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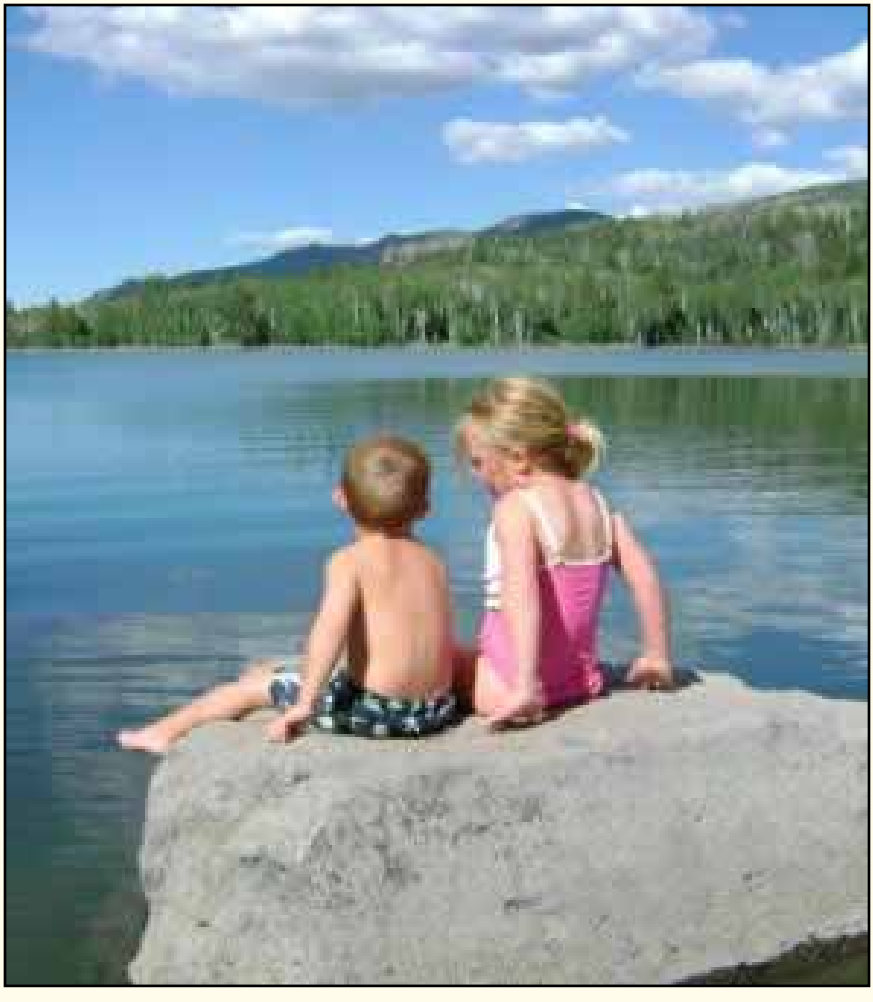


Editor's note

by Dean Rea

We trust that you won't go to sleep while reading this issue of *Author's Bazaar*.

First, you will be treated to a humorous recounting of how Ron Hylton, a letterpress printer, became engaged in what he refers to as a "horizontal business."

Of course, anyone who has visited Ron, the printer, and Liz, the teacher, in their house that fronts on Baker Bay in southwest Washington soon learns that these personable people are involved in several enterprises.

Dave Griffin gathers readers around a TV set to remind them how technology influences us all in a humorous, heart-warming story.

Lee Kirk and Sheryl Nelms share their poems, and Jim

Lamanna reminds us that amateur journalists practiced brevity in writing long before the advent of flash fiction and non-fiction.

Delores Miller describes the summer she worked as a maid for $16 a week, which was "big money" for a high school student during the 1950s.

You also will meet a Rat Terrier who learned how to be a good sport when confronted by rats and mice in a story written by Louise Fusfeld.

William "Bill" Sullivan also writes about mice in a 4,400-word short story, one of 31 scheduled to appear next year in his book, "The Oregon Variations." Bill is the author of 17 books. His latest guide, the 4th edition of "100 Hikes in NW Oregon," is available at www.oregonhiking.com.

A horizontal enterprise

By Ron Hylton

Everyone has to do something to make a living. I began my something by being a Linotype operator at a country weekly newspaper. I then learned a bit more and became a full-fledged printer, pressman and lithographer.

A brush with illness, and I decided on a career change. Three years later and I was a registered nurse. Unfortunately, the timing was off. Fresh out of nursing school I was given the opportunity to own my own print shop, and I still do today.

I began printing for mortuaries in the Portland, Oregon, area in about 1974. Miller & Tracey was the first one, and even though the business a bit secretive and very competitive, one begot two and before too long I was printing for 12 mortuaries. The printing consisted of memorial programs, those small pamphlets handed out at a service. This was the days before digital and copiers; the orders were phoned in: “We need a 100 of the red rose with the Twenty-Third

Psalm" and then the details: "George Smith —born — died —service." Sometimes there was more: prayer cards for Catholic services, tickets for the spaghetti dinner, "ticket printing courtesy of The Little Chapel of The Chimes" and of course letterheads, envelopes and the like. Some days not much business; some days a lot of business. Such is the business of death.

Type was set on one of our Intertypes, printed on a Heidelberg platen from stock furnished by the individual mortuaries. And then there was the delivery. It began innocently enough — during normal business hours. Then it was "say, can you come by a bit early and give us a hand...?" And a hand it was — and usually a bit more. Lifting a customer from point A to point B.

"Say, how 'bout us giving you a key so you can make deliveries after hours?" At first, that was a bit un-nerving; maybe too many old horror movies. I'd quickly unlock the back door, walk even more quickly to the front desk and then quickly make my exit — thankful that "no body" tapped me on the shoulder. No one did, not even to ask for a light.

One night I well remember: I entered the back door, walked past the "slumber rooms" into the foyer only to find a couple of people there: vertical types. They were as

startled to see me as I was to see them.

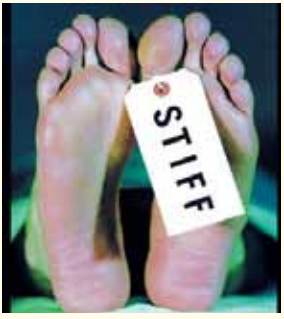
"Hi, do you work here?" they asked. "We've been waiting for about 15 minutes. Want to see our mother?" Someone apparently had gone home and failed to lock the front door.

All's well that ends well. So, it came to pass that the printer began to be a part of the undertaking team at various locations. Printing began to fade with the technology, and an apprenticeship at Chapel of the Chimes was in order.

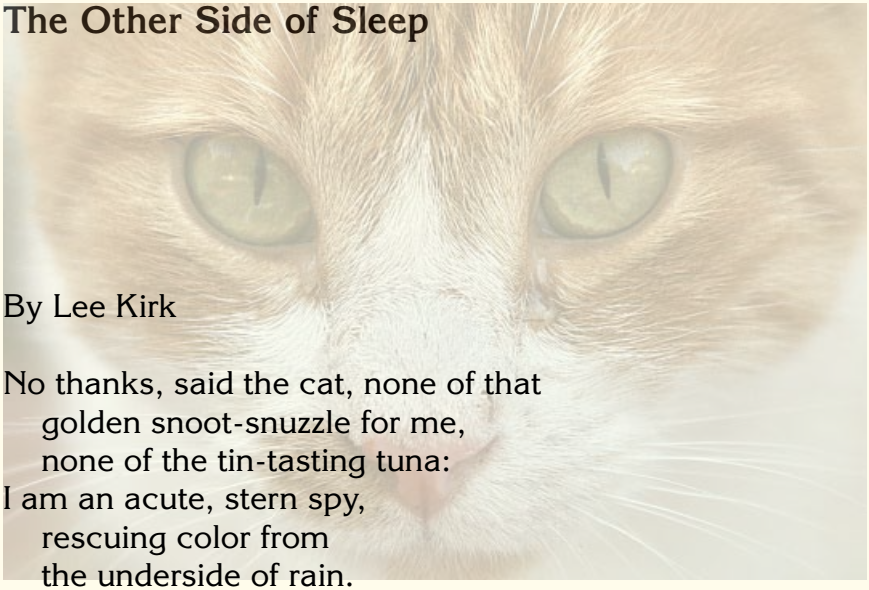
So, too, was a marriage.

Liz and I were married at a mortuary. We are driven to the reception in a limousine from one of the mortuaries. My best man was a funeral friend. Then in 1988 my friend from Miller & Tracey told me that a certain business was for sale in Long Beach, Washington, and here I still am.

Yes, there are more tales to tell, but I won't. Somethings are best unsaid. Maybe some day — but probably not.



The Other Side of Sleep



By Lee Kirk

No thanks, said the cat, none of that
golden snoot-snuzzle for me,
none of the tin-tasting tuna:
I am an acute, stern spy,
rescuing color from
the underside of rain.

Little children, do not cry:
listen for the press of my feet
denting the simple mosses of your roof.

Watch how I leap onto
the other side of sleep,
turning Time sideways, my way.

This is for you: they'll never know
what a shapely watch I keep
twilight to dawn, folding
down the dangerous corners
of the cut-tin edge of night.

Test Pattern

By David Griffin

When our children were quite young, my wife and I bought our first dishwasher and installed it in the kitchen. The kids, probably 3 and 4 at the time, became quite excited over what was to them a momentous paradigm shift in the household routine.

That evening we loaded the machine and pushed the buttons. The kids dragged their little play table chairs up to the washer to watch it work. There was nothing to see, of course, but that didn't stop them.

Helped by the whirring and gurgling noises coming from the washer, their imaginations ran away to a place only the very young can go. After a few minutes, the machine stopped and took a breather before what I guessed would be the next cycle.

"Mom, it's broke," said my daughter.

"Be quiet," my son told her. "The next show is gonna start."

I was reminded of the excitement felt by my brothers and me, three little boys, when we settled down in our living room in 1951 to watch our first television program.

On the night my father came home after ordering a TV set from a store in town, he explained that television was like a miniature movie.

The console TV with doors on the front arrived in the afternoon a few days later. We boys had all we could do to contain ourselves waiting for Dad to come home from his job as a newspaper pressman. Then we could watch our first TV show. All afternoon my mind served up images from the silver screen: my favorite cowboy stars and maybe Doris Day would hopefully appear in our living room, though somewhat smaller than in the theater.

After supper, when we were all assembled quietly on chairs and the floor and Mom had made sure Grandma had a decent seat close enough to hear, we were ready.

Dad switched on the TV set and we watched the tube light up. Immediately lines began crossing the screen, zigging and zagging and rolling enough to make anyone queasy. Finally, the screen resolved into a picture.

"What's that?" asked my older brother.

"It's called a test pattern," said Dad.

"It looks like an antenna," I said. "All those straight lines."

"It's not doing anything," said Grandma.

"Well, it's..," began my father.

"Where are my cigarettes?" asked Mom, patting up and down her apron, the one with so many pockets she could have rented out a few to the neighbors.

"I've gotta go to the bathroom," said my little brother.

"The test pattern has five lines in each set," I said. "That must be like a code."

"I've never actually seen Jack Benny," said Grandma. "Never went to his movies."

"The program will be on in just a minute," said Dad. "Jack Benny isn't on TV yet."

"Oh," said Grandma.

"Look, there are four sets of lines," I said. "Like a compass."

"Your newspaper said Jack Benny was going to be on TV," said Grandma.

"Michael, if you have to go, please go," said Mom as my little brother squirmed around on the floor.

"It's not my newspa-

per," said Dad. "I just print it."

"Four sets of five lines equals twenty," I said. "Aunt Sue's street number is sixteen-twenty!"

"Stick with the compass," my older brother said to me. "You're always lost."

"It was just a fart, Mom," said my younger brother.

"Maybe Senator McCarthy can get them to put Jack Benny on soon," said Grandma.

"It could be a message from Mars," I said. "Maybe they're taking over."

"I think ... I'm sure ... I'm pretty sure it was a fart," my little brother said softly to himself.

"You'd help the Martians take over, you turncoat," my older brother said to me. "You even look like a Martian."

"Look, there's four circles. Four times four is ... the rest of her street number," I shouted. "Dad, they're after Aunt Sue."

The test pattern suddenly disappeared, and a drawing of a man riding a lawn mower appeared on the screen. A collective gasp of appreciation rose from our little group.

Dad had read about TV studio operations in Popular Science magazine and said we were viewing a studio advertising card, a poster sitting on an easel in the studio. A camera was trained on it while an announcer read the

advertising script, a "voice over."

However, the announcer evidently had left for supper because there was no voice. In a few moments, while we sat glued to our seats, the lawnmower ad slid sideways off the easel with a jerking movement and revealed a new poster, this one selling tires.

"Turn the sound up, dear," my mother said to Dad.

"It is up," he said. "See this little button? It says ... oh, it says Contrast." He twisted a different knob.

" ... and stay tuned for our network television programming," said the announcer, who didn't know he'd been out to supper.

"Aw-w, we missed it!" said my older brother.

"What did we miss?" Grandma asked.

"The invasion," I said. "They came on lawn mowers."

"Uh, oh," said my little brother, and he slid along the floor and out of the room.

"I can see why everyone is so impressed with television," my grandmother said.

You get the picture — pun intended.

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Ajaydom
ahead of its time

By J.C. "Jim" Lamanna

A supposed innovation in our fiction and non-fiction areas of journalism and writing is today's much touted "flash fiction and non-fiction."

These stories and articles sometimes are as short as 50 words and upward to 300. I like it. But it's not really new to many of us in the American Amateur Press Association, whose hallmark, often out of necessity, has been to "keep it short."

Practitioners of our kind of hobby called amateur journalism go back as far as the 19th Century when it became organized. And because it was an era during which hand presses were the tool of the trade for us and type had to be set by hand, brevity in copy often became a necessity.

Ajayers were at the forefront of this kind of "flash fiction and non-fiction" that has become a serious kind of journalism in this era of computers and other sophisticated communication devices.

Self-publishing, a highly personalized journalism, also has become wildly popular with the advent of the myriad of electronic instruments easily available to all today but nothing new to ajayers, whose premise has been personal journalism with hand presses and mimeographs, tools of yesteryear for we not-for-profit scribes.

I like to think that those of us in the AAPA represent a strong presence among those who helped set a precedent for the highly personal journalism of today. With the practice of self-restraint, good taste and responsibility, it's a healthy development.

Being a Maid

By Delores Miller

So, let's go back to the summer of 1955. Time for me to find a job between my junior and senior years of Marion High School.

After the fiasco of the summer of 1954 and being a hired girl, I was looking for greener pastures and easier work. Again I did not want to pick pickles, the usual cash crop in Wisconsin.

My Aunt Alma after World War II found employment as a live-in maid for a rich widow in Neenah on Lake Winnebago. This area was a snaggle of paper mills, thus, rich widows with mansions. She found me employment as a domestic summer help. Armed with my Betty Crocker Cookbook and bluffing my way through the interview, bragging of all the food I made the summer before as a hired girl. The Missus hired me. No one else applied. White uniform during the day, black with a silk apron for evening serving. Pay was $16 a week. Big money in those days.

Easy job, cooking three meals a day, all served on good

china in the dining room. Learned to make fancy foods, i.e. lime and cheese souffles, salads, steak, hors d'oeuvre, deviled eggs, creme brulee, melon ball fruit cups, tomato flowers with cottage cheese and Pepperridge Farm toast tips, appetizers, canapes, molded tomato aspic, borscht or beet soup with sour cream, dried beef rolls, popovers, Yorkshire pudding, baked Alaska, Schaum torte with fresh strawberries, cream puffs, chocolate eclairs, key lime pie, omelets, English Muffins with orange marmalade, eggs Benedict with Hollandaise sauce, clam chowder, lamb chops, fresh fruit, etc. All made from scratch. Each morning the Missus wrote out the menu, called in the grocery order to a store which delivered.

I could order whatever I wanted to eat, too. (I gained weight that summer.) Dinner parties for her rich friends. Cocktail hour before dinner, a full hard liqueur cabinet, gin, rum, vodka, whiskey, brandy, bourbon, grenadine, tonic, bitters, vermouth. Bartender made martinis, daiquiris, Manhattens, Margaritas, Pina Colada, Bloody Marys, wine.

Nothing so common as beer or diet soda. I never sampled. Then came dinner. Salad, soup, over-

cooked vegetables, usually asparagus, main meat course, dessert, coffee. Serving from the left, removing dirty dishes from the right. Finger bowls to wash dirty hands. Candles. Cloth napkins, lace tablecloths. Tinkling silver bell summonded me back to the dining room for more service. Faux pas, I once took the aluminum soup kettle to the dining room, when I should have taken her bowl to the kitchen. No microwave or dish washer. Polishing the candelabras and silverware. The Missus was gallivanting often, even out of state and left me in charge of the house. How did she trust me not to steal the silver or have wild parties?

My own bedroom with bath and shower. This was a big deal for someone straight off the farm. Granted, it was next to the laundry room with an automatic washer and dryer. What luxury. Lake flies plagued anyone outdoors, so thick, one could not open their mouth, or they would get a meal. Mosquitoes. Watching the sunrise over Lake Winnebago with sail boats on the horizon, beautiful. No television, but a radio where I could listen to all the Milwaukee Braves baseball games and best of all — a library filled with books, novels, non-fiction. A 1936 Roget's Thesaurus and a 1929 Funk & Wagnallis dictionary. And I read them all. And a typewriter so I could write tales and memoirs of my adventures. Daily newspaper. Smallish house com-

pared to the big mansions further up town. A gardener, cleaning lady, laundress.

Became friends with the other maids and nannies. We had Thursday and Sunday afternoons free for movies or shopping. Playing badminton at a nearby park. Polio or infantile paralysis epidemic that summer of 1955, swimming pools were closed, quarantined. Many people died. Was not in the same league with other neighboring teenagers, debutantes who were presented to High Society at a ball at the Golf Club.

Oh, what I learned that summer being a maid: grew up and saw the "big" picture of life. Observed how people in the big city lived and worked.

Went back to Marion for my senior year of high school, graduated, kicked up my heels, shook off the dust and manure and left the area forever. Enough of picking pickles, being a hired girl and a maid.

A Sporting Chance

By Louise Fusfeld

My mother is a superb storyteller. When I was little, she entranced us at the dinner table with tales allegedly from her childhood on a farm in Minnesota. My own predictable suburban life made this world seem fantastic. I once asked her, after yet another unbelievable farm episode, "Are these stories true?"

As a joke, she said, "No, they're all lies."

A couple of weeks later at the dinner table we finished

our Jerseymaid ice cream and the conversation degraded into desiccated grownup topics. My four-year-old mind craved a farm adventure, so I made a request. "Tell us more lies about the farm, Momma."

She complied and told us the "lie" about Sport's narrow escape from the jaws of death:

My mother's family had a Rat Terrier named Sport. Rat Terriers are quite small as dogs go, not much bigger than large rats. Sport enjoyed his life on the farm, following the six kids around, snapping at the occasional gopher and lapping up the spilt milk in the barn. He had not as yet fulfilled his ancestral duty by killing a rat, but he often had dreams of slaying a large, villainous one and triumphantly presenting it at his family's doorstep.

My mother and her siblings had cousins who lived on a nearby farm. They would come to play sometimes and bring the canine member of their household, a large, slobber-jawed Newfoundland.

On this particular day, the kids were playing in and around the barn, jumping from the hayloft onto piles of straw, chasing the baby pigs and taking turns riding the Newfoundland. Meanwhile, away in the manger, Sport had burrowed into a nice, soft nest of hay to catch a ride on the afternoon dreamboat.

The visiting Newfoundland considered it highly undignified for an animal of his breeding to serve as the children's beast of burden. He shook off one of the smaller boys into a cowpie and sauntered into the barn to cleanse it of rodentia. Spotting the mound where Sport had laid down his sweet head, the Newfoundland softly padded toward it, a big glop of drool dangling from his lower lip. Sport was in the midst of an exciting dream. A giant rat the size of a Newfoundland was galumphing through the barnyard. Sport felt the call of his race and began chasing it, his little legs twitching in time with his dream run.

The real Newfoundland saw the hay rustle and his suspicions of rat presence were confirmed. Sport was about to clamp down on the enormous dreamrat's back leg when he felt himself jerked out of the hay by a pair of shark-like jaws. A thousand points of pain pierced his small body, and he curled up to withstand the force as he was snapped back and forth by the slob-

bery, tooth-laden monster.

My mother was about to perform her third jump of the day off the hayloft when she heard Sport's yelps for help. On seeing the brutal attack, she knew it was beyond her abilities to stop it. This was a job for Aunt Lydia, who had a heart the size of Minnesota and the courage to match. My mother leaped off the loft into a pile of straw and ran as fast as she could to the farmhouse.

By the time she reached the back door, she was panting so hard she could barely speak. Aunt Lydia was mopping the kitchen floor and my mom tugged at her dress and pointed to the barn. "Sport!" she gasped, "He's being killed by the Newfoundland!"

Lydia, mop in hand, ran after my mother to the barn. The other kids were now crowded around the scene of the crime. My mom's brothers and sister were futilely hitting at the giant dog to get him to drop Sport, and the cousins were hitting my mom's siblings to get them to stop hitting their dog. Sport was yelping and his blood splattered the flailing children.

Undaunted, Lydia stepped into the fray, brushed the kids away from the canines and started beating the Newfoundland on the back with her mop. My mom and her siblings cheered and their cousins cried for Lydia to stop

hurting their dog. The Newfoundland had been unconscious of the children beating on him with their small fists, but he couldn't ignore Lydia's wet mop. He dropped Sport in a small, bloody heap in the hay and ran away whimpering. My mother picked up Sport and checked for vital signs. He moaned weakly. Then he opened his eyes and licked her face, and she knew he was going to be O.K.

After Sport's near-death experience, the children noticed that he was not interested in hunting rats and mice. Once a gopher even taunted him from inches away and Sport just looked at him wistfully. Somehow being on the rat's end of the stick had lessened his desire to conquer. As Lydia and her mop had given it to him, Sport now gave his small, furry farm mates a sporting chance.

FROG TALK

By Sheryl L. Nelms

at sunset
I walk

the beaver dam

to the deer trail
it leads me

into green cattails
and the ooze
of black
mud

sets off
a splatter

of frogs
jumping
and croaking

that echoes
into night

Mice

By William L. Sullivan

There were new faces each week at the Barnett Road Coffee Club, but Richard knew everyone would end up talking about his problems with mice.

Even when he was still waiting to order his fifty-cent cup of bottomless black coffee an attractive elderly woman ahead of him turned and exclaimed, "You must be Richard Gruebler. You look so well. How did it begin, anyway, with the mice?"

Richard wore a short white beard that hid the wrinkles on his neck. An Ashland Parks Department baseball cap hid his thin hair. You might have thought he was sixty-three instead of eighty-three, except that he had begun to shuffle when he walked and mutter when he was alone.

Richard had founded the coffee club shortly after mov-

ing into the Medford Retirement Tower, a glass box that stood on a butte by the freeway like an unplugged television on an end table. Early every Wednesday morning the club's recorder left a photographic roster of new members in the office lobby. Richard tucked it under his arm without looking. Then he shuffled down the butte's spiral path to the world of young people and cars and fast food restaurants with so many empty booths that the waitresses are willing to refill coffee cups all morning.

Richard silenced the elderly woman in the line by raising his index finger to his lips. She was new and hadn't yet learned the important club rules: You never talk about health, and you do not talk at all outside the booth.

Richard paid his fifty cents, filled a tray with a coffee cup, four napkins, half a dozen packets of sugar and cream, and some silverware. Then he led the woman to the big circular booth in the back where two other men and a woman were already waiting, as curious and uncertain as volunteers at a magic show.

"Welcome, one and all," Richard said. He set down his tray and spread out the roster on the table.

"So you're this Richard Gruebler guy?" An overweight, crew cut man in his sixties humphed. "Listen, I don't even know why I'm here. I don't like clubs."

A longhaired woman in a slender blue muu-muu spoke up, her accent faintly British. "Well, I think it's brilliant. When you get to be our age, it's hard to meet new friends. I'd like to thank our host for dreaming it up."

The crew cut man still grumbled.

"Honestly," the longhaired woman said. "It's fifty cents well spent."

"Amen." A bald man with a broad face and a sharp white shirt lifted his cup. "Here's to endless refills."

Richard lifted his cup as well, and for a moment the circle of five silently sipped the rich, dark stimulant from sunny lands far away.

Richard put down his cup and picked up the roster. "By tradition I introduce new members alphabetically, so let's start with…." He paused to unfold a pair of bifocals from his shirt pocket.

"Marie Beer Broughton, born March 14, 1931, in Bismarck, North Dakota." The black-and-white photo in the roster showed a beautiful girl with bobbed hair, dimpled cheeks, and wide eyes-unmistakably the woman he had met in line. Richard scanned the biography in the roster. "A stenographer, no children. It's unclear from this if you have a husband."

"I've had two," Marie admitted, batting artificially long

eyelashes. “With a maiden name like Beer, you marry early.”

The bald man raised his bushy eyebrows. “Isn’t Beer a German name?”

“Yes, it means ‘berry’, not ‘beer’. Still, I got hitched at seventeen. The next summer he got himself chopped up by a combine. I moved to Seattle to see something other than the prairie. Married an aircraft engineer from Boeing. He built pneumatic struts or some such nonsense. A lovely man, but impotent, so I survived forty years on affairs. Finally I suppose I killed him.”

“Whoa! Really?” The grumpy, overweight man perked up.

“Sort of.” Marie fiddled with the white collar of her blouse. “If a man is suffering from terminal bone cancer, isn’t it a loving wife’s duty to slip him a triple dose of his pain medication?”

Coffee cups rose as the five club members considered this silently. At length Marie dimpled her cheek with a grin. “But we’re here to talk about Richard, aren’t we? About the mice.”

Heads nodded in agreement.

Marie poked Richard playfully in the ribs. “Come on, Mr. Gruebler. You already know about us from the roster, but we’re dying to find out about you, the mysterious pres-

ident-for-life."

Richard held up his hands in protest.

"No, really," Marie said, more seriously now. "When did you first notice the mice?"

Richard stirred his coffee. "I was three, and the world was perfect." He had lost many memories since his stroke, but certain early scenes remained so startlingly vivid that he could close his eyes and walk around his childhood home, exploring one room after another until he found his mother. Inevitably she would be in the kitchen stirring a bowl of cookie dough with sunlight from the kitchen window haloing her auburn hair.

His father, Richard Gruebler Sr., taught drama at Southern Oregon University, which meant that Richard Junior often had the house and his mother to himself. Ashland's madrone and pine woods began just up the hill from his home, but his neighborhood was full of light, the trees freshly cleared to make way for modest two-bedroom cottages with tidy lawns and driveways.

At first he was excited when workmen arrived to tear out the back wall and pour concrete foundations for a new room. But that afternoon when his father came home he learned the truth.

"Rickie," his father said, crouching low. "You're going to

be a big brother."

The house addition was not a new playroom for him but rather a nursery. His mother was not fat from the cookies she baked, but rather with a younger rival. Already his parents seemed to love it more than him.

At dinner he threw his food. Then he stomped out to the backyard and peed on the fresh concrete. His father spanked him with a slipper and shut him in his bedroom. Crying, alone, afraid, with the walls of his once-perfect home torn open to the night, he heard the demons for the first time.

"I didn't yet realize they were mice," Richard told the coffee club, staring into his empty cup. "Later I learned they were gnawing the insulation to build nests. But the wall amplified the noise like a sounding board. I thought they must be huge ogres, chewing to get in and eat me."

"Didn't you tell your parents?" Marie asked.

Richard gave a sad laugh. "I did, the next day. But no one believes a kid who says there are monsters in the wall."

The bald-headed man nodded thoughtfully. "And yet there really were monsters. And they didn't go away."

"No, they got worse." Richard tightened his lips. "Once mice get into the walls, it's hard to clear them out."

A waitress with a white cap and a yellow uniform walked

by with a glass pot. "Everything all right here? More coffee?"

"Yes, please," Richard mumbled.

She poured his cup full. "Anything else?

"Maybe an egg muffin." Richard counted out the money on the table. He added an extra quarter.

The waitress collected the money. "We'll have that up in a minute."

Richard closed his eyes. When he opened them the waitress was gone and all five coffee cups were full. He sighed and looked again at the roster on the table.

"Alphabetically, then," he said, "our next new member would be Gary Varner Dykeson, born November 23, 1947, in Klamath Falls."

"Yeah, but I'm not joining." Gary scowled, exposing yellowed teeth. Although he sat at the back of the booth, his tattooed arms were muscular enough that he might shove his way free.

"I'm not sure we have a choice," the bald man mused. "People forget so quickly. There's not much of a life waiting for us outside those doors."

Richard picked up the roster. "Let's see. Gary's a divorced log truck driver."

"Until I got diabetes, diarrhea, dia-every-goddam-thing."

"Stop!" Richard held up his hand. "The club doesn't allow organ recitals."

"Damn rules," Gary sighed, straining the T-shirt on his belly. "When the feds disbanded the Klamath tribe back in '54, we had thirty-two years of good times, no rules at all. Logged the hell out of the old reservation. I drove five truckloads a day at fifty bucks a pop. I'd get so drunk fishing Klamath Lake on Sundays I damn near fell out of the boat."

"Good times," the woman in the blue muu-muu repeated somberly, her eyebrows lowered.

"But then the weenies reinstated the tribe, locked up the national forest and gave the lake's water rights to some scum-sucking trash fish. No wonder I got sick and…."

"Last warning," Richard interrupted.

"Go ahead, man. Kick me out." Gary crossed his arms.

Richard folded the roster below the truck driver's mug shot. "Next we have…."

"No, wait!" Gary frowned, obviously uneasy with whatever might be waiting for him outside. "The mice. I want to hear about when you actually saw the mice. If you still remember."

Everyone watched Richard.

He took a sip of coffee, considering. Then he slowly un-

folded the roster. “I was seven. It was a day I am unable to forget.” His little sister Louise had conquered the house with her baby doll eyes and her whining demands. Richard had never asked for treats, but Louise would brazenly open the refrigerator door and ask, “What am I hungry for?”

Richard learned to make up for the lack of attention at home by spending his days exploring the nearby forest. Although his father had strictly forbidden him to cross Park Drive, Richard discovered a three-foot-tall concrete culvert that led beneath the road to the forest beyond. In Richard’s mind, crawling through that pipe was not exactly the same as crossing the road. He told his mother he was playing at Jimmy’s house, and she was so busy coddling Louise that she never checked.

For most of the long, hot summer between Richard’s first and second grade, he spent his days climbing trees, collecting bugs and chasing lizards. But he dreamed of finding his way through the woods to the Granite Creek Reservoir in Lithia Park. For a quarter, kids could swim in the reservoir’s cool water and play ball on the park’s shady lawns.

Finally, one scorching Saturday in August, he stole a quarter from his mother’s purse, stuffed his swimsuit into a backpack, sneaked a hand towel from the bathroom and slipped out through the culvert. His heart raced with the

thrill of adventure. He was an explorer setting out for the source of the Nile. Jays squawked at him in astonishment. Squirrels scrambled to watch him pass.

Sweaty but determined, he climbed to a five-way trail junction in a ridge top pass. Confusing signs with names he did not recognize pointed in three of the directions. He wished he had brought water, or at least an apple, but then he remembered there would be drinking fountains at the reservoir. It must be downhill in the next canyon. More confident now, he ran down the canyon trail.

But the trail led to a gravel road with no signs at all. And when he turned back, he couldn't even find the five-way junction again. A group of hikers passed, but instead of asking direction he hid behind a tree, ashamed. Hour after hour he grew thirstier and more frightened. He missed lunch, and then dinner. The sun was low when he stumbled out of the woods to a city street he had never seen before. Exhausted and frightened, he collapsed on a lawn, buried his head in his hands and cried.

A woman came out from a porch to see what was wrong. Through his tears he told her his name and address.

"Oh my!" the woman exclaimed. "You really are lost. Come sit on the porch while we figure out what to do."

She brought a miraculous tall glass of iced lemonade,

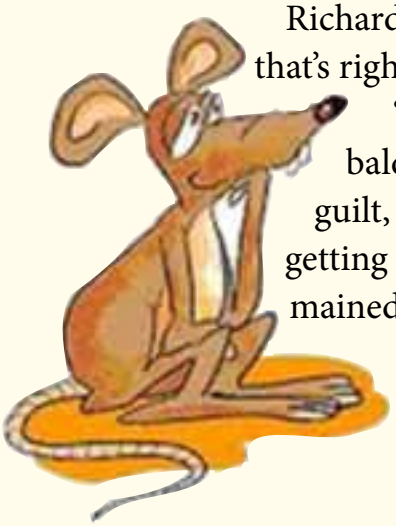
but she also brought her husband. When Richard couldn't remember his own telephone number without mixing things up, the man insisted on calling the police. In a few minutes a police car with flashing lights pulled up in the street. Richard nearly ran back into the woods, but an officer with a uniform and a gun put him in the backseat and drove him home. Richard knew the spanking of his life was waiting.

Richard set down his coffee. "And you know what?'" he told the club, "I think I would have preferred a spanking. I actually felt I deserved to die. I was so embarrassed."

Gary frowned. "Your old man didn't whip you?"

"No. He hugged me and cried. Then he ordered pizza to celebrate. We had never called out for pizza before."

The bald man nodded. "So you lacked catharsis."



Richard looked at him uncertainly. "I guess that's right."

"Shame is an insidious venom," the bald man said. "You had built up a lot of guilt, stealing money, breaking rules and getting lost. Without punishment it all remained bottled up inside you."

"But what about the mice?" Marie objected, raising her hand like a

schoolgirl with a question. "I don't understand what this has to do with the mice."

The bald man smiled and leaned back with his coffee.

Richard sighed. "That night the mice got into my room. They'd been gnawing in the wall for years. Finally they chewed a hole somewhere. They kept me awake all night, scurrying around. In the morning they'd left damp brown droppings on my dresser."

The woman with the British accent said, "At least then you could prove to your parents that the mice were real."

"That's true," Richard admitted.

Gary asked, "So did they trap 'em or poison 'em?"

"Neither. My baby sister loved animals, and my mother didn't want to upset her. So, my father bought live traps and took the mice into the woods."

"But I bet they came back," Marie said.

"Egg muffin!" a girl's voice called from the counter.

Richard stood up. He looked to the group. "Anyone want anything?"

The four new club members shook their heads. Gary muttered, "Endless coffee."

When Richard came back, he ate the poached egg off his muffin. Then he turned once again to the roster.

"Our next new member is Jasmine "Jo" Tyler Jameson.

Born June 3, 1946, in London, England." He looked up at the longhaired woman in the blue muu-muu. "According to this you sell tea. Is that part of your British background, or just because your name is Jasmine?"

Jo pulled her hair behind her ear with a fluid motion, exposing an iridescent abalone earring. "Neither, really. My father was a bookmaker by trade. I was twelve years old before I realized he didn't actually make books. His gambling office provided us with lots of money, but very little respect. Father bought me a horse so I could learn to ride like a lady. Instead I rode like a jockey and became junior jumping champion for our district. Then he bought me a spot in a fancy women's school where everyone was supposed to wear uniforms."

The bald man raised an eyebrow. "Supposed to?"

Jo broke into a mischievous smile. "It was 1967. The headmistress threw me out because I insisted on wearing their uniform without a bra."

Gary sputtered his coffee.

Jo ignored him. "I bought a plane ticket to San Francisco where everyone was hanging out in the parks, the girls without bras, wearing flowers in their hair and singing peace songs. At the end of summer someone told me I could get a job in Humboldt County, running a legitimate

business for an illegal marijuana grower. Back then every pot operation needed a bead store or an antique shop-something to explain why they were making so much money. So, I got a job selling organic tea for a year. Then I bought the tea business, expanded and ended up doing quite well."

Richard scanned down the roster. "You have three children, but no husband?"

"Not technically, I suppose. I moved in with a grower in Takilma who raised marijuana for medicinal purposes. A druidic priest performed a wedding for us in a redwood grove." She sighed and looked out the window, past the cars waiting for the drive-up. "Of course that was forty years ago."

"And it's not really why we're here now," Marie added.

Jo rubbed her temples as if she were developing a migraine. "No, we're here to ask if Mr. Gruebler's mice came back."

Richard sat back. "You don't want to know?"

Jo waved a hand vaguely as if to dispel a puff of smoke. "Oh yes, of course, we do." She managed a small smile. "Did the mice come back?"

"Not for years," Richard said. "Even I was surprised that my father's live trap worked so well."

Gary grunted. "I bet instead of letting 'em go your old man was drowning 'em."

Marie drew in her breath.

Richard took a sip of coffee. "It's possible. I never asked. After a few months I hardly thought about the mice anymore. Until the seventh grade."

The bald man frowned, cradling his coffee cup. "Adolescence is a difficult stage."

"What happened in the seventh grade?" Jo asked.

"My father became artistic director of Ashland's Shakespearean Festival. It was a big honor for him, but kind of awkward for me. My English teacher had him come to class to talk about the plays. We all had to read 'The Taming of the Shrew,' which was fine, but then everyone started calling me Richard the Second."

Jo smiled. "Well you are, aren't you?"

"No, I'm Richard Gruebler Jr."

"Still, Richard the Second isn't such a bad nickname."

This was true, but the nickname got worse. One day Richard's junior high school cafeteria had served tacos, which he disliked because they were messy and gave him gas. He had sat alone, and then spilled his tray with a clatter that made everyone watch. Ten minutes before the fifth period bell he had rushed to the boys' restroom, feeling

sick and pressured. He bolted himself in a stall, but the bathroom soon filled up with so many boys that all the other stalls were occupied and a line formed. Jimmy, the school's loudmouth joker, rattled the stall's latch.

"Hey, hurry up in there. Jeez, what a stink."

Richard said nothing, trying to hurry. But the latch rattled even louder. Finally Jimmy's head peered under the door. "Hey, it's Richard! Smells like you're performing Act Number Two."

A dozen boys laughed.

Mortified, Richard finished up and flushed. But the residue in the toilet bowl had been so infused with gas that it swirled like a cork. He flushed again, wishing it away.

"The scene's over, Richard," Jimmy said. "Come on out."

Richard quickly flushed again, but there wasn't enough water to make it go away. In desperation he said, "The toilet takes so long to fill."

"Well, you don't

have to fill it," Jimmy replied. A chorus of laughter echoed off the tile walls.

At his wits' end, Richard opened the stall door. Jimmy pushed inside. "Whoa! Look at the size of that floater. You're not Richard the Second. You're Richard the Turd."

All around the table the members of the coffee club sat silent. No one lifted a cup. The cruelest nicknames were the ones that could never be forgotten.

"Somehow I lived through the rest of that day," Richard said. "When I got home, my father had started tearing up the house again. This time he wanted to build a Frank-Lloyd-Wright-style living room cantilevered over the backyard-something to show dinner guests how important an artistic director was."

"And that let the mice back in?" Jo asked quietly.

Richard nodded. "They built nests in the attic. For the longest time, little drips of smelly brown urine ran down the wall of my closet."

Marie pushed her coffee cup aside. "Please. This is not a conversation for breakfast."

"No, don't you see?" the bald man said, leaning forward. "The mice never existed. They're simply a manifestation of shame, just as Eve's apple was a manifestation of original sin."

Gary narrowed his eyes, inspecting the bald man. "Who the hell are you, anyway?"

Richard picked up the roster and read, "Brendan Michael Monahan, born April 9, 1949, in Lynn, Massachusetts. Studied theology at Notre Dame. Served in a parish in Gervais, Oregon, for sixteen years before renouncing the priesthood. Became director of the Marion County Food Bank. Married, adopted two boys." Richard looked up. "Anything I'm leaving out?"

Brendan tilted his cup a few degrees one way and the other, eddying the coffee. "I didn't leave the priesthood to get married if that's what you're thinking. I just realized that rituals don't bring anyone closer to understanding life's mysteries. Instead of feeding wafers to the poor, I decided to give them boxes of real food. Instead of teaching altar boys Latin nonsense, I adopted a pair of Vietnamese orphans and taught them to be men."

"But you got married, too," Gary said, smirking.

"Yes. Love is the greatest lesson of all." The coffee club considered this a moment in silence. Then Richard drained the rest of his coffee and set the cup down with a clank. "You're wrong about the mice. They had to be real. I can't forget them."

"It's an evolutionary survival instinct," Brendan said,

holding out his hands as if to measure an imaginary box in the air. "Dangerous events burn into your memory as a warning. The fire that scorched your hand, the bee that stung your foot, the plant that made you sick-these are often our oldest and most persistent memories. It's nature's way of keeping us safe."

"Or God's way?" Marie asked.

"Yes. Or God's way," Brendan replied.

Richard frowned. "If that's God's way, he's brutal. He lets millions of happy memories drift away to make room for a few terrors."

Brendan brought his palms together. "And that's why He offers forgiveness for sins. Jesus is the mouse catcher of memory."

"No!" Richard banged the table with his fist. "That's not how the mice are at all. They're not sins. I didn't break the Ten Commandments by getting lost in the woods or embarrassing myself in a junior high school bathroom. Those were just painful moments, awkward experiences I can't get over. Jesus isn't a mouse catcher. He doesn't care about petty stuff like that. He's a rat catcher for real sins—things like adultery, sloth, gluttony."

Gary laughed.

"What's so funny?" Richard demanded.

"Those are exactly the things I don't want to forget." Gary patted his belly. "Messing around with the neighbor's wife, lying around drunk all weekend, stuffing myself with barbecued steak."

Brendan glared at him. "You're proud of your sins?"

"Maybe not proud," Gary replied. "Pride is your sin. But I sure as hell don't want to forget the good times."

"Enough!" Jo clapped her hands over her ears. She hummed loudly for a moment with her eyes closed. Then she lowered her hands and looked at the others. "We're not here to argue. I think religion and politics should be off the table."

"Isn't health our only taboo topic?" Brendan asked.

"I don't care," Jo continued. "We're here to ask about Richard's mice. Personally, I want to know what happened to them."

"Yes, so do I," Marie said. Brendan and Gary nodded, albeit with less enthusiasm. They all looked to Richard.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'm told I married, moved back into my parents' house and got a job with the parks department. They say I was living alone there at the age of eighty when a forest fire burned the whole house to the ground — mice and all, I suppose."

Marie caught her breath. "But you escaped?"

Richard shrugged again. "They found me wandering the streets in a different part of town. Apparently while running away, I'd suffered some kind of stroke. Just like that, more than sixty years of memories were gone. I can't even tell you what my wife looked like. All that's left are the early years, the times I was tormented by mice."

In the pause that followed, a waitress approached the booth with a Styrofoam box and a pot of coffee. "Can I freshen up that cup for you, sir?"

"No, thanks," Richard said. "I just need a box for the rest of my muffin."

The waitress winked as she set the box on the table. "I came prepared. It's the same every Wednesday for you, isn't it?"

When the waitress walked away, Gary called after her. "Hey! How about refills for the rest of us?" But the waitress appeared not to hear him.

Richard silently put his muffin, several unopened condiment packets and half a dozen napkins into the box.

Gary waved his cup angrily. "They're supposed to give us endless coffee."

Richard stood. He turned the roster over, revealing that it was in fact a copy of the *Medford Mail-Tribune*'s Life section.

"I don't understand," Jo said.

"I do." Brendan sighed. "Or at least I'm beginning to understand how little I understand."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Marie demanded.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Gary said.

Brendan pointed to the newspaper. "There is no roster. Every week our president-for-life comes here to read the obituaries to himself."

"Then we're…" Jo caught herself.

"Dead?" Gary asked, bewildered.

"I'm sorry," Richard said, tucking the paper under his arm. "Until next week, coffee club is adjourned." With a heavy heart he walked out of the restaurant and made his way up the butte's spiral path. The retirement tower loomed before him, as dull as a library of blank books. The people he wanted to talk to were dead. Certainly none of the living wanted to ask about the few fragmentary diaries that survived, deep in the fireproof vault of his mind.

As always, before going back into the glass doors, he shuffled around to the back of the building where a patch of ancient pine trees remained near a recycling center. He opened the Styrofoam box and crumbled the remains of his muffin at the base of the largest tree.

As an offering to the mice.