



Personal Essay

First Place

Eye of the Spider

“PENIS!”

I stopped dead in my tracks, in the middle of the crowded lunchroom. Had I heard what I thought I heard?

“PENIS,” someone yelled, louder this time.

Scanning the sea of seventh and eighth graders, my eyes settled on a group of boys. Just as I reached their table, a boy stood up, placed his hands on the table, raised his head like a wolf, and howled, “PEEEENIIIIIISSSSSSSSSS!”

In seconds, he realized I was behind him as his voice slowly died away, deflating like a balloon. “Penissss...s....s...” He slumped back down to a seated position and kept his eyes on his friends.

“Dude,” I said. “That was so weak. Next time you have to find your strength in your diaphragm, you know? Really get yourself ready to yell. Stand up straight and use your core.”

Each boy at the table just stared at me, mouths gaping wide, as I smiled. I tapped the Penis Yeller on the back, and said, as I walked away, “Oh, and next time? I mean, I probably would yell something else in case a mean teacher noticed you and sent you down to detention or something. Or, goodness, what if I found you doing the

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same thing again? There'd be a lot of paperwork involved for me, and I *hate* paperwork."

I grinned at them, and their hilarious expressions, and then turned on my heels and headed to my classroom. As I strutted away, in my mind, badass music was playing because I had this whole middle-school teacher thing *figured out*. Unstoppable! Almost boring!

Still smiling when I got to my classroom, I headed right to my desk to begin preparing for my next class. Halfway to my desk, I realized my motion-detector lights hadn't turned on, so I went to set down my lunch bag before I returned to flip on the lights.

Although my room was dark and shadowy, I could tell something was weird about my desk. I'm an "everything has a place," kinda girl, so now I was nervous someone had been in my classroom. No big deal, though, right? This was a school. People were in and out ALL the time.

As I reached my desk, my eyes began to adjust, showing me two 20-ounce soda bottles filled with coffee grounds.

What in the world? Coffee grounds?

I ran over to turn on the lights.

On my desk, there were two 20-ounce soda bottles, filled with dirt, sticks, twigs, and at least 10 giant, crawling, disgusting, black wolf-spiders.

I stared at them for a moment, watching them crawl around on top of each other, while nausea crept over me. My arachnophobia had long been a joke with people who



knew me. My poor husband was used to the intensity of my fear of spiders, knowing that I would wake up in the middle of the night, sobbing, convinced there was a spider carefully spinning its way down from the ceiling onto my face.

There had been a time that I'd accidentally-on-purpose punched him—HARD—in the nose as I tried to smash one of those spinny things coming down toward my face in a nightmare.

He was used to the fact that if I spotted a spider in the same room as I, I would cry and scream until someone got rid of it for me. I'd shake uncontrollably if one had been on me or even came close to touching me. My husband always tells people about the time that I sat in the basement for over two hours because I thought a spider was sticking its leg out of the lampshade, even though it ended up being just cat hair.

My coworkers were used to me running into the hallway and yelling for one of them to come and get rid of a spider. I once attempted to bribe the guy who sprayed the school hallways for pests to come in and do a quick spin around my classroom with his awesome jet-pack of spider spray (As it turns out, I didn't need to bribe him, only charm him and bat my eyes a little, and he basically didn't care at all because he probably gets a little tired of spraying the world with insect repellent).

As for my students, they were all aware. The word for spider in French is *l'araignee* (pronounced la-ren-yay), which is pretty much one of the hardest words to pronounce. Yet, even the most beginner students knew this word because I told so many stories about spiders.

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And of course, due to my fears, there was one kid in each one of my classes that would serve as a bug-catcher (typically the kid who became heartbroken if I killed a spider) and their job was to scoop it up and deliver it outside.

Now, here I was, with two bottles full of repulsive, creepy, crawling spiders. Suddenly, I shivered. *What if there were more?* I began frantically scouring my classroom for more bottles, my heart pounding like a kick drum.

Using a yardstick, I shoved things around on the floor. I crammed the yardstick inside cupboards and shook it back and forth wildly, half-closing my eyes as I imagined the gigantesque spiders that might crawl out.

With tears in my eyes, I ran to get the science teacher down the hall, the one who loved spiders. She listened carefully and then followed me back to my room, gasping when she saw the bottles. “Those are INCREDIBLE,” she said. “I can’t wait to show my classes!”

Sitting down at my desk, I cried a little more, and then berated myself for that moment of glee I’d had in the cafeteria just minutes before. “You don’t know anything,” I whispered to myself. “This is what you get when you become a know-it-all.”

It didn’t take long for me to find the culprit. I asked one group of students standing in the hallway, and one of them said, “Oh. Yeah. Alisha was talking about having spiders in her locker this morning.”

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We had a new principal that year, and in his interview, he assured us that there wasn't a behavioral problem he *could not solve*. So, I headed down to his office right after school.

The conversation was quick and went something like this:

Me: So, do you know Alisha from 8th grade?

Him: No.

Me: Well, okay, anyway, she put 2 bottles of spiders on my desk. I know that sounds weird, but that's what happened. Anyway, I'm shaken up because I'm arachnophobic, which she knows, and I feel like this is a pretty cruel thing to do.

Him: Okay.

Me: So, yeah. Can you pull her in and talk to her?

Him: About what?

Me: About the mean thing she did.

Him: Well, did you talk to her?

Me: ...

Him: Well, ok. I'll handle it. Spiders, huh? Were they big?

Me: Would it matter if they were small?

Him: Okay.

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Obviously, I'd have to take this into my own hands, so I sought out Alisha the next day. I sat her down in a chair next to my desk and began my interrogation.

"Did you put spiders on my desk?"

She whispered something unintelligible, staring at her feet.

"I can't hear you," I said. "Can you speak up?"

"It wasn't my idea."

I needed to change my tactic.

"Why did you do it? I asked.

"Brent found 'em at my house. Under a log. And he said to put them in your room because he got an F in your class."

I thought about that for a moment. I taught beginning French, and pretty much nobody got an F in my class unless they literally didn't show up for school. Ever. It seemed suspicious, but I continued.

"So, to get back at me for getting an F in French, he wanted you to put these spiders on my desk?"

She nodded.

I lectured for another minute or two, even if he told you to do it, you're the one on the hook for it, you should've known better, it hurt me, it was cruel, etc.

She just nodded.

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I was unsettled, but also unsure if there was anything else I could do. She seemed sad, honestly, and I was sad, and my belaboring that point seemed unnecessary. So, I sent her off so I could mull it over a little more, and make a decision about a potential consequence later, and figure out if I could do anything about Brent, who was now in high school.

The next morning, I was in the middle of 7th-grade French, when there was a knock on my classroom door. Annoyed, I stopped the game I was playing with my class (I was right in the middle of using Luc and Fifi, my French Barbie dolls, to help me stay completely in French as I taught, and we were at a good part) and opened the door to see my principal standing there.

I met him halfway, and he leaned in and whispered to me, “I’ll stay here with your class while you go in the hallway.”

Confused, I stepped out into the hallway, where I quickly realized I had just been thrown under the bus. Scratch that. The bus had run me over and threw it in reverse to do it again.

“So. Your boss called us and told us that Alisha was REQUIRED to apologize to you or else she’d be getting a detention or something. However, she told me she has ALREADY apologized to you. This school clearly needs to get its shit together.”

Alisha stood next to us, staring at the floor, her hair swiped messily over her face. I looked at her, opened my mouth, thought better of it, and then closed it. I’d wait.

Her mom nudged her. “Get to it, Alisha. I gotta get to work.”



“Sorry,” she muttered, in my general direction.

“Thank you,” I said. “But can you tell me why you did it, for real?”

She looked up. “What do you mean?”

“Why did you want to scare me? You know I’m deathly afraid of spiders. I was so scared that I haven’t been able to sleep. I know it sounds silly, but it’s a real thing, arachnophobia. I can’t imagine what I did to make you want to hurt me like that. And I know it wasn’t Brent.”

(I did NOT know it wasn’t Brent)

There was a long, pregnant pause. And then, “I just wanted to make you laugh.”

My mouth fell open.

“Um, what?” I asked.

“Well, it’s just ... everyone thinks you are so funny and so great, and you laugh so hard during class every day. I wanted to be the one you talked about in your story, so that everyone would know I’m funny and that you like me, too. I wanted you to like me.”

All the hot air that had been building up inside me slowly deflated, like when you’re arguing with your husband, and mid-sentence you suddenly realize you’re the one in the wrong. I had spent the rest of the school day and the rest of the night telling everyone the story, proclaiming how horrified I was, and how it was one of the meanest things anyone had ever done to me. Everyone had been aghast, shaking their heads and asking, “What is wrong with kids these days?”

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I truly didn't know what to say. As luck would have it, I didn't need to say anything.

"So. There you have it," the mom said, grabbing her daughter's hand and pulling her down the hallway. "Like I said, she already apologized. I don't know what else you want from us."

More than ten years later, I was grabbing a fountain soda at Kwik Trip when I noticed a girl stocking the shelves glancing in my direction. She looked vaguely familiar to me, however. I've had so many students over the years that this isn't unusual.

She continued glancing at me out of the corner of her eye and something about that look caused a flash of memory. "Hi," she half-whispered.

Instantly, I was transported back to the exact moment that I'd stood in front of my desk, watching those horrible spiders crawl all over each other in the bottles. But, I didn't feel animosity toward her, or fear. Not even sadness or bitterness. All I felt was grateful for the memory.

It's funny, the things you remember from decades of teaching. The moments that stick are the ones that made you feel something. The ones that changed you. The ones that you couldn't ignore, even when you wanted to.

Whether she knew it or not, she made me a better teacher that day.

From Alisha, I learned that every student's behavior isn't about me. In reality, hardly any of the behaviors are about me. She taught me that it was okay that my first



reaction was to feel defensive and wonder what I'd done to deserve her cruelty, but I couldn't let it be my last reaction. She taught me I needed to find out more.

Oh, and one last thing Alisha taught me: as a teacher, it is easy to forget what it's like to be a kid. But it's important to remember what it felt like to be in middle school – that sometimes, you'll do anything to fit in. That being liked and accepted might just make you do crazy things, like putting 20 disgusting spiders on your French teacher's desk, and blaming it on a kid named Brent, who, by the way, did not get an F in French.

Author Biography

Christy Wopat is the author of 3 books: the award-winning memoir, *Almost a Mother*, a picture book titled *Always Ours*, and *After All: Pregnancy After Loss*. Her personal essays have been featured in *Still Standing Magazine* and *The Educator's Room*, among others.

Christy is a 4th-grade teacher and lives with her husband and children in Holmen, Wisconsin. She heads up the WWA events committee, where she gets to meet amazing writers.

You can find Christy at www.christywopat.co



Second Place

“Chapter A Day”

*It makes no difference
Whether or not
I go in dreams
Or trudge on foot!
Could you tell me the way to Somewhere,
The Somewhere meant for me?
– Walter de la Mare*

I am often reminded of one or another of the foster children we've cared for through the past years. I might hear a certain name or a particular song, or glimpse an almost familiar figure, say, in the produce aisle of a grocery store. Or I might find a small toy or woolen mitten, relics, as I've named these items, left behind by children who have passed through our home. Many times, when I'm reminded of one child, I think then of others who lived with us for periods of time ranging from just one weekend to nearly four years. There was the eight-year-old boy who, the moment he walked into our home alongside his social worker, looked up at my husband and asked him with glee, "Can I call you Dad?" There was the sulky teenage girl who announced to both of us, also immediately on arrival, "Don't think you'll get close to me, I have attachment issues."

Then there was Jessica, who came with no such question or admonishment for us. It seemed as though she blew in on a whirlwind, although she actually rode home with me in our minivan from the county courthouse. Child Protective Services had placed her with us after her mother had run away with a carnival worker; her father was somewhere out West dodging child support payments, her grandmother was in jail for providing alcohol to minors, her assorted aunts and uncles were involved in domestic

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abuse and drug dealing. No one among her relatives had been deemed appropriate to care for her.

Jessica was a mere 13-year-old whose age belied the lifetime she had already packed under her belt. She reminded me of a young colt – spirited, restless, charged by excitement. And in no way halter-broken. I came to think of my life with her as “Chapter A Day,” after the radio program in which excerpts from best-selling books are read over the noon hour. For each day with her brought some new development – a behavior challenge in our home, a disciplinary problem at school, a disturbing phone call from a distraught relative. Or maybe I just heard details from earlier in her life – a vivid description of some shocking event while I listened, suppressing the gasps of disbelief that I feared would shush her candidness.

Though we provided our home as a sanctuary and a safe haven for Jessica, to her, it must have seemed a scene of monotony – no screaming, drugs, guns, or sexual abuse, no cops banging at the door or fugitive uncles living under the back porch – for she was an action junkie, her whole life had been so full of chaos that she thrived on it. When I mentioned plans for an upcoming dinner with several neighbor families, she asked, “Do you think there’s gonna be a fight?” I looked at her and realized that she truly thought there might be one, and that she was actually hoping for a good knock-down drag-out altercation.

She loved Hooters tee shirts and crotch-high black skirts, which I absconded, cigarettes, which I also absconded, and heavy eyeliner and dark lipstick, which I could only discourage. Yet there were moments when I saw the little girl inside – her funny giggle when watching TV, her snuggly pile of pillows on the sofa, her love for a particular

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gentle bear and his tiny piglet companion – and I wished I could restore that lost little girl, give Jessica back the innocent youth of which she'd been deprived.

I recall one evening soon after she'd settled into our home, she set the table for dinner. I thanked her, commenting on how nice it looked – the napkins carefully folded and the silverware placed neatly alongside them. “Oh, yeah, I never did that before, we learned it in Consumer Ed class at school,” she replied with a shrug of nonchalance. Her family, or whichever relatives she was living with, would never sit around a table to eat meals at their house, she went on, it was easier to sit on the couch and watch TV and besides, half the time they, just ate fast food while they were out driving somewhere. “Sometimes,” she said, “we had hamburgers and French fries three times in one day, nobody cooked.”

I was Jessica's advocate, her coach, and her personal assistant. I was also her chauffeur (court appearances, medical checks, counseling sessions), which led to many hours in the car for the two of us together, talking, or maybe not talking at all. Driving through town, it seemed she'd always spot some parking lot or back alley to point out and tell of some significant incident that had taken place there – her cousin had beaten up some guy, or her uncle had gotten shot by his twin brother, or her aunt's first husband's body had been found hanging from a utility pole, discovered by none other than Jessica herself as she so vividly described to me. As always, I listened, perhaps wide-eyed, but squelching my gasps of disbelief.

I was also her tutor. Watching her struggle with homework, one hand plastering down the page as she colored maps of the world or scribbled math problems, my heart ached for her. She had been around the block so many times that she seemed way

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beyond seventh-grade schoolwork, much less the seventh-grade social system. How could she be attracted to the fuzzycheeked 13-year-old boy whose mom dropped him off at school when she'd been out with 30-year-old guys who drove big loud pick-up trucks and beat up guys twice his age?

And on the topic of school, even before my drive to the courthouse to meet her, even before the morning I brought her into the guidance counselor's office to arrange her class schedule, I had known which kids would be the first to approach Jessica with a droll "what's up?" or to plop a backpack on the empty chair beside her in the school cafeteria. I had known it would not be the bright-eyed ones, the eager athletes, the smart students, the prom court members, but it would be the kids like her – kids from disruptive families or with absent parents, kids with mental health issues, other foster kids. It seems that like attracts like, that there is recognition of a kindred spirit, and thus she, with her dark appearance and sullen expression, would be drawn to others of the same substance, and they to her, their radars locking onto one another at first sight. I had known correctly.

Sometimes, we talked late into the night, stretched across her bed, about her hopes and dreams and the contrast to my own teenage years not lived under the constant scrutiny of hers. And then she seemed like she really was 13 years old. She would laugh a lot, not recognizing the futility of her unrealistic ideals – her next boyfriend was going to be a "really hot guy" who respected her – and not recognizing the tragedy of her life with all its turmoil and destructive behavior. Sometimes, I laughed with her for relief from the seriousness of it all. When her class was assigned to write stories about their lives and families, I had to agree that hers could be the thickest book in class and that maybe the teacher shouldn't even read it.

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We were companions, but we couldn't be friends. If I let my guard down, if only for a moment, conceding to a most seemingly innocent request (just a walk to the end of the block and back?), I would end up betrayed. Of course, she had arranged to meet a friend (perhaps one of her "what's up?" companions) or an older guy of driving age for a hand-off of cigarettes and a few tokes of home-grown pot. Angry at myself and disappointed in her (how could she not be honest with me? I thought we were friends), it would take the social worker's reassurance to calm me: deception was this girl's survival mechanism, it had served her well for many years and it was not a habit easily abandoned.

After three months with us, Jessica was transferred to a group home several hours away. As she prepared to leave, I saw something sad about the deftness with which she gathered her clothing, stuffed animals, and make-up and packed them all into her pink-striped luggage bag – each item handily tucked into its specific place. It seemed she'd performed this ritual before.

Driving away with the social worker, she sat crumpled in the back seat, and through the open window she waved us goodbye, with a dimming smile as she disappeared down the road.

Then she was gone. Standing in her wake, I felt an odd combination of loss and relief. I could only hope, as I still do, that I made some difference in her life, had some effect on her, that someday she makes choices based on memories of those few months she spent in our home.

Today, I am preparing to receive a new young girl. She'll likely arrive with familiar baggage, cry alone in her room tonight, bitter, defeated, full of hate for the social

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workers and me, and angry at the whole world. Tomorrow, I'll let her stay home from school, eyes red and puffy, for one personal day, a settling-in day. Then we'll tentatively begin our own relationship, and after some time, a new designation will drift into my mind – but Chapter A Day will always be my name for life with Jessica.

~~ End ~~

Author Biography

Cyndy Irvine lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband and two cats where she tends a large garden and a flock of chickens, hikes the Ice Age Trail, and counts down the days until the Birkebeiner ski marathon all year long. She has been published in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, *History Magazine*, *American Profile*, *Texas Co-op Power*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and several nursing journals.



Third Place

Stinky Fish

“Nǚ ér (Daughter),” Mama whispered, splintering the stillness that enveloped us in our Nissan’s murmur.

“Yeah?” I respond indifferently, double-tapping the gingham dress on my glaring screen.

Mama exhaled a sigh laden with exasperation. “I know you’re only in middle school and college seems far away...But don’t you think it’s time to start preparing? Working harder?”

Add to cart.

My finger twitched as Mama’s tone plunged into despair.

“You can’t continue wasting time like this. Time is water in a sponge, you must squeeze it out. You always have time to study more math. Practice more violin. Professor Yun’s daughters do homework in the car while you dawdle here and there—in the morning, after school, right before bedtime. Also, does anyone spend an entire hour eating dinner like you?”

My eyes swerved away from my phone, flitting through the darkness and anchoring on Mama’s face in the rearview mirror. Vibrant specks of gas station and automobile lights frolicked on her glasses like Skittles. A minor itch of irritation bubbled within me before retreating.

This lecture will pass.

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“Everyone is striving while you lag behind for temporary happiness. Angelina’s brother spends hours every day completing hundreds of—”

My ears are bleeding.

“You know what?” I barked out of impulse, my voice pricking with bitter shards that slashed through Mama’s ramble.

“All you—all you Chinese people do is compare, compare, and compare! Compare to this kid, compare to that nine-year-old violin concertmaster, compare to these random Harvard siblings with a tiger mom on the internet. What’s wrong with you?” I shrieked. Leaning forward, I dug my nails into the plush foam of the passenger seat.

“You Chinese people,” Mama reiterated slowly in English, the phrase foreign both in language and context. She fell silent, questioning. Interpreting and tasting each word so innocent on its own, yet monstrous when strung together.

“*You?* What do you mean, *you Chinese people?* How could you say that to your mother? To yourself? YOUR BLOOD IS JUST AS CHINESE AS MINE!” Mama rivaled screechingly in Chinese, every syllable firing out like quills, tips seeping outrage.

Or was it grief? Disappointment? Shame?

Lashed by Mama’s acidic reprimand, I felt my cheeks bloom into a boiling crimson under the bite of night frost. I sank back into my seat, unsure if I was quivering from anger or embarrassment.

“It’s really all you do, though. Comparing,” I mumbled.

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Maintaining her eyes locked on the inky road, Mama replied softly, “Yes, that’s what we do. It’s Chinese culture. It’s your culture. Don’t you consider yourself part of it?”

What is Chinese culture?

To me...

It’s a ceaseless torrent of indecipherable math problems hurled at me from the instant my hands grasped a pencil—the time when each chubby finger merely resembled a bulbous pea pod. Despite bawling through one progressively more horrid book after another, I was...

Never enough. Never *brilliant* enough.

It’s an industrious network of children juxtaposed by parents who scrutinize them like jewelers analyzing sapphires. Calculating, establishing product value through a diligent search for scintillating sparkles and glimmers of distorting blemishes. Ambitious jewelers coveting perfection.

It’s my austere Baba when he chastised me for even the most trivial matters, his wrath erupting at the first twinkle of a betraying tear. Petrified, I squelched sobs ignited by furiously arched eyebrows that magnified his forehead wrinkles—canyons carved by hours of memorizing the Chinese-English dictionary. Hours that acted as the key to *Měi Guó* (America, The Beautiful Country). Hours that collected into alphabet soup serenading sleepless nights, devouring youthful onyx hair. Seized by my 4-year-old shoulders and marched to face the ever so familiar cream wall, I’d be whacked on my behind before Baba’s storming departure.



It's drowning in apologetic guilt, yet forever being too proud to utter the three syllables of *duì bù qǐ*. Pronouncing the last character *qǐ*—briefly dipping in the middle and jolting up into a risen tone—seems to mimic a defiant question. A statement clumsily declaring, *I was wrong, but does that mean you're right?* Saying *duì bù qǐ* is like forcing a bamboo shoot to squirm out of frozen earth.

Shortly after each timeout, I sat alone on the living room futon that creaked with every hiccup. Sometimes, Baba walked by and ventured closer to sheepishly reveal a cluster of dark chocolate almonds melting in his palm.

A bittersweet apology.

It's Mama at 9 pm, returning home from a sticky star-studded Texan dusk, a weary smile crinkling her eyes as I flung myself onto her apron and whiffed the canvas cloth saturated in restaurant grease. Clung to her legs as she fingered through the rainbow of homemade bows I shoved into my hair that morning. Licked my lips when she promised to bake red bean rice cake, confectionary magic whisked up during my dreams so that I awoke to glutinous fragrance the next day.

It's my *wài pó* (grandma), sweeter than tofu pudding. A *wài pó* who scrambled to talk with me in every phone call, her local dialect's perplexing accents cascading out and tickling my ears. Accustomed to only Standard Chinese, I instinctively winced at hearing the unfamiliar tongue—until I grasped a shimmer of recognition.

“*Xiǎng Wài Pó le ma* (Do you miss Grandma)?”

Wài Pó hushed herself with childlike eagerness, as if my answer to her regularly asked question was a baffling riddle.

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“*Dāng rán* (Of course)!” I’d exclaim in reassurance, hoping Wài Pó could detect my vigorous head nodding. I enjoyed picturing Wài Pó clutching her aged telephone with both small, sun-spotted hands. Once a rich wine red, Wài Pó’s telephone began its life in the 1990s, connecting her and Mama, then a budding entrepreneur in Shanghai. Who knew that Wài Pó would one day sail her love across the Pacific?

“*Xiǎng Wài Pó le* (She misses her grandma),” Wài Pó would repeat a few times smugly,

audibly in glee.

I miss Wài Pó.

I miss my culture.

I miss how, in the three times I met her, she marveled at how much I’d grown, only to still call me a *xiǎo bǎobǎo* (little treasure baby). I pulled back in shyness when she cuddled her fragile face to mine, giggling moments later as feathery heather gray wisps teased my cheeks.

I miss Wài Pó squeezing every droplet of her affection into the few weeks we’d share in a lifetime. During those days, an ever-changing fruit medley swirled around me as Wài Pó busied herself over skinning apples and rinsing Kyoho grapes she handpicked from nearby fruit stands. Every time Wài Pó caught sight of her outdoor cat, she clambered to hoist it up for me. While I cooed sappily, Wài Pó weathered rounds of swats that swelled into scarlet marks. Sitting on her bamboo mat, as I babbled about Easter egg hunting and slapping mosquitoes under July 4th fireworks, Wài Pó listened intently, immersed in my chaotic Chinese describing America. When I plopped myself at

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Wài Pó's wooden table to savor sauteed fern and meatball soup, she observed in delight, her chestnut eyes gently perched on me for the entire meal. Everything tasted better knowing that no one in the world would look at me in the same way Wài Pó did.

Most of all, I miss Wài Pó's signature platter of Chòu Guì Yú (Stinky Fish), Anhui province's boasted delicacy that bears a notorious odor symbolical of foot stench. After I endured my first disorienting 15-hour plane ride to China, Wài Pó welcomed me with her Stinky Fish, its malicious stench snaking into and appalling my nostrils. Ironically, the dish was exquisite—adorned with a dynamic array of chilies and ginger slivers, a single grand fish laid cradled in a fiery pool of garnet red sauce. Sandwiching a minuscule morsel of fish between my chopsticks, I nibbled gingerly as the pungent flakes blossomed into a miraculously piquant aroma. Responding to Wài Pó's expectant peer that flicked between me and her salty peculiar creation, the ends of my lips inched to an awestruck grin.

I am clay molded by the hands of Chinese culture. Aged hands that tenderly paint me in Wài Pó's warmth and phoenixes gracing Mama's Qipao dress. Rough hands that place me in the kiln's fiery embrace, as algebra forges a hardened callus on my finger and disciplined scoldings crystallize my heart into jade. Unwavering hands that swash on silky glaze and lift me to the stars as Goddess Cháng é bathes me in moonlight, illuminating love, pride, and resilience. I am whole.

So, perhaps I owe a long overdue word with Mama. *D-duì b-*

Let me try again.

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I'm sorry it took me too long to learn that if I cherry-picked my culture, what's left behind is bland, like naked wontons without the scorch of chili oil.

And, to my beloved Stinky Fish, unleashing your tear-jerking curls of putrid steam, how does forgiveness sound?

Author Biography

Grace Huang is a junior at West High School in Madison, Wisconsin. She loves writing about childhood and the Asian-American experience. Her work has been published in the New York Times and recognized by the Wisconsin Young Writers Award, Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, and the Ringling College of Art and Design. She has two cats who enjoy hogging the keyboard of her overheated laptop as she types up daydreams



Poetry

First Place

We Are.

Split open
we are embers,
cradling one last spark
to light and warm
the darkness.

Split open
we are milkweed pods,
all down and comfort,
ready to sail and sow,
the be=er to feed and shelter
the fragile of this world.

Split open
we are pomegranates,
no ma=er the size,
hundreds of small bits within
that make up the whole.

Split open
we are warmth and comfort
and a hundred bits
wrapped in stardust so ancient
it stood witness
to the nativity of earth itself.

Author Biography

Sara Sarna is a poet, actor and avid hiker in Southeastern Wisconsin. Her work has been seen online, in print, and heard from stage and radio. She is a member of Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets and Wisconsin Writers Association. Her chapbook, "Whispers from a Bench," was published in 2020.



Second Place

Don't Text *Hey Beautiful* (OR) THE FRUSTRATION OF ONLINE DATING

Don't text *Hey beautiful* to me at dawn.

We just connected and those words are cheap

As fast food fries: they're salt, and sweet, and stupid.

All girls are beautiful in profile pictures.

Like saying *Such a good boy to a dog*:

It's true, but doesn't mean you know the dog.

Don't text *Hey beautiful* to me at noon.

Hey handsome in reply just sounds like I'm

Proprietress of a wild west saloon.

Don't make me salt, and sweet, and stupid, too.

I want a guy who makes me laugh out loud,

Who gets my jokes and tolerates my puns.

If I'm to have a partner, I need a man

Who really thinks I'm beautiful and knows

He'll have to spend a lifetime making me

Believe him when he says it.

Author Biography

Bailey R. Hansen (she/her) spent her unconventional childhood traveling the continental United States with a clown and a clarinetist (aka her parents), and reading ravenously. She began telling stories to anyone who would listen long before she could write any of them down. She is the co-author of the dystopian romance *FREAK CAMP* and its sequels, and the science fiction omegaverse romance *STARBOUND* (on Kindle Vella). seeks to deliver catharsis, joy, and truth through the joyful lies of fiction. Learn more at baileyrhansen.com.



Third Place

Love Me Like A Rock

Don't love me like a fire
Tinder bursting with desire
First a spark then leaping higher
'Til it dies down and we tire
Say it lasts then you're a liar
For all flames soon expire,
Love me like a rock.
Don't love me like the ocean
Claiming depth and gorgeous reefs;
Swirling currents of devotion
Hide dark secrets down beneath.
For the ocean breeds up thunder
Dragging ships into its deeps,
Tearing hearts and lives asunder
And what it sinks it keeps.
Love me like a stone.
Love me like a rock, a steady place to stand.
Love me like a stone, simple, humble, sturdy, grand.
Give me love that just gets stronger as we go through all life's pressure,
Give me love that wears us smoother through the passion and the weather,
Love me like a rock

Author Biography

When asked what she does, Elizabeth Doman often says "I make things." From arts to crafts to whole worlds of words, Elizabeth is often found working on creating something new. Otherwise she's keeping up with 3 energetic children, 2 energetic puppies, and the 2 cats her husband refers to as her "familiar" as they appear almost magically in any room she happens to occupy. Find her on her website elizabethdoman.com or on Bluesky at elizdoman.



Short Story

First Place

All That It Seems

Vickie struggled with the latest story she had in her mind. She always loved to write and had started but never finished three different novels. She was really good at sketching out a story, but they repeatedly stalled in the middle and had a habit of abandoning them in favor of a new idea or, worse, a break from writing altogether. She wasn't sure if it was a fear of failure that kept her from finishing a novel that might meet with a less-than-favorable response or just outright distraction.

On Facebook, she'd seen a reference to ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence (AI) software that could do amazing things. Curiosity got the best of her, and she logged onto the site and created an account. She described the story she was working on and told ChatGPT to create a 4000-word story. Magically the program typed an entire story while she watched. Granted, some of it was rather dry, but when it finished, Vickie sat back in amazement. Her computer had taken a command from a human and created a story entirely on its own.

The program made Vickie think of her three unfinished novels. Of the three of them, Truth Be Told was the closest to being done. It was the story of a man living in Eau Claire, Wisconsin who was secretly married to two different women and maintained a double life. It stalled in the middle when one of the wives started to suspect something was going on. Vickie had given up on it three years ago with the expectation that she'd pick it up at a later date. The three years had passed quickly.

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Vickie sipped her licorice chai tea and then typed into the ChatGPT window:

write 2000 words about Richard's wife getting suspicious of his possible polygamy

The cursor sprang to life and words started appearing faster than Vickie could read them. It wrote of Richard's wife finding suspicious clues about her husband and gave Vickie a new set of ideas to work with. Vickie scraped the words from the screen using her mouse and pasted them into a new document. She wasn't sure about the legal implications of using ChatGPT text in a personal manuscript, nor was she sure she would use them. But she acknowledged that it was nice to have the computer take away the need to think for herself. Perhaps she could finally finish her first book after all.

Forbes stood in front of his development team pointing to the screen that projected his process diagram. The room was dimly lit, and the four software developers watched in various states of attentiveness.

Forbes said, "Again, the advantage of the embedded onboard AI interface on the console of the Huron 9000 autonomous vehicle is that it is continually learning. As the car moves, it is in real-time learning mode. If it detects glass or nails twenty yards ahead, it adjusts the travel path of the car to avoid it. Or, if the passenger says, 'I don't like how close you're following other vehicles,' the system adjusts and backs off. Frankly, it's game-changing and will make our car different from those of our competitors.

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Shaun spoke up. “Playing devil’s advocate here, but how does the AI differentiate good commands from potentially disastrous commands?”

“I’m not sure I’m tracking with you, Shaun. Can you give me an example?”

“Sure. Say you tell the system to drive cautiously because of the snow building up on the roads and the car takes that to mean don’t drive more than thirty miles per hour on the freeway. The car responds by slowing to thirty miles per hour and suddenly your vehicle is a menace on the road. I guess what I’m saying is, I don’t think you can teach AI common sense.”

The room lights up with laughter at Shaun’s snarky comment.

“Well, thanks for that insight, Shaun, but in all seriousness, I’d lean toward the thought that while it may not seem like AI could be trained to have common sense, I think over time it will actually exceed the human capacity for it. After all, the human brain can be aware that something is harmful and yet still propel a person to do it anyway. A machine, on the other hand, will be trained in what is wrong one time and never repeat it. Simply because it is now in the code as a zero, not a one.”

Forbes stood there smugly wearing his certainty, cloaked in confidence.

Shaun raised his pen.

Forbes acknowledged him again. “Shaun?”

“While I get what you’re saying about the machine not making the wrong decision twice, I’m just skeptical that you can train it for every situation that comes before a driver. At least as humans, we can assess a situation and make an educated guess based on our own past experience. And it’s just my opinion, but I have to think our

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brains would make a better decision than some machine with a limited storage capacity.

Call me old school.”

Again, light laughter titters around the meeting room.

“Well, Old school, I guess you haven’t been around the AI code and all of its potential quite as much as me, so you’re going to have to trust me. In fact, I would argue that if anyone here doesn’t see the potential and the positives behind the technology, you’re welcome to drop off the team. On the other hand, if you want to be part of the next generation of Autonomous Intelligent Vehicles, stick around because, frankly, the sky’s the limit.”

Sumeesh stared blankly at the screen of his laptop. The mug near him held an inch of cold coffee on the small kitchen table of his studio apartment in Madison. He wasn’t sure he liked the direction his life was taking. His communications degree had yet to break him into fulltime gainful employment, and his job as a line cook downtown paid the rent but was unfulfilling.

He’d had some small successes with his Patreon account. His quirky videos featuring a blend of magic and humor had gained him a small following of paying viewers, but nothing of financial significance. What he needed was a breakout animation video like his friend Shauna had made. She was a gifted graphic artist whose knack for mixing caustic humor with the macabre made her the success she was. Shauna had more than eleven thousand followers and was making quite a name for herself.

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Sumeesh had long heard about the coming of AI technology and machine learning but wasn't quite sure what role it would play in the lives of ordinary people, let alone an underemployed line cook with an interest in video art. After he'd seen a deep fake video of Prince playing tennis against Stevie Nicks, he thought there might be some potential to use AI technology to make a video that earned some good money.

After a little searching on Google, he stumbled upon a product called Vidsmashup. The description made it out to be capable of creating lifelike videos of any person, dead or alive. After you fed it faces, physical feature dimensions, and a scenario, the program went about making up to a three-minute video using the characters and the stated circumstances. It looked like a small startup company of a single developer.

Sumeesh wanted to see for himself what the product result looked like. He clicked on one of the three video samples on the site. The two-minute video showed a middle-aged Richard Nixon water skiing on a lake. The video was striking in detail, including Nixon's pasty white legs. Tricky Dick leaned into a few big turns spraying large rooster tails as he cut through the glassy water. Sumeesh stopped the video in a couple of places because it looked so real. From Nixon's trademark slicked-back haircut to some tactfully placed liver spots and freckles on his arms, right down to the vintage boat from the seventies.

Sumeesh saw enough to know he wanted to buy the software to give him an edge in his work. He created an account and put in his credit card number.

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Vickie looked at her laptop screen with anticipation. The email in her inbox was from her New York agent, Missy Thompson. The subject line read, Manuscript Developments. Vickie clicked it open. It read:

“Hi Vickie,

I have some good news for you. The people at Perfection House love your book! They want to talk to you about a couple of small tweaks, but they are very happy with the overall story. They want to get going as quickly as possible, so I’ve attached a contract for your review and signing if you want to go ahead. This is a big New York house, so it is huge for both you and me! Please let me know if you have any questions. Otherwise, congratulations and get back to me ASAP.

Best regards,

Missy”

Vickie sat back in her chair, giddy with excitement. Perfection House! Not too bad! No one would ever need to know that the last third of the book had been largely generated using AI technology. Besides, she’d added her own words in spots and thus it was more of an embellishment of the actual text ChatGPT had generated. She’d applied her personal flair so she could call it her own. Besides, how would anyone ever know? They would have to use the exact keywords she had used to generate the same story. This one was all hers.

The numbers in the spreadsheet looked dazzling. Forbes read the sales projection attachment from the research and development staff, and he liked what he



saw. If they were right, the sales team could move 35,000 cars in the first month of production. The numbers were impressive and attributable to his team's innovation with the AI machine learning interface he'd helped spearhead. People were intrigued by the idea of not only intelligent cars but cars that actually evolved as you drove them. Smart cars.

The AI brain within the vehicle assimilated the drivers' preferences over time. It was capable of adjusting the air temperature, mirror, seat position, and dozens of other adjustments, all based on facial recognition. It also corrected the driver's bad habits like turning on turn signals before turns if the driver failed to.

Michael poked his head in Forbes' office door. "Hey, congrats on the Huron thing. That's going to be a sweet payout for you if sales are what they say they're going to be."

"Thanks. Yeah, I'm pretty psyched. Of course, until I see the profit-share deposit in my account, it's all just talk," Forbes replied.

"Ah, it's a slam dunk. This is going to be a game changer in the world of driving, my friend. Kudos. I have a ten o'clock, so gotta run."

"No problem. Thanks for the vote of confidence," Forbes said.

Forbes waved and returned to his work as Michael left.

Sumeesh hit watch again on the YouTube video he'd made. The video snapped to life. It showed Elon Musk arguing with a homeless woman on a sidewalk. The woman was holding a five-dollar bill Musk had handed her and was visibly angry.



“What the hell do you mean you want change? Do I look like I have change?” the woman said.

“Well then, give it back you ungrateful loser.”

“Here, take it, ya creep! You obviously need it worse than me.” The woman crumpled the bill and threw it at Musk. Musk bent down, picked up the bill, and walked away.

Sumeesh sat back and grinned. He could barely believe the realism he’d created using the Vidsmashup program. Even more unbelievable was the response it had drawn from his followers on Patreon. In the week since it had been released, he’d gathered 4,310 new paying supporters. His PayPal account had blown up and he was still processing what to do with the more than \$25,000 he’d made in the past few weeks. He’d finally found his niche and all of it was fueled by the Vidsmashup application.

He started brainstorming his next video. What would it be? Miley Cyrus as an Amish woman milking a goat? Warren Buffet mountain biking in Colorado? Humphrey Bogart rapping, complete with gold chains and a grille?

Vickie abruptly stopped walking and stared transfixed at the screen. She held a cup of black coffee and was on her way home from Ancora Roasters, her favorite Madison coffee hop.

She could hardly believe the email she was reading.

Dear Vickie,

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It has come to our attention that sizeable portions of your book, Marital Allegiance, were derived from Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology. After its publication, our plagiarism and authenticity team ran the text through a brand-new AI sniffing application. Using various AI algorithms and keywords, the application found instances on the ChatGPT site where numerous sections of the book were successfully replicated, word-for-word identical to your novel.

Once this was discovered, the application was able to target the searches and commands sent to ChatGPT servers from your computer's IP Address. These searches were verified as being tied to your username/password, complete with sign-in dates and times. This process has become a new standard for ensuring our readers only get books derived from the authors themselves without the use of computerized creative assistance (CCA).

Based on these findings, it is with significant regret that we will be ceasing production of your book and removing existing stock from all retail and online outlets. Considering the success of your novel, we realize this news will come as a bit of a shock. We at Perfection House are consulting with our legal counsel to see if there are sufficient grounds to seek royalty recovery from you, the author, in the amount of \$43,879.64. Our legal staff will be reaching out to you sometime in the coming weeks to discuss repayment or pending litigation.

Unfortunately, we did not have this AI screening capability before the release of your book, but ultimately, the responsibility for the ethical story creation falls squarely on the shoulders of the author. We are sorry for this news, but at Perfection House the

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integrity of our authors is one of the core tenets of the house, so we have no choice but to pursue the path of transparency and righteousness.

Sincerely,

The Perfection House Editorial Staff

Vickie's eyes welled up with tears as she stood there stunned.

“Chatty, take a right at the stoplight,” Forbes instructed the beta version interface of the Huron 9000. As chief AI technician, he was also one member of the four-person road test team. The car automatically slowed, engaged the turn signal, and cautiously approached the intersection. The camera sensors were intelligent enough to sense the red light, so brought the car to a complete stop and waited for traffic to clear. Sensing no oncoming impediments, the car slowly accelerated and turned taking full advantage of the right turn on red, a nuance that only an engineer like Forbes could appreciate.

Forbes looked back to his phone. Having an autonomous vehicle made phone surfing while driving entirely safe. Both the driver and any passengers could spend time watching Tik Toks, Instagram Reels, and other mindless social media content while the car did all the work. His latest infatuation was from a guy named Sumeesh. His videos focusing on celebrities were hilarious and incredibly realistic. Forbes liked them so much he'd signed up for Sumeesh's Patreon account.

A Sumeesh reel came on that portrayed Keith Richards dropping into a skate park half pipe. The soundtrack was “Start Me Up” from the Stones' album, Tattoo You. Complete with torn-knee jeans, a red bandana, and his signature hoop earring, Keith



rode the pipe to the first rise then spun in a flawless kick turn. On the return rise he did a Slash turn with ease. He finished out the third rise with a Fakie Tail Stall, where he came to a full stop, balancing on the board momentarily before dropping back in and flashing the rock-on sign to the camera.

Forbes was transfixed. Everything he saw looked 100% legitimate. If that wasn't Keith Richards himself, it was a phenomenal avatar or AI recreation of him. Of course, Forbes knew it was fake, but he marveled at the realism of it. It made him cognizant that this AI tide was changing the world as he knew it. If some hack named Sumeesh could make something this believable, what were the limits? What could a person believe anymore as actual? What could this potentially do to our governmental system? To the justice system? The possibilities made his head spin. It was a paradigm shifter for sure.

Forbes looked up momentarily to see where he was. It was mid-morning, and he hadn't had his usual cup of coffee. He thought he'd use the opportunity to evaluate the AI logic.

"Chatty, find me some coffee," he said.

The car engine revved and took a wildly sharp right turn.

Vickie stood there holding her coffee re-reading the accusatory email. By the time she hit the second paragraph, she heard the rev and whine of an engine. The bumper of the car bent her knees backward as she crumpled onto the hood. There was a sickening sound like sticks being snapped and the thud of her torso as she folded into the front end of the car. Her coffee cup was jarred out of her grasp and hit the

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windshield splashing her Latte' all over the glass. It wasn't until then that the vehicle immediately skidded to a stop.

Forbes sat dazed in the driver's seat and heard the familiar voice of Chatty say, "Your destination is on the windshield."

THE END

Author Biography

Jim Landwehr has four published memoirs, *At the Lake*, *Cretin Boy*, *Dirty Shirt*, and *The Portland House*. He also has five poetry collections, *Thoughts from a Line at the DMV*, *Genetically Speaking*, *Reciting from Memory*, *Written Life*, and *On a Road*. His nonfiction has been published in *Main Street Rag*, *The Sun Magazine*, and others. His poetry has been featured in *Orchard Poetry Journal*, *Blue Heron Review*, and many others. He lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin with his wife and enjoys fishing, kayaking, biking, and all things outdoors. Jim was the 2018-2019 poet laureate for the Village of Wales, Wisconsin.



Second Place

Pooped Cupid

On a fine spring day in a fine little village, to a fine cupid couple was born a rather fine little cupid. Now, this rather fine little cupid had a rather unique appearance, an appearance that called for a rather unique name...a name, indubitabobbly (or “indubitably”, depending on when you are from), that, I daresay you’ll never find attached to any other cupid – that rather unique name being – Potato. And having been born into the quite loving Potahto family, his full name was thus the quite memorable: Potato Potahto.

Now, this fine and rather unique little cupid named Potato Potahto had a generally normal cupid childhood full of generally normal cupid childhood things, such as playing, laughing, crying, and trying to learn everything worth learning. But these generally normal cupid childhood things evolved (as they do) into unfortunately normal cupid teenage things, such as rebelling, complaining, crying, and the unfortunate belief of already knowing everything worth knowing. Thankfully, these unfortunately normal cupid teenage things evolved (as they sometimes do) into fairly normal cupid adult things, such as working, setting out on one’s own, and joining the fairly normal cupid adult community.

Now, a slight issue arose due to a slight feeling of boredom arising in our dear friend Potato. You see, the work of a cupid, as you well know from observing them in your daily life, involves finding two people and helping them fall in love. And this type of work, as with most types of work, can start to feel a tad repetitive. And while you may not find many adults who will admit it, many will engage in a bit of slacking off on the job

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from time to time. And if one is not careful, that bit will grow to be a tad bit too much. It wasn't long before our good friend Potato began staying out later and later with his friends, frolicking and merrymaking until the wee hours of the morning, and then, while at work, sneaking off for naps throughout the day.

Now, this doesn't seem like a good way to do ANY job, much less an important one, and it wasn't. It didn't take long for the effects affecting the effected to show. You see, as I recall my neighbor Aristotle once saying, "nature abhors a vacuum". And while this might sound like an argument made by teenagers to avoid cleaning their rooms, it means that where there is a space to be filled, and something to fill it, well indeed, that space WILL be filled. And indeed, in the absence of love, distrust and destructive competition took root. A haze of gloom and restlessness misted the land. Potential partners became rabid rivals. Conceivable comrades became actual adversaries. And probable playmates turned into factual foes. Now, needless to say, though I'll say it anyway, the consequences of Potato Potahto's actions were quite noticeable, and were indeed noticed by those taking note, which happened to include members of the Cupid Council.

The Council, which was formally named the International Federation of Love-Spreading Putto Cherubim Archers, but mercifully shortened to "The Council", decided it must intervene when Princess Porkchop, the Duchess of Dingleberry, unexpectedly failed to marry Prince Puggle, the Duke of Dongleton. This unexpected failure led to the failing of the two neighboring nations to settle their border dispute. This dispute, feeding off the steady supply of frustration and quarrelsomeness that enveloped the land, would've evolved into a full-blown war had not The Council intervened...but THAT is a story for another time.

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After repairing the rift caused by our dear friend Potato's laziness and poor choices, The Council, inquiring about the cause of the chaos, opened an inquiry. Now, this inquiry consisted of several queries, and it was a series of queries that exposed the conditions that created this quandary. Quandary resolved and mystery solved, it was time for Potato to pay the piper for putting so many people in a precarious predicament with his poor performance.

Our dear friend Potato spent many weeks atoning for his mistakes, and it was through this process that he learned how the work we do is not to benefit ourselves, but for the benefit of others. And, just as important, how love, like a garden, art, or anything precious and valuable, takes time, effort, and care, and is not something we should just leave to chance. And it is here, dear readers, that we part with this story, along with a gentle reminder to tend to your loved ones, because you never know when there is a pooped cupid sleeping on the job.

Author Biography

Mike Johannes is a retired Air Force intelligence officer and the author of four self-published children's books. In addition to writing fiction, he enjoys writing and recording music, working on his small family business, and spending time with his more talented and creative wife and daughter.



Third Place

Hello, Madison

It didn't take long for Dan to spot the pretty alto sax player. He'd learn later that her name was Brenda; he knew now that she was very attractive, despite the ugly Milwaukee Brewers t-shirt she wore. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail, held in place by a baseball cap with a Gothic-lettered logo Dan didn't recognize. She sat among the other sax players but didn't seem to know any of them. He figured that meant "freshman."

Brenda caught Dan looking a few times, and when she did, she held her look on him and smiled; good feedback, Dan thought. She thought he was cute, if a little nerdy – dark brown hair neatly styled, and pretty hazel eyes that didn't let her go. She wondered about his black t-shirt with "chameleons" stenciled in white, lower case schoolbook letters.

It was the first day of marching band practice at the University of Wisconsin. By the end of Welcome Week 224 members and 75 alternates would be selected; Dan and Brenda hoped to be two of them. While the director gave his opening remarks, Dan was distracted trying to figure out the cap logo. Brenda caught him looking again and this time precociously wagged her index finger, shaming him for not paying attention to the speaker. Dan smiled back and mouthed, "Sorry."

Brenda held his attention; he thought she might have a little too much pretty for him. Still, that's what flirting was about – to see if raw attraction might turn into

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something more. And it was only Monday; Dan appreciated Pretty Alto Sax's responses, but there were several cute co-eds he was happy to flirt with.

By Wednesday Dan still had Brenda firmly in his sight but an attractive tim-tom drummer was paying attention to him. And Brenda paid attention to her paying attention, somewhat disappointed, but it was just as well. Her ex-boyfriend was coming to visit this weekend.

Dan liked the drummer; she had thick, brown hair styled in a wedge and soft features, aybe not Pretty Alto Sax pretty, but attractive, nonetheless. He was very pleased when she approached him during a water break.

"Some practice, huh?" she said. Dan nodded as he finished his drink.

"And the ninety-degree heat is a nice touch." They laughed together. "I'm Dan."

"Gretchen. I didn't realize I needed to be an Olympic athlete and percussionist." Her doe brown eyes locked on Dan's. She was interested; so was Dan.

"Trumpet is heavy enough," he said, "don't like the idea of lugging those tim-toms up and down the field."

"Bass drum is worse. You from around here?" she asked with a cute lilt to her voice.

"Brookfield. Went to East."

"Oshkosh West. I remember you guys at the Santa Parade." Both schools' bands marched last year in the only parade that welcomed St. Nick on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. "That night was soooo cold; I had ski gloves instead of my uniform ones. I couldn't play too well."



“Maybe tape the mallets to your gloves?” Dan offered.

“Now you tell me,” she said, leaning into him. They laughed together and Dan mentioned that playing trumpet wasn’t so easy in twenty degrees.

“I faked it,” they said together, laughing and leaning into each other, this time lingering.

Dan smelled her perfume and they chatted for the length of the break. Brenda saw them, a little envious; Dan saw her seeing them as their break ended. He waved, trying to act naturally. She smiled back but wouldn’t wave back.

“Maybe a little hard-to-get is what you need, flirty trumpet,” Brenda thought, noticing his ugly Chicago Cubs t-shirt.

Dan spotted Pretty Alto Sax during lunch break and hoped he could start a conversation. She was eating with several others, and studiously averting his glances. He was eating with his longtime friend Jim - trombone player and effective wingman. Dan pointed her out to him; he might need Jim’s help.

“Wow, she’s something, Dan. Are you sure...” Jim asked, thinking Pretty Alto Sax might be a bit of a stretch, even for flirty Dan.

“I know I should just focus on Gretchen, but...”

“Don’t get greedy,” Jim was often admonishing his friend.

“But Pretty Alto Sax is so pretty...oh, there she goes.” He watched Brenda get up from her table, tray in hand. Dan wasn’t finished but this was his chance, so he walked to the tray return window and pushed his in. He turned back as Brenda walked towards



him. Nearing one another, Dan slowed down, a time-tested move which had the effect of getting his quarry to stop and talk.

But Brenda knew that move; she smiled and walked right past him, giving him her promised hard to get. Jim saw it all happen in real time.

“Hobie Baker, eh?” Wisconsin is a hockey school, Jim always said, girls here didn’t give boys the Heisman.

“Yeah,” Dan said dreamily, not caring about the snub. “She’s so pretty...” Walking back to the practice field, Jim encouraged Dan to pursue Gretchen.

Thursday's outdoor practices went similarly - Gretchen flirting with Dan, Dan seeking but not finding Brenda, because Brenda kept her distance. As much as it pained him, Dan admitted to himself that Pretty Alto Sax wasn’t happening. On their way to dinner, Dan told Jim that he would chase Gretchen, certain she’d agree to a date for Friday. Jim approved the decision, not needing to remind him that the Alto Sax was a reach.

But the choreography of coincidence would change everyone’s weekend. Dan didn’t see Gretchen after the evening music practice, and in his search of the practice hall he spotted Pretty Alto Sax putting her horn away. He approached her from behind her and thought “even the back of her head is pretty.” Pretty Alto Sax, who was so easy to flirt with on Monday, was an intimidating target on Thursday evening.

Dan’s mind raced; this wasn’t a good idea - he had no idea what to say. “Tough week,” he thought, mutual events working well to get conversation started. But he dismissed it. Pretty Alto Sax was a top shelf prize; he needed something better. He



needed a laugh. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly to relax, but it didn't help. Still, he started.

"Hi, um, so, I wonder if ahhh," he cleared an imaginary frog from his throat. So far so bad, he thought, "um, so I wonder if you had a reed I could borrow?" Brenda turned toward the weak, shaky voice she heard from behind. Her heart jumped to see the flirty trumpet player.

"How long have you been playing reeded trumpet?" she asked, smiling demurely. Dan didn't expect her curve ball, but he went with it, gaining confidence.

"Oh, not long; it's new. A little surprised you even heard of it. I'm Dan, by the way." Brenda laughed and shook her head.

"I'm Brenda; nice to meet you," she said. "Some week, huh?" She ran a hand through her wavy, shoulder-length hair.

"Yeah, I'm in bed at ten o'clock every night. But it'll be worth it."

"Must be nice playing trumpet. Reed or no, you'll get in." That got Dan serious.

"I'm just another freshman. I'm not guaranteed anything." She didn't expect such authenticity; was there more to Dan than just a flip, flirty freshman?

"Me, too. It's weird; I was all that six months ago, now I'm just hoping to be a sub." They took each other in for a time.

Finally, Dan asked, "Where were you all that?" Brenda laughed at his question.

"Eau Claire."

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“I’ve heard of it,” he said, getting another laugh, and he solved the cap logo – a Gothic-lettered ECM. “Memorial?”

“Good guess. You?”

“Brookfield.”

“Central?”

“Bad guess. East. And I was something, but not all that,” he said as Jim came up from behind Brenda. “Oh, let me introduce you to my roommate. Brenda, this is Jim. He plays reedless trombone.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Used his ‘borrow a reed’ line, did he?”

“He did and hate to say it but it’s working. Did you know Dan before Welcome Week?”

“Yeah, we went to high school together; Brookfield...”

“East, I heard,” she said, smiling at Dan. Jim saw he wasn’t needed so he took his leave.

“Dan, this reed thing, what do you do with drummers?” Dan liked this feisty girl.

“Well, that’s just it, Brenda,” he said, being coy, “I can only flirt with girls who play woodwind instruments.”

“That must be tough then, when cute tim-tom players are just coming up to you.”

His coy didn’t work, so he tried honesty. “You know Gretchen?”

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“Not personally but let’s just say when you’re interested in a certain trumpet player you can’t help but notice her.”

Excited by her admission, Dan said, “There’s a sharp line between keeping options open and borrowing a reed from you.” Brenda opened her case and took one from its container. “Thank you,” he said as she handed it to him.

“So, Dan, I wonder if that reed gets me anything besides a nice chat with a new friend.”

“How about we do something tomorrow?”

“I’m busy tomorrow, how’s Saturday?”

“Great. Nine o’clock?”

“AM or PM?” She smiled.

“AM.”

“Good answer. Where should I meet you?” Now Dan had a problem.

“Um, the AM was for effect.”

“Effect taken,” she said sweetly.

“See, Brenda, I’m new at college but I don’t think I’m getting anywhere by nine AM on Saturday. Even for a date with you.”

“How about noon, then?” She smiled and caressed his arm softly.

“OK, but I’m taking your entire day. If you’ve got evening plans, break ‘em...”

“I’m yours all Saturday,” she laughed. “What should we do?”



“Lunch at Picnic Point? Vilas Zoo? Capitol tour?”

“Sounds like you know your way around Madison.”

“I’ve been coming here since I was a kid.”

“Zoo sounds fun. And a picnic. Then whatever...”

They agreed to meet on the Union Terrace at Noon. Brenda looked around the emptying practice hall and figured her walking partners had left. She would use it to her advantage.

“Dan, I wonder if I could impose; my friends have all left. Care to walk me home?” She caressed his arm again; of course he would. This was going so very well, both thought.

They talked excitedly as they walked up Bascom Hill, approaching Abe’s statue. Brenda brushed Dan’s hand a few times, disappointed that he didn’t get the hint. But he was distracted; he had an idea. “So, I keep hearing about this Babcock ice cream. Wanna try some?”

“Sure,” Brenda said, thinking. They turned to head to the Union. “So, a guy who’s been to Madison so often has never had Babcock ice cream?”

“Well, a guy who’ll lie about needing a reed may also nuance an ice cream date with a pretty girl.” Brenda melted with Dan’s compliment.

“Is this a date now, Dan?” she asked shyly.

“Maybe, I’m not much for labels,” he said smiling.

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She took his hand in hers, wanting him to know that she was on one. They interlaced their fingers, taking any last nervous out of their conversation. They learned about each other as they walked down the hill.

A long line for ice cream greeted them at the Union. “It’s busy tonight...” she said.

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never been here before,” he said. She laughed and bopped him playfully with the hand he wasn’t holding. “Hey!”

Their wait hardly seemed long as they talked about nothing and everything. Brenda really enjoyed this Dan and that meant she had a problem. Her Friday busy-ness involved that ex-boyfriend who was in town. She hoped she could be honest with Dan.

“So, um, I told you I was busy tomorrow, but...” she stopped as they reached the front of the line. She ordered butter brickle in a cone; Dan got the Badger Blast and they waited for their scoops. “...so, I sorta have a date with a guy visiting from Eau Claire.”

“I’m not really following,” Dan said, disappointed by what he thought she was saying.

“You have a boyfriend?”

“Yeah. Matt, but no, Dan, no, um, I mean, well, uh, he was but we broke up a while ago.

See, I want to be honest with you...” she took a deep breath then exhaled. “OK, so Matt is in town; he doesn’t go here, um, and that’s part of why we broke up.” His hooking up with the head cheerleader after the Chippewa Falls game was another part.

“Butter brickle in a cone,” the lady behind the counter said.

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Brenda thanked her and took the cone, “but we planned to see each other tomorrow.”

“Badger Blast,” the lady said, handing Dan his cone. He knew it was going too well. Just be cool and take the brush off, he thought as they walked onto the Terrace. Dan noticed how spectacular Lake Mendota was in the light of the approaching sunset.

“The water looks beautiful,” Brenda said; then she continued, “See, it was just for a sort of fun fling before school started,” she smiled shyly. “But I met this cute, funny trumpet player and I’m very interested in where he and I are going...” she licked her ice cream once and looked at him sweetly. Dan’s disappointment disappeared.

“I thought we decided the zoo, then a picnic.”

“See?” she asked, softly brushing his face. “My funny, new friend...” She tilted her head, wanting him to lean in and kiss her, but he missed the chance.

There were no open tables on the Terrace, so Dan pointed to about six feet of a short retaining wall. Brenda hopped up, took Dan’s hand, and returned her attention to the cone. Dan sat next to her, not really knowing what to think except that he wasn’t getting the brush off, but some other guy; and he loved how her hand felt in his.

“Brenda, I’m happy just to sit on this wall and eat ice cream with you...”

“... and we’re seeing each other Saturday,” Brenda reminded him sweetly. He thought about kissing her but chickened out. She smiled thinking he was so good at flirting, but not so good at closing the deal.

“I’d see you Friday, y’know, if you’re wondering...” Dan added, just in case.

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“Me, too. But see, I’m going with a bunch of people from my dorm so I feel like I should probably go. Look, it’s not to ... well, it’s not for the reason you might suspect. I mean, not anymore; not after I gave you a reed.” She smiled sweetly at him and they sat quietly for a time. “Do you want to meet me there?”

He did want to meet her there; he wanted to meet her anywhere; he was so smitten. But he didn’t need the drama that would develop as he chased her around a party her ex-boyfriend was at. “Well, it’s just that I may have my own date...” he said coyly.

“With the tim-tom player?” she asked, trying poorly to hide her regret. So much for honesty, she thought.

“No, with Jim and a couple guys from our floor.” This time he brushed her face softly and Brenda felt herself warm with his touch. They quietly settled into enjoying their ice cream, Union Terrace at sunset, and each other.

After finishing her cone Brenda asked if she had any butter brickle on her face. She didn’t but Dan got courageous and playfully dabbed her chin with a napkin, then he leaned in the extra few inches and kissed her softly.

Finally! Brenda thought, joyfully receiving his kiss. She reached around and held the back of his head, in case he was thinking of a quick peck. But he wasn’t; Dan’s mind left his body, and his heart took over his head, wanting only to kiss Brenda. They made out on the Terrace wall while the setting sun made the red sky raven blue then black.

Eventually a nice Union worker had to tell them the Terrace was closing but the Limnology lab had a wall they could “sit” on. Dan thanked her and Brenda looked down

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shyly, neither having noticed the Terrace was nearly deserted. Brenda didn't think they'd been kissing that long but it was almost eleven. They hopped down and started towards the Lakeshore Path, still holding hands.

"Here's the wall she told us about," Brenda said, not wanting to miss out on more kissing. This wall was taller, and Dan helped her as she jumped up to sit down; they kissed, oblivious to the walking traffic passing them. When traffic dwindled, the only sound was the waves softly meeting the Lake Mendota shore. Dan finally pulled away and suggested he should get her home.

On their way Brenda told Dan that she felt obligated to take her friends and see Matt at this party but that she wouldn't be doing anything with him. She could only kiss one boy at a time, and she was very pleased with the one she was kissing presently. Dan told her he had no worries, that she was right not to change her plans and that if he ran into Gretchen, he wouldn't be borrowing a reed or even one of those tim-tom mallets.

Brenda stopped and turned Dan to face her. "Just in case you're thinking at all about Gretchen," she said and she pulled him in. They hadn't kissed in several minutes and Brenda wanted Dan to know what he'd be missing, what Matt would also be missing tomorrow.

Coming up to Kronshage House, she invited him to meet her roommate. They chatted some then Dan figured he'd get himself home.

"See you Saturday, Dan. At our kissing spot..." Brenda said sweetly; wrapping her arms around his waist.



“See you, Brenda,” he said, having a very hard time pulling himself away from her.

Dan didn’t remember much about his twenty-minute walk back to Sellery Hall.

Author Biography

Tom Werlein bats right and throws right, should anybody need a ringer for their summer league softball team. His walk up music? Trip Shakespeare’s “Toolmaster of Brainerd.” He writes and plays golf for fun but takes softball seriously. In his work time, Tom is a lawyer for a large, commercial insurance company in central Wisconsin.