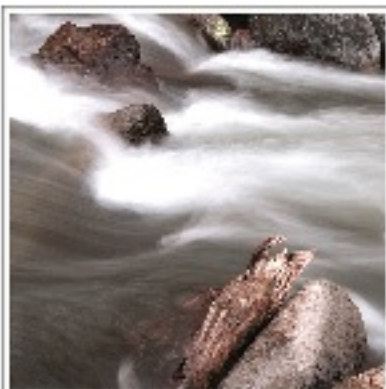
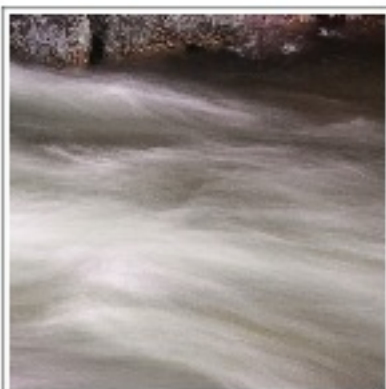
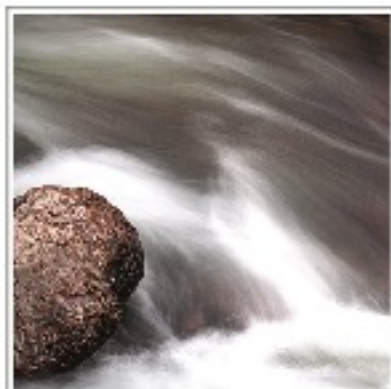


The Fallen Leaf Anthology 2011



"Falls Quadruplet" © Lorenz Kent



"The Write Retreat" and "Creativity Camp"
at Stanford Sierra Camp

**THE FALLEN LEAF
ANTHOLOGY 2011**



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Beckoned by Another Rose

Jerry Thrush, MD

A thorn pricked at Dolce LaBelle's soul as the elderly woman thrust a rose into her hand. Dolce's eyes moistened. The gift evoked a darker recollection of a childhood oath to a human flower by the same name. Dr. LaBelle willed her thoughts into the depths from which they had risen as deftly as her fingers avoided the sharp spines on the stem.

Although tears threatened to spill over her lower lids, Dolce composed herself and allowed the corners of her lips to bow. She adjusted her coat and felt the heads of men across the room turn in her direction.

"Thank you for the flower, Mrs. Grable. It was very sweet."

A moment passed before the old lady spoke.

"It's you I want to thank," she said in a shaky voice. Her head bobbed with an essential tremor, giving her the appearance of a dashboard doll. "You helped my husband last week. He's all I have left in the world. Your kindness was appreciated."

Dolce nodded and started to return to her responsibilities, but the woman continued. "I was like you once, you know."

Dolce studied the facial structure of the frail lady before her. Like herself, she had high cheekbones and widely spaced eyes. Her features were worn, but Dolce could see that in an earlier epoch, she would have been gorgeous.

"I was beautiful a long time ago. But there's more to you than that. You have a special soul. I could tell by the way you smoothed the blanket and patted my husband's hand every time you came into the room."

"Thank you," Dolce replied.

"There's something else." Mrs. Grable touched Dolce's left ring finger.

Dr. LaBelle glanced longingly at the door down the hall. Her duties pulled at her like a magnetic force, but she sensed the elder woman had something important to say, so she gave her full attention.

“I see that you are not... attached.”

“My personal life is--”

“Tut tut.” The senior raised a gnarled digit, then poked Dolce’s sleeve with it. “There’s something within you, a burning coal which prevents you from moving on. I can feel it. You must snuff it out or allow the flame to burn down a forest and be done with it.”

Dolce felt the long scar on the outside of her right thigh tingle. Its serpentine form burned like a firebrand. To her, it was more than a disfiguring mark. It represented both a loss and a promise. She knew that the old lady was right but wanted to leave the feelings of revenge in their black place.

“Thank you again.” Dolce dabbed at her eyes, turned and walked toward her section of the building, where entropy reigned and chaos was king.

A man stopped her in front of the ER door. Dolce recognized him as the hospital benefactor she’d met at a hospital fundraiser last year. His impish smile, dimples, tousled hair, and swimmer’s build were hard for a woman to forget. She recalled reading a newspaper article indicating the Bentley he drove was but one of many steeds in his eight place stable.

“Dr. LaBelle, how are you?”

“Great. And you?”

“I’ve never been better,” he responded. “I think we met at the charity dinner a few months ago. It was an honor to get to know some of the people who make this place tick.”

Dolce recalled the evening. The massive eagle ice sculpture flooded with surreal lighting remained frozen in her mind. The hospital association had outdone itself in tribute to the patrons who had donated millions.

“I couldn’t help but notice you,” he said.

Everyone notices me. That’s why the administration always makes a point to get me to those things.

He continued, “I didn’t have much time to talk with you at the affair. Would you like to have a cup of coff--”

An overhead voice cut him off and beckoned the doctor, “Trauma Team to the Emergency Department, Trauma Team to the Emergency Department.”

“I have to get back to the ER,” she said.

“How can I contact you?”

“I’m sorry. I have to run.” Dolce’s wall of protection prevented her from giving out personal information. *LaBelle, saved by the bell. Not interested. In him, or anyone...*

As she opened the back entrance to the ER, Dolce squeezed the rose stem too hard and a spike nearly drew blood, reminding her of the sage observation of the senior, a vow as a girl, and the metaphor of the burning coal. Was her barrier constructed on the foundation of an ember still smoldering in the depths of her soul?

Her stomach churned and a knifelike sensation shot upward into her chest. She knew the feeling well. It was the pang of guilt for failing to avenge the one she loved. Dr. LaBelle placed the flower next to her computer monitor and made her way to the trauma room down the hall. *If I only had one small chance, I’d do what I swore I’d do, Rose. I really would.*

Resuscitation lights illuminated the trauma bay. They were footlights for the drama that would unfold in the next few minutes. The actors took their places and eagerly awaited their cues. Dr. LaBelle knew her role in the vignette well; she had done it a thousand times. With her clipboard ready, she raised the weapon used by writers for centuries and prepared it for battle.

“What’s the story, guys?” she asked the paramedics as they transferred the patient to the hospital gurney.

“Dr. LaBelle, you look great today.” The medic closest to her grinned.

“The story?” Dolce ignored his compliment.

“Thirty-four-year-old female, restrained driver, no past history, no meds, no allergies.”

Dolce scribbled. As she wrote, she observed, evaluating the patient without so much as putting her pen down. Airway: open. Breathing: symmetric chest rise. Circulation: skin pink with no uncontrolled bleeding. Disability: eyes open and following commands.

The doctor then gave her attention to the paramedic.

“Her car was hit head on by a drunk driver. There was a loss of consciousness, and her primary complaint is now a headache. She had transient tingling of her right arm and says it feels kind of heavy. Seatbelt mark on her left breast. Secondary survey otherwise negative. Neuro intact. Oxygen saturation 99% room air, C-collar placed, and the IV, 18 gauge in the left antecubital fossa is running well.”

The patient stared at the ceiling and looked dazed.

“Anything else?” Dr. LaBelle asked.

The paramedic nodded and motioned the physician to the side. She followed him across the room, out of the patient’s earshot.

“There was an 1144 on scene,” he said, lowering his voice.

Dr. LaBelle’s face twitched. She knew that 1144 was the code used by the California Highway Patrol for death. A dark rumination flashed behind her eyes. The muscles at the nape of her neck contracted and her scar itched. She tried to quiet the emotions that bubbled in the depths of her soul. *Her ember was glowing brighter now, fueled by the flammable elixir which caused the accident.*

“There was a child who wasn’t wearing a restraint. He was ejected and...” He swallowed and couldn’t look the doctor in the eye. “The kid was hit by another car. Mom doesn’t know.”

The paramedic began to choke and turned quickly, so the doctor wouldn’t see that the cracks in the base of his chiseled composure had progressed to fissures.

Dolce moved to the patient’s bedside and pushed the knowledge of her loss into the trench of her own subconscious. Vital signs flashed on the monitor: blood pressure 163/64, heart rate 53, and respirations 14. A sensation of concern niggled, so she reviewed the patient again.

Airway: still open. Breathing: breath sounds symmetrical but a little irregular. Circulation: heart rate 51. Blood pressure 172/70. Disability: not opening eyes spontaneously anymore but still opening to command. Cranial nerves: pupils, left 5mm right 4mm, unequal - *not good*.

Dolce uttered a fusillade of orders to the staff and returned to her work area where the rose was still on her desk. She could feel the tide of muck in the ER rising, but she refused to go under.

The 60 year-old alcoholic in room five screamed he wanted a knife so he could stab himself. The 28 year-old patient in room six with heart failure cried because she was too far down on the transplant list to get a new heart any time soon. And there was a stroke patient in room four who couldn't move his right side. To her left, Dolce saw the delusional psychiatric patient in room two, who thought he was Genghis Khan, waving his cell phone like a sword. She could hear him shriek that he would bring his hordes of destruction to kill everyone in sight. The wails of patients tore the air like claws. Dr. LaBelle heard them all but listened to none and went about her work.

Ativan for the drunk, Lasix for the heart failure, page an admitting doctor for the stroke, and Haldol for Genghis before he twittered his gang of horsemen. The orders flew from her fingertips to her keyboard. After typing, she picked up the flower on her desk, rolled its thorny stem in her fingers, and fought the memories. Dolce felt her loss as keenly as if it were yesterday. Her promise roiled her intestines and it felt as if they were filled with molten lead. *Rose, I wish you were here...*

“Doctor, the CT tech is on the phone,” the secretary relayed from the desk.

“This is Dr. LaBelle,” she said, picking up the phone.

“Check out the head CT on the trauma patient. I think there's a bleed.”

As she talked to the tech, images slowly materialized on her screen. Dr. LaBelle immediately recognized the pattern of an epidural bleed. *This wasn't going to be good.*

“Two things,” she said, turning to the ER secretary. “First, I need neurosurgery on call, next, get me a respiratory therapist. We've got work to do.”

A nurse approached Dr. LaBelle as she sat behind her monitor. “Doctor, the husband of the patient in the trauma room is here. Can you talk with him?”

“Yes.” She sighed.

“Doctor, this is Mr. Porter. Mr. Porter, this is Dr. LaBelle, our emergency physician.”

Dr. LaBelle stood and shook the man’s hand. *It was time to explain what it meant to intubate.*

“How is she?”

“Have you seen her since the accident?” the doctor asked.

“No. Can I see her? Is she going to be OK? And what about little Jack? How is he?”

Ordinarily Dolce liked to have patient conversations in a private area. Sometimes seconds counted and there was no time to get to a confidential zone in the department. In this instance Dr. LaBelle knew that attention to the second hand could protect the boundary between life and death. *The hallway outside the trauma room would have to do.*

The ER staff’s calm manner of going about their business seemed incongruous with the fight for life waging in the trauma room. Joe, the maintenance man, set his cordless Black and Decker drill on the desk as he prepared to mount his ladder and remove the air conditioning vent for repair. He looked on with interest but seemed self-conscious to be eavesdropping on such a critical conversation. His eyes gave up his wish to save a life one day. Dolce took it all in and turned to the anxious husband.

“Your wife is very sick. She was hit head-on and has a bleed on the surface of her brain called an epidural hematoma. She may have other injuries that we have yet to find, but we have to address this one at once if we’re going to have a chance to save her.”

“What’s an epi, epi, the bleeding thing on her brain?”

“I have only a moment to explain before I have to get back to her. These bleeds, though not common, can kill people fast if we don’t do something.”

The man gasped and looked pale.

Joe carefully removed the vent and tried to look nonchalant.

“But with emergency surgery, there’s hope of a good outcome,” the doctor continued.

The department secretary rushed over. “The neurosurgeon on call just started an emergency case and says he can’t help.”

“Call every neurosurgeon on staff, on call or not. Now!”

“One at a time?”

“All at once, as fast as you can dial them,” the doctor snapped. “This patient’s got to get to the OR. Fast.”

A nurse poked her head out of the trauma room. “Doctor, her heart rate is falling and she’s not responding. We need you in here. NOW.”

“I’ll need some Etomidate and Veccuronium, and have respiratory prepare a size seven and a half ET tube. I’ll be right there,” the doctor replied.

Dolce once again turned her attention to the man in front of her. She knew she had seconds, or the battle to save his wife would be lost, but she remained calm.

“This kind of bleeding is almost always arterial.” She continued. “Frequently, a person will have a brief loss of consciousness, then wake up and seem all right for a short period until sinking into a coma. She will need an operation immediately to drain the blood if she is to have any chance of survival. I’m trying to get a neurosurgeon on the phone now. First, she’ll need to be intubated. That is, we’ll put her to sleep and I’ll put a silicone tube, the endotracheal tube, down her throat and into her trachea or wind pipe. Then she’ll be hooked to a machine that will breathe for her, so we can operate.”

“Do what you need to do, Doc. What about my son?”

“He’s not under my care,” she said.

Two officers and a social worker materialized behind the husband. She swallowed hard. In a few moments, much of his world would be destroyed, but she would do her best to salvage the remainder.

Dr. LaBelle stole a glance at the monitor as she entered the trauma room. Blood pressure: 195/72, heart rate: 36. Respirations: 10 and extremely irregular. The patient was not responding at all now. The doctor tried to rouse her by rubbing on her chest and calling her name. Nothing. She checked her pupils. Left 9 mm and right 4 mm. *Bad.*

“OK team, not a second to lose. Let’s get her intubated, then packaged for the OR. She has Cheyne-Stokes respirations and a Cushing response. This girl’s going to box if we don’t move.” Box was a slang term for coffin often used by medical personnel as a euphemism for death. Most of the staff didn’t understand the terms Cheyne-Stokes

respirations, or Cushing response, but all could sense they were names of demons from the depths of Hades.

The secretary popped her head into the room. "About the neurosurgeons... There's a national neurosurgery meeting this week and none are available."

"Call for a burr-hole kit from the OR. Run, don't walk. I want it here yesterday," she commanded. Turning to the medication nurse, she said, "Are you ready with the meds? Push them. Now."

In a moment, the patient was asleep and the respiratory therapist had hooked her up to the mechanical ventilator.

"Raise the head of the bed 30 degrees, hyperventilate, give 50 grams of Mannitol and start shaving the left side of her head. We don't have a neurosurgeon, so we're going to have to make do," she said. "Where is the burr hole kit?"

The secretary from the desk ran into the room again with a package in her hand.

"Open it and get me some size six and a half gloves. And I want a number ten scalpel."

The doctor carefully made a curved incision in the scalp and peeled it back. She then lifted the fibrous connective tissue, called periostium, on the surface of the skull with a tool which looked like a chisel. When she was ready, she picked up the bone bit.

"Drill motor. Quick."

The nurse handed her the device and she slid the bit into place. The only noise that could be heard in the room before the doctor pushed it to the skull was the plaintive bleating of the heart monitor. A faintly audible click sounded as she pulled the trigger. Then... nothing. She squeezed it again and again. The battery had not been charged.

"No power. I need another one. A hand drill. Anything. Run back to central and get a new one. Go."

Two technicians bolted from the room. Dolce used the time to re-evaluate the patient. Vital signs: blood pressure 205/65. Heart rate 38. Left pupil totally dilated.

"Cushing response," she uttered to herself.

"What's that? And what are Cheyne-Stokes respirations?" a paramedic asked, still loitering in the back of the room. While waiting

for the piece of equipment, Dolce took a moment to answer his questions.

“The Cushing response is a reaction to increased pressure inside the skull. As blood leaks within, it squishes the soft brain tissue and prevents arterial flow. The body then raises the blood pressure to compensate – and to balance it all, the heart slows. Cheyne-Stokes respirations are characterized by a cycle of rapid gasps followed by slowed or even absent breathing for a few moments. In the context of head injury, it means the patient is dying in front of your eyes.”

Dolce became quiet and wandered in the inky forest of her memory to a distant shadowy place. She remembered hearing the same breathing pattern on that terrible night long ago, when she held her sister in the dark after the accident. The painful pause for a tool, which might not come in time, reminded her of the agonizing wait for rescue in a car. She was helpless then, but not now. She looked at her patient. *I couldn't save you Rose, and I might never have a chance to make things right like I promised, but I know you'd want me to do my best for her.*

A breathless ER technician burst into the room. The silence of the cluster of assistants gathered around the bedside was deafening as they realized his hands were empty.

“There are no more operative drills in house. One broke yesterday and the other is in the sterilizer,” he announced.

Dolce's thoughts echoed in the hallway of her mind. *This girl is NOT going to die.*

“Get me that maintenance guy who's working on the vent in the hall. Tell him to bring his drill.”

The already out-of-breath technician pivoted on his heel and returned seconds later with Joe in tow. Tools clanked on his belt as he jogged into the room. He carried his Black and Decker as if it were a gun.

“Your drill. I need it.”

“Whatcha gonna do with it, Doc?”

“Brain surgery.”

“No way.”

“Yes way. Remove the bit and hold the handle while I attach mine. Then I’ll let my right hand go non-sterile while I take it.”

Dolce was glad she used extra-strength deodorant that morning as she drilled through her patient’s skull. One slip would drive the bit into the brain and result in death. Failing to act would leave the patient in the same state. She was sure the case would be reviewed for doing a procedure in the ER which was usually reserved for the operating room. Not to mention using a maintenance man’s drill. She didn’t care. Saving the girl was all that mattered. The Oath of Hippocrates, the traditional vow to ethically practice medicine pledged by graduating physicians for centuries, drove her onward.

The smell of bone dust permeated her nostrils as the bit took purchase and gained a grip on the skull. Bloody chips fell to the floor as she slowly advanced the sharp point toward the brain. *Steady now. Gentle pressure on the trigger.*

Blood burst through the hole and squirted two feet as the inside of the cranium was penetrated. A nurse cried out from across the room. She had never seen the procedure and, to her, it seemed the doctor had gone mad. Piercing someone’s head with a workman’s tool? Lunacy!

The meaning of the crimson fountain was entirely different for the doctor. It suggested her patient now had a good chance of survival.

As the red geyser slowed to a trickle, a human siren sounded beyond the door. The husband had learned of the fate of his child. Dolce bit her lip until it hurt. After the procedure, she did her best to clean up the blood and wipe her patient’s face before the husband came in.

Fifteen minutes later, a different pair of paramedics wheeled in another patient. He was an obese man, who tottered on his stretcher as if he would flop on the floor at any moment. The stench of vodka mixed with stale sweat nipped at her nose as they assisted him off of their stretcher and onto the ER gurney. Dolce noticed nystagmus, abnormal eye movements which were one of the hallmarks of severe intoxication with alcohol, and turned to the medic closest to her.

“Forty-five-year-old male, unrestrained driver, from a motor vehicle accident scene,” the paramedic began. “It seems he drove down the road and sideswiped five parked cars before he stopped and self

extricated from his truck. No report of injury. Witnesses said he just stumbled out and sat down in the middle of the road. No complaints, medical history, medications or allergies. His blood sugar was 104. Normal.”

“Did he have any evidence of trauma?”

“None.”

“Alcohol?”

“He keeps denying it, but he smells like a Jack Daniels factory.”

The patient grinned stupidly and settled into his bed. In a matter of minutes, the doctor concluded he was likely only drunk and had no injuries whatsoever. She ordered a blood alcohol level to confirm her suspicions. If the level was nil, she'd have to consider a long list of problems that might cause the eye movements, slurred speech, and difficulty with coordination. The cause could be a stroke, transient ischemic attack, brain tumor, or another toxic ingestion or drug. But she was sure the number one on her list was going to be correct. She could smell the answer. *It was the odor of the venom that killed her sister.*

Dolce went about her duties and began to repair a laceration. At the same time, an officer strolled into the department and started talking with the drunk she just saw. It soon became apparent that the policeman did not plan to place her patient under arrest. Dolce's blood pressure rose and she clamped her teeth on her tongue to prevent herself from spewing a few unsavory words in the direction of the cop. She knew that if she hadn't been suturing, she might have flung a verbal dart or two anyway.

“I'm going to release you,” the man with the badge continued. “Let the ER take care of you. Maybe your blood sugar is low or something.”

“Okee-doke *ocifer*,” the drunk stuttered.

The inebriated man smiled at her from across the room. The doctor's brow furrowed. She had to steady her right hand with her left as she plunged the needle into the arm she was sewing. The voice of intoxication reminded her of another she had heard a long time ago, when she held her twin in a mound of twisted metal.

Her leg blazed again. She knew it was phantom pain like that felt by many amputees, but it was worse. It was a message from a much-

loved ghost from her past, a spirit who hungered for justice. As she sewed, the recollection of the accident seeped into her consciousness like the oozing of blood from the wound that she worked on.

Although an eidetic memory made medical school easy, she hated when she couldn't control the powerful gift. In a flash, Dr. LaBelle was no longer suturing, she was a little girl riding in a car. She could feel the bumps in the road, and was lulled by the comforting purr of the engine. She and her sister were playing a game of Cat's Cradle in the back seat, laughing and singing as they took turns manipulating the string. They hummed along with the Mommas and the Pappas on the radio. Rose was about to change the pattern, when another car suddenly swerved across the double line and into them. Their car spun and rolled, finally coming to rest upside down. Her mother, the driver, somehow survived. But they were all trapped inside, and the girls having struck their heads, floated together in a shadowy universe of concussion.

When she awoke, Dolce found that her sister, who had once been more connected to her than any regular identical twin, was still unconscious. She tried to wipe the blood off of Rose's face, but it kept coming. After an eternity of silence, Rose began to stir. In a few minutes, she too was awake.

"Remember when we had the operation and I was the first to wake up?" Dolce asked.

"Yeah," said Rose, sleepily.

"When you were out just now, I remembered. It was so weird to be apart. Not to be one anymore."

"It hurt. My left leg. Your right," Rose replied.

"And how we cried until they put us back into the same crib so we could hold each other."

"We'll never be apart again." Dolce reassured.

"Never..." Rose answered after a pause.

After a time, Rose's responses were spaced by longer intervals. And eventually, she drifted off to sleep. Her breathing became irregular: *Cheyne-Stokes respirations*.

Dolce realized something was wrong when her sister wouldn't wake up. Her twin's breathing became more and more ragged. And she

heard the drunken man’s uncoordinated, slurred singing from the back seat, where she was entrapped and her sister was entombed. For the first time in her little life, the scar where Rose had been, burned with anger.

The song of her sister’s killer was forever stamped into her mind. The lush sang, “Doo dupe de doo du. Doo dupe de doo du.” She heard it over and over again, as he stupidly milled about the scene of his crime.

An hour later, when they were finally cut free from the vehicle, her sister stopped breathing altogether. Dolce fought like a soaked kitten when the fireman pried her twin’s limp form from her arms. Dolce had to be sedated for days. Six months later, she learned that a skilled attorney had the charges against the killer reduced on a technicality. Improper handling of the blood sample caused doubt as to the chain of evidence. There was, it seemed, enough uncertainty to reduce his sentence. *The hand slap punishment levied was a poor exchange for a life.*

She wanted to go to the trial and tell the judge what that man took from her and the world, but her parents wouldn’t let her. She was only eight, after all. On her first visit to her sister’s grave, she pledged upon her scar to retaliate against the drunk that killed her. If society wouldn’t give him the punishment he deserved, she would. Someday, she would.

“Doctor?” her assistant asked. “Are you OK?”

Without realizing it, Dolce had stopped repairing the cut and stared into the distance, her eyes focused only on the past. When she looked down, she saw that blood from the laceration had soaked the dressings and splattered onto the floor. It reminded her of how her sister’s looked as it pooled in the back of the car.

After she finished with the wound, she returned to her monitor and vacantly scrolled through the pages on the hospital computer, looking for lab results. One stuck in her throat like a rusty nail. The blood alcohol on the patient who was not arrested by the officer returned at 300. She knew that on the same scale, 80 was equivalent to 0.08, the boundary of the legal limit for driving in California while under the influence of alcohol.

The doctor with the poise of a statue and the grace of an angel began to shake. Anger welled within like heat from a deep sea vent. She strode to the bedside of the uninjured drunk driver and stood before him with her arms crossed over her breasts.

“Whas’ up, Doc?” The man giggled. “Say, you’re cute. Kin’ I buy you a drink?”

“I have your blood test back,” the doctor replied. Her face was a mask of professional control, a cover which would soon begin to slip.

“It was 300. Several times the level which makes it illegal to drive in our state.”

“So what?”

“You could have killed someone. What if you killed a little girl?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t,” he slurred.

“You disgust me. Everyone knows you can murder someone by driving drunk. I *never* want to see you in my ER like this again. Do you understand me?”

He smirked back at her like a truant school boy being scolded by a teacher.

The doctor lost her professional control altogether.

“You could kill a baby. Or a pregnant woman walking across the street. Why that officer didn’t throw you in jail, I’ll never know. He wasn’t doing his job as far as I’m concerned,” she shouted.

“Doctor, there’s a new patient in room two, some homeless guy with a seizure,” a nurse interrupted.

Dolce spun and collided with the cop a few paces away.

“I was just talking about you. What are we doing if we don’t arrest these guys? You, officer, have failed us all. What about the innocent children killed by idiot worms like this? I have to see them and sometimes I’m the one who has to tell the parents their kid is dead. He’s sauced like a pickled egg. He’s a parasite on the ass of mankind, sucking blood out of society like a leech. Arrest that annelid.”

“Let me do my job and you do yours.”

“I am doing mine. I *hope* you do yours,” she said.

Dolce needed a moment alone in the restroom to compose herself before going on to another patient. The revenge she swore in the name

of her sister tasted like acid in the back of her throat. It was still there, stronger than ever, after all of those years.

She stared at herself in the mirror as she washed her face. She saw what her twin would have looked like had she survived. Flaxen hair. Eyes the color of a glacial lake. High cheekbones. Smooth, sun-kissed skin sprinkled with tiny beauty marks. With a brain to match her looks, the world would have been open to anything she desired. Would she have been a movie star, a transplant surgeon, or an astronaut? Dolce rubbed the long ugly scar on her right thigh. It was an unholy inferno of pain, now far worse than ever before. She could almost feel her sister’s weight on her leg.

After composing herself, she made her way to her new patient who’d had a seizure. She waved the prehospital providers over to get their story. As she listened, she smoothed his blanket, pulled it up to his chin, and gave him a friendly wink.

“Sixty-seven-year-old homeless John Doe found in the park seizing,” the paramedic said.

As he droned on with his report, Dolce focused on the patient. The man before her was a pathetic image of what noble creatures humans should be. If she had believed in reincarnation, she would have imagined him as an insect who had committed a heinous act in a previous life to return as an even lower life form in the shape of a human. Pity welled up within her and the Mother Theresa inside made her pat the man’s arm with her gloved hand. It was an act of kindness she would soon detest.

Her patient tried to smile but revealed only brown nubs of decay where teeth had been. A bug crawled out of his scraggly beard, scurried across his grimy face, and dove into his matted hair. As she observed him, Dolce recognized the telltale characteristics of Parkinson’s disease – a mask like face, the pill-rolling tremor, and the rigidity of his extremities. His skin was mottled with ulcers, and brown stains wound their way down the backs of his legs to his socks. He clearly hadn’t always made it to the commode over the last few days.

“He usually drinks a fifth a day, whether he needs it or not,” the paramedic continued, “But he last drank three days ago...”

Alcohol withdrawal seizure. Parkinson's disease. Lice. Ulcers. Matted hair. What is God punishing him for?

She gave verbal orders to the nurses. The stench at the bedside was getting to her now and the gagging sensation from his rancid body odor began to overpower all of her other senses, even the scorching of her scar.

Orders flew automatically from her lips, "CT head, CBC, electrolytes, magnesium, blood alcohol... And give him a banana bag with an amp of multivitamins, 100 mg of Thiamine, and two grams of magnesium. Run it over two hours."

She sat at her desk and rubbed her leg. It was smoldering now and felt like it was going to burst into flames any second. It hadn't felt like this since – well, since the accident. *What is Rose trying to tell me? I haven't forgotten you – or my promise, sis...*

"We have a name on that John Doe now."

The registration clerk dropped a paper in front of her and Dolce absentmindedly pushed it to the side. Then she read the name. Elbert Drayman. The hand that had touched Drayman turned to ice. *It couldn't be.*

Trembling, she picked up her iPhone. She had scanned the old newspaper article into her computer years ago because carrying the actual item was wearing it out. On her phone, the image was yellowed and faded, but she could easily make out the title, "GIRL, 8 DIES IN CRASH."

She'd read it a million times. "A head on collision on State Route 17 last night resulted in the injury of one girl and the death of another. The sister who was killed in the crash was one of a set of conjoined twins made famous by the surgery that separated them five years ago..." Dolce felt like throwing up. *Elbert Drayman.* The place where her sister had been attached to her body felt white hot as she registered the significance of what she read.

Meanwhile, Elbert Drayman began to sing in a weak voice, "Doo dupe de doo du. Doo dupe de doo du."

She recognized the tune, *it was the song of her pledge of revenge.*

A gravitational force pulled her to the medication room, then back to the bedside of the killer. As she looked down at him, she remembered once more the bitter tears she'd cried when she was surgically separated from her conjoined twin, and how neither of them could be consoled until they were reunited in one crib. Then she recalled the feeling of her sister going limp as she slipped into the next world. *And the day in the cemetery when she swore the vow of revenge on her sister's grave.*

Dolce looked into the eyes of the man who, a moment ago, had been human. A tear meandered down her cheek and hung on her chin. Was it for him, for Rose, or for herself? She fingered the plunger on the syringe she had secretly stowed in her pocket. It felt as cold as a corpse. Dolce dredged another vow from her subconscious and superimposed it on the promise to her sister. *The Oath of Hippocrates wrestled the pledge of revenge.*

Time froze. Dolce's jaw ached from clenching her teeth. Her femur throbbed with the volcano of lava that seemed to flow out to the skin where her sister had once been. She closed her eyes and paused. Rage seethed within and restless magma threatened to overflow.

The blackness of that night—when she helplessly listened to her twin's last breath—surfaced from its dark place in the depths of her soul. She could almost feel the vile sensation of evil escape from a corner of her heart and ooze into her blood stream. Her vision dimmed with the midnight hue of her word of honor.

The doctor stole glances over her shoulder. The nurses were occupied with other patients. There were no staff members at the desk. No one was looking. Nobody would ever know that the revenge for Rose was consummated with a hypodermic. There would be no traces in the blood stream and the port on the catheter would serve as entry, so she wouldn't leave a mark. Dolce's eyes scanned the odorous figure writhing on the gurney below her. He was more loathsome than a maggot. She thought of the rose the old lady had given her and of the metaphor of the fiery coal burning within. She knew what she must do.

The Fallen Leaf Anthology 2011

The rest of the day was a surreal impressionist rendition of a shift as blurry as the Pond at Montgeron by Monet.

Later that afternoon, Dolce considered the concept of retribution as she marinated in a hot shower. The disgust of touching her sister's killer, patting his hand and treating him with kindness, brief though it was, filled her with revolt. Though she'd worn gloves when she made contact, the unholy feel of his arm on her hand had to be scrubbed from her until her skin glowed.

The old lady with the flower was right. There had been a hot coal burning within her since she was a little girl. Her decision was difficult, but she was now at peace. A walk on the beach to commune with her lost sister might be an appropriate way to remember the most beautiful rose in her life. And a sunset would be the perfect prescription to lessen the quaking inside.

After she dressed, Dolce strolled along the rocky shore near her house, carrying the rose the old lady had given her. Dusk painted the sky with strokes of floral crimson stained with the tint of dying coals, and the glowing orb slipped in the heavens toward its own release. Seagulls wafted like angels on the wind. *Do you fly with such wings now, Rose?*

She stopped near an old man sitting by a fire ring, reading a book. He was bearded, but his whiskers were neatly trimmed and he wore clean clothes and Birkenstock sandals. The folding canvas chair that he sat on was new and a meticulously groomed golden retriever lay at his feet. There was something simmering on a pot that he tended. It smelled delicious, like clam chowder with an extra measure of savory herbs. The empty chair beside him suggested he was waiting for

someone. Dolce could see by his facial expression, he was at peace with the world.

Dr. LaBelle stood atop a crag and looked over the seething sea. The movement of the ocean was mirrored in her stomach as she held one rose and considered the other. Her first memories were of her sister. They had invented their own language and could communicate with one another through squeals and grunts long before they spoke English. They discovered that by working together they could take their crib apart and push down child gates to roam through the house on their own exuberant three-legged race. One they thought would last forever. The operation to divide them couldn't separate conjoined spirits, for that only came by the schism of life and death, from a sword swung by a drunk.

She realized as she stood there that for the first time in years her scar no longer burned. The hot coal within was finally extinguished. With a heavy sigh, she tossed the red rose into the waves. As if in answer, a fin stirred the water behind the stem, and a head appeared.

Expecting a seal, she clasped her hand over her mouth and giggled. The head in the water smiled back, and then a hand plucked the gift from the current. Dolce stared. Faces did not usually appear in the sea.

The diver bobbed in the brine and curiously regarded the rose, then looked up at Dolce. With Kevlar gloves, he stripped the thorns, slipped the stalk between his teeth and swam.

With a flick of his flippers and a nudge from a wave, he shot up on the rock beside her. The sack strapped to his waist shifted. It was full of the bounty of the deep.

“Thank you for the flower.” He grinned.

Dolce was, for the first time in her life, at a loss for words.

The man winked, and, sensing her discomfort, began to speak.

***“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogroves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.”***

Dolce smiled. She recognized the poem.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son!” She laughed, continuing the verse.

“A seal who knows *Jabberwocky* by Lewis Carol?”

“You threw me a flower. I had to return a rhyme, and it was the only one I could recall.”

The silence begged to be filled. Dolce was again unable to respond.

“May I invite you for some fresh scallop stew? My father there is finishing the sauce.”

He gestured to the old man by the fire, who lifted his eyes from his Zane Grey novel and nodded.

The wall within, built on the foundation of a glowing ember and raised high from a lifetime of use, crumbled. Dolce began to form a no with her lips, but “yes” escaped them. When the diver doffed his mask, she recognized the philanthropist she’d run into that morning by the ER door.

She thought back to her release and of the syringe she had prepared for the murderer of her sister. The sound that it made falling to the bottom of the sharps container – full and unused, echoed in her mind.

Elbert Drayman would continue his existence, plagued by Parkinson’s, suffering from seizures, and besieged by lice. Wriggling on the streets as he was, he would not kill again. The universe had already exacted its revenge. Her plunger wasn’t needed. The fiery coal in her heart was quenched and the burning ghost in her thigh exorcised. Her sister was already avenged, and the Oath of Hippocrates remained secure. Now, the reward of the cosmos swam to her, beckoned by another rose.

“The Write Retreat” and “Creativity Camp” - Stanford Sierra Camp 2011



Rose Wings *by Betty Luceigh*

Author's note: This story is dedicated to the memory of G.B., my favorite uncle, who was killed in 1978 by a driver under the influence of alcohol. I will never forget him, or the phone call which woke us on that terrible January morning.