

## A BOY'S DUTY

by Sharon G. Flake

When World War II broke out, folks around here signed up right off. I was too young to join. My father was too old. But that didn't keep us from warring with one another. Or me from running away from home six times by my twelfth birthday—the last time for good.

Truth is, I wasn't suited to live on a farm. My father blamed my teachers for my discontent. He ought to have blamed himself. Slaughtering pigs and wringing chicken necks did as much to chase me toward books as any teacher ever did. But it was my father's binoculars and the almanac that pulled me away from the farm first. It's how I got the notion I wanted to be a mapmaker, plotting out every planet and star in the sky. Four years later, I'm sitting at the Lucky Linda Café, homeless. My father would say he could have predicted this.

"Boy! You boy!" yells Mr. Jackson. "Get up. This ain't no flophouse to sleep in day and night."

I keep my head down, plus one eye open because Mr. Jackson is not like his wife, Ma Susie. He wants you to buy your meal, eat it, and be gone. This is a twenty-four-hour café. Some of us have been here since midnight, so he ought to expect a little sleeping to get done.

The café is small. Maybe it holds fifty folks, I'm not sure. I've never seen it more than half-full. I used to sit at the lunch counter across the room. It faces a mirror long as the wall. Sitting here near the window suits me better. My presence doesn't suit Mr. Jackson at all. He looks at his watch. Then looks at it again for good measure. "I got here five thirty this morning. You been asleep at this table the whole time. I can't earn no money with customers doing that."

I sit up, knowing full well this isn't how he treats the other customers. They get served coffee at the regular price. "I paid for my coffee. Two cents extra, like always. And I gave her the tip." It's not true, but his wife nods like it is. One day it will be. Next week I'm signing up with the navy at the recruitment center across the street. I figure I'm plenty old enough, not that Uncle Sam or my father would agree. Uncle Sam says I need to be seventeen. My father thinks I need to come home.

Pulling spit into his throat, Mr. Jackson shoots it into a rusty can. "Country boy here, taking advantage, like they all do," he says to Ma Susie.

I rise up inside and out, yelling. "The sign says buy a cup of coffee and stay and sit as long as you like!" Looking at a

few customers looking at me, I lower my voice and settle myself down. "We all came in around the same time, midnight." I'm pointing to the regulars. "He played blackjack. The navy guys played dice." I look left at a man slicing cards faster than a butcher shaving ham. "That one there was drunk before he sat down. You look past it all. Only not when it comes to me."

The drunk man raises his coffee cup, downing the last drop. A sailor with a pretty gal perched on his lap salutes. Another one at the counter hangs his head low while he writes, then cuts his blue eyes at me and smiles. He's been here two whole days. Barely eating. Always writing. His fingers busy, moving a fountain pen from line to line. What is he, sixteen? A liar, maybe, like me. Well, the way Hitler and the Third Reich are fighting, each one of us is needed—Negroes and whites alike. Thieves and liars too, I guess.

Before the Jacksons bought the Lucky Linda Café, it was vacant—a good hiding place for rats and pickpockets on the run. Gutting it, they made it seem brand-new. Mr. Jackson laid the tile floor. Ma Susie made all the curtains by hand. Her brother installed new pipes and put in the lunch counter. A few boys got paid to haul away bricks, broken furniture, and plaster. Mr. Jackson blames me for other things they left with—his wallet, for starters. Now kids aren't allowed much in here anymore. If I hadn't done the mural, I'd be banned too.

"Old man, leave the boy alone." Ma Susie roots around in her apron pocket. "Here's another newspaper article, Zakary

James. I almost forgot." She sits it on the table. "You're famous."

THE BOY WITH HIS EYES ON THE STARS, the headline reads. Planets and stars that I painted on the front and the side of the café fill most of the page. "I told my father. There's more to life than living on a farm."

It was my idea to draw the mural, I told the reporter. I lied about the reason why. Truth is, I was trying to make up for things. The stolen wallet, for sure. I didn't run off with it, but that was just happenstance. I plotted and planned and schemed along with Ezekiel, Randy, Luke, and Tennessee. But they pulled it off without me. One day early. I'd be in the reformatory too, if they hadn't. So, I guess you could say I owe a debt to them.

Painting the mural was like painting a new life for myself. Six months later and I'm brand-new. I wrote that to my father in a letter. I included the article too. He told me to do my duty. To come home and help him run the farm. *Haven't you had enough of the low life?* he wrote. *Of dragging our family name through the mud?*

Ma points to a customer outside in a blue velvet hat. "Her type didn't come in before that mural was painted. Those stars are good advertisement. You see them from the bridge, three blocks over." She pinches my cheek. "We did right, letting you stay."

Mr. Jackson looks at me like I'm the enemy. Then he recalls a boy from a few weeks back who stole the tip jar.

I nearly took off after him. But it's my practice now to

stay clear of boys like myself. Living on the lam, breaking the law, is like drinking rotgut. It only takes one sip to draw you back in. So, I spend my nights at the café. Part of my days here too, reading and painting. When Mr. Jackson has had enough of me, I head for St. Matthew's Church. It's four blocks away. They pay you thirty-five cents a day to scrape the wax off the floors. Sometimes, to keep out of the cold, I do it for free.

Ma wipes crumbs off a table, into her hands. "Nobody's perfect. . . ." She points to the blue-eyed sailor at the counter. "Not him over there," she whispers, "or that poor thing who stole the tip jar." She laughs. "He did stink to high heaven, though." She looks at me. "Negro or white, you boys always do."

Yesterday, she passed along a bar of Ivory soap, a rag for washing myself with, and this shirt. It's a little too tight but it's clean. She lost twin boys to the croup soon as they were born. So mothering every boy who walks through her door gives her pleasure, I believe.

She shakes her head. "He had such pretty black hair. What was he, Italian? Jewish?" Ma Susie asks.

"A thief, like him." Mr. Jackson points to me.

"I never stole anything from you."

He looks at Ma. He pours water into a glass and takes a long drink. Then he brings up his wallet. He thinks he saw one of the boys who stole it. "Susie made me doubt myself, though."

"You're sixty, old with bad eyes," she reminds him. "All these boys look alike to you."

His eyes always find me well enough. "He was your friend, wasn't he?"

I lie. "No, sir." Looking out the window, I pray Ma Susie is right. Because I've no plans to see Ezekiel and those other boys again. I do what I shouldn't when I'm in their company. And for once I've got my eyes on a bigger life.

"Well, if he comes in here—" Mr. Jackson steps behind the register.

"Put that hatchet away." Ma takes it. "They steal to eat. For shoes." She looks awfully disappointed in him. "Our sons would deserve the same kindness."

"Our boys"—Mr. Jackson fights to untie his apron—"deserve to be here more than some." Pitching it onto the table, he walks out of the store.

The blue-eyed sailor puts down his pen, having watched it all.

Ma pats the apron like it's her husband's back she's soothing. Passing by a guest who has walked in, she crosses the street and sits down beside him. There's a bench in front of the recruitment center. When Mr. Jackson has had enough, that's where he goes. I get his apron and tie it on.

Some people can't imagine that I've ever worked a day in my life. But I'm no slacker. On the farm, I worked eight-and-ten-hour days. Milking. Feeding. Planting. Pulling. I hardly carry my own weight here, mainly because Mr. Jackson won't have it. But customers are at the door. And it's just me here to greet them. "Morning. Breakfast? Good. Follow me." Cook is hard of hearing. I yell at him as I pass the

kitchen. "Two for breakfast. More to come." Seating the couple at the counter, I take their order. Next, I fill their glasses with ice and water. And inspect the silver before I set it out. Pushing open the kitchen door, I read off the order. "Oatmeal, eggs over easy, toast and jam, times two." It's going to be a busy morning, I see. More people are at the door. I take a peek at Ma. She's holding Mr. Jackson's hand. He's eyeing me, but still not satisfied.

Truckers are Ma Susie's favorites. They order double and triple meals sometimes. And tip good. I lead this one back to the lunch counter too. It's easier on me. No running around the whole café taking orders. "This seat work for you? Good." I sit him next to the blue-eyed sailor. That's not the best idea, I see. The sailor grabs his things and heads for a table near the window. Maybe he wants more privacy—who knows? Who cares? I've no time to dawdle. I'm off to seat more customers. Three, to be exact. Just when I start complaining, Ma Susie and Mr. Jackson walk in. She kisses my cheek. He reminds me that I'm not to work the register. Grumbling, he says he may check my pockets for tips.

"Which he earned." Ma stuffs change from a table into my pocket. "And you—apologize," she says to him.

Taking back his apron, he sucks his false teeth. "Sometimes you is worth a plug nickel, I guess."

That's a compliment. One I'll take any day of the week from him.

When the crowd dies down, I eat my fill, with no interfering from him.

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The Lucky Linda Café is thin on customers between noon and three. Which is why I use that time to draw. Years ago, I used loose-leaf paper. But that's too flimsy for a boy on the run. Now I paint on sturdy brown paper, the kind butchers use to wrap raw chicken in. I swiped an entire roll once, and cut it into sheets. Being careful, it lasted me a year. The paintings I drew ended up in the river, though, along with a lady's purse that the cops were determined to retrieve from me.

As carefully as I can, I unroll the paper. It's one solid sheet—ten feet long, to be exact. The best work I've ever done. I modeled the mural outside after it. They're not twins, just in the same family.

"Excuse me." My painting is slipping off the tables. "Can I borrow those?"

The blue-eyed sailor hands me a sugar bowl and saltshaker to anchor the painting. Standing at attention in his dress whites, he takes his pea cap off. "Jesus. The whole universe." For the first time, I notice blue ink on his fingertips.

My chest puffs. "Counting the Milky Way, there's a thousand stars."

He points to the Big Dipper, Orion's Belt, a meteor's purple tail dragging across the sky. I bring up my favorite planets. "Pluto's the baby of the bunch. That's Saturn—a big show-off. It's got rings. All made of ice and rock. Then rings inside of those. The larger rings are each named for a letter of the alphabet. Know how many of them she has?" I answer

before he can speak. "Seven. One day I bet we'll get to the moon. Saturn too."

He doesn't laugh. Like some folks. He looks over my creation. It's done with oil paints and used brushes I won in a crap game. "How long did it take?" he asks.

"Three months for the solar system." I tell him it took two years to do the entire thing. That's not exactly true. I stashed it in the basement of a church for a year. Left it with the pawnshop owner twice. It's tattered at the edges and stained. But people hardly notice.

He reaches out his hand. "Nicholson. Gunner's Mate Jim Nicholson."

He's a tall fellow, I'd say six two or so. I'm just clearing five seven. Blond hair, a skinny nose, he looks as plain an ordinary as I do. Scared too. Which makes him fit in just fine at the café, even though whites hardly ever come unless they have a Negro girl on their arm or they're down on their luck.

"Zakary James." I shake his hand. "Pleased to meet you." I wipe the sweat from his hands on my pants.

Situating himself at a table, he pulls out a pack of Lucky Strikes and offers me one.

I take two. One to sell to the hobos on Miller Street. The second I'll pass along to the priest at St. Matthew's Church. I never know when I'll need his kindness again. "Shipping off soon?" I pull out my paint tin.

He lights his cigarette and takes a long leisurely drag, but doesn't answer.

"Got a gal? I got a gal. Emma Jean," I lie. I've no time for girls. Not with the life I live. But military men always seem to want to talk theirs up. I'm just making polite conversation.

He's digging through his back pocket and pulls out his wallet. It's black leather, stuffed full of money. "No gal. Just a mother. The best in the world." He kisses her picture after showing it off. Then he gets back to looking worried. "My father was a hero in the First World War. Died some years later."

"Sorry for your loss. I was two months old when my mother passed."

He gives me his condolences. "And *your* father?"

"He never approved of my drawings." I dip my brush in my coffee cup. "Or me."

"My father was hard on me too. Yes, sir. No, sir." He salutes and laughs. "I came to write a letter to him . . . explaining."

"You said *he* was dead."

"He is."

I watch the blinds rise at the enlistment center and use the opportunity to change the subject. "Hope Uncle Sam wears bifocals."

"I am proof that he does." Nicholson laughs.

Ma sits a plate of grits at his elbow. Sliding a forkful of heaven into his mouth, he asks, "Are you planning to enlist? I went in early myself." He leans in and waves me closer. "I wouldn't advise it."

My stomach drops. "Next week. I plan to, um . . . join." I think about my father. He has no use for war, though he served his time. *This is not the Negroes' fight*, he said in his

letter. *Your duty is to hearth and home.* I do not mention this to Nicholson.

He finishes the grits in no time. With his hands wiped clean, he shows off his father's medal. "For bravery." Out comes another cigarette. "I joined the navy three years ago, at fourteen. With my mother's blessings. She'll blame herself if I never make it back."

"Well, come back, then."

It's a whole hour before he says another word. Or Ma and Mr. Jackson interfere. They clear tables and wash dishes, serve themselves lunch, and empty the tip jar. I'm painting. Taking advantage of the sun pouring in. Nicholson is back to his writing. It's not long before the tips of his ears turn red in the sun. And he and I are the only customers.

He sets his pen down. "Have you ever seen a torpedo?"

*How could I?*

"Oh, the damage they do." He looks at me with pity in his eyes.

For Nicholson's sake, I change the subject. "I noticed you write a lot of letters." Since he came, he's been writing day and night. Filling up the trash can but never the page, it seemed. "I don't care to write much myself. I wrote my father, though. Wish I hadn't is all I can say." I babble on much longer than I would have expected. I'm talking about our farm, the peaches it produces. Some of the sweetest around. City fellows never seem to appreciate such talk. He doesn't either. He looks lost again . . . in his own thoughts. "They say a sailor has a girl in every port. Any truth to that?" I ask.

He fidgets with his pen, dropping it a time or two. "My best friend . . . lost his legs. Both." Using his fingers, he names other boys injured in the war. "Miller, Jamison, McIntyre." Whispering, he starts on the ones who died.

I'm glad when he stops.

"What if it's my turn next? Her time too?"

"Her?" I swallow.

"The *Indianapolis*."

He looks around. Then whispers. "I don't want to die."

I never think about dying. I can't. I got plans, big ones on the ship and beyond. Not that I share them with folks much. They laugh whenever I do. So, I've learned to lie about those too. To color my dreams small so people feel more comfortable.

I pull a seat over and sit down. "Sometimes it's better to run than fight." I look around the café, as if I don't know it's empty. The soldiers and sailors all gone for now. "Some fellows go AWOL, don't they?"

"Saints alive." Ma Susie looks disappointed in me. "We don't talk like that in here. No, sir." Ma pours coffee in his cup. "We believe in the war effort."

She's in the kitchen when he whispers, "I think about Tahiti."

"What?"

"Tahiti. Where they have island girls. There's no girl prettier on earth." Closing his eyes, he talks about lying in the sun with a coconut drink in his hand.

"Why don't you go?"

"Duty. Duty to my family and country." Sweat from

his forehead drips onto the table. "I came here to write. To apologize to my father for being a coward. I have not found the courage yet." He picks up a notebook and out comes a ticket to Tahiti. "And what about the other boys?" He seems to be talking more to himself than to me. "I have a duty to them as well."

*What's a boy's duty to himself?* I wonder.

Ma Susie walks in between me and Nicholson. Escorting two military men to their tables, she thanks them for their service. "'Cause for sure the Negro soldier will put an end to Hitler once and for all. That Jim Crow too." She puts two fingers up on each hand and makes a Double V—the sign for victory at war plus victory over racism here at home—then fills their cups with coffee.

One of the men tips his cap Ma's way. The other cuts his eye toward the door when it opens. In walks a lady with a peacock-colored purse swinging from her wrist. Once she takes a seat, she sits it on the table like a prize.

Nicholson and I resume our conversation. I mention the first teacher I ever lived with. She taught me about the Vikings and Columbus. For the first time, I tell the whole truth. "Ever since, I've wanted to be a sailor. A quartermaster, to be exact. Charting the ship's course, I'll use the stars to guide my way."

"The navy doesn't allow Negroes to do that."

"Not yet. But one day they will. After I'm done, I'll go to school. Then I'll teach astronomy. Maybe at Tuskegee. A colored university. My teacher said that one day, scientists will get us to the moon. I plan to be one of them."

For the first time in two days, he laughs. His eyes tear up. He holds his stomach. Doubling over, he apologizes. As soon as he gains his composure, he bursts out laughing again. Soon sorrow seems to fill his voice. "Tahiti might as well be the moon."

"What?"

"Colored or white, boys like us never follow through, Zakary." He rips the ticket in two. "The ship takes off tomorrow. Duty, right?"

Ma Susie likes to say that the devil is always set to unveil the truth about you. And no sooner than the soldiers leave and Nicholson's words settle in the air does the door blow wide-open—a hurricane of boys rushing in. Four. My old friend Ezekiel among them.

"Heathens!" Mr. Jackson reaches for the hatchet. The woman at table seven reaches for her purse. "Told you all last time—" Losing his temper, he backs into Ma, knocking a pitcher of lemonade out of her hand. "Susie. It's all your fault." With his shirt dripping wet, he takes off running. "Some of these blasted boys can't be saved."

The boys run in every direction. They jump over chairs and boxes, sliding across the floor like ice is underneath their feet. The oldest is younger than me, by a hair. But just as skilled. The tallest is quick-fingered, able to separate people from their wallets in a blink. Like frogs trying to leap out of hot water, they run this way and that, Mr. Jackson behind them but never close enough. "Zakary James. You owe me," he says, stopping to catch his breath. "Fix this!"

Nicholson snatches the youngest one, who kicks and

squirms to be set free. Cook reaches for Ezekiel, but only catches air. I stand where I am, frozen, while Ezekiel scoops the purse off the lady's lap and dances away.

"Zakary James." Ezekiel slows down some. "Catch!"

The peacock purse lands in my hands. The lady stands and gasps. Ma, over by the register, looks sad enough to cry.

"Meet me at the usual place." He flies out the back door, along with the others.

I look across the room and think of all the places I been tossed out of. My fifth-grade teacher's house after he passed on. A friend's place when his folks couldn't feed me any longer. The back room of the library. I stayed there six months, unnoticed. It all comes to an end soon enough, I suppose. Fixing my eyes on my creation, I swallow. Taking pictures of it in my mind's eye, I clutch the purse and almanac and take off running. *Told you so*, I half expect to hear Mr. Jackson say. But like the blues, his words are sad and soft—filled with a bucket of tears. "Zakary James. Stay."

I stop. Everything stops, it seems. "Sorry." I look Ma's way. Then walk out the front door.

. . .

We always meet behind the pawnshop on Twelfth Street after we do a job. For the first time, I'm the last to arrive. They probably thought I wouldn't show up. That I'd keep the money for myself.

"What took you so long?" Ezekiel wants to know. He never asks about Luke, the kid left behind. It's how it is. You lose a few along the way. Can't cry over spilled milk.

It's been three hours since I left the café. I spent all that time at the park, thinking. "They sent the cops after me," I lie. "I hid awhile."

Sitting on a trash can, I wave flies away. Then I toss the purse to Ezekiel, who has his fingers shoved deep in one of Ma Susie's peach pies.

"Found two on the back-porch steps, cooling," he says. "Last one. Have a taste."

Passing what's left of it around, he unsnaps the pocket-book. Then thanks me for my assistance. After he counts the money, he offers me the lion's share. It's how we've always done things. The person who takes the biggest risk—gets the biggest reward. Holding out his hand, he waves thirty bucks my way.

"I don't want it."

He faces the back door of the pawnshop. "Get that telescope." It's been in the shop window for years. A few times, when the store was open late, I got to use it.

"And keep it where?" I sigh.

Ezekiel hands them each a few bills. The rest get folded and shoved deep in his front pocket. The other boys finish their pie. I take the empty pans and wipe them clean on my pants. "She likes these back." Walking over to Ezekiel, I warn him. "Stay away from them. They're good people."

Ezekiel was the first person I met when I came to this city. I had no coat, or shoes on my feet. At night, I slept on the cold ground. He showed me the ropes. And listened to my stories about the stars and beyond. More than once, I can say. I owe him.



He squats down to tie the younger one's shoe. "Didn't expect you to be at the café. I heard you left town." He stands up. "Wish you had." He looks at the sky. "Is it true?"

"You ask me all the time. Sure, it is."

"The sun is really that far away?"

We all stare up, watching the sun going down. "Ninety-three million miles."

Randy, the youngest one now, sits on the ground, clutching his knees. I watch maggots squirming in water not far away. I look up to the sky. Then I find a stick and show Randy where he can find the Big Dipper, the Great Bear. An hour later, he can name the planet that's farthest away. "Pluto, right?" He smiles.

"Right."

We sit in the alley in the dark, under the lights. Ezekiel rolls dice, eventually winning back most of the money he shared.

"I thought the judge gave you two years," I say to Ezekiel.

"He did." He pulls up his shirt to show me his back. A scar runs from his shoulder to his tailbone. "Sixty-five stitches," he admits.

Put there by a doctor who still needs schooling, I'd say.

"Got it in a knife fight in reformatory. It took three months to heal. I ran off after the doctor took the stitches out." His eyes lose their sparkle when he says, "Wouldn't you?"

I nod. Randy wanders away. They'll spend their money on candy, I bet. Not Ezekiel. He pulls his shirt over his head. "I need a nap." He yawns. "Later we'll go up under the bridge.

I got a pallet there. A blanket for you. Like always." A few minutes later, he's snoring.

I think about my mural. Then I decide not to think about it. I look around the alley instead. The maggots gave up, I see. But the flies haven't. They stick to my sweaty skin. Aim for my lips and ears. I give up on swatting them. And head for the pawnshop. From the sidewalk, I can hear the owner quarreling. A woman wants more money for her pearls than he is offering. The words they use once got my mouth washed out with soap. I step inside, wave at him, and head for the telescope. It's dusty, as usual. But it still works. Not perfectly, though. The lens was always broken. A line passes through the sky when you look through it. I can't see now why I always talked about buying it. Even the knob that makes it turn left to right is rusted.

Stepping outside an hour later, I see leaves get chased up the block by the wind. And the boys get chased out of a store. They run past me laughing. Then dive into the alley, calling Ezekiel's name. A few minutes later, we hear sirens.

I look at the opposite end of the alley and think about making a break for it. Then the fire engines sound. Flying past the alley, it drowns our voices. And gets Ezekiel moving. He talks about not pressing our luck. Taking Seventh Street to Michigan, walking up back alleys, then heading for his place, under the bridge.

I pick up Ma's pans and my almanac, but can't seem to get moving.

"Let's go." Ezekiel slips more candy into his mouth. "They'll be coming for us."

"I dodged the cops," I lie. Ma would never send cops after a boy.

"Somebody's always coming," he says.

"Could be the man from the store up the street. Them reformatory folks, the police." Ezekiel lowers himself to tie Randy's shoes again. "I don't trust nobody." He steps in a maggot puddle. Then leads us out of the alley.

We're on Main Street when I ask for the money he swiped. "A buck. That's all."

"Only a dollar? That's it? It's your loss." He hands it over.

Using a pencil from my pocket, I write down my father's address. "He could use a farmhand. He'll drive you hard. But you'll get paid . . . well. It might work in your favor if you don't mention you know me."

The others fix their eyes on me. I don't know what to tell them. My father's not the type to take a whole crew in.

Ezekiel folds the money neatly. Slides it into his breast pocket. Gives it a little pat, and then squats. He brings up the boy we left behind. "You think Luke's gonna be all right?"

Randy, climbing onto his back, doesn't notice the heavy load.

"Why wouldn't he be? You trained him. Didn't you?"

Ezekiel looks up and down the street and begins walking. I head in the opposite direction.

Scarcely able to keep up with my own feet, I run for miles. Out of breath, I stop at the bridge, blocks away from the café. Looking down, I see pallets and people. Trash cans spitting fire. Crossing the bridge, you can see the café plain

as day. Along with a man on a bench. Mr. Jackson, for sure. I take my time getting to him.

"Sit, boy." He has a bat in his hand. I saw him kill a rat with it once.

"I'll stand, sir, if you don't mind." Peering across the street at the café, I see a few of the regulars. "Is Ma Susie here?"

He sounds tired, older than usual. "Sent her home." He leans the bat against the wall. "Of course, she took that blasted boy with her." He takes the pie pans from me. "She don't know, you can never replace what's lost."

I think about Ezekiel replacing me. He can't, I guess. But maybe he doesn't want to.

I sit down and rest on the far edge of the bench. "Maybe she only wants to help boys get back on their feet." I slide in closer. "I plan to join the navy, Mr. Jackson. Go to college. Live my dreams. I have a right to that, don't I?"

He doesn't say a word.

I bring up Nicholson, to clear the air between us mostly. "Did he go with Ma Susie?"

He jumps up. "He better not had!" Then settles himself back on the bench. "Tahiti! Your generation, Negro or white, got sawdust for brains."

Smiling, I think about Nicholson with them girls.

"Quit that smiling. You ruined my day!" He's up now, grabbing the bat.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Sorry don't always do. What about that woman's money?" he says, bringing up the stolen purse.

"I'll pay it back from my sailor money."

He walks to the curb, prepared to cross the street. "How many years will that take, boy?"

I got no answer for him.

He rubs his shoulder. Crosses the street. Stopping in front of the mural. "Ma made me pay that woman, even for her purse."

"I'm thankful."

"You're indebted to me, that's what you are."

Opening the café door, he asks, "What made you come back? The police coulda been here."

I look at my name written in cursive at the bottom of the mural. "I left things here."

He steps inside first. "You left a mess is what you did. I told Susan, 'I ain't his butler.' You boys. . . ." He grabs a coffee pot. Heading for the kitchen, he talks about making a fresh batch of coffee.

I sit down at my regular table. With my hands behind my head, and my feet up, I stare outside at the moon. A boy's got a duty to hold onto his dreams, I think.

## ONE VOICE

### A Something In-Between Story

*by Melissa de la Cruz*

**GRAFFITI.** The white spray-painted message glowed on the sandstone bricks of Jordan Hall. Couldn't miss it even if I wanted to. A big middle finger and a particularly shocking phrase smack in the middle of my Monday morning, reminding me that—even at what you thought was your prestigious cosmopolitan university, the one you had worked so hard to attend—someone will try to make you feel like you're an imposter. A warning not to get too comfortable. I'll give the tagger this much credit: he or she was bold, choosing this spot, knowing so many students passed through the quad. Even if you didn't see it, gossip was spreading fast.

**LAB PARTNERS.** My first class that morning? Microbiology. The graduate student running the lab asked us to evaluate different water samples for bacteria. As I prepared