

***The Dog by Michael Kennedy***

**First Place – Adult Division**

I have never been a pet lover. I have had pets in the past, dogs, cats, a canary, but I never managed to develop a close relationship, at least not in the way some people do, people who proudly tell stories about the lovable antics of Fido, Tiger, or Chirpy, expecting me to join in with warm appreciative smiles. Most of the pets I have owned eventually became connected to someone else, a wife or a child, as their primary caretaker. That was always satisfactory to me. I like to think that the pet and I agreed to this transition of power as something in the pet's best interest that had occurred in the natural course of caring and feeding. No hard feelings.

My client, Missy Taggert, was a pet lover. The large doe-like eyes gave her away, along with the emotion that tugged at her vocal strings just below the spoken words. The object of her affection was Fluffy, a nine-year-old mostly brown female Shih Tzu dog, with dark button eyes and a nasty little prognathic mouth that looked as if it could take meaningful chunks from an ankle or calf quickly, without warning. I knew this because Missy brought the dog to the initial interview for her divorce case. I allowed this gross violation of protocol for the basest of reasons of course, to get my grubby flushed hands on a large retainer check at a point when my fiscal fortunes were in somewhat of an ebb. The creature sat on her lap throughout the interview looking me dead in the eyes, on edge, waiting, it seemed to me, for a wrong move on my part, at which point it would launch itself over my desktop toward my throat like a crazed sewer rat that had come up through the office toilet. In any event, the check was produced at the end of the interview. Missy and Fluffy left my office and a divorce case against her husband, John, was filed the next day.

The case moved along as such cases do, the lawyers cooperating in the exchange of information and documents, the clients huddled with their personal allies in a state of war. There was a final divorce hearing, freighted with the expected emotion. I have often thought that people going through a divorce are experiencing one of the most creative times of their lives. This is not to say that the time is comfortable; it is, in fact, a difficult period for most clients. They usually say at some point that they just want the case to be over as soon as possible. Nevertheless, they are more focused mentally than they have ever been. There is one simple emotion that creates this rabid attention: hate. They hate each other, more than most people can imagine. This white hot hatred is the spring for creative energies that are loosed upon, in this case, the legal system.

The judge made her decision in writing, allocating the assets and debts, dealing with custody and child support, and making other standard orders for a divorce case. Since the parties could not agree to anything, including the division of personal property, the judge ordered that the parties meet at the office of one of the lawyers, flip a coin, and choose alternately from a list of personal property that the lawyers had worked out. The other lawyer was James Hoagland, someone I had known for years who was generally reasonable and easy to work with. When Hoagland sent me a proposed list, it contained furniture, appliances, expensive jewelry, a baby grand piano, and the remainder of the odds and ends that a couple accumulates through the years. It also contained the following item near the end of the list: "Fluffy".

I called Hoagland even before I spoke with my client about the list because I knew that Fluffy's inclusion on the list was going to be a problem.

“Jim, I saw that the dog was included on the personal property list. This may be an issue for my client and I was wondering if there was any way to give the damn thing to the wife, with some reasonable compensation. After all, a nine-year-old dog doesn’t have a lot of value,” I said over the telephone.

“I agree that we should be able to do that, Mike, but I’m afraid in this case we can’t. My client is adamant that the dog be included on the list. As you know, Fluffy is simply an item of personal property as far as the law is concerned,” Jim responded. He was right about that. In spite of a beating heart, eyes that could see, a nervous system that could register pain and pleasure, and, if we believe the research, a highly developed emotional life, Fluffy was no different from a nine-year-old catcher’s mitt gathering dust on a cupboard floor in the eyes of the law.

A few days later, I met with my client to discuss the issue. She wept quietly throughout our meeting. I explained gently that Fluffy was, unfortunately, an item of personal property, even though we both agreed that such a law was not really fair. There was, I explained, nothing that I could do about it. I suggested that her husband had to first win the coin toss and then choose a dog with a market value of almost zero over items that were worth thousands of dollars. The odds were simply against his getting his hands on the dog, provided that she was committed to making Fluffy her first selection. She nodded her head vigorously through sobbing sounds, indicating that of course Fluffy would be her first choice.

The attorneys and clients met in a small conference room at my office about a week later in what could be described as a tense atmosphere. Each lawyer and client sat on their own side of

the conference table so that lawyer faced lawyer and client faced client. The agreed property list lay on the table between the two clients.

Considering what was about to happen, I must reveal that I have always admired the ability of a person to make the perfect response to a statement from another in a situation that demanded comment. The art of rejoinder is how I think of it. It happens mostly in the movies, rarely in actual life, although I have seen it on a few occasions. The best example from the movies that I can think of is Mr. Christian's (Marlon Brando) response to Captain Bligh (Trevor Howard) in *Mutiny On The Bounty*. After Mr. Christian takes over the ship, he tells the sailors that Captain Bligh is not to be killed. Captain Bligh says to Christian, "If that's an attempt to earn clemency, I spit on it." A very good response in its own right. Mr. Christian then looks at Bligh (as only Brando can) and says in a tone dripping with hatred and disgust, "You remarkable pig. You can thank whatever pig god you pray to that you haven't quite turned me into a murderer." Wow! "Remarkable pig" would have been enough, world-class, but the sentence that followed twisted a perfect knife thrust. In any event, from the time that I first saw the movie, when I was about twelve years old, I have looked for an opportunity to call someone a "remarkable pig". I have never found it.

At our meeting, as arranged by the lawyers beforehand, I was to flip the coin and my client was to make the call. I stood from my chair to hold a quarter between my thumb and forefinger of my right hand held out from my body and instructed my client to make the call while the coin was in the air. I put the coin with my left hand on top of my right thumb and flipped it about three feet into the air. My client called, "heads". I caught the coin in my right palm and, without looking at it, turned it onto the back of my left hand. I took my right hand

away and looked at the coin. I said, “tails”. There was a small whimper from my client as I retook my seat. I noticed that her eyes had moistened.

The other lawyer said to his client, “Well John, it looks like you get the first choice. Go ahead and pick your first item.”

John did not look at the list. Instead, he leaned across the table staring into the wide eyes of his soon-to-be ex-wife.

With perfect enunciation in a calm voice, John said, “the dog.”

Before my client’s reaction, I realized that the moment I had been waiting for since I was twelve years old had finally arrived. I knew that the perfect response from me would have been to fix John as the sole object in my field of vision and say to him, “You remarkable pig.” I was, however, stymied. As a lawyer with some experience, my instincts told me that such a remark would be clearly out of bounds. It might even result in an ethics complaint. With the heavy weight of professional responsibility on my shoulders, I held my tongue.

My client did not hold her tongue. Instead, she released a stream of vulgarities toward her soon-to-be ex-husband that would have made an old sailor blink, after which she broke down in extended weeping. I took her from the conference room to my office to calm her down. I told her that her husband was not a cruel person, that he would likely be kind to the dog. Without accepting this as the truth, she agreed to go back to the conference room.

She took her seat and grabbed the list of remaining property with some violence. She looked stilettos across the table at John and said evenly “the weight set.”

John took the list quickly, looking at it for some seconds. He then looked onto Missy across the table and said, “the jewelry.”

And so it went, with each selecting the item that the other would want, until Missy had all of John’s possessions and John all of Missy’s.

And I had missed my only chance.

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*Saturday Night with the Not Quite Dead* by Jan Allen

**Second Place – Adult Division**

I wish I was dead, or I wish I *were* dead. I’ve never understood that tricky verb, not in 92 years, and I’m not about to learn it now.

We all know we will die someday. Even when I was a kid swinging on a partially rotted wooden plank, pulling on rusted metal chains, aiming for the clouds, I knew that I would die. Even when the handsome doctor at the city hospital chose me over all the nurses who batted their eyelashes at him, I knew that someday I would die. Even when I tried to discipline two rowdy and rambunctious boys, often alone, as my husband constantly got called into work, I knew ... Well, you get the picture. I was always okay with the inevitability of death.

What I’m not okay with is the drawn-out process toward accomplishing that end. Things I took for granted got complicated. Walking is an example. I started with a brace on my knee, graduated to a cane with a cutesy title (*As Advertised on TV*), got promoted to a walker with a padded seat and a Toto basket, and most days now I’m demoted to a wheelchair.

Medical personnel stopped curing my ailments; instead, they handed me 20 pages of small-print instructions on how to live with them. I ache 24/7—from the few hairs left on the top of my head to the thick and yellow toenails on the tips of my toes. But they tell me too much

Tylenol will damage my liver and too much ibuprofen will ruin my kidneys. I eat both like M&Ms.

My son, daughters-in-law and some of my grandchildren convene for secret conferences. One such conference resulted in the confiscation of my car keys and the signing over of my beloved DeVille's title to my 18-year-old great-grandson, who, instead of guiding it weekly, lovingly, through the automatic carwash, piloted it through a brick wall in his parents' garage.

Two weeks ago my son found me passed out from hypoglycemia on my kitchen floor, "one too many times" he said, meaning the second time in two years. This provoked yet another secret conference, the outcome of which led to my ousting from the only home I'd known for 63 years.

You might not think bricks and mortar would mean much. They didn't 25 years ago, when my husband and I planned to sell our house and travel across the country. But Dan's retirement party was preceded by his wake, by a week and three days. Two years ago my last friend died, and let me tell you, over the years I'd collected a fair number of them. Then last year I lost my youngest son. "Old age," they called it, "natural causes." That one's been the hardest, the death of my son. Not in the proper order. As the figurative walls surrounding me have crumbled over this last quarter-century, I've personified the literal walls that have offered me protection. So if you think I'm not heartbroken over the loss of my home, think again.

It's Saturday evening, and I'm eating in the dining room of this long-term care facility. Every meal, I decide I'll eat the next one in my room, like the people here who can feed themselves all must do, but every mealtime comes and goes, and I forget to tell anyone of my decision. So having completed my search for edible food on my plate, having located four forkfuls and eaten them, I study the other residents. Most of them are what we ER nurses used to

call Gomers. They can't feed themselves, they can't walk or talk, they stare as if they're blind; they're by far, sadly, more dead than alive. As I watch them, all I can think about is how, as a nonagenarian, I could easily wake up tomorrow a Gomer myself. How I pray every night to not wake up at all.

Meanwhile, I've learned these residents' names in spite of attempting not to. Names are posted on plaques next to our doors, and doors are left ajar for safety reasons. Bob, Dorothy, Helen and Jean are being fed by the staff; one nurses' aide feeds two residents.

The workers' names aren't as obvious to me as the residents', as they purposely clip on their badges backwards, so I call them collectively the Marlboro Kids. From the smell on their clothes, I think smoking is a prerequisite for being hired. They are all at least 50 years younger than I am, but I have more teeth.

I wheel myself down the long hall to the Activities Room. There will be an activity here tonight—there's one every afternoon and evening—but I'm not attending. I've been here for six days now, but it only took me three to figure out that every "activity," although given a clever title, turns out to be a version of Bingo. My intent is to grab a book off the shelf.

There must have been a bargain on Kristin Hannah and Danielle Steel paperbacks. I'm definitely in the mood for murder and mayhem, so I keep browsing. At warp speed, the Marlboro Kids wheel in the Gomers. The sooner they get the residents locked in place, the sooner they can escape outside to light one up, and in less than no time, I'm trapped.

I guess I'm playing Bingo tonight whether I want to or not.

But then a 20-something guy ambles in. He carries a stringed-instrument case in one hand and a music stand in the other. Once he's standing in front, he looks around the room as he adjusts his stand and yells, "Good evening ladies, and Bob."

Nobody responds, not even singled-out Bob. Bob's chair is now reclined, and he's studying a spot on the ceiling.

The young man spies me and walks over. "Welcome, newcomer," he says, in a normal tone. "I'm Pete. What's your name?"

He stretches out his right hand. I'd think it improbable that this gesture has in the past ever garnered a response.

"Doris," I answer, and I shake his hand.

"Charmed, Doris." He has a dimple in his left cheek when he smiles.

He turns his attention to his instrument case and removes a book of music, which he places on the stand, and then a ukulele, which he starts to tune.

I look around me. Everyone is sound asleep, even if their eyes are wide open, and I wonder what Pete is doing here. Maybe he's too tall and too skinny, his hair too curly, to get a date, but I'm sure he can find something more exciting to do on a Saturday night. Standup comedy?

Returning to his theatrical voice, he says, "Remember, everybody, if you know the song, sing along."

He strums a few times, then starts to sing "*Ain't We Got Fun.*"

Immediately and inexplicably, there's a metamorphosis. Has a sorcerer revived his zombies? Has a ventriloquist given her puppets a voice? This is what I know for sure: Six words into his song, Pete has a roomful of backup singers.

I look around me again, this time astounded. Dorothy's mouth, which always formed an O, even when mashed potatoes were scooped into it, is moving. Not that I'm an expert at lip-

reading, not that I've memorized the words to that 1920-something song, but I swear she's singing, "*Not much money, oh! but honey, ain't we got fun.*"

Reclining Bob is singing, too. He's still studying a bug on the ceiling, but I can distinctly hear his perfect baritone under the rest.

Next to me, I look from Helen's happy face to her fluffy-slipper-clad feet. They're tapping, executing a complex pattern; they're dancing.

Jean and another woman next to her are conducting an orchestra with their index fingers.

A few ladies are still sleeping, but only a few. And it makes me wonder, all these years later, how often I'd labeled somebody a Gomer in the ER when, in fact, they'd have communicated with me in some way if I'd taken extra time with them.

Pete is halfway through "*You Are My Sunshine*" when a woman walks in. She's one of us, older than the hills, but I'm mesmerized. She is not only walking, but she is accomplishing that miraculous feat unaided. No walker, no cane. She weaves her way through the maze of wheelchairs without touching one for support, and ends up in an armchair next to me, which I'd thought was there solely for appearances' sake.

Pete winks at her. She grins, nods. As Pete flips through his songbook, looking for his next song, the woman leans toward me. "You're Doris, right?" she asks. "I'm Marge." She's not even winded.

"How did you know?"

"I've been here three years. I know everybody. Besides, you still have that shell-shocked look." Marge smiles. "You'll get used to it. I thought I never would, but it took me less than a month."

There are old women you look at, and you think, I bet they were beautiful back in the day. I might be one of those. But Marge is beautiful still. Her skin doesn't sag. Her few wrinkles are strategically positioned. I wonder why I've never seen her before.

Pete, along with his audience, sings "*When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along.*"

Marge lowers her voice. "Do you play Bridge, Doris? Our fourth player's in the hospital, about to bite the dust, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry."

Marge shrugs, but her cheerful expression flees for a second. "You know how it is at our age."

I say, "I used to play Bridge every Thursday for 15 years."

"Wonderful! You're in. It's Joanie and Ruthie and me, on Tuesdays and Fridays in the Daisy Dining Room at 2 o'clock."

Pete is singing *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*. Marge joins in, so I do too.

After he finishes it, he singles out a few people. "Any requests tonight, Sondra?"

I turn around to locate Sondra. A woman whose mouth droops down on the right answers, "I'll have one for you next week, Pete." Her words are slow and slurred, but understandable.

Pete nods. "Bob?"

Bob grunts.

Pete walks over to a lady in the first row. "Philomena? Any requests tonight?"

Philomena is wiry, squirmy, 95 pounds of nothing but muscle. She lifts her butt clear out of her wheelchair by grabbing the arms of it and pushing down. Her biceps bulge like Popeye's.

“That one about water,” she says in a surprisingly deep and booming voice. Well, maybe not so surprising. Her thick white hair is sticking straight up in five different directions. Nobody’s gotten near her with a comb in at least two days, but I can’t say I blame the Marlboro Kids for that. I bet she’s a biter.

“Narrow it down more, Philly, and I’ll play it next week, okay?”

“Next week,” she booms.

An hour later, as Pete finishes his last song, before he’s returned his ukulele to its case, a curtain closes. No, that’s not quite right—a curtain would flutter. What happens in this audience is more like a door slamming shut. Mouths that had been singing, clamp down or form an O. Eyes that had been sparkling, blindly stare. Feet that had been tapping, go still.

The elevator doors open, and the reek of cigarettes assaults my brain. Quickly and silently, the nurses’ aides wheel everyone out. Soon it’s just Pete, Marge and me remaining in the room.

Pete packs up his ukulele and his songbook.

I say: “If you don’t mind my asking, why do you do this? Why spend your Saturday nights with us old people?”

“My Gram lived here. I played for her in her room sometimes. Even though she didn’t respond much, she opened her eyes when I played the old songs. The head nurse convinced me to play for everyone.”

“I’ve seen some of these people in the dining room,” I say. “They were transformed tonight.”

Pete nods, but he doesn't take credit for it. "Music does that. It's weird, though. It has to be 1920's and '30's stuff. They nod off when I do John Denver, even though I'm sure they remember his songs."

I think I know why. We want to sing songs that remind us of a time when our worlds held every promise imaginable, and then some; when a simple glimpse of the person we adored could turn our worlds upside down; when we could voice opinions that people listened to. It's these things, among others, that we'd taken for granted. It's these things, among so many others, that we've been robbed of as years ticked by.

"Thanks for a lovely evening," I say.

"Yes, thank you, Pete," Marge says. "We all appreciate you playing for us."

Pete had started to walk toward the door, but he turns around. "I miss my Gram. Not Gram that lived here, but the one I grew up with. Playing makes me feel better."

Pete gets on the elevator, the door closes, and I say to Marge, "He's coping with his grief. That's what he's doing here. He's so smart. I don't think I've ever done that, you know, grieved correctly."

Marge laughs. "That's because we didn't have Google our whole lives to tell us how to do everything. So you'll come Tuesday?"

"Sure. What time again?"

"Two o'clock. The Daisy Dining Room."

"Why do you call the dining room the Daisy Dining Room?" I ask.

"Your dining room is the Sunflower Dining Room because the curtains have a sunflower pattern. We have daisies on our curtains upstairs."

"Upstairs? I didn't know there was an upstairs."

“It’s where people live who don’t need as much help. You started out downstairs because you’re in a wheelchair, but Mandy, the head nurse, told me you’ll probably be moved upstairs next week since you’re doing OK on your own.”

“Oh,” I say.

The Marlboro Kids often get called away from the dining room at mealtime. An idea’s been forming in my mind tonight that perhaps I could feed Bob, Dorothy, Helen or Jean before their dinner gets cold.

I release my brakes. Marge starts pushing me.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say. “I was going to pick up a book anyway.”

Marge pulls one from the shelf, hands it to me. “I liked this one.” I read the cover: “Comfort & Joy” by Kristin Hannah.

“I think I’ll like it too.”

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***Sedgwick, Santa’s Secret Mouse* by Greg McCollam**

**Third Place – Adult Division**

Once upon a time at the North Pole, high up in the rafters of Santa’s workshop, there lived a teensy, tiny mouse named Sedgwick. He lived there secretly, hidden behind the smallest of cracks in the ceiling, a crack so small that only a teensy, tiny mouse could fit through it.

Everyone knows there is one thing that mice can do better than any other animal. They can flatten their bodies, even the fattest of them, and fit through very narrow places. And since Sedgwick was such a teensy, tiny mouse, he could fit through the teensiest, tiniest, narrowest, most smallest cracks anywhere. Which is precisely why he could live secretly in Santa’s workshop, where not even the elves knew he was there.

Sedgwick was a very shy mouse, and would spend his days up in the rafters, behind the crack, watching the many activities going on in Santa's workshop. The elves put on quite a show, and Sedgwick never tired of watching them.

Starting early in the morning, the elves hammered, and sawed, and glued, and sewed. They loved what they were doing so much that they spent most of the day giggling and singing while they were working. Their favorite songs were Christmas songs, of course, and they knew every song that mentioned Santa Claus, like "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," and "Here Comes Santa Claus," and their favorite of all, "Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer." At the end of the day, the elves would pick up their finished toys and pack them carefully into Santa's bag.

When the elves were gone, and the lights turned off, Sedgwick would quietly sneak out of his hiding place, squeeze through the narrow crack, and climb down the wall to the floor of the workshop. Because the other thing that mice can do so well is climb!

Sedgwick looked forward to this time of day because his favorite food in the whole wide world was candy canes. Every day, at lunchtime, the elves would eat candy canes for dessert. And the best part for Sedgwick was that they would always drop candy cane crumbs on the floor. Sedgwick would spend all night filling up his belly with candy cane crumbs until the sun came up the next day. As soon as Sedgwick heard the rooster crow in the morning, he would scurry up the wall and through the crack, back to his hiding place, where he would take a proper nap.

Now you probably know all about how Santa delivers his toys to girls and boys around the world, and how he has a special way to get those toys under the tree. His reindeer are trained to fly, and they can land on top of even the smallest and steepest roofs. Once they are on the roof, Santa carries his bag of toys over to the chimney. The reindeer like to watch what happens next because it is so magical. Santa sits on the chimney with his feet dangling inside, then he

counts to three. One, two, three! Whoosh! He jumps down the chimney, and somehow, even if the chimney is very, very little, Santa disappears from sight, bag and all!

This was a fine way to deliver toys back when every house in the world had a fireplace. Back then, everyone needed a fireplace to cook with, and to warm the house in the wintertime. The fireplace would burn wood or coal during the day, and then the fire would go out at night while the family was sleeping. That is one reason why Santa brings children their toys at night. It is much safer to jump down a chimney when the fireplace has no fire! Every Christmas Eve, it worked like clockwork. Year after year, this was the way Santa and his reindeer delivered toys on Christmas Eve. Every house had a fireplace, so every house had a chimney.

One Christmas Eve however, everything changed. On that Christmas Eve, which the elves still talk about today, Sedgwick made a big mistake, and Santa almost had to fly back to the North Pole with hundreds and hundreds of toys left in his bag, undelivered.

Here is how it happened.

It was Christmas Eve at the North Pole and the elves had just put the finishing touches on the last of Santa's toys, packing them in his bag, ready for Santa to take them with him that night. As usual, once the elves left the workshop, teensy, tiny, shy Sedgwick scurried down to look for more candy cane crumbs.

Then he smelled it. He knew what it was as soon as the scent drifted to his nose! It was not just candy cane crumbs, but an actual piece of candy cane! Probably about an inch long, thought Sedgwick, judging from the smell.

Where was it coming from?

Sedgwick followed his nose, and it led him all the way to Santa's bag. Apparently, one of Santa's elves had accidentally dropped the piece of candy cane while putting toys inside the

bag!

In a flash, Sedgwick climbed to the top of Santa's bag, flattened himself out, and crawled through the small space where the bag was tied together. Once in, he jumped from toy to toy until he made it all the way to the very bottom and there he found exactly what he was looking for...a nice, big, red-and-white piece of candy cane!

He was so excited! This was a dream come true! But just as Sedgwick was about to put the candy cane in his mouth, something unexpected happened. Santa came into the room, slung the bag over his shoulder and jumped onto his sleigh.

The reindeer were ready and waiting, and before Sedgwick could even think about what to do, he heard Santa's traditional Christmas Eve goodbye to Mrs. Claus, "Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas, Mrs. Claus, don't wait up!"

With that, the sleigh took off, with the reindeer in front, Santa in back, and Sedgwick secretly stuck inside Santa's bag.

"This was a big mistake," thought Sedgwick.

But Sedgwick was safe, so he decided to just enjoy the candy cane and stay hidden until Santa made it back to the North Pole. Everything was fine for a while. The reindeer would land on a roof. Santa would sit on the chimney. He would count to three, one, two, three, and jump! Whoosh! The next thing you knew, he was inside the house, putting toys under the tree.

About halfway through the night, however, Santa came to a town where, for the first time ever, none of the houses had chimneys! All the Christmases before, those houses had chimneys. Last Christmas, they had chimneys. But this Christmas, no chimneys. Not one house had a chimney!

Instead, they had new furnaces and stoves that were built right into the houses. They no longer needed a fireplace to cook with, or to warm up the house, so they no longer needed a chimney!

When he arrived at the very first house in that town, Santa landed on the roof like always. But he could find no chimney, so he jumped down to the ground with his bag and checked all the doors and all the windows, only to find that they were locked tight.

What was he going to do? With no chimney and no unlocked doors or windows, how could Santa possibly get inside the house with his bagful of toys? Santa stood outside the door for a long time, feeling sad that so many children might miss Christmas this year. Of course, Sedgwick was still inside Santa's bag. He heard what was happening and he wanted to help Santa. The problem was that he was so shy, he really preferred to stay hidden, down inside the bag.

But it was Christmas Eve, after all, and like Santa, Sedgwick felt sorry for the children too. So, he tiptoed to the top of the bag and peeked out. As soon as he did, Santa saw him. Oh, the look of surprise on Santa's face! He never knew he had a secret mouse living at the North Pole!

Sedgwick didn't know whether he should run back into the bag like a shy mouse would do, or be brave for once. After thinking about it, he decided to be brave this time. He climbed out of the bag, leaped from the sleigh, and ran as fast as he could to the front door where Santa was watching.

Then, because he was so teensy and tiny, and doing the thing that mice do best of all, Sedgwick was able to slide under the narrow crack below the door. Once inside, he climbed up

to the keyhole and turned the key. As soon as he did, Santa opened the door and skipped in, winking at Sedgwick, and smiling from ear to ear.

After he put the presents under the tree, Santa picked up Sedgwick and carried him back to the sleigh. He put Sedgwick down on the seat next to him and said, “My teensy, tiny friend, from now on, you are coming with me every Christmas Eve! You are going to be Santa’s secret mouse!”

True to his word, Santa never leaves the North Pole on Christmas Eve without Sedgwick seated by his side. So now, when the reindeer land on a roof that has a chimney, Santa delivers his toys the old fashioned way. He sits on the chimney, counts to three, one, two, three, and jumps! Whoosh!

But when a house has no chimney, Sedgwick, Santa’s secret mouse, who is no longer shy, does what he does best. He hurries under the door to help Santa!

And every Christmas Eve, when Santa and Sedgwick finish their work, and the toys are delivered to girls and boys around the world, they come home where Mrs. Claus is waiting for them, because she always waits up, with cookies for Santa, and a big red-and-white candy cane for Sedgwick.

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***The Flower Child* by Ellie Duffy**

**First Place – Teen Division**

She didn’t boast intricate braids or a large, feathered hat. She didn’t own a corset, and even if she did, she wouldn’t need one. Hunger shaped her delicate frame, and a wealthier

woman could not use any amount of rouge to mimic Delilah's hollow cheeks and the perk of her dainty nose.

She walked home with her head down.

Sometimes she would look up and watch the people around her, but all she saw were laughing children and beaming mothers. Their full gowns couldn't hide the round bellies that held babies in the past and would hold many more in the future. Delilah brought a hand to her stomach as if she could feel another heartbeat, but all she heard was the aggravated demand for a warm meal.

She sighed and turned into an alley, the bustling noise of the crowd fading into the wind. Delilah pushed past a pile of dirty newspapers and jumped back as a rat scurried out from underneath. A thin cry broke through the wet silence and Delilah looked around. Tiny arms flailed from above a milk crate and she crept over to investigate.

A baby, plump and naked with golden curls haloing its tearful eyes and rosy cheeks. The baby stopped crying when she saw Delilah and stared with wide eyes.

Delilah lifted the child and cradled it to her breast. She kissed her forehead, lips caressing unblemished skin, and wrapped her in the threadbare shawl she'd thrown over her shoulders that morning. Then she walked on, not stopping until she reached the one-room shack at the edge of town.

Her husband was already home and his hungry eyes gazed at Delilah's precious bundle.

"Fred!" She cried. "I found an abandoned baby. It was just left in the alley, poor thing." A thin whimper escaped the child's lips as she nuzzled against Delilah's chest. "She must be hungry."

Fred rubbed the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “Dear, we can barely feed ourselves. What makes you think we can feed a baby?”

Delilah set the child on the bed and stroked her cheek. A warm streak crept into her and calmed the ache in her heart. She lay down beside the girl, burying her nose in the curls and sweetness. “I couldn’t just leave her.”

Fred sighed. “You can keep her for today, but you’ll have to bring her to the orphanage tomorrow.” He turned back before leaving the room. “Don’t get too attached.”

Delilah named her Rosemary, and she repeated it over and over again to show the baby she had a title. A name that was all hers.

Then she knelt beside the battered trunk in the corner and pulled out the little, white gown, trimmed in lace. It was too pretty to have never been worn.

When Fred returned with a few potatoes, Delilah was humming songs and drying off a freshly-bathed Rosemary with a threadbare towel. She slipped the gown over the baby’s head, then rose to kiss her husband’s cheek. He drew his mouth into a tight line.

“Delilah.” Fred tilted his head. “I told you not to get attached.”

Rosemary chewed on the hem of the towel and bounced up and down making gurgling sounds. Delilah clenched her jaw and crossed her arms. “I didn’t. I just gave her a bath.”

“That’s a good way to get attached to the kid.”

“Her name is Rosemary.”

Rosemary for remembrance.

Fred let out a deflated groan. He stared at Delilah, his bright eyes sending a shiver down her spine.

“You named it?”

“*Her.*” Delilah took the potatoes and looked away, unwilling to continue the conversation.

“Fine...don’t talk to me. But I’m telling you, we can’t take care of her.”

Delilah glanced at Rosemary, who was crawling rocking on her knees, the towel draped around her back like a cape.

At least he hadn’t referred to Rosemary as an “it”.

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The midday sky turned gray and a chill climbed up Delilah’s arms as she dug a tiny carrot from the small garden in front of their house. She glanced over at Rosemary who had taken hold of a dandelion and chewed on the stem. Delilah rushed over and plucked the plant from her mouth.

“I know you’re hungry, but you can’t eat that. The garden is looking better today, isn’t it?” But even she didn’t believe her words as she sighed at the sad little carrot rolling around her palm. The baby rolled onto her back and off the towel. She turned belly-down upon the dead grass and pumped her legs, eyes wide with excitement and her giggles replacing the missing sunshine. Delilah’s chest expanded and she scooped Rosemary up.

How could anyone moan when a baby laughed?

She turned to leave but stopped. Down, right where Rosemary had wiggled, sprouted a patch of daisies. They were slightly crushed but still perked up and bobbing around a cluster of emerald grass. Delilah stared open-mouthed then looked at Rosemary, who only stuck her fingers between her rosebud lips. She set Rosemary down and watched as she crawled around the yard, daisies popping out of the ground like hungry moles.

“Daisies for innocence.” Delilah released a shaking laugh. The crunch of gravel drew her around and Fred approached, his eyes wide and pinned to the sprouting flowers. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead from a long day of working as a farmhand and he rubbed the back of his neck. Delilah opened her mouth but only a squeak came out.

“How?” Fred’s voice shook.

Delilah chewed on her lip and her heart thrummed. Rosemary crawled over and clung to Fred, her chin resting against his leg. He sighed and put his face in his hands, as though afraid, if he looked at her too long, he might love her. “You need to take her to the orphanage.”

Delilah snatched Rosemary up and held her close. Her voice trembled and her words tumbled. “No. Why must we? We can do it. We can take care of her.”

Fred grasped her shoulders and bent forward. “Delilah.” His brown eyes locked onto hers and a breeze blew between them. “Why are you doing this?”

Delilah turned away. Her tongue turned bitter and she breathed in a sharp gust of air, squeezing Rosemary tight. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes and she shakily exhaled as she walked toward the house.

“Delilah.”

She kept walking.

Inside, she set Rosemary on the bed. Delilah put a hand to her stomach.

As if she could feel the beating of another heart.

“Darling.” Fred’s hands were gentle on her arms.

“No!” Delilah pushed her husband away. “I can’t do it! I can’t lose another one.”

“She’s not yours to lose.”

“Yes, she is.” Her voice broke and tears streamed. “I found her all alone.” Every sob that left her lips and shook her body burned a deeper hole into her chest. “I need her, Fred. God was wrong to take my baby. You can’t take away my Rosemary.”

Fred watched her, his hands in his pockets and his brows pinching. He didn’t say a word as Delilah took up the baby—*her* baby—and stumbled away, found the wall, and slid to the floor.

The fireplace crackled, the only other sound Delilah’s sobs and Rosemary’s gentle breathing. Fred sighed and sat next to his wife. He put an arm around her shoulder and she rested her head against him.

“You know we can’t keep her.” He whispered so he wouldn’t wake Rosemary. “I know you feel guilty for what happened those years ago, but you must be realistic. We barely have enough food and money for ourselves, much less a baby.”

Delilah pressed a palm to her cheek, stained with liquid hurt and history. Fred was right, as much as she hated it. If she really cared about Rosemary she would want the best for her.

She breathed in and let it out with a defeated sigh. “All right. I’ll do it.”

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The orphanage’s black, iron door clashed against the faded bricks. Delilah clutched Rosemary tightly and ashy air nipped the child’s flushed cheeks. Her heart thrummed as she caressed Rosemary’s back and took lingering steps toward the building.

She knocked on the door and an older woman opened it. She looked down at Delilah with arched brows and a tight scowl. Her chestnut blouse clashed with her cold, colorless face and her nose was so sharp it seemed to rip seams into the air.

“I’m Mrs. Crawford. What do you want?” Her voice mocked the raspy screech of a crow and Delilah stepped back, her heart pounding.

“I found this baby. She was just abandoned.” Delilah hugged Rosemary closer as Mrs. Crawford held the door open.

“Come in.”

Delilah stepped into a large room dominated by a heavy desk. The only sign of light was the afternoon poking through the windows and a flickering candle nearly melted to a stub. Small footsteps creaked along the wood staircase and Mrs. Crawford pointed a bony finger to a tiny figure bathed in darkness.

“Are you done with your chores?”

A little girl stepped into view, shadows slipping between the window panes and painting her grubby face. Her dress hardly clung to her boney shoulders and matted hair covered her head like a cap. A whisper of dread iced Delilah’s spine.

Mrs. Crawford towered over the girl. “Go start on the next one.” The little girl crept away and Delilah noticed a red mark on the back of her leg.

“What’s the poor child’s name?”

“We don’t bother about names here.” The woman reached her arms out for Rosemary but Delilah turned away. The baby whimpered but she barely heard it over the blood pounding in her ears.

“I think I’ve changed my mind.”

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Outside the shack, Rosemary cried even as marigolds bloomed around her in the garden. They popped up one by one, all different hues of orange, red, and yellow, until they nearly

covered every half dead carrot and potato. Sitting in the dirt beside the baby, Delilah trembled, gathering her dress into fistfuls.

Marigolds for grief.

*She's not yours to keep.* Fred's words rang like a church bell in her head.

A marigold grew in front of her. She plucked it and handed the bloom to Rosemary who calmed down. The baby's wide blue eyes took in the flower as though she weren't the one growing them.

"I wish I could take care of you." Delilah's soft murmur lifted and then dissolved into the gray sky. A breeze brushed through the crisp air and fluttered the blooms.

"Hello?"

She looked up to see a woman waving from behind the rickety fence. Forcing a smile, Delilah pushed herself to her feet and walked over. "Yes?"

The woman pointed at the marigolds. "Your garden is beautiful. I don't know how you've managed to grow such beautiful blooms so late into winter. May I buy some?"

Delilah blinked and her mind froze. "Oh, of course."

She picked a bouquet of marigolds in different shades and tied them together with a bit of twine she pulled from her apron pocket. The woman dropped a few coins into her palm and walked down the road, the flowers poking from the basket she held in the crook of her elbow. Delilah stared after her, a plan forming.

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The sun finally peeked through the clouds as Delilah walked to the market, Rosemary on her hip and a bundle of marigolds in a wicker basket. People crowded the square, their arms full

of brown paper packages and bulging bags. Delilah unfolded a blanket and sat it next to a bench. She put Rosemary down and raised the flowers. “Fresh marigolds! Red, orange, and yellow.”

Several women came over and offered to buy some. Delilah beamed as she traded bouquets for coins.

One woman stared with wide eyes. “How did you grow them before spring?”

Delilah’s lips teased a smile. “Innocence and grief.” She looked over at Rosemary who was reaching for the edge of the blanket. The woman shrugged and purchased a bouquet. As she walked away, Rosemary touched the dead grass and a pink carnation bloomed.

Carnations for a mother’s eternal love.

Delilah stooped to lift her daughter. And wondered what Rosemary would grow in her life next.

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***Wishing* by Ingrid Erickson**

**Second Place – Teen Division**

It’s easy to stare up into the night sky full of stars and believe that anything is possible, isn’t it? Such an expansive universe full of secrets awaits and it only seems larger the smaller you are. In fact, you can only realize how extremely tiny everything is when looking at a dark sky that seems to wrap expansive, loving arms around everything in sight. That alone makes it almost effortless to think that perhaps stars *can* grant wishes.

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Aged mattress springs creaked in protest to the weight that was bouncing on them. Their whiny song gained them nothing, though. Bright green eyes stared up eagerly at a careworn face that smiled down at her. Particles of dust danced through the air, enjoying the last light that day

would offer them. A child's finger pointed up at the sky, and a young girl's voice broke the silence of night.

“Da, what are those?”

Her father's smile widened, and he thought for a second, playfully drawing out the wait for his daughter, who continued to bounce in impatience. “The lights in the sky?” The child nodded, enraptured by the bright light of the largest. “Those are Wish-Granters. Every night, they fly into the sky, waiting for someone—” He looked down meaningfully at his daughter, who responded with a giggle. “—to ask them for a wish.”

“Could *I* ask for a wish?”

The girl's father stroked her hair gently. “Of course you could, my dearest.”

A smile of anticipation spread across her face, before fading, replaced with deepest contemplation.

“How would I wish, Da?” Aisla rested her elbow on the open window's sill, dropping her chin into the waiting hand. “I've not wished before.”

Her father sat down by her side, causing another vocal complaint to spring forth from the bed. “All you need to do” he paused for a second, thinking, before finishing the sentence, “I won't be able to explain it properly.” He drew out a thin leather bound book which was placed into Aisla's open hands. Her father stood up, placing a kiss on the top of her head. “It will show you how.” One more smile and a wink was given to the girl before he left the room, drawing the curtain that separated her room from the rest of their small house after him.

Aisla looked skeptically at the book, turning it over slowly in her hands. The leather that bound it was soft and well-worn. Letters formed out of gold-leaf seemed to dance out of sheer joy to be looked at again, nearly springing off of the cover in an exuberant greeting. She stared

at it, awestruck, as the words shifted, imploring her to turn the page. The child opened the cover, immediately met by a combination of splendid illumination and marvelous Gaelic verse. A playful, illustrated fae skipped her way to the top, red-gold hair flying behind her. The whimsical creature sat herself on the edge of the first letter, tapping it with a slender finger.

Enthralled, the girl followed the illustrations as they gracefully swept through the book, enraptured by their beauty and the impossible history within. Once finished, Aisla stared at the sky, full of wonder. The Wish-Givers winked down at her, breaking the darkness with their bright glimmer. She pulled her quilt over herself, still rapturously watching the fae that danced through the night sky so far away. Her mind raced, flicking through simple, childish possibilities.

*Could the fae in sky—the Wish-Givers—really climb down to grant a wish? Would they do it for anyone? Or was it all an elaborate trick that their mischievous minds delighted in?*

Aisla fell asleep, dreaming of fae skipping into the sky to take a seat amongst the Wish-Givers.

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*The sun shone down pleasantly on her sleeping form, tickling her awake with its soft rays. Her eyes blinked open and were almost immediately drawn to the window, where a familiar, tall frame was plodding away. Confusion flicked across her face as she wondered where he was going so early in the morn. She got to her feet and padded to the window.*

*“Da?”*

*Her father turned and gave her a sad smile over his shoulder but continued to walk down the road. He disappeared. Gunshots rang around the house and clouds covered the gentle sun. The girl, terrified, shied away from the glass. The sky was as black as night now, but the*

*Wish-Givers were gone. They had climbed out of the sky, leaving no hint of their existence behind.*

Aisla woke from her restless sleep with a start and raced to the window to be sure she had only dreamed the whole occurrence. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the sun shining gaily down on the Scottish highlands. The girl stood there for a while, watching it glimmer and dance on the friendly brook that bubbled cheerfully on its way. Eventually, she tore her eyes away from the familiar scene and left her room, peeking out from behind the curtain into the rest of the house.

Her father was not where he usually was. In fact, she couldn't see her father...anywhere. Her breathing quickened while she recalled the dream. Surely it was not real! Small, bare feet flew across the packed dirt floor, searching for her mother. There she was, standing at a window, face turned away from the doorway through which the girl entered. Her father was there beside her, knapsack slung over his shoulder, conversing in hushed tones with his wife. They both turned, surprised, as they heard the sound of running feet coming toward their doorway. Aisla watched him with wide eyes, mind still racing. In the end, she was the one to break the drawn-out silence.

“Da, where are you going?” He wouldn't leave—he'd never abandon her.

Her father sighed and gave her the same sad smile he had in the dream.

*No. Dreams weren't wishes.*

There was a long pause before he finally responded. “I need to help our country.”

His response confused Aisla, causing her brain to tie itself into tight, worried knots. “Is it sick?”

“Yes, very.”

He shifted the weight of his knapsack and picked up his weapon. “When will you come back?” He managed something of a smile and ruffled her hair playfully.

“Soon.”

The girl and her mother watched as he strode to the door, opened it, and left. Her father slowly disappeared down the dirt road. Aisla buried her face in her mother’s skirt, trying to banish the dream that still lingered in her head. He promised. He *never* broke his promises.

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Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, and months turned into a year—an entire *year*. Nights and seasons continued with heart-rending monotony for Aisla, who waited tirelessly, yet painfully, for her father’s return. The Wish-Givers remained in their places, solidly refusing to budge for any petty human desires, though the child pleaded with them every night.

Eventually, she lost hope in the fae entirely. Her once fanciful mind that delighted in the idea of small, mischievous folk began to tune out all mention of them. A heavy mist of hopelessness settled itself comfortably on the two-person household, turning the days into a set of mechanisms that creaked and stuttered their way through life.

But through the mist shone a light—a light that danced in the shadow and skipped ever-closer to the forest. This light caught Aisla’s eye, tempting her to recall the last story her father gifted her with. Had a curious Wish-Giver come to Earth, seeking a Wisher? Or was it merely a figment of imagination that came from a mind overcome with longing?

Aisla yearned for a single wish, for that was all it would take. If it was granted to her, life would return to how it *had* been, and that would be close enough to perfect in her eyes. She left the house. Despite the normalcy of that simple action, her mother’s voice echoed quietly in her mind.

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*“Never go into the forest.”*

*The child looked up at her mother’s face, which was tight with concern and seriousness. “Why, Mama?” Aisla took a step closer to her mother, repeating her question. “Why?”*

*Her mother dropped her gaze to Aisla’s face, so far below her own. “The mischievous fae lead travelers astray with visions of what the viewer longs for most.” She paused to take a long breath. “You mustn’t get drawn into one of their traps.”*

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The light was nearly absorbed by dark, foreboding trees that towered high above Aisla. The gentle wind that had seemed so playful when it danced outside of the child’s window now whistled mournfully through the highest branches, which swayed and sighed as if they were tired of life.

She stepped closer to the edge of the forest, reaching a hand out to a tree for assurance. Upon feeling its cold, rough bark, Aisla quickly jerked back, tense and light on her feet, like a deer prepared to flee back to its familiar glade at the slightest warning call. The light was now almost gone, and her desperate eyes searched for it in the foggy mist that shrouded a path to the wood’s heart. It was still bobbing gaily down its chosen path, seemingly unaffected by the black that reached its claws out, ready to tear it to shreds in a single heartbeat.

There! Her eyes had caught their prize and as her mind began to race, her bare feet followed. After the light she ran, now oblivious to her mother’s warning and the darkness. Her entire being was set on the light and on the wish that was to come. Aisla did not see any of the oddities that were taking place around her: the trees moved out of the way, allowing the light to pass; no animals chirped their joyous tunes or scolded trespassers and thieves.

The light had stopped its flight. Aisla seemed to come to its side in slow motion, though her pace did not change. Once she had caught up, it moved forward again, but more slowly this time. The girl's heart jumped within her chest, filled with the thrill of her chase and hope that her wish might become reality.

The trees loosened their tight hold on Aisla and her Wish-Giver, falling away as they approached a silent swamp. Its murky water spread itself over the ground, greedily devouring the cool grass that had once lain on the forest floor. A knife of worry stabbed Aisla, kicking her mind back into action. The swamp felt stilted and odd, almost fake, although its outward appearance was perfectly normal. No birds sang and no frogs managed to stagger through their rusty tune. She strained, trying to hear some sound that could assure her it was not entirely devoid of life. Silence spread her wings over the scene, broken only by Aisla's quiet breathing.

She reached a hand out toward the Wish-Giver, anticipation settling over her like it had a year before. The girl delighted in the pleasant shiver of excitement that followed and closed her eyes. The light did not move. Her hand rested on top of the sphere, which burned and froze. It was as solid as a boulder and smooth as ice, yet unreliable like the deepest water. Aisla closed her eyes and breathed in deeply.

*Bring me to Da. Please.*

A smooth yet playful fae voice rang out like a small, quiet bell after a pause, as if it needed time to fully contemplate the informal request.

*Is this your wish?*

Aisla nodded without hesitation, certain. After no response came from the fae, she whispered her reply. "Yes."

The Wish-Giver began to slowly move again, bringing Aisla with it. She willingly followed; eyes still closed. Would it truly work? Her damaged trust in the fae resurfaced forcibly, calling out doubts. The desperate child did her best to subdue them and they were shoved to the back of her mind once again.

*Aisla opened her eyes, met by bright sunlight that cut through the shadow that had earlier clogged the atmosphere, almost too thick to breathe. As it was dispelled, she took a deep breath of clean, crisp air. The gentle wind had returned, and the trees seemed to sing instead of creak. Aisla's father emerged from the wood, entering the clearing that contained the swamp. He looked disoriented, his eyes roving about the open area as if he had not used them in a while. Aisla's breath caught in her throat as she saw him, and tears pricked at her eyes.*

*It had been a year—a year and a day.*

*Eventually, his searching brought him to the rim of the swamp in which she stood. The light was no longer present, though she looked. How would she explain?*

*No. There was no need to explain. He was back, and that was enough. Silent tears of joy streamed down her cheeks, and she ran to him. The confusion that had taken over her father's features vanished as he felt her touch and he reached down to swoop her into a hug. Breathless, Aisla looked up at him with a smile spread wide across her rosy face.*

*"It worked, Da. It worked!" Her father, confused once more, watched her excited face with eyebrows furrowed.*

*"What worked, Dearest?"*

*Aisla cocked her head, searching him with her eyes. "The Wish-Giver came down and brought you back... did she not tell you?"*

*Her father gave her the same sad smile. Aisla glanced at where the fae had been, the panic from her year-old dream returning. No. The forest was filled with sunlight. There were no gunshots.*

*He stayed silent, his mind now on something else. The tree line rattled in warning, though neither present understood. Aisla was cold; colder than she should have been. He had come back. Of course he had.*

“Da? Da, don’t you remember?” Her breath came out lightly; hurt and question lingered in her eyes.

*“Please, Aisla.” A new, familiar voice echoed in the wood.*

“What, Mama? What is it?” Tears came to the child’s eyes. Where was she? Why couldn’t she see her?

*“Never go into the forest.”*

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***Beware, the Wrath of Dragons* by Holly Erickson**

**Third Place – Teen Division**

*Mine!*

*Mine!*

*The barrow-guard lies on his bed of unused gifts*

*Three hundred winters*

*Three hundred years*

*The barrow-guard lies on his bed of unused gifts*

A *whuff* of air left a jagged mouth, the ensuing trail of smoke and steam drifting lazily toward the ceiling of the craggy cavern. A pair of fire-bright eyes shuttered leisurely, as a coiled dragon watched the meandering path of his breath swirling from eddying currents of wind originating outside of his barrow. He curled his armored tail closer, sweeping it across his hoard-joy. At the far-reaching motion, golden coins and other valuables fountained down as the heap of treasure within the loose circle of the dragon's bulk overflowed. His keen gaze flicked down to observe them clinking and clattering onto the base of the pile.

The beautiful sound pleased the beast and his mouth opened in a draconian version of a smile; he slowly reached out a taloned, scaly paw to clench and draw close jeweled neck-bands and a splendid coat of battle-worn chainmail. The beast closed its eyes, a purr emanating from its very core, and the metal gently scratched his scales that shone bright after centuries of being polished by his beloved gold. The tip of his tail twitched in contentment, knocking a cup aside. The jewel encrusted goblet clattered off of the sprawling quantity of precious objects and rolled from the serpent's hill onto the gritty, gray rock littered with a smattering of other fallen treasures. A yawn burbled up inside of the barrow-guard and he opened his maw, stretching terrible jaws so that the teeth gleamed. Drowsiness tugged at his now-heavy eyelids and he let the cup lay where it fell, forgotten for the moment. The time had arrived to sleep upon his store of treasure and joy.

*Thief!*

*Thief!*

*The night-demon, the terror, has awoken*

*His long slumber gone*

*His hoard-joy marred*

*The night-demon, the terror, has awoken*

Dark intuition wrenched the monster from his sweet, dreamless sleep. One fire-lit eye snapped open with a click of scale against scale, its yellowed expanse glittering like the great quantity of surrounding gold. His wide nostrils flared, drinking in a new, yet familiar, scent—a smell from bygone days of battle-glory and villages left behind, ablaze with his ravenous flame. A print upon the ground caught the winged serpent's gaze and he tasted the air, groping for the intruder's identity, though the spoor was too faint for him to justly perceive the creature that had left it behind. Eyes narrowing into molten slits, he hoisted his great mass from the ground with effort and lowered his horn-crowned head to inhale deeply over one of the marks upon his dust-marred floor. His scaled lip peeled back from yellowed fangs and a low growl emanated from deep within the monster's chest, the rumble shaking the serpent's lair from the very ground. A human had trodden on *his* barrow, through the dragon's jealously guarded hoard. Knowledge of the habits of humans was well within the serpent's ken; the thieving, miserable wretch had surely stolen something from his expansive hoard-joy.

Immediately, the barrow-guard fixed his eyes upon the edges of his domain. His goblet was the first thing he thought of as he scanned the rock-laden ground, for other objects had been forgotten with time as the dust on the floor. Where he knew his priceless cup had lain, carelessly dropped, naught remained.

How dare he.

How *dare* he?

How dare he intrude upon the land of the dragon, who found it alone and unguarded, and take what was his by right? The dragon himself had faithfully guarded the heathen gold for three

hundred winters and a human thought to sneak by unnoticed? The human would live only long enough to rue the day he had set foot upon the entrance of the serpent's lair.

*Seek!*

*Seek!*

*The dragon seeks the thief and retribution*

*His gold is stolen*

*His anger aroused*

*The dragon seeks the thief and retribution*

The barrow-guard, his pride wounded, stalked out of his treasure-filled lair, swinging his weighty head low and in every direction. He searched with a fresh desperation, for the missing object had grown dear in its absence. The desperation of the dragon, however, was patient enough to exhaust his options. Revenge would come, be it within the hour or within the day.

Ramping up on his hind legs, the beast turned his ornamented head in a complete circle. The coarse grass waved in the breeze, drops of rain coating them, without any unnatural disturbance present for the vengeful gold-defender to pounce upon. A village lay in the distance. The dragon briefly laid his gaze upon it, but commenced to ignore it. The thief himself was all he sought. A leap away from the serpent, however, the footprints ended—their scent disguised by that of the grass and hidden from even the scrutiny of the keen-eyed creature. He snarled at the path, but proceeded to return into his barrow, kicking up clots of dirt behind his talons, which gouged into the soil. Could his treasure not have been overlooked in his initial survey of the treasure?

He nosed through the mountain of treasure and cataloged each, down to the smallest golden nugget or jeweled ring. Another time, under different circumstances, joy would have been found in this activity. Each fragment of the hoard-joy would have been lovingly caressed and tenderly clutched, but not now. Now, the heathen gold was thrown heedlessly as the embittered barrow-guard burrowed within his once-neat mound, muttering to himself in deep, unintelligible rumbles.

Surging up from his fervent search inside, the smoking dragon returned to the open sky, smoke burbling out of his nostrils and his taloned feet coming down more heavily as he sought but failed to find. The night-demon's eyes burnt like embers and smoke rose from his savage muzzle as if a mead-hall blazed atop it; his teeth ground together, causing sparks to rise alongside the smoke.

How dare a mere man steal from a battle-proud dragon? How dare he steal from this barrow-guard, the bane of men? The dragon furiously paced back and forth, until a ditch was worn, as if newly plowed, about the serpent's entire lair. The violently upset soil meant little to the beast in the face of his beloved, albeit unused, goblet. His pupils dilated and contracted repeatedly as the golden cup seemed to appear before him, in his mind's eye. The image enhanced its glitter so that it looked brighter than ever before. The beast's mouth hung open in a pant: *Mine. It is mine.*

The humans—all of them within his reach—would pay for this.

*Rage!*

*Raze!*

*Their hovels burn as the cruel worm's vengeance strikes*

*It burns them all down*

*Inhabitants flee*

*Their hovels burn as the cruel worm's vengeance strikes*

The fury over the diminished hoard-joy had grown past the dragon's atavistic reason. Its scaled lip curled, baring whetted teeth. The thief had fled, not daring to face the wrath of a wronged cave-worm. The cowardice of the man clouded the serpent's mind with anger, driving it to seek retribution from not the one, but the many. The innocents would be forced to produce the guilty one. The cruel worm lunged out of its lair, spurts of gold streaming out from where they had been lodged on its wings and its talons.

The earth-fire deep within the beast roiled in its armored breast, pleading to arise and demolish all who dared defy it. Its leathery wings snapped out at the height of the dragon's parabolic ascent and they stretched taut, buoying its bulk into the wind-swept clouds. The cave-worm started its descent even as the village first began to appear beneath it. Not a single man turned his face to the sky as the monstrosity swept upon them. Had they forgotten that fiery reign of terror in but generations? Regardless, the worm's mouth unhinged, fire billowing out like thunderheads onto the wooden mead-hall and surrounding buildings. In moments, they caught ablaze in the fading light of day.

*Flee!*

*Flee!*

*Beware, O men, the wrath of a wronged cave-worm*

*His vengeance taken*

*The villages gone*

*Beware, O men, the wrath of a wronged cave-worm*

The haze of wrath and unthinking fury over his molested hoard-joy lifted from the dragon as he winged back. Smoke trailed from his mouth and he swept into his barrow—his resting-place—to await the humans who would come to him. Would they not amend their mistake? Indeed, the dragon knew the code by which the men lived and thus awaited compensation or the thief himself to be handed over.

Steam poured from the mouth of the barrow as the beast lay in wait, prepared for peace-making and parley. The residue of his flame ran off of him and trickled out of the cave's arched entrance. Inhaling deeply, the dragon caught the tell-tale scent of mail-shirts and men. The sweet taste of jewels and metal hung in the air. A stream of fire-heat bubbled from the dragon's mouth in anticipation, flowing out of the barrow expectantly. Though his heart still burned with rage, these men—these Geats—would honor his loss and hoard-joy. They would make the wrong right again.

A voice burdened with battle-lust and blood-vengeance reached the dragon's ears—a challenge came from the human's throat.

*Cry!*

*Cry!*

*Now both defenders and guardians lay dead.*

*No parley offered,*

*His rage enkindled*

*Now both defenders and guardians lay dead.*