

Annotated Sample Story

Here is a sample for readers who want to see the kind of stories they can expect in each issue of Rosebud. We've also annotated this piece for the benefit of writers interested in knowing what we look for in submissions during our selection process.

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Writer's name should be prominent. Need phone and e-mail for contact if accepted, but also include address in case the manuscript is separated from the SASE

Visiting

This title is OK. A good title will stand out in the Table of Contents, a great title gets on the front or back covers of the magazine. We are in the business of selling magazines. If a title or the name of an author (or something about author that makes him or her unique) will help do this, the chances of the pieces being accepted are increased.

Restless in the bed of his father's childhood, Michael awoke to the Wisconsin summer.

We know where we are, who the character is and even get a little background. We are into the story very quickly.

A neighborhood rumor was circulating: two hot-air balloons would be launched that morning in the park.

Foreshadowing that something out of the ordinary will take place.

Michael, even half-asleep, knew the skies were clear. He had stayed the night with his Grandmother Booth, on Saukfield's east side, just off Otter Lake on La Salle Avenue. The house was small, built sturdily of sandstone blocks and cedar shingles, but crooked somehow, as if one edge of the foundation were sinking into the geraniums. An enormous burr oak towered above the garage and hid the sun.

Enough significant descriptive detail to make the image vivid.

Michael imagined his father waking up when he was Michael's age, listening to the clank of basement pipes below, and following with ten-year-old eyes the arc of a garden sprinkler outside the window.

"Sleepyhead," whispered Grandmother Booth from the bedroom doorway. "You'll wish you were at the park."

Dialogue gets this happening here and now for the reader.

In dim morning light his grandmother seemed weightless, her robe a billow of smoke. Her skin was talcum white and smelled of Ivory soap. Michael tried to recall a dream, but the details were lost and the fearful momentum had dissolved. His dreams were visited frequently by dogs. Sometimes playful, sometimes rabid, the dogs changed from dream to dream. Sometimes the dogs talked. An Alaskan malamute said to Michael, "Come run with me and we'll circle the lake." In another dream a bullmastiff — black as a storm cloud — sunk its teeth into Michael's testicles. He awoke in the middle of the night, a phantom pain searing his groin. "I once wet my bed," his mother told him. "I dreamt I was flying, floating over rooftops and trees, and then suddenly falling like a rock. Dreams are carnival rides."

Suggestive, that the events have meaning beyond their literal significance. This gets the reader thinking and tells an editor something will be happening on different levels that makes for rich reading.

"Breakfast in two minutes," said Grandmother Booth.

He opened his left eye. His grandmother appeared to him behind a blur of lash and mucus.

"Reports of your mother's banishment are premature, although — in my opinion — not ill-advised," she said.

"Reports?"

Michael's right eye popped open. He blinked to clear the haze.

"A diet of lies will starve the soul," said his grandmother. "I would suggest that you carefully weigh all evidence in support of either one of your fickle parents. Ask yourself, young man: 'Why indeed am I waking up this morning in this house, and not my father's house, or — God forbid — my mother's or my mother's parents' house?' You ought to be thinking about all of these things."

She was straightening and dusting everything in sight, gliding around the room as if motorized, and edging ever closer to the window blinds that

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were still thankfully shuttered.

"When your father was a boy," she continued, "his guile was tempered by innocence, like Tom Sawyer. But once he was out of my hands, and beyond the sphere of my influence, he grew into some kind of wayward sorcerer, some kind of antic druid. He didn't really begin losing his marbles, however, until he met up with your mother and quit his job at the drugstore. It's been one dead end after another. His current job is insane. He has no business working as a bartender for the Knights of Pythagoras. Such a disgraceful organization! Does he seriously believe that bowling for charity once a month is a humanitarian agenda? I ask you: where are the comfort and guidance a good Christian wife provides? Am I surprised your parents no longer are able to endure the sight of one another? No, I am not. More important is where they stand in the sight of God, I'm afraid. That's the \$64,000 question, little mister."

We get some background exposition here, but in a way that throws light on the teller's character. When providing background always be advancing plot and/or character at the same time if you want to keep the reader's attention.

And then she disappeared from the room. Her shadow darted across the ceiling.

Michael wondered if there had been a dream of mad dogs that morning, or the night before. He sighed heavily, like his grandfather used to sigh, deep within his chest. The bedsprings swayed with a timeworn wobble. Hurrying into the bathroom, Michael peed and flushed, and nearly slipped on the rug while brushing his teeth. Finally dressed, he sauntered (having been told never to run) through the hallway to the kitchen. His grandmother's odd green toothpaste was still bitter in his mouth as he sat down for breakfast. Waiting for him was a scoop of oatmeal as stark and elemental as clay.

"You know the words," said Grandmother Booth.

"Help me with the words," said Michael. His father often joked that Grandmother Booth's mealtime prayers were the only salvation from food poisoning.

"Dear God," she began, her eyes closed. "Bless this food to our bodies. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord —"

Michael was staring at the glass of grapefruit juice on the table. He hated grapefruit juice, and proceeded to stick out his tongue just as his grandmother finished saying "Amen." Slowly he looked up and met her cold, clear gaze. She was watching him.

"I wish you would try harder to be good," she said. "Sometimes your behavior verges on blasphemy."

At breakfast the day before, in Kenosha, his mother said: "Grandmother Booth needs you, kiddo." Michael was assigned the chores of sweeping out his grandmother's garage and bundling old newspapers.

"Are you listening to me?"

"I'm listening," said Michael, dousing the oatmeal with sugar and milk.

"Your father loved grapefruit juice when he was your age," said Grandmother Booth. "Nowadays he debases the juice with vodka. Grapefruit juice, vodka, and something else. Soy sauce? Tabasco? I don't remember. It's a horrid concoction."

She buttered a slice of toast. "Don't stare at my hands, Michael."

Her hands are a revealing detail. Later he is concerned about losing her. The writer has introduced age and health in a very real way, without directly telling the reader she may not have long to live.

"I wasn't," he said. His grandmother's fingers were so thin that Michael felt he could reach out and snap them like bread sticks.

He looked quickly away, toward the kitchen window. Two bearded irises stood in a vase on the ledge. Outside, the yard was filled with armies of lilac, iris, and hyacinth. A breeze rich in garden smells — simultaneously subtle and overripe — swirled about the room. Grandmother Booth was up from her chair now and placed the vase on a corner of the table.

"I think they'll make me sneeze," said Michael. The flowers were as large as any he had ever seen.

"Nonsense," said Grandmother Booth.

"I get sneezes from flowers."

"Your grandfather liked to say irises are the true beginning of summertime."

Michael poked with a spoon at his breakfast. The oatmeal had hardened into an igloo surrounded by tepid milk. He was trying at that moment to remember if he had ever actually seen a hot-air balloon lift off from the ground. Hot-air balloons usually appeared mysteriously in the sky, moving silently across the horizon, origins and destinations unknown.

"Do you have memories of your grandfather?"

"He slept a lot," said Michael.

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"Well, he was very sick," said Grandmother Booth. "But he talked to you."

The irises were inches away and glowing as if radioactive. Michael could detect the pressure in his sinuses begin to build. His grandmother showed him the furry lip that sprouted within each flower's center. The spot of fuzz looked to Michael nothing like a beard, more like an eyebrow, or maybe the backside of an exotic insect. A picture came to his mind, an image (in slow motion) of his grandfather moving through the house one September afternoon. Michael was visiting his grandparents and practicing at their piano. He had spent hours repeating a simple Chopin waltz. "I love the music," his grandfather said. The day was wet with rain and the air sultry. Oscillating in a corner of the room an electric fan tick-tocked like a metronome. His grandfather carried potato chips in his shirt pocket, five or six large potato chips, and that afternoon he handed one to Michael and said, "Here's a chip off the ol' Booth." Nearly dancing, his slippers tapping the carpet, Grandfather Booth circled the piano as if he were a heavy old moth drunk with porch light.

A masterful little scene within a scene. We feel we are in the hands of a sensitive observer. This trust is necessary if we are to allow him to take us into more risky, emotional levels.

Michael's grandmother added a spray of faucet water to the irises and returned them to the window ledge. (She thought of death as a seasonal eruption, an attribute of meteorological forces. Hot and cold were conditions of the heart as well as of the air. Hadn't autumn been her husband's season, just as ancient summers seemed to flow through her own veins? Heat turned flesh to water, and water was lifeblood to all of the backyard gardens with which she had felt psychic kinship throughout her life.)

It was on a November morning that Michael's grandfather died, a morning of ice and rain. The old man had spent weeks in bed, his lucidity erratic, his breathing fluctuating in union with the wind that rattled the windows. A large green tank of oxygen — sleek as a torpedo — stood sentry next to the night table. The day before, Michael and his father had been by to rake the torrent of brown and yellow leaves that layered the yard. "Your grandfather carries autumn within him," Grandmother Booth once said. The transmigration of his grandfather's soul was sure to have a crisp, pungent presence, like the burning of leaves.

"Eccentricity is not a sin," his grandmother was saying now. She paused, measuring her words. "People claimed your grandfather was an eccentric man. He was a musician, his feelings ran deep. But there are some members of this family whom I would call 'willful misfits,' and their selfishness hurts me very much."

Michael glanced at his grandmother's toast, left untouched on her plate. He thought of the toast that was always left behind at breakfast with his mother. Because of toast, breakfast was forever an unfinished meal.

"Am I a misfit?" he asked.

"That will be your choice to make. Let your father's reckless ways be a warning to you. He's a hit-and-run driver on the highway of life. But if you remember nothing else about this family, remember this: Never listen to your Aunt Etta."

"She has dreams about Grandpa."

"Eat your oatmeal," said Grandmother Booth, her mouth tightening.

Michael reached for the sugar bowl. "Aunt Etta is eccentric," he said.

"You've taken quite enough sugar." Grandmother Booth drew a deep breath. She set her toast aside and took a sip of grapefruit juice. "Etta is a misfit," she said. "Someday you will appreciate the distinction."

A family scandal had erupted during the previous winter. Michael's father found a Post-it note stuck to his car's windshield like a parking ticket. "Papa suggests adding B vitamins to your diet," the message read. The handwriting was Etta's. She never talked of dreams, but rather "impressions" that Grandfather Booth, two years dead, had spoken to her. Other messages followed, including one to Grandmother Booth: "The polar ice caps are melting — protect your bones with calcium supplements." Michael's father was furious with Etta. "There is a fine line," he drunkenly yelled at her on the telephone one evening, "between psychic phenomenon and psychic humiliation. You have crossed that line!"

The piece also walks a fine line between the comic and the poignant. It makes the piece unique, but also increases its chance of failure. That risk-taking is exciting to an editor, above and beyond the subject.

"Is Grandpa in heaven?" asked Michael. He sliced into the oatmeal with his spoon, carefully trapping a puddle of sugar and milk.

"Etta believes that your grandfather died and went to work at a health food store," said Grandmother Booth.

Michael's tongue ran a gob of oatmeal around the roof of his mouth. "Do ghosts take vitamins?" he asked.

"That's enough."

"I found a book that belongs to my dad — "

"What did I just say?"

"But this book — "

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"Michael, please. Swallow your oatmeal."

He longed for a glass of orange juice and a bowl of Cocoa Puffs. His grandmother was again buttering toast, which had gone soggy.

"Your grandfather never took vitamins," she said. Her knife tore straight through the toast and screeched across her plate like blackboard chalk. "He sustained a rich, full life, and he never took vitamins."

"My dad has a book — "

"Here we go again."

" — about people who got phone calls from dead relatives. They call up and say stuff they forgot to say when they were alive."

"I know all about your father's books," said Michael's grandmother. "What happened to the book I gave you? Great Expectations is a wonderful story."

"It's five hundred pages long," he said.

"And?"

He wanted to tell her that Pip was no name for a boy. It put him in mind of Pippy Longstocking, an even worse name for a girl.

"The great books are long books," said his grandmother, none too convincingly. "The Bible, certainly. There's Anna Karenina and Raintree County."

Michael managed another bite of oatmeal. "What about The Old Man and the Sea?" he asked. "The Old Man and the Sea isn't a long book."

"As if you've read it." His grandmother snorted.

Admittedly, Michael knew of many more books than he had read. His father's library — which filled dozens of bowlegged shelves tilted against the basement walls — offered a grand visual excursion. The books were divided roughly 50/50 between accepted literary classics and outré occult manuals and overviews.

"Wanna know my dad's favorite book?"

"Don't tell me, Michael. Is it the telephone book of the dead?"

"It's called The Mind Parasites."

"Yes, I'm sure," said his grandmother. "He also collects those awful Bela Lugosi movies. I've no doubt you've seen every one of them by now." She was clearing the table, save for Michael's grapefruit juice.

"Yeah!" he said, eyes wide. "The best one is The Devil Bat. Bela Lugosi plays a mad scientist who's got a giant vampire bat hanging upside down in his laboratory. It's kinda stupid, actually. But the bat is cool."

"Very inspiring," said Grandmother Booth. She slid the glass of grapefruit juice nearer to him.

He heard a rustling outside in the garden. The kitchen window shone with glare; Michael squinted into the light. Emerging from behind a row of lilac bushes and running at a steady clip across the lawn was Kimberly-Ann Stohl. When she reached the house, she raced up the porch steps two at a time and slammed breathless against the screen door. Michael knew that Kimberly-Ann was at an age of outlandish and accelerated growth — her limbs shot out from her body like tendrils and crashed unceasingly into every object that stood in her path. The latest development, of which he had previously been unaware, was her hair: it was dyed with streaks of day-glo pink and yellow, and clipped unisexually short for the summer.

This character is in direct contrast to the grandmother and that use of opposites creates drama. This is what readers want. Not reality, but the heightened reality of art that plays out the extremes of that opposition (the conflict).

"I knew you were here, Michael!" she said. She was pulling at the damp front of her T-shirt. "Why didn't you come to the park?"

"Michael will be with you as soon as he finishes his breakfast," said Grandmother Booth. "Why don't you sit on the steps and quiet down?"

"It doesn't matter," said Kimberly-Ann. "The balloons are already up."

"What?" said Michael.

"The hot-air balloons. You can see 'em right here from the porch."

Michael, startled, looked at his grandmother. She pointed to the juice.

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"Away from the door, Kimberly-Ann," she said. "You and your Martian hairdo can wait on the steps."

Kimberly-Ann struck some adults as precocious, while others — like Grandmother Booth — found her hyperactive. Her father was a Unitarian minister, a somewhat cultish vocation in Grandmother Booth's Methodist circle.

"I was at the park early with Alexander," said Kimberly-Ann. Alexander was her six-year-old brother. "We were the first ones except for the joggers and the dogs. Two pickup trucks turned off Cross Point Bridge and drove along the grass down to the middle of the park. I knew what was happening because the trucks had gigantic baskets in back. The baskets were for the balloons."

Kimberly-Ann's face was pushing at the screen. "Why are you staying at your grandmother's house this time?" she asked.

"Cleaning out the garage," said Michael.

"Are you gonna come out here?"

In one long, long gulp, Michael drank the grapefruit juice. The aftertaste was horrible. No wonder his father added vodka and tabasco: grapefruit juice by itself was a nightmare of wretchedness. Even his eyes burned, and his lips bunched into a sour frown.

"Jesus Christ!" said Kimberly-Ann. "What the hell are you drinking, Michael?"

Grandmother Booth whirled around to the door. Her face was flushed a violent red. She tried to smack the tip of Kimberly-Ann's nose, which was still pressed up against the screen. Kimberly-Ann stepped back in enough time that Grandmother Booth's fingers merely strummed the wire mesh.

"Maybe you talk that way at home," said Grandmother Booth, her voice trembling with anger. "Maybe you talk that way around your father, who would as soon pray to the rocks and the trees, and who cares not a whit for the unborn babies in this country. But while you're in my house —"

"I'm not in your house," said Kimberly-Ann. She was sitting on the porch steps, her head bowed.

"— while you're on my property," Grandmother Booth continued, without losing a beat, "you'll not use that language."

In the silence that followed, Grandmother Booth busied herself at the sink, drawing water, and adding soap to the basin. One by one, she submerged dishes beneath the bubbles. Michael stood by the door. High above the trees, and seemingly stationary in the sky, were two hot-air balloons, luminous in the sunlight. Grandmother Booth poured a cup of coffee. She opened the refrigerator and removed a plate of fudge brownies that Michael had spied the night before. "Take one for yourself," she said. "And one for Kimberly-Ann."

Michael hurriedly piled one brownie on top of the other and pushed his way outside.

"Don't let the door slam," said his grandmother.

Kimberly-Ann was standing in the yard and motioning to Grandmother Booth. "You should see the balloons from here, Mrs. Booth," she said, the enthusiasm returning to her voice in an apparent ploy for redemption.

Michael handed a brownie over to Kimberly-Ann, while at the same time elbowing her in the ribs. "Don't tell my grandma to come outside," he whispered sternly. "She's practically in her underwear. How come you didn't show up and get me earlier?"

"Screw you, Michael Booth," said Kimberly-Ann, assaying the same tone and volume as Michael. "Do you even live in this neighborhood? You love to pretend you're a friendly kid, but you blow in and out of your grandma's house like some kind of Surf Ninja."

"Call me the devil bat!" he hissed, in an off-the-cuff Bela Lugosi impersonation. "See my teeth?" He exhibited an open mouth of brownie slush.

Grandmother Booth walked out into the sunlight. Michael could see the silhouette of her spindly legs through the silk fabric of her robe (patterned with orange, yellow, and red chrysanthemums). Her slippers clacked on the porch floorboards like drumsticks methodically marking time. She stopped at the railing and reached up to gently arrange the blooms of a potted fuschia hanging in the shade.

"Alexander asked one of the truck drivers how you learn to fly a balloon," said Kimberly-Ann. "The man said that you have to go to balloon school."

Grandmother Booth rolled her eyes. "I think the fellow was making a joke, Kimberly-Ann."

"The man said balloon school, and I think I believe him."

"Nonsense," said Grandmother Booth. She set her coffee cup on the steps.

"How do they blow up those balloons?" asked Michael.

Grandmother Booth stretched out her hand toward a bamboo rake that was leaning next to the house, and then she abruptly reversed the gesture and pulled her arm to her side. Michael watched his grandmother take several deep breaths and slowly sit down on the porch steps.

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The color had drained from her face. (The pain she felt was not new, nor was it unexpected. However, it was usually accompanied by a shower of lights like a Fourth of July sparkler going off inside of her head. Today the pain was dull and leaden, and minus the fanfare.) For several minutes she quietly rubbed her shoulder, as if smoothing wrinkles in her robe.

Kimberly-Ann was kneeling on the lawn and working at a handstand. "We helped them look for broken glass and things on the ground that might hurt the balloons."

"The balloons were spread on the ground?" asked Michael.

"I'm getting to that," said Kimberly-Ann. She lost her balance, flipped over, and landed flat on her back. Michael imagined her as the clumsy scarecrow in the movie **The Wizard of Oz**.

The movie nostalgia and literary allusions may not appeal to everyone, but they do to editors who have spent their lives in a world of books, movies, paintings and music. The writer uses them to enhance his storytelling; they are not superfluous to building the story's arc.

"I mean they laid the balloons out on the ground like pancakes as big as swimming pools," Kimberly-Ann was saying.

"But how do they blow them up?"

"Michael, I'm trying to tell you if you'd shut up."

He envisioned hordes of winged monkeys swooping out of the sky and setting upon Kimberly-Ann, tearing off her straw-filled arms and legs. His grandmother would surely hurl a fireball. . .

Grandmother Booth intervened, rising to her feet. "Let her tell her story."

"I'm just asking," said Michael. He was curled up in the porch swing, furiously rocking, and nearly panicked with despair that he had, without question, missed the balloon launching.

"Please stop fidgeting," his grandmother said. "That old swing creaks and it's giving me a headache."

"Sorry." He narrowed the swing's compass by shifting his body weight.

"Okay, okay," said Kimberly-Ann. "So can I tell my story now?" She took a deep breath, and then exhaled through pursed lips, as if smoking a cigarette. (Michael, in fact, had seen Kimberly-Ann on several occasions inhale real cigarette smoke with practiced aplomb.) "The baskets were set on the ground," she said, "— big wicker baskets like snake charmers use. The balloons were filled with a bit of air using a sort of electrical fan. They were still lying on the ground, filling up kind of wobbly, and you could look inside of them like a cave or tunnel all lit up and glowing from sunlight shining through. I mean it was like seeing inside of a whale. And then the fire tanks were ignited."

"Fire tanks?" said Michael. He was looking skyward, but the balloons were drifting behind a tangle of telephone wires and tree limbs.

"When they got everything pointed upright," said Kimberly-Ann, "those balloons were like circus tents as tall as skyscrapers. The fire tanks boomed like jet engines."

"This is sounding very dangerous, young lady," said Grandmother Booth. "And exhausting. I'm worn out just listening to you."

Michael lay in the porch swing. He stared up at empty skies and remembered the vast rolling clouds in the series of drawings his grandmother used in Bible class to illustrate the Ascension. In his graceful white robe and his long flowing hair, Jesus seemed ill-equipped for liftoff.

Grandmother Booth taught Bible class during the spring and summer months. In the years before Grandfather Booth died she had also operated year-round a tiny Christian bookstore on Paquette Avenue, right across from the lake. She sold framed pictures illustrating every scripted moment in Jesus' life, and there were Bible verses imprinted on items as diverse as oven mittens, ashtrays, and ping-pong paddles. Michael still owned several plastic glow-in-the-dark crosses that were so bright he could read comic books by them beneath the bedsheets.

Suddenly Grandmother Booth appeared, hovering overhead. "Sweetheart, do me a favor," she was saying. "Grab me another cup of coffee from the kitchen."

Michael brought the swing to a halt by dragging his heels like Fred Flintstone stopping his car. He carried his grandmother's cup into the house and poured the last of the pot from the Mr. Coffee. The brew was thick like hot chocolate, but smelled much worse. He was reminded of the scorched odor that resulted when he once leaned in too close to a Christmas candle and a lock of his hair sizzled and popped.

The telephone rang in the living room. He turned off the coffee machine and carefully balanced his grandmother's cup, which was full to the brim, and walked with it across the hallway. He set the coffee cup down beside the telephone and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" said Michael.

He recognized the voice, but there was a wavering of the signal, a crackling like potato chips, like burning leaves.

There is no doubt after the competence of the first few paragraphs that an editor would read on. But the piece could go either way, that's the

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chance it takes. Believe it or not an editor is cheering that it will succeed. In this story, this phone call supposedly from the dead grandfather, clinches the decision. There is a creative leap here, like the last line of a great poem, yet it has been beautifully set up by everything that has gone before. Even if the ending were to be flawed or there were some dialogue that needed tightening, the editor is committed to publishing this piece and now looks at it as part of the magazine, not as a submission.

"How's the visit with your grandmother?"

"I don't know," said Michael.

There was silence on the other end. Michael held the phone tight against his ear.

"Hello?" he said.

"Michael, don't ever be afraid."

He watched the steam from his grandmother's coffee cup rise and filter into the air. He thought of the balloons that were somewhere overhead, kept aloft (he now knew) by the thunderous roar of fire tanks.

"I don't know why I'm here," said Michael.

"Think 'calcium.' Think 'iron.' "

"What?"

"Her bones are brittle. I think you can understand that."

"So what if I can?"

Michael could hear a heavy, bottomless sigh that seemed to echo deep within the phone line.

"Let's step outside the world of the Froot Loop and the Frosted Flake. Can you do that, Michael?"

"What's that s'posed to mean? I mean, I hate Froot Loops. Frosted Flakes are okay — "

"Listen, there's more to your existence than warm blood and cold soda pop. Don't you get it? Heaven is in your head, but you've got to peer beyond the corpuscular threshold. Turn off the claptrap and the time clocks. You have too much fight in you, too much anger. Your grandmother is the same way."

He had only been in one fight — or near-fight — in his life, a gym class altercation. A student named Brillo was accidentally beamed in the head with a volleyball and blamed Michael. No fists were brandished, only threats and hostile glances. He remembered feeling not anger, but rather astonishment that someone could bestow malicious intent upon an innocent act.

"Grandma doesn't need my help."

"That's where your dumb kid logic breaks down, because you're wrong. What I'm asking is this: Would you stay a few more days with her? Keep an eye out?"

"Why would I do that? Is she gonna die or something?"

"I would imagine so."

A sudden rage flashed across Michael's consciousness. "I don't live here!" he shouted. And he thought: I'm talking to a dead man. I'm talking to a dead man. I'm talking to a dead dead dead dead dead man.

"C'mon now. Is that really the issue at hand? Hang in there two more days. Read a book, watch a movie. Keep an eye out — "

Before Michael heard another word he slammed the receiver back in its cradle.

The telephone began ringing again. Michael was out the back door with his grandmother's coffee splashing his arm. Grandmother Booth was climbing the steps. "I'm hearing telephones," she said, taking the cup from Michael. He jumped down the steps as his grandmother disappeared inside the house.

Searching the yard for Kimberly-Ann, he finally noticed her running between houses some distance away. An overpowering fragrance of lilac welled up before him and poisoned the air. He stood at the garden's edge, near the large riverbank stones his grandfather had hauled from Merrimac twenty years ago. An ocean of green encircled Michael's feet: hosta, sedum, juniper. Grandmother Booth's garden was a maze of layered plants and flowers that were timed like a Disneyland diorama to burst forth one after another, wave upon wave throughout the spring and summer. Faded daffodils and tulips were offset by the nascent bloom of poppies and honeysuckle. Irises — flowered in dense, wrinkled flesh — currently ruled the land with the sheer heft of their presence.

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Arms outstretched, Michael began to spin himself round and round. His fingertips swiped at the fringes of Technicolor blossoms. The lawn, the world, the kaleidoscopic swirl of foliage, all seemed to orbit about him in glorious madness. The energy in his head continued pumping like a Ferris wheel even after he stumbled dizzily to the ground and his skull cracked hard against the rocks. "The carnival of dreams," his mother had said, "will carry you to the very tip of the sky." And then always the descent through weighty perfume: the garden's usurping gravity. Michael felt the grip of strong heavenly hands taking hold of his soul, scooping him up like fallen fruit. As he closed his eyes he prayed he would be able again and again to conjure this delicious loss of selfhood, this wonderland of vegetable darkness.

Grandmother Booth was sitting in the grass and cradling him in her arms.

"Are you all right?" she was saying.

Michael nodded. He had a tremendous headache.

"You nearly knocked yourself dead," said Grandmother Booth. "I was watching from the window. Your father called back. Why did you hang up on him?"

"He said you were going to die this week," said Michael.

"Oh, he did, did he?" She laughed out loud. "I'm sorry your father sees fit to drop you here like a stray dog, Michael. You have every right to despise the confusion in your life. But I want you to hear this: I know a thing or two about living and dying. I know how life begins on this planet, and I know how it ends. If I should decide to die this week, or any week, you'll hear it directly from me. That's a promise. Do you understand?"

The phone call can be explained away, but not the boy's confusion. The theme of the story is loss, being left behind, wanting to rise up above all the mess of living as an adult on earth. But the grandmother is the salvation. Not just her as a person, or her fundamentalist beliefs, but the human strength and courage she represents that has served many generations in their anguish. Too often new writers depend upon a plot twist. That's why they write a piece, they have a clever idea. But more often in a short story the reader's insight comes from the better understanding of character. There isn't enough time for a lot of plot development and reversals, as in a novel, so they are sketchy at best when attempted in the short story form. The ending should suggest a resolution to the external conflict, but more important speak to the underlying theme. It's at that level, that it's most satisfying.

"I think so."

"Enough, then," she said. "Let's get you inside and wash the blood from your face."

"Wash the blood from your face," is suggestive of religious salvation, and that is symbolic for the hopefulness we feel for the boy and ourselves. I would like to thank Bob Wake for allowing us to use his story and hope these comments are helpful to those of you considering submitting material to Rosebud and other publications. Good luck.

John Lehman, Associate Publisher

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