



Congratulations Winners of our Fourth Annual Amazing Story Fiction Contest 2010!

Judges Comments:

We received 62 entries for our fiction contest, and what surprised me was how most of those entries fit within the same skill level, which made my job more of a challenge. Therefore, I will make the following statement: The judging of this contest was subjective this year. It boiled down to what I liked, what struck my fancy, or what I found meaningful in some way. Congratulations to those who made either list. But if you didn't make the Top Ten or Notable Entries, chances are it is no reflection on the quality of the work. I encourage you to send your entries out to other contests.

Amy

- 1st place - "Angie" by Jackie Beynaerts of Frisco, TX
- 2nd place - "Summer Lies" by Ellen Notehelfer of Camano Island, WA
- 3rd place - "Libbie Lou and the New Idea" by Patti Richards of Farmington Hills, MI
- 4th place - "Cooking with Endangered Animals" by Lisa Rose of Farmington Hills, MI
- 5th place - "A Distorted Reality is a Necessity to be Free" by Aaron Humphrey of Dallas, OR
- 6th place - "Thorny Child" by Robert Walton of King City, CA
- 7th place - "Kipling Rivalry" by Andrew Campbell-Kearsey of Brighton, ENGLAND
- 8th place - "The Burning" by Lisa Clark of Blagoevgrad, BULGARIA
- 9th place - "The Juror" by Judith Groudine Finkel of Houston, TX
- 10th place - "Waiting for the 11 a.m. Train" by Zareena Nazimudeen of SINGAPORE



Meet Jackie Beynaerts

After graduating with a BA in Advertising from Sam Houston State University, I moved to North Texas where my love for creative writing turned into a full-time career. Working in the creative advertising department for one of the largest clothing retailers in the nation, I have spent the last ten years surrounded by some of the most talented and creative people I'll ever know. This fact alone encourages and humbles me all at the same time.

My free time is spent enjoying my amazing husband and six-year-old son, and of course writing. I try to

write every day, whether it's at 5 am before the household wakes up, or if I can keep my eyes open, late at night when it's quiet once again. I consider myself lucky that my family supports me on this crazy, emotional, yet rewarding journey.

I have always loved to read, and my inspiration comes from the great talents of Jennifer Weiner, Emily Griffin, and Jennifer Lancaster. They always seem to make me laugh until I cry, or cry until I laugh. I maintain my favorite genre is chick-lit, even though I have been assured by multiple literary agents, it's dying, or in some opinions, dead.

Earlier this year, I attended my first writer's conference and won my first writing contest. This was hook, line, and sinker for me, and I have been both celebrating personal success and collecting rejection letters ever since.

Angie

by Jackie Beynaerts

"So what's different about me?" Angie leans across our table on the patio so I can get a better look. Why she couldn't ask earlier, before the sun had set and my margarita started to vanish, is beyond me. I examine her face skeptically, but her forever-flawless skin tells no tales.

"Hmm, of course you didn't need to do anything..." My voice trails off as I take a sip of my straw-rita, letting the slivers of ice crackle under my teeth.

She smiles, puckering her lips.

"Your lips-you got your lips done," I say proudly, more of myself than her.

"No! I got Botox, and I can't believe you didn't notice." Angie crosses her arms over her chest and sticks out her bottom lip, acting more like my five-year-old daughter than 38-year-old best friend.

I feign surprise. "Show me again!" I demand. Angie leans back over the table, this time bringing her Chardonnay glass with her. I watch as the wine splashes around the rim, threatening to sabotage her cream silk shirt.

Focusing back on Angie, who is now smiling broader than the Joker, I can see her forehead lacks any sort of wrinkle and her eyebrows are completely lifeless. "Yup, I can definitely tell. You look amazing!"

"Well, you know, next time we can go together and share a vile. It will be fun, sort of like our own glamorous girls' night out."

"Uh, I think I'll pass." I lick the sugar from the rim of my drink off my fingertip. Angie is staring at me and doesn't look amused, or maybe she does. The Botox makes it hard to tell.

"What? You know I hate needles." This is a half-truth. The other half is I need a tummy tuck more.

"You can't just assume everything will stay the same. You have to be proactive, trust me, I know." Angie's smile disappears, and the faraway look in her eyes that so often haunts her these days is back. I sigh, knowing we are no longer talking cosmetic surgery.

"I know, and I think you look fabulous, seriously, amazing." I smile, trying to lighten the mood. Sometimes with Angie flattery is the only way out.

The waiter comes with our food, and my mouth salivates at the sight of my greasy enchiladas, smothered in sour cream and cheese. Angie looks at her shrimp salad sans cheese, shell, and bacon, with dressing on the side, with indifference.

"Can I get you anything else?" the waiter asks.

Angie smiles. "Another round of drinks, please."

"Oh no more for me, thanks." I cover my glass with both hands on the off chance my waiter has had serious head trauma since I saw him last and has forgotten English.

Angie looks at me with huge, green, puppy dog eyes, "Oh come on. You've only had one! Please... one more and then we can drink coffee with dessert?" As if she would be eating dessert. But still it is tempting, and the warm, chocolate brownie sundae has been beckoning me from the dessert menu.

"OK. One more, please," I say, confident I will regret this later.

"Yay!" Angie sits up tall in her seat and claps her hands together. "So it doesn't hurt at all. You'll love it, I promise. Besides, we need a girls' night!"

"First of all," I say, blowing steam away from the hunk of cheese that oozed from my fork, "this is a girls' night, remember? You, me, food, drinks, live music..." I look around the patio where we are seated. Where the heck did the band go? And how strong are these margaritas?

"How come we always have to count us grabbing dinner as a girls' night?" Angie asks, stabbing at her salad.

Never mind the fact that Angie insisted we go to the Mexican restaurant on the bay, thirty minutes south of where we live because they have the best shrimp fajitas in town. Then we waited another forty-five minutes because not only did she want to wait for a table on the patio, but she actually picked out the table. Although now that I am sitting next to the misters and cooling fans, directly in front of the band, but not the speakers, I'm happy we waited. After all, sitting patio-side with a cool breeze in July is pretty much unheard of in Houston. But it's now quarter-past nine. I've missed saying goodnight to Janie and cuddling up with Don on the couch watching our favorite shows. I'll be damned if this doesn't count.

"This is a girls' night, because it's just us- out and having fun. And I really don't want Botox." I try to say it as casual as possible.

Angie sighs. "I just feel like we aren't that close anymore. We used to be such great friends, always doing exciting things."

This I decipher as code for "how come you aren't doing what I want," and I try not to fall for it. My entire college career was spent doing what Angie wanted. That stopped when I married Don, but Angie didn't actually notice until her husband walked out six months ago.

"Come on, we're close, and this is fun. And I'm so glad we waited for this table, it's the best one on the patio." I swoop my hand out beside me Vanna-style, so that Angie can get the entire view of what I am trying to sell.

"I guess I just don't understand why you wouldn't want to better yourself? I would think after watching Blake and I go through this..." She pauses, and I know she is hesitant to say divorce. The papers hadn't been served, and if it were up to her, they never would. "...I just think you would try harder to keep up appearances." Angie leans back in her chair, takes the napkin that is in her lap and places it over her uneaten salad.

"I'm all about bettering myself. I'm just not ready for Botox." I smile even though the now somber mood carries the weight of Angie's looming divorce. My drink is melting, and the once bubbly cheese from my enchiladas has thickened into a hardened sea of yellow. I hate when Angie gets like this, and I can't help but wonder if this is why Blake left.

"You know," Angie looks thoughtfully at her drink, "there aren't warning signs... no red lights, no huge blowouts. They just up and leave. It happens everywhere, not just to me." Her eyes meet mine and a chill runs down my arms. Angie's bitterness, that it wasn't Don who left, is apparent.

"It was wrong of Blake to leave the way he did." I choose my words carefully. Angie has already downed more than half a bottle of wine, and her chances of causing a scene are increasing with her every sip.

"I know. And you won't understand until it happens to you." She says it like a predestined event that hovers somewhere in the distance.

Unless it happens to you, I silently correct her. My marriage is fine, I tell myself. However, Angie planted that seed of doubt back in March, and she's been sowing it ever since.

She sits up in her seat and waves our waiter over. I pray she just asks for the check, but she points to the brownie on the dessert menu.

"This is what *you* wanted, right?" She looks at me, and I wonder if that is disgust I see in her eyes.

"I would like a cup of decaff coffee, please." Angie rolls her eyes and my body stiffens. I'm done, one cup of coffee, and I'm out of here. She must have seen my demeanor change, because she immediately throws on the charm.

"Wait! Please bring us the brownie with ice cream. If she won't eat it, I will!" She laughs, and then as if it was an afterthought, "Oh and I'll have a another..." She taps the side of her wine glass with an impeccable French-manicured nail. The waiter leaves, and I pick at my plate. The enchiladas are still pretty darn good.

"You must think I am such a mess at times." Angie says, tracing her finger along the wooden cracks in our table. The band is back, and I am thankful for their timing. "I'm sorry if I seem obnoxious at times. I just need to find comfort in something, and I'm really scared that I may be alone forever." The band begins tuning their instruments, and I can hear the slow and steady beat of a drum behind me.

"You are the most beautiful, talented person I know. You, my sweet friend, are going to find someone else, someone who deserves you. And you'll be better than before. I promise." My annoyance morphs into sympathy. Angie used to be confident and strong, but ever since Blake left she has been insecure and frightened.

"I think you've used that one on me before." She smiles as the waiter drops off her glass of wine and a slice of heaven smothered in chocolate sauce and fluffy whipped cream.

"It's because I believe it." I cut a sliver of brownie with my fork making sure to drag it over the puddle of chocolate syrup. "Oh Angie, you have to try this. It's decadent."

"Maybe in a few minutes. I'm still a little full." Of course she is, with all that lettuce she moved around her plate.

"I know!" Angie suddenly bounces in her chair with the buoyancy of her new idea, and I'm more than a little scared. "We need to take a trip, a weekend getaway and go somewhere fun!" She raises her voice to compete with the band, and her eyes glisten. "We always talk about it, but we never do it."

Actually, only Angie talks about it and only recently. Before, she vacationed with Blake, and we would meet about once a month to catch up over dinner. I would listen with envy as she told me about the latest restaurants in uptown, the best all-inclusive cruises and their spur-of-the-moment weekends in Cabo. Those days I would go home and try to convince Don we, too, needed a vacation, but nothing ever came of it.

Angie is staring at me, and I realize she is waiting for me to answer.

"I would love to take a trip with you, but now is a bad time. Janie is about to start school, and I really don't have the money." I hope that will suffice, but with Angie, money never really was a problem, and I wonder if that will still be the case.

"Pul-eaze, we'll find something super-reasonable. Just think, we can go to the beach, drink Mai Thais in our bikinis all day, dance all night."

I laugh. Did they even make bikinis in my size? My stomach is every bit as pale as my derrière, having not seen sunlight in over a decade. And I hadn't been on an adults-only vacation since before Janie was born. If I were going to go on one now, it would be with my husband, but I keep that tidbit to myself.

"That sounds like fun. Hey, this band is pretty good, and I think the singer was just checking you out." I congratulate myself on my ability to think on my feet and change the subject. Angie's face brightens as she looks over at the clueless singer. She is old enough to be his Mrs. Robinson.

It is well after midnight when I finally pull into Angie's stone-paved driveway and help her out of my car.

"I'm totally OK," she slurs, stumbling up the steps that lead to her immaculate two-story, colonial-style house. I set the parking brake and hurry up after her. She must have drunk an entire bottle of wine by herself, and I literally had to pry her off the amused singer as the restaurant tried to close down.

Taking her house keys from her, I unlock the front door, turn on the hall light, and follow Angie to her room.

"You OK?" I ask, pulling down her covers.

"Of course ..." she slurs, falling into bed.

Putting up with her digs is the curse. "Call me in the morning," I say, laughing.

"Hey, Nat, I'm sorry I'm always putting you in these situations." This surprises me. In Angie's world, she doesn't do anything to any one. Events just unfold around her in a random state of coincidence. But maybe this is a different level of drunk.

"You don't worry about me." I smile and turn to leave. I'm exhausted, and all I want is my bed.

"I do worry about you, you're my best friend... my Nat." She chuckles and then adds casually, as if it isn't a big deal, "Dr. Lai said that your marriage is as fragile as mine. Divorce is contagious after all. But I told her I want you to be happy. That's why I'm always trying to get you to go out and stuff. If Don leaves you, you'll want a backup plan, trust me."

Dig. Dig. Dig. Little digs that aren't outright mean, but string them together and she is worse than a mother, mother-in-law, and nosy neighbor all in one.

"Angie, I don't know why you would waste good time and money with your therapist, discussing Don and me. We're fine."

"Denial is the first step." Angie closes her eyes. "Besides y'all don't even sleep together."

"Steps are for overcoming addictions." She's drunk, but I feel the need to defend myself, and my marriage. "And Don and I do sleep together in the Biblical sense, just not our eight hours. He snores, remember? But other than that, we're fine."

Angie doesn't respond, and I realize she has passed out. Irritated at myself for letting her get to me, I leave and make the quick drive home to my modest, single story house.

Once there, I am greeted by complete darkness, and I curse Don under my breath for not leaving the porch light on. Before finding the right key, I manage to run into the oversized, metal tongs that dangle below our grill. Clanging together, they mock me as I try to hurry inside my humble abode. A good twenty minutes later, I am finally in bed with a clean face, sparkling teeth, and the world's rattiest pajamas. There is something to be said for ultra-soft cotton and having a king-size bed all to myself.

But even though I am exhausted, my brain seems stuck on Angie's comments while all the sugar I inhaled at dinner pulses through my blood like speed. Angie has no idea what she is talking about, I tell myself. Happy marriages don't just dissolve because of a friend's breakup. Angie's just too full of herself to realize, this was her mess, her problem, not some parasite that damaged her relationship because she drank from the tainted Kool-Aid. Nope, my marriage is good. I roll over and try to get some sleep, but instead battle insomnia and heartburn. By 2am I can't take it any longer and pop antihistamine and antacids. Maybe it's good Don doesn't see my like this. I am pathetic, and the girl he married eight years ago was so much prettier.

In what seems like moments later, I'm back with Angie, sitting in her Mercedes Roadster. We are trying to think of something fun to do. Dinner and a movie is out of

the question, and tired after throwing out ideas of bowling, miniature golf, and shopping, I lean back against her tan leather seats, breathe in the remnants of new car smell, and brace myself for Angie's suggestions. Then, one delusional idea at a time, I begin exercising my veto power.

"Sky diving?"

"No."

"Scuba diving?"

"No."

"Stripper aerobics?"

"Seriously, no."

"Sin City?"

"No. And get off the S's," I insist.

"Fine. Tattoo. Oh, let's get a tattoo!" She looks happy, and I'm too worn-out to object. Minutes later I am sitting in a dingy chair in an even dingier tattoo parlor, in what I'm sure is the dingiest part of town.

"What about this one?" Angie asks pointing to an oversized, four-leaf clover.

I shake my head. It's definitely too big, and besides, I'm not Irish. My heart begins to race, and I feel nauseous. I can't do this.

"This is going to be great." Angie says, calmly flipping through the pages of the tattoo book. "It's really what you and Don need."

"What do you mean?" I'm confused as to how Don benefits from my having a tattoo.

"It's the spice that your relationship needs." Angie isn't looking at me. She's too busy scoping out the tattoo artist, Moe's portfolio of Polaroids. She shows me a colorful butterfly on the small of a girl's back. The torso creeps down by her crack, and I shudder.

"What do you mean, spice?" I ask. Then, before Angie gets any ideas, I add, "I'm not getting anything that is going to draw the eye towards my butt."

Angie shrugs. "I'm just saying this will add some excitement to your relationship. Keep it fresh, keep it alive. That's the object of marriage, Nat. To keep things from getting mundane."

Moe is standing beside her, nodding stoically. The piercings in his face compete with his own tattooed flesh. And as absurd as it is taking marriage advice from a single guy sporting a hot pink Mohawk and a girl that doesn't know why her husband left her, I know they are on to something. A tattoo is rebellious, unexpected, and just the thing to keep my relationship alive.

I flip through the book of tattoo choices until I find the perfect one... a small blue dolphin that will remind Don of our honeymoon in Atlantis.

"This is it!" I announce happily.

Moe nods in agreement. It is then I know that however contagious divorce is, I am safe, because I am being proactive. My immunity- a tattoo of beautiful memories that will forever keep our wedding vows in the forefront of his mind, or at least in the soft pudgy area just inside my hip bone.

"You sure this is where you want it?" Moe asks.

"Yes." I am excited, nervous, and scared out of my mind all at the same time. I can't remember the last time I felt like this. My entire being radiates with emotions, awakened after a long, boring slumber.

"What's your husband's name?" Moe asks.

The needle has already started pulsating, and I wonder if he is just trying to distract me from the pain, which is now sharp and persistent.

"Don," I gasp.

"I could fit that above the tattoo, very small if you want," he says.

The stabbing feels like it is now coming from my hip. "Yes, I think his name would be good," I choke on my own breath. The pain is intense, and I focus on not passing out.

"Oh it's perfect! Look Nat!" Angie runs over to where I'm being tortured. Whoever did her tattoo stole away to the back room. As I look down, I see my dolphin, the one I picked out to signify my own marriage, low, to the point of almost obscene, on her stomach. The magical creature is swimming on a sea of toned, tan skin. I try not to think of what mine will be drowning in.

"Don't you just love it?" Angie sings.

I'm mad that she has picked my tattoo. She's never even been to Atlantis.

"All done," Moe says.

He pushes his wheeled stool away from me and rolls straight into the back room. Before I am able to inspect it, I see a look of confusion sweep over Angie, and I know something is terribly wrong. Looking down at my tattoo, hot tears pierce my eyes, and I struggle to breathe. The tattoo juts out over the fattest part of my hip and extends up to my muffin top. I squeeze my eyes shut, and when I open them again, I am horrified to see that instead of a cute dolphin, mine has morphed into a killer whale.

"Nooooooo..." I scream, and as I do, the letters above the hideous creature become clear, D O N ' S.

"Don's whale? Why would you pick that?" Angie asks, cocking her head to the side as if trying to see it differently. "You know, if you tried, you could lose the weight. It's not permanent, but that tattoo sure is."

"I didn't." The words come out in sputtered little syllables, marked by huge sobs of anguish and deep breaths. How could this happen? Now instead of reminding Don about our honeymoon, nuptials, and all that is sacred, I am telling him, and not so subtly either, that his bride has turned into an monstrous, pasty whale.

I wake up in a pool of sweat, and even though I know it was a nightmare, I yank down my boxer shorts to be sure. I see nothing, just pale, fleshy skin with a visible blue vein or two. Not perfection, but it's mine.

Pulling out my laptop, I Google "divorce contagious," and the results bring me to tears. "Couples are 75% more likely to get divorced when someone close to them does." "Unhappiness is contagious, and divorce opens our eyes to this." "Couples who don't share a room have increased likelihood of 50% of calling it quits." The headlines are nothing short of doom and gloom. I cry, thankful I am alone in my room so as not to disturb Don, but then cry harder because of that.

At 9am I awake to the sweet aroma of pancakes and sausage. I am exhausted from crying and being plagued by nightmares that now in the morning light seem more humorous than scary. "Divorce is contagious," however, still weighs heavy on my heart, and as I make my way to the kitchen, I can't help wondering if my marriage is safe.

I stop short in the doorway when I see Janie and Don fumbling around the kitchen. There is a colossal mess overflowing from the sink, and I know I'll be cleaning it later. But I smile, watching them work together, trying to be quiet, but not coming anywhere close. Janie walks a tall glass of orange juice over to a breakfast tray. The thick liquid splashes everywhere, leaving a sticky, orange trail down the refrigerator door all the way to the counter. Don flips sausages over in the frying pan and grease splatters about, hitting the electric stovetop and tile backsplash.

"Daddy, hurry before Mommy wakes up," Janie orders.

But as they turn to leave, I surprise them from the doorway, smiling.

Don looks embarrassed. "I was going to clean up while you ate."

"I don't even care." I hug him hard, refusing to let go, and I can feel him balancing the tray with one hand as he squeezes me back with the other.

"My turn, my turn!" Janie demands.

I bend down and give Janie a bear hug while inhaling the sweet, lavender scent of her hair.

"I love you guys so much," I say.

Don looks at me curiously. "You OK?"

"Yah. I just started feeling a little disconnected. I guess with everything Angie is going through."

"Maybe we should plan a family trip or something before Janie starts kindergarten," Don says. He still looks concerned.

"Yes, Mommy! Let's go on a trip! Please, please, please," Janie cries.

Tears pierce my eyes. Only a man who loves me could be able to suggest the one thing I need more than anything.

Taking the tray from Don, I set it back on the counter so we can eat together as a family. Then, I look into Janie's beautiful blue eyes. "Where would you like to go honey?"

"I want to go to Sea World and see Shamu!"