

John Allie

Three Stories

John Allie's "Lander" won The Edward R. and Frances Schreiber Collins Literary Prize. However, this piece was published in the 2009 issue of Long River Review, so we asked him to provide us with another for publication.

PART I: A BEAUTIFUL ASSEMBLY

There was an armchair facing the wall, but where you'd expect to see a TV, or at least a window, there was a spice rack. The house had turned out to be pretty spartan: clear countertops, minimal furniture, no curtains on any of the windows. It seemed like it hadn't been lived in for years, but Lee reminded himself again that Mrs. Traver had still lived here just a week before. She had a physical therapist who came by occasionally and last week the woman found Mrs. Traver dead, passed on in her sleep. She meant nothing to Lee. He was just her next-door neighbor. He hardly even knew her, and often had the distinct impression that she didn't like him. And yet she named him to divide the estate. It made no sense.

He went across the room to get a closer look at the spice rack. It was jammed with an assortment of little objects, trinkets really. They were Mrs. Traver's favorite little doodads, apparently the result of some weird hoarding tendency she'd developed in her old age. In any case, it was something out of the ordinary, and Lee was relieved to find it. As he pulled it from the wall, a small envelope clattered to his feet. His name was written on it, and inside was a short note in Mrs. Traver's arthritic handwriting: "Mr. Herald: Please take these objects into your care. Also the box under the bed. Don't give them to Jim or Martha. Regards, Linda Traver."

Once he'd retrieved the box, Lee went home to call Mrs. Traver's two known relatives. Martha was a great-niece, and Jim was a second cousin or something. Martha said that she'd like Mrs. Traver's china if she had any, and Jim said that he hadn't actually known her all that well and that Lee should use his best judgment. Neither of them mentioned the spice rack or the box.

After he hung up, Lee turned to the box. It was a dusty old thing but had obviously been handled regularly. He lifted the lid and rubbed his hands on his pants. Inside the box was a stack of papers, topped with a pencil drawing of the spice rack ensemble. He flipped through the pile. It was all the same, just pictures of the junk from the spice rack. Drawings, photographs, paintings, lists, even a couple poems. Lee tossed the papers back into the box and

carried the whole assortment down to the basement.

Clearly, Mrs. Traver had gone a little nuts.

He was still thinking about it the next morning. The toaster had an annoying tendency to burn the toast if you didn't pay attention to it, so Lee always stared down into its little glowing mouths while it cooked. It was the only way to keep it honest. He kept thinking of the spice rack, though, and trying to remember what was in it. There was a little ball, and a battery, and some sort of toy. Was there a bell?

He went down to the basement and snapped on the light. The rack was sitting by the wall, propped against Mrs. Traver's shoebox. It was as he remembered it, more or less. Smurf, Santa candle, ball bearing, 3-D glasses, headless dinosaur, wooden spool, nine-volt battery, croquet ball, porcelain dog, wind-up monkey. Perfect.

He carried it back up to the kitchen and set it down on the table. It was funny how natural an arrangement it seemed, almost as if these things were meant to go together. He picked up a salt shaker and wedged it in between the Santa candle and the spool. No, that was no good. It unbalanced the whole thing, made it seem insignificant. He pulled it out and there they were again: Smurf, Santa candle, ball bearing, 3-D glasses, headless dinosaur, wooden spool, nine-volt battery, croquet ball, porcelain dog, wind-up monkey. He removed the dinosaur. Funny, it looked so much less interesting this way. He put back the dinosaur and smiled as the arrangement reappeared.

A wisp of smoke rose from the toaster.

At work he was happy. Everybody noticed. He stamped packages with a flourish that even the crankiest customers had to smile at.

"You're in rare form today," said the woman who sat next to him.

"It's just one of those days," Lee said. His mind was beyond the post office. He was thinking of the spice rack, still sitting on the kitchen table. He couldn't quite remember what had been so interesting about it, but he liked to know it was there. Soon enough he'd get home, and he could look at it again.

He struggled with his keys at the front door. What if it had all been a mistake and they actually weren't what he'd thought? Suppose the things turned out to be just as boring as he'd thought the day before? No, there they were. He closed the door behind him and ran over to the kitchen table.

It was perfect. Everything was exactly as it should have been. He ran a hand along the smooth wood of the rack. What a beautiful assembly they made. And Mrs. Traver had thought he might give

them away! He laughed softly. He'd never part with them, ever.
He lifted a pen and began to draw.

PART II: A VERY YOUNG MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS

The weather had been cold and damp for weeks the day the kid with the wings arrived. Gardens were dying left and right. What with the spiraling food prices and all, we were kind of relying on those gardens. Staci was especially irritated. She'd been trying to indoctrinate her daycare kids in the joys of sustainable living. I'd been watching her all summer, pulling weeds and driving fertilizer sticks. Nothing worked.

The kid changed things. Several people claim that they saw him in the brief time he was here. Frank says he saw the kid's little red BMW through his kitchen window when he was making breakfast. Mrs. LeMue says she saw him just before he left. Martin insists that he saw the entire thing. I know that's not true. The only person who saw him for sure was Staci.

Here's what happened: She was out on the lawn with her daycare kids, spreading mulch and Day-Glo plant food. There was a cold drizzle falling. The kid's BMW came coasting up the road. He had the roof down despite the rain. He stopped in front of Staci's house and watched the children, nodding in time to soft country music. Staci ignored him at first, but when he didn't go away she headed toward him.

"Hi," he said. He turned off his radio.

"What are you hanging around for?" Staci said.

"I was just wondering if you were having any problems," the kid said. He adjusted the angle of his cowboy hat and brushed his hair out of his eyes.

"What kind of problems?" Staci said.

"Any kind of problems," the kid said. "Anything I can help with."

"Why? What can you help with?"

"Stuff," the kid said. He took the key out of the ignition and stuffed it into his pocket. He didn't wear a seatbelt. "So," he said, "anything?"

"The only problem I've got is a garden that won't grow."

He shrugged.

Staci scoffed and walked away.

The kid got out of his car and stretched his wings. They were large wings, big and white, satiny. He extended them to their full length and held them there for a second, quivering with pent-up energy, before snapping them shut against his back.

Staci still had her back to him, but one of the kids pointed and said, "an angel," so she had to turn around and see what he was pointing at.

The kid was standing in the middle of the road, wings hanging half-open, staring at her. His eyes were a radiant blue, and he was wearing a simple plaid shirt and jeans. He'd cut a couple of slits in the back of the shirt for the wings.

"What is this?" Staci said.

"I'm just a guy," the kid said.

"You've got wings."

He shrugged. "I know."

One of Staci's daycare kids, Spence, asked "Can you fly?"

"Yup," the kid said. He unfurled the wings and flapped a couple feet upward, then relaxed and dropped back to the ground.

"Oh, god," Staci said.

"So you need any help?"

"Can you get the frisbee off the roof?" Spence asked.

The kid grinned. "Say 'please.'"

"Please!"

"Please what?" the kid said.

"Please can you get the frisbee off the roof?"

"Sure," the kid said.

He flapped his wings a couple times and lifted off. He waved at the kids as he sailed over their heads. He touched down on the roof and picked up the frisbee. "This it?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Catch," he said. He tossed the frisbee with an expert flick of the hand.

Staci snatched it out of the air and tucked it under her arm. "Come here," she said.

The kid jumped off the roof and swung down toward her, spreading his arms wide like a pretend airplane.

"Turn around," Staci said. She took the tip of one of his wings between her fingers and drew it out to its full length.

"Let's learn something about birds," she said. The little kids gathered around and watched as she traced the contours in the wing. "These are the primary feathers," she said. "These are the secondaries. These kinds are called underwing coverts. This here is the carpal joint." Staci used to work at a bird clinic, so she knew this stuff.

By the end of Staci's lecture most of the kids had become bored and started wandering around, playing with toys and poking at the garden.

Staci released the kid's wing and stepped back. "You can go now."

"Are you sure?" the kid said.

"Yes, I'm sure," Staci said. "You can go. Now. Please."

"Cause, you know, if you're having any problems, I could—"

“Okay,” Staci said, “Look. You want to know what the problem is? This rain is the problem. You understand? I’m trying to teach these kids about gardening, and do you think they’re going to learn if it never stops raining? No. No, they won’t. If you can’t help with that, then no, I don’t have any problems for you.”

“I just want to help with stuff,” the kid said. “Cause of the wings, you know. So I can help with stuff.”

Staci ignored him.

“Look,” he said. “Please? I don’t know. I can’t do anything about rain. Okay? I can’t. I don’t know how.”

“Enough.” She began herding the children toward the house.

“No!” the kid said. “Oh, no. Please. I can help.” There were tears in his eyes. “I want to help the kids. Please?”

“Either make the clouds go away,” Staci said, “or go away yourself. Goodbye.” She shut the front door.

The kid walked down the driveway and stood next to his red BMW. Drops of water fell from his wingtips onto the sidewalk. For a long time he stood and stared up into the swirling clouds, moisture beading on his face. Finally he unfurled his wings and wheeled up into the sky, disappearing into the gray.

We never saw him again. I never saw him at all. Only Staci saw him, really. Just her and the kids. I don’t believe the others.

The kid’s car sat in front of Staci’s house for a few days, then the cops came and put a ticket under the windshield wiper, and then a few days later they came and took it away.

A week later the clouds broke and drifted away. Blueness spilled across the sky and the sun burned away the last of the puddles. The rain might’ve gone on its own, but we never really questioned that the kid had driven it away.

PART III: IMPOSTER

Today Mom and me went to the library to meet Paul Tripp. He’s my favorite author. He made up Lightning O’Neill, Space Vigilante. Lightning O’Neill is in these comic books, and they’re really cool. He’s a hero, and he’s an astronaut. He flies across space in his rocket ship and he has this cool red suit with a zigzag on it. No, I guess it’s a lightning bolt. And he battles alien bandits. They’re my favorite books.

Mom knows I like them, so she said we could go and meet Paul Tripp when he visited the library. She asked me, “Don’t you think it would be cool to meet your favorite author?” and I said, “Yeah, I guess so,” and she said, “You guess?” and she seemed very surprised. Actually I thought it sounded really cool to meet Paul

Tripp but really I just didn't know. I don't like meeting people.

But Mom said we would go, because I'd like it. The things at the library are usually pretty fun. Last week they had somebody come with snakes. Another time they had a magician. He pulled a coin out of somebody's ear but he kept it.

When we walked into the library we saw these signs they made that said Paul Tripp was upstairs.

"This sign says Paul Tripp is upstairs," Mom said. I can read just fine, but I think sometimes she forgets, because she always reads signs like that.

In the stairwell you could hear this funny voice echoing around. It was coming from upstairs, and it crawled up and down the walls like centipedes made of spaghetti. I didn't want it to go in my ears.

"People used to be quiet in libraries," Mom said, "when I was a little girl."

There were a bunch of chairs set up underneath the paper dragon. You can see my handprint near the end of the tail. It's red. There were these chairs set up, and people were sitting in them. I knew some of the people. Tim was there, too. They were all listening to the man with the centipede voice. He was kind of thin-looking, and his face was scruffy. He had big glasses. He reminded me of that criminal. The one who was on the news.

"Where's Paul Tripp?" I asked.

"That's him, honey," Mom said. She pointed at the man.

"No it's not."

"Yes he is. Sh, let's listen to him."

We sat down, and I waved at Tim, and he acted like he didn't see me, and we listened to the man. He had a big pad of paper like a teacher, and a big black marker.

"I'll show you how," he said, and his lips twisted and untwisted like weird worms. He uncapped the marker and attacked the page with it. He drew a picture of Lightning O'Neill punching the teeth out of an alien. He finished with some big stars shooting out of the alien's head, and then he wrote Paul Tripp on it, just like the way the real Paul Tripp does in the comics. He tore off the drawing and gave it to a kid in the front row. He gave away lots of drawings, but I didn't want one.

Then he said he would show us how to draw some things. I forget most of the things he showed, but I remember one. He showed how to draw a cucumber and then turn it into a spaceship. I still remember how. It's pretty cool.

When the man finally finished talking, Mom asked me if I wanted him to sign my books and I said no. She asked me are you sure and I said yes let's go home and she shrugged and said all right.

All the way home I was thinking about those weird lips and that voice.

When I got back to my room I took out all my Lightning O'Neill books and looked at them. The letters on the covers are bumpy, and I like to feel them. I touched Lightning O'Neill's name, and I touched Paul Tripp's name. I flipped through the pages. All these bad aliens are always trying to kill Lightning but he always saves the day. That's what makes him a hero.

Sometimes I think maybe Lightning is actually a real person. Really he's just made up, like Santa, but sometimes I wonder. I know one thing, though. If Lightning is made up, then Paul Tripp must be just as cool as he is, or he couldn't have made him up.

Paul Tripp goes to his desk in the morning, and he takes out his paper, and he says, hmm, what should the new story be about? And he puts on his thinking machine and pow! He gets a new idea, and he says, this story is pretty exciting! And he starts drawing. He can do the whole thing in only a minute because he's the fastest artist ever. He draws so fast the paper smokes. And then when it's done, Lightning O'Neill comes to visit and he looks at the drawings and says, wow, these are amazing! And Paul says well I do my best, and Lightning says with your amazing powers we should be a team. So, Lightning takes him into space with him and they battle aliens together. That's how it really is.