

The Dark Part of the Road

17th Annual Fiction Writing Competition Winner

by Lisa Siegal

17th Annual Fiction Writing Competition

The Editorial Board of the *Georgia Bar Journal* is proud to present "The Dark Part of the Road," by Lisa Siegal of Atlanta, as the winner of the 17th Annual Writing Competition.

The purposes of the competition are to enhance interest in the *Journal*, to encourage excellence in writing by members of the Bar and to provide an innovative vehicle for the illustration of the life and work of lawyers. As in years past, this year's entries reflected a wide range of topics and literary styles. In accordance with the competition's rules, the Editorial Board selected the winning story through a process of reading each story without knowledge of the author's identity and then ranking each entry. The story with the highest cumulative ranking was selected as the winner. The Editorial Board congratulates Siegal and all of the other entrants for their participation and excellent writing.

The baggie of crystal meth was Willie's payment for crouching in the dark along the propertyed shoreline of Lake Burton with nothing but field mice for company. A thermos of coffee kept his brain cells firing, so that when dawn broke, he could report back to Breeze Diego that the summer cabin of Clyde McDade was as still as a church on a Saturday night. Being on the low end of the Diego's food chain meant spending his evenings here (and at other well-catalogued vacation properties), squatting down amongst the boggy spruces and sumac trees, and eyeballing property all night with binoculars. Once he'd documented an unoccupied cabin, Diego's boys would come in for the night haul, taking out the Bose stereos, laptops, and flat-screens stocked-piled like firewood in these weekend cabins.

Willie rested against a sumac tree that crested the bank of the McDade property. Behind him a black forest of wooded pine disappeared into the expanse of night sky and twitching stars. He opened his thermos for a swig with his shaking, liver-spotted hand, and then stretched the tendons of his legs in front of him trying to wiggle his toes inside his Army boots. The diabetes had stiffened his joints and ulcerated his big toe, making walking hard and self-medicating with meth all the more appealing. He patted the baggie with his free hand and vowed to wait until morning before he opened it.

The weakness in his legs destroyed any likelihood of advancing as a career criminal as Breeze (being a quick study) was apt to point out to him; but at least here in the chill of night he had his barn coat, wool socks, a full stomach,

three cigarettes, a thermos of coffee, and the promise of a morning high. He was a solitary man and he was comforted in his own odd way by the scurry of the red squirrels in the sloping pine needle bluff, more so than if he had been home watching his black-and-white in his bare apartment with the gray-washed walls. Nights like that left him thinking of Sheila and his boys and how he'd let it all go to pot with the drinking. Better to be out here with some hawking Peregrine and the cold, damp, soggy earth than alone in the rental thinking of her.



Just as Willie was about to lower his binoculars, a Lexus pulled into the gravel drive, crunching the pebbles and shining its headlights onto the back lawn of the house. Seconds later, a yellow Volkswagen pulled in behind it.

The sound of crackling pea stone and the upward beam of lights startled Willie. He fumbled for his knapsack and scrambled up the side of the hill with his knees still bent and aching. His racing heart pumped adrenaline to his working extremities, but his mind was addled as he tried to assess his situation. He felt neither the cold of the air, nor the dampness of his clothes, but saw only too quickly that he was too close to the house. The occupants of the car were getting out and the headlights splayed down into the woods directly onto the spot where he had been. He wasn't much for anticipating disasters, but even he could see that any movement on his part would call attention to his unexplainable situation. He hunched down low against the back of the sumac. Damn! Breeze had not prepared him for this!



A man and a woman exited the car. Willie recognized Clyde McDade from the marina. McDade was over six feet with a mop of wavy, reddish blond hair that seemed boyish for a man in his fifties. At the marina, McDade had a habit of fingering the other crafts with his muscular, stubby hands, and whistling when he did so as if he was counting money in a bank vault. He carried himself with an air of importance that bordered on theatrical. When Willie heard he was a lawyer, it had all made sense.

Willie heard them talking, first softly and then growing a bit louder. Rather than entering the lake house, they started toward the woods, taking the gravel path to the boat dock. Overhead an owl's cry startled Willie, and he pitched forward on a random spread of pinecones and needles. McDade turned and looked out towards the shoreline where Willie lay spread-eagled in the dirt. Willie dared not look up, fearing the worst.

Willie told himself that it would be just a matter of time before McDade located a shotgun and began blowing buckshot into his retreating backside. He scrambled into a thicket of pine trees and determined his quickest get-a-way was to follow the shoreline to the other side of the cabin until he could eye a beeline and access Charlie Mountain Road. One of Diego's boys was scheduled to fetch him at O'Grady's Bar at dawn. He figured he could get back quicker on the main road than risk his bad legs on a nature hike up through the Chattahoochee National Forest on the other side.

Just as Willie was about to high-tail it across the property, McDade took the woman by the elbow and steered her down the path to the boat dock. If they kept in this direction, Willie had no chance of escaping via the shoreline. And now it was too late to flee to the other side of the cabin.

The two stopped in the gravel path. Their arguing voices filled the quiet air. Willie fell down on

his stomach and rolled towards the boat dock, clutching his knapsack and cursing his bad knees. He scrambled under the dock just on the dry side of the shore.

A woman's voice broke in the air above him. "It's cold out here. I want to go back inside."

"Just listen to me."

Then he heard footsteps approach the wooden ramp way to the dock.

Willie quickly body-rolled down the slope, past a flat bottom aluminum canoe pulled shoreward, and then plunged into the waters that lapped against the lake's edge. He felt the cold of the water saturate his dry clothes. With his pack buoyed against his belly, he floated outward toward the middle of the underside dock. As he did so he heard their footsteps thumping down the plank ramp.

"This isn't what I wanted," she said, "I thought you were going to leave her." Willie heard the unclipping of the lock that moored the flat bottom canoe to the dock's railing.

"You're being overly dramatic here, Diana," McDade said. "Come. Let's go out on the lake."

"We can talk inside."

"There's something I want to give you."

The ground beside Willie was quiet, suggesting the two were studying one another. He saw the woman's feet planted squarely, facing McDade, and then shift, ballerina style, one behind the other.

Finally, she said, "Alright."

A crest of water rushed towards him, splashing up against his whiskered chin, as McDade pushed the boat out into the water and the woman jumped in, unsettling its equilibrium. McDade hopped in quickly behind her. He took the bow seat and pushed off with his thick hands, squeezing the tee grip and the paddle's wood shaft down into the cool black water.

The woman, unsure of what to do, took the stern seat and sat bent-kneed and twisted toward the moonlight.

"You're not getting out of this so easily, Clyde" she said.

"I know that," he said.

There was silence. Willie swallowed his breath in the soggy under-bottom of the dock.

A flock of unsettled, nesting snow geese spread wing with irritation, honked, and lifted up above the shore. Willie watched wide-eyed as the unmoored canoe pushed out past him and into the cold black of night on a lake now lit by the white orb of the moon and a hundred overhead pinpoint stars.

Their voices continued in an unsteady rhythm of accusation, whispered placating, more accusation, and then frustrated pleas for "reasonableness." Hanging onto the underside of the dock, Willie tingled with cold and shuddered off the wet drench of the lake water seeping into his pores. The fear of being caught seemed to leave him momentarily like the exhaust of nicotine through a single nostril.

He thought again of Sheila. God, she had been beautiful. She was not the sort of woman who demanded accommodations for herself, or who would put her foot down in frustration or threaten to leave. She had loved him, tolerated him, and then one day when he awoke from a sloppy drunk, he found a twenty-dollar bill on the counter, a cupboard packed with dry goods and a note that read, "Take care of yourself, Willie."

He let go of the underside of the dock and inched back up onto the sodden shoreline. He reasoned he could crawl like a snake on his belly through the moss lichen until he could see clear enough to steal away. From what he could make out of McDade and the woman, whom he surmised was probably not his wife, the two were continuing a heated conversation that was unwise to have while adrift on a dark lake.

He had been a private in the Marine Corps on Paris Island, crawling through the peat moss when a heat rash and undiagnosed diabetes had caused him to lose consciousness and be shipped back home to Rabun County with a medical discharge and an unmet dream

of being part of the “the few and the proud.” Twenty years later he was back on his belly, crawling through the stench of soggy-bottomed earth and whiffing lichen dust, only now he was nothing but a two-bit criminal with a drug habit instead of serving his country.

“Clyde! No!” the woman called out in a voice wrenched with panic. In the instant it took Willie to lift his head up and turn toward the moonlit lake, he saw the back of McDade hunched over the woman, the boat’s paddle raised behind his right shoulder, the shaft gripped with his thick hands. The paddle blade came forward off his shoulder and towards her cheek. As soon as he struck her, she fell backwards off the edge of the stern seat, splashing into the unbroken water like crystal falling on a glass floor.

As she fell, the gunwale edge of the boat dipped low into the water on the right side, and McDade steadied the boat by rising and shifting his body to the left. The woman cried out for help. She went under and then came back up. Clyde, with the paddle still in his hand, sat down on the thwart at the center of the boat, dipped the blade gently into the water and pushed back.

“Clyde,” she called out again, but the voice was fainter.

Overhead the squawk of a nighthawk pierced the blue-black sky.

Willie watched, his open mouth drawing in cold air that seemed not to penetrate his lungs, his eyes intent on the hunched back of Clyde McDade as he swiftly paddled backwards towards the dock. The woman continued to struggle in the dark waters as the canoe edged further and further away. The woman was no longer clutching at the air. The underwater waves made by her thrashing legs dissipated and then stilled. Slowly, her head sank under the water, leaving a ripple that spread across the lake.

Shivering, Willie now hid in a thicket of birch on the other side of the dock. He no longer saw the figure of the woman in the water. McDade pulled the canoe ashore, re-hooked it and then hurried up the gravel path, crossing in front of Willie’s hidden figure in the trees. Willie heard McDade’s Lexus backing out of the driveway, the back tires spitting pea gravel as it made its turn, the headlights burning through the black sky and a fog misting out around the hood of the car as it rose out towards the asphalt road and made its escape.



Three flights of stairs separated the office the Public Defender of the Mountain Judicial from the District Attorney’s Office, both of which were located in the Habersham County Courthouse. The Mountain Judicial District covered three counties, Rabun, Habersham and Stephens, in the northeast rim of Georgia. Owing to limited tax dollars, a thinly spread population, and a fairly law-abiding citizenry, the district offices were small and not particularly overworked.

Morgan Lee, the newly appointed public defender, raced up the wide, marble staircase in Nike running shoes,

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a blue-stripe seersucker suit, and an Eddie Bauer backpack that served as both her purse and briefcase.

At the top of the stairs, a dirtied, oval window let in the faint hint of morning sun and a glimpse of the mountainside burnished in autumn color. Down the dark corridor of the third floor, Morgan approached the glass-front office door with chipped paint and her name stenciled in black on the frosted glass. She had hired a seasoned secretary from the District Attorney's office. Aileen, a grandmother with black, wingtip-polish hair, teased into a smooth helmet appropriate for inserting sharpened pencils and capped pens, sat at the metal desk and clicked the computer keys. Aileen looked over the top of her glasses as the door opened.

"Sheriff's waiting on you. D.A. Walpole, too. Got a client in the lock-up on a meth possession. Wants to make a plea."

Morgan stopped to check the morning's mail that had accumulated in the "In" box.

"It can't wait until I pour a cup of coffee?"

"The perp ... I mean... your client," said Aileen, "says he saw a murder. Wants his attorney before they question him."

Morgan entered her closet-sized office and switched her running shoes for the blue pumps she kept in desk drawer. Aileen leaned over the desk, watching her.

"Leave the sneakers out. It'll solve our rodent problem," she called out.

Morgan came back into the lobby area.

"We have a rodent problem?"

"Among other things."

"So who is he?"

"Willie McPherson. He was sitting stake-out on Clyde McDade's property. Says he saw Clyde off a woman in the lake; then drive away."

"Off a woman? Sitting stakeout? I thought you said this was a meth possession."

"Oh, yeah. That's what they

arrested him on. Turns out he is also involved in a string of lakeside burglaries. The sheriff's office was doing a shakedown itself. Caught him last night. Limping up Charlie Mountain Road, soaking wet, and carrying binoculars, a bag of meth, and a knapsack full of burglary tools. He's looking at 10 to 20."

"What else?"

"That's all I know on Willie. Better hope there's a dead body in that lake. Although they'll probably claim he did it. Then he'll fry."

"Aileen! Please."

Morgan came from a large public defender's office in Atlanta. When the criminal section of the State Bar approached her about accepting the governor's appointment for this newly created office, she'd had second thoughts. But burnout and a desire to escape the life she'd built in the city had won out. She was, admittedly, out of her element up here in the backwoods of Georgia. It seemed the secretaries and janitors understood the system better than she did.

"Oh, and one more thing," Aileen added, "The Grand Jury true-billed everything Walpole hand-fed them last week, and they're all in the lock-up too."

"Thanks," said Morgan as she grabbed a legal pad and slipped out the door.



Willie and Morgan sat side by side in the sterile conference room of the District Attorney's office. A blast of steamy, hot air shot through the ventilator by the baseboards every few minutes. Overhead, a ceiling fan spun. Willie, in an orange jumpsuit, had the strained look of a rabid animal, emaciated and dehydrated, but still hoping to escape his confinement. Sheriff Dickerson and D.A. Walpole entered from a side office door, and Morgan rose and shook their hands.

"Getting acquainted with your new office?" Walpole asked. He was a thin man with pale, translucent skin, spread tight across a

bony face. When he smiled, which he rarely did, he looked pained.

"Yes, thank you. Everyone's been very accommodating," answered Morgan.

Sheriff Dickerson was tall man with a protruding gut that bulged at the buttons of his uniform. He also wore non-regulation snake-skin cowboy boots that clicked at the linoleum when he entered the room. He took the chair across the table from Willie.

"Deputy says you want to make a deal?"

"My client has evidence of a murder," interjected Morgan. "He'd like reduced charges in exchange for his cooperation."

"I bet he would," said the sheriff. Walpole scratched notes on his legal pad as he took the seat next to Dickerson.

"And what are the charges, Sheriff?"

"Possession of an illegal substance. Trespassing. Burglary. And murder."

"Murder!" Willie and Morgan said in unison.

Morgan put her hand on Willie's knee. "What evidence do you have that Willie committed a murder?"

A close-lipped grin spread across the sheriff's face. "Body surfaced early this morning. Seems Willie knew it would. Somebody in the lock-up must have warned him that decomposing bodies have a way of floating back to the surface. Explains why he was so anxious to tell this cock-and-bull story. Now, very conveniently, Willie has remembered he witnessed a murder."

"But I did!" Willie insisted.

"Did she surprise you when you were in McDade's lake house?"

"No," said Willie.

"Sheriff," said Morgan, but he continued.

"She surprised you, and then you killed her. Whacked her on the head?"

"McDade killed her. I told you ..."

"Killed his own paralegal? Now why would he?"

"His paralegal?" asked Morgan.

The sheriff turned to look at her for the first time. "Yes, ma'am. Diana Sloan. Been with him for ten years. He's broken up about it."

Then turning back to Willie he said, "McDade's got an airtight alibi. But you, Willie, admit you were on his property. Burglarizing his lake house. And the only one who knew she was in the lake."

"I didn't do it."

Walpole stopped writing and leaned over the table toward Morgan. "If you want a plea deal, he'll need to confess."

"He says he didn't do it. He has nothing to confess."

"Then we're going for the death penalty."

"You're what?"

"I didn't do it!" Willie shouted.

The sheriff and Walpole rose at the same time and pushed their metal chairs against the conference table.

"When he's ready to talk, let us know," Walpole said. They exited the room through the same door. A deputy entered and started to take Willie by the elbow.

"Deputy, if we may have a moment." The young deputy nodded and stepped back toward the wall.

"Alone."

Surprised, the deputy left the room and shut the door.

"Miss Lee, I've said I was there. I saw McDade kill her."

"I know Willie. Let's just start from the beginning." Morgan pulled out her legal pad and began to scribble quickly.

"You never went in the house?"

"No ma'am."

"Why were there in the first place?"

"Casing the joint." She looked up.

"Some guy paid me to. I never did the burglaries."

"Who paid you?"

"Can't say as I remember." She rolled her eyes.

"Well then, I just can't say."

"Okay."

"And you're sure it was McDade?"

"I know him from the marina.

He keeps a boat there. I worked there a few months."

"Can we prove that?"

"Yes ma'am."

"What kind of car does McDade have?"

"Lexus."

"You saw it at the lake house?"

"Yes ma'am."

"What else?"

"They went out in a canoe. They was arguing. He picked up the paddle. Struck her. She fell over, yelling for him to help. He just rowed back to the shore and got in his car."

"Where were you?"

"Under the pier."

"In the water?"

"Yes ma'am"

"Why?"

"Didn't want to get caught."

"I see."

"Then what did you do?"

"Waited for him to leave. Then I headed out to the road. The sheriff picked me up. I didn't say nothin' about it then, but they was going through my stuff. And they had me on the meth and all. The next morning I told them about it when they was questioning me. Thought maybe if I told them, I could get a deal on the possession charge."

"Good Lord!"

"They promised you a deal if you'd talk?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Did you confess to anything?"

"No, Miss Lee. I didn't kill that woman."

Morgan stood up and put her hand on Willie's shoulder. He had to be telling the truth, she thought. Innocence always brought out the worst decisions in people.

"I believe you, Willie."

Tears welled up in his blood-shot eyes. "I've got two boys, you know. And an ex-wife. She won't be able to take this."

"I'll do what I can, Willie." She knocked on the door, and the deputy returned for her client.



Morgan returned to her office and slumped down in the lobby

chair, a straight-back from someone's dining room set that needed a new cushion.

"Tell me what you know about Clyde McDade," she asked Aileen.

Aileen looked up and stopped typing. "He's from an old family. Father was a judge. He's not the man his father was. Although he's head of the most successful law firm in town. They do mostly defense work. Insurance companies. Businesses. That sort of thing."

"What about his family?"

"Wife plays tennis every day. Volunteers at the school. Has two kids. A boy and a girl. He probably has a pure-bred dog for a pet, but I can't be certain."

Morgan smiled. "You don't like him?"

"He's a pompous you-know-what. But I wouldn't believe some two-bit criminal's story that he killed his paralegal. And neither will a jury. Not in this town. Better take a plea. Best thing you can do."

"You're serious?" said Morgan, sitting up.

"As a heart attack."

"But I don't believe Willie McPherson killed the paralegal."

"Well, that's too bad for Willie then. 'Cause the jury will convict him for it."

Morgan sighed, and then stood up.

"Who do we use for an investigator?"

"We don't. Can't afford one."

Morgan sighed again with exasperation. "Well if we could, who would we call?"

"Sam Slotin. But he's probably dead."



Buried in the back of a file cabinet, Morgan found a file on Slotin. Sam Slotin was a former career GBI agent when he and his wife, Fiona, retired to the North Georgia mountains to a log cabin that they'd built by hand on the weekends after their three children left for college. Three months into his retirement, Fiona was diagnosed with liver cancer and died within a year. Sam started

doing private investigative work for the local attorneys appointed to defend the indigent. Since the recent change to a public defender, he'd been out of the picture; although his face surfaced a few times in the local paper with prize bass catches and other fishing awards.

"Have a seat," she said when he came into the office. He stood while they both eyed each other. He took a seat when she sat down across from him at her desk. He was over six feet tall with a granite base of shoulders and a lean barrel chest under which he kept his shoulder holster and a clip. His hair was peppered gray and his weathered face and hooded eyes gave away that his best years were behind him.

"I've looked over the file," he said. "It's gonna to be a tough case. You know the McDade family is prominent here."

"I understand that, Mr. Slotin."

"Call me Sam."

"Sam then," she nodded.

"You're not from here, of course."

"No, I'm not."

"And you've got the tight lip that single women who move here from Atlanta to escape their boyfriend problems always seem to have."

Morgan started to take offense, and then she smiled. He was a good detective after all.

"Is it that obvious?"

"I'm afraid so. I mean no offense to you. I'm sure you've got a personal story like everyone else. None of my business. But you're gonna have a hard time with a jury is all I mean to say."

She leaned back in her chair and tapped the eraser end of a pencil on the desk.

"How so?"

"Well, I imagine you've planned on going with that reliable reasonable doubt defense."

"You seem to know a lot about me from an initial meeting."

"No. I gathered that because you said as much on the phone. 'No evidence this.' 'No evidence that.' Anyway, juries around here

tend to convict career criminals pretty easily. And they don't tend to convict the local lawyers. Even the guilty ones."

She nodded. "That's why I called you. That part I did gather."

"You want me to find some damning evidence."

"Something like that."

"Wrestle a confession out of McDade? A man with more jury trials under his belt than you and I put together."

Morgan tensed under his stare. "Do you still do PI work for a living or have you given all that up for amateur fishing?"

Then it was Slotin's turn to smile. He shook his head. "No, Miss Lee, I still do detective work. For a price."

"We pay a paltry one, I understand."

He nodded. "I expected as much."



Walpole declared the state ready for trial within a month. Judge Cole denied Willie's request for a third extension. Judge Cole also denied Morgan's subpoena duces tecum on McDade's hard drive as a "fishing expedition." The hard drive on Diana Sloan's computer had mysteriously disappeared before investigators could recover it. The autopsy of Sloan did not reveal a pregnancy as Morgan had predicted it would. If McDade had driven to the lake house, no one could remember seeing the car. According to McDade, he'd been asleep at his house with his wife (albeit in separate bedrooms the investigative notes revealed). If he left home after ten o'clock that night, he never used his cell phone, stopped for gas or got money at an ATM. And to further complicate the mystery, Diana Sloan's closest companion appeared to be her beloved cat, Mr. Whiskers, whom she'd left at the vet the day before she died.

The case against Willie, on the other hand, seemed to be wrapped up airtight. He had a ten-year rap sheet of petty thefts and a drug

habit. He admitted to working for Breeze Diego (who'd given state's evidence and pled to a lesser charge). Breeze fingered Willie as a petty thief gone bad when he'd tried to do the burglary himself. Forensics claimed the door was jimmied by a tool in Willie's knapsack, an overturned flower vase indicated a scuffle, and marks on the carpet showed signs of dragging a body. The coroner listed blunt force trauma to the head, although the cause of death was drowning.

According to Walpole, Willie McPherson bungled the burglary when Diana Sloan, McDade's paralegal, entered the lake house for a work-earned vacation weekend. Willie whacked her on the head with a claw hammer. Forensics verified it was the murder weapon. Then he tried to hide the body by dragging her into the canoe and tipping it over. Sheriff's deputies swore they found him soaking wet and limping down Charlie Mountain Road. His cellmate said Willie told him about the murder that night. His statement indicated it was "practically a confession." The cellmate also said he warned Willie that the body would surface in a day or two. The next morning Willie fingered McDade. Willie's death penalty case was set for trial on Monday.



"That's about all I got," Sam said. He shut the manila folder and settled back against the vinyl booth cushion in Gus's Diner. Morgan shook her head.

"It's not enough. We don't have McDade at the scene. We don't have a motive for McDade to kill her. If I put Willie on the stand, he'll crucify himself. And without his own testimony he might as well plead."

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you more."

Morgan looked down at her coffee, which was growing cold. She put her hands to her head and rubbed her forehead in frustration.

"I just didn't think it was going to go like this."

"What do you mean?"

"Everything. The incompetence of the police. The way Judge Cole throws every ruling to the prosecution. The way McDade has put a roadblock up against any decent investigation of his files or office. The way the whole courthouse acts as if my job is to bate-stamp the pleas that come through the office, and be a front for the constitutional right to an attorney in case the defendant has the audacity to appeal. And on top of trying a death penalty case, I have to do it with an eighty-file caseload, an investigator I have to pay for out-of-pocket, and a secretary who's sorry she left the D.A.'s office."

Sam took out a pocketknife and began to clean his nail beds.

"Well, cry me a river, Miss Lee. Maybe you should go back to Atlanta where the grass was greener after all."

She cocked her head to one side. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah. It's the same sad story we always get. Let me guess. Some

boyfriend trouble drove you out of your big city job, and you thought, 'Hey, I bet that hick mountain town will be a nice gig. And I won't have to work too hard, and maybe I'll have time to get in a morning run, breathe some fresh air, and everyone up there will appreciate how smart I am. Maybe every year or two some poor schmuck might actually be innocent and I'll get him off. Take a plaque from the county bar that year or something. Now it's not working out like you planned and you're peeved about it."

Morgan crossed her arms.

"Fine. That's pretty much it. You've got me pegged. Now it's my turn. You've been hiding out in your cabin pretending you're dead. You haven't done a decent bit a detective work other than try to analyze me. You numb your own pain by mindlessly going through the motions of a job, and you hide from your daughters and your old work pals by spending every Saturday and Sunday hunkered

down in a cove on Lake Burton chasing bass."

To Morgan's surprise, Sam left out a laugh. A passing waitress stopped in her tracks, and he waved her away.

"I was just checking you, Morgan. You seemed about to give up."

"No you weren't. But it's okay. It's true enough. I couldn't handle the pressure of a large office. Maybe I wasn't good enough. Or maybe I just told myself I wasn't good enough. The boyfriend thing didn't work out so well either. After I introduced him to my family, he suddenly had a change of heart."

"You're from a small town, I bet."

"Afraid so."

"Congratulations. And you never thought you'd end up back where you started."

"I thought I'd do this for a few years until I figured out my next move."

"So this is just a shortcut, a detour then, off the main road?"



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"Something like that."

"That's why you don't mind taking three flights upstairs to an office that used to be where they stored the mop buckets."

She smiled. "Maybe so."

But Sam's face remained rigid. "Well maybe you ought to care."

"I've cared plenty, believe me. It just never seems to count for much."

"Well too bad for Willie McPherson then. He could use somebody with more gumption than you."

Morgan shook her head. "It's not gumption I'm hurting for, it's a detective. I was counting on you to find the smoking gun."

"You think the calvary will come for you."

"Maybe so. It sure has been slow though."

He leaned back against the seat booth. "I'm looking at the calvary right now. And it's you."

She smiled. "I've been afraid of that."

Sam stood up and threw a ten-dollar bill on the table.

"You'll do fine," he said. "Detour or not. This is where you find yourself. I tell myself the same thing every morning."



Willie sat next to Morgan in an ill-fitting dark blue suit his ex-wife had brought him. He grinned at her, showing his bad teeth.

"The time in jail has done me some good, I want you to know. I've had time to think. Sheila's come and she brought my boys a time or two. When this is all I over, I'm going to spend more time with my sons."

"Willie ..." Morgan began.

"No. Let me finish. I just want you to know, when you get me off, I'm going straight. You won't be sorry."

Morgan didn't speak. As D.A. Walpole approached the lectern for his opening argument to the jury, she felt her palms grow sweaty and her voice begin to tighten. From the corner of her eye, she could just see the profile of Clyde McDade. He was moistening his lips and cracking his knuckles in his lap. The pros-

ecution's case, she gathered, would take two days. Walpole was too smart to put McDade on the stand for her cross-examination. If she wanted to question him, she'd have to call him in her case in chief. Even if Judge Cole let her call him as a hostile witness for purposes of cross-examination, she still didn't have anything concrete to nail on him. And he was too good to slip up.

She turned around behind her to check out the visitors in the courtroom. Poor Sheila McPherson, Willie's dedicated, albeit, ex-wife gave her a solemn wave. She saw a few men in the back row that she didn't recognize. Judge Cole was probably going to take a few pleas in between their breaks.

Slotin was right about her, of course. Rather than face up to her problems, she'd sidestepped them by taking this job. Then life had pole-vaulted Willie McPherson at her feet. What she couldn't get Slotin or Willie to accept was that she, Morgan Lee—Irwin County High School valedictorian and UGA law school grad—had done just about as well as someone from a mill worker's family could be expected to do. Despite her near-perfect academic record, she'd been woefully unprepared for big city office politics, had regularly missed important social clues, and had miss-stepped and stumbled through several disastrous personal relationships. Good shoes and a whitewashed accent had only taken her so far. If she was the calvary, she had better surrender.

Willie turned to her look behind him as well.

"Wonder what that rascal Vernon Scruggs is doing here?" he said.

"Who's that?" Morgan was trying to listen to the coroner's testimony at the same time.

"Vernon. He's been out of town since this happened. That investigator tried to find him for me."

Morgan stopped writing and turned to look over her shoulder again. The man Willie named as "Vernon" caught her stare. Then he stood up and slipped out the courtroom door.

"Who is he, Willie?"

"Part of Diego's group. He was supposed to pick me up that night. I never heard from him."

The voice of Walpole interrupted. "Your witness," he said.

Morgan stared at Willie, then at Judge Cole who was impatiently waiting on her to cross-examine the coroner, and then she turned to look at McDade. McDade was watching Vernon Scruggs slip out the door. A small bead of sweat traveled down his forehead and formed a puddle at his left ear.

"Your honor," Morgan began, "I'd like to recess for an early lunch."



Calling Sam from her cell phone, she raced down the courthouse steps after Vernon Scruggs. McDade's quick footsteps came from behind. Her called her by name, but she ignored him.

She ran across the front lawn of the Rabun County courthouse, and chased down Scruggs who was reaching for the car door of his truck.

"Please, Mr. Scruggs, I need to talk to you."

Scruggs turned and looked at her. McDade was approaching from the left.

"I can't get involved," he said. He had a sun-burnished face that was lined with years of drinking, and a voice that crackled when he spoke.

"I just need a few minutes of your time."

He looked over his shoulder where McDade was now standing. McDade called him by name. Morgan kept her eyes on Scruggs. "Don't listen to him," she said.

"Get in," said Scruggs, motioning to his truck. She ran around to the passenger's side and climbed in. As they backed out, she saw McDade pull a cell phone from his coat jacket and begin to make a call.

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"I said I didn't want to get involved."

"If that was true, then you wouldn't have been in the courtroom."

"Okay, Willie's a friend of mine. I'm hoping things will turn out okay for him."

"Then why does McDade look so nervous?"

Scruggs shot her a look. Then he pulled into a downtown parking spot and shut off his engine. He looked down at his hands, still gripping the steering wheel.

Morgan sighed heavily. "Willie only has about thirty minutes here. So if there is something you need to tell me, you better make it quick. I don't have all day. And neither does he."

"Okay. I told McDade Willie would be at his house."

Morgan sucked in her breath. "He knew he would be there. Why?"

"He asked me about the burglaries. I told him."

"Why would you do that?"

"I was selling meth to McDade. Let's just say we go back a ways."

Morgan studied him for a few moments. "McDade knew you were involved somehow with Diego? That there'd been a string of burglaries on the lake cabins?"

"Yeah. He paid me a couple of gees to tell him when his cabin was on the hit list."

"And you told him that Willie was going to be there that night?"

Scruggs sighed and nodded. "I figured Willie was just a joint case. No harm in handing out that kind of info. Then he asked me if I knew anyone that could kill his girlfriend."

"And you said...?"

"No."

Morgan nodded, thinking. "But McDade figures if he does it the same night as the burglary, then he can claim someone like Willie did it?"

"I guess that's right."

"Did he pay you to leave town too?" Morgan asked.

Scruggs nodded.

Her body began to shake. She could feel her teeth chattering.

"Will you testify to that, Mr. Scruggs?"

"I reckon you're gonna make me," he said.

"I reckon you kind of want to," she said. Her small-town accent seemed to be returning.



Walpole objected to the introduction of a last minute witness, not identified by the defense. Judge Cole said he was inclined to disallow it, but would give Walpole time to question the witness before Morgan put him on the stand. By the time they had all gathered in the airless conference room of the D.A.'s office, Sam appeared bustling down the hallway, out of breath, but smiling.

Walpole gave Morgan a harsh look when they entered the room.

"This is no way to conduct a death penalty trial, young lady," he said.

"My name isn't young lady," she responded.

"You pulled a last minute witness on me."

"New information has just revealed that Vernon Scruggs told McDade that Willie would be at his house that night. McDade and Scruggs share a bit of a meth habit, it seems. And Scruggs will testify that McDade asked him to kill his girlfriend. Oh, and I forgot to add that bank transfers will show he paid him to leave town."

Sam, who was standing behind her, slipped her a manila envelope when she mentioned the bank transfers. She already knew Sam had slipped her an empty file folder, but the effect worked.

"Why don't we ask the judge for a continuance?" Walpole said.

"Not in the middle of a trial," she said.

Walpole stared her down. "You won't get an acquittal."

"Drop the murder charge, and he'll plea to the rest."

She crossed her arms against her chest so that Walpole would not see her shaking.

Walpole looked at Sheriff Dickerson, and then turned back to her, nodding.

"Okay," he said.



Willie pled to the lesser charges of drug possession and trespassing.

"I won't forget what you done for me," he said as they shook hands in the courthouse.

Morgan tried not to tear up. "I was scared the whole time for you," she admitted.

"Yeah. I know. I seen your hands shaking. But I figured you was as good as I was gonna get. Guess the Good Lord took care of the rest."

She smiled. "Take care of yourself, Willie."



Then she slowly took the three flights of stairs up to her office. Even though Sam was upstairs waiting on her and, no doubt, Aileen had twenty newly opened files to review, she decided against running. She'd been running most of her life, either toward something or away from it. When she reached the landing on the third floor, she stared out the oval window at the rim of mountains, speckled now with autumn color, and lit by the expanse of blue sky.

Ahead, the view seemed endless. Sometimes there are dark parts on the road when you pass through a thick forest of pine. But then the road opens up, and you find you can see again. What she thought was the detour, turned out to be the road after all. Slotin had been right. This is where she found herself. And maybe that was true in more ways than one. 



Lisa Siegel is of counsel with the law firm of Katz, Stepp and Miller. Her short fiction has appeared in the *GSU Review*, the

Pacific Review, *Carve Magazine* and the *Emrys Journal*. She was the 2007 winner of the *Georgia Bar Journal* fiction contest. She was also the 2008 February winner of the Georgia Writer's Association fiction contest. She lives in Atlanta where she practices law part-time and writes part-time. She can be reached at lisasiegel1@mindspring.com.