

The Metropolitan



Hallway Digital Photograph Sarah Madsen

A Magazine of Writing
by Students
at Metropolitan Community College

2011

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by Students
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“What is written without effort is, in general, read without pleasure.”

Samuel Johnson

The Metropolitan 2011

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The Metropolitan publishes all types of academic and literary writing, including descriptive, narrative, expository, and persuasive works, as well as creative prose and poetry. We encourage writings from across the disciplines and also welcome visual art. Our goal is to showcase the best of the many voices, styles, and subjects MCC writers and readers find meaningful and to support critical thinking, creativity, and expression at Metropolitan Community College.

The Metropolitan is published once a year. The print edition includes the best selections from the full web edition which can be read at <http://resource.mccneb.edu/metropolitan>

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The Yellow Dress

Patty Carr

2011 Writing Awards

For her story “The Yellow Dress,” Patty Carr is the winner of The Metropolitan 2011 Prize for Student Writing, a 13.5-credit-hour tuition remission. The first runner-up, Mark Darby, is awarded 9 credit hours tuition remission for his poem “Thank You, E.B.” The second runner-up, Steven Gale, receives 4.5 credit hours tuition remission for his essay “The Sound of Lavender.”

At no time in the past four decades had Beth seen her mother—or at least the woman she called mother—so unsettled. It was a relief, then, when Mother stood up and announced it was time to start. Beth and Sarah quickly fell in line, and the trio of Oakley women made their way up the wooden staircase, which seemed to moan a “welcome home” with each of the sisters’ steps. Thirty years earlier, Beth easily silenced the old house with strategically placed feet, but today, squeaky stairs would not be the tattletale of secrets.

“I will miss many things about this old house,” said Mother, “but *not* these stairs.” She paused at the first landing to catch her breath. “I could carry the laundry only this far yesterday,” she said, bending to pick up the abandoned laundry basket.

“I’ll get that,” said Beth, reaching for the basket and recalling the precision with which Mother packed a laundry basket: socks rolled into uniform-sized balls, perfectly folded, bleached undershirts, stacks of hand towels and guest towels—separate piles, organized by color, of course, and “Oh my gosh, Mother, don’t tell me you are still ironing Dad’s boxer shorts!”

“I’m so glad your new house has everything on one floor!” Sarah said, redirecting the conversation. “Your life is going to be so much easier there, don’t you think?”

Mother muttered something like “umm huh,” which was all the sound she could muster after reaching the top step. She turned right and headed toward her room, stopping at the hallway bookshelf as if to wait for the others, but really wanting to catch her breath. Beth and Sarah darted around the upstairs rooms, delivering clean laundry to the places they had occupied for thirty years. Mother waited by the bookshelf, which sat like a wooden coffin, holding lifeless memories that no one wanted, nor wanted to discard.

By the time Beth and Sarah finished, Mother had moved to her room and was perched at the foot of her perfectly coiffed bed. The way she sat—left foot tucked behind the right, back straight,

hands folded in her lap—reminded Beth of the garden bench in the backyard where a concrete angel sat as guardian of the dead, keeping vigil over Scout, Trixie, and countless gerbils wrapped in paper towels and placed in red checkbook boxes for all of eternity. Beth wondered if it was proper to tell the new owners there were animals buried in the yard. She made a mental note to ask the realtor about that.

Beth and Sarah entered the bedroom, careful not to seem too familiar with a space supposedly off limits but covertly explored anyway.

“Okay!” said Beth. Beth said “okay” a lot. The word could mean many things but always meant she was taking charge—something that never bothered Dad or Sarah, but was always a source of contention with Mother. Today, however, Mother seemed relieved to have someone else, even Beth, take control. The bedroom had been painted seafoam green thirty-four years ago. A dresser and vanity set, circa 1960, sat against the wall facing the bed. In the corner of the room, an oak door with a beveled built-in mirror led to a walk-in closet tucked under the eaves of the 1905 mission style home. Beth walked around the bed to the corner of the room and pulled back the seafoam green drapes, exposing five east-facing windows which overlooked the front lawn. She had hoped to bring some morning sunlight into the room, but instead she found the skies had clouded over. Even so, it was brighter with the drapes pulled back.

“Okay. Shall we start with the closet, vanity, or dresser?” asked Beth. No one answered. This house had been a shrine to orderliness for fifty-three years. In fact, Beth often teased that she was going to replace the old tarnished door plate that read, “God’s peace to all who enter,” with a shiny new one that read, “A place for each thing—and each thing in its place,” which had become the unspoken but obeyed motto of the house. Mother had always chided back, saying, “With that on the front door, you’ll never be able to visit, Liz.” Beth hated to be called “Liz,” which Mother knew too well.

Beth had complied with her Mother’s wishes to go by “Elizabeth” until the eighth grade, when she was faced with a sewing project that required students to make letter-shaped

pillows spelling out their names. “Elizabeth” quickly became “Beth,” a name more suited to her personality anyway. Mother responded by saying that if Elizabeth preferred a shorter variation of her name, “Liz” was shorter than “Beth” and also sounded “more efficient.” Mother had continued to call her Elizabeth, but would occasionally call her “Liz” just to prove she could, in fact, change. Now, Mother faced the greatest change of her life. In just three short weeks, everything in this house of order would be torn apart, sorted, auctioned off or packed and moved to a house one-third the size. Just how should one go about dismantling a lifetime? How many boxes does that require? No one knew. And no one could decide where to begin.

“Shall we start with the vanity?” asked Sarah. Ambivalent nods from Mother and Beth signaled it was as good a place as any to begin. Sarah pulled out a drawer, set it on the floor, sat down beside it, and began to explore. Mother began to toy with her hands, eventually clasping her right hand over her left, as if to prevent herself from pointing toward the door and shouting “Out!”

“I think we should make four piles,” said Beth. “A pile to pack and move. A pile to throw away. A pile to give away. And a pile for the sale. Sound okay?” She pulled a plastic garbage bag from her pocket and shook it a few times. Sarah had already found something interesting.

“Look how dark your hair is, Mother. Do you want to keep this picture?”

“I hadn’t even started to dye my hair yet. Yes, we have to save that!”

For two hours Beth and Sarah pulled trinkets, playbills, handbags, jewelry, scarves, and vacation memorabilia from the drawers. Mother told a wonderful story about every item: a pearl brooch she received for being homecoming queen in college, the fancy beaded evening bag she took to Christmas cocktail parties, the silk scarves she bought for one dollar each when Levitt’s went out of business, the last Vera Neuman scarf her mother gave her before she died, a box of coins from an old maid at church, a gold charm bracelet with a gold heart inscribed, “I love you, Frank.”

"I think there's something you're not telling us, Mother," said Beth with a coy smile, attempting to lighten the mood against the darkening skies. "Who's Frank?"

"Oh, Frank. He was in the Navy. He kept sending me things. I didn't even like him, but it must have made him feel good to think he had someone to send things to. I don't care what you do with that."

"Well, finally!" said Beth. "Something for the auction pile." Mother looked toward her, lowering her head and looking over her glasses.

"I know this is hard, Mother, but you do not need these things. These scarves still have the tags on them. Levitt's closed eight years ago. If you haven't worn them by now, you're not going to wear them." Beth paused. There was no backlash, so she continued. "And you can have wonderful memories of Grandma without keeping *everything* she gave you," said Beth, picking up the crocheted butterfly magnets that had remained trapped in a snack-sized baggie at the bottom of a drawer since 1994.

"I want to know what happened to Frank," said Sarah, making another attempt to redirect the conversation.

"I don't really know. I stopped getting mail from him. He either died or found someone else to send things to."

"Okay! Back to business," said Beth. "Can you pick just a few of Grandma's things to save?"

Mother pursed her lips. "I want to keep these things, and that's that! They're special to me. And I give those scarves to the little widows from church who die without a nice outfit to be buried in. A new scarf just spruces them up so nice and makes them look like someone cared about them."

"Yoo-hoo," came a familiar voice from the back door.

"Oh good, Dorothy's here. She'll be on *my* side," said Mother, as she stood, paused a moment to let her joints adjust, then headed toward the back staircase at the opposite end of the hall. Beth and Sarah gave each other a cautious look until they heard the sound of Mother's footsteps on the back staircase.

"Do you think she'll notice if we move some things to the 'auction' pile?" asked Sarah, leaning forward to see out the door and down the hall, making sure Mother was out of hearing range.

"You *know* she'll notice. And if I die before she does, *do not* let her put one of those scarves on me. Can you believe she even finds fault with people after they're dead?" Beth had picked up a scarf with obnoxiously large purple roses and tied it around her neck. "What do you think? Would this go well with death?"

"You look well loved," said Sarah, and they giggled as sisters do. "I think this will get easier as we go along. It's just going to take her a while to get used to the idea."

Beth looked toward the ceiling, closing her eyes and drawing in a deep breath. Sarah knew she had said something wrong, but what? She quickly played the words over again in her head. Beth exhaled, and it was as if all the happiness blew out of the room. When she opened her eyes, the mischievous twinkle from a moment ago had been replaced with the sad, searching eyes that had never been able to find what they were looking for—whatever that was. Beth thought for a moment. "Meanwhile, we're giving up our entire weekends for the next month. You're missing Sam's championship game, and I'm not going to make *any* money this month. I'm already two weeks behind on orders because of my surgery, and now another four weeks You know, it wouldn't be so bad if she just *appreciated* our help, but she expects it, like we owe her. Why did she even adopt children? She doesn't even like kids! Well, she liked you, I guess, but that's because you were thin and popular ... and could sing ... and were always on Honor Roll and"

"Oh, stop it. You know that's not true. She's not partial at all—she dislikes us equally," said Sarah, bringing a little smile back to Beth's face. Beth flopped down on the bed, propping a pillow underneath her chin. "When are your orders due?" asked Sarah, making her way from the floor to sit beside her sister on the bed. "I can help you, maybe, if there's something that doesn't require sewing talent."

"No. You're sweet—thank you though. One order is for eight teddy bears made from a quilt." Beth rose up on her elbows. "I can't believe I'm going to cut up this gorgeous quilt, but the family couldn't decide who should have the quilt, so everyone is getting a little teddy bear instead. They're in no hurry. The other order is for my neighbor. It's just some pillow slipcovers, but I

told her they'd be done by now." Beth lay down again, turning her head toward Sarah. "Do you know she didn't even call me after my surgery? Dad was there every day, and she didn't even call."

Sarah closed her eyes and shook her head back and forth. "I wondered if she did, but I was afraid to ask." Sarah's eyes welled up a bit, not out of pity, but because she understood how it felt to miss the compassion of a mother.

"Well, it's not like I expected her to be there. Why would I think she'd start to care now?" Beth and Sarah looked at each other and understood what only each other could understand. "I'm okay!" said Beth. "That's what therapists are for, right?"

"And antidepressants. Don't forget antidepressants," said Sarah.

While Mother and Dorothy visited downstairs, Beth and Sarah packed up all the things in the "move" pile, letting a few items find their way into the "sale" pile, which they packed in a different box and set in a different room. After another hour, all evidence of life had been removed from the bedroom. Raindrops fell like tears down the windows of the house. Beth pulled the drapes closed and shut off the light on her way out of the room.

Sarah made her way up the stairs with an overly ambitious stack of empty boxes. At the top of the staircase, she gave up her balancing act and let the boxes come tumbling down around her feet. Dad was behind her, carrying a smaller stack.

"Gosh, I don't know what I'd do without you girls," said Dad. "The best thing I can do is stay out of the way. How is it coming along?"

"She's tough, but we'll break her," said Beth, peeking around the door of a hallway closet where she was filling a garbage bag with sacks of old Christmas cards labeled with the year in which they had been received. They could hear Dorothy leaving through the back door and knew their time of unsupervised packing was nearing an end.

"That's my cue," said Dad.

"Here," said Beth, handing Dad the garbage bag full of Christmas cards, "get this to the garbage without her seeing!"

"Dinner's on me," said Dad, his bad knees taking him down

the front staircase as fast as they could. "Anyplace you want! I don't know what I'd do," his voice trailed off, but Beth knew the familiar ending, and it made her smile.

Beth grabbed two empty boxes and threw one to Sarah. "I'll pack up the yarn, you pack the fabric scraps. Mark them 'sale.' Hurry!" The sisters packed and labeled the boxes before Mother appeared at the top of the back staircase.

"Well, I told Dorothy I spent your inheritance on a new house," Mother said, with a taunting smile that didn't get the reaction she'd hoped for. "You didn't give anything away I wanted, did you?"

"Of course not," said Sarah. She went into her old bedroom and returned with a white straight-backed chair, which she placed in front of the hallway linen cupboard. Mother sat down as if it were her throne, and her royal subjects scurried to work.

"You didn't want to save all those old fabric scraps, right?" Beth asked.

"I want to give them to my church. They make quilts for the widowers. Isn't that nice?" Beth scratched out "sale" and wrote "church" on the box. Sarah, taller and more agile than Beth, began unpacking the top shelf of the linen cupboard, pulling out stacks of towels from the top shelf and handing them to Beth, who sat on the floor facing Mother.

"Oh my gosh, I remember these from when I was little," said Beth. "Why did you keep these?"

"I might need them some day."

"You're never going to need towels from 1970, Mother. Let's save the new, unused towels and put the old ones in the sale pile."

"It won't hurt to save all of them."

"You won't have *room* for all of them." Beth rose up on her knees, reaching for a box.

"I want to save them."

"You don't *need* all of them." Beth placed the towels in a box and began to write "sale."

"If I'm poor someday, I can sell the new ones and use the old ones. I want to keep them all."

Beth stopped writing and looked at Sarah, who had also

stopped unloading and was now looking at Mother. The girls had never heard Mother say such a thing. Is this what the struggle was really about? Were all these unnecessary items Mother's rainy day security? Her emotional portfolio of sorts?

"Mom, you're not ever going to be poor. You've got enough money to buy towels for everyone in town." Mother's hands were fidgeting as if she were running some quick calculations. She took a deep breath before saying, "Okay, maybe just these towels."

Sarah resumed the process of pulling things from the cupboard: leftover napkins and paper plates from birthday parties, Christmas presents that had never been given, boxes of photos collected from dead relatives, silk sachets which had long lost their scent, sheets that fit beds the family didn't have.

Sarah had been right. As the day progressed, Mother became more comfortable with letting go. Beth even began to enjoy some of the stories. When Sarah pulled out a pair of red wooden candle holders, Mother's stoic posture relaxed and a natural smile came over her face. She held out her hands. Sarah blew off the dust and handed the candle holders to Mother.

"My Uncle Lars carved these for me. See how they are painted with Swedish designs." She slowly ran her fingers over the raised white paint designs, inspecting each detail before handing them to Beth, who carefully wrapped them in bubble wrap and gently placed them in the box labeled "move."

Next, Sarah pulled out a set of three wooden bowls, nested inside each other. Mother's posture stiffened—an obvious response—and the forced, more familiar smile returned to her face. "We will save those as well. Those bowls are the only thing my dad ever gave me. Ever." Beth waited for a moment before taking the bowls from Sarah, wondering if Mother would want to hold them as well, but her hands remained tightly clasped in her lap.

"Well, that's enough for today," said Mother. Beth and Sarah exchanged concerned glances, knowing that more work needed to be done if they were going to finish on time.

"Why don't you go down and watch *Wheel of Fortune* with Dad, and we'll just clean up our mess," said Sarah.

"I'll know if you give anything away I want to keep,"

Mother said, making her way down the stairs.

The rain had stopped, and the sun was pressing against the clouds, desperate to break through. Sarah opened the door to her old bedroom, letting a small bit of light into the hallway. They continued to work, not speaking much now, unknowingly contemplating the same things: Mother's fear of being poor, her love of Uncle Lars' candlesticks, the bowls. Beth pulled a white box out of the cupboard and eased back to the floor, her incisions still pulling a bit when she sat or stood. She opened the box and pulled back the light blue tissue paper, giving a little gasp.

"Sarah, look! Do you remember these?" Sarah sat down by Beth and watched as Beth tenderly picked up a little yellow doll dress made of a sheer floral-print fabric. She touched the baby doll sleeves, studying how evenly they were gathered. She flipped up the bottom hem to see how the miniature lace had been attached. "Someone made these by hand," said Beth. "Oh my gosh, look at these tiny snaps sewn down the back. This must have taken forever to make."

"What about this?" said Sarah, holding up what looked like a plain yellow sleeveless dress.

"Oh, the petticoat!" said Beth. "I remember." She laid the dress on the floor, smoothed it out flat, and then took the petticoat from Sarah. Holding the petticoat by the top, she slipped it inside the dress. "See, look how the flowers have more depth with the petticoat underneath." She held it up by the shoulders and moved it around a bit, admiring every detail. Look at this neckline! I've never done a neckline so perfect on adult-sized clothes! There was a coat as well," said Beth. "Is it in there?"

Sarah lifted the next layer of tissue inside the box. "How 'bout booties?" said Sarah.

"They look hand-knit," said Beth reaching out to take them from Sarah, inspecting them carefully before laying them gently on the floor, a few inches below the dress.

"A coat!" said Sarah, raising it from the box. "Wow, even *I'm* impressed."

"Let me see, let me see!" said Beth, trying to scoot closer to Sarah, but forgetting about her incisions. "Ouch!" Beth winced and grabbed her stomach.

“Beth, are you okay?”

“No—no, I’m not. I might die any second,” said Beth, purposely being dramatic. “All I want is to hold the coat and remember my childhood one last time.”

“I didn’t know you had a childhood,” said Sarah, tossing the coat at Beth.

“Don’t throw it! Of course I had a childhood. It lasted five weeks.” Beth maintained her serious composure until Sarah rolled her eyes. Then they both smiled. Sarah said something else, but Beth didn’t catch it. She was lost in the tiny stitches that had sewn mother-of-pearl buttons to the front of the pale yellow corduroy doll coat. “Amazing,” she whispered. She rubbed her index finger back and forth over the velvet trim and felt the coolness of the satin lining with the back of her hand. “So much work.”

Mother’s footsteps were on the stairs again, but this time neither Beth nor Sarah jumped into action.

“I don’t trust you to pack without me,” Mother announced, giving the girls fair warning of her approach. “I won at *Wheel of Fortune*, but Dad is getting better,” she said in her slightly breathless voice from the landing. Soon, her feet were on the steps again. “Oh, you found the little doll clothes I made.” Mother sat down in the chair, not so stoic this time, with the natural smile emerging for the second time in the same day.

“You made these?” Beth questioned.

“Oh yes. I would stay up after you went to bed and work on them for hours. It took weeks to complete this set. Did you find the blue set, too?”

Sarah lifted the tissue and pulled out another complete set of clothes, a pretty slate blue.

“I don’t remember those,” said Beth.

“For some reason you always chose the yellow set. Your little dolly was so special to you that I wanted to make her some very special clothes. I made matching pajamas for you and your dolly, too. Do you remember those?”

“With kittens! Yes! I had forgotten all about those,” said Beth, looking eerily calm and confused at the same time.

“Voila!” said Sarah, lifting a small flannel nightgown with

pink kittens chasing balls of gray yarn.

“They’re beautiful, Mom. They’re sewn perfectly.” Beth had lifted the soft flannel nightgown to her cheek now. “Why would you spend the time to do such exquisite work for a four-year old who couldn’t appreciate it?”

“I didn’t care whether you appreciated it or not. I just wanted to do it for you.”

“Amazing,” Beth said quietly to herself.

“They are well made, aren’t they?” said Mother, picking up the yellow coat to examine it more closely. “I suppose some little girl could still use them.”

“Oh no,” said Beth. “I will hold on to them.”

A faint bit of sunlight now streamed into the hallway through Sarah’s windows. Once again, mother’s silhouette reminded Beth of the garden angel statue, the guardian of cherished things long gone.

Thank You, E.B.

Mark Darby

My adventure begins, not with compass,
canteen and Khaki jacket, but with the words:
“Where’s Papa going with that ax?”
Boys play marbles in the dirt
and jump ramps with a six-speed Schwinn.
They don’t cry at Charlotte’s tiny
death, but in sixth grade study hall,
near the library encyclopedias, I do.

To My Ex-mechanic

Mark Darby

Like Tarzan, my blue shirted mechanic beats his chest
with a $\frac{3}{4}$ quarter inch socket wrench
as he demands I hear the whistle from under the hood.

“Me fix, you pay.”
He wants bananas, many bananas,
for his chimp, I imagine.
I feel helpless until I remember

I have wrestled with a 1976 AMC Matador and
I have scrubbed axle grease from my fingernails with Brillo Pads.
I will give him no bananas.

My car whistle echoes as I swing from his jungle garage.

The Sound of Lavender

Steven Gale

I was driving down the road to Apt in a rented
Renault. Like most French cars I had ridden in, this one was
underpowered and undersuspended, and I felt every bump and
rut in the road as I struggled up hills and flew down them. It was
a beautiful sunny day, and I understood why blue and gold are
the official colors of Provence, blue for the sky and gold for the
sun. As I topped a rise, I saw what should have been the third
color—purple, or lavender to be more precise. As far as I could
see, from horizon to horizon, laid out in perfect geometric rows,
was lavender in full bloom.

I was stunned by the sight. I took my foot off the
accelerator pedal without knowing it and gradually coasted to a
stop, in the midst of this sea of flowers. I turned off the ignition,
stepped out of the car, and was almost bowled over by a wave of
scent. It was floral, and herbal, and what I remember most is that
this is what *clean* smells like.

I scanned the road ahead to see if I could see one of the
many roadside stands that dot the countryside in these parts,
for that was what I had come here for. Not the flowers, but
the honey, the famous miel de lavande of Provence. It is sweet,
without being cloying, floral, without being too flowery; in short,
it’s perfect. It’s one of those little wonders that God got right
the first time, and I have no doubt that if there were four Magi
instead of three, the fourth gift would be one of honey. I didn’t
see a stand anywhere near, but I did see a young woman bent
over the lavender beside her car, cutting a bunch that I assumed
she would make into sachets to put amongst her linens, as is the
Provençal custom. Wouldn’t the farmer mind her cutting his
lavender like that? In the midst of such plenty, I supposed that he
would not.

It had been a long ride, and I still didn’t have my honey, so I
decided to stretch my legs and walk for a distance into the field. I
had the sun on my face, Mozart playing in my head, the scent of
lavender in my nostrils, and for one bright shining moment God

was in his Heaven, and all was right with the world. I was so “blissed out” that it took me awhile to hear it—a low, humming, thrumming sound that I could feel on my skin, like electricity. It was like standing next to a large electrical transformer. I eventually made the connection. Where there is lavender there is honey, and where there is honey there are bees, and what I was experiencing was the sound and energy of a billion busy bees, besotted with nectar.

I remember many things about that day, but after all these years it’s the *sound*, the sound of lavender that I remember most.

Clipped

Karolinn Fiscaletti

A bird my own color lights next to me.
“Did you cheat?” she asks.

No, I say
I am honest
because I am honest.

But as I watch the invisible wind
grasp her and lift her
far above me and away,
I can feel that leaden truth
touch the bottoms of my feet, now still.

I want to expose it,
to call after her
with another word,
but I do not understand her language.
I have only learned to memorize the pleasing answer.

Threads

Karolinn Fiscaletti

The heat is alive today.
It rises in waves
from the web of white tiles she
is stuck to.
Today his eyes say
that she has no choice.
She does not meet them,
but looks up
at the shadow of the still fan,
sprawled
like a spider
against the pale yellow ceiling.

1984

Ken McDaniel

These are two stories.
Black is white.
The first looking forward,
of socialism, communism
and doublethink.
The introduction of
a raven-haired mechanic,
an illicit love ending
in confession and betrayal
with a bullet to the brain.
Then another,
white is black,
looking backward,
of capitalism, individualism
and doublethink.
The introduction of
a raven-haired innocent,
a licit love, ending
in confession and betrayal
with a bullet to the heart.
Memories left
under the chestnut tree.
I sold you
and you sold me.

October

Brittany Zenor

Time leaps past
the trees
in the park,
and the path
is littered
with leaves
that have languished.
Some listlessly drift
to the crunchy
and crowded ground.
Glowing pumpkins
peer from porches
at passersby,
and wailing wind
walks down deserted paths.
Death destroys
bountiful hope
with gunshots
and guillotines.
Fear flies under doors
and fights with fire,
fleeing ferocious death.
Fire fights back,
and the smoke
of victory seeps
through thousands
of chimneys.

Checkmate

Nick Jeanetta

The plantation owner sat on a thin cane chair in the oasis of shade his long front porch provided. It was summer, and his thermometer had long ago exploded. He scooted his chair closer to the small, rough-hewn table in front of him. The teak boards beneath the worn leather soles of his handmade shoes were smooth, almost polished. They were spaced generously, designed to let the daily crush of Brazilian rain through, and reminded him of the ribs of a crocodile carcass he had seen as a little boy on his family's annual trip down the river from Manaus to Belém. Before him, on a burnished silver tray, was a chilled 600 ml garrafa de cerveja and two small glasses, also chilled. A peeled but still whole orange was nestled in an exquisitely blue porcelain bowl next to the beer. In the center of the table was a chessboard, painstakingly carved from a single plank of ironwood—burnished to perfection. The wood seemed to ripple as light reflecting from the bottle played tag on its gleaming surface.

The game was half over. White was losing. That f***ing Rook at c5. The man wasn't particularly good at chess; he often lost, but he loved the game. It made him feel cultured. The seat across from him was empty. It was Black's turn. He ponderously separated his orange, enjoying the slow tearing immensely. A silver ring, embossed with an intricate tarantula, clung to a thick finger. He had big hands. They had once been covered with calluses, but rich living had long ago made them soft. All the little cuts and injuries he had worked hard to earn were now faded scars. He began absent-mindedly twisting the ring. Where was Colonel Silva? It wasn't like him to be late. Perhaps he had been summoned by the General for some last minute strategy meeting. Colonel Silva was one of the best strategists in Pará. Maybe he was helping with the manhunt. Silva had phoned him late last night about the enemy helicopter that had been shot down. Apparently, a junior analyst had deciphered a message about an assassination attempt on the General—a sniper was going to be flown in by helicopter under the cover of darkness.

The base had upped security and placed anti-aircraft missiles at key positions in the jungle. The helicopter had been shot down, but only the bodies of the two pilots had been recovered. Every soldier stationed at the base was now fanning out through the jungle, each one wanting to be the first to find and capture the missing assassin.

A light breeze rippled through the stretch of cane fields in front of his estate. The resonant sound of his sugarcane clacking together was almost melodic and had lulled him to sleep every night of the growing season. Lost in thought, he didn't notice the lone figure walking through his field until he was just a few yards from him. With wide eyes he appraised the filthy and exhausted looking man. The custom sidearm rig strapped to his right thigh, complete with decidedly not-standard-issue revolver, and the mud splattered but still visible patch on his left shoulder gave him away.

He grinned at the panting assassin. In his condition, he didn't look like he could kill a cockroach, much less the esteemed General. He was holding his bleeding left arm close to his chest, and it looked as though a splinter of bone was pushing through his skin. That had to be excruciating.

“So, are you the assassin everyone is looking for, my friend?”

The plantation owner's voice had been sanded smooth by years of cigars and scotch. The man just stared, unblinking, from under hooded brows.

“Please, come sit. You must be tired.”

The man approached his porch like a dog with three legs, took each broad stair individually, and finally collapsed with a groan into the chair opposite the plantation owner. That close, the soldier's stink was overwhelming. The plantation owner pressed his handkerchief against his nostrils. With his other hand, he slowly reached over and poured the man some beer.

“Please, drink.” He grinned broadly. “My hospitality is legendary.”

The soldier couldn't contain himself. His right hand shot out, brought the cup to his lips, and drained it down his parched throat in one smooth motion—like a cobra striking a rat. The plantation owner didn't have time to recoil in shock. He was fast.

Hand trembling slightly, he moved to refill the assassin's cup. The soldier accepted the beer in silence. He took his time with this one, sipping the bitter liquid like it was ambrosia. His eyes flicked around, taking everything in, too fast for the plantation owner to follow.

"Do you need someone to play with?"

The soldier's voice was quiet and higher than the plantation owner thought it would be. He licked his lips and swallowed before answering.

"Well, actually, yes. I believe my opponent is busy searching for you."

That brought a thin-lipped grin to the assassin's face.

"I see. Then, as it is my fault he isn't here, and as you have shown me great kindness already, it would be dishonorable of me to leave this game unfinished."

The plantation owner tipped his head slightly in acknowledgement. He wondered if he would escape this encounter alive. Sweat dribbled down his brow in innumerable rivulets. Where was Colonel Silva?

"It would be my honor."

Colonel Silva would probably show up soon, despite not finding the assassin in the thick jungle. He had never been more than an hour late to their weekly chess sessions. What would happen? Would the man start shooting? Would Colonel Silva? The plantation owner swallowed again.

"It is Black's turn."

The soldier nodded and focused intently on the board in front of him. He sat deathly still and said nothing for a full ten minutes. The plantation owner began to fidget uncomfortably. His back was starting to sweat. When the man finally moved, it was slowly and deliberately. He picked up Black's remaining knight and moved it to g4. The plantation owner froze. What was he thinking? That was the worst move he could have imagined. It left Black completely vulnerable, not to mention forfeiting his knight in the process. He shook his head slowly and hesitantly captured the knight with his pawn. The soldier didn't move a muscle until his knight was off the gleaming battlefield. He smiled sadly. The game proceeded quickly after that, piece after

piece leaving the field of play. The plantation owner didn't realize the depth of the soldier's trap until it was too late.

"My God," he murmured, bringing his hand to his lips. "It was perfect... I lost the second I took that knight."

The soldier smiled that sad grin again. It was indeed perfect. No matter what move the plantation owner made, he would lose. Every single Black piece was set up to checkmate White's king. The plantation owner leaned back heavily against his chair, mopping his brow and shaking his head in disbelief. The sharp click of a rifle being cocked startled him out of his daze. He looked up in surprise. Colonel Silva stood ten yards away, automatic rifle aimed squarely at the assassin's back.

"Stay where you are. If you even blink too quickly, you are a dead man. Are you all right, my friend?"

The last was directed at the plantation owner.

"Yes, yes, I am quite all right. I have never been more soundly defeated in a game of chess, though! I think he might be better than even you, Silva!"

Colonel Silva grinned from behind the iron sights of his weapon.

"And yet, I am holding the rifle. You can come out!"

The assassin sat unmoving, grinning sadly down at the chessboard as thirty of the Colonel's men filtered out of the cane field, weapons trained on the lone soldier's back.

"We've got you surrounded. Don't try anything stupid. Daniel! Please remove the prisoner's pistol."

The heavily sweating young soldier inched towards the cornered prey, rifle tightly gripped and shaking. The plantation owner could see him hold his breath as he reached a trembling hand out and removed the assassin's revolver from its holster. He let out his breath in a great rush of relief as he jumped out of reach of the wounded man. Daniel looked almost cocky as he strutted back to his comrades. He had a souvenir and a story his two sons would love. Colonel Silva looked at him out of the corner of his eye with amusement.

"Daniel, radio the General! He will want to come see his 'assassin' immediately!"

The assassin just sat in his chair, grinning sadly.

It took fifteen full minutes for the General's jeep to roar up the road leading to the plantation owner's house. The jeep crunched to a halt on the white gravel drive, and the General stepped out, patent leather boots gleaming. He clenched a thick cigar between his ivory teeth, and his mirrored sunglasses spit the world back at its own face. He grinned, gravel shifting under his heavy steps, as he approached his would-be killer.

"It seems things did not go so well for you," he drawled at the captured man. "Turn around, so I may face the man sent to kill me."

The soldier stood up slowly, wincing in pain. He turned around. His cold eyes stared through the glasses into the General's soul.

"I have something for you, sir."

The General's eyes widened behind their flimsy protection.

"Oh? What is it?"

The soldier reached down slowly, slowly, and pried open the clenched fingers of his left hand. He pulled out the thin, bloodstained GPS chip—the red LED flashing urgently. He tossed it in on the ground in front of the General.

"I was the Knight," he said, grinning sadly. "Checkmate."

The Tomahawk missile dropped from the sky, detonating right before it reached the ground. The General didn't have time to scream.

Coffee

Kristen Shaul

A famous Dominican musician once sang, "I hope that it rains coffee." I can't help but hum the tune as I sit holding a cup of the steaming liquid in my hands. Across from me, a dark-skinned man with bright eyes sits on a plastic chair, sipping his own cup of the strong brew. Blistered hands and worn clothes reveal that he is both hard working and poor. But in spite of his humble appearance, Frances leads an extraordinary life in which he cultivates an immense supply of one of humanity's most desired and loved substances. Frances is a coffee grower, and he is devoted to raising and harvesting the beans that keep the world awake.

Frances's family has resided in Los Montecitos, Dominican Republic, for four generations, and coffee has always been a part of their lives. The family owns thirty acres of land located in a small valley where an uncommon mix of towering pines and great fruit trees dots the landscape. Underneath the canopy of the tall trees, thousands of coffee shrubs cover the earth. The small evergreens huddle together in the shade, their glossy green leaves shimmering in the indirect sunlight. Frances spends several days a week walking among these shrubs. He prunes, waters, fertilizes, and lovingly cares for the plants that support his family. When he is not working with his coffee, Frances spends time in a section of his land that is used for growing crops such as beans and peas. He leads me through the small plot and explains how the crops provide food as well as income between the coffee harvests which happen once a year. I notice the perfect rows of flowering pea bushes and how their delicate branches bend under the weight of heavy green pods. Frances smiles and says, "They look good now, but you wouldn't want to see them when the coffee is ripe!" He notices my perplexed look and explains, "Coffee is king. When the coffee is ready to be picked, I don't pay any attention to this part of my land!"

In the cool of early November, the coffee plants burst with red cherries, and the entire town disappears into the shrubs to

collect the firm and shiny fruit. Frances states, "The town really comes together during harvest, and everyone helps each other." Men, women, and children use old belts and bits of rope to strap tin cans around their waists, and they sing and joke as they make their way through the valley. Their experienced hands move quickly, and an entire shrub can be stripped of its fruit within minutes. The cherries are plunked into the tin cans which, when full, are emptied into large canvas sacks and transported back to town by donkey, horse, or motorcycle. During the winter months, Frances oversees the harvest on his land and then helps his neighbors with their own coffee. Harvest continues until late January, and every day is spent among friends handpicking the fruit that is the livelihood of nearly every family in town.

As we make our way back to town, Frances points out a large metal grinder that stands about five feet tall. He says, "This is the first stop for a newly picked coffee cherry." A large crank juts out of the side of the grinder, and Frances gives it a turn to demonstrate how it works. Huge wheels begin to turn, and the sound of metal scraping against metal causes me to cringe. Frances explains how the coffee cherries are dumped into the grinder where the beans are separated from the pulpy red exterior. He gives the grinder a little kick and says, "I love coffee growing, but this part makes my arms hurt!" During harvest, he spends several hours a day turning that metal crank. The task is physically daunting, but the result is a pile of white beans which are nearly ready to be transformed into the perfect cup of coffee.

Once they are run through the grinder, the beans are soaked in buckets of water to remove any remaining flesh. They are then piled onto large tarps which are spread across the town's single road. The beans will stay out in the sun for about three days until they are completely dry. As we walk down the road, I watch my step and maneuver my way through the tarps and piles of newly picked coffee. I soon notice that Frances' beans are being trampled on by everything from chickens to motorcycles, and I can't help but wonder if the coffee I drank earlier had been walked on by a hen. Oblivious to my thoughts, Frances continues his explanations about the drying process. He tells me that most of the dried beans are placed into sacks and sold to a large

company that will roast, package, and ship the coffee to stores all over the country. Though most of his coffee is sold after the drying process, Frances keeps hundreds of pounds of dried beans in the back room of his house. He will roast and sell some of it to friends in nearby towns, but most of it will be consumed by his family. The stash of unroasted beans will stay good for up to a year and will provide his household with a constant source of rich flavor and needed caffeine.

Frances asks if I would like to see the roasting process, and I nod enthusiastically. He leads me to a small wooden shack behind his house, and I watch as his mother dumps the coffee into a metal caldron situated over a low burning fire. She stirs the beans with a large wooden spoon, and I observe as they slowly turn from white to brown. A rich aroma soon fills the air, and Frances smiles and crinkles his nose at his mother when she asks if the beans look done. I assume that his response means no because she continues to stir for another five minutes until the beans are nearly black and look as though they are about to burn. Frances smiles and states, "I like it strong. The darker, the stronger." His mother removes the beans from the fire, lets them cool, and dumps them into a partially hollowed out tree trunk. She then reaches for a large, smooth piece of wood that is shaped like a baseball bat and spends the next thirty minutes crushing the beans by hand until they become a fine powder.

After observing the hour long process of roasting and grinding, Frances and I return to his house with a bag of rich, dark coffee that is ready for brewing. Frances' sister takes the bag, puts some of its contents into a metal coffeemaker, and turns on a small gas stove. As the coffee brews, I listen as brother and sister talk about friends, neighbors, weather, and happenings in the town. I smile when I realize that, at some point, all conversation returns to coffee.

To Frances, coffee is life. Most of his days are spent caring for the shrubs, and in the evenings, his family sits outside with mugs of the freshly brewed liquid in their hands. Frances hands me a cup, and I can't help but close my eyes as I drink. It is delicious. He smiles and says, "I am glad you like my coffee." Frances is proud of his work and says that there is nothing else

he would rather do. As I pull the cup to my lips for a final sip, I think about how what I am drinking was planted, picked, cleaned, roasted, and brewed by the man in front of me. I can't help but think about how coffee keeps millions of people awake and moving and how workers like Frances are the humble force that supplies the world's favorite drink.

The Carpenter

Vera Lynn Petersen

A film of sawdust fills the air
as he shoves the wood past the bright
spinning blade. Muscles flexed, back bent
over, determination on
his face. A hint of the scent of

Bonfire scatters across the wood
shop. The eerie noise of grinding
ceases as the plank hits the floor. He
looks up from the stopped blade at his
perfectly cut piece of dark black

Walnut. He imagines what it
will become, how every grain will
fit into the pattern of his
artwork. I watch him smile and say,
"By the work one knows the workman."*

*Jean de La Fontaine

At Your Two-year-old Pace
Elizabeth Schooler

I am your shadow while you
pick up little pieces of the world.
We feel the fresh wind breathing
on our bare hands.
You shiver and grab a maple leaf,
bright red with fall—to unite
with the other new-found treasures
in your pocket. You spot a worm,
still and stiff, and demand
he wake up before adding him
to your collection.

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