Tempe Community Writing Contest 2015

Honorable Mentions

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ASU

College of Letters and Sciences
Writing Programs in the Department of English, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
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Wendy couldn’t believe how wonderful her life had turned out to be. She graduated from the University of Southern California with high honors. She got a job teaching fourth grade at William Harris Elementary School. She inherited several thousand dollars from a great-aunt she’d met once in the woman’s Massachusetts home, and had used it to purchase a darling little bungalow just down the street from her school. Her loving parents lived across town, close enough to come if she needed their help, and far enough away that they wouldn’t keep her from living as she chose. Her sister, who had been teaching third grade in a nearby town, had offered advice, help, and hand-me-down classroom decorations.

Everything was fantastic. Then Wendy moved into her darling bungalow. And her torments began.

The first night in her house, Wendy snuggled into the full-sized bed her sister had given her. Her mother’s sheets were cool and fragrant against her skin. She drifted off.

From a deep sleep, Wendy woke to feel a sharp pain in her right calf. She sat up and rubbed at the tender spot. There was a bump there, and it hurt to touch it. It was dark outside, so Wendy flicked on the lamp on the table by her bed. Sure enough, a red bump was visible on her leg. It felt hot and painful.

Carefully, Wendy felt the mattress where her leg had rested. No pins were hidden under the sheets.

“A bug,” she muttered. “Some darned bug.” Wendy threw the sheets back and studied the entire bed. If the bump had been made by a bug, the critter was gone now. She turned the light back off and went back to sleep.

The alarm woke her at six. She trudged, sleepy and barefoot, to her little bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror.

“You’re a teacher, Wendy,” she said. “Today, you start teaching.” She slipped her nightgown over her head and stared at her reflection. On her stomach were two more red bumps. Now that she saw them, they hurt. And they itched. She scratched the three bites. She jumped into the shower and scrubbed hard to make sure any poison, saliva, or rust from old pointed metal things were utterly removed from her skin.

Once she was clean, she found the first aid cream she had stashed in the medicine drawer. She smeared it over the two bites on her stomach and the one on her leg. Then she dressed. She was ready for school, and she turned to go out the door, when she heard a tiny sound. She looked toward her cute little trash basket, a woven thing through which ribbons and artificial flowers had
been threaded. The tiny sound came again.

“Paper,” she said aloud. “That’s paper rustling in the breeze.” Sure enough, a cast-off wrapper that had once held a cracker packet wriggled on the floor. The fan was turned off, the air conditioner was not pumping air at that moment, and Wendy had not noticed a draft. “Must be a hole in the wall somewhere,” she said.

The first cold prickles of fear spiked into her chest.

School was hard work. By the end of the day, Wendy’s throat felt raw from talking for hours. She was proud of herself for her attitude and her knowledge, embarrassed by some of her actions and confused by others.

She worked in her classroom for a couple hours after the children went home. She tacked writing samples up on a bulletin board. She corrected a spelling and a math quiz she’d given to see how much her new students knew. Then she locked the door and headed for home.

She walked through the cheerful little park that stretched along the street across from the school. It was full of students she recognized, playing soccer, chatting, and chasing one another. An old man walked an unusually ugly little dog on a leash, talking fondly to the little creature. A young mother led two preschoolers by the hand.

A round woman of mature years limped painfully along the pathway, leaning on a cane. She winked at Wendy as she passed her. The ugly dog barked viciously as the old woman approached him. She stopped and smiled at the wretched creature. He backed up, shivering and whining, then ran backward to the limit of his chain. The old woman chuckled, then walked away.

Wendy would like to sit and people-watch, getting to know the people of her new community. But tonight, she was too tired.

Her little bungalow was still cute. She smiled at her own furniture, most of it either from the thrift store or donated by her family, and at the posters and family photos with which she had decorated the walls. Home. She selected a TV dinner from the freezer and popped it into her microwave. When it was finished, she carried it and a can of Diet Coke to the living room. She set them on her TV tray and turned on the television. Then she pulled it up to the sofa and plopped down behind it. She smiled at the memory of the ugly little dog. It would be nice to have a pet to share her home. Maybe someday.

She made sure the TV was turned up high enough to hear well. Too high to be able to hear crinkly paper, blowing in imaginary breezes. But halfway through her slice of meatloaf, her arm began to itch. And to hurt. Wendy looked at it. A red bump was growing on her forearm. No sign of a bug or other creature was visible. She hadn’t rubbed it against anything that could poke or cut it.

She cleaned up her mess. Then she sat down again, watching brainless but fun “reality” TV. Her left leg hurt. Scratch, scratch. Her back hurt. Scratch. Wendy moved to the wooden rocking chair, hard and pillow-free. Now it was her cheek.

Wendy was frightened. Were there bugs, camouflaged to hide on her furniture and cloth-
ing, that were biting her? Or did she have some weird virus? Maybe it was measles?

Wendy called her sister, Lisa, who assured her that it didn’t sound like measles or chicken pox. Which was good, since she didn't want to spread either of those to her students. Lisa thought that if she had bugs, she should be able to see them. At least one of them. She must just be having problems with nerves. Her first day of school was a big thing.


“I'm sure it will!” big sister Lisa said. “Don't you worry. Now you tell me all about that first day.”

After she talked to her sister, Wendy felt relieved. She went to bed and curled up in her clean, sweet-smelling bed. She didn’t wake up until four, when the pain from several new red bumps roused her. She sat up, rubbing them. Crinkle, crinkle. The paper on the floor by the trash basket was moving in an imaginary breeze again. Wendy whimpered like the ugly dog.

She wouldn’t be a victim. She would act! Wendy jumped out of bed. She showered, dressed, and slathered first aid cream on her many red bumps. Then she grabbed her purse and hurried out the door. It was five o'clock in the morning and was still dark. Wendy walked down the street, past the shadowy park and past the empty school. Half a block further was a coffee shop. Wendy ordered breakfast and pulled a paperback book out of her purse. She would wait here until time for school.

It was almost time to leave the warmth and comfort of Denny's, when her shin began to hurt. Scratch, scratch. She had a new bump.

Wendy paid her bill and went to school. Her second day was harder. It was as though her students, especially the boys, sensed weakness. They were more rowdy and less attentive. Less respectful, too. Wendy began to wonder whether she had chosen the right profession.

The math lesson was a multiplication review. Then a spot right in the middle of her back began to hurt. She couldn't reach it. She shouldn't scratch it if she could, in front of all these kids. She squirmed. They giggled. The recess bell rang and, with a sigh of relief, Wendy dismissed her students.

Later, Wendy felt like staggering down the park path, as she headed home. Children were playing again. The old man with the ugly dog walked through the grass. Wendy sat down on a painted bench and closed her eyes.

“Why, hello, dear,” a kindly voice addressed her. “It looks like you’re having a difficult day.”

Wendy opened her eyes and looked at the plump older lady with the cane. She had plopped herself down on the bench beside Wendy. The young teacher nodded. She had no energy for anything else.

“Children are difficult?” the older woman asked. Her eyes crinkled and twinkled. Her hands waved and moved across the air over her lap and at her sides. Watching them made Wendy feel peaceful. She smiled.
“Well, yes,” Wendy said.  
The old woman shook her head sympathetically. “And then you have those bugs,” she said.  
Wendy’s eyes opened wide. “Bugs? What bugs are you talking about?”  
“Go ahead,” the old woman whispered to the air. Her hands swooshed across the air.  
Wendy felt pressure on one leg and heard a snap. The old woman chuckled. She seemed to like to do that.  
“Those are a particularly nasty type of creature,” she told Wendy. “Purple. Fairly good-sized. And they have a sharp little snout to suck blood through.”  
Wendy heard the snap come from beside her right arm. Then there was pressure on her left shoulder and she heard a snap there.  
“I can’t see any purple bugs,” Wendy said. She looked down at her lap and her legs.  
“No, of course not, my dear,” the old woman said. “They’re invisible.”  
Wendy blinked and stared. The old woman grinned. “Where did you pick these things up? Are they living at the school?”  
“I don’t think so,” Wendy said. She was not at all sure she believed in invisible bugs. But maybe. “I started feeling these bites in my house.”  
The old woman raised her eyebrows in inquiry.  
“The cute little bungalow over there,” Wendy said. She pointed at her house, a few buildings down from where they sat. “I confess I’m a little scared to go home.”  
“Oh, of course,” the old woman said, nodding her head emphatically. “That makes sense. That used to be Frank’s house. Frank.” She rolled her eyes at the thought of that person.  
“These things are biting me all over the place,” Wendy said. Tears pricked her eyes and she sniffled. “What can I do about invisible bugs?”  
Slight pressure on her left knee. Snap. Pressure on her right arm. Snap. Snap by her right ankle.  
“One thing will do the trick,” the old woman said. “My darlings are helping you right now, you know. My sweet Moonlight had a litter of kittens and I still have a couple left. Moonlight and her amour Dash and the biggest kitten Starlight are enough for me. I can give you the smaller kitten, Mist. She’s old enough to leave her mama now.”  
“Oh,” Wendy said. “A cat will eat these invisible bugs?” She felt a little skeptical.  
“Of course, it will,” the woman said. She began stroking the air above her lap and along her sides again. “If it’s an invisible cat. As long as you treat Mist with kindness, she will keep your home free of vermin, visible or otherwise. I promise you!”  
The old woman laughed and arranged her hands gently around a patch of air on her lap.  
“This is Mist,” she said. She passed the air to Wendy.  
The younger woman accepted the air with her hands. And felt the soft, warm fur of a kitten. She set it on her lap and stroked it. The “air” on her lap purred.  
“She’s had her supper for tonight,” the old woman said. “But be sure and leave her some-
thing to eat and drink when you leave for school tomorrow. A little tuna, perhaps, before you go to the market for cat food.” The woman rose, winked, and limped away, her cane clacking as she went.

When Wendy and Mist got home, the kitten moved excitedly in the young woman's arms. Wendy set her on the floor and the kitten shot off, yowling a kitty war cry. Wendy heated up a TV dinner and watched TV, occasionally hearing a thud or a crinkle. And lots of snaps. After a couple of hours, Wendy felt a small, warm weight on her lap. She stroked the invisible kitten and Mist purred.

Wendy never saw a bug, nor was she ever bitten again by an invisible creature. She bought a cute set of blue ceramic bowls, with painted fish and birds around the edges. Each morning she put fresh water in one and the nicest canned food in the other.

At night, while she watched TV or graded papers, Wendy was often comforted by the sweet weight of a purring kitten that, over the months, grew into a purring cat. In bed, she sometimes felt that same weight against her back or behind her knees. And frequently she was awakened, just before her alarm, by the kiss of a warm, scratchy tongue. Lick, lick, lick. Snap!
My great-aunt Ruth thinks Jenny is a bird. She talks about it quite openly. I have heard her telling a man in the checkout line at Kroger's, a waiter at a family diner we frequent, one of my friends during my high school graduation party, a priest after Mass when she came along one Sunday morning in the spring. I personally have heard Ruth's stories about her daughter Jenny appearing as a bird many times. She once cornered me at a family gathering a few years back and began telling me a new story about bird Jenny.

“I was backing out of my driveway last weekend when a huge black bird swooped in front of my window,” she said eagerly, gripping her coffee cup either out of excitement or anxiety. “It came out of nowhere – there is no way it came out of any of my trees, Emily. Then it sat on my fencepost and shook its butt at me – right at me! – and I knew it was Jenny.” She took a sip of her coffee, her gray-blue eyes peeking just above the rim, and then released a knowing chuckle. “Jenny always had an attitude – what a tease!”

I was too afraid to give any response, positive or negative, in fear of sounding insincere, so I just nodded silently.

I actually never have heard Ruth tell the real story about Jenny – how she struggled with heavy drinking since her early twenties, since Ruth and Tom's divorce. How she went away to receive help but came back with new tricks to get high that other patients had taught her. How she always chose bad men that needed to be fixed, much like her father. How one of those bad men turned into a husband and then an ex-husband and everything started to crumble. How she quit her job and stayed home every weekend. How she didn't answer the phone and then how her younger sister Karen found her, drowned in her own vomit.

Even though I was ten the last time I saw Jenny, I knew she was not herself. Jenny drove to our house in Ohio every summer with her pudgy and affable son Matt. Jenny was always bubbly and warm, with a curly halo of dirty blonde hair and a joyous, guttural laugh. The last summer she came, she showed up with a travel mug in her hand that she wouldn’t let Matt drink from, and she clutched the railing too tightly as she made her way to the guest room. She laughed too hard and too long at my dad’s jokes at dinner time and at my baby sister’s children’s books at bedtime. She got too carsick on our daytrip to some caves in Kentucky and made my mom pull over so she could vomit in the grass. She slept too much in the morning and didn’t want to come to Mass with us. She drank from her travel mug too much. Even though I was ten, I knew she was not herself.

Everyone else knew it, too. When confronted about her problem, Jenny just would lie. It
either wasn't happening, or it was due to the stress of being a single parent, or it wasn't a big deal and everything was under control, but she never told the truth. Then she started taking things we couldn't smell on her breath or trace back to a travel mug. Everyone loved Jenny, but no one could stop her.

On a Tuesday night, a snowy, bitterly cold school night, my mom received the call. I could hear her gasp from the kitchen, and then she rushed upstairs and shut herself in her room. For the next few hours, I faintly heard my mom sobbing through the vents, and then I heard my parents talking in hushed tones. When my mom emerged and told me what had happened, her face pink and eyes wet, I didn't fully understand it. I knew Jenny was not herself, but I couldn't grasp that I never would see her again. She was supposed to drive to our house in Ohio every summer.

I couldn't go to the funeral. It was eight hours away and I had school. Maybe my mom didn't want me to go since the casket was going to be open. “Oh, they made Jenny look so pretty,” Ruth has told me. “Her curly hair looked so beautiful.” My mom said that at the funeral, four or five men came up to her and said that Jenny helped them overcome their addictions. “Jenny saved my life,” they all said. My mom said it wasn't fair because Jenny saved them but no one could save her.

Now, on a Christmas Eve twelve years after Karen found Jenny, the whole family gathers around the tree at Ruth's house. Out the bay window, I can see a steady stream of snowflakes, puffy and fragile, illuminated by the streetlight, and I think of the night of the phone call. Karen, in plain blue jeans and a plain red sweater, wordlessly pinches a lit cigarette between her fingertips, seeming wistful and pale against the backdrop of the snow. I notice that her face never has regained its same glow. Matt, twenty-something in an ill-fitting polo, peers around the room from a sofa in the corner, his nose scrunched. I avoid talking to him because his conversations always seem to turn into arguments.

Throughout the evening, Jenny is brought up twice. Once, my mom fondly tells a story about how in high school Jenny had all the boys and the coolest red sports car, which she had bought with cash she earned from her job. At the family New Year's Eve party her senior year, Jenny started the evening with one date and ended the evening with another. We all chime in, even Matt. The room warmly laughs, gently laughs, thinking about vivacious Jenny, young and healthy and happy Jenny.

The second time is when Ruth shows me a design she has drawn on the back of a napkin. It is a sparrow surrounded by two stars. “This is the tattoo I want,” my great-aunt says, to my surprise.

“A tattoo?”

“Yes, the stars are Karen and Matt, and the bird is Jenny.”

Again, I nod. Her gray-blue eyes look sad, so, impulsively but sincerely, I ask, “Have you seen Jenny lately?”

She perks up. “Yes, just the other day! I was on my porch, and this little blue bird flew up
and landed on the railing and . . . ”

I listen and I nod and I am strangely comforted.

Throughout the evening, Jenny sits pristine in a gold picture frame, glossy and perfect, on a side table. I like remembering her that way.
Rose sat at the edge of her bed and quietly listened to the crickets outside her window. Her head was down, and her feet dangled a few inches off the floor. She tucked a stray piece of squiggly auburn hair behind her ear, only to have it slide in front of her face again. A book was open on her lap; it was something for school and Rose was only half-present to make sense of the words on the page.

But then, something tapped at her window. She snapped to attention and looked up. Could it be an animal? A tree branch? A sociopathic chainsaw murderer? Oh, no.

Rose turned around. There, tapping on the glass, was her incorrigible little brother, Eric, standing outside in his pajamas. He waved. Rose made her way over to the window and threw it open.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Still want to go to that movie?” he smiled. Eric had been graced with all the fine genetic features of their family. He had the effortlessly tousled hair of her father; the piercing, azure eyes of her mother; and a broad, brilliant smile that was entirely his own. It was hard to say no to Eric, with his charms and his charisma, but it was even harder to say no to that smile. It was highly contagious and extremely deadly.

“You mean sneak out?” she asked.

“No,” he paused and smiled even wider, “I mean escape.”

“Eric!” Rose hissed, “You’ll get caught! Go back to you room or I’ll tell mom!” Rose grabbed the window and started to pull it down.

“Wait!” Eric cried, “Wait! Wait!” Rose paused, a scowl on her fair face. She pushed the window back up.

Wide-eyed, Eric pleaded, “Please, Rose, c’mon. It will be a lot of fun and we won’t get caught, I promise.” After a pause he added, “Anyway, Clark is coming, too.”

Rose took a moment to think about this. She bit her lip in contemplation and studied her brother’s face. The risks were high, but if Clark was coming . . . well, that changed the game entirely.

The sound of crickets filled the space between them as Rose thought quietly to herself and Eric searched in earnest for any cracks in his sister’s marble façade. She closed her eyes.

“Okay,” Rose said quickly, before she changed her mind, “Just give me a second.”
It was a spectacularly hot day. The sound of buzzing air conditioners filled the air, and Rose could almost hear the sidewalks sizzling in the afternoon heat. The auburn-haired gardener sat on her heels for a moment and tilted back her sun hat. The sky was a listless sort of blue, the kind that appears almost white and stretches across the horizon like clothes on the line. Rose sighed heavily and then leaned back over one of her many, many rose bushes.

Rose liked to hum to herself while she worked. She often heard of gardeners who spoke to their plants, but Rose could never find anything to say. Besides, she secretly worried the neighbors might see her talking to herself and believe that she was insane. They already suspected she wasn't quite right in the head – a married woman with ninety-two rose bushes and a husband who was never around surely harbored psychological issues. But Rose never let this bother her too much. She was one of the most reasonable and sensible people she knew. Louis always liked that about her.

Rose met Louis Levitt twenty-three years ago. On their first date, he gave her a bouquet of rare Marsalan roses. He explained that his landscaping company frequently sent him to exotic countries in search of new plant species and he would bring them back promising samples. These Marsalan roses, for instance, could only be found in a small village near the Mongolian border.

They married in a local garden during the spring and, for a little while at least, things between them were rosy. But after about a year of marriage, Louis went to Argentina for a month. When he returned, he felt terrible for leaving her alone for so long and he gave her an entire rose bush, which Rose then planted lovingly in the front yard. Then, a few weeks later, Louis traveled to Japan, then to South Africa, and then to Normandy. Rose didn't see her husband for almost four months. Upon his return, Louis gave his wife four beautiful rose bushes.

Rose had been married to Louis for almost 23 years, 276 months total. Each rose bush she received marked another month that her husband was away on business. If Rose had 92 rose bushes scattered about her front yard, this would mean that Louis's absence from home amounted to almost eight years.

Rose marveled at that number.

It was growing hotter now, the sun had reached its apex in the sky and Rose was feeling tired. Maintaining so many rose bushes was certainly taking a toll on her. She felt trapped — if she ever left, her roses would wither and die. Louis was a fine gardener, but he was gone too often and could never be counted on to care for 92 rose bushes. These roses were like barbed wire, she thought, and she was their prisoner.

Rose gathered up her gardening tools and made her way back inside. Placing her tools on the marble kitchen counter, she grabbed a glass of water from the fridge and gulped it down.

But something was out of place. The back door was open. A little puzzled, Rose went to investigate.

Hadn't she locked the door last night? She was almost certain that she hadn't been in the backyard all day, so why was —

There was a sound from the living room. A tapping noise. The hair on the back of Rose's
neck stood on end and she quickly tiptoed across the kitchen floor. She grabbed a bottle of wine from the pantry and silently crept into the hallway, making sure to step over the one floorboard that always creaked. Gripping the glass bottle like a baseball bat, Rose pressed her back up against the wall and held her breath. The tapping noise continued, a little louder now that she was closer to the living room.

She told herself to breathe — maybe it was just some animal that got into the house, that's all. It happens all the time, right?

But then again, her husband had installed one of those high-security door locks last spring, the kind that requires a special code and would be impossible for a sly raccoon or even a burglar to unlock. The only person Rose knew who was smart enough to break through something like that was . . .

Rose froze.

She lowered the wine bottle and turned the corner. There, sitting in her husband's favorite chair, was none other than her incorrigible little brother, Eric, who was tap-tap-tapping his finger on the wooden arm of the chair and mindlessly staring off into space.

When he noticed her standing in the doorway, his face broke into that smile of his and he said nonchalantly, “Great, I see you've brought the wine.”

April 14, 2000
11:26 pm

Before leaving the house, Rose had thrown on her favorite hoodie and sweatpants. She hadn't bothered to fix her hair, but now she regretted not pulling it into a ponytail, especially since Clark was there. Rose envied the way her brother looked great regardless. Even now, as he donned flannel airplane pajamas with a toothpaste stain embellishing the front breast pocket, he looked like a brown-haired Leonardo DiCaprio.

They had arrived at the movie theater a few minutes early, so they had to wait awkwardly in a small huddle outside before being let in. As the only people younger than 20 there to see the film, the trio was attracting an undesirable amount of attention. A poster for the movie they were about to see hung on a nearby wall; in an effort to avoid the stares, Rose looked it over. Three prisoners dressed in stripes struggled against the pull and clank of metal chains as they crossed an open field. The sky was a dusty brown and the words Oh Brother, Where Art Thou? were written at the top of the poster in thick black lettering.

Rose stole a glance at Clark. He was looking down now, studying the cracks in the sidewalk. His messy, sand-colored hair was a length that most mothers would consider “irritating” — hiding the back of his neck and flopping down over his ears. Unlike Eric, who had the complexion of a Roman statue, Clark's skin tone was warm and reminded Rose of Werther's Original.

Upon feeling her gaze, Clark suddenly looked up. His bright blue eyes made Rose a little weak at the knees. She blushed and quickly turned away.

After a few minutes of waiting, they were finally let into the theater. Clark bought a bag of popcorn from the concession stand and they all shared it (Eric ate more than his fair share).
The film ended just after eleven and Rose was slowly beginning to feel the effects of the night weighing down on her. It was an odyssey, she decided, the first of many in her lifetime. Now they stood under a streetlight saying their goodbyes before turning in for the night. Rose and Eric lived in one direction and Clark lived in the other.

“‘Night, Clark!” Eric waved and turned to leave. Rose watched her brother’s figure dissolve into the darkness as he walked away. Only two figures stood under the halo of light now. Rose turned to Clark and gave him a tired smile. She began to say goodbye when suddenly —

She jumped back. He had kissed her!

He was looking at her now, a little hurt. Light from the lamppost cast deep shadows on Clark’s features, but Rose could still see the embarrassment written on his face.

What should she do? Kiss him back? Turn and run? Rose felt like she was made of stars; a whole mess of them were just swirling around inside her, creating chaos.

She was running out of time to make a decision; if she waited any longer, Clark would surely be scarred forever. She couldn’t do that to him. Rose had two options: she could do the unthinkable and kiss him back, or she could play it safe and just go home.

In the end, she decided to do both.

Rose leaned in a little awkwardly and took Clark by the shoulders. He was a few inches taller than her, so she had to stand on her tippy-toes. Then she gave Clark a quick peck on the lips and wished him goodnight. Rose fled before he had time to say anything more.

***

Rose never meant to fall in love that night, it just happened. It happened in the same way that snow falls in the winter and in the same way that a traffic light turns green — spontaneously and with little warning. But this love would last longer than a two-minute traffic light. It would last longer, even still, than all the seasons combined.

June 23, 2031
11:50 am

Eric sat, one leg casually over the other, in the olive green armchair Louis had brought home from a business trip to Italy a few years ago. Her brother seemed older than the last time she saw him; his hair was beginning to gray and a day-old stubble peppered his chin. Eric quickly stole a nervous glance down at the wine bottle in his sister’s hand. Rose felt an odd mixture of warm affection for her brother and an overwhelming sense of dread and remorse at his sudden appearance. Her throat was tight, like the way skinny jeans feel after they’ve been taken out of the dryer. Whenever she saw Eric anymore, she was also reunited with an old friend of his: trouble. This time would be no different, Rose was sure of it.

She cleared her throat, “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you,” Eric brushed off his pant leg and picked at the fabric, “I thought it might be nice if I dropped by.”

Rose stared at him, her grip around the wine bottle tightened and she remained silent.
Eric continued, “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you, Rose. You haven’t aged a day. I hope this isn’t too much of an intrusion; I really like what you’ve done with the place — the front yard looks great. I was actually hoping to stay with you for a few days, if that’s alright. You see, I was in the neighborhood and I thought — ”

Suddenly, Rose stepped forward, wine bottle raised. The warmth she felt only a few moments ago was now a fire burning in her gut, like something within her had spontaneously combusted. “Eric, don’t expect me to take this lightly — you know what would happen if you got caught. Honestly, this is ridiculous! How many times now, huh? How many? It’s been like, seven.”

“Eight.”

“Eight! Eight times that you’ve escaped from prison and just dropped by hoping to find refuge here. Get out of my house, Eric! Go! Shoo!” Rose flapped around her hand as if swatting at a pesky fly.

“Rose, please,” her brother was calm, composed. Eric put up his hands so Rose could see the rough, leathery texture of his palms. He pleaded with her, “Put the Chianti down, will you? You’re making me nervous.” He gestured for her to take a seat on the couch across from him.

But Rose stood firm, her eyes fixed on Eric. The room was still, tension clinging to every surface. He laced his fingers together and shifted in his seat; he hadn’t expected the conversation to take such a precarious turn. It was beginning to make him feel uncomfortable, so Eric did what he usually did when he found himself in a tight spot: he tried to find an escape.

“How are you, Rose? Tell me, really. How are things with Louis? Is he away on business? Last time we spoke he was in Chile, about to board a flight to Dublin. Where is he now?”

Bitterly, Rose shot back: “Ottawa.”

“Incredible!” Eric leaned forward, pretending to be intrigued, “What an amazing job — to travel around the world like that. You know, I had a friend who was just recently in Vancouver —”

“Eric, tell me what’s going on. How did you get here?”

“His brought me back a bottle of Canadian maple syrup, it was fantastic.”

“Eric, please —” Rose closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. In prison, Eric was known as the “Big X.” He had made countless escape attempts and had been successful seven — no, eight — times now. His most recent jailbreak was accomplished with only a tube of cherry-flavored lip balm and a strip of Velcro. Each time Eric escaped, he ran to Rose. He would stay with her for a day or two, but then Rose would wake up one morning and find him gone. Sometimes there would be a note on the kitchen counter thanking her for her hospitality and informing her that he had taken the peanut butter on his way out. Then, maybe a month or so later, she would receive a letter from the government notifying her of Eric’s capture.

Rose wasn’t eager to repeat the whole process again; she was sick of the routine. Determined to teach her brother a lesson this time, Rose began, “Eric, I know you’ve probably been through a lot these past few days, but I . . . ”

What would happen if she made him leave? Where would he go? Rose imagined her little brother hiding under a bridge somewhere, the police scanning the area, searching for him.

“. . . I just . . . I can’t keep doing this, Eric. I’m going out of my head! Look, my husband is scheduled to come home on Monday; that’s three days from now. You can stay until then, but I need you to promise that this will never, ever happen again. You can’t keep coming here.”
Then she quickly added, “And also, I need you to promise that when you leave, you won’t steal my peanut butter, okay?”

Eric was silent for a moment. But after sighing deeply and running a hand through his thinning hair, he nodded to Rose and agreed to her terms. He even pinkie-promised to not take her peanut butter again. To celebrate, Rose retrieved two glasses from the kitchen and opened the bottle of wine. She poured Eric a glass and handed it to him. After taking a sip, he asked, “Rose, why don’t you just leave Louis?”

“Well, I’m married to him.”

“Yeah, but you don’t love him.”

Rose thought about this for a moment and sipped her wine. She was pretty sure she still loved her husband. Anyway, who was Eric to say whether she loved Louis or not? It was none of his business. Defensively, Rose shot back, “I care for him very much. That’s love, isn’t it?”

“No. Love is usually more than that,” he paused and added, “I’ve seen real love.”

“Oh?” Rose challenged, “With who?”

“Well, to name one . . . Clark loved you.”

***

In the end, Eric would stay for only one night. While his sister slept in the upstairs bedroom, he would slip out the back door and leave forever, closing the door quietly behind him. He would briefly consider taking the jar of peanut butter as a joke, but then he would decide against it — he had caused his sister enough grief. Over the next few months he would slowly make his way into Florida, taking on various disguises so as to avoid recognition. Then, on April 14, 2032, at 9:24 in the morning, Eric would walk into a Waffle House a few miles out of Tallahassee and find the Florida police waiting for him.

Louis would come home as scheduled and stay until the end of September. Then, business would call him up to Canada again, and Rose would be left to wonder whether she truly loved her husband or if she just told herself that. On April 16, 2032, Rose would receive a letter informing her of Eric’s arrest in Florida and she would call her husband to tell him the news. Louis would gruffly say, “Figures. But knowing your brother, it won’t be long before he escapes again. Honestly, Rose, that guy is nothing but trouble. I can’t believe you’re even related to him.”

After hanging up the phone, Rose would sit at the edge of her bed and quietly listen to the crickets outside. She would tuck a stray piece of squiggly auburn hair behind her ear, only to have it slide in front of her face again. Rose would look out the window and see her front yard, littered with rose bushes, and decide that no, she didn’t love her husband — not anymore.

That night, she would pull an old suitcase from the back of the closet and fill it with a few clothing items. Tears would blur her vision and she would forget to pack her toothbrush. In the morning, Rose would slip out the front door and close it quietly behind her. She would pass her 92 rose bushes on her way to the car and then, with only a brief moment of hesitation, Rose would drive away. As her front yard slowly disappeared from view, she would feel a brief pang of guilt — Louis would come home to an empty house and a garden full of dead rose bushes. But Rose wouldn’t let this bother her for long; her husband would be given a chance to start over as
She didn't want to be Rose any longer, and now she didn't have to be. She had received enough roses to last her 92 lifetimes and she had grown tired of them. Rose decided that she would no longer associate with the thorny pestilence that had ravaged her marriage and her life.

She could be anyone now; perhaps she would change her name to Lily or Daisy . . . on second thought, maybe she should just stay away from flower names altogether.

After all, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.
A Recipe for Fun

Dennis Howe

Take ten
seasoned ball players and throw
in a large pinch of leather and aluminum.
Put the mix on a dirt field in the shape of a diamond
and add some green salad grass for color. To this, add
another ten seasoned ball players with a large pinch of leather
and aluminum. Raise the heat slowly to about 80 degrees, with a
few clouds for partial shade. No mud. Slight breeze, but no wind.
Add two pitchers of medium grit. Marinade some team spirit and
sportsmanship. Dice some twinkies, sunflower seeds and chewing
gum. Sprinkle with water and soda pop to taste. With a white ball,
at game time, stir all these ingredients together with grounders,
foul balls, fly balls, base hits and home runs, and garnish with a
strike-out or two. Do not add sliding. Sugar, sweat, and verbal
spices can be chopped in at this point. Scoring is to taste and
recorded for future reference. Pour these flavored items
into a large softball bowl, and then separate into
individual servings on Saturdays at Clark Park.
Finish with a handshake, pat on the
back, and a hearty..............
“see ya next week”

I wrote this poem for the ASU
Intra-University Softball League
I dream of you in New York.
I press my head to the pillow and cup
your face, laughing into your open mouth.
I anchor myself on the bony truss of your shoulders
and forgive the bridge of your nose
as it collides with mine.
I wonder who has captured the bridge now.

“You would do well in Manhattan,”
my mother says, one day as we wait
to pump gas, wilting in a dying June
in the city named for the firebird of myth.
I look out the window, knead
my fingers into my thigh, try to conjure
how your muscles shift beneath a cotton T-shirt,
and nod, swallowing my longing
along with my words.

I sit down to write a story, something about
demons, heavenly beings, monsters in
silk stockings and dapper gray suits,
crawling like ashen-faced phantoms
up and down Wall Street.
All I see is you, the fae and ageless
king of a walkup on Bedford Avenue,
holding court on a rooftop with
Queens off your left shoulder,
humming some devotional
you heard in a Bushwick bar last night.
You turn to me, gilt-edged from the sun
bleeding across the morning sky,
and ask if I watered the roses.

Roses in Williamsburg
Victoria Ellis
The Welcoming Committee
Alexis Schlotterback

Welcome to the digital age,
a beautiful masquerade,
to hide ourselves
from ourselves,
to push away our feelings,
giving life no meaning,

But snapchats and tweets!
Never missing a beat!
Facebook updates and selfies!
‘Look at this protein shake, I’m uber healthy!’
Instagram me, follow my name!
Don’t worry, no shame!

Welcome to the interweb,
Don't blame me if you’re feeling dead,
you’re deteriorating
as technology’s accelerating
one day the human body will also be obsolete,
A mechanical heart will pump oil from your head to feet.

Don’t be silly!
I’ve never felt more alive,
Since I got my new, shiny iPhone 5!
Bet you don’t know what it’s like
To send snapchats in the blink of an eye!
I feel sorry for you, it must be lame
Living way back in the stone age!

Welcome to this cyber space,
A home without a place,
A home with a family,
Updates and posts are your only real memory,

But that Starbucks latte was oh-so-fine!
Don’t you remember that one time?
I do! I got 34 likes on that!
So don’t call me a brat!

Welcome to a land of no feeling,
A land of no meaning…

But I do feel something!
Trust me, it isn’t nothing!
Why are you saying such mean things?
I know I have feelings!

Welcome to the future then,
And welcome to the end
Of welcoming to the beginning,
Because soon the only thing left will be the absence of feeling.
I’m the last one to get them. After their heart, kidneys, lungs and liver no longer work. After the surgeon has carved them up and scooped them out. After the oncologist has pumped their veins full of fluid so toxic it can dissolve the plastic tubing that leads the medication to their blood. I get them when all of this has failed. When all the mighty efforts at life are deemed futile, impractical, insufficient. When doctors give up. It is when the patient’s and family’s energy has been ravaged and devoured that they meet me.

I walk down the long, wide hallway to the last room on the right. This is my hallway and it has six rooms, three on either side. It’s 8:30 p.m. and it’s a long way until morning and the end of my 12-hour shift.

My patient is sitting on the side of the bed, hunched over and looking toward the floor. Her elbows are on her knees. Her right knee is jiggling up and down. She readjusts the oxygen tubing over and over again hoping it will give her more air. The long oxygen tubing is strewn about and pumping 10 liters of this needed oxygen to my patient, but it is not going to save her life. Her son, a man in his late 40s, sits in a chair repetitively straightening the stack of recently signed hospice admission papers. He stands up and says, “She think she’s had a bowel movement.”

I move down in front of my patient and say, “Marla.” She looks at me. Her skin is pale, almost ashen. Thick, deep wrinkles cover her face from decades of living in the Arizona desert. Her fingernails are yellowed from years of smoking. “I’m Emily, I’ll be your nurse for tonight.”

What could have been said is, “I’m the last nurse you’ll ever have,” or “Tonight’s the night you’re going to die,” or “Relax, this will all be over in about an hour; your son will head home and the mortuary guy will come pick you up.” But the truth is these thoughts don’t cross my mind because I am a brand new nurse and I don’t know that someone like Marla can decline so quickly and take her final breaths of life. In time, I will learn to tell my patients and their families gently the truths of what to expect at the end, but for now I am still an ignorant new nurse. She has no breath to speak so she gives only a slight smile. “Are you having any pain?” She shakes her head no. “I can see you are anxious, I’ll be right back.”

I have learned in my few weeks of new-hire training, and I think, that Ativan is the medicine that she needs. It’s an anti-anxiety medication. I leave the room, walking past my other five patients’ rooms. I stop to answer a question at one door and then another. Two of my patients are alone and one room is filled with family laughing and reminiscing while their loved one lies unresponsive. I unlock the med room door. I can see the room is empty through the little square window. I get her a dose of Ativan.

I walk back to Marla’s room and things are different now. It feels like time is moving faster. Her son is standing near her. Marla stands up but then places one knee on the bed. She alternates from standing to sitting — with her elbows on her knees — to standing once again. Lack of oxy-
gen is causing confusion and she is not sure what to do. Again she stands and she puts her knee on the bed — and looks as if she is getting ready to climb into bed but then sits back down. I attempt to give her the medication. She quickly purses her lips tightly together and turns her head. She says emphatically, but with broken breaths, “No. No… more Ativan. I… don’t… want any… more!”

“Ok, I understand.” More words of my nursing school instructor flash through my head. Respect a patient's autonomy and their choices, even if they are contrary to your own.

“Marla, I will be right back to change your brief. Let me get some help.” I walk back down the hallway to the med room so I can put the medication she didn't want in a safe place and find the CNA (certified nursing assistant) to help me. The med room is next to the nurse's station. My charge nurse Andrea asks what is going on.

I explain and she asks, “Is your patient anxious? Is she confused?”

“Yes.”

“She needs some Ativan now!” Andrea charges down the hall. I follow her with the Ativan. I feel incompetent. How am I going to be a good nurse if I can't even convince my patients to take medication that can help them? How can I convince families to trust their loved one to my care when they see them suffering and me not able to do my job? How can I gain the respect of my charge nurse when she keeps having to help me with my job? I follow Andrea into Marla's room. Marla is on top of her bed on her hands and knees… rocking… more confused, hungry for more air. Her son is standing helplessly at the end of the bed. I’m so focused on my own feelings that I don’t even notice whether her son looks worried or scared or aggravated.

“Marla, you really need this Ativan. It will help you feel better.” I say this hoping she will take her medication so that I will look like a good and competent nurse to Andrea. I feel like it's a test I need to pass and Marla holds my grade in her hands. Marla again purses her lips tightly closed and jerks her head away from me. Marla's son says, “I'll step outside while you change her.”

As soon as the door shuts, Andrea looks at me, raises her voice and says angrily, “You need to learn to think faster on your feet!” Stern words from a seasoned nurse penetrate with searing force. Words that will continue to jab at my ego, jab at my mind and my heart for the next two years. Words that shatter the minuscule confidences that are being painstakingly layered within me. These layers come with each small nursing success and it will solidify me into the nurse I need and desire to be. But any successes I may have accumulated over the last three weeks of training are to no avail now. In this moment my patient is having a bad death and Andrea knows it. “Get an IV order now! Ativan and morphine.”

I rush down past those rooms which are now a blur and go to the nurse's station and sit. I frantically search for the on-call doctor's phone number in the agency's reference book. My nervous fingers fumble through the pages. I dial the number. It rings and he answers. “Dr. Kelly, I need to get an order for IV meds please.” “Who am I speaking to?” “Oh I'm sorry, this is Emily, one of the RN's at Central Inpatient Unit and I am calling about our patient Marla Spencer.” I quickly pull out Marla's chart so I can give him all of her vital information. “She is 68 with lung cancer. She is having a respiratory crisis and can't take anything by mouth right now.” I lie. She can but she won't. “She already has an oral Ativan order, but I need to change that to IV please.” I'm embarrassed and try to correct the nervousness which is making my voice quiver. The doctor gives
me the IV Ativan and morphine order. “I’m sorry, I’m so nervous. I am a brand new nurse.” “No
problem, you’re doing fine.” For a split second I am comforted, but it’s fleeting because Andrea’s
words are slamming me again and I want to hide and cry.
I quickly jot down the details and repeat back the order, “So…Ativan as needed 0.5–1 milligrams,
IV, every two hours for anxiety and agitation and morphine as needed, 2-4 milligrams IV every
hour for pain or shortness of breath.” “That’s it,” he says.
As I step out from behind the nurse’s station the adult daughter of one of my other patients stops
me. “When will you be in to see my mom? I am getting ready to leave; it’s nearly nine o’clock.”
“It will be about 10 or 15 minutes.” I say. I believe it.
I get into the locked med room and pull out the emergency narcotic box. I take out the little glass
vials of IV morphine and Ativan. I leave the box on the counter as well as the paperwork, which
needs to be filled out for using any emergency narcotic medication. As I pull out the syringes and
needles necessary for each medication, I am scared about how Marla is doing. I open the packag-
ing on the syringes. I uncap one of the needles, pop the little plastic safety disc off the top of the
vial of Ativan, puncture the rubber on top of the glass vial with the needle and attempt to draw
up the Ativan. My hands begin to shake. “The IV Ativan is so thick it won’t enter the syringe.
The needle is too small. I change the needle for a larger gauge, but I still have to pull hard on the
plunger. I pull small drops of the clear liquid out of the vial but it enters the syringe slowly. Air
bubbles get trapped in between drops of Ativan in the syringe making it difficult to measure out
the correct dose. I push it back in and pull it out multiple times and tap the syringe on the side of
the med cart until I have the exact dose I need.
I’m concerned that Andrea is wondering why this is taking so long. Two milligrams per milliliter,
I need one milligram…that’s 0.5 milliliters. I talk myself through it and double check it again.
I then recheck my math on the calculator. I begin to draw up the Morphine, but the tiny glass
vial slips out of my hand and hits the top of the med cart and spins and rolls towards the edge. I
quickly reach and grab it. I feel somewhat buffered in the locked med room, but I can hear people
talking as they walk down the hall and another call light sounds. I worry what Andrea is doing
for Marla. I wonder what Marla’s son is thinking. I feel inadequate.
I draw up the morphine. It is a less dense liquid and it is so easily drawn into the syringe that I
draw up too much. Again I do the calculations in my head. 10 milligrams per milliliter. I need
two milligrams so I need 0.2 milliliters. I have to squirt what I don’t need back into the glass vial.
The difference in air pressure causes a tiny stream of morphine to squirt straight up in the air
when I withdraw the needle. I worry that the vial will now appear short. I dilute each of these
medications and label each syringe. I grab a few alcohol wipes and make sure I have my keys and
leave the med room.
I walk quickly past the room where I know the daughter is waiting for me and I purposefully
don’t look into the room. I enter Marla’s room and Andrea is exasperated. Marla has diarrhea.
It is flowing out of her brief. She is still on her hands and knees on top of the bed, but she is no
longer rocking. She is slowly crawling around on top of her bed gasping for each breath. Andrea
is doing all she can just to keep Marla from falling off the bed. Marla is tangled in her oxygen
tubing. The room smells rank. Marla begins to vomit. As she moves, the vomit and diarrhea are
going on her legs, knees and hands. She reaches up to adjust the oxygen tubing. I put the sy-
ringes of medication in my pocket and put some blue latex gloves on. I begin to attempt to clean Marla so I can administer the IV meds and Andrea yells, “You have to give her the medicine now! We'll clean her up later. You have to think, Emily!”

I wipe vomit off of her IV port with her sheet and then with the alcohol pad. “Marla, please stop moving,” Marla slows her movement and looks at me again but doesn't say anything. She has vomit and feces on her face. It accentuates how ashen and sweaty she is becoming. She has such fear. She is taking shallow, gasping breaths. Her eyes look strangely motionless. Her jaw is jutting out weirdly with each breath. I begin to administer each medication slowly like I was taught in nursing school. “Push it in faster!”

I do what Andrea says hoping she cannot see my hands shaking. I’m frustrated with my educated ignorance. I’m nervous about not following the rule of administering IV medication slowly for safety, which has been drilled into me for the last few years in school. Almost immediately Marla relaxes. She sits back on the bed on her heels. “Ok, calm down and let's get her cleaned up,” Andrea says sternly. We position Marla’s legs in front of her and prop her up with multiple pillows behind her back, neck and head. Her color is less ashen but she looks exhausted.

As I unwind the oxygen tubing my eyes begin to burn with emotion and with the smell. “Get me a wet wash cloth, the one there on the side table and get a stack of washcloths from that drawer over there.”

I feel distraught. I hand her the washcloth saying nothing, turning my face so she can't see the tears dripping. When I look again, I see her gently wiping Marla’s forehead, her eyes and neck. I listen to her. “That’s it Marla. Nice, slow breaths. It’s going to be okay now.”

And I believe Andrea. “Get a basin with some warm, soapy water.”

We work together to get Marla clean. “Doesn’t that feel nice on your face?” Andrea asks as she continues to clean and comfort Marla. We carefully lay Marla down and turn her side to side to put on a brief. Marla is very relaxed now but her lungs are still struggling with each breath. “Let's be quick. She needs to stay upright.” We sit her back up and change the sheets gently by turning her and pushing the sheets underneath her. My tears continue to slowly drip and I still hope Andrea doesn’t notice. The pile of vomit and diarrhea-filled linens grows as we toss them onto the floor. There is a knock at the door and Katie, the CNA comes in. “Andrea, how can I help? Your patient in room 112 is asking for you and your patient in room 109 looks like he is getting close.”

Andrea looks at Katie and says, “Just help Emily finish up in here, I’ll go take care of my patients.” Andrea leaves without saying anything to me. Katie moves effortlessly and directs me to help her put a beautiful pink nightgown on Marla. She gathers the linens and puts them in a plastic bag. I feel like I am in the way. Katie swiftly straightens the room, her calming presence has me feeling less stressed.

“Emily, make sure you get Marla’s son back in here; she doesn’t look good.” I again look at Marla. She looks good to me. Her eyes are closed, she appears to be resting and her respirations are finally less labored. I walk over to the side of her bed and I ask her as I stroke her head, “Marla, are you feeling better?” Marla responds by moving her head slightly up and down slowly but does not open her eyes. “I'll go get your son, I'll be right back.”

I look up at the clock and it is nearly 9:20. I walk down the hall. The daughter, who was wait-
ing for me, is standing in the hall. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. I am so sorry.” “You’re busy, I understand.” And she gives me a polite nod and returns to her mom’s room. I find Marla’s son. “We gave her a bath and some medicine.” He walks toward her room and I head to the med room. Through the little glass window I can see Andrea inside the med room at her med cart. I unlock the door and go in. “Don’t leave the med room like this. You’ve got to get these narcotics locked up and don’t forget to fill out the paperwork for the stuff you took out of the emergency kit.” I’m embarrassed. I had left a bigger mess than I remembered. Andrea continues talking to me as if the scene in Marla’s room never happened, “My guy in 109 just died so I’m down to five patients.” Andrea leaves the med room and I begin cleaning up my mess. I’m overwhelmed and my eyes are burning with emotion again. I think about my other five patients that I haven’t even seen yet. I think about the eight o’clock meds that are late and the nine o’clock meds that are due now. Katie knocks on the little window. “Emily, you’d better check Marla.” I walk to Marla’s room, fearing a repeat of the nightmare I just experienced, but I find the room in order. I find Marla still in bed with her head back on the pillow. Her son says, “She looks more comfortable. Thank you so much.” I look more closely at Marla. I look at her and I know. I know this is the end. I watch her and see that she is taking her final breaths. Her son sees me watching his mom and he steps closer to her bed. “I’m really sorry, but she is actually very close now,” I say. He has a look of disbelief. He sits down next to her on the bed and lifts and places her hand in his and begins to cry softly. “Mom? Mom?” He quietly calls to her as if to gently wake her from a nap. Like he might have done as a child asking for a cookie. He pats the top of her hand. “Oh Mom, I love you … I love you.” I watch her and her eyes open slightly, it’s a blank stare. Her lower jaw moves as if she is trying to scoop up some air. But no air is moving any more. Her jaw stops moving. Her son looks at me and then back at his mom. We wait nearly 40 seconds then she takes one more long breath. I stand next to her son and put my hand on his shoulder. I walk around the bed and place my stethoscope on her chest. I hear the soft, distant sounds of the air in the room. I hear my finger touching the top rim of my new stethoscope. I hear the scratching of the lace from her nightgown. I hear her son’s sadness. But no heart tones, no breath sounds. I listen for a full minute, and look at the clock, and make a mental note of the time. “I’m really sorry, but she is gone.” He wipes his eyes, “Thanks again for everything, Emily. I don’t know how you do this kind of work.” I nod, “Thank you for letting us take care of your mom. I know you’re going to miss her. Take your time here but let me know if you need anything before I get back.” I am in shock. I escape down the hall. The rooms of my other five patients are beckoning me, but they are again a blur. I fumble with the keys and unlock the med room door and I feel it coming. I shut the door behind me; I take a few steps back and push myself tightly into the corner. My back is leaning against the door and I lay my head to the right against the cold hard wall. I’m tightly in the corner so no one can see me through the little window. I feel like I am holding my breath but I must be breathing. I know I am crying. I don’t want to face any more of this tonight, but I still have still 10 hours left in my shift.