EXPERIENCING TRUE BROKENNESS

BY RACHEL L. PACK
Honorable Mention
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It changed my life. This past summer I spent two weeks in the smoldering heat and poverty of Juárez, Mexico. It was a mission project to provide some common needs for the people there. Along with fifty enthusiastic and inexperienced teenagers, I took part in building houses for families in desperate need. Our job requirements were to construct one small house in four days working from sunrise to sunset. We joined together in anticipation, excitement and determination because we knew that these people needed to be helped physically and spiritually.

It was extremely hot and dry in Juárez. Growing up in the lush Appalachian Mountains, I wasn't used to the sand that constantly blew in my eyes. I was surrounded by dark, sand-covered mountains, polluted skies, and houses made of cardboard and metal scraps. The entire city looked like brown sugar had been sprinkled on everything; coming to me was an image of clouds sifting brown sugar over the earth. Litter and rubbish were along every street corner. There were no cars in the driveways or towers planted neatly beside their houses; instead, there were bicycles with no tires leaning against the houses and wiry bushes and weeds that grew wildly from the earth. This was depressing for me to experience because I was not used to seeing such poverty.

Even more than these foreign surroundings, the people in Juárez were extremely different. They spoke Spanish, wore bright colors and they were content. As an outsider, I was welcomed in their country with warm embraces and gentle smiles. Some were curious about my appearance but the overall consensus was that I was special because I was different. When I looked into their eyes I could see their joy and contentment. I couldn't understand this. It even puzzled me for weeks after I returned home. These people had absolutely nothing compared to the blessings we take for granted in America. Some go without indoor plumbing, electricity and have limited food supplies. Yet they live in happiness because they have their families and the basic needs of life. Their religion sets them apart from our culture. In America it seems that people depend on one another rather than God our Creator. I learned that in Juárez, religion is the focal point of people's lives. Mostly everyone depends on God as their hope and restoration. This is the reason they seem continually joyous. I was going to minister to these people by building houses and providing for their needs, but instead they ministered to me through their love and intense dependence on the Lord. Their love encouraged me to develop my faith and to look beyond the materialism that threatens to drown me.

There was one experience on this trip that dramatically changed my life. The other American teenagers and I had just taken a break from construction. It was the last day of work and lunch was being prepared. I remember standing in the meal line complaining under my breath about having to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the fourth day in a row. This disgusted me and I was almost convinced I was not hungry. I took a sandwich and a warm glass of bottled water and sat down. Forgetting to pray and bless my food, I slowly began to pinch away at the flavored bread. I took small bites and tried to wash them down with my warm water. I had probably eaten over twelve peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in those past four days. This just wasn't appetizing. I threw away my sandwich, guzzled my water and went back to work. After our day was completed we noticed there were several peanut butter and jelly sandwiches left over from lunch and dinner. We didn't want to waste any more food so we decided to take the food to a small cardboard house down the road.

We reached the shack and knocked on the side panel made of plywood. A middle-aged woman came to the window with a look of fear and curiosity on her face. Ten American teenagers surrounded her window with smiling faces and bags of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. In broken Spanish we convinced her that the food was for her and her family if she wanted it. Without hesitation she took the food and began to cry. She began talking very fast and in Spanish so we couldn't understand her. She noticed that we had no idea what she was saying so she repeatedly shouted “Gracias, Gracias!” Her tears were streaming down her face as though we had just saved her life.

She noticed that we had no idea what she was saying so she repeatedly shouted ‘Gracias, Gracias!’ Her tears were streaming down her face as though we had just saved her life. Still to this day I don't know exactly why that woman was so happy over a bag of sandwiches but I know there was not one bit of complaint in her mind.

I walked away from that one-room hut with many emotions. One thing I realized was that I had just experienced what it was to feel true brokenness. This woman had nothing, supposedly not even food for the day, and those sandwiches that I had complained about just hours earlier had become her salvation. How could I be so petty? I learned a lot from this trip. The surroundings, people and experiences all touched a different part of my heart. However, I learned more about myself during my time in Mexico. Some realizations were not so pleasant but I found a part of me that I had never experienced before. I was broken for the people and the pleasures of life they had to live without, but even more so, I was broken for myself. I had never really understood the meaning of being content in all things and I had always taken my blessings for granted. From my experiences on this trip my opinions, desires and perspective were different about culture, humanness and existence. It changed my life.

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DUAL EXHAUST, AND
ONE SCARED KID

BY D. SCOTT HOLDEN
Honorable Mention
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It was a cool fall night and we had just stolen a few bottle rockets. Well, we really didn't steal them. They belonged to my father, who had tried to keep the fireworks away from us to no effect. Mom always told me that Dad's experience with fireworks as a kid was not pleasant. She said that once it ended up with my Dad's dodging bullets behind a few collars. Also, she said that my uncle Al nearly lost his foot on another occasion. But that could never happen to us.

The temperature began to drop as the sun took its last breath leaving a red autumn sky line. Now we were home free. Running from the house we decided to disappear in an abandoned bay field not too far from the main road. It wasn't long before we were sitting around a small brush fire as if we were camping in some unknown wilderness.

After a while the fire dwindled to ashes and we got bored so we decided to break out the fireworks. First it was just a few harmless sparklers, then maybe a firecracker or two. It all seemed harmless to us. Then, in the midst of the excitement, I heard a car coming up the dead-end road. Its headlights pierced the darkness and sparked the "great" idea. The idea that would cause me to live in fear for the rest of my childhood life.

We rushed to light a sparkler as the roaring engine came closer. The light got brighter as I held the sparkler loosely in my sweaty hands. My heartbeat accelerated as the car came speeding past us. At that second it was as if the fire in my hand had burned its way into my blood. The sparkler flew through the air and time froze. I had intended to throw it over the blur of sheet metal but fear gripped our throats as we watched the sparks fly, bounce, and tumble up under the sports car.

The tires of the Mustang screamed to a halt and my heart stopped. In a roar of exhaust pipes and burning tires, the car backed up to cast its lights on the field. In return I did the stupidest thing one could ever imagine. The tires of the Mustang screamed to a halt and my heart stopped. In a roar of exhaust pipes and burning tires, I dived and just missed the half-ton bullet. The car disappeared down the road as I heard my mother screaming my name from the house. It all happened so fast, thank God the driver didn't have a gun. In that case I would have been a great target. The experience shook me up a little but after a few days I forgot about the whole thing.

Then one night, a couple of weeks later, I was out training for track season on a deserted stretch of road near my home, when I heard a vehicle coming up behind me. I was approaching a new subdivision, so I decided to race the car to the community's back entrance for fun. The sprint began and I wasn't looking back; I could tell the car was gaining on me by its headlights. Finally I turned into the entrance, beating the car and joyful of my win. Suddenly I was startled by the screeching sound of asphalt and brake pads. I turned in fear as I recognized the same Mustang that had charged at me a month ago. I must have learned something from my first experience because I didn't wait to see the car back up, I was too busy breaking the World's Record for the 100m dash.

Before I knew it I was banging on the door of some man's house begging him to let me in. The Mustang, hot on my trail, pulled into the driveway. By that time I was cowering behind the man's kitchen sink praying and dialing 911. The man yelled at the Mustang to get out of his driveway and surprisingly enough they did. However they didn't really leave. They continued to circle the neighborhood like a shark, hungry for blood. The cops eventually showed up but nothing could make me feel safe anymore.

From then on I became a prisoner in my own home, afraid to go running or even ride my bike. I stared out the window at the streets that had once been my playground. After the event I discovered that life was not all peanut butter and jelly. I always thought my parents would be there to save me or punish me if I had something wrong. I never realized that my actions could have such a devastating outcome. Now whenever I hear wind rushing through the trees or see headlights rounding a distant corner, I can't help looking over my shoulder fearful that I will again have to face the consequence of my actions. Why did I do it? I don't know.
LEARNING THE HARD WAY

BY MICHAEL DENNE

It was after midnight when the police came for me. I was standing in the kitchen, stunned, not sure what had just happened or what to do about it. But it all became surreally clear as I was led from my own house in handcuffs, bathed in flashing colored lights. Having gone only a few hundred yards on our way to the station, we came upon more flashing lights at the scene of an accident. "See that," the cop snapped at me. "You did that."

It's not easy being a menace to society, especially when you always thought you were one of the good guys. But that same society takes a particularly dim view of those of us who drink to excess, crash our cars and send innocent people to the emergency room with life-threatening injuries. So dim a view, in fact, that they send us to prison.

Before you despise me too much, though, I'd like to report that no one was crippled or killed as a result of my selfish stupidity. Two teenagers died, however, spend a few weeks in the hospital and several months recovering, as they both suffered head trauma from my Chevy Blazer's broadsiding their Mazda RX-7. Nine months after the crash, at my sentencing hearing, the victims appeared as two walking, talking, healthy-looking young adults.

Their injuries lingered, though, in the form of a loss of hearing in one ear (for the girl), which may or may not come back, and memory loss (for the boy, who also broke his jaw and was semicomatose for a few weeks). Not quite as good as new, but awfully close and improving, considering their condition that first night in intensive care.

I offer no excuse because there isn't one. What I did was the height of irresponsibility. Like everyone else, I've seen hit-and-run accidents on television and in the newspapers and wondered how the drivers could leave the victims behind. Well, I did, and I still don't know. It's called hit and run, but I didn't run anywhere. I wasn't wearing a seat belt and I'd slammed my head into the windshield. I was shocked, and so close to home I thought that if I could just get to that sanctuary, I'd know what to do and everything would be all right. But somewhere in my beer-soaked brain must have been the fear that generated more concern for myself than for anyone I might have hurt. And I have to live with that.

I've been locked up for more than a year now and have had plenty of time to think. It seems to me that there's a price exacted for every lesson we learn in life, and the cost is rarely proportional to the relative simplicity or complexity of the idea. Consequently, what should have been a no-brainer is quite often the most expensive education we're ever likely to receive.

What it cost me to ignore the most ubiquitous warning in the world (the one not to drink and drive) was merely everything: my license, my car, $30,000 in legal fees, a $50,000-a-year job I'd had for 10 years and my freedom are all casualties—with my house not far behind.

For far too many people this subject will forever be anathema, because the lives of their loved ones have been ruined or ended by some recreational inebriate just like me. To them and countless others I got exactly what I deserve, even though an excellent recovery and $830,000 of liability insurance appear to have left the victims in pretty good shape. I'll not portray myself as some drunken Robin Hood, because these people truly suffered, but they are not from wealthy families and now may well have opportunities they otherwise would never have had. And that's good; they deserve it.

I refuse to vilify the "demon" alcohol, because that's not what this is about. It's about responsibility. A few years ago, Miller Brewing Co. promoted an awareness campaign with the slogan "Think when you drink." That's good, but it doesn't go far enough, because we can't think when we drink. It's got to be "Think before you drink"—because as any substance-abuse professional will tell you, judgment is the first faculty that goes.

In his book of essays "Tates Worse Than Death," Kurt Vonnegut wrote, "Life without moments of intoxication is not worth a pitcher of spit." Included therein is intoxication from love or joy or the mystery of life itself, but so is, surely, a few belts at the corner bar. I'm no social scientist, but like anyone who's ever taken a college anthropology class, I learned that the society without a way to alter its perception is the exception to the rule. It is not aberrant behavior to celebrate, to alter one's consciousness, and to think that people will or should stop it is naive. But when it has a profoundly negative impact on the lives of others, it is totally unacceptable. In fact, it can be downright criminal.

My negligence was exactly that, though I am innocent of malice, of intent ever to hurt anyone. But it doesn't matter what you mean to do—it matters what you do. And few people know that better than I do.

The probation report said I'd led a respectable life but I should get six years in prison, anyway. The district attorney said I was a decent man and he felt sorry for me, but six years wasn't enough—I should do eight instead. And the judge agreed, but in his benevolence ruled that the extra two years could be served concurrently. There isn't space here to debate the deterrent value of a state prison sentence as opposed to alternative sentences, like making restitution to the injured through a work-furlough program or explaining the consequences of drinking and driving to high-school students, punishments that contain real value for the victims and the community.

That I deserve to be punished is clearer to me than it ever could be to anyone who hasn't lived it. Until you wake up in a jail cell, not knowing whether the people now in the hospital will be permanently disfigured (or will cease to be altogether) as a result of your recklessness, you can't imagine how it feels. The weight of it is oppressive.

I'm ashamed to have to lend my name to some of the most loathsome behavior known, but not so much that I won't put forth a face and a fair warning to those who still choose to drink and drive: thinking it could never happen to you is your first mistake—and it only gets worse from there. For everyone.

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BARELY BREATHING

BY EMILIE RIESSEN
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Maybe if I hold my breath and close my eyes this might just all go away. I hope for the spinning sensation and dizziness to subside, but it just gets worse as the noise gets louder and the room gets darker and hotter. There's no place to hide, no empty corners, nothing. The gym is incredibly crowded and everyone is spilling over into the halls. I was dragged here tonight by some friends who thought I would enjoy myself. Some friends.

I hate dancing. The last place I want to be right now is in this gym at this year's homecoming dance. It's so dark, I don't even know why I bothered buying a new dress and spending an hour doing my hair if no one can even see me. It's silver, my dress that is, but I don't even know why I bothered. The room is silver too because of the little slivers of light radiating from the strobe light, but mostly it's just dark. Still, it's not quite dark enough for me to feel safe, as safe as I feel when I'm alone in my bedroom, drying my hair, and yelling along with the radio with my brush as a microphone. It never gets that dark anywhere.

I'm not exactly sure why I'm so petrified of dancing. I could look up some Freudian explanation or analyze my childhood for a reason why I'm like this, but I know I won't find the answer: It just scares me, the same way some people are afraid of snakes or heights. The problem is, though, ever since I realized this deep-rooted fear, I really wish I liked to dance.

Kath suddenly leans over and grabs my hand. In all the years I've known her (and it seems like forever), not once have I seen her dance. She sways side to side enthusiastically with the music and gives me this evil, menacing glare. She usually has these perfectly plaid blue-gray eyes that don't suit her at all. (I've never seen anyone go as ballistic as she does during exam week.) The greatest part about her is that we can have entire conversations without uttering a single syllable. She knows I don't want to dance but her glare is anything but sympathetic. And her eyes tell me I will regret moping around while everyone else enjoys themselves.

Okay, so I make an attempt, an honest-to-goodness, real, enthusiastic, arms-in-the-air attempt to dance. And guess what? The music stops. Perfect. That's about as much dancing as I can handle for now anyway. I leave the crowded group of friends I came with to go into the hall and get a drink of water. It's a good excuse even if I'm really not that thirsty.

I pass by a girl who is my exact opposite. She has absolutely no qualms about what the chaperons might say. Personally, I'd be humiliated if I were forced to show that much skin. She must be a sophomore, none of the freshmen would have the guts to be so exposed, and by the time you're a junior you realize that kind of clothing (or rather, lack thereof) will have your name roaming the halls by first period Monday morning.

There's a group of junior guys standing near the door. A couple of them are shuffling their feet a little, making a half-hearted attempt to dance. Not one of them is with a girl and I'm impressed that they came without dates. One guy on the end isn't even shuffling his feet. He's standing perfectly straight and rigid, like the little mouse I caught chewing through a bag of flour in the pantry the other day. That little mouse was pretty petrified when I opened that door and he saw me standing there. This guy's a very worried person; he probably doesn't fly on planes or eat anything with preservatives. He's probably never really had fun before. In twenty years, he's going to regret not dancing at his high school homecoming dance. He's going to kick himself because he was so good at watching it all just pass him by in a heartbeat. And regret is the worst feeling anyone can have.

I finally squeeze my way out into the hall to the water fountain. I can remember when I was younger and being able to reach the water fountain by myself was such a spectacular feat. Well, it just seems like nothing is that simple anymore.

I lean on the door frame to the gym and just wait for a minute, watching. Maybe I don't want to go back in because I know I won't dance, or maybe I'm just afraid that this will always be something that scares me. I can see everyone, all my friends, and people I've known for years but never really got to know, but I can't hear them. I watch them laughing and talking and dancing, and I see the strobe light flash across their faces. The only thing I can hear is the music. It's my favorite song. "Don't let your life pass you by ... ." I don't want to cry.

A sudden urge of determination creeps up inside me and gives me that grapefruit-in-your-throat type feeling, and I feel so queasy because I can hardly believe what I'm about to do.

A sudden urge of determination creeps up inside me and gives me that grapefruit-in-your-throat type feeling, and I feel so queasy because I can hardly believe what I'm about to do. Okay, so it's not a giant leap for mankind, but it's a small step for me.

That guy is still standing near the door and he's still not moving. I feel really bad because I don't even know his name, but somehow I don't think it'll really matter. I hold my breath and hope I don't trip on something or rip my dress or knock over someone's drink. But what I really hope for is to stop thinking about everything that could possibly go wrong.

I straighten out my dress and breathe. He looks up at me and gives me this sheepish sort of smile, the kind you give just to be polite. There's a new song playing. It has a great rhythm; it's the kind of song that if you hear it while you're driving, you don't even realize that your foot is pushing the accelerator all the way to the floor. It's perfect for dancing. I'm not exactly sure what to say to him first, I stumble, "um, ah ... ." I hate vocalized pauses. This is all so confusing. I just blurt it out. "Do you want to dance?" He smiles again, but not because he's just being polite. He doesn't even say anything, not even his name. As we begin to dance, I can hardly feel my feet touching the floor. It's exhilarating and I'm so completely wrapped up in the moment.

It's probably a good thing he never did tell me his name with everything happening so quickly, so perfectly, there's no way I could have possibly remembered it.
GOING CLEAN

BY JOHN CLARKE
Winner
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It is very difficult to compare my life while using drugs heavily to my present condition. Many people think of the addict as a trashy pervert who has nothing to offer society. I must admit, it is hard not to think of myself as having been that. However, I enjoyed life to the fullest for a significant time while using drugs. I was looking at life from a totally different perspective. My friends sold stolen cell phones and drugs for their future, while I sold drugs to buy more drugs. School was no answer to my future—my future was the next day. I woke up around noon everyday, got stoned, saw my girlfriend, jammed out with my band, maybe did a line or two in the afternoon, then tripped off LSD for the rest of the night. Life was good. People hate to hear it, but junkies live a great life.

Today I did something I thought I would never do; I woke up. What the hell does that mean? I woke up every morning. However, I have never really noticed the world around me until today. I am 18 years old, and I have been completely clean for a full year now. Of course, that is a lie—very typical of a person who has a severe substance abuse. Denial is a part of my everyday life: who I am, what I have done, what my future is. Honestly, I have been clean for six months. Cocaine, LSD, alcohol, and pot are among the many drugs that I have battled with for the past seven years. My world relied on the junk I fed it. Going clean is the most challenging obstacle I will ever have to face in life. It has been horrific.

During my freshman year in high school, I was heavily dependent on drugs. It became very difficult to keep my 3.6 GPA without my Ritalin and joint every morning. Circumstances became very ominous that year. Party was my life on the weekends. The majority of the money I made from my new fast food job went towards the next buy. All of my friends were overdosing and being arrested weekly, and I nearly totaled my mother's car on a drug run. Then came the big blow: my family moved. Though I knew about the move a year in advance, I pushed it out of my mind with The closer the moving date came, the deeper I sank in addition and denial. Even my half-wit friends began to see that I was setting myself up for a major breakdown. I totally crashed. The move f---ed me up beyond ambition. I moved from the rich-a-- suburbs of Ft. Lauderdale to the backwoods of Tallahassee, FL. My sister and I lived in a crappy, rundown rental house with cockroaches. I lost everything that had been important to me: my friends, my band, and the luxury of a nice house. The people I first met in town were not supportive, except to my habit. All I could do for the first couple months was go out and get trashed. But it was not until my long-time girlfriend broke up with me that the walls really came down.

I distinctly remember sitting in the bathroom crying and screaming. My mother was pounding on the door, worried and confused. The strangest thing happened to me at that time. I guess one would call it an epiphany. I decided at that time to stop using drugs. The reasoning was silly: to get back at my girlfriend who had always wanted me to get my drug use under control. However, going clean was not as easy as it sounded.

For six months, I completely lived in a hole. I attended school, and I went home. When I arrived home, I would go to bed hoping for nothing more than to never wake up again. I would sleep through dinner and the rest of the night. The next day I would start the whole routine over. My body and mind could not operate without the substances it depended on for so long. During that time, I was often sick and I lost 15 pounds. How ironic it is to think that I was more of the stereotypical junkie when I was coming off drugs. My mind was in a state of emotional chaos. Sleep to die; that was all I could think. Crying and fits of violence came without cause or notice, and suicide was my most intimate fantasy.

It would be almost another year of off-and-on depression, drug binges, and counseling sessions before I became absolutely clean. I am scarred for life emotionally and intellectually. My experience has left me with a cold sense of emptiness and indifference. I would like to experience a relatively enjoyable life without drugs. Today, I struggle through each minute of the hour, cursing myself for the pain I have inflicted. The fear and despair of the past few years has left me apathetic to life. I wonder about who I am, what my position in life is, and where I am going. I also wonder why so few people are sympathetic to what I have experienced. Is it because drugs are illegal and should not be used in the first place? I still sold and used them. When I watch television, I see commercials with inner-city school kids talking about drugs. These actors suggest that their life was that of a Nobel Prize finalist after going clean. Going clean is not romantic, or easy. It saddens me to think I am the only one of my friends able to look back on my life.

They have all turned to dust, and there is no help for them. However, sometimes I think of them as being the lucky ones. There is no pain in their past. There is no past for them. On occasion, I ask myself if going clean has been worth the insecurity, anger, and loneliness. Sometimes, I answer no.
Everyone at some point in life says, “I regret that ever happening,” or “If I had one thing to change, it would be...” Well, I suppose you feel that way until you realize that there was a reason for those events to happen. Looking back on my childhood, I realize that those situations had a big impact on the person I am today.

It was a cold day in November, 22 days after my fifth birthday. I sat motionless in a bathtub full of bubbles, deep in thought, staring blankly, wondering this and that. Suddenly the phone rang. When the phone would ring I would run frantically, hoping it was that mysterious caller who would send a message once or twice a month. But this time, for some reason, I didn't bother to move. It was as if the ringing of the phone never happened. Eventually I drifted out of thought and listened. The phone stopped ringing and my mother was speaking. Vaguely, I recall hearing, "This boy has been waiting for a call from you for weeks." I was a little curious, so I slipped out of the bubbly liquid, put on my Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles pajamas, and wandered into the living room.

“Mommy, who's on the phone?” I asked, tugging at her shirt. She whispered something into the phone then looked down at me.

“It’s daddy, honey. Do you want to talk to him?” (Why even bother asking a question like that? I thought to myself. You know the answer)

“Really? Daddy’s on the phone?”

She nodded her head slowly, her face still, and handed me the phone reluctantly.

“Hello!” I exclaimed.

“How doin’ buddy?” said my father.

“I’m OK. I have a sore throat.”

“Oh, that’s not good. So I hear it was your birthday a couple weeks ago?”

“Yep,” I said excitedly.

“How old are you now, twelve?”

“Five, dad,” I said with a smile.

“I was thinking, maybe you would like to come over to my house and spend the night.”

The words I had been waiting to hear finally came.

“Yeah, I’ll go get ready, I’ll bring my Ghostbusters toys and my Ninja Turtles cartoons and my sleeping bag and I’ll go make pizza rolls so we have something to eat and...”

“That sounds great, buddy, and you know what else you need to do?” he said as though he cared. “You need to go and drink lots of orange juice to fix that sore throat.”

“OK...”

Suddenly the phone was taken out of my hands.

“Hello, Frank, I’m not going to let you...” my mother said, looking down at me. She stopped in mid-sentence. “Honey, go dry your hair,” she told me as she covered the receiver. I tried to listen to what she said as I returned to the bathroom. In the distance I could hear her voice get a little louder, but the words
were too muffled for me to understand.

It was about 7 p.m. and I had just finished packing my things. My mother had told me that dad had said, "Tell him I'll be there at a quarter after seven." So I began my wait. I sat on the couch and watched some of an episode of "Full House." Waiting...waiting. I could smell the pizza rolls in the oven. Having almost forgotten about them, I hurried into the kitchen to find my mother taking them out of the oven. She put them on a plate and wrapped it in foil. Mom began to say something, but I wasn't listening. The radio was playing the song "Lay Down Sally." My dad was in a band and they always would start the evening with that song. This made me even more excited to see my father. I sang along as I ran back to sit by the window.

It was 7:20 and still no sign of my daddy. I sat on the chair closest to the front window, watching all the cars that would pass, hoping that each one of them would be my dad. With each passing of a car, wind would slip through the crack underneath the window seal, sending a chill through my body. I turned around every so often to look at the clock. While panning from the window to the clock, I caught a glimpse of my mother's face. She looked upset. I didn't really care, though. My mind was occupied with the thought of seeing my dad. The seconds of waiting turned into minutes, and the minutes turned into an hour. I decided I would call to see if my dad had fallen asleep or something. My dad didn't have a phone at his house, and I knew he had to have called from somewhere else, so I quietly picked up the phone and hit star 69.

Once the recorder told me the number, I hung up quickly and dialed. The phone rang and rang. Finally, someone picked up.

"Helllooo," a drunken voice spoke, party music booming the background.

"Can I talk to my daddy?" I said.

"Whattshyer dad's name?" she asked.

"Frank."

"Oh, Frankie. Yeah, suuuure, I'll go and find him."

I could hear the phone being laid down. After what seemed like ten minutes, that strange man's voice came through the line.

"Yeah, this is Franko," he said, sounding drunk himself.

"Daddy, you said you were coming to get me," I said, my heart beating faster.

"Ah, did I? I'm sorry, buddy, but you know what?" he said, slurring his words.

"Daddy, I made pizza rolls, I got my things together, and I drank three glasses of orange juice, just like you told me," I said, my eyes welling with tears.

"What?" he said, sounding confused. "Sorry, feller, but things came up and I can't get you tonight. Maybe next weekend."

In the background I could hear a woman's voice. "Frankie, come on baby, come back to bed."

"Daddy, I love you..."

Click. The phone went dead. As I stood there trying to absorb what had just happened, the line began to beep.

I placed the device that enabled me to hear that mysterious man's voice back on its holder. I tilted my head
to the side, and the tears flowed. I turned around to find my mommy standing in the doorway, her arms out. She had known what would happen even before it happened. It was ten o'clock that cold November night when I went to sleep. For some reason, crying always had that sleepy effect on me. "No more tears for Daddy tonight," my mommy whispered as she rubbed my forehead, knowing I would fall asleep in her arms.

I knew that night that the phone conversation had been backward. I may have been only five years old, but I knew what that mysterious man really was — just a very lonely and confused child. Now I realize that conversation took place between a thirty-year-old child and a five-year-old adult. Things happen for a reason, at least that's what I believe, so I would like to thank my father for never being there for me, for when he would pop his head into my life just long enough to give me pain. I don't regret all those times I would get my hopes up and be let down. Without his influence in my life, I may not be the person I am today. People say the only guarantee in life is death. That's not true. There are two. The other is pain.

Today, my father tells me, "I wish I had a part in your childhood."

I reply, "I wish I had a part in yours."