

ENCHANTMENTS **THE MANY FACETS OF MAGIC**

Edited by
David M. Fitzpatrick



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ENCHANTMENTS: THE MANY FACETS OF MAGIC

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Dedication

The editor dedicates this anthology to
Ed Knight and Donnie Clemons.
They know why.

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Introduction

Having had several dozen short stories of my own published in magazines and anthologies around the world, and having co-edited a pair of anthologies with Ed Knight, I'd had the idea of editing an anthology in my head for a while. During a meeting with a representative of United Technologies Center in Bangor for my writing job with the Bangor Daily News here in Maine, I found an opportunity to teach a course called "Creative Writing: The Short Story."

The running joke in the world of fiction is that those who can write do; those cannot write teach creative writing. Luckily, I was comfortable enough in my own abilities to take on the course. I fully understood the challenges of wanting to see my work in print, having learned over the years (the hard way) that there's a lot to learn about English usage and the mechanics of crafting stories. Too many would-be writers with great imaginations are often without the tools to bring their ideas to the page in a way that can entice editors to read beyond page one.

My vision with the course was to work closely with students over a few semesters and publish everyone's polished tales in an anthology. But this was a technical school, so people weren't looking for story-writing classes; only four students signed up. No matter; we'd get three or four students each semester, and after two or three semesters, I'd have enough stories for an anthology.

But just one person signed up the second semester, and the class was summarily canceled. Meanwhile, one of my four students decided he didn't want to be in the anthology. Three stories did not an anthology make, and to add to that challenge, there was no common theme.

I'd anticipated a wide mix of stories from a bunch of students, but ended up with a fantasy tale, a science-fiction story, and a mainstream piece. I owed it to those three students to publish them, but I needed stories and a theme. I hail from the field of speculative fiction—science fiction, fantasy, and horror—for the most part, so I knew I could solicit stories along those lines. But that one mainstream story would throw that balance off. Plus, people who read spec fiction tended to not care much about mainstream, and mainstream readers generally weren't interested in spec fiction.

I read and re-read my students' drafts, trying to envision a common theme, and suddenly realized it was staring me in the face. The theme was magic. Every story held something magical, whether literal or metaphorical. I had a direction.

First, I offered to submit a story of my own for editing and consideration by my three students. (After putting up with me over several intensive revisions, I'm sure there was some level of satisfaction involved in returning the favor.) But even four stories wasn't enough. I needed twice that.

I solicited stories from four other people—two established writers, one with a single story in print, and another first-timer. The end result was a collection featuring eight stories—six by Bangor, Maine-area writers, four of which had never been published before.

The anthology took on a life of its own, and in the end the mix of stories truly lived up to the subtitle "The Many Facets of Magic." We have a high fantasy featuring elemental sorcery and a mystical prophecy, and a contemporary fantasy about the ignored wonder of a mythical beast in the modern world. There's a tale of divine miracles, and one of the American my-

thology of a comic-book hero with super powers. One is like a folk tale set beneath the sea, and one is a mainstream story with some very emotional metaphorical magic. And there's even magic of a science-fiction variety, and a supernatural horror story wrapped in witchcraft.

There should be something for everybody. Read on, and immerse yourself in the different types of magical spells cast by the writers of these eight stories. For anyone nervous about the idea of an anthology with several first-timers—some of them students in a creative-writing class—have no fear: These are good tales. If they weren't publishable, I wouldn't publish them.

While you're reading, consider the importance of small-press magazines and anthologies. We might not reach the tens of thousands of people the big publishers do, but like a local band or community theater troupe, we're the voices you might not otherwise hear.

For those of you who may read these tales and doubt whether any of them could really happen, don't forget that they already did in the minds of their writers. Open your imagination, and they'll happen in your mind as well.

*David M. Fitzpatrick
Brewer, Maine
April 2009*

Kate England graduated from the University of Maine at Farmington with a degree in English, but she didn't need it for her writing, in which she has a natural mastery of the language. She was once a Special Sections writer for the Bangor Daily News and is now the assignment editor for a weekly paper, *The Maine Edge*, but her true talent comes through in her fiction. She leads off this anthology with "Broken," a contemporary fantasy that is as beautiful as it is tragic, reminding us to pay attention to the finer points of life – lest we lose the chance to enjoy their magic.

Broken

Kate England

Saturday, I remember it was a Saturday. In June, I think. The breezes were still silky and cool in the morning, but by noon the humidity had made it hard to breathe. All a sane person can do is sip lemonade in the shade and watch with jealous befuddlement as the kids find the energy to run endless circles through the sprinkler. That Saturday I saw the most beautiful thing in the world. But I saw it too late.

I had moved out to rural New Hampshire after Evy was born. I had scraped up enough money to put a down payment on a small ranch-style house on two acres of land smack in the middle of nowhere. After the crushing press and incessant noise of Boston, it was almost as if the silence of the country had swallowed us whole.

Sarah had hated the move, and I swear she made an effort not to make friends at school. Instead of posters of cute boy bands and movie stars, she insisted on plastering dragons, fairies, and other fantasy-land animals on her wall. I once tried to

explain that this wasn't the best way to impress friends, she rolled her eyes.

Our neighbors were out of sight, but not too far away. Sometimes children would appear from nowhere and play with mine. They'd tumble around in the yard, or make monkeys of themselves on the swing set before mounting their bikes, grass-stained and muddier than when they arrived, and head back to their own families.

Working from home as a marketing and public-relations correspondent to several firms in Manchester and Concord, I could watch the girls play through my office window. I designed advertisements, wrote up press releases, and basically shined up their respective self-images. Working at home was supposed to keep me closer to the girls. It was supposed to help us reconnect. Instead, every time they came inside from playing, I could feel my shoulders tighten up and burn, like someone extinguishing a cigar deep in my muscles.

Evy, the baby at five years old, saw it first. She tried to tell me about it.

"Mama," she said to me while I was tucking here into bed. "Mama, I saw a horse in the woods today. Or a cow. Or a deer."

"Which one did you see, baby?" I asked with a smile.

Evy frowned at me, her glassy blue eyes glittering with frustration as she wrinkled her brow and tried to explain. "It was like all of them, Mama" she said. She shook her head and sighed looking as pensive as a five-year-old can. I smoothed her dark hair, which had curled with the summer heat.

"It looked like all of them? A horsecowdeer? A corse? A heer? A dow?" I asked and tickled her. She giggled and laughed, and tickled me back with her tiny hands, but then grew serious; pushing my tickling fingers away, shaking her head.

"No, Mama. It was very pretty." She yawned and settled

into bed. I smiled and kissed her goodnight.

I moved to Sarah's side of the room. She had a small reading lamp clipped to a large book she was reading: *The Complete Fairy Tales by the Brothers Grimm*. I sighed and she looked at me over the edge of the book without moving her head.

"Night," she said, flicking her eyes back to the book.

I sat on the edge of her bed. Sarah's shoulders tightened and she slipped a scrap of paper between the pages and lifted her eyes to look at me. It wasn't quite a glare.

"What were you and Evy doing out in the woods today?" I asked.

"Evy said she saw something. We went looking for tracks but I didn't see anything. Something has eaten the buds off all the clover in the side yard, and got some of your lettuce. Evy said it had horns, and looked weird. But nice."

"I don't like you wandering around out there. There could be bears," I said.

Sarah just shrugged, her eyes on the book.

The next morning Sarah was up before me and I saw her shoveling cereal into her mouth as she stood by the window, dressed in sweatpants and a loose-fitting T-shirt. Her dark hair was cropped boyishly short, something she insisted on doing herself, grudgingly allowing me to even out the back. Her thirteenth birthday had come and gone two months ago. She had her father's dark brown eyes, and her skin soaked up the sun, turning her as brown as wheat bread.

I was surprised to see Evy up at this hour. She was her sister's opposite, fair where Sarah was dark, with milky skin that burned on a cloudy day, and hair that turned blond in the summer.

"You two are up early," I said as I opened the fridge and fumbled for the can of coffee.

"We're going for a walk in the woods," Sarah said between mouthfuls.

“Are you going hunting for that animal?”

Sarah shrugged, noncommittal, but Evy nodded as milk dripped down her chin and her eyes gleamed with excitement. “It was pretty!”

They buzzed in and out of the house for days, barely stopping to eat. Television became a forgotten pastime, and other children stopped visiting.

I was on the phone, explaining to a marketing rep why it was better to work through me than a faceless advertising agency, when Evy and Sarah burst in through the door. They were a flurry of giggles, exclamations, and breathless excitement.

“Hold on one moment, please,” I told the droning marketing rep. The girls had caught the tone of my voice and I saw Evy wilt. I jabbed my finger towards the stairs and raised my eyebrows. I mouthed the “Now” at the girls and fought the urge to stamp my foot.

Sarah stiffened and her eyes narrowed. She put her hand on her sister’s shoulder and guided her upstairs.

After making the sale, I went back to my office and sorted through files, making lists of clients to call on the next day.

“What were you two so excited about this afternoon?” I asked as I scooped mashed potatoes onto Sarah’s plate.

Evy didn’t say anything; she just pushed her steamed carrots around her plate with her fork.

“Is now a more convenient time?” Sarah asked.

“What?”

“You heard me,” she snapped her dark eyes smoldering as she glared at me. “We wouldn’t want to inconvenience you, Ma. I’d hate if the sound of your kids laughing made you lose out on some cash.”

“You better watch your mouth, young lady, or you will be *very* hungry tonight,” I replied, feeling the heat rush to

Terofil Alexander Gizelbach has written many engaging pieces of short fiction that have appeared in magazines and anthologies all over. Of great entertainment are his various robot stories, which turn the classic Asimovian idea of robotics somewhat on its head, just as he does in his upcoming robot novel, *Near and Distant Star*. But he's quite capable of departing science fiction and crafting worlds of fantasy. In "Annwyn," perhaps amidst shades of Welsh mythology, he aptly immerses his readers in a mournful tale of love magically found beneath the waves. But the magic of the love itself, and its resolution, is every bit as real on a metaphorical level in this haunting story.

Annwyn

Terofil Alexander Gizelbach

*“Once, long ago--
I floated in green seas beneath a cloudy sky--
towering columns that shadowed my swim
and blew to me the scent of distant rain.
But that was once.
Long ago....”*

I.

The coracle drifted in a lake of molten gold; the dip of Bogatyr’s paddle trailed fire in the gloaming light. Scarred, grim-faced, and dusty, sweat stained his leather jerkin as he stroked. His biceps bulged, his neck veined, his tanned forearms rippled. He worked diligently and with purpose, sculling his craft towards the setting sun; for a storm, he judged, would strike near midnight, long ere he reached the port-haven of Innis-Frith.

Glancing up from his paddling, Bogatyr searched the

sky. Wide, pearlescent, touched with pink and blue, it swept above in a rainbow like an oyster's inner shell. The water, placid with stillness that comes only before a heavy rain, lapped against mountains flat, gray, and backlit by the sinking sun. The air, scented with metal and must, was cool; a freeze, hastened by a withering of leaves, lingered just beyond. And despite his urgency, Bogatyr's face softened. He pulled his oar from the lake, and paused to admire the beauty of the oncoming night. He breathed, silently and deeply filling his lungs.

A fine time to pass, he thought, staring longingly past the golden light bands that shimmered across the water's surface, and into the lake's blue-green depths beyond. For an instant, recalling the massacre of his kinsmen, he was still. His calm was the sky's calm, his stillness the lake's stillness, his thoughts the dark blue currents flowing beneath.

Turning with a sigh, he lowered his paddle and sculled again.

She rose from the black fathoms that lay at the lake's heart, her face a pale lovely oval that grew ever lovelier as she swam towards the surface. She came from the cold quiet places—her eyes the ice-blue of the deeps, her naked skin the first faint flush of sunset, her hair a fanning blond wave.

Gazing from sapphire depths, she smiled at him—almost sadly, it seemed: her lips red, enticing; eyes gentle, beguiling. Entranced, Bogatyr sucked in his breath, forgetting in his wonderment to exhale.

Laughing silently, she kicked her smooth legs and flickered again for the deeps, stringing the lake with bubble streams that eddied in multicolored ribbons.

Bending over the water, Bogatyr rubbed his eyes; the coracle listed dangerously close to its surface as he strained to see. But she was gone, flashed away by a stray dance of dying light—a gleam of fading whiteness, a spear point dropping.

Bewitched, Bogatyr peered into the depths.
But saw only his reflection, wavering in nightfall.

Black-clouded, wind-torn, and brooding, the storm swept over Bogatyr as he plied the midnight waters of Dannish Toon. In the flash of lightning he saw the shore, distant, unreachable—a dark wall lashed by rain. The gale’s fury grew, wailed. The lake trembled and heaved. Swells battered the coracle’s thin leather strips until the reeds binding the hides creaked against the strain, and the seams, sewn with gut, threatened to snap.

Digging his oar into the spray, Bogatyr battled the raging crests with a savagery that equaled the ferocity of the storm, cursing the foam-capped mountains that rose and rolled beneath him like a serpent’s back, snapping the craft upwards then down again.

Water, black as liquid onyx, washed into the coracle, lapped his ankles; waves crashed nearby. The fragile vessel, wallowing in the swells, listed sideways into a trough, spun like a leaf in a whirlpool.

In desperation, Bogatyr worked his paddle to turn the bow into the onrushing waves. But the current was strong, and a second wave, huge and black, roared over him, smashing the leather bowl into flotsam, and sweeping Bogatyr into the froth.

Riding the water-mountains as they flung him skyward, he shouted into the gale. Dragged into a trough, water flooded his throat, causing him to choke. Loosened by his struggles, his sword slipped from his scabbard. He floundered amidst the wreckage, thrashed his limbs against his mail’s downward pull. He looked again to the land, towards the black unattainable shoreline. Felt himself slipping into the depths, cursed the waters as they closed over his head...

Then darkness, like the lake...
Overwhelmed him.

* * *

II.

The storm's fury faded from Bogatyr's mind even as it faded from the sky; the darkness that had been cast upon him was dispelled—and, opening his eyes, he beheld her.

Water reached to the sky and the stars; clouds floated beyond, shimmering as if reflected from a mirror. She drifted just above like a spirit, a nymph; her blond hair forming halos that danced in the moonlight. And Bogatyr thought her beautiful, naked, and wild; she of blue eyes—eyes like sea-light, flecked with a shell's iridescent flash.

She smiled, her teeth like fine pearls in the half-moon beauty of her mouth. He returned her smile—and his gaze became a stare, such that, enraptured, he forgot the need to breathe. He floated unknowing and uncaring of the hours, entranced and suspended in the embryonic fluid of the lake's belly. The water slipped in and out of his lungs easily.

So this is what it's like to die, he thought at last, feeling the caress, the quiet, the cold of the lake currents upon his skin.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice betraying his wonder.

She laughed, and the sound, magnified by the water, was like a bell chiming. "I am Annwyn, Queen of the Gwraged Annwn, whom you may know as the Lake People."

"Then I am dead... or mad..."

"Nay, Bogatyr," she laughed again. "You most certainly are not dead, though I cannot speak as to your sanity. As for your presence here, 'tis my magic that brought you, and it will sustain you for as long as you swim the waters of Dannish-Toon. But you must never leave; nay, here you must remain—"

"Annwyn... how is it that you know my name?" he asked, trying to understand.

She smiled, her face softening from a laugh, her nose wrinkling from the joy that brightened her blue eyes. "The mortals called to you at Tannis Forth when you launched your craft, and I've followed in your wake ever since. Coracles—while sturdy, beautiful vessels—have not the strength to match

In her first published story, Elizabeth Fidler has forged a tale reminiscent of the classic fantasy fiction of decades past, where magic abounds on an imagined world, and the forces of evil seek to repress and destroy the innocent and the good. In “Mark of Prophecy,” Branada seeks to fulfill what has been foretold, a prophecy intertwined in a world where men have outlawed magic that isn’t theirs. The Elvere race take exception to this, and with their command over the powers of the various forms of elemental magic, seek to find a peaceful solution that will satisfy the prophecy. Along the way, Branada must come to terms with her calling – and save her people.

Mark of Prophecy

Elizabeth Fidler

*A elvan shall be born with the divine mark
And aura at birth
Both fading from sight and memory
Before her first birthday*

The newborn fiercely announced its displeasure at the loss of the womb's warmth. Exhausted Setrina examined her only child. The skinny girl had a rich down of her mother's jet-black hair, and her father's rosy complexion shone on her angry little face. Her little, slightly pointed ears stuck out in the usual way. And even in anger, the corners of her little rosebud lips curved up in that perpetual smile that was common among her kinfolk.

There were two unusual things about the child which puzzled and frightened her mother. She bore the divine mark of Kievan and Varelle, and her odd, gold-green eyes were unusually alert and aware for a newborn. Her daughter was a fighter.

Setrina thought, *That will serve her well in the end.*

Setrina's labor had been rougher than most. The baby had not wanted to leave her womb and had fought the whole way out. She had taken a full three days to bear, and the midwives had even summoned the High Queen to lend her strength of spirit, but it could not save Setrina; the birthing was just too much. "I name her a child of Fire," she whispered. "Sister, she is yours."

* * *

*The elvan shall possess abilities almost
Forgotten and gone in Elvere;
In time she will grow into them and meet
A teacher to guide her path*

Branada was standing on the peak of a snowcapped mountain, her boyish figure dressed for a long journey in her favorite brown doeskin leggings and burnt-orange poncho. Before her were many paths but she could see nothing beyond a dozen steps of any of them; the clouds in the sky blended into the mounds of snow all around her. Unsure how to proceed, Branada was studying her surroundings when there appeared a gorgeous red wolf; the splendor of his magnificent thick, bronze coat was lost to the brilliance of his jade eyes.

As Branada sunk deeply into the wolf's intense stare, a voice like faraway thunder rumbled in her mind, "Follow me, Branada," the wolf said, "I have something to show you."

Feeling a tug towards him, she followed him to a waist-high snow drift. The wolf dug away the snow to reveal the head of yet another path hidden by the fog. They walked along in silence for some time, seeing nothing ahead or behind them except a few steps in either direction of the dirt track, but everything to either side of the pair was cloaked by clouds and snow.

After following the wolf for what seemed an eternity, Branada stopped short as he dropped back on his haunches. Suddenly, the mist vanished all around them and they stood on a small hill that lay in the heart of a lush valley, alive with sights and sounds. An immense rushing river flowed around either side of the mound, its sparkling aquamarine waters winding north-south through the vale. Surrounding the whole basin was a thick forest full of every kind of tree, from blue spruce to desert palm, all growing side by side on the slopes of circling mountains.

Turning to take in the whole vista, Branada saw that, centered on the crest of their hill, was a large steel basin holding an immense bonfire. In several places, rainbow-hued moss patches covered the basin. The moss peeked through strands of climbing vines covering the cauldron, which were rooted at the base in a colorful carpet of wildflowers. The flowers spread down the sides of the knoll to the very edge of the water, and stretched out from the rim of the far bank into the forest and up the mountainside. The valley was full of animals. The young of both prey and predators were playing together while their elders lazed in the infinite bouquet of flowers, some across the water and others just within feet of Branada and the wolf, unfazed by their presence. Branada watched as a little gray rabbit chased a large panther cub in and out of a copse of birches. The wind constantly changed, blowing a harsh winter gale or a light summer breeze or anything in between, yet Branada felt comfortable in all of them. She laughed as the wind pulled wisps of her long black hair out of the leather strap that tied it loosely back. "I have never seen such a glorious place," Branada said. "I'm glad you showed it to me."

"Hush, child," the wolf said. "That is not why you are here."

As he spoke, an unnatural stillness enveloped the entire valley; time seemed to stand still. When it resumed, there was a prevailing uneasiness, where a moment before the air had

been filled with the rich sounds of contented animals and the songs of joyful birds, now the absence of their distinct noises was painfully obvious. All the animals were gone. They just vanished; there wasn't even fish in the river. The only evidence that she hadn't just imagined them was the occasional hoof or paw print and the remnants of nests in a few trees. With the creatures missing, the vale appeared to contract in on itself; all of its features looked shriveled, and the air felt lethargic.

Branada turned in frantic circles, looking with wild eyes to find a clue to the source of the shocking disturbance. Finally, on one of the lower slopes above the trees, she spied a massive brown bear and a thin yellow ram. They were headed towards the forest, the ram prodding along the slow and hesitant bear. She lost sight of them when they reached the edge of the woods. Once the pair had disappeared, treetops around the far edge of the forest started sinking out of sight.

The pair came into view again. Branada watched as the bear wandered slowly through the woods, eating whole trees until not a twig or leaf was left in the forest. Whenever the bear tried to stop, the ram stamped a hoof and head-butted him. The ram grew taller as the bear consumed the wood, but the bear's height diminished.

Next, the ram pushed the bear to the riverbank and swept his horns into the bear's left foreleg, causing the bear to crash to the ground. The bear lay motionless, growling deep in his throat, but the ram just snorted. Grunting his disgust, the bear lowered his head to the water and drank the riverbed dry. As the bear swallowed each ton of water the ram grew fatter and he became bone thin.

The ram pranced across the dead channel and up the hill-top to the steel-basin bonfire, the bear followed, more dejected and slower with every step. The ram was practically dancing around the bonfire when the bear ambled over to the steel basin, raised a single paw, and smothered the fire without leaving any ashes. The ram bleated his jubilation and nodded his

Sometimes magic is just something others don't understand – or maybe even when we do understand it, it's still magical nonetheless. In Melisenda Ellis' first published short story, a witch consults the bones to divine a task she must accomplish, attaining something important from a little boy who, like the others in his world, doesn't understand the mysteries of magic. In "The Witch's Dilemma," Ellis shows us a world that isn't quite what it seems – and neither are the things one is apt to find there.

The Witch's Dilemma

Melisenda Ellis

Sylvia stared at the bones, trying to will them into some other pattern. They couldn't be saying what she thought they were. She blinked, closed her eyes tight, wished for some other meaning, and opened them again, cautiously.

The bones had stubbornly remained in their places inside the chalked circle.

She sat back, a curious sort of numbness spreading through her. At last, she had her answer, her quest. And it would be harder by far than she had expected. How unfair; to think she had waited and hoped and worked so hard, only to be stymied by so small a thing. So small a person.

For it *was* a person, standing in her way. Perhaps it would have been easier if it were some other sort of quest, some long journey Sylvia had to undertake to prove she was worthy. Some sacrifice of flesh or hair or blood. Something simple, for Vata's sake.

Something more tractable than a six-year-old who was small for his age and made up for it in sound and fury. He was

a force of nature, Sylvia thought; but then, to her all children were. She didn't understand them, despite having been one so long ago.

This one she would have to learn to understand. She had to get the prize he held, even if the bones were unclear as to what that prize was. Sylvia wasn't bothered by that small detail. The truth would reveal itself to her in time, and until then, all she had to do was believe. Like so much of her power, it would explain itself in its own time.

First, she had to get it. Scowling, she swept up the bones and placed them back into their soft leather pouch, made from the skin of the small animal they had come from. The bones had never led her wrong, nor her matron before her. Sylvia clenched her fist on the pouch. She had to have faith, that was all. She just had to believe.

That was easier to think than to do.

The sun was high when Duncan finally dodged his mother's hands and darted outside the hut, tipping his face up to smile at the cloudless sky. Around him rose the familiar walls of the other houses in the village, their five-sided shadows pointing him in the direction of the playing field. It would be a good day today, he was sure of it. Today, Tim would listen when Duncan told him how to play the evil villain, and Duncan would be very fierce as he played his part of the heroic warrior. He frowned, thinking of the last time they had played, and Tim's unconvincing death act. He had just slumped over, listless, and kept his eyes open, not even writhing or moaning the way Duncan thought he should have. Today, Duncan was determined to make him do it right. Never mind that the other boy was bigger and older. Duncan was the boss of the street, and every child knew it.

Behind him, he heard his mother's voice, fretting and high with anxiety. "Duncan?" she called. Duncan darted away, toward the long grass where he and the others hid

from their parents to play. The farmers kept threatening to cut the grass down to feed to the cattle, but Duncan knew they would never dare. He was too fierce in his denial. His parents would never stand against him saying "No!" enough times, and Duncan was sure the farmers would cave the same way. After all, he would be their leader someday, when he was big, just as his father was the leader now. The pretty lady on the tall pack animal had told him so, and everyone knew that the Wanderers had those among them who could see the future. Puffing up with pride, Duncan imagined himself big—bigger than Tim, his father and everyone. They would all have to listen to him then.

"Boy," said a voice, breaking into Duncan's daydream. He turned, frowning up at the woman addressing him. He felt a tiny shiver of fear run down his spine, but he locked his knees, refusing to let it show. Sylvia the witch was someone all the children of the village feared, for there were tales of her eating children and wearing their skins for clothes. Duncan peered closely at the ragged cloak Sylvia wore, but he couldn't tell beneath the dirt and patches if it was made of children's skin. It didn't look like skin, he tried to convince himself.

Duncan looked up to her face, straightening to get every inch he could of his woefully small height. He was going to be the next leader of the village, and he wasn't afraid of the witch. "What?" he said.

She did something with her face that made her look somehow scarier than before, and Duncan took a step back before he realized she was smiling. He recognized her kind of smile. It was the same that many of the elders gave him when he had said or done something they didn't like. It was a smile that said, "You are a child, and therefore powerless. I am grown, and I have all the power."

Duncan hated that sort of smile. It made him conscious of his shortness, and how thin his arms and legs were compared to the other boys. It made him feel small, helpless, and afraid,

and he hated that feeling. He glowered back in return, and saw Sylvia's smile hesitate, then fade. Feeling stronger, he took two steps toward her to make up for the one he had taken back, though it forced his head to tilt back farther to meet her face. "I said, what?" he repeated, and the lisp wasn't bothering him at all. Sylvia moved her hands together nervously.

"I was wondering if you would talk with me a moment," she said.

Duncan just shook his head, disgusted. This was the witch everyone was so afraid of? This hesitant, shuffling old woman? His lip curled in scorn and he looked down his nose at her.

He drew himself up further, and adopted a tone he had heard his mother take with the young women she disapproved of. "My mother told me not to talk to strangers," he said, the lisp barely concealing his haughtiness. Sylvia blinked down at him, and something changed in her face, too quickly for him to see.

"But I am not a stranger," she said, and her voice had grown stronger, pride infusing her words. "I am Sylvia, herbalist, midwife, healer and witch, and you know who I am!"

Duncan stepped back again, fear overtaking him once more. *This* was the witch that everyone feared. This woman, draped somehow in power he could not see, but that he could feel like ants marching over his skin. He shivered, and felt himself shrink again into a boy of six with hair like straw that would not lie flat no matter how his mother combed it, and two missing teeth that made him lisp when he tried to speak. The earlier strength he had felt had fled. He was no match for this adult, no matter his courage.

He ducked his head, forcing Sylvia to lean down to hear his words. "I know who you are," he admitted. Forcing her down to his level comforted him some. She looked awkward, half crouched in the short shrubs that surrounded the tall grass, and he thought about laughing, but he didn't think it qualified as funny. He wasn't sure. Humor was still a work in progress.

Jonathan A. Murphy is a former Emergency Medical Technician and current – no pun intended – licensed electrician. He has drawn on those two unique aspects of his life experience to craft his first published story, one written in the vein of America’s most unique contribution to the world’s annals of magic and mythology: the comic-book hero with super powers. While set in the 1990s, “Hero Anonymous” echoes the nostalgic Golden Age of comic books, a time when heroes could gain super powers in improbable ways, such as from the bite of a radioactive spider, exposure to gamma radiation, or flying a spaceship through cosmic rays. In this story, Dr. Neil Cadman is one such reluctant hero, falling victim to his own brilliant experiments, a terrible accident, a dose of a happenstance, and a passion to combat his inner demons.

Hero Anonymous

Jonathan A. Murphy

September 13, 1969

“Dearest Lord, we are gathered here to bid farewell to Marilyn Cadman....”

Professor Neil Cadman sat on the small folding chair next to the grave of his beloved wife. His seven-year-old daughter Cheryl sat on his lap. Behind him were the lone hearse and three limousines that had brought him and the other mourners from the church. There was a slight breeze, and the faint aroma of roses. After living in the city for so long, the fresh air was an unfamiliar sensation.

“We know not why you took one so young...”

A surge of grief and regret welled up inside him. He did know why she had died. He was a research scientist. He had found the cause of his wife’s ailment. He just hadn’t found the cure. As the funeral ended, his friends and associates stepped forward to pay their final respects and express their condolences. He didn’t listen to them; he couldn’t. They didn’t understand. They

couldn't understand. It was just he and Cheryl now. He had failed his wife, and he didn't need any more reminders. They walked back to the car. Cheryl was holding his hand tightly, and he could only imagine what went through the mind of a little girl who had just lost her mother.

"Daddy?" her small voice floated quietly up between them.

"Yes, dear?"

"Mommy said you were her hero."

Neil hoisted his daughter into his arms and hugged her close. "That's right," he said. In that moment he felt helpless. He could not predict the future. In spite of all his knowledge, he had been unable to save the life of his wife. Cheryl already had enough to deal with, now being a child with a single parent. She was young and would miss so much.

"Promise you'll be my hero, too."

He fought to control the surge of emotion that tried to overwhelm him. He didn't want her to see him cry. She would not understand for years to come. For the moment he could make her feel a little better.

"Yes princess," he answered, "I promise."

* * *

May 27, 1980

Eleven years later

The office and lab were cluttered, but Neil knew exactly where everything was. And he even knew *what* everything was. For him, everything had a purpose. And right now, research was taking the form of feeding his pet animals.

There were six cages lined against one wall, each containing a lab rat that he had been feeding his potions to. He had created ten so far, naming them CADMAN "A" through CADMAN "K," skipping the "I" so it wouldn't be confused for a numeral "one." He took the vial of CADMAN C and added a

small portion to a piece of bread. He then passed it through the cage, and the rat immediately consumed it. He clicked his stopwatch on and waited.

The rat suddenly shuddered violently for a moment, limbs spasming and whiskers twitching, and then it straightened up on its hind legs, and looked at him.

Neil glanced at the stopwatch. "Not bad, little fellow," he said, "but what can you do with it?" He placed a piece of cheese on the other side of a set of steel bars.

The rat sniffed around it for a moment then pushed his way into the barricade. The bars began to bend. After three minutes, the rat had obtained his prize.

"Getting better all the time," Neil said. He opened the cage door, removed the barrier, and rewarded the rat with another morsel.

"That was a very impressive demonstration, Dr. Cadman."

The voice was definitely female, most probably German or Austrian. He always had welcomed visitors to his lab, but had not known any to ever sneak up on him like this. Not even his daughter Cheryl.

He turned to greet the newcomer. She was plainly dressed in an inexpensive pantsuit, her light brown hair pulled from her dark brown eyes and put up in a bun. "Yes, it is a great experiment, Ms. —?"

The woman smiled. "My name is Sophia Rosenthal. I am a molecular biologist from the University of Munich. I read your publication in the New England Journal of Medicine, and wanted to meet you."

Neil smiled back. This Sophia was very engaging, and not unattractive. He had not been part of many social circles since his wife had died, and he found himself in the awkward position of not knowing exactly what to say. He resorted to holding his hand out towards her and saying, "Well, here I am."

Sophia took his hand gently, holding hers with the knuckles up, almost as if she expected him to kiss it. He looked at her

hand blankly, and a thought of his wife rolled to the forefront of his mind. He realized how long it had been since he had felt the soft touch of a woman.

Saving him from his awkwardness, she let go and walked over to one of the cages. The rat was running on a wheel. The attached tachometer showed almost seven hundred revolutions per minute.

"This is most impressive," Sophia said. "If I may ask, what is the aim of your research?"

Neil smiled. It was not often that he got to show off his work. "I've developed several chemical agents that enhance muscle and nerve cells. It makes them stronger, faster, and more receptive. There is the potential for effective treatment to several diseases that affect these systems, including possible cures for Alzheimer's, epilepsy, cystic fibrosis, and muscular dystrophy."

Sophia didn't say anything else, but looked through the rest of the cages and at the results of his other potions. Neil felt like a giddy schoolboy again. He wanted to tell her something, anything, but kept finding the words stuck in his throat.

Finally, she turned to face him again with that intoxicating smile. "I would like to offer you an opportunity to carry out practical testing on subjects afflicted with these ailments you are researching—see how they respond in clinical trials."

Neil's spirits fell slightly. "But I don't have FDA approval to test these on humans. They want more information."

Sophia stepped closer to him. "And with my help, they shall have it," she said, "I know... people... who are willing to offer themselves in the name of research, if it will some day help others like them."

Neil's discomfort was becoming palpable. He could feel the heat rising beneath his collar as he choked out the next sentence. "I don't know..."

The door to the outer office opened. "Dad? Are you here?" Cheryl's voice called out.

Magic comes in many forms, and there doesn't have to be a speculative element for it to be there. In Jane Fried's first published story, you'll find magic in a beautiful relationship that changes the lives of two people who find each other through fate or destiny or perhaps just luck. There are no wizard's spells, no marvelous technology, and no supernatural wonders here. But in "Through the Hourglass," set in a lonely New York City nursing home in the 1980s, Fried leads us into a metaphorical magic as powerful as any wrought by a fantasy spell-caster.

Through the Hourglass

Jane Fried

"These damn legs might as well be two fat salamis."

Dot was transferring from her bed to her wheelchair with no help from Gloria, her favorite aide at the nursing home.

"Those salamis get you from bed to chair to toilet," Gloria said. "Praise the Lord for that, Dot."

"Oh, I praise the Lord, all right." Dot let herself drop the last few inches into the wheelchair. "You should have heard me praise the Lord last night in bed when it took me a half hour to turn over onto my stomach."

Gloria cradled Dot's arm a while before she put the blood pressure cuff on. "Pressure's good, Dot. You been laying off those oyster crackers Irving gives you?"

"Irving hardly remembers to get the spoon to his mouth these days, much less to give me those crackers."

Dot followed this with a one-beat laugh, coming from somewhere between anger and wistfulness. "Jesus, I miss Irving's jokes. He could do a half-hour of Henny Youngman

without taking a breath.”

“Things change, people change. Life moves along.”

“Well, I’m gonna move along to our three-star dining room,” Dot said, releasing the breaks on her wheelchair, “and have myself some nice, cold scrambled eggs, and that troubled water they call coffee.”

Dot wheeled herself over to the other bed in the room where a thin woman with long, white hair lay, eyes open and blank looking like a marble statue laid on its back before being crated for a trip to a distant museum. Dot took her hand. “Margaret, I’m going to breakfast. Gloria’s here. Your breakfast will be coming soon. I’ll see you in a while.” Knowing there would be no answer, Dot squeezed the still hand before letting go and wheeling herself toward the door.

“See you later, Gloria,” she called back.

“Enjoy the cuisine, Dot.”

“Mercy, madame, and I do mean ‘mercy.’”

Dot wheeled her chair into the hallway, saying good morning to those who’d notice and even to some who wouldn’t. At the elevator, she pressed the button and relaxed for the five- to ten-minute wait. She thought of her husband Jeff, who had broken his leg trying to shingle the garage roof, sliding and falling into the bed of his pickup. One night, two weeks after the accident, Dot was about used up taking care of him and their three kids, pleased that she’d managed to make a nice dinner for them, when he suggested that the meatloaf would be even better with a tad more onion. She thanked him warmly as she felt her backbone turn into a steel rod. When Jeff was finishing his dinner, the baby in the swing and the other two off playing, Dot took his crutches, put them in the bedroom, came back and belted cowboy songs for almost an hour while she cleaned up, washed the dishes, swept the floor, put the baby down, and gave the boys a bath. Finished with that, she picked up her guitar, sat right next to Jeff and sang some more.

Jeff hated cowboy songs, but he loved Dot. Although he

swore at her a couple of times, Dot felt the pleasure he took in her retribution. Her steel spine melted. They made it to the bedroom and, for the rest of their life together, the sight of a man with a cast on his leg tickled their mouths into half-smiles of remembered pleasure.

The elevator made a *bing* sound, and Dot started her day. Down on the first floor, walkers, wheelchairs, and a handful of device-free people were slowly filing through the lobby into the dining room. Dot took a few minutes to go to the large foyer in the front of the building to check the weather. It had rained the previous two days, but this morning, light burst through the door, a joyous assault on her sun-starved eyes.

Looking out onto the street, Dot saw a tall, skinny young man with a large, pointed nose and wiry blond hair that stuck up all over his head. Lit by the sun, his hair looked like the glowing circle around a candle burning in the dark. He opened the front door, smiled at Dot and nodded as he said hello.

"Hello," Dot smiled. Ichabod Crane, she thought.

"Nice to have the sun back," Ichabod said.

"Yes, it sure feels good." Who could he possibly be visiting?

"Well, enjoy," Ichabod said before he headed into the darker lobby.

"Oh, I'm doing that." Dot tried to imagine what it would be like to have a grandson who looked like Ichabod.

After breakfast with Irving and Bess, her fast-fading table-mates, Dot went back up to Margaret and read her the *Daily News* for a while. Margaret was a New York City Socialist and Dot was an upstate Republican who thought people didn't work hard enough these days. She and Margaret had waged fervent political battles for three years, coming close to pulling hair the day Reagan beat Carter in 1980. It was the best thing going at the nursing home for both of them. When Margaret stopped talking, the director arranged to give Dot a verbal

roommate, but Dot didn't want to lose Margaret—that dear, loopy woman who dreamed of us all joining hands in good work and sharing Earth's bounty

When *Daily News* time ended, Dot went back downstairs to the foyer for her morning sit. The building's façade had been renovated last year, and two new glass double doors let in whatever outside light was to be had. Dot took her morning sun or cloud or rain there, but the sun was what she craved. Like an old dog, she searched for a spot of warm yellow light to settle into. At her house upstate in Pawling, Dot had managed a bit of time outside every day. Even when snow had covered the ground, she'd go out with a blanket and, if it was above thirty-five degrees, she would lie out in the sun in shirt-sleeves. Now, in New York City, she could look out onto a little concrete park where parents and nannies brought their toddlers. She got to know the kids' faces, gave them names, and tried to picture the apartments where they lived, the families they belonged to.

Sometimes she saw a nursing-home resident out there in a wheelchair. She didn't want to be one of them. She couldn't bring herself to sit on the periphery of the park, even though she'd get to hear the children's voices, hear how their mothers or sitters talked to them. Sometimes she'd go for a roll on the sidewalk as if she had a destination, but she'd never cross over to the little park in the square. And she couldn't go very far on her roll. Her arms tired so fast, she worried she might get stranded and have to depend on kind strangers to get her back home—God forbid.

Dot had always taken care of herself and, from her earliest memories, had taken care of two younger brothers and a baby sister. Her father had been a drunk. When her raging mother would go looking for him, Dot, maybe five or six years old, was in charge. One time, the baby screamed so hard for so long, Dot climbed over the crib rail and lay down holding little

Edward Knight has been writing speculative fiction for years, and has had his hand in various bouts of editing (including his keen editorial eye looking over the stories in this anthology, in fact). As the former owner of Journey Books, he published small-press novels as well as the magazine *Amazing Journeys*. That project led to the acclaimed anthologies *Unparalleled Journeys* and *Unparalleled Journeys II*. For this anthology, “Captain” gives us divine magic, examining how faith in a higher power can bring grand magic indeed. And aside from the Biblical shades (and a scene reminiscent of the story of Lot), Knight shows us yet another facet of magic – one where faith need not be reserved only for deities, but perhaps for extraordinary people who have earned it.

Captain

Edward Knight

The water had a red cast, as red as the blood of yesterday's battle. The Captain looked across the Channel, the salty air filling his lungs. He was solemn, and more tired than even his men realized. The weight of his armor made him slump over and lean on his shield as he peered into the distance, watching, hoping. The mist enshrouding the Channel was thick and glowed silver in the light of early morning. He closed his eyes and remembered the corpses spread across the field – corpses already stiff, their dull eyes staring into a sun they would never again see. He took comfort in that. One of his greatest fears was that the soul might somehow remain trapped in the body after death. But he knew when he saw the corpses that the bodies were only lifeless husks, not unlike the rotting hull of a walnut, and he knew that somehow the soul had escaped them.

He sweated in the summer heat. A warm breeze drifted out of the mountains behind him, dissipating the heavy fog. For

just a moment, he could see it: the distant shores of home.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Captain?"

For over four years, he had answered to the name "Captain." Now, it seemed he had never known another name. He looked at his own reflection in his shield. His face was thinner than it had been when he had come to this side of the Channel four years ago. His dark hair needed cutting. Still young, his haggard face gave the impression that he was a much older man.

"Too long, Aagard," the Captain said. His bronze sword clanked against his silver-plated greaves as he turned to find one of his men looking toward the vaporous shore. He knew the longing in the man's stare.

"Will they ever let us cross?" Aagard asked as he leaned on his rectangular shield. He was a stump of a man, balding with an oily complexion, his dented breastplate and notched sword indicative of four years of battle. The Captain knew Aagard to be as tough a man as any, but he thought a tear formed in the man's eye as the breeze stopped and the mist closed to block the view.

"I don't know," the Captain said. "It's been a year this week since any of the men showed a sign of the sickness. I don't know why the King still waits. We should have defeated the Morth and marched home with three thousand men."

"We'd be there now if the King's Priestess wasn't a fool," Aagard said. "Still, she did even the odds."

"We've had that argument too many times," the Captain said. "They may have outnumbered us, but the blight nearly wiped us out as well as them."

"And just three hundred men left," Aagard said softly, almost to himself.

"And it spread to every village on this side of the Channel," the Captain continued. "I have no love for the Morth, but innocent men, women, and children—tens of thousands of them—died." He turned his back on Aagard to look out over the clear-

ing Channel, shaking his head. "If those are even odds, I don't want them."

They climbed the bank to join the rest of the army, which was a mere shadow of the glorious force it once had been. They were a ragged lot: tunics filthy, armor tarnished, weapons worn. Once a cavalry unit, they were afoot now, the horses used as food years ago.

One person stood out from the rest. The woman appeared as a specter among the men, light hair flying in the warm breeze, her tattered, dirty, white gown billowing slightly. The Captain frowned as he went to her. He wondered at the courage it took to hold her head high while standing among the men she had tainted—men who might never go home again because of her. Still, she was one of them, one of the exiled.

"Still no fire?" she asked.

"No fire," he said. "No signal to bring the King's men home."

The Priestess lowered her eyes for only a moment. "Perhaps it's time to send another bird. Maybe my message was intercepted."

"By what?" Aagard said. "A fish? Nothing touched that bird or the message it carried. The King still ignores us. We'll never go home. He should have kept his Priestess in his bed chambers and let us—"

"You'd be dead if it wasn't for me," she said.

"Quiet," the Captain said. "That argument has grown stale and I don't want to hear it again."

"You know you have no authority over me," the Priestess said. "I answer only to God, the King, or the King's generals."

"Thanks to you, the generals are all dead," the Captain said. "The King sits on his throne across the Channel. And your god deserted us four years ago—if he ever existed at all. That leaves me, a lowly captain, in command. Do you dispute that?"

Fury flamed in her eyes, but she stood rigid and shook her

head.

Aagard called out, "Captain—"

"Shut up, Aagard," the Captain said.

"Captain, there are men in the woods—up there."

The Captain followed Aagard's outstretched finger. Scores of men were breaking the tree line high above them.

"Phalanx!" the Captain bellowed.

In a precise motion smoothed by years of practice, the men formed a phalanx, ten rows deep and thirty wide. With their shields turned toward the woods, they looked like a multi-legged armored beast. Enemy arrows streaked through the morning sky in a high arc. One found its mark, a soldier's neck. The rest deflected off the mass of shields.

"Forward!" the Captain yelled, and the phalanx moved toward the woods with slow determination. The attackers became spread out as they came crashing down the hill in a mad rush. The enemy was winded by the time they threw themselves into the mass of shields, but the phalanx was unstoppable. The men in back put their shields into the backs of the men in front of them, pushing the foremost into the attackers. The fighting was fierce; blood ran freely in the front lines. Metal rang upon metal as swords and shields came together with mighty crashes.

The Captain was on the front right corner. Since all the men were trained to carry shields on their left arms, this was the most vulnerable position, his right side being less protected. Aagard was to his left. The two worked in tandem to lay waste to the attackers, swords flashing from between shields.

Then a bank of dark clouds rolled in seemingly from nowhere, and a cold wind blew down the mountains and across the battlefield. Rumbling sounded overhead, echoing off the hillside, and blue fire crackled overhead. The Captain and his men had seen this before and knew it well.

Then the first bolt of lightning struck. A streak of blue fire turned two of the attackers to ash where they stood. A second

David M. Fitzpatrick has explored writing from many facets. From newspaper writer to short-fiction author, from editor to creative-writing teacher, he has experienced writing in a way few others can claim. Even after working with “Indy” on several projects and having published his short works in multiple titles, I am still amazed at his talent. “Execution Day” is an exceptional example of that talent. In this story, he takes us on a journey through the twists and turns of the supernatural. He examines the horrific, the arcane beast that is dark magic. “Execution Day” delves into a type of magic that is both physical and psychological. It’s a surreal story that makes the reader want to check under the bed... just to be sure.

– Edward Knight

Execution Day

David M. Fitzpatrick

*"But if used for retribution, magic is vengeance incarnate."
—Terry Goodkind, Blood of the Fold*

"Okay, here it is: Thurston is a *witch*."

Billy Goodman's face froze at his friend's revelation. He was holding in smoke from the joint, and when he started chuckling, it was hell to keep holding. Blue-gray smoke puffed out with each hack, swirling about Jerry Wright like a miasmic cloud.

"Male witches are warlocks, buddy," Billy said, passing the joint. "And dude, Rufus Thurston is a lotta things, including the worst math teacher ever, but he ain't no warlock." They stood beneath the overhang of a service door at the far side of Evervale High's fifth wing, far from the student travel areas. They were at the edge of the thick Maine forest, where curious eyes wouldn't see them near the shadowy pines.

"Yes, he is," Jerry said, and he really sounded like he meant

it. "And he's not just a math teacher. Thirty-five years ago, he taught English here around the time Evervale expanded its English curriculum. We're about the only school where you can find courses like Creative Writing, Arthurian Legend, and Fantasy and Science Fiction."

"You're going to tell me he taught Beginning Black Magic and Spellcasting 101, aren't you?" Billy said with a lopsided grin.

"Damn close," Jerry said, sucking in a deep, nervous breath.

Billy sighed. "Okay, let's hear it."

Jerry's face lit up with the small victory. "Okay, so he gave me detention yesterday, and had me cleaning windows in his classroom. When I finished, he said I could go, and he packed up his briefcase and took off. I was getting my gym bag and happened to notice those books on top of that big bookcase in the corner—the ones covered with so much dust you couldn't even read the bindings. I'd always wondered about them, and I finally had the chance to check them out."

He looked around nervously, then said, "There were books on black magic. Spellbooks for witches... druidic rituals... voodoo. And plenty of weird New Age stuff. There were books on divination, dream study, astral travel. You name it, it was there.

"So I was standing on a desk going through them when he came back for something. I made up some excuse that I was dusting them, but I wasn't very convincing. He said, 'Are you interested in those, Mr. Wright?' So I told him the books were cool, and he actually smiled, kind of sideways and dark-eyed, and he said—get this—'I used to teach that to students, many years ago. Come to me privately if you ever have questions.'"

"No shit," Billy said. "You're serious?"

"Completely. Check them out yourself. But don't piss him off. Not over this."

Billy managed a laugh. "Jerry, buddy, I've made an aca-

demic career out of pissing that man off. I'm not worried."

From the moment he walked into Algebra II, Billy's eyes jumped to the bookshelf like magnets to steel. The stack of books was there, tantalizing him. He supposed he'd seen them before, but like trees in the forest, he'd never noticed them.

The bell rang and the students found their seats. The bell's echo hadn't quite faded when Thurston strode in, stiff as if his skin were starched, briefcase in hand. He was dressed in a conservative gray suit, ivory shirt, and charcoal tie that seemed a bit too tight. He was bald save for a wreath of gray-brown hair circling his head, and his glasses were square and plain. He set his briefcase on his desk, snapped it open, and began riffling through papers within.

Billy watched Thurston, who was bent over with his face in his briefcase, and wondered fleetingly what kept the man's glasses from falling off his face in that position, and suddenly a thought intruded: Maybe it's a simple spell, a minor bit of magic to keep a little thing under control.

He shook himself out of it, grinning. Jerry had him going, all right. But even as Thurston cleared his throat and began passing out the day's quiz, Billy couldn't stop thinking about it.

The quiz took twenty minutes; the rest of the class seemed to last eons. Thurston lectured, droning on in that monotonous, slightly nasal tone which drove Billy completely nuts. He wasn't the only one. It was easy to tell who cared and who didn't, and most of the class didn't. Thurston never seemed to notice when students didn't give a damn, but he sure noticed when somebody was whispering, or when a rubber band twanged across the sea of desks, or when someone flipped him off behind his back.

Those things ate at Billy. The guy had a knack for seeing things he shouldn't be able to see, hearing things students

were sure he couldn't hear. Not only did he always manage to hear the whisperers, but he was able to whirl around and point them out without a second guess. When a rubber band flew, he either heard the thing snap and from where, or he about-faced just as it was leaving the perp's fingers. The ability the man had for always knowing what was going on was almost like—

Magic?

Billy was surprised the word had jumped into his mind. He was thinking more along the lines of "incredible luck." He shook his head, trying to banish the thought.

As the class and Thurston's lecture dragged on, the books atop the bookcase were there, almost calling to Billy. His gaze kept drifting from whatever he was looking at—his doodles of goofy cartoon characters and marijuana leaves, Sludge Branson's brown sneakers thumping to a tune known only to Sludge, Susan Carmichael's panty line clearing visible through her sheer skirt—to the books. He swore he could feel energy emanating from them. What if Thurston really had mastered such magic powers?

But that was silly. Thurston was nothing more than an asshole math teacher at Evervale High School. That was all.

When the bell sounded like a victory alarm, Billy bolted for the door. The whole class did the same, but monotonous Thurston suddenly reared his true, ugly head.

"Be seated!" he hollered. Everyone hit the brakes, including Billy, who was at the door. Back-to, he waited, impatient. He just wanted to be free of Thurston and get to baseball practice.

Somebody in the room complained about wanting to leave. "That's too bad," Thurston barked, and Billy sighed and leaned against the door frame. "This is my classroom. And if I say you'll stay here after the bell rings, then stay you shall!"

Thurston's eyes were wide behind thick glasses, his nostrils flaring, his bald pate glistening with sweat. It was time for Billy to up the ante with the angry man. He turned