

10 YEARS  
April 1992 - April 2002  
MAGAZINE

# ESCI!

*The Literary Magazine For Aspiring Writers and Artists*



Vol 6 No 1 - \$5.00 US



PRODUCED IN THE USA

TOSH C. BIBB  
6-12-73

**INSIDE THIS ISSUE:**  
Derek Muk's *Muscles*  
Joyce Bradshaw's *Tucker Trilogy* Concludes  
New Poetry by Qualls, Liu and Mihoub



**Vol.6 No.1**

**Publisher**

Michael R. Potter

**Submissions To ESC! Magazine:**

**Writers:** We are looking for all genres including; science fiction, mystery, suspense, horror, or general fiction. Stories should be limited to no more than 2500-3000 words. Longer work may be considered. Poetry also is accepted. Submissions should be typewritten and double spaced.

**Artists:** Black and white line-art and illustrations are preferred. Please DO NOT send the originals! A high quality photocopy will suffice. Artwork should be limited to no more than 8½" X 11" in size. Cover illustrations can be 11" X 17" or 8½" X 11". If you need to draw it larger, please reduce it with a copier to the proper size. Comic strips and comical illustrations are also welcome!

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**ESC! Magazine**, is published twice a year by Michael R. Potter. Please send all subscription orders, inquiries, and address changes to the above address.

**Single copy cover price:** \$5.00

**Address:**

ESC! Magazine  
c/o Michael R. Potter  
P.O.BOX 115,  
Huntley, IL 60142-0115

All letters to the editor will be considered for publication and may be edited to save space.

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## EDITORIAL

*So what is publication? That question came when I did a routine search on Google for the phrase “ESC! Magazine”....*

**T**he first issue of ESC! was produced in April 1992 – ten years ago this month. Though ESC! started out slowly, a small blurb in Writer’s Digest lifted my diminutive publication from serving the college town of DeKalb, IL to serving the aspiring writer community across the entire United States – and the number of submissions flowing into my tiny PO Box from all points beyond sure reflected that.

In issue number 4, I published a poem entitled “A Poet’s Work” by Kenny A. Chaffin. Little did I know at the time what a firestorm of controversy that poem set off in an online newsgroup known as rec.arts.poems. For, you see, Mr. Chaffin made the unfortunate mistake of trying to share his joy of being published with the rest of the rec.arts.poems newsgroup. In was an innocent posting in which Mr. Chaffin wrote:

*“Just wanted to toot my horn and share my publication success with the group. I just had the following poem published in the spring issue of ESC! magazine. Hope you enjoy it.”* His poem then followed.

It sure seems like a simple and innocuous posting doesn’t it? Oh, you wouldn’t believe the threads and sub-threads that thing set off! Mostly it consisted of the back and forth between Mr. Chaffin and another poet who named himself ‘Marek’. Marek’s first reaction to Mr. Chaffin’s posting was criticism – and petty non constructive criticism at that. His sole comment revolved around what he perceived to be a misplaced comma in the text of Mr. Chaffin’s “drossy” poem.

The conversation went, unfortunately, downhill from there.

I bring all this up because as I read the thread of postings, a number of issues regarding ESC! Magazine – and small press in general – came up and I want to take the time in this editorial to address those issues. So, please indulge me as I go over some of the most pertinent points of that thread posted oh so long ago ....

### **The Misplaced Comma**

The one thing I do NOT do is edit poetry for punctuation. I do, however, edit for spelling. Why, I’m asked, would I deprive my contributors of such a simple editorial task? For one thing, I am not a poet, nor am I trained in what makes “great poetry.” I simply pick what I like and what fits within the particular issue I’m working

on. If it strikes me, I’ll accept it. There are those who will tell you that this is the wrong way to encourage new writing and, undoubtedly, there are some who will tell you that I’ve rejected the most wonderful poetry in the world – heck, perhaps I even rejected poetry by Mr. Marek and that’s why he’s got chip on his shoulder the size of Cleveland about the publication of “A Poet’s Work.” In any event, as I said, if I like it, I’ll accept it. As for punctuation, I feel that in poetry, the punctuation can often be part of the art. Certainly there are poets who utilize all lower case letters and no punctuation at all. Perhaps I erred by not correcting this misplaced comma, but who am I to say whether the use or lack of use of a comma within Mr. Chaffin’s poem is correct or not?

### **Does Publication [of any sort] Imply Good Writing?**

Of course not. This argument running through the thread missed and misses the point of ESC! Magazine entirely. Publication certainly does not imply good writing. But publication may, in certain circumstances, imply “writing with promise.” Without passing judgment on Mr. Chaffin’s work (I believe I’ve done that already 9 years ago), whether or not ‘Glenn’ felt that the poem “*was nothing new*” misses the fact that Mr. Chaffin was new. New to the world of poetry and new to the world of publication. The publication of “A Poet’s Work” in ESC! Magazine

*Continues on Page 24...*

## ***This Issue's Contributors:***

**Tosh Bibb:** “I first published my cartoons in my college student newspaper where I won several awards for my illustrations and comics. The newspaper is still published at the school and still has an excellent staff of writers and illustrators. I am proud to have been part of Tallahassee Community College’s student newspaper ‘The Talon.’”



Tosh may be reached at: [kohomat@earthlink.net](mailto:kohomat@earthlink.net)

**Joyce G. Bradshaw:** Joyce was raised in Westfield, New Jersey. After attending Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia for two years, she became the wife of a Presbyterian minister and had the opportunity to spend five years as a missionary to the Mayan community in the State of Campeche, Mexico.

Joyce presently resides in the Texas hill country and is a full-time freelance writer and author of three books: one is a volume of poetry, the second is a study of the modern process of globalization, and the third is the story of the way that her own writing and that of her mother shaped both their lives. She has three daughters and seven grandchildren, of whom she is exceedingly proud.

**Qian Liu:** Qian is a teen writer living in New Jersey with her parents. In her spare time Qian enjoys running, swimming, playing piano, reading and writing — particularly in the fantasy genre. Qian hopes to major in English when she attends college.

**Farida Mihoub:** Born in Paris, France, where she still lives, Farida is 45 years old and the mother of three. “I currently work as editorial assistant for a medical journal. While French is my mother tongue, the English language is my passion!”



Farida has been published in several E-zines and poetry magazines. Farida also writes children’s stories. “One last thing...! I cannot live without music, especially jazz and soul.” Farida may be reached at: [mihoub@chello.fr](mailto:mihoub@chello.fr)

**Derek Muk:** This issue marks Derek’s third appearance for ESC! Magazine since his short story “Jerry” was published on the ESC! Magazine web site in the Fall of 2000. Derek lives in California and works in the social services field with developmentally disabled adults. His fiction (all printed media) has appeared in “The Pinehurst Journal,” “Mystery Forum Magazine,” “Hardboiled,” “Kracked Mirror Mysteries” and “The Green Queen.” He has also had a chapbook of three short stories published by Gryphon Publications. He has fiction forthcoming in the online magazine, “DeathGrip.” Derek may be reached at: [derekmuk@jps.net](mailto:derekmuk@jps.net)



**Guy R. Qualls:** Guy first appeared on the ESC! Magazine website in the fall of 1998. Since that time, Guy has proven to be a valuable and talented regular in our pages. Guy was born and raised in West Texas. A former “Gulf War Volley Ball Veteran”, Guy enjoys spending his time both indoors and out pursuing his hobbies of wildlife photography and computers. Guy feels his greatest asset is his family who he “takes too much for granted and appreciates far too little.” In his own words: “Everything is dedicated to Mom -- she was the greatest fan a person could have ever had!”

### **NEXT ISSUE, (V6,N2):**

- All new Fiction and poetry
- Next installment of “Vex”
- This and more coming Fall 2002!



## think about you

Tonight I drink  
Tonight I think  
    And I seem to think about you.

Tonight I'll cry  
'remember you died  
    and I seem to think about you.

There is no way out  
'confirmed my doubt  
    and I seem to think about you.

You gave up  
Never wizened up  
    And I still seem to think about you

Been a year since you died  
CANT count the tears I've cried  
    And I still seem to think about you.

You gave so much love  
You were thinking of????  
    And I still seem to think about you.

And if nothing else  
I've learned to love myself  
    And I still seem to think about you.

The only link to my own  
But now you're gone  
    And I still seem to think about you.

You went away –  
I plan to stay  
    And I hope I can still think about you.

*by* Guy R. Qualls  
*Outta the Void*

## Mothers Day 2K1

It's Mothers Day again  
    How about that  
Third one you've missed  
    My - how time has passed

Not a lot has changed  
    Still slaves to the grind  
Just getting a little older  
    And more on my mind

I still wonder though  
    If our souls will ever meet  
But thinking like that  
    Is my own self defeat

I wish I could say more  
    But it might never end  
I wouldn't know where to stop  
    or even more - where to send

So I'll just say farwell  
    While my eyes are still dry  
'Till this time next year  
    I love you - Goodbye



# Eclipse

Qian Liu

You have spent a lifetime  
existing through the paths of others,  
steeped in the blood of others,  
killing for the mere sake

of sport.

But your reign of terror is now drawing to its close.

I will journey to the ends of the earth  
and I will find you in your hell-hole.

I will hunt you down  
in the darkest alleys at night.

Vengeance is mine to bestow or to take.

It is an awesome power  
to hold somebody's life in your hands,

to know

that with just one snap of your fingers  
you can wrench away his soul.

Isn't that incredible rush what you have sought for all your life?

To play God -- or the Devil.

And in the end,  
as your precious lifeblood slips away  
as sand slips through the hourglass,  
who do you beseech for aid

but me?

Your tormentor,  
your savior,  
yet ultimately

your shadow.

And I will bleed you dry.

# Time Will Tell

*By Joyce G. Bradshaw*

---

“**W**hat an exquisite morning,” Agnes thought. She kept the porch swing rocking gently as she sipped coffee from the stoneware mug. “On mornings like this I feel like I will live forever.”

The familiar creaking of the old wooden swing mingled with the hum of the bumblebees busy harvesting the bounty of the morning-glory vine that clung to the porch trellis. Early sunlight had worked its magic, coaxing each candle-flame bud into full flower, and the blossoms bobbed under the weight of the pollen-laden bees. Agnes watched — the sight never failed to fascinate — and wondered how the nectar-seekers kept track of which blue depths had already been plumbed. She sighed dolefully as she considered how nice it would be to have someone with whom to share the experience.

She had been alone, now, for some months. And while her seventy-three years rested on her lightly, still the lack of companionship made life a bit more tedious. She missed having another person around and about. Oh, her neighbors and friends did well enough at offering assistance in keeping up the lawn, maintaining the house, and providing fresh-cooked meals on occasion. But that simply was not what Agnes needed most. “I need someone to depend on,” she admitted to herself, “a warm body to lean against when nights are chill, a hand to hold when time presses too close.”

“Hi, Ms Agnes! Here’s your morning Herald. You have a good day, okay?” The young man on the bicycle had hesitated at the end of the walk in order to make certain that the newspaper landed on the porch within easy reach. He knew that Agnes would have difficulty getting down the steps to retrieve it if it fell in the yard. He had seen her, recently, breathing in shallow wheezes when she ventured from the house. Her closest neighbors had noticed, too, that Agnes was not as well as she had been. They all agreed that her health seemed to have declined in the last few months. But no one saw fit to inquire about it, knowing that Agnes Miller was a proud, reserved lady who preferred to keep such matters to herself.

Placing her empty mug carefully on the table by the swing, Agnes gathered up the tightly folded newspaper, unfurled its pages, and began reading the headlines: hometown stuff, mostly, with only a few snatches of national news designed to keep local folks posted on major happenings in the world at large. Not sufficient, however, to spoil the rather protected lifestyle of the small community. It had always been that way and no one had ever complained. There was no sin in being provincial.

When Agnes finally reached the section she enjoyed most — Homes and Gardens in Review — she settled back on the swing and soon became engrossed in thoughts of raising flowers and vegetables like she used to do when she had all her energies. Her reputation as a green-thumb had been widespread and her generosity as

well, for she had habitually given away a greater proportion of the harvest than she had kept. One of the hardest things, now that she could no longer manage such physical exertion, was having to accept so much from others. She preferred to give rather than to receive.

“Agnes, dear, is there room on the swing for me?”

The voice startled her. She had not heard the approaching footsteps. When she looked up over the top of the newspaper, she gasped. Lowering the sheets, she stared incredulously at the tall, gray-haired gentleman who stood at the bottom of the porch stairs, leaning on a sturdy wooden cane. Her mouth moved but she said nothing.

“Agnes, are you all right? I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

“I ... I’m not ... it’s just that...”

The man slowly climbed the steps and walked toward the swing where Agnes sat in stunned silence. On his weathered, but handsome face was the most tender of smiles and in his soft brown eyes was a look of profound affection. He stopped directly in front of her and bent to take her hand in his. Lifting it to his lips, he kissed her palm.

“Where have you been, Tuck? Why did you leave without even sending me word that you were going? Didn’t you realize how much that would hurt me? I thought you cared. I believed that you loved me.”

He sat down beside her, still holding her hand. “Agnes, oh Agnes, I would never have hurt you intentionally. You know that! It was all so unexpected. I didn’t have any idea. I would have told you, my dearest, if I had suspected beforehand.”

Agnes had turned to rest her head on his shoulder. Strands of her silver hair fell across his shirt collar. Teardrops left their footprints on his jacket.

An eternity passed as the two of them sat there, side by side, obviously basking in the utter delight of being together. The sun rose higher and the humming bees deserted their search in favor of cooler hours. The liquid in Agnes’ mug took on the whitish glaze of cold coffee. Pages from the abandoned newspaper lay scattered on the floor of the porch. The swing periodically creaked and groaned.

Finally, Tucker broke the peaceful silence. Clearing his throat first to keep from startling his compan-

ion, he spoke gentle. “Agnes, dear heart, is there any more coffee in the kitchen?”

“Oh, Tuck, how thoughtless of me! I was just so glad to have you near me once again that I completely forgot...”

He brushed the wisps of hair aside and kissed her forehead. “Never you mind,” he said, grinning at her like an infatuated suitor. “I just thought you might like some more. Yours looks like it’s frozen stiff.”

They laughed simultaneously and Agnes straightened up to gaze at Tucker’s face. “You’ve changed since I saw you last. There’s a far-away look that wasn’t there before. Where did you...”

“How about that coffee? I wouldn’t mind having a bit myself.” His interruption was gracious but conspicuous. He couldn’t have explained it even if he had wished to try. Besides, being back with Agnes was what truly mattered. “I’m afraid I only made one cup,” Agnes said apologetically. “I didn’t know you were coming!” Her smile was warm and ingratiating.

“Well, then, what about some brunch? We could go over to the cafe for coffee and eggs and maybe a couple of those delicious cheese croissants. It’s only three blocks from here. We could take our time and make a celebration out of it.” Agnes hesitated sufficiently long to cause Tucker to glance at her in concern. “What’s wrong, dear, have you already eaten?”

“No, Tuck, it’s not that.” She had no desire to worry him with her health problems. Besides, she really did want to accompany him. And what’s more, she felt better than she had in a long while, despite the slight ache in her chest. “I’m simply not dressed for it.”

“Then you’d better start getting ready!”

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Agnes had primped and preened enough to satisfy herself — she did feel a special need to appear as presentable, and as young, as possible — it was almost lunch hour. When she came through the front door onto the porch, Tucker arose from his place on the swing and walked toward her. Taking her two hands in his, he stepped away at arm’s length and stood gazing at her. “I always did love that dress and the way your hair looks when you pile it up high. Ms Agnes, you are a rare vision for these old eyes!

To his delight, she giggled and blushed. “Shall we?” he asked, taking her arm and accompanying her



down the steps. Arm in arm they strolled together toward the center of town.

The hour or so that they spent at the Mainstreet Cafe was filled with laughter, pleasant conversation, and much reminiscing. They hadn't known each other all that long and yet it seemed that they had much in common and many recollections of times spent in each other's company. It wasn't until later that Agnes realized that not a word had been said concerning Tucker's mysterious absence. By then, however, it was no longer of much consequence. He had returned and she felt whole and happy again. Even her nagging cough had subsided. She was glad of that, for she didn't want to have to explain its cause.

After returning to the house, they sat together on the porch swing and savored the warm breeze and the comfort of their relationship. Agnes, who was thoroughly exhausted from their trip to town and back, catnapped for short periods, her head resting affectionately on Tucker's welcoming shoulder.

While she slept, Tucker studied Agnes' face with apprehension. He cared for her deeply enough to have become sensitive to the vocal inflections, the unspoken words, and the subtle body language that were the true purveyors of her feelings. And he knew, in his innermost heart, that something was amiss. He also realized that the fact that she was avoiding the subject of her own well-being was not a good sign. It was similar, in significance, to his own reticence to discuss his recent "adventure." Things were too pleasant between them now to risk introducing complications.

Afternoon hours passed and evening shadows deepened. Tucker and Agnes were oblivious. They suppered on wine and a plateful of cheese, crackers, and fruit, all the while talking, laughing, and sharing whatever entered their mind. But when the clock on the wall chimed nine, Tucker got to his feet and announced quite abruptly that he thought it was time for him to be getting home. "I don't relish walking through town when most everyone has left the area. It isn't so safe these days, you know, even with a trusty walking stick by your side."

Agnes followed him to the door, then the two of them stood there awkwardly. Tucker reached over and stroked Agnes' slightly disheveled silver hair. It was silky and responsive between his fingers. Since his wife had died, he had had no one to touch or to be

touched by. "Strange," he thought, "how much one can miss the sensation of closeness."

"Tuck?" Agnes' voice was small and wavering. She had found that the tender touch of another human being's hand had stirred a profound longing inside her. "Having been widowed so long ago," she considered, "you'd think I would have gotten over the need to be touched." But she could not deny that Tucker's presence was by all means pleasurable. "Please stay."

Her request hung in the air like a melody waiting to be intoned. Tucker drew her close. His lips on hers spoke the answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Agnes awoke the next morning, the sun was already up and shining insistently through the lace curtains. "I hardly ever sleep this late," she thought as she turned over in bed and stretched her legs. Then she caught the tempting aroma of coffee and heard the shuffling of feet in the hall. The bedroom door swung open and there stood Tucker with the serving tray in his hands. He smiled possessively at Agnes and she responded with a quick blush. "Good morning!" they both said, as though with one voice.

They sat there on the bed, pillows propped against the wall in back of them, enjoying the omelet and biscuits Tucker had prepared. "Tucker, my dear, these are superb! No wonder I asked you to stay!"

"Now I know," Tucker replied. "And I foolishly believed it was because of my masculine charms."

When there was no longer any excuse for remaining where they were, Tucker stacked the utensils and dishes on the tray and retreated, like the gentleman he was, to the kitchen. Agnes didn't have to ask for privacy. Tucker understood instinctively.

Some time later, he reappeared at the bedroom door. Pausing briefly, he saw that Agnes was dressed and was seated at the dressing table, brushing her hair. Without speaking, Tucker crossed the room and stopped a short distance from her. She had not heard him coming, but sensing him behind her, she glanced up at his reflection in the mirror. It was then he observed the tear streaks on her face.

"Agnes, my lovely lady, whatever is the matter? Have I offended you? Is it because you wish I hadn't stayed? Did I take too much for granted? Forgive me, love. I would rather die than hurt you!"

At the sound of his words, Agnes broke into sobs and covered her face with her hands. Tucker knelt beside her, feeling helpless and distraught. His own eyes were clouded with grief at having caused Agnes such sadness.

Through the sobbing, Agnes finally tried to speak. “No, Tuck. No! It is nothing you have done. Your being here is the most wonderful thing that has happened to me in many years. To be loved again, to be held and caressed, to be....” The words got drowned in her weeping.

It took Tucker almost an hour to get Agnes calmed down enough to talk coherently. Even then, he had to use all his persuasive powers to convince her to tell him what had caused her tears. By then, Agnes had lapsed into periodic coughing spells. It was plain that the emotional outburst had done her no good. Nevertheless, she managed to explain.

“I didn’t want to burden you with this, Tuck. We were having such a beautiful time together. You see, dear, after you left so suddenly, I began having difficulty breathing. When I finally went to the doctor because of the pain in my chest, he said there was nothing he could do besides make my last months as comfortable as possible.”

Tucker was absolutely overcome. He turned ashen and his face was contorted with anguish. He slumped on the living room couch, breathing heavily and muttering to himself. Agnes could not decide what she should do, so she simply sat there with him, patting his arm sympathetically. She waited patiently until he seemed to be regaining his composure. “It’s all right, Tuck,” she said at last. “It’s really all right.”

“No, it’s not!” he shouted at her. “It’s not right at all! How can this happen after everything I went through to get back to you? It’s not right for you to be snatched away from me!”

They held each other and both wept out of pain and desperation. Agnes felt as though she had betrayed him by getting ill. To Tucker it seemed that his exceptional — and not altogether riskfree — efforts had been invalidated by this sudden turn of events, like a climber who had scaled a monumental peak only to discover that the valley beyond was shrouded by an impenetrable fog. His heart ached; his soul was desolate.

As their agitation ebbed and emotional control returned, Agnes spoke timidly. “Tuck, there’s nothing we can do but make the best of the circumstances.”

“That’s not good enough,” Tucker stated flatly. “I’m not willing to capitulate so readily to this situation. And I think I know something we can do to change it! Agnes, are you up to taking another short walk with me?”

“If it’s important to you, Tucker, you know I’ll do my best.”

“Bring a sweater, then,” he told her. “It may turn cool while we’re gone. And lock the house behind us. I’m not sure how long this will take.” Agnes eyed him nervously, but she did as he suggested. Her faith in his good intentions was strong.

The day had turned cloudy and reflective of their somber mood. The two of them walked along at an easy pace, Agnes with sweater in hand and Tucker with his cane by his side. It was difficult to tell who was supporting whom, their arms were that tightly entwined. Occasional quick glances passed between them but no words were exchanged. Both were breathing laboriously. Agnes coughed off and on. Once or twice they stopped under a tree to rest briefly. But each time, Tucker urged them onward as if he was in some haste to arrive at their goal.

Rounding a corner, Tucker picked up the pace, his cane tapping the sidewalk in counterpoint. Agnes strained a bit to keep up. She wanted very much to ask where they were headed, but the intensity of Tucker’s expression silenced her curiosity. The only building of any consequence was unfamiliar to her. As they drew nearer she could see a rather large wooden sign hanging above the door. She squinted at it, barely able to make out the words: “Antiques of Distinction.”

“Tucker, why in the world are we....”

“I’ll explain when we get there!”

When they finally reached the front of the building, Tucker paused momentarily. Agnes assumed that he was not certain if he wished to enter or not. She heard him take a slow, deep breath, and then he grasped her arm more firmly and ushered her inside.

A bell jangled urgently behind them as they stepped into the shadowy interior. The musty air was tinged with the scent of lavender. As soon as her eyes adjusted to the faint light, Agnes looked around at the phenomenal array of furniture and assorted items that

were crowded into every cranny. She noticed a handsomely mounted brass telescope, an ornate French armoire, and innumerable shelves cluttered with glass and china knickknacks. Never in her life had she seen such a collection.

Tucker led her along between the display counters toward the back of the shop. Just as they came to the end of the aisle, an elderly gentleman appeared out of nowhere, as though he had been conjured up out of the shadows. His smile was friendly and he spoke to Tucker in a familiar tone. "Back so soon?" he inquired. "Seeking another marble doorknob, perhaps."

"May I talk with you privately?" asked Tucker. The gentleman nodded and the two men stepped a few feet away. Agnes shivered and felt slightly dizzy. She peered about in the dimness, thinking she had heard something moving among the clutter. She could hear the men whispering to each other. It wasn't long before Tucker was once again at her side.

"Come, my love. The owner says that we may sit over there for as long as necessary." He pointed in the direction of two high-backed rocking chairs in the corner. "And he has kindly offered to make us some tea."

Agnes gathered her courage and put into words the question that was burning in her mind. "Why are we here, Tuck?"

He gazed into her eyes with true and reassuring affection. "Agnes, the story is a long one, but we have lots of time to discuss it. With luck, you and I will together encounter a twist of fate that will alter our lives for the better. Sit down, dear, and I will at long last explain where I went and what sorts of adventures I had. Then you will understand why we have come to this place."

They sat, hand in hand like two young lovers. As the gray light hovered around them, he told her about his experiences with the ever-shifting thread of time.

- end -



Tosh Bibb - kohomat@earthlink.net

## “Mirror, Mirror”

She dances on air  
with footsteps emulating liquid motion,  
her dress black as midnight,  
swirling around her like shadowy  
tendrils of mist.

She is stunning to behold  
with her alabaster complexion  
and blood-red lips,  
but if you gaze too long,  
you'll begin to see flaws in  
the startling perfection.

She smiles deviously  
and whispers conspiratorially  
in your ears, planting wicked thoughts  
in your mind,  
seducing your soul.

And if you give in  
to the temptation lurking nearby,  
she will pounce upon you  
and shatter your hard-won control.

For you see,  
she is the mirror of your soul,  
a dark, cracked image of yourself,  
who you could be  
if you lose your inhibitions,  
who you crave to become  
in the obscure fantasies of your dreams.

But if you tread too closely  
on that fine line  
between intelligence and insanity,  
then she will suck you in  
and tear you asunder--  
because you see,  
broken mirrors are *sharp*.

- Qian Liu

## **Yesterday 's news**

There were two roads in the dream  
Strange was the way they presented  
One was above the other  
They started in the same direction  
But no end could be seen  
I headed towards the highest one  
The entrance was prohibited  
It said: no one knows  
So I went for the lowest  
As I stepped on it  
Some kind of wind carried me away  
Past my deepest memories  
My mother's smile above my face  
When she took me to bed  
My father's words of peace  
When brothers and sisters fought  
The wind pushed me faster  
Until I reached the first kiss,  
The first thrill, the first love  
At the end of this road  
A sign blocked the way  
The inscription read  
Yesterday's news.

- **Farida Mihoub** -



# Muscles

*Derek Muk*

---

Inspector Dean Chan looked up at the body hanging from the ceiling fan.

The fan was off. The body was that of a short, stocky white man in his late twenties, Chan guessed. Dressed in a dark blue sweatshirt and sweat pants, and white sneakers. Head bent forward like that of a broken doll, his chin against his chest. Eyes closed like he was asleep. Hands limply at his sides.

Dr. Bernard Marshall, the M.E., stood on a ladder next to the victim to perform his initial observations. After a few minutes, he climbed back down and approached Chan, a tall, athletic Asian man in his early thirties with a black crew cut.

“You must be psychic, Dean,” Marshall said, sighing. “He didn’t hang himself. Cause of death, pending the autopsy, appears to be a broken neck. Go to the head of the class, will ya?”

He suppressed a smile. “Ah, it comes with the experience. How long has he been dead?”

Marshall pursed his lips, thinking. “No more than one or two days.”

Chan looked at the black scuff marks on the brown hardwood floor leading into the bedroom, and at a bookshelf that had been knocked down, spilling books and magazines all over the place. A broken vase was lying near that, resting in a puddle of water.

“And from the looks of things he put up quite a fight,” he said. “Any other wounds or bruises on the body?”

“I noticed a bruise on the left forearm, no wounds. But that’s all preliminary stuff. I’ll give you a complete run down when the autopsy’s done.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“No problem,” Marshall replied. He picked up his black case and left.

Chan watched as the M.E.’s assistants cut the rope above the knot with a bolt cutter, then gently lowered the victim to the floor. Then they placed the corpse into a sterile plastic sheet before zipping it up in a black body bag and wheeling it away on a gurney.

The crime scene photos and videotape had already been taken. The sketch artist was on hand making a composite of the scene while a few techs were dusting the room for prints.

Chan looked at the scuff marks on the hardwood floor again and followed their path to the center of the room where a folding chair was. The marks were plausible. They matched the color of the shoes’ soles. He saw some wear and tear on those soles, as if they had been dragging hard against something. The chair wasn’t plausible. Chan had stood on it earlier and noticed it wouldn’t of been high enough for the victim to reach the fan. And he was taller than the deceased. It’s got to be an amateur, he thought. Chan discovered another ladder in the garage before and guessed that maybe the killer had used that to carry the body up.

He then looked at the knocked over bookshelf, it’s contents on the floor, and the broken vase. Imagining the struggle in his head. Replaying how it would’ve been. Victim’s fingers desperately reaching for anything

to create some noise to alarm others outside. The vase should've gotten someone's attention. Were there screams? Maybe.

Chan's partner, Inspector Amy Villagomez, walked over to him, notebook in hand. She was around his age, of Mexican descent, and had long dark brown hair and brown skinned features.

"Victim's name was Alfred Gunther, age twenty-eight. His uncle discovered the body after he came home from work," Villagomez said, looking at her notebook.

"He see or hear anything suspicious when he got here?" he asked, looking at the ceiling fan again.

"No. Neither did any of the neighbors. Most of them were at work."

"No screams? Sound of a violent struggle?"

Villagomez shook her head. "Nope."

Chan raised his eyebrows. "Hmmm. This is too good to be true."

"I did find this note though," she said, handing him a sheet of paper. He had latex gloves on just like her and handled the sheet carefully, not wanting to smudge any existing prints that may be on it. The typed note read:

Dear Uncle Warren,

I didn't want it to end like this but felt like it was the best thing for me. I know you'll be angry and I'm sorry. Just try to understand that I was going through some personal stuff, that it wasn't anybody's fault. I wanted to tell you what was on my mind but it was too hard. If I have to blame anyone, it would be me. I fucked up. In school, at work, everywhere. I'm a failure because I'm retarded. God, I wish I was perfect like everyone else. Lord, please forgive me for being a mistake. I know I've disgraced you. I'm a freak and can't stand living anymore.

Love,  
Alfred

The inspectors spoke with Warren Gunther later in the living room of the house. There was a panoramic window that offered a great view of the downtown San Francisco skyline as the sun slowly set in the purple April sky. The house was located on 19<sup>th</sup> Street in the Potrero Hill area, a middle-class residential neighborhood with lots of families and working

professionals. The mini-van in the driveway, kids playing on the street, or couples walking their dogs was not an uncommon sight here.

Gunther reminded Chan of the actor Kirk Douglas for some reason. He was around his mid-fifties, with reddish, auburn hair that looked like it had been dyed, was bespectacled, and had a square jaw. His hands were large and were smudged with paint, and had numerous calluses.

He sat on a brown couch across from Chan and Villagomez, head bent down a little as he read the suicide note, now safely sealed in a plastic evidence bag. He shook his head as he was reading.

"He didn't write this," Gunther said.

"Are you sure?" Villagomez asked.

"Positive."

"Why don't you think he wrote it?" she asked.

Gunther shook his head firmly. "No, not Al. I knew and loved him like he was my own son. He would've told me if something was really bothering him ... you see, he wasn't the type that kept everything bottled inside. He was very open and direct when it came to expressing himself. And he wasn't ashamed of his developmental disability, he was proud of who he was. Al even started this support group for people with mental retardation that met every other week to address issues concerning that population ... the note seems to have been written by a coward, someone who's into self-hatred. Al had his whole life ahead of him. He was a competitive bodybuilder who won several county and state championships despite his disability ... he told me his next goal was to win the nationals." Gunther shook his head at the memory, looking at the trophies and plaques sitting on top of the fireplace mantel.

There were also some framed photographs of Alfred in different bodybuilding poses, smiling brightly. Chan noticed one where he was standing backstage after a contest with his uncle, arm around him while he held a trophy in his other hand.

"Mr. Gunther, were any of the doors or windows forced open when you came home from work today?" Villagomez asked.

"No, everything was okay. I checked to make sure nobody was still lurking around, you know?"

"Did you see anybody leaving the area? Car driving away perhaps?"

Gunther shook his head. "Nothing. I would've heard it, believe me. It was quiet outside. Didn't hear dogs barking which was pretty unusual I thought."

"Do you know if Alfred had any enemies?" Chan asked.

Gunther thought for a moment, looking at the trophies and pictures again. He sighed and said, "I don't remember him telling me about anyone. I have a good memory for that kind of stuff."

Chan wrote something in his notebook.

Villagomez picked up a brochure about Alfred's support group from the coffee table in front of her and looked through it. It was printed on a nice laser printer, on light blue paper. In it, it talked about the "Ten Stereotypes & Truths" about people with developmental disabilities. Like, for example, the first one: "All people with DD are stupid and lazy." The truth: "Not true. Some people with DD work just as hard as anyone else and some even have jobs where they don't require a job coach. Some have complicated jobs while others are talented artists and musicians."

"What are the whereabouts of Alfred's parents?" Chan asked.

Gunther cleared his throat. "His parents divorced when he was in his teens. His father, my brother, died of stomach cancer last year. Al's mother lives in New York. They were never really close. He identified more with his dad ... started calling me dad after he died ..."

"He have any siblings?"

"No."

Just then, Gunther started crying softly. His big hands fumbled with taking off his glasses, and drying his eyes with his handkerchief. He felt awkward that he was doing this in the presence of the two inspectors. Grown man like himself. A few minutes of uncomfortable silence settled in before he sighed.

"... Alfred and I were going to finish building this deck in the backyard," he said, sniffing. "He worked so hard on it, cutting the wood and painting it. Making the right measurements ... he talked about how he looked forward to having barbecues on it this summer. I own this hardware store over in the Richmond and he used to come in and pick out stuff we needed for the project. I remember when he used to work there part-time ... after a hard day's work on the deck, we sometimes sat in the yard and drank beer and watched

the sun set." Gunther looked at the cops for a long moment. "Who's going to help me finish it now?"

The inspectors stopped briefly at Pablo's Burritos over in the Mission to grab a bite before moving on. The owner of the taqueria, Pablo Cisneros, smiled and told them the burritos were on the house today.

"Why, thanks," Chan said. "What's the special occasion?"

"For cutting me a discount on that Robin figure a couple of months ago," he said behind the counter. He wore a once pristine white apron that was smeared with numerous food stains now. Both men were avid toy collectors, specializing in the Mego action figures from the 1970s. Chan's collection was slightly larger than Pablo's. Pablo had been over to his apartment/shrine that was starting to look more and more like a small toy museum. Figures (still in their original packaging) hung on hooks on the wall, some hung from the ceiling, while others were stashed away in numerous cardboard boxes. He remembered how hard it was to move around in his place. Chan was starting to think he needed a house. Either that or a storage space somewhere. And toys were just the beginning. In addition to that, Chan also collected obscure videos, books, and movie memorabilia. The mountain was slowly rising every day.

Villagomez wondered how two grown men could be so obsessed with the play things of children. But that was just her opinion. She guessed it had something to do with the child still inside of them. That was rather cute, she thought. She too had been over to Chan's place lots of times and felt like it was working out at the gym to make it from the living room to the kitchen. Imagine having one of those figures staring you in the face when you were using the toilet. That's what she endured.

"Oh, almost forgot about that," Chan said. "That was one of my favorites. But I got copies of him."

"You have the French edition, right?"

"Yep. That cost me a pretty penny. I'm still trying to find the bat cave at a reasonable price. Any ideas?"

Villagomez shook her head with a smile.

Pablo looked at her, chuckling. "Hey, your partner's getting bored and hungry. I'll e-mail you some info later."

“Thanks,” Chan said, and brought their food to a nearby booth. They both sat and started eating. The burritos were delicious as usual. Chan wondered what Pablo’s secret recipe was.

“Sorry to keep you waiting like that,” he said to Villagomez. “Got carried away. You know me.”

Villagomez smiled and giggled. “That’s okay. I’ve gotten used to it.”

“So, looks like we’re definitely dealing with a novice here. Killer’s first mistake was putting a chair near the victim that was too short to even reach the fan.”

Villagomez nodded, putting down her burrito. “Seems like the killer didn’t know a lot about Alfred’s character to know what to say in the suicide note. It was very clichéd and superficial. Warren confirmed that he had a bright future in bodybuilding. That he was active with his support group. Heck, that brochure was very informative and eye opening. He obviously put a lot of work into it.”

“Right. And he was working very hard with Warren on the deck,” Chan said, drinking some Coke. He shrugged. “Maybe the killer didn’t like him because he was developmentally disabled.”

“That’s a possibility.”

“I’m still bothered by the fact that nobody heard that struggle. C’mon, a vase shattering on a solid hardwood floor? A large bookshelf falling over? And no cries for help? I don’t buy it.”

“You think Alfred knew the killer? Maybe that would explain the absence of forced entry,” Villagomez said, taking another bite from her burrito.

“That’s a possibility, too.”

Iron Works Gym was located on Brannan Street, near the Caltrain station. It was now close to eight at night and people were still coming home from work in San Jose. Train after train pulled into the platforms to unload feet weary, exhausted workers like slaughterhouse cattle. The inspectors walked into the medium-sized gym with its free weights on the left near a wall of full-length mirrors, and its Nautilus equipment on the right. Yes, there was definitely a gym culture like there was a bar culture and a car culture. Villagomez used to belong to a pick-up spot like this, where guys ogled you in the mirror and always asked whether you needed help with this and that machine. After a while

she got tired of it and joined a gym that had separate facilities for men and women. It felt more comfortable there, she thought. Which reminded her, she made a mental note to herself to try to work out sometime this week.

Chan remembered when Iron Works used to be exclusively a gym for bodybuilders. He used to see ads in the paper for it all the time. But then a few years ago, the original owner died in a freak car accident here in the city and the place was immediately bought by a yuppie businessman from the east coast who envisioned a more diverse fitness environment. And so membership started opening up to families and seniors. Oh, some of the original hardcore bodybuilders still worked out here but they just avoided the new owner.

One of them moaned aloud now as he attempted to do one more repetition on the bench press. A white man with a bald head and a brawny physique stood nearby, spotting him. Chan figured he was lifting close to three hundred and twenty pounds, and that included the bar. Three plates of forty-five pounds on each side of it. He remembered trying this once and the bar almost landed on his face. Plastic surgeons weren’t cheap nowadays.

The man on the bench groaned even louder, pushing with all his might. One of the veins in his neck bulged out, and beads of sweat trickled down his arms. The whole gym was silent and motionless now as everyone watched to see if he could complete this last rep.

“C’mon, now, give me all you got. C’mon,” the bald man told him. “No wimps allowed here. Only real men.”

Villagomez chuckled at the comment.

The man’s grip on the bar slipped a little due to the sweat and it dropped down a few inches. The bald guy was right there, his hands supporting the bar, letting go when it seemed like the man was regaining strength again.

“Looking good, Russ,” he said. “C’mon, keep going. Remember, no mama’s boys here.”

Russ’s deafening groan knifed through the silence of the gym as he gave an extra push and was able to place the bar back on the support rods. Everyone cheered like he had scored the winning touchdown for a football game.



"I'd like to see you do that," Villagomez told Chan, nudging him in the ribs gently with her elbow.

"You know a good plastic surgeon?" he replied.

"What?" she asked, a puzzled expression on her face.

The inspectors walked over to the registration desk near the front door and asked a young black man if a guy named Stan Castillo was around. He pointed to a Latino man wearing a blue Iron Works Gym t-shirt standing near one of the Nautilus machines, clipboard in his hand. The cops thanked him and approached Castillo. He was about thirty-three, thirty-four, around there, with long, wavy black hair and a five o'clock shadow, laughing at something a woman on the machine said.

"Stan Castillo?" Chan asked.

Castillo stopped writing on the clipboard, turning to them. "Yeah, that's me."

The inspectors flashed their badges.

"I'm Inspector Chan," Chan said. "My partner, Inspector Villagomez. We spoke earlier."

"Oh, that's right," he said, extending his hand to the both of them. They both shook it. Castillo turned back to the woman and said, "Just keep breathing in and out the way I taught you, okay, June? I'll be back."

"Let's talk someplace more private," Castillo said to the cops, leading them down a hallway at the back of the gym towards a red door. They went through it to the parking lot outside, crossed it, and arrived at a small bar called Destination Unknown.

Interesting choice, Villagomez thought, looking at the neon colored spaceships and bug-eyed aliens on the dark walls. Framed posters of sci-fi movies hung above the pin ball machines near the door. A few punk rockers with dyed hair sat at the bar, talking to the bartender.

They grabbed a table and ordered some non-alcoholic drinks from the waitress who was dressed in a fluorescent yellow space suit.

"Great dress code here," Chan said. "Too bad we can't wear something like that to work, huh, Amy?"

"So, Mr. Castillo, you were Alfred's personal trainer?" Villagomez asked.

"Uh-huh," he said, nodding, and took a heavy sigh. "Jeez, when you called earlier and told me what happened, my jaw just dropped open. It was like, what the hell? You know? Alfred dead? Unfucking believable. Excuse my Spanish ... it's so weird ... Alfred and

I formed a very tight relationship. He saw me as his trainer and mentor, someone he could tell his deepest secrets to. I trained him for all the championships he won ... we spent a lot of time together perfecting his physique, usually staying till closing time at the gym. Afterwards, I would always give him a ride back home," he said, pausing a moment to think. "There were times where I thought he was doing just great but he would think totally the opposite and push himself to the max on certain routines. Like trying to do more reps or lifting a heavier weight."

"Did he ever tell you he was having suicidal thoughts?"

"No, never. That's what surprised me when you told me you found him hanging from the ceiling. Never in a million years would I think he would take his own life ... that just wasn't him, you know? Al had a very positive outlook on his bodybuilding career, on his part-time job at the children's recreational center, on his support group ... he was always interested in learning new challenges and was happy from relationships he formed with people." Castillo sighed again. "And you say the suicide was staged?"

"Yes, that's how it appears," Chan said.

Their drinks arrived, and Castillo started drinking some Calistoga mineral water.

"That's very disturbing, that someone would do that," he said, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Alfred tell you about any enemies he had?"

Castillo put down the Calistoga, still thinking. "He never mentioned any names but he said he felt like he had been followed home several times from work."

"He give you a description of how the person following him looked like?"

"No. I suppose I should've asked him more about it but he said it stopped happening after a while."

"Do you know if someone didn't like him because he was developmentally disabled?"

"No. Everyone loved him, especially the guys at the gym."

Villagomez wrote in her notebook, then looked up at him again. "Do you know if he received any threatening letters or phone calls?"

"I don't recall him telling me about any. Al did mention this woman he was seeing though," Castillo said, drinking some more mineral water. There was a



moment of silence as he cleared his throat. "A personal trainer that works at the gym."

"What's her name?" Villagomez asked.

"Anne Giovanni. She's a bodybuilder, too."

"How close were they?"

"Very close ... they were having sex quite a lot," he said, clearing his throat again. "The relationship was so intense that he sometimes skipped out on work outs. I would call him at home and his uncle would tell me he was at her place. Said he wouldn't be home for two or three days occasionally ... and when I finally was able to get ahold of him, he would just talk about how great the sex was, and get into explicit detail of the things they were doing ... it got pretty wild. He told me how he lied by calling in sick to work once in a while and would instead spend hours in bed with her." Castillo shook his head. "I tried talking some sense to him but it was like he was on drugs. And you know what the best part of this whole story is?"

"What?" Chan asked.

"She's already engaged."

It was a warm night.

The inspectors had their windows open as they drove to the apartment of Anne Giovanni which was on Filbert Street in the North Beach District. North Beach was the Italian section of the city, well-known for its tourist attractions such as Fisherman's Wharf, Pier 39, Coit Tower, and Lombard Street (the infamous crooked street). Columbus Avenue, the neighborhood's main thoroughfare, was home to many classy Italian restaurants and shops. One could literally get a watery mouth by smelling the garlic filled aromas as they walked down it.

The two-bedroom apartment Giovanni shared with her roommate was on the fourth floor and had a nice view of the bay. Her roommate wasn't home. Maybe that was a godsend because the place was a pigsty. Bras, panties, and other clothing were strewn all over the carpet. Chan saw a cat nibbling on a tampon that was resting near the wheel of a bicycle. A bowl of leftover spaghetti and meatballs was sitting on an end table, flies hovering over it. Lying on the nearby coffee table was a cold, plastic looking slice of pepperoni pizza that had numerous mold spots on it. Bodybuilding magazines and books on health and fitness were scattered next to it.

A surfboard was leaning against the wall near the open doorway of one of the bedrooms. Villagomez wondered when she herself would have the time to don the wet suit and hit the waves again. A trip down to Santa Cruz seemed in order. Get away from this concrete jungle, she thought. Through the door, she noticed a futon mattress on the floor, the sheets on top of it tousled. A pair of men's boxer shorts was on one of the pillows.

Giovanni was a big Italian woman, around five feet eight, five feet nine inches tall, with shoulder length hair that was dark brown and curly. She had a healthy tanned complexion that blended well with her exotic Mediterranean features. She wore a Grateful Dead tank top and *very* short red shorts. Standing barefoot. Her hands and feet both large. Chan couldn't get over how muscular her thighs and calves were, as well as her arms. Alfred definitely got his work outs, all right, he thought. He figured her to be around his age, late twenties.

Chan noticed she was staring at him.

"Why don't you guys grab a seat on the couch?" she asked, gesturing towards it. "Sorry about the mess." She went over to it and cleared some space by throwing aside some newspapers, a pair of Birkenstocks, some empty soda cans, and several videotapes. Chan almost tripped on a volleyball as he made his way to the couch. The cops sat down. Giovanni sat on a black leather swivel chair next to them, crossing those tanned, muscular legs. Doing it slowly, her red shorts pressing tightly against her thighs.

She sighed heavily. "It's a tragedy what happened to Al ... but him taking his own life? No, I don't think so. He never told me about feeling suicidal ... he was so vibrant and full of life whenever we were together." Rolling her eyes heavenward when she said it. "And had an incredible sense of humor, could always make me laugh."

"He ever tell you he was being followed home from work?" Chan asked.

Giovanni shook her head. "No."

"Do you know if anyone had a grudge against him? That wanted him dead?"

She thought about it. "If someone did, he never told me."

"Alfred never told you of any trouble he was having lately?" Villagomez asked.

“No.”

“Did he tell you he was ever harassed or picked on because he was developmentally disabled?”

She shook her head again. “No ... with me that wasn’t really an issue, his disability. I saw him as a normal person just like everyone else. He did tell me of discrimination and prejudice that he experienced in the past, but nothing recently.”

Like at the Gunther home, Chan saw bodybuilding trophies and awards on a bookshelf near the kitchen. And of course, there were great shots of Giovanni in varied poses, strutting her stuff.

“We understand that you’re engaged,” Chan said.

“So?” Giovanni asked, a bit defensive.

“So it was acceptable for you to have an affair with someone even when you’re about to be married?”

“Happens all the time.”

“Who are you getting married to?”

“I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

“Since we’re dealing with a homicide here, it definitely is, Miss Giovanni,” Chan said firmly. “Your fiancée could’ve found out about your little fling with Al and had bloody murder in mind, wouldn’t you agree?”

Giovanni sighed heavily and turned away from them, uncrossing her legs. A moment of silence ensued as she sat there, a perturbed look on her face. “... His name’s Jeff, Jeff Emery,” she said finally.

“Did he know about what was going on?” Villagomez asked.

She sighed again. “Yes, he did ... we weren’t very discreet about everything, you know.”

Villagomez nodded. “Did he say he was going to kill Alfred?”

“Yes, a few times ... he was obviously angry at me, too, and threatened to hurt me as well. You see, I wanted to break off our engagement but he wouldn’t hear of it. He was very determined that we would be living together. I started having second thoughts about marriage, felt that I wasn’t really ready for such a strong commitment ... I liked the idea of experimenting sexually with other men. There was another guy besides Al that I was seeing. I was more careful with that one ... Jeff didn’t even like me going out with my male friends. He wanted to approve who I saw and spoke to.”

“Do you know where he was around eleven this morning?” Villagomez asked.

“No.”

It was dark out at Ocean Beach.

Most of the sun worshippers who had come out earlier today with their towels, umbrellas, beach balls, and sun screen were long gone now. The few remaining could be seen jogging along the water or playing Frisbee. Villagomez could even spot a couple making out as her eyes got adjusted to the darkness.

They had parked their departmental sedan in the near empty parking lot that faced the beach and walked along the sidewalk. It was definitely less warmer than it was further inland although the cool wind was still dry. Chan heard one of the men playing Frisbee laugh as he missed a catch. Somewhere else, a woman moaned. Villagomez knew where that came from. She looked at the low silver waves coming in, imagining herself riding on one of them on her board. Feeling the adrenaline rush as the wind and water carried her down. Taste the salt water on her lips.

Chan was thinking about where he could get a good deal on the bat cave set. He hoped Pablo wouldn’t forget to e-mail him.

They walked along the concrete seawall that separated the sidewalk from the beach for another seven minutes, keeping an eye out for Jeff Emery. Giovanni told them that he usually took his dog out for a walk down here around this time. A few more joggers and bicyclists passed by them under the glow of the streetlights. The wind seemed to be picking up a bit.

Ten minutes later, they saw the same bald headed white man they saw at Iron Works Gym, approaching them with a golden retriever on a leash. He seemed about five to ten years older than Giovanni, Chan guessed, and was around six feet one or two, long, powerful arms dangling at his sides like a Neanderthal. Wearing a red San Francisco 49ers shirt and sweat pants. He had a mustache like a walrus’s.

When he got closer, the inspectors flashed their badges and introduced themselves.

“Like to ask you a few questions about Alfred Gunther,” Villagomez said. “He was murdered earlier this morning.”

Emery’s face remained impassive. Not a hint of shock or sadness on it.

“That’s too bad,” he said, sounding like he didn’t really mean it.

“We know you threatened to kill him,” she said, going straight for the jugular. “That you knew about the affair he had with Anne Giovanni.”

His face started turning red with anger. The retriever at his side scratched himself and sat down, a bored look on his face.

"I threatened him, yes. Kill him? No, I know my limits," Emery said. "Even though I was steaming from the fact that they were screwing each other blind, I controlled myself."

"Controlling to the point where you didn't like it when Miss Giovanni went out with her male friends. That you wanted to approve of who she saw when she wasn't with you. Boy, I'm glad I'm not your fiancée," Villagomez said.

"That was just me, Miss," he said. "If she didn't like that, there were plenty of other guys out there." He shrugged. "But, I thought she had agreed to my rules. I didn't know she felt differently."

"Is that why you wouldn't let her get out of the relationship?" Chan asked. "Because you're starting to sound like a feminist all of a sudden."

Emery stared at him. "Hey, she had a choice, okay? Don't make a big fucking deal out of it ... but I thought she was my woman, you know? I thought she loved me." He shook his head. "When I found out what was going on ... shit, you're a guy. You understand, don't you? Wouldn't you be pissed if you knew your girl was sleeping around?"

Chan knew he would be pissed but didn't say it.

Villagomez knew she would be pissed, too, if it was vice versa.

"Where were you around eleven this morning, Mr. Emery?" Villagomez asked.

He briefly turned to look at the waves coming in on the beach. A dog was barking in the distance. That made his retriever turn his head immediately. Ears pointed up.

"I've got nothing to hide," he said. "I was at a doctor's appointment."

"Who can corroborate that?"

"A couple of nurses and my doctor."

"What's his name?"

The next morning, Chan called Emery's physician, Dr. Cooper, and he and a few of the nurses confirmed Emery's presence at his office during the time of the homicide. But that still didn't mean he didn't kill Gunther. It just showed the odds were in his favor now.

The lab results on the fingerprints taken from the crime scene didn't arrive till later that afternoon, after Chan and Villagomez had come back from lunch. The report stated that there were no prints on the suicide note, the rope that was around Gunther's neck, and Gunther's neck itself. Prints from the chair, ladder, pens, the ceiling fan, bookshelf (including books and magazines that had fallen off of it), and vase all belonged to him.

They had been to the autopsy earlier in the morning. Nothing spectacular. They had seen ones like it hundreds of times before. Marshall had shown them how the neck was broken. No puncture wounds on the body. Bruise on the left forearm, right shoulder, and abdomen.

The weather outside was nothing short of gorgeous, clear blue skies and plenty of sunshine, as the inspectors headed back to the Gunther home. Hitting close to ninety-five on the thermometer. The forecasters said that it was supposed to be even hotter this weekend. Expect those beaches to be packed, Villagomez thought.

"Hey, you wanna go to the beach with me this weekend?" she suddenly asked Chan, who was behind the wheel, making a right on 19<sup>th</sup> Street. He parked behind a truck and they got out, approaching the front door.

"Sure, that sounds fun," he replied, smiling. "Am I going to watch you surf?"

"No, I thought I would teach you."

"Let me think about it."

"C'mon, you told me you love new challenges. This will be one of them. We can make it a weekend affair, spend a night in Santa Cruz. Maybe go to Monterey, too."

"Okay, now you got me hooked," he said, ringing the doorbell. "We'll get into the finer details later, all right?"

The door was opened a few seconds later by Warren Gunther, who simply nodded at them with a friendly smile. "Hello," he said, gesturing them inside.

"Thanks for letting us come by again," Chan said. "We just wanted to take another look around Alfred's room. We won't be long."

"Take your time."

Chan and Villagomez went to the bedroom door, signed the roster tacked on the wall, and slit the crime scene seals on the door before going in. The cops put on latex gloves as they started a fresh sweep of the

place. Nothing had been touched since they were here yesterday. A bit stuffy now with the window closed. Chan looked at the ceiling fan before approaching the nightstand and looked through the drawers. There was a stack of *Playboy* magazines in the bottom one, along with some condoms. A book on different sexual positions was next to that.

Villagomez looked around the desk, looking under the blotter, then through the drawers. Nothing. Then she emptied the contents of the waste paper basket on the hardwood floor and sifted through it. Nothing but beautiful garbage, she thought. A piece of chewed gum, few department store receipts, a broken pencil, crumpled pieces of paper (nothing significant written on them), an old comic book, and an issue of a bodybuilding magazine. She fanned out the comic book and magazine but nothing was stuck inside either item.

Chan was done with the nightstand and was now looking through the closet. He took out a shoe box and rummaged through it. Nothing but old letters and postcards. A second shoe box contained the same thing. He stopped abruptly at a letter that was from Warren to Alfred. Something about the type caught his eye ... it looked familiar ... he took out a copy of the suicide note from his notebook and compared them. They both appeared to be typed using the same typewriter. Same distinct type with certain letters that were faded, especially the T's, S's, M's, and D's. Chan shook his head, wondering how they could have overlooked something as obvious and simple as this before.

"Hey, check this out," he said to Villagomez.

Gunther was in the backyard hammering a nail into a 2X4 wood board. The board was another piece that was slowly starting to fill an empty gap on the floor of the wooden deck. When he nailed that in he grabbed another one and started hammering it in at a spot directly across from the previous one. He looked up from his work as soon as he saw the inspectors appear at the sliding glass door that led out to the deck. Pushing his glasses up his nose, he took out his handkerchief from his pants pocket and wiped his sweaty face.

"Nice job," Chan said, stepping out onto the deck with Villagomez.

"Thanks. Took us a while to get this far. Al was really dedicated to it ... " he said, trailing off, staring into space. "I can't get used to the fact that he's not here helping, you know?"

Chan showed him the letter. "This look familiar?"

Gunther squinted in the sunlight, putting his hand over his eyes to get a better look. He got up, staring silently at the letter for a long time. "Guess there's no beating around the bush now, is there?" he asked, his voice eerie and quiet all of a sudden.

"Afraid not. Why don't you put down the hammer, Mr. Gunther?" Chan asked, looking at the hammer in his large hand. It looked like a toy compared to it. Chan imagined Gunther's huge hands around Alfred's neck. Could've probably snapped it like a twig, he thought.

Gunther didn't respond, his hand still firmly grasped on the hammer. He suddenly lunged at Chan, swinging it at him, but luckily, he was able to step out of the way in time to avoid the blow. Gunther swung madly again like a wild pit bull and almost nicked him on the right ear. A crazed look was on his face, eyes bulging out of his sockets like he was just released from an insane asylum. When he came at Chan again, Chan stepped out of the way like before and tripped him, causing him to drop the hammer. He fought for it viciously but Chan stomped on his hand and kicked him hard in the face, sending his eyeglasses flying over the railing of the deck. Gunther screamed in pain, lying in a small pool of his own blood. His nose appeared broken.

"Motherfucking pig!" he yelled, clutching onto his nose. Blood oozed between his fingers. "You're gonna die--"

"Shut the fuck up, uncle," Chan said, and read him his rights.

Gunther sat at the long interrogation table later, his nose bandaged up. There were some mean bruises on his hand and face, and he had on a pair of spare glasses. Chan and Villagomez sat on both sides of him. Gunther had been read his rights again and the tape recorder was ready to capture his words.

"... I was that other guy Anne was seeing," he told them. "Alfred didn't know about it ... she was something special all right." Gunther smiled just thinking about it, wetting his lips. "We had been seeing each



other for about a year before she met Al. I told her I couldn't lose her, not to Al, not to that fiancée of hers, or anybody else ... I said to her I was going to be her future man ... I mean, look at her. Isn't she something? Gorgeous muscular body like that. All tanned. God, she held me breathless." He shook his head. "She didn't deserve Al. As much as I loved him, and I honestly did, like he was my own son, he just wasn't for her. He wasn't normal. He wasn't like you or me, you know? Now call me prejudiced or whatever, that's fine. But that's how I felt about it. I'm not saying all developmentally disabled people should be extermi-

nated or anything, I'm just saying he had no business being with her. He wanted a woman, he should've sought one that was like him, that was also DD."

Gunther sighed. "I told him that numerous times but he wouldn't listen. Kept telling me stories about how he had crushes on normal women at the gym he wouldn't of had a chance in hell with ... and I knew he wouldn't let go of Anne. She told me how obsessed he had gotten with her."

"Who said you could play matchmaker?" Villagomez asked, giving him an icy stare.

## THE END

*The author would like to thank Detective Joe Sanchez and Dr. Thomas Rogers for their technical assistance.*



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back in 1992 marked only the third time any of his poetry had been accepted and published. When I first conceived ESC! Magazine, I was determined that it would be a magazine that caters to the new writer – someone who had not been published yet or someone who could use an additional writing credit on their resume. With the publication of Volume 1, Number 4 of ESC! Magazine, Mr. Chaffin got that credit.

Jennifer Parker made a rather appropriate comment in regards to this: *“I am published, and no, it doesn’t mean I’m a great poet. It means I beat some pretty terrific odds, odds that better poets everywhere are still fighting. I envy the ones who really don’t care.”*

And there are quite a few who don’t care. Those who don’t make publication their ultimate goal and write poetry (or fiction) simply for the sake of writing and putting their emotions down on paper. For many it is simply a means of catharsis.

### **Does Publication in ESC! Magazine Imply Good Writing OR “It Appears To Mean The Magazine Has Low Standards?”**

If wanting to publish the works of those who have not been published before or simply want to be heard is considered low standards then I guess, yes, by that definition ESC! Magazine may have low standards. I am not so pretentious as to think that I, and only I, can determine what is ‘great’ writing.

What many in the rec.arts.poems group back in 1993 seem to have forgotten is their first work. The first piece of poetry they truly wanted to share with the world. No doubt the more arrogant members of the group also forgot the looks on the faces of those their first poem was shown to. Not everybody can or will ever compose poetry the likes of Emily Dickinson – but by contrast, not everybody (some of my past English professors included) thinks Emily Dickinson is a great poet and, yet, she’s been published – even though it may not have been her ultimate goal.

I believe Ms. Nancy Howells helps to make my point when she wrote: *“Having been raised in the arts, it has become increasingly clear to me over the years that that which is considered ‘good’ or even ‘great’ by some people is considered ‘bullshit’ by others — that’s called taste, good, bad, or merely indifferent. And the same goes with publishers and publishing, and so on and so forth. Every publishing house has a personality, and each one goes after a different market.”*

### **Does Size Matter?**

For those who make publication their goal, the question comes up – does the size (read circulation) of the publication matter? How about the format?

Marek raises this point: *“most of these poetry thingees have a circulation from 50 to hundreds! [ESC! Magazine falls in this range] I reach many more people on rap [rec.arts.poems], and when Wojdylo and Zeleny drag me out onto multiple newsgroups, why, we are talking world exposure.”* He then goes on to say: *“Publishing? Sure? At esc! magazine(sic) circulation 100? ...not!”* Well, at least I can thank him for remembering the exclamation point!

Countering that, a Mr. Westover then says: *“‘Publishing’ on the net does not necessarily require any discipline in the writing, It makes all things ‘art.’ I find that notion somewhat unsettling.”*

So we’ve got one guy saying that publishing his work on the internet gets him read by more people than he could ever hope to be read in print and another saying sure but is it art? Mr. Westover also implies that you may be more widely read on the internet, but the writers are also more likely to be undisciplined.

As most of you know, in addition to print, ESC! is also now available for download from the website to a potential market of millions. By Marek’s definition I should now have a circulation many hundreds or thousands of times greater than I ever had before but, unfortunately, this is not yet true. When I distributed solely as a print magazine, I hand delivered (or mailed) copies to local bookstores and more often than not sold them on consignment. This meant I always had an accurate count of the number of issues sold. Yes, ESC! is a magazine with circulation in the hundreds, but I always felt that this made ESC! more intimate and more accessible. I feel to this day that the target audience of ESC! Magazine appreciates my efforts.

*Continues ...*

**ESC! News:** In the “Where Are They Now?” category, ESC! Alumnus **Ryan G. VanCleave** is currently the Anastasia C. Hoffman Poetry Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Institute for Creative Writing. Ryan earned his Ph.D in English (poetry) in May 2001 from Florida State University. *Ryan made his ESC! Magazine debut in 1992. His poetry has appeared in ESC! Magazine four times (v1n2, v1n3 (2) and v2n2).*

As for whether it's art or not, that's certainly a good point. I'm not a big fan of the web sites or magazines that overload the page with art and then present the poem amongst all that noise. It distracts from the real reason you're viewing that page – to read the poetry. But that's not what Mr. Westover meant by "art" is it? So we've come full circle to the notion of "If it's published, is it any good?"

#### **"Mousenuts!"**

*"The audience one reaches on usenet is likely quite a bit larger than most of the mousenuts magazines that one is likely to get published in. If you are writing for an audience, you might as well put it on the net and let the audience find you since there is little or no money in poetry anyway."* So says 'Doug.'

I like the phrase 'mousenuts' and I don't think 'Doug' necessarily meant it as an insult – at least I don't take it as one and the writers featured in this magazine shouldn't either. 'Mousenuts' really does describe ESC! Magazine and others of its ilk. I would argue that some are certainly more 'mousenuts' than others. I cringe when I walk into a Tower Records and see row upon row of photocopied and stapled-in-the-corner 'zines waiting to be picked up and read by those who dare pass by the "body modifi-

cation/mutilation" section of the magazine racks. I have a hard time with the term 'Zine because 'zines typically fall into more of the "vanity press" category. ESC! Magazine is a literary magazine, but not a literary magazine for my own work. ESC! is a quality literary magazine which publishes the works of other aspiring writers and artists. ESC! Magazine could be described as, I suppose, a 'mousenuts' magazine for 'mousenuts' writers.

Mousenuts or not, ESC! Magazine gives the contributor something tangible to pass around. Something the writer can show to friends and loved ones and say "Look! Someone else likes what I do ... someone else likes what I write."

ESC! Magazine's goal is to provide an extra boost to that fledgling writer – a boost that encourages them to write again, to submit again and to wait again ... to wait for the day that their next acceptance letter arrives. To wait knowing that they are not alone in the world and that someone else is listening.

See you next issue.



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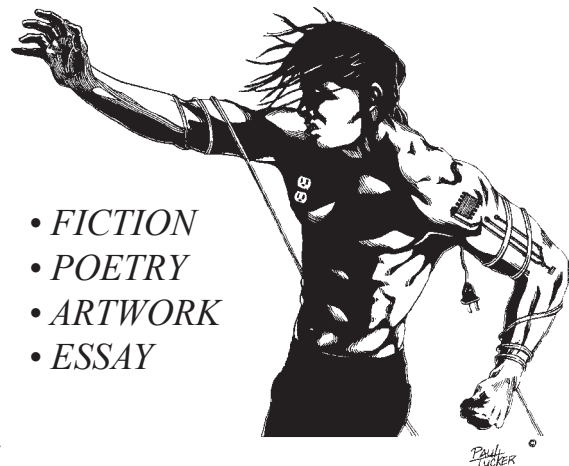
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