InterText

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 4 JULY–AUGUST 1996

"With Thoughts of Sarah"
by CHRISTOPHER O'KENNON

ALSO INSIDE

DIANE PAYNE
RUPERT GOODWINS
MICHELLE ROGGE GANNON

ISSN 1071-7676

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Contents

JULY–AUGUST 1996
VOLUME 6, NUMBER 4

INTERTEXT
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COLUMNS

FirstText: *There's a First Time for Everything*
GEOFF DUNCAN **3**

SHORT FICTION

Tongue–Tied
DIANE PAYNE *(dpayne2555@aol.com)* **4**

Little Acorn
RUPERT GOODWINS *(rupertg@cix.compulink.co.uk)* **7**

Iowa Basketball
MICHELLE ROGGE GANNON *(mrogge@sunflowr.usd.edu)* **9**

With Thoughts of Sarah
CHRISTOPHER O'KENNON *(psy3cho@atlas.vcu.edu)* **15**

CURRENT & BACK ISSUES

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***InterText*'s next issue will be released in September, 1996.**

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First Text

GEOFF DUNCAN

THERE'S A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

BACK IN 1990, I WAS GETTING WORRIED. I'D recently been recruited as an assistant editor for *InterText's* predecessor *Athene,* and was having an e-mail conversation with *Athene's* editor, Jim McCabe. Jim was lamenting the fact the current issue was more than a month behind schedule, and he still didn't know when he was going to find time to finish it. I commiserated, told him I was sure it would get done somehow, and (fool that I was!) tried to convince him to offload as much of the work as possible to the group of assistant editors. "It's not that simple," Jim tried to tell me. "Some work just can't be passed along."

Six years later, I know exactly what he meant.

Jason Snell and I have been producing *InterText* every eight or nine weeks for about five and a half years. I can count on the thumbs of one hand the number of times in the past we've been late with an issue. And never—*never*—have we been as late with an issue as we are with this one. Over the years, we've taken a certain amount of pride in maintaining our bimonthly publication schedule. Sure, a regular publication date may not carry the same meaning for an online magazine (particularly a free one) as it does for a typical print-based publication. But we felt—and still feel—that consistency is the better part of valor. Consistency tells readers and authors *InterText* is serious, and willing to make a commitment.

Jim McCabe later remarked via e-mail that he thought he was creating a new form of editorial: the apology. Every issue, it seemed, he was telling readers how sorry he was that the issue was late.

Well, I'm not going to apologize.

Quite a bit has happened since Jason pulled *InterText* from the ashes of *Athene,* and we couldn't have predicted any of it. The Internet certainly isn't what it used to be—when *InterText* got started, Gopher was considered pretty cutting edge, and no one had ever heard of the World Wide Web. These days, no one's heard of Gopher.

Jason, Susan, and I have also changed, and we couldn't have predicted that, either. We all earn our livings (allegedly) working in the computer industry, with all the associated technical jargon, impossible deadlines, hardware snafus, and never-ending e-mail. Jason and I do significant work in addition to our jobs: Jason recently published a very solid book about Internet services; I do a lot of software development, freelance writing, and stuff I'm not even supposed to *talk* about. I'm personally amazed Susan finds time to breathe, let alone meet the outrageous editorial deadlines often associated with her work. Whenever I think my workload is impossible, I think of the miracles she routinely performs under much greater pressures.

None of this is new, but it has been building for some time—years, in fact. When *InterText* started, the idea of publishing on a computer was new and exciting; now, electronic publishing is our job, and regardless of the intent or content, at a point doing anything with a computer is work. After a while, staring at pixels is just staring at pixels, whether you're doing it to pay rent and buy groceries, or simply because you think it ought to be done.

We haven't been keeping track, but since we started we've undoubtedly processed well over a thousand submissions, most of which are read by more than one person. We've produced thousands of files, from the setext and PostScript versions of the magazine to the PageMaker layouts and individual edits only we see. Jason puts a phenomenal amount of work into maintaining *InterText's* mailing lists and extensive Web site, as well as managing the bulk of our editorial e-mail. We do this out of enthusiasm and because we think it ought to be done, rather than from any sense of obligation or duty.

And we still think *InterText* ought to be done, and still believe there's a place for well-edited, established fiction publications among the noise, drivel, and seemingly unending Internet hype. But we need to seriously examine *how* it ought to be done. In the same way we've personally been changing all these years, it's reasonable that *InterText* should change as well. Maybe the changes will all be behind the scenes—new ways of processing submissions, and handling edits, and producing issues. Or maybe the changes will be very visible. Maybe both. In any case, change is inevitable.

And I'm not going to apologize for it.

Tongue–Tied

DIANE PAYNE

It's said the Lord works in mysterious ways—
you would too, if your work was never done.

I WALK DOWN SEVENTEENTH STREET PRAYING Jesus will provide me with powerful words to convince the Road Knights motorcycle gang and the Lock family to want Jesus. Though I'm only thirteen, I have visions of becoming a famous evangelist, the youngest one with a TV show. It'll be called something hip, like *Freaked Out on Jesus*. Billy Graham can still have his show and audience. My show will be for the more difficult converts, the skeptics who ridicule everything. But even they will come around after watching my show.

Come on, Jesus, I pray while walking, Give me the words and I'll do your work. My first stop is at the Road Knights' house. Once when they were drunk playing poker, a friend and I were collecting money for a school project and they emptied their pockets for us. And Grandpa bowls next to them on Tuesday nights. He says they're all right. They just like long hair and loud mufflers. One of the guys even helped him fix his lawn mower.

Yet there's something about making these house calls alone that's a bit intimidating with folks like the Road Knights. God is not their thing. Jesus didn't always drag his disciples along when he preached. He was strong, and didn't get humiliated when people ridiculed him.

That's it, I remind myself. I've got to be humble. Be like Jesus. Come on, Jesus, give me the words and I'll be humble no matter what they say or do. Let them pick me up by my shoulders and throw me on the streets. I won't be embarrassed. I'll return. I'm doing this for you. I hope you're paying attention, Jesus.

Sometimes Jesus seems to get distracted. I can be certain he's about to fill me with words and when someone opens their door, I freeze. I get tongue-tied for Jesus. This is especially unfortunate for someone who wants to have her own TV show.

Except for all the Harleys parked on the lawn, no one could tell this was the home of a motorcycle gang. Except for the oldest neighbors on the block, most of the homes look like they need paint and windows fixed. This is a house filled with people wearing leather, both men and women, and none of them seem to be parents or family-oriented. I have never seen one motorcyclist leave alone. If one pulls out, all the rest follow. Guess that's why they call themselves a gang.

That's it. Jesus just gave me an idea. Before I lose my nerve, I knock on the door. A large man with a long scraggly beard answers. He's being too friendly; must not have any idea I'm a Christian on a mission.

"You bowl on Tuesday nights?" I ask him. He looks suspicious, so I quickly add, "My grandpa's team bowls next to you."

"Who's your grandpa?"

"Hans. The guy who mows lawns."

A deep smoker's laugh vibrates off his chest. "Hans. He's a good man. Reminds me of my own grandpa. He's all right, isn't he?"

"Oh, yeah. Fine. That's not why I'm here." Come on, Jesus. Don't leave me tongue-tied now. "You know, I was wondering if the Road Knights might like to get involved with my church. You know, start a club called Jesus' Mufflers, or something like that."

The big man spits out his beer laughing. Leaning over the kitchen table, he pounds another guy on the shoulder, the one who is waiting for him to get back to their poker game, and says, "Did you hear that? She wants us to start a motorcycle club called Jesus' Mufflers!"

"I was wondering if the Road Knights might get involved with my church. You know, start a club called Jesus' Mufflers, or something like that."

Come on, Jesus, I'm losing them. Make me say something sensible. It's not like I'm trying to sell them a used Pinto. Don't you want these guys on your side? Think about it, Jesus. They could be your crusaders with other bikers. That's it! "Okay, that name may not be right. But what about Cruisin' Crusaders? You could cruise all night and when you see people, you can tell them about Jesus."

"What do you want us to tell people about Jesus? That he's a hypocrite who hates people like us?"

"Oh, no. As a matter of fact, you look a lot like Jesus. Jesus would have been driving a Harley instead of wearing out all those sandals if they had them back then. Don't you know that Jesus loves you?"

"I'm glad your grandpa don't talk like this. Don't you want a beer or something? Is it that hard for you to be like other teenagers?"

"No, I get high on Jesus. And you could too."

"Yeah, but we don't want to. So go on," the man at the table says.

"But if you die," I hurry and get this crucial part in, "do you know if you'll go to heaven or hell?"

"What difference does it make? I'll be dead. I live for the now, sweetheart. When I'm dead, my body can go to science for all I care. Is that why you do this? To get a place in heaven? You wouldn't do this otherwise? If Jesus wasn't promising you a room in heaven, you'd have a beer and live like normal people?"

Come on, Jesus. These people are smarter than most. I've never thought about this before. Why aren't these things in the Bible? Come on, give me words quick. "You know, you'd be a great evangelist. Really. Are you sure you don't want to get saved?"

"Enough," he says, ushering me to the door. "You should take up bowling with your grandpa. Stay away from the churches. It's ruining you."

"It don't have to be called Cruisin' Crusaders. You can think of another name," I say walking to the sidewalk.

"We got a name. The Road Knights!" the man at the table yells back.

As I head to the Locks' house, I wonder if I'd be a Christian if I didn't believe in heaven. Heaven does sound unbelievable. Do babies go to hell because they're not saved? Do Christians who backslide go to hell? I wonder who really gets to heaven? Mom thinks her mother's in heaven but what if she isn't? What is hell—a Grand Canyon of fire?

Mrs. Lock is sitting on her front steps. This makes it much easier than knocking on the door. People who knock on the door remind me of the bill collectors we hide from at home. I feel like Lazarus, or whoever that greedy bill collector was in the Bible. But I'm not a bill collector. I'm a soul collector. Can't they see the difference? If I could just get these people to church Sunday night, they'd understand what I'm talking about. The *Strung Out For Jesus* rock band will be playing. It'll be mostly young people in blue jeans. The old folks go to the morning services and think these evening services are a disgrace to God, but the minister says God is flexible and doesn't mind seeing the church used this way, so they don't say much.

Mrs. Lock is drinking beer out of a quart bottle and smoking a cigarette. I don't see her kids around but I hear the stereo blasting and figure they're in the house.

"How ya doing, Mrs. Lock?"

"I got a goddamn headache. Why?"

This isn't the greeting I was hoping for. "That's too bad."

"You're telling me. I was up all night. Now I got to go to work in two hours." She laughs a minute, "But it was worth being up all night. There's a goddamn price you got to pay to have fun."

"Ain't that the truth?" I say, desperately trying to fit in.

Then Lou Ann joins us on the steps. It's never been the same between us since that night Lou Ann and her brothers saw me pinching my tits in the mirror. Now I've learned to close my curtains. And I'm trying to be less vain, more like Jesus, but Jesus was from a different time, and he wasn't exactly normal. If he was a girl, he probably wouldn't have cared about breasts because they wore those loose robes no one could see through anyway.

"So, what brings our neighborhood Jesus Freak to our House of Sin?" Lou Ann asks. Mrs. Lock laughs with her. And once again, Jesus leaves me tongue-tied.

"This ain't no house of sin."

"Come on, what is it you want?"

I want to say *your soul,* but can tell that doesn't sound right. "Nothing. I just thought I'd invite you to our church Sunday night. You know Ray Gonzalez, right? Well, his group is playing then."

"Ray used to be a cool dude. Liked him when he played in garages better than in churches."

"Well, he plays about the same kind of music."

"Shee-it! You think I'm stupid?"

"I'm telling you our church is different at night. People go barefoot, wear cut-offs."

I don't get to finish. "And talk about being high on Jesus. I know your rap. Damn. Give me my weed and let me get high on the real thing."

"I ain't been in a church in years, " Mrs. Lock says. "Didn't even get married in one. We ain't got nothing against you and your church; it just ain't for us."

"You probably think I'm worried you'll go to hell but I don't think that way. Doesn't really matter to me if there's a heaven or hell." I'm on a roll, though I'm not sure if this is the Road Knights speaking or Jesus. Gets confusing when the adrenaline rolls. "All I care about is the now. And the now ain't all that great. But there's something about being with other Jesus Freaks that makes it seem less shitty. You know your house ain't no more a house of sin than my own."

"I don't know why your Ma don't throw your old man out. We can hear him hollering over here. I know men like him. Plenty of 'em come in the bar and drink 'til they pass out on their stool. They're at their best when they're unconscious. I don't bring those men home. Once we drag them out the back door, I never think twice about them. Ain't none of my concern what happens to them. Those loudmouth bastards are nothing but trouble. Some people drink and have a good time. Those are the people I like serving booze to. Your ma should throw him out."

"Yeah, I know. I keep praying he'll change."

"So Jesus ain't working no miracles on your family, is he?" Lou Ann laughs.

"Not really, but things are better now. You never know, things may change."

"Yeah, sure. Maybe a tornado will wipe us all out. I like getting high my way. Don't need to wait for no

miracles cause I feel like I'm having a miracle when I take acid. You should try it. See what Jesus looks like then."

This has been a difficult day. First I lose faith in heaven, now I lose faith in miracles. I don't know if Jesus is trying to make me see things more clearly or if Satan is leading me astray. Sometimes they're like the same person. "Well, I got to go make dinner but remember tomorrow night you can walk to church with me if you want."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's what we'll be wanting to do. Right, Ma?"

"Quit picking on her, Lou Ann!"

"Don't worry. She's got Jesus on her side. She can take it. Ain't that right?"

"Yeah, sort of. Well, remember Jesus loves you," I add before crossing the street."

"Thanks, I feel better now. Hey, your tits haven't grown much, have they?" Lou Ann yells. "Maybe that will be God's next miracle!"

"Lou Ann, don't be such a brat," Mrs. Lock says while laughing.

It ain't easy to love my neighbors, but I keep trying.

THE NEXT DAY I ASK A FEW FRIENDS TO PRAY THE Road Knights and Locks will come to church. They laugh. Think I'm getting more and more fanatical. I remind them if they'd pray for the Locks and Road Knights, it'd make a difference, but no one believes me.

Our church is three blocks from Seventeenth Street. About an hour before church begins, the Locks are sitting on their front steps drinking beer; even a few of the Road Knights are there. I keep looking at them through our front porch window, praying Jesus will give me the confidence to return with one more invite. They seem to be having a good time, a better time than they'll have in church. Jesus wouldn't back away. He'd be over there. So I cross the street. Everyone laughs as they seem me approach. In my head, I repeat, "I'm high on Jesus. I'm high on Jesus." By the time I get near them, I actually believe it.

"Well, anyone want to go to church with me? It'll be good tonight."

They all laugh. "Can we bring our beer?" a Road Knight asks.

"Sure," I say, hoping it'll be finished by the time we get to the church door.

"Oh, yeah? Can we bring a full cooler?"

"If you want." Jesus, I pray to myself, if I ain't saying the right things, you should intervene now. I'm not too sure about all the church rules.

"Shee-it! What the hell. I'll go with you," Mrs. Lock says. "It won't kill me. You say they have live music tonight? Well, I'm ready for some music. Back home our church used to have gospel music, good gospel music, but you say they got rock and roll tonight. Well," she laughs again, "I like rock and roll, too."

"You mean it, Ma?" Lou Ann asks.

"'Bout time I do something to set a good example."

"Oh, get off it!"

"No, I'm serious."

"Ah, what the hell. If I can bring my beer, I'm coming too," the Road Knight man says.

Next thing I know, they all pick up their bottles of beer and walk with me. Fortunately, no one bothered to fill a cooler. My underarms are sweating something terrible. This must be what is meant by a religious experience. Unless I control myself, I'm certain I'll start talking in tongues. That's how close I feel to Jesus right now, but I know it'd frighten the neighbors if I started talking in tongues, so I bite it, hoping I'll feel like this again. I've seen others talk in tongues but I haven't yet. "Jesus, don't tell me this is my only chance," I pray. "I don't mean to be cutting you off right now, but we may lose them if I start talking in tongues."

"Can we bring our beer?" a Road Knight asks. "Sure," I say, hoping it'll be finished by the time we get to the church door.

Before entering the church, they set their beer bottles by the bushes instead of bringing them in.

"Will be like piss water when we get out, but it'll be better than nothing," a Road Knight says.

"I ain't bringing mine in case Jesus does a miracle and turns it into holy water," Mrs. Lock says. "Can't take no chances. Be my luck she finally gets to see a miracle when he screws with my beer."

"Ya never know," I say, certain this is already a miracle.

There's ten of us and we're not quiet, so most of the people turn around to watch us find a seat. All of their faces look like they're praying we won't sit next to them, but I forgive them for those thoughts and know they'll change their mind after they see my neighbors go up to the altar call and get saved. We take up one entire pew, the last pew in the balcony. It's extremely hot up there and all of us are sweating, but no one says anything. They're just as curious about the other folks as they are about them.

The young preacher starts off with a rather slow prayer, one that puts the Willy the Road Knight man to sleep. Mrs. Lock wakes him and he groans loudly. It's a good thing the band starts playing right away or they'd walk out. Long prayers can make anyone feel that way.

On my show, I'll only have short prayers and I'll try to say them fast, not in this long, drawn out voice some preachers use. The music gets our entire row tapping their feet and shaking their hips. It looks like the band is going to convince them.

"Shit, can't believe Ray sold out to a Jesus Freak band," Lou Ann whispers, but not quiet enough to stop the people from three rows ahead of turning their heads. "Nothing's the same anymore."

When it's finally time for the altar call, none of my neighbors leave their seats. Lots of other people do, but some of them are regulars and go to every altar call. I start praying one of them will get up and get saved, but no one moves. They just stare at those weeping by the altar.

"God, they know how to ruin a good night, don't they?" Willy says.

I try not to lose faith, hoping the music is just having a delayed effect and will hit one of them at home.

As we walk home, Mrs. Lock says, "It wasn't half bad. Better than I thought. But I got to tell you, I'm not going back."

"It's just too bad Ray turned Christian," Lou Ann adds.

When we get to our homes, we say goodnight, and I fall asleep dreaming of my TV show. On my show we'll have a different ending, an ending where everyone gets saved. But my show is on hold. Jesus makes me wait for everything. All of this waiting must be to make me strong and patient, but I seem to be getting more impatient and confused. I'm not even sure how I'll describe miracles or heaven anymore. I guess that I'll just have to count on Jesus to untie my tongue and say the right words. Don't know why he's not as eager as I am to get this show on TV. Can't he see how it'll change the world? Seems like my days not only end with more questions than answers, but my stomach is getting as knotted as my tongue is tied waiting for all these things to happen.

DIANE PAYNE

Lives near the Mexican border with her daughter and dog, and teaches writing at her local community college. She has been published in numerous magazines. "Tongue-Tied" is an excerpt from an unpublished book about growing up in Holland, Michigan.

Little Acorn

RUPERT GOODWINS

Throughout history, humankind has only been able to watch in amazement as its ideas take on lives of their own.

"I CAN NEVER GET ENOUGH OF TREES," says Simon Beswick, the artist. His latest structure—*Grand Oak of Orion*—is the largest object he's constructed. Sometimes he says that it will never be finished; alternatively, that it was finished the moment he finalized the programs for the tiny, powerful spacegoing robots or worker ants that are doing the donkey work.

For *Grand Oak* is assembled in space, between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, in the middle of what used to be called the asteroid belt. The mining craft bring in rocks, minerals, metals from the region, and from that bounty produce two things—more of themselves, and more of the Oak.

The Oak itself is, at the time of writing, some five hundred miles long from topmost branch to deepest root. It is in form as in name, an enormous tree, complete, uprooted, thick trunk fractally branching out top and bottom to dense and mazy tips. It is, as everything is this far from the sun, a dark and cold place, fitfully lit by flashes of light from the worker ants. On command from Beswick, though, the ants take up position and illuminate the Oak with a thousand brilliant beams. The effect is indescribable: there are more colors here than one ever suspected existed, and mundane words such as glitter, iridescence, and jewel are grotesquely inadequate. It may not be the greatest spectacle in the Solar System, but it's the closest we men and our machines have come to mirroring the massive beauties that nature has carelessly condensed from the dust.

Yet Beswick is surprisingly sanguine about the importance of this work. Propose that the Grand Oak may be the most significant work of art this century, and he shrugs. "It took so little effort, and so little cost," he says. "And

it's hard to claim significance for a work that has demanded so little of either from me." Indeed, he refuses even to claim authorship for it, preferring to be seen as a director of what he refers to as "the project."

"The thing builds itself, and has done so from the beginning. I suggest how certain aspects may progress; there's a wide variety of materials found by the workers, and often the choice for which to use on a certain part is aesthetic. They ask me, but more often mechanical pragmatism determines the result. I sometimes feel that the real art lay in making it happen, organizing the finances and practicalities."

Bureaucrats would agree. While the popular image of the Grand Oak is of one man and uncountable machines, beavering away in the lean, dark corners of the system, the resultant corporate structures on Earth and Mars have a size and complexity to rival the branches of the Oak itself. The mining companies who support the project are much more than mere sponsors—they reap an exceptional knowledge of the asteroid belt, together with substantial proportions of the finer elements discovered. They're also managers of by far the largest fleet of autonomous mining ships in existence—a fleet that built itself, and that is growing exponentially. The whole business long ago became self-financing, and Beswick has been known to publicly muse that while the Oak is the nominal reason for the activity surrounding it, it may be no more than a metaphor for what is actually taking place.

It's natural to ask where it all may end. The dynamics are fascinating; as the Oak grows exponentially, so does its appetite for raw materials. A rough sphere of mining activity has grown outward from the site of the Oak; if you assume an even distribution of material in that space, its increased surface area will nicely match the demands of the tree. Ferrying the stuff in gets more difficult; the algorithms behind the workers are choreographed were based once on bees returning to the hive "as much from instinctive, aesthetic reasons as from analytic, reductive reasoning," says Beswick. But the dense mesh of computers that runs the workers has long since modified those designs on its own initiative: another part of the community of humans that live in the branches of the bureaucratic shadow the Oak casts on the ground is devoted to unravelling these decisions and understanding just what it is that's growing out there.

And before you can predict where it'll all end, points out Beswick, you have to know where it is now. That's surprisingly difficult: there are graphs of materials used, radius and length and mass, and all show the same pure exponential law. But exponential systems distort their media in unpredictable ways—the third Law of the Net—and nobody's prepared to say just which bit of the medium in which the Oak is growing will buckle beneath the stress first.

If pressed, Beswick will admit that he'd like to see the Oak reach maturity—whatever that will be—before he dies. "If you follow the analogy through," he points out, "at some point the project will reach some form of equilibrium where its own growth will slow dramatically or stop and its energies will go into procreating a forest. Which raises the problem that's dogged creators ever since the activity became fashionable; it looks as if durability of a work depends on independence, mutability and mortality. And sex."

It's known that the consortium behind the Oak is more keen to see the tree finished. Nobody who's seen it ablaze in space is in any doubt that here is a sight of infinite attractiveness in a damn awkward spot. Proposals to move the Oak into a LaGrange point have been circulating, although even here the tidal forces of gravity may damage the structure. And Beswick's teams of programmers are surprisingly unwilling to say with any certainty that the huge machine out there can ever be turned off.

Meanwhile, the Grand Oak of Orion is unperturbed, attended by its artificial acolytes, following with absolute certainty the single purpose that it undoubtedly owns: to grow.

RUPERT GOODWINS

London-dwelling Englishman, 31, with own modem and mild Ballard/Dick fixation, seeks lifestyle of indolent SF authorhood. Currently technical editor on PC Magazine UK. *More—or less—can be found on* <http://www.fly.net/~rupertg/goofimr.htm>.

Iowa Basketball

MICHELLE ROGGE GANNON

We'd all like to picture a good *death for ourselves.*
But few of us gets to choose the way we go into that good night.

RIGHT NOW I'M LYING UNDER THE DINING ROOM table, trying to rest. It's the only space available where Dad won't step on me when he gets up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

It's not a bad place, as long as I remember I'm not in a bed and don't sit up straight and smack my head. From here I can watch the television in the living room, even though all that's on is a grade-B western, the kind stations run at one in the morning.

Somehow I find that bad western comforting. The good guys are gonna win. We're talkin' a happy ending, most definitely. I'd like to see some old episodes of *Perry Mason*, though—Perry Mason with his gut instincts about a client's innocence. But Dad, even though he is asleep in his favorite living room chair, has first dibs on the television. I learned long ago I couldn't just tiptoe into the living room and switch channels. He would always wake up and, trying to be gruff, say, "Hey! Turn back to that western." Or that basketball game. Or whatever he happened to have been watching.

From under this table, I'm close enough to hear my 18-month-old son Jamie if he should wake up and cry. He is asleep in Mom's bedroom on her bed. I'm nervous because the bed is kind of high off the floor, and I have to tuck pillows all around to try to prevent his rolling off.

Most importantly, from under this table, I'm close to Mom. She is sleeping her troubled sleep about five feet away from me.

Her hospital bed takes up most of the dining room. We set it up in here because it's warmer and easier to take care of her, and she's not isolated in a bedroom. I hope she doesn't feel like she's on display. Actually, I don't think she gives a damn.

Dad is snoring. He's not watching that western at all. "How many times do we have to endure John Wayne?" I grumble. At least there's no sign of Gabby Hayes or Glenn Ford.

Dare I risk it? Being careful not to bump my head on the underside of the table, I steal into the living room, glancing guiltily at Dad. He's asleep in his easy chair, bent slightly forward, his head hanging down. It is the only position Dad can sleep in without going into an coughing fit. Sooner or later, he leans further forward, jerks himself awake, and catches himself from falling out of the chair. I wonder if he dreams in that position.

As quietly as possible, I change the channel. The light on the television flickers noticeably. Dad snorts and sits up, blinking. His glasses are still propped on his nose.

"I'm changing back to your show. I just wanted to see what else was on."

Dad nods and closes his eyes for a moment. Then he stands and totters off to the bathroom. Shuffling along in his sweatsock-covered feet, he glances at his sleeping wife as he passes her bed.

Sighing, I slip back into my place under the dining room table. The floor is carpeted, yet, even with Mom's lady long johns on, I'm still cold. I pull one of Mom's hand-crocheted afghans over me. I'm not fond of polyester yarn or the strange purple and green combination Mom chose for this afghan, but it's something she made that I can wrap around me. We already piled the heavy quilts on top of Mom and Jamie, so they wouldn't be cold. After all, it is the middle of January.

Mom's hospital bed takes up most of the dining room. I hope she doesn't feel like she's on display. Actually, I don't think she gives a damn.

Dad shuffles back to his chair. He peers at me through his bifocals, looking at me as if I'm some kind of a nut. "Why don't you go to bed, Amy?"

"This is my bed," I say. "I want to be close to Mom in case she needs me."

"Don't look too comfortable to me." He closes his eyes after a moment and bends slightly forward, returning to his Leaning-Tower-of-Pisa sleep.

I MUST HAVE DOZED OFF FOR A LITTLE BIT. SUDDENLY I'm aware Mom is trying to ring the bell.

"Mom, I'm right here." Forgetting about the table, I sit up and crack my head. Wincing and rubbing my crown, I hurry over to Mom.

"I gotta go to the bathroom," she says.

"Okay." Mom was a big woman, and it's awkward to help her onto the port-a-potty next to the bed. I strain to support her until she sits down. Once she's seated, I steady her because she's dizzy from her medication.

I hear a thump and a cry in Mom's bedroom. Jamie.

"Oh, great." I stand there, unable to leave Mom. If she falls, she might fracture some of her fragile bones. "Jamie, come out here. Mommy's out here with Grandma. Commere, sweetie."

He stumbles out, wailing, holding one arm out to me, his bottom lip stuck out. "Ma-ma. Ma-ma."

"I know, sweetie, I know." Mom is almost done. After a few moments, I help Mom clean herself and help her back into the bed. Jamie is holding onto my leg, crying.

There's nothing like being needed.

"Sweet little thing." Mom's tiny bird eyes, dulled by cataracts, manage to locate Jamie. She holds out one shaky hand to him. "The little thing."

Picking up Jamie, I place him within Mom's reach. She pats his chubby left arm gently. "Don't cry, Joey, don't cry."

Joey is my second brother's name, but I don't bother to correct her. Tucking the quilt under Mom's chin, I notice the frightening, alien way she looks at me. But I know she can't help it.

I slowly lull Jamie back to sleep in the rocking chair next to Mom's bed. Mom watches us. She shifts, trying to find a comfortable position. That must be hard to do when you have a tumor as big as a basketball rising out of your stomach.

"How are you feeling, Mom? Are you in pain?"

She sighs. "I always have pain."

Being careful not to bump Jamie, I glance at my watch. "It's almost time for your medication."

"Don't give me the full dosage. I don't want to be too doped up."

I nod. Gently rising, I carry my sleeping son back to Mom's bedroom. This time I pile pillows and blankets higher, creating a mountainous barrier. Jamie doesn't wake up.

Returning to the kitchen, I get Mom's pills. One kind is a pain pill, and the other is a tranquilizer she's taken for more than forty years, since her breakdown. I count out the dosages, recording the time and number, then bring them to Mom with a glass of water.

She can barely push the pills from her tongue to her throat. I dread seeing her struggle to swallow, knowing we'll have to resort to liquid morphine if it gets worse. "Mom, is there anything else you need?"

She shakes her head slightly, watching me.

"Is—is there anything you want to talk about?"

She draws a very audible breath. "No, not really."

I sit down on the edge of the rocking chair, feeling pressure to say something significant since she's wide awake. The doctor's prognosis hangs over everything: *your mother has two weeks left to live, three at best.*

But I have never been strong under pressure. I think of the time I choked in a high-school basketball game when we were one point ahead and I threw the ball to a girl on the other team, who turned and made a basket with ten seconds left in the game.

I keep twisting the gold tiger's eye ring on my right hand. It's Mom's class ring, 1934. She gave it to me years ago after I lost my own.

"Did I tell you, Mom, that the Twin Cities Women's Club asked me to speak at one of their dinners? I'm so nervous."

Mom stares at me but doesn't respond. It's as if she's off somewhere, contemplating something a lot bigger than the stuff I'm talking about. This isn't like Mom—usually, she's interested in the mundane doings of her youngest child.

But then, usually, she's sitting at the kitchen table, crocheting, smoking a cigarette, slugging down coffee, listening to the confessions, boasts, and amusing tales of her children, grandchildren, and old-lady friends.

I miss seeing her sit at that table.

I fumble around for something else to say. "Well, Mom, I haven't talked to Jamie's dad in quite some time. But I'm applying for child support. Hennepin County says I'll have to prove he's the father, since we weren't married—"

A look of complete distaste settles like a terrible weight on Mom's wizened face. I'd better shut up now or I'll have to slap myself.

"Guess I'll get some sleep," I mumble as I slide under the table. Mom's lying wide awake, a few feet away from me, but I know anything I say is going to sound inane in the face of death.

ONLY TWO DAYS AGO I WAS IN MINNEAPOLIS, unaware of the struggle going on in Iowa, inside my mother's body.

When my sister Louella told me over the phone that Mom had two or three weeks left to live, I laughed—a short, nervous, disbelieving laugh.

"What do you mean?"

"It's complicated, Amy. But that's what Dr. Nichols told us. Mom's known for a long time that something was wrong. She just refused to go to the doctor."

My sister's voice began to tremble. I sat with the phone to my ear, stupefied. In front of me was a pile of papers: forms to be signed, notes to myself, a draft of a speech. I made a mental note: *cancel all your appointments for the next month.*

First Dad got lung cancer. My brother Rocky and my sister took turns driving fifty miles to Sioux City every day with Dad, until the radiation treatments destroyed the tumor. So, just when we think we can breathe a sigh of relief…this happens.

"How could she keep this a secret?"

"Amy, you haven't been around. You haven't seen what's been going on."

"I was home at Christmas," I said. "That was only three weeks ago!" She'd seemed fine then—just the usual aches and pains. "She fixed chili on Christmas Eve. And she had plates of sugar cookies, all the usual—"

"I know, I know," Louella said. "She made Christmas as normal as possible. She kept it a secret from all of us."

Neither of us spoke for several seconds.

"Sis," I said at last, "I should come home right away."

"It's a good idea. Actually, we need you to—to help take care of Mom."

"I don't understand—isn't she in the hospital?"

"Right now she is," Louella said. "But there's no point in keeping her there. She wants to spend her last days at home. That means we'll have to take care of her around the clock. I can be there during the day, but at night…"

I understood. Louella has a husband and family. My brothers have families too. I only have my infant son.

"I'll be there tonight."

During the six-hour drive to Battle Creek I had plenty of time to think, and the more I thought, the angrier I became. This was so *typical!* Knowing something was wrong and refusing to go to the doctor, believing she could control and conquer this disease herself. Maybe she thought the tumor would go away on its own, or if she didn't acknowledge its presence it simply would not exist. God knows what she thought.

But I wasn't surprised. For the last three years, Mom had suffered from cataracts. Instead of having an operation, she kept getting new glasses, trying different prescriptions. She wanted new eyeglasses to solve the problem. But, of course, they didn't.

Finally, not long ago, Mom permed a customer's hair at the beauty shop, and she wasn't sure she'd done a good job. Since it was affecting her work, she decided to have the eye operation.

When the nurses gave her a physical, however, they discovered her blood was too thin for an operation of any kind—she'd taken nine aspirin that morning to dull her pain from the ailment she'd told no one about.

The Battle Creek doctor knew what was wrong almost immediately. He could feel the tumor just by pressing on her abdomen.

One thing led to another, with my sister Louella dragging Mom to the hospital in Sioux City. Mom was told her days on this planet were finite. There was nothing the doctors could do.

I WAKE UP—OR DO I JUST DREAM THAT I WAKE UP? All I know is that the moments I'm about to describe seem like a dream.

Getting up from under the table, I look at my mother. She is wide awake, and her eyes don't seem so filmy, so blind. I can talk to her straight.

Sitting down next to her, I savor the warmth of her crumpled body. Still alive. I clutch her right hand a little tighter than I should.

"Amy," she says.

"Mom—" Frantically, I search my mind for anything that will make her keep fighting. "I won't be able to bear it if you go. Minneapolis is so stressful. The only way I cope is knowing you're here, carrying on. It keeps me sane—"

"I know," she says. And she does seem to know. She really does.

"You can't let this beat you, Mom. You gotta keep going—"

I saw Joey holding Mom's hand and telling her things. The right things to say at a time like this, things I would never think to say. I envy him the peace that is in his eyes.

She nods and takes one of her deep, shaky breaths. "I'll try." She means it. She won't let this disease take her away from us. Something in her still believes she can lick this thing, just as she has conquered so many other problems in her life.

For the moment, I believe it too. I hug her, just as if I were a little child. And then I go back to bed, to my under-table nook. In my sleep, I embrace the seeming reality of my dream.

WHAT WAKES ME UP IS NOT THE SUNLIGHT OR DAD'S snoring. It's the television.

I can imagine all sorts of things being on at 6 a.m.—an old movie, a Lucille Ball rerun, a religious meditation, or news, maybe. But looking past Mom's frail body in her hospital bed, past Dad snoring fitfully in his Leaning-Tower-of-Pisa stance, I see a blond, pink-cheeked woman in a skimpy aerobics outfit saying, "Energy! Energy! Let's show some energy this morning! Up and down, and up and down…stretch, stretch, stretch!"

"Stretch all you like, honey. You've got enough energy for me and this entire household. And then some."

I sound cranky, but I'm feeling better—although "better" is a relative term. Better than rock bottom?

Regardless, I prefer daytime. Everything seems more upbeat. In an hour or so, my oldest brother, Rocky, will check on us before he goes to work. Then my sister Louella will come to relieve me. And, no doubt, there will be other visitors, coming to say good-bye.

When my sister arrives, I greet her with a hug. She gives Mom her medicine and talks to her briefly. We both coax Mom into trying a can of Ensure—this high-calorie, nutritional milk shake. When she drinks half of the can's contents, we cheer up, making jokes. We even talk about mundane things in front of Mom, and I don't feel stupid.

Jamie's new word, "Cowabunga." Whether or not it will snow. That beautiful purple and green afghan.

I walk out to the kitchen, smiling. practically giddy. It feels good to feel good. I can only feel bad for so long.

Louella is right on my heels. She puts Mom's medicine away and turns to me. A smile lingers on her lips, but there is something else in her eyes. Shaking her head, she glances at Mom. "How can this be?" she says. It is not really a question.

THE PHONE RINGS; IT IS MY AUNT JUDITH. I AM relieved to hear the healthy, energetic sound of my aunt's voice. As a child, I always looked forward to her visits. She was so much fun.

Today, however, she sounds strained. Mom is Aunt Judith's big sister.

"Can I speak to your mother, dear?"

I turn the phone over to Mom, holding it to her ear. Mom's eyes become brighter for a few minutes. She listens intently, responding to Aunt Judith in monosyllables. There is death in her voice, and I know the sound of it must carry over the wires. Gradually, Mom retreats into that limbo place, a time-out. The enlivened look in her eyes fades, and she stops speaking.

I take the phone from Mom to speak to Aunt Judith. All I can hear is this choking sound—inarticulate grief. Wordless, I hand the phone to my big sister.

I go to the living room and sit in Dad's easy chair. Staring at the television, I can't laugh, although what's on seems damned funny just now—the soap opera, *One Life to Live*.

AS THE DAYS GO BY, I NOTICE A CHANGE IN MOM. Because she has trouble swallowing the pain pills, we switch to liquid morphine. She appears sleepy all the time and has difficulty forming sentences. I don't know if it's the medicine affecting her mind, or the disease. She strains, searching for ways to finish what she wants to say.

Watching her struggle, I imagine the way death should be: easy, without pain, the mind lucid, the body allowing you to accomplish whatever you want in your last, glorious moments. Everyone should get to make that final basket before the buzzer goes off, winning the game by one point.

Instead death is wasting away in bed, cancer destroying your body, organs shutting down one by one, someone cleaning your bottom for you, your final words distorted.

I call the nurse from the hospice program in Sioux City. "Can we lessen the dosage? Mom can barely communicate with us. She hates that."

The nurse advises: "Try cutting the dosage in half."

I do so, and it isn't long before I see a change. Mom becomes paranoid.

The nurse comes, but Mom refuses her bath. Mom never refuses anything, is never rude. But today she tells the nurse, "Go away!" And she looks at me with suspicion as I give her the morphine. She is certainly not sleepy now.

My family is milling about. My brother Joey came at high speed from a business trip in New York with his wife Elisha. This traveling salesman of a brother can put everything he wants to say in a few magic words. He's the kind of basketball player who can travel in a basketball game without the referee blowing the whistle.

Last night, I saw Joey holding Mom's hand and telling her things. The right things to say at a time like this, the things I would never think to say. Afterwards, I know he has said everything he needed. I envy him the peace that is in his eyes.

My dad turns the radio on in the kitchen, and the familiar sounds of a high school girls basketball game drift into the dining room. It's tournament time. My sports-minded brothers lean against the counters and listen. Smith passes to Uhl. Uhl dribbles, passes to Wright. Wright goes in for the lay-up and makes it!

"That Wright girl is a pistol," Dad says.

My sister puts one arm around my shoulder. "You were a darned good basketball player."

"I was just a substitute my last year—don't you remember?"

Louella shakes her head. "You were a good basketball player," she repeats.

I shrug. Coach Baumgarter had thought otherwise. I warmed the bench my senior year because I choked in key moments. I stuck it out until the end of the season, although the coach probably wished I would quit. I lost my passion for the game. It bothered me that somebody always had to lose.

Hope Sorensen, a neighbor lady, comes to visit. She is elderly and delicate, but healthy. I try not to look at her resentfully. She is bearing a plate of Rice Crispies bars. "I thought your mother might like a sweet treat," she says. She holds onto the bars, evidently worried the rest of us might eat them before Mom can try one.

If we could get Mom to eat anything, I would do handstands. We've tried everything, from favorite foods to new foods, but I could only cajole her into drinking a little more Ensure. She's almost finished a second eight-ounce can. It's only taken her three days.

I told the hospice nurse about it on the phone. "I'm not sure if it's the cancer that's killing her," I said, my voice cracking, "or if she's starving to death."

The nurse answered gently, "Your mother's body is giving her a message."

"I don't think I like that message."

Hope Sorensen sits in the kitchen—where Mom always used to sit and visit—and chats with my brothers and me before she talks to Mom. Hope's gossipy ways tended to annoy Mom, but Mom was always polite to her.

Rising from my chair, I go into the dining room when I hear Mom talking with Louella in an angry, alien voice.

"Send her away," Mom says. "I don't want to talk to her. Get rid of her!"

I look at Louella. "Get rid of Hope?"

Louella is smiling behind her hands. "Yes—we have to kick her out."

This is going to be awkward. But before we can stop her, Hope walks into the dining room to speak with Mom. "Elizabeth, I brought you some Rice Crispies bars. How are you feeling?"

Surprising us, Mom puts a smile on her face. "Better," she says. There is a lot of orneriness in that one word.

"Wonderful!" Hope looks at us as if to say: *you're wrong, she's not dying, you silly children.* Fortunately, Hope only stays a few more minutes, without hearing Mom be rude to her even once. She leaves, convinced that she has put Mom on the road to recovery.

Louella's husband calls and asks her to come home to help with the chores on the farm. So I tend to Mom while my brothers hover around somewhat helplessly, discussing the local high school's chances of making it to the state girls' basketball tournament.

It is time for Mom's medicine again, and I'm dreading it. Mom stares at me, not with suspicion anymore, but, it seems to me, with…hatred.

"I won't take it. You're trying to poison me."

I stand there, flabbergasted. Can this angry old woman be my mother? "Mom, I would never hurt you. This medicine takes away the pain."

"You're trying to poison me," she repeats. She slaps the cup with surprising strength, and the morphine spills on her blanket.

"Boys," I call out, "I need your help."

My brothers surround me almost before the words are out of my mouth.

"Mom," Rocky says soothingly, "what's the matter?"

"You're trying to kill me," the old woman insists.

"No, Mom, we love you. We would never hurt you," Joey says.

"You don't love me. And I don't love you."

The words rise up out of me in a sob: "Oh, Mom." I turn away.

This is not my mother.

Somehow Rocky and Joey manage get this woman to take the morphine. They settle her down.

I sit holding my head, which feels quite hot, thinking about the speech I have to give for the Twin Cities Women's Club. It's supposed to be about the influence our mothers have had on our careers, the inspiration they have provided. Thinking about it calms me. And then I remember: I'm supposed to give that speech *tomorrow* in Minneapolis.

After waiting until things have calmed down, I tell my brothers I have to go. I can't cancel—it's too important to my career. It will only take one day. I'll go there, give the speech, and turn right around and come home.

I tell my brothers I have to go. I can't cancel—it's too important to my career. It will only take one day. I'll go there, give the speech, and turn right around and come home.

Rocky and Joey stare at me but say nothing. They understand—work comes first. Mom set that standard for us. Immediately, my brothers start to figure out schedules for tending Mom and Jamie.

Mom sinks into sleep before I leave. I can't go near her bed, afraid that those eyes will open and look at me accusingly. Part of me wants to hold her hand, at least, but I can't. I tell myself I'll do it when I get back. Instead, I hug my son a little too tightly. He wriggles out of my good-bye embrace.

ON THE WAY TO MINNEAPOLIS, I GO OVER MY SPEECH, reinventing my mother, erasing what I've witnessed:

My mother had graduated from high school, attended beauty school, and started her own business at the tender age of eighteen. She supported her immigrant mother and five younger siblings with her earnings. Later, when she married, she supported her own family. She was the town's oldest original owner of a business, running her beauty shop for over fifty years. Elizabeth Cooke was still working up until one month before her illness.

An uninvited memory rises up: Mom, fifteen years ago, when she fell in the living room and broke bones in her right foot. She never went to the doctor, afraid that he would put her foot in a cast and she wouldn't be able to work. She would lose her customers. Mom worked in spite of the pain, standing for hours at a stretch. Over time, she developed a huge lump on one side of her foot. One toe twisted and curled on top of another. She had to wear shoes specially made for her feet because no others would fit. Mom complained about the price of those shoes—over $400.

At first, I do not see the state patrolman behind me, his lights flashing. He has to turn on his siren for me to notice him. I pull over.

I am developing an elaborate story about why I am speeding when he says, "You should go home, Miss. We got a call from your brother—they asked us to keep an eye out for you, to send you back."

IT'S LATE WHEN I GET HOME. THE FAMILY MEMBERS who live nearby have gone home. Dad, of course, is there, and so is my brother Joey and his wife Elisha.

When I walk in the dining room, I see that Mom is gone. The hospital bed has been taken away. The dining room is just a dining room again.

It doesn't register. I stand there in the space where I would have stood next to Mom's bed holding her hand. I'm digging my nails into my palms.

Tonight my dreams will try to convince me that Mom is still alive. Part of me won't know Mom is dead for a long time to come. Every day, for months, I'll wake up, thinking for a few sweet moments: *she's alive.* Then I'll remember.

Joey greets me, breaking off my reverie. He is not a salesman now. He hugs me and asks, "Amy, can you make some hot fudge sauce for ice cream?"

I nod, relieved and not surprised at all. I find Mom's recipe easily. Searching through the cupboards, I find that Mom has all the ingredients we need—unsweetened chocolate, sugar, flour, evaporated milk, vanilla, and Oleo. I make sauce, measuring, stirring, and pouring ingredients, performing a ritual.

Joey and Dad are the only ones still up. They sit at the kitchen table, talking about little pieces of nothing. I'm glad they haven't mentioned the funeral preparations. Just now, I can't think about a funeral.

They watch me make the sauce, and I realize I'm more of a comfort to them than any episode of Perry Mason could be. I hand Dad and Joey bowls of ice cream and let them to help themselves to the hot fudge sauce.

Joey looks at me gratefully. "Just like Mom's." He drowns his vanilla ice cream, creating a mud-and-milk lake. I smile and am about to make a dish myself when I look at Dad. He is eating without enthusiasm.

"Forty-nine years ago," he says, "Your Ma and I got married. We eloped 'cause your Grandma Ellis didn't approve of me. I didn't have a job. We drove to Nebraska in a car that leaked oil the whole way. We'd have to stop every once in a while to dump in a can of oil. I was surprised we made it. Nebraska…maybe we were married in South Dakota." He laughs shortly. "I can't recollect."

He continues to eat, almost as if he's not really tasting the ice cream. With each swallow, it seems to me I can see a tumor growing in his chest, one the radiation treatments didn't check.

And I keep thinking, maybe, just this once, the referee will stop the clock, to show a little mercy.

MICHELLE ROGGE GANNON

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With Thoughts of Sarah

CHRISTOPHER O'KENNON

People like to believe in lofty goals and higher ideals, but, more often than not, selfless acts are performed with only our own interests in mind.

I JUST DIDN'T THINK IT THROUGH. I WAS BLINDED by the pain of loving her and I just didn't think it through.

I suppose it all started with Weed Mulligan. Surprisingly, it didn't take us long to get used to him. As long as I didn't think too hard about what he actually was, drifting gently in his tank, I found I could look at him as just another piece of equipment or an exceptionally ugly lab animal. But what amazed me the most, and still does, was that the damned thing could communicate and seemed completely unaware of what had been done to him. But communicate he did. And he even seemed to know his new name.

The name Weed Mulligan was someone's idea of a joke. I don't remember who started it—probably some technician or Foundation bigwig, but the name stuck. Weed was a floating jumble of nerves and brain tissue that actually resembled a cross between a patch of seaweed and a pot of Mulligan stew. He was now just the central nervous system and much of the peripheral nervous system of a chimpanzee, with a few bits of the endocrine system thrown in for good measure. The idea was to see how much Weed could remember and communicate while in this state. But, as interesting as that was, the real corker was that Weed had been dead for more than a week and didn't seem to know it yet. He was a collection of memories that had been fooled into thinking it was alive.

Dr. Sarah Yuen, my partner on the experiment, sat across the lab comparing a stack of readouts to various displays and meters. Her pace bordered on frantic, held in check only by discipline. "I'm getting a slight deterioration reading from the optic chiasm and the corpus callosum," she said as she pushed her straight black hair out of her face. "I'll increase the vitamin input long enough for us to get the memory recording finished."

"I'll be ready in just a second," I said, turning back to my keyboard, but trying to keep an eye on Sarah just the same. I suspected she had stopped taking her medication, as she sometimes did when she felt it numbed her thinking. Sarah was bipolar, but she had it under control with the meds. When she bothered to take them.

Mark Walker was standing beside me, keeping track of a few thousand wires and tubes while making sure no one wanted coffee. Mark was a grad student helping us for free because he didn't have much choice—that's part of the deal when you enter grad school. You become a professor's slave for four years or so. You dot his i's and do the dirty work he doesn't want to do. A great racket, if you happen to be a professor.

I finished entering the important data and handed Mark the keyboard. He smiled slightly and took over for me, verifying computations and that sort of thing. I walked over to Sarah under the pretense of being some help. "This should be Weed's last recording gig," Sarah said as she reached over and squeezed my hand. "Soon the old boy will be a star."

"He won't be the only one," I said, and kissed the top of her head. She gave me a wonderful smile and returned to her work.

I stood there a bit longer, just looking at her, enjoying her presence. Being in love can be one of the nicest feelings a human can experience, but you can count on not getting much done until you get used to it. And I certainly wasn't used to it. My life had never been saturated with intimate relationships, for one reason or another. I had had brief encounters when I was younger, but I could never master the trick of keeping a relationship going for more than a few months. So when I found someone who wanted to be with me as much as I wanted to be with them, it looked like I might be able to finally fill that void in my life. Sarah made each day worth living.

The real corker was that Weed had been dead more than a week and didn't seem to know it yet. He was a collection of memories that had been fooled into thinking it was alive.

"Whenever you're set, David," she said, leaning back in her chair. "I'm ready at this end."

I took my place back at the computer terminal as Mark went over to Weed's tank to check the hook-ups. When he gave the all-clear sign I started telling the computer what to do.

And what the computer did was record Weed. Every electrical impulse, every memory imprint, every chemical pattern in his nervous system was recorded on a special disc whirring like a small star inside the MRAP. The disc was only a small part of the MRAP, which stood for Memory Recorder and Playback device. The MRAP itself was such a marvel that I almost blush to admit that Sarah and I helped put it together. The process was

complex and irreversible; unlike other forms of recording, the original did not survive the replication. In that sense it wasn't really replicating but transferring. We broke Weed's memories, the essence of his personality and all that made him unique, down into data more easily stored. If everything worked as predicted, he would never notice the change. As the laser disc slowed and stopped, I looked over at the readings for the original Weed in the tank. No electrical activity was present. None of the memory chemicals were to be seen. The holographic imprints that had lived in his brain were gone. All that was left of Weed in the tank was just so much garbage.

"Play back the disc," I said. Mark carefully removed the disc from the MRAP, being careful not to touch the shiny surface, and changed several settings. Eventually the MRAP would do that itself, but refinements take time. He slid it back into the MRAP and turned it on.

"He's in there!" shouted Sarah as the memory data flooded across both my screen and hers. "That beautiful chimp made it!"

"Let's go for broke. I'm starting computer assist," I said. Our computer-assist program was a translator: it took data from Weed and created a form of output. It read Weed's memory of himself and created a hologram to match. It also gave him a voice, not that Weed would get much out of that.

A ball of static appeared in the air over the holographic projector. The faint outline of a chimp appeared, its insides shifting colors like a badly tuned television. Then it snapped into focus and was, as far as I could tell, a perfect likeness of a chimpanzee.

Hello Weed, I typed into the computer. *This is David. How are you feeling?*

The chimp hologram started gesturing, using the sign language he had been taught when he still had a body. I saw Sarah smile out of the corner of my eye and looked at the screen. *Weed want banana,* he signed.

"I think it's your turn to feed him," said Sarah, laughing.

Then the world fell apart.

I STILL REMEMBER HER LAUGHING. THE WAY HER entire face lit up when she was happy. The way her almond-shaped eyes turned to thin, dancing lines. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. I know it hurts to remember, but that doesn't make it bad.

The experiment was a success. We still had a bit to do, little polishings here and there before we wrote up the final research article for the journals and the press. Neither Sarah nor I would have made huge sums of money out of the deal, we worked for the Foundation and any discoveries we made were technically theirs. But the prestige would send us both into history. Life could be good sometimes.

And sometimes not.

It was about a week after the recording of Weed's memories when Sarah slipped into one of her depressive phases. I had seen it before. Sarah's self-destructive tendencies worried me. She had mood swings, sometimes drastic ones, and she always became depressed after a project—even if it was successful. The break in the routine seemed to be a trigger. I remember one time, when she was at one of her lows, staying up all night listening to her cry. Sometimes she had definite problems that were beating around in her head, but more often than not it was just a vague, generalized despair, and that was the worst. She would sob into my chest and I would hold her, feeling just as bad with the frustration of knowing there was nothing I could do. I would have given the world to shoulder her pain myself, anything to save her from what she went through.

Eventually she would fall asleep, but it would be several more hours before I could follow her.

I suppose she just grew tired of it. Despair can get old after a while, that much I've learned.

On a night much like every other night, sometime while I was at the lab closing up, Sarah managed to get the courage to do what she must have been thinking about for a long time. With surgical precision she slit both her wrists. By the time I returned to the apartment we had been sharing for almost a year, she had bled to death most efficiently.

Everything that happened next had an almost mechanical feel to it. The last normal thing I recall doing was throwing open the bathroom door, expecting to find Sarah in the middle of a bubble bath. I can still feel the way my face froze in disbelief when I saw her laying there in the tub, the red water still warm and her arms draped along the side of the tub. Her eyes were closed and her face had a calm, almost dreamy expression. If it weren't for the blood and the criss-crossed cuts on each wrist I would have sworn she was asleep.

I felt for a pulse, not because I expected to find one, but because I couldn't think of anything else to do. I kept my hand on her neck long after I was sure there was nothing there. Eventually I put my arms around her, sliding her half out of the tub and myself half in, and rocked her gently in the water. I sat there in the bathroom, just holding her and sobbing her name into her wet hair.

Sarah, oh Sarah, what have you done?

A year and a half of shared experiences poured through my head. The first time we met. The way she had to tell me it was okay to kiss her that first time. The night we were snowed in at the University and had to camp out in a classroom. The shared secrets and midnight promises.

The time we both got stinking drunk and couldn't find our way home. The first time we made love. The taste of her. The smell of her. The feel of her.

I trusted you, Sarah. I let you past the walls of my heart and into my most secret of places. I gave you my trust and you do this to me? How am I supposed to live without you? How am I supposed to go on with no one to love? What about the future we could have had? What about the life we could have had? You can't go, Sarah! I love you!

And then, like a door opening into the darkest corners of my mind, I knew what I had to do. I knew a way to bring her back. If it worked for Weed, it would work for Sarah.

GETTING SARAH'S BODY TO THE LAB WAS MY FIRST problem, and that one proved the easiest. First I drained the tub and washed her. It wouldn't do to leave any trails of blood. With luck, no one need ever know she had died. I could always come up with an explanation for her disappearance later.

I taped the wounds on her wrists with electrical tape and carried her from the tub to the bedroom. She was a small woman, so I had no difficulty placing her on the bed and wrapping her in the sheets, but when I was almost done I had to stop and look at her. So many jumbled thoughts clamored around in my head, but none of them would focus enough to make sense. The pain I was feeling welled up and threatened to wash me away. My vision blurred and I thought I was going to fall, but I clamped down on my emotions and switched back over to whatever automatic pilot was managing to keep my limbs moving. I pulled the sheets over Sarah and made sure they wouldn't come undone. I had no trouble getting her into the back seat of my car—it was three in the morning on a Tuesday, so there wasn't much of an audience. Even if there had been someone out at that time, I doubt if anyone would have cared enough to wonder about the large white bundle the good professor kept talking to. Possibly ten years ago, but not now. The only real problem occurred when I reached the lab and found Mark still there.

Under different circumstances I might have tried some shrewd plan of misdirection and hustling in order to get him to leave. But, as I sat in the car looking at the bright windows of the lab, with Sarah draped across the back seat, no inspiration came. Nothing even remotely clever. So I once again turned myself over to the autopilot and slipped a good sized wrench from under the seat into my back pocket. I didn't know if I was going to use it, but I thought bringing it would be a good idea.

I picked Sarah up and carried her into the lab.

Mark looked up from the table where he was working, a little startled. He started to smile and stopped, his eyes moving from my face to the bundle in my arms. We stared at each other, him with his pen suspended centimeters from his notes and his face thoughtful, me like a marble statue, my face stuck in neutral. He suddenly seemed to realize what he was doing and put the pen down, making more of a production about it than was necessary but keeping his eyes on Sarah and me.

"I didn't expect you back tonight, Dr. Hammond," he said slowly. When I didn't answer, he continued, "That's not what I think it is, is it?"

"It depends what you think it is," I said, walking forward.

"It looks like a body wrapped in a sheet," he said, not quite sure if he was joking or not.

"Then it's what it looks like, Mark. I hope that doesn't alarm you."

Mark opened his mouth as if to say something, but changed his mind. He just watched as I put Sarah on top of one of the larger tables, still wrapped up. "Would I be far off base to guess that this isn't something the University has okayed?" he asked.

"I didn't expect you back tonight—
that's not what I think it is, is it?"
"It depends what you think it is."
"It looks like a body wrapped in a sheet."
"Then it's what it looks like."

"No. Nor the Foundation. This is something that just came up. Would you help me move this table closer to the tank?"

For a second I thought Mark would bolt for the door, and I was tensed for it. I probably would have killed him. But he had always been a nice kid, so maybe I would have recorded him too. But after grinding his teeth, he got up and helped me with the table.

"Is it anyone I know?" he asked as we lifted the table. He was trying to make his voice sound casual, but we both knew he was failing. I don't think he knew it was Sarah, but I'm sure he knew it wasn't some cadaver from the Medical School.

"Yes," I answered simply. He almost dropped the table, but we had it where I wanted it anyway."It's Sarah. She killed herself tonight and I'm going to bring her back."

"Jesus Christ in a wheelbarrow! Dr. Yuen? You want to record Dr. Yuen?" He took a step backwards.

I put one hand on the wrench and tried to look relaxed. "I don't have a choice, Mark. She's dead. She slit her wrists and she's dead."

"Shit," he said and ran both hands through his hair. He seemed unable to come up with anything better to say so he said it again. "Shit."

"I'm doing it because I need her, Mark. But think of the implications, for science and for you. Weed was impressive, but he was just a monkey. The first recording of a human's memories, of a human's personality, will put us into historic immortality. You think Freud is important, Mark? He wasn't even a good scientist. All he did was come up with unprovable theories. You and I can shake the world."

Mark was quiet. I knew he was thinking it through, trying to talk himself into it. Granted, it was a bit odd, but Mark was a struggling graduate student in psychology trying desperately to make a name for himself. The payoff could be staggering for him. "What about the police? This has got to be against the law."

"We didn't kill her, Mark," I said as I unwrapped Sarah, carefully placing the sheet on the table like a tablecloth. "She'll even be able to tell the police that once we're finished."

"I don't know, Dr. Hammond. I don't think I can do it."

"We won't have to do her the same way we did Weed. We stripped him down to the bare essentials because we didn't have the experience we have now. We couldn't keep his entire body from decomposing while we experimented. But we won't have to…to damage Sarah," I finished, a little uncertain. Mark knew what I meant by "damage"—neither one of us thought we could cut Sarah open and remove her nervous system. But we wouldn't have to. We wouldn't even have to put her in the tank. "Please, Mark. I could use your help."

He looked at Sarah and then at me.

HELLO SARAH, HOW DO YOU FEEL? MY HANDS WERE shaking as I watched the holographic image of her form in the middle of the room. It had been necessary to remove a portion of Sarah's skull to get some of the probes in place and that hadn't been easy. Mark was almost as pale as I was but he was mercifully covering the body with the sheet. When he finished he silently moved over to the other terminal to watch what happened.

The holo of Sarah snapped into focus and I thought I would cry again. She was wearing baggy jeans and her favorite brown sweater, the way she dressed when we were alone and casual. She looked around, giving the impression that she could see what was going on. I knew that was an illusion. She no longer had much in the way of stimulus input, just the computer and the MRAP.

"David? Is that you? Where are you?" she said, with help from the computer. It was uncanny how good the voice was.

Yes, this is David. I'm here. You've had an accident, but don't worry about it. You'll get better.

She flipped the hair out of her eyes and moved slightly in place as if her feet were getting tired. "What kind of accident, David? The last thing I remember was… no. You didn't."

Don't get excited, Sarah. I'll take care of you.

Sarah sat down in a non-existent chair, which frightened me for a moment. Either the computer was trying to be inventive or Sarah was actually seeing and responding to something in her mind. "You did it, didn't you? Yes, that must be it. I couldn't see anything at first, but my vision is clearing slowly. Only it's not really my vision, is it?"

"We won't have to do her the way we did Weed. We couldn't keep his body from decomposing while we experimented. But we won't have to…damage Sarah."

I'm not sure, I typed. *What do you think I did?*

"You recorded me, didn't you."

Yes. I had to. You killed yourself.

"That's what I thought," she sighed. "The last memory I have is…starting. Everything else must not have made it out of my short-term memory. I can almost see you now, David. That's pretty strange, I shouldn't be seeing anything at all, should I?"

No, you shouldn't be seeing anything. Maybe the computer is adjusting for you. It adds to your memories as well as plays them back.

Sarah blinked twice and looked like she was trying to focus on something. "Maybe. But I doubt we're where I see we are. We'd probably have to be in the lab, I'm in our apartment. It could be my brain making something out of nothing. Only I don't really have a brain anymore."

You don't have the actual organ, but that doesn't matter. The organ is a vessel and a recorder, just like the disc and the MRAP. *All that makes you up is still there.*

"I'm not sure about that, David. Are you? Is this all I am? All I ever was?"

Personality is a product of memory. You know that.

Sarah was quiet, her image looking thoughtful. I wished I could see what she was seeing. I wanted desperately to touch her again. "I can see you now. You're sitting across from me on the bed, wearing those silly bear feet slippers. You shouldn't have done it, David. You shouldn't have done this to me."

I had to. I wondered if she could feel the pain in those words and wished I could speak them to her. *I love you. I need you, Sarah.*

She smiled gently and stood up. "I know you do, David. That's what made it so hard to kill myself, even with all the pain I was feeling. But it was too much," she said as she walked to the limit of the projector. She

seemed to be looking at me, but I knew what she was seeing was her illusion of me just as I was seeing my illusion of her. "I wanted to die. I needed to die."

We can work it out. We always have in the past.

"No, we never worked it out. We just put it off. The only solution I could live with was the one that killed me. It was my decision, David. No one twisted my arm."

Sarah, please. We can do so much together.

She smiled again. "I don't think you've thought this through. What can we do together? I'm a disc, David. And I belong to the Foundation now. I wish things were different. I wish I were different. But I'm not."

I put my head in my hands. I could feel the tears again, and this time I let them come.

"You know what you need to do," she said.

You want me to destroy the disc, don't you?

"Yes. It was nice to be able to say good-bye to you David. I didn't think I'd have that chance. But it's time for me to die again."

It will mean my killing you, Sarah. I don't think I can do that.

"Don't think of it as killing me, David. I did that. You're just sending me back where I had intended to go anyway."

There's another problem. I had Mark help me and I don't want him to go to jail for this.

Sarah looked surprised. "Then you didn't find my note? It's on my desk. It should do the trick."

A note. I didn't even think to look. I stared at the screen. *This hurts more than anything.*

"I know it does, David. I'm sorry."

I love you, Sarah. I'll always love you. I reached for her outstretched hand and passed right through it, as I knew I would. She hugged something I couldn't see and stayed in that position while I fit myself into the empty space. It was almost like the real thing. "I loved you too, David. Be strong. Do what you have to."

I nodded to Mark as I stood there, hugging Sarah, and he turned off the MRAP and the projector and left me hugging air. But then I'd really been hugging air all along, hadn't I?

"Will you be okay?" asked Mark.

"I don't think so," I said. He put his arm around me and led me to my chair. "Does it ever get better?" I asked him, as if he had the answer. "Does it ever stop hurting?"

"I'm told it does," he said, "But I've never known it to happen. It just gets so you can live with it."

We sat there for what seemed like hours, saying nothing. Eventually I got up and went over to the MRAP. My finger hovered over the button that would erase Sarah forever.

After a time I pushed the button.

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Is a freelance writer living in Richmond, Virginia. He has been published in several newspapers and magazines (where, he reports, he has managed to enrage both the Henrico Police Department and the U.S. Navy). He spent two years working in a psychiatric hospital, which altered his outlook on life quite a bit.

You say "tomato"—I say "ammunition."