



MUNDELEIN  
**WRITES**

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“ N A T U R E ”

# **Mundelein Writes**

Issue No. 03: “Nature”

Fall 2018



**Mundelein**  

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**Arts Commission**

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# SACRED

By Tomoko Funihashi

*First Place*

Our charter bus starts. I sit by the window, looking at a crowded street near the Kyoto Station. Tourists, cabs, trucks, and tour buses pack the area. Bicycles and mopeds thread through them. The other passengers have been chatting since we gathered at the station. Mostly, they are middle aged, and they look excited at the prospect of returning to the site of our lost village.

The bus will drive us to the riverside of where our village used to exist. Homes were swept away and the area was abandoned after a massive flood twenty years ago. Recently, I received a letter titled, *A nostalgic trip*. The previous residents received it before they start to build a community as a new bedroom town of Kyoto City. The construction company seems to be trying to ride a wave of economic inflation. As a swimming instructor for a small local team, I am busy with the young swimmers and have no time to learn about investment. But what gets my attention is their plan of rebuilding a bridge to a small

island in the river.

My family used to live on the island until the flood washed away the old bridge. When we lost the route to cross the river to the village, we had to move out of the area along with the other villagers. Unlike the others' houses, ours was barely damaged. We gathered as much stuff as possible onto our boat and left. The village had disappeared completely.

Through the tinted window, I watch the passing scenery of Kyoto City. Our bus stops at a traffic light. A tour guide with a flag is leading a group of tourists. I see a concrete ditch and a mud fence. A gate appears, and behind it emerges a five-story tower.

"This is Toji, a famous temple in Kyoto. They hold a flea market every month. My mother used to come here to buy crafts."

A middle-aged man in the seat next to me says, "You're such a young man. Are you interested in buying a house in the area?"

I hadn't expected that anyone would talk to me. "No, a letter about 'a nostalgic tour' made me want to come here, though I remember little about the village."

"I'm Tanaka. How old were you? Do you remember where your home was? Kawabata? Bunayama?"

"I was only six. I don't remember the exact area, Tanaka san. Sorry about the delay, my name is Fujiyama."

"Oh, your family name is Fujiyama. You came from the area tons of wild wisteria used to grow."

"I remember those flowers were in the yard."

“You know, Nature is powerful. Our ancestors tried various levees and bridges, but they were flashed away every time it rained big.”

He seems to want to talk more with me, but another man in front of us calls to him. I resume watching outside again. A boy strolls on a sidewalk, hitting the fence with a stick. He reminds me of my brother Tetsu. He used to slap the swaying grasses along the path while walking forty minutes from school. He was in sixth grade when I was a first grader.

Tetsu was not a nice brother. When we ate fish for dinner, he would play with the fish bones. He always broke the bones at the neck and tossed them away. We would've been sitting on a zabuton mat—a flat, cotton-filled cushion—around a small fireplace on the wooden floor. Dad would scold him, saying he had no respect for food. Mom would tell him to throw the bones into the trash.

When the rice fields were filled with water, Tetsu would step into them and mess up the baby rice plants. He would come home with shoes covered with mud. Mom would stop him from entering the house until he cleaned them. Because Tetsu wouldn't want to touch the shoes with slimy mud, he would threaten me, “Wash my shoes, Riki. Otherwise, I'll throw you into the shrine at the bridge.”

*The shrine.* I was afraid of it. The miniature shrine was about four feet tall and a white, eerily decorated fox mask was enshrined. It had a pointy nose and its thread-like eyelids slightly opened, peeking glassy black eyes. Mom always said, “The fox is a god that protects our island

from the disastrous water. We should respect it.”

Tetsu knew my fear of the mask. He bragged he would steal it from the shrine and glue it on my face. He ordered me to catch frogs, dung beetles, and butterflies. He put firecrackers into the frogs and popped them. He killed the bugs by tearing them apart. I hated to watch him, but I did whatever he wanted me to do anyway. Compared to the fox mask, his order was nothing to me.

Suddenly, the bus lurches. The passengers quiet down, checking outside. We are climbing a rough, winding road through the forest. The sun blinks, turning the scenery into psychedelic hues.

Tanaka says, “After the peak, we’ll drive down. Our old village, now just bushes, will appear soon.”

As soon as we hit the top of the hill, our view suddenly opens. Strong sunlight pierces into our coach.

“Wow,” Tanaka cries. “Look at the devastation.”

No need to wait until we completely drive down. The rest of the hill is naked—the trees on the slope are shaved off. Down toward the river, green bulldozers growl, pushing the dirt into mounds. Slender weeds are poking out. A big blue sign of “New homes available: A New Community, Sacred” stands near a gray temporary building, probably the company’s office.

A man shouts, “What’s Sacred? Our village didn’t have that name!”

“It’s uncool,” a middle-aged woman moans. Voices of complaint swirl in the vehicle.

Behind the dirt hills, a river appears. It looks quiet.

I can't believe it is the same river that swallowed everything twenty years ago. I try to spot where the bridge used to be. A small piece of land covered with bushes comes into view.

"Tanaka san, do you remember where the bridge used to cross?"

"It was about one third of the way around the biggest curve. But I don't see any big curves in the river. Look at that. The water is slow and wide like a belt. On the island, a patch of birch trees was the sign the bridge used to be. But I'm not sure if they are still there."

The mountain ridge behind the river looks familiar to me. I feel like I may find the shrine on the island.

With a squeak of the brake, our bus stops. Several vehicles are parked near the office building. There must be people who want to live in such a rural area. I have no interest in their advertisement. I intend to ditch the event and swim to the island. I brought a waterproof camera. I'm wearing a wetsuit under my outfit and water sports shoes. While they give away brochures to the group and explain the concept of the development, I'll swim to the island, take some pictures, and come back before our bus leaves.

My plan seems to work well since the passengers now confront the company about their destruction of nature. No one pays attention to me walking away from the group. As I approach the river, the grasses become scarce, and the ground surface rougher. I find a six-foot tall, pear-shaped rock near the shore. Hiding behind it, I take off my clothes, put them in a sack, and leave it at the foot of the rock. I secure my camera with the strap and

step into the water.

After several feet, the riverbed suddenly falls steeply. My feet slip. I feel pressure of the water on my entire body as I step on to nothing. Starting to swim, I realize that frequent flooding has dug a deep ditch in the center of the riverbed.

Even though the river apparently has grown wider, it's slow. And crossing the river is not a problem to me. I'm a swimming instructor now, but I was afraid of water as a child. Tetsu knew about it and would laugh at me by calling me a wimp.

Then, when the flood hit the area twenty years ago, the river swelled its body like a huge toad. Hysterically laughing at me, Tetsu said, "Look at the big water, Riki! You can't swim in the river! Wimp wimp!" Despite his boasting, I knew he also feared water. He had been scolded for not participating in physical education class when they had swimming.

I spat, "Tetsu, so can you swim? You can't! Because you fear water, too! You wimp, too!"

As soon as he heard me, Tetsu stood up. His face turning red, he ran out into the storm. The rain was roaring. Mom screamed. Dad immediately followed him. But Tetsu vanished as if the storm had dissolved him.

Now, I pause my movement in the water. My heart wrenches. I think about ifs: if I hadn't said that, if I had been older than he, or if I had admitted I was a wimp, Tetsu might still be with us.

Soon, I reach a shallow shore. The island is covered

with mixed trees I can't identify. From my memory, my house is supposed to be in the middle of the island, probably behind the bushes. I decide to walk in the water along the shore. The water gently moves, glittering on the surface. The shoreline is filled with washed gray stones. Behind it, a forest stands like a wall. There, the river flows straight again, and the beach ends.

I look around for a small shrine and a tall beech tree near the bridge. Away from the beach, on a slope of gray pebbles, a huge beech tree has collapsed. Under it, I see orange-red wooden pieces. It is the color of the shrine. The tree must have smashed it, and probably buried the mask. I am relieved, but while I look at the debris, a weird idea crosses my mind. *Because the shrine was destroyed, the god couldn't protect this island any more. Without the god's protection, my house might have been torn down by Nature's hand.*

Something swings at the corner of my sight. Clusters of pale blue-lilac flowers hang from the bushes. The wisteria. I remember how they used to bloom on the trellis Dad had built in our yard. My grandparents had loved to watch the blossoms from their beds. Now, trees with tangled vines look down at me.

*The wisteria must lead me to my old house.*

I duck under the hanging flowers and follow a wild path through the bushes of wisteria and crawling vines. I spot a part of a thatched roof ahead behind the bush. *Our house?* My heart beats louder. With my eyes still fixed on the roof, I push away the branches and step off the path.

There stands a small shack covered with green and black moss, half buried under brown leaves. The forest almost engulfs it from behind. It seems that the god has spared my house.

I walk toward the yard hoping to find Dad's trellis. I peek around the corner and gasp. The trellis is not there. Instead, the wisteria flowers hang from an enormous tree which has fallen, crushing half of the roof. I run back to the front. The glass of the sliding doors is gone, and wooden boards partially cover the space. I pull on the wooden frame, but it is stuck to the track with the gooey soil. I scrape out the mud and open the door.

The foyer is as bright as outside. Blue sky peeks at me through the holes of the dried straw roof. Wisteria clusters hang from the ceiling. It is like a live Christmas ornament. Mixed feelings grasp my mind. *Sad, but beautiful.* I take a couple of pictures. Unnatural clicks penetrate throughout the half-buried house.

I decide to walk through it. On the floor of the family room, the square fireplace is still there. Covered with debris, it sleeps quietly as if it has forgotten the sounds of crackling firewood and boiling miso soup. *We used to sit down here. Dad would be drinking sake, and Mom would be mending our clothes.* I hesitate, then step on to the dusty floor without taking off my shoes. *Would Mom scold me for walking in the house with my shoes on?* Near the fireplace, a flattened zabuton mat is untidily placed. A bunch of crooked short sticks are scattered around. I pick one up. It has tiny threads like two-sided comb and has a black

triangle at the end.

A bent fish bone?

I crouch down to take a closer look at other bones. The tiny fish bones spread around the zabuton mat, all of them are broken at the neck. I look around. *Tetsu?*

I shake my head. *No way. He could not have survived. We just had no time to clean up.* I walk into the room he and I had shared. The wall is missing, open to the outside. The overhead beam is tangled with wisteria flowers, which quietly sway. I step into my parents' room and then grandparents'. Both rooms are still roofed, but their windows are gone, and again the purple flowers are grinning at me. A big branch from an outside tree has become a beam replacing the original.

I move back to the foyer and look at the empty entrance. No shoes are left because everyone moved out wearing their footwear. Tetsu had put on his clean shoes that I had washed.

*And he disappeared.*

With depressed feelings, I step down at the foyer and approach the door nailed with a board.

*Wait. Our house was not affected from the flood. When was the glass broken?*

I gaze at the poorly fixed sliding door.

*Did Tetsu fix it?*

I touch the wood. It is crumbled from the exposure to nature. *Absurd. Probably the glass had been broken before the flood. I simply forget because I was small.*

Outside, hazy gray clouds invade the blue sky.

Before stepping out, I glance at a wooden shoe cabinet on the entrance wall. Like it has escaped the passing time, the cabinet is there in the same manner as it used to be. *We would put our cleaned shoes in it after taking them off.* With nostalgia, I want to peek at our used but clean footwear. I slide open the cabinet, and I catch my breath. On the top shelf, a pair of boy's sneakers, covered with white hardened mud, with half torn brown shoelaces, are pressed over a clean pair, as if they were trying to hide inside of the cabinet. *Tetsu had come back.* My heartbeat becomes faster. I feel like choking. Holding back my tears, I grab the shoes out of the cabinet.

"Tetsu, everyone said that you were killed in the flood. But..."

I recall Tetsu's restless angry eyes, his frustrated cheeks, and his spitting mouth. Now, I see him just as an elementary school kid. I don't know how he came back home or in what condition. I can only imagine the lonely days and scary nights he had to spend by himself, waiting for someone to come for him.

Tears roll down my cheeks. We had thought he would come back with his boasting triumph on his face. But he didn't. Even though his body was not recovered, we gave him up, believing he had been swallowed up by the bulging water. He was a mean kid. I hated him. I had never missed him since the disastrous event.

*But I am crying for him now.*

\*\*\*

When I return to the shore, our bus is just starting the engine. I put on my clothes and get in. As I sit down, Tanaka says, “You know, our village had many wisteria trees before. Though they might have swept away with the village in the flood, I believe the shrubs would have grown back and fully bloomed by now. But the bulldozers for ‘Sacred’ have wiped them out. Makes us laugh, huh?” He looks at me, “Did you get in the water? Your hair is wet.”

I touch my head and nod, “Yes.” The image of the light purple flowers in my house and bent fish bones flash through my mind. Suddenly tears well into my eyes. I hurriedly turn toward the window.

“Fujiyama san, your eyes are red. Young people are not used be exposed to Nature. You might get infected from the water. You’d better go to a doctor.”

No word comes out of my mouth. I sniff and squeeze my sack, which is bigger now than it was when I left the bus.

# TO SWIM AMONG STARS

By Sarah Yost  
*Second Place*

Astrid Ventas sat in the jungle and looked out the window into the sea. She hated it here. Not just the jungle, though that was bad enough. It was humid, smelled of decay, and was full of insects with an alarming degree of self-awareness. She hated the whole dome system: the desert and the arctic and the beautiful meadow. All of it. She hated being trapped in a web of glass bubbles meters deep in the ocean.

But the jungle served as a refuge. All the others, the ones who believed in their purpose, felt really connected to these domes; they were insufferable. This was her refuge from their overindulgent pride, from all the back-patting and smug grins. She came here when she wanted to skip lessons or just be alone. While the wristband she wore, tuned to the specific dome's frequency, kept predators and other nefarious creatures away, it was still an unsettling place. She sat on the dark forest floor where little of the

artificial light reflected by the closed windows above could reach her. Down here the lower panels were open to the sea and she stared into the depths, dark as her mood.

She opened her satchel and took out the book. The book that had changed her life. It was a collection of images taken by the Hubble telescope. She turned the glossy pages, caressing the bands of light that made up galaxies, the billowing colors of nebulae, the intricate pattern of stars. Astrid often lost herself in these pages, dreaming of escaping. Of floating in unlimited space, seeking a better home for humanity.

Breaking from her reverie, Astrid began making her way through the thick green foliage, moving leaves wider than her body out of the way and tripping on roots and the refuse left behind by animals dwelling above. Eventually she found the main path, a dirt trail that was maintained rigorously to be free of the pervasive plant life. Astrid looked up and saw the simulated sky, the bright “sun” shining in her eyes through gaps in the canopy, and resignedly made her way to the door.

She passed a few workers, men and women in the yellow jumpsuits of biologist or the green of botanist who inspected the dome’s inhabitants daily to make sure the delicate ecosystem was being maintained. All were heading to the door now. Everyone would be at the ceremony whether they applied to leave or not. When an event only took place every twenty-five years, attendance was mandatory.

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The stage and podium gleamed in art deco glory at the far side of the immense atrium. The room was festooned with swaths of rust and silver fabric. A variety of flowers and vines decorated the platform, carefully cultivated among the many domes specifically for this ceremony. Astrid pushed her way through the crowd, being given leeway when the others recognized her. She was tempted to get close enough to smell the roses and penstemon and orchids but wanted to be far enough back to see the whole stage.

Astrid grew anxious as the rest of the dwellers gathered and the din of conversations filled the space as surely as the bodies. When the lights dimmed and the hush fell over the crowd, the weight of her anticipation was the weight of the entire ocean above her.

The Director walked on stage and everyone clapped, not uproarious applause but a polite greeting. Astrid wished they would show some real emotion beyond their smug righteousness. Director Ventas motioned for them to stop, and they quickly did. Her mother was good at controlling the crowd.

“Thank you all. Thank you for coming on this momentous day to support our brave volunteers.” She stopped, giving everyone time to congratulate themselves on their role in this event. “It’s hard to believe that this is the sixth Expedition. One hundred and fifty years and our project is still running smoothly and successfully.”

A light applause here and someone, probably one of Astrid's classmates, cheered. After a smattering of laughter at the outburst, the director continued.

"Before we begin I would like to thank all of the volunteers. It shows great bravery and a self-sacrificing nature to submit your name for this task. It is our duty to share our abundance, knowledge, and resources with those poor souls remaining on the surface. It will undoubtedly be a difficult journey and a daunting task. Thank you, deeply, for your service."

Astrid stopped paying attention. She was growing impatient. All of this rhetoric was pointless. Who was the Director trying to convince anyway?

Astrid wondered how many of the people who submitted their names actually believed in the Expedition. Did any of them feel the way she did or were they trying to earn extra prestige among their peers? Astrid was willing to bet she was the only one of the lot who truly wanted to go. Who truly believed she would do more good up on the surface of the planet looking for another solution to humanity's problems, one that didn't rely on trapping anyone in a stagnant ecosystem.

"When I call your name, please come up on the stage to be recognized."

Each name called was a gallon of water in Astrid's stomach. One less chance her name would be next. She could taste the salt of disappointment on her lips each time she politely smiled and clapped for someone else being given her dream.

When all one hundred chosen stood on the stage, the applause grew louder. There were cheers and, finally, authentic emotion swept the room.

Relief.

Astrid stopped fighting the tears.

\*\*\*

Astrid let the crowd disperse around her. Everyone went back to their duties, their families, their lives. She remained. The volunteers, bedecked with sashes to match the room and the smuggest faces of all, promenaded off the stage, beginning their new training.

All the colorful blooms of the stage garland had long since begun to bleed together through Astrid's blurry vision, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned.

"Director?" she said, quickly wiping her face and defiantly making eye contact.

"Astrid, please stop that 'Director' nonsense."

When Astrid didn't respond, she continued, "What are you still doing here?"

Astrid didn't know how to answer. Hadn't she seen the tears? Or did she just not understand? Again. How do you tell the person who should understand you the best, that you have been anchored to the spot by the overwhelming disappointment of losing the only chance at your dream?

"I don't know."

"You don't know. Right. Well, why don't you come

back to my office while I wrap up some things before dinner.”

Not seeing a tactful way to get out of it, and not wanting to start a fight, Astrid followed to the elevator.

As they rose, Astrid looked out the glass walls at the structures shining in the dark water. The atrium dropped from view and revealed the rest of the domes. The arctic dome was currently in its winter season so the panels were open, letting the darkness of the sea beyond the glass simulate endless night.

Astrid often wondered if the animals living in the domes could tell that they weren't looking at the sky, but rather a vast expanse of water—if they felt something was off. Then she realized none of them had ever seen the real sky. Like her, they had only ever known this simulated cycle. Unlike her, they didn't have the capacity to learn about the things they were missing.

The Director's office was tidy but full. The bronze fittings reflected faux flames coming from the fireplace and an overstuffed leather sofa in front of it took up more space than was practical in the small round room.

The Director walked to her large, carved oak desk and began moving things around. Astrid was not convinced it was productive at all. Probably a ploy to get her up here to talk. She went to the sofa and sat down just hard enough to get attention, but no comment came her way.

Reverently, Astrid took out her book. The images barely registered. She wiped a single tear off the photo of

Eta Carinae, a dying star, as the director came around and sat next to her.

“I know you wanted to go..”

Astrid turned on her, letting the sadness turn to anger and show in her face.

“It’s your fault,” she said. “You’re the reason I didn’t get to go.” She threw up a hand. “Even if you didn’t personally take my name out, no one would have sent your daughter to the surface.”

“The names were removed from the applications and replaced with numbers. No, I’m serious. No one knew that your application belonged to you. It isn’t my fault. It’s yours.”

“How dare—”

“I looked up your number and found your application in the pile labeled ‘Too Valuable.’”

Astrid turned away, unable to face her mother’s words.

The hand was on her shoulder again.

“I promise,” her mother said. “Your test scores were too high. As terrible as this sounds, we don’t want to send our best and brightest out. We say the Expedition is to aid the surface dwellers but it is as much about population control. And there is more than one aspect to that.”

“You kept me here so I could have smart babies?”

It was a weak response, but she just couldn’t process all of this.

Astrid stood, wanting to pace, but the office was too small. She just ended up at the window, staring out

at the network of domes below them. They bubbled off the central tower like one of the jungle trees covered in mushrooms. Her eyes fell on the jungle dome. Below that were the series of salt water domes, which had always seemed asinine to her. There was clearly still plenty of salt water.

“Listen,” her mother said, “that’s not what I meant. You could be running your own dome someday. You could be running the whole thing. We can’t let valuable members of the community go off on a fool’s quest to see the stars.”

“It’s not a fool’s quest. There are entire branches of science devoted to it.”

“Yes, and which scientists saved the world?”

“We didn’t save anything! We’re *hiding* down here. We’re living in our perfectly controlled environments while the real heroes are still on the surface trying to save what’s left. Trying to make a difference and maybe even find us a home on another planet that isn’t dying.”

“How can you be so smart and so dense? The planet isn’t dying; it’s dead. You can’t even see the stars from the surface anymore. Immense pollution and particle contamination fill the night sky. The air isn’t breathable and no one is there to look for fantastical worlds.”

Astrid turned as her mother took the few steps toward her. She struggled against her mother’s strong grip on her arms

“Astrid, those volunteers are going up to an empty world. We haven’t heard anything in years. We are likely sending them to die.”

Shock stilled Astrid, let her be drawn into a tight embrace as her mother sobbed softly into her hair. She had never seen this much passion in her mother. Perhaps all the emotions that fled from Astrid had found a home in her.

\*\*\*

Shortly after the Expedition ceremony, Astrid graduated, received her job assignment, and moved into her own bunk in the first-year dormitory. The first job was always randomly assigned and then people could apply to move around after a year. Astrid thought it was fitting she was assigned to the jungle dome. Perhaps she should have taken to hiding elsewhere during her sulks; the assigner had acted like he was doing her a favor when he passed over the new credentials.

She wore the brown jumpsuit of the grounds crew and silently went about her daily tasks. Currently, the third quadrant path needed to be cleared. The jungle plants grew very quickly and she was pulling things out of the path every day. The interlopers had to be carefully removed so no other roots were disturbed. When possible, they were transplanted deeper into the jungle.

On her hands and knees, trowel at the ready, Astrid paused and looked into the dark forest. A simulated rain shower started and she flipped the neck guard of her hat down to keep the water out of her jumpsuit. She kept staring into the darkness. Some monkeys chattered as they

leapt between trees and passed high above her head. Birds were calling and singing. Something squealed and Astrid knew a lucky predator was enjoying its dinner.

She had done this many times. Stopped her work and focused. Focused on the life surrounding her, trying desperately to find that connection, that spark of interest that the others found here. That she had only found in that book of unreachable stars.

It never came.

\*\*\*

One night, after a particularly difficult and dirty day in the jungle, Astrid was relaxing on her bunk when a messenger delivered a note. The envelope was sealed with her mother's mark. They hadn't spoken since she moved out. Not that the Director hadn't tried. But the job assignment was the drop that tipped the bucket. There was no way it was random.

Astrid was about to toss the envelope in the box on top of the others when she hesitated. It had been a hard day. And her mother had the best food.

She opened the letter.

"Meet me at dome 26-S at 7. Please come."

Not even dinner. Astrid tried to remember which dome that was but couldn't. Most people didn't use the number designations. So, of course, that's the way her bureaucrat mother would refer to them. All the same she might still get some food out of it.

As it turned out dome 26-S was one of the saltwater domes. That's probably what the "S" was for. When Astrid realized this, it was clear why her mother had used the number; she nearly turned right back around and went home. Curiosity kept her going, however. And her growling stomach.

Her mother was standing outside the entrance. The woman looked nervous.

Astrid couldn't ever remember seeing her look nervous before. Not this woman who routinely addressed thousands of people. Astrid approached cautiously.

"Mom?"

Her mother turned and smiled, the ease coming back over her features. Lines disappeared and her chest heaved in a relieved breath.

"Oh, Astrid, I'm so glad you came this time."

*This time?* Astrid thought back to all the other envelopes in the box by her bed, the look of nerves she had seen. And a ripple of guilt passed over her.

"Why are we here?" she asked.

"I'd like to show you something."

Her mother opened the antechamber door and gestured her in. When it closed, her mother went to the lockers that lined the wall, pulled out a wet suit and helmet, and held it out.

Astrid looked at her blankly.

"Seriously?"

"Why else do you think I'd bring you here? Just take the suit."

With deliberate exaggeration, Astrid took it and started putting it on. Surprisingly, her mother took out a second and began undressing too. They got ready silently and entered the decontamination chamber. After the UV lights removed any foreign threats, they entered the airlock.

Astrid hadn't been in any of the water domes since she was a child. They made everyone learn how to swim for obvious reasons, but since discovering that book of space images, Astrid hadn't had any interest in the water worlds. Weren't they, after all, the opposite of what she dreamed of?

"What's the code for this dome?" Astrid asked, ready to adjust her wristband.

"Oh, you won't need that." Her mother ignored Astrid's confused look. "Before the doors open, close your eyes. I'll lead you to the center of the dome."

"I don't like that idea," Astrid said.

The rushing water caused a moment of initial panic. Astrid tensed and then felt that same, reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"It'll be okay. I've got you."

Reluctantly, Astrid closed her eyes.

Her mother swam expertly, pulling Astrid along. When they stopped, her mother steadied Astrid as she remembered how to tread water.

Astrid tried to recall her lessons on such environments but even before her love affair with space began, she hadn't been all that interested in learning about

water. It seemed too mundane when she could look out the window and see it any time.

“Mom, what are we doing here?”

“Open your eyes.”

Astrid understood why her mother had brought her to this dome.

In the absolute darkness of the deep ocean, she saw eerie fish giving off dim lights down the length of their bodies, reminding Astrid of the small galaxies in her book. She saw schools of red jellyfish floating leisurely, trailing their amorphous bodies like the gasses of a nebula. Everywhere Astrid looked, a magnificent creature was showing off its dazzling bioluminescent display.

And between them all, tiny blue-green spots glowed bright, spread out or in clusters, creating their own constellations.

“It’s not the stars but...”

Her mother’s voice trailed off. Astrid refused to cry. Refused to let her vision be compromised.

She reached out and took her mother’s hand. Squeezed.

It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. More wondrous than the pictures in her book. If she wanted, she could reach out and touch these stunning visions. After all her dreams of visiting space, here she was, in a tiny ocean within an ocean, at home amid living stars.

# A MAP IN HIS HEAD

By Jerry Cornille  
*Third Place*

## BBQ

“You oughta use higher heat for grilling,” Carl said to Brian’s back. “Locks the flavors in.”

“I like to sweat the vegetables a bit before turning the heat up to finish them,” Brian said as he thought, *Why do I answer him?*

Brian was doing his best to ignore Carl Stark. Good grilling was an art, and distraction led to disaster. Brian was annoyed by Carl’s constant critical tone about everything. Carl always knew a better way, and everyone else was always wrong. The man had never admitted a mistake in his life. Now he was going on about how Brian shouldn’t let Tommy play inside on such a nice day.

Brian and Claire’s son, Tommy, was mildly “on the spectrum” and shy. Tommy had been outside all day until Carl and Barb had arrived with their daughter Nicole. He went inside when Mr. Stark told him about Nicole get-

ting a prize in her school's art fair, followed by, "What have you been doing in school, Tommy?" The tone was aimed at someone five, not eleven like Tommy was. Tommy was only a year younger than Nicole, but Carl always talked down to him.

Tommy had once told Brian that he didn't understand how Barb, the nice lady across the street, could be married to a guy who reminded Tommy of kids who were bullies.

"Tommy should be out more," Carl said, moving from one criticism to the next. "If I were you, I'd make Tommy give up books for the summer. And I'd turn the heat up pretty quick on those onions."

Claire and Barb came out with a platter for the vegetables and chicken for the grill. Claire handed the platter to Tommy, who had followed the women outside. He held it for his dad, who used tongs to carefully transfer the strips of peppers, onion halves, and ovals of char-striped zucchini to the platter. It pleased Tommy that his dad laid them in neat rows. Brian knew that.

When Tommy put the vegetables down on the table, his mom handed him foil. Tommy pulled out a strip, measuring it against the platter, and then covered the vegetables. He crimped the edges underneath, being careful that the foil wouldn't touch the vegetables.

Brian heard Tommy say to Nicole, "You want to see the hummingbirds? They're on the side of the house, and they're not afraid of you."

Brian waited and stepped to the corner of the

house. Nicole literally had her mouth open, staring at the aerial acrobats. Tommy was standing with his hands clasped behind his back. Brian thought Tommy seemed pleased that Nicole liked something he liked. And perhaps pleased with himself for suggesting it to his friend. Brian was cautious about projecting his thoughts and feelings onto Tommy. He certainly recognized that Tommy was wired differently, but he knew his son and felt sure he was reading him right. He stepped back to the grill before the kids caught him spying on them.

“The meal was absolutely delicious, and I love this Rosé wine. Goes nicely with the grilled chicken,” Barb announced, draining the last of her glass.

“Thanks. It feels summer-y to me,” Claire replied.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t feel right drinking French wine here in the U-S of A right before the 4th of July,” Carl said.

“Claire’s dad’s family came from France, and she grew up on it,” said Brian, instantly regretting taking the bait.

“Let’s go inside for dessert and coffee,” suggested Claire. “Tommy, will you help me clear the table?”

Nicole and Tommy helped carry things in and then went to play a video game. Carl returned to his theme about “kids”—meaning Tommy—spending too much time on computers and not enough time outside. Brian thought: *Tommy loves playing outside and has daily computer/video time limits.* But this time Brian said nothing.

Claire glanced at Brian and changed the topic:

“Barb you have the nicest garden. I wish I had your green thumb. You must be at it all the time.”

“Actually, it’s mostly perennials, and they thrive on my neglect. I’d like you to help me plant some herbs like you have in your yard.”

Brian mentioned, “We’re thinking about a camping trip before summer is over.”

“Yeah, we’ve been wanting to get our four-wheel drive some exercise,” Carl responded.

A little bit later, returning from the bathroom, Brian heard Claire saying. “That’s a great idea, Barb! Camping together with Nicole and Tommy will be great.” Brian couldn’t breathe.

After the guests left and Tommy was in bed, Brian was sulking. Claire tried to soothe him. “Oh, c’mon. It’s just a weekend. I like to hang out with Barb. She’s been my best friend since college. Tommy likes to play with Nicole.” Then getting to the core of the problem: “Carl’s a jerk. Don’t let him get to you.”

Silence.

A minute passed before Brian said, “He’s always insulting to me, and he talks down to Tommy. He waits till Barb and you aren’t there to make his snide remarks.”

## **4th of July**

America’s birthday started out with fireworks. Not all of them the fun kind; some the Tommy meltdown kind. After days of anticipation, Tommy didn’t want to go to see

the fireworks. He wanted to know who would take care of Cosmo if he got scared.

Sporadic fireworks the previous night had spooked Cosmo, Tommy's canine soulmate. Cosmo had run into the bathroom and had wedged himself between the bathtub and the wall, whimpering with each new explosion. If Tommy was out of sorts, Cosmo was, too. If Cosmo was nervous, Tommy was hyper-nervous. Tommy had sat in the bathroom with Cosmo until well past both their bedtimes. Efforts to dislodge one or the other had only caused both to dig in. With a big day ahead, Brian and Claire had waited patiently for a lull, promising ice cream in Tommy's bedroom, along with making an exception to let Cosmo sleep in Tommy's room that night.

Now Brian tried, "Cosmo will be fine. This isn't his first 4th of July."

"He'll be all right, I promise," Claire amplified.

"Put my rug in the bathroom," Tommy finally said. "He likes lying on my rug when he's scared."

"Great idea. He probably won't need it, but I'll put it in the bathroom just in case." Brian knew that despite idiosyncrasies, his son was a bright and thoughtful boy.

"Let's watch the fireworks near where Maple Street goes into the park," Brian said as they got in the car. "But," pausing for emphasis, "I forgot the way there."

This was Brian and Tommy's regular game. Tommy loved everything to do with maps and directions. He paid attention to the routes whenever he went anywhere and remembered both street names and landmarks. "Make sure

you give me enough notice when I have to turn, “Brian said in a mock serious tone, “not like when your mom says, ‘Turn here,’ two feet from the corner.”

“Hmmpf!” Claire snorted from the back seat.

Brian knew Tommy would figure out a route—he always could, as though he had a map in head. Upon arrival Brian turned to Tommy and said, “Great navigating, co-pilot!” Tommy glowed silently.

Tommy was sensitive to loud noise, so they brought a pair of children’s ear protectors for him to wear. As each rocket rose with a trail of sparks, Tommy held them tight to his ears and smiled at the visual display.

Afterwards in the car Tommy asked, “Dad, how do they make it so the explosions are designs with different colors?”

Brian shook his head, “No idea, Buddy.”

“I would like to learn how they get those shapes from the rocket,” Tommy said moments before falling asleep.

Brian carried Tommy into his bedroom. Claire brought Cosmo, ears down and shaking, but happy to curl up by Tommy.

## **Camping**

As Brian loaded Cosmo into the car, Claire said, “I’m glad you decided to drive.”

“Carl told me that I’d regret not joining them in their 4-wheel drive SUV. He said our car won’t make it on

back roads. I told him it already had, and he said, ‘Hope your luck holds out.’”

Tommy said softly, “You’re a good driver, Dad.”

When they arrived, tents were set up, stakes driven. Sleeping bags were pulled out, firewood gathered and arranged inside a stone-rimmed circle. Carl’s advice on everything was dispensed.

“There’s a little lake back off the main road with a nice path around it. You guys feel like a walk before dinner?” asked Carl.

“Sure,” Brian replied.

On the walk, Tommy spotted a heron fishing in the reedy shallows just beneath them. Claire silently pointed as an eagle took flight across the lake.

Back at the campsite, dinner around the fire was followed by ‘smores. “They were Nicole’s idea.” Barb said.

“Great idea!” Tommy said between gooey bites.

Right before bedtime, Claire again pointed silently at the sky. A faint glow was blocking the northern edge of the Milky Way.

“Wow,” Brian whispered, as if he might scare it away.

“What is it?” the kids asked nearly simultaneously.

“The Northern Lights,” provided Brian.

“A good omen,” offered Claire.

The next day Carl was in ‘take-charge’ mode, as usual. “I got topographical maps and did some planning,” he said.

“What are you thinking?” Brian asked while bend-

ing over the map on the picnic table. Tommy pushed in next to him to look.

“Well, there’s a big hill not too far from here with a lake behind it. The only marked trail actually going up it is on the other side, but I figured we could find our way up from here.”

Brian noted the elevation lines at the near edge of the hill were pretty close together.

“Kinda steep. Probably why there was no trail from here. But, hey, we can try it.”

The hill was indeed steep. Bare rock stood out among the patches of trees.

“Looks like a spot the glaciers missed,” Brian mused. “Maybe we should walk around?”

“Here’s a path where something went up,” Carl pointed at a thin break in the brush.

Claire looked unsure, Barb looked downright scared. The kids tried to read the adults.

“Let’s go,” Carl said, already starting up.

Carl and Brian went first, then Tommy and Nicole, and Barb and Claire trailed behind. Cosmo waited, then passed everyone up to lead the way. At first, they were walking steep switchbacks; then there was a wide flat stretch of trees before more rock face and scrub rose to the top. The way through the trees was difficult. Brian noticed Cosmo sniffing. It was a pile of bear poop filled with berries. He decided not to mention it. They got to a small clearing and paused. Everyone was winded.

“Did you see the bear scat?” Carl asked Brian.

“Yep,” Brian replied.

“Bear scat?” Barb said in a rising voice.

“What is scat?” Nicole asked.

The adults were quiet; Tommy whispered, “I think it means poop.”

“Don’t worry. Black bears are more afraid of people than we need to be of them,” Brian said reassuringly.

“HmMMM,” from Claire.

The going got steeper and the sky started to cloud up. They were seeking handholds as well as footholds now. Loose rocks crumbled away. Even Cosmo was tentative. In a few spots, Brian had to help him. Suddenly, Nicole slipped. “Yow!” was the sound she made as she lost her balance. Her mom and Claire reached to break her fall. Barb almost lost her balance as she grabbed at Nicole. Tommy and the men turned and looked back at the sound.

“You okay, honey?” Barb asked. Neither Barb nor Claire had let go of her.

“I’m okay,” Nicole said tentatively.

“Carl, maybe we should turn back?” Barb said.

“We’re almost there,” Carl answered.

“It’s starting to look like rain,” Brian said pointing to dark clouds rolling in.

“We’re fine,” Carl snapped, turning to go on.

At the top there was rocky soil with more scrubby growth and stunted trees. Thunder rumbled as they walked across low hills on the plateau. There was no visible path anymore.

Finally, it crested, sloped down, and offered a beau-

tiful panorama of the lake with trees beyond, stretching as far as they could see. It was then that Carl noticed that Nicole was leaning on a stick and grimacing. Tommy was holding her free hand.

“Are you all right?” her dad asked.

Nicole didn’t answer and behind her, her mom shook her head. “Tommy got her a good walking stick, but I think you should look at her ankle,” Barb said.

Carl looked. “It’s a little swollen.” Nicole grimacing as her dad squeezed gently.

Claire produced a bandana from her pack and tied it expertly around Nicole’s ankle, just as the air was shattered by a flash of light and a nearly immediate cracking roar of thunder.

Suddenly it was pouring.

Carl said, “We’d better head back.”

Water was standing everywhere as rain came down faster than the earth could absorb it. Back-to-back flashes of lightning disappeared between them and another hill perhaps a mile away. Tommy had covered his ears, but then, noticing Nicole looked on the verge of tears, he reached to hold her hand.

“Don’t be scared.”

Carl was walking briskly back in the direction they had come.

Brian shouted, “Wait!” He was thinking they had to get off this hill where they were the tallest things and standing in a vast pool of water. With water pouring down the rocks, he knew they would never get down the way

they came up.

“We have no choice,” Carl yelled.

“We have to find the path that goes down the other side,” Brian said.

“We won’t find it in this rain.” Carl said. He held the map under his jacket. He and

Brian looked at it. “It’s impossible to see where the trail comes in up here. It’s dark and the rain hides everything,” Carl continued.

“Let Tommy look at it,” Brian suggested. “He’s great with maps.”

“Are you kidding? He’s—he’s deficient!”

Claire heard Carl say that and snatched the map from Carl’s hand, shot him a sharp look, and handed the map to Tommy.

“Tommy, where do we get the trail that goes down the other side to the lake?”

Brian was impressed by Claire’s decisiveness.

Tommy looked at the map. He looked up at the rise in the hill off to the side, then back at the map. He looked to the left at a spot in the landscape, corresponding to something only he knew. He swept his hand left to right from a point to a point, then slowly retraced about a third.

“This way,” was all Tommy said.

Brian and Claire had complete trust in Tommy. Cosmo did, too. Carl opened his mouth to object, but a flash and roar stopped him. He realized everyone else was following Tommy, who was staring at a point in the distance and walking toward it. Trees stretched away to both

sides below them on the edge of the hill. Somewhere in that green wall was a path down. Between the hikers and the trees was a gentle slope, but the rain was making it slippery. Tommy again took Nicole's hand without looking away from the point he was concentrating on. Cosmo stuck close to Tommy's side.

"This is crazy," Carl muttered.

Meanwhile, at the back of the column, Barb was getting panicky. Claire was walking ahead behind Tommy, and Barb had fallen behind, hunching forward as she walked as if to avoid the lightning. Brian noticed her talking to herself. He dropped back, trusting Tommy to find the way.

"We could die up here," he heard Barb say. "The lightning would get us all in this water." She was pausing every few steps and looking around her.

"We'll be okay. The lightning is letting up," Brian told her without being convinced. He tried to keep her moving along.

"It can't get any worse," Barb said.

"I *hate* nature," Barb shouted. "I love computers; I hate nature. This can't get any worse," Barb said again in an anguished voice.

"Don't say that—" Brian said. Right on cue they started to get pelted with marble-sized hailstones. Barb put her hand around Brian's wrist.

"It's not here!" Carl yelled angrily as he reached the line of trees.

Tommy looked left, paused and looked right,

turned a bit to the right and in about fifteen steps, calmly announced, “Here it is.”

“Where? I don’t see any—” Carl stopped mid-sentence when he saw a small break in the trees, marked with a barely visible slash of yellow on a rock where the trail began. The trees provided shelter from the last few hailstones. They went slowly because Nicole was limping a bit. The rain let up before they were down the hill. Still wet, but under blue sky again, they arrived at the campsite. Barb had regained her composure and was checking Nicole’s ankle.

“It’s not too bad, Mom.”

“Well, that was an adventure!” Claire said lightheartedly, though inside still fuming over Carl’s remark about Tommy.

“I guess, we were lucky,” Carl said to no one in particular.

Tommy and Brian were sitting on a log, both stroking Cosmo. A minute passed. Tommy looked up at his dad and said, “Luck is like Nature. It can be good or bad, and you can’t control it.”

Brian beamed and looked into Tommy’s bright eyes. Claire tussled his hair.

Barb looked at Tommy, “Well, we were lucky we had you with us, Tommy.”

# TO BE INDOORS

By Wendy Morris  
*Honorable Mention*

The sweaty, red-faced tourist blinked rapidly as he emerged from the darkness of the stuffy stairwell and into the blinding summer afternoon. He'd hoped for a cool breeze but was met with a blast of fiery heat. His wife was right behind him, fanning herself while trying to catch her breath from the climb. Their two daughters pushed their way past her, relieved that they had made it to the top.

"It's hot," said one girl

"I'm thirsty," complained the other.

"Kids, look at this view, you can see all of Paris from way up here," their mother called, trying to make them realize the point of climbing 387 steps up the narrow, winding staircase of Notre Dame.

The children glanced but were unimpressed; then they spotted me.

"Oh, look at that, it's so funny looking," the older one said, rudely pointing. She stuck her tongue out at me, mocking my face, which I really hate.

“I can’t see,” the smaller one cried. The father swooped her up to give her a better view and she too stuck her tongue out.

The father saw that the girls were interested in something for the first time that day and took the opportunity to share some knowledge. “It’s supposed to be terrifying; his job is to scare away demons.” He spoke in an eerie tone of voice and tickled his small daughter, trying to playfully frighten her. She giggled in response.

“What is it called?” the older girl inquired.

“It’s called a gargoyle,” the mother answered. “Look there’s more of them over here.”

They moved on and I watched them go. I sighed and for the ten millionth time I said, “Madame, I am not a gargoyle, I am a chimera. My name is Stryga.”

I am a goat-like demon with horns and wings that I believe would be quite terrifying if I opened them, but they are folded behind me against my will. I watch over the people of Paris with my perennially bored-looking face resting in my hands and my tongue sticking out, forever blowing raspberries at the city below. For a while I was happy with my facial expression as I watched them build Eiffel’s monstrosity, but now I am quite fond of the tower. It’s my favorite thing to watch at night when the lights shimmer and its beacon dances across the buildings. Now I felt my face looked like I hoped someone would share an ice cream cone with me.

Hundreds of people visit me every day. I have been photographed more often than all the other chimeras and

mine is one of the most famous faces in all of France. Yet I would gladly give up the fame and attention if only I could go inside from time to time. Tourists often stand next to me and reflect on what they'd seen that day. They point to the Louvre and talk about the Mona Lisa and how crowded the Grand Gallery was and how they got lost among rooms filled with some of the greatest art in the world. I, on the other hand, merely watched as one wing of the great museum was built. Daily I see the crowds line up, hourly I watch flocks of birds land on the roof, but never have I seen the treasures within.

"My favorite was the one by Monet or maybe Van Gogh," said one young traveler to her friend.

"The Impressionists were my favorite," her friend replied.

Those artists were also my friends. Many of them visited me while looking over the city they loved so much and from which they took so much inspiration. They'd often stand alone and confide in me about their insecurities and self-doubt, but they'd just as often share with me their observations of light, color, line and shape. Yet they never thought to bring one of their paintings for me to see. I assume that my stone-faced expression did not encourage the delicate ego of an artist; rather I believe they saw me as a visual representation of their inner critic. I wished I could have changed my expression to more accurately express what I thought.

I could see Montmartre, where they liked to gather and paint, the neighborhood on the hill that looked down

on the city much like I do. They'd walk the winding streets, talk and drink and have terrible arguments and inspiring conversations. And then they would retreat to their studios, or a special corner of Paris and create their masterpieces.

I longed to be among them.

Once an older couple spent a lot of time with me. The climb up the tower was arduous, and they took their time regaining their strength. They gazed out over my city and reflected upon their travels.

"Wow, this has got to be the best view that I've ever seen," the wife commented.

"Almost worth the climb. Definitely better than the climb up the Duomo in Florence. That stairwell was too narrow for two-way traffic, and my claustrophobia kicked in," the husband said. His wife playfully nudged him.

"I can't wait to stroll down the Seine with you," she said

He brought her hand to his mouth and gently kissed it. "Where do you want to go next?"

"Maybe somewhere with fewer stairs," she joked. "What should we do for dinner?"

He thought for a few moments. "What about that little bistro, the one with amazing steak tartare and onion soup?"

"The one with the perfect little pastries in the window?" She asked, her eyes bright with the thought of tasting those delicacies.

"That's the one, assuming that I'll survive the de-

scent back down to the street.”

“I think you’ll make it, Old Man,” the wife said and started to walk away. She turned and saw her husband lost in thought while he gazed across the city. She asked, “Are you coming?”

I’d would have gone with them if only they’d asked me.

Rain was one of my favorite things, followed closely by her sisters, snow and ice. Apart from birds they are the only things that touched me leaving me feeling clean, unlike pigeons who did the opposite. I watched storm clouds head my way and I was always excited for the arrival of the presents they carried, especially the gift of making the tourists stop taking my photo. They always took it from my bad side.

When they cleared out the only people that always stayed was an attendant or two. My favorite was Anna, a middle aged, former sales manager who felt trapped by her life and always having to be inside when it was so beautiful outside. She wished to escape the rigors of the business world and she found peace living in mine.

“Good morning, Stryga. How are you doing on this fine day?” She never failed to greet me. “The line outside is long so get your handsome face ready.”

I could see them from my perch, so the bored look that I always wear did a fine job of replying to her, my protruding tongue conveyed my indifference. But that day did not end up as fine as the other days in which she had wished me well. That beautiful October day started off the

same, a parade of people from all over the world that came to the same place to marvel at the beauty that is Paris in the fall. One man stood near me for a very long time. He did not speak, he just stared out at the horizon. This was not the first time I had seen this and these were the moments I most wished to be able to do something: turn my head, wink, say hi, anything at all, and I could have made all the difference in the world. I could have stopped him from climbing the wall.

But I couldn't because I had been made of stone.

Someone screamed, "No!" and then there was a lot of commotion. Anna helped usher people away and the tower was closed for the rest of the day. She was pale and shivered slightly despite the warmth of the mid-day sun but she stayed at her post to be able to answer any questions and to make sure that people stayed away. Later she stood by the same spot and tried to look over the edge but the wall was quite high and she really didn't want to see what might still be down on the ground. She looked at me, tears in her eyes and gently said, "I am sorry you had to see that."

Suddenly I had a tear in my eye as well. She saw my tear and then she did something that no one else ever thought to do. "Stryga, would you like to climb down from your perch and go inside for a while?"

I did what I wish I could have done earlier, I finally spoke and I said, "Yes, please."

We made our way down the spiral stairs and out into the street. It was late afternoon and the sun had sunk

low enough to turn the light into a magical pink hue. For the first time, I saw the façade of Notre Dame and understood why Monet painted it thirty times in two years, attempting to capture the ever-changing atmosphere. He often stood next to me and cursed the cathedral for the very reasons he was drawn to paint it.

It was strange to walk the streets I knew so well but that were always so far away. They were wide, brightly colored and very noisy. The people even seemed to be different from the parade that walked past me every day. They were lively and full of spirit as they briskly walked past restaurants and shops, sometimes glancing in to see what looked good that day.

Anna brought me to the Louvre and I finally saw the masterpieces created by my friends and was surprised and pleased to find my likeness in some of their work. I stared at the statues in the collection with longing: they stood inside stunning spaces, safely out of the elements. They looked happy and content in their alcoves and on their pedestals. I wondered where I could sit and what I would be able to see. I never wanted to return to my tower, to the freezing cold or the blistering sun, subjected to bird shit and people laughing at me.

We next went to the Opera House. I stopped dead in my tracks, overcome by the beauty of the space. Every inch was decorated, not a spot lacked for the attention of an artisan. I spun in a slow circle, jaw dropped and eyes wide open, trying to take it all in. I never imagined that this was what was hiding under the roof. Is this what all

the other buildings looked like inside?

Anna had left me to get tickets and when she came back, she found me in the exact spot where she had left me. She dragged me to our seats and I continued to stare all around me. I never thought I would see anything more spectacular than that theater, but then the production began and the spectacle of the performance managed to outshine the lavish environment in which it was produced. Tears again flowed down my face during the hero's aria at the tragic loss of his true love. He was magnificent.

She brought me to her apartment in the Marais. She invited some friends and for the first time I shared a laugh over a drink and plates of fruit, fresh bread and cheese. Her friends were funny and kind and I found them fascinating. I could imagine staying here forever, warm and comfortable. Would Anna ask me to stay?

Her friends had many questions for me and I answered all of them, making them laugh with my description of the many people I had seen or the antics of the crowds while they stood in line to enter the Cathedral. Then a young woman asked me, "What's your favorite thing you've ever seen from up there?"

I thought about the question for a long time. "I've seen so many things that it's hard to choose. Some have been dark, such as when invading armies have come through and threatened to destroy everything in their path. The bombs they dropped from above was the only time I was ever scared." Anna touched my arm and I felt encouraged to go on. "I watched the Seine flood and cause

panic, I've seen many beautiful buildings rise only to be destroyed by fire."

I paused for a moment, reviewing the last century and a half of Parisian history that had occurred while I scrutinized the city from high up in my bell tower. "But I watched many triumphs; when enemies were driven away, Olympians that competed with each other and cyclists in the Tour de France as they raced to the finish line and the fireworks on Bastille Day. I watched the Sacre-Coeur being built on a hill and I've seen it shining every day since." I smiled for a moment and looked at my new friends. "But my favorite thing I have ever seen is the sunset each night. It's like a spectacular display that the heavens perform just for me. They are always different and beautiful despite whatever mayhem or celebration may be happening down below me. Even when it's stormy and dark clouds obliterate the sun, there is a special subtle beauty when the light changes at the end of the day. And if I am really lucky, the sun will break through the black clouds, its rays of light violently streaking across the sky like it's trying to vanquish the power of the storm by throwing a rainbow with all its colors across the world."

Everyone sat silently, lost in their thoughts, visualizing the scene I just painted for them. Anna finally squeezed my hand and a person sitting next to her said a nearly silent, "Wow."

A tall, skinny man with his brown hair up in a bun said, "I wonder what it would be like to be you, just for one day."

Dawn rapidly approached and I knew it was time to go back. Without exchanging a word, Anna and I left her apartment and strolled down the street. Everything was quiet and peaceful as we ended up along the Seine and I took my first walk along the banks of the river that surrounded Notre Dame but into which I had never even dipped a toe. The path led us back to my tower and I stood at the base and looked up at the empty spot where I should be.

“Are you sure you want to go back?” Anna tentatively asked me. “You don’t have to, nothing is making you stay there.”

I smiled at her. She’d been so kind to me and I hated for the night to end. “We are the soul of this cathedral. Our job is to communicate its different egos and be thoughtful or melancholy, cunning or wicked or even to just stick out our tongue in judgement of all the silliness we see. I am a chimera and it is all I know how to be.”

She hugged me tightly and then let me go. “I will treasure this night for my whole life, Thank you for coming with me.”

“Thanks for asking me,” I said, and then for the first time in 154 years, I opened my wings, stretched them a little and flew up to my spot along the gallery of others like me. I settled in, tucked my wings back comfortably, rested my face back in my hands and sighed deeply as I stuck out my tongue.

# WHAT'S IN THE ATTIC?

By Dorothy Bakirtjy  
*Honorable Mention*

CREAK. CREAK. CREAK.

Mandy and her husband, Tom, are asleep for the night. Mandy sits up in bed listening for more noises. Tom is snoring, undisturbed by the sounds. Nothing. She looks over lovingly at her husband.

“Wake up,” Mandy gently shakes Tom’s shoulder.

“Why?” Tom asks sleepily.

“I think I heard noises in the attic. They woke me up,” Mandy answers as she points to the ceiling.

“It’s just the house settling,” Tom responds without opening his eyes.

“Tom, I think we have an animal in the attic,” Mandy insists.

“We don’t have animals,” Tom rolls over to go back to sleep.

“Tom, I think we do. I need to tell you what the vet said today about Moonshadow.”

“Can’t this wait until morning?” Tom murmurs.

“No. It’s important,” Mandy responds as she turns on the floor lamp bathing the bedroom in a harsh light.

“Ok, ok. Turn the spotlight off. It’s hurting my eyes,” Tom answers putting his hands in front of his eyes.

“Are you awake?” Mandy asks.

“I am now,” grumbles Tom, as he sits up in bed. “What did the vet say?”

“The vet said that Moonshadow has fleas. They had to give her a flea dip,” Mandy blurts out in frustration.

“How can an indoor only cat get fleas?” Tom questions.

“That’s what I said to the vet!” Mandy proclaims. “The vet asked if we had taken Moonshadow to a groomer or boarded her.”

“No to both questions. Has she gotten outside lately? Maybe she went out when we were bringing in the groceries?” Tom is determined to find the reason.

“No, but the vet said that we should check our house. Since the cat had fleas, they may be in our carpet. She asked if we had any unusual bites on our legs. Fleas can jump from the carpet onto your legs,” Mandy carefully relays the information.

“Why are we discussing this now? I won’t be able to sleep, thinking that we have fleas in our bed,” Tom says grumpily.

“Well let’s check out the carpet tomorrow.”

“I don’t think I can sleep now,” Tom mumbles as he lies back down and begins to snore.

Just then the rafters begin to creak.

“Tom, I think I hear something,” Mandy says as she nudges Tom.

“It’s just the house settling. Go to sleep,” Tom sleepily responds.

CHIRP, CHIRP, CHIRP

“I hear chirping coming from the attic,” Mandy whispers as she looks up towards the ceiling.

“We probably have a bird’s nest in the attic. I’ll check it out tomorrow. Just go to sleep,” Tom commands.

“I think I saw a hole in the soffit. That’s probably how the birds got inside the attic. Maybe they have a nest with babies.” Mandy tries to rationalize the reason for the peculiar noise.

Both Tom and Mandy fall asleep with Moonshadow curled up next to them.

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!

In the early morning hours, the sounds in the house are so loud, they wake up both Tom and Mandy. Moonshadow leaps off the bed and hides in the closet. It sounds like someone is beating on the ductwork. Mandy hugs Tom out of fear.

“Do you still think it’s birds?” Mandy shakily asks.

“Obviously, there is an animal in the attic,” Tom grumbles.

“One? There must be at least two chasing each other,” Mandy responds irritably.

“Where are you going?” Tom is puzzled as Mandy begins to leave the room.

“I’m calling Animal Control. This is an emergency!” Mandy abruptly stops and quickly turns around, returning to the bedroom.

“Can they get inside the house from the attic?” There is fear and concern in Mandy’s voice.

“No. The house is sealed from the attic,” Tom assures her.

“OK. Just checking before I go into the rest of the house.” Mandy leaves to make her phone call.

“Hello. Is this an emergency?” The Animal Control operator asks as she answers Mandy’s call.

“Yes!” Mandy responds emphatically.

“What is the nature of the emergency?”

“We have animals running around in our attic.”

“Have you seen animals anywhere else in the house?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry but this is not an emergency. Also, Animal Control does not remove animals from attics. You’ll have to call an animal removal company.”

“How can this not be an emergency? The animals are making horrible noises that are resounding throughout the house!”

“I’m sorry but Animal Control only gets involved if there is an emergency. We don’t have the resources to remove animals from houses that are not an immediate threat.”

“Where do I find someone who can help me?”

“Just look up animal removal on the Web. Good luck. I wish I could help you.”

“I wish you could help me too,” Mandy answers dejectedly.

Tom comes into the room wearing his bathrobe.

“When are they going to be here? Shouldn’t we get dressed?” Tom asks as he runs his hand through his hair.

“They aren’t coming,” Mandy responds.

“What?” A look of disbelief appears on Tom’s face.

“They said this isn’t an emergency and we need to contact an animal removal company.”

“That’s ridiculous. We have animals in our house!” Tom’s anger is beginning to mount.

“Let’s just call an animal removal company and see if they can come over now.” Mandy tries to diffuse the situation.

As Tom paces the room, Mandy gets out her computer and starts looking up animal removal companies. Tom is muttering and clearly disturbed that Animal Control refused to help him.

“Why do we have Animal Control if they won’t do anything?” Tom mumbles and is clearly annoyed.

“Tom, calm down. Here’s a company that offers 24-hour service. Let’s call them.”

“Great. Tell them this is an emergency. Get them out here now!” Tom orders Mandy.

Mandy calls the number and twirls her hair as she impatiently waits for someone to pick up the phone.

“Hello. 24-Hour Animal Removal. Can I help you?”

“Yes, we have an emergency situation. We have animals in our attic. Can you come now?” Mandy blurts out in a panic.

“Do you know what kind of animals you have?”

“Well, we originally thought that we had birds because of the chirping. But now at least two animals are chasing each other and are making very loud sounds throughout the house. It’s terrifying.”

“From your description, it sounds like raccoons. They’re nocturnal. The chirping is probably baby raccoons. You may have an entire family in your attic. I’m surprised you haven’t had fleas in your house. Often the fleas get into the ducts.”

“My cat was just treated for fleas,” Mandy responds.

“You will need to flea bomb your house once we get the raccoons out.”

“So, when can you be here?” Mandy asks.

“It’s 3 AM. We don’t consider animals in an attic as an emergency because they can’t get into your house. We can have someone there at 7 AM. Will you be home at that time?”

“Yes, we’ll both be here.”

“Our services can get expensive with so many animals to catch.”

“I don’t care. I need to get them out of my house. You don’t poison them, do you?”

“No, we provide baited cages and remove them

alive.”

“What do you do with them? I don’t want them killed.”

“We release them back into the wild. Far from your house.”

“That sounds perfect. Can you hold just a minute?” Mandy asks as Tom interrupts her conversation.

“When can they be here?” Tom asks.

“She said 7AM. Well, I guess that’s four hours from now,” Mandy responds.

“Why can’t they come right now?” Tom demands.

“She said it’s not considered an emergency.”

“This is ridiculous. Give me the phone.” Tom grabs the phone from Mandy.

“Hello, we need someone here right now! This is an emergency!” Tom yells into the phone.

“I’m sorry but you’re not in immediate danger. Our policy is to send someone as early as possible the next day. We have scheduled someone for 7AM. That is the best I can do,” 24-Hour Animal Removal responds.

“How can you call yourself 24-Hour Removal when you don’t respond immediately?” Tom yells into the receiver.

“We do respond immediately, if you’re in danger. I understand this can be scary having loud noises in your home, but your situation is not a serious threat to your safety. Do you still want us to come?”

“Yes, definitely. My only issue is that I want you to come now!” Tom demands.

“I’ll try to get someone there before 7AM. That’s the best I can do.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

Tom triumphantly hands the phone back to his wife.

“They’re coming earlier. Can you give them our address? I’m going back to bed,” Tom instructs Mandy as he leaves the room.

At 6AM, Mandy and Tom are awakened by the doorbell. They spring from the bed and grab their robes in order to answer the door. Tom reaches the door first and opens it with great gusto.

“Hi. I’m Adam from 24-Hour Animal Removal. I have an order here for animal removal from your attic. I have cages in the truck,” Adam introduces himself.

“Come on in. I’m Tom and this is my wife, Mandy. We are so happy you could get here earlier.”

“You are lucky I live nearby. We normally don’t start this early, but I heard this was a stressful situation for you. Do you know what animals are in the attic?” Adam politely asks.

“We don’t. At first, we heard chirps and thought it was birds. But last night it sounded like squirrels or raccoons chasing each other,” Mandy blurts out.

“Well it could have been a raccoon chasing a squirrel. We get that a lot. Squirrels will go into a house and raccoons will go inside to eat them. If the noises are only at night, it’s probably raccoons. Squirrels are normally day-

time animals. Baby raccoons are active in the daytime, too. So, if there are babies, they may have been chasing each other. It doesn't take much weight to make loud noises when running on top of ducts," Adam said with authority. "I'll bring in two baited cages and let's see what we catch." Adam walks out to his truck to get the cages.

Tom looks at Mandy lovingly. "You made a great choice with this animal service. I like that they seem to know what they are doing, and are going to catch the animals alive and release them back to the wild."

Mandy beams at Tom. "Me, too."

Adam returns and asks Tom if he will show him the door to the attic. Both Adam and Tom disappear up the attic stairs. The attic has a strong odor and there is disarray where boxes have been knocked over.

Adam turns to Tom and says, "Definitely raccoons. That smell is raccoon. I'll put the cages here and there. I'll need you to check them and call me if you catch one. "

Adam and Tom descend the attic stairs. Mandy looks up anxiously.

"Did you see any animals?" Mandy asks.

"No, but the attic really smells," Tom responds.

"We'll have to check the cages for live animals and take the cages down for pickup. Do you think you can handle that?" Tom asks sheepishly.

"What? No way!" Mandy recoils at the thought.

"I didn't think so, but it never hurts to ask." Tom winks at Mandy.

"Do you have any questions before I leave?" Adam

asks, looking at both Mandy and Tom.

“Yes. Can’t we just plug the hole that they are using to come and go?” Tom questions.

“No, you do not want to do that until we have them all out of the house. If you plug the hole, they might rip through your walls to get out. All I need you to do is check the traps once a day and call me if you have a live animal. We charge by the cage so let’s hope we catch the babies with the mother,” Adam responds.

That evening after work, Tom immediately goes up into the attic to check the traps. There is an adult raccoon in one trap. The other trap has two babies with their mother. Tom carries the traps down the attic stairs with the raccoons hissing their displeasure. He sets them in the shade by the side of the house.

“Mandy, come look!” Tom shouts excitedly.

Mandy runs out to see why Tom is calling her.

“They are so adorable. I’m so glad we caught the mother and her babies!” Mandy exclaims.

“Looks like our animal troubles are over,” Tom proudly announces.

Tom goes to call 24-Hour Animal Removal. When Tom returns, he is not as happy as he had been earlier.

“What’s wrong?” Mandy asks after seeing Tom’s face.

“Andy said that raccoons often have more than two babies. We may have some orphans in the attic now. He wants me to replace the cages to catch the babies. He is

dropping off two more cages,” Tom says sadly.

“How will we get the orphans back with their mother?” Mandy asks.

“I’m guessing they would leave the babies where they left the mom. Let’s just catch them first. OK?” Tom walks off, defeated.

Later that day, Andy shows up for the raccoons. He leaves two empty baited cages and a bill for the services.

When Tom comes home from work, he puts on his work gloves to take the cages into the attic. As he approaches the baited cages, he notices one cage is not empty! Flies are buzzing around a very filthy and unhappy looking opossum. He lunges at Tom showing his sharp little teeth. Tom jumps back and yells for Mandy.

Mandy comes running. “What’s wrong?”

“Get back!” Tom shouts at her.

“What is it?” Mandy asks.

“An opossum got trapped in the baited cage that Andy left for me,” Tom explains.

“Shall we just call them to pick up the trap?” Mandy suggests.

“No, I’m not paying for an opossum. I’m just going to open the cage and let it out.”

“Do you think that’s safe?” Mandy asks.

“I think it will be fine. Get back. I will open the door with that stick over there.”

Tom opens the door and the opossum meanders out of the cage, hissing the entire time, the flies following

behind the opossum.

“I guess he was not happy with the cage. Do we have anything we can replace the bait with?” Tom asks Mandy.

“I have peanut butter,” Mandy responds.

“Perfect. Can you bring me the jar and a plastic knife, so I can put it in the bait container? We just saved some money here,” Tom proudly proclaims.

Tom rebaits the trap and carries both traps into the attic. He looks around and doesn't see any animals, but the smell is still there. He leaves two traps and goes back down the stairs.

The next morning Tom checks the traps. One trap is empty, but the other trap has a baby raccoon. He smiles as he sees it and takes down the trap. Mandy is waiting at the bottom of the stairs and sees the baby.

The baby raccoon has large black eyes, with a black mask on his small face, and is twitching his nose. His little hands are grasping the bars, as he tries to climb inside the cage. He is making small chirping sounds.

“Oh, aren't you precious! Your mommy is going to be happy to see you!” Mandy cooed.

“Well the other cage was empty so let's hope we have them all,” Tom proudly announces.

Tom puts the cage outside in the shade and goes to call 24-Hour Animal Removal.

“Tell them that they need to release this one wherever they released the mother. Otherwise it will be an orphan,” Mandy insists.

“Adam said not to worry. This one will go where the mother went,” Tom responds.

“That is great. I’m so glad. I wonder if there are any more,” Mandy beams.

“I hope not,” Tom mumbles.

Later that day, Mandy starts worrying about the baby raccoon. She calls 24-Hour Animal Removal to ask if the mother and baby were reunited. She wants to know if the mother actually found the baby. The woman who answers the phone for the company is confused.

“Didn’t they tell you that State Law requires us to humanely kill the animals? We do a lethal injection.”

Mandy is in shock. Those cute raccoon babies were killed! The baby that she worried about is dead as well. Mandy can’t believe it.

“I was told that the animals would be released safely into the wild. I would never have hired you, if I knew I was signing a death warrant. Why did you lie to me?” Mandy is angry and close to tears.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know who told you that, but I assure you that we are following the State Law. Once raccoons are professionally removed from a house, they are humanely euthanized. This is the law. They can carry babies.”

“We are done doing business with your company. You can come and pick up your cages today,” Mandy responds.

When Tom comes home, Mandy tells him about

her conversation with 24-Hour Animal Removal. He can't believe it.

"They lied to us. This is unbelievable. You're right. They can have their cages back. We will buy our own cage and contact a wildlife rehabilitation center if we catch any more babies," Tom proclaims.

"I'll research wildlife rehab centers while you go buy a cage. If we catch any more babies, at least we can save them!" Mandy hugs Tom.

"Well we have the peanut butter!" Tom responds as he kisses Mandy.

"Maybe we should write to our representative to try to change the law. Think about the lives we could save!" Mandy says enthusiastically.

"I love you, Mandy! You care about wildlife as much as I do!"

# MAGGIE'S NATURE TRILOGY

By Marcia Axelrad  
*Honorable Mention*

## Part One – Observing Nature

Maggie thought of her yard as a nature lab. Whenever she had the opportunity to sit out, she would smile and enjoy watching the delicate yellow small butterfly and the larger orange- and black-striped Monarch with white dots flitting from the Milkweed plants to the liatris flowers.

Yellow finches and grey doves would take turns at the bird feeder. On a rare occasion she would spot hummingbirds with their incessant flapping hover around the polka dot coleus plant. These were truly joyous moments for Maggie. There was a family of rabbits in the area. On one sunny Saturday morning, Maggie spotted two rabbits. She immediately named them Hopper and Scrambler. They were munching on wild flower leaves under the kitchen window. Maggie grabbed her phone and switched to camera mode, and snapped photos of the two hungry bunnies, one grey and one brown. Another regular in the

front yard bushes was Rusty, a small orange spider who would spin the most delicate of webs.

## **Part Two – Enjoying Nature**

The overwhelming, delightful scent of lilacs greeted Maggie as she entered the back garden and slipped into a lounge chair. She was relaxing and sipping a cup of coffee. She put her coffee cup on the wrought-iron side table and rested her head against the back of the chair. She looked up and watched the filmiest of clouds lazily sail to the east in an ocean of blue. The sweetest chirp of a bird was heard in a nearby tree. This was her oasis. Not some swanky spa, but her own back yard. The flowers were spreading beautifully, with their hues of raspberry, purple, fuschia, and a splash of pink.

On closer examination you could see chives and dandelions sprouting in the patio block dividers. Regional area plants were invading the roses and other planned areas. Logs and branch firewood needed cleaning up, and rusted tabletops needed a touchup. This is home . . . in due time.

## **Part Three – The Best of Human Nature**

Maggie went to turn on one of her favorite TV programs. The program was preempted by an emergency situation in Houston, Texas: nature's vengeance, with rain torrents and winds causing untold damage with tornados and flash

flooding. The cameras focused on a truck submerged in water up to the top window level. There was a person in a chair on top of the truck holding an umbrella. There was a man standing on a flat bed just beneath the roof. Maggie watched with tearful eyes as the truck and occupants slowly descended into the water. Suddenly an inflated boat approached to rescue the two occupants. They boarded the rescue vehicle and floated off. The truck was totally submerged ten minutes later. Thank you! Thank you!

That past week Maggie sat comfortably in her home in Illinois and watched nature's ravaging of Texas. Tears streamed down her cheeks watching the heroics day after day, people stretching their endurance efforts to reach thousands stranded helplessly as they were engulfed by continuous rain and flooding: no chance to salvage anything but their own existence, while Maggie sat with tons of "things" cramping every corner. There was beauty in what she saw. The very best of humanity. She did not see despair. An unending stream of the best people, reaching out.

# THE NATURE OF CHANGE

By Linda Frederick  
*Honorable Mention*

During the 1920s, America had become the wealthiest country in the world. Everyone had good jobs, good pay, and money to spend. By 1929, twenty percent of Americans owned cars, traveling on roads built by tens of thousands of workers. Springing up along those miles of highways were motels, garages, restaurants, and towns.

Life was grand in America. If you wanted something, you went out and bought it. Even President Herbert Hoover confidently stated, “The business in America *is* business.” The stock market was booming; everyone wanted the chance to make his fortune. Over a million people owned stock, making handsome returns on their investments. Americans were lulled into a false sense of security by the prosperity experienced during that decade.

No one could say with any certainty what specific events triggered the catastrophic collapse of the American economy on Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929. Some

believed that structural weaknesses led to massive bank failures and the stock market crash on Wall Street. Others subscribed to the theory that the government was to blame for not regulating interest rates, curtailing bank failures, and controlling the money supply. Whatever the theory, the end result was indisputable; it was the beginning of the economic downward spiral that enveloped America and impacted the world for the next ten years.

Capital investments and construction virtually came to a halt. People weren't spending or investing their money; businesses were forced to close and workers had to be laid off. As a consequence, unemployment in the United States rose to greater than twenty-five percent. Cities dependent on heavy industries such as manufacturing, mining, logging, and construction were particularly hard hit. Prices for goods dropped in response to the decrease for demand.

These were certainly desperate times for all Americans; and while twenty-three-year-old Sophie was no stranger to misfortune, she was now forced to face additional hardships.

Since immigrating to the United States with her mother and two older brothers in 1910, life had shown her very little kindnesses. When she was an infant, her father left their home in Poland to pursue a better life in America for all of them. After three years of separation, he'd saved enough money to send for their family. Sophie was uprooted from the security of her home and reunited with a father who had only existed in a small photo perched

on the fireplace mantle. The adjustment to life in America and a new family dynamic proved to be one of the lesser hurdles for Sophie. Being almost four years old, she was quick to learn the language and customs.

For the next ten years, Sophie was nurtured by her loving parents and soon blossomed into a gregarious child. She was quite the conversationalist; a combination of wit and charm earned her popularity among classmates and adults, alike. This natural gift was an asset her mother often relied upon when entertaining guests and hosting club meetings. She could depend on Sophie's social skills to make every function a success. As the years passed and their family grew, it was no surprise that Sophie was delegated the task of supervising her younger siblings.

Unfortunately, the prosperity and security of her family's life in America could not withstand the test of time. The Spanish flu had killed over fifty million people since 1918—an astounding three percent of the world's population. The pandemic showed no discrimination, leaving a trail of devastation from the Arctic to India. The influenza virus had claimed its share of infants, children, and elderly; but primarily attacked young adults like her mother and father.

Sophie's carefree childhood came to an abrupt halt in early February of 1920. Both of her parents developed deadly compound pneumonia from the flu. Within a thirty-two-hour period, Sophie, along with her seven siblings, were orphaned. A few days after the funeral, their house was sold and her brothers and sisters were scattered

throughout Minnesota, facing unknown fates. Sophie, then thirteen, was sentenced to servitude for the next four-and-a-half years. The same funeral parlor that buried her parents offered her room and board in exchange for labor. It was a depressing existence for Sophie. Forced to quit school, she spent her days cooking and cleaning for the steady stream of mourners attending wakes and funerals.

Liberated on her eighteenth birthday in 1924, Sophie left Graham's Funeral Parlor and never glanced back. Now that she was legally an adult, the Virginia Bank released her share of the trust created from the sale of their family's house. With her three-hundred-dollar inheritance securely tucked inside her pocketbook, Sophie relocated to the city of Virginia, Minnesota.

Walking through the business district of Virginia, Sophie noticed a "Help Wanted" advertisement for housekeeping staff at the Virginia Arms Hotel. This prestigious establishment, conveniently located on downtown's main street, offered the finest accommodations to business and recreational guests. Apparently, the years spent toiling at the funeral parlor were not without merit. After a brief interview with the hotel manager, Sophie was hired. Finally, she received a fair wage for her duties and had unlimited opportunities for socializing. The future, once again, held brighter possibilities—that was until the Great Depression hit.

Sophie desperately tried to ride out the tough financial times. Those countless hours spent learning to knit with her mother proved invaluable. Selling her exqui-

site sweaters, hats, scarves and blankets in the hotel lobby helped to supplement her income. As the Depression dragged on, the number of travelers frequenting the Virginia Arms Hotel dramatically decreased, as did the sale of her knitted apparel.

After two years, her situation was still in a state of flux. Upon serious introspection, Sophie decided not to stay in Minnesota. Relocating to a big city would give her a better chance of supporting herself. After talking with guests and doing some research, she picked a new destination: the Windy City, that hustling, bustling town known as Chicago. In the autumn of 1931, Sophie, fueled with optimism, dreams, and the seed money from her parents, boarded a southeastern-bound train to begin the next chapter in her life.

It was a hot day in late July when Sophie wearily returned to the air-conditioned lobby of the Lexington Hotel. She'd been pounding the pavement most of the day interviewing for jobs. The responses were always the same, "We're sorry, but we're looking for someone with more experience." It shouldn't have been so difficult to find work—she'd been in Chicago for eight months and was still unemployed.

Lately, her attitude was less than positive. Beginning to doubt her self-worth, Sophie's confidence was shaken. Time had dampened her enthusiasm, and the reality of her predicament was inescapable. Forced to live off of pocket change, she'd soon be unable to afford the rent if her luck didn't improve. She hadn't endured years of ad-

versity and abuse in Minnesota only to end up destitute and defeated now—her tough constitution wouldn't allow that to happen.

Looking down at her ring finger with purpose, Sophie gazed at her mother's wedding band. Gently, she grasped the ring with her thumb and index finger, twisting it ever so slightly while admiring its sparkle. The stunning half-carat diamond with blue-white brilliance had been meticulously cut and polished by a European gemologist. Set in a white-gold filigree band, the ring was modest yet stylish.

For a brief moment, Sophie entertained pawning the ring. The quick cash would guarantee food and lodging for another few weeks. Contemplating such a deed frightened her; immediately, she squelched the idea. She'd faced dire circumstances before yet always clung tightly to this heirloom, never daring to part with it. Her mother's most coveted possession had been entrusted to her and was all that remained of her parents' love and commitment to one another. So how was it possible, even in a moment of weakness, to think of something as indecent as selling it? Obviously, she was under more stress than she realized.

Sophie needed to clear her head. Panicking over her temporary lapse of good judgment wouldn't solve anything. She entered the hotel's coffee shop, head held high, walking decisively. With each step, her summer-white, T-strap high heels rhythmically clicked against the tile floor. Her wavy, honey-colored hair was neatly contained in a rhinestone hair net with a dainty black bow. Her flawless

complexion and smooth alabaster skin showcased her natural beauty. Wearing a grey two-piece dress with a white V-neck collar and white patent-leather belt, Sophie's demeanor was that of a savvy businesswoman. With only pennies in her pocket, she intended to relax over a cup of coffee and a cigarette before changing out of her interviewing clothes. It was unsettling that the familiar feeling of desperation had followed her to Chicago. Being alone and in a tight spot was the perfect catalyst for impetuous actions.

Many times as she'd entered the hotel lobby or restaurant, the same group of dapper young men would glance her way. It'd been going on for months and seemed innocent enough. Sometimes they'd smile in acknowledgement, other times they'd wink. Occasionally, those gestures were accompanied by a soft whistle and a lingering stare. She ignored their advances, feeling insulted by their crass behavior, yet a tiny part of her was flattered by the back-handed display of attention. With the passage of time, Sophie had become impervious to their antics. However, this day was different. As she walked past their table, one of the gentlemen commented, "Hey babe, how 'bout joinin' us for a drink?"

Stopping in mid-stride, she thought, *What would be the harm in sitting with the boys and having a free drink?* The diversion might boost her morale. They appeared to be pleasant fellows, always laughing and joking around. She'd seen them on many occasions—technically, they weren't exactly strangers. They dressed well and apparently had

money to spend on food and entertainment. Some friendly small talk and free coffee seemed harmless enough.

Looking directly into the eyes of her host, Sophie responded, "Thank you. I don't mind if I do, but my company is going to cost you more than a drink." As she reached for an empty chair, the slender man jumped up to offer some assistance.

"Let me help you with this." Grasping the back of the chair, he slid it away from the table. The husky aroma of cigar smoke wafted from his tailored navy-blue pin-stripe suit as his arm brushed past her. The vibrant red carnation in the boutonniere hole of his lapel caught Sophie's eye. Her gaze drifted to his stunning paisley brocade tie and matching pocket handkerchief made of fine silk. Obviously, this man had good taste and class.

Once Sophie was seated, he said, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Jake."

"Thank you, Jake. It's nice to make your acquaintance." Sophie, impressed by his act of chivalry, cordially extended her hand in greeting.

"Sitting to your left is my associate, Paulie, known as 'the waiter.' Next to him is Tony, who I affectionately call 'Joey Batters.' And whose company do we have the pleasure of enjoying today, might I ask?" Jake inquired in a most charming voice.

"Why, you already know my name," Sophie replied while watching in amusement as the brows of the three men perplexedly furrowed. After dramatically pausing for several seconds, Sophie remarked with an air of play-

ful wittiness, “Don’t you remember? You said it when you called me over to your table. It’s Babe.”

Her clever quip was met with chuckles and oohs. Paulie poked Tony in the side with his chubby elbow and smirked. Jake slapped the table with the flat of his hand and laughed hard, after which, he said, “I like you, kid! You’ve got spunk and clever comebacks. Ok, *Babe*, what’s your pleasure?”

Before she could answer, Jake snapped his fingers above his head a few times. A waiter appeared almost instantaneously. Jake requested, “Johnny, our lady friend here, *Babe*, would like...” he hesitated while glancing in her direction, indicating that she should order.

“I’d like a cup of black coffee, no sugar, a glass of water with a lemon slice, and a turkey club with plenty of mayo on the side, please.”

“Okay, Johnny, you got that? Bring the rest of us a plate of biscotti and some coffee.”

“Right away, Mr. Guzik. Will there be anything else?” Johnny respectfully asked.

“No. That’s all for now.” Jake flicked his wrist a couple of times, dismissing Johnny into the kitchen.

The four of them sat at that table conversing for a couple of hours. Sophie liked the light-hearted banter, enjoyed escaping from her financial worries. She’d made some friends, and that always brightened any situation. They were brazen towards life, which she found intriguing. They were flashy dressers, living the good life. Sophie knew she wanted to be a part of their clique.

While she might've suspected they had mob connections by their mannerisms and conduct, it didn't concern her. Perhaps, if she'd known how heavily involved they were in Al Capone's outfit, it might've given her cause to reassess her choice of cohorts. She had no idea that Jake, the principal bagman and brains behind Capone's operations, was responsible for payoffs to police captains and sergeants, as well as the politicians at City Hall. She only knew she was treated well and felt special in his company, and that was enough of an incentive to cultivate the relationship. So began her inevitable involvement with the criminal element of Chicago.

Sophie, officially known as "Babe" among her new acquaintances, was entertaining and amusing. They enjoyed her companionship, and in exchange, they showered her with gifts. She wanted for nothing and no longer fretted over finances.

Babe was a confident, assertive young woman with a penchant for excitement and attention. Capitalizing on her knowledge of human nature, she quickly gained entrance into the mob's social circles. She enjoyed being surrounded by an atmosphere of gaiety. Her new companions were a fast party crowd seeking the thrills and adventure found at speakeasies and gambling houses around Chicago. Wherever they went, the money flowed as freely as the booze.

Babe's bold behavior skirted on the edge of impropriety. She wouldn't have lasted all those months in Chicago if it weren't for her opportunistic resourcefulness in the

first place. Following her instincts, she did what was necessary to survive. If that meant profiting from her charm and good looks, then that was completely defensible. Though she wasn't always proud of her actions, she didn't agonize over them either. Depending on her ingenuity to exist sometimes meant compromising her ethics. That was the reality of her situation since the death of her parents and separation from her siblings. For Sophie—now Babe—the end would always justify the means.

## JUDGE BIO

Richard Thomas is the award-winning author of seven books—*Disintegration* and *Breaker* (Penguin Random House Alibi), *Transubstantiate*, *Staring into the Abyss*, *Herniated Roots*, *Tribulations*, and *The Soul Standard* (Dzanc Books). His over 140 stories in print include *Cemetery Dance* (twice), *Behold!: Oddities, Curiosities and Undefinable Wonders* (Bram Stoker Winner), *PANK*, *storySouth*, *Gargoyle*, *Weird Fiction Review*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Gutted: Beautiful Horror Stories*, *Qualia Nous*, *Chiral Mad* (numbers 2-4), and *Shivers VI*. He was also the editor of four anthologies: *The New Black* and *Exigencies* (Dark House Press), *The Lineup: 20 Provocative Women Writers* (Black Lawrence Press) and *Burnt Tongues* (Medallion Press) with Chuck Palahniuk. He has been nominated for the Bram Stoker, Shirley Jackson, and Thriller awards. In his spare time he writes for Lit Reactor and is Editor-in-Chief at *Gamut Magazine*. For more information visit [www.whatdoesnotkillme.com](http://www.whatdoesnotkillme.com) or contact Paula Munier at Talcott Notch.

The Village of Mundelein Arts Commission, established in August of 2016, hosts writing contests for Lake County residents. Winners and Honorable Mentions are featured in issues of the *Mundelein Writes* publication. If you would like copies of the publication or are interested in participating in a future writing contest, please visit the Arts Commission website at: [www.mundelein.org/mac](http://www.mundelein.org/mac) for more information, or contact:

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Photo: "Hanging Out Red" by David A. LaSpina