

Ms. Ruby was ready to go home to await Bobbi's return from the center for the insane; Mama Lena walked Ms. Ruby home before dark.

As Mama Lena walked back to her little house, she thought about how the Lord watches over those who cannot help themselves when they're not in their right mind.

Granny Winnie also lived on Mulberry Lane about six houses down the lane from Mama Lena's house. She knew Winnie years before she married and gave birth to twin daughters. Winnie was a very lovely woman. She had a beautiful spirit, especially in the light of all the misfortune she had experienced.

Winnie is a quadroon with pale skin and one good green eye. She wears a black sating patch over her left eye. She uses her shoulder length black hair as a curtain to cover the satin patch.

She married a very black man named Henry, breaking the family rules of marrying outside of her class and color. Winnie loved Henry and Henry loved his darling Winnie. Mama Lena says, "Winnie just tried chocolate and fell in love." Winnie's family fiercely disapproved and disinherited her but she persisted in love and life.

Six hours after Winnie gave birth to twin girls, Chantilly and Charmaine. Charmaine died and Henry died instantly three months after the birth of their twins in a car accident. One year after Henry's death, Winnie had her right leg amputated and ended up with a peg leg.

She worked hard as a seamstress to support herself and Chantilly who looked like Winnie's twin; in spite of Winnie's best efforts, Chantilly found all kinds of trouble to get into. At age sixteen, she got pregnant by some old man who owned a record shop in town and gave birth to a giant baby girl that she named Sabrina, with eyes greener than Winnie's. Everyone in the village called her Bib Rina; two months after Chantilly gave birth to Brina, Chantilly ran off with a musician who came to town one weekend, leaving Brina in Winnie's care. No one has heard from Chantilly since then.

Brina has some developmental problems as she was growing up, but she did manage to complete high school eventually. It did not stop her from wanting to venture out into the world which her Grannie Winnie regretted staunchly.

Big Brina grew to be an attractive full figured girl who discovered the city; she made a number of trips to the city over the course of the year; Brina knew it was a place where she could let loose and keep her secret from Grannie Winnie. Brina did not realize that her secret would cost her more than her life's dream of becoming a Hollywood star. Mama Lena had more than a suspicion about Brina's trips to the city as she strolled and sashed down Mulberry Lane to board the train downtown.

Mama Lena said, “When a girl has to sneak a life away from others, the girl is living a shadow life.” Early one Sunday morning, Big Brina walked down Mulberry Lane past Mama Lena’s house where she was sitting out on the porch in her rocking chair reading; Brian was dressed pink from head to toe; she said, in a slow dragging way, “hey Ma Lena, how you doing today? Yes, Brina is back in town, you got any chicken and biscuits on the stove ma?” Mama Lena said, “Now Brina you know I cook a hot meal every Sunday I prepare meals with love and I believe in sharing my food.”

They both laughed and Big Brina climbed the four little concrete steps leading to Mama Lena’s house. They went inside and Mama Lena prepared two big plates of food with: baked chicken and gravy, fluffy buttermilk potatoes with chives, hot biscuits and a pot of collard greens. After dinner, Mama Lena served piping hot peach cobbler in glass bowls and vanilla bean ice cream for dessert in thick beveled parfait glasses. Mama Lena and Brina had a meal that filled both of their hearts with joy coaxing them into a heartfelt conversation about love as they sat at the kitchen table.

Brina said “Ma Lena, have you ever been in love with a man before?” Mama Lena replied, “In love, yes, I was deeply in love many years ago with a man. It could never be because we were a world apart in society.”

Brina, “since I been back all I can do is think about him.”

Mama Lena, “Him, who is him, Brina?” Brina, my man Jay, he is my protector. Mama Lena, “oh, he is” Brina, “yeah he sure is...he looks out for me when I’m in the city. Mama Lena “well where does he work, Brina?”

Brina, “he has his own management business, he is into managing his clients’ personal lives; he gives them all kinds of advice.”

Mama Lena sensed Jay was into managing human flesh for profit. She said, “Where is his place of business?”

Brina, “Oh , he operates his business without having office space.” Mama Lena, “Oh, how long has he been in business?” Brina, “for a long time and he says he is doing well especially with his female employees.

Mama Lena, “he employs just female employees?”

Brina, “yeah, they work better to build his business.”

Mama Lena, "I see he manages female employees to help build his business; well, Brina, what exactly does Jay tell you and his other female employees your job is?"

Brina, "To be nice and smile when we entertain his men clients." Mama Lena said, "Brina, who do you think you are talking to? I lived in New York City well before I came to Rustic Village, my folks had a little jazz club in the city and I have known many girls who were just exploring the city with a monkey on their back yearning for another fix before she turns a trick."

Brina, "Ma Lena, I just gotta get enough money to get to Hollywood and I'm gonna stop living this way."

Mama Lena just shook her head and said, "Brina, how are you going to respect yourself? Do not let anyone use and abuse your body, no matter how much you love him." Brina started to cry. Mama Lena put her hand on Brina's shoulder and said, "If you want to, you can do anything you set your mind to doing, no matter what it is." Brina gathered her light weight pink sweater and purse and told Mama Lena goodbye with tears in her eyes. She hugged Mama Lena and walked out the door. Mama Lena collapsed on the couch. She knew she would not see Brina again. A week later, Grannie Winnie called Mama Lena asking her if she had seen Brina since last Sunday; Mama Lena said, "No I have not seen her since Sunday afternoon, I thought maybe she was headed to your place after she left here." Winnie said, "She only stopped for a few minutes and got some clothes. Then she left in a hurry going to the train station."

Mama Lena wanted to believe with all of her heart that she may have convinced Brina enough that she was going to leave Jay the manager.

The next day was Monday, and it seemed especially hot early in the morning and Mama Lena got up and started moving around. She heard the phone rang. She answered with a high pitched hello, it was Winnie again. She said, "they found my Brina" and there was silence. Mama Lena called Winnie several times and Mama Lena did not hear a response, so she grabbed her house dress and took off down the lane where Winnie lived; as Mama Lena walked quickly to Winnie's house, she felt it was not good news. She tried to be hopeful anyway. By the time Mama Lena made it to Winnie's place, Gracie Winnie's neighbor greeted her at the door and she said Winnie had to be taken to the hospital, Mama Lena; old Fred and his wife Dot drove her there after she dropped the telephone while she was talking to you; Winnie got the news in the early morning hours that the police found Brina in an alley dead from an overdose. Mama Lena broke down; she could not stop crying. The neighbor lady helped her to a chair and tried to comfort her. After

a while, Mama Lena pulled herself together and waked back home and sat inside the house thinking about the last time she saw Brina alive.

Late Monday evening, Gracie knocked on Mama Lena's screen door to let her know that the funeral would be Friday at one o'clock p.m. Brina would be laid to rest after the church service at Holy Hope Peter's Rock Church just outside the village. Mama Lena was still sitting in the same place she was sitting in earlier when Gracie knocked on the door.

Mama Lena was a little dazed but she managed to get up and let Gracie know that she appreciated her coming by to let her know about the funeral service for Brina. Friday morning before the funeral, many residences of Rustic village showed up to pay their respects. Grannie Winnie was not able to be at Brina's funeral because she was so ill from grief, she had to be sedated in the hospital. Jack and Bella were amongst many people who came to the funeral; Bella looked good for a change. She was not bruised up; Ms. Ruby and Bobbi, along with her other three daughters came to the funeral.

Miss Fannie Lou ushered at the church service before the funeral. Although Brina died in a way no girl should have to die, she looked peaceful lying in the lavender pink coffin; she was dressed in a light pink dress, her favorite color since childhood.

During the funeral, Mama Lena noticed a big tall older man holding what looked like a bundle of pink and white blankets. He sat way in the back with his head nestled in the blankets; after the service, Mama Lena walked towards the back row of seats where the man was sitting, with his head hung low; "excuse me, sir, are you okay?" The man looked up and said "I loved her, she tried to leave and he killed her with them drugs and she left the baby with me. We was to be married and leave for California when she left street life."

Mama Lean said, "are you Jay?" He said "Jay died with Brina the same night. I wanted to bring the baby here for Brina's Ma Lena to raise. She said if anything ever happened to her, take the baby to Ma Lena's house." Mama Lena took a deep breath and put her hand on the baby blankets to uncover the bundled blankets. She looked down at the baby girl with features like Brina's. Mama Lena smiled and took the baby girl into her arms. The man said, "I hope you can take care of her the way Brina said you could." Mama Lena said, "she is a special little girl and she will be treated like a precious pearl." Grannie Winnie died a day later in the hospital. She never made it home to see her great granddaughter, but she can rest assured that Mama Lena will raise the little girl well.



Michelle Bright Sanchez

The Creative License

By Anjali Sharma

“And what do you know about capturing a person’s most inner-deep desires?”

“There’s a fine line between desires and complaints; you do the latter.” Arial said as she first-take note, sniffed the wine, shook it, and sipped a little.

I depict what goes on behind the stage.”

“Oh contraire Christian, you show only what is obvious to the naked eye. Speaking of, as if you choose your subjects blindly; as if you hear their churning, and you’re the knight in shining armor, on a big white horse, with the whole hero-complex.”

“Like your choice of profession is nobler than mine. You just do it for yourself; it’s all about you, and what you feel, and what you want to do. I capture reality at its essence. Have you ever seen, when it’s snowing out and a couple is standing by a hotdog stand and the woman is holding on so tight to her lover, it’s like she feels safe in his arms. That is what I do.”

The chocolate soufflé served here is the best you can get in town, but having arrived now, Arial’s hunger had vanished.

“Here, you can have it.” Arial says as she slides the dish to Christian.

“Oh come on, we’re just having a very normal and healthy conversation—don’t lose heart already darling.”

“You don’t have the right to call me whatever you want, you greedy superficial imbecile!” Arial retorted as she knew she would have to end this whole façade now.

“Look, clearly I over-stepped my boundary, I apologize. Please don’t go, we can still salvage something out of the night. Like me ordering some more outrageously expensive champagne for you! And if you want, tell you how gorgeous you look, and how all I want to do is take you home.”

“Oh so first, insult me, then try to get me in bed!”

“Did it work?”

“Maybe...”

“Look who’s a sell out now!”

“Shut up!”

“Looks like this late night candle-lit dinner isn’t going so bad after all!”

“Yah, sorry I am taking so seriously! It’s just that, last night I was thinking about how hard it is to stay in my own skin. Maybe that’s the way art is supposed to make you feel, to catapult you into another aspect of yourself and let you dwell there a while. Or maybe that’s just what it is to be human and try to live an examined life. And you earning a few more bucks than I do, by photographing stick-thin models doesn’t even come close to that.”

“Well, I guess I should be more understanding of your kind of people’s notions.”

“What is that suppose to mean?”

“Since you’re asking, I’ve just noticed that artists always have this touchy, feely crap way of looking at things.”

“You know what I’m going to do you a favor, and leave, so, don’t worry, you aren’t getting any of this crap!” Arial said, before she angrily walked out of the restaurant.

Here I do it again, note to self: no more blind dates! Christian thought to himself, as he sat alone, in the dim-light.



Michelle Bright Sanchez

Freedom on the inside

By Anthony C. Armstrong

One of the most disturbing truisms that has plagued our young men and women of today is illiteracy. This is so alarming because as a whole, society understands that the children are our future and if one child is left behind, he or she can have an effect on a complete generation. The unseen areas of these tragedies are the individuals incarcerated in some form or another within the Department of Corrections throughout the country (Executive Summary, 2007). Although many of these unfortunates continue to let themselves fall victim to the chaotic lifestyle that prison has to offer, there are just as many who have taken the opportunity to rise above the nonsense and in the end, come to understand what "Freedom on the Inside" really means.

As a young man enters into a penal institution, he tells himself there is no hope left, because at the age of eighteen, he has let everyone, including himself, down. He feels the only way for him to make it through this incarceration is for him to associate himself with the in crowd. The problem is he has been sentenced to thirty five years for an unmentionable heinous crime. Growing up, the street life was all he knew, so he thought, and education had never been on the top of his lists of priorities. The only thing that mattered to him was making money and making it fast. Never had he considered the type of consequences that making fast money would bring him. Now, here he sits with his back against the wall, with no earthly clue on how he is going to survive these grueling years.

As a condition to his incarceration, he is required to obtain his GED. Oh, how he despised the idea of him being forced to achieve something that has never been any importance to him. Somewhere along the way, one of the veteran inmates sat down with him and explained to him how detrimental it would be to his future for him not to learn how to express himself without the usage of vulgarity and slang statements that had no purposeful meaning. "Why is it so important that I learn how to read and write now?" he asked. "I am in prison for thirty five years. I have no future and for that matter, who is really going to care what I do at this stage of my life?" After careful consideration to this question, the elder man responded; "The concept of literacy behind bars may seem farfetched to some, but to others like me, it has truly been the difference between life and death."

The first five years of his incarceration definitely had its challenges for the young man. Through trial and error, he began to make the necessary changes needed to maintain some kind of focus towards earning his GED. By his third year, his reading had improved to the eighth grade level. To most, that seemed like nothing special, but to him it was a milestone. During this time, he was introduced to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, written by Alex Haley and Malcolm X, respectively. The young man was so intrigued; he read the book three times, a quote that stuck with him was when Malcolm X stated; “Months passed by without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so free in my life” (2010, p580.) For the longest time, the young man could not conceive how anyone could consider themselves as free, when it was so plain to see that they had been imprisoned for a number of years.

Entering into his seventh year of incarceration, the young man finally earned his GED. As a reward, several of his fellow inmates threw him a congratulatory party. This was the first of many achievements he would accomplish. His self-confidence reached an all-time high, to the point he convinced himself that he could attend college and earn a degree. Before doing this, he told himself that he needed to increase his vocabulary. With this idea in mind, he decided to learn the same way Malcolm X did. He remembered another quote by Malcolm X’ “I saw that the best thing I could do was to get hold of a dictionary-to study, to learn some words” (2010, p577). And so his new challenge began. He worked months and months with this tedious ritual, which included copying the words and then writing down the definitions. The task became so engrossing, that he too at times had forgotten that he was imprisoned. While getting a better understanding of the English language, he also began to read any book he could get his hands on. He read self-help books, romance novels, fantasy, and even westerns. He realized that reading was a way for him to go and see places he never thought possible. The limits of his imagination became endless.

The time had come for him to journey into the next phase of his education. He was now enrolling in college. Taking on this endeavor was painfully terrifying. Before fear was able to set in, the same veteran inmate assured him that he had overcome the hardest part. He had accomplished more than many of his counterparts. Now was the time for him to buckle down and put forth some more effort. He was reminded of how proud he had made his friends and family. After attending his first college course, he was so thankful for the painstaking hours he had put into studying the dictionary, learning how to use the English language without sounding

like an educated fool. Even though he was a student himself, he found that it gave him great joy and satisfaction to be able to give some assistance to his fellow students.

By the time he reached his junior year in college, realization set in that there was nothing he could not accomplish if he put his mind towards it. While attending a Psychology class, he began reflecting on his past and chuckled a little remembering how lost and confused he had felt at the beginning of his incarceration. Not only did he figure out how and why he felt as he did, he also started to feel compassion for the young men who were just now entering the beginning of their sentences. He started to believe that he had a purpose. He did not know how, but he knew that he was destined for great things. To him he felt the greatest thing he could do was to help those in need.

College graduation was just two months away. Although he had only served thirteen years towards his sentence, it seemed like only yesterday since his journey had begun. As he looked back on the time he had served, it dawned on him that he had become the veteran inmate who had mentored him so many years ago. He surmised that he was now taking young men under his wing and molding them into someone who could who could take pride in themselves. He began to see that he had found his calling. To his surprise, after graduation he was called into the counselor's office and was informed that he was being granted an early release.

After his release, this now grown man began taking courses in public speaking, and with the assistance of the courts along with the Department of Corrections, he obtained a position as a guidance counselor for wayward young men. Going back into the prison system and hearing the door slam behind him, sent shivers down his spine. Even then, the happiness he felt helping those in need, had an overriding effect on him. As he began his first counseling session, he looked around at the young men in the room, remembering the title to Maya Angelou's poem, and stated: "I know why the caged bird sings." (2012)

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The Ride of Despair

By Anjali Sharma

I recently started taking the bus for the very first time from school to my new apartment. And though all of this ---being on my own included, was very strange for me. I had adapted and become somewhat comfortable. A trusting fool even; a mistake I shan't make again.

You see, today on this not so ordinary day, I sat on the bus aloof to what would come. A creepy fellow sat beside me, leaning in close. I tried to placate my senses, but my tingling spidery senses were already wakened from their slumber. His eyes, matched the color of his skin; icy black marbles with murky intent. As his breath drew near, it reeked of alcohol. At first, I was none the wiser, but then it dawned on me what was happening. This is really happening. I am being harassed by a drunk psychopath on the bus. He kept asking me if the fact that he paid all his rent was good, and no answer to him would suffice. The stranger then proceeded to shake the dice that lay between his demonic hands, as if to taunt me. My heart, also like the dice shuffled, and skipped a beat with each turn. I tried to ignore him, but it was to no avail, my brain was already in hyper drive. I was now officially panicking. I was scared, fearful for my safety. Luckily, I had been texting my friend about this and told him to call me, anything I could do to get out of the situation, since I could not do so physically.

It was ridiculously good to hear his voice, in this troubling time. It was an instant of reassurance, the familiarity clamed my beating chest. At first the faint shadow of a man besides me, muttered incessantly peeved that I was on the phone ignoring him and playing it cool to my best intent. Alas, it eventually worked; he got up and sat behind me! I then tried to explain to my friend what had happened and alleviate myself, whispering as much as I could. It was at these times that I wish he and I were able to speak another language with one another! Although, as what I found a sweet gesture, he offered to let me speak in my language, even if he didn't understand it. But mostly, I whispered onto the phone, not caring anymore for what lurked behind me, but setting myself free from the fear that had held me captive.

When he got off the bus, the lowlife waved goodbye to me. Was it some sort of last ditch attempt for the convoluted creep to regain some dignity? Assert his dominance? Or further delude himself? I do not know. What I do know is that he had apparently done this sort of thing before, by that I mean harass unsuspecting women on the bus.

Disgusting, I say.

By the time I got home, my heart may have been on overdrive but at least my friend was there in time of need, a consoling voice to the many crazy thoughts in my head. Our brief but poignant conversation was cathartic nonetheless.

I wonder now, why did I go through this? To learn a lesson: To become more assertive, aggressive even? And not such a nice, innocent, sweet girl? Message received! If you can't be safe, or expect civility and decency in broad daylight, when can you?

I'm sick and tire of being someone who takes what's given, and doesn't take life by the horns. I'm through with being a victim, a passenger on this ride of despair. I'm driving from now on.



Eman Alkotob

My Love, Your Love,

Our Love

Forever

By C. Raymond Wallace

Clarence was 16 years old, painfully shy and introverted; he had just received his very first driver's license and he was like a bird leaving the nest for the first time; finding his wings and flying off into his new found freedom. He has been under the protective wing of his Mother for what seemed like, to him, forever. His first breath, his first cry, his first step and his first day going to kindergarten at his Elementary School and every day after that for the next 2 or 3 years. Bea was very protective. She and Pasco lost a child at birth 2 years before Clarence was born, which probably added to her desire to protect her only child.

It was Sunday morning and Clarence is on his way to his father's church; on the west side of South Bend behind the Sears Roebuck store. He went to his father's church looking for his dad and found a new church, new friends, some for a lifetime and Cynthia. Clarence and Cynthia became great friends. Cynthia was a beautiful young lady with a face full of freckles. They were constantly together; they sang in the youth choir, traveled the Indiana and Michigan highways, and played whisk with a group of friends calling themselves the card sharks. Cynthia quietly kept a secret; she was in love with Clarence; however, this was the 1950's and 60's and women didn't allow their feelings for a man to be known. Quite a few years lapsed before Clarence realized Cynthia's feelings for him. In the meantime, Cynthia married, had a son, divorced and moved to Atlanta, Georgia. Clarence became a professional photographer in the San Francisco area while always staying in constant contact with Cynthia.

In Cynthia's early forties, she had the first of three debilitating strokes; each one taking a little bit of her muscular stamina, her ability to stand or walk and sometimes to talk. After her first stroke, she moved to Bloomington, Illinois. She would joke about her Cadillac, her ability to drive it to the supermarket and through it if the isles were big enough; her Cadillac was a converted golf cart.

After, Cynthia's third stroke, Clarence was in his car heading to Bloomington to be at Cynthia's side. On his way, he stopped at a supersize department store outlet to purchase a string of small tear drop tree light, 2 tall candles, 8 small stubby candles, a vase and 2 scented candles. When he was near Cynthia's complex, he stopped at a florist to get a dozen roses and a very special yellow rose.

After about three and one half days of traveling, Clarence arrived at Cynthia's complex; as he was going through the garage, he had a little chuckle as he saw Cynthia's Cadillac in the garage waiting for her return. As he entered the living room with the roses in his arms, he saw Cynthia sitting on the couch reaching out for him. Her arms ravaged by the three strokes were not able to reach out as far but her voice as she called out to him; "Oh Clarence, you are here!" As he sat next to her, he gave her a hug and presented her with the 12 red roses and the one very special yellow rose. This yellow rose represents the beauty of your heart, the beauty of your soul and you. As late afternoon turned into evening and we sat watching the stars shining from her ceiling, and the candles flickering in the distance and the roses in the vase lit by the candles light and the scented candles leaving a pleasant aroma in the room; Clarence read the card he had written for the flowers; "The reality of love is but a moment, the memory of love is forever. Clarence finally took in the moment and realized he was home with his friend and his love as he turned around and whispered in her ear, "My love, Your love, Our love, Forever" as jazz whispered in the background.



Michelle Bright Sanchez

Imaginary Piano

By Brittany Hazen

I fell asleep and woke up in a dream. I find myself sitting across from a boy that looks to be carved of marble, all sharp edges and graceful angles. His auburn hair falls lightly across his forehead, darkening his amber honey eyes. There is something unsettling although comforting about the way he holds himself. He sits still, no blinking, no breathing, not a single movement from his angelic form. As I look around, I am suddenly aware of my surroundings. As I take them in, I notice the table which I sit at is placed in snow, a covered field. A pine tree stands to my left and I can hear the wings of a small bird fluttering to my right. Thunder cracks, startling me, then snow starts falling from the darkened sky. I look up and then back at him, wondering why the sudden noise had not disturbed him. Snowflakes have collected on his eyelashes and in his hair, making his beauty more startling than before.

I raise myself from the table and make my way down the long table. I run my hand over the mahogany as I do. The snow collects at my finger tips. Once I make my way to the boy, I crouch to eye level, raising my snow-covered hand as if I am going to cup his face. An urge to see if his cheekbones would feel as ruthless as they look surges through me. I reach out but then suddenly stop myself, the hot rush of a blush spreading across my face. Perfection wasn't meant to be touched by imperfection like me. My hand goes back to my side where it rightfully belongs. Then he blinks and the gasp that falls out of my mouth is louder than it should be. My chest rises and falls with the deep breaths I take. My heart is jumping like I'm going into cardiac arrest. He looks at me and smiles that kind of smile those mothers warn little girls about. He puts a hand on my cheek, making me look down in complete shame. He leans forward, so his mouth is mere inches from my ear. I can feel the warmth of his breath trickling through my hair. "You look beautiful in that dress." That's when I realize what I was wearing. Red silk covered my body.

The neckline dipped low and hung loosely on my shoulders. The dress hugged all the places I hated and still looked uncharacteristically fitting. My hair was curled and the free locks swarm around my shoulders. He stood up from the chair he was sitting in and took my hand, pulling me up from my knees along the way. As he stood before me, I was given the chance to look him over. To drink him in. The tux he wore was tight fitting; the rose pinned to his lapel looked blood red next to the dark black of the fabric.

As he opened his mouth, only a single word made its way out, “play.” I looked up at him in confusion. Not understanding, he swept his arm out, drawing my attention to a white piano in the distance. “Please”: he brushed a piece of my hair behind my ear. I looked back up to his face. His eyes were pleading, I could feel them begging. So, I grabbed his hand and he trailed behind me as I made my way to the baby grand. I sat down at the bench. I could feel the years of practice taking over me. I could feel the buzz in my fingers like electricity. I placed my fingers on the keys and I played. The music surged through me, making me close my eyes. The melodies and notes drifted through spaces in the air. Every inch of the place was filled with it. As the smile stretched across my face, I opened my eyes to look over my shoulder. He was there, standing right next to me. And with a smug look on his face. His lips parted as he began to sing. He sang with a deep husky voice, like dripping honey on a hot day. Smooth and sweet, something you don’t want too much of because you know it’s only going to end up with the pain of a stomach ache. While he was still singing, he placed his hands under both of my elbows, pulling slightly so I was standing. He then directed my body so that I was standing still in front of him. He stopped singing as he placed our bodies in a dancing position. We both laughed as we danced in silence, whispered giggles that flowed from our lips. The only other noise was the rustling of the wind through trees and the flight of birds. He stopped suddenly, and placed his hand behind my head, running his fingers through the hairs at the nape of my neck. I looked up at him that wicked smile still painted on his face. I can feel heat creeping up my neck and I look down at my feet. I feel his other hand underneath my chin pulling my face back up so he can see my eyes. He leans forward and pauses for a second as if asking me if this is okay. His lips touch mine and then I wake up.

Leaf

By Elisa R. Vannett

It begins with an edge, a crooked unfurling and then re-furling of intricate corners. A wrinkle expanding out towards the sun in a golden-rod tip. Now arching backwards, slope preceding slope. A vein that jags in sharply after the wild twisting curves, contours outlined in crisp shadows. It began with an edge, now ending at the stem.



The Other Tangerine Friend

By Elisa R. Vanett For Abby

The Other Tangerine Friend

is someone I've never met before.

And although we have never met,

I dream of meeting you quite often.

Somedays I can just close

my eyes: There You Are.

Licking your fingers, peeling back rinds,

and oozing with sweetness.

You are always smiling, with

the sun streaking upon it.

The fruit of your hands gives

you an aroma -- zesty. And though

they might be jealous of us -- I have

a Tangerine Friend. Maybe when

I am old and gray and I can no longer

see -- I can finally meet you, my friend.

We'd be sitting under the trees,

picking off like memories from the roots

Of regret and happiness once long ago, peeling

the rinds of our skins back, oozing with laughter,

licking fingertips. Yes, I can see us now, there

in that secret place. Together. Sharing Tangerine



Michelle Bright Sanchez

The Observance of Lent

By Kim Hively

Lent is the time just prior to Easter when all good Catholics are expected to abstain from something. For those of you who are not part of the Catholic Lenten tradition, it is when you see all the signs for the fish fry's on Fridays, all the fast food restaurants add fish, "for a limited time only," to their menus and Long John Silver's has a line of people out the door. Many religious observances require forms or periods of abstinence. Not having been part of other religious observances, I cannot speak for what exceptions there are to the rules, but I do know a great deal about the exceptions to the Catholic rules.

The day before Lent begins is Fat Tuesday. This is the day that many Catholics gorge on sweets and pastries.

It is the big ass party before the sentencing begins. Lent begins in earnest on Ash Wednesday. For anyone who is unfamiliar with Ash Wednesday, it is the day when you should not say, "You have some schmutz on your forehead." It is supposed to be there. These are the burnt ashes of the palm leaves from last year's observance of Easter that have been blessed. They are then smeared on your forehead as a blessing from all the evils of the world. It is also a very visual symbol to everyone what an outstanding Catholic you are. Now, there are ways around going to Church and yet still lead people to believe that you are still outstanding. Visit a smoker and have them bless you right from their bountiful supply of ashes, bless yourself with the wick of a candle, and probably the least of the suggestions, practice questionable

personal hygiene (This one is tricky. Sometimes it is hard to just get your forehead dirty and it may be accompanied by an odor that gives the whole thing away.)

Ash Wednesday's observance is also the beginning of the eating of fish and has the added bonus of not eating between meals. Now, here is where I must get into the rules about this ritual and the exceptions to these rules. If you are Catholic you are expected to observe this tradition UNLESS...you are too young, too old, too sick, or pregnant. Other UNLESSES may include....hoping someday you might be pregnant, you might grow to be old, your feel really young and immature or have the sniffles. Another way to work with the rules, especially as it pertains to eating between meals, is eating veeerrryyy slowly so that one meal flows into the other, sleeping in very

late so that breakfast starts at lunch time, lunch is around dinner time and dinner is around bedtime, and my favorite, sitting on the couch, with the bowl of popcorn on your lap, waiting for the alarm you set on your clock to strike midnight, because that is a new day, and gorging on food until 2 a.m.

As my mother explained to me, Lent is supposed last for forty days. Somehow this works out to be 6 weeks. I have done this math many times (6 weeks times 7 days in a week is actually 42 days). When I brought this discrepancy up to my mother, her response was that Sundays were free days. Free days? What the hell is a free day? Right after the smack I got because I cursed, mom explained that I did not have to abstain from my item of abstinence on Sundays. So, now I am back to the math, which again does not work. (6 weeks times 7 days a week is

42 days. Minus the 6 free Sundays now brings the grand total to 36 days. Again I say, what does forty have to do with it?) By now, my mother is completely frustrated with me and sends me away with, "Get the hell out of here!" I'm thinking this must be part of that "New Math" thing that seems to cause such problems.

Lent's last rule is that a person must give up something for this period of 40 days. The challenge is what to give up. According to my mother, it is supposed to be something that is a hardship. My grandmother used to give up eating between meals every day and watching television. That seemed a little extreme to me and honestly there wasn't really anything that I wanted to give up. As I was pondering what I might be able to do without for those 40 days, I overheard my mother tell someone that my great grandfather

used to give up watermelon every year. Apparently, he loved watermelon, but since it was out of season and he could get it anyway, it seemed like a good choice. This got me to thinking. I could give up something that I couldn't have anyway. Hmm. Several days later my mother asked me if I had decided what I was going to give up. I announced with great pride that I was going to be giving up sex. There are a couple of issues at play in this part of the story. First, my grandmother was also there when I said this (yes, the grandmother who gives up television and is veeerrryyyy Catholic). Second, I was twelve. My mother let out a shriek and called me by all of my names and a few other names that weren't mine, "You have to give up something you LIKE!"

My response to this was simple, "I might like it someday." (Again, I will

remind you that my grandmother is present). Mom let out a wail, followed by a string of obscenities, which my grandmother didn't really appreciate. Finally, I said, "Fine, then I will run my other ideas past you." Here is a brief list of my other ideas; hitting my sister, going to school, going to church, smoking, homework, getting spankings, going to bed at 9 p.m., doing chores, eating vegetables, and one of my personal favorites, folding my underwear. Who needs folded, wrinkle-free underwear? (Again, I must remind you that I was twelve.)

By this time my mother was fed up with me (and I am sure really embarrassed because my grandmother was praying under her breath by now) and she gave up her quest for the item that I would be giving up for lent. Not asking me was the status quo for a couple of years. Then one year she

ventured to ask again and asked every year after that. For a number of years, my answer was sex. The year she asked and I didn't answer sex, I got a look. I just smiled. There was a policy of 'don't ask don't tell' on the topic of sex. (I am 47 and still waiting for my sex talk.) I was not the only one in my household who gave up crazy things for lent. One year my mother gave up the F word. That's right, not cussing, just that one word. It lasted for about 2 hours and if I remember correctly, it was in some dealing with me that she broke her Lenten observance.



Michelle Bright Sanchez

Sheep

By: Willie Dearing

An adorable baby girl born to a mother that already had many

Much pain and suffering she came

Move girl outta my way

Why you always gotta be in my way!

Put that down! And she slap her face

Baby girl was put in a corner to play

Now you stay there all this day!

All while she was little she try to stay outta her mother's way

But there was never no safe place to be; Never no save place to play

So as she got bigger she thought

I'll just go away

Momma don't know I'm innocent she gone hit me anyway.

When she was bigger

She hit the streets

With no place left to be good

I know the Lord loves people but do he love me?

I don't feel all that now, now that I am free

Momma done locked me out

Guess this is where I'm gone be

Im lost and alone and momma don't care

I love her, but she hate me...I sware!

Im a sister!

And a mother, im a friend!

And I am good!

But now im messed up

And I feel hateful, cause I should

Now im guilty!

I Felt my security

Slipping away a long time ago

I was good to her, but she just don't know

Im a nice girl, just trying to be okay

When I look about, I can't see

But I do wonder

How many peoples

Are like me

Black Sheep.

FREEDOM TO ATTACK

Eman Alkotob

The way that I see it
I am all alone
But those crimes that others commit
I should verily disown

He made me stand out
I was attacked
But those who can recount
Decided to interact

Why must race, religion, and rights
Be required to defend—
When this country was made on freedom of great heights
Not slander that can kiss my rear end.

It's not a joke, you can see
But humor can make it better
Especially when these things are at such a degree
Since I don't wear a scarlet letter

I wear my scarf—I wear my race
To which I confidently embrace
But those who cross this bigoted space
Should learn love and grace...

Sister Morgana

Andrew Beidinger

I call on thee, O Sister Morgana
Child of the Fey, Priestess of Avalon
How we long for thou to show the way
You lost your way, they took you in
Mystic isle, sacred waters, powers
In the Light of the Mystery are Thee.
Lady in the Dark of Night, Mistress
Of Magick, Lady of Ravens, prodigy
Of Vivienne, The Lady of the Lake;
From her did ye learn the Great Magick?
The parting of the Mysts, to our Paradise
That Grace is within you. Beyond the ruins of the past,
You part the fog that leads astray, you are the light of the
Darkness, when all lights go out. It is You who gave Excalibur
Back to the Holy Isle; Avalon, Our Home. Lady lead us home,
Child of the Goddess, rise us from the darkness to thee 'ternal
Light. Lady who stirs the cauldron, Lady of secrets, Lady of Magick,
Guide us Sister Morgana, Morgana le Fey, Lady of Avalon.
The Church spake thee of ill, of such ill there is not. Thou art rose of
Swych virtue. What became of Thee, we know not, come Sister.

Chainlink Companionship by Elisa R. Vanett

It feels pretty lonely
--sometimes
watching you and all the other
pretty girls and the loud boys
making games together.
It must have been because
I was too ugly. Or too poor. Or too stupid.
Those pretty girls -- I see them all
--laughing a lot
making games together.
And I saw you turn away
while I was shining
--cheektocheek.
And yet, I stood.
These creaky swingsets
are reserved for the lonely children
--our companionship is weathered through
the years of rust. And metal. And chainlinks.
--Bonded.
And yet, I stood
by the playgrounds edge
--lonely
at the chainlink swings.



Eman Alkotob

More Learning Through

More Living

By Kim Hively

- Sometimes the loft of my goals are just to get through this without a baby or a prison sentence.
- If I have to keep your secrets, I also get to point out your stupidity.
- The three things that will offer more chances of success are hope, kindness, and an open heart.
- The most important phrases in any great vocabulary are, "Thank You," "I am sorry," and "I love you."
- If at the end of any day, there is nothing to laugh at, I always have myself.
- Happiness is a condition that is easily correctable with stress and chaos. Please don't bring me your cure.



Michelle Bright Sanchez

It Gets Better!

A while ago in high school, I wasn't bullied for being smart. I was bullied for being gay. I could never understand why I was being bullied because I liked guys. Was it so wrong to be interested in guys than girls? To some people it was wrong, a sin against "God". To others, it was to be an abomination. I would really like to disagree with this. I am not an abomination. I am not a sin against any deity as many I went to school with at New Prairie would like to believe. One thing is for sure, it gets better!

I did not know what I was until I started going to high school. Girls were really not my thing at the time. Focusing on my studies was the main reason of why to be at New Prairie or so I thought. All of that began to change. At the drop of a hat from minding my own business learning, I began to hear anti-GLBT slurs. On one occasion, I ran into a bully scene. A group of male students whom I did not really care or know were harassing another male student. I heard the words "fag" and "faggot" being used in not exactly a nice manner. When I would ever hear those words, I would think of the old English for a "cigarette" and "a bundle of wood used for kindling/starting a fire". Then this phrase hit me like a ton of bricks, "You know you like the penis, you sick freak!".

I never had a problem with people who liked the same gender. I could/would never think less of them as a human being. Those people were born this way. My mother taught me how to love and accept people no matter what they are. Gay, straight, white, black, Catholic, Muslim, that did not concern me. What did matter was if they benefitted society and the Human race. Everyone is equal in my eyes. I cannot and will not discriminate.

Later in school, I started to defend and reach out to people who are/were GBLT. There were consequences but I could not care any less. Then I was bullied for supporting. I started to have feelings for "the guys". I wanted to keep that from everyone but my close friends, people that I could trust. It was hard coming out to them at first. They understood what I was going through inside. Coming out is hard. For some it may be easy; but for others, sometimes you have to have an outline and plan it out. For starts, ask if you can fully trust them. Yes, this sounds silly but this is a step in a right direction. One more thing, never come out on your mother's birthday.

Bullying hurts. Some people cannot imagine the pain that it brings. From being the victim, I would let that pain eat at me, and let it rot me from deep within. It hurts so bad that I cannot describe the pain and misery. How can people be so cruel? How can people torture someone for how that person is? This is more than inhumane. It is diabolical! This could lead to a new holocaust, a whole new Shoah. Sometimes I would have dreams of people who are GBLT being crucified along with me. Yes, being nailed to a cross and not coming back from the dead after three days.

A few times I have made attempts of suicide. I am more than glad that those attempts were failures. I would not be where I am today. I would not be going to college. I would not be working the job that I love and have been begging for. I would not have the family and friends who are extended family that are still loving and supporting me. I wouldn't know the people today that inspire me to continue fighting and dreaming my successes and making them become

my realities. I have never been so thankful until now. My success is in my hands, I have the power to make or break it. I choose to make it and to go beyond.

Later on, I learned about the It Gets Better and Trevor Project. The projects are non-profit organizations for the supporting of GLBT youth, affirming straight allies, and their advocates. Also there is the GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network). In a survey from 2009, there were some shocking results. 29.1% of GLBT high school students missed a class at least once and 30% a whole day due to safety concerns (glsen). I was one of those students that skipped class, and have taken a few days off from school due to me being bullied. Yes, I had actual sick days, and days for doctors' appointments. I was bullied on the bus, in class, out of class, in cafeteria; you name the place, it happened. Sometimes it was due to safety concerns. Sometimes I did not feel all that "safe" at all at my high school. GLBT youth are three times more likely to commit suicide (MHA).

Being bullied in can affect one's mental health. Getting used to such bullying can cause you to lose your GPA. This happened to me because I let it happen. I let myself get bogged down and lose my self-esteem. Now it is back and not going anywhere but up. One does lose self-esteem when feeling that they are not good enough. I felt that way almost every day. I did not even want to wake up some mornings. On the It Gets Better project's website, there are videos from every day people, celebrities, our politicians, and religious figures telling us that yes, it gets better. Some of these videos are more than just heartwarming. They are inspiring young people to keep living their dreams. To keep the fight going for the constitutional rights that we are given. We need to be there for them to keep fighting for equality for all. To keep fighting for the American dream that we are told that we have.

The IGB project started as just a video posted on YouTube.com by Dan Savage and Terry Miller saying it gets better. The video received more than a hundred hits. This happened in Bloomington, Indiana (IGB book). Yes, in our state. Our home. Then a slew of hundreds more videos popped up. The message was clear. It was becoming much, much clearer. Dan and Terry then came out (yes, they have.) with a book containing the essays from the videos of the Youtube.com phenomenon. Watching these videos made me believe in the message. It was like going to church and listening to a sermon and bible readings that actually made sense to the common person without the unpronounceable names, places and the jealous wrath of some fearful deity. Some of the videos made me cry. If I had known of this project a lot sooner when I was younger, I would have been able to fight for my rights.

Some GLBT loving/supporting celebrities have been bullied as well. When Lady Gaga was young and in school, she was thrown into a huge garbage can. She went to an all-girls Catholic school. What those bitches did was unforgiveable. That is so wrong. But look at Lady Gaga now. She is making millions, she rose above the hate. I have no idea how she did it. In fact, look at the success of other celebrities that support GLBT people. Look at Ellen De Genres, she was a comic, sitcom star, has her own TV talk show, and was a guest judge on American Idol. Plus, she happily married Portia! Ricky Martin is another success story. He has been making music for quite a few years. He finally came out and relieved himself. Welcome to the stage Kathy Griffin. She is straight and she loves the gays, and has worked with them. In her video she blasted the rightwing religious leaders for their bigotry. I have to applaud her for that. I would go to her book and her comedy to get me out of my depression sessions. These videos have done me and many others so much good.

Can you imagine yourself being bullied for being gay? This is not funny. To the bullies it might be but I am quite sure that they do not realize the affects it makes on others. Do they want kids as young as they are or younger to kill themselves? Do they know that the kids they hurt belong to families that love them? Do those teens know that the other teens and youth who are being bullied and commit suicide could be the next doctors, nurses, politicians, teachers, engineers; the people who make this world go round? A bully can never truly love.

A young lesbian or gay male could come up with the cures for Aids/HIV and numerous types of cancer? Do they not know that their peers can make a difference in the world? There is so much that can be done by them. And there is so much good that could be done. I wish that people today realize that they are in a way killing future inventors? GBLT people are everything in occupations that their heterosexual counterparts are.

I would like to finish off by saying that, yes, it does get better. Tell people you know who are struggling with themselves that things will be better for them. Especially tell the youth. Tell them that they are the light of the world. Let them know that they are loved. Tell them that the spiritual beings they go to for guidance love them and do not want them to change for nobody. Have them know that they are not alone. They are never, ever alone. These youths whether being male or female need to know that there are people out there to help them. Give these teens the chance to fight for what they believe in, to fight the good fight and dance until they die. I am sure that the parents of these teens love them.

They need to know that. Love does not discriminate. It welcomes all. Know that for whether you are gay, straight, white, black; whatever. Do not let this kind of bullying stand in the schools of America. Do not let this stand. It may be a hard, long road ahead, but it is worth traveling. I have traveled down this road and back bringing others along the way. Some of us call it the Underground Railroad. Sometimes I'm called the GBLT Harriett Tubman. This not a physical road I am talking about. This road, on which we are traveling, is all in the head. Please do not fall back; you are still having a ways to go. You will make it. You just have to believe. I have stood up, I fought, and I made it. I know where I have been. And yes, it gets better.

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Dreams of a Little Girl in a Big World

By: Lucinda Jones

Once upon a time a girl name Ruth lived with her parents Joseph and Alice. All of Ruth's youthful years were filled with big dreams of her life. She regular fanaticized about how she would grow up, get married, live in a big white house with the bright red door that welcomes family and friends and the perimeter of the yard guarded by a white picket fence and family vacations. Of course she didn't forget to dream of the best house pet ever, Lassie. Lassie was brown and white and the most friendliest guard dog ever who was well trained. Every year after Ruth graduated from high school, she would evaluate her dreams to see if she had accomplished any of them. She would mentally check off her accomplishment as she achieved them. Her first check off began five years after graduation. She thought, married, (check), start a family (check) decent job (check), bought a house (check), it's white but does not have that red welcoming door she dreamed of or the white picket fence. That's ok, she thought. Now at this point she realize after 20 years from graduation she had only accomplished 4 of the things she always dreamed of. Ruth began to question her dreams. Hmmm...., How can she accomplish her dreams at a faster pace then five year time periods. I must do something about this or I will be to far up in age to want to do anything to achieve my dreams, she thought. Ruth began to mentally list her dreams to reinforce some motivation in her. She realize that she had to be content at where she was and appreciate it first before she could grasp the hold of her little girl dreams and launch forward. She began to thank God for what he has bless her with so far and prayed that whatever He has for her, she knows it's for her. She knew at that moment her blessings will go far beyond any of her dreams. Ruth smiled with relief of knowing that her plans are not of God's plan for her life. Her progress was ok just at the paste that it was going.

A love song

By John Comeau

The other day I slipped into my sixties
and now I seek to make sense of this gray
The blacks and whites have long since come full circle
but I realize a little more with every passing day
What a gift this life- with all its sungold memories
and the blessings of the rain, all the necessary pain
of our becoming

But what do we become?
Amid the constant chaos and incessant background noise
slipping ever further from the garden of our days
back when earth was infinitely various and new,
back before the kids and wives
before the fall from paradise.

Have I come to parodize the truths I onetime knew?
Like driving out into the night
past buildings bathed in moonlight gray
(Frost a cake in gray and see what happens
People look and quickly turn away.)
If god is there, he doesn't care.
He leads you to the overwhelming questions-

Then you drown upon some beach.
But up until that moment when time and light will bend
some noble work may yet be done before we reach

The End



Michelle Bright Sanchez

Contributors to the Ivy Quill, the Fifth Volume

Writers - -

Eman Alkotob

Peggy Stogdill

Elisa R. Vanett

Claire Roof

Kim Hively

Artwork –

Terry Sue Helvey

Michelle Bright Sanchez

Paula Deen

Cover Art --

Mary Ann Glover

Elisa R. Vanett

Diane Bright

Photographs –

Ben Musick

Eman Alkotob

Duncan Kinuthia

Lisa M. Stump

Edward Smith

Anjali Sharma

Lucinda M. Jones

C. Raymond Wallace

G. D. Andrews

Adrian Six

Donita Gill

Anthony C. Armstrong

Brittany Hazen

Willie Dearing

John Comeau

Andrew Beidinger

