

2025 BC GATOR SR GAMES & SILVERARTS LITERARY ARTS

Sub-Category			Title	Place
Short Story				
	Chuck	Bins	The Snare	1 st
	Paul	Buckley	Lucky	2 nd
	Ken	Formalarie	Tennessee Waltz	
	Eric	Mens	A Walk in the Woods	
	Janet	Meuwissen	Let's Have A Party	
	Janet	Stiegler	A King's Naked Ambition	
	Janet	Stiegler	Two and Two Make Five	3 rd

THE SNARE
SHORT STORY
BY CHUCK BINS

The Snare

By Charles Bins

In the wilderness of Tennessee, tucked in a hollow at the base of the Appalachian Mountains, a black bear rolls to her side. A crack of light stirs her slumber. As she stretches, a sour note in her stomach builds into a pang.

Pushing herself from darkness, she stands and tips her nose to the fall breeze: Damp leaves, deer droppings, a campfire. Her two cubs brush against her. She moves into a trot, remembering dreams of fall when deer hunters come hiding snacks in tents and meat in plastic boxes. With a swipe, tents tear like bark, men run. Some boxes flip open. Others require effort but can give way without a shot. The meat's not warm but can fill cravings and feed cubs.

As she trots toward the smoke, her cubs try to keep up. Her mouth is watering and her tongue wags, tasting the past. A startled doe raises its tail and lopes away. The bear, intent on her goal, does not react. Further on, three crows zigzag and caw overhead, signaling warning.



She moves into a trot, remembering dreams of fall when deer hunters come hiding snacks in tents and meat in plastic boxes. Photo by [Jessica Weiller](#) on [Unsplash](#)

* * * *

Walter Dakota had lived many lives before he was born, for his Cherokee blood ran strong. He learned the old ways from his grandfather, whose own father had been an elder and medicine man. His grandfather taught him how to track an animal and nature's secrets, that of fire and water, of milk thistle, and the bark of oak and willow. His parents had moved to New York for a better opportunity. When Walter and his younger brother started school, his mother became an expert seamstress and soon tailored suits for men who handled money and power. His father earned a good living in the ironworkers' union, walking girders in the sky despite the weather. He taught Walter the way of the Cherokee.

In elementary school, Walter got into fights too many times. Once on the way home, two boys pushed his brother into a bush. One boy left with a fat lip, the other, a black eye. Another time, an older boy snatched his Cleveland cap and started calling him "redskin." Before the boy could say it a third time, Walter grabbed his shoulders and pushed him backwards onto the sidewalk. In 8th grade, he got baited into fights three times in a month. After doling out bloody noses, the other kids said he was on the "warpath." Nobody messed with Walter Dakota after that.

He had set his eyes on Cindy his freshman year, who, in his opinion, was the cutest cheerleader. Because he was shy around girls, he tried out for the baseball team. He started at second base, but really wanted to play pitcher to be sure she would notice. The coach gave him a chance sophomore year, and his fastball was so fast, he beat out six others for starter. He made friends with some teammates, and the coach often let him pitch five innings.

Walter took Cindy to the junior prom, but after dating her a few times, he didn't find her as enchanting as he originally imagined, and they went their separate ways.

That summer under the willow, his grandfather spoke as they whittled hardwood crosses. "Learn the hearts and minds of those around you to understand your own, Little Bear, and wisdom will show you her way."

As Walter matured, he awakened to nature and the nature of those around him. He delved into plants and biology the way his classmates jumped into video games. He gravitated to pharmacology, and after graduating from New York University, he landed a job at a Manhattan pharmacy. The wilderness still whispered to him like an ancestor, and he spent every vacation fishing and hunting deer. Not surprisingly, ten years at a chain pharmacy in "the city that never sleeps" was enough. He built a cabin near the Cherokee National Forest in eastern Tennessee and opened his own drugstore.

The tail of a recession wasn't the best time to open a neighborhood pharmacy, but few knew it then. In any case, Walter was fiercely independent, and no one could convince him otherwise. His family knew Little Bear must make his own mistakes and they hoped he could hit the curve balls.

Life proved his parents right: Little Bear was a better pharmacist than businessman. At first, he struggled to build customers and pay the rent. He had two decent years, but across the country, chain stores were undercutting local pharmacies. Six years in, Walter's was one of the last neighborhood drugstores still standing. While he enjoyed his customers, he was fighting to breathe. He knew how Custer felt as the Cheyenne swooped in to take scalps and bleed men dry.

It had been another slow week, and today was the first day of deer season. Walter packed his Jeep and deer rifle and headed for his spot near the Tellico River. He fell asleep to the sound of an owl and awoke to the cawing of crows. Far off, he heard the growl of a bear followed by moaning. Suddenly alert, he pushed himself from his sleeping bag, donned his clothes, and snatched his loaded 6.5 Creedmoor.

* * * *

Near the Tellico, bear hunts were on alternate weeks in the fall. But this was the last day of an off week, so Walter thought a bear might have been attacked, but by what? As he trotted along the path, he detected movement. He slipped behind a rock to survey the scene. An adult bear paced in front of a large oak, yanking its leg. A thick, plastic-clad cable tied to the tree had snared its ankle and tightened with each tug. Two cubs played near an overturned bucket that had held bait.

It pained Walter to see the bear struggling. He hunted small game and overpopulated deer, but never bear. They were fierce animals, but also majestic. Like him, they belonged to the forest. It angered him that the cubs would be left alone. It angered him more because females with cubs were off limits, part of the reason traps were illegal.

Walter waited until the groans subsided, but still no one came. Tuning into his surroundings, he detected the faint smell of fire. He followed a winding trail downhill some distance before coming upon two young men with sparse beards frying eggs outside their tent. Wondering if they could be the trappers, he inquired about their hunting habits, their shotguns and ammo until he was satisfied that they were just hunting small game. Finally he asked, "Heard anything strange this mornin'?"

The blond-haired kid wiped egg on his sleeve and pointed. "Ya, up there. Sounded awful. Hope it stays the hell away."

"Know what it was?" The dark-haired kid with the blue eyes wanted to know.

"A bear caught a doe in some brambles. She's got cubs and is fightin' mean. Better stay out of her way."

As Walter stepped away, he felt sure about the boys, but doubled back quick to the snare, realizing someone else could be around. When he arrived, the bear was slumped and motionless. Then one of the cubs licked her face and nudged her awake. He decided it was more likely that the trap had been set yesterday, and the trapper would return before dawn to claim his ill-begotten trophy. With the mother laid waste, the cubs would likely be torn apart by coyotes. Walter couldn't let that happen.

He raced to his Jeep. If he were lucky, when he reached the main road he could reach Fred Baker, the county vet, and return in under two hours. Walter had to drive several miles to pick up a cell tower, but Baker did him one better. He'd head to Walter's parking area with darts full of ketamine and alpha-2 sedative, and he'd contact warden Wallace on the way.

Baker knew Wade Wallace was more desk jockey than outdoorsman. Should the man ever be too far from a snack machine, he'd be in danger of shock. He asked Wallace for a walkie-talkie, then plunged ahead with Walter. The warden called after them: "I'll radio base and catch up with you."

Walter led the silent dash, possessed by nagging doubt. The area seemed quiet as they closed in, but they stopped behind the rock. Walter pointed. Two men were approaching the clearing with shotguns. It was the boys. He motioned to Baker then crept to the path and hailed them.

"Thought I warned you two to stay away."

"Just taking a look, mister. Don't see any deer though. A doe you said?"

The bear grizzled, and Walter gave them a wan smile. "Can't be too sure about folk these days. -- That your snare kit?"

The blond-haired boy scrunched his lips. "If I said 'yes,' would you back off?"

"Can't do that."

The blue-eyed boy chimed in. "Know how much that hide's worth, mister? We'll split it."

"Shut up, Will," Blondie said.

Walter shot Blondie a look. "I'm not interested in the hide or the money. That bear's goin' free."

Blondie raised his 12-gauge. "No need to split with you then. We got two guns to your one."

The bear growled again in protest.

"Easy now. A hide's not worth killing over, gents. And it's not gonna come to that 'cause here's the truth: See my friend behind that rock? He's got a gun trained on you with enough tranquilizer to take down a 400 lb. bear. Of course, you only weigh, what, 150 pounds? Not sure we'd revive you."

"So we're even then..."

"Nope, not even close. The warden's not more than 5 minutes off. Even if you killed us both, which I sincerely doubt, you'd be unconscious. And even if Will here had time for skinnin', he'd have to choose which to carry out, the bear's hide or yours."

Blondie spit on the ground. "What if we just kill you both then and wait for the warden."

Walter glanced at Will and noticed his barrel wavering. "That's a long shot. And I don't think your friend is down with killin' people, are you Will?"

"Don't say a word, Will... What do you suggest then?"

"I'd say it's your lucky day... You boys unload your weapons, leave your ammo and run. Never come back to Cherokee, and it'll be like nothing ever happened."

"If we unload, how do we know you won't just hold us for the warden?"

"You don't, but if the warden gets here first, all bets are off."

Will started ejecting his slugs first, and then they both dumped their shells in a pile.

"Now crack your barrels open and run along -- quick like a bunny." Walter watched them scamper out of sight, then started picking up shells. He shouted to Baker: "Hey doc, shoot the bear already."

"What're we gonna tell the warden?"

"We've known each other a long time, Fred, and you know what? Nothing happened here, OK?"

“You think they’ll try it again somewhere else?”

“It’s possible. But they’re young, and today they got a jolt of God. And hey, it’s not just them or the bear that got away today.”

That day on the ride home, Walter made the best decision of his life. He’d sell his store to the highest bidder and become one of the best game wardens in the history of Cherokee National Forest.

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Lucky
Short Story
By
Paul Buckley

Lucky

It was a busy fall day at Sam's Service Station. Sam Adams and his help, Sid Thorn, were on the go from the time they opened at 6 A.M. until they closed at nine o'clock that night. It was not until about an hour before Sam Locked up that he noticed the old dog watching every car that drove in. As Sam tells it, he would get up from under the tire rack, stand there with his tail wagging hopefully, and then sort of sag and go back to his spot. Guess somebody just went off and left him there. Wasn't that a rotten thing to do?

In a small town like Pomeroy, filling stations don't open until noon on Sundays, and when I pulled into Sam's about 1 P.M., the old dog was still under the tire rack, still watching every car expectantly. Sam had opened a can of dog food for him and given him a pan of water, but outside of a few laps of water, nothing was touched. He looked like a cross between a black lab and a German Shephard, a smart looking old character with some grey in his muzzle. But he had a hurt and puzzled look about him that was hard to take.

"What are you going to do with him, Sam? I asked. "Darned if I know. I don't dare bring home another dog or Mary will leave me flat. And Sid's wife has a house full of cats and you know what will happen if I hand him over to the county dog catcher." He sighed. Then he added "Hey, how about you?" "I'd be glad to take him, but Doc Miller says Mom's bronchial asthma- or whatever you call it is aggravated by the dog hair in or around the house."

So, I left Sam's place not feeling great about anything at all. The next morning on my way to work, I almost halted to look as I drove by the station. There he was under the tire rack, watching every car. Although it was really none of my business, I stopped in again at noon on

my way home for lunch. "Well, he ate a little this morning." Sam said. "But he's still watching every car. Any ideas?"

As we stood there looking at each other, who should drive up to the pumps but old Bill Green, wearing his usual scowl. "Mean Bill Green" they called him, but not to his face, I can tell you. Big as a house and strong as an ox, he was somewhat feared and grudgingly respected by almost everyone in town. Usually a silent old sourpuss with an occasional outburst of temper, he seemed mad at the world and just about everybody in it. He lived much to himself ever since his wife up and left him years ago, just after he got back from Korea. He did a little trapping, odd jobs, and a lot of duck hunting, but nobody really knew him.

As the old dog came out to check Bill's truck, I noticed that Bill had two nice mallard drakes in the back together with his rolled-up duck blind and some decoys. The dog was about to turn around, disappointed one more time when he stopped short and made two audible sniffs. He had winded the ducks and suddenly rose up with his front paws on the tailgate of the truck and took a look for himself.

"Hey, get out of there." Bill snarled as he climbed out of the truck. The old dog looked at him sadly for a moment, dropped to all four, and eased slowly back to the tire rack. "Where did you get that old mutt?" Bill muttered as Sam picked up the gas hose. "Somebody just left him here." Sam said. Bill merely grunted, "Do you think he's a retriever?" "Sure looks like one," Sam answered. "Why don't you try him?" Me? What do I want with an old mutt like that?" He looked over at the dog, who was watching them both with his ears up, almost as though he knew what they were talking about.

“How much?” Bill asked. “Nothing. Whoever he belonged to just went off and left him.” After a long pause, Bill said almost too quietly to hear, “Yeah, I know how that is.” Then he stepped back from the truck, looked over to the dog, and called in his rough voice, “Hey, boy. Come on, old black dog. Let’s see if you can find that mallard I put down this morning.”

And then as though he’d been waiting, the dog got up, trotted over to the truck, and with an almost youthful bounce, jumped up into the truck. And then went to find that mallard.

Going by Sam’s again that morning. I was saddened to see the old dog back in his spot under the tire rack. Guess it hadn’t worked out between him and Bill Green. Too bad, I thought.

Early the next morning, I noticed that my right front tire needed some air, so I’m back at Sam’s just in time to see Bill Green drive in, jerk his truck to a stop, and looking madder than ever, head for the office where I could hear him complaining loudly to Sam.

“Some dog you loaned me yesterday. Found that mallard right off, but when I tried to take him out to the point, he just took off and left me. I’ve had enough of that kind of treatment. Never mind about his wanting to get back here. He left me.”

Then I noticed that Bill had dropped a glove on his angry march to the office. I watched the old dog pick it up off the blacktop, walk over to the truck, and wait patiently for Bill. When Bill arrived, there sat the old dog, gazing up at him with the glove in his mouth and a pleading look in his eyes. “Now what?” Bill asked. And glowering down at the dog, he snatched the glove out of its mouth, stood there for a long moment, sighed deeply, and said, “Okay. Looks like our luck has finally changed.” Another long pause, then, “Come on, Lucky, get in the truck. Let’s go home.”

As Lucky started to walk around to the back, Bill stopped him, opened the cab door, and in one bounce, Lucky was on the front seat. And when Bill got in, Lucky tried to give his new boss a big wet kiss. Then we saw Bill actually laugh and gently push him away.

So as Sam and I stood there grinning like a couple of kids, we watched Mean Bill Green and his new dog, Lucky, go down the road.

TENNESSE WALTZ

SHORT STORY

KEN FORMALARIE

It blew through the trees, rustling the leaves, making them whisper, leaving just as quickly as it came. Mountain breezes are just so in the stillness of July heat. Evening found us sitting on the quaintly fashioned, log-made porch rockers that matched our rented log cabin. We were seeking relief from the day's oppressive high temperatures. The mere thought of another breeze coming through filled us with anticipation like young lovers awaiting their next chance encounter. It gave Maddie, my lifetime love, the opportunity to share with me her simple joys found in nature. I felt joy as she did when she brought my attention to a chipmunk foraging before us on the wood's edge. I cherished these moments of respite with her because they soothed my busy mind that never stopped humming. Despite this, Crystal, a native of these Tennessee Smoky Mountains, lingered in my thoughts. Her eyes and smile alone had captured my heart. Our introduction had been brief, and I would likely never see her again, but she remained in this moment as one of life's inexplicable mysteries.

Crystal was the "Mistress of Tastings" at the Tennessee Legend, a well-known distillery of Southern Corn Mash Bourbons, Liqueurs, and the historically infamous "Moonshine." She stood behind a long counter hosting those tastings, acting as a master trained in the fine arts. This is where Maddie and I met her. After she greeted us, she asked to see our IDs, which was obligatory for anyone wishing to partake of these Tennessee libations. While she stood viewing my ID, I felt foolish; it is obvious from my appearance that I am old!

When done, she looked up and said, "Thank you, Benjamin, I love North Carolina."
I answered back, "Please call me Ben."

She smiled sweetly, while handing my ID back to me, revealing a slight dimple on her cheek. "Interesting coincidence," she said, "You and I were both born on New Year's Day!"

"How unusual," I told her. "It is rare for me to meet other people who share my birthdate."

"Well, if you find that unusual," she said playfully, "try this, I have a half-brother born on January 1st."

"Strange coincidence," I thought quietly, she now had my full attention. Before I could respond, another customer walked up to the counter seeking Bourbon samples, interrupting my conversation with Crystal. It was a welcome distraction, giving me pause to ponder Crystal's noted coincidences! When she turned back toward me, with that sweet dimple smile, bright blue eyes, and silky black hair, my conversation

opened up to her like a leaking faucet. I told her of my unpleasant fate to be born the second baby on that New Year's Day.

I shared, "It gave my mother an opening to remind me of my tardy arrival, which deprived her of the town's gift to the firstborn: a \$100 savings bond and a year's supply of diapers." I added, "Mom would tell this story to anyone who would listen, even strangers!"

"Well Dang, ain't that something!" Crystal exclaimed with surprise, "I was born the second baby on that New Year's Day in my town. I guess we both missed the glory of being the firstborn."

Strangely, she then began jokingly mimicking me. She stood with her hands on her hips, sporting a stern look like a stage actor, declaring, "Why was it my fault? *You* could have pushed harder!" It was obvious she was channeling me speaking to my mother!

I found her manner of flirting endearing. Her relaxed tone and ease of comments made me chuckle, but I settled myself back to the task that brought us here. I told her, "I have a son-in-law in the Marine Corps for whom I wish to buy a gift of Bourbon. Could you help me make a selection suited to military tastes?"

She looked at me surprised, eyes wide open and no smile. "Ben," she said softly, "I also have a son-in-law in the Marine Corps, so I would be happy to help."

This newest coincidence threw both of us off balance as we traveled together down this 'rabbit hole.'

I let out a nervous laugh, asking, "Really?" It was starting to feel eerie. Crystal and I were experiencing something "Other Worldly." I wondered where Maddie was and what she thought of all this. "I need a witness," I thought to myself. I had become so mesmerized in conversation with Crystal that I had lost track of Maddie, standing right beside me.

I tried to hide my surprise by asking Crystal, "Did being born on New Year's Day make you feel like you missed out on having a real birthday?"

"Well, I have to tell ya, my fiancé was born on Christmas Day, true birthday death", she said, "Which allows me to feel sorrier for him than for myself."

"Ouch!" I said almost reflexively. This comment kept us locked in each other's eyes as if we were co-actors in a stage play! I could not help but wonder what the odds were of two strangers connecting this way over a stream of similar fates and events. My newfound sense of familiarity with Crystal left me feeling

unsure of myself. Her string of parallel coincidences with me pulled away my familiar safety nets, leaving me searching for a safe place to land. Despite my confusion, I politely smiled at Crystal, allowing her to continue as our taste mistress. She began deftly suggesting samples in startling combinations that displayed her virtuosity as a tasting host.

I was now observing Crystal like a student attending class, watching her finesse Maddie and me through sample tastings. As she did so, my mind wandered back to contemplation over our shared coincidences...I nearly drowned in my thoughts. That is when my inner detective took over.

I reasoned that Crystal having a half-brother could have meant something separated her parents, or perhaps something went foul in her marriage to have a grown-married daughter and a fiancé, or she never married and raised a child out of wedlock. "Her appearance was misleading; she looks young," I mused, "So she must have had her daughter at a young age. Either that or the consumption of Tennessee Bourbon might have magical properties unknown to me that keep one looking youthful, which would suggest Crystal regularly imbibed." Such was the nature of my mental wonderings...

The common thread holding my thoughts in place was that she intrigued me! I did not want to embarrass Crystal or myself by asking more questions of this "familiar stranger," but her life's story kept churning in my thoughts. I continued watching her interact with Maddie over Bourbon tastes, quietly wondering if Crystal detected how smitten I had become with her. Maddie, Lord loves her, appeared bemused by all of the conversation, gleefully participating in her tastings. I settled on the ambiguous conclusion that random, unexpected events will happen at any age to anyone, so why not just enjoy the ride? I surmised that Maddie recognized this as a rare opportunity to have fun. I felt we were acting childlike and silly with little money while Crystal persuaded us to taste Bourbons, each one more expensive than the last.

Suddenly, the floor dropped! Quite unexpectedly, Crystal announced, "If you buy 6 bottles you will get a 10% discount, if you buy 12 or more we can apply 20% off!"

Her words landed like a heavy slap, shattering my euphoria! "How rude!" I thought to myself. I instantly saw Crystal in a transformed persona. "Game on!" I thought quietly. This fellow "Capricorn," with her statement on discounts, had just challenged me to a duel. I calculated to win, one of us would have to anticipate the moves of the other and then act with swifter thoughts!

I looked up and away from the bourbon list on the counter, staring directly into Crystal's eyes, explaining that "Maddie and I are both retired," subtly adding, "I worked in sales through most of my career." At this point, I felt we were engaged in a familiar game I had spent more than half of my working life playing, thus fancying myself a worthy opponent. My instinct was to feign disinterest in her spiel, making her work harder to sell me more booze and then buy less! "Who would be the winner then?"

"What did you sell?" Chrystal asked.

"Busted!" I thought to myself. The nature of her question felt designed to throw me off balance. I suspected she was deploying a counter tactic to my previous comments, to toy with me as her prey, slowing down her approach before executing the kill.

Before answering, I gazed into Crystal's beautiful blue eyes while she waited for my response. I wondered if she held the same curiosity about me as I did about her. Perhaps the bourbon affecting me allowed this lingering euphoria, but the haze passed quickly. I wished I could respond to her query with something like, "Oh, I was a diamond wholesaler, you know, making my living in a gritty daily contest of wit and will," but she would have quickly ripped that lie away from me. So, I did what I always do best: I told the truth!

"I sold wholesale supplies to Greenhouse Growers, and retail supplies for Garden Centers, throughout the great states of North and South Carolina," I stated proudly, while feeling my nerves pinching my brain.

"Now that's different," came her response.

At that moment, I had an epiphany that "simple truth" may get us through most situations, but in my case, it was woefully inadequate to shield me from the thirst of someone determined to wipe my defenses clean! She knew it, and I knew it. I was not surprised when she doubled down, putting more bottles up on the counter, saying, "Y'all have not had the best yet, try this!"

Challenge on, taste we did! Up to now, this stuff had been clean and smooth going down with no afterburn, possessed with the hallmark trait of sneaking up on us shortly afterward, dulling our senses, and setting us to drifting. However, this new stuff was high-proof Bourbon we were snorting! Crystal had previously treated us to various whiskey flavors: cinnamon, coconut, and coffee flavor, mixing them with targeted liqueurs to enhance and change the flavor. We had already passed by our fifth tasting when she

put her so-called "best" on the counter. This last one smelled and tasted like Jet fuel, pure alcohol, 120 proof, no flavor! I glanced at Maddie, wondering if she liked her taste, noticing she winced at it going down. She appeared to now have an involuntary smile permanently affixed. She kept pushing her tongue at her lips as though she was unable to feel them. Then she began staring, with slightly glazed eyes, at the wall of bottles behind the counter.

Could this have been Crystal's calculated next move in our game? Perhaps, but it seemed more likely she was so practiced at her art that she drew sadistic satisfaction at watching it work for her every time. Either way, I remained stoic, determined to press on when God smiled upon us sending another customer in, who perched against the counter beside me. Oddly, without speaking a word, Maddie and I both took this as an opening to leave the counter while Crystal, looking at me the whole time, reluctantly tended to her newest prey.

As we walked away, I observed a different woman behind the counter now gathering sealed bottles by the register, all of which were the bourbon flavors we had been sampling. Teamwork, "nice play", I thought to myself.

Maddie parted from me and wandered out among the showroom's retail shelves, viewing merchandise while I went directly over to the see-through clear glass wall. On the other side sat the distilling equipment, huge copper-colored holding tanks, more likely brass, all wired and plumbed with twisted coil pipe reaching out from the top of each tank. They resembled a Dr. Seuss storybook drawing, all of it beguiling. Workers were busily tending to one or another tank, checking gauges and adjusting valves or turning spigots, never looking up to see who may have been gawking at them. This was serious business, and these boys were on stage playing their part in the great act of selling booze! I was fascinated but quickly lost interest and turned my attention to the store shelves myself.

The showroom was arrayed with touristy gifts everywhere. The perimeter walls were stacked floor to ceiling with bottles of "Tennessee Legend's Best," as the wall sign above them foretold. I managed to finger some trinkets, knowing Crystal was watching me the whole time, waiting for us escaped flies to return to her web.

Sensing our little break was over, I smiled and returned to the counter. I stopped directly across from Crystal, looked into her eyes, and smiled. This prompted her to ask me which Bourbon flavors we had chosen.

"Don't know," I told her.

"So are you here on vacation?" she asked.

Yes," I replied, "we are staying in a cabin very close to here looking for interesting things to do."

"Have you been to the Caverns yet?" Crystal asked.

Maddie cheerfully replied, "No, but I have been reading about them and someone else told us they would be a relief from the heat."

"Oh yes," Crystal agreed with her, "I have been there several times and they are cool! You will have to bring a jacket because down deep it is only 57 degrees but you will love what you see."

Crystal had now oddly turned into a tour guide.

Hearing this, I began thinking I had perhaps been a little harsh in my judgment of her. She now appeared to be genuinely curious about Maddie and me. Her earlier display as a "salesperson" had morphed into looking like someone just doing her job, quite well I might add.

She smiled at me shyly, with her chin dipped slightly toward her delicate neck and cocked a little to one side, then asked if I was interested in any further tastes to which I replied, "**No!**"

"Where is your cabin located?" she asked.

I told her, "It's not far, perhaps 3 miles off into the woods from where we are."

"Oh, I know it well," she said, "it is quiet there and peaceful." She continued, "I hope Tennessee is taking care of you and you will enjoy your time here." She said this while putting all of the tasting bottles away back under the counter.

I replied, "At least your little part of Tennessee is a treat."

"How long are you here for?" She asked, again flashing those beautiful eyes at me. Maddie again responded for me, "Not long, just a couple more days."

I then told Crystal I enjoyed my tastings and could not leave without a bottle or two. Her smile broadened so wide that I thought her face would crack.

She excitedly asked, "What flavors are you picking?"

"Well," I told her, "not sure I remember everything too clearly that we tasted but if you point them out on the counter chart and remind me again I am sure it will help me remember."

We went over everything again and in no time I had picked out six bottles, I told myself they were gifts, conferring with Maddie as to who would get what. I was pleased with myself, believing that my purchase had contributed to Crystal's grand smile. With that, I moved over to the register to pay up.

The other woman working behind the counter, who had been listening closely to our conversation all the way through, had already supplied a divided bottle box with six slots to carry my stash. They were all then neatly packed in with loving care by Crystal. When she finished ringing them through she politely asked me if I would do her a favor.

"Would you fill in this questionnaire ranking how well you were pleased with my service?" She asked this while handing me a piece of paper printed with questions. "If you don't want to do that, you can go online to the address shown here," she said while fingering that line on the paper where the web address was. She continued: "That way you can comment on me in private."

"You will have no trouble winning hearts with those eyes and that smile," I told her, "I will be happy to talk about you there online, in private," I said this to her while cherishing one last moment to look more deeply into those clear blue eyes. She stared back into mine, freezing time, for an eternity of mere seconds.

She finished securing my box by taping over the lids and slid the box across the counter toward me. Maddie headed out, so I followed right behind her.

Crystal stopped me, gently speaking to my back saying: "By the way, my fiancé's name is Ben."

Startled, I turned to have one last smile with her, and time simply stopped! She had completely captivated me. I said goodbye softly, wishing the moment would never end. We were both aware that something odd but wonderful had just befallen us that we would likely wonder about for some time to come. Not long after, sitting with my Best Gal on the Cabin's porch, sipping bourbon, I began to write...

A WALK IN THE WOODS

LITERARY ARTS – SHORT STORY

by Eric Mens

A WALK IN THE WOODS

The car's predictably inaccurate thermometer displayed an outside temperature of "5 Deg. F." With the wind chill, she thought the outside temperature would likely be closer to minus 10 degrees Fahrenheit. She had left home shortly before dawn, hoping to get some great shots with her new camera while the light was still favorable. All around her, virgin snow blanketed the mountainous landscape.

With its base of ice and packed snow, the highway leading to the park had been treacherous and deserted of other traffic. She drove slowly to absorb the calming solitude of the snow-covered mountains. Occasionally, a wintry gust lifted the powdery snow into mini spirals, *swirling* higher and higher until they dissipated into the early morning light.

As she steered her car into the park's entrance, she noticed that the small parking lot lay empty and undisturbed. Several inches of snow from the previous night's storm blanketed the ground. To her front, the snow had drifted to a foot or more against the trunks of the trees bordering the lot. A paper-thin blanket of ice covered the pines, causing their branches to bow in supplication to the Earth.

"Oh, good. I've got the place to myself," she muttered to herself.

A heavy stillness hung in the air, broken only by the sound of ice and snow crunching under the Subaru's wheels as it labored into the open lot. She searched for a place where the day's fickle sun might warm her car while she went about her business. A smile crossed her face as she glanced at the camera on the seat beside her.

I hope he sees my note before he heads to the slopes. The resort should be full of skiers today.

She and her partner were both avid skiers. Lately, they had barely seen each other during their time off. He had committed to serving as a weekend Ski Ambassador at a nearby resort,

giving him plenty of time on his skis. On the other hand, she had more than enough time to explore the area with her camera.

An icy blast caught her breath as she stepped from the car, nearly knocking her off her feet. *Damn, it's cold! Need to keep my camera close to me so the shutter doesn't freeze.*

Reaching for her camera, she hung it around her neck and tucked it into her parka. A sudden gust of wind slammed her door shut, the sound reverberating loudly through the silent glen. Pulling her cell phone from deep within her coat pocket, she looked at the screen.

No signal. Hmmm. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to make this trip by myself. She brushed the thought aside.

As she took in her surroundings, she looked for a break in the woods. On spotting the blaze of blue that marked the trailhead, she crossed the parking lot and made her way to the path. The snow-covered ground crunched underfoot as she reached the path and began her uphill trek. The wind along the trail subsided, blocked by the dense forest of mixed hardwoods and pines.

She reminded herself to follow the blue markers and to stay on the path as much as possible. Lost in the silence and solitude of the woods, she continued her climb.

Spotting the barely flowing stream, she followed it for a short distance, bearing right at the first fork in the path. She had hiked this trail so many times this past summer and felt comfortable that she could follow the path blindfolded to the falls.

It was nice to have the park to herself today, free of the noisy tourists who frequented the area in summer. Occasionally, she stopped to shoot a few pictures.

It wasn't long before she strayed from the path, descending the bank toward the stream bed. The slope was slippery, and she struggled to keep her balance on the downhill.

Reaching the streambed, she followed the flowing water upstream, marveling at the ice-covered trees glistening in the sun. Magnificent white crystals edged both sides of the stream bed. Entranced, she stopped at times to capture the scene with her camera.

Remembering that she had left water and snacks in the car, she decided to hasten her journey by returning to the path. Determined to reach the falls, she pulled herself up the rock-strewn bank and returned to the trail.

At last, she reached her destination. The recent frigid temperatures had slowed the fall's usually heavy water flow to a mere trickle. Large icicles, some two stories and higher, cascaded and glistened like diamonds in the morning light. Entranced by their beauty, she continued to shoot, no longer worried that her camera shutter might freeze.

Reaching the top of the falls, she scrambled along the rocky slope. Camera clutched high in one hand, she stepped onto a ledge to get a better view of the scene below. It was the last thing she would do.

No one would hear her scream as her boots slipped from under her.

LET'S HAVE A PARTY!

Short Story

Janet Meuwissen

LET'S HAVE A PARTY!

“How am I ever going to get my husband to finish the back deck and stairway that leads down to our swimming pool, Claire? He can handle any home improvement, but he never seems to wrap up a project. The deck looks like it’s almost completed.”

“That’s easy, Carol. Tell him you’re having a party! That’s what I did. My husband began building new front steps but then got distracted by other tasks. I told him they had to be finished because we were hosting our school’s monthly get-together. He finished the steps, How about announcing that you’re having the end-of-the-year party?”

“That’s a great idea! I’ll tell him he’s got two weeks to finish the deck and stairs. Bill always loves hosting a get-together.”

Two weeks later, the first of thirty spirited guests arrived in their best summer attire to celebrate the end of the school year and the start of the warm season. The mild sunny early evening was perfect for an indoor-outdoor gathering. Carol’s sliding glass doors leading out to their deck showcased a panoramic view of the valley beyond. The guests were invited to view the new deck and celebrate the start of summer as they sipped Carol’s renowned sangria punch.

In the kitchen, Claire helped Carol arrange the scrumptious appetizers that the guests had contributed. Rumakis were a favorite. Deviled eggs and spanakopita as well as wings, chips, dips, cheeses and crackers kept people coming back for more. Carol kept filling the punch bowl.

Bill set up their sound system to play energizing music inside and outside, encouraging people to party on the deck. The Beatles “Twist and Shout” started the dancing. Jerry Lee Lewis’s “Great Balls of Fire” was the next song to play. Then as Bill Haley’s “Shake, Rattle, and Roll” energized the crowd, the dancers’ rock-n-roll synchronized movements caused something strange to happen.

“Carol, this is a great party! So glad Bill got the deck finished in time. I’m loving this sangria and as I gaze through your sliding glass door, it’s looking like a moving picture to me. Everyone’s dancing and having a great time. But, wait, why are the dancers slowly starting to descend outside the frame of the picture?”

“What do you mean, Claire? Everybody’s just enjoying themselves! Maybe you’ve just had too much to drink. “

Yikes!! Was that a scream I heard out there? What’s going on? People are starting to dash inside!”

Suddenly, the joyous scene took a dramatic turn. The newly finished deck, under the weight and movement of the dancers, gave way with a loud creak. A

collective gasp rose from the guests as the deck began to collapse. People scrambled, spilling glasses and dropping plates as they hurried to safety.

In the midst of the chaos, Pat who had been sitting at a picnic table on the deck found herself in a precarious position. The table tilted, and she started to slide towards the edge. Her shrieks were mingling with the startled cries of others. As the deck continued to give way, she slid faster while she was heading straight for the pool below.

Among the startled guests was Kirk, who had enjoyed a generous amount of libations. Laughing off the chaos, he sauntered to the pool's edge and decided to take a swim. The cool water seemed like a perfect respite from the unexpected turmoil.

As Pat slid towards the pool, still trapped on the bench seat of the picnic table, her cries for help mingled with the splashes of Kirk's playful swimming. Without a moment's hesitation, he noticed her plight and casually swam over to her. With remarkable clarity and strength, Kirk managed to extricate Pat from her wooden prison. He freed her from the imminent plunge.

Bill and Carol, rushing outside, could hardly believe what they were witnessing. Their beautiful new deck, the pride of their home improvements, lay in pieces, and the party was abruptly over.

The guests, now assembled indoors, exchanged concerned glances, gathered their belongings, and promptly departed. Kirk, however, still under the influence, remarked that this had been the most eventful gathering the town had ever witnessed and guessed that it would be hard to beat. After this testimonial, he and his wife also left.

As reality was setting in, Carol turned to Bill to ask him about the deck's collapse. "I know you're an excellent builder; what happened?"

"Well, you wanted the job done in two weeks. Turned out that I didn't have the right-sized nails—and not enough of them. I knew they would have to be special-ordered and wouldn't arrive on time, so I faked it. I used the smaller nails and skimmed on how many I needed at each joint. I planned to do it right, after the party. I didn't think about the effect of synchronized bouncing by dancing."

"OK, Bill, I understand. I should be mad because you always put things off, but I pushed you into finishing a job in a timeframe that couldn't be done. Next time, could you just be honest with me? We could have put on the party without using the deck."

Bill nodded in agreement. Carol turned to Claire and remarked, "You know, Claire, having a party isn't always the best way to get a job done. We might need to think of a safer and less rushed approach next time. Any ideas for our next party?"

Claire grinned widely and said, "Well, Carol, maybe we should just have it at a trampoline park! At least there, synchronized bouncing is encouraged and won't cause any decks to collapse." They all burst into laughter, imagining the next gathering as a boomerang extravaganza.

A King's Naked Ambition

(Short Story)

By Janet Stiegler

A King's Naked Ambition

The King sat up in his lofty tower, surrounded by his fancy gold curtains, designer robes, sumptuous meals, and succession of beautiful women. He traveled by private carriage (also gold-plated) to visit his lavish golf courses and casinos, with little concern for the men and women on whose backs his Empire was built. In fact, those people made him uncomfortable, and he wished to send them away. Calling them awful names and accusing them of horrible crimes, the King hoped others would do the dirty work for him.

His followers bought into the vision of a downtrodden Empire and his promise to make them and the Kingdom great again. Playing on their fears and insecurities, he convinced them of problems and dangers not based on truth. His solutions to complex problems were quick and simple. "I will fix things and get rid of those bad, bad apples," he boasted in easy-to-digest sound bites. Half the Kingdom liked this message because they weren't doing all that well, so someone had to be at fault. And it certainly could not be the King or his court of nobles and lords, even if they did control all the Empire's wealth. No, the King would solve all their problems.

The Empire had some foreign enemies, but the King admired them because they ruled with iron fists. He wanted to be like them. Knowing this, an assortment of swindlers surrounded and abetted the King. They encouraged his puffed-up image and urged him to expand his Empire. The problem was that the land the King hoped to acquire belonged to

what heretofore had been friendly crowns. Still, he stewed and sputtered about artificial borders and threatened to take what he thought should be his.

Once recovered from the shock, these neighborly sovereigns gave inspiring speeches to their countrymen, making them more popular than ever at home. Their nations boycotted any goods produced by the Kingdom and booed the King's countrymen at jousting events, making the King even more determined to claim their territories.

Meanwhile, a clever court Jester saw an opportunity to add to his personal wealth and power. He would funnel money from the pesky governing bodies into his pockets. After flattering and stroking the King into an oblivious state, the Jester played Jenga with the Empire's long-established governing tower. Little by little, he removed blocks from the tower, laughing when it became wobbly and hoping he could blame its occupants when it fell.

When some of the Empire's loyal subjects were negatively affected by the Jester's game, the King stepped out on the castle balcony in an invisible robe made from the swindler's looms. He tried to convince them it was all for the greater good. "It's going to be beautiful," he promised. "Really beautiful."

"But he hasn't got anything on," said a small boy standing below. "The King is stark naked," said the signs of some women marching towards the castle. Soon, half the town was crying, "The King has no clothes; there is nothing of substance up there." When a

few hapless farmers complained that they were having trouble making ends meet because of the boycotts, the King got annoyed and had his guards escort them all away. He didn't like all the negativity. His people were supposed to bow down and applaud him.

The King's feeble ministers feared losing their jobs or being shut out if they didn't pretend to see the fabric covering the King's bloated body. So, despite their misgivings, they claimed he looked handsome and was doing a great job. They even gave him their limited powers because they feared his temper tantrums. Half of the Kingdom was fooled by the King's parade of alternative facts and grand gestures that gave the illusion he was taking decisive action for the good of the country. Who were they to disagree?

Alas, it was only a matter of time before everyone would be poorly affected. But for now, the King and his court had put his believers under an evil spell, preventing them from seeing his blatant naked ambition and cruel aspirations. It can only be hoped that their eyes will be opened before the King does his faithful subjects serious wrong and puts the entire Empire in grave danger.

Two and Two Make Five

(Short Story)

by Janet Stiegler

Two and Two Make Five

Dr. Adrian Brickman made some notes in his medical journal, then carefully placed *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* at the right corner of his desk. He liked having it displayed there when the patients came in, as it reflected the gravitas of his station. There was always that initial moment when the subjects would give the heavy tome a sideways glance, cower slightly in their chair, or sit on their hands. It set the right tone.

After straightening the paperwork on his desk, Adrian leaned back, pushed his reading glasses up his nose, and re-read the invitation from the annual APA conference in Los Angeles. They wanted him to be the keynote speaker this year. Basking in the honor, he grinned. His draft paper, *Homelessness and Dementia: a Study of Brighton Beach*, had garnered the attention he long deserved. The conclusions were gelling as predicted, but he still needed more data, a few more street people, to make it statistically relevant.

A deliberate man by nature, Adrian was attracted to the statistical side of psychiatry. He dealt with hundreds of patients each year, but, by and large, they all fitted nicely into several diagnostic categories he used to underpin his research. The file in front of him would be no different. Conduct the intake interview, test the man's cognitive capabilities, identify the extent of the mental illness, and then send him out with a \$25 note for his time and services.

Adrian's secretary cracked open the door, and when Adrian nodded, she ushered the homeless man in. He was gaunt and slightly bent at the shoulders, with grizzled hair that barely covered

the top of his head. Gnarled fingers clasped a wooden walking stick with a curved, engraved handle. His dusty coat hung unevenly off his shoulders as if carelessly draped over an abandoned scarecrow. Crow's feet framed his blue-gray eyes, which quickly surveyed the room.

"Count Dmitry Alexander Volkonsky," the old man said with a bow. He reached across the desk with his calloused hand. "But feel free to call me Count."

Adrian hesitated, then tentatively took the end of the fingers in his palm and gave a weak shake. Sitting down, he reached into his drawer for a disinfectant wipe. The Count sat down, stretched his long legs, and watched the psychiatrist with silent amusement.

"Hmm, yes, so, Mr. Volkonsky, I mean, *Count* Volkonsky," Adrian said, drawing out the word "Count" with undisguised sarcasm. "Let's start with your family history and upbringing. Would you describe it as happy, unhappy?"

"All happy families resemble one another," the Count said with a twinkle. "But each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

"Hmm, yes," muttered Adrian, barely looking up. "**Unhappy Family**," he wrote in the appropriate section. "Was your father in the picture? Who were your male role models growing up?" Adrian could practically write the answer without waiting for a reply. Father probably abandoned wife and kids, leaving them destitute.

"Role models? Ah, there were many," the Count said, gesturing expansively with his arms.

"Shelves of them--the greatest writers of all time. I absorbed their wisdom in my late father's lap, along with the earthy scents of buffalo leather, Cuban cigars, and aged cognac.

The Count's elliptical answer gave Adrian pause, but he decided not to pursue it. **"Father was an Alcoholic,"** he wrote on the form. "I imagine," he said, "you suffered some in your youth?"

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times," the Count responded with a smile.

"Mr. Volkonsky," Adrian said, putting down his pen and massaging his temples. "I'm trying to get a general profile of your upbringing. Often, it explains how you and others like you wind up homeless without a penny to your name."

"I see," the Count said, crossing his legs. "But perhaps there is no link. Suppose I choose to reject all wealth, success, and material possessions in favor of the simple life of a peasant?"

"Nonsense!" Adrian said, clenching his jaw. "No one chooses to be homeless! Sitting in the dirty streets, begging for food!" He didn't like the way this interview was going.

"We sit in the mud...and reach for the stars." The Count raised his eyes to the ceiling, trying to recall the author. "Ivan Turgenev," he said finally.

"Ivan who? What are you going on about? How could you be happy out on the streets? Certainly, it has affected your mental capabilities, your touch with reality." Adrian scribbled "**Delusional**" in the file.

"There are no conditions to which a person cannot grow accustomed, especially if he sees that everyone around him lives in the same way," the Count responded. Then, seeing the psychiatrist's bemusement, he added, "Anna Karenina."

"But certainly," Adrian sputtered, "you would be happier with a roof over your head, a warm meal in your stomach, and a loving woman by your side."

"The greatest happiness is to know the source of unhappiness," the Count responded evasively. Then he stood up and walked over to the doctor's bookshelves. Leaning on his cane, Count Volkonsky tilted his head to read the titles. Gliding the end of his cane along the book jackets, he shook his head and scowled. "All rather dry material, Doctor Brickman. Literature is the true portal to the human condition."

"Mr. Volkonsky, er...Count, or whoever you are," Adrian countered, his face red and nostrils flaring. "These esteemed scientific volumes provide clear explanations for the realities of our existence! Have you no regard for the sciences, for the simplicity and orderliness of mathematics?"

"The formula 'two and two make five' is not without its attractions," the Count said, quoting Dostoevsky. "That is to say, human nature is complex. If you want to understand human behavior, you must appreciate the absurd, the unpredictable, and the irrational."

Adrian wrote "**Irrational**" in bold letters on the paper, then stood up, spilling a cold cup of coffee and knocking askew his APA manual. His eyes bulged, and the vein in his neck pulsed in rage. He had dealt with outliers before, but this man was intolerable. And most irritatingly, he could not determine if the Count's responses were signs of dementia or some type of oblique wisdom.

"Now look at what you've done!" Adrian shouted as he tried to clean up the mess. "You ridicule my life's work and defy comprehension with your silly semantics! Do you expect me to identify scientific truths with ambiguous statements and quotes from century-old fiction? You could drive a man insane!"

The Count shuffled back to his seat, placed his cane across his knees, and waited for the psychiatrist to calm down. "Perhaps, Dr. Brickman, we are finally getting somewhere. Would you like to talk about it?"