

1997 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Winner

HE FINISHES WITH A FLOURISH

By Mari E. Jorgensen

WE MUST LOOK SWEET, THE THREE OF US.

We must look like a freaking Hallmark's commercial, Laurel and me and her sister, gathered around this table in Hogi Yogi with our matching raspberry yogurt smoothies ("You order for all of us, Chad," Laurel told me), and Amanda with her grannie get-up on—those polyester shorts she wears hiked up almost to her armpits and her blue-flowered shirt, white orthopedic shoes and tube socks. We must make a tender picture, the three of us. I can tell, because people keep tossing fond smiles our way. I know what they see: a nice boy and his girlfriend, who is lovely with her dark hair draped down her back and her nut-colored skin and chalky blue eyes—the two of us out for a bite to eat with this sweet handicapped child. (*What is the proper term?* they are thinking. I can almost see the words clobbering around behind their eyes: *Down's Syndrome? Mongoloid? Mentally Disabled?*)

People think we're adorable. The truth is, though, that I've never had much of a say when it comes to Laurel's sister. She just comes as part of the package. What can I do? I could never let on to Laurel how I feel itchy under the skin whenever Amanda's around. It would crush her, and I have no desire to crush my girlfriend.

"You going to eat all your chips?" Laurel swings her hair off her shoulders and gives me a steady stare across the table. She slides her straw against its hole in the lid of her Styrofoam cup, making that squeak-squeak-squeaking noise. I know what she wants. I glance at Amanda, who is finished with her chips and has the foil bag split open and flattened against the table so she can lick up every last crumb.

"Hey, 'Manda bear,' I say.

Her fat tongue works at the foil bag. She doesn't look up.

"Manda Bear," I say. "Here's some more chips." I slide my bag of Dorritos across the table, and Amanda ducks her head. She's cute, in a quirky sort of way—bashful about people watching her take things, pudgy like a puppy. Her fingers fiddle with the edge of the bag until she thinks I'm not

looking, then she nabs the chips and stuffs them in her mouth, chewing them up into one great wad, her fat tongue working noisily.

Laurel kisses the air between us. *Thank you*, she mouths.

Don't mention it, I mouth back, but this makes her eyebrows curl in confusion because *Don't mention it* is way too complicated of a message to mouth to someone who doesn't read lips.

After Amanda has polished off all my chips, she folds the empty bag in half. She folds it again and again until it is a tiny, slick square. "Do you think Elmer flew away?" she says.

"No, 'Manda," Laurel says. "He's indoors, remember?"

"Yeah, but he could fit through the window." She's talking about her pet magpie, which she found wet and huddled on the kiddie slide in the back yard one day. Her look to Laurel is fierce. As fierce as a person's look could be from beneath those fleshy, pink lids of hers.

Laurel heaves a sigh. "Okay, we can go. Chad?"

"Sure. I'm easy." I squash my empty smoothie cup against the tabletop and hookshot it over my head towards the trash bin by the door. I miss.

"A regular Karl Malone," Laurel says.

Outside, downtown Salt Lake City is slick with heat. The sky is a wash of yellow, and the mountains in the west are backlit—wedges of black against the yellowing sky. Two kids in backwards baseball caps whiz by on roller blades, calling each other "pisshead" and "shit-for-brains." At the corner of Fifth South and West Temple a new Volkswagen Bug pulls up with a bumper sticker that says, *This is the right place—just not the right place for you, so get the hell out.* Brigham Young would be proud.

"Look," I say. "'Manda, look.' I like to entertain Laurel's sister by playing the air sax. I hum a nasally version of "Saturday In the Park" and sway to the beat, squeezing my eyes shut in my musical rapture. Amanda doesn't even crack a smile.

"Cut it out," Laurel says.

"Do you think Elmer flew away?" Amanda says.

I stop with the air sax. Laurel is taking Amanda's hand now, steering her up South Temple towards their parents' house on

MARI E. JORGENSEN is a writer living in Belgium. She can be contacted at mari.jorgensen@skynet.be.

E Street. I live on O and Sixth—a whole thirteen blocks away from them. "Wait," I say, grabbing for Laurel's elbow. "Hold on. Aren't you going to invite me home with you? I hear your parents are out of town. We could, you know, break into the liquor cabinet and take a champagne bath or something."

Amanda is yanking on Laurel's hand, fixed on the idea of going home, but Laurel turns to me and laughs. Her teeth are small and white, her left cheek dimples ever-so-slightly, and the half-moon on her beaded necklace glints in the dying light. She can't keep herself from laughing, I'm so irresistible, but still she presses her palm against my chest when I get too close, shoving me away. "You're like a slobbering rottweiler," she says.

I laugh too.

We both know, however, that this is just me goofing around. This is just a show. She and I are both fully aware that we will not *do it* until after we're married. And even then we will not *do it* in a champagne bath because Mormons don't drink. This a part of our religion. A big part.

"Don't you think you ought to be getting home now?" Laurel says. She is still trying to push me away, but with Amanda pulling her in the opposite direction she's not having much luck. Her hair smells like Breyer's vanilla bean ice cream. Exactly.

"Yeah, I guess," I say. "But I was thinking we could get a video, make popcorn, eat licorice whips?"

"You know you need to go home."

"Why?"

"Because." The resistance from Laurel's hand suddenly gives way and she lets me fall against her. "Because," she says into my ear, "you know that no matter how late you stay out your mom will still be dying when you get home."

I must look shocked and dismayed—crushed, even, at her emotional brutality—because then Laurel kisses me hard on the mouth. She lets go of Amanda's hand and kisses me hard, pressing herself so tightly against my chest that I swear I can feel her nipples through her cotton T.

"Okay," I say. "I'll go."

I AM crazy about Laurel, I make no bones about it. I am not ashamed to say that I feel about her the same way those sappy guys in romance novels feel about their girlfriends. And even though she and I have only barely graduated from high school, I would marry her tomorrow if she would go for it. But she never would. Laurel has a schedule all worked out. Because we're Mormon, I am supposed to go to college for a

year. Then, when I turn nineteen, I'll buy a couple of dark suits from Mr. Mac's (they give discounts to prospective missionaries) have my hair sheared to near stubble (around your ears, two inches above the collar) and go on a mission for the Church. After that, according to Laurel's schedule, I will come home as one of God's triumphant warriors, and then, and only

then, when I've gotten another year of college under my belt, she and I can get hitched and live happily ever after.

Don't get me wrong. It's not that I'm against going on a mission. It stirs me to think about what a noble pursuit it will be. Seriously. I can't wait to go to bed with my limbs aching and limp from serving people for fourteen hours straight. It's the way I was raised. My whole life my dad has rousted me out of bed of a Saturday morning to help snow blow some old geezer's driveway, or rake their leaves. What can I say? I'm a regular saint. It's just that every time I think about going on my mission and being away from Laurel for twenty-four months straight, I nearly go blind with heartache. I am, as my friends would say, totally whipped.

After Laurel has told me to beat it, I head straight home and let myself into my parents' restored Victorian-style home in the upper Avenues of Salt Lake. Dad bought this house back when he first started to make it big as an international tax attorney, and he must have shelled out a pretty penny for it. It's posh. He's also got an apartment in New York and a flat in Prague. I've never been to either, although he's constantly on my case about it. "No offense," I tell him whenever he bugs me about going with him on one of his business trips. "It's just that my idea of a good time isn't an evening of bizarre, overpriced food and *La Boheme*. But, hey, you go knock yourself out."

He's a good guy, my father, but the two of us aren't exactly two peas in a pod.

My letting myself into my own house at nine-thirty at night like this without any forewarning whatsoever makes my mother's hospice nurse, Louise, nearly jump out of her skin. "Good Lord Almighty," she says as she leans against the front stairs railing and presses her hand against her heaving chest. "You scared the living daylights out of me, Chad."

"Sorry." Is it my fault that lately this woman prowls around our house like the specter of death itself?

She's been carrying an empty catheter bag and a plastic cup filled with pills up to my mom's room, but now the pills are spread over the marble tile like beads off a broken necklace. I squat on my haunches and help to chase down capsules and



We both know that this is just me goofing around.

**We will not *do it* until after
we're married. Even then we
will not *do it* in a
champagne bath because
Mormons don't drink.**

tablets with my fingers. Louise slaps the backs of my hands. "Don't worry about this," she says. "You go on up and say goodnight to your mother. Your sisters have left already and your dad's waiting for you."

"Are you sure?" I say.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It's never been my intention to be ridiculous."

"Go." Louise has the pills gathered up and deposited safely in their container. The catheter bag is cradled in the crook of her arm. "It's what I'm here for." She straightens up and slaps a wrinkle from the leg of her pink scrub pants with her free hand.

"Okay," I say. "Thanks." I turn and start to make my way upstairs, but Louise stops me.

"Chad." Her voice is only slightly above a whisper, as if I might be susceptible to loud noises because my mother is dying and a certain decibel might make me break down into sobs. "I've been doing this for a long time, nursing cancer patients," she says. "Sixteen and a half years, to be exact, and after that much time you start to get a feel for . . . things."

"Things?" I say. Standing where I am on the fourth stair up, I notice that Louise doesn't look her usual gargantuan self. She is almost petite, in fact—her red hair slicked into a plastic clip, the light filtering through the half-round window above the door and settling onto her cheeks and forehead, making her face seem pale and sort of hollowed out. This is the woman who bathes my mother every morning, strips off her soiled bedclothes, and acts like this whole business of dying is as normal as sending your shirts to the cleaners.

"Yes," she says. "Things. Like when the end is near. Tonight I asked your mother a question I ask all my patients because it helps me to know about the timing of things, so that I can help the family to prepare. I asked her if she was seeing visions when she, you know, sort of fades out like she sometimes does? And she said yes, Chad. Do you know what that means? It means that the end is near." Louise reaches up through the stair railing and places her hand—this dry, caked thing—on my arm. "I just wanted you to know," she says. "I can sense these things."

"Okay," I say, and I slide my foot to the next step up, hoping that Louise will catch the hint and get her scaly hand off my arm. My mother is a living skeleton. It doesn't take a freaking brain surgeon, I want to tell Louise, to be able to sense these things.

AFTER I have looked in on my mother, who is sleeping, and said goodnight to my bleary-eyed father, I sit in my room and finish the last quarter of a cherry-cream cheese pie while watching M*A*S*H. It's the one where Radar gets honorably released and Clinger and B.J. trash Rosie's bar because they want to go home too.

When it's over, I click off the set and stretch out in my boxers on my bed. I try to fix on the fact that my mother has no liver left to speak of. I attempt to focus on the tragedy of how the cancer has left her face a shrunken shell and how she has lost her blinking reflex and how soon my father will be a widower and I will be a . . . what do you call someone in my shoes? A partial orphan? A motherless child? I will be sad. But maybe I am too young, or maybe I am too cold or demented or something, because the sadness doesn't sink in right away. Pretty soon I find myself thinking about, instead



**Dad doesn't know this,
but my three older sisters and
I used to mock him....
"Son, on behalf of
your mother and myself, I
would like to ask you to
mow the lawn"**

of my mother's death, my life with Laurel.

I imagine that it is three and half years from now and Laurel and I are together. Not together like we have been ever since the ninth grade, with our school class voting us cutest couple and all that junior high crap. I imagine that we are husband and wife. And I don't just think about the sex. I would be lying if I said I never think about the sex because I am, after all, as hormonal as the next guy. But even more than the sex, I like thinking about lying next to Laurel in our room, in our home, and listening to the soft flutter of the curtains curling in the breeze and smelling her vanilla bean hair. Maybe we live in a brick bungalow and have a yellow dog named Scout. Maybe I have a music studio at the end of the driveway and teach sax to the neighborhood kids. Maybe we have a salsa garden.

"Let's not talk about that right now," Laurel says whenever I ask her if she will stick with me through the lean years. "We have all the time in the world to worry about that. First we need to get our ducks in a row."

Laurel is very big into people getting their ducks in a row.

I am just starting to drift off when my father taps on my bedroom door. "Chad?" he calls. "You awake?"

"Come on in," I say.

He nudges open the door and a weak wedge of light falls onto my carpet. He looks like hell, my father. Worse, even, than when I saw him with Mom earlier. His thin, strawberry-blond hair is poking up in all directions and his eyes are two tangles of blood vessels.

"Everything okay?" I say.

My father clears his throat into his fist, as if he's about to give an acceptance speech. "Actually," he says, "I was wondering if you would be so kind as to do me a favor."

My dad doesn't know this, but my three older sisters and I used to mock him. My sister Caroline used to waltz into my room and flop onto my bed and say in this hokey Dad voice, "Son, on behalf of your mother and myself, I would like to ask you to mow the lawn." Now, of course, my sisters wouldn't breathe a word against my dad. Now that they've moved out and have families of their own, they all think the sun rises and sets at my dad's command.

"Shoot," I say.

"Yes, well, I was wondering if it would be possible for you to sit with your mother for a few hours. I'm exhausted, and I feel rather reticent about leaving her alone."

"Sure," I say, scrambling out of my bed sheets. "You could've asked me sooner, you know."

"Yes, well. I wanted to stay with her. But I'm afraid. . . ."

"You're afraid?"

"I'm afraid I can't keep my eyes open a moment longer."

"Gotcha," I say. "Say no more."

In my mother's hospice room, which used to be the sitting area of my parents' bedroom suite but is now almost entirely eclipsed by a white roll-away bed, my father shows me the eyeglass with the stuff in it to keep my mother's eyes moist, and the other dropper with the morphine in it. "You don't have to make sure she swallows it," he says about the morphine. "Just allow it to seep into the skin of her mouth and it will find its way into her bloodstream." He hands me the dropper and rakes his fingers through his fading hair.

"Thank you, son," he says.

After my dad leaves, I sit on my mother's favorite chaise lounge that has been squeezed in next to her bed. I put my hand through the metal railing and stroke her hand. It is a collection of bones and wrinkles, her hand, and my mother herself looks old, old. She is older than most of my friends' parents because I was an "oops baby." That's what my mother calls me—her "oops baby." She was forty-one when she got pregnant with me and was scared silly that I was going to turn out with clubbed feet or have the IQ of a turnip or something. But then, she says, she had this dream where I appeared to her as a young man and told her everything was going to be all right. I try to imagine myself as a spirit who had not yet been born

coming to tell my mother everything is going to be all right. I wonder if I knew what the hell I was talking about.

The cotton nightdress my mother is wearing is draped over her body like a sheet of plastic wrap stretched over a bowl of leftovers. Her cheekbones look like golf balls, since her face is so sunken, and her mouth droops open so that it seems like her face is nothing more than two rows of perfect, white teeth.

The truth is, if I couldn't hear my mother's forced breathing I would swear she is gone already.

This is the way it has been for the past couple of days: My mother goes away somewhere, and then she comes back. Ever since she had a heart attack at the end of last week, which happened, Louise says, because her liver and kidneys have begun to shut down and her bloodstream has built up too much potassium, my mother has drifted in and out of consciousness. One minute she'll be lying here talking to one or the other of us and the next thing we know her eyes will roll back into her head and she will go away somewhere. Spooks the crap out of you. But then after a couple of seconds she comes back and

picks right up on whatever it is she was saying before. It's like she wasn't even gone in the first place.

My mother's fingers flutter against my hand. "Chad? Is that you?"

"Hi, Mom. How are you? Can I get you anything?"

"No, no. Where's Dad?"

"In his room. He was beat."

"I can imagine."

It's quiet again for a few minutes and just when I think my mom has drifted off she starts to talk again. "Know what?"

"What?"

"I was dreaming about you just now. I dreamt you were a baby again. You were so cute—all round and pink and bald. And then the next thing I knew you were grown up, like you are now, and you said something I didn't like, so I said, Don't speak to me that way, young man. I used to powder your behind.' "

"Really? You've never said that to me."

"I know, but I always planned to."

My mother and I have a quiet chuckle over her dream, and then her breathing gets hard and regular again, so I know she's asleep. Lying back on the chaise lounge with an afghan over my legs, I listen to the rasp of my mother's slow, sharp



**This is the woman who
bathes my mother
every morning, strips off her
soiled bedclothes, and acts like
this whole business of dying
is as normal as
sending your shirts
to the cleaners.**

breathing. I can see why my dad was so frazzled. It's like listening to see if your own heart is beating. When I finally fall into a shallow, tortured sleep, I dream that Laurel and I are married and that she gives birth to a Down's baby. It has almond-shaped eyes and a fat tongue and sometimes people call it a mongoloid child. I have to try to kick the crap out of these people, for honor's sake.

THE next day I go to Laurel and ask her to run away with me.

It's nothing too drastic, like eloping to Vegas or shacking up together or anything like that, it's just that I want to get away. "I've got it all worked out," I say as soon as she opens the door to her parents' house and waves me inside. "We can spend the rest of the summer down in Moab. I can be a mountain bike trail guide and you can waitress. I know the manager at the Sizzler down there. Or else you can be a guide with me. And there's a trailer park, too. Dirt-cheap. Wouldn't that be cool?"

I am telling all this to Laurel's back. She is leading me down the hallway towards the back of the house, through the set of sliding glass doors that open up to the back yard.

I can see Amanda laughing and playing frisbee with her miniature terrier, Stubby. Laurel doesn't look at me when I tell her about my Moab idea. She opens the sliding glass door part-way and says, "You and your harebrained schemes." Then she steps outside.

"Why? Why is it harebrained?"

Outside, she pours me a Dixie cup full of lemonade from a Tupperware pitcher she has perched on an upturned crate. "It's really very practical," I say. "We can still make money for school this fall. And we wouldn't go until this whole thing with my mom is over, of course, and by then my dad will have thrown himself back into his work. Can't you see us kicking around down there, just the two of us? We'd have to live in separate trailers with roommates, of course, but I could deal with that. What do you say?"

Laurel gives me a soft smile and turns to kneel in the mud of her parents' vegetable garden. She's weeding the tomato plants. She digs out a couple of weeds, then stops and poised her trowel in mid-air, as if she is contemplating the pros and cons of scooping out the next weed. A bee careens near her head and she waves it away with a flick of her thin wrist. Finally, she makes a visor with one hand and peers over at

Amanda. "Did you know," she says, "that people with Down's Syndrome have a fifty percent chance of contracting leukemia?" She digs up a weed and tosses it aside.

But I'm a little slow on the uptake. I'm mostly clueless as to the finer points of good relationship skills, because when it comes to people trying to tell me things and I've got my mind fixed on something else, I'm a real clod. "No, I didn't know

that," I say, and immediately I'm back on my Moab idea. I list all the cool things we could do while we're down there, and I keep pushing and pushing until finally Laurel's shoulders hunch. And still it takes me a second to realize what's going on. But then I hear her sobs and see her shoulders trembling and I nearly fall out of my lawn chair with shock. I've never seen Laurel cry before.

I scramble over to her and kneel beside her in the mud. "I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't know that. Please, you're killing me."

The place where she cries into my shoulder feels raw, like an open wound. "It's just this thing with your mom," she says, "and you going away next year, and Amanda. She's not going to live forever, you know, not even as long as your

mom. I could never leave my sister for the whole summer, Chad. Please don't ask me."

"Okay, okay," I say. "I'm sorry."

As if by radar, Amanda has honed in on the fact that Laurel is unhappy. I don't know how she does it, since she's nowhere even near us, but this isn't the first time I've seen Amanda figure out on her own that Laurel is sad. She knows something is wrong, and she comes barreling towards us. I have to get out of the way to keep myself from being crushed by her pudgy body as she throws herself on Laurel. She strokes Laurel's hair and she says, "There, there." This makes Laurel sob harder.

I have to wonder who Laurel feels sorrier for: herself because she'll be losing me for two years and probably later Amanda, or me because I'll be losing my mom, or all three of us, me, Laurel and Amanda, because here we are in this group hug that is laced with all sorts of illusions and hopes and shortcomings.

Laurel's eyes catch mine over Amanda's head: "A weak heart," she mouths. "That's what it usually is, if it's not leukemia—a weak heart."

It's a complicated message to mouth to someone, but, amazingly enough, I understand it all.



**She had this dream
where I appeared to her
and told her everything was
going to be all right.
I try to imagine myself
as a spirit coming to tell
my mother that.
I wonder if I knew what the
hell I was talking about.**

MY father has called a family meeting. My three sisters, Made-line, Naomi, and Caroline are gathered in my parents' living room along with their husbands and kids. Louise is here, too, but she's lurking somewhere out in the kitchen. My mother has asked to be moved down to the sofa, just for this evening, so that everyone can be here together with her. I find it amazing that this frail slip of a person can want anything, has a will of her own to say, *Please move me down to the sofa just for this one evening.*

Laurel and Amanda are here too. Amanda insists on sitting scrunched up next to my mother, whom she calls "Ma Carolyn." She's wearing her grannie get-up again, this time with a new pair of purple-striped tube socks.

There is food—homemade strawberry ice cream that Louise made this afternoon. ("I didn't even know we owned an ice cream mixer," my father said when she produced it.) My sisters are cracking jokes about the fact that Dad never let *them* eat dessert in the living room when *they* lived at home. We blather aimlessly, talking about the people across the street who built this monster Arabian-style home out of pink stucco. It's not very practical, we're saying, to build a house with a flat roof for patio furniture when you live in Utah. Whatever happened to the neighborhood's Covenants, Laws, and Restrictions? Laurel is clutching my hand so tightly that my palm is running with sweat.

Finally, my father positions himself behind the sofa and places a hand on my mother's shoulder. The long windows behind him show a sluggish, purple sunset. The air kicks on, and this seems to be the cue for my sisters to start crying. Madeleine is standing by the fireplace, jiggling her smallest kid on her hip, her eyes blurry with tears. I try not to look.

"Your mother has something she would like to say," Dad says.

Mom's eyes flutter open, as if this announcement has taken her by surprise. She looks from one to the other of us with mild confusion playing behind her eyes. She opens her mouth to say something, thinks better of it, and closes it again. "I want you to keep things upbeat," she says at last.

We all cry some more.

A few minutes later Bishop Benton shows up to help my dad give my mom a priesthood blessing. It's part of Dad's

agenda for the evening. Bishop Benton pours a drop of consecrated olive oil onto my mother's batch of brittle hair and blesses it for the healing of the sick and afflicted. Then it's Dad's turn. He covers Mom's hair with his hands and calls her by name, ushering in the power of the priesthood which he holds to help give comfort to those in need. Everyone is supposed to shut their eyes during the blessing, we all know this, but Amanda and I forget. I've seen the general shape of this blessing thing before—my whole life, in fact—and I've even had a few of them myself, but somehow this one isn't registering. Who is this person, this powerful tax attorney who wears Hugo Boss ties and calls the shots in so many parts of his world and yet can stand here covering my mother's skull with his hands and say to her to take peace and return to that Creator who gave her life? I glance over at Amanda. She and I both keep our eyes open wide, wide through the whole prayer.

"Thank you," Mom says when it's over.

After that, my mother asks me to play the piano. She has always had this dream of her children becoming concert pianists. The poor woman. My

sisters would only sit through two and a half years of lessons before calling it quits. I only lasted until my twelfth birthday. Now I wish I hadn't been so mule-headed because my dying mother wants me to play for her and I only know one song. But what can I do? I go to the Steinway baby grand my father bought as an investment and sit down. I feel slightly ridiculous playing "Send In the Clowns" while my mother lies dying on the sofa. It's way too hokey of a song for the occasion, but what can I do?

While I'm playing I glance around the room. I think of how my sister Caroline had a stalker when she was sixteen and my dad had to take out a restraining order against the guy and ship Caroline off to Connecticut to live with his mother for a few months. Then my other sister Madeline had a baby die from SIDS—just woke up one morning and found the little guy lying in his bassinet a milky shade of blue. And then there's Naomi. My sister Naomi is messed up in so many ways it's not even funny.

And as for myself—who knows? Maybe I'll meet with a fatal accident on my mission. It happens. You hear sometimes of missionaries who get decapitated in fluke biking accidents or



**Who is this person
who wears Hugo Boss ties
and calls the shots
in so many parts of the world
and yet can stand here
covering my mother's skull
with his hands and
say to her to take peace
and return to that Creator
who gave her life?**

are stabbed by crazed anti-Mormons. And then again maybe everything will be fine and maybe Laurel and I will get married and I will have my music studio at the end of the driveway and I'll play my saxophone in a band. We'll have our salsa garden and our yellow dog and a couple or three great kids. Then perhaps some twenty years down the road I will find myself covering Laurel's skull with my hands and telling her to go quickly, to leave me and her pain behind. And perhaps late one night my son will catch me kneeling in my underwear at the side of her deathbed, my hands clasped in prayer and saying, "I know what you've promised us, that we'll be together in the next life, but I want her now. Do you hear me? I want her with me *now*."

I've never played "Send In The Clowns" with such gusto be-

fore. So what if I quit playing when I was twelve because I thought I would never be any good at it? No one can say I play the one song I do know without gusto. Laurel is watching me carefully, as if I'm showing all the signs of losing it. A couple of my nephews stare, dribbles of dried strawberry ice cream stuck to their faces. I finish the piece with a flourish, a grand flourish for my dying mother's sake, and all the while I am thinking *maybe*.

Maybe, just maybe, I will be half so lucky in my life as the people in this room with me have been in theirs.



To comment on this article, or to read comments by others, visit our website: <www.Sunstoneonline.com>



FORTUNE'S CUBE

*"... to make or break a fortune
some slaughtered but still warm elephant
lost his big teeth."*

He loved to hear the castanets of chance
when rattled in his hands,
and he whistled when blowing across the bones.
Ancient bleached bones.
Sometimes rolled snake-eyes, sometimes rolled sevens,
his pockets were empty, his pockets were full—
it all added up to crap.
Ivory dice,
grandpa's legacy, a pauper's estate—
I'm heir at law.

A lifetime of rolls,
Could sell them for a modest gain.
Could play them as grandpa did,
wear custom made suits
or lie in rags down a dark alley.
In one lifetime
he wore both tailorings
and never twiddled his thumbs.

—RICHARD FEIN