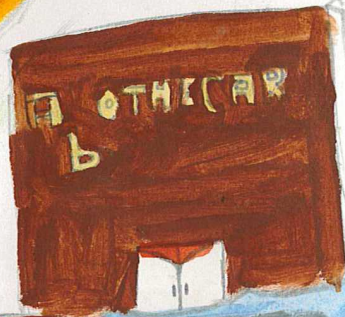


Friend Creative Writing  
Class

Look Book

2021-2022 Edition



Judy  
B

# The Friend Creative Writing Class Look Book

2021-2022

Elijah Black

Madi Cropp

Mandy Landis

Grant Pavel

Mr. Butler-Gruett

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*Cover by Zoey Borgman*

*Back illustration by Fred Hausman*

*Illustrations throughout by Madi Cropp*

Fall 2021

“How to Avoid Getting Fired”

A Collaborative Story By Elijah Black, Madi Cropp, Mandy Landis, Grant Pavel, and Mr.

Butler-Gruett



Claire Wilkinson III was pacing around the restaurant, checking up on her tables. She walked over to table D5 and asked them if they were enjoying their gnocchi with pesto sauce. They had ordered a round of Sprites for the table and were currently almost boxing each other with anger.

"No, I wanted *Pepsi*," one patron said, with a vein popping out of his forehead.

"You told me you wanted Sprite," another patron responded. He was wearing a red cowboy hat with a pink flamingo feather stuck in the brim's right side, the kind of hat that told Claire he was not from Canada.

"I could bring you Pepsi instead," Claire offered, leaning toward them.

"I don't like the cheese either," said the red cowboy hat patron, whose hat brim kept slipping over his eyes, since it was

one size too big. "My name's Michael, by the way." He tipped his hat.

Claire tried not to look disgusted. She didn't want to get fired today.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said, realizing that it sounded a bit dramatic about parmesan cheese.

Michael looked confused when she said this, as if gradually realizing that she was insulting him. His phone buzzed on the table, the banner of a text popping up. "Sorry about today," it read. Claire considered this.

"What's that about?" Claire asked, referencing the text.

"I'll tell you what it isn't about," he said, "and that's the fact that this parmesan cheese tastes like wood shavings."

"Who was that from, eh?" Claire asked, feeling nosy but curious regardless.

"Listen, honey, I just want a Sprite, and I want it pronto," Michael said, and he tipped his cowboy hat off his head.

"I'm not your honey," Claire said. "I'm Claire Wilkinson III, and it's not my fault you got fired today."

"Well, if you don't get me *my* new gnocchi with pesto sauce and fresh cheese," Michael said, "it will be *my* fault that you get fired today."

Claire, fuming to such an extent that she imagined cartoon smoke might be coming out of her ears, said with a clenched jaw, "Coming right up." She walked back to the kitchen and retrieved the new dish of gnocchi, brought it back, making sure to carry it high overhead so everyone could see. What she did next was to trip (intentionally) in front of all the patrons on an obviously bunched up section of a rug, loudly cried "oops-a-daisy," and directly frisbee'd the dish of gnocchi onto the man's prized red cowboy hat.

"My baby," Michael said, on the verge of tears, cradling the red hat against his chest.

He then whipped his neck around, his rat tail flailing in the breeze, and said to Claire, "You're going to pay for this." He stormed off in the direction of the front desk.

Claire overheard shouting and saw his wild gestures, and she thought, *Oh, crap...*

Claire leaned back and sighed discontentedly. She titled the doc "memoir paper rough draft" and changed tabs. She hadn't intended to cause such a ruckus at work last night, but sometimes her anger got the better of her. And now tomorrow she had a meeting with her general manager, a big, mean, harsh, hairy, Italian man—not that there was anything wrong with Italians or hairy people—who was sure to fire her.

Claire surveyed her room. Currently she was lying on a stack of eleven flamingo and pink pig Pillow Pets that she had saved from each of her siblings who had moved out. She was now

alone in the house, which she usually didn't mind, but tonight she felt lonely. She opened Spotify in a separate tab to drown out the silence with a podcast. Joining in with this noise was the old, grossly yellow, dust-encrusted AC window unit kicking on, which sounded like a purring cat that just swallowed a jackhammer. She could barely hear her own thoughts anymore.

As she sat listening, she abruptly heard, "Wanna break from the ads? Blah blah blah," and she tuned out. After a few minutes of relaxing onto her stack of Pillow Pets, she perked up at the words, "change the course of your future." Claire recognized the ad as one for an online college. She disregarded it, of course, as she was already in college, but something about the offer struck her as appealing. "Change the course of your future." Could she? Could she avoid the meeting and the hairy man? Her professor's essay prompt had suggested that she take a real experience and give it a happy ending, but could that work? Of course not. So she'd write the most unrealistic ending she possibly could.

She reopened the Google Doc to add her happy ending:

Claire sat in her manager's crummy little office next to the kitchen, waiting for him to finish screaming at someone over the phone. "No, I *don't* have any use for pink flamingo Pillow Pets. Don't ever call here again."

He slammed down the phone.

"Miss Wilkinson III, have a seat."

Claire was already sitting.

"My deepest apologies, Mr. Luigi. The red cowboy hat was simply too much to handle."

"What do you mean by that?" Mr. Luigi said.

"That pink feather itself should be considered a crime against humanity," Claire said. "Have you ever seen a bull when it sees red? Same thing for a server: when I see red, especially on a cowboy hat, I absolutely lose it."

"Have no fear," Mr. Luigi said. "For a plate of warm cookies is here." With that, he withdrew a steaming tray of homemade doublemint Oreos (which Claire hadn't ever heard of) and offered them to her.

"Thank you, kind sir." Claire took and chewed a huge bite of one of the Oreos.

"You're welcome," Mr. Luigi said, handing Claire the rest of the cookies. "And by the way, don't worry about the red cowboy hat man. That threat has been...neutralized."

Claire paused for a moment. This was suspicious, the way he phrased, but she was here for the cookies, not the backstory. And with that, she went back to her house in North Toronto and ate the rest of the cookies.

Claire closed her old, stickered Macbook, leaned back into her Pillow Pets, and closed her eyes. That was ridiculous enough for an ending, at least for tonight. Now that she'd finished with the assignment, it was time for something less mentally exhausting. Time for some brain candy. She turned on the TV and went to Petflix, a favorite streaming service she subscribed to that was about streaming different animals doing tricks or pratfalls. Her laughter at the pets slowly



subsided and was replaced with yawns. She slipped into the blanket of sleep, as she often did, dreaming of pets—dancing tonight in a golden field stocked with Sprites.

When she awoke, she heard rain drizzling down her window like syrup down a sundae. She looked over to her clock to see the time, 9:35 am, displayed. She was running a little bit behind today. She would normally wake up earlier since she had work at noon. She barely caught the bus in time. When she got in, she noticed her usual seat was taken by a skinny, black-haired man. Claire took a seat behind him, annoyed that he had taken her spot. A tattoo peeked out from behind the collar of his leather trench coat's collar. It read "Marsellino." Behind her, she heard a series of snaps like a horse clopping on cobblestones. A woman was chewing each of her fake fingernails off and placing them into a pile. Claire was disgusted. Her morning couldn't have been more irksome.

"Miss Wilkinson III, in my office, please." Mr. Luigi stuck his head and shoulders out from behind the door.

"Yes, Mr. Luigi, I'm coming," Claire said.

She was shocked to find that the exact scene she'd written in her document played out before her very eyes. The layer of dust on the desk, the call about pink flamingo pillow pets, and the smell of homemade doublemint Oreos.

"Is this true?" Claire said under her breath. "I don't believe that this is happening..." She went through the rest of the meeting in a daze, taking doublemint Oreos without any further thought or control over her actions. Outside the office, standing with a plate of steaming hot Oreos, she mulled over the endless possibilities of what this could mean.

Suddenly, a man approached her and said, "Excuse me, do you know where I can find some different types of double Oreos? I am kind of tired of the double stuffed chocolate Oreos."

Claire noticed that he had the tip of a tattoo sticking out from under his black leather trench coat. She read with disbelief that it said, *Marsellino*.

“Who are you?” Claire said. She remembered seeing this man on the bus.

“I am,” he began with a flourish, “Lorenzo Alonzo Luigi III, comrade and one-time brother-in-arms of your own supervisor, Mr. Luigi.” He attempted with a turn of his hand to gesture dramatically as an introduction but tripped over his long trench coat's tails so that he fell head over heels but landed, impressively, on his feet again in a dramatic pratfall-turned-bow.

“Lorenzo, what was that fall?” Claire said. “*That* was dramatic. But, anyways, we need to talk about some stuff for the Oreos.”

“As you wish!” He began to bow again but was stopped by a look from Claire.

“These Oreos here have already been given to me, but Mr. Luigi, the *other* Luigi, might be generous enough to give you some if you go through there,” Claire said, pointing at the doorway. Though this interaction was a strange one, it was even stranger that what she had written in her doc had really happened. She would need to see if this was real or just coincidence when she went on her break later today.

After the lunch rush, during her break, Claire took a walk by a shiny glistening pond, and she went around the pond and enjoyed the beautiful sunny day. Halfway around she was passed by a runner. At first glance it looked like the runner was wearing a giant top hat striped with red—but on closer inspection, she recognized that it was only a buoy that had lined up briefly with his head. What if someone were to run in a top hat, she thought. That would be wild.

She paused briefly, struck by a thought. On the other hand, what if she were to use this moment on her break as the test to see if her Google Doc truly did write the future? She took her phone out and opened the app:

Claire was walking around the pond when a bright flash of color caught her eyes. A jogger was sprinting past her. That was normal enough, but he wore a gigantic red-striped top hat balancing precariously on his head.

Claire looked up and saw the jogger come back around the corner. Indeed, the jogger *was* wearing the red-striped hat when he passed by Claire. Claire was shocked for a moment, frozen in place on the bench. The jogger kept passing by. This could change her life forever—for better, or for worse.

Claire looked at her phone:

Claire was walking around the pond when a bright flash of color caught her eyes. A jogger was sprinting past her. That was normal enough, but he wore a gigantic red-striped top hat balancing precariously on his head..

She noticed the period changed into an ellipsis and frowned. That's odd, she thought. She must have hit the button with her thumb without noticing. She shook her head, shut her phone off, and returned to work.

Throughout the day, Claire pondered—while bussing tables and waiting—the various newfound implications of her powers and the Google Doc. Claire had the idea that the Google Doc could help her at work. She could, she thought, go back into the breakroom and write

something that would help her out. But work wasn't something that she truly needed help with at the moment. Her thoughts ran stranger and wilder:

She could give herself a quintillion dollars in gold Sacagawea dollars. She could order herself ten lobster-thermidor, white-pearl-albino-caviar pizzas from Domino's, delivered on camelback. She could order Marilyn Monroe's Happy-Birthday-Mr.-President dress and wear it out to a saucy rib dinner. She could conduct a mock battle in Buckingham Palace using Nerf Blasters and Hulk Smash Hands. None of these fantasies served any practical purpose, but she loved them.

What *was* something that would help her, though? What could improve her life? Claire's brothers and sisters were all successful with college degrees. Her grandmother, Claire I, died of the bird flu in 2005 when Claire was 6. Claire's grandmother had cut the crust off her sandwiches, tucked her into bed, all the things *mothers* were supposed to do and Claire's mother didn't—and losing her grandmother took away the parental figure that her siblings had had the luxury of having. She'd give everything and anything to get her grandmother back, and now she could.

Running quickly back to the breakroom, she began to type into the doc:

In a cemetery in Toronto, a grave began to shake. Suddenly, an old lady appeared next to it. She flew to her granddaughter's room, through the window, and landed in front of the bed.

She looked down at what she wrote and gasped. She had to get to her grandmother in her room—now. She needed to see if her doc's powers had truly brought back from the dead one of

the people she loved most in the world. She quickly ran to Mr. Luigi's office and slammed open the door.

"Sir, I need to leave, please. There is a family emergency at home," Claire said.

"No, we need you here, we don't have enough staff," Mr. Luigi said.

When she arrived in her bedroom, Claire saw—astonishingly enough, it was true—her grandmother, in the salmon polyester dress she'd been buried in, looking confused and sitting on the edge of Claire's bed. Claire needed to ask her the question that had been plaguing her her entire life: how did she get the bird flu? How had this resulted in the death that had deprived Claire of her grandmother's love and thrown her into an emotional spiral?

"G-Ma, how did you die of the bird flu?"

There was a tense pause.

"Well it's a long story, but you wouldn't wanna hear about it." They both moved to the living room, where Claire's grandmother was sitting in a rocking chair by the fire.

"Please G-Ma," Claire said. "I need to know. How did you die of the bird flu?"

"Well, sweetheart, you know how your G-Ma had a bunch of chickens in the basement, right?" Claire nodded, and G-Ma continued, "The chickens were sick, and while I was playing with the chickens, I got sick too."

"Why did you *have* so many chickens, G-Ma?" Claire said.

"Well, y'know, it *was* the early 2000s, and I might have, for just a little bit, had a little cockfighting ring downstairs." G-Ma shrugged, minimizing the admission. Her face looked only as disappointed as if her least-favorite lollipop had fallen on the concrete.

"A what?" Claire said. "G-Ma, a cockfighting ring? You're not serious, right?"

This wasn't what Claire was expecting to find out at all. Her G-Ma, a basement criminal? She had been expecting a happier reunion, what with her back from the dead and all, but at least she got an answer. This *had* been a positive development, she could argue. The doc had worked!

G-Ma said, "Yeah, well I needed money for you kids, for presents, for Christmas, so you kids had good gifts."

Claire nodded at first, accepting this. She motioned with her grandma to follow her back to work. Then it hit her: "But G-Ma, you never bought us gifts."

When Claire got to work, G-Ma played solitaire in the breakroom. Old people always loved cards, Claire noticed. When she arrived, Mr. Luigi was yelling at the kitchen staff. Apparently, they didn't know how to properly wash dishes—even though to Claire they looked sparkling clean.

When he looked up and saw Claire, he had fire in his eyes, and he walked over to Claire and started yelling, "*Basta!* Claire, stop!" Claire was shocked at the Italian, shocked at his *urlando*, his screaming. Mr. Luigi continued, "First, you spill gnocchi and parmesan cheese on a customer. Then you leave when we are short-staffed and booked after I told you that you could not. Then you come back the same day with no explanation expecting to get back to work like nothing happened? I knew your grandmother *and* your mother both, and they were tremendous women, unlike you. You don't deserve the title Claire Wilkinson III. You're fired!"

Claire was speechless. What had happened before only in the Doc—Mr. Luigi firing her, or attempting to—was now happening for real! Would she get mint Oreos this time? Where was her phone? Could she write herself out of this with the Doc? Oh, no. Her phone was in the breakroom, she'd forgotten.

Before Claire could even begin to speak to Mr. Luigi, a door slammed open to her left. There was a deafening exhale of “Ugh!” from the doorway. Everyone looked at once to see who was there.

Claire's grandmother's face was beet-red, and she yelled in perfect Italian, “*Fermati! Hai imbarazzato gli italiani ovunque con le tue azioni! Dovremmo licenziare invece!*” Then, returning to English, she yelled, pointing at an office chair, “Go sit down.”

“G-ma, how do you know Italian?” Claire said, astonished.

Her grandma raised an eyebrow. “You think I ran such a successful cockfighting ring without the approval of the mob? Without the blessing of the Luigi family?”

Claire, continually astonished now (by her grandmother's cockfighting ring! by the fact that her grandmother was cooperating with the mob! by the fact that Mr. Luigi was now in the mob!) by the experiences she had had over the last few days, slapped her open palms onto her cheeks and cried, “G-Ma, no!”

“Oh, yes!” G-Ma said. “You should have seen me down there in the basement with Lorenzo Alonzo Luigi III racking up the bets—Marsellino didn't stand a chance!”

Claire, still standing with her hands clapped to her cheeks, was struck by the familiar names but couldn't quite remember where she'd heard them.

“Lorenzo would place the gamecock in the cockpit. I would collect the entrance fees and the bets; I was the bookie. When the fight was over it was my responsibility to snap the loser's neck, and I ALWAYS did. And I'd do it to you, Mr. Luigi!” And with a careful, impressive flourish, G-Ma tore her deck of cards entirely in half.

Claire, full of more astonishment now than she'd thought possible, took a dish of tiramisu from a passing waitress and chucked it full-speed into the wall. The plate shattered. Everyone turned to stare at Claire as if they had forgotten she was there.

Once again, the door to the outside opened, and there he was, the man they'd thought they'd never see again. An elderly man with high-arched eyebrows and a green infected mole over his lip, stalked into the room, coattails swirling in his wake. “Claire, I have loved you my whole life—and both of yours. I would love for you, with your lovely business sense and iron-strong hands, to be part of my Italian family. Will you marry me?”

“Um, I'm flattered,” Claire III said, astonished. “But first, you are very old, and I am not interested in someone who has an infected mole that is green. Go find someone your own age.” She crossed her arms and turned up her nose.

Not making eye contact with Claire III, the elderly man twitched his green mole and shoved her aside, moving past her. Claire almost fell.

From the back of the room, G-Ma screamed, “Marsellino? Is it really you? After all these years? Yes, oh, yes of course I'll marry you.”

“G-Ma, who is this man? Tell me,” Claire III said, staring at Marsellino in the eyes. “How are you going to marry him when you're technically dead?”

Before G-Ma could answer, Marsellino stepped forward and gestured with a twirl. “Actually, *I* am dead. Technically.”

Marsellino explained to them then, to Claire and G-Ma and Mr. Luigi (still cowering in the corner from G-Ma's card-trick display) and the passing waiters, how he was brought back to life by the doc, the same doc that had brought G-Ma back to life. Maybe they were destined to be together, Claire considered. After all, they *were* both dead.



Marsellino grabbed G-Ma's hand and ran through the door to elope. Claire watched Marsellino spot a taxi-cab, go up to the driver's door, throw the taxi-cab driver out, and get in. G-Ma seemed largely unfazed by all of this and got into the car with Marsellino. (Given her past, her reaction was acceptable.)

Months later, Claire would learn that G-Ma and Marsellino, after eloping in Vegas, flew back to Toronto and buried themselves in one another's arms, descending back into G-Ma's grave in a double-sized coffin, forever in love.

Left alone now with Mr. Luigi, she turned to him and glanced down at him still holding the ripped cards. What a weak man, she thought. Weren't Italians supposed to be resilient? Apparently only some of them. Could she still work for a known mobster? Maybe this would give her some leverage.

"I'll see you at my nine a.m." She paused at the doorway and looked down at the tiramisu plastered to the wall, then looked up and smirked: "And I expect a raise."

The swinging doors closed behind her.

\* \* \*

Prof. Kiss Varga (pronounced, he would always clarify, *Kice* like *rice*) sat at his desk. It was fairly plain, a small name plate at the corner with a stack of papers to grade to his right. He took the last stack of papers from the pile of memoirs and centered it in front of him. He looked at the top right corner of the first page, and read: *Claire Wilkinson III*. He sighed preemptively and began to read. He had assigned her to write about her life, but she had written about tiramisu, a mobster-run cockfighting ring, and a sentient Google Doc.

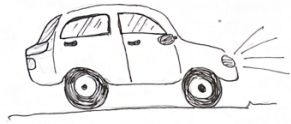
Preposterous!

Below, to express his response most accurately, he marked on the paper in red Sharpie  
Magnum™:

A large, bold, red, italicized letter 'F' is centered on the page. Below the letter is a thick, solid red horizontal bar. The entire graphic is rendered in a vibrant red color.

## “A Dark and Stormy Night-Errant”

By Elijah Black



“One dark and stormy night,” I said, looking down at my niece and nephew, “a king, a queen, and a prince were flying in an airplane. The king was flying the plane. He was an excellent pilot, but because of the clouds, he didn’t see a mountain in front of them - BAM!” Lightning conveniently chose that moment to strike, making them jump.

“What happened!?”

“Well . . . sorry to say, the king died, the queen died, *and* the prince died—but one person survived.” I paused for effect. “Who was it?”

“Who was it, who was it?”

“The dark and stormy knight.”

“But you didn’t say he was on the plane!” my nephew squealed.

“Yes, I did. ‘One dark and stormy knight,’ a king a qu—”

“But that’s not fair, Uncle Richie!”

“Yeah—what Alex said!” This was from my niece.

“But that’s the point, Alice! I tricked you.”

“So.” My nephew wrinkled his eyebrows.

“So what?”

“So your jokes aren't funny!” He burst out laughing with a raucous harmonization from his cousin.

She had moved here only about six months ago but already seemed at home. Her mother had died during childbirth and her father left an alcoholic to supposedly work on the mines out in California. My sister said she found her waiting on the doorstep with a letter and a bundle of flowers she had picked herself. She said that her papa was coming back to get her once he was rich, but I don't think anyone believed her—maybe not even herself. I tried to help with them whenever I had time, but that was not frequent with my job as a well-reputed lawyer.

“Welp,” I slapped my knee as I stood up. “It's about time for me to head out. Thanks for listening to my *apparently* boring stories.”

“But it's raining outside/” My sister poked her head out from a doorway. “Won't you stay for the night?”

“No, no, sis. I'll be fine.” I turned to my niece and nephew. “I'll see you two ragamuffins soon.”

“Bye Uncle Richie!” they chorused.

“And don't catch a cold out there!” my sister's voice rang from the back of the house.

“Don't worry, Edith. It's not that bad out there.” And with that, I stepped out into the storm.

The rain poured down much harder than I had expected. Even with the roof of the buggy, my clothes were as wet as if I had jumped into a lake. Lightning flashed all around me. The wind whisked away any warmth left from the comfort of the cottage. At last I had had enough; I was not even a fourth of the way home.

But as I began to turn the buggy around, one of the buggy's wheels stuck in the quickly forming mud. In desperation I leapt out of the buggy and began to pull on the reins, urging the horse forward. Rain ripped through the air like a strafing run of a renegade pilot. A bolt of lightning struck the ground nearby, and the horse reared out of control, knocking me off my feet. I landed on my back and tried desperately to roll over and scramble away. The horse's silhouette darkened the already nearly black sky. The shadow came rushing down on me like a suffocating blanket, and darkness engulfed me.

*So . . . this is what it is to be alone. I have thought before that I was alone, but now I realize how foolish I was. The world around me looks more desolate than I have ever felt in my short miserable life. The faint excuses of trees seem nearly as alone as I do. Their dark angular claws look as though they are trying to claw the sky down to earth for comfort. The bleak wasteland surrounding me of gray and brown sludge is slowly drowning the few remaining strands of strangling weeds.*

*I wander aimlessly over my past like all the dying are said to do. Fiction suggests a sharpness and clearness of the mind during death, this is not the case. Instead, I find myself surrounded, hemmed in by the visions of my life. Choices I have made seem to be laughing in my face taunting me with what my life could have been like had I chosen differently. But no, life is not generous enough to give a second chance at avoiding death.*

*Now I lie here staring death in the eyes, and yes, I am afraid. I can see the dark shadows of the carrion crows circling above my lifeless form, slowly descending to the sweet smell of blood. I can hear their harsh cries of victory over yet another despicable human. I can smell the stench of death slowly slithering over the world, consuming all before its tide of blood. I can feel*

*my life like a leaking faucet slowly . . . dripping . . . away. The flutter of black feathers, and scuttling of taloned feet surround me, hiding in the shadows of my darkening eyes.*

*Even as my vision becomes a void and a last breath escapes my lungs, the raven of death leans over my body and croaks, “Yo, bro. Wake up, man.”* I opened my eyes to the same desolate scenery of my dream, but instead of a raven, a stout bristly little man was staring down at me.

“What . . . How . . . Where am I? Who are *you*?” He shifted his head and the sun glared down, causing me to shade my eyes.

“Oh, me, right.” He blinked. “So, my name is Perdicion Samael Morningstar. Perdy for short. I’m here to hurry you along to the Inquiry. But the lines are a little tight right now, so you might have to wait in my office for a tad. Cool?”

“But wha—” I was cut short by Perdy.

“Sorry man, but I forgot to ask you what *your* name is.”

“Okay. Um, my name is Richie.”

“So is that short for Richard or . . .?” Perdy scratched his beard.

“No, just Richie.”

“Well *Richie*, I need you to follow my assistant to my office to wait for the Inquiry. Cool?” He gestured to a tall toothpick of a man in a faded suit behind him.

“Williams. At your service.” His voice had a tightness to it, as if at any moment his vocal cords might snap. “If you would care to follow me,” he said, and began to stride toward a slightly denser cluster of trees in the distance.

I scrambled to my knees and hurried toward his receding figure. “SO WHO ARE *YOU*?” I yelled.

“Williams, *at your service*—and you're yelling in my ear.”

“Oh, sorry about that. So who *are* you?”

“I am a retired butler, currently assisting Purgatory with its growing traffic issues, while I wait in said traffic. Speaking of the devil—here it is.” He pointed to a steep stairway leading down into a tiled cement hallway.

As I walked down, feet appeared, then legs and torsos. Before long I could see rows upon rows of people standing in line. “Doesn’t anybody ever try to skip the line?”

“Occasionally, but the people in front of them don’t typically respond peacefully to it.” He didn’t even look at me when he said that. Instead, he guided me down a narrow, chained-off path on the edge of the line.

As we went on farther down the seemingly endless hallway, I noticed Williams’ body stiffen, and his fingers began to twitch at his sides. Hoping to ease the tension I tried to strike up a conversation. “So, we're in Purgatory, right?” Receiving a curt nod I continued, “But then why’s Perdy not named Pergy or something?”

He barked a halting laugh that was completely empty of any emotion. “Firstly, what kind of name is *Pergy*? And secondly his father has a...unique...sense of humor. He named his son after the end destination to which Perdy’s current post is penultimate.”

“Oh ... I see.” I asked a question that had been bothering me. “Did you leave anyone in line?”

“Yes, he did.” A gruff voice interrupted his reply.

“Excuse me, Hamilton. I need to be on my way,” Wallace said.

“So do I! And unless I am mistaken, you’re taking that *boy*—”

“Sir, I am not a boy!”

A large figure on the other side of the chain turned to face me. “Is that so? Tell me, how old are you? I bet you're not even a hundred.”

“Hamilton, leave him alone.”

“Right, like you told me to leave Hector alone and then he sent us both to this God-forsaken place?” Hamilton’s voice was dripping with sarcasm. I opened my mouth to try to change the direction of the conversation but was interrupted as he continued, “Or like when you told me to relax, and then he cut me in line?”

“How was I to know that he would choose that moment to finally take revenge for all of the injustice you have done to your brothers?!” Wallace’s hands no longer twitched at his sides, and instead were clenched white-knuckled. “You have harassed me from birth to my death, and you have yet to still desist! He reached his hand into his worn suit jacket and pulled out a gray object. “I, Wallace Hamburg, challenge you to a duel!” He slammed his gray gloves onto the dirty tile floor. “What are your terms of engagement?”

Hamilton gave a ghastly grin, “Pinfingers.” He pulled out a large cleaver with blood stains from his suit.

“No! Stop! Can’t we talk this out?” I was shocked by the sudden violence.

“We *have* been talking it out!” Wallace said. “Now all that’s left is to chop off a few fingers.”

“No! You can’t!” I said.

“Tell me ‘not little boy,’ why not?” Hamilton said.

I scrambled for some excuse but was interrupted anyway by a new voice. “Because there is no table on which to duel, and because knives—especially of that length—are not allowed in the line.”



“Perdy!” Wallace scooped his gloves off the floor and stuffed them back into his pockets. “I didn’t mean to—I wasn’t going to—I didn’t want to—”

“Be quiet,” Perdy interjected. He strode over to Hamilton and snatched the cleaver from his grip. “I ought to send you back in line after a few centuries for having this, but honestly I’m mildly impressed that you managed to get a knife of this size into line. Besides, Lucifer knows traffic is bad enough as it is!”

“Perdy, I am sorry for the trouble my presence might have caused—then again, I don’t exactly want my presence here either. Regardless, I didn’t intend to start a duel, it just sort of happened,” I said.

“Ah, the first of the overflow is also the first to speak his mind.” Perdy raised an eyebrow at me. I opened my mouth to respond but was cut short again. “Come with me and Wallace to the Immigration and Travel Department to sort out a few papers and we’ll send you on your way.” He turned and began to briskly walk down the hallway, leaving Wallace and me scrambling to catch up.

The chained off section of the long hallway soon split off into a large room with seemingly needlessly large amounts of chained fence stretching in long lines to a few unoccupied counters. After the swift navigation of the chain link maze Perdy led us into a smaller office. He sat behind a desk Wallace stood next to him. He motioned for me to sit in a small chair in front of him. He rapidly flipped through a folder until he found the page he must have been looking for. Perdy clicked a pen and began scribbling on the form.

“Richie M. Roberts. Relations of the Aldens. Born 1822, died 1854. Cause of death: horse and buggy crash.” Perdy muttered unintelligibly as the list went on. “Act of penitence, oh that’s a good one. Hmm.” He scratched the stubble growing on his prominent chin. “Usually,

you have to go about perdition doing good deeds for a few decades before you can get sent back, but you've only been here for barely one day.... Wait! I got it! Act of penitence: resolving conflict between the Hamburg brothers.” With a dramatic flourish, he signed the paper and handed it to me to do likewise. “I’m sure you understand the gray territory very well, being a lawyer and all, but nobody really cares what excuse you use, as long as we solve the traffic problem.”

I signed the paper and asked, “So, what now?”

Perdy snapped his fingers and Wallace hurried forward with a syringe full of a dark liquid. “It will burn a little, but it will go away soon.”

I began to reply to Wallace, but Perdy interrupted me—he seemed to have a knack for that. “Once on the other side, Perdition will be like a bad dream.”

“It certainly has been a unique experience.” I wiped my sweaty palms on my legs and took a deep breath as Wallace plunged the needle into my neck.

I heard Perdy’s voice like a distant echo as the liquid rushed like a firestorm through my veins. “Indeed it has.”

## “Eyes of the Forest”

By Madi Cropp



Back at what Sophie Barley has referred to as “her study,” which is just a room with a table shoved in the middle of it and an evidence wall with lines of red string connecting pictures and notes together. It’s the place where all of her most valuable knowledge on the creatures is kept, and it seems to come in handy from time to time, despite its chaotic nature. But it’s also the place where she’ll do work for her job, designing and redesigning things for companies. Investigating is interesting, but she’s an adult, and she has to do something to pay the bills.

The evidence wall has lots of blurry, shaky photos from outside, day and night, where the creature *should* have been. Sophie found out very quickly that they don’t photograph well—or at all, really. Along with the photos, you can see layers of sticky notes, newspaper articles, and notes of bigger pieces of paper, all written or collected by her, some things connected by a cherry-red string of yarn. She needed solid evidence. Some of the things on her board were *technically* solid, as they were newspaper articles, but they didn’t really lead her anywhere. Most of the evidence that was about any particular place was from her town of Chester, Pennsylvania. Anything found in the articles was really just facts, unchangeable facts. Or they had at least been accepted as such throughout the course of history. The creatures don’t photograph well, Sophie knows that, but there has to be something that she can do to capture them. She would have to go find one and *actually* go up to it, observe it from the inside rather than from the comfort of her

home or through newspaper articles. Sophie exited her study so she could get some materials together for this trip that she would go on tomorrow night.

The next night, Sophie goes to the forest alone. Bringing her dog Chow wouldn't be a good idea, at least not this time, considering what happened the last time he was brought on a "investigating trip." He was a good dog, but he could get a little sidetracked, to say the least. She also didn't want to have to recover from a sprained ankle, or potentially something worse, again.

In Sophie's bag are items that are concluded to be essential for her investigating trips, such as a flashlight (and extra batteries of course), a coat, a water bottle, and a small first aid kit. She is truthfully hoping that she won't be finding a use for her small first aid kit tonight. Before leaving, she double-triple-checks her bag to make sure that she has everything she needs. It feels like she is missing something, but maybe that is her brain's way of trying to get her to stay home.

The walk to the forest is short, as it is near her house, but seeing as the investigation she is about to do, the walk feels like it takes hours. When Sophie has finally made her way there, she stands in front of the opening and just looks in for a few minutes, apprehensive to go inside. She doesn't have to do this really. She can just turn around, go back home, and watch TV with Chow until he falls back asleep. But even if she is scared to do this, she has to if she wants to know more about these shadowy creatures that lurk around.

She makes her descent forward, not having a clear place or direction in mind. All she knows is that she has to, or more wants to, find something. The forest is silent, aside from the crickets and decaying foliage under her feet. She can see in the distance for now, but with how fast the light from the sky is disappearing, it won't be long before she will need to get out her flashlight. *I should just get it out now, she thinks, I'll just hook the clip onto the belt look of my*

*jeans*. She swings her bag around and plops it on the ground, the leaves making a loud crunching sound underneath it.

As she is zipping up her backpack, she hears a rustle in the distance in front of her. She whips her head in the direction of the noise and slowly zips up her backpack. Throwing it on her shoulders, she slowly makes her way over to the bushes where the rustle came from, sure to be as quiet as she can with the crunchy leaves of the forest floor. What if there is a shadow in there? This could be the big breakthrough she needs to really get going with her research. When she gets to the bushes, she takes a deep breath before slowly putting her hands in the bushes. In one quick motion, she pulls the bushes apart with her eyes clenched. She slowly opens an eye to see that the rustling she has heard isn't her big break; it is just a rabbit that is looking for food. Its ears twitch before it looks at her. Its eyes widen with realization and slight fear. They twitch their nose. The rabbit runs after, quickly grabbing its found goods to find another place of safety. Sophie rolls her eyes after taking a much-needed deep breath, heart still racing.

“Of *course* it would be a dumb bunny, ridiculous,” she says to herself, annoyed and grumbling. She stands up straight and tousles her hair in frustration. She puffs out a breath.

“Whatever,” she says. “It wouldn't really be much of an investigation if it had been that easy to find something, would it?” With an attempt to get her spirits back up, she readjusts her backpack and shakes herself off, continuing to descend into the forest.

The forest never seems very interesting to Sophie, despite the fact that the shadows seem to hang around in it often. She mostly sees it as a place full of mud, dead leaves, and animals with rabies. Taking another step forward, she is able to see a small pond in the middle of a clearing of trees. *Now this might take my research somewhere*, Sophie thinks. Her next steps toward this clearing are quicker now that there is a potential to further her research, to possibly

find something of interest or something useful, so this late night trip doesn't end up as a waste of time.

Finding herself in front of the small pond, she can see that it is for the most part clear. Or at least clearer than most ponds in a forest would be. While that is strange, Sophie keeps her thoughts going forward. Sophie crouches down to get a closer look. The pond is, again, abnormally clear, and there seems to be now leaves or forest debris of any kind floating in the water. The rocks in the water are also clear of any scuffs or marks of dirt. The grass and plants around this pond seem to be healthier and brighter than any others found in the forest. The more and more Sophie observes this pond, the stranger it seems to get. She stands back up. While this is an odd occurrence and she would *love* to stay and explore it, finding anything to do with the shadowy creatures is more important at the moment. She continues to walk around this small clearing, looking and listening for creatures, or possibly prints that they can leave behind. Well, if they can leave any kind of foot or handprint behind, that is. After walking past a tree covered in bushes, Sophie startles after hearing the chirps of a squirrel that is rustling around. She rolls her eyes after realizing what it is. While it isn't doing her any harm, she decides that it might be best to go and scare it off so the noise doesn't distract or get in the way of something else. With that, she turns back around and makes her way back to the tree covered in bushes. She first checks the tree, looking past the branches and leaves, but it seems like the squirrel is actually in the bushes. This is confirmed once she hears more chirps and teeth-clicking coming from the nearby bushes. Moving over a few steps, she puts her hands in the bush and is going to push it open when she hears another noise coming from the squirrel. Though, now that she is closer to the noise, she notices that it sounds off in a sense. Of course, it is making noises that a squirrel would, but it sounds more like something trying to imitate a squirrel, and they are almost

succeeding. Shaking off her confusion and curiosity, she opens the bush in one swift motion. At first, she doesn't see anything, so she further spreads the bushes apart. As she is rifling through the bushes, she comes face to face with a shadow creature that is in a small, distorted shape. She assumes it is trying to imitate the look of a squirrel too. Luckily, the creature hasn't noticed her yet as she is frozen in fear at the fact that she is less than five feet from a creature that may or may not be dangerous. Quickly snapping out of her trance, she backs up and hides behind something nearby in the clearing. She observes the creature from behind a tree, trying to decide what she is going to do, now that she has this opportunity right in front of her. Knowing that they don't photograph well, Sophie quickly takes out her phone so she can type out some observations instead. After spending a few minutes feverishly typing, looking between the creature and her phone, she quietly picks up her backpack and makes her way out of the clearing and the forest so as to not be seen by the shadow. As she is making her way back, she can't help but think, now that she has a clearer head: Why a squirrel?

## “The Prankster”

By Mandy Landis



In a little seaside village, Kinsale, Ireland, in Europe, there lived a little boy whose name was Jasper Jones. He was seventeen. He had a green shirt and some black pants on. Everyone knew who Jasper was because he was the village prankster. Most of Jasper’s pranks were pretty harmless. One time he covered the baker’s car in gift wrap, and another time he filled the village’s only phone booth with popcorn.

Sometimes Jasper would even prank his own family members. His mother never really forgave him for gluing all of her furniture to the ceiling. Jasper’s most famous prank was the time he put the mayor’s underwear up a flagpole, which everyone thought was pretty funny. Well, everyone except the mayor, of course.

That was the thing about Jasper’s pranks. Most people thought they were pretty hilarious, unless they were the ones being pranked. Anyway, in the morning Jasper woke up, trying to figure out who he was going to prank next. He couldn’t decide if he wanted to toilet paper Markis Ken (his next neighbor)’s house or replace Alex Bomb the baker’s cream-filled donuts with toothpaste.

The toilet paper thing felt like a lot of work, and it had been a while since Jasper decided on the baker, so Jasper decided he’d go fill the baker’s donuts with toothpaste for today. Jasper



got out of bed and brushed his hair, then headed up the hill to the bakery. On the way there, he passed a few people he knew.

He waved to Marian Linn, the dressmaker, and Miki Tray, the cheesemonger, but neither one waved back. He figured they were just sore at him for covering their shop windows in mustard the week before. Things got stranger when Jasper walked into the bakery. His friend Dieter Indigo, the shoemaker, was walking out, and when Jasper said hello, Dieter ignored him. A few seconds later, when Marta Swine, the librarian, walked in to buy her daily baguette, she walked past Jasper like she didn't see him. When Marta went to the counter to buy her bread, Joris was distracted, and that's when Jasper made his move. He pulled the tube of toothpaste out of his pocket and grabbed the glass lid off the donut platter.

When Jasper reached for the lid, his hand went right through it. Jasper was so confused that he ran outside and onto the street. What happened next upset him even more. Because when he stood in the front of the mirror shop, he didn't have a reflection. Even when Jasper barged in on the Mommy and Me class at the yoga studio, everyone just kept doing their thing like he didn't even exist.

Jasper tried talking himself into thinking this was a good thing, because if no one could see him, he could pull off some really epic prank. Just then a short line of people walked past Jasper. There was Brom, his best friend growing up, and his first schoolteacher, Mrs. Van. Everyone was dressed in black and looked really sad.

Then Jasper saw his own mother at the back of the line, bawling her eyes out. Everyone was headed into the church, so Jasper followed them inside. Even though Jasper knew no one could see him, he felt a little underdressed, so he sat in the back row by himself. It didn't take

long for Jasper to figure out that he was at a funeral. He was still pretty shocked when he realized who the funeral was for.

The preacher said, “The fun-loving boy who has passed on Thursday was toilet papering Markis’s front yard when he got struck by lightning. You probably already figured out that person was Jasper.” So now Jasper knew the truth. He wasn’t invisible all this time. He was dead. He had to sit there while everyone came up to the front of the church to say a few words.

Usually at funerals people say nice things about the person who died. All anyone could talk about was Jasper’s annoying pranks. For the first time ever, Jasper could see that sometimes he took his pranks too far. He wished he could live his whole life over again and become a fisherman or a librarian or just about anything other than the village prankster. After the last person spoke, it was time for final goodbyes. When Jasper's mom went up to the casket, it was a little hard for Jasper to watch.

Jasper had no idea what you were supposed to do at a funeral when you were the person who died. So even though it felt weird, he went up to say his goodbyes, but there wasn’t a body in the casket at all. There was just a pumpkin with a face drawn on it, which kind of looked like Jasper.

Then everyone started laughing at once. That was the moment when Jasper realized he wasn’t really dead and that this was all one big prank. Jasper was happy he was alive, but to be honest, he was annoyed that the other villagers got him so good. For one thing, he couldn’t figure out how his hand went through the glass donut lid at the bakery.

Then Joris explained that his nephew was a whiz with technology, and the whole donut platter was a hologram. When Jasper asked why he couldn’t see his reflection in the mirror, the

guy who owned the mirror shop said he'd replaced the mirrors with televisions that showed an empty sidewalk.

Then the people who were in the yoga studio said they almost lost it when Jasper walked in on their class. It turned out the whole village was in on the joke. Since pranking was kind of Jasper's thing, he had a hard time admitting they got him. Jasper told everyone it was a decent prank but he was way better.

Then the preacher said this was a double prank, because the day before, a meteor wiped out the village and everyone in it. That meant they were all dead and everyone was a ghost. Well, this was the second time Jasper found out he was dead in one day, but this time he didn't take it as hard.

Jasper always wanted to travel, and if he was a ghost, he could fly to Italy and see the city of canals. Jasper climbed to the top of the lighthouse, seeing the leaves on a tree blowing in the wind, with the thought that if he jumped, he would fly to Italy. As Jasper prepared to jump and he saw many of the villagers from the ground yelling at him, Jasper strained to hear what they were yelling and heard them wanting him to stop and not to jump, and Jasper was glad this was a prank or he would really be dead. It turned out the story about the meteor was a prank too. And this time, the villagers thought maybe they were the ones who took a prank a little too far. So he climbed down, and he headed home, but he got interrupted by the TVs in front of the bakery, and he turned and Stephen King was on with his interview about life, and Jasper found this important when he heard, "The scariest moment is always just before you start." And then Stephen King said, "You can, you should, and if you're brave enough to start, you will." He could relate to this, because after everything he had been through today, he decided he needed to be a better person. Maybe Stephen king was right. Maybe the first step was the scariest. So he took the advice from

Stephen King, and he ran home to see his mom and dad, and they came up with a plan, like maybe he could go into something he liked to do, such as becoming a magician, since he liked to do pranks, and he had to be sneaky with his pranks. So Jasper was about to pull off an epic prank for his last prank. He was going to put toothpaste in the donuts, and then he was going to put mustard in his dad's jelly sandwiches. His face was red. He was trying not to laugh so hard.

## “The Apothecary”

By Grant Pavel



The winter wind blew open the window covers with a loud bang. The cold air penetrated Bram's blankets, and he awoke immediately. He ran to the window and slammed the wooden covers shut. As he looked around his room, the cramped space looked very cozy. A stove in the corner provided all the warmth that his small dwelling needed. Adjacent to the stove, the wall was lined with books. He sat in his chair every day and read the selection of his choice. The red carpet had lost color with its old age but still remained cozy. His grandmother had raised him in this house, and he had lived in it his whole life.

His grandmother, Ada, was still asleep. At 90 cycles, she was surprisingly lithe and limber. Awake now from the cold breeze, Bram went over to his small stove in the corner and began starting a fire to make some tea for his grandmother. He grabbed a couple of pieces of scratch paper and set them afire with the tip of his finger. It was the first type of sorcery that his grandmother had taught him, and it was one that he mastered quickly. He added a couple of the logs that sat next to the stove. He lifted the lid off the water bucket and sunk the kettle in, collecting just the right amount for two people.

While he waited for the water to boil, he began to pull on his clothing for the day. His clothing consisted of a pair of trousers, a cotton shirt, and a heavy wool coat. He would need Ada to make some newer clothing as the ones he was wearing now were getting quite worn. He sat his boots by the door for when he needed them and went over to the kettle that was now

whistling. He grabbed one of the many tin canisters labeled “peppermint” and threw in a spoonful. Ada began to stir, and Bram quickly pulled his boots on and ran down the stairs. If Ada knew that he hadn’t opened up the shop by now, he would be in trouble. The two-storey house contained the upper level, their living area, and the downstairs level, which they used for their apothecary shop.

The house had been passed down for generations and was located in the city’s West Wing. The West Wing was the Kingdom of Thesite’s oldest area. It wasn’t poor or rich, and not fancy or elegant, dirty, nor extraordinarily clean. The North contained the palace and was elegantly rich. Wealthy merchants and aristocrats were located there. The East was the Kingdom’s coast. Fishing and farming was the most common profession there, and many different taverns were in the area. The South, the new land that had been acquired by the Kingdom recently, was fairly unknown, but there were nomadic tribes who roamed the lands. As Bram reached the end of the stairs, he quickly went about lighting all the candles in the shop. With a snap of his fingers, the many candles quickly were aflame. For the most part, apothecaries were looked down upon in the Kingdom. Their unnatural abilities were also feared, because not all used their gifts for good. Some were capable of channeling a great deal of their powers, whereas others could only do the simplest of tasks. Ada, for instance, was from a very powerful line of apothecaries. Bram was just beginning to be able to channel more of his power, but the full extent to which he could was yet to be seen.

Bram ran the shop most of the time, while Ada made potions. She was still teaching Bram to make them, but he was pretty adept at doing so. The herbs natural healing properties, when imbued with magic, helped to create a powerful medicine. Apothecaries could, of course, heal someone using magic alone, but it often left them very tired, and if they over-expended

themselves, it could kill them. That's why mixing magic with herbs was useful. It created something powerful that didn't leave the apothecary completely drained. They could also keep a stockpile of certain medicines for when outbreaks of diseases occurred. Their shop served many people daily and got good business. Bram also delivered certain medicines that had to be applied by an apothecary.

"Bram, dear," Ada said as she walked down the stairs. "We have an early delivery this morning, and I'll be going with you, as the process is quite taxing."

"Yes, Grandmother. I'll go get the carriage ready."

"Take your tea with you," Ada said, handing him his drink. "And be quick about it. We don't have much time."

Bram stepped out onto the street and was shocked at the bitter cold. He turned and made his way to the small attached stable and greeted the horses. Tar and Nav were two fine horses. Ada and he had gotten them a couple of years back when she had saved a wealthy quartermaster's son from a grave wound. He had gifted them to her to show his appreciation. Bram quickly attached their bridles and led them both out. After he attached them to the carriage, he went to tell Ada that they were ready to be on their way. Stepping back into the shop, he found Ada in the back room preparing some medications.

"Who are we seeing?" Bram asked.

"The son of a merchant," she replied. "He hasn't been feeling well, and none of the doctors can seem to help him."

"Do you know what's wrong with him?"

"Possibly, but I won't know for sure until I can examine him."

Ada quickly bundled up the ingredients she was preparing and went to the shelf to grab a couple of medications. Bram watched her grab a few and throw them into her satchel. He grabbed his from underneath the table. Their satchels contained wraps, poultices, and basic potions for pain and sickness. Ada opened the door and beckoned for Bram to come and join her. Bram opened the carriage door, and Ada swiftly jumped up and into it. Bram climbed the wagon and sat down atop. He shook the reins, and with that, the horses pulled out at a swift pace. The streets were barely lit, and Bram lit the lantern that sat on the wagon. The streets were paved with brick, but it wasn't always even. Some places were missing a few, and the wagon was bouncing up and down. Dense fog coated the street, and the sun was covered by clouds.

“Keep going up towards the market. The merchant owns a shop there and will be expecting us any minute,” Ada said.

Bram kept his eyes on the road and sat the horses out at a bit faster pace. The market was still a good while away.

\* \* \*

“Bram, the one with the statue,” Ada said, pointing to an imposing statue the shape of a lion.

Bram pulled the carriage up next to a grand house. The houses touched each other and were 4 stories high each. They went up and down the street, and the end couldn't be seen. Each was identical in grandeur.

Bram jumped off the carriage and opened the door for Ada. She was swift and walked right up to the door and banged on it a few times with the heavy iron knocker. The door opened, and they were greeted by a servant.

“Good evening, Madam. How may I be of assistance?”



“I am here to see a boy,” Ada said impatiently. “I have spoken to your master who arranged a meeting.” The servant seemed to pause for a moment and think. “Ada Visser and my grandson Bram Visser,” Ada said to help jog his memory.

“Ah, yes, Madam Ada.”

“Yes, may I come in?”

“Yes, Madam, you are most welcome here. Allow me a moment to fetch Sir Ivan,” the servant said, motioning for them to enter.

Bram stepped into the house with Ada and was shocked by how grand the house was. A huge glass chandelier hung from the ceiling and lit the entire room. Two pairs of staircases led to the upper levels and met in the middle. A lush red carpet covered the stairs. There was hard flooring underneath their feet that shined with cleanliness. Before they could look around anymore, a tall man with a top hat appeared.

“Greetings, Madam,” the man said, bowing before Ada. “I am Sir Ivan, and who is this?”

“This is my grandson, Bram. I will require his help today.”

“Alright, my son is just this way,” Sir Ivan said, leading them up the stairs.

The top of the stairway revealed a long hall with many doors on either side. Sir Ivan led them to the very end and opened the door. Inside Simon could see a small, sickly figure lying in the bed covered with blankets. A soft, wheezing sound emanated from the figure. A small woman stood over the figure, holding a wet washcloth on the boy's forehead. Ada walked over to the woman.

“May I look at the boy?” Ada said.

“Yes. Please help him. No one else seems to know what's wrong with him.”

“Tell me a bit about the boy.”

“He's been sick for about a week. It didn't start to get really bad until a couple of days ago. He was overseas with his father, Sir Ivan, and we suspected a common cold at first. But it soon grew much worse than that.”

Bram looked at the boy. His face was dark and bags hung under his eyes. His skin looked dry and pale, red dots appeared on almost every inch of his skin. The skin lay taut over his cheekbones. He couldn't be much younger than Bram's 16 years. Ada had stopped touching the boy.

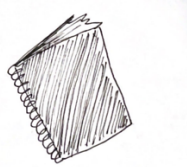
“Simon. Reach into my bag and grab the bottle of alcohol,” she said calmly.

Simon did as he was told and quickly reached into Ada's satchel. He grabbed and uncorked the bottle. Ada took it from him and quickly poured the alcohol all over her hands.

“No one must leave this household. A plague has begun to take hold and unless we can contain it, this whole kingdom may fall,” Ada said in a grave tone.

Word Count 8/27

By Elijah Black



“The peace was not destined to last, however. Water’s firstborn, Fire, became jealous of his younger siblings. He convinced his youngest sister, Air, to join with him against the supposed tyranny, and so he began to plot the demise of his other two siblings.

“Fire breeds an army of dragons, great lumbering beasts who spat out fire from their jaws. And fleet raptors of the sky. In order to ensure the demise of his siblings, he traded the gift of fire with Wind, in exchange for the gift of flight for his highly immobile army.

“The armies of the plains and woods tried in vain to stem the flood of invaders, but to no avail. Fire destroyed the entirety of the plains and much of the woods, reducing them to desolation.

“However, this reign of terror was quickly slowed by an outstanding feat of espionage by a great hero. This hero, born by elven and mannish parents, was named Alric. Alric stole himself into the great palace of Fire under the guise of a servant. There he learned the location of the Ignentus. The Ignentus is a pendant on which dangles a gem of burning flame. This pendant was the token by which Fire and Wind shared their gifts. The Ignentus was locked tight in a hidden chamber under a lake of boiling fire. Alric stole the key from around Fire’s very neck while he slept, and began the quest to find the Ignentus. He weaved through the lines of Fire’s minions, and hid from the searching eyes of the Nephelee.

“Despite the many perils of the journey, Alric successfully stole the pendant. Fire’s armies were severely crippled, but Alric did not want to risk the pendant being recovered so he set out to destroy the pendant in the chasm of Darkness, deep in the Shadowlands, where Night the youngest of all of Water’s children has hid in exile since the early years.

“Night forsook the pleasantries of the world that Water and his siblings were creating. Instead he created dark monsters and nightmares so ghastly that Water forced him into a small corner of the world where all of his children roam. It was in the Shadowlands where Alric was confronted with Night himself. Night threw Alric into the chasm of Darkness where there is naught but death. Night then took the Ignentus and hid it in one of his many dungeons where he would try to use the pendant for himself but could not, because his body was nothingness.

“However, this story does end on a hopeful note, even if not a happy one. For ancient prophecies foretell the coming of another Elf-man like Alric, but unlike Alric, the coming hero would be an adolescent rather than a veteran of warfare. This hero would recover the pendant and save the Forest.”

“Does that mean Daddy will be safe when he hunts deep in the woods, and can get us a deer?” The small voice of the middle child spoke up again.

“Yes, my little Zephir, yes it would.”

Word Count 9/17

By Madi Cropp



It's late at night when Sophie decides to go and do some hands-on investigation. She decides that the best place to go is near the edge of the forest. Before she goes, she packs a little necessities bag, including a full water bottle, a small first aid kit, her phone, a jacket, and her trusty heavy duty flashlight. The last thing she needs though is Chow.

“Chow!” she says, “Do you wanna come investigate with me?”

“Ruff!” he says, trotting to the door, wagging his tail excitedly.

“Ok, let's go then,” she says. No need to chain up Chow; he and Sophie are stuck to each other like glue most of the time.

The walk to the edge of the forest is short but peaceful. Sophie throws her backpack to the ground and reaches in to grab her flashlight.

“All right, all we're gonna do here, Chow, is look around and see if there are any creatures around. Maybe they'll react to the light, maybe not, but we will not bark or run up at them, ok?” Sophie says, raising an eyebrow and looking at Chow expectantly. He huffs and turns his head to the side. When he does so, his eyes widen, and his ears perk up.

“What?” she says, whipping her head around to see if anything is wrong. No more than a second later, Chow makes a mad dash to the forest. Sophie takes off in a sprint towards him, but he is already out of her sight by the time she gets into the forest.

“Chow! Come here! Get back here!” She says, “I told you not to run off. Come back!” She is silent for a moment and then hears a bark in the distance to her left. She goes after it. The barking gets louder as she persists forward until she has made it to a clearing of trees. It seems to be empty, but the barking sounds as if it is right beside her.

“Chow! I can hear you, so come out now,” she says, growing frustrated with the Saint Bernard’s antics. She turns around to check around the clearing and sees herself within 5 feet of a shadow creature, this one in the shape of a dog. It’s a Saint Bernard. It barks once more, but now that Sophie is so close to it she can hear that it sounds almost distorted. She quickly turns and starts to sprint in the opposite direction, desperate to get far, far away from the creature. There’s a log in her path as she is running that she doesn’t see. Sophie trips and tumbles down the slanted earth, picking up foliage on the way.

Sophie finds that once she’s stopped, she feels a sharp pain in her ankle. She takes a look to find that it’s just a simple sprain. But in her midst to go after Chow, she never put her backpack back on, and she has no first aid supplies to try and mend the cuts littering her legs, or to try and wrap up her sprained ankle. Her only option is to give herself a moment and then start to find a way out of the forest, hopefully finding Chow along the way.

Suddenly, there is rustling in the bushes. Even though she has a sprained ankle, Sophie is ready to get back up and hobble as fast as she can out of here. Though, she finds that hobbling won’t be necessary as what popped out of the bushes was Chow, this time the real thing and not a double.

“Chow!” Sophie says, delighted to see her dog safe and sound, “Get over here!” Though, short lived, once she remembers how upset she is that he ran off in the first place. “I told you not

to run off! And what do you do? Exactly that!” she says. Chow grumbles at the scolding but comes to sit next to her regardless.

“Now, can you please help me up? I sprained my ankle while looking after you, by the way,” she says. She makes her way to stand up, using her good ankle, trying to keep as much pressure off of the bad one as possible. She effectively gets in a position where she can use Chow as a crutch.

“Stand, please,” she says. Chow lazily stands so Sophie can start to lean on him as they begin to make their way out of the forest to get Sophie's things so that they can go home.

Spring 2022

“Florin the Monkish Bandit”

A Collaborative Story By Elijah Black, Madi Cropp, Mandy Landis, Grant Pavel, and Mr.

Butler-Gruett



In Târgu Mureș, the bell rang ten times. The marketplace was bustling. Florin, who was 18 and skittish, kept tripping over the hem of his tunic. He was late now for his appointment with Father Dante. His sister Luiza's pneumonia had just taken a turn for the worse, and he was still sickened by the thought of the blood she'd coughed up.

"Quit jostling my fruit," a vendor shouted as Florin jogged through the square.

"Scuze," Florin mumbled. He shuffled around the vendor toward Fortress Church.

“Don’t apologize to me.” The vendor had stuck a pudgy arm out in front of Florin, “Apologize to the beautiful apples you have spoiled!”

He grabbed a handful of the *căpsune* nearby and threw them in the vendor's face and chest and they made a big thud as they hit him. The vendor lost his balance and fell to the ground, hitting his head and knocking him out cold. Florin looked around to double-check, but the swarming crowd were all too distracted by the anxious shopping and bartering happening as the Târgu Mureș residents prepared for Easter dinner.

He fled from the scene so as not to be late for his appointment. He paused before the heavy oak door and spruced up his hair and clothes. He raised his hand hesitantly to knock on the door, but right as he was about to bring it down, the door creaked open. A thirtyish man with



unkempt facial hair poked his tonsured head out. He was wearing a cloth covering over his eyes, so Florin couldn't make eye contact with him.

“You’re late, you blubbing barnacle,” the man said.

“My apologies, I was delayed by a disturbance in the marketplace,” Florin said. He realized his hand was still hanging in the air, and dropped it back down. “You know how busy it gets before Church holidays.”

The man sniffed at the slight to the church. “Come this way,” he said. “I’m Brother Barbu.” Barbu led Florin up the shiny marble steps, and as he turned his long black robes swung dramatically.

They ascended to Father Dante's room, where Florin had been previously.

“I heard you wanted to speak with me about becoming a monk,” Father Dante said.

“Yes sir, I wanted to become a monk because my sister is sick and my father has died. I wanted to bring honor to my family name again,” Florin said.

The master Dante went out of the room to ponder this decision. Florin knew that it was a privilege to enter this historic and respected monastery, and he didn't expect to get in easily. He had studied and trained for many summers to even get this appointment. As he sat in the room alone, waiting, he could hear the murmur of Dante conversing with a very high-pitched male voice—almost like a mouse.

Father Dante returned to the room, looking mysteriously pensive and dark. His hands were held behind his back so that Florin couldn't see them. Suddenly, with a thunk, Father Dante produced his hands from behind his back and threw down a long green and red snake on Florin's lap.

“Meet,” Father Dante said.

The snake slithered and constricted Florin's short arm. His arm soon became red like a tomato. Florin carefully reached his other hand out and gripped Buttercup firmly by the head. With a sharp crack he yanked its head to one side. Florin then held out the limp snake in front of him, "I assume that was a test?"

"You should hope so," Father Dante said. "Otherwise, you just killed my pet."

Florin laughed nervously and rubbed the rough callous on his fingers he'd developed from hours of writing with a quill.

"Are you familiar with Acts 28?" Father Dante asked. "In the story, Paul is bitten by a snake on a secluded island. Being bitten by the snake tests Paul's faith. Apparently you share a similar faith."

*"per quem accepimus gratiam et apostolatum ad oboediendum fidei in omnibus gentibus pro nomine eius,"* Florin said, quoting the verse. "My late father was a monk and a scholar of Latin. It is in honor of his memory that I come to you now."

In a remote corner of the village, with the creakiest gate and longest walkway in Romania, sat a daubed cottage with a thatched roof. Its walls were caked in ivy and mud. The thatch in the roof was clearly in need of desperate repair. Any rain in Târgu Mureş collected in muddy pools on the floor and soaked everything they had. His sister, Luiza, who is seven, slept in a corner on a pile of straw. His mother spent her days and nights arguing with their decrepit donkey, Apollo. The family and house, Florin had begun to notice, were now equally desperate.

"Mother," Florin shouted. His mother was outside the cottage pushing Apollo into his enclosure. Apollo was as stubborn as any other donkey, but was particularly agitated today

because his mother had spent all day trying to sell him. "I've just been offered a task at the monastery."

"Oh, kind gentleman, would you be interested in buying this beautiful animal?" his mother shouted back. "He has impeccable manners and a fine constitution. One-half horsepower, all-leather exterior. Test drives available. I am offering him to you for five drachmas—for today only."

Florin shrugged and moved inside—hopeless.

There he found Luiza still coughing up blood.

"So, are you going to be getting a lot of money at the monastery?" Luiza asked, smirking.

"Oh, yeah of course. We will have plenty of money." Florin then realized that this was a lie. While the monastery paid an okay amount, it was not close to the amount they were used to when his father was abbot.

"I'm hungry, can I have some food, please?" Luiza said, while she was coughing. "I am so hungry. I need food."

"Yeah, just a minute. Let me get you some water first." He came back with a clay jar of water. He handed it to her and said, "I'll be back with some food in a bit."

On his way out the door, he paused by his bed and pulled a rumpled domino mask from the straw. Out on a slow road at the edge of town (where he had previously seen his father's spirit float briefly before disappearing in a flash), he watched from the shadows for a lone traveler to pass. He was wearing a black smock and some khaki pants with a brown leather tunic. Behind him, he pulled a wooden tumbrel. It looked decrepit, but was piled high with cabbage, radishes, carrots, and potatoes. There was even a bundle of trout and a glistening slab of pork shoulder. If Florin could somehow make it off with the whole tumbrel, it would feed his family for weeks.

He could even attach the tumbrel to Apollo, parade it through town. All of Târgu Mureș would envy them!

He picked a very thick stick he found on the ground and hit the traveler over the head and knocked him out cold. Florin walked closer to the tumbrel to examine all the goods inside. But as he examined them, he heard the crunch of a dry leaf behind him. He whirled around and held up his dagger. He faced a man of perhaps thirty years. The man had a black wide brimmed hat that cast the top half of his face in shadow. Behind him Florin could see five faint outlines suggesting that he was not alone.

With a bang and clash, the five figures—including the man whose face was in shadow—descended on the tumbrel. One of the bigger men picked up a whole basket of potatoes and started off with it. Another went for the pork shoulder. A small, gray-haired man went for the bundle of trout, but before he could grab it, the man with the shadowed face beat him to it.

Florin was shocked that the five men cleared out the cart so quickly. The shadow man pulled out a fishing pole and threw it at the man that was on the ground, and it smashed his bruised hand.

“You there, young lad,” the shadow man said, and as he spoke, Florin could see his slightly yellowed, small teeth move as he spoke. “If you’re ever interested in frying bigger fish than this,” he said with a wink as he tossed Florin the string of fish, “You know who to look for.”

The man cantered off to join his band.

Florin considered the offer. He was already a bandit, he thought, now that he'd robbed the traveler. And he considered Luiza at home, desperate for nourishment. His mother—he didn't

want to think about his mother. Why not join their crew? As long as the monastery never found out, this could be his ticket to riches and a better life.

“Wait,” he shouted after the shadow man, stepping over the fishing pole. "I want to fry bigger fish than this. I'll join you."

“In that case,” the bandit grabbed the pork shoulder and lobbed it to Florin. “I'm Banjo. Nice to ‘meat’ you.”

\* \* \*

Florin wearily took a few more steps, and pulled down what seemed like the thousandth wanted poster. Somehow, even with the shadows and the domino mask, the traveler had been able to direct a regrettably accurate sketch of Florin's face (same mushroom-brown hair, same bumpy nose, same weak jaw). He had been plodding around town for the last two hours, and now he was going to be late for his first day at the monastery. Hopefully no one saw any of these, he thought. But he had to avoid seeing the sheriff at all costs.

Florin quickly made his way up the cobblestone steps of the monastery. He stopped at the front of the doors, nervous to find out if Father Dante or any of the other monks had seen the posters around the village. Before entering, Florin smoothed out his hair and clothes and then opened the doors.

“Oh, Florin, you are right on time,” Father Dante shouted. “Did you run here? You are all sweaty and out of breath.”

“Oh, no, not at all,” Florin said, floundering. “I'm just struck breathless by the glory of the Lord.”

Father Dante raised an eyebrow. Father Dante led Florin up the stairs to show him around, but Florin was thinking he really did not need a tour around, since his dad used to run the place. But he went along anyway. It was his job. He should probably be polite.

First they saw the grotto, where they stored religious artifacts and the relics of saints—white hair, a sliver of wood from the cross, and the robe of St. Walter, who had covered the helpless around him with his voluminous cloth.

Then they went to the refectory, where the cook served tomatoes that looked like ladybugs and overcooked carrots. They ate a brief lunch and introduced Florin to the monks he would be living with. First there was Barbu, whom Florin had already met, with his cloth-covered eyes. There was Leith, who was skinny as the bell pull, and whose tunic hung loosely around his frail body. Next was Anav, who was standing tall and pompous, the tonsure of his head polished and pristine enough so that Florin could see his reflection in it. Next was Ionut, and he had a black soul patch with a chinstrap mustache, and his hair was blonde. He had a phrase he'd always say that went, "I have had just about Ionut of you." Lastly, there was Bonehead. Florin couldn't remember his real name, and neither could anyone else, frankly—hence his nickname.

"I'll aim to make myself useful, for once," Florin said by way of introducing himself.

Most shrugged in response, except Leith, who nodded politely, and Barbu, who grunted angrily.

"Thank you, my child," said Father Dante.

Lastly Father Dante showed him the candle-lit crypt beneath the monastery. It smelled of dirt-crusting garments, and of holy incense slathered over rotting corpses. Florin hardly paid any attention to the numerous graves, lingering momentarily over his father's. He mentioned nothing

to the other monks, but he sensed some disturbance in the air around it. He had heard whispers during his tour. Florin was not able to make out much except for the word “ghost” repeated over and over again. He jumped as he heard someone say ghost.

Florin said, “Did someone say *ghost*? Who would dare say that word?”

Florin knew that Father Dante, a Christian man, wouldn't believe in ghosts, so he was partially pretending to have deep conviction in front of him. In reality, Florin *did* believe in ghosts. His father's ghost, especially, he believed in.

As Florin was finishing cleaning the floor at the day's end, his thoughts began to wander. He had not expected this pitiful display of respect for the son of the former Abbot. At this rate, Florin would not be able to make enough money to help support his crazy mother and sick sister. He needed to face joining the bandits for more money because he knew he was broke. He would meet them tonight.

But first he needed to find out where to find them. He knew where to look first: the Târgu Mureş jail.

Florin walked through town and stopped at the front door of the jail. He tried the door and found that it was open. As he entered he saw a portly man asleep at a table. An open flask sat next to him. Florin walked by him quietly. The man reeked of alcohol. The jail was dimly lit with a few torches casting orange light on the walls. A hall stretched out before him with cells on both sides.

“Brother Florin,” said a gristly prisoner, “help me.” He reached his arm through the bar. “I had tried to steal some iceberg lettuce from a vendor, but I was caught and arrested. I want salvation, please Brother Florin. I feel such remorse.”

“Well,” Florin said, stroking his chin and withdrawing the rosary beads and crucifix from his robes, “the scriptures say that one good deed derives one in turn. You have done evil and have had evil done back to you. So now help me and the Lord will show mercy on you and help you.”

The prisoner frowned. He was speechless because he was already in jail. What else could happen? He just stole the lettuce. What is bad about stealing a veggie? “A peculiar request,” he said. “But I suppose. What deed did you have in mind?”

“A simple thing,” Florin said, “Merely granting information about the whereabouts of your fellow bandits.”

“I was only with them for a few days,” the prisoner protested. He slunk back in his jail cell. “Well, I don't know them well, and I hesitate to relive my criminal past, but I suppose I will.”

“How long ago were you with them?” Florin said.

“Oh, I suppose,” the prisoner said, rolling his eyes back and calculating, “about eight on Tuesday morning.”

“But... today is Tuesday, so you did it this morning?” Florin said.

“Was that only this morning?” the prisoner said. Then, sighing, “It's so hard being a criminal. Your sense of time just gets so warped in here.”

Florin pressed him: “Right, right, right. But where did you meet them?”

The prisoner was in no hurry. “Who?”

“The bandits!”



“Oh,” the prisoner said. “I was running my daily rounds and saw a man in a black wide-brimmed hat and four other figures with him, and they were making off with a precious, huge, red-and-green snake together.”

Florin, losing his patience to the point of almost emitting steam, "I don't care what he was looking like, or what he was stealing! Where did you see him? WHERE!?"

The prisoner jumped, startled by Florin's tone. "Oh, you should have mentioned that before. He was right by the bell tower. They should be there now, in their hideout. They're probably debating who lost the snake. Do you want to hear about the rat that snuck into my cell and nibbled on my toes?"

“I'm leaving,” Florin said.

Hidden in plain sight by the bell tower, where everyone in town could have noticed it but didn't, was a pauper's cemetery. Florin approached slowly. In order to find the bandit's hideout, you had to take a number of steps:

1. You had to walk over to the grass and you had to jump on the grass to see if it was hollow underneath. Then you had to find the latch.
2. Upon disengaging the latch, you lifted the wooden trap door that the grass was rooted in, went down the ladder, and closed the trapdoor behind you.
3. Once you went down the ladder, you opened a small, circular door and went through a tunnel.
4. On the other side of the tunnel were three doors. you had to choose the correct door (if you wanted to avoid imminent death). Florin opened each of the three doors to see for himself: behind the far left door was a pit full of spikes, the middle door opened to a

strangely empty room, and the far right door revealed a passage. Not wanting to get spiked, he went through the far right door's passage.

5. If you went through the correct door you had to go through the tunnel and toward another door.

Really? Another door? Florin thought. From the other side, Florin heard a loud man's voice saying, "*Steak* the password." Knowing Banjo, if he was indeed the man whose hideout this was, the password would have something to do with a cheesy meat pun.

"Rawr meat?" Florin guessed.

The door swung open.

As Florin walked in, he saw Banjo standing on his head on top of the round table; he was eating some meat with sugar and cheese on top.

"Greetings, welcome to my glorious cave," Banjo said as he was eating his meat upside down. "Or should I say—*meatings*."

Florin stood there in shock at the sight of the robber. "Banjo, you know tables are for sitting at, not standing on top of," he said. "I'm not even going to address the hideout until I find out what you're doing."

"Sorry, I've just had way too much vanilla caramel mochas and sugar," Banjo said. "Headstands help me get rid of my migraine."

"Let's get you off this table first, so you don't get hurt; then we'll talk about this hideout that is randomly in a cemetery," Florin said, helping Banjo to his feet.

"Uh huh," Banjo said, and now right-side-up, he smirked knowingly at Florin. "I assume you're here for a job?"

“Perhaps,” Florin said. Then, embarrassed, he said, blushing like a tomato, “But it's not a big thing. Just some extra drachmas.”

“Welcome aboard to our bandit crew,” Banjo said, beaming. He went to shake Florin's hand, but Florin, seeing Banjo's hand was full of grease, went for the knuckle pound instead. “Let's get you introduced to everyone.”

Florin looked around the room at those assembled. Banjo introduced them to him one by one.

“First,” Banjo said, “meet Farris.” Farris was a short and rather round fellow, with a dark gray beard and long scar running from his eye to the corner of his mouth.

“Next up is Elena.” Elena was a tall skinny girl who was the wife of Banjo. She had bright red hair, and she walked like she had a pebble in her shoe.

“And then Luca,” Banjo said.

Luca, a fat boyish figure in a gray tunic, sat playing a small hurdy gurdy. The tune he was playing was “Spiral Dance<sup>1</sup>,” which sounded like something an eccentric old man would write.

In response to meeting them all, Florin waved hello and introduced himself. “I am Florin. And I have come to be a part of your crew. I hope to go on many adventures with you all and make loads of drachmas.”

“Welcome aboard,” Banjo said, extending his hand. “I hope this will be a...*pheasant* experience for you. By the way, have you seen our snake? It's red and green, and we were going to put it in the pit behind one of the three doors to our hideout as a trap. But we can't find him anywhere.”

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<sup>1</sup> Listen to the song, reader!



Florin realized suddenly that that must have been Father Dante's same snake, the one he had killed. They couldn't know that he was a monk. "About that," he said.

Then Banjo paused, and said to Florin, "Do you see that cow barking or is it just me?"

\* \* \*

Back at the monastery, Florin and Banjo found a hidden box that had a bunch of drachmas in it, and they had to figure out what to do with the drachmas.

Banjo had told Florin, as soon as Florin joined the bandits, that he was planning on making a big heist in the monastery. There was a large pile of drachmas in a box, Banjo said, and they needed to find it. Florin had had to try desperately not to reveal that he was, in fact, *living* at the monastery. Banjo laced his fingers together and gave Florin a boost, and they climbed through the first-floor window, one after another. Once inside, they searched first in the library, pulling open books and quartos and folios and looking inside.

"This is *pointless!*" Banjo said. Florin looked behind them at the great pile of open books, quartos, and folios.

Next they searched in the garden, tripping over bricks and pulling up potted plants. No luck.

Finally, they descended to the crypt. Of course, the drachmas could only be in the crypt. But Florin knew what else lay in the crypt: his father's tomb...

As they descended the dark, nasty staircase covered with cob-webs and damp and soiled walls, Florin could see only a couple feet ahead of him too, so he saw a giant, slobbering orangutan crouching in a cage in the corner like he was in the wrong world. The expression on his face looked to Florin as if Florin had cut him in line at the line for the marketplace spice

barrel. The oppressive and deafening darkness was illuminated by a lone torch. Once they reached the end of the stairs, there were sarcophagi on both sides stretching in every direction.

“Wow, it's pretty depressing in here,” said Banjo.

“Did you see that back there, Banjo?” Florin said

“What?” Banjo said.

“The monkey in the corner?!”

“What about him?” Banjo asked, unfazed.

“Why is he in a cage in the crypt?”

“Who cares. We're here for the money, right?” Banjo began moving among the graves and sections of the crypt, tossing aside chunks of stone and bunches of rotted flowers and bunny fur and burnt-out braziers as he looked for the drachmas. As for Florin, he sat confused for a bit, wondering, Why am I robbing a crypt when I should be with Luiza? He felt conflicted. He was, after, getting the money to help her, but he felt still guilty about the actions he was taking.

He heard Banjo's voice suddenly from the other side of the room: “Hey Florin, that monkey you were talking about is acting kind of weird. For a monkey, of course.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one, he has started gnawing on his cage and—” Banjo was cut out for a moment by the obnoxious hoots and howls of the agitated orangutan, “And he doesn't seem to like us being here much.”

In the meantime, Florin looked down and noticed the name on the tomb in front of him: ALEXANDRU NELU—his father. The text was noticeably more recent than the other tombs, albeit dusty like the rest. The tomb was plain, and other than the name, it had no other mentionable features.

“Florin, this monkey is sitting on a pile of something. I can’t tell what it is, though, since he is all over it with his big monkey self. He seems to have some beef with us,” Banjo said.

“Let’s try and move him.”

Florin ignored Banjo. He had already seen the motley collection of rusty drachmas in the back of the cage and knew he needed to look for something more valuable. Thinking of a rumor he had heard from his fellow monks, he tentatively reached down and pushed on the stone on top of his father’s tomb. Florin winced at the grinding sound of stone on stone, but Banjo was too preoccupied to notice. Every rumor is based on some element of truth, and indeed resting on his father’s skeletal chest clasped with both hands was none other than Saint Christopher’s Goblet.

There was a loud bang. Florin looked over toward Banjo and saw him with his hand inside the cage. He had distracted the monkey by whacking the torch on the brazier. The monkey *was* distracted by this but only for a moment. Once the monkey regained his composure, he saw Banjo’s arm inside the cage reaching for the drachmas. “Oh God, Florin, please! I need some assistance. This cruel ape has caught me.”

Florin hurriedly stuffed the goblet into the voluminous pocket of his tunic. He hoped that the outline of the relic would not be noticeable. He would deal with this later. Should he tell Banjo? No, he wouldn’t understand; he was a simple bandit. He finally gave up and rushed over to help Banjo. Banjo had been pulled tightly against the bars of the cage by his arm, and his face was inches from the orangutan’s snarling teeth.

With a *yoink*, Florin ripped Banjo out of the orangutan’s clutches, saving him from certain death but tearing the sleeve of his shirt in the process.

“Dang it,” Banjo said, looking at his one short sleeve. “Now I’m uneven.”

“How about thank you?” Florin said. “Why don’t we try this instead?” He gingerly pulled out a half-eaten banana from Banjo’s pocket. “That is probably all he wanted anyway.”

“Oh.”

Florin tossed the banana into the cage while Banjo snuck behind the orangutan and snatched the few handfuls of coins off the feces covered ground.

“Oh my goodness, money!” Banjo said, while pumping his fists in the air.

“Yes, yes. Let’s head back to the hideout before someone comes down here,” Florin said.

“Now quit monkeying around.”

*To be continued...*

## “The Best Begging Stall”

By Elijah Black



Marcus shifted uncomfortably in the small space between Shadrach and Shadrick. The brothers did not particularly mind his intrusion on their space, and as little more than a teenager, he took little room away from them. Besides, law dictated that a beggar should not deny a fellow beggar at the marketplace—and Shadrach and Shadrick were nothing if not law abiding. Unfortunately, Baltazar and his group of professional beggars were not. Many of the poor, including the new fellow Marcus had noticed, were forced to call from the back of the pack and hope a generous merchant or other took pity on them.

With a weary grunt Marcus stood up and walked over to the man with a dark gray cloak and strange blond hair. He had received an entire loaf of bread from a trader in an especially good mood earlier that morning and could afford to let the foreigner take his place for a few hours.

“Hey,” the man looked up at him. He had a young face and a square jaw, but his eyes....  
“What’s your name? I haven’t seen you here before.”

“My name is Cain, and you haven’t seen me because I just got here from the West.  
What—” he paused to clear his throat, “What is *your* name?”

“Marcus, Marcus Akkadian. And in the hospitable spirit worthy of a citizen of Ur—or in light of my good fortune this morning,” Marcus tossed his half-eaten loaf of bread in the air and caught it with his other hand, “you can have my spot—at least for a few hours.”



Cain looked up with his strange, gray eyes. “Thank you, and may the Lord bless you sevenfold.”

\* \* \*

When Marcus emerged from the shade of a stall in an alleyway three hours later, he was still pondering the strange words. He looked for Cain but could see neither him nor the Anutu brothers. After a few minutes of searching, he finally spotted them sitting in the stalls in the main square with at least seven empty places around them. “Cain, I know you are new here, but that is no excuse for this foolishness. You have taken the places of Baltazar’s beggars. And you two,” I said, turning to Shadrach and Shadrick. “How could you let him endanger himself that way?!”

Shadrach, the oldest of the brothers, smirked. “It didn’t seem to me that he was in much danger to me.”

“Is that so?” Marcus looked over his shoulder at a group of men dressed in rags, nursing bruised faces and limbs. “Well, in that case,” Marcus plopped cross-legged to the cobbled ground, “I’ll take the risk.”

\* \* \*

Usually, Marcus, Shadrach, and Shadrick didn’t go back to their alleyway until late in the evening when the market closed. But with the incredible business at the square, they invited Cain to come with them for a relaxing evening. Marcus grabbed a pile of hay from a horse stable a few blocks away and laid it out in a corner. “Welcome to our humble abode.” He swept his hand in a wide gesture for Cain’s benefit.

Cain turned and appeared to be taking in his surroundings (the moldy walls, rat nests, and mossy stone floor). “I’ve slept in worse.” He shrugged. “I am grateful for your hospitality.” He sat down in his corner and rested his head against the wall with a sigh.

Shadrick shifted uncomfortably. "So...uh," Shadrach elbowed his brother, "how did you do it?"

Cain turned his gray eyes on them, "Do what?"

"Well, you know...the whole..." Shadrick sent a few wild punches around.

"I am," Cain hesitated for a moment, "cursed."

Marcus cut in with a dry smile. "Well, that hardly seems like a curse to me."

Cain leaned forward and stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I haven't ever told anyone this story before, but I feel like I can trust you. It started a few hundred years ago."

"My parents had model characters—as long as you didn't bring up the fruit incident. Eve always had a meal ready when I got home from the fields, and Adam would even occasionally help me during harvest—not like he would help my little brother Abel, mind you. But even with that wedge between us, we were still brothers." He nodded at Shadrach and Shadrick. "You two remind me of how we used to be. We were inseparable.

"It all started at one dinner. We were eating a lamb stew, with large chunks of Abel's mutton, and small pieces of my vegetables. We seldom ate much of my food—I think it reminded my parents of the tree. And I found myself remembering that there was only one fruit that they did not hate, the fruit of life. It was back at the garden, but I knew the way. The only difficulty would be the cherub.

"The next morning, I got up with my brother. He was already outside at his altar. He had one of his spotless lambs tied down on the hot stone. Today I needed any blessing God could give me. So, I gathered the best of my crop and burned it on my own altar. But for whatever reason, my fire did not burn as bright as Abel's, and my aroma was not as sweet. Apparently, the Lord himself did not like to be reminded of the garden. I spoke a few cajoling words to my

brother, and then we were off, traveling east—the Lord was certainly going to be reminded of the garden today.

“We arrived at midday. It was strange to be trying to hide in broad daylight. Abel moved from one side as I came from the other. I tried to tread quietly and cringed at any twig that snapped under foot, praying that the angel of fire would not hear us. It was also strange, praying to God that one of his servants failed in their mission. Little did I know that the cherub was already hurtling toward us from the other side of the garden, and in moments, he would be upon us.

“I saw the angel first. It was hurtling toward Abel’s turned back, flaming sword bright, even in the sunshine. I rushed toward him and called out his name. By the time I had reached the tree, the cherub was already beginning to swing the sword. I was faced with a choice. I had time either to hurl myself at the angel and hope that Abel could escape, or I could eat the fruit of the Tree of Life and be safe. Almost against my will, I found myself reaching up to grab the fruit. My reflexes were acting against my control. All my repressed impulses were unleashed, and I instinctively chose to save myself rather than my brother.

“I had just brought the fruit down from my mouth when the angel, driven by momentum, plunged the sword into my chest. My whole body burned with pain and a bright white light consumed me. Floating in and out of consciousness, I saw my brother’s body dripping bright red with blood. I was lying there, barely thinking anything, only vaguely aware of the rough scratch of grass and dead leaves on my neck, when my whole vision distorted. The very air seemed to buzz with energy, and it hurt to keep my eyes from closing. If I hadn’t already eaten from the Tree, I suspect that I would have been struck dead right there.

“I felt rather than heard the booming voice that snapped out like a thousand voices raised in a single chorus, ‘What have you done to your brother Abel?’ I tried to bluster my way out, saying that I didn’t know what had happened to him, that I could see what the angel did, that it wasn’t my fault. But He ignored me and said, ‘Cain, you will be cursed to wander the land until the day of judgment, but out of the memory of your brother, whose blood rests on your hands, I will lay a mark upon you.’” At this, Cain flipped up his long bangs and showed an intricate scar of a flaming sword on his forehead. He continued, ““That whoever curses you, you will curse back sevenfold, and whoever blesses you, will blessed back sevenfold.””

After a moment of silence, Shadrick tentatively raised a hand. Cain nodded at him, and Shadrick said, “But you kicked out more than seven of Baltazar’s crew at the square. How’s that work?”

“Well, you see, seven is more of a symbolic number for ‘a whole bunch.’” Cain smiled before continuing, “It’s just that sometimes I choose to curse a little bit more than other times.”

“Oh.”

“So if you’re like...a million years old, do you just know the answer to everything?” Marcus asked.

Cain shrugged, “I know pretty much everything except for the answer to that question.”

“Well then,” Shadrick cut in, “how did the beggar survive the gallows?”

Cain shrugged and then said, “Poor execution.”

Marcus raised an eyebrow at Shadrick, nestled himself snugly into the corner, and closed his eyes. Shadrick, taking this as a challenge, asked Cain, “Why do beggars make the best protesters?”

\* \* \*

When Marcus woke up the next morning, it was still dark, but he was not surprised when he found Cain's pile of straw empty. *You will be cursed to wander the land until the day of Judgment.* He was perhaps even less surprised when two shadows detached themselves from the walls and swiftly looped a coarse rope around his neck. His vision grew even darker than the alley, as Cain's strange words rang in his ears.

A few minutes later, a stocky form strode quietly through the dark, dragging behind him several dark shapes. One by one, seven bodies joined Marcus's gentle swaying from the large oak in the town square.

## “The Hunt for Greatness”

By Madi Cropp



Noah Tucker and his crew were wandering the forests of Santa Marta, Columbia, looking for the elusive Titanoboa. He and his crew had been sent on a mission to find the last Titanoboa in the world, and they would be compensated handsomely for their dedication and struggle. Walking through the forest, the foliage crunching under their feet, they descended forward and looked through any crack or crevice where there could possibly be a clue as to where the giant snake was. Despite the Titanoboa being 50 ft long, the snake had been hard to locate. It was constantly moving, looking for food, prey, and shelter.

As the crew continued further in the forest, they heard a rustling in a big and leafy bush nearby. Quickly and quietly, Noah slunk over to see what it was. To his amazement, it was the Titanoboa. It was the exact beaded-eyed snake, and the same greenish brown scales all over its face. But Noah could see its greenish-brown tail slithering away. Noah knew that his opportunity wouldn't last long, so he got a running head start and jumped on the back of the snake, wrapping his arms around to keep hold. The snake started to thrash around, desperately trying to fling Noah off. His grip began to loosen, as the snake continued to move, and eventually he was thrown off. The snake turned around and started to wrap itself around Noah tightly, successfully beginning to constrict his airflow. Noah struggled to get out, but it was already too late, and he was starting to lose oxygen and feel lightheaded. He stopped his struggle; he had been caught. A

few moments passed, and a member of the crew turned around the corner to see all the commotion. He quickly fumbled around till he found a pocket knife and threw it at the snake. The snake, getting hit by the knife, unwrapped itself and slithered away.

Noah suffered from the realization that he would never be any match for the snake unless he could find the proper way to trick and catch the snake. But the only way I could trick the snake would be if *I* were a snake as well, Noah thought. He thought that this idea, though a spur of the moment thought, was the perfect way to catch the snake. He told his crew what he had to do and went back to base so that he could work on the perfect disguise. The crew was skeptical at first, thinking the idea was childish. Noah assured the crew that the idea was anything but childish, telling his crew that “such a well-respected and mature adult such as himself wouldn’t make up a silly fantasy.” He was sure that it would be perfect, because even though the Titanoboa they were trying to catch was the last one in existence, the Titanoboa wasn’t away from that.

Noah and his crew soon got to work on the snake costume after announcing his ultimate plan. Noah made a call to the best designer in Columbia to help with this costume—Valentina Dome. She was able to provide a proper sketch and a structure that would be able to hold up against the constant slithering on the forest floor. It would be able to hold up against anything that happened to be on the ground as well, anything that might tear or get the suit wet. This suit would be able to perfectly mimic the actual Titanoboa skin, thanks to the material that Dome had provided as well.

Dome came along to oversee the making of the suit, so that there wouldn’t be any problems with the suit. “We are making hiss-tory, boys,” as she would always say while they were working. She would be getting a small portion of the money that would be given to Noah

and his crew after catching the snake, since she provided the blueprint for the suit. Along with her, she made sure to bring her loyal companion and guard dog, Anastasia the Borzoi. Despite the silly appearance of the Borzoi, they were made to hunt, so they would do so to the crew if they were to disturb the progress of the suit. She was as keen as a hawk looking for prey when it came to having to oversee the crew.

After two grueling weeks of working day and night, pouring blood, sweat, and tears, the suit was finally done. Noah went into the suit to test the feel of it all, to see how he would be able to maneuver this beast of a suit. The inside of the suit was a pale pink color, and it had various parts lining the inside that were helping to keep it in its tube-like shape. It was a struggle at first to maneuver the suit. Noah had piloted planes much bigger than this suit, but the suit required him to put his full concentration and entire body movement into it so that he could get the results that he was looking for. He was, surprisingly, not exhausted after controlling the suit, despite having to put every muscle into controlling the suit.

Noah continued to slink around for hours. It was now starting to get dark outside. He was lucky that the suit was made of high-quality materials, otherwise the inside of this suit would be very dirty and wet, and he wouldn't be able to see anything with the approaching darkness. Noah would probably be steaming as well. But the suit was made to mimic the skin of a snake and to keep him comfortable so he could proceed with the task at hand. He was tempted to turn around and slither his way back to the camp grounds, but something inside him was telling him that he should go just a bit longer. And so he continued to go further into the forest, making various turns and loops around trees or boulders. As he was making his way around a tree, he heard a rustling a few feet ahead of him. Quickly he made his way around the tree and inched himself



forward fast enough to make it to the sound, but not so much that he would make a noise. He didn't want to scare away what was, potentially, the Titanoboa.

Once making his way to the sound, he could make out the shape of something moving under a pile of foliage. It had to be the snake, considering the size of the moving lump. He decided to burrow under the foliage as well. It was surprisingly deep. Despite the depth of the foliage, Noah was able to see the slight glimmer coming off of a snake scale. The Titanoboa was in sight; the target was locked. Noah continued to follow the snake, getting closer and closer till he grabbed the tail of the snake, using the mechanics of the suit to chomp down the mouth of it. The snake started to thrash around in an attempt to get Noah off of him, but the suit kept itself clamped down on the end of the snake.

Eventually, the mouth of the suit began to loosen because of the snake's constant movement to get Noah off, and that was just enough for the snake to fling Noah across the forest floor. Noah quickly escaped the suit before the Titanoboa could see that he was even there. After the Titanoboa inspected itself, it turned around and went after the suit, or what it believed to be another snake. Noah hid behind a nearby tree, trying to catch his bearings before he decided on his next move to take down the snake. He decided that he would sneak up on the snake while it was distracted, and then he would stab it with his knife. He made a quick dash for the snake, jumping and plunging his knife into the snake. Noah had been aiming for the top of the head, even below the chin or neck, but he had been a bit off. He had only grazed the snake, giving it a long and non-fatal wound. The snake began to thrash around, trying to get Noah off. Eventually, the snake was able to throw off Noah's grip and flung him a few feet away. He quickly realized that his thought-to-be brilliant plan wasn't going to be working as he had hoped. He was going to have to fight the snake from the ground. It was soon realized by him that he was no match for the

Titanoboa. It was just too big and fast for Noah. It grabbed Noah and constricted around him, eventually killing him, and promptly ate him.

For the next few days after Noah had yet to return from trying to find the Titanoboa, his crew went in search of him. They had been searching far and wide for a whole week, until one day they came across Noah's pocket knife, knowing it was his by the initials that were engraved into it. The Crew continued to search the forest for hours, until they came upon a skeleton by ripped pieces of the snake suit.

## “No-Good Nick”

By Mandy Landis



Nick Paterson was 14 and living in Texas as an orphan after her father Tony Paterson, 35, went to jail for a warrant for robbing a convenience store and joining the mob. While he was getting arrested, he realized that the restaurant across the street from the Patersons' restaurant, the Thompsons' restaurant, got him shut down. Nick was adopted by Dorothy Davis and Sam Davis, who were both in their 40s. The Davis family told Nick to find a family and rob them to get their money, and Nick found the same family, who sent her dad to jail. She acted like she was Ed Thompson's cousin, who was only 23, but they took her in anyways. Nick was wearing a black shirt with a flannel over the shirt and some black ripped jeans.

Jeremy Thompson was 17, but he was still suspicious of Nick, and it took a while until he trusted Nick. Nick had a secret phone that she used to call her dad in jail and to communicate with Sam and Dorothy, her foster parents. Nick was not supposed to be talking with her dad, but the Davis family had no idea that Nick was just getting the money to steal so she could get her dad out of jail. The Thompsons had a thing called chore market. It was where you bid on chores, but the lowest bid won. They were going to team up on Nick and have her take all the hard chores.

They sat in the living room, and they were doing the chore market. Nick got all the chores, so 15-year-old Molly and Jeremy got no chores, meaning they get no allowance. Nick was going to give the chores she does not want to the other ones but for half-off. One week later,

Nick asked Liz Thomson, who was only 22, to work at the restaurant to sell the wine that was worth \$5,000, but while she was getting the wine switched out, she gave it to the Davises, but she forgot to put the labels back on, so they were worth nothing.

Nick went to see her dad and see how he was doing. She asked her dad what happened. Her dad told her that he missed the deadline, and he got his arm broken and a few bruises. Now she found a new thing to steal and sell, so she got someone to rob the Thompsons and got a bunch of money. The volunteer squad was going to fine people five dollars for not wearing offensive costumes and switched the money boxes so Nick got all the money. They refused Jeremy to even go to his dance because it was super offensive.

So Jeremy still did not trust Nick, and so he called Social Services, and they said that Dorothy was not a social worker. Now Nick needed to gain Jeremy's trust, and so she got Jeremy elected to student-body president. She got all of the clubs of the school to vote for Jeremy. He did his speech, so Nick rigged the votes so Jeremy won, and he was surprised. Molly was now mad at her mom because she booked an appointment without asking her, so they got into this huge fight.

Nick got ahold of Liz Thomson's ring because she realized that it was worth a lot. So then later that night, when Nick was going to take the ring to Sam and Dorothy, she saw that their mom was super upset. The tears were dripping down her face like when raindrops drip down a widow. After all, it was her grandmother's. Ed, their dad, flew to this pawn shop in a different state and got it back from the pawnshop for the mom. She felt bad and gave it back, pretending she found it in the pipe. Nick found something that looked like a ring, and Sam did not buy the act.

Sam tried to force Nick to go back home with them because she had not given Dorothy or Sam anything for at least a month now. They got into a big fight about it, and Sam tried to tell Nick that they were her legal guardians. What they said went, but Nick outsmarted them and told them that if she went back with them she would just go to the police. She could tell them that the Davis family was just a bunch of crooks who had foster kids that they made steal from families for them.

Nick set up a GoFundMe for this kid named Omar. He was one of the foster kids, and she got it up to \$10,000. She tried to set up a bank account and failed. Then she realized that Ed worked at a bank. She went from \$105 to \$10,000. Then she told the family that she set up the GoFundMe for Omar. Ed, the dad, gave him a party at the bank, and Omar realized that it was \$10,000 and wanted more than \$60. When he got the check, he forgot to turn off his GPS, and Sam found them and took the check from the kids.

They had a school raffle, and Nick got a guy named Tod the Bonehead to win the bike that was worth seven grand. Then after she realized that Molly was not sorry for the reviews of the restaurant, she showed the video to the volunteer squad and ruined her friendship with Molly Thomson. Then she ruined the restaurant by releasing mice and got the mom's restaurant shut down.

Jeremy was not sorry that he tore up Nick's flyers for her dad's reopening of the restaurant. So Nick set Jeremy up and put the text answers on his computer so the whole class could see them. She did not get him expelled or suspended, so she put the voting ballots under his computer and got him expelled, so his life was ruined. Now she only needed to ruin Ed for declining the loan, so she was going to rob this necklace that was at the bank, and she asked to go to the private room, took a pic of the camera, and got the necklace.

Molly and Jeremy were going to find out the truth about Nick. Liz Thomson, the mom, and Ed were going to adopt Nick and no one knew it. Now Jeremy was going to come out to his family, but Alexa got all confused and played the presentation that he had and the coming-out music. Nick was going to leave with her stuff and the necklace, and then the dad of the Thomsons got arrested for robbing the bank.

Molly and the whole family found out that Nick's last name was not Paterson, it was Franzelie. Nick's dad's last name was also Franzelie, so after Nick told the truth about everything, the dad of the Thomsons yelled for a police officer and said that Nick stole the necklace. So, Jeremy had to brag. They all loved her and treated her like family, and now, after Jeremy said he was right, he thought that what she did was kind of payback for them, because they did ruin her life.

Nick went to the Thomsons to knock them out to get the necklace again. Now all the Thomsons (except the dad) felt bad. Nick was in the house. Now she had to knock them out, but they all told them they felt bad. The dad still was angry, but they went with her plan because they were listing, so they got fake knocked out because she told them to go with the plan, and good thing they did, because the Davises got caught and arrested, and the dad would get out. Since he was never charged, they now needed to catch Dorothy and Sam. The necklace was a fake also, but they needed to make it believable. They were being charged with fraud, conspiracy, endangering the welfare of a minor, and attempted grand larceny.

Now she wrote a letter that made everything better for them as best she could. She went to her dad to tell him that she was leaving to get out of there. She needed to start anew. She would keep sending money for him so he stayed safe. She got a bus ticket to leave the town, and

she wanted to get out of the Thompsons' lives forever. Now they were going to find Nick, because she did do mean things, but they did forgive her, and they were going to find her.

The Thompsons found Nick, and they were going to take Nick home. She ran into their arms, and they went home to figure out what came next in their lives. Nick got adopted into the family. She was now part of the Thompsons, and no one knew if she got her friends back from school, but at least she got a family who cared about her. As she went inside to have fun with her new family, she saw these leaves blowing across the driveway as she went inside.

"Hey, Nick, want to here a joke?" Molly said

"Sure," Nick said.

"Knock knock," Molly said.

"Who's there?" Nick said.

"B," Molly said.

"B who?" Nick said.

"Bananas," Molly said.

The end.

## “The Devil’s Servant”

By Grant Pavel



Dusk quickly overtook the girls as they made their way through the woods. The light of near 100 torches brought light to the darkness.

“Run, Jill, you HAVE to run faster,” MaryAnn screamed behind her.

“Wait up, MaryAnn, please,” Jill screamed back. She couldn't get caught. She couldn't be burned. The dark ground in front of her was riddled with dead leaves. She could hear the \*crunch crunch\* of it beneath her every step. A glimpse of MaryAnn's white dress caught her eye, and she ran towards it, sending a silent prayer that it was her. Jill ran past the tree she thought she had seen MaryAnn behind, and immediately felt a hand cover her mouth. *HELP! HELP! HELP!* Jill thought in her mind. *This can't be the way things end.*

“Be quiet,” MaryAnn's voice came from behind her, and the hand was suddenly released.

“Oh my god, MaryAnn. Thank God I caught up with you. We have to go. They are coming.”

“We aren't going anywhere.”

“What do you mean? They'll burn us. We have to keep running.”

“No, we are going to hide,” MaryAnn whispered, motioning to a fallen tree.

Jill understood MaryAnn's plan as soon as she saw the tree. The tree had rotted away and was mostly hollow. The girls could get inside the hollow tree and wait for them to pass. Every inch of her body wanted to keep running. *I can't wait to be found by them. I can't wait for them to come to me and tie me up and BURN me. I have to keep going. Waiting is a stupid idea. But I*



*can't keep this pace up for much longer. My feet are all cut up and they hurt me so. If they would pass, I would be safe.*

“Ok,” Jill said, nodding her head to MaryAnn. The girls ran over to the log and began to position themselves inside of it. It was small and dark inside the log. Jill looked down at the clothing the girls were wearing. MaryAnn's white dress was streaked with mud and dirt from the forest. Her own light grey dress her mother had made for her 15th birthday looked much the same. The intricate lace that adorned the neck had been ripped. She couldn't help but feeling sad about the dress that her mother had worked so hard to make for her. Jill could hear approaching footsteps in the distance like the marching of an army. She held her rosary tighter in her hand and prayed the men would pass them.

MaryAnn pointed with her finger through a crack in the dead tree. Light passed through the hole and hit the other side of the log between the two girl's heads. Through the hole, Jill could make out a couple of figures, although, she knew there were many more. Men with torches, a wagon piled high with supplies, another with a large square object covered with a tarp. The light of the torches drew closer and closer until they seemed to fade all at once. There was silence. Complete silence.

“HERE,” shouted a gruff voice behind the dead tree log, breaking the deafening silence. Hands reached into the log and grabbed the girls by their legs and arms. They both screamed and kicked, but there was no escape. They were caught.

“We have the witches,” one said.

“Burn them,” said another.

The men drug the girls out through the hole in the log and proceeded to tie their hands and feet together with coarse linen. Hastily made gags were shoved into their mouths by dirty

hands. A large, portly man stepped forward. The mayor. Mayor Reeges. His wicked smile revealed yellowed teeth covered with plaque. He crouched down until he was level with Jill's face.

“Thought you witches could outrun us, eh?” As he spoke, spittle flew from his mouth, directly onto Jill's face—she lurched backward in disgust. The men laughed at this. “Not so powerful anymore, are we? Throw them in their cage boys and be quick about it.”

The tarp covering the second wagon was cast down. It revealed what Mayor Reeges had described. A cage. Made of wrought iron with a single opening in the bottom left corner. The door was opened and the girls were thrown into the cage. The bars formed a grid with small openings no bigger than two or three fingers across. It would keep them trapped. The men threw the tarp back over the cage, blinding the girls.

“Getting comfy back there?” Mayor Reeges barked. “Back to Salms.”

Jill could feel the wagon begin to move. The two girls sat next to each other. They couldn't move much and couldn't speak. The only thing they could see was the fear in the other's eyes. Exhaustion overtook them, and they fell asleep.

\* \* \*

Jill looked over at MaryAnn. Their trial had been swift and had consisted of Mayor Reeges announcing the charges and then sentencing them all within the span of a couple of minutes. A crowd had gathered. People that had been friends up until a couple of days ago. The teacher. The baker. The tailor. The whole town. Rough rope replaced the coarse linen on their hands and feet. The pyre they were tied to had been covered with straw so it would burn easily.

Everything had been laid out so they would burn.

“Ya settling in alright?” Mayor Reeges asked. His questions were clearly for his own

amusement.

“Alright, everyone. Settle down, settle down. We are here to carry out the execution of these here two witches. Jill Stone and MaryAnn Payne. They have been found guilty of selling their souls to the devil, conspiring with the devil, and practicing witchcraft.”

\* \* \*

Ealdwine Turnbulle had just arrived in the town of Salms. The town was small and very religious. Ealdwine was a tall, thin man around 50 years of age. His grey hair and beard betrayed him and made him look much older. He was on official government business. The small inn he was staying at was cozy but lacked many of the amenities that he was used to.

As Ealdwine walked down the stairs of the inn, he was surprised by the lack of people. Other rooms seemed to be empty and the tavern beneath the inn was usually the center of activity in any town. There was one lone man tending the bar, though, there wasn't much of anything to tend to. The man stopped wiping glasses and looked at Ealdwine expectantly.

“I'll just have some rum. And maybe some bread if you have any handy.”

“That I can do, sir.” The man grabbed a flagon and poured a metal glass full of rum. He handed this to Ealdwine and then went into the backroom. He returned shortly with a hunk of course bread.

“I thank you very much. If I could bother you for just a moment more, why is this town so empty?”

“Oh. You haven't heard? There is to be a burning today. Two witches. Yup. Mayor Reeges caught 'em about a day ago. A hero in this town. Doing God's work, I'll tell ya.”

“What?” Ealdwine said in disbelief. His government business was to inform the public that it was now unlawful to execute people on charges of witchcraft.

“Will Mayor Reeges be in attendance at this execution?” Ealdwine asked. Mayor Reeges was the authority in the town of Salms and Ealdwine had no power here. The citizens would not listen to what a stranger had to say no matter the fact that he was a lawyer of the General Court. Mayor Reeges had no option but to listen to Ealdwine, but he had been informed that he was rather difficult.

“Of course he will. He sentenced them to burning at the stake. He will be performing it.”

Ealdwine was stunned. Mayor Reeges was overstepping his power. Sentencing and then performing the execution? One person controlling the entirety of someone's fate was not lawful. “Where will this execution be held?”

“Near the Gallows Bridge. A bit up north, past the town square. Can't miss it. And you better hurry if you want to watch, twilight is nigh.”

\* \* \*

Ealdwine stopped for a pace to catch his breath. He had run across most of Salms in order to reach the Gallows Bridge. He could now see an emerging crowd, but not the pyre. Ealdwine began to run again. He could not let potentially innocent people burn on the stake. The crowd was shoulder to shoulder and tough to push through. Ealdwine could smell smoke. “MAYOR REEGES! MAYOR REEGES!” Ealdwine began to shout. He could now see flames in between the people and began to hear screams. The heat from the pyre hit the crowd, and everyone took a few steps back. There he was! Mayor Reeges stood in front of the pyre, holding a torch that he had presumably used to start the pyre aflame.

“You must stop this. The General Court has found it unlawful to execute—” Ealdwine stopped talking when he saw the girls. Their bodies were black and charred in some places, and the smell of burning flesh began to waft through the air. Ealdwine was too late. They were dead.

Word Count 4/8

By Mandy Landis



There was a little boy named Tobias, and his nickname was Toby. He was three years old, and he was wearing a gray-back shirt and blue jeans with socks. Desi, Toby, and I all went to the donut shop to get breakfast sandwiches and donuts with sprinkles, and some were not, and there was one that was chocolate. So we grabbed that, and we went back home to give everyone their food. After we finished our food, we went to the game store to get controllers, and we then headed to the mall and got some games to play on the Xbox.

After we played, we went and got food from Applebee's, and we had to leave Toby at the house, since he was sleeping, so we had Bruce stay at the house with Toby. We went and got food then we ordered Bruce's to-go, so he could eat it at the house. As we were sitting at the table, we were talking about stuff that was funny, like how my sisters thought that the bartender was cute, and how the waiter was not, so we finished, headed home to give Bruce his food, and then we went to play the games some more. We played this game where you have to save this bot's eye, so we didn't finish it, but we started playing Call of Duty. The short term for it is COD.

We played that for a while. Then Desi got tired, so we stopped, and I and Lindsey watched this one show. It was funny, but it is kind of bad to say in this story, so I won't say it. Let's say Lindsey went to bed at 2, and I stayed up till 5:30, because I was not tired at all. Toby

did not want to go to bed, so I let him lie with me till he fell asleep, which was till 4, so then I laid him back in Mom's room, and I went to sleep at 5:30 and woke up at 7 or 8.

After, Desi came home at 7, because she works overnight on trains, so she works from 10 to 7. So she came home and went to sleep till noon, so we had some small breakfast, then big breakfast when Desi woke up. Then at 1 she did my hair, and I loved it. Tobias learned how to say his name. He is learning so many new words and all sorts of stuff. He is growing up so fast that soon he will be four.

Word Count 2/25

By Grant Pavel



When you first set step into the land of the wizard, it was apparent that he was not very clean. All around the room, knocked-over cauldrons, flasks, and ingredients were sitting on the floor. Potions were filled to the brim with a mysterious green liquid. It was some type of smoking concoction, but it was apparent that it was not meant for consumption. The wizard was passed out on a decrepit daybed surrounded by empty bottles. They were clearly not alcohol but presumably some type of potion that was self-made. The wizard's long beard hung off the daybed and touched the floor. He made sounds in his sleep which suggested that he was having a dream. Good or bad? That remained unknown.

“Wake up Mr. Wizard,” I stated. I needed his help, and as desperate a case he looked, he was my only hope.

“Uh nuh, zzzzzzzz.” That was the only response the wizard made. Great. This all looked really promising. My last hope was a drunken wizard who wouldn't even wake up. I refused to let this happen. I walked around the wizard's abode. I was looking for something that would create a loud noise. Wait, what was that? Oh yes, that would work just great! I picked up a copper pan and grabbed a wooden spoon sitting next to the sink. The wizard was asleep still, not to my surprise, however. I positioned the copper pan directly above his ear and brought the wooden spoon down on top of it with much force. WANGGGGGGGGG. The wizard's eyes flew open, and he sat up immediately, hitting his head on the copper pan in the process.

“WHAT IN THE DEVIL,” the wizard shouted, rubbing his head. He was too stunned to look around and attempt to find his tormentor. Once the wizard got over his initial confusion, he began to look around for the perpetrator.

“You there! Did you see what knocked me over the head,” the wizard shouted, waving his fist in the air. His eyes were bulging as he waited for the answer.

“Who, me?”

The wizard clearly shook his head yes.

“No, I have no idea. I just got here... Your name?”

“Oh, aw, yes. My name. I am Julius the Conqueror. Master of...um...oh well that part always escaped me anyway.”

“I am Cenric Fultone. I have come seeking your assistance on behalf of King Ulric.”



## Afterword

The foregoing work—in all its banditry and serpentine windings, with its crowded purgatory of tricksters and angels—is the result of a year’s creative efforts on the part of the Creative Writing Class at Friend Public School in Friend, NE. We hope you like it, but it’s also okay if you don’t like it. *We* like it.

The class was set up to provoke as much creativity from our writers as possible. Each week, students would turn in three hundred words of their most outlandish thoughts and imaginings. One of the juiciest of these word counts has been included for each student, but there were many more throughout the year we could have included. Each week the students developed, discussed, and pursued their ideas, and each week their skills grew.

Some of these word counts and weekly assignments turned into larger projects. For both semesters, each student in the class would turn in a longer piece of work, and we would conduct a workshop in which we all read, annotated, and discussed the work in front of the student (the student whose work it was wasn’t allowed to talk during the workshop, much to their consternation). What is that villain’s backstory? we would ask. Where did the snake come from? How did he get into his own funeral?

By far we laughed the most writing our collaborative stories together. Each week we would continue writing in our shared document, throwing out ideas, shaping the story, learning tricks for dialogue and transitions for action and how to make an em dash. We did research into Toronto, Oreos, Italian phrases, medieval Romania, the hurdy gurdy, and drew illustrations of our bandits’ lair. We learned to write and think with puns and gusto.

Thank you to the students involved, to Mr. Arp and his art classes for collaborating with us on the cover, and to the administration for allowing this class to happen in the first place. We loved it more than Claire loves G-Ma.

*B.-G.*



# Friend Creative Writing

## Class Lookbook 2021-2022

