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THREE SHORT STORIES

by

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**PRESS  
CARD  
HERE**

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## THE MUSIC BOX

Carl stared at the cold gray ceiling from his bed. The steady drip of the rain on his roof outside was hypnotic. A spider crept slowly over the stones and between the mortar as Carl watched him progress across the ceiling. His long spindle-like legs reached forward with deliberate exertion, pulling his lump of a body behind him. Suddenly his footing slipped and he dangled from the stone for only a moment. Carl did not move, even at the prospect of a spider falling in his bed. Rather he watched with intense curiosity as the creature regained his footing with perfection, drew his body rigid, and continued his pace along the stone.

Thoughts of the weeks events raced about in Carl's mind as loose ends, threads of thoughts with no realistic meaning. His mother's death had been expected for such a long time, and yet, the sudden reality of it seemed so cruel, so unnecessary. She had been a heart attack victim for many years, never really knowing what tomorrow might bring.

Carl gazed at the spider now creating his bed for the night in a dusty corner of the ceiling.

His life seemed so uncluttered, confined to catching his prey, avoiding man's destructive blow, compared to Carl's. There had been so many problems, so many delays in settling the estate. Carl knew he had been right in sending Harriet and the children back to Kansas. The legal details might take another week.

The hall clock echoed in the foyer. Carl counted the chimes. Already four o'clock and he had not closed his eyes. The troubling times seemed to intense for rest. A limb snapped outside the window, it's cracked flesh speaking aloud. Carl sat up and stared at his door. Perhaps, he wondered, the papers were hidden in the trap door underneath his mother's dresser. Carl remembered the days of his youth when he and his sister had played in the tiny chest hidden inside the floor. Throwing the quilts aside, he slipped out of the warmth of his bed.

The brass key that unlocked his mother's bedroom lay on the chest by his bed. Carl slipped the cold metal into his robe pocket, rushed quickly to the door, and out into the hall. The cold stone corridor had always frightened him as a child. They had seemed so unfriendly, so bitter. Now, Carl ran his hands along the

wall to feel his way down the length of the hall. The window at the end of the corridor offered no consolation on this moonless night. Its draperies flapped noisily at the whiffs of wind that dared to pass through the window and into the house. Carl moved slowly, not fully remembering the cold slate floors or the wall candles that extended out and into his path. Flashes of his childhood play appeared on the walls like an old movie. Carl vividly recalled the hidden room in his father's study, the loose stone in the downstairs chimney, and the little two stone cemetery in the back yard. He and his sister, Melanie, had once dared each other to stomp on the graves thirteen times, and neither had been able to prove their disbelief in superstition.

That same faint feeling of horror crept back into Carl's mind now. Reaching the heavy, carved, wooden door, he fingered the door knob carefully, debating whether or not to enter. This room had been sacred when his mother and father were alive. The children were never allowed in the room except by invitation. Even now, Carl felt as if he were betraying a trust, spying where he should not be.

His thoughts were interrupted with the sound of humming. The high-pitched tune came from within the room, its charm seeming to seep through the keyhole and into the corridor. Carl pressed his ear to the door and could distinguish the sound of rustling clothes. The humming was warm and free, as if someone were swaying about the room to a self-composed song.

With emergency in his motions, Carl thrust the key into the hole, turned it until the latch clicked, and flung open the door. The room was still, every thing just as it had been when his mother lay on her dying bed. He lit the candle on the table near the door, its flame casting dancing glints of shadow on the bedroom walls. Picking the candle up with one hand, Carl pushed the door closed with his free hand. Walking about the room, he slowly studied each remnant of his mother's existence. Her canopied bed looked wrinkled and faded, the once bright blue spread now a muted gray-blue. A tea-stained lace cover was folded neatly at the foot of the bed. Beside the pillows, a Bible, worn and tattered, was closed and resting with peace.

On her night table was the beloved music box.

Carl had known his mother to sit in her rocking chair for hours and listen to the opened box, it's song filling the room with warmth. Atop the lid, the pink dressed ballerina would twirl around, her ceramic body posed gracefully. The music box had been a gift to Carl's mother from her mother, a ballerina herself. Staring at the music box, Carl remembered the stories he had always heard of his grandmother, the toast of all Grand Valley. Her grace had never been surpassed, so said her admirers. The newspapers, magazines, and critics had always delighted at the mention of her name. Her face, strangely beautiful yet daringly defiant, had often been splashed on the front cover of the nation's top magazines. She had been internationally known as the ballerina of mystery, her performances always leaving the devoted audience captivated.

Gingerly, Carl opened the music box, allowing the song to swarm around the room, and drift about the atmosphere. He watched the ballerina spin in her predetermined circles, becoming captured by her rhythmic movements.

Carl's mother had so wanted to be like her own mother. She had dreamed of dancing on the stage as her mother had done, proving to the world that she possessed her mother's ability. But the world would not accept her. Her youthful attempts at following in her mother's footsteps had been defeated by instructors and teachers who had discouraged her. Carl remembered how his mother would burst into tears when trying to talk about her lessons, the hours of practice, the moments of depression.

Abruptly Carl slammed the music box shut. These, he realized were memories to be forgotten. Memories to be locked in this room along with the decaying furniture. Carl did not remember to look for the hidden door underneath the dresser as he replaced the music box and rushed for the door. Quickly he closed the door behind him, checking to see that it had locked. Reaching for the coldness of the walls, he moved toward his bedroom, carrying the still burning candle with him.



## TWO

"Melanie, would you please pass the salt?" Carl spoke to his sister at the other end of the breakfast table. She, too, had chosen to remain at Tyron Estates until the legal details were finalized. Without speaking, she forwarded the shaker. Carl, reaching for the salt, noticed how youthful Melanie looked at thirty-five. Her hands were still lean and soft, her hair as golden as it had been in her childhood. Her eyes were just as blue and innocent, her cheeks just as rosy red.

"Carl, do you remember the sliding door under mother's dresser? It occurred to me last night that the most recent will, the one we know she wrote less than a month ago, might be in there."

Carl had forgotten his original mission of the night before. Melanie's cleverness had made him feel like the follower instead of the leader.

"Indeed, I considered just that myself. I haven't searched there yet. Perhaps after breakfast we can look together."

Melanie's expression did not change. "Howell, we're ready for another cup of coffee." Howell, the family butler for nearly twenty years, rushed from the dining area and into the kitchen. Elizabeth, the housekeeper and cook, was busily chopping carrots for lunch at the butcher block table.

"She's here." Carl looked up at his sister.

"What do you mean, she's here." Melanie replaced her cup in its saucer. Howell entered the room and promptly filled the coffee cups.

"Shall I leave the pot, Miss Melanie?" Howell, his stern black body standing beside her as he stood beside her mother so many times, held the pot in his tired hands.

"That will be fine, Howell. Thank you." Howell positioned the coffee pot on the table near Melanie's plate. "Carl, what were you saying?"

"Mother. She's here. In the house." Carl glared at his sister. Melanie had never really seemed to love his mother. She was always a wicked child, conniving against Carl for their mother's affection.

"Why do you say that Carl? Do you mean she is alive? Is she living in this house?"

"Melanie, she isn't alive. We buried her body on Tuesday. I can't explain it. I know she is here." Melanie filled her cup again, put her napkin beside her plate, and pushed away from the table.

"Let's go into the parlour. I don't want Howell or Elizabeth to hear this conversation."

Melanie rose from the table, carrying her coffee cup with her. In silence, the two walked to the parlour. Strangely, Melanie sat down in her mother's favorite chair, the one that had always been reserved for their mother. Carl watched her position herself with deliberate consideration. Carl chose to sit by the window that overlooked the garden below. How well he could recall the yellow roses his mother had adored. Now the garden was overtaken by thorns, weeds that showed no mercy.

"Carl, did you not hear me? What is this talk of mother?" Melanie looked annoyed with Carl.

"Last night I heard her dancing in her room. She was sweeping around the floor and humming. I heard her."

"Do you realize what you are saying? Mother is dead, Carl. There is a new tomb stone in the cemetery out back. She's dead, Carl."

"Yes, I agree. She is dead. But Melanie, you have to believe me." Carl became distressed and anxious. "She is here in spirit or in ghost form or maybe in the flesh, I just don't know, but believe me Melanie. she is indeed here in this house."

Maybe in this room. Who knows?"

Melanie rose to her feet. "Carl, you must be kidding! You are asking me to believe in a ghost! A ghost, Carl! Wake up Carl, this is not a Saturday night late show!"

Carl began again. "I think I can prove it. Tonight I want you to go to her room with me. I can promise you that you will see my point."

Melanie glared at her brother. He had been such a gay child. Now that gaiety was gone. Carl remained stern, hoping to startle her with his seriousness.

"Fine. We'll see what is going on here." Melanie left her cup and saucer on the table, turned her back to Carl and walked from the room. Carl glanced out the window again, imagining the flowers as they once had been.

### THREE

Carl moved about his room straightening his things into an orderly fashion. Arranging his clothes within the large dusty closet, Carl recalled those days when his mother might have scurried around the

bedroom, separating his clothes, gathering his things, arranging the pillows on his bed. Those days seemed so much a part of yesterday, and yet so much a part of today.

Reaching for his book and pipe, Carl remembered the hidden doorway underneath the dresser in his mother's room. With fluid motion he threw the book on the bed, reached for his tobacco, and turned toward the door. Fumbling in his pocket for a match, Carl tried to light his pipe as he moved into the doorway and advanced down the hall.

Approaching the door of his mother's bedroom, Carl felt a particular gnawing in his stomach, a strange desire that drew him nearer to the door, yet encouraged him to escape into his own room again. The anticipation of visiting with his mother again forced Carl to swallow his childhood fears. Reaching for the door knob, Carl clutched the cold metal between shivering fingers. He turned the knob, letting the door ease open. The door squealed with discontent, creaking aloud under the pressure of Carl's weight. Carl chewed nervously on his pipe, its fire having diminished to only a dull odor. The door swung open letting Carl slip into the icy environment. The air seemed to hang around Carl's shoulders with heaviness.

He stood just inside the room, the enclosed atmosphere tightening around his body.

Suddenly the door swung shut, it's sweeping movement producing a gust of wind. Carl turned around quickly, reaching for the door knob. He jerked at the door only to discover that it had locked. Struggling in his pocket Carl fumbled for the key, and, with quivering hands, tried to place it in the keyhole. Desperately he worked the key, clanking it's metal against that of the keyhole. But the growing sense of despair that swelled in Carl's stomach seemed to assure him of his defeat. Slowly Carl released the knob, reached for his pipe, and placed both key and pipe in his jacket pocket. He turned to face the shrouded room, letting his hands fall aimlessly by his sides.

Carl could feel the shallow emptiness of the room, the void that seemed to exist. With rigid steps he moved toward the dresser where the hidden door was located. Suddenly, as if lit by an unseen hand, the wall candles by his mother's bed jumped with flame and fire, letting yellow streaks of heat dance above waxed sticks. Carl stared at the flames, his eyes swollen and bloodshot. He shivered at the thought of how the candles had

seemingly lit themselves. The reflection of the flames in Carl's eyes sent piercing beams of heat deep into his eye sockets.. Carl shook his head, hoping the lighted candles did not truly exist, but indeed, they only flickered more vigorously, casting ghostly shadows on the ceiling.

Carl stood stiffly, afraid to move. The room, so wickedly cold, so full of death, flashed blackened shadows about the walls. The mysterious charm the room had once possessed now turned to deceptive trickery. The room began to fill with song, a faint relaxed hum that swelled from within the walls, draining between the cracks in the stones, and drifting out into the room.

Carl could feel the haunting song creep up his body, swirl around his head, and smother him with terror. He gasped for air, sucking in the notes until they circulated through his body, filling his soul with the horror of the tune. The music swept over his being, lifting him off the ground and carrying him with the song. Carl breathed in spurts, too frightened to relax his lungs, too frightened to hold his breath within.

Suddenly from within the song emerged a floating wad of cloth, a pink sheer shroud that swirled



around the room. With swishing movements the shroud filled the atmosphere about Carl, the pink drape falling over his body and brushing against his skin. Carl, as if hypnotized by the spell, stared at the cloud, letting the dancing fabric evaporate about his head, only to reappear wrapped around his feet. The song encircled his body, the shroud swirled in rounds over his head. Carl had become so intoxicated that he closed his eyes, letting the rhythm move about the room, the drifting tune exploding inside his ears.

"Carl, are you okay? We've been looking all over for you." Melanie stood at the bedroom door.

Swinging around toward the voice, Carl glared at his sister. The room was still, the candles cold. Only the familiar staleness of the atmosphere remained.

"Oh, ah yes, Melanie. I was just checking on things in here." Carl moved toward the doorway, stepped past Melanie, and advanced down the hall toward his own room. He could feel the eyes of Melanie piercing through his flesh searching him for clues of insanity.

Reaching the warmth of his room, Carl stepped inside, slamming the door behind him. Quickly he fumbled in his pocket for his pipe; instead he felt



a certain softness. From his pocket Carl pulled out a transparent square of pink chiffon. Clutching the fabric in his fist Carl walked over to the window. Staring at the pink softness, he let the sunshine bake his temples, thawing the frozen chills that were sweeping through his body. He closed his eyes, rolling his head around on his neck. The clock in the foyer sounded four chimes.

#### FOUR

The knock on his door awakened Carl.

"Sir, your dinner has been ready for some time now. Are you well?"

Carl turned to look at the clock. It had hardly seemed like two hours of sleep; and yet, the hearty growling in his stomach assured him it was time for dinner.

"I was sleeping, Howell. I'll be right down."  
Carl lay on his bed until he heard Howell's footsteps disappear down the stairway. Sitting upright Carl straightened his clothing. Reaching into his

pocket, he checked to see that the fabric was in his possession. Carl let the fabric slip through his fingers for a moment or two, allowing the reality of the softness to be revived. Standing up, Carl walked toward the bathroom to wash his face.

"Carl, are you in here? Carl!" Melanie's voice called at the bedroom door. Carl turned and walked back toward the door. Just as he reached for the knob Melanie threw the door open. Her casual invasion of his privacy annoyed Carl.

"Carl, I've got it! I've got the will! The current will!" Melanie's voice held child-like qualities. Her eyes danced with excitement.

Reaching for the will Carl exclaimed, "Are you sure? Really sure?"

"Wait," Melanie whipped the envelope to her breast. "It is still unopened. I've called the lawyer. He'll be here at 8:00 tonight to examine it. Oh Carl, we've finally found it!"

He smiled at his sister. Her wide-eyed innocence reminded him of their youthful days of play. And yet, because he knew her convincing games she loved to play, Carl questioned her.

"Where was it?"

"Remember the loose stone in the fireplace? Mother was very original, don't you think?" Me-

lanie clutched the envelope. "You haven't had dinner, have you? Come; I'll walk downstairs with you."

Carl nodded and moved toward the door. He had checked that loose brick right after the lawyer had informed them that the will which they assumed was current was actually four years old. And, he had found nothing except stale spider webs.

"Hurry!" Melanie exclaimed. "This is all so exciting!"

## FIVE

Carl lay across his bed organizing his thoughts as he listened for the downstairs clock to chime. It's abrupt calling suddenly startled him. Eight bells beckoned him downstairs where Mr. Joseph H. Balliford would be waiting. The review of the missing will could now begin.

Hurriedly, Carl grabbed his pipe, slipped into his shoes, and brushed off his jacket. He advanced down the stairs quickly, having become

accustomed to the clank of his shoes against the planks of wood.

Sitting in a huge upholstered chair, Mr. Balliford wiped his glasses with a tissue. His moss-green suit seemed to work well with his personality. Both suit and character shared a disturbing air of dullness. His face looked weary, the creases around his fat cheeks falling in folds down to his mouth. Carl had always thought Mr. Balliford looked increasingly like a bulldog, his lower lip in a perpetual pout. He raised his eyes to greet Carl, nodded his head, and focused his attention on the glasses again.

Howell stood in the doorway between the study, where the reading would take place, and the music room. Carl spoke,

"Mr. Balliford, thank you for coming. Melanie feels she has discovered the last will that Mother wrote. I'm sure you can understand our urgency."

"Indeed, Mr. Tyron, I would much like to close this case myself." Balliford's manner had always lacked warmth.

"Howell, where is Melanie? I thought she would be the first one here?" Carl raised one eyebrow as he gazed at Howell.

"Sir, she was here only minutes before Mr.

Balliford arrived. She dashed back upstairs for something, I believe." Howell looked on as Carl walked back toward the lawyer.

"Mr. Balliford, Howell will get you anything you might like, coffee, tea, perhaps some Brandy. If you will excuse me, Ill call Melanie."

"That will be fine." Balliford tugged at his vest, trying to loosen the buttons that pulled tightly across his stomach.

Running up the stairs, Carl heard Mr. Balliford's deepened voice mumble something to Howell about a Brandy. As he approached the third floor Carl glanced down the hall toward Melanie's room. The door was standing open with no lights within. He moved down the hallway, stopping momentarily to light a wall candle.

"Melanie, let's go!" Carl called aloud.

Faintly, Carl thought he heard noise coming from the end of the hall near his mother's room. With quickened steps he moved down the hall. Standing outside the door of his mother's room, Carl heard the familiar hum, it's sweetness reaching out into the hall and beckoning him to come in. Slowly Carl opened the door, letting it's creaking sound compete with his mother's own song. Carl

stepped inside the room, turned toward the music box, and gasped with terror.

The flickering wall candles cast yellow shadows on the blood streaked body. Red thick drops of gore ran down the hanging corpse and splattered in a puddle at Carl's feet. The music danced in swirls around the room, slipping about the deathly skin. Melanie's eyes bulged from their sockets, her mouth hung open to allow the crimson stream to seep from under her tongue and down her chin. Her limp, ragged body hung from her neck where a pink chiffon knot caught her skin. Her head fell forward, her tangled hair clotted with a mass of blood. Her body swayed slightly from the chandelier, it's every turn being captured in silhouette on the room's peeling walls. Her skin was blue, tight and growing cold. The haunting tune sounded with delight; Melanie's body swayed almost in time with it's rhythm.

Carl stared at his sister. So deceitful she had been. He had known the will was a forgery and so, apparently, had his mother.

Melanie hung in all her glory. Her hands dangled like broken sticks at her side. The elbow protruded as though the bone might pierce through the drawn skin. The muscles of her arm

shrank under the skin, letting the excess blood ooze to the surface through the pores of her skin and trickle down to her fingertips, where, with careful timing, each drop fell to the floor.

The humming grew more loud, enclosing the room in a haunting song. Carl's mother sang more gleefully than ever before, her voice sweeping through the room and wrapping itself around the tattered body.

Carl closed his eyes. And the wickedness of the evening swallowed him up. As he hummed along with his mother's song, the ballerina music box opened itself and joined in the charming tune.



## THE HUNTER

A frozen crust of icy beauty stretched lazily across the barren land. Were it not for the graying trees stuck into the ice like sticks, there would be no interruptions across this glistening blanket. Though the wind swept daringly over the land and between the tree limbs, it's voice was almost silent. So still was this frozen ground that it hinted of stories of ghostly charm, moments of the past buried well beneath the snow. Perhaps the roots of the trees could feel the warm pulse of life far below the crusty surface.

Silence was broken only with the crush of man's boot against the snow, sounding as if the ice were in pain under the pressure of every step. Bratford stopped to quiet the snow's painful exclamation. Dressed in bearskin and leather, he hardly resembled a man. Pulled down to swallow up his ears was a black fur cap which briefly touched the collar of the massive bearskin coat. Bratford had shot the bear himself on a previous hunting expedition. The bear had since returned to Bratford much comfort, much warmth.

Thick tan boots laced up to his knees where they wrapped themselves around the leather trousers,



sealing the pantlegs against the bitter cold. Heavy gloves protected his hands from the blackening frost-bite. Strapped to his back was his bag, heavy with the essentials of life. Over one massive shoulder hung his rifle and around his waist, shells, to arm the weapon.

Bratford lowered the backpack to relieve the cramps in his shoulders. Weary from travel, Bratford rubbed his gloved hand against his aching flesh. Stretching his neck from side-to-side, he tried to relax the knotty feelings in his muscles. Every inch of his body seemed to pierce with fatigue. Looking toward Stoffan, Bratford motioned him to take a well-deserved rest.

Stoffan began opening the brass belt buckle that secured the sachel in place, allowing the pack to drop against the earth; a frozen earth. Rubbing his hands together as if to generate a flame, Stoffan stared about the snow-laden land. Wrapped in a coat of mud-colored buck, Stoffan resembled a deer standing erect. Were it not for the leather soled boots that disappeared underneath the fur coat, he might have rivaled a buck for it's mate's affection. His cap sat above his ears allowing thick brown hair to sweep around his face. Whiskers, sensitive to the powerful cold, stood

erect and at attention as if awaiting inspection. Only Stoffan's bushy beard distinguished the two men.

"Why are we stopping here?" Stoffan gazed across the icy wilderness. "There's no sign of food."

Bratford, the self-appointed leader of the pair, moved his head within the wooly collar, spanning the land in one slow sweep.

"See that tree?" Bratford pointed. "The limbs are badly broken. I'd say it was a mountain lion. Or a climber of some kind. He wouldn't be here if there was no food. Let's take a closer look. The freshness of the break in the branch will tell us how recently it was here."

Bratford moved toward the tree, Stoffan following in his footsteps only a few feet behind.

"Bratford, look out!" Stoffan fell to the ground covering his head with his arms. Sweeping through the air as if Nature had thrown it, a mountain lion descended toward Bratford. Powerful legs struck at the wind for one brief moment and then tore into the bearskin coat, shredding the black softness as if digging for the flesh hiding below.

The piercing cry of the cat quivered with rage,

echoing against the distant mountains as a death song. Bratford, his eyes swollen in terror, his mouth gasping for air, fought with the ice, trying to flee, to run, only to be humbled by Nature's white robe.

Again the cat cried, letting it's mouth close on Bratford's hand. With one quick snap of her head the animal tore off a mouthful of flesh, leather, bone and tissue. Laying helplessly on his back, Bratford felt only numbness as his opponent sought to kill her prey and then devour it. Bratford watched as she raised her powerful paw, and, closing his eyes, he saw his head roll aimlessly over the ice, trailing sweet blood for the cat to lick up. Bratford imagined the cat's thick raw tongue gulp at the blood-stained snow, letting the red life drain down into her throat, swallowing the bloody ice with gusty growls.

The sound of the shot pounded in Bratford's head, a fitting salute to one's own death. He no longer felt the weight of the animal pressed against his chest, only peace.

"Bratford!" Stoffan slapped his cheek. "Bratford! Don't try to move! I'll get the medical kit!" Stoffan's voice sounded faint to Bratford; the slap on the cheek seemed only a distant touch. He tried to open his eyes, but was confronted only with a misty

haze, a certain glare that separated him from Stoffan.

Stoffan came running toward the injured man.

"Bratford, just lie still. Don't try to talk or move."

Stoffan began pulling bandages from the emergency bag.

He crouched over Bratford, surveying the wounds. The

animal had torn into the vulnerable flesh with no

mercy.

"She....she came...ah...from.." Bratford spewed out the stuttering words, his saliva thick with clotting blood. The red wad in his throat fell back in his mouth. Bratford tried to cough, but unable to raise his head for relief, he squinted his eyes, strained his neck, and swallowed the mass of bloody slime.

"Hold still, Bratford! You can explain later. I've got to get the bandages in place." Stoffan wrapped rounds of cloth about Bratford's hand, pulling the knot tightly to aid in the clotting process.

Bratford lay helplessly on the frosty ground. His body seemed only an extension of the earth, an inanimate creature, a fixture. His could move only his chest allowing each breath of air to circulate briefly through his gut. His hand began to contract, drawing from within the muscles of his arm. Bratford bit his lower lip until it oozed with thinning blood, dribbling across his face and down his cheek. The pain

crept from within each finger, in deliberate slowness, as if a thorned limb was dragging through a blood vessel toward the shoulder. With caution the knifing agony crawled up his arm until Bratford retched with misery.

Stale, thick blood rose from his throat, spurted between his teeth, and sprayed onto the ground, its warmth melting the snow underneath.

Stoffan watched Bratford's shallow breathing, every gasp being a struggle. Stoffan realized that these wounds combined with possible internal injuries, would delay the expedition. Covering Bratford's body with a blanket, Stoffan decided not to move him for a while, giving the wounds a moment to begin clotting.

Lying beside Bratford's body, the rising and falling of the dying cat's chest remained unnoticed. Her eyes flickered frantically as she searched for her kitten. Twitching sporadically her muscles alternately relaxed, then tensed. She could feel the warm moist flow of life run from the corner of her mouth and drain quietly onto the snow. The dull sting of pain spread with eager through her hip, piercing deeply into the joint, that every warm tendon might be bathed in agony. She blinked her eyes and tried to capture the glint of sunlight reflected off the icy crust. But even the sunlight evaded her.

## TWO

"Was it worth it?" laughed Stoffan, tossing a bone over his shoulder. The campfire flickered delightedly while the two men hovered over the flame.

"No," muttered Bratford. His stare was fixed on the remaining meat hanging over the fire. Stoffan reached for the meat, jerking a section loose, chewing greedily. The rawness dripped down his chin.

With a fixed stare, Bratford watched his friend eat. Though the meal had been filling and necessary, the terror of that afternoon still had a strong grip on Bratford. The ache of his torn and ground hand was still a piercing sensation, running from his fingertips up into his shoulder. He could still sense the feel of the cat's mouth around his hand, jerking and snatching it about. Chewing that same cat's flesh now seemed a vital part of revenge. She had dutifully paid the price for her actions. Bratford clenched his teeth against the sting in his wrist, and drew his blanket tighter around him. Closing his eyes, he remembered the events at hand. Stoffan seemed content to wait several days before moving on; yet, Bratford realized how impractical that might be. The two had to check the traps just east of their current location before

starting homeward. If they delayed because of Bratford's condition, the storm might become worse. The possibility of becoming snowbound was not appealing to Bratford at all.

"Hey, don't fall asleep here. If you're tired, I'll help you move over by that tree." Stoffan was wiping his greasy mouth on his coat sleeve.

Bratford looked up, nodded to his friend, and began trying to stand erect. Stoffan jumped to his feet and grabbed Bratford from behind.

"Dammit, Stoffan! I can walk!" Bratford pulled away from the hunter, trying to progress on his own. His misdirected steps however, found him face down in the snow.

"So you can walk, huh?" Stoffan once again clutched his friend's body, guiding him to a large tree base.

"You'll be okay here. There's very little wind. I'll be right beside you. If there's anything you need...." Bratford glared up at Stoffan. It was not that he resented what his friend was trying to do for him, but rather that he resented everything that had happened. Instead of snapping at Stoffan, he positioned himself for sleep, holding his injured hand close to his body. Somehow the added warmth seemed soothing.



### THREE

The morning sun floated along the mountain's edge, it's bright arrival almost painful against the eyelids. Stoffan stirred in his sleeping bag, enjoying the dreamful coziness. Rolling over to face Bratford, Stoffan saw that his blankets had been abandoned under the tree. Stoffan sat up and, through half-parted eyes, gazed across the land. Bratford was moving toward him with the aid of a broken limb cane. The fur of his once soft and inviting coat was now a matted weave of clotted blood.

"If we get a good start, we can easily make it to the traps. The trees look thicker up ahead. Daylight will be our best advantage. Let's get packed." Bratford began moving about, trying to gather things up. His awkward movements made his progress very slow.

"You've got to be kidding!" Stoffan leaped out of his bag. "You can't go anywhere. Not for a day or two anyway! And then we're heading home! You need medical care."

"Look, I'll be okay. My hand is just a little numb, and I figure that is probably best. I can still handle my gun."

"I'm not moving! I'm not losing my best hunting buddy to some weird infection! And your ribs! Bratford, you know you've got a broken rib or two! For-



get it, friend! We're not going anywhere." Stoffan sat down on his bag with determination in his actions.

"You mean you're not going anywhere. I'm going to check the traps. We didn't travel two-hundred miles to be attacked by a mountain lion and then return home. We'll be loaded and ready to go by tomorrow morning. Now, are you coming with me?" Bratford stood his ground.

Stoffan glared at him, wondering if by defying him he could control him. He wanted to shake his friend by the shoulders, slap him until he could see the nonsense in what he was saying. Instead Stoffan rose to his feet, glared at the fur clad creature, and said,

"You win. I can't very well let you go alone. That would be murder. Just remember, this is your idea. I'll not be responsible for your self-imposed destruction."

Stoffan jerked up the sleeping bag and began rolling it up.

Bratford knew that Stoffan was right. His hand was swollen, the tightly wound bandages causing the blood to look as though it might burst through the skin. And yet, despite what Stoffan had said, he was determined to complete their mission and return home as quickly as possible. He felt sure that he could endure the journey east, only a day's walk away. He

only hoped that the burden of supplies on his back would become lighter as he progressed.

Within minutes the two were on their way, collars pulled high to combat the spiteful wind, caps pulled down low to aid the collars in battle. As they disappeared, two furry spots on a spotless landscape, the wind blew about the remains of last night's camp. Soon the white blanket was restored, leaving no evidence of any disturbance; no fingerprints gave mankind away.

Though the sun rose high into the clear atmosphere she offered no comfort to the hunters. For the bitter coldness below far outweighed the teasing warmth of the sun. Stoffan grew weary; Bratford grew more determined. By the late afternoon, the men were hungry, tired, and still five miles or more from the traps.

"Let's break." Bratford let his backpack fall to the ground. "Just a minute or two will give us a rest."

Stoffan readily joined his partner, surprised that the hard-driving man would allow rest whenever they were so close to their goal. Remembering Bratford's hand, Stoffan assumed that the journey was indeed becoming more than Bratford could handle.

"I want us to split up." Bratford began explain-

ing his plan. "If you continue to move northeast, and I move east, we can approach the traps from opposite sides and quickly check to see if there's anything there. Agreed?"

"Bratford, that's crazy! You know the hazards of hunting alone! It's crazy!" Stoffan stared at his hunting companion in disbelief.

"No it isn't, not at all. It's the best way for us to make rapid progress. Think about it. We can cover the traps twice as quickly."

"I know you well enough to know that if you've made up your mind, I'll have no choice in the matter. Okay, I'll agree. But Bratford, if anything goes wrong, signal me with a gunshot, twice in the air. Got that? I'll come as quickly as I can."

"And vice versa. Look Stoffan, I'll be very careful. You know I'm an experienced hunter. I'm not planning to get myself into trouble."

Stoffan looked dismayed. "Okay, let's get going."

#### FOUR

Bratford moved through the trees carefully, tracing his footsteps on the map in his mind. With every turn he stopped, thinking he had heard a cat. His mind wandered aimlessly as his eyes desperately searched over the drifts of snow. Bratford's attention was drawn suddenly upward as a bird fluttered overhead. He swung his loaded gun into position, trying to capture the wing in his sight, but the bird had vanished into the gray skys. "Dammit," Bratford muttered, lowering the gun with disgust. The familiar pain in his fingers danced up into the muscles of his arm. Carefully he switched the gun to the other arm, hoping he could effectively handle the weapon from his left hand.

Seeing a stump protected from Nature's nasty breath, Bratford decided to sit down long enough to collect his thoughts, establish his position, and rest his cramped shoulder. Falling down against the stump, he dropped his head back, letting the sun shine against his exposed cheeks. In near slumber, Bratford's head fell over against his shoulder. Jerking the tired neck muscles upright Bratford snapped to attention. And then he saw the goat.

A mountain goat crouched over by a tree just beyond a ridge of snow. Bratford thought his weariness might

have induced the vision, but no, it moved.

Bratford repositioned himself on one knee, carefully fingering the ammunition belt around his waist. Dropping the bullet into place, he slid the cartridge into the chamber. Slowly he raised the rifle, peering gallantly through the sight and down the barrel.

He fired. The goat fell over on it's side. Jumping to his feet Bratford reloaded his gun and fired again into the sky. Letting the gun fall, he clutched his injured hand and ran toward the kill.

Lying beside the tree the rhythmic rising and falling of his chest was hardly noticed. His eyes flickered frantically as he searched the land for Bratford. Stoffan felt the piercing pain burning in his hip, penetrating deep into the joint, that each tendon might be bathed in agony. He felt the steady trickle of moisture run from the corner of his mouth to leave a crimson stain in the snow. Stoffan blinked his eyes trying to catch one last glint of sunlight, but even the sunlight evaded him.

## THE MOUSE

Noisily the metal mouth clanked against the cold hard concrete, opening quickly to devour the trash. I swept into it, then snapping shut with the familiar clank. Glimpsing an idle cigarette butt just by the doorsteps of the Magic Shoppe, I moved down Main Street toward the wooden porch and clanked my metal mouth against the ground. Alertly it opened wide, swallowed the still smoking tobacco, and clanked to a close. Walt Disney would have been proud of my prowess.

Dressed in my white slacks, jacket, socks and shoes, I was a contrast against my can full of sticky ice cream wrappers, lipstick stained cigarette butts, and Magic Kingdom ticket stubs. Mickey would have it no other way.

"Damn you, George! Give me that damned camera! I swear you ain't got no sense at all!"

"So who are you, Maggie? Some damned camera expert?"

I swung around in time to see a dusty gray head duck low out of the reach of an irate woman. She rammed her fist toward the gentleman's temple, missing him only because his reflex was much too quick for her.

"George, give me the camera! Dammit, I'm gonna git a picture of that boy there. Maybe it'll teach

them kids at home to clean up after themselves once in a while." Greedily she snatched the camera out of his hand. George stood up, realizing, I suppose, that he had lost the battle. I watched his ears turn a delicate pink, and marveled at how my own ears must look. I was sure they were a deep, rich wine color. Jerking at my jacket sleeve, the woman was speaking to me.

"Hey boy, you don't mind if I take your picture, now do you? My youngens at home, they don't never pick up nothin. Let me just show them how a fine young man like you can do."

"Well, okay. I guess one picture is okay, ma'am."

I glared at this strange woman while she positioned me in front of the Magic Shoppe, straightened my cuff, told me to say cheese, and clicked the camera. Stocky and short, her body wiggled gently as she moved about, fat repositioning itself with her every breath. Her thin gray hair trailed around her ears, some of it sticking to her temples with sweat. She and Aunt Harriet had so much in common. The wide set eyes, slightly buldging, the small pointed nose, and the heavy pink lipstick caked onto thick dry lips. I had grown up with Aunt Harriet after my parents had been killed in a car accident. Her own son was two years older than me and quite an achiever. I had often wished to be



just like him. Strong, good-looking, athletic....

"I said, thank you boy, you can go about your sweeping now."

I watched the couple walk off, the fat little woman and the frail little man. He looked so pitiful, walking along and staring at the ground.

## TWO

My neck, weary and stiff, yearned to stretch, to look over the heads of the crowd, to see the floating yellow and red balloons so ingeniously crafted with Mickey Mouse ears. But instead I watched a fat lady drop peanut shells as she made her way to the Bordon's Old Fashioned Ice Cream Parlour on Main Street. I and my metal mouth followed her path like a bird following a trail of bread crumbs.

I glanced up at Cinderella's Castle. Eleven-fifty stared back at me from the huge gold-faced clock. That allowed me eight minutes to completely clear Main Street before the noonday parade. I picked up my



pace, anxious to clear the area of various debris. The tourists, aware of the approaching event, had already begun to situate themselves on the sidewalk, packed together like ill-arranged sardines. As the road cleared, I emerged as the lone star, walking gallantly down the street, my metal mouth clanking open and shut rhythmically, gathering carelessly placed garbage into the shiny little gadget, stopping only briefly to relieve the mouth of it's load into a nearby waste barrel. I had often wondered if the crowd, watching me retrace their steps down the street, was not amazed at the ease and grace with which I did my job, patiently correcting the destruction they had caused, proudly willing to restore harmony to Fantasyland. I'm sure they gazed at me with warmth, my red curly hair wisping about my face from underneath my white cap, my green-rimmed glasses sitting quietly on my nose. I, the conqueror, righted the wrong that they had caused. Grandly I moved down the street, enjoying the admiration. My Aunt would be proud.

Spying a juice bar stick just on the border of my territory, I took a deep breath, walked toward the culprit, and clanked my metal mouth open. With the brisk movement of a ballet dancer, I swept the stick into the mouth, clanked it shut, and turned to face the

cheering crowds. Overwhelmed by their admiration, I closed my eyes, lowered my head, and mumbled, "It was nothing; all in the line of duty."

"Yeah....yeah....Mickey!"

"Hey, here comes Mickey!"

"Mommy, Mommy look! It's Mickey!" A young freckle-faced girl screamed as she saw Mickey Mouse coming down the street, my freshly swept street, my street.

### THREE

A squattly little Puerto Rican family stood by the freshly painted rail that separated eager tourists from the hungry mallards, throwing hunks of probably stale bread to the green throats of noisy ducks.

"Carlos, put that down! Don't eat that!"

Big Mama slapped the hand of her youngest son, causing the bread to fall in the water. Junior started to cry and clutch wildly at his mother's nose. And why not? Her nose was full, broad at the base, hooked high on the bridge, and faintly purple in color. She

snatched at his hand, pushing him away from her snout, mumbling some wildness with her native tongue. Junior cried more loudly.

Big Mama, dashing in her red blousy tunic over yellow pants, leaned over, her fat dimpled cheeks swelling up underneath the parakeet colored pants, picked up Junior, and threw him aimlessly onto her shoulder, letting his drowling lips drip profusely down her back. She mumbled something about Fantasyland, and with her four children clutching at her legs, she steered the group toward Frontierland. Peering over the rail, I watched the ducks gulp down the soggy hunks of bread and wondered if they were audio-animatronics.

Ambling over to Space Mountain I saw what appeared to be a crumpled Coke cup wedged between the grating of a handrail. Disgustedly, I reached for the cup, only to discover that it was full of a gooey brown slime. Hearing the twuuuuu-it sound of someone spitting, I looked around just in time to see a tall skinny man, donning a goodguy hat, roll his wad of tobacco from one jaw to another, swirl saliva in his throat with a gutsy growl and spit a huge blob of brown slime onto Disney's snow white sidewalk. Having noticed my swollen eyes peering at the puddle, the Texan twanged, "Working hard, boy?" He smiled a dingy row of teeth

in my direction, and, tugging at his belt, pulled up his baggy pants.

"Honeypot, you promised me we could see the Country Bear Jamboree. Ain't we there now? I just cain't wait no longer! Wooo-weeee!" she squealed. "This shore is excitin, ain't it honeypot?"

She grabbed the Texan's arm, looking just like Daisy Mae, and tugged him off into the crowd. The taps on his studded boots rivaled my metal mouth for attention. I walked to Tomorrowland Terrace to ask for paper towels.

#### FOUR

"Daddy, Daddy, there's Donald!"

"Can we make Donald's picture, Daddy?"

"Well Martha, now ain't that cute? Shore is a fair likeness of a real duck, ain't it? All dressed up in that thar red jacket! I swear, that Walt Disney was a real sharp, I mean a REAL sharp buddy. Just look at that Martha!"

"Duck, you're just as cute as they come! Heh, heh, don't you know it?" Some short, mustached man giggled away, rubbing the soft tail feathers with apparent delight.

"Donald, can you sign my t-shirt?" A blue-eyed little boy yanked wildly at his shirt, getting it wound about his shoulders.

"Hey duck, you shore got skinny legs!" A young, maybe thirteen, boy, much too tall for his age, kicked Donald hard in the shin. I watched to catch Donald's reaction, and in true Disney style, Donald chuckled and patted the punk on the head.

I had never really understood why everyone loved that awkward animal at all. He certainly wasn't attractive, not compared to myself, anyway. But the real mystery centered around the king, the master of the place, the mouse himself, Mickey. I wondered why Mickey never appeared during the daylight hours. He shared a striking resemblance to my cousin. Mickey was grand, overwhelming, and loved by all. Like my cousin, Mickey could have been a doctor, no, a brain surgeon! Even Donald's spotlight faded in the presence of the mouse.

"Dumb duck!" Some child stuck her fingers up Donald's nostrils, large and open, situated high in Donald's beak. Still, he chuckled.

The gentleman standing next to me threw down his cigar, proclaiming, "Hell, that duck sure looked real to me, just like he stepped out of a cartoon!"<sup>6</sup> He chuckled and slapped me on the back.

"Must be something, huh boy, working here? Like a different world every day, I bet..Right boy?"

"Huh? Ah, sir?" I remembered my basic training and hoped no supervisor had heard me say 'huh'.

"I said this place is magic."

"Yes sir."

"What's that boy?"

"Yes sir, magic."

"You all just part of the magic, boy. Heh, you ain't animated too, are you boy?" The husky man, rolling in his laughter, pinched my left arm just to make sure.

I smiled while my arm stung. Banging my metal mouth against the cement, I scooped up the cigar and I'm almost sure I heard my mouth cough.

Swiftly I felt the move of the crowd pushing past me. Everyone seemed to be going in a different direction. Each carried a large Mickey Mouse plastic bag filled with at least one pair of monogrammed MM ears, and an array of assorted odds and ends. Dressed in the usual casual attire, blue jeans and shirts, the ensemble often featured a sun-visor, farmer's cap, or,

for the ladies, a big brimmed straw hat. Most of the people were either pushing or pulling kids along as though they were extensions of their own bodies, an unusual growth at the end of their arm. And yet, somehow, the crowd was always different.

"Pearl, this ain't no Cowland. You brung me over here deliberate, hain't you? You just want me to take you to them damn Tiki Birds again, don't you?"

"Horace, I ain't no tourguide! This place is so durn big, I reckon anybody can git turned around! Sir, you got any idea where Cowland is?"

The sharp metal made a goose-pimple sound against the chair leg as I scraped diligently at a wad of Blow-Pop innocently stuck to the bottom of the pink and white striped Sara Lee Bakeshop chair.

"I said, is this Cowland, sir?"

I glanced over my shoulder and realized that this woman was talking to me. 'Sir!'. No one called me 'Sir', only 'boy'. I took an immediate liking to her. Standing up, I replied,

"No ma'am."

Realizing that her wincing face was caused by the gooey string of pink that dangled between my hand and the chair bottom, I quickly snatched my hand behind my back. The gum stuck itself securely to the belt of my jacket.



"Ah, no ma'am. Disney World doesn't have one."  
I muttered.

"One what, sir?"

"Oh, ah, Disney doesn't have a Cowland, ma'am.  
If you're looking for Adventureland....." I pointed  
off to the left with my short handled broom.

"They got the Diamond Horeshow?" Her voice  
rang with excitement.

"No, ma'am. That's the Diamond Horeshoe Revue.  
It's in Frontierland. You're headed for Adventureland."

"Well, what they got there in Adventureland?  
Some swinging adventure, I hope!" Her smile widened  
and she winked at me.

"Ahhhh, well," I cleared my throat. "Well,  
adventures there include the Jungle Cruise, Pirates of  
the Carribean, and the Tiki Birds, ma'am."

"None of them damn Tiki Birds!" screamed her  
companion, or maybe husband, or friend, or even her  
brother.

The woman looked undisturbed by his remark. "Sir,  
how can we get to the saloon show?"

"That's in Frontierland, ma'am. Around the Castle  
and to your left."

I watched the couple stride off through the  
crowd, the lady's husky body stiffly moving away.  
I wondered if she had ever played football, or maybe she

had been a wrestler. She had had that brisk dark mustache on her upper lip that characterizes some husky women. And such dark eyes she had possessed.

Standing in place, I wondered which way to move. Slowly I squatted letting the gum lower down to the level of the chair leg, and looked around for the napkin dispenser.

## FIVE

Six o'clock. Tourists were beginning to clear the streets again. At six-thirty, Mickey would work his way down Main Street around Cinderella's Castle and into Fantasyland, where he would miraculously disappear behind a fence somewhere. Dutifully I moved out into the street clanking my metal mouth against the pavement, gathering wadded napkins. I gazed up toward the Castle to check my time, but my view was blocked by a mass of thick straight blonde hair toppling down over bare shoulders. There stood a lady, no... a woman, her face narrow, her cheek bones high, and

her lips deliciously full. I ran my eyes across her neck, long and lean, and down to her swollen breasts, pressing warmly against a little knit top. Her arms were long and tanned, slightly taunt, yet, soft looking. Her midriff was lean, her belly button deep. Tight jeans wrapped her hips in faded blue. I stared and wondered what her legs might look like. Long, very long.

Bringing my eyes back up the body, across the tummy, the breasts, the neck, I wondered what it would be like to catch her gazing at me, smiling toward me with those delicious lips. I stared at her neck preparing myself for the moment when our eyes would meet, that golden moment when bells ring and birds sing. Slowly I raised my eyes and looked into her huge blue eyes. She smiled delightedly.

"Here he comes!" she screamed.

Abruptly I glanced over my shoulder and saw those familiar ears coming our way.

The music grew louder as the parade approached. Mickey rode on the first float, marching in place to 'Who's The Leader Of The Band', tossing his cane and top hat about. Tonight he was wearing tails, black and formal. His white ruffled shirt was so cleaned and starched that you could hear it crack with his every movement. Mickey swung his plastered smile from side-

to-side, waving at the crowd and throwing kisses to the children. As the parade approached, the music grew louder and louder.

The crowd cheered and screamed, singing with the music, clapping their hands on the off-beat, while the Mouse marched, lifting one stick leg, then the other.

Suddenly some little girl standing a few feet from me darted out to Mickey screaming, "Mickey, Mickey, Mickey!" Before anyone could stop her, she climbed up on the float and clutched at Mickey's leg. The Mouse grabbed her hands and the two danced around the float.

"Yeah, Mickey! We love you Mickey!" The crowd cheered louder. Seeing the little girl with Mickey was just too much for the crowd. Suddenly, children from everywhere became climbing up the float, screaming and singing aloud. Anxious to touch the real life mouse, the kids began to tug at Mickey, flinging his cane and top hat into the crowds below.

Someone grabbed his jacket and tore it off. All the children snatched at it trying to grab a section. Security guards began trying to pull the children off, only to be shoved aside and kicked by flying legs and arms.

"Who's the leader of the band....." the music played.

A tall lanky boy, towering over the heads of the other children, jerked away from a security guard, falling back against Mickey. Abruptly Mickey and his attacker fell to the floor. Mickey tried to push himself upright, but he was smothered by children. Suddenly a child screamed. Without notice, Mickey's head popped off, fell over the side of the float, and rolled to a rest beside my metal mouth.

I looked down at the plastic head with it's plastered smile staring up at me, and I'm almost certain I heard my metal mouth open.