

Under the Stairs



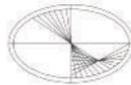
an international collection of flash fiction
edited by

Lisa D. Keele

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Dedication

*“Something will come of this...” and so it has.
For Daddies and Daughter, I love you.*

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Preface

This is an outstanding collection of Flash Fiction: short stories which, in this case, are two-thousand words or under. It takes talent and skill to craft stories of this kind. Putting together this collection fulfills a life-long dream, and these authors are seeing their dreams come to light as well. I constantly had my nose in a book when I was a child and love books like this one—collections full of varying types of stories that capture my imagination and bring me into the scenes with the characters. I hope you enjoy the hard work of these authors. I thank them for all of their effort. I appreciate their talent and look forward to their success.

There are people from my past that I am inspired by every day—Risa, thank you for raising the most beautiful girl in the world. Trey, thank you for teaching me to fight; I wouldn't be here now if you didn't make me plant my feet and take a punch. Very special thanks to my husband for his patience, understanding, and love. To all the people involved in helping me and in the production of this book—I appreciate you more than words can describe. There is one very special person I would like to thank most of all, Kenneth J. Tupper. I am so fortunate to know him; he is a noble man of honor, a mentor, and all around

beautiful person. Thank you, Ken, for making this all possible.

—*Lisa D. Keele*

Under the Stairs

by M. Jarboe

Under the stairs where we were not allowed to go—that’s where the noise came from. “What is it?” Robert said. “It sounds like something scratching.” We stood in front of the forbidden door, barely moving. Robert was nearly four inches shorter than me, even though he was older. He’d be 12 in a couple of weeks.

“Mother always said not to get into there,” I said, trying not to let my voice quiver. I knew that if it did and this noise turned out to be nothing I’d never hear the end of it from my brother.

“Don’t even open it,” Robert recalled aloud, raising the pitch of his voice to half-emulate mother’s tone.

Whatever was behind that door had been forbidden since I was three, since our father had died. Until now, I had not had a reason to question mother's authority on the subject. Now the scratching seemed to grow louder and more menacing, almost calling us toward it. As far as I knew, though, there was nothing in there that would interest me.

Of course, that didn't stop my mind from wandering to the door from time to time. My imagination would sometimes run wild—especially growing up in this old house—telling me that there was a secret room, a basement, a tunnel, or a portal to another world in there. I convinced myself that there must be a hidden laboratory down there where my dad conducted all sorts of experiments, or that he had gone through that door which opened up on some foreign planet but couldn't find his way back.

Needless to say, I knew better now. Whatever was behind that door had some explanation which didn't involve portals to another world. It was something real and concrete. It had to be and yet, even as the thought went through my mind, my heart skipped a beat as the scratching continued. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end at just the thought there might be some supernatural force behind that door.

“Maybe there really is a monster in there?” I regretted the words as soon as they left my mouth. I’d never live it down if Robert told the kids at school I was still scared of monsters. But Robert just laughed a sort of hollow, uncertain laugh. I could tell he was just as afraid as I was.

I took an uncertain step closer to the door. “Wait!” The word sounded as if it had caught halfway up Robert’s throat and he had to force the end of it out with the rest of the air in his lungs. He cleared his throat and set his jaw. “I should do it. I’m the oldest and besides you’re—”

“Don’t you dare say it,” I cut him off, but I took a step back to clear the path between him and the doorknob. Robert stared forward, gathering his determination. He looked like he did the day that he stood up for me at the bus stop when I was in first grade. Back then I was often the butt of jokes, and as I was walking home one night Marcus told me that he would ‘pound me’ the next morning. I reached the house with tears in my eyes, and my big brother was standing there. I thought he would tease me, but instead he asked why I was crying. As soon as I told him that determined look had taken shape on his face, and it didn’t go away until the next morning when Marcus lay on the ground, nose bleeding and tears welling up in his eyes.

Since that day Robert and I shared a shaky alliance, as most siblings do, but it was then that I realized my big brother would do anything to protect me. That's what he was doing now by putting himself between me and the door. He walked forward, each footstep seeming to come with great effort. The door looked normal enough as Robert reached it—just like any other door in our house—but the two of us knew that behind that door could be any number of horrible things.

As Robert's hand touched the doorknob I heard him take a deep breath at the same time as I did. I thought back to all the terrible things that could have been behind that door, but none of them could have prepared me for the truth which was revealed when my brother opened it.

The scratching sound was no more. Whether it had stopped or I had merely stopped listening as my eyes took in the contents of the closet, I could not tell. Under the stairs, behind that off-limits door, my brother and I found our father. Not his body, as Robert once theorized when we were younger, but all of the things that he left behind. His clothes, all the photos of him that mother had packed away, his old bowling ball—it was all there.

We never found out what the scratching was. Maybe it was just a mouse and we had set it free when we opened the closet. Or maybe it was dad's ghost, wanting

us to find all his old stuff. Either way, after that day, we had our father. Not the way most kids did, but he was there with us from then on.

A Night Off

by Dave Rudden

Once a year I shut my doors. One of my punters was an American who worked in some fancy marketing company. He used to laugh drunkenly when he heard about my rule of closing, citing in a voice thick with alcohol and buzzwords all the money that could be made by opening on that particular day—the costume parties, the promotions, demographics and trends, rolling off figures from the pockets of his expensive suit. I would always shrug and say that I made enough, that it was a tradition, and then I'd shuffle over to empty an ashtray or wipe a surface, the bartender's universal signal that the conversation was over.

It'd come around to that particular day and my usual opening time would come and go quietly, as if unwilling

to disturb the silence on that cold morning. I'd spend my morning sitting in the deserted bar, without my sprinkling of hardened regulars looking to kill a morning beneath betting slips and Guinness. I'd clean during those gained hours, tracing the familiar lines of my bar with a cloth, carefully dusting paintings and ornaments. I'd eat my lunch in the back office over receipts and invoices, rendering a year of nights and drinks and laughter into a couple of neat little columns on snow-white paper. Outside, the day would drag on, the wind and dark rising beyond the shutters.

I keep a staff of about five, but they know that this night is always a night off. Sometimes I'd press a fifty into their hand so I could be sure they'd go out and enjoy their night, not grumble about the lost pay. I had a girl here once that the punters loved, quick on her feet and mad about the horses, always ready with a joke in her broad Glasgow accent. She was a great girl, but she got too curious about my tradition and I had to let her go. Didn't like doing it, but it was better than the constant questions and what could have gone wrong had she dropped around to quench her curiosity.

It would be around seven that they would come.

I never look too closely, keeping myself busy with tap-checks or the careful stacking of glasses, but since the

doors were bolted and shuttered it's a brave man's guess where they come from. I would sometimes look up, just for a moment, and see a flicker of light around a keyhole or the shadow of movement at a painting, but the first thing you learn in this trade is to keep to yourself, to respond but not query, to nod and to smile, hearing orders not voices, drinks and not faces. They were good punters; they kept to themselves, never left a mess, and so I didn't complain.

The American would have been pleased to know that their money was good, if a little cold.

They drink wine, whiskey, brandy and scotch. Some drink beer, but only the rough, flavourful European stuff, not the tasteless American brands. Glasses would be left up on the bar, so I never had to weave between the flickering, monochrome shapes to collect, even though a little part of me wanted to. Just curiosity, no more than my Glasgow girl, but a part of me was smart enough to know when I was being done a favour. I'd serve my time, keeping an eye on the old Famous Grouse-branded clock on the wall above the mantelpiece, counting the minutes until closing.

When the night was ending I'd flick the lights, trying not to notice how some of the punters held their own glow, shimmering like moonlight on water or a firefly somehow trapped in the folds of a diamond. When a bartender dims

the lights, it's an unspoken signal, that subtle hint that this night, like any night, was ending. We call it the 'half-hour of grace'. It would pass without incident, except for those rare nights where I'd see one of the drinkers rise from the corner of my eye and lift a glass in something that wasn't quite a hand. Out of respect I would turn to the till, and my fingers would shake as I counted the notes into even, crinkled piles while the punters' song rose around me.

When I would pull together the courage to turn around, they would always be gone.

I avoid thinking about them much over the year. I try and lose myself in the Christmas rush, in New Year's and Valentine's and Paddy's Day and all those other nights where the living take their turn to toast the dead. It works, for the most part. It's a night like any other night, just something I've always kept to myself. A duty I've been doing for years. There are times though, when their light shimmers across the stacked bottles on my shelf, times when I think about calling that girl from Glasgow and letting her know that there's still a job here, and a single night when I keep the shutters down and the kegs full. Not for a couple of years yet, though.

I'm not ready to move to the other side of the bar.

Hot Stuff

by Stephanie Jordan

Do you know the Muffin Man?"

The bar was crowded. I knew my whispered words would not be overheard. Still, the wolf-man at my side stiffened and looked around. His ear twitched.

"Which muffin man?" he asked, his gravelly voice barely audible above the drunken laughter and heated arguments around us. I gave him a pointed look.

"You know which one."

He sighed and downed the rest of his drink.

"Come with me."

We stood in the alley behind the pub. It was dark — I could barely see Big Bad's form leaning against the dirty brick wall. The only indication he was still there was the flashing of his golden eyes.

He took a pack of cigarettes out of his leather jacket pocket and lit up, providing a little illumination, if only for a few seconds. After a few puffs, he decided to speak.

"Drury Lane."

"What was that?"

"He lives on Drury Lane. The Muffin Man."

I kicked away a stray piece of garbage.

"So I heard."

"What you need him for?"

I swallowed.

"Blueberry."

His eyes widened as he regarded me with shock. The cigarette nearly fell out of his mouth. He struggled to find the words to express his astonishment.

"Blueberry," he repeated lamely. He shook his head. "Well, he doesn't make blueberry much anymore. Keeps it on the D.L. They've been cracking down hard on it, you know?"

"Oh, I know," I said, probably more darkly than I'd intended. Big Bad looked at me strangely, as if seeing me for the first time, and stuffed his paws in his pockets. I cleared my throat.

"I know. I used to get my fix from the Muffin Man before the big raid on Dorset. I haven't been able to find him since."

“Ah.” He let out a grunt of sympathy. “Well, he’s relocated to number 14 Drury. That’s pretty much all I can do for you.”

I nodded.

“Thanks.” I turned to leave, but was stopped by his voice.

“Hey, wait a sec, will you?” He whipped out a business card from his jacket and handed it to me. “In case you need to contact me again.”

I nodded acceptance and slipped the card into my own pocket. He went back into the bar. I turned to leave. Once I’d made it out onto the cobble-stoned street, I looked at it beneath the flickering light of a street-lamp.

Big Bad Wolf
Demolitions Expert
Specialist in many fields and forests

The house was nearly the same as the last one. Three stories. Brick façade. Tall and skinny, with little room on either side. I squeezed through, making my way toward the back. The back yard was concrete, and a dog lay chained to a rickety doghouse. A small sparrow sat perched atop the roof of the mutt’s shack. They glared at me as I walked up to the back door.

I used the old code. Four knocks, pause, four knocks.

The door opened as far as it could while being chained shut, a familiar eye peeking out through the crack. The door closed and the chain was undone. The Muffin Man opened the door, warm light and heavenly smells spilling out and engulfing me.

“Hello,” he said, a slow smile spreading across his face. “So you’ve found me again.”

“So it seems.”

He opened the door further, allowing space for me to step inside.

“Do come in,” he said. “I’ve just taken a batch out of the oven.”

“Blueberry?” I asked almost desperately. His smile widened.

“Just as you like it.”

The Trolley Thief

by Rachel Worsley

The trolley thief! The trolley thief has struck again!"

Panic spread through the supermarket. One moment a trolley was left unattended as a woman bent over to grab a watermelon. The next moment her trolley, along with all her shopping, was gone.

"My vegetables, my fruit!" she wailed as shop assistants rushed to her. "All gone!"

"This is a disgrace!" said an old man behind her. "How can we shop in security knowing that our trolleys will be pinched under our noses?"

One of the shop assistants scratched her head furiously, wishing she was out there eating chicken curry instead of

dealing with old men. "I'm sorry, sir. It's not my department. If you're scared about using trolleys, why not use one of our ever handy baskets instead?"

"Baskets? Baskets? Do I look like I do weight training, mademoiselle, with all the shopping I do?"

Behind a pillar, a seventeen year old boy started chuckling. With tousled blond hair and blue eyes, he looked just like any teenager out there gaming on PS3s at the game store across from the supermarket. He fingered an Australian two dollar coin in his pocket, eyeing the whole scene with an amused smile.

Too easy, he thought. It was amazing how people were so inattentive nowadays. At least their reactions were worth the stealing. He thought of his father, the eternal practical joker, and he smiled bitterly. The light euphoria that accompanied every successful theft was starting to fade. He had to see his younger brother soon.

Two minutes after he left, the trolley was found with the shopping intact. As the woman screamed and thanked the detectives, one of them put out a hand and tapped the coin slot on top of the trolley.

"Madam, you owe us two dollars to get your trolley out of the basement parking trolley bay."

Twenty dollars. Ten trolleys. Ten opportunities to get caught, but finally he had enough.

He counted the two dollar coins again, letting the gold coins slap into his palm. *Clink, clink, clink.* Just like his brother's xylophone. His heart twisted at the thought and he dropped the coins into his wallet. Time to go.

At Toys R Us, he walked past rows of shiny toys to the very end, where an assortment of teddy bears stood smiling at him. Big ones, little ones, furry ones, polyester ones. He chose one of the biggest, furriest ones in the corner, holding it up to the light. Twenty dollars exactly. Its smile was as wide as an upside down rainbow and its eyes were chocolate pools of warmth. Perfect.

Bringing it to the cashier, his heart started to pound with dread. Payment was going to be problematic with those two dollar coins. It hadn't taken that long for people to realise it was the two dollar coins in the coin slot he was after, not their shopping. Now he was crossing his fingers hoping that the cashier hadn't caught wind of his new nickname.

Trolley thief! Trolley thief!

"Good afternoon, sir. How are you?" The cashier smiled at the size of the bear and placed its barcode against the sensor. The beep went off, drowning his mumbled reply.

"That will be twenty dollars exactly."

Clink, clink, clink.

The cashier blinked at ten gold coins sitting in a neat pile before her. For a while, it seemed like she wasn't going to move. The dread returned with crippling force, turning his face ashen grey. *Please don't say anything now, please.*

Then she laughed, scooping the coins into her hand and placing them within the cash register, "I've never seen anyone pay for a bear with two dollar coins! Well, well, well, there's always got to be a first, hey?"

"Yup." He wanted to shout with glee, but managed to smile instead. "I was going to change it to a twenty dollar note, but I'm running late." He took the bear from her, holding it tight to his chest. Safe. It was safe.

"Who're you giving it to?"

"My younger brother." His voice wavered.

The cashier's smile faded. "I hope the teddy bear will cheer him up."

"I hope so too."

Then he was out, back into the sun that warmed his back briefly, before he turned the corner towards the hospital. Its giant white structure stood like a castle against the skyline, blocking out the suburbs that lay behind. He hurried into the main entrance, jabbing the buttons on the lift. The door opened onto the fifth floor children's ward. With heavier steps, he made his way to the second room on his right.

Darkness engulfed him. The teenager flipped on light switches, flooding the room with artificial light. He winced at its brightness. It would have to do. In the corner, his brother was starting to wake up, eyes adjusting to his surroundings.

“Theo?”

“It’s me.” Theo walked over to him. “I’ve got a gift for you.”

Something warm and bright, just like the sun, blossomed within him as his brother held the teddy bear and hugged it tight. Just seeing him smiling again was worth all those trolleys, all those close shaves. Something prickled at the edge of his vision and he lifted a hand to catch the tear.

“My teddy! My teddy bear! Can I name it after you, Theo?”

His voice choked up. “Of course, Ben, I don’t mind.”

Ben was dying. Why would he mind? If anything could be saved now, it was his happiness. To die happy would be blissful, more so than to live in dread of the end. He thought of the eight years they had shared together, of all the good moments they had as brothers. Water fights, brownies, toys. It didn’t matter; it was all about to end.

After all, thought the trolley thief, love was what never ended.

Catch

by Verena Sandford

Paco passed the small rubber ball from his left hand to his right and then wristed the object toward the opposing wall. The ball bounced on the floor and against the wall before Paco caught it with his left hand again. The monotonous sound of the bouncing ball was soothing and the routine—throw, bounce, catch—put Paco into a kind of trance that soon made him lose count. When he was throwing the ball, nothing else mattered.

The raw, wooden floor and the walls of the tree house vibrated with every bounce. Paco sat with his back to the only window, and the setting sun gave the room a faint red glow which made it look more comforting than it was.

The tree house was Paco's refuge. It was his domain, and neither his mother nor his younger brothers and sisters ever set foot in it. His father used to but, like Paco,

Papá didn't mind the dirty floor, littered with comic books and empty chocolate wrappers. His father hadn't visited him here for a long time, so Paco was left to bounce the ball on his own.

The illness had come slowly. First, it was just the tiredness. His father was out of breath when he came home from the fields, and his mother scolded him in her quiet, unobtrusive way for working too hard. Then the coughs started, but his father couldn't take a day off from the work on the farm to see a doctor. Then it was too late.

Paco bounced the ball, following its way across the room, onto the wall and back into his hand, and thought of nothing else.

His father was a tough man, a third-generation farmer who knew nothing but hard work. He didn't surrender without a fight, but the illness had taken its toll; for weeks now he had been unable to leave his bed.

Unable to cope with his mother's tears and feeling like the house was choking him, Paco had taken to spending more and more time in his sanctuary. Here, he could be himself. He could bounce the ball and imagine the times he played catch with his father. Here, he could cry without anyone seeing him. He could scream his anger and pain at the world without having to apologise for waking his father. For now, he just bounced the ball.

“Francisco.”

The voice was so soft that he could hardly hear it over the soft thuds. He caught the ball and held onto it. He listened. The early evening air was silent again, apart from the sounds of restless animals, and Paco thought he must have imagined hearing his father’s voice.

As the first-born named after his father, he was never known by any other name but Paco, the abbreviated version of his father’s name. No one, not even his grandmother, a strict, old-fashioned *abuela*—who would speak only Spanish despite her being born in America—ever called him Francisco.

The voice, quiet and frail but unmistakably his father’s, repeated the call. Suddenly Paco leapt to his feet. He had no idea why his father would use the unfamiliar name to address him, but to ignore his call had never been wise, and Paco was not about to start disobeying him now.

Out of the window he saw his father. Papá had gotten out of bed and stood in the middle of the yard, shielding his eyes as he looked up at the tree house. Paco had time to notice the absence of the so familiar walking stick before he scrambled down the rickety ladder and came to stand before him. Paco gazed at his father’s face and could not suppress a grin. Papá looked well. The last two

years had taken their toll, and the once strong, tall farmer had lost both height and weight. The deep lines drawn on his face by the illness that had made it impossible for Paco to look into his father's eyes were gone. The frailty was still there, though, stopping Paco from flinging himself into his father's arms.

They stood regarding each other silently. His father's look had always found Paco wanting; the oldest and yet weakest of the seven children, the one who should one day take over the farm yet showed more interest in books than animals, Paco had believed himself a disappointment. He quivered under his father's probing eyes and forced himself to appear taller. He held his gaze, and when his Papá nodded approvingly, Paco felt proud.

His father's hand slowly reached out and ruffled his hair, so lightly that Paco wasn't sure he had felt the touch at all. When Papá opened his mouth, his voice was quiet like a whisper.

"I want you to mind your mamá, Francisco," he said.

"Yes, Papá," Paco said. He was afraid to speak up, afraid the silent bond between them might shatter when the words were spoken, but not to answer would be disrespectful. Paco held his breath and was relieved when his father continued to smile at him.

"You are a good boy, Francisco," he said. The highest

praise he had ever heard, Paco wanted to cry and fiercely fought back the tears.

“Run along now,” his father said. “Mamá needs you in the house.”

Paco didn't move. The moment was too precious to end so soon. He held up the ball. “Catch?” he asked.

His father laughed, and the sound was beautiful yet scary and popped in the air like soap bubbles. “I wish I could, son,” he said but shook his head. He nodded towards the farmhouse. “Go now,” he commanded.

Paco obeyed. At the door he turned around, expecting his father to be gone, but he was still there, regarding Paco with an affection that had been absent while he was alive and with regret. Paco raised his hand, and then suspended the movement in mid-wave. His father copied the gesture, and for a moment they smiled at each other across the yard. “I love you, Papá,” Paco said.

“I love you too, Francisco,” he said. He turned and walked towards the fields.

From his father's bedroom, Paco could hear his mother crying.

Rob Meets Pterodactyl

by Helen Harvey

The pterodactyl was a problem. Rob could have sworn it hadn't been on the ceiling when he went to sleep.

"Hello Rob," said the pterodactyl, and Rob saw all its tiny pointed teeth. "I could murder a fish finger."

"I'm not allowed to use the oven," Rob explained.

"Oh, frozen's fine. I'm not fussy."

Rob threw off his duvet, picked up a jumper from the floor and padded down to the kitchen. The tiles chilled the soles of his feet and his knees started shaking. The pterodactyl had followed him in the air, flapping clumsily through doorways. Now it perched on the back of a dining chair, waiting.

“Just one?” Rob said pulling open the freezer. His fingers were colder than his toes. He shuddered.

“How many am I allowed?”

Rob shrugged.

“Mum lets me have three. Dad lets me have four. Sometimes five even. There’s a whole box here.” Rob poured them all onto a plate. “Would you like some juice?”

The pterodactyl was too busy crunching frozen fish to answer, so Rob poured himself a lemon squash and got out a Mars bar.

“What were you doing in my room?”

“I got lost,” the pterodactyl said between bites.

“On your way where?” Rob asked, and took a massive bite of chocolate.

“Looking for the chip shop,” the pterodactyl said. “Got any more of these?”

“No. There’s some frozen chips though.”

“Bung’em on the plate.”

All ten fish fingers had vanished down the dinosaur’s gullet. Now he gulped beakfuls of crinkly chips.

“How did you end up in the future?”

“Oh, that’s a long story. I’m not going back now. No one can make me. Where’s the rest of those chips?”

Rob poured.

"I used to have a toy pterodactyl when I was a kid," said Rob, who was still a kid. "I called him Terry. It wasn't a very good name. Terry Pterodactyl. But he had brown coloured scales, not blue-ish, like you."

"You people are idiots. You think you know everything." The pterodactyl finished off the bag of chips and licked his teeth with a long tongue.

"Are you gonna be gone before the morning?" asked Rob. "My mum and dad might want to know why there's a dinosaur in the house. You can't get me some more chips and fish fingers can you? My mum'll be cross. She might stop my pocket money."

"Ok, ok," said the pterodactyl. "I'll see what I can do."

"Why did you want fish and chips anyway?"

"Oh, you know, a prophecy, a wizard with a time machine, the usual."

"You mean you're in a story?"

"Basically."

"Can I co—" Rob was about to ask if he could go too. He had always fancied saving the world.

But the pterodactyl cut him off. "Thanks for the meal," and flew out of the window.

In the morning Rob's mum woke him up by asking why he'd left a bag of frozen chips and box of fish fingers

on the table.

“You’ve got no imagination mum,” Rob said, and his mum didn’t argue.

The following night the pterodactyl was back. One wing was broken and his face looked badly bruised.

“What happened to you?”

“All—lost—” panted the pterodactyl, dragging his wing over the kitchen tiles. “One true hero didn’t show. Carnage in the final battle. Magic object in hands of the enemy. It was horrible!” He panted once or twice. Then, meekly, “have you got any more fish fingers?”

Over a second meal of fish fingers and bag of frozen chips the pterodactyl told the whole story.

“And the worst thing,” he said at last, “is that it was over so quickly. Usually these things take weeks, months, even years sometimes. This was only meant to be the opening tussle, the first little scare. But virtually all the good guys are dead! I only escaped because of a freak accident involving a tree, a pair of ladies’ tights, and an unexpected train.”

“What went wrong?” Rob was, by now, on his third Mars bar and chewing open mouthed.

“I told you. No hero. Somewhere along the way the forces of light were supposed to stumble across a hero.”

“What sort of hero? Did you want more chips?”

“Yes please. You know,” the pterodactyl said munching, “the usual—a small boy or girl who lives too much in their own imagination. The kind of kid who, when he goes home afterwards, everyone will think he’s just making it up. Sometimes we find them quite by accident. But now, now...”

The pterodactyl was all choked up. He coughed up a mangled chip and cleared his throat.

“Now there will be no more adventures, no more stories! The army of light has been massacred. All lost! All lost! I wish I’d just stayed put in pre-history.”

“Perhaps it’s a good thing I didn’t come,” said Rob, and he sighed theatrically. The pterodactyl didn’t even look at him. “After all,” Rob pushed on, “I’m just a boy. And I’m not strong or anything,” he declared. “I’d probably just’ve been killed. Wouldn’t I?”

But the pterodactyl didn’t answer. Rob nearly felt annoyed, but the visiting dinosaur looked so dejected that he couldn’t manage it. He almost offered the pterodactyl a hug, before he realised how awkward it would be, what with the wings and the claws. Instead he chewed the last bit of his Mars bar, lost in thoughts of fantastic battles in space and time.

Sixteen Fingers

by M. Pence

She made the piano weep. Pretty melodramatic of me, I know. Ever since the day I heard her play *Pathetique*, second movement in A flat minor, certain things inside me began to move, to change. All because of her crooked little freckle spotted, chewed nailed hands that coaxed my mother's piano to make noises I'd never heard of in my life.

I'd been chasing a ball tossed by Jack, my inseparable best friend back then. We were your typical pain-in-the-ass ten year old boys. We smashed windows with baseballs, played ridiculous pranks, put toads in our pencil cases at school and tugged the pony tails of little girl's everywhere just to make 'em cry. That was us! We were pretty proud of being the typical snots, and that was my life then—dirt, bugs, toads, probably making my mother

wish she'd had a girl. Music or the arts didn't interest me in the slightest despite my mother, the neighborhood piano teacher, trying her damndest to sit me down and "*God, Robert, would you at least try chopsticks without pulling the cat's tail?*"

And then there was Lisa.

Lisa had the unfortunate fate of being born with a prominent overbite and parents too poor to do anything about it. Lisa kept her mouth shut firmly, creating the sour impression that she never broke the thin, nervous line of her lips to ever smile. To make matters worse for her, she was freckled in painter's fine-smatter—enthusiastically might I add—from head to toe and paper-pale. Her hair wasn't even very red. Maybe it was a smidgen of strawberry gold strictly woven into a severe braid right down her back. The tip of it was generally stained blue, because I always grabbed it in class and dipped it into the teacher's inkpots.

Here she was bent over my mother's piano in our living room strewn with family photos—playing that damn thing like it was built for her fingertips alone. It wept for Lisa, that ancient piano. It wept and then it rejoiced to be played by someone who finally understood it and wouldn't try to chase the cat across its keys just to hear the awful cacophony such a thing caused. I thought

she had sixteen fingers from the way she hit notes and crawled along ivory keys.

I forgot entirely about my ball. I stood for I-don't-know-how-long staring gap jawed at this scraggly little buck-toothed, stick shaped, freckle spattered girl moving heaven and earth for my ears. And she became the most beautiful thing in the entire world. I was going to ma— someone elbowed me in the ribs, breaking the spell I had been under. I didn't need to turn around to know who the idiot behind me was, and cuffed Jack's ear in return.

"Ow! Hey!" grinning even as he winced. His cry startled Lisa into a silence which, even at that age made me ache at the loss of her music. I refused to look her in the eye from that moment on.

I didn't dip her braid in ink pots anymore after that.

§§§

I graduated top honors that year in high school. Damn, but the world wasn't ready for me—so I thought—but I was sure ready for it. Football, track, cheerleaders, beer and glory; that's what it was all about then, and Jesus wasn't I foolish to believe it... but isn't that the way of being a kid?

Engaged to a ridiculously gorgeous cheerleader named

Melinda, I was celebrating after graduation down at old Milton's, a dive of a bar if there ever was one. The drinks were cheap and Milton didn't care much for what you did so long as you paid at the end of the night. So here we were, Jack, Melinda, the entire class it seemed, hooting and spilling draft everywhere when I heard it...

Milton's old beat up piano in the far corner past the pool tables. It was out of tune and it would always be out of tune as long as that place remained open. Notes struck on Milton's old piano were akin to the dinky notes of jewelry box's being opened or wind up jack-in-the-boxes. I heard it over all of the noise we were making and it sounded like magic: *Pathetique*, second movement in A flat minor.

I'd forgotten about her. I'd forgotten about the girl with sixteen fingers and how she made me feel that day in my living room. I rushed toward the piano, leaving Jack, Melinda and the class behind. She wasn't there when I finally made it. I took a long time staring at the empty piano and didn't hear Melinda come up behind me until her hand curled around my arm.

"Everything alright?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I lied to her. Because you just don't tell your wife-to-be about little freckled piano girls bathed in sunlight you thought *might* be magic.

§§§

It's alright here. I get food, they keep me clean when they can, and the kids come every two weeks with the grand kids. They're scared though; they don't like it here. I can see it in their eyes. The youngest, Marissa, has Melinda's jet-black hair and gray eyes. Every time she looks at me I keep seeing Melinda, and I'm not sure how to explain to her that it isn't *her* that makes Grandpa look so sad...

They keep wheeling me out in this baby-blue, plastic chair and sticking me in the shade outdoors, like I need some sunlight and every yellow pill they give me is a little sprinkle of water. That's what I'm chuckling over—the idea that I am some sort of old plant—when I hear *it*.

The first strains of it coming from across the field. You know something? At that moment I seriously think I'm finally succumbing to dementia, because as I look out over green grass drenched in summer afternoon sun, I see nothing. The tall blue spruces donated in memory of the other poor schmucks like me living here are still all in the same place. White housing buildings dot the horizon. Everything is exactly as it should be. But fluttering through the trees carried on the back of the wind the music still comes to me: *Pathétique*, second movement in A flat minor.

That's it, I tell myself, I'm not going to miss this, this time. So I'm pushing myself up out of this god-forsaken chair and fumbling with my walker across the lawn to follow it. Every step I take wobbles as I imagine newborns might and it grows louder with every inch forward.

That's when I see her. There she is under the bowing, dancing strings of a weeping willow, playing my mother's piano as she did years ago when I was a little boy.

She's beautiful. Her hair is a riot of copper sunshine down her back; she's in a printed sundress that leaves her shoulders bare. That's my girl with sixteen fingers! She stops playing to twist about, looks over her shoulder at me and *Jesus* if she isn't the most enchanting woman I have ever seen. I'm literally struck silent.

"Robert," she smiles. Her whole face does this lighting up business when she smiles that I think is a woman's secret—a weapon devised to bring men fumbling idiotically to their knees and bobbing their heads along dumbly to anything they say just to see them smile like that.

So I nod.

"Come, Robert. I've been waiting," she says. I nod some more but don't wait for a second invitation as she pats the piano bench beside her and begins to play again.

Now? Now I have lived my life without regret. Now is when everything falls into place and I am content, truly

content. I turn aside to give her a tremulous smile and exhale one long, deep breath that I feel like I have been holding in since the moment I saw her. With it, I whisper her name and the willow, the spruce, the grass and the sky whisper it back to me.

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