

1999 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Winner

FALSE POSITIVE

By Mari Jorgensen

THEY HAVE BECOME A CLICHÉ. AT BEST, AN acronym. Yuppies: Young Urban Professionals. A couple of free birds with their candy-apple red Jeep and their golden retriever named Scout and their Arts and Crafts bungalow in the Sugar House area of Salt Lake City. Or maybe Dinks is a better term—Double Income No Kids.

But in reality, Melanie thinks. In reality she spends her days sidestepping stacks of back splash tiles and layers of sheetrock propped against their bedroom wall. Weekends she wades through Gary's gallons of eggshell paint with their names as soft and round as poetry: Potter's Clay, Amber Harvest, Claret Jug. In reality, she is trying not to leave him.

Not that it's the fixer-upper's fault. Or Gary's. Or anyone's, as far as Melanie is concerned, except perhaps God's. And what's the point of ever trying to pin anything on him? Still, she needs to tell Gary. She had planned on doing it tonight, after her draining series of parent-teacher conferences, but now as she's pulling into the driveway, her headlights catch her brother's Nissan pickup. It gleams softly in her halogen lights but is as hard and real as the feeling of despair she carries around inside her chest cavity day after day. What can she do? She can't very well leave her husband in front of her brother.

"What the hell?"

Sam's voice reaches her first, after she's slipped through the back door and, in deference to Gary's newly lacquered floors, out of her loafers.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Trying to get myself killed; what do you think?"

"Well, you're doing a bang-up job. You've got to figure out the pattern."

"No duh. What do you think I'm trying to do?"

They're playing Super Nintendo. Leaning against the living

room door frame, Melanie can't help thinking what a cozy picture the two of them make. Her husband, thin and boy-like, hunched over the game's controls, and her brother propped against the far wall, his toes hooked into the oriental rug (one of Gary's famous flea market finds), eating chocolate pudding with his finger. For a moment, there is only the cozy picture the two of them make and the canned music of the game and the little running man in his world of dangers: deadly turtles, swinging bars, cliffs, and pitfalls. Who, Melanie can't help thinking, *made up this game? And what was he thinking when he did it?*

"Hi, honey," Gary says.

"Hi," Melanie says. "What are you guys doing?"

"Oh, you know," Sam says, "mildewing."

Seeing him here like this, cracking jokes and eating a Jell-O pudding cup with his finger, licking globs of it off his knuckles, Melanie feels a mass of tenderness well up inside her. She can't help it. *You and your sisters*, Gary is always saying. *I hope you know you're all half in love with Sam. I feel sorry for the woman he marries because whoever she is, she won't be good enough.* And it's true. Melanie adores her nineteen-year-old brother, not only because he is charming and good-looking, but also because he is good. Once when she dropped by his apartment toting a pan of homemade lasagna, Sam's roommate, clad only in boxers and with hair that would have made his mother crazy, answered the door. Sam was out, he told her. "I don't know about that brother of yours," he said, lifting the pan from her hands in one smooth motion. "I mean what kind of guy gets up at the crack of dawn just to go drive some chick home from her night-shift job? And not even someone he's interested in, either. A real dog, actually."

Now, still warmed over the cozy picture the two of them make, Melanie moves towards Sam. She steps over Scout, who is snoozing in his usual place squashed against Gary's side. She edges past the scent of citrus stripping agent Gary's been using lately on the house's wood trim. It lingers in his clothes and his hair and on his skin. A part of him.

"Hey, watch it," Gary says. "I've only got one life left."

"I hope you know." Sam is standing to hug Melanie. "I am



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kicking your husband's butt."

"Put a sock in it." Gary says. "You can't come into my house and eat my pudding and give me that kind of lip."

"So?" Melanie says to Sam. "Any news? Any mission call looming?"

"Not yet."

"Well, let us know. And when you go on your mission, I want to borrow your laptop. Okay? I call dibs on your laptop."

"If I get to go on my mission," Sam says.

"What?" Melanie says.

"Damn it," Gary says. "I'm dead."

"Listen." Sam's hands are on Melanie's shoulders. His skin, she notices, doesn't smell like chocolate pudding, or like stripping agent. It smells like the outdoors, like basketball leather and Taco Bell. "Listen, Mel," he says. "I came here tonight to tell you something. And I don't want you to freak out, okay? Promise me you won't freak out."

"What? Tell me."

"Promise."

"Okay, whatever." Melanie raises her right hand. "May God strike me dead if I freak out. Now spill it."

Gary has tossed aside the game's controls and is now standing at Melanie's side. The start-up menu flashes green on the TV. "What, man?" he says.

"Okay, here goes. I went to the plasma center the other day—"

"Sam," Melanie says, "if you needed money—"

"No. That's not it. That's not what I'm telling you. What I came to tell you, to tell both of you—and you can't tell Mom or Dad, you have to swear—is that the plasma center ran its usual battery of tests and one of them came up positive."

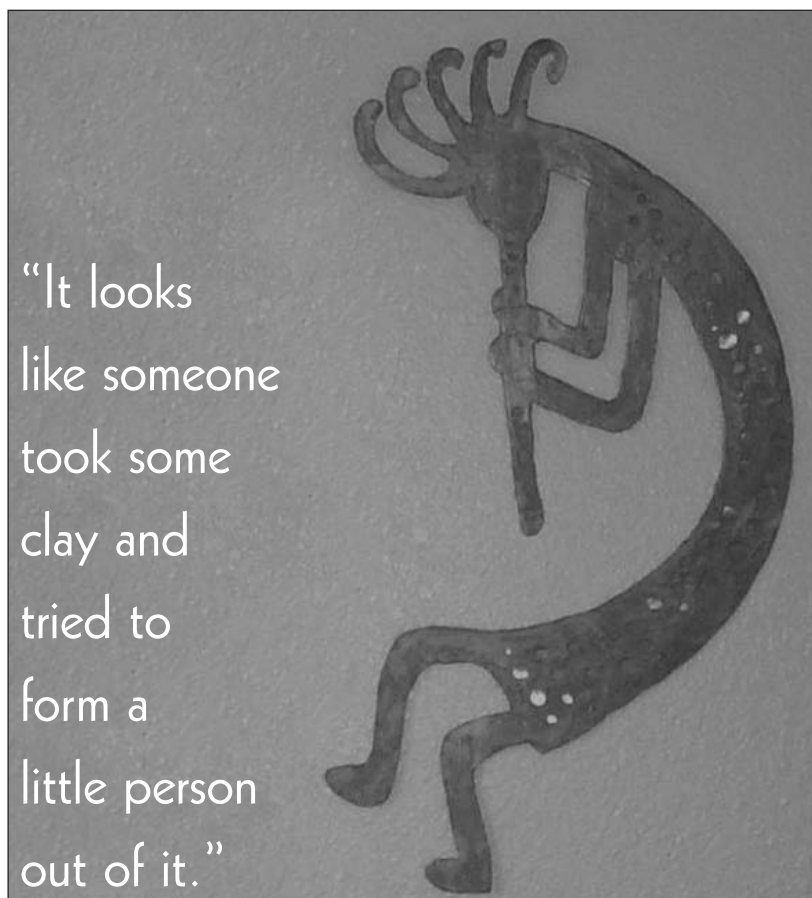
His eyes, Melanie notices, are hazel with flecks of gold. Their father's eyes. "Which one?" she says.

"The one for HIV."

IN REALITY, MELANIE lives her life in cycles. Days three through seven of each cycle, she swallows a tiny white pill which causes her ovaries to inflate inside of her like two diminutive balloons. It always surprises her how she can feel exactly the location of her ovaries, those two organs she never before gave a moment's notice to. On day twelve, she lies on a paper sheet in her specialist's office while he studies the monitor on which is pictured the bulbous arc of a follicle that looks ready to erupt, like a miniature volcano, and emit the only cell in the human body visible to the naked eye. "Looks ripe and ready to go," the specialist always says, which causes Melanie to picture her reproductive organs as tender pieces of fruit, drooping on a vine.

Days twelve through fourteen of each cycle, Melanie urinates on a test stick twice a day, waiting for the blue line which would indicate her luteinizing hormone surge—the optimum time for conception to occur. On the fourteenth day, when the blue line fails to appear, Gary gives her an injection in her hip, and twelve hours later they "have rela-

tions," which Melanie tracks on a grid the doctor's office provides. Then for two weeks it is nothing but waiting, of monitoring her body for the signs she remembers from her first pregnancy: the swollen breasts, the fatigue, the pressing need to urinate. It always amazes Melanie how well she knows her body during these weeks. The things that carry her through her days—her bones and organs and blood and skin—become, in a sense, an entity apart from herself. An enemy.



"Remember the good old days?" Gary says on the morning after Sam dropped his bomb. He is perched on a stool in the kitchen eating Lucky Charms. "Remember," he says, "back when these little marshmallow things in Lucky Charms all had one thing in common? They were *lucky charms*?" He pinches a piece of dehydrated marshmallow between his thumb and forefinger and dances it towards his mouth. There are droplets of milk on his chin. "I mean, really, red balloons? And how, pray tell, is a balloon supposed to be lucky?"

Melanie just stares, her glass of orange juice poised halfway to her lips. "I don't know," she says.

"Oh!" Gary hops off his stool. "I want to show you something."

Melanie allows her husband to cup her elbow in his palm, steer her through their obstacle course of a house. Through the kitchen with its newly installed granite counter tops and rebuilt weight-and-pulley windows. Past their bedroom with its

lath and plaster walls that Gary is in the process of taping and sanding in preparation for their treatment of topping compound. Past the bathroom with its refurbished clawfoot tub and pedestal sink. It frightens Melanie that she knows these terms. Lath and plaster. Knob and tube. Tongue and groove. True divided light. They are like so many words in a strange incantation. They are Gary's words.

"Welcome," Gary says, with a flourish of his hand, "to the conservatory."

"The conservatory?" They have arrived in the addition at the back of the house, where Gary has installed new

eyes and stick arms and tiny primitive instruments—they give her the creeps. But she does have to admit that they add something to the room. An intangible aura of artsiness. Of coolness. She does have to admit that Gary possesses a certain knack.

"It's great," she says. "Just great. What's not to like?"

MELANIE USED TO love the phrase "leap of faith." It sketched in her mind images of harrowed-up souls and expanses of cool, lifeless darkness and limbs teetering on the slick cusp of the abstract while a hand, cupped in the midst of the abyss, waited to deliver up the faithful. But that was before. Before the baby she and Gary had spent two years trying to conceive had died prior to being born. Before she'd seen the look on her husband's face as he gazed down at the fetus that lay curled like a question mark on the disposable blue chuck the hospital had provided. Before her mother, standing at her bedside in the hospital room (not a delivery room, since the doctors knew there would be no live baby to deliver) said, "It looks like someone took some clay and tried to form a little person out of it."

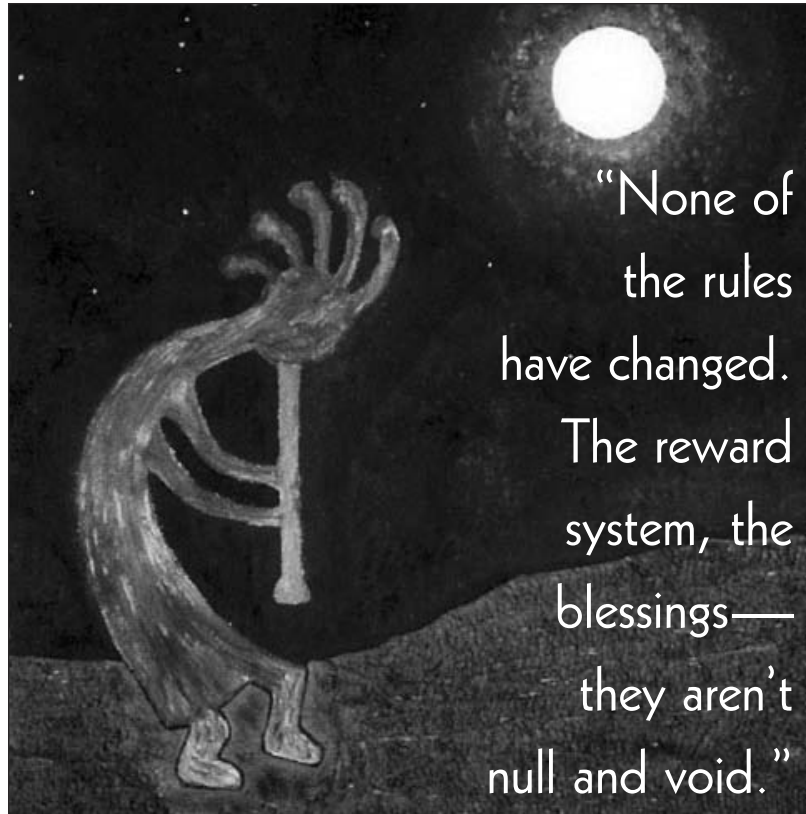
It was a fluke, the doctors had said. A trisomy on the eighteenth chromosome. A one-in-a-thousand chance of it happening to anyone. Never compatible with life.

Fluke, Melanie later learned, was not the correct word. It was the word the doctors—the perinatologist and her own OB/GYN—used to describe her situation. But a fluke, Melanie learned later by looking it up in the Oxford English dictionary, is an accidental stroke of *good* luck.

The shower is her favorite place to cry. She uses a nub of almond-essence soap (somehow it's always a nub, never a new bar) to rinse away the salty residue of what she can't control. She doesn't just cry over the expected disappointments, either, like the image of her almost-baby on its disposable blue hospital chuck, or the prospect of her hand-

some and charming brother contracting AIDS—a disease with a name spelled all in capital letters, as if it is to be screamed—she also cries over the less obvious. She cries, for instance, over the Olympics. On the afternoon she sees how that shrimp of a girl saves the U.S. women's gymnastics team from losing the gold to the Russians—after she watches her vault herself into a nearly perfect dismount despite the torn ligaments in her ankle—Melanie steps into the shower and sags against the wall. *Power to women*, she murmurs to herself.

After her cry, after she is weak with weeping, she steps from the shower and finds Gary in their bedroom applying topping compound to the walls. "You okay?" he says when he sees her. Melanie knows her eyes are red-rimmed and puffy: a dead give-away. He drops his putty knife into a bucket of topping compound and slides his dust mask to the top of his head, so that he looks like a nurse in an old film. "Melanie?" he says.



washer/dryer hook-ups to save Melanie from having to lug baskets of laundry downstairs. "And who are you? Colonel Mustard?"

"Okay, then." He grins, his teeth overlapped slightly. "The mud room."

He steers her towards the room's fireplace, one of the house's many oddities, installed by a previous owner and of no apparent function, and shoves aside the cherry mantel he has taken down so he can strip it and gouge it with a carrot peeler in order to give it that "distressed" look. This isn't what he wants to show her, he says. What he's really pumped about are the three tiers of crown molding he's built into the wall above the fireplace. He's painted them a glossy white, the color of whipped meringue, and set on them the four Kokopelli statues he'd brought back from his mission to Arizona years before.

"Well?" he says. "What do you think?"

Melanie has never liked the Kokopelli statues. Their circle

Approaching the wall, Melanie rubs her palm over a strip of embedded tape. She is stalling, measuring the weight of her words, assessing whether or not they are of such a heft that they will, in fact, crush him. *Perhaps*, she will say, *it's time to call it quits*. But he will not understand. After five-and-a-half years of marriage, Melanie is almost a hundred percent sure of this: he will think she's referring to their attempts to conceive. Perhaps he'll assume she's suggesting adoption. But even so, Melanie knows, now is the time to speak. Gary is, after all, waiting for it. She should speak now. *The fixer-upper isn't to blame*, she might say. *Nor are you. Nor is anyone, as far as I'm concerned, except perhaps God. . . .*

But no words come. Instead, she picks at the strip of tape beneath her fingers. She digs at the topping compound with her nails until, with a puff of white dust, she has ripped the tape free from the wall. After five-and-a-half years of marriage, she would have bet on Gary's trying to stop her. Or at least launching into a detailed explanation on the necessity of mesh tape when patching lath and plaster walls, that without it the topping compound would be of no use: the cracks would come back full force. Melanie has heard it all before. But, to her surprise, Gary doesn't say a word, doesn't even flinch, in fact, while she makes her way around the room, standing on Gary's unopened buckets of compound when necessary, and tearing fragments of tape from the walls.

Soon she is smeared with plaster dust. The towel she is wearing is sopping with a mixture of her water and sweat and plaster dust. Melanie doesn't care. She doesn't even try to push down the feeling of glee that bubbles inside her like a malignant wave. She continues to attack the walls, ravages them with her nails, yanks away every last strip of mesh tape until, suddenly, Gary's mouth is on hers.

"It's not true," he says, pulling her close. "It's a mistake. He's never done drugs. Never shared needles, never had a blood transfusion, never even had sex. He's a good Mormon boy, for crying out loud!" He shoves her towel aside and presses himself against her. She doesn't resist. The water on her skin mingled with the powder from the topping compound is creating a sticky paste between them. His hands move over her body. "I'm telling you, Mel, none of the rules have changed. The reward system, the blessings—they aren't null and void. Why can't you believe that?" He kisses her and moves against her and tells her again and again it isn't true.

Within a few minutes, he has brought her to orgasm. She clutches his hips between her thighs, holding tightly to what he is giving her. Because in that moment of pleasure—in that moment of pure physical release—she feels as though she can finally leave the many cycles of her life behind and disappear forever.

ON TOP OF everything else, Sam has taken up country dancing. His first dance competition is on Friday night, and since Melanie and Gary have no pressing plans, would they come?

Sure, they say. Why not?

At first, Melanie has difficulty picking him out. In the

University of Utah gymnasium, where the competition is being held, she follows the lines of couples whooping and stomping their way out onto the floor. They are all wearing the same Wrangler jeans and cowboy hats and blousy shirts with numbers pinned to them. They are more like characters than people. Finally Melanie spots him. He and his dark-haired partner, whom Melanie doesn't know, are doing the Texas two-step swing. She is familiar with this dance because in the short time Sam has been dancing, he has coaxed her more than once into hop-stepping and promenading with him across her living room floor.

Gary is beside her. "There he is," he says. He points, as if Melanie may have some type of visual impairment.

"I see him," Melanie says.

It has been only a few hours since Sam called to say he'd heard back from the county health center, where his latest test results were being assessed. It was just as they had suspected: false positive. Happens more often than anyone would like to admit, sorry about the scare.

"Happy?" Gary asks. His expression reminds her of the one worn by the members of the Russian women's gymnastics team as they watched that shrimp of a person vaulting herself into the air: hoping and hoping but poised on the brink of disappointment.

Happy? Melanie does not know. It is too abstract; she cannot remember the feeling associated with the word, those two succinct syllables. It occurs to her that she should look it up in the Oxford English Dictionary. But she is, she supposes, relieved. Relieved that her brother is nineteen and strong and will go on to live another day. Relieved that he will be able to serve his mission now. She can just picture him out there tramping through some Brazilian or Chilean street that runs with open sewers and stray dogs whose testicles are swollen with disease. She can see him knocking on falling-down doors, buying milk in bags from the shacks they called stores, and drinking Coke by the liter because, although the Church is technically against caffeinated beverages, it helps to keep the intestinal parasites at bay.

"Happy," she says. Alone, the word comes out weak, anemic amidst the motion and light of the gym. Amidst the blaring music and the dank scent of sweat and leather and the weight of her husband's fingers against her thigh. Her eyes are on Sam. Hop-step forward, hop-step back, he guides his partner into the underarm arch, then the man's cuddle. Now, Melanie knows, it's time for the lift. She watches, transfixed, as her brother flings his partner into the air and catches her so effortlessly, with her abdomen supported by one of his shoulders. Then they began to twirl. They twirl and twirl and twirl, and the girl's arms slice the air like wings.

Happy?

Seeing her brother here like this, dancing the Texas two-step swing, Melanie cannot cope with happy. The best she can do is wonder how her mother, a relatively unassuming and narrow-hipped person, could possibly have pushed into the world someone so sturdy and splendid and good. ☺