

For more quality material, visit our website at  
<http://www.speechgeek.com>

Duo Interpretation (Male / Female)

**The Birthday Wish**

by Shane Cole

Duo Interpretation (Male / Female)

**Whack Job**

by Courtney Wright

Dramatic Interpretation

**Prairie Madness**

by Andrea Berthot

Dramatic Interpretation

**Evil**

by Andrea Berthot

Prose Interpretation

**Secret Identities**

by Corey Alderdice

SpeechGeek.com  
1504 Park St., Apt. B9  
Bowling Green, KY 42101  
[thegEEK@speechgeek.com](mailto:thegEEK@speechgeek.com)

Season Four: Fall 2006  
Copyright 2006  
ISSN Number 1545-9209

SpeechGeek



Season Four: Fall 2006



ISSN 1545-9209 Price \$25 US  
<http://www.speechgeek.com>

# The Birthday Wish

by Shane Cole

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This play is told on two planes of existence by the same two characters, Marty and Laura. There are the storytellers and the couple in "real event times". There should be a strict separation between the two, but it is meant to go back and forth quickly.

*(The staging begins with Marty stage right and Laura stage left. They scenes within the scene are played to each other while the storytelling is to the audience.)*

## TEASER

**LAURA.** *(singing)* Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy Birthday, baby I love you. Happy Birthday to you.

**MARTY.** *(makes a wish and blows out his candles)* This has been the most incredible day. Laura, I don't know how I can ever repay you for making my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday one I will never forget.

**LAURA.** Well I can think of a way.

**MARTY.** *(obviously thinking about sex)* Really, but I thought you already gave me my birthday present.

**LAURA.** I did. Why? What are you talking about?.....Oh...Oh, no you don't mister we're not going there.

**MARTY.** But you said...

**LAURA.** I said I could think of a way. You're the one that used the wrong brain to come up with that conclusion.

**MARTY.** What did you mean then?

**LAURA.** Tell me what you wished for.

**MARTY.** But if I tell you it won't come true.

**LAURA.** You don't actually believe that old superstition do you?

**MARTY.** Of course I do. I've never told my birthday wish and they always come true.

**LAURA.** Oh really?

**MARTY.** Yes, really.

**LAURA.** Ok, what did you wish for last year?

**MARTY.** That's easy. I wished for you.

**LAURA.** Wait a minute. How is that possible? You and I didn't even know each other yet.

**MARTY.** I wished that I would meet the love of my life, the girl I would spend the rest of my life with. And then I met you.

**LAURA.** Do you mean that? Really, Marty, you want to spend the rest of your life with me?

**MARTY.** I do.

**LAURA.** I do, too.

## SCENE 2

*(BREAK TO STORYTELLING MODE; speaking to audience instead of each other. Play will alternate between these two planes of existence.)*

**LAURA.** So are you sick of us yet?

**MARTY.** It's ok to say you are. That's what everyone of our friends said at the time, too.

**LAURA.** We were that couple everyone loved to hate because we were just so...

**MARTY.** Perfect?

**LAURA.** Well I wasn't going to use that word but yes. It was perfect. I mean it's not everyday you meet someone that takes your breath away.

**MARTY.**  
**LAURA.**

*(very pleased with himself)* I took your breath away?  
Don't get to sure of yourself. Yes, you did take away my breath when we met but do you remember how we met?  
*(remembering and understanding the connection)* Oh yeah. So you literally mean I took your breath away.

## SCENE 3

*(Marty and Laura walking in opposite directions. Marty runs straight into Laura knocking her to the ground.)*

**MARTY.** Oh geez, I'm sorry. Please, let me help you pick up your books. *(He looks to Laura and sees she isn't breathing)* Are you ok? You're choking??? Oh I hope I remember how to do this. *(He begins the Heimlich and she spits out her gum onto the floor.)* There. Are you ok?

**LAURA.** Yeah, I think so. Thanks. *(Looks at her books and papers all over the ground.)* Oh no, my American History Paper is everywhere. I'll never get it back together in fifteen minutes to turn in. *(helping her pick papers up)* I'll go with you. I'll tell them it was my fault.

**MARTY.** You don't have to do that.

**LAURA.** No, really I feel awful about knocking you down.

**MARTY.** Accidents happen. Really, it's no big deal.

**LAURA.** Well at least let me make it up to you. I work at the coffee shop across the street. Stop by sometime and I'll buy you whatever you want...*(shyly)* I'm Marty by the way. *(extends his hand to her)*

**MARTY.** *(She shakes his hand)* I'm Laura. *(Turns back to audience and back out of scene.)* Thus, the great American romance began. Seriously, the whirlwind dating and the way our friends reacted, you would have thought people were taking bets on how long we would stay together.

**MARTY.** They did. *(immediately realizes he should not have said that)*

**LAURA.** What?!!

**MARTY.** Well you know how boys can be. They were cruel. That's why I never told you about it.

**LAURA.** Well what did they bet on...

**MARTY.** How long we'd be together? How long until the first fight? How long until ummm...well you get the idea.

**LAURA.** Your friends suck.

**MARTY.** *(under his breath)* Well yours aren't much better.

**LAURA.** What did you say?

**MARTY.** I said yours weren't much better. Yeah. That's what I said. Who do you think won the bet about how long until our first fight?? Hmm?? It was YOUR little sorority girlfriend, Sheryl.

**LAURA.** Sheryl??

**MARTY.** Yes. She bet that we would have our first fight on our six month anniversary. And she was right. Oh, don't think I don't remember. One week after my birthday was our anniversary. And you had to go screw it all up.

**LAURA.** Me, screw it up. How dare you. I did no such thing.

**MARTY.** *(to audience)* See no one is perfect all the time.

**LAURA.** *(turning away from him)* Especially not you.

**MARTY.** Don't leave them in the dark. We should at least let them know what happened.

**LAURA.** Fine.

## SCENE 4

*(They both turn as if they are walking in the park)*

**MARTY.** It's beautiful out tonight, isn't it?

**LAURA.** *(preoccupied)* Yes, it is. *(Silence)* You haven't said a word about your

# Whack Job

by Courtney Wright

## SCENE ONE: THIS ISN'T PC

FRANK. Where have you been? I called you 10 times,  
WANDA. What are you watching? Talk shows? This is garbage.  
FRANK. She cheated on him with his sister...  
WANDA. (Instantly intrigued) Nuh-uh.  
FRANK. Yep, and what she doesn't know is that his 'sister' used to be his brother.  
WANDA. Oh, so this is about to go down? He looks like he'd hit a woman if she used to be a man.  
FRANK. It's funny you say that because later on, he punches his own mamma.  
WANDA. You've seen this already?  
FRANK. Yeah. Ha, ha. I guess that is a bit embarrassing. Ha. Actually, I figured you'd want to watch it. You know, brush up on some excuses for when I finally catch you and Bernard.  
WANDA. Ugh, whatever. I hate how paranoid and controlling you are.  
FRANK. I hate how he calls you all the time.  
WANDA. Nothing is happening, we're friends and he's gay!  
FRANK. Yeah, yeah. He's sort of gay...  
WANDA. Yeah, well... (Under her breath) that's why I'm so surprised you two don't get along better.  
FRANK. Huh? Hey, babe hand me the re - mote.  
WANDA. Ugh. When you say it like that you sound like a re - tard.  
FRANK. Ooh, 'Retard'? Hey, 6th grade cut down! It's nice to see you again. Planning on calling me 'gay' soon?  
WANDA. What are you saying?  
FRANK. You can't say retard, it's not PC.  
WANDA. Your iMac isn't PC, but you still use that. Oh, baby I'm sorry. I forget sometimes... you know... I forget sometimes that you rode the small bus to sped school.  
FRANK. It was the only bus that rode out to my house! You know that.  
WANDA. I know, I know... of course, you were in Special Ed, too. Right?  
FRANK. I have dyslexia and I'm a male. Males make up the majority of special education classes - they don't want to teach us.  
WANDA. Sure, sure.  
FRANK. Wanda, I have my master's degree.  
WANDA. Are you sure you didn't watch Tiger Woods win the master's?  
FRANK. You know what, if you're going to subject me to ignorance, then I'm going to do the same.  
WANDA. What show are you trying to find?  
FRANK. Cops.  
WANDA. Cops! Ugh. Wait, you know when Cops is on?  
FRANK. Cops is always on between 3am and 11:00pm. All cable channels show some sort of Cops show.  
WANDA. Why do we have to watch that?  
FRANK. I want to compare you with other simple minded, ignorant folks.  
WANDA. Oh, you are such a hypocrite. You know that? They aren't simple minded. Those people are just poor. That's why I hate that show - let's find some crack head who we probably kicked out of school 10 years ago, and let's arrest him at his most humiliating point. Those 'ignorant' fools are so entertaining!  
FRANK. Wanda, I'm saying that the cops are ignorant. You remind me of cops... like this guy. Officer Gilbert.

WANDA. Oh, turn that off. I hate domestic abuse. I'm sorry. Please.  
FRANK. Sorry. You've hurt my feelings and you must pay.  
WANDA. No, no, please. Please.  
FRANK. I'd really like to, but...  
WANDA. FRANK! TURN OFF THE TEEVEE!  
FRANK. Geeze, baby. I'm sorry, okay.  
WANDA. My dad was abusive. Okay?!

FRANK. Okay, okay. I know that babe, and I'm sorry. I'll never hit you. You know that.  
WANDA. But you'll throw a cell phone point blank at my head?  
FRANK. Come on, you said you'd forget about that. You really think I didn't miss on purpose? Besides, he called at 3:15 AM.  
WANDA. He had just gotten off a date! We're like girlfriends! And look at you! I don't think normal Frank would hit me, but 'I'm jealous of Bernard' Frank? All I'm saying is; don't think for a minute that I won't hit back.  
FRANK. Wanda. All jokes aside. You could sleep with Bernard right in front of me and I would never, ever, ever hit you. I swear, baby.  
WANDA. Oh baby, I've known all along... that you want to see Bernard naked.  
FRANK. Oh, would you quit with the gay jokes.  
WANDA. 'Wanda, you could sleep with Bernard right in front of me I swear. Please baby?'

FRANK. What?  
WANDA. Just say it with a little less hope in your voice next time, please?

## SCENE TWO: BUTCHER KNIFE HALL

FRANK. (To himself, practicing)... You've just messed with the wrong guy! (To Nancy) Hi, I'm sorry to bother you so late. I live next door, sorry. I've been driving all night, that's why I'm dressed like a hooligan.  
NANCY. Oh, right. Hi. Sorry about the chain on the door, I didn't recognize you.  
FRANK. Oh, I'm not offended. I'd be panicked too, if some strange guy knocked on my door at this time. Especially since you live alone, and no one beside you and I live in this wing here.  
NANCY. Well, I wasn't creeped out before, but I am now. Your name is hot dog, right?  
FRANK. Uh, Frank.  
NANCY. Yes! That's it. We called hot dogs 'franks' back in the day. I guess that's over your head. You're kind of slow, right? Didn't you ride to school on one of those small busses?  
FRANK. Ugh, I think you may have me confused. It gets hard to remember sometimes, doesn't it? Well, like I said, I'm sorry to knock on your door so late but...  
NANCY. Oh, I wasn't sleeping. Colombo.  
FRANK. Huh?  
NANCY. Colombo, he's a TEEVEE detective.  
FRANK. Right.  
NANCY. He is on at 3am. Every night! I love that one-eyed-fella.  
FRANK. Yeah.  
NANCY. You're lucky you caught me. I won't answer calls, or doors, between 3:00 and 3:30. You've got 4 minutes, unless you want to watch?  
FRANK. Oh, I can't. Actually, I've got a surprise for my wife and I was just wondering if I could borrow...  
NANCY. Wife? You have a wife? I always thought you were...  
FRANK. Just engaged? Hmm... nope! We're married. Look can I borrow the biggest, sharpest knife you have?  
NANCY. Huh?  
FRANK. Really, really sharp if you have it.  
NANCY. Why?  
FRANK. Oh, it's for my wife. I need it for the surprise.

# Prairie Madness

by Andrea Berthot

ANGIE.

Dark storm-clouds are gathering in our horizon, and even now they flap their cold wings about my head, causing my heart to tremble with fear. I am so impressed some nights with this feeling that I sit up in our make-shift bed in the wagon for hours, cringing from some unknown terror. I tell my husband, "We are doomed in this land; if we stay on the plains some great calamity will come upon us; and it is on me that the storm will burst upon with all its dark fury." Sometimes a voice speaks to me in the rolls of thunder, saying, "Rise, rise! Take your husband and daughter and flee to the mountains – do not remain on the plains. Haste away! Destruction's before thee!" Joseph tells me, "Angie, do not feel so; I am afraid you will go crazy. I think it is your imaginings, caused by our current disappointments and discomforts." I believe he must be right, and yet, I cannot stop the feeling...

JOSEPH.

We are continuing our trek along the Kansas River, traveling over the prairie by day and making our encampment along the stream at night. The waters of the Kansas I can only compare in color to that of creamed coffee or a kind of ash color. (On drinking it raw I could perceive the grit between my teeth). This country, at the very foot of the Rocky Mountains, seems strangely not to rise. The land about us is broad, rolling, and rich. I can forget every trouble I have ever had out here. Everything is free; everything is new. Stirring deep within me is an excitement unlike any I have known before.

I often worry about Angie, however. She has always been rather high-strung but, in her recent grief, she has become even more so, and I have heard many stories of women driven mad by this untamed wilderness...They are only stories, however. I am certain that she will adjust in due time – especially once we are settled in a permanent home. Perhaps, after a while, we will even try for another child...

ANGIE.

I shall never forget the moment I first entered the dark embankment of sod that was to be our home. Without a word I crossed its threshold and, standing very still, slowly looked around at the floor of dirt, the walls of mud, and the single crevice that served as our window, its greased-paper curtain flapping angrily in the wind. Insects crawled about freely, in and out of the hay-thatched roof above my head, and I was certain I could hear the earthworms as they tunneled through the damp soil that constituted our walls. As I stood there, something within me began to give way, and I immediately sank upon the ground. Burying my face in my hands, I sat for hours without moving or speaking. Never before have I given way to such despair.

How am I to raise my daughter, who has always been such a frail and sickly child, on this wild and untamed land – with no trees to shelter her from the sun, no neighbor children with whom to play, no home save this dark and dreary hole in the ground, and no certainty save hard winds and hard work for the rest of her days? Joseph expresses no concern for such matters; he takes all that he finds unpleasant and buries it so deep inside of himself that he could not ever find it again if he tried.

JOSEPH.

Angie and I have been hard at work, clearing our newly acquired land in order to plant the crops that will transform this virgin earth into a working farm. Strangely, in spite of the demanding physical labor, Angie's spirits seem to lift a bit when we are working side-by-side, clearing away the rocks and tree stumps surrounding our new home. She is unhappy indoors, perhaps because she is not yet accustomed to the sod house, which is to be expected considering the solid brick homes to which we were both accustomed to in Massachusetts. She will adapt in time, however, I am certain, for soon I will begin raising the money we will need to run a farm (I have learned that I can make \$9 a day plowing fields and \$34 for twelve days stints of hauling freight!) and she will be back inside the house, which will no doubt aid in her adjustment and help her to become more comfortable with her new surroundings.

ANGIE.

The days are immeasurably long, especially when Joseph is away hauling freight. We are 100 miles from another settlement and 50 from a post office. I have not seen a wagon in two months or another woman in three, other than Little Angelina of course. No one passes by us at all...some days it almost seems as if she and I are the only two people left on this earth.

I am also beginning to fear that Joseph's extensive outdoor work has caused his mind to become somewhat altered by the heat and the sun. Last night, as I was sewing by candlelight, he stood in the doorway and stared at me, his eyes wide and his mouth open as if he had walked in on me chewing tobacco. He asked, "What are you doing?" and I said, "Can you not see? I am sewing a new dress for Angelina." Then he looked strangely alarmed, almost frightened, and did not say another word for the rest of the night.

JOSEPH.

I am a simple man; I do not know how to handle situations such as these. I fear returning home at night and have been intentionally avoiding plowing jobs and accepting more and more freight-hauling assignments so that I may be absent longer. What was once Angie's feminine folly is slowly turning into madness – a madness so unpleasant and disturbing that I often find I cannot even look upon her – when I do I fear that something deep inside of me, some secret, hidden rage will suddenly be unleashed and I will lose all control of myself. If it were merely sadness that plagued her, perhaps I could solve the problem, but this is not mere sadness. If only she would allow me to touch her, to start it all over again...but there is a fear in that woman that is stronger than mine, stronger than the howling winds of this prairie. I do not know how to overcome it. I fear the inevitability of the choice I will have to make...

ANGIE.

Joseph is insistent on my having another child, but I am afraid to give birth alone out in this wilderness with no family and no other women nearby to help me. Besides, I tell him, I have enough to do as it is, taking care of this house and Little Angelina, who is often ill, all on my own. Whenever I say this he curls his hands into fists and groans, pacing about the room so frantically that I am almost frightened of him.

There is an uneasiness building between us, like the mounting doom of the fierce thunder storms that vexed me so on our journey to this place. Joseph said then that he feared for my sanity, but I have heard many stories of men as well as women who have been driven mad by the prairie, and if the day is to come when Joseph too will snap and lose his

My parents were hippies in the sixties, but unlike most of their peers, they failed to grow out of it. Although the drugs were thankfully a thing of the past, by the time I was born my mother was still the president of the town's practically extinct chapter of the National Organization for Women and my father was still representing the poor and downtrodden (terms he preferred to "the dregs of society") and making close to no money as a public defender. In a move that clearly indicated their mutual love of frustration and ostracism from their community, they had decided to settle and raise their daughter in the middle of Kansas. As a result, I, Susan (as in S. Anthony), who spent my grade school years writing essays about the evils of corporate America rather than the assigned book reports and informing my classmates that their attitudes were "shallow" and "misogynistic," could always be sure of my place at the "weirdoes and losers" table at lunch.

Over the years, however, I began to grow tired of not having any friends and, as I became a teenager, not having any boyfriends. So, upon entering high school, I decided that the time had come for a change – a decision which was either the cause or the effect of my relationship with him – I'm still not quite sure which one.

He was different from any other guy I had known. He was older – seventeen – and he was the only guy in our entire high school who proudly proclaimed that he did not believe in drinking, smoking, swearing, sex before marriage, or even playing cards. He was an advocate of what he called "good, old-fashioned values" and thought that women like my mother were the enemies of Christianity and that men like my father set criminals free. Looking back, I wonder if my initial interest in him stemmed from some subconscious desire to rebel against my parents, who pretended to be tolerant of the relationship but were simply too genuine to be successful liars. Maybe that was the reason; or, maybe I was a lonely fifteen year old girl who was mesmerized by a passionate, older boy and just wanted to be smiled at, called pretty, and kissed.

Kissed. He was the first boy I ever kissed and I loved to kiss and be kissed by him. I loved that more than anything; it was thrilling and exciting and completely satisfying in and of itself. I wanted it to stay that way, just like that, for a long, long time. Maybe that's why I felt so safe with him. He had always made it clear that sex before marriage was out of the question, so I never worried about being pressured to do something I didn't want to, unlike my friends or the girls in the movies on Lifetime.

I was so naïve.

We kissed whenever we could for the longest time, usually in his car after going to the movies. We were both happy then, for the couple of months it lasted, we were both happy. But then it became clear that he wasn't happy anymore, and I felt terrible. I already felt like he was making some kind of sacrifice just by being with me – he was so strong and good and sure of what he believed in and I was so weak and flawed and uncertain...I think that somewhere, deep inside, I felt that if I was more beautiful and less sinful that somehow just kissing me would be enough for him. Still, I couldn't bring myself to give him what he wanted...it just scared me. So, one night, when we were together in his car, he did it for me.

He didn't hurt my hand when he grabbed it – he hurt my brain more it seemed; I couldn't think for at least a minute. He put it there and the world stopped. I processed nothing. He moved my frozen hand for me, like it was a sponge he was using to clean up a stain on the carpet. When I finally realized what was happening I wondered why he

even needed my hand at all. I guess for the same reason you need a sponge to clean up a mess on the floor – it gets the job done faster and you don't have to get your hands dirty.

What should I have done? Pulled away? Screamed? Crazy people do things like that. Should I have said 'No,' walked away, and told an adult? I wasn't a kindergarten being lured to a van by some sick pedophile with a promise of puppies. I was fifteen, and he was my boyfriend – my trustworthy, respectable, devoutly Christian boyfriend.

I closed my eyes and went somewhere else in my head, which was easy since my body had felt numb from the moment he first grabbed my hand. But then I felt his other hand on my shoulder, pushing me down, gently at first. I felt like I had awoken from a dream to find myself drowning in ice cold water. Instinct took over and I tried to push myself up to the surface, but that single jerk of my body provoked something else in his. The gentleness vanished and he pushed me down with both hands, hard.

He didn't say anything. No "Come on Baby," no "I love you," no "Please." I wasn't even worth the effort of persuasion.

He held it in his hand and pushed my face toward it. I smelled sweat. I felt his hands move to the back of my head. I closed my eyes and shut off my brain, but I could still hear his voice. It sounded like it was coming from a distance, far above me, like the voice of God in old movies.

"Do you like it?"

He didn't really ask it, not the way you ask someone something when you want an answer. He just said it, as if hearing himself say it was satisfaction enough. I didn't even think to respond, but then he pulled my head back and said it again.

"You like it don't you?"

I said yes immediately and didn't even consider it a lie. By then there didn't seem to be such things as a truths and lies; there were right answers and there were wrong answers, and it was obvious which one was the right one. He didn't say anything again until it was almost over, and then he just mumbled, "Don't get it on my pants," so I didn't. I was actually grateful for that moment, because then I knew it was over.

He did say a few things to me as he drove me home, things like "Wow," "That was amazing," and "Thank you." I remember suddenly feeling cold when he said that – "thank you." I don't know why, but it made me feel sicker than anything else. I smiled and said "You're welcome," though. That's what you say when someone thanks you; it's the polite thing to do.

Once I was inside my house I rushed straight to the bathroom, threw up in the toilet, and brushed my teeth so fiercely that I almost gagged myself again. After that I walked to my bedroom, put on my pajamas, turned off all the lights, and crouched on the floor in the corner of the room. I felt safer there, like I was hidden – from what I don't know; there was nothing to be scared of in the room that I had slept in for the last fifteen years. I even remember being surprised that the room seemed just the same as it did before, when nothing else in the world did, or would again.

So that was the first time, and after a while I just quit fighting it all together. It became routine, inevitable. I didn't even enjoy kissing anymore because all I could think about was the thing that I knew would be expected of me next. A few times, I actually got up the courage to say that I just didn't want to do it, but he always had the same response: "We have to do this, Suzy. If we don't we'll give in to temptation." How could I



# Secret Identities

by Corey Alderdice

Wednesday has to be just about the greatest day of the week—at least to me. Most people look forward to Friday, with a full weekend of no school or work in sight. Others are big fans of Sunday, a day of rest, religion and professional sports. Me, I'm a Wednesday kind of guy, and not because it's hump day. It's comic book day.

"Hey, Ben," Chuck says as I walk into Secret Identities. It's 3:35 on a Wednesday afternoon at the most out-of-the-way comic book store in town. And like every other Wednesday, I'm the only person in here.

"You realize I could set my clock by you. Is it 3:35 already?" He doesn't bother looking up from his indie rock magazine. Chuck's almost thirty. Chuck's almost always been about thirty, at least as long as I can remember. He inherited Secret Identities from his father, a comic book geek of a simpler time, with simpler heroes. The place hasn't changed a bit as long as I can remember, and I've been coming here for almost six years. Sure, there are different books on the wall and more back issues now than then, but it's still the same poorly lit labor of love it always was and I guess will always be.

"What've we got today, Chuck?" I sit a Taco Bell bag down on the counter. Chuck and I have a standing deal, I bring him two cheesy bean burritos and a large Mountain Dew every Wednesday at 3:35. He always pays me back, but he can't leave the store so I bring it to him. I figure it's my way of staying on his good side. He, in return, let's me in the store. I consider it my community service. Chuck's a great guy, a real friend, but you can only take so many questions from a sixteen year-old about comic books before you go berserk. I mean, even the biggest fanboy has his limits. Chuck sets his magazine aside and inspects the bag.

"You did get the Fire sauce, right?" he says through a gulp of soda.

"You did get the new Ultimate Spider-Man, right?"

"Yup."

"Yup," I say pulling the packets of sauce from my pocket.

"Okay, I'll leave you to your moment." Chuck picks the magazine back up and focuses his attention on the burrito.

I squeeze through the rows of long, rectangular cardboard boxes to the back of the room. This is my Sabbath. This is my Church of the Superhero. The back wall lined with wire framed shelves each nook holding a new sacred text with my communion. These are my Stations of the Sequential Art, frame by frame...page by page...issue by issue. Each glossy cover with a new gospel inside. This is what it feels like to be alive, or at least a comic book geek.

"You may wanna look at the new Fantastic Four," Chuck mumbles in between bites of burrito. "There's supposed to be a Spidey crossover this month."

I pick five books from the wall, one I've never even heard of, but it looks cool. My mom won't be home for another hour and a half, so I decide to stick around in the store today and go through the back issues. Chuck's been collecting comic books since he was a kid. Chuck father's, who died last year, had been collecting since the forties. He always loved telling the story of how he had a copy of Action Comics #1—the first appearance of Superman. He said it to start his own store back in the eighties. He was in his forties at the time, recently divorced, and wanted to start a new life for himself and his son Chuck. So, he used the money from the book and began life anew. Chuck took it pretty badly when his father passed, but he was always happy at the store, and it's what his father would have wanted. I guess that's why Chuck's always been so cool with me. I like to think of him as something like a big brother.

"What'cha lookin' for?" Chuck asks as he sits down on the floor next to me. He reeks of salsa and garlic.

"I don't know," I say, "I've just been wondering lately more and more why Peter Parker does what he does. You know, why he's Spider-Man."

Chuck smiles, "With great power comes..."

I cut him off, even the most basic fan of Spider-Man knows this one. Even the lameoes who've only seen the movie can regurgitate, "Great responsibility, but what's the point?"

"I guess that's something we've all gotta figure out." Chuck's expression goes blank for a moment, he's about to say something important. His forehead always creases when he gets ready to make a profound statement. "You know, when my dad left me the store, I didn't know if I wanted to sell it or keep it open."

"Really?" I interject, almost in a panic of disbelief. "'Cause, I mean, I'd wet myself if I had the chance to run a comic shop. Seriously. Who wouldn't wanna run a shop like this?"

"At the time," Chuck mumbles lost in his own thought, "not me, but the store was important to my dad and he wanted me to have it. Don't get me wrong, I love Wednesdays just as much as you. I love the feeling of opening up the box of comics and smelling the gloss on the page. It's a lot of responsibility, though—taxes, invoices, bills, bills, and more bills."

He's lost me. Adults usually lose me when they start talking about bills and other stuff like that. It's like when my mom and dad used to argue about bills. Actually, they'd argue over just about everything—even me. I think that's when I started spending more time at Secret Identities. It's when I became a regular, when Chuck and his dad actually learned my name. I didn't have a lot of money at the time, so I didn't buy a lot of comics. Come to think of it, most weeks I just looked at the books. A lot of shop owners would yell at kids like me and say, "Hey, this ain't a library. Either buy something or leave."

I snap back to reality and Chuck's still talking. "So I guess that's why he says with great power comes great responsibility." Chuck gives me the look that says that I'm just a kid and not quite old enough for the whole thing to make sense, and it bugs the crap out of me.

"Yeah, uh huh." I pretend like I was listening. He'll probably repeat the same conversation. Chuck has a knack for telling the same story over and over again, but he's cool to me so I can't complain.

"Here," he says handing me several issues of the Spectacular Spider-Man, "read up on these and see if it answers your questions, but don't get any chocolate or whatever on them."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Like I say, Chuck's a pretty good guy...even if he's thirty-something. He's probably the coolest adult I know. "Well, I gotta go. If I don't beat my mom home, I'll be in a crapload of trouble."

"How much is a 'crapload' of trouble?" Chuck looks amused.

"A lot." I say while walking out the door of the store. It's a late September day—cold enough that I should be wearing a jacket, but not cold enough to worry about freezing to death. I catch a bus across town and walk the rest of the mile home. It's just an apartment, nothing fancy or anything, but I guess it's home. After mom and dad got a divorce and mom got custody of me, we moved into the city and into this place. She's worked really hard to make it look like our old home. Dad never liked Mom's taste in furniture, so she kept most of it. Problem is that it's too big for the apartment...that, and it's pink with flowers.

That's why I don't invite friends home. Well, if I had friends to invite home, I wouldn't...because of the couch. I turn the television on to MTV in time to catch the last bit of TRL. Mom keeps saying I should take an interest in something other than comic books. I think it's best for me to pretend to be normal. Besides, I like the background noise while I read, like my own personal soundtrack to the story. I carefully open the polybags protecting Chuck's comics. I treat it like it's a really expensive piece of glass even though they're only worth a couple of bucks apiece, but I wouldn't want to make Chuck mad. The last thing I need is another adult mad at me.

Before I know it, it's five o'clock rolls around and Mom comes through the front door with a sack of groceries in her arms. She's out of breath. What my mom doesn't tell people is that her hair started turning gray last year, so she's been dying it. It's a little more brown than it used to be. She told everyone she felt like a change, what with getting divorced and all. She wanted a makeover—I think that's what she said. So, she took part of the divorce settlement and bought new clothes and new makeup (the good kind from the department stores) and new shoes. I even got a pair of Chuck Taylor All-Stars out of the deal. She said something about reading in a magazine that these were the shoes that every teenager wanted. Actually, I wanted shoes with Velcro, but she said Velcro shoes were for preschoolers. My response to that was so what.

"How do you feel about meatloaf for dinner tonight?" she says. She's frantically moving around the kitchen putting stuff away. She always seems in a hurry these days, I don't know why.

I offer a noncommittal, "Whatever."

"I guess we could have beef stroganoff or some other Hamburger Helper."

"Whatever."

She stops. When she stops, that means she's mad. "Did something happen at school today?"