “Drive me home?”

I smiled back. “Anytime, old friend.”

***by Avery E. Kats***

Calgary, Alberta

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Mama

“SHE SHOWED UP THIS MORNING. Won’t leave, but she doesn’t want to be caught,” a barrel-chested construction foreman named Jason said, shaking my hand. “Thanks for coming, Officer.”

“It’s no trouble.” I donned the hard hat he offered, following him through a maze of concrete forms and protruding metallic snakes of rebar. Machinery hammered and buzzed.

“There she is.” Jason pointed beyond a block of steel framework.

Across the site, a painfully thin dog paced anxiously in the dirt. Eyeing us suspiciously, her ears perked, listening for signs of danger.

I shook my head. “Poor thing. . . .” Her dark fur was matted, caked with dirt. Loose skin hung beneath her body, jostling as she moved. Some kind of Labrador-cross. “Is she injured?”

“Not that I can tell. Just needs meat on her bones,” the foreman answered.

“Agreed. I’ll see if I can get her to safety. Thanks.”

Jason wished me luck with a wave, and I focused on the task at hand.

Slowly, I approached, keeping my posture low—unthreatening. Holding a leash behind my thigh, I offered gentle murmurs to the dog, beckoning for her trust. “I’m here to help, darlin’.”

Her nose tipped into the air, trying to catch my scent.

Stopping, I knelt down and held out an open can of dog food. “Come here, sweetie. Come have some grub.” But she didn’t take the bait.

A frayed blue rope dangled from the collar circling her neck. *This poor creature belongs to someone.* Scooping out some dog food, I tossed it. She hesitantly snatched it up, so I continued inching forward, getting within ten feet before she darted away. Thankfully, she only ran several feet before turning back with a nervous glance.

“Shh, easy girl,” I cooed, approaching again. From close up, I saw her loose skin was actually teats, full of milk. “It’s okay, Mama, I just want to help you.” The dog skittered away but turned back, just like before. With her head low and panting from stress, she watched me. *Why is she sticking around? Shouldn’t she be with her puppies?*

Realization hit. “You trying to tell me something? Where’s your pups?” I advanced a third time, and when she repeated the exact same manoeuvre, it immediately confirmed my suspicions. She needed my help. I radioed dispatch, requesting they tell the SPCA I was on the move. “Okay, darlin’, I’ll follow your lead.”

Mama’s eyes seemed to soften, as if understanding my words. This time, I stepped out with a steady motion, making no sharp movements. The dog stayed about ten feet ahead, double-checking over her shoulder every so often.

“I’m still here, Mama.”

She took me down an alley and then surged across a busy street. Passing through a small park at the edge of town, we ventured into a farmer’s field beyond. As my leg muscles burned and a sheen of sweat developed on my brow, I wondered how much farther we might travel.

Thankfully, not very.

She stopped at a faded old wooden shed perched at the backside of a scrubby bush line. A farmer’s yard rested just beyond the trees. *Hmm . . . this must be the dog’s home.*

Mama yipped and sniffed around some large flat paving stones stacked against one wall. Tiny mewling sounds filtered to my ears, the cries weak and desperate. *Oh, no. . . .* My heart wilted as Mama whimpered. Her pups were inside. Searching, I spied no other

exits anywhere. It was clear someone had done this on purpose, locking these babies up—someone who'd rather kill than care.

Cheeks hot, I reported my location. Then, after photographing my findings, I moved each heavy slab to the side. Mama dove in as soon as possible, retrieving pups one by one, then lay down to nurse the six hungry nippers. Panting, her golden eyes finally welcomed me to pet her.

“Relax now. Your pups are safe.”

A short while later, the SPCA arrived, and the little family was safely headed to a shelter. I, however, ventured into the farmyard. A rickety old doghouse sat beside the garage. It was surrounded by feces, devoid of food or water dishes, with a familiar blue frayed rope attached—*Mama's rope*. I snapped pictures.

A scruffy-faced man with pewter hair and a sour expression stalked outside. The door slammed as he waved his arms, cussing and demanding I get off his property.

No, he wouldn't be that lucky.

“Good day, sir.” I smiled politely. “We need to have a little chat.”

**by R. A. Clarke**

Portage la Prairie, Manitoba