The Price

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Julia Napoli absently brushed a coil of ebony-colored hair out of her eyes, too absorbed in the letter before her to remove her gaze from the page. Reading over her childish scrawl, she vaguely remembered writing it and noticed the spots where previous teardrops had made the paper bubble and the ink smear."

Cover Page Footnote
Darryl waited for the dancer to finish. After giving the restroom the once over and making sure that there weren't any surprises to clean up, he exited and headed for the women's room.

After making that sharp click with his time card that meant there would be another Dominds sheet pizza and a bottle of Colt 45 on the table this week, Darryl headed back upstairs for a quick peek in the Windsor Room. The dance was about a half hour from ending when he looked in. Though the music sounded like fingernails scraping across a Blackboard, there was something about the dancing that excited him. The visions before him of writhing youth pressed flesh to flesh reminded him of the many times he had taken Alice to high school dances back in the '60s. For the next half hour Darryl felt 19 again as a smile bloomed on his face.

Julia Napoli absently brushed a coil of ebony-colored hair out of her eyes, too absorbed in the letter before her to remove her gaze from the page. Reading over her childish scrawl, she vaguely remembered writing it and noticed the spots where previous teardrops had made the paper bubble and the ink smear.

When she was seventeen the letter had been what she'd needed. The pain of his absence, instead of decreasing with time, had remained, provoked by all the occasions that came and went without his acknowledgement. Breaking the silence between them, she had written, pouring out all the anger and resentment that had been left unspoken. The bitter, hateful words that stared back at her were obviously her attempt to hurt him in return.

It wasn't until the last paragraph that she realized the intention of the letter seemed to change. It was detached, the writing stilted, as if it had been difficult for her. No doubt it had been, she thought, wincing as she read it over again. Despite all the pain she had just bluntly expressed, this paragraph alone dared to suggest the faint hope that they had a future.

There had been no reply to that letter. Julia closed the diary and ran her finger over its cover to remove the dust that had accumulated over the past ten years. The copy of the letter to her father had been the last entry she'd made before leaving for college. She remembered thinking how important it was at the time to copy all the words exactly as she'd written them, almost as if she had known that years later she would need to read them again. Now, sitting on a pile of boxes in the musty attic, she realized, wincing as she read it over again, despite all the pain she had just bluntly expressed, this paragraph alone dared to suggest the faint hope that they had a future.

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Dust danced carelessly in the air around her, disturbed from its rest by her methodical search for the diary. The distant memory of its existence had led her to the attic and sent her shuffling through box after box of forgotten love letters, high school yearbooks and football pennants. It contained the final communication between her and her father but offered little explanation for his recent request. The conversation with her grandmother floated back to her and her fingers tightened around the diary as she remembered the older woman's words: "Your father wants to see you, Julia."

They rarely discussed her father and Julia had been caught off guard by the unexpected remark. She had pictured her grandmother's worried frown at the other end of the phone and knew what the sentence had cost her.

Rose had been trying unsuccessfully for years to renew her son's interest in his only child. After the divorce she had known the restricted visitation rights and the three-hour commute to his former home would be difficult for Michael. But two years later, when Julia was nine, and the infrequent weekend visits stopped, Rose had been shocked. A bitter argument with Michael had ensued and while she had received no explanation for his behavior, she had been forced to accept it. She had never stopped hoping, however, that Michael would have a change of heart and the two could resume their relationship as father and daughter. It was that hope that had made her the willing messenger between them; years ago delivering Julia's letter and two days ago, Michael's request.

A muffled, high-pitched giggle broke through her thoughts and Julia traveled the length of the attic to stand in front of the window that faced the backyard. The air on the third floor was dry and hot, as if the house had been trying desperately to trap the warmth of summer. The
sealed pane offered little hope of escape into the cool fall day visible through the dirty glass.

Staring at the scene below, she heard another peal of laughter and spotted its small owner in a scattered pile of crinkly, red and orange leaves. The precocious three-year old was obviously delighted by the game her father had invented and waited patiently as he re-nailed the strewn leaves into a tidy clump. Taking an unsteady running start she rushed headlong into the colorful patch, then through it into her father's arms, sending sprays of autumn foliage wafting through the air.

Unconsciously, a smile spread across Julia's face. Seeing the two of them together always managed to take her breath away. Sometimes it surprised her; how much Sam loved the toddler. When Alexandra was born she had been sure Sam wanted a boy, although he had never stated a preference. Still, Lexie was everything Julia could have hoped for in a daughter, and the apple of her father's eye - a beautiful, happy little girl with glossy black hair and a curious nature.

Sam was unable to resist spoiling her and Lexie in turn adored her mother. Together the three of them formed the family Julia had always wished for, only her role in it had changed.

Turning away from the window, she began to unpack the adolescent souvenirs that littered the dull hardwood floor. Her hands were filthy from an hour in the attic and smudges of dirt trailed across her cheeks. She had promised her grandmother an answer by tommorrow.

"Mama, look," Lexie interrupted, running to stand in front of her mother. Her black eyes were wide with excitement and kneeling down to meet them, Julia noticed how long her bangs had gotten. They hung down past her eyebrows and met the curls of her eyelashes every time she blinked. Making a mental note to trim them, she kissed Lexie's cold cheek and turned her attention to the small chunky fist that stretched toward her. The little fingers slowly uncurled to reveal a slimy, dirt-covered earthworm. It was not at all what Julia had expected and she gasped in surprise. Lexie giggled at her mother's reaction and ed Lexie's cold cheek and turned her attention to the worm's movement.

"It's Albert," she explained with little girl innocence.

"He's beautiful, Lexie," Julia humored, resisting the urge to get a napkin and remove Albert from her hand.

"Lexie," Sam admonished, hanging up their coats. "I thought I asked you to leave Albert outside?"

"But it's cold outside, Daddy," Lexie explained seriously.

"Worms like the cold, honey," Sam improvised. "Remember I told you we'd have to keep him in the backyard?"

"But he'll get wet," she argued. "How about the 'frigerator'?" Both parents conceded smiles and Julia patiently explained that Albert would really prefer the backyard where he could be with his friends.

With a small frown puckering her brow, Lexie reluctantly handed the worm to her father. "Be careful with him, Daddy," she cautioned.

"I will, Lex," Sam assured her gently. "Now why don't you run upstairs and wash your face and hands. Then, maybe after dinner we can go outside and visit Albert for a minute before you go to bed." Lexie nodded silently, her pout recording as she turned and ran from the kitchen.

"I can't believe you said she could keep him," Julia scolded softly when Sam returned from outside.

"Honey, it's only a worm," he replied with a smile in his voice.

"I know, it's just, first the dog and now this. I hate it when she gets disappointed."

"You mean," Sam stated, his smile fading, "when I disappoint her."

"No, when either one of us does." Sam's anger then had taken months to cool.

Julia patiently explained that Albert would really like the cold, honey. He was a tough little fellow, and besides, it was a small price to pay. He had made their entrance into the kitchen.

"Hey," he frowned with concern,

"It's cold outside, Daddy," Lexie argued. "He's beautiful, Lexie," Julia humored, resisting her closer, marveling at her status as a parent and considering it was now snored noisily on the floor.

Lexie stirred softly on her lap and Julia looked down at the sleeping child, at the tendrils of her hair on the tendril of the couch, with their daughter on her lap. Julia noticed how long her bangs had gotten. She had promised her grandmother an answer by tommorrow.

The prospect of seeing him again scared the hell out of her, she admitted. As a child she had imagined what it would be like and there had been no fear. Back then, if he had embraced her he would have forgiven. The comfort of her father's arms had been all she had wanted, certain that once he was holding her everything would be all right. At the time, she had still been young enough to believe that her parents could help. She had promised her grandmother an answer by tommorrow.

"You're right," Julia exclaimed, trying to avoid Sam's steady gaze. Lifting her chin with his finger, he bent to kiss her but stopped abruptly.

"Hey," she frowned with concern, "have you been crying?"

"No," Julia answered, the lie coming easily to her lips. Sam, he sat down in a large black chair and extended his arm. In the nearby corner of the room, with their daughter on her lap, Julia considered, it was a small price to pay. He had made their entrance into the kitchen.

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Turning away from the window, she began to repack the adolescent souvenirs that littered the dull hardwood floor. Her hands were filthy from an hour in the attic and smudges of dirt trailed across her cheeks. She had promised her grandmother an answer by tomorrow. Reaching the main floor, she heard the door open and felt the fall-scented draught that preceded their entrance into the kitchen. “Hi, honey,” Sam yelled from the doorway. “I thought you were coming out?”

“Mama, look,” Lexie interrupted, running to stand in front of her mother. Her black eyes were wide with excitement and kneeling down to meet them, Julia noticed how long her bangs had gotten. They hung down past her eyebrows and met the curls of her eyelashes every time she blinked. Making a mental note to trim them, she kissed Lexie’s cold cheek and turned her attention to the small chubby fist that stretched toward her. The little fingers slowly uncurled to reveal a slim, dirt-covered earthworm. It was not at all what Julia had expected and she gasped in surprise. Lexie giggled at her mother’s reaction and flattened her muddy palm to accommodate the worm’s movement.

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“I will, Lex,” Sam assured her gently. “Now why don’t you run upstairs and wash your face and hands. Then, maybe after dinner we can go outside and visit Albert for a minute before you go to bed.” Lexie nodded silently, her posture receding as she turned and ran from the kitchen. "I can’t believe you said she could keep him,” Julia scolded softly when Sam returned from outside.

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“You mean,” Sam stated, his smile fading, “when I disappoint her.”

“No, when either one of us does.”

Sam’s fingers lingered in the air. “I’ll see Albert again. Albert will be all right. At the time, she had still been young enough to believe that her parents could have forgiven him. The comfort of her mother and Julia had always wished for, only her role in it had changed.

The afternoon spent frolicking in the leaves soon took its toll on her family and Julia leaned back against the cushions, watching them sleep. Sam had sprawled comfortably in the chair, his arm curled around his daughter on her lap. Julia took his hand, knowing it was all she could say, confident it would be enough.

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think about it. Hearing her grandmother's expectant voice answer, she twirled the phone cord tightly around her finger and tried to sound casual.

"Hi Gram."

"Julia, hi!"

"How're you feeling," Julia probed with concern. "You had a cold, right?"

"I'm fine, honey. Just fine."

"And how's Grandpa?"

"He's good. He's in the other room watching sports," Rose chuckled softly. "What else?"

Julia laughed nervously at her grandmother's affectionate remark, not knowing what to say and uncomfortable stating the reason for her call. In the thick silence that followed she knew her grandmother was waiting.

"Well," Rose hinted gently, "your father's going to call today, about five I think he said." She hesitated a few seconds, then continued. "Do you know what you want me to tell him?"

"Yes," Julia admitted evenly. "I'm going to go Gram."

"Oh, Julia, I'm so glad," Rose responded happily. "Of course your father will be glad. He's called here twice to see if I've heard from you. He'll do the right thing," she concluded, "you'll see."

Hearing the confidence in Rose's voice, Julia remained quiet, knowing her grandmother was pleased and hoping that, this time, she wouldn't be disappointed.

* * * 

It was a typical autumn day, dawning cold and full of clouds, yet Julia knew it was a day she would never forget. Examining herself in the mirror for the seventh time, she finally decided on a pair of old faded Levi's and a white silk shirt. She felt nauseous, as if someone had kicked her in the stomach. Forcing herself to swallow the last of her coffee, she grabbed Sam's brown leather jacket and headed for the car.

Not to meet him at her grandmother's summer cottage on Moon Lake. Largely deserted at the end of the season, it had seemed the perfect place, being half-way between their two homes. Ironically, Julia remembered, it was where she had last seen her father, the summer she was nine.

Her gazing eyes met Sam's meaningfully as she kissed Lexie goodbye, squeezing the little body close to her. He knew how nervous she was but had never said a word. He didn't have to. He had said it all the week before.

The long drive passed quickly as Julia tried hard to imagine what they would say to each other. Staring at the road ahead, she wondered briefly what she should call him. Years ago she had called him 'Daddy,' yet that title seemed pitifully inappropriate now.

Pulling into the gravelly dirt driveway, she saw another car there and knew it was his. Her grandparents had remained home, Rose having decided that it would be best if they met alone. Julia let herself sit in the car a few minutes, feeling sick and wanting desperately to leave, to go back to being Sam's wife and Lexie's mother, roles that were familiar, anything but Michael's daughter.

As the top of the gray slate steps that dotted the hill, Julia stepped onto the deck. The red, weathered wood circled the house, giving a view from every direction, the front facing the beach. She and Sam had brought Lexie here last summer and except for the warm presence of her grandparents, 'Julia noted, the house hadn't changed.

Walking around to the front, she dropped her purse on a rusty lawn chair and paused a moment to lean against the railing. The long stretch of sand that led to the water was frickled with driftwood and marred by the scattered remains of forgotten campfires. She felt herself relax slightly as she looked out at the lake she had loved so well as a child. It was more green than blue today, whitecaps popping up on its glassy surface. The wind blew coldly against her, making her nose run and bringing color to her cheeks. Deciding she should probably go into the house, Julia took a last glance at her current shoreline and spotted one standing near a pile of large rocks that jutted into the water. As if he had felt her presence, he turned to face her and when their eyes met he raised his hand in greeting.

The sun-bleached front steps seemed to take forever to descend, knowing that he was watching her. At the bottom, her shoes sunk into the cold, damp sand and wet sticks broke under her feet. She made herself walk over to him, conscious of every second it took, wanting to remember it, in case she never saw him again.

Reaching him, Julia stopped, unsure what to do and taken back by his appearance. The change in him was strong evidence that the years they had missed could never be reclaimed. The young father she remembered was gone, replaced by a man whose thick, dark hair was mixed with gray. His tanned face and strong jawline were still familiar but lined with age, unlike the man she had known.

"Hi Jewel," he said, trying to smile.

"Jewel,"" Julia whispered in disbelief. "He's your father she remembered was gone, replaced by a man whose thick, dark hair was mixed with gray. His tanned face and strong jawline were still familiar but lined with age, unlike the man she had known.

"Hi Jewel," he said, trying to smile.

"Jewel," she answered in a low voice.

The childhood nickname surprised her and she looked up into black eyes that matched Lexie's. "Hi," she answered, careful to keep the emotion from her voice. In front of her stood the man who had once been her father, yet there was no affectionate display or welcoming embrace, only an awkward silence. The realization left Julia cold and sad.

"You've grown up," Michael stated with a tentative smile. The strong, solemn gaze he offered searching her face, as if struggling to relay a message he couldn't put into words.

Examining his features critically, Julia barely heard his remark. Suddenly it all seemed so pointless that she wanted to turn and leave. For so long, she realized, she had fooled herself into believing that she knew him, that somehow during that brief period of the childhood she had been able to form an image of him that would last forever. He had known him as only a child could know a parent. It was a shock to realize that she had been wrong. She knew nothing about him. The person before her looked different from the father she remembered and had acted out of character for the man she had believed to be. He had lost her trust and it would take more than a wishful smile to gain it back. Turning away from him, she stared off into the cloudy horizon, steeling herself not to cry.

Running his fingers through his hair, Michael seemed to sense the change in her. "Do you want to walk for a while?" he asked quietly. She nodded and they started down the beach, the rough water rushing close to their feet, smoothing the sand.

"I knew this wouldn't be easy," Michael managed after they had walked a ways.

Strong gusts of wind lifted his hair away from his face and Julia glanced over at him, noting the deep lines that furrowed his brow, the long, confident strides he took as they walked. Things she should have known so well, yet barely remembered.

"I don't know how you feel about seeing me again, Julia," he continued softly. "You're so quiet."

With both hands shoved deeply into the pockets of her jacket, Julia pulled the warm coat tightly around her. "I don't know what to say to you," she answered in a low voice.

It was the truth, she conceded. All the hurtful, angry words she had been prepared to hurl at him had died on her lips. She had been ready to meet him as an adult, a wife, a mother, all the things she had grown to become. Instead, seeing him again she realized that none of that made a difference. In his presence she would always be reduced to a shy seven-year-old, wanting to make him love her and she hated herself for it.

For several awkward minutes neither of them spoke. Leaves from the surrounding roadside had managed to reach the shore and rustled furiously across their path. The playful, swirling patterns caught Julia's eye and the tension between them was forgotten as she concentrated on the beauty of the land around her.

This was the beach that she had played on as a child, and although the sky was gray with clouds and the air held the smoky scent of fall instead of campfires, she could still recognize it. Here, she remembered, she had waited, searching the drive to see her father's car and listening to hear his voice call her from the water. It was hard to remember, it seemed, she no longer waiting, when the hope had faded and when the father she loved had become a memory. It seemed like
think about it. Hearing her grandmother's expectant voice answer, she twirled the phone cord tightly around her finger and tried to sound casual.

"Hi Gram."

"Julia, hi!"

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"And how's Grandpa?"

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Julia laughed nervously at her grandmother's affectionate remark, not knowing what to say and uncomfortable stating the reason for her call. In the thick silence that followed she knew her grandmother was waiting.

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Hearing the confidence in Rose's voice, Julia remained quiet, knowing her grandmother was pleased and hoping that, this time, she wouldn't be disappointed.

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Thinking it would be best if they met alone. Julia decided she should probably go into the house, Deciding she should probably go into the house, waiting desperately to leave, to go back to her grandmother was waiting. Examining herself in the mirror, she knew her grandmother was waiting.

For several awkward minutes neither of them spoke. Leaves from the surrounding roadside had begun to fall and turned the dirt road to a bed of colored leaves. The sun-bleached front steps seemed to take forever to descend, knowing that he was walking down the hill. At the bottom, her shoes sunk into the cold, damp sand and wet sticks broke under her feet. She made herself walk over to him, conscious of every second it took, wanting to remember it, in case she never saw him again.

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"Hi Jewel," he said, trying to smile. "Do you know how you feel about me?"

Julia glanced over at him, noting the deep lines that furrowed his brow, the long, confident strides he took as they walked. "I don't know what you want me to tell you," she answered in a low voice. "It was the truth."

"You've grown up," Michael stated with a tentative smile. "The strong, solemn gaze he offered her face, as if struggling to relay a message she couldn't put into words.

Examining his features critically, Julia barely heard his remark. Suddenly it all seemed so pointless that she wanted to turn and leave. For so long, she realized, she had fooled herself into believing that she knew him, that somehow during that brief period of the childhood she had known him as only a child could know a parent. It was a shock to realize that she had been wrong. She knew nothing about him. The person before her looked different from the father she remembered and had acted out of character for the man she had believed to be. He had lost his trust and it would take more than a wiseful smile to gain it back. Turning away from him, she stared off into the cloudy horizon, steeling herself not to cry.

Running his fingers through his hair, Michael seemed to sense the change in her. 'Do you want to walk for a while?" he asked quietly. She nodded and they started down the beach, the rough water rushing close to their feet, smoothing the sand.

"I knew this wouldn't be easy," Michael managed after they had walked a ways.

Strong gusts of wind lifted his hair away from his face and Julia glanced over at him, noting the deep lines that furrowed his brow, the long, confident strides he took as they walked. "I don't know what you want me to tell you," she answered in a low voice. "It was the truth."

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Intent on his examination of the rock, Michael rubbed it between his fingers, running his thumb along its surface. Julia, watching him, realized that for the moment, he was as absorbed in the memory as she had been. Then, just as suddenly it faded.

"I know I have a lot to explain," Michael whispered after clearing his throat. He put the rock in his pocket, lifting his head to stare out at the water again. "I guess I don't know where to start..." The words came out with a conscious hesitancy, as if he had rehearsed them earlier, only to realize how false they sounded when he repeated them. "Your Mom and I...well, you know..."

"This isn't about you and Mom," Julia interrupted.

"No, you're right. It's not, it's about me." He paused for what seemed like hours and when he spoke again there was a resignation in his voice that hadn't been there before. "You know, when you get to be my age, Julia, you start to think about all the mistakes you've made in your life, choices you've made, things you could have done differently." He never looked at her as he spoke, his gaze alternating between the sand at his feet and the turbulent waters of the lake. "I wish I had done things differently with you. I wish I could go back...I just...I just couldn't be a week-end dad, Julia. I know that doesn't sound like much of an excuse, Lord knows you deserve a better one, but...you've got to know that...I never meant to hurt you.

"I remember," Julia answered softly. Fleeting, tiny images of a tall, smiling man and a small, sunbaked little girl crossed her mind. They were together, walking slowly along the bright summer beach, their heads down as they searched the shore for the flattest, smoothest rocks. She could remember it all, the comfort of his hand wrapped around hers, both of her knees damp and dusted with sand, the feel of a faded floral bathing suit with ruffles on the bottom and the soothing, mingled smells of the lake and coconut sunscreen. They were glimpses of a childhood that she had long ago stopped regarding as her own.

"This had nothing to do with my conscience, Julia. I...I hurt you...I know I did and I would give anything if I could change that, but...Jesus," he whispered roughly, dragging a hand through his hair. "I was your father once...and I tried," he continued hoarsely, "honestly I did. But, it wasn't easy and I wasn't good at it. We were drifting apart...things were happening in your life that I wasn't a part of...and I guess I thought it would be easier, for both of us, if I just...let you go.

There was a pregnant pause as Julia let his words sink in, feeling the deeply buried pain and anger rise to the surface. "So that's what I want you to say, she asked sharply, her voice breaking, "an incovenience...it was too difficult to be my father so you just...turned your back and...and forgot me? Am I supposed to understand that? Is it that easy to-"

Grabbing her by the shoulders, Michael cut off her last remark, knowing he deserved it but unable to watch the pain on her face. "Listen to me," he began, forcing her to look at him. "I was very young, Julia, too young to know what I was giving up...And no," he answered softly, his eyes bright with tears, "it wasn't easy...and I never forgot you.

Facing him, Julia felt her hard, polished reserve cracking. His last four words had the effect of a physical blow, making it difficult for her to breathe. A choked sob escaped from her throat and she began to cry openly.

Pulling her against him, Michael listened to his daughter's sobs, knowing it was the price he would have to pay and knowing she was worth it. He searched for the words that would comfort her, as he had done when she was little, when he hadn't been the problem, but the solution.

As he wrapped her in his arms, the tears streamed freely down Michael's face. "I'm sorry, Julia," he gasped. "God, I am so sorry...We have so much to talk about."

"It's dark when Julia finally walked back down the driveway. The gravel crunched under her feet, breaking the silence that enveloped the deserted summer cottages along the lake.

As she sat in her car letting the engine warm up, she could see him standing on the deck, his form silhouetted by the dim light filtering through the cottage window. He was leaning against the railing watching her, the tip of his cigarette glowing brightly as he drew on it. Funny, she thought, she had forgotten he smoked, had forgotten a lot of things.

Their meeting hadn't turned like she'd imagined, Julia reflected. Instead of being indifferent to him, she had begun studying him, relearning his features, the way he walked and talked, the way he said her name. Somehow along the way, she had found herself hoping that he could see in her the child he had left behind, that maybe this time it wouldn't be quite so easy for him to say goodbye.

He had said it had never been easy, in fact, he had said a lot of things in his quiet, sincere way that Julia had been afraid she would never hear. He wanted to be in her life, to be a grandfather to Lexie, a father-in-law to Sam, someone she could trust and love, and rely on. It was a lot to ask and for a moment part of her had wanted to deny him, as he had denied her years ago, of the luxury of having a father. She had tried to remember every time her birthday had passed without a card from him, every family vacation when his absence had been filled by a stranger. Even those memories had failed to erase the effect he had on her.

Today she had gotten a glimpse of what it had been like to be his daughter and despite the past, she admitted silently, she could never walk away from him, even if staying meant getting hurt.
Intent on his examination of the rock, Michael rubbed it between his fingers, running his thumb along its surface. Julia, watching him, realized that for the moment, he was as absorbed in the memory as she had been. Then, just as suddenly it faded.

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In the shelter of her father's embrace, Julia let the pain come. Michael's jacket grew wet with tears, still held her. This was what she had always wanted. It couldn't erase the pain or replace the memories, but there was a part of her that had never outgrown him. Rocking her gently back and forth, Michael absorbed the brute of the cold wind, his face buried in his daughter's hair.
had always known the price but had never thought it worth paying. Now, she knew differently. Maybe it was too late for them, maybe

MICHAEL E. MCGRAW

The Flight

It happened
This year on March 8th
Like the distant bells of a Skippy Ice Cream truck
And I
(Enlightened)
Scattered
As if I were scattering for change
But the coins I found were my eyes
Like two silver dollars
Waiting for a chance
Gazing into the blue
Ready
To taste the cool fresh flavor
Of the flight.