

Pre-Med

by **Gary Fincke**

Whiz Kids

We were Sputnik children, the designated smart ones who had been accelerated in science and math since seventh grade, but by May, 1963, we were impatient seniors bored with high school. In Southeast Asia, the United States had begun posting military advisors for a war that was so obscure none of us would ever fight, not nineteen bright boys (and two brilliant girls) taking advanced, progressive physics. Not the shortstop on our advanced physics class softball team, the Coriolis Force, who called in our scores to the *Pittsburgh Press* each time we beat the faculty, the French Club, or even the rest of the senior class minus those who played varsity baseball.

In *Problems of Democracy*, the map for world policies showed a large blue French Indochina where Miss Ward had hand-painted Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, both North and South. “Maps,” she said, “must last ten years before replacement; this one is two years overdue,” and we snickered like we had when she’d altered Africa as if countries were as temporary as high school.

What was up-to-date in our high school was physics, chemistry, biology, and math, and before 1963 ended, everyone who played for the Coriolis Force expected to be finishing his first college semester at MIT, Chicago, CalTech, or schools with less name recognition, but where, we’d been told, science flourished.

What’s more, the Coriolis Force, despite a battery of eggheads, went undefeated for all nine games we played. The Press printed all of those scores in agate type, but by graduation all of us believed some reporter should have covered us, whiz kids who kept statistics, including batting averages taken to an extra place like the Pi we memorized for math, science all-stars about to march off to discoveries.

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Summer

In July, when I turned eighteen and had to register for the draft, a woman at a desk in Pittsburgh's Federal Building asked me for my eye color. "I don't know," I said, and instead of smiling, she glanced quickly and said "hazel," something I didn't bother to debate. I was off to college in less than two months. All I knew about a draft card was that it would admit me into the dingy, downtown Art Cinema to see movies full of naked women or to buy the raunchy magazines that were sealed in plastic on the vendor's shelves at the bus station. Drinking and voting had to wait until I was twenty-one, but Kennedy seemed like he was going to be President for another five years, and my first beer wasn't even a fantasy yet. The initial steps to medical school were on the top of my to-do list. That, and making the college basketball and tennis teams, meanwhile trying my luck with whichever girls might be interested in how I saw myself, a scholar-athlete.

All summer, my mother had headaches and what she called "the blahs." On the days when she stopped holding her head, she often carried canning jars up from the cellar. When she sat at the kitchen table, catching her breath, she sometimes snapped the ends off green beans, using that time to recover, whether the pills she took kicked in or not. Because, she explained, who else would preserve the beans or later, the tomatoes and peaches, arranging the filled, sealed jars for winter? Who else would cook and clean, strip the beds and remake them when her headaches only simmered like soup she reheated, sipping the broth because she could keep that down and work? When she stopped moaning into her pillow. When she came out of her darkened bedroom. When she could do what needed to be done. When she could save things that needed saving.

In August, Joey Reimer became the first one in our graduating class to die, driving his hand-modified old Ford off the road near our high school and into a tree. He hadn't been a whiz kid, hadn't even been going to college, but he was my age, something, my father said, to think about.

A few weeks later, during my last Friday night of working in my father's bakery from 10:30-5:30, my father brought up the story of the night in November, 1950, when fire invaded his bakery where a tangle of wires shorted behind the ancient blue refrigerator. He explained how he had purchased the bakery earlier that year from a

baker whose breath had been shortened by the invasion of emphysema. He wanted me to know that he had been lucky his lungs had stayed clear despite the clouds of flour. My father said it had taken that man a decade to die, that the baker's widow still stopped in to buy a coffee cake every Saturday.

I remembered how he had guided me, age five, through what was salvaged, and now I understood that he was trying to teach me what could be lost and the necessity of rebuilding despite everyday threats. As if he meant me to realize we were always under attack. As if he was reading my mind in order to say, at last, "Use that brain of yours if you don't want to stand on your feet all day to make a living."

First Semester

My first night at college, after enduring hours of orientation sessions, my new roommate and I piled into another freshman's beat-up Plymouth. He lived in town and wanted to drive us around to all of the places he expected to leave behind in four years. He said he knew the disc jockey who was playing rock music on the small, local station, and before we took off, he called the station from our dorm's one hallway phone and requested "Bust Out", what I told him was my current favorite song.

We drove past a factory where railroad cars were produced and one with aluminum in its company name. Except for the college, it was a Western Pennsylvania blue-collar town. The disc jockey said, "This is for the new guys at the college," and I leaned forward, ready for the aggressive guitar and saxophone instrumental I loved. Instead, I heard "Sugar Shack," a sappy, big hit for Jimmy Gilmore and the Fireballs. I was happy that he hadn't mentioned my name.

"I guess he didn't have 'Bust Out,'" my new friend said, and laughed. We drove into the country, picking up speed, but the car didn't seem to handle. "What the hell?" the driver said, and he pulled over to the shoulder. One look at the front, passenger-side tire was enough for him to say, "Whoa." The tire was tilted. He showed us how the lug nuts had come loose or had already fallen off inside the hubcap. For a few minutes, he performed only the last step of tire changing while I tried to laugh like he did.

I registered as pre-med, a first-generation college student with whiz-kid credentials of high SATs and excellent grades, placed, accordingly, in advanced math

and advanced composition. All of the twenty in advanced math were freshmen; only one other was a freshman in advanced composition, a discovery I relished.

I had an eight o'clock class every day, three days in French, two in gym, where the former Marine wrestling coach lined us up and gave us the "look-to-your-left, then look-to-your-right" speech, reminding us that one out of three of us wasn't going to graduate and to think about how we could make sure we weren't among them. Terry D, a townie, was to my right. Greg L, who said he'd hated gym since junior high, was to my left. I didn't worry about my chances.

After five weeks, I hitchhiked home with a friend who lived half a dozen miles away, getting in and out of six cars to cover the eighty-five miles. The next-to-last ride was a quick eight miles with my junior high school art teacher. He remembered me because, he said, "You couldn't make yourself draw breasts on your female figures." I squirmed, red-faced.

He chuckled as he dropped us off about ten miles from where I lived. "I hope you got over that," he said. I told my friend that everybody I knew had always thought that teacher was gay.

The last ride was with a guy in his early 20s who quickly accelerated way over the backroad speed limits, cresting a hill where a cemetery entrance lay to our right. There was a line of cars turning in behind a hearse, no chance of us stopping in time. I braced myself, but that driver barely touched the brake as the line parted just enough to let us squeeze through to a variety of horn sounds. "We dodged one back there," he said, and I thought of myself as being as calm as a surgeon, outside of myself somehow rather than wallowing, like I had, in the embarrassment of awkwardly drawing a girl's body at twelve or thirteen.

The weekend was uneventful and boring. All of my whiz-kid friends were away at college. Other graduates who lived at home had jobs or girlfriends. There was nothing to do but sleepwalk through Saturday and wait for church to end on Sunday before swallowing two helpings of Sunday's roast beef dinner and riding in the rear seat as my friend's mother drove us back to school.

I tutored chemistry during the first semester. All the work felt like a rehash of what I'd learned in high school advanced chemistry. For a while I went to parties with

one of my students, another freshman. She was happy with the C+ she received on the first test. "I would have failed, for sure," she said, and hugged me. I wanted to tell her I thought the hardest thing about college was getting up for my daily eight o'clock classes while my roommate slept.

But I loved advanced composition at ten a.m. I wrote and revised and wrote some more. With relish, I tackled all of the long, complicated sentences we were told to diagram. They were puzzles to solve. And their solutions filled me with a sort of academic joy.

Like times tables up to twenty, the math of each weekday's requirements was done in my head. The future wore scrubs. It washed its hands in scalding water and answered the body's questions with blades and thread.

In mid-November, I made the basketball team. Playing time was likely to be infrequent, but I had good news to take home for Thanksgiving. A week later, walking to the dorm after a Studies in the New Testament lecture, I learned that Kennedy had been shot and killed. Every station on my cheap clock radio played solemn music. The news on the television in the basement of the dorm said the country was in shock and mourning, but when I went to basketball practice, the coach ran us for the whole two hours and announced we were scrimmaging another college on Monday at the same time as the funeral, Kennedy already becoming a comma in the long sentence of my first semester.

My mother, forty-three now, tried on three of my aunt's wigs before we drove off to the annual Thanksgiving dinner at my grandfather's house. She made me turn away, eyes closed, until she sported a second shade and style, asking which one I liked and whether she looked good enough to be seen in public. She was modeling like a schoolgirl, eyes meeting mine in the mirror when I stood behind her, a third wig waiting on the dresser, three styles in brown barely different under the dim overhead ceiling light, the drapes pulled shut as if our neighbors might spy her bald head. "Which one," she asked, makes me look as if I'll live?"

At my grandfather's, nobody seemed upset about Kennedy. I watched football with my uncles, my cousins, and my father while my aunts and mother worked in the kitchen. We were separated by the large dining room where we would finally mingle

over turkey. My mother wore her wig. She acted as if she didn't mind standing on her feet for a couple of hours.

At half time, my uncles asked about pre-med. They sounded impressed. "That will be something," one of them said. "We've never had a doctor in the family. Another said, "By the time you have a practice, all of us here will be old enough to be regular customers." My father seemed to glow, but then he said he was going to the kitchen to see if the heart, liver, and gizzard were ready to eat. My mother was waiting for him in the kitchen doorway. They sat together in the dining room until the third quarter was nearly over.

Saturday night I went to my former high school's senior class play with a friend, something, at least, to escape watching Lawrence Welk and *Perry Mason* with my parents. On the way home, my friend had his father's car up to sixty on the narrow, two-lane that snaked past the streets where we lived half a mile apart. Less than a mile from my street, a car backed out onto the road, and when my friend punched the brakes hard, the car drifted to the right as I gripped the door handle and watched the world turn green with hedges that shielded a cement wall. Then the car spun, the tires caught, and we rocked to a stop parallel to the other car. "He must have shit himself," my friend said. "Good thing I knew what to do." It sounded like he was excited we'd almost died. When I walked inside my house a minute later, my parents were watching the news. I didn't say anything but "I'm back."

In my room, the radio on to settle me down, I thought about how, in seventh grade, that friend who was driving hadn't been chosen to be a whiz kid, but he'd graduated with better grades than I had, just missing salutatorian. He'd always been a better driver, no doubt about that. And I thought I knew why my friend had sounded the way he had. I felt experienced. I had a secret.

I played a few minutes of garbage time in two or three December basketball games. My roommate threw up after a party that offered free beer, one that I missed because of an away game.

Christmas was no different than the ones I'd celebrated before college. Church on Christmas Eve, another dinner at my grandfather's. A quartet of uncles sang their songs of expectation in unison. My mother wore the same wig as she had at

Thanksgiving. I went to a party at the home of one of the two whiz-kid girls. Nobody drank anything but Coke.

New Year's Eve, I rode to the Belmar theater in Homewood with the whiz kid shortstop in his father's Peugeot to see a triple feature of Edgar Allan Poe thrillers. That part of Pittsburgh was what my parents called "a colored neighborhood." Admission was so cheap we expected broken, empty seats, a janitor hobbling the aisle with an early broom and bag while Vincent Price let loose his laugh on the screen.

The Belmar, though, was crowded. We stumbled over sets of feet as we squeezed into a row near the front, entering in mid-feature, half an hour before the House of Usher tumbled. We settled back to watch Monsieur Valdemar melt into phantasmagoric gore. Before the credits rolled for *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the house lights went up, and we saw ourselves whiter than white. The aisle clotted, black and loud, but everyone ignored us. We worked the crowd's rhythm so perfectly into our shoes we managed to bump nobody in that swirl from behind or the side, impeding none of the three hundred black patrons who never seemed to see us. In less than a minute, we walked speechless into the cataract gray of near midnight, snow swirling around the tracks we made toward that foreign car.

Twenty minutes later, my friend's mother made us each what she called a cocktail. "There's no harm in having one," she said. "You should celebrate not running into trouble over that way." I said nothing about the fact that I was swallowing my first drink.

My grades arrived the following week. My mother was pleased. "He won't say so, but your father is happy, too," she said, "but he wanted to know why you had that one B in your math class after being in all those special classes through high school."

"Everybody in the room was in a special class in high school," I said, though I had no idea whether that was true.

Second Semester

The first day of second semester, Terry D wasn't standing beside me in eight a.m. gym. I'd heard, as soon as I'd got back to school, that he'd been killed in a car crash the week before. Someone whose name I didn't know was to my right. After roll

was called, I reminded the wrestling coach I was excused from gym because of basketball. "That will be over in a month," he said, "then you're back here at eight sharp." I decided not to tell him I would be excused again once tennis season started, receiving another one credit of A. I had three cuts, enough time for the courts to shed winter and practice to begin. I'd be on the official roster sent to all the gym teachers by the coach.

The first weekend of the second semester, I attended my first keg party. It was love at first sight. I told myself, only on weekends, a vow I thought I could keep.

The senior chemistry lab assistant told everybody that Ranger VI had hit the moon on Ground Hog Day, but it failed to send back any messages. "We need to get our act together," the lab assistant said. I'd never heard of Ranger VI. I hadn't been in the television room since Kennedy. A few days later I made my way downstairs and stood in a crowd to watch the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. The night before, after my second keg party. I'd thrown up in the bushes behind the dorm, congratulating myself on how discreet I could be.

The professor in charge of chemistry recitation had been raised and educated in the Soviet Union. Each week his tone sounded to me as if it was overstuffed with condescension, asking his questions in a way that showed he expected weak, insufficient answers. One morning, he stopped in front of where I slouched in my chair. "Sit up straight," he said in a voice that made it clear good posture was mandatory, and I did.

"What an asshole," I said to half a dozen classmates after we were dismissed, but I knew that professor controlled the class participation grade that was factored into the semester grade for chemistry. Though bad posture could be considered bad class participation, what I was angry about was how I'd acquiesced to authority.

In advanced calculus, another B in math rapidly became a fantasy. I moved from anxiety and embarrassment to shame and despair. The professor returned the first test in the order, from best to worst, of grades received. Near the end, there were only two of us left without a returned test. He seemed to relish having suspense before he handed a test to a guy seated three rows away from me. It took the professor a few

seconds to make his way back to my desk with that last-place exam, a 40% that he mercifully did not announce aloud.

The failure in calculus settled in like a long hangover. French was a hassle to attend at eight a.m. Chemistry had moved past material I was previously familiar with. Arranged alphabetically by our initials, our test grades were posted beside the professor's office door. GWF's first test score was 83. Not only did I have to remind myself nearly every day to study, I struggled just to do laundry and make a my bed. To rise from filthy sheets and attend a lecture, so unprepared for class participation that I kept my head down as if I was about to vomit. "You're becoming a familiar story," a girl I went out with said. While I was trying to make out whether or not she was being sympathetic, she said she'd prefer folk medicine, miracles, and prayer to my future medical care.

I started leaving chemistry lab early. Three hours was exhausting. Sometimes I managed to finish an experiment if a miracle occurred in less than two. Usually I asked a chemistry major who lived just down the hall from me, "What did you get?" as if I were comparing results, as if I wasn't working backwards from his answer to produce a semblance of proper procedure.

Before long, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday became the best days for waking near noon, when calculus and chemistry and French were nearly ended and the gang shower was deserted. Tuesday and Thursday were a relief. I attended history and literature, classes where I did the reading and didn't dread being a fool.

Spring break was a week stuck in Pittsburgh while the weather was still problematic. After I received an F in calculus at mid-terms, the grades arriving home before I could escape, my father asked me if I knew the story of how janitors were once hired in Alamogordo, New Mexico, whether the name of that town meant something or if I'd stopped thinking altogether about anything but my present self.

"The atomic bomb," I said, but he went on as if I hadn't answered.

"If you couldn't read a word, you were hired. They wanted illiterates to do that work in New Mexico."

We were together in a restaurant. I had been born, within a few weeks, of the atom bomb's first test. I was supposed to become a doctor, not clean up after their

accomplishments, somebody who'd never know their secrets, a failure sweeping up in ignorance.

"The scientists," he said, "were creating the end of the world while those janitors, unaware of their secrets, emptied trash." Lips moving, he calculated a tip before sliding three quarters and two dimes under his plate, waiting for me to stand, leaving my grades open on the table because I needed to understand that anyone, even a busboy, could recognize I was as helpless as those illiterates in New Mexico.

That night, out with two girls and a friend who followed me home in his car, I believed I was being thoughtful as I carefully opened the garage by hand to park my parents' car inside.

Because we thought it was cool to stay up until sunrise, last beers standing open for more than an hour, I was awake and dressed at five-thirty when my mother called that friend's house because she needed to be at work. "The driveway and your bed," she said, "were both empty," crying because my small kindness, so unexpected, had brought her anger, and then a near-paralysis of fear.

My mother drove off in time, and I walked outside into the same weather my mother felt at the bakery door my father unlocked for her before six each Saturday, returning to doughnuts and eclairs, the most perishable items he sold made last. Outside, the scream inside my ears dialed back to buzz, and I believed I was myself again.

We drove those girls to the houses in which they lived before it was fully light outside, the car's radio full of the British Invasion. One sat beside me, knees drawn up to her chin like a pouting child. Expectation is the only thing that had happened between us. I followed her under the driveway's double floodlights to the house I would never be inside. "Next time you're home," she said, offering an empty promise, before my friend and I pulled away and drove, a few miles later, past where she would die in another boy's new sports car the following week. It was a place I'd seen so often, I noticed nothing but oncoming headlights, ones kept on by cautious drivers even as the light improved. I switched the radio in to Marvin Gaye and James Brown, the road so familiar I didn't worry as he became careless with the speed limit.

“You have the blahs,” my mother said when I saw her later, true enough, since I was already failing one course, scraping by two more with Cs. Even then, before those cautionary grades became final, I couldn’t see why my parents said nothing more than my father’s breakfast veiled warnings about janitors in New Mexico. Why my mother, after working from six to six, made fried chicken and corn that night as if her remission was something to be tested by exhaustion. Why my father read the newspaper while he ate, his plate turning white with coagulated grease beneath bones. Why she washed dishes while I showered and dressed before borrowing the car again as they settled in to watch Lawrence Welk. But mostly why I thought melancholy was a way of life or preparing me for discovery.

When I used my first away tennis match as an excuse for taking a test late and the professor gave me the same test that a friend provided to sample problems he had solved, I managed only a 55. All that was left was the chance I might get above a 70 on the final.

One morning, the present felt crumpled like scratch paper after an exam. That wadded ball unfolded wrinkled and smaller and whimpering until I smothered it in my fist. All day I was leery of numbers that chattered like reunion relatives: square roots and functions, molecular weights of compounds. Already the slide rule was a set of footprints that ended in a steep drop into water. The day I gave up medicine, Lyndon Johnson declared a war on poverty, but I didn’t learn that until the semester ended because I didn’t read a newspaper or hadn’t watched television since that night with the Beatles.

Later that day, a girl I wanted to have sex with said I should be tested for the name of my problems, sounding like a family doctor handing me off to an expensive specialist. I slipped my hand under her blouse, thinking nothing about the medical terms for arousal, intent upon the anatomy of desire. Whatever she felt for the next few minutes, our separation had already begun.

Easter came early in 1964, Good Friday on the 27th of March. As always, my father closed the bakery from 12-3, and I, home again, was expected to sit through all seven words of the cross. Nearly every churchgoer came and went between the words, spending anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour. Except for me and my parents. We

lasted through “I thirst,” “Why have you forsaken me,” and “It is finished” as if Good Friday service was the equivalent of chemistry lab. We sang the doleful hymns. The minister worked seven variations on sacrifice and martyrdom before he released us to blink in the late March sun. My mother, at three p.m., reopened the bakery for workers whose shifts were never adjusted for God. My father slept and ate and drove me back to sugar, salt, flour and grease by seven because my mid-term failure made me feel obligated to pitch in and help until midnight for some sort of atonement.

We were side by side at 9:26 EST in Etna, Pennsylvania, the work room filled with the smell of yeast, my father, because it was still Good Friday, refusing the red radio until midnight, instead humming the old hymns, keeping the last hours holy, when an extraordinary earthquake struck Alaska. Though neither of us knew anything about it until five minutes of news came on the radio at midnight just as he turned it on as a signal I was excused.

The next night, as I was leaving the house, I told my parents that I’d changed my major to English. I came home late enough to be certain they were asleep.

My father didn’t talk to me at breakfast or on the way to church. My mother passed my news along to a couple of aunts after the service. She took me aside to confirm what I already knew. “Your father is disappointed,” she said. “He doesn’t know what he’s paying for now.”

At my grandfather’s, while we ate ham and scalloped potatoes, one uncle said, “I hear you’re an English major now. What’s that all about—pre-law?”

My father looked stricken. “Maybe,” I started in, then decided against lying and added, “probably not.”

An aunt said, “I know. You want to be a teacher.”

“No,” I said at once, sure of myself on that guess.

A moment passed. “What else is there?” my uncle said.

“That’s what I’ll find out, I guess,” I said.

My uncle looked at my father. “Sounds like you’re paying for a mighty expensive scavenger hunt.” I knew what my father was thinking: English is fuzzy and feminine, an easy major that means his son is an academic coward.

Once basketball had ended, I had begun drinking a few weekday evenings a week in a townie bar that served underage. Like nearly everyone, I ordered Iron City drafts that came in ten-ounce glasses for fifteen cents each. Alone sometimes, head down, I listened to men my father's age complain about politics and work.

I was always waiting for a story to tell, and one night, before I finished three beers, it came in the shape of a man who stumbled down the backroom's flight of stairs holding a knife anybody could tell he'd been stabbed with. Ashen and sweating, he mumbled his way to a booth and performed the dead-man's drop. Like me, the men seated nearby watched him in the mirror above a sculpture of bottles while the bartender dialed the phone beside the cash register.

For three minutes, no one ordered or spoke. Siren wailing, an ambulance arrived seconds after two bellied policemen. As if he'd been summoned, a shirtless man came down the stairs to surrender. "Stop me," one cop said, "if you've heard this one before," and from both sides of me stories started about an earlier upstairs stabbing, one from the year before.

Weeks went by, nothing worth retelling except the night that stabbing victim, apparently recovered, sat at the bar and nobody asked him about anything but high school football and basketball. His assailant sat beside him, and I felt older knowing men returned to habits as easily as swallowing beer, that they could even fall asleep in the same room while jukebox rock and roll rose through the floor, and I sat infatuated with small experiments in self-destruction.

All that protected me was silence and quarters. I slotted one after the other like a townie who wanted to be liked by playing Fifties music, someone whose father surely worked with steel or coal.

At the spring honors convocation in mid-April, I was announced as the male recipient of the freshman scholarship. The award was for the combination of first semester grade point and a multiple-choice test that reminded me of the verbal SAT, the test that the school had used to place me in advanced composition.

The donor wanted to meet me and the female recipient. I recognized her. She was the only other freshman who had been placed in advanced composition first

semester. I'd never spoken to her. My calculus professor walked past in his academic regalia and seemed to squint when he saw me.

In May, in a low-budget Cleveland hotel, I watched my doubles partner snap the arms off both chairs in the room of another doubles team from our college. Drunk, he'd decided he wanted them to witness a show of force, sitting to flex his arms. Hiroshima, he said, triumphant, and as if they needed to understand, he reseated himself for Nagasaki, laughing and leaving them to wonder. For two days, he had been my ally in a college conference tournament we hadn't won. The following week, I'd receive my first F and learned, when I moved back in with my parents for the summer, that my father would continue his Easter break refusal to speak.

My second day at home, borrowing the car while my father slept after his night shift at the bakery, I noticed a neighbor at the bus stop at the end of our street. He was older than my father, but now he looked ancient, stooped and fragile, and I offered him a ride. He sat beside me and said he was going grocery shopping at the Giant Eagle along the highway a couple of miles away, that he didn't drive anymore, launching into his colostomy story, his liver cancer sequel, ending "I'm still here today," he said. "I'm buying food." He smiled as I dropped him off at the grocery. "Maybe you'll be the one discovers a cure for this mess," he said.

I didn't tell him I was no longer pre-med. I said, "Sure thing," driving off to a factory job interview daydreaming about my F of calculus, his F of tumors, and what seemed to be the passing grade my mother had received, all of them assigned by the hit and miss of luck. Though I thought, finally, that all of my ambition had suffered a form of congestive failure.

"Go to work," my mother said at ten o'clock. "It's his last night. Surprise him." Her hair had returned. She'd given those wigs back to my aunt. She knew that my father wasn't about to tell me that he had decided to close the bakery. "He got himself a job as janitor at the high school," she said. "He says it's because it's too hard to make ends meet, but I know it's because of what's been going on with me this last year."

My father nodded when I walked in. He turned the radio on. In Etna, that last night of baking, he marked the early hours with the same scheduled hand-work as always—bread and sandwich buns being readied or already baking. When my father

spoke to me for the first time since March, I knew my mother had been working on him since Easter. He told me to go home and sleep, and then, as if it was an afterthought, he said he needed me the next afternoon, so be around.

The next afternoon, in the day's full heat, there was one wedding cake, three tiers, the bride and groom standing in a white gazebo that needed to fit inside a circle of sugar roses and loops of icing. My father ordered me to drive so he could balance that beauty nine miles, three of them to avoid the cobblestones of a neighborhood called Cabbage Hill to the Cherry City Fire Hall where women were preparing golabkies, pierogies, and kielbasa, sweating in a windowless small kitchen.

He retouched those swirls of icing and laid that white gazebo just right, erasing the dot of icing that reminded him which part of those circles faced front. Those women praised the cake and offered beer, Iron City on tap, but my father waved his spatula until one of them fished out a bottle of cherry soda from a cooler packed with ice. She looked at me, and I nodded, accepting the same, able to wait three hours to drink myself stupid with a girl I planned to never marry, allowing my father to take his time with the end of baking, standing beside the cake until he decided to drive back to the bakery where my mother, near closing, would be offering everything for half price.

"I could have kept this going," he said as soon as we were in the car. "You understand what I mean by that?"

I nodded. And I did. It would kill my mother, maybe, and because hiring a full-time salesperson would erase the thin margin of profit. Because, feeling useless, my mother would refuse to quit until she dropped or her still-unspoken "health problems" returned. Or what would never be said, because it would take his legs out from under him or cloud his lungs and, unlike the janitor position, there was no safety net of social security or medical insurance or retirement plan and never had been.

"Get up for church tomorrow," he said then. He didn't say anything else, but that one extra sentence felt like acknowledgement by indirection, that beginning the next day he'd return to a few comments about sports and church, leaving unspoken that janitor was a job that suggested failure as much as the English major did, that we both had something to prove. He wasn't self-sufficient, my mother was mortal, and "whiz-kid" was a name more appropriate for those who hadn't yet been tested.

Sunday night I drove to a high school graduation party for a girl I'd been out with a few times. After it ended, as I approached the railroad tracks that crossed the highway a block from my father's bakery, the red lights began flashing and the crossing gates lowered. I could see there was no train coming from the south. Impatient, I slowed and glanced up the tracks to the north, noticing the train seemed far enough away to beat. "Here we go," I said, like I'd done it before, pulling around the gate and bouncing over two sets of tracks, the train, running downhill, something I hadn't fully considered, flashing behind us a second later.

That girl caught her breath as if she were resurfacing from a minute underwater. Neither of us spoke, not even when she left the car and hurried up the driveway to her house without waiting for me to walk beside her. I idled at the curb like a taxi driver who believed he was protecting the vulnerable from possible harm. She never looked back.



Gary Fincke's latest collection of personal essays *The Darkness Call* won the 2017 Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose and was published in early 2018 by Pleiades Press. His collections of stories have won the Flannery O'Connor Prize and the Elixir Press Fiction Prize, and earlier nonfiction books were published by Michigan State and Stephen F. Austin.