

## UW Colleges August Derleth Creative Writing Prize Award winning Short Story

### Liquid Sugar: Unrefined

By: Shannon Tweedie

A crumpled bag containing a note, a few sugar cookies, and a jar of pure honey sat plopped on his doorstep. He had not yet slipped out in his leopard print robe and fuzzy slippers to grab the paper or even to smell the Arkansas air; he just sort of ended up by the porch, peering down, eyes wide like peapods. Creaking open the door with one raised eyebrow and a frozen stance to kill, he waited. (Nobody was near him.) On the porch, he swayed, eyes sagging and purple like couches. Nobody was near him, and this was his prize.

He savagely opened the bag with lusty fingers and picked out the note. It was on purple cardstock with blazing yellow lines and the writing was all in capitals. "This must be important," he thought, alarmed, "but the rest isn't safe." It was now that he grabbed the honey bear by the plastic spout and slid it smoothly next to the bananas on the cheap Formica counter. With a swift grasp, he swooped up the cookies which were contained in their own tiny package of clear Saran wrap, twisted to shit with a twist-tie. He almost contemplated untwisting the muddled package but immediately became disgusted.

"Honey has a long shelf life," he said aloud. His mind wandered to the time the sky was fuming with lightening and hail, and he stayed in to watch the History Channel about how they found honey from thousands of years ago in tombs, packed neatly beside the jars of liver, bladder, and brain, all smashed next to a mass of intertwined gauze, putrid with bones and old flesh.

The archeologists tasted the honey.

His mind entered back into the present, where he unfolded the note. In big, bold, letters, it read:

**The Merlot is berry BERRY tasty, indeed...  
the label is what you need to read.  
\*Aisle 10, second shelf from the bottom.**

He raised his eyebrow very highly, and, rather than terror arousing him, curiosity ran its sensual, beckoning fingers throughout his thinning hair. (Apparently, curiosity has one mean manicure!) His gaze traveled forward, beyond the naked statue of Zeus, guarding the fireplace, and out the back window at the Monday city streets. "Fitzgerald Avenue... the liquor store. 10 o'clock! Dang nabbit, where are my moccasins? I need a breakfast sandwich," his mind fragmented as he quickened his pace to a scamper, becoming more impatient.

He slipped out of his robe and eased into some comfortable pin-stripes, neatly pressed, with a cranberryish overcoat and a white polo underneath. Two spurts of female-sized foam, from mouth, landed on each shoe as he polished away the rubbish from the day before. He was more than ready!

"Come on, Cavanaugh!" he barked at the Chinese Foo, lying sleepily under the window.

Wrapping his leash around the golden beast, he left the security of his bedroom. Cavanaugh clapped at his heels as he paced forward. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight blocks away, the corner store frumped over. Its bricks were overcast with ivy and mold. "Damn, I'm bound again," thought Cavanaugh, tongue lagging from his mouth and sweaty.

Inside, he found just the right aisle. “A liquor store is not a liquor store without the admirable sight of a dark red merlot in a 2-liter bottle,” his mind read, sneaking a peak at the rows of real-steal wines. Grazing the shelves of Cabernet, Gamay, and leathery Nebbiolo, his wandering eyes landed upon one solitary bottle of C.J. Pask with a slight tweak in the upper corner of the label. With a nimble gander from side to side, he slipped on to his knees. He peeled back the label, which gave a unique message:

**Why hey there, curious...  
Tilt your head and swallow me.  
The paper’s open to A-3.**

All the madness was surreal. “I had to be curious,” he thought, with a mutter. The acne-faced cashier took ten thousand light-years to rub the ruby, glass, cylinder over the laser. He began to get uncomfortable, tensing his jugulars until they almost exploded. The cashier beeped the bottle over the counter and stuffed it into a small, brown, bag, never once taking his eyes off of his jittery mirror; he paid no heed to the pulsating jugular. “Have A Nice Day.” “Thanks.”

A pattern of green and gold diamonds lined the floor, and he followed their lead outside. The sky was an ashen-grey and he stared at the clouds. They came rolling in like massive fluffy gods, strict and enthralling. All the way home, he asked them life’s questions.

As soon as he got inside, he locked the door behind him and waltzed into the kitchen. He let the Foo off its leash. It was humid and sticky and it seemed like a kitchen not his own, but from a dream, and a dream of somewhere further away, like the Egypt-ridden land in the third Mario game, where the blocks spring to life if you get too close to them. The fridge seemed to beckon him, so he opened it up. Cottage cheese, goat milk, anchovies, and white rice faced him in neat bundles, all correctly labeled, all especially handsome. Grabbing the rice by the boxy Hmong hips, he popped it on open and dashed to the cupboard. Kikkoman soy sauce and freshly ground pepper are the best partners to fried rice. After jazzing up his takeout meal, it was time to sit on the sun porch and re-think the morning.

The TV. buzzed with the sound of Robert Stack of Unsolved Mysteries, talking about a missing young prostitute, ripped at the seams. She had been gone for nine years. In front of the screen, atop the cherry table, his rice steamed with a vengeance. Nibbling furiously, down to the bottom, he wiped off his face with the edge of a napkin. Afterwards, his sweet tooth shouted and demanded he seep back into the cupboard again. Uncrossing his legs, he scurried throughout the wooden doors, leaky tongue, to spy a bowl full of fortune cookies, appearing especially mysterious.

Snap.

Crack!

Whhhhhffff.

This is the sound of an origami cookie, crisped and deep fried to perfection, playing the gypsy when summoned. Opening wide, he crunched and he crunched and he swallowed the treasure. It was sticky, like the air. With a giggle and smile, he ran his slick fingers across the fortune paper and pursued the art of receiving this daily karma. A bit surprised, his face became flushed when he read:

*Though knowledge will not get you too far, reading surely will.*

It was now he remembered the newspaper. The wine. The newspaper. The ugly, smart-ass cashier who thought he knew everything about his innocent customers. The jar of honey, and the cookies. Slapping on his shoes, he went outside to get the mail. He couldn't believe it when none other than the liquor-boy cashier from earlier rode his BMX on by, with a shoulder bag full of papers. "Hey!" the boy taunted, unshyly. "Weren't you in my store this morning? I know about you. I know everything about you!"

"He's just trying to get a rise out of me," he thought, and tried to remain calm, but his vein began to bubble.

"Keep the Hell out of my store!" he yelled and tossed the paper over into the driveway. It just missed his head.

"Fuck you!" he yelled as the teenager's feet picked up speed on the pedals, cycloning down the road and disappearing along the line of Balsam firs. The paper landed in an uncleanly heap in the middle of the driveway.

The Life section blew away.

Trying his best to keep the fumes within his throat, he peered at the opened newspaper. Section A-3 stared straight up at him and he stared right back. Moving to his knees, next to the pictures of the sweet married couples in black and white photos, he saw the obituaries. Glancing through a few of them, he noticed the names. "Jimbo, age 82, led a good life...", and "Nancy of Dodgersville died peacefully in her sleep on Sunday morning..." was all he thought existed on the thin pages. Then, he realized a hand-written obituary was drawn in, boxed in its own red square.

"Sudden, mysterious death of a man on Oceania Avenue, age 41. He loved taking walks with his dog and drinking chamomile tea. Every Monday, he worked out in his sun porch in light blue jogging shorts. Living alone, his pastor was the only person who came to see him. He was schizophrenic. He led a sad life. He wrote notes to himself. He cooks rice with arsenic. No one will miss him."

A single tear dripped out of his eye that he quickly wiped away as he choked back the rest of the salty river, about to pour from his glands. "Why?" he asked the clouds again. "Why? Why? Why?" Defeated, he slowly descended on to the pavement, face down, cheek to the left as he felt the afternoon sun now steaming his face. Cavanaugh, the heavy, Chinese Foo, peered through the foggy glass window at the man he thought he knew. Then, he put his tail between his legs, and walked the other way.