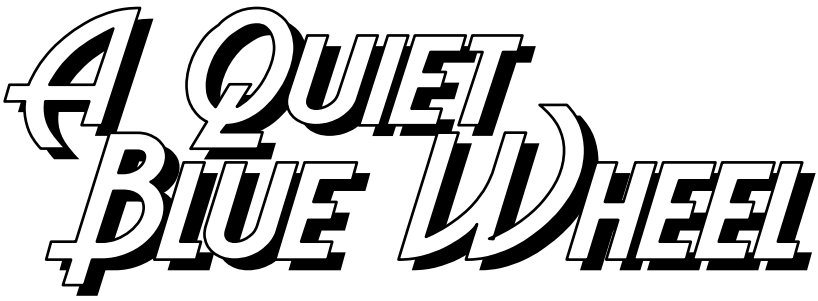

Edited by
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Epic Saga Publishing
Brewer, Maine

SPECTRUM STORIES #1:
A QUIET BLUE WHEEL

"I feel within me

a

peace above all
earthly dignities, a still and

quiet

conscience."
– *William Shakespeare*

"Artists can color the sky red
because they know it's

blue

...Those of us who aren't artists
must color things the way they
really are or people might
think we're stupid."
– *Jules Feiffer*

"Fortune's

wheel

is ever turning."
– *Polish proverb*

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Introduction

In the fall of 2009, I began teaching a class through Bangor Adult Education called "Creative Writing: The Short Story," which was based on my philosophy that anyone with three things could become a published writer. Those three things are a basic command of the English language and its mechanics, an imagination, and a love of writing.

With a love of writing and an imagination, but no basic command of English, the writing might well be unreadable.

With a love of writing and a command of English, but no imagination, the stories would be dull and bland.

And with a command of English and an imagination, but no love of writing, the writer's apathy would show, and his readers will care no more than he does.

Luckily, there has been no shortage of imagination or love of writing in this class. And the command of English has been good—and when that command has weakened, it's my job as editor to fix it.

This anthology is the first in a series with a formula for the title, which follows a format of "Adjective/Color/Noun"—such as *A Quiet Blue Wheel*. After several weeks of class, the students began writing their main project stories for the semester, with only a few rules. The main one is that their stories must reflect the title in some way, so that the object of the title becomes integral to the story. I do this to keep a general theme to the anthology, so

there's some connecting idea, lest the anthology become a discordant collection of completely unrelated stories.

But that's where the similarities end. Each contributor has created a story featuring five basic factors: protagonist, antagonist, plot, resolution (in which the protagonist participates), and change (in the protagonist).

Aside from those requirements, and each author featuring a quiet blue wheel of some sort, they had free reign. And they did a great job. They worked hard on their stories, peer-reviewed their classmates' tales, submitted them to me, underwent further editing, and polished their work.

If nothing else, I hope this anthology serves as an example to everyone who has ever wanted to write but never seems to do so. If you want to write, just write. There's nothing stopping you. It might be a difficult challenge, but it will all be worth it in the end.

It has been my pleasure to work with the writers in this anthology, and share with them the few nuggets of wisdom I've gained through years of stumbling through the publication process. For some, this class was just for fun; if so, I hope they had plenty of it. For others, it was with an eye on submitting other work elsewhere; if so, I wish them the best of luck.

Special thanks to student Greg Westrich, the guest editor who reviewed and accepted my submission to the anthology and introduced it, and to student Anette Ruppel Rodrigues for offering a fresh pair of eyes proofing this book's layout.

A portion of the proceeds from this anthology will benefit Literacy Volunteers of Bangor. If you enjoy this book, consider reading other titles in this series, which will also benefit LVB. The next one is *An Odd Red Puzzle,* and its contributors have done an equally admirable job.

David M. Fitzpatrick
Brewer, Maine
April 2012

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of someone who made a profound difference in my writing life.

George McCutcheon was my Creative Writing teacher in high school, around 1985, and he taught me more than I realized at the time. He insisted on strong plots and three-dimensional characters, demanded solid storytelling, and worked to teach me what made good fiction. He didn't expect perfection, but he expected me to strive for it.

But at that time, I was far too busy being a self-centered teenage boy, thinking I knew everything and he was just a silly old man, focused too much on my own perceived talent to understand the importance of what he was trying to teach me. It didn't matter that he was a close friend of Stephen King's and proofed all of Steve's novel drafts (and, in fact, was echoed by a character of the same name in the short story "Uncle Otto's Truck" from King's *Skeleton Crew*). Such is the way of teenage boys, I suppose.

Mac flunked me in Creative Writing. And he should have, even if I didn't realize it at the time. I was furious when he did, because I thought I was the next Stephen King. Later, I realized what lessons Mac had thrown at me—those lessons I'd skillfully dodged, unwittingly, to my detriment. Better late than never, as they say, and today I know I'm a much better writer today because of him.

The fact is, Mac probably wouldn't have remembered me

after I left his class. I was one of countless students who came through his classroom, and although I probably thought I was special back then, I'm sure I was quite forgettable.

Mac died on April 26, 1987, the victim of leukemia. I'm sure there are many students who remember his name. Many will do so with a grimace, as he could be the tough teacher everyone hoped they didn't get, and those who took Creative Writing just to earn half a credit but didn't have that passion for writing probably hated every moment of it. But I'll gamble that any of the students who had a passion for writing will remember him fondly, either for the successes they found in his class or, like me, for the failures from which they learned.

I know Mac would be the first to approve of the stories in this book, written by students who tried hard and wrote hard and polished hard. And he'd certainly approve of my focus as a teacher, because I followed in his footsteps in that regard. I insist on strong plots and three-dimensional characters, I demand solid storytelling, I work to teach them what makes good fiction, and, while I don't expect perfection, I expect them strive for perfection.

The first writing exercise I ever did was in Mac's class, when he wrote down several columns of nouns on the blackboard and challenged us to choose one item from each list. Right there in class, in fifteen minutes, we had to write a story using those things. My students recognize this exercise, because, twenty-seven years later, it's the first exercise I do on the first night of class.

When I was a high-school kid, I wanted to be the next Stephen King. Today, I strive to live up to George McCutcheon's standards, both as a writer and a teacher. It's sad that Mac can't appreciate this dedication, because he's been dead since 1987, but this dedication is intended for the potential writers who read this. Mac isn't here to teach you what he taught me, and I don't presume to be him. But I hope that, by reading this story, you might gain some insight into

what writing fiction is all about.

It's about plot and characters, and good storytelling, and all that. And, as in my class, I could go on about protagonists, antagonists, character motivations and flaws, rising action, theme, resolution, and so forth. But let's boil it down to the one thing that should be woven through all of that.

It's about striving for perfection. That's at the heart of writing fiction—hell, writing *anything*. In the introduction, I mentioned that I believe there are three things you need to be a fiction writer: basic mechanical knowledge of the English language, imagination, and a love of writing. Now, anyone can learn basic English mechanics, and everyone has an imagination that can be sparked and stoked and ignited into something powerful. But if you don't have a love of writing… well, that's the deal-breaker. Maybe you can learn to love writing in the way that you can learn to love a style of music you never thought you could, or love a food you used to hate, or love a person you never thought you could. But I think the chances are pretty good that either you have an innate love of writing or you don't, whether you know it or not. And it's the hardest part to fake.

Mac didn't teach me those three points; I came up with them on my own. But I did so thanks to the ball he started rolling for me. I only wish I'd realized what a great and inspiring man he was before he passed out of this world, because I'd give anything to go back in time and let him know.

Let's honor his memory, and honor the writers in this book, and honor the spirit and passion of writing anywhere, by enjoying the tales that follow.

Amanda Updegraff doesn't waste any time letting us know what her quiet blue wheel is, but this metaphorical wheel permeates the life of the protagonist throughout. Most of us have those moments of desperation and futility in our lives, and we each deal with them in our own ways. Some of us run away from our problems; others of us face them. Perhaps the protagonist in this story does a little bit of both.

Appaloosa Night

Amanda M. Updegraff

She imagined all of life to be nothing more than the tragic turning of a great and silent blue wheel. Some days she imagined a tyrannical child obnoxiously spinning it, while others it seemed only the lackadaisical spiraling of a tide pool. All she really felt was that whatever this madness, it was beyond her understanding or control and it made her feel sick, exactly as she did as a child on a carousel riding a pretty horse on its infinite and absurd journey. She could not tell you if she wanted to get off the carousel. She loved her horse, she loved to ride; she just couldn't stand the queasy feeling that always resided within her, had become her constant companion, her very own self.

Sickness is another self, she thought. She desperately hoped for sickness because all diseases had cures—even those that hadn't yet been found. In the meantime, people wore brightly colored ribbons pinned to their chests in your honor. They donated money in order to help you and your helpless, pitiable cause. You had doctors who had gone through years of

tortuous training, so that one day they could meet you—this unique and desperate patient who would make all their late, sleepless, coffee-stained nights spent trying to feel up nurses in the back office worth it. Worth it to be in a loveless marriage and drive a big nice car, live in a big nice house. To say, "I did do something after all. I did not just consume the world around me. I gave another human being life, if only for a brief and futile forty more years. I bestowed that utmost of gifts on another and for that I am godlike. I am charitable. I deserve not to die."

From earliest childhood she remembered feeling off-kilter, tilted, a dread of spinning, and the utter torment of the tire swing. She did not understand the other children holding hands and turning together in those awful circles, laughing and giggling until some poor meek one of them—the one who would assume he would inherit the earth but would really only inherit a life of making up, trying to be big through other means—a lawyer, a cop, a wall-street banker, whatever predilection he could turn into career—and watch out, here comes the big man now—would puke on his shoes. She knew she sounded cynical, she sounded bitter. Bitter at forty is acceptable; bitter at thirty is just lazy. A bitter flavor to cover up the rot.

Immersed in the water in her bathtub, s.She stared at her painted purple toes against the lime-green 7tile of her bathroom wall. Water covered her ears. Better to hear herself think—if "better" could be that distended gobbledygook, so much a perfect imitation of thought. The water was cold, her skin wrinkled.

She lay there.

The phone rang, loud and angry against the walls.

She lay there.

Then she got out and lay in her bed.

Another night passed and a day. Light marked the movement of time, the passage of worldly life. Dust specks traveled

from one end of a shaft of light to the other. Her cells died and were reborn. She exchanged the entirety of her molecular self with all that is the universe. She lay in her bed. The phone rang.

The alarm buzzed. She walked to her car. A purple car, a green car—no, just the dull grey of reality: her car. She drove her grey car down the road and watched the breeze play frenetically with the tops of the trees. She thought, "They must get sick swaying back and forth like that. Never in control of their motion, except the steady quiet upward thrust of growth, until the quick, loud, resounding down of death."

At the stable, the horses had been fed. Their heads stuck out of their stalls, quietly watching her, each other, the distant activities of what she could never tell. She loved the quiet of the barn before the clients arrived. The loud stomping and whinnying of horses was movie myth. She liked knowing the truth of this one thing, of being able to see beyond what is told.

She opened her locker, dust matted to everything inside it. She thrust in her purse, hung up her keys. She took out her new helmet and stared at it, just for a moment, but long enough to remember.

When she had fallen, when they had fallen, she meant to say "No, I didn't mean it. I didn't mean all that suicidal ideation, not really, I was just tired. I want to try. I won't be so sad this time. I did feel something once, something that was more than the daily atrocities."

But now she knew those moments were few and far between, mainly in dreams, the dreams you don't want to wake up from. And as far as being sad—well, honey, nobody can make promises like that. Sadness just is. Learn to sit on it.

And perhaps in reply to her plea, the fire engine had come, small children gawked and parents ushered them away while turning their own heads to see. She had lain in an ambulance, a hospital bed, a gurney within the ambient blue cylinder of the MRI. A mere concussion, the ones people forget about, reduce

If Philip Marlowe were an Irish cop in Boston, the character you're about to meet might well be him. But unlike Chandler's larger-than-life detective, this hard-boiled cop isn't quite as invincible, as he's been hit with a pair of traumas that forever changed his life. Charles O'Leary lets us ride along for the journey his damaged hero takes, which quickly moves from its opening detective-noir feel to a more relaxed mystery in Maine, where a work of art might feature a blue wheel... and it isn't talking.

Her Room

Charles J. O'Leary

I was a cop. My father and his father were cops, too. This was the way with the Boston Irish. You followed the trade. If your father was a plumber, you were a plumber; if your father was a brick mason, you were a brick mason. Well, my father was a cop. I'm not complaining; there were advantages. You never lost your job because of market conditions and you never lost your job because they invented something new. You didn't have to worry about the color of your tie or the cut of your suit. We always wore blue, and humanity hadn't changed in a million years. People still beat, murdered, and stole from each other. Murderers, rapists, and thieves were our stock in trade.

I was a cop, but for the last seven months I've been a civilian—or, to be clear, a retired cop… a retired cop with a disability. I have post-traumatic stress disorder. There are a lot of veterans of the Iraq War or Afghanistan that have PTSD. Theirs resulted from road bombs or violent combat. Mine was the result of a dispatcher's mistake.

On February 4, 2009, I was working out of the Bureau of Domestic Services of the Boston Police Department. At 2:57 a.m. I received a call from dispatch sending me to an address on the Boston-Brookline line for a domestic disturbance. When I arrived at the address there was a car with blue lights flashing; I was not the first on the scene. Sergeant Bill Riley, a cop I knew from the old neighborhood, was standing by the entry to a basement-level apartment, the kind that has three windows at sidewalk level and three at the back that looked out on an alley. As I started down the stairs, Riley said: "Lieutenant Foley, this is a bad one."

I should have known when he called me by grade that he was sending a signal. A mick cop never addressed another mick cop by grade. This was as bad as it gets in police work.

I walked into a large room that served as a dining room, sitting room, and kitchen. In the dining area was a female, mid-thirties, Caucasian, her hands tied with electrical cord and the bottom half of her face missing. As I looked closer, I saw that it was not missing but spread on the wall to her right. She had multiple wounds on her torso, probably stab wounds. To her left and in front of the kitchen sink was a male, Caucasian, late thirties, with a large and bloody hole in his chest. This was not a domestic disturbance; this was double homicide.

I went to the rear of the apartment and found a room that had been decorated as a child's room. There were Disney murals on three of the walls; Donald and Mickey were looking straight ahead, but Goofy was drawn facing the children's beds. There was a nightstand with two glasses of water and a Dr. Seuss book, the one he wrote about green eggs and ham. The blue walls and the nightlight gave a glow to a boy, maybe age twelve, and a girl of about seven. The boy had been shot once in the back of the head. The girl, wearing pajamas with a sailboat design, was on the bed opposite the boy. Both were covered with blood. Her carotid artery and jugular vein had been cut with such violence that the small muscle above them

was hanging apart from her body. A pool of blood had accumulated on the floor.

I looked at the wound and the blood, thinking that she probably bled out in three or four minutes. I had to get out of the apartment. I sat in my car. First I vomited, and then I cried.

Why had I been called? This was not domestic violence—this was a multiple murder. Fate and a mistaken dispatcher had left me with a vivid, traumatic memory I would not forget.

* * *

Depression is worse than death. Death has finality to it. It's over. Depression goes on forever. At the very least, you think it's going to last forever. It is a detached loneliness that immobilizes you.

For five days after I visited the homicide scene, I played solitaire on the computer. I didn't answer the phone, I didn't watch television, I didn't go out, and I didn't eat. Well, I didn't eat much. A stale doughnut, a piece of cold pizza, or a peanut-butter sandwich would do. I didn't choose to be that way; it was just the way it was. Sitting in my house on the Cape waiting for the world to go away.

On the fifth day, I woke up and started thinking of Ann and how this would have been our twentieth wedding anniversary if that miserable bastard hadn't killed her. Just a guy drinking all afternoon with his buddies who gets in his car and arrives at the Bourne Bridge precisely and on time to kill the woman I loved. As I tried to cope with this day, I thought to myself, *Oh Jesus how I would love a drink. God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change… Oh Jesus, Jesus, Jesus how I want a drink. Ann, I miss you. Help me, dear Jesus, help me…*

Then I heard one hell of a racket coming from outside the house. Somebody was pounding on the door and calling my name.

"Pat! Pat, are you in there?"

Shit. There was Charlie Boyle pounding and yelling. Charlie is my oldest friend—maybe my only friend, but not

Josh Updegraff knew from the beginning his story would involve a miniature elephant, and having a miniature elephant for a protagonist isn't like having just about any other character as a protagonist. Raja's quiet blue wheel is a security blanket of sorts, giving him a place of rest during the good times and a place of comfort during the bad. And as this little pachyderm embarks on his adventures in a human world, he'll find plenty of both.

The Elephant in the Corner

J. D. Updegraff

The small, furry elephant stood in the opening of the living room door. Looking outward he saw houses, planted in a row, conjoined at either end, not one dissimilar in size or color. Above the interminable joinery of rooftops the elephant, squinting his small eyes in the discordant glare of the morning sun, strained to see the distant hills not yet touched by backhoe or excavator. He stepped outside onto the concrete door slab, adorned with a coarse welcome mat, and breathed the cool air, heavy with the scent of drying leaves. It was autumn. He shook his hair, matted by time and listlessness. It fell slightly from his body and hung in disheveled blond locks. This short fleece coat atop wrinkled pewter skin was indeed disparate from the usual pachyderm as well as his unusual proportion, similar in size to that of an armchair. This elephant, emerging into the bracing light of morning, was indeed unique. But none

would ever know just how much.

His tangled tresses once fell upon a throne of sorts, if one could believe: a downy round bed adorned with tassels, jewels, and thick rope stitching; it sparkled brilliant blue when shafts of light spilled through the skylight above it. The hemming was sewn into the fringes of the bed with eight straight pieces of rope connecting to the center, forming spokes like that of a wheel. These ropes, pregnant with flecks of gold, added to the luminescence of the bed. It was truly remarkable craftsmanship, assembled by the most skilled of artisans. Surrounding this bed was a room, vastly open and ascetic in furnishings, containing only a wooden bookcase and a red, wingback chair, which sat abreast of the blue bed. The floor was granite, cut into large tiles and jointed by carefully smoothed plaster. The meticulously laid stone was silver with flecks of pale-white feldspar; unshined, it had a dull veneer that drew little attention. There was glass both above and next to the bed. Skylights stretched across the ceiling, giving way to the insipid blue vespers of fog eddying overhead—common to the London firmament. To the side, an entire wall of plate glass separated the room from a massive, enclosed garden. Within this garden was a cobblestone walkway that meandered through raised beds, containing fruit trees, high arching palms, and ferns, all under a milky canopy of glass.

From atop the bedecked pillow the elephant would sit and listen to his master ruminate on literature, poets, and playwrights, invoking the sonnets of Shakespeare in heady, verbose dialectic. One particular night the elephant watched in silence as the aging Englishman, his face drawn downward by time but uplifted by gaudy narrative, acted out a scene from Macbeth. He used the full extent of the vast floor space. The elephant's small dark eyes blinked in quiet observation from behind wisps of tan hair. "Double, double, toil and trouble…" the man squealed, his elbows arched high into his armpits, his

wrists and bony fingers luridly stirring an imaginary kettle. He then turned and shifted his character—straightening his gait, puffing his chest into a proud posture, personifying the poise of Macbeth.

After hours of play, the man collapsed, his face red from his great reenactment of amorous gestures, and raucous evocations, into the wingback chair, like an exhausted child. His hand stretched out and touched the thin tips of the elephant's forelocks. "Raja…" the man said in a quiet, receding voice, thick with English brogue. His head slowly tilted to the left as his hand slipped from atop the elephant's head. His speech melted and gave way to deep guttural snores. Raja readjusted his trunk and lowered his head onto his downy, blue bed. The furry elephant drifted into dream beside his master, under darkened skylights.

Nights within the house were often spent this way, with the Englishman gleefully telling stories or acting out plays. During the day, however, their time was spent in the garden—the only other room which Raja would ever see inside the London compound. The man would walk with the elephant at his side and speak with fervor regarding one thing or another. As he spoke, the man would ring his hands and occasionally gesture, his arthritic fingers outstretched into the humid air. Raja, would listen as they shuffled along the cobblestone walk, noticing the peaceful stillness of the garden sanctuary. The recirculation fans, impelling tarnished city air through filtration before being dispensed into the enclosure, were unequivocally silent and supplied meager airflow, providing an immersing tranquility. This allowed Raja to fall deeper into watchful observation of the carefully planted world and the aging Englishman to stray deeper into thought. As Raja's four padded feet fell against smooth, cobbled stone he watched leaves of great trees and smaller ferns fall under the weight of insects. Once close, Raja's eyes would blur and the world would become a blank fog of colors, commingled with the slight impression of

Christopher Olsen's blue wheel seems very not-quiet at first. It's set on a backdrop of local Bangor history, thanks to Olsen's first-person familiarity with local history and the Bangor Historical Society. But he's changed names and situations to protect the innocent, and perhaps the guilty, while working up a good, old-fashioned ghost story. It's worth noting here that Chris wins the awards for "Hardest-Working Student" and "Most-Improved Student," having diligently worked through seven drafts in a die-hard bid to produce his first story so that it would be publishable and engaging. He's done an exemplary job, and has never known the meaning of the word "quit."

Ten Grand

Christopher Olsen

Jack Kendall sat waiting for the interview with the Historical Society's board of directors in their museum's Grand Army of the Republic room. Jack was originally from suburban New Jersey but had ancestors with roots in New England. He found the history of Bangor fascinating to say the very least. The city was a thriving and prosperous community at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, due in part to the lumber and logging industry but even more so because of the spirit of its people and the desire to compete with and even surpass Boston. A job here would be perfect.

A white-haired gentleman, who Jack assumed was one of the organization's volunteers or board members, was sitting in a high-back chair in the corner of the room, smiling at Jack. "History fascinates me," Jack said to the man, returning his smile. "I've lived in Maine since I was twelve, but I grew up in a house that was a stop on the Underground Railroad in northern New Jersey. All these Civil War artifacts you have here are awesome."

"Rehearsing your 'hire me' speech?" said the board president, Sally Hallett, as she entered the room.

Jack turned to face her, momentarily wondering why she was being rude to the gentleman, but he politely replied, "Just making conversation," he said. "I'm always up for talking about the Civil War." He turned as Sally found a seat, and realized the white-haired man had left.

"Sometimes we have visitors from the south," Sally said. "They call the Civil War 'The War of Northern Aggression.'"

"I've heard that," Jack said, shaking his head. "But there are a lot of fascinating things about that war that you'll never find in the history books."

"Such as?" asked Sally.

Jack pointed out a visored infantry cap in an exhibit case. "This hat, for instance, was likely the basis for today's baseball cap. There were even accounts of ball games played on Sundays between Union and Confederates. They had such thick leather visors because the majority of new infantry recruits had never fired a musket, and unlike the Spencer repeating rifles that came out later in the war, the muskets had one hell of a kick, very much like a shotgun. Many of the recruits could only get off one shot. The kickback was so powerful that a lot of them got knocked out cold when the barrel snapped back and hit them in the head."

"I think you'll like one of the upcoming exhibits that talks about the advances made in nursing because of the women getting involved by helping the wounded."

"They made a real difference. I've read that they saved many lives acting as nurses and some women even went to battle, passing for men. It wasn't until they applied for benefits following the war that they came forward as soldiers." He enjoyed talking history with her. He really wanted this job.

"Well, you clearly have the right mind set for this position," Sally said with a smile, as if reading his mind.

* * *

One by one, the rest of the board filed in. Jack was surprised that the white-haired man he was talking with earlier wasn't among them. The seven members gathered around the long wooden table, and the interview got underway.

It was long, and Jack didn't get the sensation that he was making much of an impression on the group; they seemed bored with him and the interview. The pauses got longer and more uncomfortable, and although he really wanted the job, Jack realized he wasn't getting it. His confidence lost, he decided to ask a question that would ensure the deal would be blown so he could just get out of there and move on.

He blurted out, "So… who died in here?"

Surprisingly, the tension in the room dissipated as the small group broke out in laughter. When the laughing stopped, he asked again, "Seriously, who died here? I feel like we're being watched."

Sally smiled. "You have to be the most unpretentious candidate we've interviewed yet. If you read the Godfrey Journals, you'll find the only one who actually died here was the home's second owner, Samuel Dale, the city's mayor, after a scandal."

"What sort of scandal?"

"In 1871, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed much of that city. Communities all across the country raised money to help the people in the city as they worked to recover and rebuild. Bangor raised ten thousand dollars, which was quite a large sum for that time, but it disappeared."

"And the mayor was involved?" Jack asked.

"His wife, too," Sally said, "It's all in the Godfrey Journals. The man who founded the historical society was a probate judge named John Edwards Godfrey; our next exhibit is based on his view of the city. He wrote them like a journal, as letters to his sons. The money never arrived in Chicago. But the investigation was delayed; the railroads had linked up, allowing trains to go all the way from California to the Canadian Maritimes, and President Grant was visiting Bangor. By the time

Annette Ruppel Rodrigues is German by birth, a German instructor by vocation, and a historian by avocation – or perhaps by fate, given her devout commitment to the history she pursues. For her inaugural fiction story, she has drawn on her extensive knowledge of the history of German participation in the early days of the United States, particularly in Maine and the Maritimes, to craft a tale based on fact, with richly drawn characters who were actually real people. But the particulars of the story are from her imagination, including one important object in the title character's life, which serves as her quiet blue wheel.

Margaretha

Anette Ruppel Rodrigues

The darkness of the lower deck which had frightened Margaretha in the beginning of the journey had become rather comforting. The tight bunk enveloped her like a cocoon. No matter how rough the ocean was, she felt safe among the wooden planks of the bunks hugging the wall of the troop transport ship. She was so excited when Georg told her that he was signing up for service with the troops of Margrave Carl Alexander of Ansbach-Bayreuth. The Margrave had promised his cousin, the King of England, a detachment of excellent soldiers to help quell the rebellion in America. These were already the fifth replacement troops, and it seemed to be a war which never wanted to end.

Margaretha's father had been quite pleased to see that Georg found reasons to continue to come to the Wunderlichs' new mill after he had helped build it. A brick and stone mason would make a good son-in-law, and the young, pretty Margaretha definitely was a good catch. The dowry that she would bring into a marriage was more than what could be expected of

the tenant farmers' daughters. Being the miller's daughter placed Margaretha socially higher than others in the village. But, most importantly, she could read as well as any of her brothers. Her father had seen to it since he needed her to decipher the names on the grain sacks and write in the ledgers in the small room off the mill entrance. Reading and writing came easily to Margaretha who exhibited a very independent nature even as a young girl. Her parents often wondered what the future would hold for their bright determined daughter.

When Georg started courting Margaretha, she happily agreed to follow him to the ends of the Earth, or at least as far as North America where the troops would be sent. Even Margaretha's parents gladly entrusted their daughter into his care when he asked them for her hand in marriage. All women in the Wunderlich family started wedding preparations for the three-day festivities while Margaretha busied herself adding to her trousseau. How she enjoyed spinning on her grandmother's spinning wheel! Many years ago, Grandmother had found a way to run her wheel very quietly. When she spun wool from the fleece of her sheep, and her hands were covered with lanolin from the wool, she coated the moving parts of her wheel with the oily substance to silence any squealing spinning usually caused. Since she liked to do her spinning after her children, and later her grandchildren, were put to bed, she did not need to fear waking them while she enjoyed her spinning. When Margaretha was a little girl she had begged her grandmother to paint the wheel her favorite color, sky blue. Grandmother gladly agreed, and there it was, a blue wheel quietly humming along, the treadle powered by Margaretha's little foot. Margaretha and her grandmother spent many happy hours talking and perfecting the little girl's spinning. How Margaretha wished she could take the spinning wheel with her, but on the journey to the New World they were limited to the absolute necessities. The military would supply Georg with his uniform and other clothing, and the wives were expected to

bring clothing they needed, and pots and pans to cook in. The knitting needles and wool, and the sewing boxes and cloth, could easily be packed, but a spinning wheel was too bulky.

The whole village came to see off the Jäger troops who relished the thought of being feared by the rebels as elite sharpshooters. Margaretha was glad that her older cousin Elisabeth was able to talk her husband Michael into joining up. Michael had been in the service during the Seven Years War and joined the troops as vice-corporal. Tears were shed, and the older people were fearful for the young who were going into a world strange to them. But what they dreaded most for the troops was the ocean voyage. For their concern the elderly only earned laughter from the young. And young they were. Even the highest ranking officer was not yet forty years old and all his junior officers were only in their twenties.

Regardless of the fears, the send-off was tremendous. The ten musicians with the troops played as if this were a village dance and not a march into the unknown. The eight women and one child with the troops wore their traveling clothes and the women carried their Sunday-best dresses in the packs on their backs. The weather for the march to the river was not as pleasant as springtime can be, but as long as they were moving the cold did not bother them. Only after they were packed tightly onto the river boats did they feel the biting chill of April. How glad they were when they arrived in Bremerlehe, and the troops passed review in front of the British commissioner William Faucitt, and were found satisfactory.

Finally on June 10, 1782 the fleet set sail for North America. Margaretha's churning stomach discomfort had let up, but almost everyone else was ill with seasickness. She actually enjoyed eating the daily pea soup with salt pork. She did not understand the chuckles from the older women when she told them about her food cravings. When her cousin Elisabeth reminded her of Georg's last furlough, before he reported to the

A high-school prank set in a Maine cemetery can't end well. In David M. Fitzpatrick's telling, the young characters' lives, filled with hopes and desires, go skidding off the rails. The quiet blue wheel is unmoved, unchanged as it observes the events unfold. But don't think you've got it all figured out; the story's narrator holds his pain close and reveals it slowly.

– Greg Westrich

The Curse of John Trafford's Grave

David M. Fitzpatrick

I remember every detail of that terrible night in 1981 like it happened yesterday. Thirty years later, I still don't go anywhere near that cemetery—not even during the day, when the sun makes the grass appear the happiest green, and the gravestones seem like bright and cheerful monuments. That is, except for one day out of the year: my birthday. Every year, when I should be celebrating making it through another trip around the sun alive, I steel my nerves and I go there long after the sun has gone down, when it's dark and foreboding and utterly haunting, and try to find peace with what happened that night so long ago.

We were in high school, too old to be kids and too young to be adults. Jimmy Ellerby was my best friend, as he had been since kindergarten. And we were friends with Darcie Keegan, although we both wanted more than friendship with her.

While Darcie wasn't one of those popular preppies, she was definitely above our social status; we'd always been the kids nobody liked much. But she hung out with us anyway. She was that kind of friend.

And she was beautiful. I can still see her face that way when I close my eyes. Hers was a soft beauty framed by quiet elegance, innocent and overpowering, and so pure it made my heart ache. I first met her when her family came to town while I was in the third grade, in 1974. They'd moved in right across the street from me, in the old Fenton place. I remember the whispered rumors about that house, because Old Man Fenton had supposedly smothered his wife with a pillow. Years later I found out she'd actually died of a heart attack in bed, and he'd gone crazy with grief. But kids keep crazy rumors alive, so of course we believed the Keegans were moving into an evil-ghost house, and that something in there would eventually drive them all mad and smother each other with pillows.

Those silly stories flew right out of my mind the moment I saw Darcie, pretty as a princess in her green-and-red plaid dress, with yellow ribbons in her auburn-colored pigtails. We grew to be great pals over the years, but eventually puberty grabbed hold of me and I started thinking of her in other ways. Her mane of silky auburn hair, her widening hips, and the bulging lumps we'd been teasing her about that had become full-fledged breasts suddenly seemed attractive. And she smelled nice, too—of melon-scented shampoo, of coconut lotion, and sometimes of flowery perfume. It was intoxicating.

Jimmy had it for her, too, but he was just horny. It was far more than that to me. On my twelfth birthday, I told her I loved her; she just laughed and called me silly and gave me a quick birthday kiss on the cheek. I told her again on my thirteenth birthday; once again, she laughed and called me silly, but this time the quick kiss was on my lips.

When I told her on my fourteenth birthday, there was no laughing. She locked her lips to mine for many long seconds,

and it was exciting and wonderful and neither of us had any clue what to do. But when it was over, she wished me a happy birthday and called me a good friend, and headed home. We didn't talk about it again.

Since my birthday kiss had been getting more special every year, on my fifteenth I got myself alone with her and we actually made out. She let me touch her in places I thought I'd never get to touch a girl, but when it was over she breathlessly told me that we couldn't do this again, because we'd end up ruining our friendship. I agreed, because I thought I was supposed to agree and didn't want to make things difficult by going against her. But secretly, I was willing to wait another year. I was sure we weren't just being careless friends; I loved her, and I knew she loved me.

The day before I turned sixteen, Jimmy came up with the idea to scare the pants off Darcie's little brother, Lenny. He was ten and quite naïve, so when Jimmy told Darcie and me about his plan, we knew we could pull it off. It would involve the grave of the long-dead Captain John Trafford.

Like the Old Man Fenton story of Darcie's house, there had been tales told about Longview Cemetery—but people had told them as far back as anyone could remember. Nobody had been buried in its back half of Longview since the mid-1800s, and the headstones dated to the 1770s. It was spooky even in broad daylight; kids never went there even close to sunset. Even our parents and grandparents had told the stories of the faint, but unearthly, wailing that had occasionally been heard over the centuries. We'd never heard it—not one single wailing note—but we all told the story as if we had, and we stayed away from the place at night.

On the sunny afternoon the day before my birthday, the four of us had cut through the cemetery after throwing around a yellow Skyro flying ring in the park. We walked four abreast, Jimmy and Lenny to my left and Darcie to my right. I was already thinking of what my birthday might bring this year—

If you're looking for a literal quiet blue wheel here, you won't find it, but Paula Burnett's story does center on a blue wheel of sorts. And what's quiet about it? It might seem like very little, but with the bottled-up emotions and festering pain both Megan and her new-found friend are trying fiercely to handle, you'll soon see that what's truly important on Blue Wheel Drive is sadly quiet, and desperately in need of being voiced. This is a story of loss and redemption for two unlikely friends who, when they most need it, find each other.

Until We Meet Again

Paula Burnett

Sitting alone on the sunlight-speckled porch in the early afternoon, Megan's mind was racing. The agonizing thought of making new friends due to yet another of her dad's relocations for his employment with various university engineering programs drained her of any momentum. For a couple of weeks, she had been sleeping late into the morning and dreading this summer vacation. At sixteen, Megan was already tired of the many starts and stops in her life. However, this time was different. Her mother was gone, having been killed earlier that year in a head-on collision with a truck whose driver had fallen asleep at the wheel. One day they were all giggling and preparing a dinner together to celebrate their move to Maine; the next day, on the way to a dentist appointment, she was killed.

Her mother's special ways of connecting Megan and the family socially whenever and wherever they moved from state to state would be missed, especially for someone as shy as Megan. Her dad rarely talked of his grief and just kept telling her to cry whenever she needed, as if that would be the

remedy. Since the move to Orono to accept a job her mother had persuaded him to take, her dad seemed to just want to be left alone with his computer and only deal with people at the engineering department. Now Megan felt abandoned in her new surroundings.

Subconsciously, she knew that her dad was genuinely doing the best he could to smooth things for her. He allowed Megan to finish softball season at her last school prior to moving. Also, until school started in September, he would be working from home on one of his various university research projects. Today's conversation over breakfast centered on how he believed she should get involved with a summer church or recreation program.

"You don't get it," Megan replied to her Dad's suggestion. "I'm not going to sing hallelujahs to a god that took Mom away and make stupid little crafts no one really wants."

"Well Megan, I don't want you moping around the house all summer in hopes friends simply fall out of the sky," he said. "You've got to make an effort to meet people halfway. I want you to be safe, happy, and connected with *good* people. So just give it a try."

After conversing at the table with her dad, Megan sprinted with her jellied toast in hand to her thinking spot on the porch stoop. Here she could watch the world go by without her participation. Images of her mother crept into her head and tears raced down her pink cheeks as Megan wrapped her arms around her knees and rocked side to side.

In the summertime, Megan and her mom would hit the road early in the morning for a bike ride around the neighborhood and would come back to a leisurely breakfast with the music blaring. Sometimes they would take turns spinning her mom's records from the 1970s or singing karaoke, pretending to perform like rock-and-rollers as their lithe bodies twisted and gyrated to the sounds from the Beach Boys' *Surf's Up* album and hit songs from the Rolling Stones. Often, they would

lose track of time and reality as their air guitars moved and rolled to the music. The performance would conclude with them bowing to an imaginary mass of screaming fans below them.

Megan had not touched any of the record albums since her mother's death. The turntable, once prominent in the living room of their previously rented house, now sat tucked in a corner covered with a dull, grey dust next to the unpacked box of records.

Two days later Megan woke to the sounds of a squeaky garage door being opened. A few minutes later Don Higgins yelled to his daughter, "Get up, Megan, get up! Your ride awaits you!"

Megan raised the shade slightly and peered out her bedroom window with one eye open a slit to discover her dad was polishing her bicycle in the front yard. The last thing her mom had bought for her was that ten-speed bike in her favorite color, royal blue. The bike had been hung from the garage rafters alongside her mother's Schwinn, as her father hadn't been able to part with his wife's prized possession.

"I know you love riding this bike and dream of taking a bicycle trip across country some day," her dad said when a dressed Megan finally reached the front yard. "This is a good day to remember that dream and work on getting in shape for your eventual trip. Plus, biking is a wonderful way to explore the neighborhood and check out summer programs. Hint, hint, hint…"

"Fine, I'll do it," Megan said while shuffling her feet and rolling her eyes. "I'll ride the damn bike. But I don't promise to stop at a church."

Megan meandered back and forth on her bicycle down her long street, College Avenue, with its mixture of older homes with carriage houses that had been turned into apartments and

There's nothing like a murder mystery, but they're usually told from the point of view of the investigator trying to solve the case. This one sort of is, but Nora isn't a typical detective. Rather, she's a woman caught up in the midst of circumstances, with connections to the suspects, a blooming romance with the police detective, and a big wheel of blue cheese that isn't talking… because nobody knows where it went. Kelly Jean Richardson's first published story takes her love of a good mystery and puts it to good use.

Pungent Death

Kelly Jean Richardson

I could see the steam-clouded window panes of the commercial-quality kitchen, and I could already smell the fragrance of potent and exotic spices. The warmth of the spices contrasted sharply with the crisp fall air outside the house, tinged with the faint smell of burning wood and the muffled crunch of the decaying fall leaves under my feet. On West Broadway, grand old houses sat on either side of the wide, tree-lined street. I'd finally reached my destination. The stately house loomed in the dark, conjuring up ghostly tales. Garbage cans cast spooky shadows into the street. I shivered despite my warm, down-filled coat. I walked partly to stave off the indignities of age, though I admit I mostly did it for the pleasure. Walking makes me feel strong and vigorous—an increasingly delightful feeling the older one gets.

The housekeeper led me into the kitchen, announced me to Regina, and just as quickly disappeared. I'd started the gourmet club several years ago with members chosen from people I had met while taking night classes. Some were teachers, others

students, but all had an avid interest in good food. None of the members were close friends, although some I had known many years—like Regina, who was cooking tonight's meal.

I tossed furtive glances around the kitchen, making sure everything ran smoothly. On several occasions, disaster loomed large, but I always stepped in calmly to assist. Everything ran like clockwork as Regina chatted while working with practiced steps. Her parents had raised her with old-world values, despite their enormous wealth, and expected her to give back generously to the community. She had devoted her adult life to working tirelessly as a patron of the arts.

Regina said, "Nora, Victor is in the conservatory setting up the wine and cheese course. Anthony just dropped off a wonderful selection of cheese. I'm sure he'd enjoy some help setting them out, and you two can quibble over the proper wines to serve."

I said, "I'd love to, and I can see you have everything well in hand here." She smiled at the compliment, and I went in search of Victor.

Victor stopped arranging the mounds of crumbled and cut cheeses on a delicate crystal platter to greet me. Smaller china platters held crackers and a variety of breads. The platters displayed garnishes of fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, and fresh herbs. The room overflowed with fresh flowers, a faint smell of exotic incense, and soft music from India playing in the background. I smiled in absolute delight, and, of course, Victor saw and smiled at my pleasure. He always noticed every detail, including when you were genuinely pleased or merely pretending; not much got by him.

We had met in a wine-tasting class about four years before when Victor first moved to Bangor. Quite an elegant man, he had recently opened his own art gallery with his wife Regina's financial backing. When I invited him to join the gourmet club, he asked if his assistant, Anthony, could join us, as he felt the young man could use some refinement. I assured him Anthony

was welcome, as was Regina, if she wished.

Lew Walters arrived first; he wrote grim tales of horror and the macabre. He was world famous, yet down to earth. Witty and energetic, he was not at all the dark, brooding type you'd expect if you read his material. He adored eating gourmet food, but he'd be the first to admit that his cooking skills were rudimentary at best. I routinely paired him with another cook, and he pitched in however he could. He was followed in by Anthony, and then Susan Montgomery. A thoroughly delightful woman, I took an immediate liking to her when we met in a photography course. She hesitantly asked if she could join the gourmet club after she had heard other students talking about it.

Susan's smile lit up the place and, after seeing the way Anthony flirted with her, I suspected why. I sensed that, bound by convention and slightly uptight, Victor disapproved of Anthony's playful and lighthearted banter. I think he disapproved of Susan rather more strongly at all times. The wariness on Victor's part puzzled me. Susan treated everyone in a warm, friendly manner, including him. Perhaps she reminded him of someone that he disliked. That did sometimes happen.

I put several delectable pieces of cheese and bread on my plate to eat as we mingled and talked, fueled by excellent wine and anticipation of the meal to come. I noticed Anthony walk over and hand Susan a small plate. She turned a bright smile his way and laid a light hand on his arm. "Thanks, Anthony," she said. "Did you know that I happen to adore blue cheese?"

"I have insider information," he replied. "I picked out the cheeses myself and I wanted your opinion of the Cashel. Did you know that it's an Irish farmhouse cheese?"

Susan savored the cheese slowly and cooed over it in delight.

I was disappointed that Victor had left the blue cheese in the pantry and I'd missed my chance to try it. As I knew others would be eager to sample it as well, I asked Victor to bring out

Tourists think that Maine is all about lobsters and Bar Harbor, but there's something about rural Maine that goes far beyond those things. There's the tenacity and perseverance of Mainers, and the strong work ethic you'll find in them. There's the deep sense of pride those folks have. And there's the time-hardened Maine concept of what it means to be "from away" – a concept often adhered to with the fiercest resolution. In his story, Greg Westrich – who is, in fact, "from away" – shows us how keenly he understands those things, and he weaves them together into a tragic mystery where one quiet blue wheel tells a terrible story. What happens in the lonely woods of this fictional Maine community could happen in any of the real towns you'll find once you venture even a short way off Interstate 95.

Greenland, ME

Greg Westrich

I coasted to a stop at the top of the rise and leaned forward onto my ski poles. An echo of the dry rasp of snow spread out from me, up into the bleached blue of the sky like ripples on a pond. With each breath I could feel the bitter cold burn my throat and cool my chest. The moisture in each exhale froze into a fog that hung about my head in the still air. A raven glided silently over me, turning to peer down at me as it banked off toward the woods to my right. In front of me the snowmobile trail dropped down through the hay meadow, across a small alder-lined stream, and into a smaller hay meadow along the Station Road. The trail disappeared where it turned sharply to the right—avoiding actually going into the meadow—and hugged the edge of the alders until it entered the woods.

On the side of the meadow sat a hay baler, little more than a giant lump in the deep snow. Its faded green shell around blue metal machinery and wheels were hidden; the grass stubble, grease, and bloodstains were all frozen beneath a deep

blanket of snow. The baler had been sitting there since early October.

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It had happened on a Monday; I remember because I was eating lunch before heading into Bangor to the bookstore when the first ambulance roared down the road, past the house, across the bog in a cloud of dust, and down to the Kimballs' dairy farm. A few moments later a State Trooper and two of the town's fire trucks followed into the farm's dusty front yard.

Polly and I went to the kitchen window. "What do you think it is?"

As we stood watching from our kitchen window, the ambulance backed out of the yard and drove slowly farther down the road.

"Doesn't look good."

"Yeah—jeez, and I'm gonna be late for work. I'll call at dinnertime."

As I drove into town, I was wondering what had happened, and thinking that even though we weren't close with the Kimballs, Polly would have us involved. Helping someone. We'd lived in Greenland for ten years, but I still felt like an outsider. I was very much from away. Hell, my daughter had been born in our house, but she was from away. That's the way it was. Greenland had once been a thriving community of well-off vegetable and dairy farmers with its own train station, grist mill, and downtown. All that was left of the mill was a broken dam on Dead Stream that was great fun to run in a canoe during the spring; downtown was a clapboard general store, a gas station, a tiny brick library, the Baptist church, and a concrete slab where the pizza place had been before it burned down. We lived on the Station Road, which used to go from town to the railroad station. The town didn't even maintain the road all the way to the tracks anymore. One retired neighbor, who we would meet occasionally on our family walks, told us that when she was a girl you could see from her house all the way
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to town hall. All the land on both sides of the road was in crops or hay; now it's almost all woods.

The town was down to a handful of dairy farms: Every barn fire, retirement, or long winter meant fewer families willing or able to stick with it. Everyone said that there were more people growing pot for a living than farming something legal; given the number of drug busts every year, I tended to believe them. There were more rusty mobile homes than farm houses, and most of farm houses—like ours—weren't farms anymore. Somehow the Kimballs had held on. It took everyone in three generations to do it. Even so, they were barely getting by. I wondered if they had been on the land for more than two hundred years because they were too ornery to quit or if they had been at it so long that they couldn't imagine anything else. The previous Christmas, Dawson—who was in second grade like my son Ben—and his older brother had come over to the house to show off their new winter coats. They were satin jackets, like baseball players wear with a Holstein embroidered on the back and said: "Sixth generation Kimball farmer." The boys' names were over the pockets on the front. Straight out of Norman Rockwell.

At dinner I called Polly; she was crying. "It was Edwin. Something with the hay baler—I don't know. They have three kids. We—we—gotta do something." She didn't say he'd been killed. She didn't need to.

"Can you make something for me to take down tomorrow? Maybe I should see if Masha needs help with Dawson. Jerry?" A covered dish: a bit of a cliché. I knew better than to say so.

"Yeah, I'll have time before work." And besides, if I make it, Polly will deliver it. I really didn't want to go down to the farm; I didn't know what to say to them on a good day.

"Thanks, Jerry. Those poor kids…" I'd have to talk to Wayne; he was the biggest gossip I knew. Even though he moved in across the street only a couple of years ago, he

Marsha Libby had two distinct story ideas for her contribution to this anthology. Unable to decide which she most wanted to write, she decided to do them both. The result is an intertwined pair of tales about coming to terms with difficult circumstances and finding the power to go forward. One story happens in our world, in the here and now; the other takes place in a world of fantasy, where magic prevails, but where the challenges of the human condition are just as prevalent as they are in ours. Libby gives us two subtle quiet blue wheels, both wrought with power – one literally, the other metaphorically. What follows is an expert blending of two stories, two protagonists, and two quiet blue wheels into a tale you won't soon forget.

Reclaiming Candace

Marsha Libby

The moment had come.

Ilyana swallowed, willing her nerves to calm. "Are you ready?" she asked the two mages standing with her at the top of the hill. They nodded, eyes dark, faces somber.

"All right, then, let's do this." She bowed her head, concentrating, readying herself to embrace her power.

She hesitated. The magic lay just beyond her reach, her ambivalence and misgivings forming a barrier between her and the sparkling river that she saw in her mind's eye. She took a deep breath, steeling herself, and pushed past the invisible wall. She was inundated with magic; it filled her with a quiet confidence and peace as its power washed over her.

Something was missing, however. Once, she had been a fire mage, a powerful one. A small corner of her mind ached with emptiness, yearning to be filled with the recklessness, the feeling of barely contained power, which always accompanied fire magic. Its loss had opened up a wound that could never heal. Water magic was a poor substitute, a consolation prize

that only served to remind her of what she had lost.

Anger sparked within her, causing the peace induced by the water magic to shatter, the mental barrier to slam down once more. Victory in the battle against the rebels depended on her using her magic, yet she abruptly turned her mind away from its glittering stream. She knew she should be grateful that she had it, that she should welcome water the way she had once welcomed fire, but she could not bring herself to do so.

Her desire to once again touch fire magic overcame her reason. She reached deep within herself, striving to grasp that which had once been so readily accessible to her. She encountered a void; nothing remained where once a magical fire burned except the cold ashes of extinguished hope. She could just as easily capture sunshine in her hands as seize fire.

Fury flared up in magic's stead, and she fell to her knees, fists pounding the dry earth, frustrated sobs racking her body. All around her, battle raged, a losing battle, for water magic was the key to winning, and in her agitated state she was unable to use it. She had failed.

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Candace woke, disoriented and shaking. She gripped the arms of the rocking chair so tightly her fingers ached. Feelings of anger and helplessness threatened to overwhelm her. She had had this dream before, she knew, and always woke up feeling this way. She tried to capture the details of it in her mind, but they flitted away like a butterfly avoiding a toddler's clumsy hands.

She forced her fingers to loosen, and shook them to relieve their aching. She stood and took a deep breath, willing the frantic beating of her heart to slow. She stretched, fists pushed into the small of her back in an attempt to ease the pain that, along with her swollen belly, was becoming her constant companion. She felt a kick; her rising had awakened the baby. A wave of resentment washed over her; she knew it was wrong, but she could not get over the feeling that this little creature
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sought to take Gabriel's place in her heart.

The kicks became stronger and more insistent. She sighed and resigned herself to a beating from within. The baby was getting stronger, and sometimes its kicks hit with enough force to make her gasp.

She moved to the window and drew the blinds, blocking the reddish rays of the setting sun and plunging the room into darkness. Passing the crib, she ran her fingers along its rail, pausing to straighten the ribbon on the little brown stuffed bear sitting on the nearby dresser. Its contented expression only amplified Candace's sorrow. She slipped out of the room and drew the door shut behind her. She leaned against the closed door a moment, hastily wiping away a tear as she attempted to get her emotions under control; Owen would be returning home soon and he would not appreciate seeing her like this.

He missed his son as well, Candace knew. After Gabriel's death, they had grieved together, seeking comfort in one another. But lately, he had shown impatience with her tears; once, he lost his temper, saying, "Just let it go, Candace!" as he stormed out of the room. That had hurt her deeply, and as she could not let go of her grief, she did her best to hide it from him. Deep down, she felt that he blamed her for Gabriel's illness. How could she fault him for that, when in her darkest moments she felt overwhelmed with guilt? She couldn't help thinking that if she had just monitored her diet more carefully or paid closer attention to her obstetrician's advice, it may have somehow prevented Gabriel from developing his fatal heart defect. She and her husband had been drifting apart these past few months, and she suspected that her feelings of guilt over their baby's death were part of the reason why.

Her friends from work, too, had long since distanced themselves from her. Most did not call her anymore, and the few who did usually kept their conversation brief and made no mention of her loss. She remembered well how she would talk