

1minutestories round 5



January to March 2012

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The Rescuer of Baby J

One day Mama said, “We are all out of bananas, again.

I am going to town. Neknek Fran will baby-sit while I’m away.

You must be good children and listen to her ‘till I get back.”

“I will,” said Maria.

“I will,” said Max.

“ He, he, he!” said Baby J

“Sigh,” said Mama.

Maria sat at the table to play with her computer.

Max went to play with his fire truck in the living room.

And Baby J played with her teddy.

Nanak Fran said, “I see you are all busy. I will be painting in my work room.”

After a little while Neknek ran out of the very special paint she needed for her most unusual paintings.

“Children,” she called. “I am going down to the stream to get some eye of newt and a few toad toes for my paint. Will you behave yourselves and stay out of my work room?”

“I will,” said Maria and she went back to her game.

“I will,” said Max and he went back to rescuing his action figures.

“Urk oom! He, he, he,” said baby J.

“Humm,” said Neknek Fran, with that look. And she went down to the stream.

Then Baby J went to get the little step ladder and pushed it to the door of Neknek's work room and climbed up to peek in.

“Urk oom!” said baby J with delight. “Pretty!” She said as she tumbled over the top of the door into the room. “Red!” she said as she painter blue dots on her shirt. “Geen!” she said as she stuck her fingers in the purple paint. And then she saw the painting her Neknek was working on. And went to help her finish it with the purple paint on her fingers.

The moment she touched the painting she slipped right into it!

“Urk oom, wgooo!” said Baby J.

After a while Max said, "look Baby J. See how far my truck's ladder will go." But there was no Baby J to be seen. So he went to Maria and said, "Where is Baby J?"

Maria said, "Oh no! I thought she was playing with you. Where could she be?"

They looked in the greenhouse and they looked in the bedroom and they looked in the barn. But they could not find Baby J.

"Oh no. You don't think she would go into Neknek's work room?" Asked Max.

"Yikes! I hope not," said Maria and they went to look.

The room was a wreck but no Baby J.

Max went to take a closer look at the painting on the easel. "Maria! I found Baby J and she is stuck in Neknek's painting."

"This is really bad," said Max. "We have to get her out!" And he reached for the picture.

"No wait!" said Maria. "You might get stuck in there, too."

She thought for a minute, and then said, "I have an idea."

She went to a shelf and picked up a little pot with the label that read "dream paint."

"Find the longest brush you can. I don't want to get too close to that thing," she said.

Max hunted through the litter on the floor 'till he found a paint brush with a very long handle and gave it to Maria.

She dipped the tip of the bristles into the dream paint and drew a door in the painting. Then stood back and looked at her work. "What do you think?" she asked Max.

He looked at it and said, "I think you should add 'exit'."

"Great idea!" Maria wrote E X I T carefully in the middle of the small green door.

Then, even though she was afraid, she reached for the door. Max tried to grab his sister but she had slid into the painting too. Maria scooped up Baby J and slipped back out the exit.

"Ya! We did it." Max yelled.

Maria hugged Baby J and said, "You naughty baby. Neknek told us not to come in here."

"Urk oom. Weeee, he, he, he!" said Baby J.

"Hurry," said Maria. "We have to clean up this mess before Neknek comes back." They set to work and finished just as they saw Neknek walking up the garden path.

When she came through the door all the children were sitting on the couch. Maria was reading them a story.

Baby J seemed a bit more colorful than she had when Neknek left.

"Have you been good children while I was away? What did you do?" asked Neknek.

"I played with my computer," said Maria.

“I played with my fire truck,” said Max.
“Color red weee!” said Baby J.

“Hummm,” said Neknek Fran with that look. And she went to put her new paint into her work room and found everything in place. “Well almost.” she said with a little laugh.

A few minutes later Mama came home calling. “Anyone want a banana? And why are you all laughing?”

This is not

The End

Granny Laura

Granny Laura silently slipped into the children's room to have one more look at them. Her thick, wooly socks didn't make a sound as she moved through the cozy warmth of the room to bend over each of the three slumbering forms. They looked like sleeping angels to her, their hands folded by their faces, tiny wings folded at their backs and just a glimmer of a halo over each of the three heads of curly hair. They looked so peaceful, tucked into their thick quilts, heads resting on billowing feather pillows. She breathed in the familiar and heartwarming sent of the baby and listened for the subliminal soothing synchrony of their soft breaths then slipped out as silently as she entered.

She lingered on the broad staircase, looking at each photo hung on the wall with fondness. She caressed the thick mahogany banister as she descended another step and turned to look at another memory captured in living color. Here the children were riding ponies. Here they were on a carousel, swirling through carnival lights. As she descended into light of the foyer, the colors became more vivid and each scene stirred memories of her own joyful childhood. Here their father was swinging the two oldest kids on his arms in the yard of the family's summer home. Here their mother was snuggling with the youngest next to a beautifully blooming hydrangea, the late afternoon sunlight illuminating the purples and pinks of the bright flower heads on the deep green background.

The parents would be home soon, no doubt, she thought and moved silently to the kitchen where she was glad her socks insulated her feet from the giant flagstones of the floor. She put away the dinner dishes, already dried in the warm air of the kitchen, pausing to look at the texture and shape of each. As she did so, she thought of the great meals they had contained... the freshly picked green beans, with golden pats of melting butter streaming, the tart apples cooking down to thick, steamy apple sauce. She liked the weight of the crockery, the blue and white designs on the porcelain. Wiping her hands on a crisp red and white checkered dish towel, she looked around the glistening countertops and neatly organized cooking utensils with approval. It was a pleasure to see a kitchen in such lovingly orderliness. She knew the woman who cooked here had a generous heart.

Granny Laura returned to the rocking chair by the fire place. First she wrapped the soft grey shawl around her shoulders and then put on and laced up her boots. She wasn't sure that the children's parents would find it a bit strange that an old woman preferred to walk around in her socks. She felt it gave her better connection with the house, she could feel the timbers in the planks and beams of the old house, and hear the ancient stories they told better when her feet were unencumbered. Well, if she put her shoes on now, she wouldn't have to explain, and save everyone the trouble of trying to understand an old woman's quirks.

She gazed into the fire and watched and daydreamed and smiled to the dancing of forest spirits, liberated from tactile bounds as they spiraled up and merged into the infinite freedom of the atmosphere.

Granny Laura had no idea how long she had been staring into the fire when she heard the crunch of the tires on the drive outside as the parents pulled up. She stood, a bit stiff from sitting for such a long time, located her reading glasses and book, and stuffed them into her rose-pattern knitting bag.

"Well, hello, dears. Did you have a lovely time at the play?"

Marshal and Lorain, who had just entered the foyer and were removing gloves and tossing car keys onto the small desk placed in the hall for that purpose stopped abruptly swiveled in her direction.

"I trust it was an entertaining evening," cooed Granny Laura. She was happy at the thought of young people like this enjoying a night of carefree delight.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Lorain in a voice that trembled with white lipped fear.

"You'll be happy to know that the children were simply lovely. They ate everything on their plates and went right to bed when asked."

"What the fuck are you doing in our house?" Lorain, tense and brittle as if she might break if she fell down, took a menacing step towards Granny Laura, who continued to beam cheerfully at her.

"Honey, its OK," Marshal spoke quietly but urgently, "Its just Granny Laura.

Lorain turned towards her husband as if she were going to attack him. "You know this... this... person. This person who broke into our house!?"

"Now dear," Granny Laura soothed, "Nothing was broken in this house. The children played ever so peacefully and didn't as much as drop a spoon.

"Marshal, what is going on here?" demanded Lorain.

"Sweetie, it is just Granny Laura. She lives down the street. She is perfectly harmless."

"But what the fuck is she doing in our house! What did she do to our house when we were not here?" Lorain was still shouting, but it was clear that Marshall's words had calmed the edge from her fear.

"Well, it seems Granny Laura was babysitting our kids, isn't that right, Granny Laura."

Granny Laura beamed with a maternal pride, "You are lucky to have such a bright family, Mr. Ludlow. The children are such darlings."

"But... but... we don't have any children, Marshal. Granny Laura, or whoever you are, WE DON'T HAVE ANY CHILDREN!" now Lorain was now clearly more angry than afraid.

"Honey, just... Uhm. Granny Laura, where are the children now," asked Marshal in a friendly voice, giving his wife a steady look to indicate she should just wait and see.

"I just checked on them upstairs a few minutes ago. They were sleeping like angles. Ms. Ludlow, there is no need to worry about them. They are snug as bugs in a rug."

Lorain stared hard at the old woman before her and whispered, "We don't have an upstairs."

Marshal, seeing his wife had calmed down sufficiently, began ushering Granny Laura to the front door. "Would you like me to drop you at home, Granny Laura?"

"No thank you, dear. Old people don't need as much sleep, and I prefer to refresh myself in the night air. The linden flowers will be perfuming my way home."

Before Lorain could state that the neighborhood had no linden trees, Marshal opened the front door and guided Granny Laura out, patting her affectionately and wishing her well.

"Thanks for taking care of the kids," he waved, watching her grey head disappear into the darkness under the trees at the sidewalk.

"What the FUCK was that all about?" demanded Lorain.

"That was just Granny Laura. She lives in the old house at the edge of the park." Marshal guided his wife now to the sofa and went to the kitchen to get a bottle of wine and two glasses.

"Don't you remember her, honey?" he asked, "She was on the TV twice. Got busted for growing psychedelic mushrooms in her basement."

"Oh!" Lorain's soft exclamation came as she recalled. "Yes, I remember. I remember now. They had to let her go because she wasn't dealing."

"Well," said Marshal, pouring the red wine, "They couldn't prove that she was dealing. Do you remember the interview with her? She said that she had a lot of penpals. And that she was delighted that so many young people were interested in mycology."

"Ha! I don't remember that part! But I do remember her face now. Boy, she gave me quite a shock. When I saw her standing there, I was sure she was breaking and entering."

"Well, I guess she did," said Marshal, looking around for broken windows. "Or maybe we just left the front door open."

"We'll have to be more careful about that," Lorain sipped her wine, forgetting now, the fear she had just felt. "Friggin' hippies!"

"Right," Marshal snuggled up to his wife, "We don't want to find any more doped-up octogenarians babysitting our imaginary kids again."

Thanks to Loca for help with the concept.

Shannon Frances

1minute stories, round 5

"inappropriate babysitter"

28 January 2012, Nibong Tebal

Busy Body

Milton Fetherstone had a problem, well he actually had several problems, not the least of which was that he died sever weeks ago. His problems started when he seriously annoyed the Reverend Mygood Pringle. Mr. Pringle, the baptist preacher, and part time hair dresser at Bab's House of Beauty, was unbwknownst to the good citizens of Meadowview, a necromancer.

Milton had criticized Mr. Pringle's sermon on True Nature of Hell. In which the minister claimed that hell really is a mall at Christmas time. Pringel had spent quite a bit of thought on that sermon and he was exceedingly proud of it. Mygood being a preacher and all, might have been forgiven Milton, if he had not gone on to try to convince Miss Mahalia Praise God From The Roof Tops Johnson that she of all people, could never pass as a natural blond. And that is what what started the ruckus.

Mahalia was the love of Pringle's life. He thought she was just about perfect. Her big brown eyes, her generous curves, her delightfully kissable lips were pure perfection in the preacher's eyes. And she, all by herself composed 5/11ths of his gospel choir. There was only one more thing he could ask for in a woman. And he did.

He had a thing for long blond hair. Mahalia, fully reciprocated the preacher's affections. She just didn't feel she was cut out to be a blond. Eventually she gave in when he explained true blondness as not simply the color of one's hairn but more like a state of being, a spiritual essence. If Mormons could have spiritual wives why couldn't a baptist preacher have a spiritual blond.

When he put it so eloquently Mahalia could not refuse. Especially when he had gone on to describe the impact of seeing her stand up there in her blue and fuchsia choir robe, with her flowing main of golden blond hair, giving voice to that most sublime of all spirituals, " Jump Back Jack, God Don't Take no Flack." His sapphire blue eyes misted over with real tears of proud joy. "Baby when you let those words of pure inspiration slip past your bodacious lips it will be the laluralie's siren song bring the unregenerate souls crashing on the rocks of true enlightenment.

So after work Tuesday night she let him do his magic with Lady Call Girl Golden Blond and two foot long blond extensions.

The next day when she ran into Milton pushing his broom down the Meadowview middle school hallway where she taught home economics part time to help supplement her night job as the town's undertaker. He took one look at her, gnashed his teeth and spat out the words that doomed him. "Mahalia girl you let that damned idiot Pringel make a fool out of you. Just look at you girl. Aint you got no pride? You ain't never going to pass for no blond chick?"

Had she not been just a tiny bit sensitive on the topic of her new look she might not have done what she did. But believe me when I say if is never a good move to piss off a voodoo conjure woman. Did I mention that their similar spiritual orientations was yet another link in the bonds of their true love. Juju woman have a understandable affinity with necromancers considering all the time they spend in grave yards. And Mahalia had an impeccable lineage going all the way back to Lilith the grandmother of Eve. It is always the grandmothers isn't it?

The Reverend Pringel tried to be particularly supportive of his beloved's plight when the awkwardness finally came out. "Baby I know you you were upset but really it might have been better if you had discussed this with me first?"

"But Bunny Bare was he was killed in a hail storm, you know how global warming is making the weather real extreme theses days." Mahalia dabbed at her eyes with one of her many colorful shawls.

"Now Molasses Angel that was no hail storm. Only one big hail stone and it mashed right through the roof of that poor moron's house and smacked him on the top of his pointy little head right while he was doing his business on the toilet. One hail stone, even a really big one does not a hail storm make,

no matter that it weighed 20 lb.”

“OK Bunny Baby, you're right. But I was just so mad.” Mahalia dabbed at her eyes again knowing what was coming next.

“Now what I really want to know, darling of my heart, is why did that skinny, broom pushing. . .” Pringel had to take a deep breath and steady himself before he could move on to the real crucks of the problem. “Why did Milton have your name tattooed on his left butt cheek?”

Mahalia twirled the corner of her shawl as she peeked out from beneath her long plastic lashes. “Well now, you know Baby, I'm not the only woman with the name Mahalia. I got a Honnica card from my cousin Mahalia Trumpet of Judgment Goldberg last year. She used to live in Backpocket Tennessee until she discovered how to make Kosher ham by baptizing the pig a christiam right before slaughtering it. That was it wasn't a Pig in the Jewish tradition. Then She married Sven Nasaire and they moved to L.A. and made a killing with Kosher pork Barbeque.” Pringel leveled his most sever ministerial scowel at her. “Now don't mess with me woman! Your name reaches all the way across both but cheks. Tybby Jackson was the EMT on call. He had to use the jawa of life to cut that worthless broom jock out of the toilet seat. And he told me, and enjoyed every minute of the telling I must say.”

“Ok I'm sorry it was nothing, just a yourhful indiscretion. Long before even I met you.” Mahalia murmured as she studied the pink bowes in her platform flip flops. A chrystal tear slid down her soft round cheek. It touched the preacher's heart.

“A youth full indiscretion?” He said lifting her face so she could see the magnanimousness of his understanding. He heaved a mighty sigh and said “Youthfull indiscretions are all a part of the grand unfolding of our growth towards a mature spiritual being.” he intoned in his rolling baratone preaching voice.

The Preacher really did try to be the forgiving type but Mygood had paid Milton \$119.95 for some landscaping at the Kindom Hall of the Reserected One...s that Milton promised to but had met with the unseasonable hail storm before he could get to it. “Milton owes me for work on the Hall and I mean to collect fron dead or not. You with me babe?”

Mahalia's damp eyes soarked with delight. “Oh bummy bear, You know how peoud I am to work with you on one of our life renovation projects!”

Milton's grave had not had time to settle so the happy couple working with companioanbel efficiency had no problen resurecting him.

Mahalia wheelbarrowed Milton's remains back to Pringel's garage /work shop/ laboratory, while Pringel refilled the empth hole.

The lights in the Preacher garage burned well in to the small hours of the morning as the they perused their mutual interest in revivalism, in one of its more unique forms. By the end of their labors, Milton, though not pretty, could pass for human in the dead of night by a person with very poor vision. They considered good enough was good enough, and called it a night. Mahalia wanted to be fresh for the next and more exacting preparation Milton for his post death work life. Once again they labored together in joyful fellowship until slightly after midnight when a weary but optometrist Pringel thought they could take their handy work for a test run. Walking Milton the the Kingdom Hall Of The Reselected One . . .s they turned him loose the the clippers and mower. By a little before dawn the contented colleagues looked upon their work and called him “not too bad.”

Two weeks later they felt confident enough in their creation to drop him off at the Hall and leave him working on his own.

By the end of the month Pringel began receiving congratulations on the vastly improved appearance of the Kingdom Hall of the Resurrectd One. . .s. Not only were the lawns and shrubs manicured to perfection but beds of bright flowers graced the margins of the parking area and decorative benches ringed the two big Yew trees by the front doors.

Mahalia began to cast curvaceous glances on the beauty of place. “Sugar can I borrow Milton every

other Monday and Thursday to work at the funeral home.” It seemed Milton had a exceedingly latent talent of landscape design.

The logical consequence of these two remarkable renovation jobs proved so out standing it wasn't long before the mayor and the library board wanted in on the deal until Milton has a work week that would kill a living man. Things finally reached a climax when the three surviving members of the Daughters of the American Revolution approached Pringel. Bula Jefferson wanted a little sprucing up done on their retirement home. Dolly Washing, wanted something less stodgy, more flashy in nature to overcome the stuffy reputation the organization had developed. And Priscilla Madison wanted something artistic and if possible classical so the locals wouldn't forget just who was who in town.

Milton had already been run ragged, well more ragged, keeping up with all the demands on his time and he wanted a rest. So when Pringel presented him a brand new mower and the best gardening sheers \$19.95 could buy and told get hopping, Milton felt a frisson of rebellion kindled in his dead tired heart. somewhat rundown being when he went to work that night.

The next day the town woke to find the ancient boxwood hedge that encircles the yard of the DAR retirement home had received a topiary make over. To the right of the entrance drive appeared larger than life reproductions of Renoir's “After the Bath, To the left Goya's Nude Maja lolled. The North side of the yard facing Main Street now boasted, Fuseli's Naked woman and Woman playing the Piano. The East side feature Modigliani's Nude Sdraiato. And the the west depicted Cezanne's Leda and the Swan. Though it must be admitted the swan's neck came in for some heavy criticism. As an added flourish Milton had managed to give each of the Ladies 2 blinking red Christmas lights placed to greatest effect. Technically it fit all the criteria. Bula had sprucing. Dolly definitely had flashy and Priscilla and had classical. The amount of foot traffic around the grounds brought town to a stand still with very mixed reviews from the citizenry. Though almost everyone appreciated how a slight breeze moving through the leaves gave the ladies the appearance of laughing. Mahalia secretly loved it, and kind of wished she has thought of something like that for the funeral home, Pringel however was livid. The hew and cry for the identity of the perpetrator of the Topiary Travesty as some called it and the Pruning Piesderesistance as others saw it became national news.

Pringal stormed into his garage as soon as he fought his way clear of the throng of reporters, pro and con citizens, art lovers and representatives of Christians for the Abolition of Nakedness, and snatched what was left of Milton from the foot locker he inhabited during the day light hours. “Milton you demented whack job! You are fired!” Where upon the grinning x corps burst into flames and vanished.

Milton woke to find himself in a shabby shopping mall in a deselect rust belt inner city. Loud speakers blasted Alvin and the Chipmunks vrsionsversions of, “All I Want for Christmas is my Two front Teeth”, “I saw Mommy Kissing Santa Clause”, and “Grandma Got Run over by Some Rain deers”, from competing speakers. Gray faced woman dragged around screaming children, repetition “No I told you a million times we are not going bankrupt this Christmass.” While exhausted men screamed into cellphones that they could not make the damned board meeting. They didn't care if their job depended on it. They were doing their damned last minute shopping. All these wretched souls were being chased by daemon elves poked everyone with switches of prickly Holly.

Milton s jaw dropped open when he ran smack into a fat man in a red designer suite. His pointy white beard, two shinny black horns poking from his red fur trimmed hat convinced him where he was.

“HO, HO, HO, Milty. Surprise Pringel had it right after all.” Satinclaws sang out in a deep baritone voice.

“Well damn! Groaned Milton.

Job's to do list

Gerhard took a deep breath and braced himself before opening the door to the bookshop. The door had barely closed behind him, when he heard the cashier — today sporting red streaks in the hair she took great care to keep permanently mussed — shouting, "My god!!! What is that on your nose!?!?!"

Gerhard was not a shy person, but he was rather formal with people he did not know, particularly in work or business-related situations. He cringed, but only inwardly, as he took measured steps towards the counter in the back of the store.

"Hello," he greeted the cashier with intentional calmness and professional warmth, as she gaping at him with all her teeth awry.

"I was wondering..."

The cashier shattered the polite little speech he had prepared.

"That!" she said, emphatically pointing to the tiny diamond stud in her left nostril, "What in Gaia's name is THAT?"

"Ah. You are asking about the blister on my nose?" Gerhard tugging the arms of his suit in turn, proceeded smoothly to the next bit of thought-out conversation.

"Is that what you call it? It looks more like an ulcer. You know, my grandmother used to get diabetic ulcers on her legs that looked like that only blacker. But yours actually look more like rats have been chewing your nose."

"Ha. Ha. No, no rats did this to me," Gerard shifted to take a more humorous approach. "It is a cold sore. Just in an unusual location. Actually, it is not that uncommon. Er. I was wondering if you..."

"Wow, does it hurt? Jesus tap-dancing Christ, I never saw nothing like that. What did your mom say when you showed it to her? Sheeze. Cold sore. How'd you get it?"

Now Gerhard registered that he was, against his will, being drawn into a conversation about his nose. He accepted the fact and tried to continue with grace.

"It is just a normal cold sore, the kind you get after a cold. It can also be induced by UV rays when you get too much sun."

The cashier eyed him with open suspicion. "You mean, like HERPES?"

There was no one else in the store, and therefore no one to scandalize. But Gerard felt scandalized none the less.

"Yes, well. Herpes Simplex I... orofacial herpes. Not Simplex II." Gerard felt like bolting from the bookstore, and quickly reviewed the situation. He absolutely needed to pick up his book today in order to be able to scan it over the weekend before the conference next week. He had to endure this until he had the purchased book in hand. So, in a move he hoped would end the conversation, he brightly added, "Not genital herpes," in a voice that was calculated to radiate confidence. "Now, I was wondering if you have the book...."

"HA!" the cashier's eyes gleamed, "I bet you got it on your nose when you went down on your girlfriend!" This time Gerhard cringed visibly, but braved on.

"The book that I ordered last week. Your colleague called to say it was in. *Political Economics of Sustainable Agriculture in South East Asia?*"

The cashier did not seem to notice his question, as she was rubbing her hands, clicking the various skull and bat shaped rings as she did so, obviously delighted to get some good gossip.

"Is that she that little chubby woman you brought in her a couple of weeks ago?"

Surprised out of his strategy, Gerard involuntarily sputtered, "What?"

"That girl who was in here with you a while ago. The one with the brown corporate-drag suit on. Is she your girlfriend?"

Flabbergasted, Gerard croaked a slightly outraged "NO!" before he could continue with as much restraint as he could manage. "No. That is Dr. Brandburry. She is a colleague of mine."

"So, you didn't go down on her herpes-ridden twat? Is that what you are saying?"

"Look... I... uh. She is not my girlfriend. Getting back to the subject, do you perhaps..."

"Well, does she have a boyfriend? Or maybe a girlfriend?" the cashier drawled the last word out weirdly. "Cause, you know, I sort of go for that wage-whore look."

"I did not come here to discuss my colleagues sexual preferences..." and anticipating the sparkle in the cashier's eyes, "nor did I come to discuss my own sexual activity. I am simply interested to know..."

"Yeah, yeah. *Political Economics*... I'll go check," the cashier sneered and let her hands drop disappointedly as she turned with a distinct air of punk bitchiness and disappeared into the storeroom.

Gerard was simultaneously surprised that she had remembered the title of the book and enormously relieved that she was gone if only momentarily. He tried to use the few minutes to gather his thoughts. He considered himself an incipient Buddhist, or, as he described it to the few people he trusted with such intimacies, a student of Buddha. He tried to look deep in himself and find compassion for this terrorist of a cashier. She probably had no idea how uncomfortable she made him and, even if she did, she probably had very little control of herself. She was, in all likelihood, acting out of her own personal frustration and possibly even trauma. He was pondering how unpleasant it must be for someone as ... er... interested in other people's lives as she is to work alone in such a quiet, unpeopled environment. It must really be painful for her, and her own desire for happiness is the very thing that was causing her to act in such a way as to make it difficult for him to be happy.

He was just reaching the point where he was feeling a soft, warm glow in his chest as he filled with compassion for the cashier and all living beings, when she

dumped the book in front of him and stared pointedly at his nose, as if leering over an invisible pair of glasses. Very slowly, she began to wrap the book, moving as if she were tranquilized.

He rapidly pulled out his wallet and was calculating the sales tax so he could pay the exact amount as quickly as possible. The cashier was moving with excruciatingly slow movements, popping her gum while taking sideways glances at Gerard's nose. After what seemed like several minutes, she tapped a few keys on the cash register with slow motion drama until suddenly her hand froze, hovering above the key that would indicate the end of the transaction when, in the infinitely distant theoretical future, she pressed it.

"But maybe you didn't get it from your girlfriend," she swiveled towards him accusingly. "Actually, you never said you HAD a girlfriend... do you?" But before he could answer, she continued. "I have a friend once who gave a guy herpes 'cause she blew him when she had a cold sore. She agonized about it but I told her not to, because he coerced her and he basically got what he deserved. Don't you think?" she paused, finger still poised, expecting an answer.

"Uhm," was all Gerard could think to say. Everything that occurred to him was bound to provoke more unpleasant conversation with this person.

"I thought so. You men are all the same," her finger neared the key with a tiny, barely perceptible movement, "But of course you got herpes from rimming your BOYfriend." Her left eyebrow arched incredibly high on her forehead as her finger finally plunged the last few centimeters.

He barely noticed the cash registered ping open. Before she could touch the book again, he grabbed it, slammed down the counted out cash and literally sprinted out the front door of the bookstore.

He slowed down a few blocks down the street when he was sure he was out of earshot of the store. He tried to calm his breathing, which was much harder than the bit of exertion could have caused. Feeling a bit foolish and rather unskilled, he tried to calm himself down. Nothing really bad had happened. He had received no physical damage and, to be honest, all he had suffered was a bit of mild discomfort. That poor, misguided cashier hadn't taken anything from him. He mentally patted down his ruffled feathers and let his breathing even out and deepen. Gerard felt himself coming back into wholesome balance when he stopped mid-stride. He had remembered that the suit he needed for the conference was still at the dry cleaners around the corner. He absolutely had to pick up the suit today.

He slumped momentarily, then straightened, resolutely crossed the street and turned left down a minor street. Gerard took a deep breath and braced himself before opening the door to the dry cleaning shop.

1minute stories, round 5
busybody
Shannon Frances, 2 February 2012, Nibong Tebal

My Way

Charles Logan watched the woman sitting in the waiting area for flight 271 bound for Hicks Creek. She could almost feel his demand that she look over at him. That she acknowledged his interest. She tried to disguise her sigh, thinking that the man's mental image of himself was at least fifteen years out of date, still attractive but that had a lot more to do with some very expensive barbering and a suite made for him in a very exclusive ship in Malian *The next thing he'll do I wait till I glance his way then check his Rolex.*

She was his type. Not his type at all, too tall, too dark, too self possessed. He liked his women small, blond and compliant. He smiled to him self. The Ranch, he knew, would be well stocked with lots of his kind of women. But still he watched her. There was something about this woman that intrigued him. Maybe her confidence. Her pants suit was well cut in an understated way. Her black hair, thick and glossy, her skin a dusky rose, He thought she might be Mediterranean, maybe EEgyptian, even and her face was striking if not really pretty. Her features were too strong to be pretty, large dark eyes and seriously kissable lips, her nose, while big, fit her face well. A handsome woman he decided, as the call for boarding finally came.

With a little jostling he managed to get behind her in line. The flight would only take an hour and a half so there would be no assigned seating, and he might as well enjoy the flight.

He stood in the aisle next to her and helped her store her small bag in the over head compartment. She kept her laptop.

“A business trip?” he asked, nodding at her computer and flashing his best grin as he slid in next to her..

“Yes. Just a little mess that needs cleaning up. And you?” A smile curled up the corners of her generous lips.

“Going back to the ranch for a bit of hunting.” He delivered his line with a certain world weary sigh to let her know how much he deserved his down town. While not a lie he made it sound like he owned the Sportsman's Safari Star Ranch.

He caught a whiff of her perfume something rich and exotic that suited her perfectly. “I'm Charles Logan,” he offered his hand.

“Jain Rainwater.” Her voice and her smile had intriguing depths.

Well not Egyptian, he thought maybe Indian, I never had an Indian might be interesting. He thought.

By the time the plain made its final approach to the tiny, Hicks Creek Air Field, She knew all about his big game hunting exploits. He discovered she was a lawyer tidying annoying detail of some confidential nature. And Charles decided he really wanted to add an Indian to his list of conquests.

Her cell phone rang the moment the pilot allowed them them to turn on electronic devices. She listened to it for a moment, her face eloquent with annoyance before she sighed and replied “Yes, I understand. I'll see you then.” and snapped the phone shut with obvious annoyance.

“A problem?” he asked.

“Yes, my client will be delayed until later this evening.” She cast a disparaging glance at what could be seen of the tiny Texas town. “This place doesn't look like it has much to offer in the way of entertainment while time killing.” Jane sighed.

“Hey, why don't you let me show you around. I have a jeep waiting for me and I can take you out to the ranch. Its still early and we have some really great scenery.” Charles smiled at Jane in what he believed to be an innocent congenial chamber of commerce way.

“Oh, I couldn't do that you just got here and I'm sure you must want to get settled in and, um, oil you gun or what ever big game hunters do.” She said with just a tiny hint at possible implications of the last part of her statement.

Charles' grin widened in acknowledgment of the possible implication. I already have my gun with me and believe me it is always ready action.

As he helped her into the jeep he asked her about her work. "Not the confidential part just what kind of work you do?"

She gave him a rueful smile. "I'm a lawyer, but don't hold that against me. I gave up the trial end of the business. I found that too tedious. I still keep my hand in now and then but I guess you could say I'm into resolution management now.

As though to distract him from her unsavory line of work she said. "Big game hunting must be very exciting. What's the most dangerous thing you ever killed?"

That was all it took. Charles launched into a lengthy and highly embellished description of tracking wolves in Montana, bagging gigantic gaiters in Louisiana, and when she made all the appropriate oohs and aahs, he launched into how this time he was going after a mountain lion that was attacking the local cattle.

By now they were several miles out of town in a thickly wooded landscape of rolling hills. "Do you mean there is a mountain lion around here somewhere?" She gave a convincing shiver.

Her reaction pleased Charles. *Maybe she'd like a little taste of the wild side.* He thought.

As though reading his thought, she said, "if you have your gun with you do you think it would be safe to get out and look around for some lion tracks?"

This is like shooting ducks in a barrel. Just the way I like them, he thought as he pulled off the road into a secluded side track. He parked the car and dug his rifle from its custom made carrying case.

"Is that thing loaded?" Jane asked with little gasp of delighted dread.

Charles slipped a clip into place and said, "it is now sugar. You are safe with me."

Jane gazed at the gun as though fascinated by its deadly power. "Oh my God! Do you think you could show me how to shoot it?"

"Sure thing," he said as they walked a little way down the rutted path. "Look, over by that big tree see that squirrel. You think you want to try on that?"

"Well if you'll help me. I never shot anything before." She seemed a little frightened by the idea but willing and a little excited by the prospect of blowing the small furry creature to bits with a gun that had the stopping power of a mac truck.

He handed her the gun and moved around behind to help her seat the rifle to her shoulder and eased her back tight against his body. "Line him up in the sight and squeeze the trigger. That's all there is to it." He said flicking the safety off. The shot went high and wide but the recoil sent her back against him with more force than he expected and Charles landed on his butt.

Jane spun around and smiled down at him. "That is some kick." she said as the barrel of the gun swung in his direction.

"Woh there, sugar" he said reaching out to move the barrel to one side. "First rule is never point at anything you don't mean to shoot."

Jane had backed away a little further. "But I do mean to shoot you. This so called sports club is a farce. Most of these game animals are former pets or ancient toothless creatures dumped here when the two bit circus that had them folded or couldn't afford to keep them just so bored men with more money than amnhood could brag to bimboes about their well oiled guns." Something dark and dangerous flickered in Jean's eyes. You are the mess I came to resolve."

Charles made a scrambling attempt at standing but flew back as the bullet vaporized his head, Jane walked back to the jeep and maneuvered it into place. She put in a painters cover all that was folded neatly in her small bag before slipping a nylon rope around Charles' ankles then tossed the end of the line over the tree limb the squirrel had sat on. She secured the rope to the jeep's bumper and pulled forward to hoist the body off the ground. Then she gutted him, "Like the pig you were" she chuckled to her self. When finished, Jane removed the blood soaked cover all and carefully put in a

plastic Wall-mart bag to be dropped in a trash can at a distant airport.

Charles was found three days later and the Sportsman's Safari Star Ranch went out of business the next month. This was the third sportsman to be found hanging from a tree with his innards missing.

"That sort of thing really puts a real damper on the good old boys." her boss said to her when she went into her office at the law firm that served as the leading advocate for environmental caused. "I guess we won't be going after them again, How many times did they wiggle out of the suits we brought against them? Her colleague asked, shaking his head.

"One too many it seems," Jane said, then she went into her office. "Let's see wolf hunting in Montana humm that sounds interesting. Who are you and how many times have you litugated against? You might need at little tidying up." She sat at her desk and booted up her computer singing softly to herself, "I did it MY way."

Verbose Cafe

The lunch rush had started earlier than usual, and Marilyn had to abandon the "Today's Special" board before she finished. As the servers were serving and the bussers were bussing, it read:

Eloquent Mushroom Soup with Prosaic Salad \$4.99

Pregnant Pause Casserole with

She was, as usual, mingling with the guests: swapping gossip, replacing dropped spoons, asking after everyone's health, bringing bowls of chips for Nuance Nachos, and making recommendations (i.e., trying to fob off some Lyrical Lasagna that had already sat in the fridge over night). The dining area was glowing in the early afternoon sun from the large street-view window and the usual chatter was bubbling away, filling the room with a pleasant din. At the moment, only the cash register was silent.

"Refills on the Chamomile Whisper Tea are free."

"How about a cuppa Pronoun Java?"

"How's the Verbal Attach Pie today? As controversial as ever?"

After the tables filled up with food and before the food disappeared in to the guests, the servers gathered at the condiment station, to chat while they eyed their tables.

"The guy at table 3, right. Ordered Loquacious Spaghetti and Quotation Balls. Requested chopsticks." Sniggers and suppressed giggles followed.

"We are running out of the Mixed Metaphore."

"Did ya hear that the guy at table 4 asked the girl out on a date?!?! Boy, what was HE thinking?"

"We gotta 86 the Braised Terse Tempeh. But still got plenty of Rhetorical Sushi Sets."

The light gossip and joking was turned down a notch when Deidre moved up to the small group with her long-legged catwalk, intentionally drawing attention to herself. She stopped, squaring her back to the guests and glanced briefly over her left shoulder and paused for dramatic effect: "Look who's back... Grizzly Adams!"

The crowd of servers was suddenly and uncharacteristically silent as all eyes swiveled to table 6 to stare at the tall imposing guest they had nicknamed because of his rough, survivalist appearance. He was easily over 6 feet tall and had a long blond beard that merged seamlessly with his long blond hair. He always wore a worn-out T-shirt and the same faded olive green tourist shorts with lots of baggy pockets.

Everyone was a bit afraid of Grizzly Adams. In addition to looking like he could best any three of them in a physical combat, he rarely spoke and this level of self control inspired awe and a bit of distrust in the restaurant staff. Marilyn had

instructed them upon pain of getting canned to not disturb this particular guest with chit chat or miscellaneous conversation. They were strictly to take his order (It was the same every time: Garbled Soba with Adverbial Veggies) and let him indicate when he wanted to pay. Whenever anyone asked why, she just said her intuition told her it was the way to treat this particular guest, which of course led to rampant theories as to what sort of crime or perversity filled his mind as he looked into the distance.

Marilyn, noticing the unusual quiet focus of the group, had joined.

"Last time he was here was when we had Voice of God Strawberries. It's been a good 8 months since he was in here."

"Where's he been?" whispered someone.

"It was strange," Marilyn recalled, "The last time he was here, two guys in suits came in and sat at his table and talked at him for a good hour. Grizzely got angry, threatened to thrash them, and stormed out of the place. Hasn't been back since." Seeing that her staff were clearly planning on being overwhelmed with curiosity, she reminded them "If I catch a single one of you disturbing Grizzly with questions, I will personally rip your heads off. Understand?"

Her wide-eyed group nodded in obedience when a deep grumbling voice from behind the group surprised them.

"Oh. So that's it."

It was Grizzly Adams. Everyone was so engrossed in the story, that no one had noticed that he had walked up behind them, bill in hand. Like proverbial deer caught in the headlight, they stared unblinkingly at him, as though they would bound a way in a moment.

"I thought no one talked to me because I had intimidated someone." Everyone felt awkward at the reversed roles and stayed silent to see if Grizzly would say more.

"Er. Actually, I like it. It is the reason I come here. I like the lack of distractions." Feeling compelled to continue in their continuing silence, he added, "It helps me work."

Somehow the spell was broken and several people began speaking at once:

"Where did you go?"

"What's your real name?"

"We didn't know you could talk normal."

"Are you going to hurt us?"

Now Grizzly looked confused and ready to bolt.

Deidre shushed everyone and asked, "What kind of work do you do?"

"I write," he said. "I am an author."

"I never saw you write," accused a bus boy.

"I saw you drawing naked ladies on the napkin once," volunteered someone else. Grizzly blushed a bit but continued calmly.

"I think the stories through here. Then I go home and type 'em."

This seemed to satisfy the question and everyone had the "Ah ha" arched-eyebrow look on their faces.

"I have traveled all over the world, and I can tell you this café has just the right level of white noise to really get some thinking done."

"Well, that explains the blank looks."

"What do you write about?"

Grizzly looked as if the conversation was getting to be too much for him, but persevered "I write mostly short stories. Mostly surreal." After another embarrassing moment of silence, he added, "Nothing you all are likely to ever find."

Now the restaurant staff looked a bit relieved.

The new buser bravely asked the next obvious question, "What did those guys do to you?"

Grizzly clearly had no idea what the boy was asking about, so he added, "Those guys you got into a fight with the last time you were here."

Taking a moment to think back, Grizzly figured out what the boy was asking about. "OH, those guys were film makers. They wanted to make a film of one of my stories."

"But that is good, isn't it?"

"So why'ja fight with them?"

"Shush, it wasn't a fight!"

"I guess I was just surprised," Grizzly replied thoughtfully, "I never imagined anyone would want to adapt my story for the screen. It took them a while to convince me they were for real."

"So, did they make a film?"

"Yep. We just finished filming on location in Indonesia."

"ooo" said everyone. "What's it about?"

"Well, that is a bit hard to explain... it is based on my experiences living in Bali in a hut by a rice paddy... it involves floating blue frogs... I guess it could be classified as erotica..." Noticing the startled expressions circling him, he added, "Um. I did mention it was surreal." Grizzly didn't seem to know what else to say about it.

One of the senior servers was pantomiming smoking a spliff behind Grizzly's back.

"All right, that's enough," Marilyn's authoritative voice snapped everyone to attention. "Let's let this guy pay his bill and get on with his day. Break it up people. Let's go serve some folks some lunch now."

Grizzly held up his check in a demonstration of relief.

As he paid, he complimented Marilyn on her soba and thanked her for the peace and quiet. He said the words never flowed as well here as anywhere else – before he started frequenting the café, he had been paper shy. Regrettably, he was leaving town soon. He had made enough money from the movie to fulfill his dream of moving to the Himalayas to pursue the Yeti, in a literary sense, of course. Turning just before he left, Grizzly said that the café had contributed a lot to his success. Marilyn wondered this was really such a good deed, but had never asked him his real name, and would never know whether the stories were any good.

Postword: I know it is not very much on the topic. And apologies to HZ for writing another story about a writer. But this was a great opportunity to combine two devices I have been kicking around for a while: Verbose Café (inspired by a silly afternoon with Horizon) and the writer who punches out a film maker who offers to adapt a story.

1minute stories, round 5

finding my way

Shannon Frances, 10 February 2012, Nibong Tebal

The hair dryer hummed its familiar comforting drone as Betty Jean leafed through a well thumbed copy of *Glamour Secrets*, the magazine for the discriminating mature woman. Alice gave her the sharp rap on the dryer hood that told Betty Jean she only had 3 minutes before her comb out, so she flipped to the back where all those enticing ads were. She skipped over the single men seeking comfortably off older women when her eye caught a small listing for Madam Afradidy's miracle elixir of youth. The exotic dark-haired beauty in the illustration seemed to wink at her. Beneath the lovely woman's picture the blurb calmed that madam Afradity was 70 years old and owed her smooth skin, lustrous raven hair and, twinkling sapphire eyes to her secret elixir. You, too, can return to the fresh, glowing, bloom of youth for just \$19.95, send checks to

Betty Jean glanced at her reflection in the mirror over the rinse sink and closed her eyes. *It is ridiculous. I am 67 and there is nothing that will make me look like that*, she thought.

April lifted the hood and steered Betty Jean over to the comb-out chair and began a lively recitation featuring a really dreadful hair disaster suffered by Dody Liberman when she made the huge mistake of going to that new place out on the bypass as she styled Betty Jean's thinning hair.

Later that evening when Norman came home from the shop, he dropped a fleeting kiss on her cheek on the way to his recliner. "Hair looks great." he said without breaking stride. "Did you remember to take my good suite to the cleaners? We're going to the annual Chamber of Commerce dinner Saturday night."

"Norman you didn't even notice that I changed my color. I'm now a golden peach." Betty Jean sighed with resignation.

"Right, it looks great," he said with out looking up from the evening TV program schedule. "Game's on in 20 minutes. Can we eat in here. It should be a good one."

Betty Jean sighed again as she resigned herself to another night of eating alone in the kitchen while Norman lost himself in another stupid spectacle of grown men frantically chasing a ball. She dished up his meatloaf, mashed potatoes and peas and brought it in and sat it on the small folding table that had become his preferred dinning location and returned to the kitchen. *Alice said she looked like a real knock out as a golden peach. For all Norman cared she could have glued the peas to her head.* Betty Jean served herself a slender serving of meatloaf and potatoes without gravy and wondered why she bothered. *He probably wouldn't even notice if I went up a size or two*, she stuck her fork into the meat loaf and wondered what had happened to her dream life. Then she caught her reflection in the kitchen window and knew. This is what life is like for old women Then she noticed her red purse sitting on the end of the counter and sticking out of it was *Glamour Secrets*, the magazine for the discriminating mature woman. *Oh my heavens, I must have accidentally stuck it in there while Alice combed out my hair. I'll have to return it tomorrow.* She decided she might as well finish the article about ten foods that will revive your love life while she ate her dinner. But when she put the magazine on the table, it fell open to the second last page. The one with the ad for the elixir of youth. *Silly, who would believe anything could restore a woman my age to something like Madam what's-her-name. But there is a money back guarantee so it must do something. And it is only \$19.95. I would spend that much on a good night cream.* Madam Afridity seemed to beam approval up at her as she copied address in the advertisement.

Four days later when Betsy Jean received a small package in the mail, she had to think for a moment before remembering sending away for the elixir of youth. She had to laugh at herself for being so gullible, but the idea of erasing even some of her crow's feet before the Chamber dinner had been a strong motivator. She discarded the junk mail in the trash and put the bills into the "To be paid" box

before opening her package. Instead of a squat round jar of night cream she expected, she found a slender glass vile with a sparkling pink rhinestone top and a hand-written note that read, "Drink this now and prepared to be amazed!" A flicker of doubt fluttered through her as she twisted off the top, but it smelled all right. A little like kiwi and cations. *And surely no one would be so foolish as to send something dangerous through the mail. That would be illegal.* So she closed her eyes, put the vile to her lips and downed the sweet, pleasant-tasting liquid. A warm bubbly feeling seemed to envelope her for a moment. *Really quite pleasant.* Norman's suite... the Chamber dinner was only three days away.

Betty Jean woke up with cramps and a vague feeling of unhappiness. She rolled over and tried to recapture the dream she'd been having moments before. And then it came back to her. She had been sitting in the back of the gym watching Mr. Dickerson run through basketball practice with the boys. She loved the gym teacher with the totally hopeless adoration that only a thirteen year old girl could. And he was happily married to Mrs Dickerson, the bubbly blond Librarian. Betty Jean almost groaned aloud. She hadn't felt that way about Mr. Dickerson since she developed a crush on the high school quarterback. But here it was again, this dreadful longing for a long gone gym teacher. Maybe she could Google him as see whet he was doing these days. Just out of curiosity.

Betty Jean opened her eyes and tried to focus on the bed-side clock. She squinted and blinked a few times but just couldn't seem to bring the numbers into focus. There was something wrong with her vision. Her eyesight hadn't been this bad since before her had laser surgery to correct her near sightedness years ago. She scrambled out of bed and padded into the bathroom. Thinking maybe some of Norman's eye wash would clean the sleepies out. Reaching for the medicine cabinet door, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and had to stifle a shriek. The face looking back at her was hers all right but one still padded with the baby fat she hadn't out grown till she was in her junior year of high school... and that face had three vibrant red blemishes. One decoration on her chin, one beside her nose and one in the middle of her forehead.

Hoping that if she could just get back into bed and pull the covers over her head this would all go away. She beat a hasty retreat into the bedroom and had the covers over her head when Norman came in.

"C'mon sleepy head, rise and shine." he said.

His wife only made a snuffling sound and held tight to the blanket covering her head.

"B.J. aren't you feeling well? Its almost 7:30," he said.

"No, I think I'm coming down with something. I'll just have a little tea and toast later." she replied.

"OK, well, right... Give me a call if you need ginger ale or anything."

"Thank you, Norm, I'm sure I will be fine." *If I can just wake up from this craziness.*

Norman's footsteps faded as he descended the stair. Betty Jean waited until she heard his car pull out of the driveway before she felt it was safe to get out of bed. Fear, fatigue and confusion fought for primacy within her as she tiptoed into the bathroom. One look in the mirror and she sank onto the toilet and buried her head in her hands as the realization of her situation slammed into the conscious mind.

It is that damned elixir of youth. Standing up she looked in the mirror again and groaned. Her teeth had their pre orthodontist snaggle. "Well I am mighty damned dissatisfied and I want my money back." she told her reflection.

In the kitchen Betty Jean grabbed the magazine from her purse and flipped to the second last page. *Yes there it is plain as day — a money back guarantee and a 1 800 number for refunds. Good*

thing I didn't have time to take that magazine back. With a growing sense that relief is at hand, she dialed and waited until finally a soft and lilting voice asked her, "May I help you?"

"Yes you may help me. I am not at all happy with your so-called elixir of youth!"

"May I ask why you are dissatisfied?" the voice purred.

"Because I . . .," Betty Jean couldn't seem to find the right words for her predicament. "Because I seem to be experiencing a sort of second adolescence." she thought that sounded pretty good.

"Well isn't youth what you ordered?" crooned the voice.

"Youth? Of course I want youth but not acne and... and all the rest of that hormonal misery. I went through that once and that should be enough for anyone."

"If you didn't want your particular youth, whose youth did you think you would be getting?" bubbled the voice.

"Youth, you know, glowing skin, a slender figure, thick lustrous hair... that kind of youth."

"But that is impossible. A person can only have their youth." soothed the voice.

"Be that as it may, I am not happy and I want my money back." Betty Jean had had enough of the voice and felt a bought of teenage misery about to settle in for a good cry.

"Of course, dear, I fully understand and I will gladly refund your \$19.95 by return mail. If that's what you really want." said the voice with just a hint of a trap door to it.

"Thank you, that will be fine." said Betty Jean with just a hint of insecurity.

"Will there be anything else." hinted the voice.

"Um... Will I return to my old self then," asked Betty Jean with mounting anxiety.

"Why no, dear. For that you need our seasoned sage elixir and it comes with a money back guarantee as well." stated the voice

"And how much will that cost?" asked a resigned Betty Jean.

"That will be only \$199.50 but you can sign up for our installment plan of \$19.59 a month with no interest for the first month."

Betty Jean sank on to the kitchen chair. \$200 to become the woman she was yesterday. "How fast can you get it here?" she said.

"For only \$19.95 you can have it this afternoon's mail. If you pay by credit card."

"Right, here is my card number. . . ."

When Norm returned home that evening he found his wife fixing him his favorite sausage lasagna.

"You feeling better?" He kissed her on the cheek on his way through the kitchen to check the sports section for tonight's game.

"Yes, much better. And I was thinking, why don't you move the TV in here so we can watch the game together while we have dinner."

"I thought you thought all ball games were stupid." he said pleased to finally be able to enjoy both a game and a dinner at the same time.

"Well the game may be stupid but I like your company and compromise is one of the lessons that comes with seasoned sage of mature years."

Norman wasn't too sure he understood that last bit, but it sounded good to him.

One Minute Story
Subject: "Unrealistic Expectations"
Horizon, 02-2012

Bad Cookies

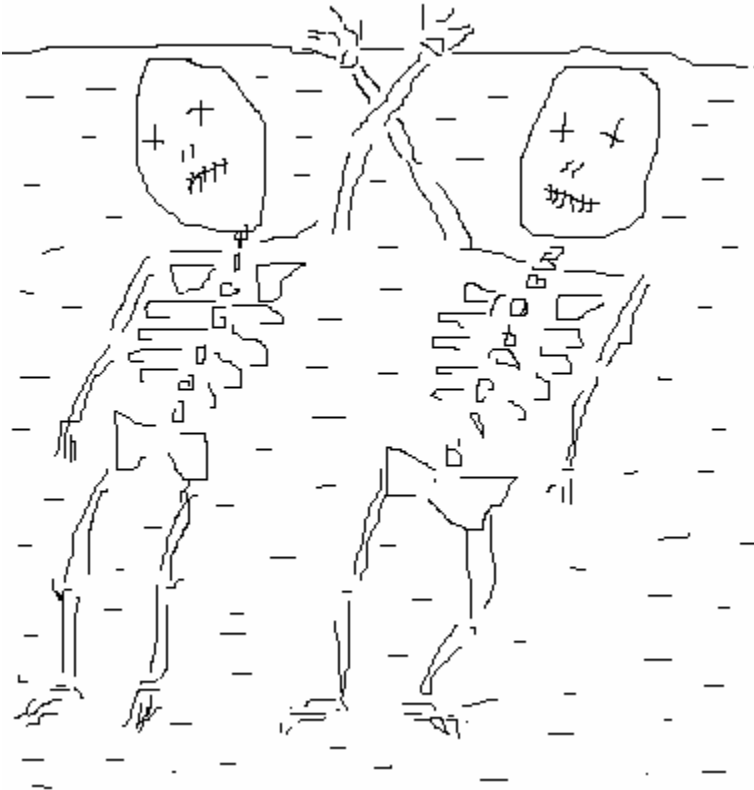
In retrospect maybe it wasn't such a good idea. Grandma always had strange things in her cupboards and closets. How were we to have known? The dusty bag on the back of the shelf behind the herbal tea had some kind of Aztec god face in profile. It looked innocent as chocolate often does. We were going on a road trip and just wanted something to bring along to munch on. "Eating cookies in the car...", it kept running through my head like a fever dream. "Cookie eating in the car..." They baked up and smelled, well, just like cookies. Several hours later, when we were actually on the road, they even tasted like cookies. Nothing gave the slightest foreshadowing of the dark things to come except this single line of text. That is until we got to the edge of the Indian reservation. "Turn back now or die!" was painted in black on a rusting white sign that rocked in the breeze. "They've got a bit of a penchant for the Over-The-Top" I remember thinking. In retrospect maybe that sign wasn't all that over the top. Psychotics think they receive signs specifically meant for them all the time, but until now I never had.

Apart from the sign the first indication that something was gravely wrong was a rustling in the bag. I'm not sure if I began to feel queasy before the bag of cookies started seething, or only after. There was a slight scratching sound at first, like a small insect was trying to get into the bag. It got progressively louder, till the bag was noticeably moving as though a mouse or something was trapped in it. I was debating how to trap or kill the rat without getting bitten, when suddenly the bag burst open, and the cookies began pouring out of it. They raced around the car like speckled brown mice. We swerved off the road and rolled into a ditch at the foot of a large burial mound.

A dry wind whipped up dust devils from the dirt road, and scattered into the surrounding sage brush. Slowly the last wheel of the overturned van spun to a stop as a ray of sunlight glinted through a crack in the rocks overhead. I must have been stunned, and as I regained consciousness I slowly became aware of an acute abdominal pain, like a hard cramp. I didn't immediately notice the cookies which were crawling all over my body, and biting into my flesh. I was, however aware of the squirming in my stomach. There was something moving around in there, and it felt like it was eating its way through my intestines. I painfully extracted my self from the overturned vehicle. The cookies were on me every where, frantically racing over my skin, and sinking their teeth into me, actually biting chunks out of my skin and muscle and burrowing into me. I tried to fend them off, but the gradual hollowing out of my insides was taking its toll. I rolled back on to the rocky ground. My head was spinning, and my hand fell against the ground, making a ceramic "clinking" sound. I looked over to see a glassy black stone with a razor sharp edge. Obsidian. It was all making sense some how. I had to get these accursed cookies out of my gut. Raising the obsidian stone with both hands, I plunged it into my belly just below the naval. With successive thrusts I managed to cut upwards to just below the sternum. You would think this would be unbearable painful, but I was so nauseous and dizzy, I had become numb to the self inflicted wound, and cut with every ounce of strength I could muster. Reaching in, I dug out the offending cookies one by

one. I think they made growling sounds, but I can't be sure, as my ears were starting to ring and I was getting tunnel vision. Everything had turned a fuzzy shade of yellow.

Another flicker of recognition came to me as I looked to the side, and could make out my companion, similarly self disemboweled. There were vultures flying over head, but neither one of us noticed them. I could only think of one thing to stop the madness: I needed to be buried. With indescribable effort we managed to scratch out shallow depressions in the rocks and sand beside us. With a final effort we each slid into our meager dugouts. There was a slight sense of relief, if not actual relief, at settling into the earth. Slowly we buried each other.



Unreasonable Expectations

The view to the yard showed a calm, peaceful scene... sunny and protected. All the tools were neatly oiled and sharpened, hanging against the garden shed in tidy rows. Perfectly peaceful and tranquil.

But it was just that peacefulness that disturbed Rough. Now that he was thinking about it, the thing that disturbed him was that Harold was staring at the yard with such silent intensity. Harold was the kind of guy that was always DOING something, and something was awry if he was keeping still for long periods.

"So..." Rough broke the silence. Harold appeared not to notice.

"Whatcha doing?" Rough asked trying to sound casual as he sat down next to Harold.

Still intently watching the yard and with barely even moving his lips, Harold replied, "I am going to kill the cat."

Rough started, "What!?!"

Turning toward Rough with the penetrating look he always used when asked a stupid question, Harold enunciated carefully, "I... am... going... to... kill... the... cat," and turned back to his vigil.

"B-but, you can't do that!"

"Yes, I can."

Rough's mind was reeling with the idea of the violence.

"But its wrong!"

"Look. That cat has killed a lot of innocent critters. I don't see how you could consider it immoral to kill it. Especially, considering...." Harold let the sentence dangle. Rough looked down with discomfort.

It took him a few moments to collect his thoughts again.

"But, I mean, you can't in a practical sense. Cats are hard to kill. And I hear they have nine lives."

"No, actually, it will be quite easy," said Harold, suddenly animated. "I got the idea from something I saw on youtube. It is a piece of cake."

"Youtube... like from a 'Tom and Jerry' rerun?"

"Yeaaaaah, something like that," smiled Harold with a malicious gleam.

"But I mean, in the evolutionary sense. Cats are superior predators. They have evolved to kill. It is their instinct. You can't blame the cat for killing."

"Its not a matter of blame, Rough. I just want it to end."

"But the farmer will get another cat, won't he?"

"Well, if he does, I'll just have to kill the new cat, too."

Rough was left speechless. He knew it was wrong, but he had to be careful how to formulate his argument. Harold was clever ... and very slippery. He could justify anything he wanted to do.

"Well, what about this," Rough decided to go for the logical approach, "The cat is huge. It has fangs and claws. If you try to kill it, it will use the same strength and cunning to kill you that it has used to kill everyone else it has encountered."

Harold just smiled wryly.

"We are at an evolutionary disadvantage here. We are smaller, weaker, slower, and less filled with killing instinct as the cat. How do you propose to overwhelm the predator ability that evolution has been honing for millions of years?"

"Just wait and see... look, here she comes." Harold's gaze was fixed downward at the corner of the yard next to the gate. After a moment, Rough could see the fluffy orange form of the cat sauntering lazily into the yard. It sat in the dead center of the yard, filled with cat arrogance, and began to preen.

"I mean..." Rough was interrupted by Harold's hand chopping his neck to keep him silent. Just at that moment, the cat noticed something dangling just in front of the shed door. Rough hadn't noticed it before, but now he could make out that something sort of furry was hanging from a string.

The cat began to bat at the long, grey object dangling from the furry mass.

"W-what is that?" asked Rough fearfully.

Harold glanced meaningfully at Rough and replied "It's Chuck's."

Harold realized with a shock that the grey rope hanging from the furry mass was Chuck's tail. The cat had gotten him just yesterday.

Rough pressed his hands to his mouth, suppressing the gag response. Too horrified to speak, he stared with Harold as the cat continued to bat at the tail. Her play intensified and, wishing to take a playful nip, she curled a paw around the tail and brought it to her mouth, shaking her head sharply. The jerk caused the stick to pull out and tip down. Harold had only registered the movement when a series of rapid events took place. They were too quick to follow, but he later figured out that the stick had been balanced so that, when pulled forward slightly, it unwedged from the end of a shelf. Then the shelf, destabilized without the stick, tipped, allowing the great cans of paint resting on it to roll down, hitting some leftover lumbar that had been angled to send the heavy rolling cans on a direct trajectory to the cat's head. Pummeled with three gallon cans of paint, the cat crumpled and expired without a sound.

"Yahooooo!" screeched Harold! "The cat is dead! Long live the rats!" and he streaked down the side of the barn into the yard.

"The cat is dead! Long live the rats!" he shouted as he did a victory jig. Cautiously, other rats began to show themselves.

"Happy Rat Day, everyone!" whooped Harold as he began to zoom around the dead cat. Slowly a mass of rats began to form a circle around the cat and the dancing rat.

Rough sat and watched silently for a while as the fearful rats approached and touched the cooling body. With disgust, he continued to watch as they became braver, pelting the body with stones and sticks and, growing more confident, began climbing up the huge orange mass.

When Harold began screeching "I'm gonna EAT this cat!" Rough had decided he had seen enough. He took one more look at Harold, who was tearing handfuls of fluffy orange fur from the belly of the dead cat, and then quietly descended into the barn to a dark corner where he knew there would be a few moldy kernels of corn that he could spend the afternoon gnawing.

Shannon Frances

1minute stories, round 5

"unreasonable expectations"

28 January 2012, Nibong Tebal