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Calamity's Child

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Calamity's Child

Abstract

Richard Russo selected Calamity's Child as the winning entry in our Chapter One Contest. Here are the first 20 pages of Ducey's novel.

Keywords

letters, girl, cowboy



ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

May 6, 2011

Calamity's Child

by Kevin Ducey

Editor's Note: Richard Russo selected Calamity's Child as the winning entry in our Chapter One Contest. Here are the first 20 pages of Ducey's novel.

The story has been told many times with variations. Sometimes the daughter is a stepchild. Sometimes the girl is a boy. Coursey claims Calamity gave birth to a son in Sydney. Senn reports the incident as follows:

'Deadwood citizens confirm the story of her arrival in Deadwood accompanied by her husband and a bright young girl about ten years old ...'

- J. Leonard Jennewein, Calamity Jane of the Western Trails

* * *

Letters to Edison [excerpt]

8 June 1903

Electric, Montana

Dear Mr. Edison,

...I didn't hear the train come in. There was no horse riding up either, though I didn't, generally speaking, have a lot of time to sit around waiting for the train like some people might. Carl decided somewhere along the line I needed more stuff to do to keep me out of his hair. He has been a dentist as well as a saloon owner and has taken it into his head that I should grow up to be the dentist for our town. Carl tells me that what this town needs is a young dentist. Since there aren't any dentistry schools anywhere in this part of the world is how come I find myself most afternoons down on my knees on the bar floor filling in the tiny cracks in the planking with a spackling compound that Carl says acts most like a dentist's oxyphosphate of copper cement as any sealant he can find. The floor of Carl's bar is about halfway sealed in enameling like a giant tooth at this point when I look up from the floor (not because I heard the sound of a particular train or horse, but mainly I reckon because all the low murmuring of cards and drinking stopped all of a sudden) and I look up into the bright sunlight coming in through the saloon doors and a shadow falls on me where I was kneeling there with putty knife in hand.

Now Carl generally likes to keep the room dark on account of the heat and he always says people spend too much of their time out in the sun. He says that and then he's just as liable to launch into some homesick story about Quebec as not, and the way the sun spoke to him one morning with a French accent, the same day his stake in the Black Hills finally yielded up its mineral wealth and gave him the idea to open a bar called 'Chez Carl' in Montana along the Milwaukee Road. Even though he swears he never talks to the sun or moon anymore, his face went pale as a full moon of whey cheese when the sun, *je suis désollée*, was eclipsed by the figure of a stranger standing in the open saloon doors. With the sun settled on the stranger's left shoulder it was hard to see who it was, but I knew it wasn't one of our townies. I've seen most of 'em from the knees down for years and the newcomer's boots were worn so bad you could see the traces of glue and tar signifying several lifetimes of comfortable re-shoeing. The stranger's jeans were chapped and filthy dark brown; the color of our street, but it was clear the raggedy ends carried the stink of horse manure from the Bitterroot to the Mogollones. The stranger's hips were wide and belted with a simple leather belt. Slung low on one leg nestled a holster

with an old revolving pistol even I could tell was old and a coughing puppy, like Carl would say: "That horse is a coughing puppy," or, "that fire ain't gonna catch, it's a coughing puppy." The stranger wore a dark shirt of unknown color. Traces of fringe still trailed from the sleeves. Saddlebags and a poncho rested across a shoulder. One heavy step, then two, into the room and I saw the stranger's hand, gnarled and rough like old burlap. The head came slowly into the darkness showing me the ugliest face I've ever had the pleasure to appreciate, Mr. Edison. Cruelly scarred by the pox, the skin hung from the skull. The long hair, pulled back from the craggy, flying dutchman forehead, was brown, and streaked with white. The lips twisted in a half smile, half sneer and the eyes were deep socketed with a hunger I've only seen in the eyes of Indians out along the road if Carl doesn't shoot 'em first. The eyes of the traveler fixed on Carl's ashen face and I don't ever know how I would react if I had someone look at me with eyes like that. Staring and angry and hopeful and other things I couldn't name all in that look. As if the face held a secret on the rest of us, it came steadily into the room and stopped across from Carl.

"Jane?" Carl said.

The stranger swung her saddlebags onto the bar and stood straighter. The ceiling came swooping down on her as she drew herself up another five feet into the air and ducked as the rafters went past. Or so it looked to me from where I was still down on my knees. I was watching her, but I kept glancing over at Carl. Something in his eyes had gone shiny and he says again:

"Jane Canary?"

Almost like it's a question that he knew the answer to, but didn't want to hear it spoken out loud where his ears would have to listen to it; like it was a question he didn't ever expect to hear spoken where the world would grab ahold of it. But if the newcomer heard anything in Carl's voice she didn't pay it any mind. She took off her old hat and threw it on top of her saddlebags.

"Hello, Carl. How about a drink?"

"By God, it's been a long time, Jane," Carl says.

“Not so long, Carl. I had a bottle coming outa Billings.”

Before Carl could answer she turned quick-like to me, because I moved, or something that caused her to look at me like I was some kind of ghost sneaking up on her with a club of bad memories. She looked scared of me almost and I stood up slowly, thinking maybe she was afraid of short people. She narrowed her eyes at me and took a step or two closer.

“Sweet Jesus, boy,” she says to me, “what’re you doing crawling around Carl’s floor?”

Carl spoke up and explained about the lack of dental schools and the spackling compound oxyphosphate of copper and this Jane character looked from Carl to me and then at the carefully enameled half of the barroom floor that I’d spent my last several months making shiny and smooth and then she did it all again; she looked from Carl to me to the floor all over again like she hadn’t heard right.

“I’ll have that drink now,” she whispered. And Carl went about setting up the glasses one for himself and one for her. Although he usually only drank beer, this time he poured a whiskey for himself as well as a tall glass for her.

“Thank you, Carl,” she said and I got up my nerve and cleared my throat. I could tell by the way Carl was leaning over the bar that he was settling in to chew her ear off. I said:

“Ma’am? Excuse me, but ma’am, I’m not a boy. I’m a girl.” But I didn’t say it loud enough and they went on talking, so I said it again louder and this time Jane and Carl stopped and looked at me like they’d forgotten I was alive. Some of the regulars in the bar who’d been watching this all go on started to laugh and I felt the heat in my face.

She looked down at me and then around at the room where the other folks were laughing and they shut up and she looked back at me. “Course you are, I see that now. My eyes is just getting used to the light. Why ain’t you wearing a dress, girl? Shoot, you gave me a fright a moment ago you look so much like someone I used to know. What’s your name, child?”

“Jane,” Carl said, “I figured you’d know my kid Andy – I mean, Andrea.”

I put out my hand to shake hers – like I shook the cowboys’ hands. They were always shaking hands with me and each other. She turned to me and took my hand in both of hers. Then before I could grab it back, she bent from the waist over my hand and pressed her lips to the skin. Her lips felt light and dry, like a grasshopper or butterfly lighting on my skin. Nobody had ever kissed my hand before. I’d read about gentlemen kissing hands attached to the arms of French ladies, but I wasn’t a French lady and I didn’t know what I was supposed to do next and while all this was going on she straightened up, looking me in the eye all the while, and said: “I’m so happy to meet you, Andrea.”

By way of reply I ran out of there as fast as I could.

* * *

Forgive me for writing so much, Mr. Edison. Carl told me I was only supposed to write and say thank you for the photo of yourself that you were kind enough to send us. If you don’t mind my saying so, sir, I must say you look tired out. Doubtless you are still working night and day on your new problems.

I will send Carl’s diagrams for a new light bulb when I find the old receipt that has his design sketched out on the back. I also wanted to tell you that I have taken your advice and have given away my Buntline novels.





ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

Calamity's Child

June 1903

Electric, Montana

I usually relied on my dog, Bain, for advice but since he'd taken himself for a walk the day before and hadn't come home yesterday, or yet today, I ended up at Kuzma's Mercantile. Greta Kuzma ran Kuzma's Electrical Emporium & Mercantile in partnership with her husband, Marcus. The place was always dusty, decrepit, and overstocked, so you entered it holding your life egg-like in your hands because of all the large sacks of things that might fall on a child's body and crush the life from you as you lay under a mountain of dry goods and mercantile. Like what happened to that Swede boy who slammed the door too sudden once and the big parrot there in the rafters screamed and the fresh load of pintos carefully stacked bean by bean (in one of Marcus's famous full-scale displays of the architecture of his beloved Bohemia) came avalanching down on that boy like it was God's avenging anger for that noisy character's plundering Viking heritage.

Even if the threat of a wall of beans doesn't frighten you, it's better for you if you step quietly when entering because Greta and her friend Mrs. Gorvitch would usually be back there somewhere in the hazy shadows amidst the wagon wheels and canned goods from Illinois, sipping their

laudanum-laced tea and loud noises might startle them too quick from conversation. It was that or somebody would be getting the electroflux treatment in Mrs. Kuzma's chair and she liked it quiet. I always found it went easier if I showed up at Greta's elbow as if I'd always been there. Usually the conversation then came around to what I wanted when they noticed me standing there quiet as a door.

I arrived as quietly as possible, my hand still burning with the application of a strangers' lips, and I must have been agitating the spot because Greta and Mrs. Gorvitch looked up from their talk as I came in and Greta asked me what in God's good name was wrong with my hand and I said, 'nothing.' And so they went back to their talk. They were sitting across from each other, Greta still had her blouse loosened from her electroflux session. I wanted to tell them what had happened but they shushed me and I held my tongue and listened as Mrs. Gorvitch finished the story she was telling. Mrs. Gorvitch had very pale skin. The blue veins of her forehead could be traced along her skull, disappearing under her high starched collar and then rediscovered crawling out from under the long, lace sleeves of her blouse. Up to that day she was the oldest-looking person I knew. She offered me a piece of the tea cake they had been eating and I accepted before I realized Greta was glaring 'no' at me. Then I didn't know if I should eat it or not as Mrs. Gorvitch stuck a piece on a plate and put it in front of me.

There was a long silence while I looked at my cake, watched Greta out of the corner of my eye and acknowledged Mrs. Gorvitch's smiles at me with smiles of my own. Greta's old parrot tottered back and forth on the beam above our heads squawking something that sounded like 'strudel.'

Mrs. Gorvitch went back to the telling of her story about the distant cousin she'd hoped to marry back in Hungary, but he fell from a horse and down a deep well where he died calling out for his mother and breaking Mrs. Gorvitch's heart. We hung our heads as we always did at that point in the story because it was so sad. After we sighed, Greta roused herself to ask what it was that called me away from my dental work on the floor of Chez Carl. I didn't answer directly, because I knew they weren't really interested in the work I still had to do, but they were asking out of not politeness really, but out of their sense of what one did. So I told them about my progress on the barroom floor in such a way that it might seem as if I believed in their interest and that I felt a sense of gratification that they

should take an interest. Finally, because I felt the need to pee, I asked them directly if they knew a lady named Jane Canary.

Greta's face colored bright red when the name dropped from my mouth. Mrs. Gorvitch leaned across the tea table toward her friend.

"What's wrong, Greta?"

Greta picked up an illustrated magazine and began fanning herself, but she stopped and looked at me. "First," she said, "that woman is not a lady."

"No, ma'am. 'Course not."

"Second, and I've told you this before, and you ought to know by now, that people don't show up without a reason. There's a plan to everything. Nothing's ever 'accidental' in this electrical world. People come and they pass on for a reason. Everything –"

"Yes, ma'am. Everything flows and seeks valence."

"That's right," she said and then thought for a moment, biting her lower lip. She said to Mrs. Gorvitch: "Marcus probably brought her in. He's always up to something." Then back to me she said: "And third, I would appreciate a glass of water, why don't you quit squirming around in your chair like that and go get me some?"

* * *

I ran out to the outhouse and forgot about the water for Greta. Instead, I went out to the fields. I ran so far I forgot who I was for a minute and I stood in the field with all the grasses waving their arms and fuzzy heads in the wind. The breeze patterned the fields as if it was God's hand, smoothing down the velvet cloth of the earth so it was showing all one color, and then shoving it back the other way, making patterns of the wide fields for the hell of it. Out on the edge of my sight, I saw the heat dancing on the horizon. The edge of the world waved with all the heat that was busy sucking the sweat out of my forehead. I'd forgotten my hat. I squinted my eyes up and thought I could see arms waving out there: Somebody waving at me in every direction I looked.

When my mother was still walking about the earth, she would have had me in the electric chair at least once a week to make sure my valence didn't get unbalanced. Some days I felt anymore like those grasses in the field – pushed this way and that, repelled by one body's electrical charge, only to be attracted by another's. If you've never done it, I recommend an afternoon in the chair as it is a wonderfully spiritual exercise to have all your electrical energies spinning in harmony with the world. Sometimes as I sat in the chair, feeling the thrum of the machine rising through my body, I could feel a rise in the pulse of energy as though it were the swelling of tomatoes in our power plant heaving a gentle sigh of exhaustion and green desire. I wondered what a tomato might desire and when I asked my mother that she didn't say anything for a while, and then I remembered her laugh, clear as the heat out there on the horizon. I wondered if it was because I was in the chair getting electrocuted that she laughed like that. Maybe she was thinking the tomatoes were doing the talking – just as she used to say the liquor did most of the talking in our bar. She then told me that those fluctuations I felt were the “sweeping wings of the solar wind.” Maybe that's a desire that the tomatoes are aware of. It sounded like something a tomato would like.

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ABOUT ARCHIVES CONTESTS PRINT SUBMIT

Calamity's Child

Letters to Edison [excerpt]

June 1903

Electric, Montana

Dear Mr. Edison,

I will finish this letter soon and mail it off with our parts order and please expedite the return so Carl will get his parts. I have to finish telling about what happened that day Jane showed up and I have some questions that I'm sure you can answer for me. On that particular day, I ended up walking out to the fields thinking about how I missed my dog, Bain. (Bainbridge happens to be the name of Carl's dental college in Ohio.) Whenever Carl shows me how to coil the imaginary gold leaf prior to insertion in the oral cavity he says, "this is how we did it in Bainbridge."

The day Marcus brought Bain into Chez Carl the critter came over to me a curious (not a coughing) puppy – wondering what it was I was up to on the floor. I didn't notice it right away, 'cause sometimes my eyes might not be seeing right and Carl was yelling something that day about how rough my denture work was and Bainbridge, Bainbridge, Bainbridge, when I felt something wet and cold poke me in the cheek and it was this big, ugly dog sniffing me. Bain was sly a sly dog from the first. He knew most of my

secrets eventually. Bain was part dog, part moose, brown body with a black face and the softest ears that made the telling of secrets easier. I told him everything, which makes his return even more urgent. I need to get him back before the whole world knows everything. Now that he's disappeared, Mr. Edison, I lay awake at night, listening to the coyotes repeating a story I'd told Bain and nobody else. Like I said, he is a sly dog.

Mr. Edison, in your article in *Columbia* you say it is the entities that rule our lives. I have been considering your statement and was wondering about the nature of the entities. I had to ask Mr. Kuzma what an entity is. I have been thinking about the story you tell about that time when you cut off the skin on your thumb and then the skin came back. Is it true that the fingerprints were the same as before? Didn't you have a scar? If there's something inside us telling our fingertips how to grow, where does that something go when we die? Maybe, after leaving the body, the entity moves like a butterfly landing on a flower. How do the entities know where to land? Once a person knows the character of an entity is that knowledge an invention or a discovery? I reckon you'd find that an invention. If an entity landed like a butterfly on you while you were out in the wind hanging laundry on the line, what would it feel like? Is it like a kiss on the hand? Or is it like an itch that makes you crazy?

* * *

That night, Carl butchered the fatted calf for his visitor. He built a fire in the pit and had the dead animal turning on a spit. It looked like it was going to be a late night. I didn't know where Carl had gone, but when I got back from Kuzma's he'd set out a table and chair in the shade in the backyard and Jane was sitting there with a glass of beer at her elbow. She was getting up to turn the cow over when I came up to the house. When she saw me, she straightened up and shouted, "Hey you. Andy. Have you seen my revolver? It's missing." She turned her hip to me to show the empty holster. "You didn't take it, did you?" I shook my head and tried to walk past her into the house.

"I'd understand it, if you had taken it: every girl wants her own gun. And it ain't just for *self-protection*." I pretended she wasn't there and kept walking.

Carl was inside and he told me to make up some cornbread for dinner. Carl

went outside and came back a few minutes later leading that Jane person into the kitchen. They didn't pause, but went down the hall to Carl's dental office.

Carl keeps his office in a room off the bar. He has a fancy chair with a headrest that doubles as a vice. It has handles and spring-loaded levers all around the bottom of the seat and you can just about launch a person to Kansas if you get the settings right and press them all at once. I know because I've tried a couple of times, but haven't got the combination right. Carl started locking up his office after I strapped one of the Sweeney boys in there and left him overnight. Carl's also got a small chaise lounge that patients recover on and a woodstove that he uses for melting paraffin and making coffee. He's got a couple of magazines on the coffee table. The subscriptions ran out years ago, but Carl says that nobody reads in a dentist's office anyhow, they're too scared. He keeps illustrated magazines of the Spanish War. Some of the drawings are especially gruesome – this is to Carl's liking, since he looks at them over and over again. I tried to throw them out, but he stopped me. "Pictures like these, Andy, help to set the mood." He also has several copies of the *American Magazine* and *Columbia* – especially those issues that have your articles in them, Mr. Edison.

He also has a small, windowless workshop, a large closet, really, where he makes his dentures and keeps his safe. He's covered the walls with pasted calendar pages and prints. He's stuck them up with dental plaster; the dust is all over everything in the room. He lights the workshop only by the bunsen burner that also keeps his coffee warm and heats up metals for his fillings. My father's blasphemous proud of his dental work and the research he has conducted to further the cause of dentistry here on the frontier. I don't know if it's true, but he says the best thing he's ever done for dentistry is his procedure for breaking and re-setting jaws to cure overbite. He says one day he'll write a scientific article on the "talum usum aere figere dente" (application of brass knuckles in certain operations), but he says he's still in the research stages. I will let you know when his article is ready for publication. Carl's denture work is more popular. He specializes in making sets of dentures that look just as nasty and discolored as the patient's original teeth. Coffee-colored, tobacco-stained, and gap-toothed, my father's denture work is the wonder of Montana.

Carl and his patient were still in his office when I put the cornbread on the stove, so I went out to turn the cow.

When the locals began showing up, Carl dished out the cow with beans, sauerkraut and cornbread. He doesn't usually put on a feed like this and when word spread, people came in who normally wouldn't and grabbed a plate. They set up along the bar and at all the tables around the room and I heard a lot more talking and laughing than I usually heard in my father's bar.

By the time I finished washing up the supper dishes it was already past midnight. I like to sit in the dark far corner of the saloon. Carl stores some barrels in that corner and a couple of them stand between me and the bar, so if I'm quiet Carl doesn't notice and he forgets to chase me off to bed. But the night this Jane showed up I didn't really have to worry about being quiet, it was so loud with people carrying on. A new piano player had come in on the same train as Jane, but he hardly had a chance to play; people wanted to listen to Jane's stories about her travels.

I watched Carl working the bar, laughing at these stories this hand-kisser was telling. I've never seen him laugh like that, Mr. Edison. I guess usually when Carl laughs everybody gets sort of quiet. The stories didn't seem that funny to me. I worry for Carl's immortal soul sometimes from all the cussing he does, but he's a saint compared to Jane standing at the bar with a tumbler of whiskey in her big hand.

The men seemed to have forgotten all their arguing and card playing and picking on each other and they lined the bar calling out questions and peculiar notions that came into their heads. They asked Jane again and again about Hickok and how did he manage to get himself killed when he was so fast with a gun? She laughed and remembered out loud how some of them bad hombres used to shoot like regular coughing goddamn puppies. And they laughed kind of nervous-like 'cause they all knew she meant Carl (that was his patented phrase and nobody ever said 'coughing puppy' around him, except me maybe when I was in my room and the house was quiet and I knew that he couldn't hear me. Then, sometimes, I whispered 'coughing puppy' or even, 'coughing palomino,' because I knew it was a magic phrase and maybe I'd get some of Carl's power if I could master it). But Jane, she just threw it out there as though she had all Carl's words down and the cowboys were scared because nobody ever kidded Carl, but I saw Carl throw his head back and laugh. He slapped the bar

with his hand and the barrels along the back wall jumped with his pounding.

Back of the bar's a painting of a naked lady. It's been there since Carl bought the place. He's whitewashed the walls and hung his framed magazine pictures up there (one of them is of you, Mr. Edison) where the mural of a naked woman used to be (the cowboys called her Rosie). The whitewash has started to fade and the outline of Rosie re-appears under the white paint. She's reclining on a big red couch. I think it's supposed to be a couch covered in drapery, but it looks like that rocky patch over in Eberson's field. Her thighs are big and she's crossing her knees and she has her hair piled up on the top of her head. Her face is turned to the side and maybe it's because it's been painted over, but it looks like Rosie's two eyes are on one side of her nose. They're beautiful brown eyes with long lashes. I don't get to see her face very often because Carl has hung a portrait-photograph of you-know-who looking thoughtful where Rosie's head used to be and Carl has a landscape of the Wizard's Lair over her bosom (she has a large bosom, Mr. Edison) and we forget about Rosie mostly, except when a newcomer like Jane shows up and starts asking about her. This happened now and the cowboys gathered around, marveling at Rosie's wonderful persistence.

Marcus came in the door then carrying his old accordion and Jane insisted he play them funny goddamn Bohemian songs he used to play in the old days. Marcus obliged, playing songs I'd never heard him do before. They did sound happier than what he usually played. But despite the whooping, hollering, and foot stomping that Marcus put on, nobody laughed. Carl got quiet and several of the older cowboys, big, leather-faced men, put their heads down on the bar like they didn't want the others to see their faces in the yellow glow of Chez Carl's big electric light. Marcus sang:

O, the grass grows high
where the cows go by
away on the long yerba night.
Will you sing for me
my Molly McGee
on the trail
by the sad Rio Grande?

O the proud Brahmin bulls

of the Kansas cow towns
carry ticks by the score, or more (or more).
Will you sing for me
of the rough chapparal
on the road
by the sad Rio Grande?

From the Yellow Slave Lake
to the Brown Musselshell
the cows wander 'way from me.

Will you light up that smoke
my Molly McGee
on the trail
of the sad Rio Grande?

At the end of the night when I was starting to nod, I woke up as the usual crowd of them with any money left set off for the whorehouse down the street. They talked Jane into going along and she went saying something about being interested only if they had some pretty ones.

Carl went about locking up, dragging the passed-out drunks outside where he left them on the front porch. The night was warm and wasn't going to hurt any of them, so Carl could just leave 'em there: a big mess of men on the boardwalk.

I crept down the hall past my bedroom to the room that Jane had taken. The door was open, so I went in. Hanging on the wall was the coughing pistol she'd accused me of stealing. On the floor, by the side of the bed, she had a small traveling box and thrown across the chair by my old dresser, were her saddlebags.

Through the window I saw the full moon rise on the horizon and from a long ways off I thought I heard the train whistle calling. It was probably only Carl though, scraping the chairs in the bar along the half-enameled floor. In a minute or two he'd be ready to head across the street and turn off the Yellowstone Power Company for the night. I slipped out the door and ran back to my room.

It is now very late and I have to be up early. I'll close here, Carl will wonder

why it took so long to send out our order for parts.

Good night, Mr. Edison,

your friend,

Andrea

P.S. Carl says we're still waiting for the repair parts we need for the commutator I wrote to you about in April.

P.P.S. After I finished writing I heard Jane come in the back door and walk down the hall, but instead of passing on to her room two doors down she opened my door, walked in and sat on the foot of my bed. She took off her hat and scratched her head for several minutes, muttering to herself, I didn't know if she was talking to me or not. I'd left my French lesson on the bed and she picked it up and looked at it, turning the pages over, wondering. I shifted in my bed and she looked up surprised and said: "what are you doing in here?"

"This is my room."

"Oh."

"Yours is down the hall."

She indicated my book and said: "Say, it looks like you like to read. I've got a book you can read. I wrote a book. It's my oughttabiography, full of things I ought'ta done."

She pulled a folded pamphlet from her back pocket and handed it to me. The cover had a picture of Jane dressed in buckskin, holding a little squirrel gun.

"I usually sell them for two bits," she said, "but you can have that one there, gratis."

I took the pamphlet and studied it for a few moments. "It says here you were a scout for General Custer and you rode for the Pony Express," I said.

"Would you read that part to me?" she asked. "I like that part about the stage robberies and I never get to hear it anymore."

"Can't you read it?"

"No. I can't read."

"But you said you wrote it," I said.

"I *did* write it. I learned the writing business all right, but I never had any patience for reading. Writing seems reasonable, because you know what you're putting down there on paper, but when you pick up something to read, god knows what you're getting into."

I sat up and read aloud the story of the death of Bill Hickok in Deadwood. She grasped my hand as I read and wept until my bedclothes were damp.

"Darling, that is such a sad story," she said.

"Yes'm, it is. I heard Carl say that you had a daughter."

"A sweet little girl. That's in there too."

"Was Hickok her dad?"

"Why, yes. Wild Bill *was* the father of my little girl. She can read and write letters and shoot from a galloping pony and drink tea with her goddam little finger stuck out if she needs to."

"What's your daughter's name?" I asked her.

"I call her Janey, but her name is really Elizabeth."

"She must be a young woman by now. Is she married? Where does she live?"

"

"She isn't that old. She's still my darling little girl."

"But Bill Hickok died twenty-five years ago, Miss Jane."

"I know that. Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I think about that every day? My little daughter was born in the petrified forest and everything moves slower in the petrified lands. Plants, minerals, children. You might think you're living life at railway speed in the petrified places, but you're not: you're still a young kid in spite of yourself. In fact, I've spent a lot of time petrified myself – that's how I've managed to keep my looks, honey. You've seen how all the boys are still crazy about me. But I had to give my little girl up you see, even though she was petrified."

"Petrified? You mean, like a stone?"

"Well, she wasn't *quite* like a stone. She just didn't move very fast. She was slow to grow. I think she spent extra time in every year. But I've not seen her now since I gave her up to adoption."

"Even though she was petrified?"

"I think that being petrified made the girl even more attractive to folks. Except you know you gotta feed kids and watch out for them; and a petrified child is harder to watch out for cause they're such slow growers."

"I've heard about petrified forests, but I never heard about petrified people–"

Jane said: "I think it has to do with all those underground minerals and things. The Indians believe these places to be holy and they avoid 'em because none of 'em want petrified children running around – an Indian child's gotta be on her feet and helping out from a young age. It's the way of the Cheyenne you know to avoid petrification."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know, child. I stay away from her. She has a fine respectable life. She don't need no disreputable old woman getting in the way."

"How do you know? Do you ever write to her?"

"No writing," Jane said.

"I could write a letter for you."

"You could?" She thought about it for a moment, moving her lips and she looked off somewhere to my left. "No. We better not," she said and then she stopped and looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "You want to know about her?"

I nodded.

"Wait."

She went down the hall, a little steadier than when she came in. After a few minutes she returned with her traveling box. She set it down on the floor. I sat up and looked over the side of my bed as she sat on the edge and opened the lid of the box. She rummaged around inside, taking out some old clothes, a dress, rubber boots, a few extra shirts.

"Miss Jane, I'd wash those for you, if you like."

She grunted something in response, lost in her search. She pulled out parts to a broken shotgun wrapped in oilskins. When she set it on the floor, shotgun pellets rolled under the bed. She had a bundle of her pamphlets tied up in twine. She reached deeper into her trunk, pulling out more hardware: bits of coffee mills, cigar tins, empty medicine bottles.

"Here it is," she said. She uncovered a small rag, a gunny sack with the faded lettering 'bea...' The sack had a couple of holes knocked out on the top and sides.

"What is it?" I asked as she put it into my hands.

"That's my darling's christening gown," she said.

"Mmm."

"Here," She took it back from me and ran her hand under the unravelling fabric. Her gnarled fingers caught and twisted in the moth-eaten holes of the gown.

"Dammit," she said as a fingernail tore the cloth.

"But do you see?" she asked. "Do you see?" And she moved her hand gently inside the gown. Her eyes searched out my own and I nodded.

"I did all the lace work myself," she said.

"It's lovely, Miss Jane. It looks like a butterfly. Yes, like a butterfly caught in a net."

She stopped the motion of her hand when I said that and we watched the dirt brown of her wrist and the dark-veined back of her hand through the gray burlap gown. And it did look a little something like a butterfly – or maybe a prairie dog – caught in a net.

"It took me weeks of work," she said. "I used a 20 gauge loaded with birdshot. For the really fine Armenian lace here," and she showed me the shotgun-laced hem. "I soaked the cartridges in pigfat so's the pellets stuck together and they made this nice bricbrac. Oh, remember how her tiny body filled out this old gown?"

She fixed me with her eyes, and I nodded 'yes' or maybe I meant 'uh huh.'

"Why did it take weeks if you used a shotgun?"

She looked at me to see if I was pulling her leg – pretending not to know about the uses of firearms in lacemaking. "Oh honey, when you make a lace like this you don't shoot directly at the fabric. Like all the important things in life, girl, you aim *in*-directly. That's how it's done. Why, a straight-ahead shotgun blast would tear big ol' holes in this little dress. And the sooner you learn *that*, the better the whole deal will go."

She folded it up reverently before stuffing it back into the bottom of her traveling box. This done, she replaced her hat on her head and left, taking her box with her.

Kevin Ducey lives in Madison, Wisconsin. His book of poems, Rhinoceros, is available from Copper Canyon Press. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in Exquisite Corpse, Crazyhorse, Sonora Review, AGNI, Hotel Amerika, The Pinch (River City), Beloit Poetry Journal, and other places.

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