1-1-1996

Dialogue

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Dialogue is a magazine dedicated to enhancing productive conversation. In pursuit of such, we warmly welcome submissions of short stories, poetry, essays, commentaries and visual art, as well as letters of response to submissions. All submissions should be typed and double-spaced. Whenever possible, a three and a half inch Macintosh or PC diskette containing the material should also be provided. Dialogue reserves the right to edit submissions, but will do so only in consultation with the author.

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"Coney Island" Photograph Mark Wiegars

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Our fond memories are held in reserve, and when we are lucky, they flood over us, mingling and magnifying each other, together warming our lives. Over Interim I read a short story by Willa Cather entitled *Neighbor Rosicky*. Its twenty pages opened the flood gates of my memory, flushing out my worries, enveloping me in their reassurances.

The story begins with a description of Rosicky, a sixty-five year old immigrant farmer whose oddly triangular eyes convey a comforting interest in whatever they rest upon. He is stopped on the top of the hill overlooking his modest farm. Soaking in the view, "his own roof and windmill looked so good to him that he promised himself to mind the Doctor and take care of himself. He was awful fond of his place, he admitted. He wasn’t anxious to leave it."

In the farmhouse, his and his wife’s uncommon selflessness enthralled me. He has such an effect that his daughter-in-law, marvels that no one in this world could love everyone as fully as did Mr. Rosicky. Throughout the story, the description of his comforting and gentle, guiding touch helped me realize the goodness of the people and places of my life.

This feeling evoked a specific memory of my own farm in Wisconsin. Fifteen miles from the nearest town, my father stopped the car as we crested the hill on Tower Road. He opened the tailgate of the station wagon, and lifted me out and each of us searched the view of the land rolled out below. We looked towards our tiny cabin, a quarter mile away, set against a wall of oak trees with a meadow overrun in goldenrod laid out in front. A small opening in the wall of oaks revealed the cavern under the canopy which sheltered a 1970 VW bug, bought for $19.75, which survived four pre-teen drivers. The meadow bore the scars of our driving lessons on the weaving roads cut by a 1952 Ford tractor now resting hub deep in the goldenrod. The bells of St. Camilius chimed the quarter hour while we soaked in this view. Rosicky’s roof and windmill reminded me of this day as we looked from this hill, toward the cabin.

I have not thought of this particular day since it happened fourteen years ago and I now remember this day in particular, though I know we stopped in that spot more than once to rejoice in the view. That day with my family remained hidden in my mind, waiting to return that childhood happiness to me.

Despite the clarity of this particular memory, the details of my life grow hazy in the time that passes; I have trouble remembering much of what made my childhood so happy (though I know it was) and trouble pinpointing the other memories which flooded my mind that night I met Mr. Rosicky. However, that night, it was Rosicky’s fondness for his home and family that reminded me, sparking the memories of my own. He joined my memories, mingling and magnifying and clarifying them, bringing me back to Tower Road and to my family and my home. He tripped these beautiful memories which washed my consciousness, revealing to me how wonderful is the world and its people.
Portfolio: Mark Weigers

Liberty State Park
The Calvin Dialogue

The Dead on Clearance

By Caleb Seeling

Stanislas Kayibanda awoke with a start. He glanced nervously around. The gunshots and the hack of machetes of a dream faded as sleep left him. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. The day was crystal clear and the early morning sun shone redly on the African savanna like fresh pomegranate seeds. He would see his wife and child today. It would be the first time since they were separated in the Great Flight nine months ago. They would reunite and tomorrow they would journey south out of the country and into safety.

With renewed vigor, Stanislas climbed to his feet, found his bearings, and trumped down the little swell he spent the night on. It was a wondrous morning—the already warm air still retained a hint of cool morning dew that was punctuated with the heady scent of moistened dry flora. Mice scurried away as he disturbed the long beige grass. Off in the distance, a family of giraffes moved slowly away to his right, their long necks swaying against the lightening blue sky.

Stanislas saw the morning through blank dark brown eyes. His chest squeezed within his chest as he watched the giraffes. Soon he would be with his own family. But, what if the RPA... no, no matter their condition they would be together again and that's all that matters. His fingers closed into tight black balls at his side and his step quickened. He hoped he would not run into any Tutsis or RPA soldiers on the way.

He did not notice the ache of his empty stomach. It was merely a part of life.

"Hans, hurry up or you'll miss the bus!"
"Coming, mom."

"Helen, do you have your cheerleading outfit for the game this afternoon?"
"Yes, mom."

A plate of blackened toast with a rather thick slab of hard butter and runny jelly suddenly appeared before Helen. She made a face at it, swept her long blonde hair from her face with a flick of her head, and pushed it away.

Julia Dykstra swung to the bottom of the stairs. "Hurry up, Hans. Your breakfast is getting cold."
"Mom, I'm coming."

"It never was warm," Helen mumbled as she wiped residual jam from the plate off her fingers onto her jeans.

"Honey, don't wipe your hands on your pants," Julia said as she hurried into the kitchen. "Oh, did you get your math test studied for?"
"Yes, mom. Don't worry about it."

Julia came back in, tossed a bowl of poached eggs on the table and poured orange juice into Helen's glass. "Well, I am worried, dear. I want you to do well so that you can get into a good school. It's almost time to start looking at colleges, you know."

"Yes, so you've told me," said Helen. She poked her fork at an egg which promptly exploded in a stream of yellow. She wrinkled her nose as the yolk flooded around the other eggs.

Julia stepped briskly to the stairs. "I'm just not sure that you're taking this seriously enough—Hans, get your little patooi down here...now!—It's just that your getting older."

"I know it, mom."

"I mean, you've just got your driver's license, a new car...That means more responsibility."

Helen pushed her chair back and slung her bag over her shoulder. She kissed her mom on the cheek. "Love ya, mom."

Hans tripped down the stairs running his hand through his wet, short blonde hair. "Mom, where's my hockey stick?"
"I don't know, dear. I think you left it behind the coats by the patio door."

Hans disappeared and came back with hockey stick in hand.

"Don't forget your breakfast, dear."
He picked up a dripping egg and quickly transferred it to the untouched piece of toast just as it burst. He stuffed the whole dripping mess into his mouth. Julia handed him a napkin as Helen regarded her little brother disgruntledly with a raised eyebrow. "Mom, why does he have to be so gross?"

"Now get going or you'll be late."
"Bye, mom," Hans called as he grabbed his backpack and ran for the door.

"Good luck on your test, honey," Julia called after Helen. "I'll see you at the game. Have fun at practice, Hans. I'll pick you up at six."
"OK."

"Oh, Helen. Will you drive your brother to school
The African savanna spread out broadly brown beneath him and stretched to the horizon on either side. Ahead, large billows of smoke obscured his view. The source fires were small but there were many of them throughout the streets of the village. He looked for movement in vain—there was not enough for a village of several thousand people.

Stanislas felt his hope flicker and die but he felt no despair; no sadness. All that remained was emptiness. The countryside should have been beautiful. But it felt empty. He stood, a stone sentinel watching the smoke rise into the blue Rwandan sky.

"Oooh Jules, Jules let me look at you; well aren’t you just a picture? Your hair! You cut your hair short! Oh it’s wonderful, you must tell me who did it, of course my hair is no match for your beautiful blonde hair, but maybe if I went to your stylist…”

"It’s good to see you too, Rose,” Julia squeamishly grinned, trying to mask her tiredness. She gently proded her eccentric friend into the cafe where they met once every other Tuesday. Usually Julia dreaded going because she knew it was bound to become a one-sided conversation— not her side. But there was something magnetic about Rose that Julia could not help admiring. She didn’t know what, exactly, but she just had to smile and shake her head in amusment of her proportionally well-stocked friend.

Rose peered at her through squinty eyes and over large rounded lipidous cheeks. “What’s wrong, dear? You look a bit tired.”

“Oh, it’s nothing really. Just in the middle of some Christmas shopping.”

“Ah, yes, that does it every time, I really don’t like Christmas shopping at all, all the crowds and trying to remember what to get for who and all of such stuff just throws me into a tizzy.”

“Yes, I’m only half way through…”

“I haven’t begun myself, I don’t have much family you know, it’s hard being single these days especially at my age and in this season, I mean look at me, I’m getting old, Jules…”

“No you’re not, Rose…”

"Yesterday I found another gray hair, I declare that at this rate I’ll be gray by New Years for sure and I don’t even have kids! I don’t know why it’s happening except that I’m getting old, I’m always so tired at the end of the day I barely have enough energy to change into my nightie; goodness gracious can you imagine? At this rate I’ll be gray by New Years for sure and I don’t even have kids!”

Julia blinked and suddenly realized the tirade had stopped for a moment. “Huh? Oh, Helen...she’s fine,
Rose was looking frantically around. Julia asked, "What's wrong, Rose?"
"Confound it, where is that waiter? We've been sitting here for ages and he hasn't even offered us coffee yet."
"I'm sure he'll be here soon."
"He'd better be or I'll...ah, here he is. Young man where have you been? This is a coffeehouse isn't it?"
"Well, sort of, ma'am," was the startled, nervous reply.
"Sort of? Of course it is and we want some coffee. What are you some kind of dope? We've been here for ages and we haven't been offered any yet."
The young waiter stiffened and grew defensively curt. "What would you like?"
"Just a simple caramel latte and Jules here wants one too."
"Can you make it decaf, please?" Julia quietly asked, giving him an apologetic look.
"Yes." With that, the waiter disappeared.
"Honestly, he didn't have to be so rude! I just wanted a simple cup of coffee."
"Of course, Rose."
"Now what were we...oh yes, Christmas shopping, it's so crazy in those stores, there's hardly a man anywhere and all the women are on a mission, I had to struggle with one woman for that cowboy shirt I told you about but I was bigger than her so I got it but really it's Christmas, isn't that the time when we're all supposed to be full of good cheer, but I always see the opposite..."

After an hour and a half, Julia finally pried herself from Rose's grasp and headed back into the fray at the mall. Rose's observation was a good one and she noticed all the set, determined, tired faces of the people—mostly women—around her. Did she look that way, too? She stopped to rest on a bench. Why was she always so tired? Why all the stress in her life? She had a good life. Her home in Melody Hills was beautiful with beautiful homes around her and friendly neighbors. She had two wonderful children and a loving husband. Yes, she and Fester got along pretty well...until recently. He had a good job, but his future there had just been thrown into doubt. The thought of a job loss frightened her. What would they do? They might have to sell the house. Fester's severance pay would be good, but her future—the family's future—would be wrenched from her careful control. Sacrifices would have to be made, of course, but if they had to move...Julia's chest tightened. It will all work out in the end, she thought, at least we'll be together. Perhaps this little trial will help us reorganize our priorities.

She stood up, drew in a deep breath, and headed toward the Lord and Taylor's sale. On her way to the young men's department, she walked past the electronics section, past walls of black TVs all tuned to the same channel. The multicolored whirling images arrested her. Julia stood transfixed, dwarfed, surrounded by the piled images of the twirling pictures in rhythmic syncopation. The driving beat of high decibel rock music blasting crafty marketing schemes. Blurring vision, wide half-closed eyes—blurring sound, half-hearing half-listening—near the bottom of the mountain on an older brown turn dial model with big yellow tape across labeled clearance a small image not jibing with the rest. Half focused eyes watching both the different image and the larger picture so as not to miss anything. An African man was pulled away at gun point from a pile of burning bodies. The nose wrinkling and the focus shifting back to the dominating god. Clearance. Julia blinked and remembered the sale in the young men's department. A new TV would be nice...but sacrifices would have to be made.

From the back of a decrepit truck jostling down a dirt road, Stanislas watched the countryside move slowly past him. He ignored the Rwandese Patriotic Army soldier who was guarding him. He watched without seeing. He still saw the bodies of his wife...
and child as they were dumped on the cremation fire—
trampled when the entire Hutu camp charged the RPA
which had come to close it down. Now they were
dead with the rest of the village.

This was spoken to him by a UN peacekeeper be­
fore Stanislas was noticed by a patrolman. He was
arrested for participation in the genocide of the Tutsi
tribe more than a year ago. The Tutsi leader question­
ing him paid little attention to his quiet protestations
of innocence.

He was led through the street expecting to die by
bullet or machete blade when he saw his daughter
already blackening and sizzling and his extremely
pregnant wife being hefted into the air and unceremo­
niously dumped next to her daughter.

Raped.

When they knocked him out nine months ago they
must have raped her. It was at that moment, looking
at his burning family, that he had died.

Indifferently, he was loaded onto a truck for the
Kigali prison. Horrible conditions there, he had heard,
too many people stuffed into too small a space. No
matter. He would be safe in prison. There he would
find a little food. His family was gone and his own
life inconsequential.

No more fear.

As the truck turned a dusty corner he overheard
peacekeepers saying something about missing Christ­
mas for the first time. He had heard about the holi­
day from a visiting missionary once. Something about
joy to the world and peace to all men.

For him peace had taken on a new meaning.

Acquaintanced Friendships

Looking back through the mirror of my life,
Finding it shattered in shards on the floor.
Faces, names, and places gone,
No farther nor nearer, no less, no more,
Fast vanishing.

Gone from the world and human view,
trapped forever in hearts and minds.
A blur of feelings and happenstance,
Of fear and love, of rude and kind.
Harsh reality.

Where they have gone, I may never know,
On with life as it goes around.
Cradling the broken splinters in my hands,
Their sharpness apparent as the sift to the ground
Amidst the changing tears.

Risa Jung
"Sunset at the Bush's"  Oil on Canvas  Shawn Krueger
Near the end of 1995 my wife and I discovered that after almost four years of trying to start a family she had become pregnant. One week later she had a miscarriage. Not easily able to talk about my feelings, I instead wrote the poem below. Perhaps it will mean something to others who have suffered similar losses. It contains no easy answers, but the act of writing it was cathartic for me–perhaps the reading it will be cathartic for you.

You never died,
(you never were)
and yet you lived.

If life is a book, pages virgin with expectation,
how to describe you, whose story glimpsed
was never grasped.

Tears flowed and wet, but ink dry and stubborn,
and words (in the beginning) began not,
memories mourned that do not exist.

You see, before you were not
we imagined you.
Watched others and wondered,
if in them, you.

Names? Tossed around to be sure,
like children blowing bubbles,
laughing at the creations as though we owned them.

An arrogance perhaps in never pausing to consider,
naming what is not, yet on we plowed.

Clocks beat louder when rhythm is pondered.
Alone in a strange room at night, time in unstoppable lockstep.
We heard the hands with cold certainty unnamed.

And then giving up became giving in,
yielding, surrendering.
body and soul.

While we slept, the cover long shut was turned,
the first words written,
and you who never were, were
became without warning,
a bubble not burst.
Not yet a stream, or even a spring,
still underground,
weeping through rock and roots,
gathering resolve, marshalling reserve,
'til one day, through soil, water would flow.

Just seven days we knew before your promise,
your presence, withdrew, your story ending much too soon.

Before you were not, you were,
if only for us, a week.

If only for us, awake.

Phil deHaan

"Evoke"  Intaglio  Dan Van Til
Hospitality
(To a brother and his wife)

I'd prefer to stay home,
yet needed to flee awhile this house
justice supposedly evacuated.

Your insistent invitations cause
my prone hesitancy to subside,
if only temporarily.

Take my coat, usher me in.
I sit on mahogany-colored couch,
pug at my feet.

In my own good time, the lump allows
my voice to pass and I tell
and you listen

To Russian folk song
you make me eat
and share your wine.

Reminds me of the Host Himself

Jane E. Tebben

"Struggle" Intaglio Dan Van Til
"Dan"  Oil on Canvas  Aaron Brelanld
Untitled  Acrylic on canvas  Jesse Claggett
Saul

ahead
of the
crowd

a head
in the crowd
loats on the
waves of
knaves

and hair the
wind runs through
like a spoon in
spaghetti

and faces
oh
where do they
all
come from?

not knaves
a lake of spice
a sea of seasoning
with one combined
taste

but one a head
not hair not face

must be
connected to a
body

and maybe someone is in there

Karl Voskuil
"Crucifixion" Acrylic Erik Nykamp
Elevator
By Karl Voskuil

He climbed out of his office chair and went out into the hallway of the building. After waiting for the elevator, he slumped inside and pushed the button for the ground floor. He sighed and leaned against the wall as the soft bagpipe elevator music danced over his mind.

A burst of sunshine flooded his face as he walked onto the main boulevard. A woman reading a Victorian-era novel nearly ran into him. Jane Eyre. Which reminded him of his own Jane. It seemed that everything reminded him.

She was lovely. Cascading gold hair, high cheekbones like those of an armadillo, and exquisite feet. He wiped a tear from his eye in remembrance. He looked around to make sure no one was looking at his face.

The painful part of his longing was the closeness of its realization. Jane worked on the eighteenth floor of his forty-nine story building, only one story above the floor that he had just vacated. In a sudden burst of decisiveness, he turned back towards the office building, and the sunshine that was now on his back caused his face to be shrouded in a shadow.

John hadn’t talked to Jane for three months. And six days.

The cartel boss carried himself and his jet-black suit confidently down the corridor. Few people knew that a floor existed between the fourth and fifth floor of the office building. He climbed through a trapdoor to the fifth floor where he could take a elevator to the top executive floor.

At the same time a mechanic in a single-piece gray uniform gained admittance to the elevator shaft to work on the mechanism. He carried a tool chest and a walkie-talkie.

John staggered his way into the elevator. His recent confidence had completely drained, and his mind was a maelstrom of confusion. Nothing was clear to him. What would he say to Jane? Oh, hi Jane, just trying to find the men’s room. Do you want to get married? Again?

Obviously not. After all Jane had put him through, John felt insane to even be considering returning to her. Returning would be like the death of his soul. But she smelled so nice. That was very important. Death. The smell of death?

The nice thing about an elevator was that once you started it, it would keep going whether you wanted it to or not. Decisions are so hard to make, one way or another. John’s eyes were set on the small lights that climbed towards the number eighteen. Just then the elevator stopped.

At the fifth floor. A muscular and perfectly arranged man in a black suit boarded the elevator. Just as John had made up his mind to get out, the doors closed. “It’s my elevator. I’ll push the button,” the man said with a smile. He punched floor forty-nine. Which meant John wouldn’t have another chance to leave. John’s body was calm but his mind was panic. He could only think of the number eighteen. One part of his mind saw that the man in the suit had pulled out a newspaper and was completely oblivious to John.

With an obscene suddenness, the elevator arrived at floor eighteen. And the door opened. Life and death, John was thinking. Life or death. Was she worth it? It was time to decide to either face her or stay in the elevator. Decisions were so hard.

The man in the single-piece grey uniform held a small box with sweaty hands. The farther the elevator fell, of course, the better, but after about twenty-something floors it really didn’t matter. In an aggrivated gesture he picked up the walkie-talkie. It cracked, and a voice said, “...alright, the doors are closing again. Its on its way to the top floor. Do it now.”

The mechanic let out a sigh of relief and pushed the button on the detonator, exploding the charges and sending the elevator 250 feet straight down to a shattering impact. •
I thought I had stopped dreaming. I meant in the childish sense. Being “mature” and “wise to the world”, how could a fantasy actually terrify me? Or a nightmare have enough influence to affect my conscious decisions? And as dreams may be foretelling—vaguely—and meaningful—yet often interpreted more ambiguously than its meaning deserves—this dream was entirely truthful beneath its vignette of absurdity. I do not expect the total of people who read this to believe in it.

I felt cold. I opened my eyes to the glaring light that emanated from all around me. I could not ascertain the source. It was as if the air was glowing; my eyes adapted quickly.

There were lush green hills with short grass rolling in all directions. The white icy sky blurred off into the distance with the little shapely green mounds. And there was no shadow.

I turned and saw another being, who looked like a man, with his back to me. As far as I could determine, he wore a blue military coat of the eighteenth or maybe nineteenth century. It looked more dignified than infantry, but it was not majestic. In fact, it was torn in odd places, badly worn on the tails, and extremely filthy. He wore wrinkled and dusty black leather boots up to the bottoms of his knees. His trousers, tucked into his boots, matched the coat in color, wear, and filth.

The air was still. The light did not have warmth.

The man was bald in irregular places; tufts of striking snow-white hair grew thickly in small patches or didn’t grow at all, revealing purple veins under the reddish brown skin. At a closer look I perceived his head as also being irregularly shaped, like it withstood a crushing injury, as if his skull was almost malleable by the way the dents and protrusions coalesced. He so oddly contrasted with the clean, surreal landscape that it gave me an extreme but reluctant curiosity for his reason in being there. Immediately my stomach dropped into that weakening state of dire anxiety when I dared assume the contortions of a face possessing that wretched skull. I only ventured a few steps back, away from the man, before he turned his ugly head and then his body to face me. His face did not evince the terror I anticipated; yet I was still startled by his overall peculiarity. His eyes were rather large and buggy; his sallow complexion was etched by dark, dirty crevices around the eyes, beside the corners of the mouth, and across his forehead. His mouth jutted out almost past his nose. His lips were shut tight.

He opened his mouth and smiled at me; I suddenly drew short of breath and felt a needle-like pulse pierce its own way to my fingers and toes; he could not be human. He must have owned twice the human amount of teeth. They were too thin, and jagged on the ends like little broken yellow icicles. Some had grown disgustingly longer than the rest and had begun to warp, like a rodents, to the left or right. His lips—haphazardly shredded and bleeding—looked liked they had been tangled in his rough, gnarly teeth. A few pieces of lip hung, limp and scabby on the tips, like bloody, lifeless tentacles. Down his neck and onto his formerly white vest, a brown stain ran in a somewhat irregular diminuendo nearly to his waist. It looked of ancient blood.

I felt nauseous and light-headed. He took a few steps closer and spoke, with what sounded like a hundred sorrow voices: “What do you want?” The black, scar-like wrinkles on his face danced back and forth. His lips flailed about repulsively, slinging drops of blood everywhere. I had never seen or imagined anything more terrible. The dried blood on his neck and vest got overlaid by a fresher, glistening crimson that ran down from his lips. An aggressive terror closed my eyes and I blacked out.

I awoke to the sounds of many different voices. Some were low, most were animated, and there were a few loud exclamations like on a street or in a carnival. I opened my eyes and again saw the lurid white glow all around me; the cold grass beneath prickled me to awareness of my obscure surroundings. I laid on my back and let my senses regain vitality. After the slight delirium wore off, I got up and began walking toward the voices.

Down a more gradual green slope congregated what I yearned to be humans. And they were. A rush of happiness filled my soul and I quickly directed my way to them. As the individuals became focused, I noticed that most congregated in small or large distinct groups. Some groups walked around in precise unison, some were more lax. The amoeba-like light made their skin appear just as pale as the sky. Their clothes, mannerisms, and speech mimicked their re-
spective groups nearly to the point of absurdity. From where I perceived this on one of the little green hills, the directionless clusters of people looked like herds of sheep or pigs, reined in by invisible, amorphous fences. But the herds certainly did not seem oblivious to each other. Despite the separations, the totality of the people was very assimilated. I continued walking.

I nearly laughed out loud when I saw that every person of every group and age had a lollipop. Some people had too many to carry, some lollipops were so massive they required mounting into the ground; they towered high above the people like plastic trees, with color splashed on them like childish drawings. The people's attention was fixed on these works of beauty, indeed, transfixed. Nothing in this carnival on this mysterious land matched the color or diversity of the lollipops. I began hearing countless crunchings and slober-sounding licks under the din of the voices. It seemed every energy, will, and purpose of the people was intrinsically directed to or for these flat-sided, round sweets molded on sticks. But the source of the candies and the sticks I could not see; there were only people and lollipops and rolling green hills under the cold, white illumination.

And yet, by far the most bizarre and heart-rending aspect of these pseudo-humans struck me when I finally came upon the center of the whole crowd. I stopped walking and took a second look at their eyes. My first observation did not deceive me: the eyes of all were deathly pale. The irises and pupils were fixed in their heads—like little pebbles—staring blankly in front of them. Their faces showed every facet of human expression; but their eyes were ambivalent.

After some time of utter amazement, I began to see particular trends in the habits of these people. Generally, the older couples possessed the largest and most decorative lollipops. They were usually sitting on top of them, high in the air, either munching on the candy or looking down, as if admiring their descendant's youthful zeal for their own "miniature" lollipops. When not subject to these states of bliss, the older couples were fastidious about every detail in their lollipop's position, color, style, and most notably in what their neighboring peers were doing with their respective gargantuan sweets. The youth held the smaller lollipops and were quick to show off their collections and likewise to give compliments on their peers' candies; although many children fought, to my surprise, very violently over the more colorful ones; however, this did not inhibit the older people from adoring their own lollipops or their children's.

In a few groups of old and young alike, they ate intricately designed lollipops ravenously, almost out of control. Later when they slowed the fury, some vomited and looked the epitome of agony and destitution. I tried to speak to a few of them, but they quickly turned their pale eyes away. The unsightly messes quickly disappeared. And without hesitation they began the cycles again in triumphant glee.

I walked away from that gross display. As I scanned the groups around me I accidentally bumped into a man. He gave no attention to me but kept on talking quite animatedly to someone next to him. The man put emphasis on every syllable. He seemed to be educating another man about the latter's lollipop, which I assumed was the large and gaudy one tipped over in the ground, with the circular candy suspended only a few inches from the green grass. The vociferous man pulled a little dusty black book from his pocket and showed the unfortunate man a passage. The second man nodded his head pensively. Then the wiser man pointed to a handsome and very carefully mounted lollipop, which must have been his own, and the unfortunate man nodded his head again in agreement. The wise man captured the unfortunate's attention once more by speaking passionately and poking the pages of the book with his finger in anger over not wanting to "sacrifice his intellect", refusing to believe in things he "couldn't see", and how superficial the differences between "such and such" really were. With that said, he turned to the back of the book and revealed a few pages; they began laughing hysterically. Yet the mirth on their faces did not last as long as I expected it to. The wise man carelessly discarded the book behind him in anger with a sweep of his arm.

I then heard a joyful melee of young voices. I turned in their direction and walked toward them. They were mostly young adults, male and female, sharing lollipops hesitantly at first, then with more and more confidence, finally succumbing to a regular routine. The more they shared, the more insatiably they ate each subsequent time. To the other people gazing upon them, they were considered honorable—even noble—for their actions. After a while, if no one shared with someone, that person became sadly distraught. An even smaller number mysteriously died with obscure diseases. One of these sad events just took place and a girl stood alone, crying. I asked her why she does these absurd things if she or her friends could die of it. She turned to me with those dead eyes and replied, "Grow up, it's not that serious." She made me angry and I felt hopeless for her. I stared in frustration at the maliciously eager people she began walking back to, who were urging her on with the tantalizing lollipops and promises of more partners.

I walked away disgusted and found a space without those sickening pseudo-humans or their idiot lollipops and sat down to rest. I could not believe this existed. Besides the odd setting, couldn't there be something natural or pure? Something that seemed innocent or even kind did not dwell here without an aura of malice. And where was here? What matters?
Lollipops and ritual obsessions and groups of people matter; they are important. Is there nothing else?

Then I remember not hearing anything, no voices, not even a licking sound. Suddenly a great discordant chorus rose from the hills behind me. I got up and peered from behind the closest hill. All the people and groups of people stared straight ahead, arms in the air, waving their lollipops back and forth, in strict unison, like upside-down pendulums. A few excited people attempted to climb up the larger lollipops to get a better view; they were quickly grappled and pulled off or stepped on by more desperate climbers. In a small time the mass of people began bellowing in a despairing drone. I scanned the throbbing ocean of colorful circles and my heart stopped at seeing the gleaming white hair of that wretch of a man in his ancient war fatigues. He stepped up to the top of little grassy hill with an insolent, sickening alacrity of a devil and smiled over the crowd. It was he they venerated, with the coagulated blood and marrined face. These clones of foolishness gave all the attention their opaque eyeballs were capable to this grotesque being and his mouth of yellow jagged teeth and mutilated lips. He glowered back at them and gnashed his conflicted teeth with a triumphant air; he was satisfied with their reverence. From a few people on the closer edge of the crowd I heard that "Man-of-the-World" was his name. I have never seen the clone people express caring sentiment so adamantly for their own as they did for this Man-of-the-World.

All the absurdity in front me began to make sense of itself. The Man-of-the-World must be the source of the lollipops. The people's dependence on the lollipops absorbed their will; the only thing that brought them out of their addictive trances was the Man-of-the-World himself. He gave them lollipops to satisfy their capricious and fruitless desires. They felt liberated, affirmed, and significant; but the lollipops in turn induced assimilation like mute tyrants. The people were his army, his blind orchestra, that seemed to be his people's dependent, with the coagulated blood and marrined face. These clones of foolishness gave all the attention their opaque eyeballs were capable to this grotesque being and his mouth of yellow jagged teeth and mutilated lips. He glowered back at them and gnashed his conflicted teeth with a triumphant air; he was satisfied with their reverence. From a few people on the closer edge of the crowd I heard that "Man-of-the-World" was his name. I have never seen the clone people express caring sentiment so adamantly for their own as they did for this Man-of-the-World.

Another group exactly like the last, with their own dignitaries leading the procession, approached the same vicinity. Seeing this second robed gentleman and his entourage, the first called his people to attention and began reciting something. His people responded with a plodding volition. The second gentleman, who did not want to be outdone, drew his people to attention and began reciting something different from the first. This stirred the first crowd to recite louder and more unified than before. At length both crowds screamed frantically at each other, paying no attention to unison or keeping order with the leaders; for the leaders were just as vehemently shouting and pointing fingers like the rest. They ranted on and on but I couldn't tell exactly what they were screaming about. Near the end, though, I thought I picked something up like "points" or "fouls." Even among the people with the more colorful lollipops I had never seen such hatred expressed. Many people, mostly the young, lost interest in this useless squabble and wandered to the other groups of people with the more inviting sweets.

Now this first group of bland people, beginning with the leader, began passing pieces of bread to each member. It was the first kind of food I had seen beside the lollipops since I set foot in this place. The second group, with the same competitive nature as before, passed glasses of red wine to each of its members. They ate and drank these delicacies other than being the Man-of-the-World's tools for complete control over these blind-eyed pseudo-humans. They were his army, his blind orchestra, that seemed to be the Man-of-the-World's tools for complete control over these blind-eyed pseudo-humans. Then why are they so dependent on the lollipops? Surely they could let them go...

The Man-of-the-World finished his ploy. He walked away from his clones. To my surprise no one followed him; I expected to surely see the people canter along side his quick gait like children; I don't think they ever dared summon him or speak to him. I thought this as being very odd: the people did not want to get too close to the person they expressed such admiration for.

Then I saw another group of people I hadn't seen before. They did not give their attention to the Man-of-the-World so completely as the others. In fact, I distinctly remember a good portion of them laughing at the astute attention of the much greater crowd. At the head of this particularly dull crowd there stood a very dignified gentleman wearing a robe, with what looked like a few dignitaries behind him. The rest of the people behind the dignitaries spoke together in little groups. I moved closer to the crowd—they paid no attention—and listened to some of the conversations. I soon realized the conversations and the mannerisms were repeated over and over, but the people did not see the lunacy of their actions. These people held lollipops too, usually very small and bland in color. Some were trying very hard to conceal the more sizable and colorful varieties in their clothes. Of all the groups I had seen this group was the dullest, most redundant yet. And they too had the dull, pale eyes.

"They will all die with me."
Tradition is an unequalled ally. The people must have it or they will be broken if they do not fulfill the need for “purposeful” acts with their fellow people. The underlying paradox, though, is that they are lost in either case—together in tradition—or separated in their selves.

The air of unction his hideous demeanor expressed revolted me. The Man-of-the-World stood in his decaying clothes like a gentleman, with all the charisma of a politician, gesticulating and emphasizing the crucial words. He glared at me, with his lips oozing fresh blood down his neck and shirt. The reopened scabs revealed the jagged and dirty yellow teeth in his ape-like protruded mouth.

I asked “But why must they die with you?”

His forehead wrinkled into tighter furrows and then he smiled. He opened his mouth completely and laughed like a multitude of dying men. He abruptly stopped, leaned forward, bulged his eyes out, and whispered: “Because they don’t read or understand it, therefore they will never understand Him!”

He clenched his dirty fist in front of my face. I backed away to escape the putrid odor from his mouth.

“There are many who laugh at you and ignore you!” I shouted. I knew I had lied, in part, after I uttered this; but I could not make myself believe in all of that resolute obedience to this wretched creature.

“Allow me to elaborate. They will all die with me... forever.”

Never had I seen such infinite hatred expressed with such a bitter face. He must have revelled in my anguish as he continued, “And it’s much worse than it sounds.” He raised his eyebrows, opened his eyes farther, and laughed an impish “hee hee hee hee!”

Again, blood splattered off his lips and ran down his neck and shirt.

But I no longer felt as intimidated as before; I burned with anger against this Man-of-the-World, this twisted being warped into irrevocable evil. He must have been condemned by someone mightier. And out of the most impenetrable spite, he procured the lollipops to signature the people to share his doom. They were blind and ready, ready for nothing other than their eternal deaths. All for lollipops, for the sake of short euphoria as they lived their “lives.”

“Why must you take people with you!” I asked angrily, “They did nothing to you!”

“You don’t read it either, do you,” he answered calmly.

The Man-of-the-World turned to walk away when my eyes caught sight of the little black book—the same one discarded by the man I bumped into previously—open on the ground with pages sprawled under the weight of it. I ran to it, picked it up and read a few lines out loud: “...he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

The Man-of-the-World swung around quickly on his heel and glared at me cruelly. His eyes burned into my soul. A breeze picked itself up; his white tufts of hair and dangling lips responded reluctantly at first but then gave full sway to the increasing gale. I could see the whole mass of people in the distance behind him, in their groups of particular vices, spread over the green hills and under the cold, white light, still holding on to the trifles that would send them to their eternal deaths. All they had to do was drop them...

“But you can’t say that for anyone else! Haaaaahahaha!” he interjected with satisfaction. But his countenance quickly changed into that of a furious rage; he shook his fist at me wildly as if cursing my existence.

“You can’t read it for anyone else! You can’t believe it for anyone else! You will be alone! Alone...”

His shouts died away in the screaming wind. I did not feel alone.
My Sometimes Peace

blue diamonds tease me sometimes
and i wander away
dear God
please let me hold them for today
i faintly simile at
the sparkling stars
thoughtfully placed
on my makeshift coffee table
and i think about being thoughtfully placed
in this makeshift world
i wonder why i must sit and ache
waiting for those nowhere people
i hold my blue diamonds tighter
they cut my hands
weeping streams of scarlet tears
and i realize my mistake
my disastrous poem
my disheartened foolishness
oh God
thoughtlessly
i have placed myself
in the world you have made frightfully shifted
now
i surrender my blue diamonds
you scatter them
onto the floor
i look to you again
to your patient eyes

i gave you
my sometimes peace
artificial and manufactured by my hands
you gave me your forever light
burned it into my soul

Emily Tanis
"Thinking of You"  Acrylic  Erik Nykamp
Mass media exists to fill a void. It plays on our wants and our needs. It caters to our hopes and fears. It ties marketable material into irresistible packages for our consumption, and we wonder whether mass media is feeding on us, or we on it. The wants and needs, the hopes and fears from 1920 to 1960 took America on a roller-coaster ride like no other. The desires and concerns of the consumers of mass media were a launching pad for two distinct kinds of music that came of age in this period. The age-old question of if and where one fits in was the platform from which the fathers of blues music and the writers of Disney's classic catalog would wage their debate—they have both left us a rich heritage of saints, streets, and most importantly, songs. The songs have a story to tell. They tell the story of what Americans wanted to hear then and now.

What were Americans feeling in this forty-year period? Take the subject of war. In the 20's we had had quite enough, thank you, but in a mere twenty years we wanted to start blasting "Japs" right off the map. By the 60's, even though we thought we hated war, we knew that the "Cold War" was anything but cold. Where did America fit into the globe? At home, class lines, religious beliefs, and skin color caused millions of people to ask the same question. Where does a Catholic fit in? Where does a Jew fit in? Does a poor man or a black man fit in at all?

Lesser questions were just as real. What about work? What about that woman or man we're all desperately searching for? The answers were there for the finding. The blues men put the word out in the bars and over the airwaves. Walt Disney put his answers on the screen and in recordings so that his gospel could be taken home.

To appreciate the conflicting philosophies, nothing serves as a better starting point than a pilgrimage to the Meccas the two have left for us. On a section of Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, the legacy of the blues is preserved. A statue of W.C. Handy guards one end while a statue of Elvis keeps vigil on the other. There are no choices to make. If you want to eat here, you eat Cajun food. If you feel like music, they play only the blues (Except at Silky O'Sullivan's, the obligatory Irish piano bar). If you want to look on the bright side of life, you've got the wrong address. It's a big world and a cold world, but if you want, you may take a seat and join the anonymous throng of good men feeling bad. When the sun goes down, Beale Street starts warming up.

Hundreds of miles to the South lies Main Street USA, the antithesis of the blues. Main Street is a clean, happy place where the employees are so happy to see you that they look as if they'll burst any moment. On Main Street, you can have anything you want. Would you like to be scared? Try a roller-coaster! Would you like to be entertained? Try the Pirates of the Caribbean! Would you like to throw up? Eat the food and jump in a whirling teacup! Inevitably one must go to the Small World exhibit. It is here that Walt finally assures us that we all fit in. It is here that people get that song emblazoned on their minds. "It's a Small World After All" is Disney's mantra. Main Street USA invites us into a world of fantasy where everything is a little brighter. A clean colorful world, where for the price of an E-ticket, we can all belong.

The foundation of these streets was the popularity and revenue that they generated when they came to maturity in the forty years after World War I. Walt Disney invited one and all into his world of fantasy. W.C. Handy and the blues men moaned rebuttal to anyone looking at the world through rose-colored glasses.

...Fate is kind. She brings to those who love, The sweet fulfillment of their secret longings. Like a bolt out of the blue, fate steps in and sees you through. When you wish upon a star...your dreams come true.

The Great Depression was a difficult time. Never had the American Dream become such a nightmare. Americans were hungry and jobless. F.D.R., for all his New Dealings, wasn't pulling the USA out of the hole-World War II would have to do that. At this time Walt Disney gave us the movie Pinocchio, and the song When You Wish Upon a Star. America gobbled it up--A puppet who, with the help of a cricket and a few catchy songs, actually comes to life. Nothing could be more ludicrous or fantastical. This tale lacked the
hard reality that was 1940, and Americans loved it then as we do now. *When You Wish Upon a Star* won an Oscar. If *It's a Small World After All* is Disney's mantra, then *When You Wish Upon a Star* is his national anthem. He knew that this is what America wanted to hear.  

But somewhere in the back roads of Mississippi a young man, one of the most influential blues writers of all time was singing the blues. In his haunting blues classic *Cross Road Blues*, Robert Johnson makes a deal with the Devil to achieve his dreams, instead ending up at the crossroads, "[asking] the Lord above, 'Have Mercy save poor Bob, if you please.'" Robert Johnson died in 1938 at the age of 26. Cut down in the prime of life by a bottle of whiskey laced with strychnine, he was poisoned by a jealous husband who was angry at Johnson for flirting with his wife. A real man's life ending in real tragedy. To borrow a phrase, Jiminy Cricket...call your office!

It ain't no trick to get rich quick.  
If you dig dig dig with a shovel or a pick.  
In a mine...where a million diamonds shine.  
...We dig up diamonds by the score,  
A thousand rubies sometimes more!

In 1937, the concern on the minds of many Americans was lack of money and work. How could the masses fit into the minimal economy? Enter Walt Disney and Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. Once again we see Disney's mass media machine offering the public the fantasy in the lyrics of *Heigh-Ho* and once again America embraced the fantasy wholeheartedly. Americans with no jobs, little money, and less hope were listening to dwarves whose vocation was collecting millions of diamonds even if, by their own admission, "We don't know what we dig 'em for."

The blues man had a different view of work. He sang of bosses gettin' you down and shuckin' steel in a mill like a slave. T-Bone Walker sums up the attitude in his blues standard *Call it Stormy Monday*. He laments over his work-week "They call it stormy Monday, but Tuesday's just as bad, Lord and Wednesday's worse, and Thursday's oh so sad." The only consolation is when, "The eagle flies on Friday. Saturday I go out to play". The blues shook and moaned with reality; the work available was miserable, and the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Civilian Conservation Corps hadn't managed to stumble across any mines full of diamonds and rubies.

Still, the majority of America grasped at the fantasy embodied in *Heigh-Ho* and its accompanying song, *Whistle While You Work*. Whatever your fear, Walt Disney fought it with fantasy and song. Is it 1954 and is the Cold War plaguing your mind? Just watch *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. For the price of admission, you can see the sinister and destructive genius, Captain Nemo, defeated by Kirk Douglas. Not only is the world safe once again, but it's saved by Kirk Douglas--Granite jaw, cleft chin, and he looks pretty good in that tight shirt singing about his *Whale of a Tale*.

Is it 1946 and do poverty and racial tension in the South have you down? Pull up a seat and listen to playful creatures sing *Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah* in the Disney hit *Song of the South*. Still feeling low? How about *Ev'rybody Has a Laughing Place* from the same movie? "Ev'rybody has a laughing place to go. Take a frown turned upside down and you'll find yours I know." Love it! Fantasy triumphs again! *Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah* tops the charts and Disney bags another Oscar. A more accurate song about a burning cross or a black man swinging from a tree would not have met with this success.

Class boundaries got you down? Let Uncle Walt calm your anxieties! Just take a dose of *Lady and the Tramp*, and call me in the morning! A mangy street-wise Tramp ends up bursting through the social barriers and making the sophisticated Lady his very own. Who can forget the Italian dinner scene with its images of spaghetti and sounds of Bella Notte wafting in the background. It’s not just poor dogs dating rich ones either. Elsewhere in Disney we can find a deer whose best friend is a skunk. Mickey, a mouse, associates with Donald duck, and Pluto the dog, and even Goofy, although no one is quite sure what he is. In Walt's World everybody fits in, but somewhere in the back I can hear Washboard Sam growling the line, “I'm too old for the orphanage and too young for the old folks home" from *I've Been Treated Wrong*. Sam didn't find acceptance as easily as a Disney character.

Does the message have to be so heavy? What about the lighter side? What about love? Every generation has had its concerns in this arena. Here we can wage a fierce battle between the two. All of the classic words unsaid and things unseen bring an end to the uncomfortable silence a blink, a cough, an unwarranted glance, surge and rage the internal violence

Joe Sushi
Disney love stories are stories that end in the happily-ever-after. If love were like this, the blues wouldn't be the blues. In 32-20 Blues Robert Johnson sings, "Take my 32-20, now, and cut her half in two." Robert is so fed up with his woman, he's going to kill her. In Johnson’s Me And The Devil Blues, Johnson declares, "I'm gonna beat my woman 'til I gets satisfied." In Call it Stormy Monday T-Bone Walker never finds his woman and cries, "Lord have mercy on me, I try to find my baby...won't somebody bring her home to me." In the blues, women aren't the stuff dreams are made of. In the blues, women are absent, unfaithful and the source of pain. Work and women were what gave the blues man the blues. This may be summed up best in a recent remake of the Eddie Boyd standard Five Long Years in which modern-day blues virtuoso Eric Clapton moans Boyd's words:

I finally learned my lesson.
Shoulda long time ago.
Next woman that I marry,
She gonna work and bring me the dough.
Have you ever been mistreated?
You know just what I'm talkin' about.
I worked five long years for one woman,
She had the nerve to put me out.

Most of Disney's classic love stories are from the women's perspective, and the songs paint a wonderful picture. Patience will be rewarded by charming princes coming to take the beautiful dreamers away. Snow White sang Someday My Prince Will Come, and Sleeping Beauty – Once Upon a Dream. Cinderella, the heroine of the story bearing her name, croons, "No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing, the dream that you wish will come true". (Hoffman and Livingston) Sure enough, Prince Charming came back, and the soundtrack from the movie sold 750,000 copies in the first year. I'm sure that this was one of Walt's dreams coming true.

The mass media of that age gave the people a choice. Walt Disney lived out his American dream by encouraging others to dream with him. Pure fantasy is presented with no attempt to even brush with reality. Bright colors, true love, and, most of all, a sense of belonging. If the world has got you down, let Disney help you escape. Blues men, on the other hand, wore dark shades, not rose-colored glasses. If the world has got you down, their advice would not be to escape into fantasy but to overexaggerate reality. The preachers of the blues invite you to release by getting so far down that you can't help but get up when the song is over. To them the world was dark, love was a lie, and belonging was impossible.

The people made their choice. Both of these forms of music are still very much alive today. Searching through my own collection I found five different versions of Cross Roads Blues. This was not a shock to me. What did shock me was that I also have four different artists singing When You Wish Upon a Star; all on CD! America and I are still consuming both of these forms of music.

Who is winning the musical debate that lies between men who deal with the Devil and children of all ages who wish on stars? For sheer universal appeal, Disney is triumphant. Disney World is perched on thousands of acres of valuable real estate in Florida, while Beale Street's blues district is approximately four blocks long. Super Bowl winners proclaim, "I'm goin' to Disney World." Just once I'd like to hear a man getting up from the mud, blood and beer declare, "This stinks...I'm goin' to Memphis!" Disney, behind a philosophical and musical formula based in fantasy, has become an international entertainment juggernaut. Blues men still scratch and scrape to make ends meet while the little money to be made goes to the record executives.

The consumer of mass media is the final judge. If the consumer did not continue to embrace Disney's fantasy, we wouldn't be subject to so much of it. Participants in the American Dream seem to love dreaming Disney's way, but somewhere in the backs of our minds we need the blues. Somehow we reach for this cold slap of reality just enough to keep the traditions alive, whether it be in Eric Clapton or B.B. King. Somewhere back there Memphis' favorite son, Elvis, is reminding us of something. He was the American Dream. He was our Cinderella story. He was King! We all know the end of the Memphis Cinderella...and they all got divorced, he developed drug dependency, living unhappily for years until he died fat and miserable while the world shook its head in disbelief. Afterwards, we all went back to fairy tales that didn't end that way.

We seem to have a strange need for Disney. We need to fear for our safety on roller-coasters that have more safety back-ups than most nuclear reactors. We need to go to the Small World exhibit and stand next to people that we don't know, from countries where we've never been, speaking languages we don't understand, all listening to that song, humming it in the car all the way home. America sails along, dreaming the dreams to which Disney gave names, faces, and songs—even if they weren't originally his. Often, the fantasy of Pinocchio and Cinderella is the vessel on which we sail, but it's good to know that somewhere, back there, we have the blues for ballast.

It's a Small World After All: Words and music by Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman
When You Wish Upon a Star: From the movie Pinocchio. Words and Music by Larry Morey and Frank Churchill. 1940.
Looking Can Be Deceiving

By Kim Clousing

I look at my watch again, as if that will make the slob behind the counter move any faster. Why did I stop at this mini-mart? Everyone knows you have to be really, really hungry before this stuff will taste good. At least at McDonald’s you get to sit down. I look down at the small pepperoni pizza I’ve just microwaved to perfection. Yum. I think I’ll avoid reading the mandatory nutrition information on the label. Why make things worse? I look up and stare at the backs of the people in front of me. There’s an older woman ahead of me in line wearing a faded orange housecoat. At the counter, there’s a man in a black leather jacket asking for cigarettes by the carton.

The guy buying smokes looks like he’s stepped right out of America’s Most Wanted. Viewers, we need your help in apprehending Billy Joe Johnson, responsible for over 25 mini-mart robberies in the last two months. Just call the number listed on your television screen; do not attempt to apprehend this dangerous criminal by yourself. “Have a good day,” he says to the slowpoke behind the counter after he’s finished paying for his smokes. He strolls out the door, gets into a station wagon, and drives away. Looks like Billy Joe’s harmless after all. Sometimes my imagination goes. Only one person ahead of me now, the lady with the orange housecoat. She looks like my grandma; therefore, I’m just a little bit surprised when she pulls a .357 Magnum out of her purse and points it at the cashier. She turns slightly to her left so that I am also in her field of vision.

“This is a robbery,” she says, as if we haven’t noticed. She orders me and the cashier to move to the far left wall and sit down next to the Hostess display. Great, first time I wear my new khaki pants and I get to sit on the sticky floor of the Sunshine Mini Mart. Maybe I should be thinking about more important things or going into hysterics, but I just feel numb. I don’t believe this. A senior citizen is robbing a mini-mart. What did you do today, Ma? “Oh, I mended your socks, baked cookies, scored a bundle off the mini-mart down the street... It was a pretty quiet day.” I’ll never look at my grandparents the same again.

As she’s filling up her brown patent leather purse with bills from the register, I try to covertly study her face. Oh, she’ll be really easy to describe. Well, officer, she had short, purplish-white, curly hair and a powdered, wrinkled complexion; quite distinctive, really. I’ll have to do better than that. It’s obvious I’m the only one who’s going to be of any help to the authorities; the cashier is literally speechless. I guess he’s one of those people who can’t handle stress well. Or maybe he’s just really embarrassed: he confessed to me that he has a panic button hidden behind the counter, but he was so surprised to see an old woman pointing a gun at his ample gut that he forgot to push it. I ask her why she’s robbing a mini-mart. Probably a dumb thing to do, but I’m suddenly feeling brave.
She tells me that her husband retired last year, and now he hangs around the house all day and orders her around, not letting her get housework done or have any time to herself. She never has “a moment’s peace” anymore, so she’s going to take a road trip, funded by Sunshine Mini-Mart, and he (“the most annoying retiree in the Western hemisphere”) can shove it. I want to say, “That’s it,” but I realize that would probably be unwise. Instead, I start to eat my pizza, which I forgot was in my hand. Yuck, cold pizza. I ask this prune-juiced perpetrator if she has any grandchildren. My question provokes a long tirade about her loser son, whose nasty ex-wife won’t let anyone see their two young boys. I get the feeling Grandma’s bitter. You’d think she’d be a bit nervous, but her gun hand stays steady as she resumes tossing money into her purse. Why hasn’t anyone else entered the store? Then, I see the sign in the window. She must’ve changed it to “CLOSED” when she came in the door. The windows are so dirty that I’m sure no one can see what’s going on inside, anyway.

Of course, what good would it do if someone else ventured in? They’d just have to join me and the practically brain-dead cashier on the floor. He hasn’t said a single thing this whole time. Just as I’ve mentally labeled him as a complete moron, he inclines his head in my direction, temporarily focuses his glazed eyes, and whispers,

“This cop named Sergeant Wilks drives by every night at the same time, just to make sure everything’s OK. He should be here real soon.” According to the cashier, the cop also picks up a latte, but that’s not why he comes by. Really. Actually, I’m not all that worried anymore, because I honestly don’t think Grandma’s a lethal killer. Sure, she’s really ticked off, but I think that she’d rather just take some money than actually hurt anyone. But maybe I’m mistaking her calmness for genuine insanity. Maybe she won’t panic if the police come. What am I saying? Of course she’ll panic. That’s what you do when you’re robbing a mini-mart and the police drive right up to the door.

After she’s gotten all the paper money from the cash register, she starts scooping quarters, dimes, and nickels into a side pocket on her purse. She walks around the counter and is almost to the door when she stops dead in her Nikes. A police car has just pulled up to the curb. Grandma lets fly some decidedly non-grandmotherly language, then makes me and the cashier stand up and get between her and the door. Sergeant Wilks gets out of the car, peers through the window grime and sees an old woman pointing a gun at two civilians. What an expression on his face. He’s probably irritated that he can’t get any coffee. He runs back to his car and gets in, presumably to call for backup.

The next few minutes are just a bit tense. Grandma seriously considers whether she should just run out the back door, or whether she should use us as human bullet-proof vests to get out of the store and into her olive four-door Dodge Dart. **Local police officers today accidentally shot two civilian hostages before their captor drove away unscathed in a really ugly car.** Before she makes up her mind, we hear sirens come closer, and our captor realizes that she won’t get far if she leaves on foot. I start to wonder how she’s going to keep the police from following her as soon as she lets... oh, of course. She’s not going to let us go. I tell this to the cashier guy, who manages to corral enough brain cells to tell me that his name is Bob. Figures.

After I tell Bob that my name is Karen, we both stare at the thief, who asks what our problem is. I tell her, very respectfully, of course, that a road trip with her is not high on our list of fun things to do. Couldn’t she just let us stay here? We’re sure her Dodge can outrun a police cruiser any day; besides, in a crisis situation, aren’t the hostages always the most important thing? If she doesn’t take us with her, why, they’ll probably just let her leave without any trouble, they’ll be so busy making sure we’re all right. She doesn’t look like she’s buying this. I guess I don’t either. Bob’s the only one who looks truly disappointed when she dismisses our idea.

The phone rings. The three of us stare at it for several seconds. Finally, Grandma Felon picks it up and says, "Yes?" What a polite woman. Apparently it’s Sergeant Wilks on the other end. It’s the age of technology: he’s calling her on his cellular phone. He seems to be asking her what her demands are. She says that she just wants to walk out of the store and drive away unaccosted. She doesn’t state the obvious: what she’ll do to her hostages if they don’t let her leave. Apparently the police officer is none too bright and must therefore have the obvious spelled out for him, because, after listening for several seconds, she laughs, says, "I’ll shoot them, of course," and hangs up. The phone rings again, but she ignores it. I hope she’s just putting on a show of bravado, but I’m starting to sincerely believe that I will die today. Oh no, I haven’t cleaned my apartment in a while. My mother is going to have a fit when she comes to see what our problem is.

My mother is going to have a fit when she comes to check my things. All of the sudden, I feel like crying; I hadn’t realized I was so scared. My thoughts are mercifully interrupted by my bladder. I ask Grandma if I can use the restroom. She agrees, and lets me and Bob go, one at a time. That makes sense, of course. If she let us go at the same time, there’d be nobody there to stand between her and the window, and the cops might take the opportunity to see how well bullets go through thick mini-mart glass.

Again I hear the call of nature, but this time it’s coming from my stomach. I tell Grandma that the cold pizza I had half an hour ago didn’t quite do it for me. Bob backs me up by stating that he has “thin blood,” and must eat frequently or he’ll faint. From looking
at Bob, you can tell that he takes this frequent eating thing very seriously. Our captor lets us grab saran-wrapped sandwiches from the refrigerated section, and tosses us each a carton of skim milk. Bob doesn’t look too enthusiastic about his lunch fare, and I consider slyly suggesting that his customers don’t like his food any better than he does, but I refrain. Why make his bad day a little worse?

I’m not too excited about eating standing up, so I ask Grandma if we can sit back down on the floor. My new pants are really dirty by now anyway. She agrees and also sits down, making sure we are still between her and the door. After I’m done eating, I ask,

“So, uh, couldn’t you have talked this over with your husband? You know, found him a hobby, made him get a part-time job, anything to get him out of the house. “Grandma levels a stare at me, and I wonder whether she’s going to shoot me for being annoying, but instead she says angrily,

“I tried, but he says he’s earned the right to do nothing. What about my rights? He controls all of our finances, and now that he’s home all day, he has to approve every purchase I make. He’s even started to keep the car keys, so that I have to ask for them if I want to go anywhere. Yesterday, I decided that I had had enough, and, no, I am not sorry I’m doing this.”

I can’t figure out why I’m not more afraid than I am. Maybe I just have trouble being truly fearful of a woman who is at least three times my age. I try to think of a way to get out of this situation. I’ve read every single Nancy Drew book, and Nancy always manages to find a way out of every predicament. But, that’s because Carolyn Keene (a.k.a. any writer who the company hired to write the next installment) always gives Nancy a way out. You might say Nancy is one of the luckiest people on the face of the earth. She faces death at least once a week, but she never ever dies. That would make it kind of hard to sell more books. Installment #573: Who needs Nancy? By Carolyn Keene. I try to think of what Nancy would do in my situation, but nothing heroic and yet totally danger-free comes to mind.

As I’m mentally saving the day, two more police cars pull into the parking lot. One comes really close to scraping my bright yellow VW Bug. Great, and I just got a new paint job. If there’s a shoot-out, my car will somehow get shot, even though it’s parked off to the side; it’s inevitable. I wonder what gunshots sound like in real life. On TV, a gunshot sounds like an explosion, but I’ve heard that it really sounds more like a little “pop.” I wonder what it feels like to get shot...as my mind threatens to overload on thoughts about my imminent death, Sergeant Wilks gets back out of the car with a bullhorn, having given up on negotiation by phone.

“Ma’am, if you release all of the hostages, we’ll let you walk out of there a free woman, we promise “And now, straight from the home office in Sioux City, Iowa, here’s David Letterman’s newest top-ten list: things police officers say but don’t really mean. Grandma’s face tightens with irritation, and she tells me to go to the door, open it a crack, and yell, “She doesn’t believe you.” I personally much prefer negotiation by telephone, but have no choice, so I do what she asks. When I flop back down on the tile floor, Bob opens his mouth.

“Can you at least let me go? You only need one hostage.” I don’t believe this guy. What happened to victims sticking together? Comaraderie in crisis situations? What a jerk. The worse part of it is, Grandma actually agrees. Suddenly, Bob is Mr. Energetic. I glare at him, but he’s so excited at the prospect of freedom that he doesn’t seem to care. He literally runs to the door. I peer through the windows and watch him jump into the back of one of the police cars. Grandma looks almost relaxed as she watches him go, and I wonder why she isn’t more worried about what she’s going to do.

I ask her if she’s going to let me go. There’s a long silence and I think I stop breathing, but finally she answers.

“You’re coming with me. I’ll let you out somewhere down the road.” I nod, having heard what I expected to hear. Stating her intentions seems to spur Grandma into action. She picks up her purse and orders me to get up and face the door. I feel her press the barrel of her gun into my back, and she tells me to walk slowly out the door. As we exit the mini-mart, she yells,

“I’m leaving now. If anyone moves, I will not hesitate to shoot my hostage.” The police officers watch as we walk over to the Dodge Dart. I climb into the driver’s seat, and my captor gets in behind me, keeping her gun pointed at the back of my neck. She fumbles for her keys and hands them to me. The car turns over a few times before starting, but the engine catches, and I wait for my instructions.

“Drive out of the parking lot and...” She is interrupted by a small whooshing noise. I wait for her to finish her sentence, not daring to turn my head. I hear nothing from the backseat.

Finally, I turn my head and see Grandma slumped down in the seat, a small red mark on the side of her neck. There are spatters of blood on the seat and the window, and a small stream of blood is trickling down into the collar of her housecoat. I turn off the engine, get out of the car, and sit down on the ground. My pants are dirty anyway. •
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The Long Drive