

ESCI!

For Aspiring Writers and Artists

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Miriam Lee & Bob Potocki

Also Featured:

Joyce Bradshaw's "The Wanderers" part 3

PLUS! An All New VEX by: Paul Tucker



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by Paul B. Tucker

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Extending the ESC! Community

an editorial by



Michael R. Potter
Publisher

In a way, ESC! Magazine has always been about charting new territory. Primarily for our authors, of course, but definitely for the magazine as well. How so? Well, while caught up in the spirit of providing an outlet for under-published writers, we've grown from an independently produced magazine with little in-store presence and a meager subscription base, to a magazine with a worldwide audience by journeying across the oceans and into the homes of ... thousands? ... through the ever-magical and omnipresent Internet. With billions of bits flying around the globe each second, we've been lucky enough to have bits, in the form of ESC! Magazine, find their way to the screens of those who in any other time would scarcely know of our existence yet, through search engines such as Google and pleasant word of mouth, are able to read the works of writers such as Joyce Bradshaw, Cindy Potocki and Paul Tucker to name just a few ... and that is very cool!

Using detailed logs from our web server, I can tell whether a copy of ESC! was downloaded from Boise or from Stockholm, but that's all I know. I don't know who you are, the town you live in or whether you think this issue is great or a pile of horse manure. In order to get that sort of feedback, it's long been a dream of mine to create an online community for the readers of ESC! Magazine. A place where you can post questions or comments about ESC! or about your writing and the writing of others. A place where you can communicate and bond with aspiring writers like yourself as well as seasoned writers who have life lessons learned they are willing to share about writing and the publishing world in general. With ESC! being read in all corners of the world (and thanks to a wonderful new software package named MegaBBS) it seemed the time was ripe to attempt to gather our far flung readers into one place by forming a new community of writers, for writers. I've hinted at this in issues past, but as of October 12th, I can now proudly announce a new **website** offering all of that and more. This community is named ... **The ESC! Forums** (www.escwebs.com/escforums).

When you visit The ESC! Forums, you'll find it divided into three main sections: **The Writing Life**, **The Reading Lounge** and **ESC! Magazine**. Each of these sections offers a slightly different perspective on our world whether it be as the creator, the consumer or the information seeker. In this article I hope to give you just a little insight into each before setting you free to explore on your own.

The Writing Life

As an aspiring writer, you may often find yourself seeking out new markets or new resources for inspiration, or you may have found a new website or book you think other writers could benefit from. You may have even found a great new market friendly to freshman writers. The Writing Life is where you can trade those tidbits with others.

Currently The Writing Life is broken down into six forums: *The Writing Experience*; *Writer's Block*; *Writer's Resources*; *Writer's Markets*; *Small Press Announcements* and *Other Literary News*.

Continued on page 26

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!" ESC! Magazine is proud to have a long association with such a talented illustrator.



Tosh may be reached at: kohomat@earthlink.net

Joyce G. Bradshaw: Joyce has based her trilogy, "The Wanderers" on real life experiences. In her younger years, she spent many summers on Cape Cod and in New York City. She has also hiked part of the Appalachian Trail. The main characters in the story are take-offs on her very handsome and intelligent grandson, Erik, and a marvelous stray dog named Jonah, who became an important part of her life in Texas. All the action in the trilogy is in sync with real-life personalities.

Miriam Lee: Miriam Lee always had an active imagination. As a child growing up in Downey, California, she would not go to sleep at night until she had imagined an entire story from beginning to end. These were the first signs of her innate desire to write. In her teenage years she started her first book. In her mid-twenties, Miriam wrote several stories. ESC! Magazine published her first science fiction short story, *The Friends of Addie Smith*. Her first novel *Deadly Probe* was published in February of 1999. *Masquerade Journey* was published in April of 2000 and *Faceless Enemy* debuted in Spring of 2001, copies of which can be purchased on her website at www.mysteryromance.com. Miriam may be reached at: sherlock@mysteryromance.com



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



Bob Potocki: Bob has been a movie critic for several midwestern newspapers including the Kane County Chronicle. In addition to movie critic, Bob also was an art critic for the Indiana Times news chain, wrote articles on travel for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and some special articles about Navy Pier for the Indianapolis Star. Bob has written several plays, and is currently collaborating on a musical called "Encore."

Cindy Potocki: Cindy is a 2003 graduate of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She majored in English and spent one semester in London as an International exchange student. Her hope is to eventually work in the publishing business as an editor. Though only 22, Cindy has already been published. Her short story "Girl from the Via Dolorosa" was her first success. Cindy is the daughter of Bob Potocki, whose short stories have appeared in ESC! Magazine.

Guy R. Qualls: Guy was hatched somewhere south of Oklahoma and west of Arkansas. He now mostly resides north of there. His usual hangouts are unknown. He is of a solid build and has hair. There have been reports of his works appearing in ESC! Magazine since its rebirth on the internet (ESC! is now under investigation of harboring fugitives of common sense). He has been described as having an discomposingly realistic view in his poetry and brilliant in wit and stature. None of this has been verified and the credibility of the source is suspect. All parties should be on the lookout for a large frame male weighing 250 pounds or more and standing over 6 feet tall - Guy will either be hiding behind him or his own words. You will be able to catch his works in ESC! as long as the editors need to fill space. Guy would like everyone to know that his work is always meant to be read by the heart, interpreted without intentions and felt in the soul. Please enjoy and Share. E-mail Guy at: void@literalsolutions.net.

Paul B. Tucker: Paul's work has graced many covers of ESC! Magazine including the Premier issue back in 1992. Paul also designed the logos for ESC! Magazine and ESC! Publications. After suffering from repeat nervous breakdowns, Paul recently relocated to a one-hundred year old home in his hometown of Kewanee, IL. Judged clinically insane by top psychiatric professionals, he lapses in and out of reality. During those few moments of coherence, he illustrates and paints in his dark gothic home studio. Paul may be reached at: paullyt2000@yahoo.com.



:: Cindy Potocki ::

Diary of a Quarter Life Crisis

So there I was, finally, a college graduate. All my dreams had come true. Well, all right, not exactly. I was twenty-two years old, unemployed, living with my parents, and beginning to form a very intimate relationship with my sweatpants. Needless to say, this was not the high-powered career driven post-college existence that I had imagined. All of my friends had “real” jobs and boyfriends and the like, and I had not seen the shower in days. Things being as they were, I did what any sensible English major would: I sat down to write the Great American Novel. When this endeavor failed, I settled my sights upon the Great American Bodice Ripper. After two weeks of attempting to write poor dialogue that would appeal to spinsters with too many cats, I gave up. I gave up partially (or so I told my friends) because I did not want to “whore myself out” to sub-par literature, and partially because my keyboard had begun to stick due to all of the Mallomars with which it had been under siege during the past two weeks.

So that is how I found myself on my parents’ couch, in my sweatpants (at least I was able to make some sort of commitment) surrounded by tissues, having a minor mental break down. My parents started to call it my “Quarter Life Crisis”, thus giving it validity and, at the same time (as tends to happen when parents name things ala Dr. Spock) extremely annoying. I decided that I needed to do something, and quickly. I needed to make a meaningful commitment to something that was not an overpriced piece of cotton from Abercrombie. I would start anew. I would (eww) start with a shower.

* * *

“How would I be an asset to your company? Well, I am a cheerful and hardworking. I have many skills. I am computer literate. I graduated from a Big-Ten University with honors. I am dependable”

“Why do I want to be an editor? I have a deep love for the English language. I can spot a spelling error from a mile away. I am committed to journalistic integrity.”

“Why do I want to work in advertising? I committed to providing the public with honest information about products to spend their hard earned dollar on.”

“Why am I interested in the manufacture of car parts? Well, I’ve always loved cars. Oh, and, yes manufacturing.”

“Why do I want to work at Starbucks? I drink a lot of coffee; I mean a lot of coffee. You might go so far as to say that coffee is my passion.”

That is how the job search started, and I might add, ended. Apparently, my degree from the University-in-the-town-with-too-many-bars did not qualify me to work at Starbucks. My honors

classes had evidently not instilled me with enough “team-spirit”. I was too jaded for Starbucks, or perhaps under-caffeinated. I began to toy with the idea of padding my resume with comments from my kindergarten teachers: “Works well with others”, “Plays well in a group”.

So, two months after my parents began shame-facedly telling their friends that I was “finding” myself when asked about my job prospects, I was still unemployed. Surrounded by penned-up classifieds, used Bics and cups of Starbucks coffee (The boycott only lasted three days before I caved), but still unemployed. It had started looking as if the job search was going in the same direction as *The Great American Bodice Ripper* and *The Great American Novel* that had preceded it (although by this time I had, thankfully, kicked the Mallomar habit).

My only solace came from my gainfully employed friends. We would go out to bars (only on the weekends, of course) and they would order martinis and glasses of white wine while I would guzzle cheap

beer. I would tell anecdotes (many of which were made up) about my nearly non-existent job search while they would babble on about their “real jobs” as assistant-banker-to-the-cabinet-of-ministers-who-made-very-important-business-deals and such. During these long speeches about almost misplaced zeros (which would always get a hearty laugh from my other boring-working-friends), I spent a great deal of time pondering the health and well-being of my cuticles (hmmm...could use another manicure). Despite their boring-job-stories and even more annoying boring-boyfriend-stories, they were a great source of comfort to me. They convinced me, although unintentionally, that work would not complete me in the way that I hoped it would. Despite making me feel better, this opened up a whole new can of worms. If I wasn’t interested in jobs like theirs, what was I interested in? When it came time to live, I wanted to live out loud. A hundred thousand dollars and a degree later it looked like the question was still the same: “how?”

- END -

Flying kites

When I opened the drawer,
I saw the map of the world.
I laid it open on the table
and looked at all the colours.
The legend said that green was for plains,
blue for oceans, brown for mountains,
and yellow for deserts.
I wondered why the map didn't show big cities,
high buildings with smoke on chimneys,
small people on big avenues,
crowded trains and rush hours,
workers sleeping on the way home,
and children laughing, running,
flying kites up to the sky.

**Farida
Mihoub**

Street talk

It was fun to hold dad's hand
on the high street at week-ends.
Sometimes he'd meet a friend on the way,
and chat about a few things.
They sounded like wise men
because they smiled as they talked.
I could never understand all they said.
Words like honesty, peace and freedom
were complicated to me.
I only knew that they all led to one way,
the best, dad said, less trouble and safer.

:: Joyce G. Bradshaw ::

The WANDERERS

Part 3 - Coming Full Circle

No one noticed the tall, slender young man that exited the shabby apartment house before the sun was up. Fringes of blonde hair escaped from under his tattered baseball cap. It was almost long enough to make a decent ponytail, he had considered as he gazed despondently in the bathroom mirror that morning. *But that was the old me!* he had said to the sorrowful face in front of him. *Maybe I don't even want one now.* He had laughed at the apparent change of attitude and when he slid into his jeans and they hung loosely around his hips, he had realized that his body was changing also. *I don't think city life agrees with me.* Patting his faithful hound on the head, he was struck by how white the dog's hair was turning. *It's not good for him either,* he had decided, signaling the dog to stay put on the rug by the door.

At the bottom of the apartment-house steps, Erik hesitated as though he wasn't sure which way to turn. He was due at the theater at seven sharp, but he wished it were not so. Working on the stage crew was not really that difficult (although he did tend to be pretty tired when he got back home in the evening); it was just beginning to become boring. At first – what was it now, about two and a half months already? – he enjoyed painting and arranging sets and watching the actors rehearse their lines and their stage moves. The director was more than a little brusque with him, that's true, but after all, he was only a temporary hired hand.

Only once, when one of the bit players was out sick with the flu, Erik had been half tempted to try for a part. But the director's nephew was on hand to fill in and Erik blew off the idea as foolish and unrealistic. Nevertheless, during breaks between scenes, he had stood behind the curtain, mimicking the leading man.

“Charlotte, my dear, I don't believe you have the vaguest idea what all of this means! I have been called to London to head a new department and I must remain there for at least a year. You act as though you don't give a

damn!” The actor strode across the stage and stopped in front of the female lead.

“How can you say that, darling,” she asked, tilting her head up in that tantalizing manner she had. Erik had often observed her, through the open dressing-room door, practicing different ways to appear coquettish. He knew it was all an act, but he couldn’t help wishing that she would shake her long red hair and look at *him* with that be-my-slave-and-I’ll-love-you-forever expression. “You know that I’ll miss you terribly.”

Oh, sure. Like he doesn’t know about your paramour. You’re such a liar!

“Then kiss me good-bye, dearest.....(and whispering loudly to the off-stage prompter, the actor said, “What’s my next line?”)

“Don’t pine away in my absence. I should be devastated if anything happened to you, my dear.” As the last word left his lips, Erik realized that he had spoken the line out loud. “Quiet backstage,” the director shouted. Erik stepped back, hoping not to be identified as the intruder.

Nothing had been said about the incident; but each day behind the scenes, Erik waited expectantly to be reprimanded for interfering with practice. This particular morning was no exception. As he passed silently through the alleyway door, he tried to make himself invisible. He was shaking from the cold (New York winters without a warm coat can be hazardous to one’s health) and even the coolness of the theater felt good. He did not have long to enjoy it, however. The stage manager was almost immediately on

hand to present the day’s schedule. Opening day was rapidly approaching and so the pace had picked up, along with stress levels among cast and crew. Mostly to avoid the eyes of the director, Erik went to work instantly.

It was not until mid-morning that he got a break. As was his habit, he stood at the edge of the stage, concealed by the heavy drapes, listening and watching as the actors went through their lines. *No scripts, I see. That must be tough!* Yet he continued to mouth the words of the drama’s main characters. Over the weeks of rehearsal, Erik had come to empathize with the young fellow who played the part of the personal servant to the unfaithful wife. His status as a novice made him a perfect target for the director’s often stinging criticism. Although there was only a single line of dialogue assigned to him, he couldn’t seem to do it to the producer’s satisfaction. “The gentleman is waiting for you on the terrace, madam,” he would say, as if the news was meant for everyone to hear.

*Why doesn’t he realize that she would rather not have her husband made aware of her lover’s arrival? If the truth be known, Erik had practiced that very line, many times, in front of the mirror, trying to add the necessary note of mystery that it required, *If he would just emphasize the word gentleman, then the announcement would take on more significance. And he needs to use a husked but forced tone to make it sound more secretive.**

“Get off my stage, you fool! I’ve listened to you destroy that line enough times already. No more! Call the understudy!”

The director was livid and the

casting manager was in a state of frenzy. “There is no understudy for that part, sir. We didn’t feel that it was required for so small a role.”

“Is there no one who knows what they’re doing around here? Find me someone to fill the part! And do it fast!”

Erik had been standing off stage all the while, not moving a muscle for fear the enraged director would notice him and blame the whole catastrophe on his interference. “You there! Come here!” It was the man in charge of casting. *Oh, God, he’s looking straight at me. What have I done now?* “I’ve seen you following the lines. Can you get on and off stage without tripping over your own feet?”

Erik swallowed hard. “Yes, sir. I believe I can.”

“Then be in place for your cue. Do you understand when you are supposed to enter? Don’t walk too fast and keep your eyes down and for heaven’s sake, make it sound like a secret!”

By the time Erik left the theater that evening, he was exhausted but exhilarated by the unexpected opportunity. Even though it was a “nothing” part, it was a real chance to do something worthwhile just for once. He had gone from stage-hand to actor in a matter of seconds. And he had managed to carry it off without a hitch. He took the front steps two at a time and burst through the apartment door. “Jonah, guess what happened to me today! I became an actor! And you’re an actor’s dog!”

But Jonah was nowhere in sight. Erik clapped his hands (there was no use to whistle, for the hound was almost entirely deaf) and waited for

his friend to appear in his usual fashion. No sign of him. *Where is he? He's always here to greet me when I get home.* He began frantically searching through the small rooms, a sense of panic rising up the back of his neck.

He found the dog lying on the kitchen floor a few feet from his water bowl. With his throat knotted in fear, Erik knelt beside him and lifted the hoary head into his lap. "Jonah, oh Jonah, what's wrong? Are you sick or hurt or what?" When the dog opened his eyes and looked up into his master's face, Erik broke into tears and pressed the hound's snout against his chest. "Oh, Lord, I thought you were dead."

There was little, if any, way that Erik could arrange to take Jonah to a veterinarian, so he did his best to check the dog out and to diagnose the nature of the problem. As soon as the old hound tried to stand up, the answer became obvious. Cold, damp winter conditions had tied his back haunches into tight knots. Obviously, when Jonah had attempted to cross the slippery linoleum, his hind feet had slid out from under him. Once down, the dog could not brace himself sufficiently to get up again. Erik carried his friend to the couch, wrapped him in a blanket, and sat there stroking his head.

It wasn't long before Jonah indicated his readiness to move around a bit. Erik watched him intently to make certain that nothing else was wrong. He had been extremely miserly about heating the apartment, especially during the day; but in order to help the dog recover, Erik raised the temperature. *It was the cold! That's what did it! I feel so terrible, my friend, about making you suffer. Please forgive me.*

It's all right. I understand. Jonah looked straight into his master's eyes. His answer seemed crystal clear. He licked Erik's hand slowly and tenderly, as though he knew that his friend was distraught. The young man felt his sense of guilt fade away. He relocated the dog's water bowl at the edge of the carpet, assembled food for both of them, and then the two sat together and enjoyed their light supper. (Working at the theater did not garner enough for much feasting.)

That night, Erik lay sleepless on his bed with Jonah stretched out on the blanket nearby. The two of them had come a long way together and thoughts of their travels filled their minds. Their meeting in the hills of Pennsylvania seemed like ancient history by now and their adventures since then were numerous and varied. Through it all, the two wanderers had formed a deep, close friendship and an unusual understanding of each other.

What do I do now? Erik struggled with conflicting emotions and opposing desires. He had seen the door open on a possible new career that promised recognition, if not fame and fortune. For the first time in his life, he actually had a goal in view. He didn't know if he could just give that up. *But Jonah has stood by me all this time. He came back to me when he knew that I needed him. He gave up his freedom to help me. I can't simply turn my back on him!* Erik realized that in order to give the hound any kind of comfortable last years, he must somehow move him to a better environment. New York City was not the place for the dog to be. By morning, the young man was sure of what he must do.

The trip was not easy and the two travelers were able to cover only short distances each day. But by the time the first indications of spring were visible, they had made their way out of the metropolitan area (traveling primarily by hitchhiking to save Jonah from too much walking), across New Jersey, and into the Pennsylvania farmlands. Erik had plenty of opportunity to consider his future, now that he had separated himself from the theatrical district. At first he had conceded the loss of his acting career. Nonetheless, as the days passed he began to ponder the likelihood of following his dream through off-Broadway theaters. *It could be done! Why not?*

One afternoon, the travelers dislodged themselves from the back of an old farm truck, bid the driver good-bye, and started up a long dirt road toward a stately farmhouse settled far back in a grove of tall trees. "We've come full circle, Jonah my friend. Our traveling adventures are over. Providing my aunt and uncle will have me back, we'll have a good place to live and a warm and comfortable environment in which you can live out the rest of your days."

Jonah pressed his nose into his master's hand and gave it a gentle nudge. *Whatever you decide is fine with me!*

- END -

:: Bob Potocki ::

GIFTS

The unruly bug-bear finally unleashed itself. Chained and caged for an agonizing two months made the nasty little beast vicious, hungry for revenge. So it spied it's captor, old St. Nick and decided to bite the children's hero. It mattered not that the attack would occur during a present request session. Addictions are like that, you know, uninterested in the right time, uninterested in the proper place.

Santa A.K.A. Eddie Crowder was listening with barely half attention to the eight year old boy spewing out his litany of wished for gifts when the cursed urge struck. The damned thing came at him with such force, that even the young boy felt the jolt. Santa suddenly needed a drink and he needed it now. Sixty days of abstinence made desire rage for relief. He looked over the desperately long line of greedy children longing for their chance to ask Santa. One could almost make out the words forming on their tiny lips; I wish, I want – a last ditch effort to keep childhood's fire burning, before they all fell out of grace forever. Waiting for the queue to dissipate was out of the question. Santa was following orders now. He would do what the alcoholic itch commanded, which meant shoving the little snot off his knees and running for a drink. Losing his job at Peterson's department store mattered little, certainly not when compared to satisfying that horrendous desire.

It would have been a done deal when Eddie spotted something that transformed him back into Santa. Back of the line, outside the ropes stood a late prepubescent girl, age around 11 or 12 with her eyes decidedly fixed on him. It was obvious that the girl wanted to speak with him, yet he noted that

she would not approach the line. Some invisible wire seemed to hold her in place, rooted to the spot. To the girl's right stood a woman that easily passed for an older version of the girl. "Mother and daughter" he whispered in his mind. The mother too was staring at him, yet like the girl seemed unwilling to move forward. In addition to the reticence, there appeared to be an uneasy aura around the mother. He immediately surmised that it was the young girl who kept them both in place. His curiosity was aroused and he would have waved to them but protocol prevented it. The banging on his arm broke his eye contact with mom and daughter. The little boy on his lap beat on him with both plea and fist.

"I wan a drum. A big, big drum. With sticks. Drumsticks. OK?"

"Yes", Santa answered.

He returned to his duties. The alcoholic fire left him, although just momentarily. That's the way it is with addictive urges; violent relentless assaults sometimes followed by a distraction which calms down the fury for awhile.

The little boy got off of his lap, satisfied with the promise of a drum which would drive his parents crazy.

"Next!" The line moved up and a little girl, hardly three got up on his lap. She stared at him for a little while, and he decided to help the situation along by asking her, "And so, what would you like for Christmas?" No sooner were the words out of his mouth, when the three year old began to cry and scream, uncontrollably. Santa looked for help and found it in the girl's father who with a large grin removed the girl from Santa's lap.

"I guess she's still too young,"

said the father nervously.

"Ah yes, I guess so," replied Santa between clenched teeth. The little girl was whisked away and Eddie Crowder looked past the line to see if mother and daughter were still there. The girl was. The mother was not. The girl still had those Edward Kean eyes pointed directly at him, so he wondered.

Back he went to playing Santa, besieged by requests for bikes and dolls, wagons and Lego blocks, toy trains and puzzles. Typical fare. One little boy interrupted the endless boring list by asking for a missile—with an explosive head on it. Santa figured the kid had been exposed to too much CNN.

"I'll see," was all that Santa would grant the junior warmonger. The line finally ended and Santa looked past the line. Mother and daughter, gone!

"Two ships..." he thought.

Santa, A.K.A. Eddie Crowder started on his short trip to the changing room when he almost ran over mom and daughter. They stood in the aisle blocking his path, eyes as usual on him. They were both examining his face looking for...what? He would have walked around them but an insatiable curiosity took hold of him.

"I noticed you two standing there..."

"She wants to talk to you..." the mother answered, pointing to her daughter.

"Well, she should have gotten in line."

"Not so easily done," replied mom.

"Why not? Just get in line and..."

"Look, Mr..."

"Claus!"

"No, really..."

"Eddie Crowder."

"Look, Mr. Crowder. We're Jewish. My name is Maxine Rosenman and this is Chloe, my daughter."

"And...?"

"And we don't believe in all this stuff, this Christmas stuff. We celebrate Chanukah but not..."

"OK, so what do you want from me?"

"We...Chloe wants a private session..."

"A what...?"

"A private session. She wants for you to come over to our home and do what you do here."

The request sounded not only impractical but also absurd to him. Besides it was against the rules. The store's rules. His rules. The rules of logic and propriety.

"No, Mrs. Rosenman. It's completely out of the question. If you're so opposed to this stuff..."

"But my daughter wants..."

He looked over at Chloe. To say that she was beautiful was an understatement. Large brown eyes and dark brown hair that hung down below her shoulders made her glow. Her mother was more of the same. Two goddesses. The temptation to relent peeked out but, "I'm sorry Mrs. Rosenman."

With that, he walked around the two of them and headed for the changing room. Inside he thought about the situation, shook his head and put it out of his thoughts. He then went through his nightly transformation morphing from Santa into Eddie, a 40ish, thinning haired sad faced man.

Once outside, he decided to

walk home avoiding the crowded bus. He looked up noticing that the sky was clear and the stars gleamed unaware of man's endless suffering. He became lost in reverie, remembering long ago Christmases, the joy, the lights, the sparkle. The joy was gone now. Adulthood casts a pall over all that *joie-de-vivre* of childhood. Where did it all go? With him, it disappeared under the heavy onslaught of a failed marriage, lost jobs and most of all a seemingly unwinnable battle with the bottle. The greatest irony of life, Eddie thought, is that the life force mocks humanity. Despite all the agony we go through, suicide for most of us is repellent. To be is always our final answer.

The moment Eddie walked in his small apartment he looked over at the cabinet where the divinity resided. He didn't even take off his coat before he opened up the cabinet door, grabbed the bottle of whiskey and a tiny glass, set them on the table and sat down. Sitting there with the overcoat still draped over his weary shoulders, he stared at his tormentor and savior. He sat there for a long time waiting for the urge to come at him and bend him to its will. It didn't. For some reason he knew that he would spend at least one more night in dull sobriety. He finally put the bottle and glass away, threw his overcoat over the chair and lay down on the bed in his clothes. He fell asleep and dreamt of two Persian cats chasing him, scratching at his back with razor sharp claws bringing pain and blood. Then came oblivion.

As he was walking into the changing room the next day, Phil Mudge,

the store manager stopped him.

"Uh...Eddie you won't be sitting on the throne today. Davis will be taking your place."

Eddie's heart skipped a beat, "Have I been fired, Phil?"

"Oh, no," Phil laughed nervously, "nothing like that. It's just that you're going out on special assignment. Orders from Mr. Peterson himself."

"Mr. Peterson? I don't..."

"Look, Eddie, you kind of insulted two of our customers yesterday. You may remember a Mrs. Rosenman and her daughter. You refused to..."

"Wait a minute, I was just following rules, which were set down by Mr. Peterson himself."

"I know. I know. But this is a special case. Mr. Peterson knows Mrs. Rosenman. She's a divorcee who's inherited her estranged husband's seat on the department store's board of directors." Mudge hesitated for effect.

"Get the picture?"

"Got it. So what do you want me to do?"

"Do what Mrs. Rosenman and her daughter wanted...asked you to do."

"Ah, with or without the uniform," Eddie said sarcastically.

"Without. Davis is wearing the only uniform. Now here's the address. And here's \$100 for a cab and for whatever else—buy yourself something for Christmas. Go now. They're waiting for you."

In the cab, Eddie considered the whole proposition. Mrs. Rosenman had gone to Mr. Peterson to tattle on him. And, for what? So her little precious could talk to me.

But why? She admitted that they were Jewish, so "going to Santa" was out of the question. But Chloe still wanted to see me. He began to suspect that there was more to this than met the eye, a hidden agenda most likely. It was possible that even Maxine Rosenman wasn't fully apprised of Chloe's intent.

The high-rise where the Rosenman's lived was a luxury building in the luxury section of the city. The lobby of the building was all marble except for the floor that was covered by a massive red Persian rug. The intricate patterns reminded him of something Somerset Maugham had once said in one of his novels, that Oriental rugs are exactly like life, very complex and beautiful but in the end having no meaning.

Without much ado, he was buzzed in by the doorman. The Rosenmans lived in the penthouse apartment. When Maxine opened the door, the sheer plush of the place overwhelmed him. Everything appeared as if the famous Mr. Clean had his way for a month in the apartment. Eighteenth Century paintings dotted the walls. He noticed a Watteau, one of his favorite painters. The furniture sat on another Persian Rug. In the middle of the ceiling was a large chandelier that lit up the entire large living room and needed no ancillary lights. The furniture was mahogany—dark, dark mahogany that ate the light given off by the chandelier. He was suitably impressed.

"Glad you could come, Santa, I mean Mr. Crowder."

"I had no choice, Mrs. Rosenman."

She ignored the resentful retort and pointed at Chloe who was sitting in the reading room which was at the end of a long hallway that connected it with the living room. She sat facing him; her large eyes as usual focused on him. The whole bizarre situation discomfited him.

"What's this all about, Mrs. Rosenman?"

"I'm not really sure myself. All I know is that Chloe insisted on seeing you. I just presume that she wants to do what the gentile girls want to do..."

"You mean ask Santa?"

"I suppose."

"I don't have my Santa suit. There was only one..."

"That's alright. It's better this way."

"Hmm. Let me go and talk to her. I'll see what she wants." As he walked into the long hallway, a spooky sense of de-ja vu came over him. When he came to the end of the hallway, the feeling disappeared. Chloe got up from her chair and, like the well-bred girl that she was, stood up and shook his hand. He thought it funny that she responded this way. For a moment they both stood facing each other awkwardly. Then they sat down. She considered him for a moment before she leveled her accusation.

"You really lie to all those kids, don't you Mr. Crowder?"

"Excuse me! What? I don't understand..."

"You pretend to them that you, Santa, are the one who flies through the air comes down their chimneys and puts presents underneath their bush...I mean tree."

"Oh, I see. Well, of course... but it's not really lying."

"I disagree. It's lying and you know that it is."

"Well, O.K. but those children are what? Five, six, seven and how old are you?"

With that Eddie looked back over his shoulder. Maxine Rosenman was still standing at the end of the long hallway, probably trying to figure out what the conversation between him and Chloe was all about.

"I'll be turning twelve after the first of the year. Obviously, even if I were a gentile girl, I wouldn't believe in you, anymore."

"Alright, already. You've made your point. So what is it that you want from me?"

For the very first time, Chloe lowered her eyes. Then she raised them, and peered, if possible, even more intently at him.

"Mr. Crowder...Santa...I want you to lie to me, just like you do to those other kids."

"Lie to you? What are you talking...I don't understand..."

"It's simple. Lie! Tell me something you know that can't be. That's just not possible. But I want you to tell me it, anyway."

"I still don't...What is it that you want me to tell you?"

Chloe didn't answer but turned her eyes toward her mother and the other end of the hallway. Her orbs rested on that maternal figure that stood silently waiting for this strange ritual to end. Then the young girl faced him fully again.

"Mr. Crowder, are you married or have you ever been married?"

"Yes."

"Well, which is it?"

"I was married once."

"Any children?"

"Yes, a girl. Actually, about your age. Almost exactly. Ann is her name."

"Ann, that's a very nice name. Does she have a nickname?"

"Little Kitten," replied Eddie, "her mother is Big Kitten."

"That's so cute. Do you see Little Kitten often?"

"Uh..." Eddie Crowder was at a loss for words. Truth is, he hadn't seen her for almost a year. The truly horrible thing about it was that he put her out of his mind for the most part. Hardly thought about her. But this conversation brought her back, made his face flame red from shame and guilt. He was saved from an embarrassing answer by Chloe's desire to talk about her situation.

"My dad, my father called me Princess, Princess Di, from Princess Diana. He called my mother Queenie."

"Well, I can see that," said Eddie with a sudden gentle smiling tone in his voice.

"My father, my dad, is Barry Rosenman. He made a lot of money in real estate and owned part of Peterson's department stores. He did OK but he, my dad, had a weakness, a problem."

"And that was...?"

"He suffers from what my mother called the Shiksa hunger."

"Shiksa? What is a shiksa?"

"Gentile woman. My father had, has, this need to be with them, around them. His desire for them is so strong..."

Eddie noticed Chloe's eyes moisten, then release a little stream of water down her cheeks. Her facial expression didn't change but he could tell that her immobile face covered deep agony.

“Finally, he met one that he liked better than the others. He met one that he liked more than Queenie, than me, Princess Di.”

Eddie felt awful, but he pursued it.

“So he left?”

“He left for her, and he hardly ever comes around. My mother divorced him and took most of his money. It didn’t matter. He wants to be with that...that...”

“Tramp?”

“Yes...than being with us. Tell me Mr. Crowder, why did you leave Big Kitten and Little Kitten?”

Eddie felt as if a hammer had pounded him in the chest. But he was here, so he had to answer.

“To tell the truth, Chloe, Princess Di, I didn’t leave. I was kicked out.”

“Why?”

“Because...because, I’m an alcoholic. Do you know what an alcoholic is?”

“Yes. You love liquor.”

“Well it’s more than that. I’m addicted to it. Can’t stay away from it. So my wife...”

“Big Kitten?”

“Yes, Big Kitten told me to leave and not come back.”

“So Mr. Crowder, you love liquor more than you love Big Kitten or Little Kitten?”

“No, no, it’s just that the urge...you don’t understand...the urge is so strong...”

“Stronger than your love for your family...?”

“I guess...” At that moment, Eddie Crowder wished that a giant

hole would open beneath him and swallow him up forever.

“Chloe, what is it that you want?”

“I told you...I want you to lie to me, like you do with the other kids.”

“OK, what is it...that you want Santa to bring you?”

“I want my father to come home. I want him back here. With my mom, with me...Princess Di... Bring me that...as my Chanukah present.”

“Chloe, I can’t...”

“Please,” she pleaded.

“OK, I’ll bring you your father. For the holidays.”

“Thank you Mr. Crowder, Santa.”

He stood up and formally shook her hand. Then he went to the door and shook Mrs. Rosenman’s hand. She was still standing. She handed him 10 one hundred bills. He was about to refuse when she whisked him out the door. Downstairs in the lobby, he was putting on his coat when he heard the doorman address a well-dressed man, age around 40.

“Mr. Rosenman, it’s so nice to see you, after all this time. Going upstairs?”

“I don’t know. Not sure. Maybe.”

Eddie walked over.

“Barry? Barry Rosenman?”

“Yes,” Rosenman looked at Eddie with one of those “do I know you?” looks.

“Barry, they’re expecting you up there. Queenie and oh yeah, Princess Di.”

“Princess...? Say, who are you

and what...?”

“Santa. Santa Claus,” and Eddie Crowder walked outside. He turned just once and noticed that Barry Rosenman had moved to the elevator door. He was going up. “What an incredible coincidence,” Santa thought.

Eddie looked up at the stars. They didn’t seem so distant at this moment. It was cold, terribly cold but Eddie felt good, better than he had in years. He decided to walk, take the long trek home by feet rather than rely on the internal combustion engine of a taxi. He wanted to think and so he did. The fog that had clouded his mind for so long lifted and he knew what he wanted to do and would do.

Again, he no sooner came into his apartment and went straight for the liquor cabinet. He took out the whiskey bottle but not the glass. He walked over to the sink, opened the bottle and poured it down the drain. He felt as if he had pried an eight hundred pound gorilla off of his back.

“Fuck you,” he addressed the last drop as it fell into the sink, gone forever.

His next action took a little more courage. Five times he lifted the receiver on the phone, then let it drop again. Finally, after building his courage and resolve, he dialed the phone. A hesitant moment and then he spoke, “Hello, Little Kitten. It’s Santa.”

- END -

synonyms :: **faridamihoub**

If I were to find synonyms to certain words,
some would be easier than others.
For arrogance and greed
only bad words would surface.
For power and control,
I wouldn't even dare spell them.
For destruction and hatred,
they would break my heart.
For selfishness and cruelty,
no one could stop me from crying.
I'd rather work on the painless ones.
For happiness, it would be smile,
for love it would be yes,
and for hope it would be you.



TULLEY'S GHOST

A cool wind whistles on a black October night.
O! Tulley's Ghost now almost in sight.

Tulley was a hard-luck man.
Pride of the people, pride of the land.
A small town boxer in a working class town.
He had a punch that'd knock em all down.

With lightening-fast speed, Tulley was a star.
His manager said he would go far.
So fame became his light.
But it burned too bright.
Fast times and spirits were plenty.
His Manager took all and left
Tulley's pockets empty.

O! Tulley's fight game slipped.
And Tulley did drink.
In a spiral, he fell from favor.
But honest he was.
And always repaid
A token of help from a stranger.

O! Tulley was indeed an honest man.
Honest he was with life.
But when he'd all he could take.
He stepped 'front a train
And ended what was left of his might.

He'd come so far, yet finished not first.
Light having faded to night.
But Tulley lived fast. So were his times.
Though honest and strong was his fight.

So listen real close on any cold October night.
A ghost train will whistle sad and so bright.
And beckon O! Tulley once more
To the final round in his very last title fight.

Paul ©
Tucker

:: Miriam Lee ::

The Redemption of SANTA ED

“Stand up straight!” He bellowed. “Right face!” He paused only a second, and then Lynch yelled, “Left face!” About ten more seconds of scrutiny, and Lynch stated, “And above all, keep those bellies *out!*” Douglas Lynch took his job very seriously. He walked around the group like a Marine corps sergeant preparing his recruits for battle. His last step was the inspection of the uniforms. “Santa Gregory,” he told the nervous man, “shine up that belt!” Lynch moved over to the shortest Santas in the group and said, “Santa Felix, brush off those pants! Santa Mort, straighten that beard!”

A moment later, Lynch was right next to him. Doug surveyed him from top to bottom, and then stepped back in front of the gaggle of Santas and said, “Why don’t you guys take your cue from Santa Ed? He’s got it down just right. And, that’s why he earned the prime spot in *this* store and you didn’t!”

Ed wanted to hide behind something, but there was no reindeer or sleigh in sight. Even through the bearded faces, he knew the others hated him for being the best Santa—something he never strived to be—not even close.

But it was always in his nature to be the best he could be, Santa or otherwise. As he awaited the end of the inspection, he recalled how far he had come to be here—his 30 year career in advertising as a top executive, his courageous but doomed foray into the dot.com business, and his fall, as the virtual business sank quickly into the toilet—along with his life.

Edmund Parks had risked it all and lost. Almost 2 years had passed. He was “too old” for the job market now. They liked their hot shot, college-degreed, youngsters, and all of his 30 years of hands-on experience now meant nothing.

For the first year following his bankruptcy filing, he worked for various temporary agencies, hoping it would lead to a permanent position, but it didn't. He even did manual labor for a while to keep cash coming in.

By the end of the first year, his wife had left him for another man—and a much younger one at that. Brenda wasted no time in filing for a divorce, and Ed felt he had lost it all. He didn't want his 22 year old daughter, Cassie, to see him down and out, so one weekend in the Fall, he left Chicago and hitchhiked west, ending up in the state of Arizona. He lost touch with everyone who had ever meant something to him, and started a new, reclusive life in the desert.

Now he lived in a small, nondescript, studio apartment just outside of Tucson. From day to day, he did not know if he would have a job. And, when the temp agency offered the Santa gig, it meant steady work for several weeks, plus it sure beat being home with no money during the holidays.

Brighton Mall South was the newest of the Brighton Mall group, and residents came from miles around to shop, gawk, and mingle. Though the corporation had decorated the mall in festive holiday cheer, Christmas in Arizona could not compare to Christmas in Chicago. For one thing, there definitely would be no snow. And, Christmas without snow would be like a hot fudge sundae with no hot fudge!

As Doug Lynch dismissed his Santa troops, sending them off to other area malls, Ed recalled a particular Christmas about fifteen years

ago when the snow was falling, his house was colorfully decorated in holiday trimmings, and his wife and seven year old daughter adored him.

That was a particularly tough Christmas for Cassie, as her best friend had died in a car crash only two days before Christmas. This was Cassie's first dealings with mortality and Ed had done his best to comfort her.

Time passed and Cassie began to play with her other friends and appeared to come through this heart-wrenching episode fairly well.

His thoughts returned to the present as Ed walked out the employee side door that would take him to Santa's Village. He reached the roped off area while noticing all the eyes on him. The next four hours would be grueling, but he would make every effort to be the best Santa he could be.

Three hours and fifty-five minutes later, Ed squirmed while barely listening to the chubby boy who was giving Santa a list of what he wanted for Christmas. Suddenly feeling very tired, Ed looked toward the end of the waiting line. His elf helper, Suzanne, had put up the "Santa's Gone to his Workshop at the North Pole" sign, and closed off the red rope to prevent last minute children from getting in line.

"And, I want a computer, lots of games, a basketball, and a puppy..." He stopped listening as the boy rambled on some more. Several seconds went by when he heard the youngster say, "Okay, Santa?"

"Well, you be a good boy and Santa will do his best," Ed said. The boy scooted off his lap, and suddenly kicked Ed's shin, saying, "This is just a bunch of hooley. My mom

and dad are Santa!" Then he ran off down the mall.

This was not the first time he'd been kicked, but this little cretin carried quite a wallop. Ed reached down and rubbed his aching shin.

"Does it hurt?"

Ed had not seen this little girl at the end of the line when he'd looked earlier. She stared at him with a concerned look on her face.

"No, dear," he reassured her. "Santa's fine."

She smiled at him. Ed looked around but did not see a parent with her. "Where's your mommy, little girl?"

"She couldn't come," the girl answered. "My daddy's with me."

Again, Ed surveyed Santa's village and saw no one. "I don't see him."

"He'll be right back," she said. Then she just stood there—staring at him.

"Well, what's your name?"

"Meg."

"Did you want to tell Santa what you'd like for Christmas?"

"No."

Still, she stood there and stared at him. The girl appeared about eight years old and had a sweet face, perfect nose and pretty brown eyes accented by long, dark eyelashes. Her skin was a rosy pink and her cheeks had a natural blush to them.

"Are you sure your daddy's with you?" Ed asked her.

"Of course," she said. "I'm too little to go by myself."

Again, Ed scanned the area when his eyes met Suzanne's. She shrugged her shoulders as if to indicate she wasn't sure what was going on.

Just then, a man came up behind Suzanne. He was nicely

dressed and appeared to be about thirty years old. “That’s my daughter,” he said, pointing to the little girl. Suzanne let him by and he came up to Santa’s throne.

“Sorry, Santa,” he said. “It took me a little longer to get back here than I anticipated.”

“Daddy!” Meg reached for him and her dad picked her up, kissing her on the cheek.

“I hope she wasn’t bothering you.”

“Not at all,” Ed said. “But, she didn’t ask Santa for anything.”

The father put his little girl down and held onto her hand. “She’s a very giving child.” He smiled down at her and then looked back up at Ed. “Actually, I have something to ask Santa.”

Ed looked at the man. “You’re not going to ask to sit in my lap are you?”

The man smiled, “No, but I was hoping you could help me out.”

Ed was curious, but somehow felt uneasy. “What do you want?”

The man leaned down to his daughter, and they exchanged whispers. Then he stood straight up and said, “We would like Santa to come to the house on Christmas Eve.”

Ed stared back questioningly. “If you mean *me*, the store will not allow me to—”

“Take private engagements,” he said, completing Ed’s sentence. “I know, because I just came from the store manager.” The man paused. “I’m not a man without means, Santa Ed. And, after hearing that you are the very best Santa he has, I’ve convinced Mr. Lynch to let me have you on Christmas Eve. Of course that is after you get off work here.”

Doug Lynch agreed to this? “Are you sure he said it was okay for me—”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Then he reached inside his coat pocket and handed Lynch’s business card to Ed. “The address is on the back,” he said. “If you could be there by 9:00 pm, it would be great.”

Ed hesitated. He didn’t want to be at a party where he knew no one and watch all those happy faces of close family and friends. “I don’t think that—”

Just then the man pulled a \$100 bill out of his jacket and handed it to him. “There will be another one before you leave that night.”

Once before, money had been a motivator for him—and that had led to his downfall. He should not take this. He would not be easy the whole night. Playing Santa to a multitude of strangers every day was one thing, but playing Santa to a group of family and friends, that was another.

Still, he could use the money. He was barely able to pay the rent last month, and it was going up in January. “All right,” he mumbled.

“Thanks, Santa,” the little girl said.

“See you at 9:00,” the man said.

In a few seconds they were gone. Suzanne walked up to him, saying, “What was that all about?”

Ed told her.

“Need an elf?” She asked. “I could use some extra bucks.”

“No,” he said, as he loosened his large Santa belt. He didn’t need anyone else to witness him playing his final Santa role of the year.

Suzanne looked disappointed, ripped off her elf hat, and took off down the mall corridor.

Edmund Parks headed toward the mall’s locker rooms, shaking his head while thinking this would surely be his worst Christmas ever.

He had to take three buses to get to the Tucson suburb. At the last stop, he walked about six blocks west and one north. Two houses from the corner was the address he was looking for. The Spanish style house was two-story and the whole tract appeared fairly new. Several cars were parked near it and in the driveway, so he knew this party was well on its way. As he got closer, he admired the white holiday lights which twinkled sporadically draping the house like white icing on a bundt cake.

He walked up the porch and knocked on the door. No one answered, so he knocked harder. Finally a man opened the door and stared at him. “Don’t you usually come down the chimney?”

It was obvious this man had already had plenty to drink. He swayed a little while holding a glass of liquor in his hand. “Hey, Lloyd, you’ll never guess who’s coming to dinner!”

Ed stood uneasily for a few seconds when a second man appeared. “Yes?”

“I’m from Brighton Mall.”

The second man continued to stare at him as the first staggered back into the house.

“What are you doing here?”

Ed paused, looked at his address written on the card and verified with the numbers on the house. “I was hired to play Santa tonight.”

The man did not respond at once. “I know my wife was looking into it, but she didn’t tell me she

hired someone,” he told him. “Are you sure you have the right address?”

“Yes,” Ed told him, “and it wasn’t your wife.” He collected his thoughts and then told him, “There was this man, and he hired me to—”

“Look, there has to be a mistake,” the man said. “I’m sorry, but—”

“Oh boy, Santa’s here! Everybody, Santa’s here!” The exclamations came from a young boy who was now standing next to the man.

“Jason, go back into the den and Santa will be in shortly.”

“Oh, boy!” The youngster dashed off.

“Look, mister, I don’t know what kind of a scam you’re pulling, but now that the kids expect Santa, you’re going to do it. If anything goes wrong, I’ll call the police.”

Ed was astonished. “Never mind, I’ll just go home.”

“No,” the man said, pulling Ed in the front door and closing it behind him. “We’ll discuss this later. You just come with me to the den and make those kids happy as you give out the gifts from under the tree.”

“I don’t know...”

“If you’re really a Santa sent from Brighton Malls, you know how important you are to the kids. Now that they’ve seen you, I can’t let them down,” the man said. “Who hired you, anyway?”

“A man,” Ed told him. “He was with a little girl. But, I forgot to get his name.” He pulled out the card with the handwritten address on the back. “He gave me this and told me to be here tonight.”

The man looked over the card and handed it back to Ed. “What pay were you promised?”

Ed explained about the first \$100 and the second due afterwards.

The man thought over all he had said, then told Ed. “I don’t know how this happened or who did this, but for now, you go into the den and make those kids happy. I’ll be watching you.” He looked at Ed with a firm expression on his face. “We’ll sort out everything later. Now, what is your name?”

“They call me Santa Ed. You can call me Ed.”

“I’m Lloyd Ferris and this is *my* home, so I have know idea why anyone would have hired you to come here, unless my wife sent someone to the mall to hire you. She’s been a little sick lately, and I guess she could have sent one of her friends and forgot to tell me.” He shook his head for a second, and then said, “I’ll talk to her about this later, but for now, come with me to the den.”

A few seconds elapsed, when Lloyd slid the door open and announced, “Santa’s here everyone.” The kids jumped up and ran towards Ed.” The giggles and joy-filled voices echoed throughout the room.

“Okay,” said Lloyd. “Now you all sit down quietly, and Santa will start giving out the gifts.” Lloyd signaled to Ed to follow him over to the tree. He moved a chair by him, too. “Just read the tag and wait until each child has seen their gifts before calling another name. Got it?”

“Yes.”

Ed started playing Santa, but it was really hard at first, knowing this guy might end up having him arrested. After about thirty minutes, his mood got better as he saw the

fun that the children and their parents were having.

Lloyd hadn’t taken his eyes off him, and Ed couldn’t help but wonder if he thought he was a pervert.

“Lloyd! Lloyd!” The call came from the doorway where a teenage girl stood. “Your wife is ill!”

In a split second, Lloyd was out of the room. Ed had the impulse to bolt out then, but seeing the kids excitement and the presents still under the tree, he decided to continue.

About forty minutes more passed, and all the presents whose name tags were called had been opened. The kids were now engrossed in their gifts, so Ed thought he would forsake the \$100 due him and get out of there.

He got up and went out into the hall, heading to the front door.

“Where you going?”

Lloyd stood at the bottom of the stairs, his eyes fixed on Ed.

“Home.”

“My wife didn’t hire you.”

“I told you that.”

“You didn’t get the rest of the money.”

“That’s okay.”

The man stared at him a second and then said, “Look, I’m sorry I was so mean to you. I just have a tendency to distrust people. I don’t know how you were brought here, but you made those kids happy. Come into the living room and I’ll write you a check.”

Ed was surprised and followed Lloyd into the room down the hall.

“Lloyd?” A woman’s voice called out.

“Yes, dear.”

“Where are you?”

“In the living room.”

A few seconds later, Ed heard her voice again coming from behind him.

"I'm feeling so much better now," she said. "I just wanted to see Santa."

An odd feeling passed through Ed as he slowly turned around. When he saw her face, he gasped for air.

"Are you all right?" Lloyd asked as he helped Ed to the couch. "This is my wife, Cassie Ferris."

No, it can't be...was he dreaming...or was his deepest desire causing him to see an apparition? Or, could it be, that he was staring at his daughter?

"Lloyd, get him some water, quickly."

Lloyd ran out of the room, while Cassie sat down beside him. "You'll be fine," she told him. "All those kids can be a handful."

Lloyd returned with a full glass of water and handed it to Ed. "Maybe you should take off your beard—"

"No...I...can't...I mean..." Ed couldn't think straight.

"How about you unbutton the top of your costume?" Cassie said.

Her voice, her sweet face, he wanted to take her in his arms, but after all these years, what would she do?

Ed unbuttoned the top of the costume and just sat there staring at her. And, she seemed to be staring back at him.

"Your eyes...seem familiar," she said. "May I..." She reached up and removed his glasses. "That's odd." She stared some more. "Lloyd, he looks like dad."

Lloyd came over to his wife, took her hand and said, "You know

we did everything to locate him, Cassie. But, you wanted to find him so badly, you kept seeing him everywhere...at the theater...across the room in the restaurant. Sweetie, it's quite logical you'd want your dad to be Santa."

She listened to Lloyd and then looked back at Ed. "What's your name?"

Ed felt confused. If he told her, would she throw him out or embrace him? Maybe he should wait...think this over. "I have to go." Ed got up.

"Lloyd, it's dad's voice."

"Now, Cassie...you must be wrong."

Cassie got up and walked in front of Ed. "I want to see for myself." She reached up for his beard.

"Stop it, Cassie," Lloyd said, catching her hand before it reached its target. "I know you want to find him, but it's been years now. He hasn't tried to contact you. He just doesn't care."

That last remark shot through Ed's heart like a sharp knife, but he remained silent.

"You don't need him," Lloyd told her. "I'll take care of you, you know that."

Cassie stared at her husband. "You take good care of me, and I know you'll take good care of the baby when she comes, but still...he'll be a grandfather and never know it."

This comment shook him some more. The impulse to run out of the room quickly came and went. As he considered his options, Lloyd talked to Cassie, "I'm worried about you...and our baby. You've been sick and weak through these first

few months of your pregnancy. You have to forget about your father. It's tearing you apart. You tried to find him. He didn't want to be found. Just forget him, Cassie. "You have to finally face the fact that your father just doesn't care about you."

When he saw the tears coming down her face, he could stand it no longer. "That's not true," Ed said. "He loves her very much!"

"Stay out of this, you—"

"Dad?"

He looked at Cassie and his arms ached for her. It seemed as if hours passed when momentarily, he took off the beard. "Cassie...I'm so sorry...I never meant to—"

Before he could tell her all the things he wanted to, she was in his arms, kissing his cheeks, and saying, "Oh, dad! I can't believe it's you." He hugged and kissed her back while Lloyd stared at the two in disbelief. Ed's heart was racing at breakneck speed, and he wondered if at any moment it would burst out of his chest.

As the emotion subsided, Cassie let go of Ed and ran into Lloyd's arms, saying, "This is the best Christmas present you could have given me."

"But, I—"

"How clever of you to find him. Thank you, thank you, thank you." She kissed Lloyd on the mouth.

Lloyd looked up at Ed as if to say, "I don't get it."

Neither did Ed. An uneasy silence filled the air.

"Dad," Cassie said, "this is Lloyd, your son-in-law." The two men stared at each other. "Lloyd, this is your father-in-law, Edmund Parks."

Lloyd nodded back and appeared to be as dazed as Ed felt.

“Come on, Dad, let’s all sit down and talk,” Cassie said, her eyes beaming with happiness.

“We have guests,” Lloyd reminded her.

Cassie looked at her watch. “It’s almost midnight,” she told him. “Why don’t you say good night for me? I want to catch up with dad.”

Lloyd hesitated momentarily and then left the room.

Again, Cassie embraced him and he returned the embrace. “There’s so much to talk about. Where’ve you been...what you’ve been doing...besides playing Santa. How Lloyd found you—”

“Lloyd didn’t find me,” he told her.

“But, how—”

“It’s all very strange, but let me tell you.” So Ed told Cassie how he came to be hired and ended up at her house.”

“It is very odd,” Cassie said. “But, I’m going to say that the simplest explanation is that my prayers were answered.”

He looked at his beautiful daughter. “You put me in your prayers?”

“Sure,” she said, “every night since you went away.” She squeezed his arm. “You were the one who told me to believe, remember, after Margaret was killed?”

He thought over her statement, but still felt confused. “Margaret?”

“You remember, dad, that Christmas when I was only seven, and my best friend was killed in that car crash.” She paused for a second and got up, went over to a bookshelf, pulled out a photo album and brought it back over to the couch. “We’ll have plenty to see in here,” she said. “Now, where is that picture?”

Cassie quickly flipped a few pages, stopping momentarily at one picture. “Here it is,” she said, pointing to the black and white photo of a little girl.

“That was Margaret,” Cassie said. “I sure miss her.”

Ed froze as he stared at the picture...a picture of the little girl...one...who looked very much like the girl he had seen at the mall. But, of course that could not be. He must be mistaken. “I remember some of your little friends, but I don’t remember this girl.”

“You never met her, Dad,” Cassie explained. “Do you remember the kitty you gave me for my sixth birthday?”

“Snowball?”

“Yes,” she said. “Margaret was allergic to cat hair, so I always had to play at her house. You never met her.”

More old memories marched forward. “That’s why I didn’t recognize her.”

“Sure. We were planning to go to her house Christmas night and you’d have met her and her dad.” She paused, looking back at the photo. “Of course, they never made it home that night. And, with Margaret’s mom dying of cancer the year before, it was all so sad.”

He pulled his daughter to him in an effort to comfort her. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that.”

“But, you really helped me, Dad,” she said. “And, now, I believe even more in angels.”

A silence again filled the room. Finally, Cassie spoke up, “Her family and friends called her Margaret, but she liked the nickname Meg,” Cassie touched Margaret’s face in

the photo. “And, that’s what I’m naming the baby, Meg.”

Now, he could admit it—yes—this was the same face of the girl who’d called herself Meg at the store, but still Ed felt dizzy as he tried to sort through his maze of questioning thoughts. Cassie turned the page and said, “Here’s a couple more of me and Margaret playing at her house.” Ed saw the photo of Cassie and Margaret on the swings.

But, the very next picture stopped him cold. It was Cassie and Margaret sitting on a blanket eating burgers. But, in the background, was familiar face—a man flipping a burger on the grill while posing for the camera. “Who’s...who’s that man?”

Cassie looked at the photo, “Oh that was Margaret’s father,” she told him. He was such a nice man and so good to Margaret.” She shook her head. “It was all such a shame.”

Ed tried to make sense out of it all, but couldn’t. This looked exactly like the man who hired him to play Santa. The faces were the same, he was sure of it, but his common sense said it could not be.

“Is something wrong, dad?”

He didn’t answer her.

She studied his face for a few seconds, and then said, “You told me after the tragedy that I should know that Margaret and her dad were with the angels. And, that thought comforted me so much. It was the reason I could go on believing in life...something...and the reason I never stopped praying to find you, hoping that someday the angels would bring you home to me.”

Could it be? He wondered. Should he even try to make sense

of any of this? Or, should he believe, as he told his daughter to do years ago? Tears came to his eyes as he reached and embraced his daughter again. “I had given up ... on almost everything ... but you didn’t. Your love has brought us together again and I’ll be forever grateful for that.” His throat was choked with emotion.

Cassie held onto him for several seconds and then said, “Oh, there’s something else.” She ran over to a desk and opened up a drawer. “It’s here somewhere.” She rifled through some papers, and then said, “Here it is!”

She went back to him and sat down, handing him the envelope.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a statement of your investment portfolio from the agency.”

Ed looked at her and smiled. “They were losing tons of money when I left.”

“Yes,” she said, “they were. But, they were bought out by Millikan, Behr and Wright.”

He was aware that they were a top national advertising agency. “I didn’t know.”

“You were gone when it happened, so I had the statement address changed and sent to me, in hopes someday I would see you again...and now that day is here!”

He stared at the envelope for a second and then said, “I only had about \$300 worth of stocks when I left.”

“Look at it, Dad,” Cassie coaxed. “It’s gone up a little since then.”

Ed opened the envelope and when he saw the stock value, he was nearly speechless. “\$467,000?”

“It’s probably more now. That’s last quarter’s statement,” she said. “The stock split a while back and is still climbing.”

Ed’s heart was full. Again he embraced his daughter. “I don’t know how all this came about, but I guess in my heart of hearts, I never gave up. Sure, I got down at times, but I never got out.” He tightened his hold on Cassie. “Because I knew

I had something to live for...my daughter...and now my soon to be granddaughter, and...and...” Emotion kept him from going on.

Just then, the Anniversary clock on the mantle began to chime. It was midnight.

“Merry Christmas, Dad,” Cassie said.

“Merry Christmas, Cassie.” They hugged again while Ed thought of the man and little girl who had come to see him.

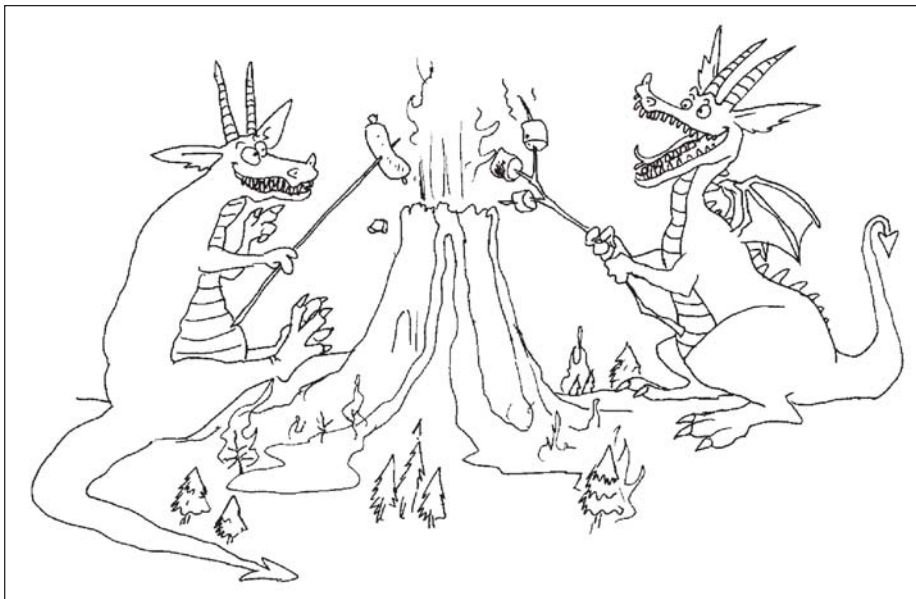
Had he been visited by angels? Maybe he would never know for sure, but whatever brought his daughter back to him was worth being grateful for.

And, grateful he was...for now...and for a new future filled with family, hope, and love.

His previous prediction of the outcome of this evening had been wrong—thank goodness. Edmund Parks was pleased to admit that this truly was the best Christmas ever!

- THE END -

Volcano



Tosh Bibb - kohomat@earthlink.net

Prayer and Faith

A prayer tonight
A little faith for tomorrow
These wings are soaring
On air I had to borrow

A sigh of relief
That the day is through
We've almost made it out
It's the best we could do

Maybe it's all about
That little prayer tonight
A little faith on loan
To make it all feel right

Guy R. Qualls
Outta the Void

The Reading Lounge

I created this section because a big part of writing is reading and understanding the works of others. With that in mind, there are two forums in here to help you discover that next great comfort novel, a new style of writing or yet another “favorite author” to add to your already overflowing bookshelves. The two forums found here are: *Suggested Reading* and *Books and Authors*.

ESC! Magazine

This is where you'll get all the latest and greatest news about ESC! Magazine. I've created a number of forums which are specific to ESC! and our community. I'll let you explore these on your own but I want to mention just two of them I feel will be places you'll want to return and participate in again and again.

It's not often a magazine will attempt to keep up with what its contributors are doing in the world outside, but *Contributor Success Stories* is my attempt to do just that. As a user of the forums and a former or current contributor to ESC! Magazine, you may post information related to your publishing successes outside of ESC! Magazine or, if you'd rather, you can get me the information through other means and I'll post your news there for you.

Discuss the Current Issue is a forum where you can critique and analyze the current issue or any particular piece contained within it. What I'm looking for is honest, constructive criticism. I'd rather you didn't just say a short story was “great” or “stinks,” I'd rather you told everyone a little bit why the story moved you or what about it you liked - or disliked. You'll also find things such as **website links** discussed in the issue or things we just didn't have space to include.

As our forums grow and I get more input from you regarding the type of information you want to share and talk about, we'll add or delete forums as necessary but, until then, if you have a suggestion, please start a new thread in the *Suggestions* forum!

I'll be the first to admit the forums are pretty sparse right now, but that's to be expected when something like this first goes online, so I hope you'll all participate whenever and as often as you can. With your input, and the input of your friends and fellow writers, this community should grow to become a regular and valuable addition to your daily routine.

Office Suite Alternative for Writers

As writers, you must have heard about the “new” version of Microsoft Office (including Word) that came out on October 21st. Unless you find yourself in a corporate environment, I'm afraid that, much like MS Office XP and the older MS Office 2000, as a writer you'll be hard-pressed to find much about this new 2003 version to tickle your fancy.

If you are using an old version of MS Office or you're running a “borrowed” copy, you may be due for an upgrade, but before you rush out and plop down \$300 or more on Office 2003, please give OpenOffice.org (OOo) a look. OOo is an open source and free of charge (yes, free) office suite that includes a word processor, spreadsheet and a presentation package as well as some other stuff like a nifty drawing program.

After using it for some time and loading it up on all the PCs at my “day job”, I can assure you it's well worth your time to at least give it a try. Since you can run OpenOffice.org and Microsoft Office on your computer at the same time, you're not out anything if you decide you don't like it. You should be aware that this program is a BIG download. It's roughly 65mb, so if you don't have a broadband connection, you may want to get the program on CD. Because I like this program so much, I will offer to burn a copy of OOo for any reader of ESC! Magazine who would like one, but I will ask you to pay a very small shipping and packaging fee.

The complete text containing all of my comments about OpenOffice.org and full

details for ordering the CD will be posted in the ESC! Forums under *Discuss the Current Issue*.

In This Issue

In addition to our regular contributors, I'm happy to debut **Cindy Potocki** and her short story “Diary of a Quarter Life Crisis” to our readers. Cindy, as you will learn on page 4, is the daughter of ESC! regular Bob Potocki and a welcome edition to this issue. In other short stories, **Miriam Lee** and **Bob Potocki** have each contributed a special “holiday” piece for this issue with similar, yet divergent themes. Read ‘em and find out what I mean. Our issue wouldn't be complete without the final installment of **Joyce Bradshaw's** three part story, “The Wanderers”. Joyce's stories have resulted in a lot of positive feedback, I hope we'll be seeing more of her in future issues.

Always thought provoking, **Farida Mihoub** and **Guy Qualls** round out our poetry selection with four new pieces while **Paul Tucker** brings us the semi-biographical tale of the success and ultimate downfall of a small town boxer turned pro in his latest installment of “Vex”. You certainly won't want to miss that. Last and never least, we have another wonderful comic from our good friend **Tosh Bibb**.

Well, that's about it for another issue of ESC! I hope you have as much fun reading it as I have had putting it together. See ya in the forums – the ESC! Forums that is....

A Moment With ... Farida Mihoub

Back in July, I read once again about the French government's efforts to ban English words from the French lexicon in official documents. As a French citizen who has expressed her "passion" for the English language in her writings, I wondered how Farida felt about this. Here is what Farida had to say:

“There is a lobby in our country that fights hard against the use of English words in French. What to do with this 'invasion', as they call it. Many English words have entered the French language and are used on a day to day basis. Many are now in French dictionaries like hamburger, chips, yacht, basket, top model, warning, weekend.... I could not imagine saying in French 'la fin de semaine' for week-end. In the very short 'Y' section of French dictionaries, you can find the following words: yacht, yacht club, yachtman, yankee, yard, yearling and ... yuppie. With the internet, it is true that English words are used more like the web, webcam, surfing and ... email. To decide to call 'email' 'courriel' (courrier meaning mail in French) is just nonsense to me. To use the French root and add the English end (courrie-l) sounds like Frenglish (Franglais) as we call it here. I wish our deciders would spend more time on issues that really matter like the worrying rate of illiterate youths in this country or a better education system and not quarrel about something they could never stop. The world is one, languages are like us, they live, they change. We have to keep open to the world and encourage our children to learn and love foreign languages without any barrier of any kind.”

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