

FIRST PRIZE

Providence

The wedding had been short and solemn but the ceremony afterwards was a celebration with food and family. It was late as they rode home in the buggy, pulled by two strong horses, trotting along in the winter snow. The evening was clear and mild and tiny stars shone up above, forecasting, for Rebecca and her new husband, a life filled with happiness and fulfillment.

Rebecca smiled and put her hand gently on Noah's arm as he held the reins. "It was a lovely day," she said in the guttural Pennsylvania German that was her mother tongue.

Noah nodded slowly.

Suddenly, from behind them, a large, grey truck came barrelling out of nowhere and pulled along beside them on the road.

"Get off the road," the passenger yelled when he had rolled down the window.

A bottle flew from the truck; grazed Rebecca's back and landed with a thump in the snow at the roadside. Even in her heavy winter coat, she could feel the pain of the object having struck her along her backbone.

Noah looked straight ahead, but his mouth was set in a tight line and his eyes blazed. The truck sped up, leaving a gust of snow to settle over the buggy.

"What did we do wrong?" Rebecca asked her husband.

His voice was grim. "Our lights were on and we moved over to the side as we should. We did nothing wrong." He slapped the horses with the reins to move them along. "We'll soon be home."

Rebecca leaned back into the buggy, and then winced as her sore back met the hard leather of the seat. She sat forward and smoothed her blanket over her knees. She hoped they wouldn't meet up with the truck again.

At the S-turn in the road, Noah slowed the horses even though they knew the intricacies of the sharp turn well. To the east, the sky looked blacker.

"Snow coming," Noah predicted.

Almost at the end of the S-turn, the couple could see a small snow bank left by the plough on the road when it had turned off to the right to enter a side road. The horses and sled glided easily over the small drift.

Suddenly, they spied tracks leading off the road and heard the sharp cries of someone calling for help. In the bush nearby, an owl hooted eerily like a sentry. The couple could see the grey truck that had stopped beside them earlier was now upside down in the snow bank at the side of the road, tires spinning like Ferris wheels in the air.

"What should we do?" Rebecca whispered to Noah.

He adjusted his glasses up on his nose and cleared his throat. "Nothing," he said resolutely. "We have no telephone and we're miles from anyone in the dark. There's nothing to be done."

She regarded him, puzzled. "Won't God be angry if we don't stop?"

"God acts in His own way. Providence," he murmured mysteriously.

The horses and sled had slowed a little now and Rebecca peered out to see if anyone had gotten out of the truck, but there was no sign and the cries for help had stopped.

Snow had started to fall, as Noah had forecast—large, marshmallow flakes falling softly through the sky. Rebecca looked back at the truck and knew it wouldn't be long before the truck was covered. *At least it's not cold out*, she thought. Noah clicked to the horses and slapped the reins again and they moved forward.

Rebecca regarded her new husband with some surprise, how he could leave the truck in the ditch and continue on, despite what had happened earlier.

“We will leave it to God,” he said, as if reading her thoughts, and she knew the decree had been made. He was, after all, now the head of the household and his decisions were final.

“When we get home,” he said, his voice tender now, “I will help you clean and dress your wound.”

She hesitated, then took his arm again and patted it gently as he guided the horses through the thick, swirling snow and on to their matrimonial home.

by Connie Cook

Melancthon, Ontario



SECOND PRIZE

For Sale

Through the viewport, Jupiter hung in a dark void—a collection of immense storms masquerading as a planet. Dark, cyclonic bands swirled deep in the interior, looming above our spaceship like an angry god. Europa orbited in the foreground, a dirty ice world that reflected solar light with all the enthusiasm of an exhausted call girl.

I fingered a picture of the kids in my pocket. After nine months spent in *cryosleep*, their looks would have changed. Jamie, the oldest, was in the middle of a growth spurt and about to enter high school when we launched. Little Jessica was recovering from chemo; her hair would have grown back by now.

“Hell of a view,” the retired farmer said. He leaned on the rail next to me and stared at the gas giant. “They say watching it is better than sex.”

“Can’t say I buy it,” I said, tearing my gaze free. “Especially after nine months of forced celibacy.”

The wizened little man laughed and slapped my arm. He had befriended me during embarkation, once he discovered both our families had been evacuated to Luna after rising CO₂ levels poisoned the East Coast.

I noticed movement in the adjacent room and gestured with my hand. “Looks like the presentation is about to resume.”

The farmer’s eyes narrowed and he ran gnarled fingers through a short goatee. “Yep, the old bait and hook,” he muttered. “They’ve dangled the bait in front of us and wetted our appetite. It’s time to spring the trap.”

I smiled in spite of my depressive thoughts. The old guy had a habit of cutting to the chase. He even argued with the company reps about the demise of agro-farming in the Midwest grain belt. They said the cause was the infestation of a genetically superior locust. He said the chemical effluents from the five-mile deep mining projects poisoned the soil. He should know since he spent five decades working the dying land.

The company representative, an albino with a French accent, stepped onto the raised dais. His white hair, moustache, and eyebrows clashed with the navy blue suit, but his smile hadn’t slipped since waking from cryosleep. “Ladies and gentlemen, it’s decision time. We’ve discussed the details of the habitats, the greenhouses where you can grow your own food, even the recreational spaces hollowed out beneath the ice plates.” He made a show of glancing up at the wall clock. “However, your first refusal rights are set to expire in seventeen minutes and other ships are entering orbit as we speak.”

From the standing-room-only crowd, a hand shot up. “What about communication with Luna and the colonies?”

The rep nodded. “A tight-beam transmission sequencer comes standard in every unit.”

“You said the condos are larger than those on Luna and Mars?”

“Each base unit has fifty-percent more floor space. Some are as large as 500 square feet.” Someone whistled and the salesman’s face split into a wide, plastic grin. That much space shouted *privacy*, an amenity unheard of in the crowded inner colonies.

My farmer friend elbowed forward. “What’s the bottom line?”

Faint lines appeared at the corners of the albino’s eyes. I knew everyone on board had been vetted by company accountants before being invited on this solar-system version of an open house. Luckily I made my money early in life. Even so, it cost a bundle to get us off-world. Luna

was safe but the crowded and claustrophobic conditions were no place to raise a family. “The company invested heavily in geologically stabilizing the moon,” the rep said.

“Cut to the chase,” the farmer growled. “How much?”

The rep hesitated. “100,000 credits per year . . . for five generations.”

I grimaced. A standard generation was thirty years.

“Units on Mars cost only a fraction of that,” someone muttered.

The rep pursed his lips in feigned sympathy. “Unfortunately, this is the last scrap of real estate left in the system. And with Earth’s condition worsening and millions vying to get off. . . ,” his voice trailed off ominously.

I pulled out the picture from my pocket. The kids looked so young in front of the old Victorian mansion that sat perched on a hill overlooking the ocean. The water had gradually turned to acid, the hill to toxic slime. My wife succumbed to the atmospheric poison one year after the photograph was taken, six months before they were able to evacuate the girls and me.

I raised my hand. “Where do we sign?”

by Michael Simon

Saint John, New Brunswick



THIRD PRIZE

The Inevitable

I should have just left it alone. But some days, you just can't take it anymore and have to do something about it.

It had been raining all day. Endless buckets of water poured down on the earth without any letup. It should have stopped. It should have died down to a sprinkle and then eventually down to nothing.

Clearly, Neko had made a mistake. Or something was wrong. After so much rain, I knew I had to visit him and see what the problem was.

I found my rain jacket and shoved my feet into my rubber boots. Before I reluctantly left the warmth of my house, I stared at the streams of water running down the windows, hoping it would stop soon and I wouldn't have to go. But it didn't stop. With a sigh, I pulled the hood up over my head and stepped out into the deluge to find my ladder. It lay next to the side of the house like it always did. It was a heavy wood ladder, but I managed to lean it against one of the rain clouds.

Rain beat down on my face as I climbed. It almost seemed like a warning not to go further, but I paid it no attention. I focused on making my steps sure and smooth. In all my years of visiting the cloud master and his apprentice to make my complaints about the weather, nothing bad had ever happened to me.

I gritted my teeth as the rain sank into my jeans and slid down my arms. A chill hugged my hands, but I continued to climb. It was never a pleasant journey.

When I finally reached the rain cloud, I pushed past the grey, misty air and nearly bopped my head against a cold pipe. The room I had entered was full of pipes, twisting this way and that, going to places I could not see. I wiped my dirty hands against my jeans and walked further into the room where a wood stove burned. It was perpetually wet in the rain cloud. You were never warm unless you stood near the fire.

I found the cloud master sleeping in a chair next to the wood stove. I shook my head. This was the reason the village was getting so much rain. And yet, I couldn't be angry. Only a few short months ago, Neko had gone from being the apprentice to being the cloud master. He was still trying to find his rhythm working all by himself. After all, Hemlock, the old cloud master, had been telling him what to do, and now Neko had to control everything. It wouldn't be unexpected if he made a mistake every now and again.

I walked over to his work station and looked at all the dials and barometers and pressure valves. Some indicated high levels and didn't look good. It confirmed my suspicions the village I lived in was getting too much rain. I turned off the valve, even though I wasn't supposed to touch anything, and watched the levels return to normal. The water pressure slowing through the pipes made them groan and shake. The noise jerked Neko awake.

"Ali?" he said worriedly, as he sleepily straightened in his chair.

I turned to him, pushing back my hood. "You just sent us a lot of rain. More than we need, for sure. I just turned it off."

Neko jumped up from his chair, seeming more awake than he had been a second ago, and rushed to his work station. "You should have woken me up," he said distractedly. Scanning the dials and screens quickly, he reached for the valve I had turned off and turned it back on.

I frowned. "What are you doing?" I asked anxiously. "If we get any more rain, it will wash away the village."

Neko didn't answer. He looked at the complicated machinery wordlessly and stood as still as a statue.

"You're going to flood it," I said, the truth dawning on me. "You're creating a disaster."

His eyes widened with fear. "This wasn't my decision. You know I get orders from elsewhere I have to follow precisely. Disasters happen."

"Not to my village," I said, feeling angry. "Nothing happens to it."

"Times are changing, Ali," he said sympathetically, "and not for the better." A wave of emotions passed over his face. "I'm glad you're here," he said, sounding choked up, "because soon there won't be a village anymore."

by Shelina Turner
Campbellford, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

White Lies

Hands wrist-deep in murky wash water of the kitchen sink, her gaze wandered to the window, where she had spent hours watching her children play outside, the dog a constant beacon of their whereabouts. The same window where she had watched them leave home in their first cars, no longer under her care.

A silver car pulled into the yard, the gravel crunching under its tires. She had done her best to raise them well. . . . *But when does raising them stop? Or is it always my responsibility to help guide them? Will I cross a line when I become a nosy old mother who loves her children too much?* She closed her eyes as she let her hands drip off, the droplets feeling like her heart falling as her son crawled from the car and a girl exited from the passenger side.

Coating her lips in gloss and clutching a hand purse, she tramped up the stairs as her tall, lanky son pulled bags from the trunk and hauled them onto the porch. *When is too much?* she asked herself again before drying her hands and leaving the kitchen to meet her son's girlfriend.

"How are you, Naomi?" she asked.

"Oh, good. I forget how long of a drive it is out here. How are you, Catherine?"

"Good, I'm happy you made it nonetheless." She felt her smile fade until her son barrelled through the door, dropping the bags.

"Hey, Mom!" He came forward, giving her a hug, which startled but pleased her all the same. He released her, stepping back. "I'll put these away and join you at the table." She nodded and watched him descend the stairs to his room as Naomi followed.

He's still my son, his life is his own, but from the outside looking in, it's so obvious. Sometime this weekend I will talk to him. He has to see what she's like. He cut off his old friends, he isn't playing baseball anymore . . . and now they're talking about moving to Toronto—as if Calgary isn't far enough away from me. . . . Catherine slowly walked back to the kitchen, trying to form a plan to open her son's eyes.

By the time they ascended to the kitchen, she had the dishes put away and the table counters and floor cleaned. She took a seat, her thoughts still flicking across old memories of her son and daughter jumping into their chairs for dinner and supper; now her son slouched into his as Naomi gingerly sat on the other. *Probably worried she'll dirty her clothes.*

"Mom—"

Something in his voice sharpened her gaze, dispelling her wandering thoughts.

"There's something we want to tell you."

She dared not breathe as she met his eyes.

He smiled weakly at her. "Well, it's that—"

"We're engaged!" interjected Naomi, placing her hand on the table, fingers splayed to display the diamond on her finger.

Oh shit, were her first thoughts, followed by, *How could this happen?* "Well, it certainly is soon."

"Yes, but we love each other so much we thought, why wait?" She flashed a grin at her and Catherine collected herself to lean on the table and study the ring.

"You have good taste, son. It's beautiful."

"Oh, I picked it out. I couldn't bear the thought of Kent picking a ring I'll wear for the rest of my life."

Catherine almost choked as she felt the heat rising in her face. *Three billion girls and this is the one he picks? I'm too late. I had hoped he would see her for who she is. I've lost my son in a battle I never fought.*

It took all the strength she had from raising two children by herself to muster a smile for her son. "I'm happy for you . . . for you both." She could feel the colour draining from her face. *I just lied to my son.*

She stood from her chair and turned, busying herself in the pantry. "Let's have a drink to celebrate," she said as she hid her face. *And I did it for him, just as I've always done everything for them.* She blinked away a tear. *How did I end up here, lying to my son when I should have been honest months ago?* Behind her, her future daughter-in-law blathered about wedding plans, but all she could see was her own face looking back at her in the glass reflection of the pantry door. *All those years to end up here.*

by Chad Weiss

Maple Creek, Saskatchewan



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Middle Way

“Try it now.”

He fumbles with the key. He can't feel it through the double wool and leather layers of the heavy work mittens swathing his hands. His breath hangs in small, cartoon-bubble puffs in the brittle stillness of the early morning. The thermometer hasn't edged above zero in ten days now and last night it plunged to minus thirty-two, just enough that school's closed. Logging never stops, so Dad's still supposed to be at work, but this morning, the old Fargo pickup barely growled when he hit the starter, so now he's stretched out underneath, playing a blowtorch over the bottom and sides of the battery to give it a little more kick. He's pushed the hubcapful of burning gasoline heating the oil pan a bit further back so he can squeeze in beside it. The meagre heat trapped under the engine compartment isn't much, but between that and the direct flame played over the battery, it might be enough.

“T'e hell ya doin'?” Hit it!”

“Just a sec!” He dumps the key on his lap and peels off the bulky mitten. When he picks up the key, it's like grabbing a hot blade. He jabs it in the ignition, pulls the choke full on, and hits the dash-mounted starter button. The cold knifes through the ball of his thumb, but the starter moans, the engine cranking slowly over once, and then again a little faster, and finally fires once before dying as the battery expends its brief burst of energy. He lifts his thumb from the button.

“Shit! Don't stop! Y'almost had it! Try again!” The hiss of the blowtorch ratchets up a notch as it's cranked up to full.

He punches the button again and holds it. This time the engine makes two reluctant revolutions, fires, falters, then fires again. Instinctively, he pummels the accelerator pedal while keeping the starter engaged until the occasional explosive report stutters into a ragged tattoo that finally begins to get ahead of the starter motor. He releases the button as the last frozen spark plug joins the race, the staccato drum roll gradually smoothing to a throaty bellow, then beginning to stutter again as carbon-black smoke belches from the exhaust. He inches the choke in, easing back his pumping on the gas until the engine's running smoothly. Satisfied it's not going to stall again as it settles into a mid-throttle roar, he slips his mitten back on and rapidly flexes his fingers to restore the circulation.

Dad slides out from the front of the engine, dragging the smoking hubcap behind him with the tip of the blowtorch. He's still barehanded, and the boy wonders how he can hold the frigid metal cylinder without crying. In that moment the boy makes a resolution he'll spend a lifetime pursuing. Details are hazy but the general picture is of an absence of cold, freezing rain, sleet, snow, ice, and the other accoutrements of defying the frozen north.

“Damn,” Dad says. “Christly block heater wasn't on. Wonder we got 'er runnin' at all.” He hands the blowtorch and hubcap to the boy. “Put these in the shed.” He stomps off to the house, SnoPaks scrunching on the iron-hard packed snow of the driveway, hard-hat liner flaps flipping back in the minor breeze he generates passing through the still morning air. He's already lighting another cigarette, having only ground out his fifth of the morning in a grudging concession to safety, just before handling the open pan of gasoline. He's whistling as he steps up onto the porch.

Dad's always like that. He moves through life with awe-inspiring purpose, never seeming to question his destiny. It's just the way it is. Winter's bitchin' cold, unless it's storming, and then there's snow to shovel. Get through that and there's the mud and the mess of break-up. And

once that's done, it's mosquito, black fly, deer fly, and no-see-um season, in nature's unrelenting quest to torment anyone fool enough to live here. He simply squares off against each challenge, overcomes it, and moves on to the next. Retreat is unthinkable, and failure, as they say, is not an option.

The ceaseless round of life's trials frames the central question that will dominate the boy's life from then on—informing his pursuit of the resolution he's just made. Is there another way, another path that might be preferable to this one? A middle way between the full-frontal assault and the unthinkable alternative?

by Robert Rubis

Princeton, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Dead Woman on the Floor

The three men were named Gibbons, Nibbins, and Wile. There could've been a fourth, or a fifth, or a woman, or a dog, but I didn't see either for their lack of dialogue. So, therefore, they didn't very well matter, or so I will assume.

Inside the house, Gibbons was the first to notice what didn't seem right. "By Jove, there's a dead woman on the floor there."

"I'd say, most certainly dead she is, but to what degree?"

"More so than alive, I would assume, dear Nibbins."

"Perhaps she is not dead then," Gibbons suggested. "Her head was previously lolled left but now it is nearer right."

"Ah, but if to live is to be alive then she is clearly asleep."

"How do you know the state of her head, Gibbons? I didn't see you measure when we walked through the door."

"Why would I measure when you can clearly see her head has moved?"

"Well pick it up and give it a drop just to see if it'll flop," was the suggestion from Wile.

And so Gibbons picked up the woman's head and let it fall to the wood floor with a smack. "Quite clearly dead, I would assume," he said.

"Or she slumbers rather well."

"No one slumbers in a state of death."

"Her arms are bruised, and therefore she was beaten to demise."

"You can't simply be beaten to death. You can be beaten towards death and then die shortly afterward."

"That's nonsense. You die as a result of the beating given to you."

"Or do you die as a result of the result of the beating given to you?"

"Quiet, you fools," Wile demanded. "Can't you hear the ruckus about?"

"Ruckus? There is no ruckus," Gibbons retorted. "There is only a dead woman on the floor."

"I'm telling you the woman is very far from death," Nibbins said as he knelt down beside her. "Her breath breathes on me."

"The window is now open and that's the source of the air! Her breath is stale," Gibbons shouted.

"Regardless of her living or neglect to, she's the cleaning lady. I know this for a fact for I often saw her clean."

"Everyone cleans to maintain tidiness. She is certainly the cook."

"To cook is to maintain life through nourishment."

"She is most certainly not the cook because if to cook is to ensure life she most definitely did not cook, sir."

"To cook does not guarantee life. That is not what I said. That is what you said to make me out to be a fool."

"I think, therefore, she must be a painter because of the red on her lip," Wiles said.

"The red on her lip is most definitely blood because she is dead."

"The red on her lip is a kind of paste applied to the lip to aid in attraction," Nibbins said.

"So, transforming the body as if it is a canvas then?"

"We are all artists and therefore all painters in our own respect so she is not only a painter."

“Right you are, Nibbins. She is dead. That’s what she is and that’s what she’ll be as long as we stand here and quarrel.”

With the thirteenth mention of death the woman must have had enough because she leapt from the floor and proceeded for the door.

“She is alive!” Gibbons shouted.

“Quite seemingly.”

“And where are you going?”

“I don’t live here nor do I know in what manner I arrived so I’ll leave now,” the woman said.

With the woman gone, the men looked around and saw the new spectacle that was before them. “My god, we’ve been robbed!” they all declared.

by Chad Durling

Bridgetown, Nova Scotia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Handz 10X

They had a simple down payment of two-hundred and fifty and the contract on them lasted for two years. Of course the warranty on them only lasted six months, but my last set lasted the full term, though they were a tad shaky by the end.

I was so glad to get rid of the older version. The newer model, the Handz 10X was said to be five times stronger, as well as having a better battery life of about seven hours. They also moved quicker and stored more information. I needed them fast if I wanted to keep up in the workplace.

I yanked off my right hand, model Handz 9.9, and then jammed the new one into place. After that I did the same to my left. I moved them around a bit, flexed my fingers, showed off the peace symbol. They worked just fine from the looks of it.

Ouch. I put my right hand to my chest and felt around a bit. Maybe it was something I ate last night. Will have to reprogram the things; I always liked being left handed. You know, being a rebel and all.

Before I could get started, the phone rang. I rushed over, my Legz Silver Y carrying me swiftly. They of course were the latest model. I answered the phone and it was Lisa, my workmate who I had been flirting with for weeks and was now just a step shy of dating.

“So, you got them?” she asked.

“Yep. Had to put in for some overtime, but it was worth it,” I responded.

“Ya, got mine too. Very first in line! They’re a little stiff though.”

“Mine seem to be just fine,” and immediately on saying that the phone slipped right out of the grasp of the Handz 10X. A bit embarrassing, but I picked the phone back up and then scanned over my hands with my Eyez Pearl 7. They looked just fine.

“You okay?” Lisa asked.

“Yes, I’m just fine.”

After I stated this my hands went numb. I couldn’t feel the phone any longer. I used my left hand and poked around my face, nothing. They were clearly defective. It happens, that’s what the warranty is for.

Ouch. Chest still hurts.

“I’m going to have to call you back, Lisa. Got some things to take care of,” I said into the phone.

She responded with a polite and quick goodbye and then I called up Stars, the body parts company I got the Handz from. I was on hold for a good twenty minutes while my left hand was moving on its own. It sporadically fumbled about, sending a chill down my spine.

Ouch! Do I have acid reflux or what?

At last I got someone on the phone. “I do apologize for the difficulty you are having with the new Handz 10X. Since, as I can see here, they were shipped out to you, you’ll have to ship them back. Once we obtain them we can send you a new set,” stated the phone representative on the line.

“That means I won’t get new ones for like two weeks. Can’t I just go to a store and exchange them there?” I responded with a slight hint of anger in my voice.

“I’m sorry, but a store can’t process a return when they weren’t the ones that gave you the Handz. They would simply tell you the same thing.”

“Fine, but my monthly bill should be adjusted for the inconvenience.” I paid about eighty a month for their services, which was a fair price seeing how many robotic parts I had.

“We can’t place a credit until the issue is resolved. I can fully note the account though.”

“Yes, you do that and give me the note number.” This had not been the first time I had gone through that process. I would be lucky to get new Handz in two weeks and very lucky to get any kind of adjustment.

The representative gave about ten more apologies without any hint of emotion and then I left the line. I would mail the Handz back tomorrow.

Ouch! I felt my chest and then collapsed to the ground. I could feel my Hertz B5 struggling to keep going inside me. It slowed down to a crawl and then just gave up. My last thought before I blacked out was, *My warranty on the thing just ran out, blast it.*

by Colin Perkins

Pembroke, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Photograph

He drained the frigid dregs of his coffee. Though it had been many hours since his secretary had delivered the bitter taste, his stomach had not yet untwisted from the news she had heralded.

"I've taken a job with an insurance company across town," she'd said, as she handed him the piping mug. "It's closer to my home, so the commute won't be as frustrating." Biting back tears, she had paused to grip his hand. Then, he had heard the *click-clack* of her heels down the hall, followed by the *ding* and *thud* of the elevator. She had left nothing behind but a trail of floral perfume.

Swallowing the resurgence of his dinner, the man returned to Marketing's latest report. Squinting through the dimness, he leaned forward in his office chair, holding the page at an arm's length, before tapping the base of his gooseneck lamp. As the light intensified, its beams glinted off the frame of the photograph on the desk, catching the man's sleep-deprived attention.

The photo was only a few months old, but already the man in the picture was a stranger to the man in the office. The only familiars were the smiling fellow's companions. The figure on the man's left was an eight-year-old boy who shared his carefree grin and café-au-lait hair. On his right was a woman with ebony curls that framed her heart-shaped face. She held a toddler on her hips, who fixed the camera with a wide-eyed expression as his pudgy hands reached for his brother.

A two-month-old nightmare swam across the photograph, eddying around a kitchen scene with the man's oldest son. "Why can't you come?" the boy had asked, plopping his elbows on the island for emphasis.

"I have to work," the man had recited, turning his back on the boy as he loaded the dishwasher with careful composure.

"But you worked last weekend!"

"I'm sorry, buddy." The man had turned momentarily to ruffle the boy's hair. "It's budget season."

The boy had huffed a sigh, collapsing across the countertop as he watched the quivered stacking of plates. "Maybe Mom could do your work and you could come to the baseball game!"

"It doesn't quite work that way, buddy."

"I still wish you'd come. Mom's no fun at games. She can never remember which team's which and she covers us every time a fly ball comes by."

"Well, I don't want you to get a concussion." The boy's mother had appeared at that moment holding the youngest boy, asleep in a Blue Jays jacket. "Come on, let's go before the traffic starts up." She had looked up at her husband. "Are you sure they can't spare you at work?"

The man had averted his eyes. "No. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

He knew it wasn't okay. Her gaze dissected his crafted words, revealing the hidden intentions. She taunted him with his shame every time she looked at him. After a hesitant kiss with his wife, he'd hugged his two boys goodbye, promising to listen to their account of the game when they returned home. His last memory of his family was a foam-fingered wave as they skipped down the steps to the car.

From what he'd gathered from the newspapers, it had all stemmed from a single beer. Some university student who'd felt he was well enough to drive. They never made it home from the

game. The paramedics said the boys were taken the moment of the crash. His wife passed on in the ambulance. The identification, the funeral, and the burial were all a blur, nothing but an endless stream of questions, commiserations, and sympathy cards. Since then, life had become a broken record: a river of tears, a mountain of work, and an abyss of silence the few times he returned home with the dawn.

Gasping for breath, the man cast aside the photograph and fumbled blindly for his report. Hands crumpling the paper, his mouth closed around his fist. The office swirled in saline whirlpools. The papers had painted him as a devoted family man, saved from the fate of his family due to his equal dedication to his work. Yet only three people knew the truth about his whereabouts that night—knew he'd been nowhere near his armchair and goose lamp, but instead in an apartment across town, reeking of floral perfume and the nauseous guilt that accompanied it.

by Dessa Hayes

Ottawa, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Oxygen

XR3-B Expedition Reports to NASA by Chief Communications Officer Alex Evans:

Day 736: Hibernator II has worked just as planned with the deprivation chamber. Expedition Captain Don Spink, has just de-Hibed both Sylvia Frith and me. Don had set each oxygen level and heartbeat at 02% and temperature at 02 degrees. We de-Hibed flawlessly and his scientific view is that even lower settings and longer times are possible. According to my calculations, in those 730 or so days in several Hibes I have aged but fourteen or sixteen days so I feel really rejuvenated.

We have lost radio and cyberspace contact with you. Hopefully you are still receiving us.

Day 737: Up ahead we have sighted Planet XR3; hopefully we will find answers to why Expedition XR3-A perished in its inhospitable atmosphere. Captain Don reports our oxygen machines and our supply of water to produce oxygen are abundant to get us home safely so their plight of a supposed oxygen shortage shall not be ours.

Day 738: Our reversers set us down gently, and we ventured out. As I was collecting soil and examining it, I found little leathery or rubbery disk-like pebbles. I picked one up with my gloved hand, and though it seemed smooth, it stuck to my glove and I thought it stung my hand. I spooned several such disks into a specimen canister for Don to analyze later.

The little disks were of special interest. They stuck to our clothing and gloves when handled. Don reports the dust is silicon dioxide, like our sand, but he gains no known chemical reading about the disk. Perhaps it is an early life form—a tremendous discovery for us to bring back. Sylvia's Geiger found no metals.

Day 739: In the night the oxygen monitor sounded and Don adjusted our oxygen flow upward. He did the same again at 300 hours and at 600 hours. When we awoke wheezing and gasping for breath, Don adjusted the oxygen flow further. In our morning debrief we were greatly concerned about the loss of oxygen and about the general inhospitality of XR3. We decided to lift off.

We shall return to Earth in 737 days; we shall make vocal contact with you as soon as we can.

After lift-off we discovered our boot soles all had little disks sticking to them and we scraped them into the space capsule's garbage rather than pollute the atmosphere. Our canister of disks remains carefully guarded for you to see when we come home.

Day 740: Our oxygen flow has dramatically increased and Don's calculations say we have just enough capacity and just enough water to produce more so we should reach home in safety. We have searched everywhere for a gas leak and found nothing. Again Don has increased our oxygen flow. Sylvia and I are afraid we cannot reach Earth under present conditions. Hibe starts tomorrow but not before we do another search for a leak.

Day 741: As we were searching today, Sylvia knocked over our canister of disks. She asked, "And what are these marbles?" The little disks have grown fat. Immediately Don thought our oxygen had combined with some element within the disk—like a chemical reaction or like some life form breathing. The disks are using up our oxygen! This robbing of oxygen is probably why XR3-A perished. We gathered up all the marbles in the canister and garbage plus any we could find in the cabin and thrust them out the carbon-dioxide exhaust vent.

Don did a recalculation of our oxygen situation and believes we may not reach home in safety. We will have to rely heavily on our enforced hibernation. Sylvia is crying and we men are trying to reassure her Hibe II will pull us through. Don is recalculating maximum deprivation.

Day 742: All three of us will enter Hibe simultaneously and Don will set it for full oxygen flow to begin just as we re-enter Earth's atmosphere. He has set oxygen and heartbeat at 01% and temperature at 01 degree.

With this I say goodbye. Sylvia gives her family all her love and Don says a fond farewell to his mother and father. To my brother, John—by my calculation of de-Hibe time you are now the eldest in the family—take good care of Mom and Dad. Goodbye all. God help us.

Chief Communications Officer, Alex Evans, signing off.

by Alvin Ens

Abbotsford, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Fire

Hot evenings aren't meant for thumb wrestling with broken oil caps, but cars aren't really considerate. You'd think I'd have grown to hate the old wreck by now, but I don't know. I guess the constant chores keep me moving. And besides, I like getting my hands dirty—figuratively speaking, but I guess literally too. Black stains are kind of like marks of pride, you know? Like a cross between battle scars and temporary tattoos.

I haven't had much else to do since the layoffs anyway. It's a bitch, but software can be like that, especially when you work in a crappy small-town branch of Fiserv. The website with the tacky nineties mouse animations rises to the second page on Google, and suddenly we're close enough to the big-time to upgrade. Boom, all the programming languages you know are obsolete and they're replacing you with twenty-somethings who write programs in half the time you could. Fubar.

The boss called us each into his office, his tense fingers tented. Salaries had to be cut, he'd informed us with a concerned pout. Budgets needed tightening, and all that. But hey, no problem, if he switched us to contracts and commissions, he could rearrange the legal crap to make up the difference.

Things spiralled. Contracts started drying up, probably piped off to savvier kids. Bastards didn't even have the decency to tell it to our face, broke the news to us bit by bit with Post-its on the bulletin board. People got cut one by one—no pension, no severance, nothing. Within two months, my floor had become empty space and strangers. When I saw the boss again, he just threw his arms up all bewildered and helpless and apologized, said there was nothing he could do, the call came from the higher-ups in Brookfield. Probably flashed every schmuck he screwed over with that stupid, innocent grimace. He was really fucking good with his mouth. It's probably why they hired him.

It's clichéd, but I often wonder if there were some opening I missed, if my indecision torched me how Dad warned me it would. Dad was the indignant type—stubborn, abrasive, the kind who's sure he's always right. Mom always got headaches, said he was like a third child whose tantrums she needed to pet away every time he got surly. Most of the time he'd send himself into some shaky, sweaty seizure while the rest of us found something to rest our eyes on and wait for the noise to stop.

But sometimes, the red in his blood ignited like an ember touching dried leaves, his head anointed with a flush oil that shimmered with the steady intensity of a monk. I remember how his bellow transfigured into a rallying mantra that spread like a hot wind, popping pine cones and forging forests in beds of sand and ash. I bet if people tried this pyramid-scam bullshit on him, he'd have shown up on their front porch drenched in gas and clutching a match. I bet the flames would cradle his body as if he owned them, like he'd stolen the scream from cremated lives to become a hot scalpel plunging to cauterize the wound.

I'm not a man of fire. I soak my passion in water—cool, docile, and deep. But lately I find there's a cold slipping in the depths, tweaking the flow with a pressure and a pull against every threading current. And though the quiet can be rich and savoury and full, this silence feels like an emptiness that takes up too much space.

I wish I'd watched closer, that I'd learned the flow of my father's fire. I'd rise and fall to chase the heavenly bodies, splashing the surface with shimmering ripples that crackle the eyes of passerby with sparks of sun.

With a loud snap, the cap's threads cut my daydream. I give it a twist. It'll probably leak, but what the hell, it's holding. The struggling's near finished, and I can sit back on a job well done.

Better pack up. I scoop up the oil jug with a swing, listening carefully. Plenty left. I'm learning to do more with less. I stroll over to the back and carefully place the oil in the trunk. The wispy clouds in the tie-dye sky look ready to shimmer. I feel lifted. Ashen, sweat-soaked hands turn a spark into a molten roar. Tonight, I'll be resting in fiery waves that sweep light up into the dusk.

by Justin Toh

Mississauga, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Eternity

Sixty-six years old and survived another day—another tedious day. Each day added to the last like wooden balls on an abacus stretching into an uncertain outlook. I spend a lot of hours in this venerable tavern—*My sanctuary*. Each day the same characters languish about at their self-designated tables here . . . *there*. One grizzled fellow is snoring away slumped face down on the bar. *They should bronze him. If we weren't here I suspect we'd probably be feeding pigeons in the park.*

I examine the round glass stains on the table and count them—something to do. Pensioned off last year after forty years with the company. “We’ve replaced you with a computer—more efficient and cost effective.” So I got a handshake and a kick out the door. *Twenty-one-year-old computer nerds prepare a program and sell it for billions. Read in the paper about an eighteen-year-old getting six figures for her first novel and a movie deal. Not fair! Worked all my life for what?*

I put my empty glass down; add to the rings staining the table. *Need to get my ass in gear and work my way home.*

Home! Right! Home is that tiny bungalow I bought thirty years ago. Needs paint, a new roof and a lot of other things. Never was much good at maintenance. Don't I hear about that! Was lucky to get the second mortgage. Don't think we can keep the house much longer.

I shuffle along. *Look at me! Wearing baggy corduroy pants, old denim shirt, and a jacket I bought at Walmart ten years ago.*

Well! Here is home.

“There's no place like home.” Sure, Dorothy!

I climb the sagging wooden steps. *Going to break my neck on these steps one day.* The screen door creaks as I open it. *Need to oil those hinges.* Stumble into the kitchen. Smell cigarette smoke. *She must smoke two packs a day. Filthy habit!* I look into the TV room. She barely glances from her soap opera. Big bowl empty of popcorn lies on the greasy carpet. Ashtray overflows with butts. Air smells stale and reeks with her body odour.

God help me!

Amble into the kitchen and make a grilled cheese sandwich. *Love the smell of grilled cheese.* Help myself to a Coors Light. Goes down nice and smooth. *Now what? Go in there and watch soaps?*

“We need to talk.”

Not the words I was expecting to hear. There is an ominous sense to “We need to talk.”

She lurches into a kitchen chair. *Must admit in spite of the popcorn and smoking she has kept her figure.* When first married we were like rabbits—sex at any opportunity. She ran to me when I came through the door. We shared long baths together. She lay on me, and I held her tight, my soapy arms around her. We were in love. *Can't remember when we last had sex.*

She goes on and on listing all my shortcomings. It's like static in the background. A buzzing fly trapped in the windowpane mesmerizes me. The fly becomes increasingly desperate as it attempts to escape its prison. *What is she saying?* She has found someone else and is leaving for good this evening. She gets up and informs me she is going to have a bath before leaving. I sit there frozen and realize this affair must have begun some time ago. *How did I miss the signs?* I amble over to the windowpane and loosen the screen. The fly takes off. *Take me with you.*

I hear her singing in the bath. *Singing! Haven't heard her sing in ages.* Look around the unkempt kitchen. My eyes fall on the ancient transistor radio I bought from Zellers for her birthday—it seems one thousand years ago. It's plugged into the wall socket. Can't remember when we last used it. *Need something!* Rummage through the cluttered drawer until I find what I need. *Got it!*

I take off all my clothes and stack them neatly on a chair. I clutch the radio against my bare chest and strut down the hallway to the singing. Plug the radio into the extension cord and the other end into the wall socket. Turn it on. They're playing Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs. Appropriate!*

Open the door to the bathroom. Light from the window blinds me. Her joyful singing guides me. Shut the bathroom door behind me.

Eternity.

by John Corvese

Burlington, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Meant for Two

The realtor puts it plainly: “The house will be too much for you. The roof is begging for new shingles. The siding is peeling in sheets. The stairs are rickety, and the backyard is massive, overflowing with crabgrass and wildflowers. It’s a sentimental dream, but a real fixer-upper. A place meant for two.”

Nan nods while the realtor explains all this, her gaze unfocused and distant, blackened by grief. She gives “yeahs” and “uh-huhs” whenever the timing seems right, hearing out the realtor’s suggestion to retract her offer, if only so she can bluntly refuse.

Jules had wanted the place. It was as close to their dream as they were ever going to get. It is enough of a reason to stay.

“The house would have been small for two people,” Nan’s niece proclaims on moving day, her skinny arms wrapped around yet another potted plant. “It’s small, but the upkeep will be fine once you fix the electrical on the first floor. It’ll all be fine, except that godawful backyard’s gonna hand you your walking papers, I tell you that right now. Jules should’ve never talked you into it. There are twenty gallons of chickweed waiting for you back there at least, and you better not be expecting any help from me.”

Nan’s niece trails behind her on the path up to her new front door, complaining all the while about the number of trips they’ve made between the old place and the new, about how many more times they’ll have to fill the horse trailer before all of Nan’s junk will make its way over. Nan gives a simple smile and tells her niece how much she enjoys hearing her restate the obvious. Her niece fires back a wicked grin, her tongue lolling childishly.

Jules was a pack rat by nature, Nan notes once they are inside. A moving crew brought over the furniture two days earlier, leaving the couch and the table, the dressers and Jules’s overstuffed lounger, scattered like driftwood along the first floor. Nan has covered every vaguely level surface with precarious piles of boxes. The rest of the space remains dedicated to Jules’s potted garden.

Nan’s niece purses her lips and plants her fists upon her waist. “It’ll take a lifetime to unpack all this crap, I’ll say it now. The yard sale better come soon.”

Nan spends her first night alone in the kitchen, staring out the window into the backyard. Newspaper unfurls in a box beside her, discarded in favour of the cup now held in hand. She swirls her drink and listens to the crickets outside in the honeysuckle. She imagines again the flower beds Jules had described, and wishes she knew how to achieve them.

Each day, Nan picks weeds until heat exhaustion claims her. She finds shelter beneath the back veranda, sitting in the cool shade amongst Jules’s potted plants. She’s slow in returning them to wild soil, she knows, but they’ll all find homes eventually. Nan takes a breath and meanders down the overgrown path, her feet skirting over frost-heaved stones, her hands sifting through gnarls of violet phlox. Sorrow wraps its mournful arms around her, holds her close. She returns its embrace for a heartbeat, nothing more.

She grows accustomed to roaming the house alone, shadowed by her sighing, shuffled footsteps. Boxes still litter the hall like fat toads, their brown bellies bloated by dusty memories. Jules’s hobbies gather in a dull room downstairs. On sleepless nights, Nan rifles through the endless boxes, the miles of knitting yarn and electrical wires, the forests of sun-bleached paperbacks and broken circuit boards. It’s all Jules, and it breaks Nan’s heart. Too many interests and not enough time.

The wiring downstairs goes on the fritz occasionally, and the doorbell chimes at odd moments during the day. Nan likes to pretend Jules is buzzing her en route to the backyard, already babbling about another day spent digging up thistles. Nan's niece sometimes phones, asks if she's called an electrician about it yet, and Nan fumbles through her reply. They chat for a while before something comes up and her niece has to go. Nan returns to her small supper in front of the television, her mind elsewhere. She curls into bed between faded flannel sheets, her aching hands accompanied by one of Jules's old mystery novels, a distraction until sleep reluctantly arrives.

The place would have been small for two people. Nan had known it from the start. But she would have been happy anyway.

by Caleigh St. Onge

Moosomin, Saskatchewan



HONOURABLE MENTION

Drawing the Line

It wasn't just the arsenic in her tea that bothered her. It was his trickery, in both instances! Oh, she knew when he had added a pinch of the white stuff to her cuppa all right—it had a distinct, bitter flavour. As did her feelings when she would find him on the phone at the end of the hallway; talking into it more intimately and sweetly than he ever did to her. She'd watch from the shadows, noticing how he'd keep his arm and leg muscles flexed, so he moved stiffly, as if in a ring. He'd hang up when he'd see her and as they passed each other, he'd mutter something about work. *Work, my foot!* she'd think, as she'd go to find some tissues. Her nose bled easily now—symptoms of arsenic poisoning. She also watched her weight fall off her bones—she noticed he, too, was getting thin. . . . *Guilt eating away at him?* She blew out more of the red stuff at that thought!

She knew she could confront him on both accounts, but somehow felt bound, like a trapeze artist to his tightrope. Bit like a cock on a wire anyway—him and all his dolly birds. Always holding it against her how she'd never undress before him. And when she'd get into bed, once all the lights were out, he'd never hold her against him. Never.

And for one so thin, the onion under her knife suffered as she'd *chop-chop-chop*, tears running down a pinched, drawn face.

She went to hang out laundry, the grass was prickly wet. His dog came out of nowhere, almost bowling her over, a bull terrier mix that looked very much like him. The dog dashed 'round the lemon tree, picked up a green lemon from the ground, and began to chew. Lemons partially destroyed and totally decimated lay strewn upon the lawn—made her think if it rained, they'd have a pool of lemonade.

When the wash line began to sag under the weight, she noticed a puff adder sunning itself in a crevice. She was unconcerned about being bitten—*One form of poison in exchange for another!* She explored the idea of catching it and placing it in their bed. . . . *He was always under the sheets before her!* The thought gave her cold comfort as a ticket stub fell from one of his shirt pockets. She saw he'd been betting on the horses again; such a waste of money, his numbers never won.

Being thirsty and fed up led her to think about how she always enjoyed her tea; the fact he now spoiled the first cup of the day really annoyed her. She decided to take control of this matter: it wasn't hard for her to find where he kept his poison: in an old biscuit tin with a faded motif of red hearts. She cut it by 50% with icing sugar—she always took sugar in her tea, after all! He never made tea the way she did, never brought fresh water to a full boil. And then had a way of chucking the tea bags into the pot from a dizzying height! She almost had empathy with the round, sodden bags!

After some time, she began to feel a little better; her bleeding stopped and she maintained her weight. But he in turn became so agitated at her well being. As he chain smoked, he'd stare out at her from behind a smoke screen, like a sickly wizard, his only potion: double whiskeys to wash down his high-blood-pressure pills. He had an odour about him too: sour; and pursed lips, as if the residual taste from lemons was lingering there.

It was while another onion fell under the wrath of her knife she heard him cry out, in an almost feminine voice, as he fell. She wondered if he were outside with the dog. But no, there he was down the hallway again. The phone was dangling from the receiver, spinning in the air, as

a woman's voice was calling his name, asking all the while whether it was "her" who'd finally collapsed, was she dead and gone?

Putting off making tea for a moment; she calmly took the phone from his unclenched hand. And as she looked into his frantic, fading eyes, she spoke into it, saying, "Wrong number," before hanging up.

by Adrienne Lacey

Mackenzie, British Columbia

