

2008 Winners

1st Place - Lori Krause - *The Forgiving Years*

2nd Place - June Venable - *Me and Junior*

3rd Place - Carol McConkie - *The Rag*

2007 Winners

1st Place - Daniel R. Cole - *Fish Breath*

2nd Place - Pat Agar - *The Cow and Miss Creasy*

3rd Place - Eugene D. Alvin - *Anasazi Moon*

2006 Winners

First Place Dawn Goldsmith - *The Vigil*

Second Place Patricia Crandall - *Not Suitable Viewing for Children*

Third Place Lynda Diessner - *The Old Yellow Chair*

2008 First Place Winner

The Forgiving Years

Lori Krause

Molly placed her coffee cup on the end table near her chair in the living room. She noticed the bottom was wet and it started to leave a ring. She just looked at it wondering if it mattered. Why did she insist her kids always use a coaster when she was so lax about doing so herself? A little furniture polish would take away the water ring anyway. She covered her face with her hands and bent forward holding her head. She felt the hot tears forming. Why had she been so upset with Jenni for breaking that figurine last night? Why had she yelled at her so loud and long and sent her to her room? Yes, it had been her grandmothers, and yes, Jenni should not have been wrestling in the living room with her brothers, and yes, Molly had told Jenni many times how precious it was to her. But Jenni was only seven years old. Molly raised her head and looked at the broken pieces lying on the table and picked up the largest one. Was a broken figurine, no matter how precious, worth a broken relationship with her only daughter? Jenni had gone to school that morning looking dejected and alone, but both mother and daughter were still very angry.

“Oh Lord,” thought Molly, “I am becoming my mother! My very strict, unfeeling, exacting mother!”

Molly rose from the chair and walked to the window, gazing at the swing set, the trampoline, and the big back yard where her three kids played so often. The neighborhood kids gathered there to play soccer, softball, or volleyball games during the summer. They were healthy, rambunctious, normal kids who got scraped knees, cuts and bruises and enjoyed every minute of it. Jenni reminded Molly of herself at that age. She had been a real tomboy. Being the only child her mother had not been pleased with that. She wrapped her arms around herself, sniffed

back her tears, and remembered her 7th birthday party. She would never forget that day as long as she lived.

On that fateful day Molly was excited from the moment she woke up in the morning. Her birthday party was going to be that afternoon right after school was out. It was the first birthday party she would have with just her friends there. Up until then her parties consisted of her Mother's friends. They were nice enough people, but they weren't fun. They gave her outlandishly expensive gifts that were meant to sit on a shelf, nothing that she could actually play with. Then they all sat around visiting with each other and basically ignored her. So she was anticipating this birthday party so much she could hardly listen to the story her teacher, Mrs. Johnson, was reading. Molly was the last second grader to turn seven years old before the end of the school year. That meant she was the youngest in her class. Sometimes when things didn't go her way her best friend, Amy, would teasingly call her "baby." It was then Molly knew she better stop pouting.

The hands on the clock finally showed 3:30 and the dismissal bell rang loudly. Its shrill message echoed through the classrooms as students hurriedly cleared off their desks, then donned coats and caps. It was the beginning of April but spring had yet to arrive in this small Nebraska town. Molly knew they would be playing most of the games indoors at her birthday party. She knew her Mother wanted them to play outside but with the chill in the air, and the clouds in the sky, it wasn't going to happen.

Twelve shrieking giggly girls gathered in the schoolyard, prepared to walk the three blocks to Molly's house. They joined hands in two's and three's and followed Molly down the sidewalk like little ducks waddling after their mother, skipping over sidewalk cracks and hopping on one foot or the other. They chattered noisily in their excitement, and at times whispered secrets in a friend's ear. They told each other of the surprise gifts they had gotten for Molly and knew they would be as thrilled as Molly when she opened them.

At Molly's house they played games down the basement. Maybe it wasn't as much fun as being outside but none of the girls noticed. There were many prizes given out and each of the girls was given a small gift to take home with her. The noise level had reached its climax when Molly's mother, Amelia, called them for lunch. They stormed up the steps, each trying to be the first. They were volleying a ball among them, seeing how long they could keep it from touching the floor. When they got to the living room the ball was still in the air. It was then the ball slipped, or got hit too hard, or went out of control. No one knew exactly what happened. Molly couldn't grab it quickly enough. It knocked over the antique crystal vase on the mantel, causing it to crash to the marble floor near the fireplace and break into a thousand little pieces. An audible collective gasp filled the room. The girls were afraid to breathe.

Molly's Mother, Amelia, entered the living room carrying the beautifully decorated birthday cake with seven large candles flickering. She had it made at the most prestigious bakery she knew of and was so proud of the way it looked. The little girls would love it; it was that awesome.

She stopped in her tracks, a look of horror on her face. She was speechless and breathless as she saw the original heirloom vase from her grandmother turn into a pile of rubbish on the floor. A stern look of anger was on her face. A glare of blame flew across the room to where Molly was standing. Molly started to cry and shuddered with fear. She had heard the story often of how her Mother had inherited that irreplaceable vase from her grandmother. Molly wanted to say how sorry she was and her eyes begged for understanding but the cold stare of her Mother never wavered.

Molly felt the wetness from her tears running down her cheeks, as well as the wetness running down her legs. For several minutes no one moved, no one spoke. Then the girls, stunned and afraid, slowly started to leave one by one. No one stopped them. No one said goodbye. Amelia and Molly were soon left alone in a silent house. The candles melted down into the cake. Ice cream turned into milk and Amelia

turned from the room leaving Molly standing there alone, silent sobs wracking her shoulders.

Molly shuddered as she came back to reality, shaking off the memory. She inhaled deeply. The house suddenly felt cold, the outside chill seeping through the windows. Maybe a little heat from the oven would be good. She'd bake brownies, thick gooey ones with lots of walnuts, Jenni's favorite. They would be ready and waiting when Jenni came home from school. Then she and Jenni would sit on the sofa together and share the chocolate treats with hot cups of cocoa, and Jenni would tell her about her day at school. And then Molly would call her Mother. Not today, she was probably out with her bridge club, maybe after this weekend. Tuesday would be good; she would invite her out to lunch.

Lori is a retired school secretary and enjoys writing mainly as a hobby most of my life. She is married to her husband, Ken, and lives in the small town of Elgin, Nebraska. They have four married children and many grandchildren.

2008 Second Place winner

Me and Junior

June Venable

He must have something on his mind. The fishing pole lay still in his hands, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

I watched for a minute wondering what bothered him. I wanted to get home and listen to the radio. I could see fireflies blinking, and a danged old mosquito had taken a chunk out of my leg.

“Come on, Junior, It’s getting dark.” I knew he wanted to listen to “The Lone Ranger” too, so it surprised me to see him lollygagging on the pier.

“I’m leaving,” I yelled, and walked away.

“Wait up, Ben. I wanna’ ask you something.”

I watched as he stood up, collected his toy gun and straightened his big hat. Even in hot weather he wore his cowboy outfit.

He hopped from one bare foot to the other on the still sun-scorched planks. His mama bought him shoes, but somehow he kept losing them. Even his beloved boots numbered among the latest missing footwear.

Catching up with me, Junior looked straight ahead, still skipping a little and asked, “Ben, you ever thought about getting saved?”

I wondered why he wanted to know. We didn’t usually talk about religion. Mostly I read to Junior when he begs to hear Dr. Suess. I sure don’t like to read that baby stuff, but he loves to hear *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* and *Green Eggs and Ham*. I never let the other guys hear me reading to him. They call him “dummy” and “retard.”

See, Junior just turned seventeen and I'm only eleven, but I take care of him. Sometimes I wish somebody else had the job, and then I'm ashamed and read twice as long.

I'll tell you about Junior. Course I wasn't around then, but I've heard the story lots of times.

The Conners, Junior's family, live next door to us. His mama wasn't expecting him for a few weeks, but one night he decided to come anyway right in the middle of a big storm. They said the wind blew something fierce and the rain sounded like buckshot against the windowpanes. Lightning turned night into day. During one of those lightning strikes, Junior came howling into the world. His mama called him her miracle child.

A beautiful baby, they said, with pink rosebud lips and eyes the shade of bluebonnets. Nearly three years passed before the doctors told them his beauty hid a sad secret.

Oh, most of the time he seemed okay, but he just couldn't learn like the rest of us. "Slow," they called him. I knew better. Beside being a top notch fisherman, he knew the names of all the animals in the neighborhood. He could nurse a sick kitten back to health and get birds to perch on his finger.

"I just talk their language, Ben," he explained.

Junior once saved me from a rabid dog that got into our yard. Since then, I've sorta taken care of him.

"Well, have you?" He waited for my answer, his blue eyes holding mine.

"Uh, well, I believe in the Lord, but I haven't been baptized yet."

"I heard mama say a big revival's coming to town next week. They'll have a tent and gospel singing and a real fire and brimstone preacher."

His eyes bored into mine. "Will you, Ben. Will you go with me?" He begged.

"Yeah," I sighed. "I'll go." I could see it meant a lot to him.

The following Wednesday found me digging into a slab of meat loaf and making tunnels in my mashed potatoes to march my peas through when the doorbell rang.

“Now, what?” My father asked no one in particular. He doesn’t like disruptions when he eats.

He came back in a few minutes, his eyes rolled heavenward, followed by a resplendent Junior. We all stopped eating and stared. Junior had talked his folks into buying him a suit for the revival. He even had on a tie. His blond curls stuck to his head with some kind of goo. Its smell filled the room, as overpowering as cabbage. It made my eyes water. The crowning touch was a pair of shiny new shoes. I wondered how long they would last.

“I declare, Junior, you look just splendid.” My mother was the first to find her voice.

“Thank you, Miss Edna.” Junior smiled his slow sweet smile. “Uh, I’ll wait on the porch, Ben.”

During the past week, Junior had forsaken Dr. Suess and began bringing me a worn copy of the Bible. “Will you read this out loud, Ben?”

Well, after going through all the “begats,” *Red Fish Blue Fish* didn’t seem so bad.

The big brown tent sat on old man Sorenson’s land. We arrived early, but the crowd had already begun to gather.

Junior looked around with a satisfied expression as if to say, *well, I got ‘em here, Lord. Now, You can take over.*

Promptly at seven o’clock, four men appeared, dressed in electric blue outfits. Introduced as the “Singing Soldiers of the Lord,” the gospel quartet was followed by a lady in a shimmery dress that seemed to change colors when she moved. I kept a close watch on her hairdo. A silvery blond color, it stood at least a foot high. I figured if she tipped to one side, she’d look like the leaning Tower of Pisa. I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

We had about given up on the main attraction when the canvas flap of the tent opened and in stepped the most amazing sight I’d ever seen. I quickly forgot the lady.

Dressed all in white, except for a red flower in his buttonhole, stood a man well over six feet tall and pole skinny. You could have heard a pin

drop. Raising his arms aloft, he spoke. “Welcome, my friends. I am Brother Jasper Longworth, personal messenger of the Lord, and I save souls.”

He scanned the crowds then shouted, “And I intend to save every one of you.”

I looked at Junior. His mouth hung open and his eyes shone as he gazed at this apparition. For the next hour he hardly took his eyes off Brother Longworth who stood quietly now, head bowed as the colored lights flashed over him. Bathed in the reds, blues, and greens, the preacher looked like a character from another planet. He raised his arms and spoke softly to the crowd. “My dear friends, tonight I plan to set you on the path to glory.”

The crowd leaned forward, straining to hear his words. Almost in a whisper, he painted word pictures of the joys of eternity. Slowly, his voice changed, growing in volume so that the uprights of the tent shook. Two hours passed in a blink. Brother Longworth had his listeners in the palms of his hands. No one moved for a full minute after he vanished through the canvas flap.

“See you tomorrow night, Ben,” Junior murmured when we reached his house. These were the only words spoken since we left the tent.

Each evening, from our front row seats, we watched Brother Longworth undergo a chameleon-like change. The spotlights flowed over his lanky frame making his clothes look like a rainbow gone crazy. Junior breathed in every word and gesture.

Then, the enchanting stories of the hereafter changed over the week, and the sermons of fire and brimstone appeared.

As the preacher marched up and down the aisles warning of all sorts of evil, Junior paled, and I heard sins I never heard of before. Some of them sounded pretty interesting.

Junior sprung his idea on me as we walked home. “Ben, I’ve made up my mind. Tomorrow night I’m gonna accept the Lord. I think Brother Longworth has saved my soul from infernal damnation.”

“Gee, that’s great, Junior, but I think you mean ‘eternal’ damnation.”

“Okay, Ben” he said, waving his hand impatiently, but I’m joining the army of the Lord. Do you think He’ll want me?”

“I’m sure He will, Junior.” His announcement didn’t surprise me.

The next night, as we walked the now familiar route, Junior had a peacefulness about him that made me wonder what went on in his mind. In honor of the Lone Ranger and the Lord, he had worn his cowboy outfit.

Brother Longworth came full circle this night. Decked out in his white suit again, he strutted up and down shouting out to heaven. If the Lord weren’t deaf already, He would be by the end of the evening. Finally the candidates for baptism were called forward, their way lined by tall white tapers. The tent was dark with the exception of the flickering candlelight.

When they assembled, they headed for Sorenson’s pond. The gospel quartet, along with Miss Francine Lamont, the singer, followed the procession.

It took about an hour to get around to everyone. I even saw Mr. Rufus Doyle, who made moonshine in his backyard, walk by with a happy grin.

At last, came Junior’s turn. When asked if he wanted salvation, the sweetest smile I’ve ever seen lit up his face. He replied, “yes, sir,” and under he went. He forgot to keep his mouth shut and came up coughing and sputtering.

I hoped the ceremony would be over soon so Junior could change. Brother Longworth couldn’t chance losing his new Christian to pneumonia.

When the saints returned to the tent, I realized I had lost my front row seat. People had crowded in and I found myself at the entrance. Rising on tiptoes, I tried to see what had happened, but the crowds cut off my view. I could only hear the quartet belting out, “When the Roll is Called up Yonder.” I hated to miss Junior’s big moment, but just then, someone in front of me shifted and in that instant I saw his face. I shivered. A light seemed to shine below his skin. His curls had dried from the dunking and formed a golden halo around his head. The

flashing lights turned him from gold to silver. His eyes seemed to see into the distance. Junior was somewhere I couldn't go.

The quartet tuned up with Brother Longworth joining in. His rich baritone reached out into the balmy air. Suddenly, a scream pierced the night. At that moment, someone pushed me to the ground. The smell of new spring grass filled my nose, and from somewhere in the pasture came the scent of honeysuckle. I jumped up and called out to Junior, but only noise surrounded me. The words finally got through "Fire! Everybody out!"

I ran to the back of the tent looking for the flap, but the flames had already reached the night sky turning it a smoky orange. Somebody grabbed me. "You can't go in there, boy. No one could live through that." The distant wail of fire engines mixed with the crackling sound of the flames.

Calling Junior's name, I raced through little knots of people who stared into the inferno. I kept thinking I'd hear his voice. "Here, Ben. I'm right here," he'd say.

At last, I slumped to the ground, my breath ragged, gulping back tears. The weight of a hand rested on my shoulder, and I looked into the face of Junior's father. My folks followed with his mother.

"Ben, where's Junior?" Mr. Conner asked, his face a mask of fear.

"I know he's all right. He's probably helping the fireman," his mother said. "He's always so helpful..."her voice trailed off and a sad little smile tugged at her mouth.

Later, we heard he pulled two people out before going back for another. He didn't come out after that. I miss him an awful lot, but I think he was probably the happiest person on earth that night. And I'm sure the Lord didn't mind at all when Junior arrived all decked out in his cowboy outfit and with a hearty, "Hi-Yo, Silver, Away!"

June Venable writes short stories, non-fiction and novels. She has published her first YA novel, "Hannah's Journey," and has completed and submitted a second one. She has been published in several magazines and when she isn't writing, she enjoys reading and quilting.

2008 Third Place Winner

The Rag

Carol McConkie

I am a rag.

I am lying here in this roadside ditch among trash and discarded rubble. I am disgusted by what I see around me...broken bottle, dented soda cans and unspeakable filth. I cannot even imagine the origin of the filth and its descent into its preset state. A fine trickle of dirty gray water runs through the ditch. It smells greasy and putrid.

I blew off a large truck on its way to the dump. I had been stuffed in a black plastic bag along with other discarded rags, most ripped, all crumpled and used. The driver was unaware of my escape as I worked my way loose and dropped to the asphalt. I was blown and tossed around by passing vehicles. Some ran over the top of me. No one swerves to avoid running over a dirty faded rag.

I have lost track of time, but I tumbled into the ditch some time ago. I have been soaked by the rain and baked by the sun; I suspect this will be my final resting place.

I was not always a rag.

Oh, I was once proud and beautiful. I am silk. I was spun from the fibers of the finest silkworms in Asia. My threads are woven tightly. They are small and delicate, creating a fabric unlike any other in the world. The silk makers dyed my fabric length a deep cheery red and when I dried I was a rich, brilliant color. Holding me was difficult since I slipped through the fingers like liquid. I was that soft.

A buyer from across the seas bought my cloth for the trousseau of a beautiful young woman who was promised to a handsome officer in the Army. I was to be cut into a ruffled petticoat that would peek out from under her full swirling ball gown.

How proud I was to grace this lady with yards and yards of my silky fabric, whispering softly as she moved. My placket was secured at her small cinched waist with tiny pearl buttons. My ruffles at the hem were shitted and full and flirted sweetly to the music as she danced with her beloved.

But my lady soon became saddened and afraid. Her officer had his orders. Holding her, he promised to return and asked for a favor to wear close to his heart...something to remind him of her sweet sent, her soft touch, her rich love. My lady removed the petticoat and tore a large square of my bright red fabric and tied it tenderly around his neck. He and I left together. I would see her again, he would not.

In the evenings, alone in his ten, the soldier brought my fabric to his face and breathed into my folds, longing for his love. He wore me a round his neck, next to his sin, and in battle the throbbing of his veins rustled my cloth, whispering softly. On day the throbbing stopped and the whispering stopped and his blood darkened my cloth a deeper red.

They retuned me to the young widow along with his other things. She wept and raged and twisted me in despair. She rubbed me against her face and at night slept with me pressed to her body.

When the tears finally subsided I was laundered with sweet lavender soap, pressed smooth and put away in a camphor chest to grow old.

I was taken out of my camphor chest only twice. Once by old wrinkled hands that held me briefly against a soft, deeply lined face. A tear spilled from that face and lay next to the dark stain that could not be washed out.

The last time I was removed it was for good. I heard the bidding that promised that even though my fabric had weakened and my color faded I was still a usable, fine silk cloth. But, alas, a yellow-haired woman, smelling of cheap perfume bought me, sewed black fringe on my edges and placed me on top of an upright piano. I was there for many years

with that silly fringe bouncing and dancing to the piano tunes. People put damp glasses on my silk and sometimes spilled their drinks right on me. Ashtrays with dirty smelling cigarettes were put on top of me and someone burned a hole in my cloth. I was never washed and I was shamed.

One day the yellow-haired woman grabbed me off the piano and tossed me in a cardboard suitcase with her smelly clothes. Even though I was probably as foul as my neighbors I felt contaminated by their closeness. We were placed in a bus station locker and stayed there a long time until set free and given to a church. At last I had a bath and the dreadful black fringe, now knotted and twisted, was pulled from my fabric. Oh, it felt good! Though not pressed flat I was, at least, clean. I was now much smaller, having undergone some trimming after the defringing. I was stained, quite unevenly faded and had holes in my fabric.

I spent several more years in the bottom of the church barrel, because who would want an old faded piece of world's finest silk.

Indeed, the rag picker would. He collected old rags to sell and when he touched my softness he claimed me for his own. I was his prize. He stuffed me in his pocket and brought me out to wipe his swarthy brow and blow his nose onto my fine silk. I was so humiliated I was thrown into the washing machine roughly with his dirty trousers and shirts with disregard for my delicate fabric and I became even more faded and spent.

After a time I fell from his back pocket, and even though I was soaked with his greasy sweat, I was free. I don't know how long I lay on the cold concrete of the dark basement, accompanied only by my memories and small rodents.

Finally, some men come and cleaned out the damp basement, taking care to not touch me, but using a sharp rake to scrape me into a pile of debris. With gloved hands I was shoved into the black plastic bag. How disgusting and ugly I must be.

So that is my story. I think of the times when I was young and beautiful, cared for and loved. I was happen then. I never believed it would end this way.

A car is stopping behind me.

What is this? Some people are leaning out the ditch. How nice! A woman remarks that she found a lovely piece of faded red silk. That's me. She thinks I'm lovely. She places me in a paper bad and carries me to her car.

The lady washes me carefully with mild soap, rubbing just a bit on my more stubborn stains. I am laid flat to dry and then ironed and the burn holes are cut from me. My silk rejoices in the pleasure of being clean. I am now the color a very old rose. I run through her fingers like liquid. I am that soft.

I am so proud! I have been made into a lovely faded-rose heart, backed with cotton and placed in the center of a magnificent quilt. Tiny stitches hold me in place amidst other lovely fabrics. My life is complete and am once again beautiful and bring pleasure.

And, if one looks at me carefully, there in the center of my heart is a faded dark stain, and, if one imagines hard enough, a pale tear.

2007 First Place Winner

Fish Breath

Dan Cole

His final gift arrived in my office at Swanson Scientific Instruments along with a request from his daughter. The gift stirred memories of my angry years.

I had vented much of my teenage wrath on Old Man Fish Breath. His real name was Finley Fisbeck, general science teacher at Newton High School in Phoenix. He taught astronomy too, but that was for the good kids, the ones he liked.

He was old; at least to us he seemed that way. He had wavy, gray hair and blue eyes that were always fixed on me during class. In a nasal monotone, he could yammer for hours about photosynthesis, or the gravitational pull of the moon.

I got stuck in general science. I didn't mind, because my buddies, Carl Beeler and Frank Elston were in there, too.

The three of us joked our way through classes in the daytime, and prowled the neighborhood at night, looking for trouble. It wasn't hard to find in Phoenix in 1976.

The good kids never had any fun. They could have been out guzzling beer, smoking pot and playing tag with the law, but they stayed home with their parents, watching TV or studying. Sometimes, they came back to school at night to look through old Fish Breath's telescope. We hated the little suck-ups and Fish Breath, too. Coming back to school at night

was the next-to-last thing I wanted to do. Staying at home with my old man was the last.

One Saturday night in May, Carl swiped two six-packs of beer from his dad's refrigerator and we sat on the creek bank behind the school, drinking and throwing our empties into the water. We were talking and laughing about some of the fun we had had at Fish Breath's expense.

Carl took a swig and looked up at the sky as if he were seeing a giant movie screen. "Remember last fall when we sneaked into the lab and taped a Playboy centerfold over that chart?"

"Oh, yeah." I looked up at Carl's imaginary screen. "It had all of those weird chemical things. It was rolled up like a map. I'll never forget the look on his face when he pulled the chart down in science class--Miss October, in all her glory!" I could still see her on the sky-screen.

"That was so cool. The class was in an uproar."

With a little beer in us, the incident seemed funnier than when it had actually happened.

After that, we had gotten more vicious. I cut the valve stems off two of his tires one day, right after we got out of school. I never told anybody, but the beer and the moment of camaraderie now loosened my tongue. "Remember his flat tires?" I propped myself up on one elbow and looked at Carl with an air of superiority.

"Was that you?" he shouted.

"Oh yeah."

"Wow, my dad would ground me for a year if he knew about any of this stuff." Carl belched and lay back down.

"Ground you," I said, but didn't complete the thought. Carl didn't notice, so I let it drop. He had shut his eyes, so I lay back and looked up at the screen again. I saw my dad, yanking my BB gun from my ten-year-old hands and smashing it against a tree stump before tossing it indifferently into a trashcan. I was showing him how I could hit a tin can, but the BB had ricocheted off the can and hit his car

windshield. For that and a hundred other things, I hated my dad even more than Old Man Fish Breath.

Carl had his screen, and I had mine.

Carl called it a night when he missed the creek with his final beer can, but I stayed for a while, staring at the sky, while my private hell played out on the starry screen.

An hour later, I got up and staggered over to the schoolyard. I had one can of beer left, so I threw it as hard as I could through a science lab window, flipped the latch up, and crawled inside.

Using a hammer from the woodshop, I released all my drunken fury on that telescope that the good kids used and we had to look at while Fish Breath droned about photosynthesis. I smashed the mirrors, put two huge dents in the long tube, and knocked off the eyepiece. Retrieving the cracked eyepiece, I shrugged and tossed it into the wastebasket. Leaving the way I had come in, I wobbled home, found no one there as usual, and went to bed.

Mr. Sanders, the principal, called me to his office the minute I arrived at school on Monday morning. Five minutes later, Fish Breath and a big policeman came in. Fish Breath sat directly across from me. There was another old guy there, too. They said he was the night janitor.

"Yeah, he's the one," the old guy said. "He's the one that done it."

I didn't look at any of them; I just stared at the floor, knowing that I would be going to boys' school or jail. If my dad beat me again, it would be the last time, I decided. I could handle him, now. The policeman said something about pressing charges, and I glanced up. Fish Breath rubbed his chin like he did when he lectured. Then he shook his head and twanged something about restitution. They talked about painting and mowing. I didn't listen much, because I was thinking about punching my dad's face.

When Fish Breath told me about his plan later that day, I wished he had just let me go to boys' school. He made me work during the summer, painting some old outbuildings on school property and mowing grass.

I never saw any money from my summer work. Old Fish Breath used it to buy parts. When they came in, he would call me at home and tell me to meet him in the science lab. I had to make full restitution by rebuilding the telescope.

“Now, don’t tighten any of the nuts until you get them all in place. Turn them down with your hand, then go back and tighten all of them with the wrench.” Fish Breath was so picky.

In two weeks, I had earned enough to pay for the big tube and two mirrors. It took almost an hour for Fish Breath and me to install them. At the end of the third week, he called and said to meet him in the courtyard that night. “Ten o’clock. Be there.” He didn’t wait for a response. I slammed the receiver down, fuming, but I knew I had to go.

That night, we attached a small viewing tube to the big one, adjusted the legs of the tripod to make the base level, and dropped a lens into place in the small tube. When we were finished, Fisbeck monkeyed around with the settings and aimed the tube at one of the stars.

He moved aside and motioned for me to take a look. Peering through the lens for the first time, I couldn’t believe my eyes! The star that Mr. Fisbeck had aimed at was huge and it had funny looking stripes on it and a big red spot! It was the most amazing thing I had ever seen in the sky.

I sucked my breath in and hoped that he hadn’t heard it.

Using a red light for night reading, he checked something in a book, and then fiddled again with the settings.

“Now, look,” he said.

What I saw next looked like something out of a science fiction movie. It was oval shaped and had a huge, incredible ring around it. I never dreamed that stars looked like this through a telescope. I wanted to keep looking at it, but as I watched, the big star quickly moved across the eyepiece and disappeared.

“We lost the star,” I said. “You must have moved the telescope.”

“No, the telescope didn’t move,” Mr. Fisbeck said. “Saturn moved. And it’s not a star; it’s a planet.”

“Saturn?” I was embarrassed because my voice cracked.

"That first one was Jupiter." He hadn't noticed my embarrassment. "Normally, we'd have a tracking motor attached to the telescope to follow the planet across the sky, but somehow, ours got broken." I couldn't see his face, but I could hear a smile. "The money you earn next week will take care of that." He readjusted, and let me look at Saturn again. "By the way, did you notice the moons around Jupiter?"

"Moons?"

"Sure. Jupiter has a lot of moons. Any time you look at Jupiter through a telescope, you can see four or five of them, sometimes more." He readjusted the aim, and when he was satisfied, let me look again.

"They just look like stars. How do you know they're moons?"

"If you track Jupiter for a long time you'll see that they move along with the planet."

The next week lasted forever. As I mowed, I couldn't stop thinking about the telescope and Jupiter with all those moons. I wanted to look through the telescope again, but I had a lot of grass to mow. Friday finally came and I got the call from Mr. Fisbeck.

"Meet me tonight at 10 o'clock."

I hurried into the courtyard at 9:55. He was already there, bent over the telescope, fastening something to it with a screwdriver.

"Hand me that box," he ordered, without looking up.

He worked the small motor into position. "Take this wrench and tighten the bolts."

When we had the motor fastened down, he found Jupiter again and pressed a button on the motor. Powered by a battery, it made a faint humming sound. Completing his adjustments, he finally let me look. I saw the big planet with the large spot again, and five moons in a different configuration from a week ago. I looked for a long time without saying anything.

"It's not moving as much tonight," I observed.

"Oh, it's moving just as much as it was before, but now we're tracking it. The motor lets the telescope follow it across the sky." It was the photosynthesis voice, but out here among the stars, not as irritating.

I pulled back from the telescope and looked up. "There must be millions of them," I said.

"Each one of those stars is a sun, Jimmy, just like our sun," he said. "Some of them have planets orbiting them just like the planets in our solar system."

"And there are billions of them," he continued. "Hundreds of billions, and that's just in our galaxy. There are hundreds of billions of galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars."

I was hooked, and he knew it.

And I've been hooked for the last thirty years.

Mr. Fisbeck's daughter took the telescope from my office out to the showroom and lovingly placed it next to a display case containing the gleaming new ones that we sell today. Its wobbly tripod and rusted hardware made our merchandise look even more impressive. But to me, the old instrument was the most beautiful thing in my store.

The new ones show us the heavens; this one reveals the past.

Her request was small when compared to what I had received from her father: three decades of stargazing, a prosperous business, a lifetime of wonderment, and now, this dilapidated old telescope.

I told his daughter I would be honored to give the eulogy for the man who showed me how wonderful the starry sky could be.

Daniel R. Cole taught mathematics and computer skills at the secondary level for 30 years before retiring in 2004. He lives in Plainfield, Indiana with his wife, Pamela. In addition to creative writing, he enjoys bowling, woodworking and reading.

2007 Second Place Winner
The Cow and Miss Creasy
Pat Agar

That a cow should have solved the problem was hilarious when you think about it. In fact, the whole situation was a real fiasco, though I certainly didn't think so at the time.

I was teaching in Spruce Grove, a one-roomed school in rural Manitoba in the fifties. I got the job after the first teacher walked off before the end of September. A broken leg plus a bout of measles had prevented me taking a position earlier, so I was happy to "get back into harness." But at the same time, I was more than a little apprehensive. Why had Miss Creasy, the former teacher, left so abruptly? Were the students unruly? Had the parents proved difficult? What predicaments were awaiting me?

Except for a few minor incidents, the first two weeks passed peacefully. I found the twenty-five pupils responsive, diligent workers, and the smiling faces that greeted me each morning repaid me fully for the workload of keeping eight grades busy throughout the day.

Monday morning of my third week I was busy writing an assignment on the blackboard when an unfamiliar voice alerted me. I turned to find the doorway almost filled by the bulky shape of a young woman, a lumpy bag in one hand and a large purse in the other. I noticed large, prominent blue eyes, full, rather petulant cheeks, brilliant red lips, and thick, black hair, carefully coifed. She was wearing a blue-flowered dress and high-heeled black pumps. Had a new family moved into the district?

Then she spoke in a high, piping voice and at first I didn't quite take it in.

"You can go now. I'm back. I'm Miss Creasy."

Without waiting for any response, she plunked herself down in *my* chair, at *my* desk, while I stood, dumbfounded, chalk in hand, for at least thirty seconds. But I couldn't fail to notice the children's reaction. It was as though each face had been smacked with a cold, wet towel. I was sure I heard Peter mutter under his breath, "If she's gonna be here, I *ain't*."

"But..." I stammered, "there must be some mistake, Miss Crea..."

"No mistake!" she snapped and yanked out the register. "You're finished now."

Right from the start, confusion reigned. She completely ignored the assignments I had written on the board, and bawled out her own orders. When she came to the primary grades, I decided it was time to interrupt.

"I have the primary lessons all prepared, Miss Creasy. You can help the Grade Fives with"

"What! You're giving *me* orders! I'm the real teacher here. You can walk out that door right now. Just because I got sick and had to go home!" Then, in a voice bordering on a scream, "Kids! Don't sit there like idiots. Get your books out and GET TO WORK."

A smothering fog spread throughout the entire room. Bewildered faces looked up at me. *Do we have to obey HER?*

"Just go ahead with your assignments," I said, in as calm a voice as I could muster, though my insides were churning like piston wheels. *Am I really a usurper? Have the School Board bungled the whole issue? Now where do I stand?*

She bawled out another order, then turned on me. "I never resigned this job. Thought you could sneak in and claim my wages, did you? Well, it's MY job and I'M not leaving."

More bewildered looks, with some students following her orders and some mine. But when she ordered little Carolyn Simpson, smallest child in the room, back to her seat after I had called her up to the blackboard, three little girls burst out crying. By now my Irish was up.

“If you feel you have a case, Miss Creasy, go see the Board. This brouhaha is getting us nowhere.”

“ I see it now. You’ve poisoned them all against me. But I’ll be back tomorrow, see if I don’t, and I’ll personally bring my lawyer with me.” More tirades followed but at least she grabbed bag and purse and flounced out. Twenty-five deep sighs swept the room when the door closed behind her.

A hastily called School Board meeting followed that evening and my presence was requested. The secretary-treasurer, Wes Coleman, had disappeared, nobody knew where, but the meeting went on without him. Mr. Staynor, Chairman of the Board, was an abrupt, stiff-necked Englishman. When he rose to speak, I found my insides quaking, for I wasn’t at all sure he approved of me. When I told Grade Six that New York City was the largest in the world, he sent a note to school to inform me that London, not New York, claimed that distinction. I felt thoroughly chastened.

“As long as I’m trustee of Spruce Grove School,” said he, pulling down his suit jacket and straightening his tie, “that woman, that Miss What’s-her-name ... Crassy, will never again take charge in this classroom. The woman’s a complete idiot. She did absolutely *nothing* when she was here, she left with *no* explanation and if she thinks she can just move back here on a whim, bluffing about her rights, she’ll have it straight from me. Let her bring in fifty inspectors.”

Doug Wallace, another father, rose slowly to his feet, thrusting his rust-brown hair from his forehead as he did so. “But we gotta go careful here, Mr. Staynor. According to her contract, we gotta give her one month’s notice, *and* have a valid reason. Wes says he just had it from her mother that she was *never* comin’ back. Guess she’d laid it on pretty thick. But what real grounds have we got?”

“Grounds!” spoke up John Ortynski. “How much grounds do we need? That woman never did five minutes work when she was here. If any inspector comes poking around, let him tell me what a teacher is hired to do, and I’ll tell him, she never did any of it. Except be inside the

door by 9:00 AM. If that qualifies for teaching, we might as well hire Wes's white poodle."

"Just a minute now," Doug went on, measuring each word carefully, "did Wes actually send that letter terminatin' her position here? And what do we really know about her teachin'? Just tales the kids told at home, and we all know how kids can twist a story round so far you can't tell end from middle. We gotta watch our step here, or we're gonna find ourselves saddled with a whoppin' lawsuit."

That word did it. Everybody started talking at once, with nobody listening, until Mr. Staynor raised his hand.

"Silence!" he thundered. "We asked Miss Courtney to come to this meeting. Let's hear it from her, what happened this morning, after Miss Crassy arrived."

I gave them a brief account of the proceedings, trying not to blacken the other girl's character too much. But I made no excuses either. I had just finished when the five mothers walked in. I noticed a buttoning up of Mr. Staynor's features as soon as they arrived. He started to speak but Mrs. Wallace beat him to it.

"We know this an Official Board meetin', but as mothers we want a chance to say our say. We all like Miss Courtney here and we don't want to lose her, especially to that dimwit. We're all agreed if she tries to start any more trouble, we're goin' to be ready for her. We're callin' ourselves the Stout-Arm committee. We're gonna link arms in front of the school door and no phony teacher is gettin' by us. And believe me, we mean business."

"Exactly," added Mrs. Ortynski. "We're not putting up with any more nonsense like today. I'm coming tomorrow morning, if I have to bring baby, bottles and diapers with me."

But the former stiff-necked soldier required no assistance from any housewives.

"You don't need to lug your babies, Ladies. I shall personally come to the school tomorrow morning. I will be more than happy to settle the score with that ...that nincompoop."

The women did indeed mean business. Three of them showed up early next morning and ranged themselves on the school steps. Young Arthur Wallace eyed them speculatively.

“What will you do if she comes flyin’ at you like a battering ram, Mom? She could smash right through you. Watch she doesn’t break your arm.”

“We’re not expecting a full-scale attack, Arthur. We’re here to make it quite clear where we stand on this issue. Shoo off now, and see if you can smash a home run out on the ball diamond.”

I could see by the thrust of Mr. Staynor’s jaw that he resented the ladies’ intrusion, but he refrained from making any comment. They didn’t have long to wait for action to begin.

The bell had rung and the children were heading into the school, when a green Austin putted, putted in to the schoolyard, Miss Creasy at the wheel. Just as she was emerging from her dwarf –sized vehicle, a large, rangy red and white cow sprinted into the schoolyard. It was heading past the car on the passenger side, when young Freddie tore shrieking around the schoolhouse corner, hotly pursued by Stevie. The

frightened cow wheeled about with lowered head, careening smack into Miss Creasy just as she closed the car door. The next thing we knew, that horrified lady was splayed across the cow’s back, kicking and screaming, as she draped it in blue-flowered billows. Her sash, caught in one of the cow’s horns, cork-screwed about in the breeze, while her purse sailed over the car and landed in a mud puddle. The cow, in sheer panic now, charged around the schoolhouse corner and tore across the grounds, Miss Creasy clinging to her horns for dear life, her shrieks blasting the air like a freight whistle.

We all rushed after her, envisioning drastic injuries and blood flowing and dear knows what other dire consequences. But the cow, that had already deposited her burden into a rose bush, was streaking out of sight, and Miss Creasy was struggling to regain her footing. I reached out a hand to assist her but she shook me off like a poisonous insect.

“I knew it,” she screeched. “You’re all in this together. YOU!” she glared at me, her face turning from deep red to purple, “You planned this on purpose.”

Except for scratches across the cheek and a slight hobble on one foot, she appeared to have escaped serious injury. Certainly her tongue hadn’t been damaged. “You won’t get away with it. I’ll sue you, I’ll sue the lot of you, see if I don’t.”

Waving away any offers of help she limped to her car. Slamming herself in to the little Austin, she revved the motor and executed a semi-circle, almost running over her purse as she did so. Freddie ran out to retrieve it for her, but she just snatched it from his hand, wheeled about and flew out the schoolyard, spraying gravel her only sign of farewell.

For the first few seconds nobody said a word. Then Mrs. Wallace started it. It began with a slight titter, but in no time it became an explosion. We laughed till our sides ached and just when we were calming down, somebody else would start and we were off again.

“I have a feeling,” said Mr. Staynor, after we had regained our senses,” that that young lady won’t bother to come back here in a hurry.” Then he shook a bewildered head. “That a cow should settle the account!”

Thus ended the reign of Miss Marilyn Emogene Creasy, the name I’d found scrawled at the bottom of each page of the register. But the whole incident had one important result. From now on I walk taller, speak more firmly and have more confidence in my decisions. Do I thank Miss Creasy, or the cow?

Pat Agar is published in Canadian publications, including Western People, Green's Magazine, Pine Cone Press, and Canadian Stories. She lives in Brandon, Manitoba, where she belongs to a local writers group.

Third Place Winner 2007

Anasazi Moon

Eugene D. Alvin

Josh's flute was missing! Leg braces click clacking; he headed down the hall toward the living room. The shadow flitting on the wall beside him was a hated reminder of his misshapen twelve-year-old body. A skinny frame, withered legs, and curved spine made him look like a nearsighted vulture hovering over its prey. His spiked carrot-orange hair, protruding chin and square glasses with their thick lenses just enhanced that image.

"Aunt Jolene, have you seen my flute? I can't find it."

Uh-oh, I interrupted her soap! She glared at him, eyes hot with drunken anger. She reminded him of an obese frog perched on a dirty toadstool shaped chair.

"I'm tellin' you for the last time, DON'T BUG ME when I'm watchin' my stories. No! I hadn't seen that ratty lookin' thing."

The flute was a gift from his dad on his fifth birthday. "It's magic," his dad had said, "Playing it will open new doors for you."

The wooden flute was faded yellow with red stripes and ivory colored bone inlays. A carved green snake coiled around it from the mouthpiece to its bell shaped end. When he played, his melodies would drift through the air, placing magical splashes of rainbow colors over his grim world.

When his mom and dad were alive, their home was cheerful, warm and loving. Since Jolene became administrator of the estate everything had changed. Gardeners, housekeepers and caretakers had all been let go. The grounds around their two-story stone house looked like a set from a horror movie.

The hot summer Utah winds had littered the grounds with bits of

trash, leaves and debris, thorn bushes and dead leafless oaks stood guard over the mess like gaunt skeletons. He didn't dare talk back to Jolene. Once, when he did, she slapped him so hard his glasses flew across the room.

Josh turned and dejectedly limped down the hall and out into the front yard. Three galvanized trashcans lined the driveway. He kicked the can closest to him, hard as he could, wincing in pain. The lid popped off, rolling and clattering across the blacktop.

He was about to pick it up when he saw a familiar shape pressing against the outer skin of one of the garbage bags. *My flute!* She's been in my room!

There were only two places Josh could get away from her. His bedroom was one; his "clubhouse" was the other. The only reason Jolene didn't come out there was because she was too lazy to walk across the back yard. His clubhouse was an old Indian ruin that had been part of the property since the early 1900's when his great-great grandfather bought the land.

Josh limped around the side of the house and headed out back, flute clutched tightly in his fist. He squeezed through a crumbling stone doorframe, ducked under a mass of green grape ivy pretending to be a roof and sat down. He and his dad used to sit here. His dad was an archeologist and would tell him stories about the Indians that used to live on this land. Sometimes, late at night, when the moon was red and low over the buttes, he felt like the spirits of the Anasazi were hovering, close by, listening to his music. Soon the low piping of his flute drifted out, touching the surrounding greenery and adobe ruins, floating on the breeze like exotic incense, softly caressing each object as it meandered by.

Something moved! The center of the dirt floor darkened, like water was being poured on it. A splotch, about three feet across, shook like thick pudding, and then started to spin, forming a muddy whirlpool. He teetered on its edge, then crashed to the floor below in a cloud of dust, his flute skittering across the room.

Lying still, he checked for any new pains then pushed himself up on

his knees. A dim light filtered down from a square hole above him. He was in a circular underground room about twenty feet in diameter.

A crude wooden ladder was lying next to a low stone bench. *At least I'm not trapped.* He picked up his flute, stuffed it in his back pocket, hoisted up the ladder and pushed it through the hole in the ceiling. Josh slowly clambered up the ladder and struggled out. His clubhouse was gone!

In its place was a large room with adobe walls decorated with brightly colored pictographs. An old gray haired Indian man and a girl about Josh's age stood in front of him. The girl was hiding, peeking around from behind the old man, her dark eyes wide in fear and wonder. The old man whispered something, reassuring her, then spoke to Josh.

"Welcome Kokopelli. I, Lan Ta Sha, summoned you."

"Who are you? What d'you mean, summoned?"

"I'm medicine man of the Anasazi. This is my daughter, Swift Bird."

"Well, medicine man, you goofed! I'm not Kokopelli, I'm Josh, Josh Tannenbaum! You've summoned the wrong kid. What are you doing here anyway?"

"You are Kokopelli," he said, "Look, here is your likeness, drawn with the blood of the ancient ones." He pointed to a drawing on one of the walls. Josh stared. It did look like the shadow he cast on the hallway wall at home.

"I guess I can see why you messed up, but I'm not this Kokopelli!"

"You are the spirit of Kokopelli," the old man insisted, "It was promised that when Kokopelli's people need him, he will return. The evil of Cihuacoatl, the wailing woman, haunts our waters, searching for her lost children. Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, cursed her because she drowned her babies. Now she is doomed to walk the rivers and lakes, searching for their bodies. Those who go to the river to fetch water disappear. We hear her wailing late at night. Our women must walk many miles to get water from the Big Spring. Soon we will have to leave our village unless Kokopelli can drive her away with his magic flute."

"My flute? What's that got to do with it?" His brow furrowed and his palms started to feel sweaty.

"You must let the magic of Kokopelli weave its spell and drive away this curse."

"Old man you need a hero, a warrior, not a cripple like me!"

With that, he headed for the door as fast as he could, the clicketty-clack of his braces sounding like a staccato sewing machine. He stepped outside.

A well-worn adobe dirt path curved its way downhill from the tower behind him to an Indian village. A hand touched his shoulder. It was Swift Bird.

"I'm glad Kokopelli's here."

He turned toward her. Her soft brown eyes had a look in them, like he was a great warrior or something. He had a wild impulse to lie, to pretend he really was Kokopelli. Josh hesitated, then said, "I'm not who you think I am."

She ignored him and went on, "Tonight my father will lead you to the river where you will play your flute. We will wait for your return." She smiled, timidly squeezed his hand, and ran toward her father's house. That night Lan Ta Wah led him to the river's edge.

He lit a torch, chanting and infusing the area with the pungent scent of burning mesquite. Next, he lit a small campfire. Last, he placed a medicine bag on the ground next to a large flat rock that had a pictograph of Kokopelli on it. Josh turned toward Lan Ta Wah, but he had vanished. Clouds raced across an angry red moon causing shadows to scurry passed him like frightened rabbits. A soft breeze sighed, intimidated by the darkness. Then the sigh sharpened, increasing to a wail. Fear raced through his body like kerosene torched by a match. It was Cihuacoatl! His hand shook as he raised his flute. *Maybe I if just play something, anything at all, it will work.*

The low tones of his flute fluttered helplessly above the fire like a dying moths. The wailing rose to a shriek. A sharp blast of wind knocked him down and whipped at the fire causing an eruption of sparks to leap wildly into the night. His flute skittered across the ground and tumbled out of sight into the darkness. A woman's insane laughter taunted him. Suddenly he found himself walking toward the sound, step by reluctant

step. Cihuacoatl was beckoning him to the river.

A stone flew out of the night, striking his shoulder and breaking the spell. Swift Bird! She picked up his flute and tossed it to him. He instantly started to play. The melody was not one he knew. It had a savage edge to it, like the enraged scream of a Puma. It swirled, seethed and thrust its untamed melody into the night.

Cihuacoatl's wails mingled with it, sometimes over-riding, sometimes overridden. Dust devils clawed their way into the air, fighting for space, pelting him with stinging bits of dust and debris. Josh staggered, but kept on playing.

The fire blazed, filling the circle with ravenous flames that hungered to devour the sky. Swift Bird screamed. Cihuacoatl had her and was pulling her to the river. He couldn't stop playing.

His flute was like a python squeezing him, forcing his weak lungs to push every last ounce of breath into it. The wailing turned to a long drawn out wolf-like howl.

The flat rock next to him shattered. The earth shook! Night birds, insects and little rodents raced for shelter. Josh held the final note. The fire winked out! Silence! Mesquite smoke burned his eyes. Nothing stirred. Then he heard the soft sound of moccasins scuffing behind him. Swift Bird's fingers touched his shoulder. The way she looked up at him filled him with pride.

The next day the celebrations started. The whole tribe gathered, women were dressed in their finest beaded apparel, while braves showed off their best-feathered headdresses and buckskins. Swift Bird hugged him and placed a silver and turquoise pendant around his neck, the sign of a warrior of the Anasazi.

Late that night after the celebration, he hobbled back up the path and into the tower. Outside, he heard Nan Ta Wah chanting. A single drum accompanied him. Josh couldn't make out the words, but the sound was hypnotic. Sleep crept into him like a cotton fog, extracting its price on his tired body.

He woke up in the room under the floor of the Kiva, his flute next to him. His legs felt different, somehow stronger. My braces are gone! He

effortlessly stood up.

The room was buried in fine talcum like dust. How'd I get back down here? I don't remember falling!

He picked up the ladder, pushed it through the opening in the ceiling and scrambled back up. His world had changed again! All that remained was a crumbling pile of rubble where the tower stood. Josh ducked under the mass of green grape ivy pretending to be a roof, squeezed through the crumbling doorframe and walked out into his debris-filled back yard.

Jolene was screeching for him to come to the house, just like he'd only been gone a few minutes instead of a day. Anger flashed through him.

"I'm a hero, you old drunk, you can't yell at me," he grumbled. He stopped. Self-doubt took over. *Did it really happen? Am I really a hero? Is this all just a daydream?* Something warm pressed against his chest. It was the pendant from Swift Bird. It seemed to whisper to him, no, Josh, not a dream, the best is yet to be...

2006 First Place Winner

The Vigil

Dawn Goldsmith

Starlings attacked. The adult robins defended their nest. Pecking and diving, trying to divert the intruders from their home, the parents spread their beaks wide and did their best to look fearsome and intimidating. But the starlings, predators adept at getting what they want, persisted.

It was the father robin that accidentally pushed the fledgling out of the nest. One minute he was defending the nest, the next minute, he was hovering over his child, flying air cover over the vulnerable body of flesh and meager tufts of downy feathers.

The starlings ceased their attack as quickly as they had begun. Had they wanted the nest? Were they just having fun?

The baby robin landed at the base of the ornamental evergreen, wined by its bounce from twig to twig and its ungraceful plop onto the packed earth. A few more inches and it would have landed on the cement sidewalk.

Fortunately neither the family dog nor the neighbor's cat was outside. The robin parents, caught between bringing attention to their defenseless offspring and trying to protect it, flew and dived and called encouragement. Finally the fat-bellied baby struggled to its feet and waddled one painful step at a time away from where it landed. But it headed into the open. Danger. It laid still, only its sides moving in and out with its labored breathing.

The parents took turns feeding their baby and calling encouragement. They dove and perched close on low branches, and walked nearby in the grass. All the time keeping vigil, placing their bodies in harm's way.

They entered the danger zone close to the earth where predators waited and hoped the birds would let down their guard and become an easy meal.

The human in the house brought the dog out and the parents panicked. They called and squawked, dove at the dog's head and then tried to lead the pair away from their exposed baby. The dog's nose knew and he headed directly toward a tasty morsel. But the human spoke and the dog obeyed. He sniffed the bird, but did it no harm, except maybe to give it a good scare with that cold nose on its bare skin.

The human knelt, but didn't touch it. She saw the remnants of a worm nearby and evidence of bowel movement, all signs that the baby was being fed. Her meager experience with birds was that they would be abandoned by their own kind if a human touched them and a human had a hard time raising a baby bird. It was nearly impossible in her experience. She backed away, telling herself that nature would have its way.

All night the baby lay on the ground. Its mother stood watch beside it, spreading her wings to give it cover. The father hovered in a nearby tree, watching from his vantage point for anything that would harm his family.

The vigil continued for three days. The parents took turns standing watch and bringing food. They encouraged the tiny new life to move into the grass and toward cover. One little faltering step at a time it would move. But never got far from where it fell.

The human and dog checked on his progress every day. She would bend over the baby; whisper words in a kind voice and then back away, hesitating. She wanted to do more. She wanted to rescue it. But would the rescue save or kill it? She feared she would kill it and she did nothing. When the sun heated the day, the baby moved into the taller grass near the edge of the sidewalk. By the third day its body was totally covered with downy feathers and the wing tips were growing flight feathers.

But the weatherman predicted a drop in temperature and rain. Thunder and lightning, torrential rain, temperatures dipping into the low 50s. All night the parents hovered and worried. By morning the baby's

breath was slower, weaker. By evening it lay dead.

The parents brought worms, nudged the still body, flew to a safe perch and watched. For two days they visited the little body. They continued to protect it from predators, including the tiny ants that approached its body even while it was still alive. They picked them away.

By the third day after its death, the parents did not return. The corpse lay alone in the grass. Only the dog nosed it curiously and the human shooed him away.

She came with a shovel and an old abandoned nest. Maybe she should have tried shoveling the baby into the nest days ago. But now, she took the lifeless form to the back of the property and dug a hole, a deep hole among the daffodils and laid the little one to rest.

This year of loss, she thought. So many buried this past year. As she marked the grave with a rock three times the size of the baby, she cried.

Dawn Goldsmith, essayist and freelance writer with several years experience as a newspaper reporter, writes for a variety of national markets including Christian Science Monitor, The Washington Post, and Notre Dame Magazine. New to fiction, her short fiction has appeared in Flashquake, Green Tricycle and The Painted Door.

2006 Second Place Winner
Not Suitable Viewing for Children
Patricia Crandall

“Study this photo, class, and tell me what you see,” instructed Lewis Golden, a math teacher at the Marin Middle School in Carmen, New York. Lew held up a picture of a tortured, dismembered body. The seventh graders squealed with delight before he slapped the picture face down on his desk and took several deep breaths to compose himself.

The realization came too late he had picked up the wrong folder from his brother, Ralph’s, cluttered desk at the crime lab in nearby Rensselaer when he had stopped early morning to have a cup of coffee. Lew’s folder had contained photos of rare plant and insect specimens that he was going to incorporate into a statistical study project for the class in session.

Right now, faced with the prospect of having to scrap the Tuesday morning project, he decided he could make this error work for him.

Giving the class a five minute drill assignment, and managing to keep his breakfast down while flipping through the grotesque photos in his brother’s gory collection, Lew chose several photos suitable for viewing by the youngsters.

Lew rapped his desk with a pointer. “Class, there will be a change in format. Rather than studying plant and insect specimens, we’ll identify geometric patterns and shapes.”

Moaning and caterwauling rose in the classroom.

“We’ll make the project fun. I promise.” Lew indicated the photograph pinched between his thumb and forefinger, depicting a large

metal beam falling from a New York City skyscraper with black geometric patterns of tall and angular buildings in the background.

“Who will be first to identify two geometric shapes and give a brief sci-fi fantasy?” Lew asked.

A wriggling hand rose in the third to last row.

“Jeremy Therry.” Lew nodded at the tall, stocky youth.

Jeremy stood up awkwardly and said in a changing voice, “I see two squares a little left to the asymmetrical gray shapes in the middle of those big buildings. The squares are alien computer boxes and Venus microchips are stored inside them, meaning big trouble for the people in New York City.” He pressed inky fingertips to his pudgy lips. “Uh, Mr. Golden, can we see those other pictures, please!”

All of the youngsters chanted, “More, more...of what we had before!”

Lew scratched the stubble on his chin. “For obvious reasons, class, we cannot view the first set of photos. I apologize for my absentmindedness. I must return that package of photographs to Detective Golden as soon as possible.”

Lew grimaced at the thought of Ralph frantically searching for the explicit crime photos in his smoky, airless office at the Rensselaer Police Headquarters. He winced at the thought of Ralph’s reaction as he eyed the pastoral nature scenes. He planned to call him during recess to confirm the mix-up.

“Let’s continue!” He gave Jeremy permission to sit down.

A small, straight arm stretched upwards.

Golden looked over his glasses at the waif-like Tarah Lawrence.

Tarah arose lazily, twiddling a pink plastic medallion hanging on a silk ribbon circling her neck. She squinted hard at the picture, having left her eyeglasses at home. “I see,” she said in a tiny voice, “a message. It’s inside a triangle and there’s another message inside a square.” She looked shyly at her instructor.

Lew drummed his fingers on his desk contemplating what appeared to him to be squiggles.

“And what do these messages say, Tarah?”

A funny expression came on Tarah’s face. She said, “From right to

left... 'Horse is smoked' ...that's in the triangle, and in the square, 'Ashes are snorted' ... 'Runner' is printed in the small script at the bottom of the page."

Lew knew just enough about police work to be dangerous. Intuitively, he felt Tarah was on to something. Why, he couldn't say. He just did.

"How did you come by these messages, Tarah?"

"The codes are written in hieroglyphics, Mr. Golden," Tarah explained. "My dad is an Ancient History Professor at MST College. He and I decipher hieroglyphics every night after supper, instead of watching television. It's like a game. Sometimes we play Monopoly, Clue, or Scrabble, too."

Lew announced in a loud voice, "Class, go to your library stations immediately and bring your math assignments. Ms. Harris will monitor you while I attend to some urgent business with Tarah."

"Not fair!" the class thumped their desks before order could be maintained.

Lew Golden sat opposite his brother, Ralph, and Ralph's superior, Detective Mick Connors, in Connor's paper-littered office at the 7th Street Precinct in Rensselaer. Tarah Lawrence leaned forward on the desk with chin in her hands, sipping a Diet Pepsi through a straw. Her dad stood behind her with his back against the wall, his arms folded tightly across his chest.

"Tarah," Lew coaxed. "I want you to answer Investigator Golden's questions about the assignment we did in class today."

Tarah slurped Pepsi and nodded.

Ralph Golden's stern, hard-lined face softened as he spoke, "Tarah, this photograph is important to an investigation we are doing into a drug ring. Will you decode the hieroglyphics for us?" He made eye contact with her father.

"Tarah's an expert." Ty Lawrence said with confidence.

"Repeat to me what the message in the triangle means," Detective Golden pressed.

Tarah viewed the skyscrapers.

"Horse," Tarah answered.

“And in the big square?”

“Ashes.” In a tiny, breathless voice, she added, “And in the middle square, the little words mean ‘Bronx.’” Then she pointed to the square at the bottom of the page. “‘Runner.’”

Ralph rolled his chair back and said to his brother, “Do me a favor, Lew, give an A plus or higher to Tarah if that’s possible. This young lady has cracked a tough case.” He shook his head in disbelief. “That photo, which was on its way to a dealer and was intercepted by one of our men, has been dubbed here at the Precinct, The Mysterious Photograph. No one in the squad has been able to come up with a solution. I’ve just made contact with an expert to decode these hieroglyphics. Along comes a pint-sized kid in my academic brother’s classroom who decodes messages through hieroglyphics with her dad, and lifts the lid off a million dollar heroin ring that reached from South East Asia to New York City and Albany.”

Mick Connors twisted his 6’ 4” frame out of his chair. He dwarfed the others in the room and said, “I’ll never let my men live this down. Furthermore, due to the crime-busting success of Miss Lawrence, guess what’s going to be a requirement for all squad members including you, Ralph.” He turned to Detective Golden.

Ralph rolled his eyes. “I can’t wait to hear this!”

“Hieroglyphics!” Connors sneered.

The Lawrences’ left the Precinct, having been assured the drug dealers would be arrested and jailed for a long time. Lou laughed at the smoldering look on his brother’s face.

“Must I take a course in hieroglyphics?” Ralph lip-synced.

“What was the message Tarah decoded?” Lew broke into his brother’s meanderings.

Ralph massaged the back of his neck and said, “The message in the triangle alluded to ‘Horse,’ and the one in the square, ‘Ashes’ – in some cases equals ‘smack,’ both of which to drug users are known as heroin. The tiny, cramped wording in the bottom square refers to the ‘Bronx,’ where the dope was to be cut and diluted into a quantity four times its original weight.

Once cut and packaged for sale, it was to be shipped to drug peddlers upstate. With the help of the national computer system, I was able to track the code in the square at the bottom of the page revealing Eddie Hodges, alias ‘Runner,’ as head of the ring. Hodges has eluded international police and our police force for more years than I care to remember. Once in a while you get lucky.”

There was a buzz of excitement in the middle school auditorium. Tarah Lawrence stood beaming on the stage. Her parents stood at her right, and Lew Golden, at her left.

Detective Ralph Golden was behind the podium, flanked by Detective Mick Connors and several officers from the Rensselaer Precinct. Detective Golden looked out at the audience consisting mostly of spirited students being hushed by their teachers. He cleared his throat and then explained how the mix-up between the two folders had transpired. He went on to describe the success Tarah Lawrence had in decoding the hieroglyphics that led to the closure of the Mysterious Photograph case.

In a formidable voice, he said, “Tarah Lawrence, we present you with this \$300.00 check and a plaque stating you are a Nancy Drew Detective in the Rensselaer Police Department. We look forward to your further sleuthing with the Force in the future.”

There was a standing ovation and loud applause from the audience as Tarah wobbled up to the podium in high-clog shoes to accept her awards.

“And to my brother, Ralph Golden, who wisely brought the answers to the drug ring to our attention, albeit through a mistake, I return your manila folder.”

There were hoots and hollers from the students as Lew accepted the nature prints from Ralph and returned a brotherly grin.

Ralph motioned Tarah to come forward again, and handed her an envelope. “The Police Department also wishes to send you and Mr. Golden in a limo to Tommy’s Steak House for dinner.”

Tarah Lawrence and Lew Golden raised their entwined hands in the air. Lew shouted, “Hey kids – it doesn’t get any better than this!”

Patricia Crandall has recently published her novel The Dog Men via Publish/America. It is available through Amazon.com. She has two other books in print, a historical book, Melrose, Then and Now and a book of poetry, I Passed This Way Before. Patricia is presently working on a book of short stories concerning Bottle Mining Adventures, to be published in the near future.

2006 Third Place Winner

The Old Yellow Chair

Lynda Diessner

The screen door on the back porch slammed behind him as the old farmer pulled off his coat and hung it on the hook. No need for overshoes or coveralls this winter. There were few cold days. He ran his big, calloused hand through his thinning, gray hair and thought about how farming had changed in the last thirty years. He had dealt with horrible blizzards that came during calving season and the summers with little rain. The blizzards didn't come anymore, nor did the rain. The pastures were sparse year around. Thank goodness for irrigation or there would be no corn crop.

Stepping into the kitchen, he set the mail on the kitchen table and realized he missed the soothing smells of cinnamon rolls and coffee since his wife took the job in town. He recalled their struggle with that decision. The cash was not flowing. Cattle and grain prices were at an all time low. Fertilizer and seed costs were skyrocketing. Fuel prices were unbelievable. They were not making any money, and they had to do something different. He knew Louella was reluctant to leave him; she took such good care of him, the house and garden. He assured her he would be fine. He could fend for himself when it came to meals and even try to have a little supper ready when she got home. He was grateful she found a job; still, he missed her presence in the quiet farm house.

He put a cup of water in the microwave and took the instant coffee out of the cupboard. Standing at the sink, he gazed out the window, his glance stopping at the empty feedlot. He felt empty, too. That had been another

tough decision to sell the livestock. Years of calving, chores, sale barns and cattle trucks drifted through his memory.

The work with cattle was second nature to him. He no longer had the hard work that went into raising cattle, and yes, that was hard work he told himself. Fast moving snowstorms the end of February and first of March would take a toll on those mothers and baby calves. Finding a critter suffocated in a snow bank was a loss of money on the spot. The vaccinating, weaning, hauling them all to pastures in the summer. They had fun when the boys were little and they would all load up in the pick up truck and take salt and mineral to the cattle in the pastures. Louella would squeal when he drove on a side hill; she was afraid they would tip over. The boys would laugh as she clung to the door handle. Rounding them up in the fall to bring them back home was a family project, plus a few neighbors. He didn't realize how hard he worked until he looked back on it. Was doing something you enjoyed considered work? Still, picking out those big steers to sell was a good feeling. His dad told him the smell of manure was the smell of money. He chuckled to himself at that. He wished he could pass that bit of wisdom onto his sons, but they weren't interested.

He thought of the years he raised hogs, too. Now that was the real work. He remembered how the kids hated to hear, especially when he told them at breakfast, that when they came home from school, they would help him sort hogs for market. Their faces would drop; their day was ruined before it began. He shook his head as he remembered how angry he would get at those young ones for letting a one of those big porkers slide past them. He would yell and curse at them. At the time, a hog confinement that would house a couple hundred pigs seemed to be the way to go. The three-sided building and a strong nylon curtain on the south side that would automatically raise or lower, depending on the temperature. Cement floors with pens on both sides with automatic feeders took away some of the daily chores. When it was time to sell, all

he had to do was open the gates to the pens, run the hogs down the center alleyway, right up the chute and into the truck. It was Brad's job after school, to hop on the 4-wheeler and run up there and make sure everything was running smoothly. If anything was wrong, he seemed to always blame it on Brad for not paying closer attention. He remembered the winter the temperature dropped to -23. Everything was frozen up. He made both Brad and his younger son, John help him try to get everything thawed and running. He was in a rage most of the day. Sorrow filled his heart; he never apologized, but went on as if nothing happened. No wonder the kids didn't want to stay on the farm. "I drove them away," he thought. What good did my anger do?

"Buy land any chance you can," was his dad's advice. Over the years he acquired a good bit of land and rented land from others. The more land he bought or rented the more work he had. This gave way to bigger, more expensive equipment to get the planting and harvesting done.

His dad, who told him real estate was the best investment, was a prominent farmer and cattleman whom everyone respected. He had made a lot of money in his time. But now, at 92 years old, he sat in the nursing home, one day drifting into the next. Only in his mind was he still on the farm. Once when asked if he had seen the doctor, the poor old guy said, "Yes, I was out plowing and I saw Doc waiting at the end of the field by the fence. I don't know what he wanted or how he found me."

Seeing his dad like this, made him remember his childhood. There was so much hard work that never seemed to end. After church, Sundays were for the odd jobs that didn't get done during the week. Things like changing the oil in the tractors, or picking up irrigation pipe to move to another field to water. There were always hay bales to pick up out of the field and store in the barn for winter. Why did they work so hard? For what?

He thought of his own sons. With both his boys working in the city, it was hard to find good help. "I should've spent more time with them," he said out loud. "Should've taken them fishin' and played ball with them. Man, I missed out on a lot. I just took it for granted my boys would take over the farm for me. I thought they loved this life."

He was so surprised when his boys wanted to go to college. He didn't think they needed to, but they had been talking to their mother about it all along. He thought they would go for an Ag degree. Neither one was interested. Had he traded wealth for family?

When the microwave timer dinged, he jumped with a start. After stirring in the instant coffee and adding a little milk, he turned toward the large oak table. Setting his coffee cup down, he thumbed through the mail. He first tore open the envelope from State Bank. He squinted as he read it. Yes, he realized it was time to come in and get his operating loan; they didn't have to send a letter to remind him. It was the same every year, borrowing more money to raise corn that didn't make him any money. That thought settled on his brain as he blew across the cup of the too hot coffee like the dry summer wind across his fields.

Being another unseasonably warm, winter day, he gripped his coffee cup and went outside. As he settled into the old, yellow lawn chair next to the house, his bones creaked in harmony with the rusty chair. He gazed around his farm. The big barn stood empty. How that building used to be the hub of activity! Closing his eyes he could see Luella coming out the barn after milking their two cows. She would hold up the bucket, smile and say, "Free milk, today!"

Even after all the years of hard work, she was still a beautiful woman. Those little lines at the corner of her eyes were like a ripple in a pond sending out good feelings to anyone near. Louella was always singing or humming. He would tease her when she would sing that song about the

country roads to West Virginia. “Nebraska is your home and you have never even been to West Virginia!” She would snicker and shrug her shoulders. They worked side by side for so many years. She never complained and only occasionally asked to get something for the house. Why had he been so reluctant?

“A new easy chair won’t make any money,” he would gruffly answer. Now here he sat, and nothing he had done had made any money either. Louella had worked hard and for what? To have a job in town now? His heart ached; a new chair wouldn’t have made any difference.

He shifted his weight and ran his hand along the rusty arm of the chair. At that moment it seemed everything was showing its age. He looked to the north at the center pivot irrigator resting on the stubble in the cornsqfields. What an investment! Many long hours, some late into the night, were spent at the oak table in the kitchen trying to figure if watering the corn for better yields would be worth spending this substantial amount of money. Louella was right there with him supporting any idea he had. It was a good investment but now, just like its owner, the pivot was getting old. Last summer he spent many hot days in the cornfield repairing its flat tires and motors. He tried to do as many of the repairs as he could. The irrigation company was now charging \$50 for a service charge, plus parts and labor. He noticed every year it was getting harder to crawl up that tower of galvanized steel to fix a sprinkler.

The sunshine felt good on his weathered face. He rested his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes. He tried to imagine what it would be like not to have all this work to do. He wondered how it would feel to go to bed at night and not have to think of what jobs didn’t get done today. It was hard to admit his heart wasn’t in farming the way it used to be. He had lost his ambition and drive. Although he loved his farm, he was just too tired to work it anymore.

Calmness came over him, like when the wind dies down to a gentle breeze in the evening. “I have worked hard on this farm and now I think I deserve a rest.” In his heart he felt it was time to let go and surprisingly, it was a good feeling. What if he was to rent the farm to someone else? They could have the headaches and he could collect his cash rent. Those young Kelly boys were getting established; they were always looking for more land to rent. What would he do with those idle hours? The kids always want him to come for a visit and stay awhile. The only free time he had in the summer was if it rained. Wouldn't it be nice to watch the grandkids play ball and swim? When Louella saw on TV those trips to New England in the fall, she would sigh and say how wonderful it would be to do something like that. A warm, contented feeling came over the old farmer. All of these dreams were possible. Slowly opening his eyes he saw his farm and his life in a different light. He raised himself out of the chair and headed straight to the phone in the house. He called the Kelly's first. Then he called Louella.

She was startled when she heard his voice, he never called her at work and she was afraid something had happened. “What's wrong?” she asked nervously. The old farmer, hardly able to contain his excitement, stumbled over his words. “Louella, nothing's wrong! Come home right away and tell your boss you won't be back!” He hung up the phone, stood by the kitchen window and gazed out. He drew in a big breath and felt his heart swell. Yes, he was ready now. He was ready for a new beginning.