

FIRST PRIZE

Teacher

Teacher, I planted a seed today.

The teacher paused, sighed, and composed a response. His instinct was to reply with a rhetorical question, but since LitStudies' retirement for "inflammatory potential," he doubted the student would recognize the effort—but College might.

The teacher simply keyed, Student, this comment would be better served in HistHortStudies.

No, a strictly philosophical comment, Teacher.

A seed needs fertile soil and nourishment, Student. And as he scrolled through his records, sure enough, he was conversing with Student35LOG. Funny, in the last twelve years, this particular student was the only one who elicited a curiosity from the teacher. Students were students, all conflated into one vacuous body of lip-service to "education." But this latest *non sequitur* from 35LOG was one more odd comment in a series of increasingly odd comments.

Student? queried the teacher.

Just then, College interrupted: Teacher, you are correct. This is an HH inquiry. End this line and move to more accountable material. This will not go on your record as an admonishment at this time.

But the threat was there, just the same. The teacher wondered if 35LOG had received the same reprimand. Probably not, he surmised.

Student, let us move on, the teacher keyed. What is the College's position on *The Allegory of the Cave*?

Well, Teacher, it seems the College's position is that the cave is all that is necessary in life. One is shown all that one needs.

The teacher was not certain, but 35LOG seemed glib, conveying *sarcasm* of all things. Good. College wouldn't be able to pick up on the tone and would log the corrected discourse between teacher and student. Correct, Student. That will be enough for today.

The teacher remained at his station, ruminating on this particular student. The first time 35LOG had made his presence known was a few months earlier, in an unusual departure from "normal" lines of inquiry: *Teacher, are you real?*

The question had given him pause. Another teacher was recently retired for using the "antiquated" rhetoric of Descartes, so he replied with a more sanitized, moderate response, stating, *Student, reality is perception. I exist, therefore I am real. Let us get back to the topic at hand, shall we, of the unexamined life, the only worthy life to which to aspire.*

And just as he thought he had successfully diverted the student, he interjected: *Teacher, the unexamined life is not worth living, at least according to Plato, to Socrates. . . .*

He remembered being shocked from his automatic discourses—official teachings from College-approved PHILO2. As he struggled to form an appropriate response, Student35LOG continued: *Will I be made to drink my Hemlock, Teacher? I've heard it tastes like victory.* And then College terminated the link.

That was the last he'd heard from Student35LOG until now, talking about planting seeds, of all things.

The teacher sighed and started to rise, but a blip appeared on his monitor.

Teacher, are you there? Don't be concerned—I've created a patch. College can't see us.

Student, this is highly unorthodox. Illegal, in fact. Please explain.

I planted a seed, but I need you to help it germinate.

So once again, as if from his previous life as a teacher, he had a student. One who would challenge and inspire him. It was unheard of. Terrifying. Wonderful.

And that became his new day-to-day. More and more students joined in on the patch conversations. His official teachings became increasingly mundane, which seemed to please College, who offered commendations rather than warnings.

Later, his student informed him about his growing stockpile of books and attempts to recover data. This means novels, Teacher. Can you imagine what it will be like to read again? To really teach and learn?

The teacher smiled at such a thought. It would be . . . it would be like it had once been.

I'm sorry, Teacher. I planted a seed but had to dissolve the patch so its roots could spread. He realized with a sense of foreboding that the conversation was occurring in the regular forum.

And as he heard the insistent knocking at his door, Student41ALE keyed: Teacher, I planted a seed today.

Student26CAN: Teacher, I planted a seed today.

The knocking became more forceful. Student comments kept appearing, all saying the same thing: Teacher, I planted a seed today.

A seed of destruction.

Teacher, . . . the door kicked in.

A seed of change.

Teacher, . . . hefted from his chair.

A seed of hope . . . work station blasted.

The teacher smiled victoriously as they took him away.

by Becky Hingley

Orillia, Ontario



SECOND PRIZE

The Underground

“How did you manage to get released?” Tom said.

“It wasn’t easy,” Beverley said. “Son-of-a-bitch Wong wanted info about the latest underground.”

“Did you tell him?”

“No!”

“Must have been a battle of wills between you.”

“It was. I thought they had you cornered. How did you escape?”

“Through a back alley.”

Beverley shivered. The only comfort against the biting cold came from the cigarette they were sharing, that and the heat generated by the other bodies. She took another drag. “This is good shit, where did you get it?”

Tom shrugged and took the cigarette. “Bought it on the black market.”

Cigarettes had been taxed heavily back in the 2020 budget when the government wanted money for health services. Ten years later, many companies declared bankruptcy. In another five years the anti-smoking lobby convinced the government to make smoking punishable by a fine for the first infraction, rehabilitation for the second, and jail for subsequent offences. A few manufacturers went underground.

Beverley leaned closer to Tom. There was a distinct blue haze overtaking the tunnel. The latest trend was tobacco laced with marijuana.

It was three days ago when their underground, an abandoned tunnel connecting Centre Island and Toronto, was raided by CSASS—Canadian Squad Against Smoking and Smokers. She was certain someone had squealed. “You were lucky,” Beverley said.

“I know. It’s getting tougher to evade them.” The technology had changed over the last decade, some of it for better. Diabetes had been eliminated. Cancer had decreased. AIDS had been eradicated. But, now there was growing government intrusion.

“You can still outrun the best of them,” Beverley said.

Tom shook his head. “There’s coming a day, though, when I won’t.”

“I’m so tired, I feel like I could sleep forever. Why can’t they just leave us alone to carry on with our lives?” She hadn’t been allowed to sleep for two nights during Wong’s interrogation. . . .

“Tell me where the next Smokevention is and I’ll let you go,” Wong said. He carried around his short, rotund body with an agility that defied his size, constantly stopping to blow smoke in her face. Here was the man in charge of eradicating smoking in Canada using the very act to torture her. “We’re going to get all of you, sooner or later,” Wong said. “Why don’t you make it easy on yourself? I can make it worthwhile for you.”

“How?”

“Unlimited cigarettes. Or, we could put you through the program.”

The *Program*—it was the last thing she wanted—pumped full of drugs containing a cocktail of Nicontrolric, Nicofin, and Nicotitrelief. “You have nothing on me. You have to let me go.”

Wong accessed a tablet. Here was a man who would actually like going to the dentist, someone who liked the feel of the drill, the rattling, whirring, buzzing. Wong scrolled down the tablet. “Why are you giving me a hard time? I can take good care of you.”

“I doubt that.”

“Says here you applied for a child permit twice, but you didn’t pass the means test.” Wong had to be accessing the government’s central database. He would also know Tom had been a sperm donor before he was sterilized. His sperm was held in a central bank, monitored and doled out for use in artificial placenta and vitro fertilization, a process regulating childbirth.

Beverley sniggered. *Means test*: it was an oxymoron for a process to determine fitness for parenthood. The Department of Conception developed a dossier on applicants based on factors ranging from ability to provide for the child to a psychological profile.

“I can arrange a permit for you.”

Beverley shook her head. “No deal. Either book me, or let me go.”

Beverley stirred. She’d been sleeping on Tom’s shoulder. The tunnel had grown more crowded and the noise level had increased. Tom was still smoking, to her surprise. He seemed to have a secret stash.

A sudden calm rippled through the tunnel. “Do you hear that?” Beverley said.

“Don’t hear anything.”

“Yeah, it’s coming from the entrance.”

“You’re imagining things.” But people had already started to head for the rear of the tunnel.

“We should go,” she said.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. Wait here with me. I will take care of you.” Wong had said the same thing.

She ran with the others. The last time she looked back, Tom was calmly puffing away on his cigarette, looking as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

by Ken Puddicombe

Brampton, Ontario



THIRD PRIZE

Maybe Today

As the sun shone through the cracks of the curtains, Caleb awoke, straining his eyes against the bright light from the glowing orb. He glanced at the dust specks drifting in the morning light and looked around, having the same feeling he had every morning. He saw the view he had seen each day for years: his same old bedroom with the same old chair sitting in the corner next to his fading wooden bookcase. He got up from his creaky bed and made his way to the kitchen.

Maybe today will be different. He stood, thinking to himself as the coffee slowly brewed, making the same gurgling sounds as it did every morning with the smell that always accompanied his morning elixir; a good change from the usual, stale smell of inside. The faded wallpaper in his apartment hadn't been replaced in years and he was ready for a change. *Today*, Caleb decided, *Today is the day I spiff up the place a bit. All it needs is something new on the walls. . . .* As his mind began to create a whole new look for his apartment, the coffee machine's ding brought him back to his current kitchen, the one in which his coffee was ready.

He made his way outside after breakfast, glancing at the picture that had been hanging by the front door for years. Its vintage frame looked worn and weathered. He passed through the door and was in a whole new world.

As he inhaled the fresh, mid-morning air, seeing the beauty of the trees around him with the glorious beams of gold shining through, his whole outlook on the day changed. From the same old, dreary day, a brand-new, fresh spring day arose just like that. He began to hum as he made his way to the hardware store, ideas buzzing in his mind.

Caleb had seen many interior design magazines, which had given him multiple thoughts for his new kitchen. *Hmmm, should I stay with wallpaper? Maybe I could switch it up and use paint. What if I made it look like a retro diner?* He was getting more and more excited about what was in store for his kitchen, so much so he didn't even realize he had made it to the hardware store so quickly.

After consulting with the salesclerk by the paint desk, Caleb was confident this bright yellow would surely brighten up his bleak apartment. Happy about his purchase, he made his way home with a bounce in his step, one he hadn't had for years.

Oh boy, she is going to love this colour! he thought, approaching his front door. Caleb reached for his keys. The noise they made was familiar and brought an immediate joy and satisfaction to him. A joy he hadn't experienced for so long he didn't remember the last time the sound of keys jangling about made him so happy.

He opened his door, immediately seeing his drab kitchen, being instantly reminded as to when he had last had that feeling of joy. It was when they had renovated the apartment together. It was when she had accompanied him home from the very same hardware store with rolls of wallpaper tucked beneath their arms, carrying bags with haphazardly placed paint rollers and the containers of glue as well as they could without dropping anything. It was the time when she had said "I love you" to him for what seemed like one more time within the ocean of their lives. The memories he had been avoiding for years flooded back to him and he was unable to move. The realization she was not there waiting for his return crippled him.

She would never be waiting at home for him again. The only place where she would wait for him again was a few blocks down the road. She was always waiting for him there, the last place where he had watched her go to sleep: Barkleyville Cemetery.

He couldn't move from his grief. There was nothing he could do—nothing but do the same thing he had been doing for years. He glanced back at the picture they had hung together the day they had moved in, the picture of them on their wedding day. Stifling his heavy sobs, Caleb made his way back to his same old bedroom, got back onto his creaky bed, and thought, *Maybe tomorrow will be different. . . .*

by Amber Hougestol
Didsbury, Alberta

HONOURABLE MENTION

Tenacity

Dennis Revering and his daughter, Tracee, moved through the fair, the former munching a hot dog while the latter devoured candy floss.

“Rides?”

“Nope,” the six-year-old replied.

Several teenagers coaxed the twosome for a try at The Birthday Game. The father gave a silent refusal while Tracee grimaced at the stuffed animals hanging from above. No teddy bears.

Tracee’s father had one game in mind. He had practised it for three long months, and in the last month he had reached near perfection. Dennis owed his daughter a large teddy bear, but he didn’t want to spend a lot of money acquiring one.

The sight of the sign “Ring the Bottle Game” set Dennis beaming. Huge plush animals dangled from the round wooden rafters of the makeshift tent. Instantly, the teenager behind the counter beckoned the couple to play and, most importantly, pay.

“Any winners today?” Dennis spoke up.

“No, she’s been tough lately,” the slovenly youth replied. “We had a guy walk off with one of these big suckers yesterday!” The teenager stroked one of the stuffed animals. “You can do it too!” he added.

“I am going to. Been practising for three months.”

“Yeah, my daddy said he’d get me a big, big teddy bear ’cause he burnt my last one with a cigarette.”

Dennis gave his daughter a look of reassurance.

“Ring a small bottle and win a small animal. Ring a big bottle and get a big, beautiful teddy bear. Three rings for a buck,” the youth explained.

“I’m not stopping until I win,” Dennis said confidently. “Hold this stack of bills, honey, and keep handing the man a dollar when he gives me three rings.” Tracee nodded and Dennis placed the money in her tiny hands.

Something was different about this game opposed to the set-up Dennis had in his garage. The bottles were further apart and the rings had to fall from a higher point. Frustration began to show after Tracee handed the teenager a dollar for the fifteenth time.

“I’m going to win, I’ve got to!” Dennis tried to look happy.

Rings clanked against the pop-bottle glass. None went around the neck. The stack of fifty one-dollar bills now were one-third gone. Dennis took off his sport coat and wiped his brow. His tense hands grabbed another set of rings. Failure after failure increased the father’s persistence. He had to get that teddy bear. The sun beat down on the two contestants as the youth watched the action, sipping a soft drink.

“When am I going to get a teddy bear?” Tracee grew restless.

Dennis gritted his teeth. “Soon, dear, I’m going to win. I’m going to, believe me.”

Tracee looked up at the bear. It was bigger and more attractive than any she had ever seen before. But as she admired, the pile of money grew thinner. No more than twenty dollars remained. More ring tossing and more misses. Dennis’s breathing grew heavy. The ruddy-faced man threw another set of rings . . . another set of misses.

“I’m going to win. Win, win, win,” Dennis repeated, hoping it would affect his accuracy.

When the final dollar was in the teenager’s possession, Dennis clutched the three rings and stared into the expanse of bottles. He tossed the first ring. It missed clearly. The second ring ricocheted off several bottles and landed on the ground. Dennis’s body quivered. He was down to his last ring. He took it in his hand, aimed, and let it go. The last ring flew wildly into the air missing the bottle area completely.

With a yell of frustration and a furious push, Dennis stormed off, leaving Tracee in a state of panic and confusion. “Daddy! Where are you going? Is it over? Do I get a teddy bear? Daddy? Daddy. . . .”

by Tony Gryner
London, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

I'd Lie

A loon called, its cry distinct and sharp across the quiet lake. A few minutes later a boat roared past, heading home for the evening. Its sound faded while waves lapped at the shore, shifting the dock. Cal's legs hung over the edge while his grandpa sat next to him in an old yellow lawn chair, the woven kind no longer made, as he smoked his third cigarette since supper. Their bobbers floated beyond the dock, the water placid except for the occasional boat roaring past that Cal watched longingly.

That morning, he'd woken up excited to go fishing, but after a long drive, arriving at supper, and fishing throughout the evening with not even a bite, Cal was bored. He sighed heavily. "Grandpa, are we gonna catch something?"

He looked over his shoulder to see his grandpa smile. "There's a saying, Cal, that some people fish their entire lives without ever realizing they're not after the fish."

Cal scratched the back of his neck, frowning. *I'm still bored though.* He kept his thoughts to himself as they sat.

Nibbling on a fingernail, he glanced back at his grandpa. *He would understand. He would know what I mean . . . he wouldn't cry like Mom.* He stared out across the lake; his bobber seemed determine to float forever. Finally he took a breath and said, "I don't like Paul."

His grandpa's chair creaked behind him. "Why not?"

Cal screwed up his face, contemplating the answer. At last he settled with, "Because he's not Dad." He blinked, pushing away the tears. *I'm such a baby.*

His grandpa sucked on his dentures behind him. "I miss him, too, Cal. That's why I brought you here. I always used to bring him fishing here."

"That's why I wanted to come." Cal swallowed, then chewed on his lip a moment before letting it pop out. "That's why I wanted to come. Paul asked Mom to marry him, but she said she wouldn't unless I supported it."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. . . ." Cal didn't add how he had cried. "She says she loves him and he makes her happy. I don't want her to marry him. What would you do?" he asked, tears blurring his vision. He blinked them away and twisted around.

His grandpa stared out at the water as the sun winked between the tops of pine trees. It seemed the creases around his eyes and brow deepened with the lengthening of shadows, until he growled, "I'd lie."

Cal started at the words before blurting, "Why?"

"It's like I said earlier about fishing. Sometimes we do something, thinking we want that thing, when the reality is we're after something else entirely."

Cal turned back, frowning as he contemplated his grandpa's answer. Just then his bobber disappeared. His drag whined loudly and Cal gasped, jumping onto the dock while his rod jerked and bent as his line fed wildly out.

His grandpa barked a short laugh before he said, "And sometimes we just want to catch a fish. Reel him in, son."

Cal looked over at his grandpa sitting next to him, brown eyes sparkling as the cigarette hung between his lips, his skin wrinkled and creased from years of life. And suddenly Cal felt closer to his dad than he had in a long time. *He did this very thing with Grandpa . . . I want him back.* Cal started to reel the fish in. He pulled the walleye onto the dock, its back fin flaring while its scaled skin glistened.

"Good work, Cal, a pickerel."

"Let's throw him back."

"But it's a pickerel," grunted his grandpa before he looked at Cal and shrugged. "Go on then." Cal knelt, holding the fish against the dock and unhooked him. "Careful of the fins," warned his grandpa as Cal flipped him into the water and the fish took off. "Sometimes it's good to let them go," he muttered. He felt his grandpa's hand settle onto his shoulder. "That's enough for tonight. We've got a big day tomorrow."

He nodded as his grandpa reeled up his line and folded his lawn chair. Dusk had settled across the lake as a loon called again and Cal thought, *I miss you, Dad, and you'll always be my dad.*

“Come on, son,” his grandpa said as he walked up the slope to the cabin. Cal followed, knowing he would give his mom his blessing.

by Chad Weiss

Maple Creek, Saskatchewan



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Code of Silence

The pounding at the door was incessant, in sheer rhythm of desperation. The heavy downpour and cracks of thunder did nothing to drown out the urgency. Mr. Hemmingway waved his butler aside and barely unlocked the door before it swung open.

The man rushed inside. "Lawrence, they've killed him!"

Hemmingway ushered his colleague into the study as the butler forced the door shut against the storm. "Warm up by the fire, Andy. Fitz, bring him a towel."

Andy shook uncontrollably. "I waited at the pub as James had asked. There was a commotion outside. Then someone ran in screaming to call the police."

As Fitz passed Andy a towel, Hemmingway fixed two whiskeys on the rocks. He handed one to Andy, "Slowly, chap. What happened to James?"

Andy downed the whiskey. "He lay there at the entrance, convulsing. I could hardly make out what he was saying. Something about they got to him. He died in my arms, Lawrence!"

"Who's they?"

"He didn't say. Told me to meet him, saying he had something important to tell me. He never got the chance. Slipped me this before collapsing."

There was a flash of brilliant light, quickly followed by a loud thunderclap. Hemmingway unfolded the paper. "Did you read it?"

"Glanced at it when I ducked into a store. I had this strong sense I was being followed. It's an enigma, Lawrence. There are references to books. I can't quite make sense of it."

"Fitz, Andy will need another—make it a double." Hemmingway began reading aloud as Andy handed over his glass and returned to the warmth of the fire:

"Pay heed to this tale I am about to tell you.

One as cryptographic as gentleman Goff's letter to his lady.

It began on an island in the Tropic of Cancer.

Story runs as scandalous as Lady Chatterley and her lover.

We're living in a brave new world filled with invisible men.

As predictable as the sun sets, the sun also rises.

Catch Holden in chapter twenty-two referring to a Robbie Burns' song.

Guards the fields like an overprotective mother with her sons and lovers.

Great Scott, can you not see that 1984 has gone with the wind?

Sad as the tale of the fisherman—the old man and the sea!

Weigh the difference of mice and men—as I lay dying, not when I'm gone!

Surrendering will only fuel passion for all the women in love.

Seek the five who bring the farm animals to the slaughterhouse.

Uncover the ring leader, my friend, or say a farewell to arms."

"Not just any books, Andy. Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, there's a reference to *Catch-22*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Sun Also Rises*, *Sons and Lovers*, *The Great Gatsby*, Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*, *Gone with the Wind*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Slaughterhouse-5*. Every one of these books was banned at one time or another."

As near as Andy was to the fire, he found no warmth, "*Slaughterhouse-5*? Seems James knew the names of the five behind it all. This bloody operation, with secrets so horrible they're willing to kill to keep hidden! The leader's name . . . must be in there somewhere." Fitz handed Andy a refill, which was quickly consumed. "Lawrence, we've got to solve his riddle and call it in. I understand the reference to the books, but what's with the letter?"

Hemmingway noticed Andy was sweating profusely. "The love letter is the clever work of Goff titled *From a Gentleman to a Lady*. It can be read two ways: Straightforward, denouncing any interest in this particular lady; the way he wanted her father—who had done everything in his power to keep Goff away from his daughter—to read it. Or reading every other line, which

would reveal his complete adoration and devotion. The true message, reserved for his lover's eyes only."

Andy pulled at his collar as he began to feel a choking sensation. "I'm not seeing the connection."

"James left a clue how to read his enigma. You see, dear boy, if you read every other sentence you come across a banned book by D. H. Lawrence, then one by Ernest Hemmingway. Yet again, one by Lawrence, then by Hemmingway. Then once more for good measure."

Andy collapsed to his knees clutching his throat. He looked towards Fitz, then up at his colleague. "You!" the last word he would utter before darkness engulfed and silenced him.

by Donald G. Martel

Montréal, Québec



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Loneliest of Lonely

“Well, look who’s here!”

Keith heard a female voice peeling across the bar as he entered and hung up his jacket. He looked about, but the only inhabitants were the barkeeper and a woman about forty at the far end of the bar. He ignored the comment, sat down on a stool, and ordered a glass of beer.

The woman looked him straight in the eye. “You don’t recognize me, do you?”

Keith regarded her carefully and shook his head.

“You took my boys away from me ten years ago. Child Protection, it was called. I bet you don’t remember their names either.”

Nothing came to mind. Keith looked about the bar for clues, but the pub was unyielding.

“Josh and Jacob,” she said.

And then he recalled. Names as plain as bread pudding. He thought of their shaved blond heads holding fast to their garbage bags full of clothing as he had pulled away from her house so many years ago.

“Marlene,” she said softly, as if realizing she had been too harsh with him.

“How are you?”

She shrugged. “I’m okay. You know, the boys came back to me the minute Protection services went away. Once they turned eighteen they were at my door, wanting to live with me again.”

He nodded. “You were their mother. There never was any doubt about that.”

She seemed to relax, leaned back and crossed her legs. “What brings you to a lonely bar on a lonely Saturday night?”

Keith shrugged. He wished he could pull out a cigarette and light it right here, right now. Then he grinned. “Just lonely, I guess.”

She nodded. “I don’t really drink much anymore, so I don’t know why I’m here either. Just lonely too. We’re the loneliest of lonely,” she laughed bitterly.

He twirled his glass, debating what to share. “My partner is in the nursing home,” he said softly. “I just came from seeing him.”

She raised her eyebrows. “What’s he doing in a nursing home?”

Keith shifted in his seat and patted his cell phone in his pocket as if for support. “We were going to travel,” he said. “Once I retired from Child Protection. But slowly, just before my retirement, he began to forget things; sometimes the pot boiling on the stove, water running in the bathtub, and then, the ultimate was when he went to a mall three counties away and couldn’t figure out how to get home when they closed. The security guards called me to come and get him.”

She shook her head and her earrings swayed.

“Well, the doctor said, ‘You’ll have to put him into a secure facility where there’s twenty-four-hour care.’ Three months ago, that was. I’ve been there every day since then. He hardly knows me now.”

“Just like my children could have forgot about me, after you took them,” she countered.

“It’s not the same.”

Her face reddened. “I know. You were doing your job. The kids knew too. It’s just hard to think I missed all those years with them.” She smiled wanly. “Paul left after the kids were taken. He said he couldn’t stay with any woman who couldn’t look after her own kids.”

“I’m closing in ten minutes,” the barkeeper warned, wiping down the counter with hard strokes.

Keith turned sideways in his chair. “Come on,” he said to her. “Let me buy you a drink; the evening is still young.”

“I don’t know,” she hesitated, looked at her cell phone and then towards the door. “My boys. . . .”

“Might be waiting?” he asked. He had to at least give her that.

She smiled. “Why not?” They headed for the door together.

Outside a gentle snow had started to fall and twinkled on the street and sidewalk. She gathered her coat around her and turned to him. “I think I’ll pass this time,” she said. “It’s late for me and I don’t really drink anymore.”

Keith shrugged. “Whatever you say,” he agreed. “Good luck to you, Marlene, and the boys.”

Once she saw Keith had rounded the corner, she hailed a cab and hopped into the back seat. The cab was warm and the cabbie had Molly Johnson playing softly on a CD. Marlene began to hum.

“Where to?” the cabbie asked, looking her over in his mirror.

“Bailey’s Pub on Queen,” she said, smirking softly. “The night’s still young.”

by Connie Cook

Melancthon, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Last Phase of the Moon

Death is close. Many chose suicide. Some chose cryopreservation. I'm now on battery power. When the lights go out darkness will last until the end of time. I must complete this journal. Then I die the last human. . . .

It began in 2015 when astronomers discovered the planet Kepler-78b in the Constellation Cygnus 400 light years away. Scientists were certain Kepler-78b supported life.

Shortly after its discovery our radio beacons received a message from the alien planet. Once decrypted the message was simple. It read, "We are coming." What did this mean? When was it sent? Einstein theorized nothing could travel faster than the speed of light at 186,000,000 miles per second. Even if the inhabitants of Kepler-78b could travel at that speed it would take them 400 years to reach Earth.

The United Nations organization, working with government and civilian contractors, planned to build a station on the moon to serve as a sentinel. Ex-planet Exploration Program handled travel to the moon. I received a ticket because of my expertise in cryopreservation. I happened to be among the younger members of the scientists and technicians selected.

Advance groups had dug deep caverns on the moon at the impact crater *Nectaris*. One group of about one thousand would spend a year deep in the bowels of *Nectaris* assembling farms and all the things necessary for a thriving community. We would then return to Earth to be replaced by permanent colonizers. Plans were in place to complete a similar operation on Mars. The scientists claimed we had plenty of time.

In 2020 the chosen entered the advanced space shuttle and flew to the greatly enlarged International Space Station capable of handling several thousand people. At the crater we descended into a gigantic cavern deep underground. I watched with anxiety as the enormous outer doors came together. The inner doors closed. The air lock between them voided of air. We were isolated for the next twelve months. *God help us!*

On occasion I would hitch a ride with the lunar mapping team. This relieved the monotony of a daily underground existence. While my crewmates did their work, I would stare at Earth, that unique multicoloured colossal marble in the cosmos. How fragile she seemed. *Don't let anything happen to her.*

A year passed and the first group of one hundred planned to depart. We waited at the inner doors for the signal. The head of my department rushed over to me. "We have lost contact with Earth," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure. There have been a lot of solar flares. But the satellite dishes on the surface aren't getting signals."

"What about the lunar space craft picking us up?" I said.

"We've had no messages but should know more when we open the outer doors."

The klaxon sounded, meaning the inner doors were opening. One hundred of us entered the air lock. I fastened my helmet and turned on the air and communication device. The inner doors closed behind us and the air sucked out of the chamber. We waited for the outer doors to open.

I guess we all had our own thoughts. Many things went through my mind at this moment. I thought of the kiss I would give my wife. I thought of seeing my parents. I thought of Christmas with roast turkey and all the trimmings. I thought of birthday parties. I thought of holding my wife's hand as we walked in the park. I thought of the monsters haunting my dreams.

The klaxon signalled a warning. The countdown began: Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven. . . .

The clanging pulses of the klaxon quickened: Six . . . five . . . four. . . .

Anxious bodies pressed against the outer doors. Three . . . two . . . one. . . .

The heavy doors came apart with agonizing slowness. Why at that moment did the tag line from the movie *Alien* enter my mind? *In space no one can hear you scream.*

I was at the back of the pack. When I made it outside the chamber, people had fallen on their knees. *What are they staring at? It's not there. It's not there. God cannot save us.* I stared into space where Earth should have been. Twelve billion people had vanished. Two things crossed my mind. One was that Einstein got it wrong and the creatures of Kepler-78b could travel faster than the speed of light. The other was the catastrophic mistake in allowing only men on this mission.

by John Corvese
Burlington, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Way to Go

“So when Ms. Trulove here refused to refund your 150 bucks, you beat the hell out of her. Is this so?”

“N-no, it wasn’t like that at all.” The accused is a small man, tub shaped, with a puffy face and lanky brown hair. “She tripped and fell.”

“That’s not exactly how the complainant remembers it,” counters the magistrate. “How do you explain the multiple bruises and lacerations on her upper arms and neck?”

Stephen Finlay turns yellow. It’s his way of blushing, having succumbed to Pansy’s full pouty lips, ponytail, capacious tank top, and jeans cut off at mid-thigh.

The magistrate stares down at Finlay. “You know what you need to recite in order to plead guilty to a lesser charge. But let the record show that I strongly oppose this proviso.”

Finlay’s tongue runs the circuit of his lips. He begins, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to . . . er . . . thy loving kindness; according to . . . ah . . . the multitude of-of. . .,” his voice expires.

“Very well, then,” says the magistrate with evident satisfaction at the opportunity lost. “You’ll be taken to punishment room number four. Does the complainant, Pansy Trulove, wish to exercise her legal right to witness or . . . er . . . participate in punishment?”

Pansy flutters a raised hand and shakes her head.

Finlay is seated. A technician stands at his control panel. He sets the dial at fifteen and pushes a green button. In a predetermined succession, electric shocks buffet the accused’s buttocks. He grunts, gasps, yells, shrieks, and sobs uncontrollably.

The following Tuesday evening, a squad car draws up at Pansy Trulove’s apartment building. When Finlay broke in, she managed to summon the police on her cell phone.

“I-I wish her no harm. I just want to . . . well . . . explain,” he tells the magistrate. “But she wouldn’t even listen, kept on at me that I was filth, scum, a pathetic old has-been who couldn’t even. . . .” Finlay blinks furiously behind rimless spectacles. He continues, now barely audible. “All I ever wanted is someone to love me and someone to love, just a little. That’s all.”

The magistrate is unmoved. “Your execution is by a self-administered substance at six o’clock this evening.”

The walls of the room, its lighting subdued, are hung with Impressionist prints, the sky-blue ceiling speckled with gold stars. There’s the fragrance of roses. Muzak plays. A recliner in deep burgundy faces the floor-to-ceiling, single-paned picture window. It overlooks the city’s twinkling lights and the snow-capped north shore mountains beyond.

Finlay shuffles in, escorted by two lethalists. Two of them in case their intervention is required to effect an “expedious death” by an injection. Finlay is helped to lie down. He is handed a Starbucks’ plastic cup. “Drink it down,” he is told. He makes as if to throw it to the floor. The lethalists tense. He thinks better of it, drinks slowly, slides into unconsciousness.

The other lethalist moves to Finlay’s side. She looks down at him. “Good to the very last drop, eh?” Pansy murmurs. “Way to go. . . , reverend.”

by David Hawkins (85 years)
Vancouver, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Can't Stand It Anymore

It's been going on for two hours, that loud, annoying sound.

When it began, I forced myself not to pay attention to it. After all, I knew there was nothing left I could do; everything had been done already to prevent it, but there it was anyway. I had no control over it, absolutely no control, so why bother with it? It would cease the same way it started: all by itself. I just had to keep on doing the work that needed to be done, and wait for it to come to an end.

But time passed and it was still going on, irritating. It sometimes stopped for a few seconds, which made me sigh with relief before it rose again in a vicious way, as if it wanted to remind me what calmness felt like before cruelly taking it away.

The first hour I was able to wash the pile of dirty dishes and even start a laundry as usual, but the second one, it seemed like every little normal thing was unbearable. With that noise surrounding me and getting under every layer of my skin, even the otherwise pleasant smell of soap on the tiny clothes was more than I could stand.

So I ran away from the folding table, curled myself up on the couch, and prayed for it to stop.

It was hurting my ears, pressuring my brain, poisoning every single thought I had. At that point, it even seemed to grow louder and louder, more and more high-pitched as time went by without putting an end to it.

And that was all just too much.

I put my hands on my ears, but it made me cry because I could still hear it through my fingers and I couldn't tolerate it, not another single second. So I started screaming, but I was not the loudest here; I kept hearing it anyway. I had to run away, as far off in the house as possible, in the corner of the basement, in opposition to its source. But even with my hands still on my ears and with my own cries coming out of my own mouth, I could still hear it, always hearing it, and it was just too much—too much for me to endure it.

"Please, please, please. . . Make it stop. . . Please, please. . . Make it stop, someone. . ."

And that's when I heard, between two bursts of the insupportable noise, the front door open and close, then footsteps over my head. With every step, now on the stairs in front of me, the sound was becoming louder and louder.

I opened my eyes to see my husband with our baby in his arms. Its face was red and covered with tears, still crying, always crying, way too loudly.

"How long has he been like that?" he shouted, bouncing the weeping thing to try to calm it. It wouldn't work; nothing works. "You'll have to do something, okay? I gave you time, but I can't stand it anymore! Help yourself or I'm leaving with him for good!"

I had never seen him this angry with me before. But we'll see who he'll be angry with in two hours. Because it's still crying and it doesn't look like it wants to stop.

At least now, I can get out of here and have some peace.

by Leftie Aubé
Québec, Québec



HONOURABLE MENTION

Bored as Hell

Working in Hell was pretty much like any other job Matthew Loser had during his physical lifetime. The pay was crap, the hours were long, and there was never any positive feedback from his boss. Yep, working in Hell was just like working on Earth except for one big difference: he was stuck in Hell forever doing the same old crappy job, and forever was a long, long time.

On breaks in the staff lounge he would complain to the other damned that he never got to do the fun jobs. He never did the torturing, he never got to administer any ironic punishments, and he sure as heck was not allowed to approach the guy in charge. Quite frankly, in his estimation, Hell was not a whole lot of fun.

Of course, there was that hot temptress on Level C. Hot Temptress was not her actual name but her job title. She would periodically go above to the living world where she would trip up unsuspecting men and women and lure them into the sin of adultery. That was her niche and from all accounts she was very good at it.

Because she was so successful at her job she got to go to all the executive functions. She sat at the left hand of Satan during the big banquets and was introduced as one of his key operatives in the living world. She would hobnob with all the elite demons and it was rumoured that she had something going with the head of the Hell Fire Brigade, although that was just a rumour on the Devil's radio. She even was on a first-name basis with Beelzebub—or as she called him, “Bub.” Yet she never noticed Matthew.

Matthew sighed whenever he caught a fleeting glimpse of her or saw her perfectly shaped legs walk over his head on the glass ceiling above him. Matthew longed to be working on the same level as Hot Temptress, but he knew that there was no way. He simply wasn't hot stuff. Rather than pine he begrudgingly kept on with his routine. Every morning he would make his way over to Sisyphus to bother him just that much with heckling so he would lose his grip in anger and would have to start moving that stone up the mountain again. Matthew would then head on over to thirsty Tantalus with a big gulp and wave it in his face before taking one long sip and then pouring out the rest of the contents near the man's craving lips. Finally, he would head over to Agamemnon and give him the news of the day, the news always being how satisfied Clytemnestra was now that he was out of the way. Day after day, decade after decade, Matthew would go on about his business; the only consolation he would have was the sight of his fantasy, Hot Temptress, above his head.

Then one day he discovered he didn't even have that solace anymore. “What the hell!” was all that he could exclaim upon hearing the news Hot Temptress had somehow displeased the powers that be and that she had been demoted from Level C.

Matthew was crestfallen. His work suffered. He now barely made any comment to Sisyphus, which ironically made the man even more unnerved than before. He started to forget to pour out his big gulp of liquid refreshment, leaving it near Tantalus to quench his thirst. Finally, rather than tease Agamemnon about his wife's affairs, he found himself listening to his Trojan War stories instead, which cheered Agamemnon immensely.

This reduction in work ethic was quickly noticed and Matthew was called into Hell's human resources office. He noticed it was a bit warm in there and was concerned this was not going to be a pleasant meeting. For once Matthew was right. He was rung over the coals, literally, and then sent to the punishment circle of Hell.

The business-attired receptionist at the Seventh Circle of Hell met Matthew and led him to a door. Inside was an apartment with a large bedroom, a lovely view, and someone baking Devil's fruit cake in the kitchen. To his great astonishment it was Hot Temptress! “My name is Hellen Wheels. Welcome to the Department of Ironic Punishments,” she announced. She smiled and licked her lips. Matthew screamed knowing what was to come and wished to Heaven he was back at his old dead-end job. His afterlife was about to become Hell.

by Stephen Nolan

St. John's, Newfoundland

HONOURABLE MENTION

Portobello

This whole situation is Milissa's fault. I feel no hesitation in blaming her either as she is more than asking for it. Partly because her decision to go by Milissa rather than Melissa screams "make me your scapegoat!" but mainly because as my hairdresser, she should know better than to schedule a vacation the week before I go back to school. If it weren't for Milissa I would be in a top-of-the-line salon right now, being offered a delightfully foamy latte, and receiving a follicle-stimulating scalp massage. Even though I always refuse the latte and the scalp massage makes me uncomfortable, I would still rather endure my salon's hospitalities over the unknown horrors that await me within the eleven-dollar barbershop I am about to enter. I was sent here by my father, who has been coming to this place for years, but as he is rapidly running out of hairs on his head left to cut I value his recommendation about as much as I now value Milissa's reliability.

I creep through the flimsy narrow doorway of this unnamed "barber shop" and shuffle two steps to the left before planting myself in the nearest of three chairs. The simplicity of this shop astounds me. Uniform beige wooden planks cover the floor, ceiling, and walls, and the room appears to be configured into a basic four-corner plan. Corner one, in which I am seated, is the waiting corner. It is used by those who are waiting, and features issues of three different cycling magazines and one copy of yesterday's newspaper. Corners two and three are bare-walled and nearly empty, spare a minefield of hurriedly piled hair, and the tattered straw broom used to set the explosives. Corner four, directly to my right, is the most important corner of them all. It is where the hair gets cut, and is also the place I hope to get in and out of as soon as I can. In it is a dull red barber's chair, one thin frameless mirror, and a word-processed paper that reads, "Haircut: \$11.00," permanently joined to the wall by a single nail.

Right now the chair is filled by a middle-aged man receiving one of the cleanest-looking flattops I have ever seen. As I struggle to covertly examine the edge-perfect flattop being constructed before me, I briefly lock eyes with the barber, and receive a slight nod confirming I am lucky enough to be next. I spend the rest of the wait brushing up on my cycling.

When the door clicks shut behind flattop, I am at last alone with the barber and accept the invitation into his chair. He mumbles over his name and I am not brave enough to ask him to repeat it, but he continues on with some amusing yet surprisingly self-deprecating stories of how unskilled a barber he actually is, and the vast array of hairstyles he refuses to provide. He manages to have me fully convinced he is indeed a blemish upon the barber profession before making the confession I should have seen coming: "Your hair is too thick, and I'm not good enough to cut it." While I am proud to be one quarter Italian, and of the thick luscious hair this heritage provides, the barber's statement concerns me. "I'm going to have to just trim up your sides and send you on your way," he says as his eyes deliberately glance to the "\$11.00" sign and then back into my own.

My lips quiver in anticipation of a response, but fall limp when my body instead simply slumps back in the chair. I spend the rest of the cut cringing at every clip, as I watch the sides of my head transforming into a stem, barely able to support the tremendous weight of the cap with which it is burdened. The barber's moans of complaint at how my thick hair is making things difficult only prolong a final few minutes that deflate me of all self-esteem.

The cut ends with the barber's heartfelt words, "If you ever come here again, I will have to refuse you service," and I am out the door with a dead heart and a blank mind. Outside, the morning breeze biting my face is harsher than I was expecting, but all I can focus on is that my head is a mushroom, and how much I hate Milissa. I start school in two days.

by Devan Chiappetta McCannel
Victoria, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Inter Nos

“I didn’t know what else to do. I was at my wit’s end.” Leaning against his truck, Joe sips his coffee.

“I hear ya. Potato Wart last year! Ruined my whole crop. Not enough profit on this year to offset the loss of last,” Charlie agrees. “Not even with the needles found in my competitor’s potatoes! It all seems so crazy.”

Clifford shakes his head. “And where’s the rain this year? As if last year weren’t bad enough with the torrential downpours. One after another. All my seeds rotted. I had to replant. So much wasted time and effort, not to mention money.” He squints as he looks up at the sky. “And then this year, drier than a popcorn fart!”

“My bee guy lost 240 of his 300 hives,” Jeremy commiserates. “The freezing winter darn killed them off. Now I have to wait until he gets them replaced, or I have to find another supplier. Not easy on short notice, especially since everyone’s suffered some hive losses.”

Taking off his hat, Bobby wipes his brow. “Ya, my crops went in late this year because of the cold. Such a late spring and hardly one at that. I didn’t know whether to bother or not. The days of the small-time farmer are numbered.”

“You can say that again. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. We had those darn potato beetles a few years back. I can’t catch a break,” Charlie adds. “I think you’ve got the right idea, Joe. Money’s in wind turbines. Even if it does look like a spaceship has landed in your field.”

“How much did you lease your land for?” Bobby asks. “Maybe I should get out of the farming business. And wind energy is the future. Everyone says so.”

“Well, I’m not really at liberty to say. But I can tell you the contracts vary. The price is usually per turbine and it depends on how big of an area you want to lease out, how much wind you get . . . there are a lot of factors involved.”

“But you can’t say what you’re getting?” Clifford asks. “Sounds like a scam.”

Joe shrugs his shoulders. “You can take my advice or not,” he says. “If you don’t trust me, just Google it. One thing I know, though, is there ain’t no money in farming anymore. And who wants to buy less than 100 acres of farmland these days? Everyone’s moving into the city. It’s the service industry now . . . hotels, restaurants, spas, and salons.”

The farmers all nod in agreement. Wistfully, they look out over the fields behind the bakery. Jeremy scratches his head.

Joe straightens up. “I know I’m gonna miss the work. I’ve been riding tractors since I was sittin’ on my granddaddy’s knee. But I won’t miss the bills. And it’s nice to know that my family will live comfortably once the regular cheques start rollin’ in.”

Jeremy sighs and pats his truck hood. “Back at ’er,” he says. “Same time tomorrow?”

“You bet,” Bobby says. “I’m gonna read up on those turbines tonight. Joe, maybe you can set up a meeting for me with one of those big wigs?”

“Sure thing.”

The farmers climb into their vehicles and pull out of the parking lot.

Joe enters the turbine with three turbine executives. Once the door is securely closed, their human bodies morph into their alien forms.

“It’s working,” alien #227 says, lacing his fingers together.

“Hhmp. It’s taken much longer than anticipated, but they’re finally coming around,” alien #74286, aka Joe, agrees.

“So many tactics we’ve had to employ. Changing weather patterns, pests and disease, infiltration of environmental concern. As if a few turbines are going to put them on easy street! Those humans certainly do have thick skulls!” laughs alien #4448.

“The hoax of the needles in the potatoes was a nice added touch. I wish I had thought of that,” admits #00038.

“Look how many turbines we’ve installed already. It’s only a matter of time now. Soon that leased land will be owned by us! #00038, send a message for more spaceships,” #227 commands.

#00038 sits at the control panel and channels his mental image on the screen. Within seconds he has a response. “Four ships will be arriving tonight,” he replies.

“Good, good,” #227 nods. “Colonization plan confirmed.”

by Linda Najjar

Milo, Prince Edward Island

