

**1st Place
High School Grades 11-12**

**TAPS
By Alexia Antoniou**

The green bottle was sweating between his fingers, pearls of water dripping through the top of the lattice iron table and spattering across his knees. His free hand perched at the edge of his receding hairline, acting as a dam against the sweat pooling there around the springy, brindled hair. He licked the back of his teeth.

“It’s hot out here,” Gregory announced. His sister spooned potato salad onto a paper plate and slid it across the table. “Feels like the Fourth of July. I like it when my weather acts like it’s supposed to- give it to me straight, right?” Genie wiped a veiny hand on the front of her shirt and clicked her tongue, trying to remember if she had left the stove on or not.

It was her backyard they were sitting in- her and Buddy’s, anyway, their cabin. When she had woken that morning, all of their patio furniture was missing, from the table down to the seat cushions; sometime during the night, Buddy must have gotten up and dragged it down the hill to the dock, because that’s where she finally found it.

Buddy was an insomniac. Before, she would try to sit up with him, but after fifteen years of marriage, Genie usually just took a Benadryl and went to bed. Some nights, though, a storm might wake her and there she’d find him, three in the morning with half his body out a window, the wet wind slapping slicks of gray brown hair across his face and his arms spread like he was going to embrace someone.

Today, however, the sky was clear. She and Gregory sat with their chairs angled so they could dangle their feet in the water. As she watched, his tongue flicked out to catch a glob of mayonnaise clinging to his mustache, reminding her.

“Um.” Genie turned in her chair, fumbling for the nurse’s name. He was a young man, and quick. He looked up from where he’d been lacing her mother-in-law’s shoe, eyes gold hazel like a deer’s.

“Yes?”

“Can she eat any of this?” She gestured to the bowl of potato salad. A fly crawled across the cover, feet sticking to the cling wrap.

The nurse looked at his patient. Buddy’s mother crouched in her wheelchair like a shifty-eyed rag doll, her hands folded in her lap and a suspicious curl to her mouth.

“Mrs. Bannister? Would you like something to eat?”

Genie sighed. “She can’t hear you,” she said, and brushed away the fly. The nurse gave a tight smile and scratched a spot on the back of his neck.

“Maybe, maybe not.”

Genie stared at him.

“She’s a mute.”

“That’s true,” the nurse agreed. “Anyways, I don’t reckon she’ll be very hungry now that she’s started up on this medication- not for a day or so, at least.”

“Oh,” Genie said, but she was watching a heron skim over the lake, its wings the same slippery blue as the water.

The dock creaked as Gregory reached below the table to open the Styrofoam cooler. He was wearing one of Buddy’s old shirts, and the way it stretched across his shoulders and choked at the collar made it look like he was trying to squeeze into one of his daughter’s tees. The damp skin formed a puffy ring around his neck.

“You’re welcome to some food yourself, if you want,” Genie offered uncertainly. The nurse brushed the dirt from his knees and crossed over for a plate.

“Don’t see too many male nurses,” Gregory remarked. “Now you see, *I’m* a cop.” The silence that followed begged some kind of answer. Receiving none, Gregory aimed an experimental flick at the neck of his bottle. Satisfied with the responding *clink*, he leaned back in his chair and gave the bottle another flick.

“How’s work, Greg?” his sister asked, crushing a potato chip in her hand.

“It’s fine,” he started to shrug, than stopped. “You remember Pavel? Came to dinner last year, remember? Russian guy, with the funny little beard. Ten years he’s been in and out of the station. Gets picked up every other month- never anything real bad, you know, but there it is. Funny guy.” He paused to scratch his mustache, grinning. “‘*Gregorovich*,’ he’d shout whenever I was loading him into the car, ‘you’re a *Cossack!*’ But they’ve really got him now.”

Genie, who had only half been paying attention, looked up from the lake.

“Botched robbery,” he explained. “Somebody got shot, and now they’re shipping him down to the state prison before trial. I *told* him last time I brought him in, I told him ‘Pal- they are going to come down hard on you one day.’ And now he’ll probably end up on death row.”

He downed the rest of his drink in one gulp, though there was more than half of it left. His face was a little red. "His wife sent me a basket of pierogis. *Christ*." He rubbed his face with the heels of his palms. "Say, where's Buddy at anyways?"

"In the boat house."

Gregory and Genie started; they had forgotten about the nurse. He was tearing pieces from his hotdog bun and throwing them to the lake, his hands watched closely by Mrs. Bannister's glittering eyes.

"And where's Monkey?"

The nurse rubbed his nose before answering,

"She's in the boat house, too."

At that moment, the door was flung open by a girl with arms full of fireworks. Her sleek braid was held together with red and blue hair ties and her shins were spotty with scratches.

"There you are, Monkey. Come and give your aunt a hug." Genie languidly let her arms fall open. Monkey hesitated. Then, tightening her grip around her treasure, she bobbed forward to bump her cheek against her aunt's.

"What'd you got there?" her father asked, sitting up. The crisscrossing metal had bit a pattern into the backs of his arms and neck. Monkey puffed out her cheeks and said nothing.

"Where'd you get those from?" he tried.

"Uncle Bud."

"I didn't know we had fireworks," Genie mused, eyeing the boathouse door. She was waiting for her husband to appear, but the shed's only movement came from the flutter of white curtains at the side window.

"Well put them down, dumpling. Those things can blow your face right off." Greg grimaced at his stomach, wishing he'd eaten a little less. Already his gut felt bloated against the taught fabric.

"In fact," he continued, "that's how your Uncle Buddy *himself* lost those fingers! You ever look at his hands?" Genie's face, gray with sun exposure, suddenly flushed. Monkey stared at her father.

“That’s not how he lost his fingers,” she said.

“Who says?” asked her aunt.

“Uncle Bud says. He says he cut them off himself.”

There was a silence like a vacuum. The nurse’s hand twitched as it flicked the last of the crumbs to the fish. Even Mrs. Bannister seemed to lean forward in her wheelchair. Abruptly, Monkey dropped her armload and cannonballed into the water, scattering fireworks all across the dock. A roman candle dropped into the water.

Gregory cleared his throat.

“I thought you told me it was fireworks,” he said finally, looking past his sister.

“That’s what he told me.” Somebody- Genie wondered who- had decorated the spokes of Mrs. Bannister’s wheelchair with scraps of red and white crepe paper. The streamers seemed to droop from their scotch tape in limp exhaustion.

“Anyone want a drink?” Gregory asked, looking from his sister to the nurse, then, somewhat uncertainly, to Mrs. Bannister.

“No,” said Genie, waving her hand, “but you go ahead and have one, Greg.” The nurse raised his eyebrows. Genie eyed him over her brother’s bent back.

“Hey,” she said, “don’t you play the trumpet?” The nurse buried his hands in his back pockets, and the sun that hit his face revealed freckles hiding beneath the tan skin.

“Sure.”

“I *thought* you did.” She smiled at him as her brother straightened, having peeled off his beer cap with the bottle opener dangling from his wallet chain.

“Yours is the red car?” Greg asked. “Yeah, we saw one of those instrument cases in there. Wondered what it was; Monkey thought you played the flute.”

“No,” said a voice from the water. “*You* said that.”

“Why don’t you play for us?” said Genie. “Why don’t you play something patriotic for Independence Day?” She had been about to say ‘for Buddy’s Day’; her mind was still on the boathouse.

“No,” said the nurse quickly.

“Please? It would mean so much to Buddy. And to me.”

Gregory snorted.

“You think a rousing round of ‘Taps’ is going to lure him out here?”

“Eat your potato salad, Greg.” She snapped. The nurse quietly placed his plate on the ground beside the wheelchair and started up the hill towards the car.

The sun was sinking lower in the sky now.

“Musicians are all alcoholics,” Gregory declared and polished off his fifth beer of the day. Above the mustache, his nose was leaking. “All of them. Even the tuba players. They carry liquor around in their cases with the instruments, and the reason they’re so-called *starving artists* is because they blow all their money getting shitfaced- sorry, Monkey.”

“What do you know about musicians, Greg?” Genie asked stiffly. She laced her fingers across her right knee and pulled it into her chest.

“I know enough. I’ve been to that polka bar down on Terrence Street a few times.” He closed his eyes and began humming. “Bum bum bum *bum bum bum...*” He turned his head and blew his nose into the shoulder of Buddy’s cast off shirt.

The sun was melting over the lake, floating on the water in fifty different colors like a brilliant oil spill. Even the sides of the little girl’s head reflected tangerine and emerald and gold.

“Monkey?” Genie called, staring into the cold beetle eyes of her mother-in-law; it was like gazing into outer space through the wrong end of a telescope. Genie shuddered.

“Go ask Uncle Buddy to come out here, please.” Monkey gripped the edge of the dock and popped out of the water, body spilling across the wooden planks. She was up in a flash.

“We should get going soon,” came Gregory’s voice from behind his castle of empty green bottles. “Marjorie will be a bitch if we’re late.” Genie pursed her lips.

“He says he’s coming in a minute,” Monkey called from the lawn beside the boathouse. The water was snaking down her legs and her wrists and her braid, dripping to the parched tongues of grass between her toes.

“Monkorovich,” Gregory thrust an accusing finger in the direction of his daughter, “you’re a *Cossack!*”

When no one responded, he recommenced his humming. Genie looked around her back yard as if in defeat, bringing a wrist to her forehead.

“What’s that boy doing up there?” She wondered aloud, remembering the nurse. She had wanted him to play something military like, from the army, wanted Buddy to hear it and to come out to them. Monkey squinted up the hill.

“He’s smoking,” She said, and trotted up the slope to the driveway.

The wind had picked up some, so the nurse had to keep his hand cupped around the lighter as he brought it to his lips. The small flame at his chin transformed his face, so that for a moment he was only a jumble of shadows and patches of light and then the flame went out and it was his face again. He dropped the lighter into his pocket, smiling when he saw her.

“Hello, Monkey.” He gave a cheerful salute.

“My name’s Angie,” she said. He considered this.

“Mine’s Thomas.” They shook hands. Beside them, the cabin squatted in the dark like a giant, hollow-bellied toad. Its shutters were rotting, practically dropping from their hinges, the screen door a loose flap of skin held agape by an upturned cinderblock. Standing on the driveway, they could smell the dampness radiating from the wood.

“Is it true what you said about your uncle’s hand?” Thomas asked after a while. Angie nodded. She was trying to copy his easy lean against the car.

“It was because of the bugs. He says he could always feel the bugs crawling around on his hands. Especially at nighttime. He couldn’t see them, but he says he could feel them, and he could feel they were made of metal and that they were eating him from his hands. And then he cut his fingers off.” She pinched a pebble between her toes and let it drop. “When he was in the jungle.”

“Huh,” Thomas said, and folded his arms across his chest. The temperature had dropped some since the sun went down. Pretty soon, he would have to wheel Mrs. Bannister back inside the house. Angie shot him a sideways look.

“He’s not crazy,” she said. She watched him chew his lip and waited until he nodded.

“Do you want a smoke?” he asked, dropping his own cigarette to the driveway and grinding it into the gravel. Her eyes widened.

“I’m nine years old!”

Laughing, he patted her on the head and strolled down the hill. Her father passed him on his way up.

“Hey, Monkey, time to go.” He made to rub her head but missed, instead brushing her nose with his fingertips. The car was already unlocked when he opened it, falling rather than lowering himself into the seat. Monkey turned her head until she could see the dock where four silhouettes blended into the wood and water.

The sky exploded above their heads, raining down in green and yellow sparks; across the lake, someone was setting off fireworks.

“For chrissakes, get in the car!” Gregory called, beating on the horn for emphasis. His head lolled from the window like the tip of some giant, mustached tongue. Light from the firework was fast dissipating; Monkey could barely see the small shadow of her aunt shove Uncle Bud in the chest, a hard push that nearly sent him tumbling into the lake. Then the light dissolved.

As they drove off, the fireworks began in earnest. It felt to Monkey, crouched in the foot space beneath her seat, that they were fleeing the site of a nuclear fallout.

Four hours later, Buddy Bannister stood barefoot on the dock with a trash bag full of paper plates and potato salad at his feet. In his late fifties, he was a man built like a blade- lean and pointed, with a jutting chin and a long, flat nose. Behind him the tables, chairs, and busted umbrella were piled on the grass, waiting to be ferried back up the hill and home again. A mound of broken green glass glittered on the dock. The moon was out. Its mild glow had a softening effect on the scene; his denim shirt appeared less wrinkled, somehow, the chipped wooden dock smoothed over- but even this light could do nothing for Buddy’s hand.

It was his right hand. The white flesh was a mottle of reds and blues, colors leeching from his wrist to pool by the scar tissue of his knuckles. Only his thumb and three-fourths of his index finger hung from this lump; they were like two gnarled roots reaching down towards the water of the lake. He closed his eyes.

He was listening. Cal Davis used to say that cutting off one sense made all the other ones stronger, that blind people could hear everything and the deaf all had vision like super heroes- Davis had planned on going to medical school before his letter arrived, and there was always something quasi-scientific coming out of his mouth, right up to the end. He could remember that, too: Davis divvying up a handful of rice between the lot of them, sucking his gappy teeth and shaking his head over the waste Buddy had made of his

hand. It had been early in the morning still, the mist rose green and smothering from the dirt where Buddy lay on his side. He had his head clenched between his knees, he was shaking. Ferris Anderson, the stutterer, asked if there was any peanut butter left, and then a bullet sprouted from the middle of Davis' forehead and the man was dead. His last word had been 'bacteria'.

Buddy was listening now for fireworks, but they were finished, over, leaving behind a haze of smoke that settled over the lake like pulled cotton. Animals had begun to settle in again now that the barrage was over; he could hear them clawing up the trees. Grass rustled. Twigs snapped. A frog splashed from the water to the shore, hitting the sand with the old sound of things falling to the ground and not getting up again.

Buddy imagined his wife lying in their bed, her hair tucked in pink plastic curlers and her body tangled in the sheets his mother had given them as a wedding present. He thought of the trash bag still lying on the dock, and his eyelids almost flickered open, but he caught himself and crinkled them shut. Inhaling, he took a step forward and into the lake.

It was so warm he could cry. Sinking through the water, he felt his shirt scrunch around his body like an outgrown skin, so he peeled it off and kept it gripped in one hand so that it wouldn't float away without him. Beneath it, his chest was thin, almost concave, and blindingly pale. His collarbones thrust forward. All the while he could feel the pores of his body expanding and expanding until the lake began flowing into him and Buddy himself was seeping out through his skin and diffusing across the water. They were reaching an equilibrium, and then his foot collided with the bottom of the lake and he kicked out, rising up again through the bubbles and the silt like a seven-fingered saint.

