

The Broken Teacup - Volume 3

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Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, conga drummer/percussionist who plays Afro-Cuban folkloric music for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in *Ranger*, *New English Review*, *A Sufferer's Digest*, *The Raven's Perch*, *Corvus*, and many others. . .

THE COST by Jeffrey Zable

There's enough artificial love going around
to fill a toilet bowl that reaches to the moon.

This artificial love is everywhere: in politics,
in the entertainment industry, in the religious
community, among relatives, acquaintances,
and so-called friends.

My only advice is to be careful where you devote
your heart, your time, and your money,
‘cause, in the end it could cost you dearly—
so much so, that you may not be able to find the road back
from where you came. . .

A. Kahn (she/her) creates raw, emotional poetry and prose, and is currently revising a novel. Her prose has been published in *Of Rust and Glass*, poetry in *ONE ART* and *San Pedro River Review*, and artwork in the horror anthology *Café Macabre II*. When she's not writing, she can be found reading, watching movies, or drawing.

Nuclear Option by A. Kahn

Help me feel nothing
Take away
the baby-sized urns
and a life abandoned
out of fear.
I'll be the 1950s housewife
Rolling out gluten-free dough
staring into space
finally unwondering
How things might have been

Audrey T. Carroll (she/they) is the author of *What Blooms in the Dark* (ELJ Editions, 2024), *The Gaia Hypothesis* (Alien Buddha Press, 2024), *Parts of Speech: A Disabled Dictionary* (Alien Buddha Press, 2023), and *In My Next Queer Life, I Want to Be* (kith books, 2023). Her writing has appeared in *Lost Balloon*, *CRAFT*, *JMWW*, *Bending Genres*, and others. She is a bi/queer/genderqueer and disabled/chronically ill writer. She serves as a Fiction Editor for *Chaotic Merge Magazine* and Editor-in-Chief of *Genrepunk Magazine*. She can be found at <http://AudreyTCarrollWrites.weebly.com> and @AudreyTCarroll on Instagram/Bluesky.

Desire in the 21st Century by Audrey T. Carroll

I want the air to be clean, for my
students to be able to breathe,
for my daughter to be able
to breathe, for me to be able to breathe

Air purifiers are listed on a site named after
warrior women and a savanising forest
with images of cute little corgis and beagles
as though they are the problem—
their odor, not our human greed

I added one to my wish
list when the west coast wildfires
made it too dangerous to be outside
or open windows, when my sister
back in Queens gave me tips and tricks
for keeping the suffocating air from seeping in,
instructions for the best use
of towels and blinds to keep us
from choking as we suck in ash and smog and soot

I want the air to be clean, for my
students to be able to breathe,
for my daughter to be able
to breathe, for me to be able to breathe



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] our human greed

[REDACTED] is [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] wild [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] too dangerous [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] suffocating [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I want [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] a [REDACTED] forest

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] trick [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the suffocating air [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to keep us

from [REDACTED] ash [REDACTED]

I want [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to breath [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I want [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to breathe]

I want [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] to breathe]

for my daughter to be able

to breathe, for me to be able to breathe

Peter Cashorali is a neurodiverse queer writer living at the intersection of rivers, farmland and civil war. He practices a contemplative life.

Three Musketeers by Peter Cashorali

We saw the young unhoused woman
Yelling to the air in socks
And no shoes, back and forth
Beside the little corner store.
Hurried home and got a pair
Of newish sneakers then drove back,
Parked, got out and approached her
Carefully and from the front,
Showing her what we'd brought,
Could she use these? She accepted,
Plus the dollars in our wallets.
She asked if we'd go in the store
And get her a Three Musketeers,
The man wouldn't let her come inside.
We went in. Young guy at the counter
Not an asshole rang us up,
Said customers got screamed away,
He felt bad but what to do?
We said we knew it wasn't easy,
What a crazy time this was,
Went back out with candy bars,
Gave them to her. As we drove
Away she had resumed her pacing,
Back and forth, shouting down
Voices she heard anyway,
Sneakers under either arm,
Dollars crumpled on the sidewalk,
Musketeer bars in her fist.
Suffering that doesn't stop,
Misery that wasn't earned,
The nothing of what we did,
The mystery in the nothing,
Musketeer bars in her fist.

Jasmin Leigh is a contemporary author of works focused on what it means to be human. Shining a spotlight on all the love, grief, and raw moments most people turn a blind eye to. When she isn't writing, she's usually browsing for more books to add to her slowly growing pile. Jasmin is currently in the process of having her first book of poetry published. She's been published in *The Ikebana Magazine*, *Between Magazine*, *paloma magazine*, and *The Accendo Review*. Some of her work can be found at <https://murmurousdaydreams.substack.com/>

Waiting in a Blur by Jasmin Leigh

I send you over a couple of my crying selfies, tears staining the lens, my eyes red and swollen, my face akin to a lobster

It's 6 hours later that you copy and paste a fanfic you wrote involving the two of us clasped together, all sweaty limbs, needy mouths, and endless moans

I wonder how many cigarettes you smoked in those 6 hours, I imagine lapping the ash off your tongue

I say I would've preferred a Greek mythology, epithets of you, smoke-haloed, and me, tear-glistened

A normal person would've texted me "calm down" to placate my crying and justify their own selfishness

You're still selfish, but in a way that gives and takes at the same time

How often I find myself yielding to your flights of fancy

The least you could do is curtsy to my own desires

Patricia Russo's work has appeared in *One Art*, *The Sunlight Press*, *The Twin Bird Review*, *Revolution John*, and *Metachrosis Literary*.

If It Was Good News, It Would Have Already Come by Patricia Russo

The autumn day is sunny
but we keep to the shade.

Tomorrow is hurrying to us
but we decide not to think about it.

I count my heart beats,
he watches the ice in his glass melt,

as we ponder how much can change
in the blink of twenty years

and the sleeping dog scratches the air
with one back paw.

Time and Space by Patricia Russo

The landlord swears he'd changed
the batteries in every smoke detector
in the place

but there's still a beeping
coming from the basement unit

the one that the three guys
who built a time machine
are no longer occupying

but as they paid a year's rent in advance
the landlord isn't bothered.

Today, the neighbor on the left
said she's seen them
going in the front door

only there were four of them now.

I've not heard anything from below
no voices, no footsteps
just that distant beep

every 52 seconds

like that of an aging rover
half-submerged in the dry gray sand

still alive
but running out of time

and never coming home.

november by Anonymous

I am unaware of everything but november here, now. It is cold outside and all my blankets and dirty laundry are on the floor. I am unaware of the way my tongue searches for water, only the naked angry voices begging for it. No one can see it inside my mouth, no one understands what it is that I am asking for. The cold moon sees through my paper skin and sharpened teeth. I cannot carry it on the train or on the plane, it will not fit through the door. I must break every bone in my body for them to take this burden from me.

Till Kallem, Ph.D. (they/them) is a transmasc biochemist from San Francisco, currently living in Liverpool. Their poetry explores the tender and brutal moments that accompany queerness in young adulthood. Their work can be found in *Adult Groceries* and *Corporeal*.

Stacks by Till Kallem

isn't it interesting how
my hair keeps growing even
without your fingers finding their
way between them. isn't it odd how
the dead skin on my palms sloughs off
unearthing an unlimited supply of fresh
layers that do not know what it feels like to hold
your hand. and isn't it strange how I eat the peach
chapstick from my lips when you are not there to share
and no matter how much I seem to slather my lips keep
cracking peeling while my fingerpads are stained black with
the pen marks I nervously trace after seven hours in the stacks
as my hair grows thick and unkempt on the sidelines until I'm some-
one I don't recognize. it's honestly the most startling way to realize that
time is passing me by and it's unnerving to watch my body forget, rise in
the morning without the smell of skin on skin so shoulders seize during the
afternoon until fingers and wrists are lightning rods of hot and cold and lower
front teeth press against upper front teeth now splitting blubbery cheeks in half

But I Don't Forget.

you swirl echo repeat with tic tic triggering those same pathways
in my brain that keep fussing firing tweaking tugging at the
tendons that connect my muscles to my frame
making this mindless body jerk and
jolt I swear this is no
way to live.

Drunk by Till Kallem

if we were both drunk we would
cry,
in a corner,
for two hours.
god how i want that,
need that—
to break,
fall,
bleed let me bleed.
these scars have been quiet for too long.
I want to untangle the ball of yarn
in my chest,
to find the beginning
and the end.
I want you
to knit me into a sweater
and keep yourself warm.
but i won't and you won't because
I don't drink and
you don't cry.

Sia Moon is a young New Orleans-based poet of Black and Buryat descent. Her poetry has been featured in the *Riverbend Review* and the *Eunoia Review*. It has also won a Scholastic Gold Key.

Please Laugh at My Poetry by Sia Moon

Right now, I'm thinking I should've written this as a vignette. You know—Sia Moon is a sixteen year old poet who can't write, here's a short narrative about her. Funnily enough, I didn't know the meaning of the word “vignette” until yesterday, when my eleven-year-old sister told me. I guess I can still make this a vignette, but it's one eleven a.m. and I'm getting lazy. I used to write serious poetry. Now, I write about fish talking to humans and crazy girls who spit in martini glasses. I use *italics*, for God's sake.

Make the sign of the cross. Pinch your fingers together and, do it with me now, forehead, heart, shoulder, shoulder.

No, pick your hand back up, you have to do it three times.

Sorry, I'm paranoid about God stuff. Call it religious confusion. Call it blasphemy—I'm not sure.

Okay so about the title: I just realized that my art is so self-deprecating... How sad is that? I don't believe in poetry anymore. I have to attempt literary mirth in order to not want to rip the keys off of my laptop.

Is it possible to be a poet who can't write? I try everything to exercise my creative capabilities. I get drunk, I hang upside down, I go on jogs, I draw, I smoke weed, I stick my head out the window, I pick flowers, I go swimming: *Nothing works!* I can't write a poem for the life of me—not one of substance.

Sia Moon is a highschool student who can't study, a gym rat who can't do a pushup, an artist who can't draw, and a poet who can't write a poem.

There's my vignette. I'm not trying to manifest this energy, I'm just frustrated, so hold on:

Make the sign of the cross. Pinch your fingers together and, do it with me now, forehead, heart, shoulder, shoulder.

Pick your hand back up.

I Choose to Stay Floating by Sia Moon

In Cool Water. I don't swim.
Though, if my arm swept
The waves, I would certainly take flight
And propel myself far,
Farther, farthest away.

A shark!—*No*, a fish.
Big, blue. With bloody gills
That open and close laboriously.
Poor baby.

Nevermind. He impales
My skin with his nibble-teeth,
Dragging me towards
An island,
Towards seclusion.

“*No, thank you!*”
Though, he didn't ask what I thought about this ordeal. Featherly,
Is that a word?
I remove his fangs
From my calf.

In cool water, I don't swim.

E Kraft is a poetry editor whose poems have been nominated for the 2024 Pushcart Prize and published by *The Hanging Loose Press*, *The National Poetry Quarterly*, and others. She is grateful for everyone who has read her poems or attended her readings including her favorite dog from the local shelter.

Whispers in the Wind by E Kraft

I whispered into the winds last night
Straining out the window to hear you,
White knuckles gripping the oversized sill,
But all I heard was trees rustling.

My heart raced to the possible sound of
Footsteps approaching the room,
Persistent undercurrent of dread seeping
Under the first door of my youth:
Uninvited.

Looking back, I saw laughter marred by unease,
Anticipating complicated dishes of memories,
Dry aged pain stewed into herbs of survival
Bubbling in its pressure cooker forebodingly
Then force fed into me, still burning.

Wrath finally flipped the pot onto the ceramic floor
Allowing the pungent pus to ooze into
The cracks within the cheap supersized tiles
Then I smashed one bowl after another
Elucidating my emancipation.

I whispered into the winds last night
Saying my last good-byes to the spoiled stew
And embracing whom I have become:
Today I am full enough.

Hannah Dilday is an emerging American writer residing in the Netherlands since 2020. Prior to relocating abroad, Hannah earned her BS in Philosophy from The University of Oregon. Hannah's poetry has appeared in *ONE ART*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, and *Book of Matches* among others. When Hannah is not writing poetry, she enjoys photography and practicing Dutch with locals.

Hunger Pangs by Hannah Dilday

Let every apparition drip
between your fingers as you
try to catch me like the rain.

Listen as sandcastles swallow all
your oceans in my deserted land.
Feel my lost letters like leeches

softly etched into your skin.
Look down and you'll still see
my scars, cus' nothing you do

will ever make me disappear.
Sometimes desire doesn't die,
and I'm afraid it never will.

Mark J. Mitchell has been a working poet for 50 years. He's the author of five full-length collections, and six chapbooks. His latest collection is *Something To Be* from Pski's Porch Publishing. His latest, a novel, *A Book of Lost Songs*, is due out in April from Histria Books this spring. He's fond of baseball, Louis Aragon, Dante, and his wife, activist Joan Juster. He lives in San Francisco where he points out pretty things. He can be found on Bluesky @MJMitchellwriter

MANSPLAINING MOONRISE by Mark J. Mitchell

Look east—you rarely look that way.
It's small—a green glow. Let's walk up
that hill. The park filters twilight.
We'll climb the slide and watch the sky.
Below the bridge—see it? The play
on water arcing. How its stuck
one thin horn above the bay. Right
there. Can you see with your new eyes?
The moon can rise during a day
and you may miss it. She can touch
your bones. When she sinks in night
we're left with stars and lonely sky.

John Doriot is an award-winning author and poet. He has written fifteen books, of which six have won the Georgia Independent Author of the Year Award from 2022-2024. Two of those books, *From Sorrow To Tomorrow*, and *Slowly, I Grow*, won for best collection of poetry in 2023 and 2024 respectively. He has contributed poetry to *WestWard Quarterly*, *Poems for Tomorrow*, and *Feed The Holy*.

Leaks by John Doriot

My mind drips

like
a
leaky
faucet.

It is annoying for me,
a reminder to others
regardless of repairs,
it will continue to leak.

There is not an endless supply of water,
yet, it appears there are infinite subjects
which tunnel into my brain like earworms
increasing hormonal levels of angst

I try to shut off the main valve, but I fear
doing so would sedate me into little more
than a pillow, appealing for a moment
as I close my eyes, and relish the dark,
until I hear the ticking of the cuckoo clock.

How Many Times by Kendra Whitfield

must I burn the cross of you
on the pyre of my shame?

A nightly effigy in photos and forgotten ties.
I've burnt your letters, your bills, your fucking meeting minutes.

Remember how you called a "State of the Marriage" meeting every day
before I had a chance to even put down my books, or brew a pot of tea?

How you scorned me for not completing action items or writing SMART goals,
as if our relationship was an agenda item, a business transaction?

Yeah, I burned those, and the dog's favourite toy.
I couldn't believe you left that behind,

that you, the careful one, would be that careless.
All the leftover detritus I burned was mere kindling compared

to the bridges that smoked in your wake.
You even burned the boat that bore us to the

shore of forever and left me stranded
on the sand with nothing but love to burn.

So I pile every scrap of you I can find on the pyre,
light them with a prayer: Godspeed to you.

May your madness abate and your senses return
May you never return to me.

It's been a decade and
The bonfire is still smouldering

I am tired of the burning.
The smoke smarts my eyes.

I cannot see clearly
I cannot see you.

That, I suppose, was your point.

What Do I Know About Kendra Cammell? By Kendra Whitfield

I'm not attached to my body
I hit myself in the head and call it self-care.

I wonder how sharp my knives
need to be to slice open my carotid artery

I travel easy through life knowing
there's enough whisky and sedatives

to do the job if ever I decide that
work should be done.

I was named after a man who died the weekend I was conceived.
Was it morning lovemaking? before the conference began?

Or was it grief sex? Frantic, feral,
after he dropped dead in my father's arms?

I'm so tired of being an afterthought.
I can't do this anymore.

Robyn Schroeder is a graduate of Truman State University. She enjoys making an adventure out of anything. Her work has been published in *Prairie Margins*.

Dear Taxidermist by Robyn Schroeder

The news is that
my death will surely
be something so ridiculous—
asphyxiated by tortilla chip,
abdication of the ground
for too strong a fixation
on the constellations,
kitchen renovation
gone wrong—
That it will be received
with a cosmic face-palm
from the universe too
used to my shenanigans
to let me have
the last laugh.
The joke's on them, though,
(the cosmos)
because they'll have to
see to the sensation
that will be my funeral
and my final request:
Dear taxidermist, please
contour my face so
someone will finally
notice my cheekbones.

Cristina Adams is a Cuban-American writer and editor. She has an M.A. in creative writing from New York University, and her work has appeared in various publications, including *Dickinson Review*, *Minetta Review*, *Ark* and *Buffalo Press*. When she's not writing, she likes to travel and read short story collections. Black beans and rice are her comfort food. She lives in Austin with her husband and Luna the dog.

Rage looks for a place to rest by Cristina Adams

I have armloads of anger. It is full
of grief. Some days it snarls,

a tethered pit bull behind chain links,
snaps at passers-by (frenemies, politicians, assholes),

the taste of escape on the apex of its tongue,
canines clacking, strings of furious drool

swinging from its maw. A brother's temper,
stomped pale by the years, fits in a shot glass,

lives quietly on his pantry shelves behind jars
of seaweed-green dill pickles, boxes of day-glo

orange macaroni dinners. No, he didn't forget
where he put it, but he tries. Amnesia promises

a more peaceful home. On overcast, humid days
when the dog lolls on her back, legs splayed

in sufferance, rage takes a break, stretches
out, sneaks away for a little me-time.

Cultivating wrath is hard labor like brick-laying
or collecting garbage along an interstate

with only the spiteful August sun to piss you off.
May I leave some of this burden in the borrow pit?

You only need enough for a sip.

Sarah Chin lives in Chicago, IL. From nine-to-five, she works in progressive politics and organizing. From five-to-nine, she is working on her first novel. Her writing has been featured in publications like *HAD*, *Kingfisher Magazine*, *Anodyne*, *The Belladonna*, and *fēlan*.

Snowshoeing Through Amsterdam by Sarah Chin

Being someone who always remembers is an imprecise form of love.
It's kind but unforgiving, sharp and lean but buoyant and newborn pink in a certain type of light.

I remember your mother, your sister, the specific shape all your stories had.
I remember your cracked front teeth.
I remember the inside of your mouth.

I would recite my remembrances in there, willing you to swallow them so that some part of me could be some part of you.

“Do you remember when we snowshoed through Amsterdam and you fell and skinned your knee? And I took off my skin just to be there with you?”

I am someone who lives most of my life in my mind,
so I remember how quickly I became a body for you.

It was the cold cobblestones pressing into my back,
a smell like iron, my finger on a bruise
like snowfall pressing insistently on the night sky
the thought that I could lie there and stare at the wound forever.

Huina Zheng, a Distinction M.A. in English Studies holder, works as a college essay coach. Her stories have been published in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, *Midway Journal*, and others. Her work has received nominations three times for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She resides in Guangzhou, China with her family.

Unseen Magic by Huina Zheng

Sunlight sneaks into our small kitchen and plays tag with dust motes above the sink. My son scatters his pocketful of pebbles on the sill. Arranging. Rearranging. Believing that the right combination will reveal the secrets of the universe, possibly making him invisible or sprouting wings. He mumbles spells, forehead all scrunched up. Outside, my daughter's on her shadow-chasing spree, darting around the backyard with all the hope in the world cupped in her tiny hands. She chases, leaps, convinced they're sprites in a fleeting space. "Join me!" she beckons. To catch a shadow. To make friends. Trusting a world where wonder forever unfolds.

What Foundation Can Cover by Huina Zheng

is every flaw on your skin, smooth as fine porcelain, like a patch of land blanketed by the first snow of early winter. Like a husband who, after leaving bruises on his wife's face, kneels to apologize and swears never to do it again, only to inflict new scars as soon as old ones fade.

The wife is as forgiving as the ocean, like a bottle of carefully formulated healing cream, persisting in an internal healing process. The husband thinks she will always hide the scars. On the surface, they respect each other, appearing harmonious and loving. Every neighbor, every relative, every friend believes this facade.

But foundation wears off. But foundation knows the truth. No matter how many times makeup is applied, tears will eventually dissolve all pretense, leaving the truth nowhere to hide.

The husband kneels again, swearing no more domestic violence. The wife believes him again. And then, not long after, and many times in the future, in the dim light of dawn, just as day prepares to break, he will shatter her foundation bottle, scattering shards like the glaring rays of the sun.

Alice Lowe's flash nonfiction and prose poems have been published this past year in *Bridge VIII*, *Burningword*, *Bluebird Word*, *Skipjack Review*, *In Short*, and *Drifting Sands*. She has been twice cited in *Best American Essays*. Alice writes about life, literature, food and family in San Diego, California. Read and reach her at www.alicelowebooks.wordpress.com

On the Mantel by Alice Lowe

On our 67-inch mantel, atop our non-functional fireplace, from left to right, are a straggly pothos, started from cuttings, in an orange ceramic pot; a celadon-glazed vase made by my friend Ava; and a scale model Airstream trailer, 10 inches from front bumper to rear hitch, homage to my husband's fantasy life. In and around the trailer and a small model cabin found on a walk, are a collection of plastic miniature critters, most of them found objects: snakes, spiders, frogs, a dinosaur, an alligator, a turtle, a rabbit, an eagle, a centipede and a couple of generic bugs, a tiny cat, an even tinier flamingo, a tiger on the roof, and a one-inch baby human, molded into a sitting position, perched inside on a banquette, plus assorted extraterrestrials, a railroad tie, rocks, a piece of flint, small bits of manzanita wood, and a capital letter R, maybe a monogram from a bag or belt, a hint to the stories behind found objects and the people who owned and lost or discarded them.

A clay sculpture made by Eric, a local pottery teacher and master of the form, with a purple glitter wand inside, next to a small poorly formed pinch pot with a narrow squeezed mouth that I made in one of Eric's classes. In front of it are three origami cranes in different sizes that Linda, another friend, brought me from Japan, and behind it a wire chair with a starburst seat back, next to a small square mirror with a ceramic snowflake hanging from it, in front of which is a brass menorah with half-burned candles—this is the midpoint of the mantel—and more of our menagerie: an orange chicken my husband, Don, brought me from New Orleans, an aluminum squirrel nutcracker from an antique shop in Idyllwild, a real peanut in its mouth and a keychain from Guadalajara hanging from its paw, and a little chick made from wood chips that we bought from a vendor in Balboa Park.

A wooden goddess, playing a toothpick that substitutes for a flute, an elegant ceramic bowl, also celadon, with pressed leaves and jagged edges, made by the dearly departed Geri, a blue and white Delft star hanging from one of its edges, and filled with pine cones, dried seeds, a small green Christmas ornament—the newest addition, found by Don in the park—an ominous-looking crow hovering over two little wooden birds, red and blue, and assorted bird feathers. In front of it are a fragment of a blue and white tile, its design resembling hieroglyphics, and a flat, round formed piece of clay with multi-colored stones set in the top, perhaps intended as a coaster, made by Sarah, a friend's daughter, at a summer camp 30-plus years ago. Another green vase, this one from a yard sale and lacking the elegance of Ava, Geri, and Eric's clay work, next to a bronzed pomegranate, a delicate pale blue ceramic perfume bottle with dropper, a feather-topped voodoo

doll from New Orleans, a clay bird, and, finally, a mini-grandfather clock, a gift from former neighbors during their moving-away yard sale.

We're not hoarders or collectors, but found objects of no tangible value—tchotchkes, trifles, baubles, bibelots, doodads, gewgaws, whatnots—tend to amass on windowsills, bookshelves, and other flat surfaces, the *crème de la crème* allocated to the mantel. These are pleasures, not treasures, indulgences in whimsy and playfulness, sadly lacking in the world today.

E.P. Lande, born in Montreal, has lived in the south of France and now, with his partner, in Vermont, writing and caring for more than 100 animals. Previously, as a Vice-Dean, he taught at l'Université d'Ottawa, and he has owned and managed country inns and free-standing restaurants. Since submitting two years ago, more than 90 of his stories and poems have found homes in publications on six continents. His story "Expecting" has been nominated for Best of the Net. His debut novel, *Aaron's Odyssey*, a multi-genre gay-romantic-psychotic thriller, is to be published in 2025.

Three's A Crowd by E.P. Lande

"Well, I had an interesting experience," Katie announced.

When, during the past year that I had known Katie, had she not had an interesting experience? And when had she not told me about it, all about it, all the details, far more details than I cared to know yet needed to know, to satisfy my innate curiosity, my need to know all about her and her life apart from me?

"At my modern dance class, this guy..."

I knew it; I *knew* it. It had to be... yet, I could be wrong.

"...asked me out for coffee."

Sweet; how old-fashioned... the dog. I could just see it: the guy panting over a caffè latte, drooling over his Danish, slobbering over his words; they sounded soooo cute! And?

"I told him I couldn't—not then as I was meeting you—but we had a chat. That's why I'm a bit late."

And?

"He actually asked if we could go on a date. I told him, 'Sure, why not?'"

I looked at Katie. Here she was, not two months after telling me she needed a breather, that entanglements would be shelved. Well, I guess entanglements these days have a very short shelf-life.

It was 'our' Tuesday when we practiced Argentine tango in my restaurant. We started dancing—a waltz—but Katie was so wrapped up in her tale that she lost her form.

"Katie, this is not a Viennese waltz. I think you watch *Dancing with The Stars* too much. Look at me... that's right. Now pretend we're just tango'ing, none of the heads held high and away... and, come closer... yes, close embrace. I want to feel your body against mine...yes, like that... What's this guy's name? You haven't mentioned his name."

Did my voice reveal a little testiness?

"Ernie; his name is Ernie."

"And Ernie, what does he do—aside from taking modern dance classes?" Nosey, to the point, blunt, inquisitive—whatever it's called, I was being overbearing as well. "That's right, a little lilting, but keep the rhythm ... better. Now I'm going into cross-basic." Wow, Katie did a front boleo, with her left leg as I held her against my right shoulder without my leading it.

"Ernie's a contractor. He has his own company... in Belvidere, I think. I don't know that

much about him. We've only just talked—and that was only for a few minutes." Katie made a pirouette—a tango pirouette—again without being led. Ummmm... I wondered what else she was doing without my leading her? I could see it all: Ernie's in, What's-his-name is out. Musical lovers, a new game for adults. But I didn't seem to be the one calling the tune. I looked at Katie again. How could I be upset? All she was doing was what came naturally—to her—what came naturally to all of us. To some it came more easily than to the rest, but it's all there, in our genes, ready to pop out when needed—or led.

"What do you think will happen?" As if I had to ask such an obvious question.

"Well, I'm not sure..." Come on, Katie, don't play games—not with me. I know you know, and I know you know that I know you're going to tell me. So?

"How old is Ernie?"

"Ernie's in his 30s..."

"So was What's-his-name." I seem to have forgotten the name of her last lover.

"True, true. But Ernie's a more mature thirtyish." That's a rationalization, pure rationalization. I know. I was trained as an economist, and if there were a group of people who know how to exploit the art of rationalization, it's we economists. If the economy is getting too hot, we rationalize it as cooling off; and if the economy is in a downturn, we rationalize it into an expansion. With Katie it was called hormonal rationalization.

"This guy, Ernie, does he have any attachments?" Now I was making him sound like an email.

"No, none that I know of. Sweetie, I only just met him, remember?" How could I forget?

"So, he's not married?"

"Nope, nor has he ever been." Thirtyish and never married? My suspicions reared their ugly—or maybe they were really attractive—heads. I knew we lived in Northern Vermont where prospects were slim pickings, but even the ugliest, the most-homely, the stupidest, found someone. How had Ernie managed to avoid the inevitable Vermont experience? Perhaps he was craftier than I thought. Perhaps Ernie was smart. What a shocker that would be. But was he clever? I knew many smart people—but few were clever. And, I knew a few clever people—and most were not smart. To be both—smart and clever—that was the winning combination. I needed to build my forces for combat.

"I presume then that he hasn't had children?" Up here, you could never take that for granted. People reproduce like rabbits—and marriage wasn't a precondition, nor an obstacle.

"No, no children. At least I don't believe so. He didn't speak of any. I told him about mine, and he didn't admit to any of his own. But I imagine I'll hear more about his private life—if I see more of him, that is." I was sure too. Knowing Katie, I would be the first to be told as well. That was my rôle—at the moment. I needed to be more careful—less critical, less judgmental, more generous—to leave the corridor to my cunning open and clear of impediments.

"Let's dance, shall we?" Katie suggested as she rested in my embrace. Wasn't that what we had been doing? I couldn't believe we had spent all this time talking and not dancing—except for a desultory attempt at waltzing.

Sun Tzu advised that strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory, but tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat. I needed any and all information so that I could form my plan, to marshal all my forces, for I had yet to discover Ernie's vulnerabilities.

It had been more than a week since I learned about Ernie.

“Ernie's an excavator.” We were trying a new routine, using nuevo tango music—Piazzolla—to take us deeper into the inner voice of the dance. “He digs foundations, you know, for homes and such...” I held Katie back a little longer than I usually do as the music—being nuevo—called for a more modern interpretation. “...but he doesn't pour the cement.” I think I held her just a tad too long, for Katie began leaning back against my right arm. “He grades roads...” I brought her back, placing my right foot against hers, in preparation for a morida. “...and driveways...” Holding her, I moved my left foot, and, bending my knee inward, pressed my right foot against hers, to slide her right foot over to meet our left feet. “...but he doesn't maintain them.” I stepped back, holding Katie in place. “Occasionally he does carpentry...” Katie stepped forward, and before I could take a breath, did a front boleo—unled. “...and that's how he built his own house.” I was so proud of her. “Ernie's handy...” We then stepped together, but not to go to the cross. “...if you need a carpenter or someone to excavate the foundation of the house you plan to build...” I led her to step around me... “...or grade your driveway.” ... so that I could sacada her trailing foot. “Ernie's nice; he's polite.”

I learned a lot about Ernie, about as much as I truly wanted to know, information which I might be able to use later—when needed to destroy Mr. Nice Guy, in battle.

It was once more ‘our’ Tuesday, and we were dancing Argentine tango in my restaurant. The previous weekend Katie had had a date with her newest ‘friend’, Ernie.

“Katie... well?”

“Well, what?”

“Ernie, your date with Ernie.”

“Honey, you don't really want to know, do you? I know you; you do... and you don't. You say... and ask all the right things, but, you know, don't you, sweetie? I know it, and I love that you do. Now I'll tell you.”

“Katie, you don't have to tell me, unless you really want to.”

“But I *do*, you know I do.”

We danced while Katie told me about Ernie.

Ernie was independent... at least for the first four minutes of our dance ...setting his own hours... Katie danced ochos, back and front. ...which meant he could meet Katie at just about any time...

I placed a gancho. He gave her the impression that he had a tendency to be rigid. ...after which she crossed her feet. But perhaps Katie was confusing him with her previous lover that I somehow got rid of without trying. Then I led her to begin a molinete... Inflexible was the word she used to describe Ernie. ...placing sacadas to her trailing foot. This was based on her wanting

to change the time they were to meet ...I reversed her movement, to position her to place a sacada on my foot. ...and Ernie telling her that he couldn't, that he had another appointment. After the sacada, she continued another molinete... It immediately raised a red flag in my mind: appointment? ...while I circled my foot in lápices... Was Ernie implying that Katie was an *appointment*? Katie performed a back boleo... I thought they had a *date*. ...followed by a very snappy front boleo. This could lead to problems with Katie who, despite having three young children, was more of a free spirit. With her free arm she gestured, moving her hand... hesitatingly.

And then there was a girlfriend... I almost tripped: girlfriend? Did Katie say, *girlfriend*? ...recently relegated to the past tense. Of course, Katie had a past, or I should say, a few past lovers. I had to plan—to scheme—and it just fell into my lap. But Katie's past boyfriends were exactly that: past tense. Was Ernie's past girlfriend—to him—a past girlfriend? Perhaps Katie was putting too much of her own interpretation into what Ernie told her about this girlfriend—

We were walking a little too desultory for a good tango. But if what she related to me were the facts, this ex-girlfriend was another red flag, a clink in Ernie's armor. I brought us back to the cross, the cross being the best place... Now, how could I exploit this fissure, for I saw this girlfriend as Ernie's Achilles heel. ...for a salida for Ernie. I had my homework.

Katie always knew. She may not let on that she knew, but she did. She could read me, and I guess I knew that she could. But I never told her I thought I knew she knew, and neither did she. There was this sense of mystery between us. I would only go so far, then stop. Subconsciously, I must not have wanted to be obvious, never wanting to express what I felt, or how I felt, for then I would have committed myself. It would be out there, wouldn't it? And, you couldn't take it back; you'd made the declaration. Could I ever express my feelings accurately? Therefore, I left blanks, empty phrases... to be filled in. There would be misinterpretations—misunderstandings—but these could be refined, always coming closer to the truth. But what is the truth? People change, evolve—and so does the truth.

I recognized a change—a transformation—in Katie since we first met. What did I know of her then, and what did I know of her now? Perhaps the truth has been there all the time, and I had failed to see it. And then, what did Katie know of me? How much of me have I hidden from her, by design or by neglect?

Perhaps it's best to accept, and not wonder, not question, to be kept in ignorance, to always ask, "Do I really know?" Then the novelty remains, always—as does the mystery in the relationship.

We danced. Wasn't it strange, that each time it was different, how each of us danced, Katie's response to my lead, the way she moved? It was all strange to me—but I liked it that way. I never knew what to expect—nor did I want to, really. It was like each time was the first—and yet it wasn't. I forgot about Ernie... and the others. I was dancing with Katie; nothing else mattered.

I reached home with Katie still in my thoughts—of how each of us seemed to know what the other was feeling and thinking. That evening my friend David called. Since he introduced me

to tango, we had shared our experiences, so he knew of Katie. I told him about Ernie.

“Aaron, you told me this Ernie guy is a contractor? I have this contact in India; why don't I speak with him about, you know, arranging an accident? It should be easy.”

“David, I said I wanted to eliminate him from Katie's life—not eliminate him from his own life.”

“Well, you say there's a girlfriend; why don't I arrange with my contact to have her return, change her tense from past to present, so to speak.”

“Your ideas are too *deus ex machina*, David. Maybe in Greek tragedies they work, but we're not discussing some mythological situation. This is about real people here and now, a real situation in the twenty-first century.”

“Okay, maybe you're right. In any case, women usually don't give up on a guy that easily. She'll probably return, without any help from my source in India.”

“Are you sure? I was counting on Ernie's ex-girlfriend to be his Achilles heel.”

“That's because you don't understand women, Aaron.”

“You're the third person who's told me that.”

“Well, sweetheart, if three people tell you you're drunk, you better stop drinking and lie down. Have you thought about how you feel about Katie, because all I can tell you is that every conversation we've had since you started dancing with her, she's all you've talked about? If I were you, Aaron, I'd think about my own feelings for Katie, and what I want in the relationship. Then, instead of scheming to eliminate her other suitors, become one yourself. That, sweetheart, is strategic planning.”

Was David right? I hadn't courted a woman... in years! In decades, actually. Back then the acceptable ways—flowers, champagne, moonlight dinners—may not be how it's done today. I decided to call my sister Rachel; she would know.

“Rachel, remember you once told me I didn't understand women? Well, I'm now calling for your advice.”

“I was wondering when you would call, Aaron. By now you must be desperate. How can I help?”

I told Rachel about Ernie and his ex-girlfriend, and that David had told me I should court Katie myself.

“I agree with David. You need to jump into the fray fully armed. It's not going to be easy, Aaron. From what you've told me, Katie's a very modern woman—Independent, living on her own, self-employed in a professional capacity—all obstacles you'll have to break down without destroying them. They are her defenses against men—even against you, dear brother.”

“So, what do you suggest I do?” I hoped despair hadn't crept into my voice.

“First, I would befriend Ernie. Women love it when someone they admire—you, in this case—take an interest in the person they're dating. They open up and tell you everything, and this you can use to eventually get rid of the other suitor. My second piece of advice is: don't rush. Katie is currently involved with Ernie. You don't want her to feel you're trying to damage whatever is going on between them, because, if she thinks you are, she might start defending him

...and this you do not want to happen. Once you've stabilized the situation with Ernie, you can then start your own offensive."

"What do men do today? My only experience is TV dramas and current movie... and how real are they?"

"Women want men to focus their attention on them, not on themselves. Take an interest in everything Katie does, and everyone in Katie's life. You've told me she has children. Involve yourself in their lives and their interests. Mothers love it when an important person in their lives befriends their children. It shows them that this person cares, and would potentially make a good father—or step-father."

After my conversation with Rachel, I had to regroup. Some of what she told me—showing an interest in Katie, and taking an interest in her children I'd done, naturally, without any prompting or forethought, and I would continue, regardless of who Katie was dating. Now I had to subtly place myself forefront in Katie's thoughts, for her to realize that the person she was dancing with—the person right in front of her every Tuesday—was the right person for her. That would be my strategy. I would take Rachel's advice.

Katie suggested I meet her and Ernie after their dance class and before our practice, for a caffè latte. Taking Rachel's advice, I had hinted that I would like to meet Ernie as he would be approaching

the demarcation line between being an interlude and entering into the relationship phase, an appropriate time for me to determine his staying power.

After we ordered, I asked him about excavation as I was planning to build an indoor riding arena. Ernie could possibly give me advice.

"Ernie, the people I've been talking to have suggested piers rather than a concrete slab. Which, in your opinion, should I use?"

"I've never built an indoor riding arena, Aaron, but I have built barns. I believe they're similar in that neither requires heating. So, piers sound like the way to go," he told me.

"I understand that piers are more expensive."

"Yes, but they cost less than a slab if you require repairs down the road," he said.

"Aaron, you never told me you were planning an indoor arena," Katie joined in. "That's wonderful. Willie and Poppy will be really excited. That'll mean they can ride year-round," she added, referring to her youngest children. Since the previous summer, Willie and Poppy had been riding my two paso finos, Caesar and Sylvester. Dawn, Katie's oldest, came to ride infrequently, as volleyball and the clarinet took up most of her free time.

Ernie's phone rang and he excused himself. When he returned, he told us that something had come up, and left. Katie and I finished our caffè lattes, then crossed the road to my restaurant, to dance.

Katie continued dating Ernie. I learned that Ernie's ex-girlfriend was calling him—even now, months after they had separated.

"I thought she would, eventually," Katie said. "When Ernie and I started dating she would

call him all the time, not just once in a while, or even every day, but several times during the day.”

“Didn’t Ernie make it clear to her that their relationship was over?” I played dumb. According to David, ex-girlfriends often return.

“Yes, Ernie told me he had. But he also said she was very clingy, you know, needy.” So, it wasn’t over—at least as far as Ernie’s ex-girlfriend was concerned.

“Ernie’s going to have to tell her to stop, no?”

“That’s what I told him. I gave him an ultimatum: either he ends it with his ex, or I go; he can’t have it both ways.” Well, that was gutsy.

“When did all this happen?”

“Saturday night. We were at this bar where we hang out sometimes. I drank a Virgin Mary and we danced. There were lots of Ernie’s friends there too. Actually, Saturday one of his closest friends—a guy called Denis—came on to me.” Katie was like a field of flowers with all the bees buzzing around her.

The following Tuesday, Katie had put on a rather pensive tango before I arrived, swaying back and forth, like she had when I first explained the movement of ochos at the beginning of our dancing together—oscillating like a pendulum. I watched with different eyes, not wanting to interrupt her. Katie was meant to be herself, not made over to suit someone else. I had discerned that since we discussed our respective rôles in the dance. She understood what partnership meant ... at least when we danced together. I didn’t know what she was searching for in a life partner—but I didn’t know what I was looking for either. Watching her now, I did know that I would follow Rachel’s advice, to know if Katie was that person.

“I’ve decided Ernie and I should try not seeing each other, for a while at least.” I held her in a loose embrace, her back against my chest—and visualized Ernie’s eventual *salida*.

“Has this to do with his ex-girlfriend calling him all the time?” I seemed to be forever stating the obvious. Maybe it was merely a tactic, so as not to miss any of the details. She placed one foot over the other, then pivoted, to face me.

“He hasn’t told her to stop... or if he has, he hasn’t insisted. I don’t see the point.” She lifted her

left leg, slowly, as though she would do a front boleo. “He obviously hasn’t given her up, not completely. That’s not the kind of thing that’s good for a new relationship.” ...but then reversed the movement, and placed a back ocho. “If he works it out with her, well then, I might reconsider.”

Katie made it sound like a business arrangement—but then, she didn’t give me the impression that there was more to the relationship with Ernie than convenience. From one ocho she danced another—unhurried—as if her thoughts were somewhere else.

“He does have his points...” As Katie said this, she looked ever so seductive. I could tell what she was thinking—but I didn’t ask, because I didn’t want to know, or at least not be told, to have my suspicions confirmed.

“Ernie seemed quite nice, when I met him,” I added. Katie looked up at me, and placed a

sacada to my right foot, sending me 360 degrees, to face her again. “He works, has his own business, and you've told me Ernie is quite handy.” I didn't want to build Ernie up to be just about a perfect match for her; I was just following Rachel's advice.

“Yeah, I know, but his ex-girlfriend, well, being with Ernie is like having a relationship with two people... and that's not what I want.” I could see Katie's point. I didn't have to add anything more.

We remained in our thoughts while the music took us along, neither of us wanting, or needing, to be other than in an embrace.

A week later the definitive rupture occurred, and it wasn't pretty. I was practicing lápiz, trying to sacada Katie's trailing foot. I think I caught her foot on the last sacada before bringing her to cross her feet in front of me.

“Last Saturday I told Ernie: that's it. I told him not to call me until he's entirely finished with his old girlfriend.” I wanted her to step over my foot, so that I could stop her and then sweep her leg up...

“How'd he take it?” ...her leg went up, a little too far. I had to admit: David knew women better than I did.

“Okay, I guess. I think he was a bit upset, 'cause he left...” ...but she brought it down, into a back ocho. “...and there I was, alone in the bar, without a car.” Here I had, well, positive thoughts about Ernie, and he goes and does that. At least I need not have any more thoughts—of any kind—about him. I led Katie to take small steps: step, together; step, together; like that.

“How'd you get home?” I held her, and stepped back.

“Fortunately, Denis was there...”

It was while we were having a latte; actually, Katie was having a latte, and I, a double cappuccino. I needed a double, for Katie had just told me that Ernie had been taken out of his pasture and was now back in his stall.

“He's better than most. It'll give me time to look around. I've decided that our relationship is purely sexual, that it's not going anywhere else.” Had I just landed in purgatory? I didn't know—and to have asked myself might have given me answers; I had yet to find the courage. Having a more settled Katie—and I don't mean stable—allowed the two of us to better enjoy our moments together—and for me to continue with my strategy.

“Katie, maybe we should plan on going to Montreal, you know, dance at a real milonga?” I had, for a long time now, been suggesting we do this. I thought Katie needed to dance with others, for up to now I had been her only dance partner. We had become so accustomed to each other's moods and ways that we had begun to second-guess each other. For my part, I now no longer needed to be a forceful leader; I could get by on less. As for Katie, she needed to have as many experiences—and by this I meant of the dancing variety—as possible, especially different styles, to improve her ability to follow. We were becoming like an old married couple... and that's not what I had had in mind.

“Oh, honey, I’d love to. When should we plan to do it?”

“What about Ernie?” I asked.

“What about Ernie?” she replied. Good question, a delicate question—for both of us. At this point in our relationship, was I ready to jump in with both feet? I still didn’t know, despite Rachel’s advice. I knew I didn’t want to be an interlude. Knowing the right moment, no book could tell you, only instinct, and I wasn’t sure.

“Well, would he mind?”

“I dunno, but maybe he could come along with us.” *What?* Katie certainly had the weirdest suggestions sometimes. *Come with us?* How cosy. No; that’s definitely not what I had in mind.

When Katie had finished her latte and I, my cappuccino, we went back to my restaurant to dance. It was one of those dances where your mind wanders—not in the dance, but in the conversation that preceded.

I dreamed we were in Montreal, just Katie and me, dancing to light tango music, the kind you dance to in the afternoon at a tea dance. At the museum earlier we had seen an exhibition of Picasso; we went as it would be a treat for Katie. The exhibition was a small selection of his work, mainly portraits, a few Cubists still-lifes, and a bullfighting series.

“Enjoying yourself,” I ask.

“Ummmm, yes”, she murmurs as her hands—both her hands—wind their path around my neck... randomly.

Suddenly we hear a crash. The door opens and in prances a bull, and the music switches to Bizet’s *Carmen*—played in a tango rhythm. Everyone stops dancing. Katie turns to face the bull.

“*Ernie*,” she shrieks. “How did you find us?”

The bull prances across the room, knocking over the tea table, sending the cups and saucers and dishes with the tea sandwiches and the tea pot, crashing...

“Aaron... Aaron...” I heard Katie’s voice, from far away. “Aaron... are you...”

“Hi, sweetheart.”

“Where were you? I tried to do a front boleo, but you were so close that I hit your leg. Didn’t you see it coming?”

“I was somewhere else... somewhere... I’ll tell you later.”

We danced, my mind brought back from Montreal, back from the trip we were to take together. At least Ernie wasn’t going anywhere; but then, neither was I.

“It’s over; finished.”

It was the following Tuesday, and Katie had put on one of di Sarli’s more dramatic and sensual tangos, and we were just beginning to dance.

“What’s over?” I asked, in my mind thinking that ‘over’ wasn’t a word in Katie’s vocabulary.

“I told Ernie, it’s over.” Now I knew... but still wondered. “His ex- has recently been

calling, not a few times a day, but like every hour, like robocalls. It's no longer fun being with Ernie." Katie's molinete was precise, her pivots exact.

"Does that mean he's back in the pasture?" I hoped.

"For all I care he can be in Minnesota." While I wanted Ernie out of our lives, exiling him to Minnesota was somewhat extreme—even to me.

"What do you plan to do?"

"I had a call from Denis..."

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Jane Amulet by Paul O. Jenkins

Jane Amulet fancied herself a discriminating reader. That is, she wouldn't read any book before subjecting the author to what she deemed the appropriate scrutiny. There was great power in the written word, and she was determined not to allow any false idols to hold sway over her. In this regard, she was truly her mother's daughter. Emma Amulet was a librarian at the local college. Her specialty was information literacy, the ability to find, evaluate, and use information appropriately, but she especially enjoyed her secondary role: liaising with the English department to select new titles for the collection.

As a girl, Jane devoured every classic placed before her. The Narnia series, though a bit pedantic, contained valuable examples of allegory. Beatrix Potter's books about rabbits and other furry animals were important in terms of plot structure and anthropomorphism. When Jane expressed interest in the works of Mr. Lewis Carroll, however, Emma drew the line. Not only were his relationships with young girls questionable, he was known to have played at charades.

Jane's college years were less happy. She was, she had to admit, rather shy and had lost a bit of confidence in the first semester of her freshman year. She told her mother, though no one else, how a chance remark by her roommate, Becky, had shattered her confidence: "Just because your eyes are different colors," she'd said, before going out on a date herself, "don't use it as an excuse to stay in every Saturday night." In truth, Jane had never thought of herself as a wallflower. Frank Thatcher, who played #2 doubles on the tennis team, had squired her around during the last few months of their senior year in high school. Frank, currently attending a nearby university, was a reliable correspondent, and Jane secretly entertained dreams of marrying him one day.

One of their favorite pursuits was to compare reading interests. Jane had recently discovered Thomas Hardy, and was fairly certain he had been a man of good character. Frank, on the other hand, was knee deep in the nineteenth-century Russians. At first he favored Turgenev, but after being introduced to Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, Frank demoted the creator of the superfluous man to the status of "minor author." Tolstoy, he explained in one of his weekly letters to Jane, believably portrayed the entire spectrum of Russian society, from serf to aristocrat. His spectrum was thus horizontal. Dostoyevsky, on the other hand, drew characters both saintly and psychotic, and so one might say his spectrum was vertical. Between the two geniuses, all of Mother Russia, indeed all of life, was on full display.

Despite Frank's earnest devotion to the Russian greats, Jane was suspicious. In the library stacks that semester, she confirmed her doubts. Turgenev had spawned an illegitimate daughter; Dostoyevsky, though pitiable, seemed thoroughly dissolute. And if Tolstoy had been a wonderful

humanitarian, he appeared to have an unnatural preoccupation with sex and continually mistreated his wife. She was worried that college had changed Frank, and not for the better.

Just before Christmas break, Jane received a phone call from Frank announcing that he was very sorry, but he had met someone else, and would she please understand, and not hate him for disappointing her? He still thought highly of her, and could they please remain friends? In her initial horror, Jane could only deduce that he had met someone who did not suffer from heterochromia. Doubtless, some Slavic beauty with two blue eyes had dazzled Frank with her ocular uniformity. Staring into the mirror that night, Jane wondered if Becky might have been on to something.

The holiday season was understandably bleak. John Lennon's assassination made her question human nature, and that awful man Reagan was due to take office in the new year. Not even her mother's gift of a new set of steady Anthony Trollope's *Barchester* novels could lift Jane's gloom. She spent most of the holidays sifting through Frank's letters, looking for any clue that might help explain his eventual betrayal. She did not answer the weekly letters that the false one continued to write to her. Wisely, he made no mention there of his new acquaintance, but continued his praise of all things Russian.

Emma was quick to pick up on the change in her daughter. "Is there anything you want to talk about, dear?" she asked one evening while they were playing Scrabble. As she pondered a reply—not to mention how to unload the three "I's" polluting her rack—Jane wondered if now might be the time to bring up the father whom she had never met. She'd often been on the verge of raising the delicate subject, but just now the timing didn't feel right. "No, nothing," she said. "I just have a headache."

Spring semester held no hope of happiness for Jane. Campus life suddenly seemed so lonely, and then there was that loathsome required math course hanging over her head. She stumbled her way through the first few weeks of the semester like a somnambulist, content with the B's she received on quizzes and papers. The expectation of a summer with no obligations other than helping her mother weed the library collection back home represented her only consolation. She found herself fixating on her classmates' eyes. There was such beauty in their very regularity. Her only comfort was a deep-seated belief that she was a good person and that, in life as well as literature, virtue was always rewarded.

One night, as Jane sought solace from the horrors of math by dipping into Trollope, a brisk knock resounded from her door. She marked her place carefully, and walked to the door. It would be for Becky, she knew, another boy came calling. Based on the succession of boyfriends Becky had already worked through, Jane imagined his features. He would be tall and slim, well groomed, and equipped with the kind of swagger Frank had never attained.

The opened door revealed someone much shorter than she had imagined. He was about her height, and owned a pair of brown eyes that instantly began to study the floor directly they met hers. Despite her surprise, Jane was the first to speak. "Are you here for Becky?" she asked. In truth, by now she had guessed that he wasn't, but it was a question she'd asked so often that it escaped her mouth before she could think of anything else to say.

“Actually, I’m here for you,” the young man said, though his eyes still failed to meet hers. Jane felt certain he was afraid of acknowledging her heterogeneous orbs and decided she wouldn’t help him. Instead of saying anything, she merely tilted her head a fraction to the left and waited.

“A friend of mine sent me here. You’re Jane, right?” Jane murmured something in confirmation.

“Jane Amulet—like the charm, right?” He managed a little smile.

“Yes” was all she could find to say.

“Well, Emily thought you might be up for something,” he said.

Jane cataloged his features. His chin was decorated with small pimples, and she wondered if he ever had a need for a razor. He had a fine nose, though, and a strong jawline. His hair was short and aggressively wavy.

“Emily Brontë?” she asked. The joke escaped her mouth before she’d had time to consider its merits.

“No, Emily Meier,” the boy said, with a straight face, before realizing that it would be polite to acknowledge her attempt at humor with a smile.

“Well, in that case I guess you’d better come in,” Jane said.

The boy finally introduced himself. “I’m George,” he said, walking in and heading straight for Jane’s bookshelves. After a moment he said, “I see we have some common authors.” He studied the floor and reloaded. “That is, that we like some of the same authors. I like Trollope, too. And there’s nothing like some Hardy to make you feel better about your own situation.” He punctuated the remark with a hopeful grin.

Like Jane’s, George Gargery’s world was and always had been dominated by books. On his parents’ bookshelves stood all the masters, Austen to Zola, lined up like so many soldiers, ready for service when called upon. His father taught English at one of the many small private colleges that flattered itself with the distinction of being “the Harvard of the Midwest.” Far from encouraging his son to join the professoriate, however, Père Gargery cherished a hope that young George might choose a more useful profession, perhaps librarianship.

Jane sat down on her bed and with a wave of her hand indicated that George should sit on the chair stationed at her desk. “And whom do you prefer,” she asked her caller, picking up on his earlier remark, “Tess, or Bathsheba Everdene?”

George wanted to scratch his head, but was afraid it might indicate he suffered from dandruff. Television commercials for medicated shampoo had made a strong impression upon him. “I guess if I’m honest,” he said, “I prefer Bathsheba. She gets it right in the end.” Then he seemed to reconsider. “But you can’t help feeling sorry for Tess now, can you?” When Jane showed no sign of a reply, he went on. “I think we’re generally too quick to condemn. Misunderstandings are inevitable, and, let’s face it, we all make mistakes.” He scratched at his jeans in an attempt to remove a mustard stain. “And besides, she needed protection and never really found it.”

Jane evaluated his answer, assigned it an A-, and noticed a certain benevolent gleam in his eyes. Their discussion quickly became less esoteric. Soon they were discussing favorite professors, Emily Meier and other common acquaintances, and the relative adequacy of the campus food service.

As the weeks progressed, their relationship remained chaste. Then, just as Jane was beginning to wonder why George hadn't tried anything, he put his arm around her shoulder one night, and asked if that was okay. Jane replied by means of a quick, chaste kiss. She was happy to see a smile spread across the young man's friendly face and felt a certain warmth kindle deep inside her.

Things soon fell into a comfortable pattern. They dined together each night in Downton Commons and spent most of the evening studying near each other in the library. She knew that George was inexperienced but found their growing intimacy enticing. She enjoyed being in charge. One night he told her that he'd never felt this safe with anyone before. It was her eyes, he went on, at first turning his back to her before finding the courage to face her again. "I just know somehow that you would never let me down," he said in conclusion. It was just such moments of innocent disclosure that raised George in her estimation. Their kissing became newly passionate, but George seemed in no rush to take things to the next level. She pondered taking the initiative once more, but before she could act, another letter arrived from Frank. He and his girlfriend had ended their relationship—by mutual consent, Frank was quick to add. He had realized the error of his ways, and could he visit soon? He missed her.

Jane pondered the request for a number of days before replying. Did she really want to see Frank again after the way he had behaved? Should she tell George about Frank? And how might he react? Finally, she admitted to herself how flattered she felt to be pursued by two young men and gave Frank the go ahead. She must hear him out if nothing else. Thus, she accepted Frank's proposal that he visit her on Valentine's Day. The fact that the holiday fell on a Saturday was perfect. Surely, Becky would be out on a date with her latest swain on that of all evenings so she would have the room to herself.

When George arrived for their regular Friday night date that week, he seemed very excited. He checked the soles of his boots for any remnant of snow, placed them on the mat just inside her door and cleared his throat in what struck Jane as a significant manner. Any form of deception was anathema to Jane Amulet. Before George could utter a word, she summoned her courage and explained that she had something to tell him. George's face fell as she revealed the history of her relationship with Frank. Though he maintained a forced grin during her explanation, Jane could tell that he was crushed. He sat down, fit in a few pieces of the *Pride and Prejudice* jigsaw puzzle they had begun only last week, and then said he needed to get a head start on studying for midterms.

Jane was disappointed by the sulky nature of George's response. She knew he was inexperienced, but his reaction struck her as both petulant and boyish. Since Frank found Jane Austen "a bit frivolous," she carefully preserved the progress she and George had made on the puzzle before sliding it under her bed. Later that night her dreams were haunted by strange

melodies, and visions of her unknown father, the man her mother referred to only rarely and then simply as “that wretched scoundrel.” He appeared to be walking towards her but somehow never got any closer. Then, following the absurd logic of such nocturnal hallucinations, the paternal figure vanished and she found herself walking two dogs on one leash. When Jane awoke she felt as if she had never been asleep at all and wondered at the random electrical activity that had united such seemingly disparate notions in her brain.

In Downer Commons the next morning she looked about for George but neither her brown nor her green eye could detect him. She spent the rest of the morning in the loathsome company of integers, graphs, and Boolean values. At lunch George was again nowhere to be seen. At four o’clock she pinched some red into her cheeks as her mother had taught her and set off for the bus station. The Greyhound was right on time, and Frank was the first passenger to disembark. He fixed his eyes on hers before dropping his bag and crushing her to him with an impassioned hug. Compared to the more demure embraces George practiced, Jane found Frank’s effusion thrilling. He looked quite dashing and full of appeal.

“It’s so wonderful to see you again, Jane!” he said, looking straight into her eyes. As they walked to campus in the brisk weather, Frank threw his arm around her shoulder in a manner Jane found simultaneously exciting and presumptuous. It suddenly struck her that he was taking a great deal for granted. “We’ll go wherever you want for dinner,” he said, “and then I thought we’d just hang out.”

When he shrugged off his coat in her room, Jane was amused to see that he was wearing a Russian peasant shirt. It was off-white, featured a colorful if simple pattern on its cuffs and collar, and fell well past his waist. Frank noticed her reaction immediately. “It’s called a kosovorotka,” he said proudly. He spun around like a fashion model and then drew her to him again. Jane detected a faint odor of some wonderful cologne and began to imagine what they might do after they’d returned from their meal.

Since Jane felt the occasion warranted a bit of a splurge, she chose the Hampstead Inn for dinner. She’d heard their chicken piccata was excellent. When they removed their outer wear before being seated, she noticed some of the other diners staring at Frank’s shirt. During the salad course, Frank asked Jane a series of questions that were polite but also perfunctory in nature. How were classes, what was she reading, how was her mother? He nodded in reply to her answers but seemed impatient to move on to the real agenda: the latest developments in his life.

“And what’s new in your world?” she finally asked, in order both to put him out of his polite misery, and because she did feel a certain curiosity. She wondered if he might tell her more about the young lady who had come between them.

“Well, Jane, I’m going to Russia,” he announced proudly. “Our class leaves right after the Spring semester ends, and we’ll be there all summer.” He waited for her reaction, but Jane remained mute. “There will be some travel restrictions, of course, but, Jane, I’ll get to see Yasnaya Polyana!” Frequent mentions of Tolstoy’s estate in Frank’s letters had made her familiar with the name.

“How exciting,” she said, summoning as much enthusiasm as she could muster. She even reached for his hand in acknowledgment of such potentially life-changing news.

“I knew you’d be pleased, Bijoux,” he said, using the sobriquet he’d created shortly after they’d started dating. The mention of the nickname made Jane think of what she had just started to call George: Pip. *Great Expectations* was his favorite novel after all.

During the rest of the dinner Frank described the trip’s itinerary in detail worthy of *War and Peace*. The chicken piccata had a funny taste to it, and Jane declined dessert, but she described the meal as “wonderful” in response to the waiter’s inquiry as he presented the check. On their way back to campus, Jane felt she must come clean. “Frank,” she said, “you should know that I’m seeing someone else here at the moment.” In stark contrast to George, Frank took the news in stride.

“Of course, you would be,” he said. He paused for dramatic effect. “It’s only natural that a woman as lovely as you, Jane, should be highly sought after.” He paused again. “I mean, you do realize how beautiful you are, don’t you?”

Jane was astonished at the immediate effect these words had on her. In rare moments of self-confidence, she had grudgingly assigned herself the adjective “pretty,” but this word “beautiful” stood out in bold linguistic relief. Did Frank really regard her as a beautiful woman rather than merely as a pretty girl? Or was he just flattering her? Her mother had once shared Abe Lincoln’s observation that knavery and flattery are blood relations.

Following up on the perceived advantage he felt his compliment had achieved, Frank kissed her. First his lips were tentative, as if he were trying to rediscover some lost magic the pair had once felt. But then, as Jane began to respond to his overtures, Frank grew more confident. They had stopped beneath a street light, and Jane quickly indicated anything further must wait until they returned to her room.

There, Jane felt she was being kissed by a man instead of a boy. As they tasted each other repeatedly, Jane explored the muscles of his chest and felt newly desirable herself. She pulled off his kosovorotka, and they began undressing each other. Something fluttered inside her. Frank’s hands seemed everywhere at once, and she was aware that their relationship was about to gain new heights. Jane knew what he wanted, of course, but even in her reckless state she felt some trepidation. “Not that, Frank,” she said in what she hoped sounded like a murmur, “but I’ll help you another way.” As their eyes met, she felt they understood each other.

The next morning was unseasonably warm. As she lay in bed next to Frank, Jane heard both his measured breathing and the steady drip of melting icicles. Though she knew better, it seemed to Jane that spring beckoned. She saw the kosovorotka on the floor and thought how much easier it would be to love Frank if he were only shed of his Russophilia. She wasn’t especially proud of what she’d done last night, but she was pleased by the fact that she had acted on a woman’s instincts. And though the notion struck her as absurd, she thought Becky would have approved of the decision she’d made. Realizing her roommate would likely be returning soon, Jane shook Frank awake. He smiled at her in a new way, stepped into his jeans, shrugged on his peasant shirt, and headed for the bathroom down the hall.

At breakfast in Downer, Jane and Frank found seats near the end of the dining hall. She looked up in time to see George staring at her with an expression best described as injured. She found she couldn't meet his gaze and shook more salt on her already-salted eggs. She held two thoughts simultaneously: first that George seemed boyish, and second that she had somehow wronged him. She felt something turn over and die in her stomach, and, without excusing herself, ran to the restroom. There she left the contents of both her breakfast and the chicken piccata from the night before in the toilet bowl. A chill had seized her, and her head pounded. She staggered out of the bathroom, saw someone that looked like George, and fell senseless into his arms.

When she awoke, she was looking into Becky's face. "You're back," she said. "That guy's been asking after you every hour on the hour." Jane thought for a moment she might be referring to Frank, but then intuition told her that Becky must be referring to George.

"Pip was here?" she said. Her mouth felt pasty. The room still spun, and she knew she might need to run to the restroom again at any moment. "George, I mean," she added.

"He's the one," said Becky. "The other guy said he'd call you soon, but that he had to catch the bus back. Seemed like kind of a dick to me, if you don't mind my saying. And he left you this." Jane saw that Frank's parting gift was a tiny volume titled *A Confession*, by Leo Tolstoy. Becky reached for a glass. "Drink up. Lots of water. Then get some more rest." She paused a moment before adding, "what in God's name did you put in your mouth last night?"

Jane sickened anew at Becky's unintended witticism. She recalled Frank's appreciation for his Russian masters' ability to portray the wide spectrum of life and wondered where she might fit on the continuum? What had she done? In her current state, the desires she felt last night suddenly appeared foolish and ill-conceived. Instead of some long-delayed and inevitable step towards adulthood, her actions now struck her as those of a child.

"Okay, then. I'm meeting someone for lunch," Becky said, gently touching the top of Jane's hand. She looked at the alarm clock near the bed before moving to the door. "That guy'll be here any minute, I'm sure. Seems like the dependable kind."

Jane felt as if she had exchanged the contents of her stomach for some new-found wisdom. Empty didn't begin to describe the way she felt, both physically and morally. She drifted off to sleep, only to be awakened a few minutes later by a soft knock on the door. "Come in," she murmured.

George entered. He was holding a bottle of aspirin, and a large thermos. He pulled a chair next to the side of Jane's bed and said "it's important that you stay hydrated." Jane smiled weakly at him and stroked his hand. "Yes," she said, raising herself up with an effort, "but first can you walk me down to the bathroom?"

There, as she knelt penitently before what she'd heard Becky refer to as the "porcelain goddess," Jane vowed never to eat at the Hampstead Inn again. She imagined Frank on his seat in the bus and wondered what he must be feeling. When she found the strength to regain the hallway, George was there to return her to bed.

Jane looked up at George with her heterochromatic eyes and saw a tear in his. "Did you get my note?" he asked simply. "I slipped it under your door Friday night."

"No," she said. "What note?"

George thought for a moment and then went to the door. He lifted the mat, audibly sighed to himself, and retrieved a small envelope. Returning to her bed, he handed it to Jane. She recalled the letter Hardy's Tess had attempted to leave her lover, Angel, in a similar manner. For a moment she felt overwhelmed and asked him to read it to her.

"How about if I just show it to you?" George said. He drew the chair a little closer, opened the envelope and held up the small piece of paper. Jane read fifteen words: "Sorry, Jane. I'm new at all this. But I think you can keep me safe."

The icicles continued to drip from the windows. Though she couldn't hear the end of their journey, Jane knew that their long descent ended with a simple splash and a return to earth. At that moment, the future seemed infinite, unimaginable, in the hands of some indiscriminate God. As she touched the top of George's hand, his note fluttered onto her chest. And if she still wondered whether she might ever want to eat anything again, or if George Gargery were her destiny, she was certain that, in Hardy's words, love alone can lend you loyalty.