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1st Place Photography Award

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1st Place Non-Fiction Award

LOVE ISN'T BLIND, IT JUST NEEDS GLASSES

I've been giving this a lot of thought lately and suddenly it's all become very clear to me...Our whole society is based upon the idea of the couple. The most basic concepts of our lives are rooted in it. Also figuring heavily in to it, I suspect, is the fact that misery loves company. Therefore anyone luckless enough to find him or herself with only half the requirements is going to be under an awful lot of pressure to shape up, and (again therefore) it is my contention that there isn't anyone in this country over the age of fifteen who hasn't been faced at least once by the stunning realization that someone is trying to "fix you up" with a Blind Date.

Maybe your love life has been falling a little short of "True Confessions" material lately, you admit that, but you know you're just in one of those little valleys that make the peaks in life so much more interesting. It's nothing serious. You aren't ready to get thee to a nunnery. Yet.

But beware! Somewhere out there a friend is waiting. You may not even have noticed that this person was your friend (rest assured he or she won't be much longer) but this person has noticed you—alone a lot—and is terrifically anxious to help you out. By strange coincidence this person also knows someone with the opposite sex and the same problem, and was just thinking, well..... Killing two birds with one stone is probably a very apt description.

If you aren't careful, and sometimes even if you are, what will happen is that one day this friend will maneuver you into a corner, drape an arm affectionately over your shoulder, and in cheerful conspiratorial tones, say "When can you come over and meet my brother (or sister), Rover?"

Notice that your friend won't say "Can you" he'll say "When can you." So, if you're carefully brought up as most of us are you won't endanger the friendship—no matter how much of a surprise it is to you—by answering what you truly feel, which is "Never!" You shuffle verbally for a while and then compromise by naming a date far in the future, yet by the same token not offensively so, since something like "Oh I don't know, what is he doing around the turn of the century?" will only provoke your friend.

Let's say you settle on a week from Thursday. With any luck Rover will come down with distemper, or your old unit will be recalled to active duty, or something equally extenuating will happen to get you out of it. Of course it never does, and those are the times you find yourself in a car saying, "I know it's only nine o'clock but I really do have to get up very early in the morning." At this point the lines you can think of are endless.

What I'm getting at is that we all have horror stories we could tell. Before I tell you my own I feel I should come right up front and admit that it's not the worst one I've ever heard. It's mild for example compared to one woman I know whose perfectly awful blind dinner-date was capped while still in the restaurant when a fat drunk went into cardiac arrest and collapsed on top of her. The poor thing went home in tears and the ruins of a \$6 pair of pantyhose. No, my experience with blind dating can't compare with that one for either color or drama, nevertheless it's etched indelibly in my mind.

It all started one night when I was sitting home, innocently watching tv. The phone rang and I answered it, and on the other end was a woman I barely knew, and if I'd thought about it, liked less.

"Hi," she said warmly. "What are you doing?"

I was younger then and couldn't see things coming like I can now. "Oh," I said. "Not too much...Why?"

"Well what I was really wondering about was what are you doing tomorrow?"

You can take it from there, can't you? The next night I was at the woman's house having dinner with her and her husband, while a fourth place at the table remained conspicuously vacant.

"I can't imagine what happened," my friend said as she dished up the salad. "Jerome said he'd be here by the time we were ready to eat."

"He probably got held up at work," said the husband, polishing his fork on the edge of the table cloth.

"Mmmm," I said.

"You'll like my brother," my friend said when we got to the main course. "I've told him all about you and he's really dying to meet you."

"Yep," said the husband, picking mushrooms out of the gravy and pushing them to one side of his plate.

"Mmmm," I said.

Still later I was taking a drink of water and wondering how my friend had managed to get the lemon pie to taste so much like library paste when she said, "If Jerome hasn't come by the time Ron and I get ready to leave, you can just wait for him here."

"Make yourself at home," said Ron, smothering a burp.

I coughed, spraying water all over myself. "What?" I choked.

"Oh didn't I tell you?" my friend said. "We're taking a course in metaphysics and tonight the class is going to find out if there's a purpose to life or not."

"Wouldn't miss it," said Ron, handing me a dry napkin.

"Well, uh..." I said.

Dinner ended and still no sign of Jerome. The woman and her husband cleared away the dishes while I said "Well, uh..." several more times. As the two of them were putting on their coats car lights shone out in the driveway and a motor sputtered to a stop. My friend peered out between the slats of the venetian blinds.

It's Jerome," she said.

"Honey, we're late," said her husband, zipping up his parka.

"I'm ready, dear." She grabbed her purse, adding airily, "Well, the next person to walk through that door will be Jerome. I just know you'll get along fine...He's so anxious to meet you."

"Bye," said the husband, and they disappeared into the night.

"Well, uh..." I said to no one in particular.

What is time, anyway? I mean, how long is the moment in which you realize that the shelf in your closet has finally given way and the whole thing is about to come crashing down on top of you, or when you pull the plug on the bathroom sink, remembering as you do it that the reason it was full of water was that your contact lens were soaking in there? Well, that's how long I waited for Jerome to appear. And as I waited, counting my pulse and sweating, I suddenly knew with crystal clarity that Jerome was not going to be the man my mother had been talking about all those years. Hope, which is supposed to spring eternal in the human breast, put a gun to its head and pulled the trigger. I was doomed.

I squirmed in this purgatory for perhaps thirty seconds, though it seemed eons, before the door opened at last and Jerome was standing in front of me. It was then that I realized I'd been overly optimistic after all.

It was immediately apparent that Jerome knew the chemistry was wrong, too. I don't know, maybe it had something to do with the way I was nonchalantly posed on top of the tv set. Anyway, he winced, sighed, and what had been a bright, expectant smile quickly died from his face.

He took off his coat and said stoically, "Hi there."

I could only swallow noisily in reply. "Glorp," I said.

"You must be Donna," he said.

"Well, uh..." I said.

At this point some of you may be thinking that this story has a trick ending, that Jerome and I are now happily married, with twelve kids and a house in the suburbs. You may think that the sun comes up in the west, too, but in both cases you'd be wrong. From that modest beginning Jerome's and my relationship took off and went absolutely nowhere. He sat on one side of the room, stroking his sister's cat while I sat on the other side, watching the clock and thanking God for having let me drive my own car that night. To this day I don't even know why Jerome missed dinner.

In fact the only thing I ever learned about him was that he liked the "Waltons" and the only thing he learned about me was that I didn't. Finally, around 8:30, I couldn't take any more and made some transparent excuse to put us both out of our misery; Jerome didn't argue even a little. From beginning to end it had lasted about two hours, and it was the longest evening of my life.

Since starting this essay I've talked to one or two people who maintained that they've been on blind dates that were not terrible. It is my opinion that these people are either recovering from amnesia or else they think that the rest of us are pretty stupid. One man went so far as to say that he actually enjoyed blind dates and would go on more if he ever got the chance.

He said that there was lots of dating potential out there, just waiting to be discovered, and so what if you had to wade through a little sludge to get to it?

"Sure," he said. "I always go on blind dates. You never know, the next one might turn out to be somebody really great."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Well in that case how'd you like to meet my cousin Esther? She's got a great personality, is loads of fun, and doesn't eat much."

His eyes took on a slightly crazed look and his knuckles turned white as he tightened his grip on the arm of his chair.

"Well, uh..." he said.

I thought so.



Anthony C. Kallas

2nd Place Short Story Award

DEATH'S WISHBONE

Now that the years have pinned me like some aged moth to this board of a bed, they think I am finished. They think that soon it will be time to divy up the old man's loot, and so it will. But I'll have you know that it was not always like this. No...

Once, before this face of mine was wrinkled like the loose skin of an elephant's behind and long before the snow had touched my head, I was somebody; I really was. Pah! You don't believe me, you think it's the drug making me ramble. Well, maybe it is. But even if you filled me to overflowing with those modern pain killers and yesterday-erasers, I would still remember. Even if you changed my skin to plastic and pushed me full and packed me tight with today's latest and greatest modern miracles, I would still remember. Do you hear? I WOULD STILL REMEMBER!

Ramble on old man, you are thinking, I'll just make a notation of your ravings on the chart and recommend to the doctor that he increase the dosage of the calming balm another 100cc's.

Fuck You! Do you Hear? Right where it hurts the most! I do not want to be calmed! I do not want to be soothed! I want to feel while I can...to remember while I can...to breathe on my own while I can. And when I can't any longer, to die...on my own while I can. Do you hear? Do you...Come back. Come back! You acorn-titted nurse, come back and listen.

Do you see what it is like? They only see the dilation of my eyes, hear the beating of my heart, feel the temperature of my body, but they refuse to see me...hear me...feel for me...but...What am I? And then, what did I expect? No better, certainly. My ex-wife is a nurse, or, that is, she was a nurse until they made her retire, put her out to pasture in an old peoples home. Brought in beginners to care for her, student nurses, who probed and poked at her private parts with wiggly-rubber-tubes and shiny-steel-needles. Poetic justice? What the hell, she was as cold as fish as ever swam in a deep-freeze anyway.

But, does anyone deserve to be quick-frozen while still alive? Never mind, forget that, strike it from the record; else they'll up the balm another 50cc's. Still, I wonder how many needles and tubes she took before they finally got her?

You know, when I was just a bit younger, I was quite the ladies man. Not exactly a Don Juan, but, on a scale of one to ten, I would have rated myself at seven or eight. But that was before and after my marriage, and occasionally during. I gave and took as I could. Of course, that was before the liberationists moved in

with their pantsuits and their starched, white uniforms. What they wanted was all take or all give, according to their mood at the time. Well, it was confusing. I was always giving or taking at the wrong time with the wrong one.

But, I don't blame them any; they were just caught up in the lunacy of the times. You see, it was at this time the bubble of the american dream popped right in our faces; covering our fragile bodies and egos with the muck and stickiness of a hundred plus years of hard won freedom. All we were trying to do was to cleanse ourselves by rubbing briskly and abrasively against each other. Of course, all we managed to do was to rub each other raw and the wrong way at the same time. Still, we managed to generate some heat; that's more than they got now.

Why I would no more fuck one of these neon-nurses than I would let a large mouth bass tickle me with its tongue. I'll wager all these prim and proper Penelopes get their off duty kicks by making it with a test tube. On duty, I already know what turns them on—"charting." What else?

But now, enough of my crackling. Pot-shotting and muckraking will not help me now. Nor them. Nor you. I and everyone else knows that the whole human race is born, embarassingly enough, with clay feet. Oh, we do our very best to hide them? our cracked clay feet. We stick them in shoes that constantly change their design and color according to the fashion of the day.

"Oh, what beautiful feet," We exclaim, never believing a word of it. Yes, we do our best to forget that our very foundation is laid on the very basest and most common of all materials — clay: wet and gummy, dry and cracked, slimy and oozing, or hard and baked. We cannot escape the simple fact that our existence is firmly and permanently rooted in clay.

"Shut up old man," you are thinking, "Shut up and die." But I won't! Do you hear? I won't! I'll just keep these sheets soiled and this room smelling of death just as long as I possibly can. I will be foul-mouthed, ill-tempered and odoriferously nauseating till, at last, you recognize me: the clay-footed person I really am. I will no longer be a thing called Longaster, Frank S., whose whole existence consists of lines of a chart. No, I will be Frank S. Longaster, nicknamed Fang, a living-breathing-pissing-shitting-puking-fucking human. Before I am finished with you and this whole GodDamn institution, you will know me as a whole; the total sum of my parts, not as some errant gall stone whose progress can be charted. You will be intimately aware of my strengths and my weaknesses, right down to the dimples on my cheeks.

Of course, all this that spits and hisses from my tongue does me absolutely no damn good. It gives me a sore throat, leaves me panting for breath, and increases my dosage of balm another 50cc's. But, what the hell is there left for me to do? How can I show them that I'm a me, not some fucking picture puzzle that can be pieced together, scrabbled, then pieced together again? But, of course, it's hard for me to make my point when I'm lying scattered in a zillion pieces, impatiently waiting for them to match my colored fragments to their coding chart.

It wasn't my idea to come to this wonderland. Even the lies told here are pure and white. My sons talked me into it. I should have known something rotten was cooking when both of them showed up on my porch. Shit-faced with excitement, breath steaming green from their mouths and nostrils.

"Hi Dad, long time no see," they squawked in unison. "How have you been?"

"Just fine," I answered, looking at them. Their eyes, too, were all aglow and sparkling. Diamonds, diamonds, burning bright, some old man will fry tonight.

"Mind if we come in and visit awhile," the oldest one asked for the both of them.

And, of course, I thought “Yes” and said “No.” After all, blood is thicker than water. Isn’t it?

“Well, Dad,” said Michael, settling his mountain of mush into my favorite chair, “the old place still looks the same.”

“Yes, it surely does,” agreed his younger brother Jude, his dark complexion making him seem little more than a shadow.

“Home is always nice to come back to, even if it’s only for a visit,” mused Michael the mountain.

“Yes, it certainly is,” echoed the shadow.

“How’s the garden?”

“Yes, how’s the garden?”

“And, how’s your lumbago?”

“Yes, how’s your lumbago?”

“Have your planters warts been spreading?”

“Yes, have your planters warts been spreading?”

“And, how are your corns? Have they been bothering you lately?”

“Yes, have your corns been bothering you?”

And how’s this, and how’s that, and have you this, and have you that, ad nauseum, even worse, until I couldn’t stand it or them any more. And, of course, I couldn’t stand it or them from the very beginning.

“Don’t lose your temper with them,” I told myself. “After all, they are your sons. But what does that mean? It means,” I thought, “don’t lose your temper with them, even if you can’t stand them.” But, of course, I did.

“Why do you keep shouting repetitions at me,” I asked them angrily. “Do you think I’m deaf or dumb?”

“Oh no. Certainly not,” exclaimed the mountain.

“Oh no. Certainly not,” exclaimed his shadow.

"You see! GodDamn it," I shouted at them, losing complete control. "You're doing it again!"

"Pardon us," said the mountain.

"Yes, pardon us," echoed the shadow.

"We had no idea," said the mountain.

"We had no idea," echoed the shadow.

But, of course, they did. Confusion was their game and I was their aim. And, they succeeded. By the time they finished their duet on me, I was on the verge of a completely heinous crime. But, of course, I did nothing. Nothing, that is, but sit and listen and play right into their hands, knowingly, in my paternal ignorance.

"Father," said the mountain, "we have been extremely concerned over your mental and physical well being."

"That's very true," agreed the shadow, sitting in the gloom of his brother's hulking presence.

"And we have decided that it would be in your best interests for us to admit you to the Riddof Medical Clinic for a thorough going-over. Dr. Riddof has agreed to take personal charge of the investigative, diagnostic, and therapeutic evaluation procedures.

"No," I screamed, "I won't go!"

"Yes," said the mountain.

"Yes," said his shadow.

"No," said I. "I am your father."

But, of course, they made me go. Blood is thicker than water.

My sons personally dragged me to the clinic; though clinic is a somewhat misleading name for the massive complex of medical marvels which occupied over a hundred acres, grounds not included. A score or more of sparkling white buildings, reflecting the sun's heat back to where it originated. The original Crystal Palace, home of the perfection of progress.

"Stop," I pleaded with them! "Stop, before it's too late. You are my blood. I am your Father. Why are you doing this to me?"

"Blood is thicker than water," said my son, the mountain.

"Yes, blood is thicker than water," echoed my son, the shadow.

The administration building was a busy place. God thrives on business. Everyone turning here, turning there, timing, timing, timing; tiny moving parts of God's great wristwatch.

My sons moved me toward the receiving counter: the last dividing line between love/hate, sanity/insanity, generosity/greed, life/death, blood/water.

I was assigned to the geriatrics building, third floor, room 333. I told them I had changed my mind and decided not to have the complete physical after all. The desk clerk informed me that the choice was no longer mine, (Was it ever?), that amongst the papers I had signed, was a voluntary commitment, minimum duration two weeks. I told them I didn't give a fuck, I was leaving anyway. They immediately assigned two seven-foot snow monsters as my personal escorts: guides, so I didn't get lost.

As they pulled me away, I appealed to my sons for help. They nodded and smiled encouragingly at me, but, of course, did nothing. After all, blood is thicker than water.

Once I was settled in my room, a sweet, young nurse came in and gave me my first fifty-cc shot of calming balm. She was a perfect young thing, complete in every way, except, of course, she wasn't human and didn't have a heart.

"There," she said to me after she finished snapping the needle into my arm. "You have a nice rest and we'll do your worrying for you."

I tried to tell her that I had been doing my own worrying for over seventy-two years and even though it made me miserable, I was fucked if I'd part with it. But, of course, I couldn't get it all out, the balm worked too fast and soon I was outside of time, nibbling at eternity. And even though eternity tasted good, I soon had my fill of it.

Later, when I had regained my senses, I realized I was not alone in the room. I had a roommate about the same age as me, but much, much older.

"Hello," I said. "My name is Frank S. Longaster; my friends call me Fang. What's yours?"

But, of course, he didn't answer. He just lay staring at the blank whiteness of the ceiling.

"Well," I continued, "if you don't want to tell me who you are, it is ok by me."

"I am Death's wishbone," the old man whispered.

"What?"

"I am Death's wishbone."

"Oh," I said, "I don't get it."

"Neither do I," he whispered, "but, it doesn't matter. Death knows."

"What?"

"Death knows."

"What," I asked.

"Everything," he whispered.

"Oh," I said, "I see."

"Yes," he whispered, "but, what you see is nothing. With your vision, you can see into the heart of nothing. But, Death, ah, it sees into the heart of everything; the heart of nothing included."

"Oh," I said, "I see."

"No, you don't," he said. "You see nothing."

"How long have you been here," I asked, trying to change the subject.

"Where," he asked in a whisper.

"Here," I said, "in this place."

"Oh, in nowhere," he answered. "I have been here in nowhere forever."

"Oh, I see," I said.

"You see nothing," he whispered.

"I don't understand," I said.

"Neither do I," he whispered. "But, Death does."

"Look here," I said. "If you're trying to confuse me you've succeeded, so, you can stop any time."

"Stop what," the old man asked in a whisper.

"Never mind," I said.

"Never mind what," asked the old man.

"Nothing," I said. "Forget it."

"Forget what," repeated the old man?

"Nothing," I said!

"I can't," said the old man.

"You can't what," I asked.

"Forget nothing," he said. "Death knows I've tried, but, I just can't. I've never been able to forget nothing."

"Oh," I said.

"Oh, what," asked the old man in a whisper.

"Oh, nothing," I told him. "Forget it."

"Forget what," he whispered?

"Nothing," I said.

"I just told you," he said, "I can't. And what's more, I never have been able to." The nurse came in just as he finished our conversation.

"Hellooo," she cooed at us, "and how are we feeling today?"

"Touchy as hell," I said. "When will the doctor be in?"

"After your shot," she answered, flashing me a smile that froze my nerve-ends solid. "He will be in to see you then."

"But, I'll be out from the balm then," I told her.

"Yes," she said. "That is correct," and she snapped the needle into my arm and plunged the plunger that set off the dynamite that exploded the universe.

"But," I managed to push the words through the shooting stars, "how will I know when I can leave?"

"Now that is not my responsibility," cooed the nurse, cocking her head. "You'll just have to ask the Doctor when he comes in."

"Oh," I said, and the white went black except for the shooting stars.

Sometime during the period of my absence from earth, my sons must have come in to visit, because, when I finally managed to open my eyes, there they were; perched on the edge of their chairs like a couple of starving vultures, waiting and watching, pinning me fast to my bed with their unblinking gaze.

"What in the hell are you two staring at," I asked them.

"Nothing, Dad," wheezed Michael the mountain, wiping globules of sweat from his forehead. "It's just that we have been awfully worried about you. You were almost a goner."

"What," I managed?

"You were almost a goner, Dad," repeated the shadow from his chair in the corner.

"Why," I asked, "What happened?"

"They injected too much balm," said the mountain. "They got your color coding chart mixed up with someone else's and it almost finished you. You have been out for almost three days."

"Yes," said the shadow, "they gave you too much balm and it almost finished you."

"GodDamn! I'm getting the hell out of here before they kill me," I said, feebly kicking at the sheets.

"You can't, Dad," said the mountain, "it would be fatal."

"What," I asked. "What? What?"

"It would be fatal to leave," repeated the shadow.

"Yes," explained my son, the mountain, "the overdose of balm has caused damage to your heart and maybe more. They are not sure yet, but, they're going to run some tests."

"But, they will kill me," I whined. "If I stay here, that nurse will finish me forever."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about her any more," said the mountain.

"No," agreed his shadow.

"What," I said, "I don't understand."

"They transferred her to the terminal ward," explained the mountain, "where she can't do any harm."

"Yes," echoed the echoe. "She will be harmless there."

"Oh," I said, "I see."

"No you don't," whispered the old man, still staring at the ceiling. "What you see now is nothing and that is not anything at all. But you will see."

"What," I asked.

"Nothing," he whispered.

"What," demanded my son, the mountain?

"WhWhat...whwhat," stuttered the shadow?

"Nothing," I said.

"Yes, that's it," whispered the old man. "Nothing. Now you're beginning to see."

"What," demanded Michael?

"Nothing," I said, "absolutely nothing."

"Absolutely nothing what," asked the shadow in vibrato.

"Absolutely nothing-nothing," repeated the whisperer still staring at the naked white of the ceiling.

"What does he mean," the mountain demanded of me?

"Yes," echoed the mountain's shadow, "just what does he mean?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Yes," whispered the old man, "I think you've finally got it."

"What," repeated the mountain in a duplicity of rage?

"Yes. What," screamed the shadow? His voice an ear-splitting falsetto.

"Nothing," whispered the old man.

My vulture sons were struck dumb.

Of course, like me, they had been struck dumb from the very beginning. But, now, their condition was eternally concretized, thanks to the old man, who was the same age as me, but much, much older.

I waited as my son, Michael the mountain, struggled for control. But, of course, that is all he achieved—a struggle, which controlled him and made him lose control.

"Who is he," the mountain demanded, his bleary eyes bulging from his fat head?

"He," I said, nodding my head toward the old man, "is Death's wishbone."

"What," asked the shadow, sinking toward the back of his chair.

"I am Death's wishbone," whispered the old man.

"Yes, yes, of course," agreed the mountain, changing his tactics. "But, why are you here and what precisely is wrong with you?"

And, of course, the old man paid him no attention. In fact, the old man never took his gaze from the naked white of the ceiling.

"Did you understand my question," asked the mountain.

"Yes," whispered the old man sadly.

"Then," said the mountain confidently, "let us hear your answer."

"Yes," echoed the shadow, "Let's hear it."

"I am doomed forever here in nowhere for the same reason your father is."

"And what is that reason," asked Michael, smelling his own stench in the wind.

"I," continued the old man, "am doomed forever here in nowhere precisely because there is nothing wrong with me. Except, of course, that I am Death's wishbone."

"What," said Michael, "I'm afraid I don't see."

"Neither do I," exclaimed the shadow.

"Yes," whispered the old man, "you both see; and what you see is the nothing that is your destiny."

"Oh, how absurd," exclaimed the mountain.

"Yes, isn't it," said his shadow.

"Yes," whispered the old man, "it seems that way to me also. But, of course, I can't know that it is for sure. But, Death knows."

"But, how do you know that Death knows," demanded the mountain?

"Yes, how," asked the shadow trying to make his voice sound deep. But, of course, no matter how he tried it still came out a squeak; the kind of squeak that a dirty squeegee makes when it lacks water to wash with. And, the squeak wasn't even the shadow's to call his own; it was just an echo off the mountainside.

"I know," said the old man, "because I'm Death's wishbone. For years Death has whispered the truth in my ear. It has said that we are all his wishbones: that all things that live must die. That he is the origin of the point of truth. He has whispered to me that this small pin-dot is all there is; that this truth can only begin when the absurdity called life ends: finalizes its' circular strivings and terminates its' fat blood illusions. But, of course, you two cannot understand me; the taste of blood is still sticky sweet on your tongue."

"No," said my son the mountain, jerking himself up, glaring maliciously at the old man. "No! Our blood will always be thicker than water. Your truth is dying, soon to be dead."

We all waited, but the shadow was silent. The mountain had lost its' echo, and now it stood alone facing a future that was already a past.

"Your blood," whispered the old man, "is thicker, but, not thick enough to keep you from sinking to the bottom and drowning in its' sticky ooze. Water, like the truth, can quench a life-long thirst. Your blood cannot do that. Taste blood and the animal that you are becomes lost in the sweetness of its' taste. Still, you remain an animal, lost in sweetness or not."

"No," said the mountain, "No! My life will be sweet. It must."

Turning his bulk, he strode toward the door, paused, pivoted; a tank with one track locked, the other grinding away with motion.

"Good-by Dad," he said, not looking at me, but looking for his shadow that was already gone. Then, he too was gone.

"Yes," I said, "good-by."

For awhile, after the departure of my sons, all was quiet. The old man lay still as ever, eyes fixed, staring at some invisible spot on the ceiling; and I, well, I spent most of the time going over all the could-have-beens that might-have-been if I had only known that nothing is what I would eventually come to. Perhaps, known is the wrong word, for I had known all along, but, somehow I could never quite believe. To know and believe at the same time is quite a trick; few ever manage it. Now, thanks to this old man, I, too, could manage it. Gratitude welled up within the walls of my tired, worn-out body.

"Thank you," I said.

"What," asked the old man in a tired whisper.

"Thank you," I repeated.

"For what," again a tired, faint whisper?

"For nothing and everything. For letting me see, for showing me my sons and myself. For showing me my death."

"Oh," again just a whisper.

"May I ask just one more thing of you?"

"What?"

"Who are you? I mean, what was your given name before you became Death's wishbone?"

"I..." came his voice creeping softly between the beds, "my name is...was...Dr. Benjamin Gottlieb Riddof."

"The founder of...?"

"The same," came the whisper.

"Yes, Ben Gott. I see."

"Yes," he whispered, "Now I believe you do."



Mary Elizabeth Coffman

“A NOVEL”

“Tell me who you are,” he whispered passionately.

“We are supposed to put everything in a supply closet.”

“Get me a pepsi.”

It was noon on a Friday, but no one was yet aware of that. Everyone was dead. But they didn't care. It would have been impossible for them to care. You see, they were not conscious of things in the same way they had been before.

It was an odd situation for Nora, a new office worker, to come to grips with. She noted the bad grammar and awkward construction of the last sentence. Perhaps, she thought, the dead were not that, oh, how should she put it, *particular* about matters of form. No, doubtless they were more interested in style.

“That is a non sequiter,” observed Mary.

Now the day had run its course. For the dead it had been a long day, yet if they were fatigued it did not show. This puzzled Nora, a very able office worker indeed, and she knew she would think about it later. Then again, maybe not. Maybe she would just go away, making certain the office lights were turned off and the door securely shut. She hesitated about the propriety of leaving so many dead people in the office with no staff present. She supposed, however, they would not steal much. She hoped so. That is, she hoped not. Hoped they did not steal anything. It would destroy her faith in dead people if they did, and it would be hard to prove her non-complicity in the act. Indeed, impossible, since she would have no living witnesses.

But enough of death! thought Nora, now an off-duty office worker. The evening was young, and she had many a plan. Let the dead take care of themselves. *She* would not do it for them. That was not what she was paid to do.

Chapter Two: “Avoid Verbal Orders — Say It In Writing”

Some of you may be new at this game. Many of you may be new to this game. The majority of you may be new to this game. In fact, I have little doubt that *all* of you are new to this game.

What is this game? A good question. (To be read in a conversational tone.)

Give them what you've got, boys.

It's not what you think it is.

(tenor voice) My lungs have collapsed.

(three to fifty altos or a single saxophone) I feel ill.

No no no no no no. It's not that easy. The story started long ago, when I was a little child. I love to tell the story. The theme of fame and glory. To tell the old, old story.

But that's another story.

Well, I suppose you're wondering about all the dead people in the office and how they got there. We presumed they did not arrive after their death. It is proven that self-locomotion is vastly more difficult after death. That means that Travel Agents realize essentially a very small portion of their money from corpses.

All the people in the office were just strangers who'd drifted in from the street (before their death, of course) in twos and threes. Once in the office they'd just all killed each other. That's all there was to it. They didn't like each other so they just all killed each other. Pretty soon they were dead. Now that was a fine way to act, wasn't it? Do you think that was nice? Well, I don't either.

And so this is the story Nora was never to know. But she didn't care. A good office worker, such as Nora, can find a job in pleasanter surroundings.

F u cn rd ths u cn gt a gd jb w. mo pa.

THEN END

Notes on the contributors:

SANDRA RISEMAN is a former Sangamon State student. She has been published in *brainchild*, a women's poetry cooperative, volumes 1, 2, and 3, and in *Uzzano*. Next spring her poems will appear in a chapbook sponsored by Sangamon Poets Press. JOHN RANYARD has majored in psychology at Reed College in Portland, Oregon and holds an M.A. in biology from SSU. In January of 1977 Sangamon Poets published his book of poems entitled, *Dog's Breakfast*. MARY ELIZABETH COFFMAN received an M.A. in literature from SSU in 1975, and is currently in her third year of teaching rhetoric and composition at Danville Junior College. MARGARET PENDER who is from Rhodesia has attended Lincoln Christian College and is currently a junior at Sangamon State majoring in literature. MAUREEN SPHAR was enrolled in creative writing at SSU in 1975-76, holds a B.A. in Individual Options, and is now studying for a master's in the Community Arts Management program. DENNIS KIRCHNER is a part-time student at SSU, working towards a master's in biology, and is employed at the Illinois Department of Transportation. MICHAEL MINER holds a B.A. from Illinois College in Jacksonville and is currently a student at SSU majoring in literature. SAM WHITSITT is a graduate assistant and student in the literature program at Sangamon State. DONNA McCracken has acquired both a B.A. and an M.A. from Sangamon and is employed in University Relations as a staff writer. She is also currently working on her second novel. ANTHONY KALLAS has completed a chapbook of poetry entitled, *Rock River Suite*, to be published and released next spring by Sangamon Poets Press. TERRY PETERS is employed in the Gerontology program at SSU and is a working novelist. CRAIG McGRATH is a graduate assistant at the Learning Center at SSU and a student of literature. ROBERTA DEKAY is working on an M.A. in literature at Sangamon and has published poems in the Springfield women's poetry magazine *brainchild*. BILL CONNER lives north of Springfield and is currently working on his first novel. JANE MORREL is a poet and teacher. She received her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville plus additional work at the University of Missouri. Presently, she is working in pediatrics at Memorial Hospital in Springfield. Her work has appeared in many journals and periodicals and she is active in creative writing workshops at Sangamon State. RICARDO MARIO AMEZQUITA has received a B.A. and M.A. from SSU and has published *Eating Stones*, a chapbook printed by Sangamon Poets Press. JANE PLASTER is currently enrolled in the psychology program at Sangamon. JAY JACKSON is working on a B.A. in economics and will begin work on his master's this spring with the emphasis in sports and recreation administration. His art has been displayed at local and statewide art shows. LINDA JACOBBER is a graphic artist employed at Horace Mann. SANDY KREISMAN received her B.A. as an arts major at the University of Maryland and has shown her artwork both privately and publicly in and around Washington, D.C. She is currently working on a master's from the Community Arts Management program. No biographies were given to be printed for the other contributors.