



CORVUS REVIEW

FALL ISSUE (6F)

Cover Art:**Allen Forrest**

Born in Canada and bred in the U.S., Allen Forrest has worked in many mediums: computer graphics, theater, digital music, film, video, drawing and painting. Allen studied acting in the Columbia Pictures Talent Program in Los Angeles and digital media in art and design at Bellevue College (receiving degrees in Web Multimedia Authoring and Digital Video Production.) He currently works in the Vancouver, Canada, as a graphic artist and painter. He is the winner of the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's Reed Magazine and his Bel Red painting series is part of the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection. Forrest's expressive drawing and painting style is a mix of avant-garde expressionism and post-Impressionist elements reminiscent of van Gogh, creating emotion on canvas.

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A Stereotypically Twenty-First-Century Attempt at Inoffensive Interpersonal Interface
Reggie Mills

“Okay yeah, sure, I mean, yeah I did say that maybe under, like, *certain* circumstances I wouldn’t mind if perhaps—and please, babe, do keep in mind that I meant and mean only, like, very specific, one-in-a-million circumstances wouldn’t ever come up in regular ordinary day-to-day life—that perhaps I wouldn’t mind if your parents were maybe—or like, just coincidentally or serendipitously happened to be—dead.”

“ ... ”

“Don’t look at me like that, babe, please. I’m not some monstrous, inhuman creature. Look, just consider, okay: I’m sure that in your position, given the proper circumstances, that you might also feel the same way regarding my parents. Like not mind if *they* were dead. I mean, if they were, y’know, still alive, of course. Sure, I’ll grant you that they are dead now and all and you obviously, naturally, couldn’t say whether or not you would because they—my parents, I mean— And then, like, you haven’t even *met*— But like, even for *me* for God’s sake there are, like, an infinitely many more circumstances under which, y’know, *I* maybe wouldn’t even mind my *own* parents being dead, like compared to the number of circumstances when I wouldn’t mind yours... But what I mean and all is just that, like, I can pretty much almost, y’know, assuredly guarantee that there are...that there are situations in which you wouldn’t maybe, perhaps slightly, mind my parents being dead also. And, like, I wouldn’t even in the slightest take that personally, babe, you know I wouldn’t.”

“ ... ”

“So yeah, I’m just saying, like, I’m not sure if it’s maybe right for you to—”

“ ... ”

“I mean c’mon, I don’t mean it in a bad way or anything.”

“ ... ”

“Like, I mean look, okay, let me just show you what I mean before you go and berate me, babe. So for example, like one thing that I thought of before was that if maybe your parents were perhaps mass-murdering serial killers, and they, like, went around killing people, right? Willy-nilly and all, then I—like, that seems reasonable, right? Like, if your parents were serial killers that would put me—and you too, also; you and me both—like, it would, of course, put both of us into, like, prime targeting position, right? For murder and all.”

“ ... ”

“Which, like, they aren’t actually, of course; that’s out of the question. But if maybe perhaps they were like mass murderers then I maybe wouldn’t mind them, like, randomly or accidentally just, y’know, dying or something.”

“ ... ”

“Like, but you get what I’m saying, right?”

“ ... ”

“Babe, you know I hate when you get like this; all quiet and stuff. Like, I can’t even tell what you’re feeling. I mean, what I mean is, like, yeah, I know you’re obviously upset with me and all, obviously, but like besides that, I don’t even know what’s going on in there.”

“ ... ”

“And, like, I already did tell you that I’m sorry about what I said, which was, okay, *yeah*, during dinner at your parents’ house, no less, and in front of your parents and your sister and all—and, like, our nieces, too—that I said then that sometimes I feel as if I wouldn’t mind if they were, your parents and all, I mean...And c’mon, babe, you know me; you know I wouldn’t say something like that and mean it for like every goddamn possible context and situation in the whole world or something, you know that.”

“...”

“Okay yeah, maybe in front of your family and everyone wasn’t the best place to say that, I agree. But I made a mistake, babe. I’m sorry. What do you want me to say?”

“...”

“And like, you know I *sincerely* wish them the best of health and everything, honest. I do. And you know I love them so much, like almost as much as I love you, babe, really. And geeze, I hope they took it sincerely when I said to them that I wished them the best of health and all.”

“...”

“But like, do you think they did?”

“...”

“I mean I hope they did, because I really did mean it. Sincerely. And yeah, of course they stress me out and I get super anxious for things like this, for things like tonight’s dinner; and okay, sure, maybe I *might’ve* had maybe one too many glasses of wine; and I *might’ve* had one too many Klonopins; you *know* I’m sorry about that, and that it was my mistake and...and that I’m feeling, like, super regretful about it and everything. But like, I obviously didn’t mean it seriously at all, I swear.”

“...”

“But I *did* say I’m sorry to everyone, like straight out in front of everyone; gave my sincerest apologies when we had to leave right after I said everything. And you know also that I’m gonna go tomorrow and personally call, like, every single *one* of your family members that were in attendance tonight, you know I will. Even our nieces, too.”

“...”

“Okay yeah, point taken: I *did* have one too many Klonopins and was feeling relaxed and non-anxious and short-sighted-slash-absent-minded and, like, unaware—like, unaware and not thinking of the potential consequences, sure. But like, they stress me out, you know that, babe. You can’t blame me for being stressed.”

“...”

“Like, I don’t know what you want me to say. What do you want to hear, babe? What can I say? I’m grasping for straws here, babe.”

“...”

“Okay, I don’t know, maybe I’ll like give you another circumstance. Like, for instance, maybe if I were on, for example, maybe a cruise ship or a resort or, like, a deserted island or something for, like, a week or two and it was just me and your parents—just them and I—maybe then, I don’t know, maybe then I might perhaps not mind them just conking out or something. Because like, I don’t know if I’d be able to stand them for that long...and then especially now considering what they must probably be thinking towards me.”

“...”

“But like what can I say, babe? I’m sorry, honest. I’m only human. Like what, do you want me to be superhuman? Do you want me to be perfect? Is that what you want?”

“ ... ”

“Do you want me to be Superman or something? For God’s sake, babe. Because you know what, you know what? You sure as heck aren’t perfect either, babe. Like sure, I could maybe have a little more tact, I know that, and I’m working on it babe, honest, I’m really trying. But like, do you think a perfect person would get all pissy and quiet towards someone who made one goddamn *mistake*, babe? Do you?”

“ ... ”

“Like are you even listening to me babe? Is there anything going on in there?”

“ ... ”

“Or like, do you think a perfect person would perhaps be able to, like, get pregnant after practically two goddamn *years* of trying? Or to just try to, like, *attempt*—to make a single goddamn *effort*, babe—to back me up in the slightest back at your parents’? Oh, and that’s even *with* fertility treatments for, like, the past six months or something? Does that sound perfect to you? To, like, just stand there all horror-struck and blank and all, babe, while I’m, like, standing there fumbling over my words, just, like—oh, and not to even mention *plus* chairs, babe—I’m, like, standing there and *literally* fumbling, trying to get to the door, and not in any stable mental state whatsoever to even have an *inkling* of thought regarding what to, like, do in that situation, babe? With your family being there looking at me as if they, like, weren’t even aware—like, not only hadn’t *considered*, but couldn’t even possibly goddamn *imagine*, couldn’t *comprehend*—that the, like, the me that was, like, standing there, babe, was an actual *person*; someone standing and looking back *at* them and actually being *aware* of the, like, utter, like, *contempt* they looked at me with? And then not even being able to back me up or something? To support me at all? And to just be standing there goddamn *beside* them? *With* them? Like don’t you think, babe, that maybe a relationship—a fucking *committed* relationship—requires like a certain level of, like, I don’t know, *unity*, babe?”

“ ... ”

“Don’t you?”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Okay. Okay, I’m sorry. I was out of line, yeah, I know. Babe, please. Please don’t cry. Please. Here...here.”

“ ... ”

“God. You *know* I wish I could take back what I said, I really do. Just go back in time or something. But I’m only human babe, geeze. Okay here...let me just...Let’s just say we’re both sorry and...just...”

“ ... ”

“Fine okay, you can just lay there while I do all the work, what do I care, shit. But like, I swear, if you fall asleep again during this babe, I swear...”

Work at Hylyne

Nicholas Bernier

Palpating the stomach of the meter-wide fabric, the seamstress sewed in a peachy, straight line until she'd filled her whole room with rolls and curves. Then it started converting to skin. She pushed down her glasses past the bone saddle in her nose and saw the first graft form a few feet in front of her on the pink ribbon. How stunning--the needle was picking apart skin cells from her fingers and anchoring them in the fabric. Each colony grew (there seemed to be hundreds now, like abstract mold designs you find on cheese after a vacation), spreading to the edges of the fabric and blending with other colonies as they spread into each other. The seamstress looked around and felt proud; all of the weighty skin belonged softly to her. She felt a tear fall down her cheek, and when she wiped it away with the silky masterpiece, she shocked herself with skin-to-skin contact.

Recently, the things that cross my mind as I cull the chicks have started to scare me.

Sometimes I see myself in them: an ochre braid filled with gray streaks hanging down my back shows instead of my comb over, greased to one side on my head. I tolerate the scares for these moments--where I cherish myself, a slim form with a clean complexion, staring out at the yard on a Sunday, or hunting for vodka-filled Easter eggs. Or any chance I get to see Benny hugging me--or just him being Benny, actually. I like the imaginations for that, too. And, often, sinking into a warm chocolate bath, or watching the sand crash against the watery shore, is a nice escape from the white washroom, screaming chicks, the vibrating air conditioner that drips right next to my station.

We used to asphyxiate them, but we've been downsizing. I had a chamber I'd place them carefully in to and turn the gas on. I could look away as they settled their bodies, some clumsily stacked on top of one another. Sometimes I'd watch, just to make sure things were going right. Most of the time, just turn around and wait for the engine to stop running so I could remove the limp bodies. It was faster, too. Don't believe anything you hear about how "grinding" is more efficient.

Hylyne sold the chamber, so now it's all cervical dislocation.

I take a single chick in my old hands, and it's soft against the nicks in my fingers.

The afternoon bin today is full with 550 chicks, all male, none of which have a use in the poultry market. It's a simple neck pop; a squeeze between the thumb and the forefinger, like cracking a knuckle, and the chick born today is dead by my hand. I place each body carefully down in the "BIO WASTE" bucket next to me.

On my way to our Hylyne Branch, I point my hands out the creaky windows. It's a large, white warehouse outside of Sioux City, and pine trees line the road leading up to it. Red lasers emanate from my thick fingernails, beaming in straight lines for about a hundred yards. As I pass by, my lasers burn through the bark of the young trees and cut

through their bases with seamless ease. Each tree gives the sound of a release—a death, a cry—when I pass by, and it leans on the shoulder of the one still standing next to it. I cut that one down next. When I turn back, my lasers sizzle in the air, and the line of trees cries out, stacked in dead logs on the ground.

It's not until I walk in through Hylyne's doors and peep through the first-floor windows that I recognize the trees still stand, and my lasers have retracted.

"Good morning, Ms. Harrison," Lieutenant Director James Caulfield salutes. He wears a grey suit that fattens his short, skinny physique. Those lines that reach down from your nostrils to the corners of your mouth? What are they called--nasolabial? It's the first thing you see when you look at his face.

"Good morning," I reply.

He pixelates. As I move closer, the small boxes that make up his skin appear to combine and move into splotchy new arrangements. When I pass, his warmth emanates from the single pixel, and he continues away. I move to my station.

For a couple months now, there's a circle of black, fuzzed around the edges, in the center of my vision. I believe that it's glaucoma; my sister has it. I have to avoid the burned out part during the neck breaking. I move the chicks to the corners during the dislocation, and alternate between the left and right sides to avoid pressure on my shoulders.

"What are you doing, Linda?" Daisy asks. Daisy's a younger, plump girl with thin hair pulled back in a ponytail. She works across from me. She likes to check in on me--perhaps it helps her focus on her work if she believes she's simultaneously serving the community.

"It's my vision," I reply, and give a pop to the next chick. "I can't seem to see in the middle anymore."

She gives a startled look, and I turn to look behind me, figuring she'd seen something I haven't. In the wall, a huge hole has been blasted, and green hedge leaves shake like fire around the rough circumference. Outside, all had been matched with different shades of hedge--even the sky glows a delicious granny-smith green, and it rustles under a continuous wind. I watch one pedestrian sit and fall asleep against the extra-terrestrial greens.

"Better douse it with some water!" I say, "But then, of course, that fire may only grow."

But then I am back, and the smell of unwashed chicks reinvades. I look down at my old, strong hands, matted with fuzzies.

She smiles sympathetically and I hear an extra crunchy pop under her hands.

.....

My husband, Benny Harrison, owned the most successful hardware company in all of East Sioux City. I'd run the register, and offer coffee or tea to any long-term customers.

Benny couldn't live without me. Really. He'd dote on me--to excessive awkwardness, often--he'd come home in the middle of the day just to see how I was doing, and Saturdays and Sundays he closed the store so he could stay in bed with me all day. But I can live without Benny; I sure have, at least, for the past four years.

Some vacation scam stole all of our savings. The crazy part was we had actually *gone* on the vacation--stayed in rain-worn white tents at some ecofriendly place in Hawaii (too much for me, but Benny just loved it. Pull me out of bed in the morning with a coffee he'd gotten at registration so we could enjoy the morning sun on that flat beach.)--but on our trip, they'd drained us. Benny came home; I guess the surprise of it turned his mind all frail. Couldn't take the embarrassment, the frustration. He had a stroke 14 days after we got back. The warmth of the beach drops in the back of the last memories I have of my Benny, and for that I am grateful. But now, I break necks to maintain rent.

Benny's funeral started the hallucinations. It's odd, but I'm aware of them, and their dreamy vividness makes me proud of my imagination. Who knew that a simple mind like mine could come up with towers of babbling squashes, pumpkins filled with liquid adrenaline that truly give me butterflies whenever I carve a jack-o-lantern and eat its pouring contents? I'm happy with where I've come, and it doesn't scare me. If that makes me unhinged in Daisy's mind, who am I to care?

.....

That night when I was home chopping carrots, eating a few of the peels as I went, I blinked and everything turned a mighty brown. In one frame, a stream of light sparkled with dust particles over my carrot pile, and the next frame filled completely with the same dust--bacteria that had divided and overpopulated the petri dishes in my eyes.

But it didn't stay like that for long. The edges of the brown burned with a lighter yellow that stung. I felt my ears perk up past their casual alertness.

This is a real death, I thought. I'd experienced death often: my friends, one by one and sometimes in groups, seemed to be dropping into quick and startling deaths; my husband had turned cold with his branching fingers in my palm. *Other deaths aren't as real, because we can't experience them firsthand. Or are they? I don't mean to sound rude. I'm being selfish.*

But it's true; this was a death. Now the reality that I would never experience my imagination in the same way sent squiggles of fear from my hips up through my breastbone. I'd never see (well, hallucinate. I knew he wasn't truly before me, I did know that. But sometimes he was so vividly *there*, every scar on his rough arms marked appropriately--but of course they would be, because I remembered them--that it wasn't hard to pretend) my husband sitting behind the bar in the kitchen again, giving himself a tattoo, or dismantling his face with the liquid he kept by his bed (he'd dab a little under his ear and give a hard yank; smear some in the creases below his nose before cracking off his source of smell until all that remained was a fleshy skull, smiling, asking for eggs.)

Even with yellow blurring on the edges, I felt safe in the dark brown. I put the cold knife in the sink. Scooped the carrot peels up off the counter and dropped them in the sink. Everything felt wet--but just seconds ago, there was only a small pool under the cutting board. Had it grown? Was something leaking? Peels still clung to my palms and tickled my skin.

I moved one hand across the counter and let the other follow tentatively behind, wiping off whatever clung to my hands on a rogue washcloth, on the coarse handle of the refrigerator. It was this--feeling drunk, feeling like a pit of everything frothed in waves and inched back to avoid each successful step, until I reached my bed and felt the dangers of a new imagination.

Dreams hit me, I would fear, for the rest of my life (well, not really these dreams--but I'd see them, or variations of them, fairly often. Repetition will wear you out). Oddly, it wasn't the fears of slipping from a sightless world to an unconscious one that lessened, but the vividness of the dreams themselves. My father came up to me after living on the streets, his body skeletal against the harsh, grainy pavement, hugged me, and whispered. "We're dead, hon," before returning to his spot next to his wife, who had frozen overnight. I'd turn around and find myself surrounded by screams of grief, burning under layers of the hottest sand--the new tanning method; a woman on the phone, who refused to hang up, wouldn't believe me. There was an *alien* in the other room, for God's sake. *Was I supposed to nurse it back to health? It kept breaking, whenever I tried to touch it.*

.....

I still had my imagination.

On the bus the next morning, that's what I was thinking. Sure, took me a while to find the sidewalk. Had to crawl across the grass at one point, and my jeans were slippery on the knees now. But I still had things to *see*.

"Good morning, Ms. Harrison," piped up Mr. Pixelator. The morning had been crisp, and I remembered a wind storm we'd had a few years back that had swept the city in garbage--really! Banana peels draped scrumptiously across buildings, black trash bags swinging through the streets and threatening to hit pedestrians.

"Mr. Caulfield, it seems as though the glaucoma has taken my eyes."

He didn't know how to respond, clearly, and I felt him breathe out in apology.

"Don't worry," I assured, "I can still maintain my duties at Hylyne. It's not vision-heavy work."

"Linda, I...I don't know what--I mean I'm so sorry. Of course--well actually, do you really think--"

"Yes, it won't be an issue. It's snapping necks."

I'm still scared. I must admit it. It's traumatic, you know, because now my visions are so vivid and colorful that I crave certain portions of reality. I have my memories--I do remember the real world. But it's as if whatever it is I used to know has been damaged, and then mixed with what I knew to be hallucination. I don't know what is the original form anymore.

"Good morning. Daisy?"

"She's not here today."

Mr. Caulfield's suit pants swished against each other as he hurried to my side, squeezed my elbow, and shuffled me to my station.

"Today's haul is in the bin in front of you. The waste is to your left."

"It always is. Thank you."

Lucky Ones
Robert Joe Stout

Shortly before I left Oaxaca to return to San Francisco, I ran into Joan Campbell in the Zòcalo. “*Chinga, Madison, cuidado!*” in her sharp voice that always seemed to be jumping from one octave to another, one language to another.

“I wasn’t anticipating an attack.”

“I guess not. You were sleepwalking.”

I wasn’t sleepwalking: The Zòcalo was filled with people although most of the sidewalk restaurant tables were vacant and I was distracted by clanging marimbas, bead vendors, armed police. Joan asked me where I was going and I fabricated an answer, then invited her to a cappuccino.

We talked for almost an hour. That is, she talked. Reed-thin, sharp-featured, ruddy complexioned despite her Anglican surname, “Bullshit!” she crackled, thin fingers flipping strands of gray hair off her ears. There still were police everywhere she bristled, paramilitaries stopping cars, hundreds of protesters in jail, hundreds of others disappeared.

“Fear! You can feel it everywhere! *Pèsimo!* Like the gas—like it’s still clinging in the air!”

The “gas” was the teargas the police and militaries fired to drive protesters out of the Centro Historico. I witnessed it; so did Joan, although we were in separate parts of the melee. Detained by police shortly after the militarized purge of the protesters’ encampment she’d refused to acknowledge her U.S. citizenship until a human rights lawyer had intervened.

“*Sale abuelita,*” a jailer had ordered and she’d spit in his face. “Grandmother I am! And if I had a grandson like you, I’d die of shame!”

“Tell everybody up there what’s happened here!” she commanded when I left Oaxaca. “Make them understand!”

Nobody north of the border understood. Nobody believed; nobody cared. Oaxaca was two-thousand miles and two centuries away from San Francisco. Propaganda machinery had assured everyone outside of Oaxaca that the police had stomped out a leftist rebellion, not a legal protest. Beatings, torture, rapes, imprisonments without trial were pushed under the carpet. As far as people north of the border were concerned, Mexico was a land of barefoot peasants, dirty and ignorant, not professionally educated, idealistic, socially responsible educators, artists, engineers.

For a time Joan’s commentaries—“diatribes” she belittled them—appeared online in what even politicized San Franciscans considered a radical news site. I read them and occasionally commented although summer classes, tutoring and an aggravatingly persistent lack of money curtailed intended returns to Oaxaca and I lost contact with Joan and most of the people I’d met there. Then her photo appeared on one of those *People you also might know* FaceBook pages. I sent her a note and she responded with a rattle about goldmine exploitation, migraines, renewed teacher demonstrations. In reply I chided *keep your gasmask close at hand* and received an immediate *SHIT!!!* in capitalized oversized type.

“It’s not the same, not like it was...” she asserted:

Shithead Governor Ulisès is gone: Everything's smoothed over. Smoothed over hell!—covered up! Torture, rape didn't happen. Teargas didn't happen. Everything you remember is false. No, shit, I'm telling you, here it's all pretty costumes for the tourists. Zapoteca dances. Funky parades...

Hombro a hombro, codo a codo remember? 700,000 supporting the teachers, supporting democracy—wiped out. Gone.

Now the teachers are the enemies. Reviled. Oaxaca is zombie land. Yesterday as I passed a blocked government office a woman turned to me and shrieked, "Pinches flojos!" At the teachers. Because they were demonstrating. Over two billion pesos in state funds missing! Stolen! By fucking crooks who were in the government! Què puta madre! Okay, so maybe that woman's got kids at home driving her crazy because the schools have been closed for two days but there's no money for schools! For salaries. Nobody gives a rat's ass! Except the teachers. And not all of them, I might add...

Perhaps I should have waited to reply, thought through what I wanted to say, but the words beneath Joan's photo—chin thrust forward, smile almost a snarl—challenged, commanded. I complained that my JC students, most of them products of suburban high schools, didn't give a rat's ass about their own communities much less about any in Mexico. Their attempts at essays were pallid excursions into drug usage, hamburger prices and Giants baseball. Ostensibly sexually liberated, they were as neurotic about appearance, rejection and money as any of their grandparents had been. My co-faculty, I added, weren't a helluva lot better. I could be talking to the walls for all that I was able to achieve.

Chinga Madison! My first school in Chicago—I was twenty-two, graduated twelfth in my class but no political connections, they assigned me to a center city school, all African-American except for a couple of Puerto Ricans. The sewers continually stopped up, the water in the drinking fountains was vile, girls having their periods stayed home because the faucets didn't work. One of the few students I could understand—ghetto slang, slurred words, every other word muthafuckah!—disappeared—two warrants out for his arrest on hijacking and assault charges. One youngster—Bradley, his name was Bradley, walked with a congenital limp, overdosed on heroin. Kate, a twice-readmitted dropout, clearly psychopathic—the boys were afraid of her because she beat them up—broke all the windows in one classroom. Another, sweet thing, had been a twelve-year-old prostitute. Stephanie, a pretty girl, quit school because her boyfriend was murdered. I finished the year—some of those who didn't drop out even gave me little presents. That year radicalized me more than all the university protests before or since. And I learned two things: hungry, badly treated kids don't study; education degrees don't mean shit.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—I read the e-mail on my laptop between classes. Compared with hers, my teaching experiences seemed inconsequential, superficial—and my students even more so. Mired in routine, all of us. "Okay," I announced, as much to rupture my own ennui as break through theirs, "I'm going to read you

something. I want you to come back tomorrow with an account of your own high schooling. And I want it to be as honest as what I'm about to read."

I can't say the results were startling. But Joan—that is, Joan's descriptions—got through to most of the thirty-seven. Many of them (for lack of originality?) copied Joan's one or two sentence tat-tat style: drug busts, car wrecks, attempted rapes, things they'd observed rather than experienced personally. The most evocative was the description of an abortion—fears, humiliation, wanting to forget—written as having happened to a friend but I got the impression that it was a personal trauma and I wrote Joan about it and about other secret existences the mini-essays provoked.

Good job, Madison! (Joan's responses always seemed more like slaps in the face than pats on the back):

Poverty splits people open. Everything pours out: anger, hatred, sexual desire. Middleclass chavos like yours learn early in life to disguise—learn how to pretend. Things here in Oaxaca are more basic. More brutal. Abortion? It happens. But usually they just have the kids. Thirteen-, fourteen-year-olds. Grandmothers by the time they're thirty.

In the Zòcalo, 9-10 thousand striking teachers, hundreds of camp tents, ambulantes materializing out of nowhere, charcoal stoves, empanadas, tacos, tlayudas, candy, gum—5, 6, 7-year-olds selling one cigarette at a time, little baggies of peanuts, candied sweet potatoes. A young teacher from rural school way off in nowhere told me that the one really smart girl in his class had joined a cartel—yeah, shit, they recruit girls!—to be with her novio.

Her classmates, he said, call her "the lucky one."

Lucky, chingada yes. The rest of them, he said, have no futures. But that's not what he's supposed to teach.

No futures. I suppose that fifteen years ago those of us wrenching our way through high school thought we had futures. Not that we were naïve. Even middleclass kids growing up in New Orleans felt the poverty, experienced crime. But we developed a kind of immunity, a "them not us."

The really frightening thing was to come face-to-face with "Who gives a shit whether I live or die?" ("Who gives a shit whether I kill you or not?") I smoked pot—hell, everybody in New Orleans did except for a few Baptists—but I didn't deal. That was the middleclass way, nibble at danger, at lawlessness, at prohibitions but keep one foot anchored in middleclassdom, always with an escape hatch, a way back. The threat of going to jail stopped me—it didn't stop those who didn't care. The threat of being killed didn't stop them. It's something you can't deal with. You see it and you realize what evil really is: a black hole where the light of life should be.

After I wrote Joan I realized that my students were doing as much as I and my high school friends had done: tiptoeing close but pulling back before they got immersed. Choosing make-believe over reality: Love is forever. Work hard and you'll succeed. Good wins out in the end.

Ah Madison, Madison, Madison, you've just described why revolution hasn't happened here! The teachers come closest to igniting a conflagration, that's why the govt tromps on them. The govt can deal with the narcos—hell, they're after the same thing: money, more money and lots more money. The bastards in the govt and the bastard narcos can share the power in their own brutal ways. But people rising up? People taking power? No, my young friend, that fucks things up. The people have to be repressed. Kept in ignorance. Fed a make-believe reality: telenovelas, football, religious holidays.

Part of the make-believe reality here is blame the teachers. Crackdown on disruptions. Abolish non-conformity. The fucking narcos run wild but it's the teachers the govt represses. Shit, yes I know the union was corrupted by caciques; and abuses are numerous. But I also know that for thirty fucking years they've pushed for transportation, uniforms, bathrooms, breakfasts as well as salaries—the narcos pay beginning recruits more than teachers who've endured the system for 15-20 fucking years take home! And the people? The people who should support them? Off in la-la-land of make-believe repeating govt clichés...

Make-believe: make-believe and cover up in Oaxaca, make-believe in New Orleans, make-believe and cover up in suburban S.F. Students afraid to break out, live real lives. Like the student who put abortion experiences in the third-person. So different from Joan. Joan in the thick of things, participating, analyzing. My students repeating, reporting, staying safe. Doing homework because they have to in order to pass, in order to get their A.A., maybe go on to a four-year university...

Nevertheless, I congratulated them on their essays and tried to direct my grading away from grammar and punctuation, towards content. I suggested they post their efforts electronically on the class group site and write comments to each other—a non-graded exercise that even if it got minimal response might get them outside themselves, generate some thought. Also, I assigned an exercise based on Joan's perception of make-believe reality and their perceptions of its existence in their own lives.

Better results. Some unexpected. Several students analyzed—clumsily but with nuggets of insight—family myths that they concluded were cover-ups. A coed deliberating about a personal relationship that she'd entered “despite not wanting to inside” and suffering abuse and humiliation. A returned G.I. (one of the few in the class) scratching at indoctrinations about “democracy” and the lack of it he'd seen in Afghanistan. A young man of Vietnamese ancestry's polemic but touching diatribe against the “cement walls” of neo-liberalism and how impossible it was to break through.

And, later, a visit from the department chair.

“An interesting group site,” she commented, acknowledged that “others in the department” had voiced concern about assigning English 102 essays on “what would seem” to be more appropriate for social studies or international relations. She asked about “this source” in Mexico—“a friend, I presume?”—and (as department chairs so often do) mitigated her criticism by complimenting the “very commendable results” the students were achieving “but the truth is, Madison,” she fingered the tight collar of her brocaded blouse, “we have to stick to literary examples.”

And before I could counter: “Believe me, I'm with you on this...” she evoked her own struggles as an African-American competing for a place in academia then thrust her

shoulders back and crisped, “If they want to write about politics, prejudice, sex, whatever, that’s one thing, you grade them on how well they convey what they’re trying to convey. But to assign something overtly political, overtly controversial? Not appropriate for J.C. freshmen.”

“Stick to make-believe reality, not think, not—”

“After-class activism fine, in-class this is the English Department.”

“*Carajo!* Don’t I know!” Joan responded to my description of the encounter:

...try to move Popocatepetl with a shovel. You can’t do it. After two years in hell I transferred to a suburban school. Eighty percent white. Seventy-nine percent racist as hell. In front of the school one day a five-year-old hit by a car. Mother screaming. Ambulance driver demanding to know if she had insurance. I intervened: told the sonofabitch to get her to emergency or I’d have him jailed. Back in the classroom, so furious I could have ripped crocodiles apart with my bare hands, I overhead Just a Meskin, should’ve let her die...

Of course I wanted to use that as the next essay assignment but as I looked at the grades I’d given out I realized there was a lot of C- level flotsam: nineteen and twenty-year-olds who couldn’t break through, whose perception of living make-believe lives, of evoking reality, was itself a simulation, a trying to give me what they thought I wanted to read, not what they felt or thought or had experienced. I set Joan aside and gave the class a couple of humorous essay examples from a West Coast literary magazine “for a change of pace.” But I couldn’t fake it. Or fake it well enough. The ex-G.I. came up to me after class—timidly, I thought, for someone who’d seen combat in Afghanistan—and asked if “admin had stomped” me. He said he knew that some in the class had complained about what I’d assigned and word had sifted upstairs. I winced a “not really” then called him back and paraphrased the department chair’s definition of appropriate.

“So I can raise hell but you can’t?”

“I have to do it literarily,” I said, as much to Joan as to him.

“Strike’s over,” Joan wrote

...the teachers and the govt came to an agreement. The teachers get a raise and roll up their tents but threaten more actions if the crimes the govt committed aren’t solved. Shit! The govt hasn’t done anything in six years it’s not going to do anything in six more but the la-la-land robots can park their cars again, shop, get their shoes shined. The kids hate school and the teachers hate the govt and the govt vacations in Cancun. The few like you, Madison, who really care, wear down and either quit or give up and join the make-believe. I quit. I could only take it so long. I could only take marriage so long and Clay and I were about to kill each other. We both were looking for ways out and I bailed first. Chicago was a tough town but there were other things to do and I wound up in Mexico. I’m an outsider here. That’s okay. People see me as different and let me be different. Up there where you are people don’t like different. There’s pressure to conform. It breeds

anger. Hate. I get angry here but I can accept, I have a way to vent. As nasty, pigheaded, irrational as I am, I get to be me.

After finals the student who'd written about the abortion experience sought me out to thank me for "making parts of a boring class really interesting." I took it as a compliment and I asked her about her plans for the future. She interrupted whatever cliché she'd started to invent by fiddling with a water bottle pouched in her pack and mumbling, "Tomorrow, you mean?" Then, "Get a job. Maybe get married. Or kill myself."

An echo of her words came back to me as I sat facing the department chair for my annual evaluation. *I like your approach, Madison, your innovation. Where are you with your doctorate...?* Adding that "given the current climate" it would be essential "otherwise..." her long fingers calligraphed the space between us,

...otherwise I could wind up like Joan? I thought and as she mused, "with a Ph.D. you see..."

...I could wind up in make-believe...

Like you.

But I didn't say it. I booked a flight to Oaxaca instead.

Brothers

Evan McMurry

Sasha's first boyfriend had an older brother, 19, who smirked when he first saw the two sitting on the couch, an evil slant-grin, as though he'd caught them in some sin. He was prematurely balding, head like a dying field, had just come home from his job at the recycling plant and reeked of poured-off lager. "You two don't get up to nothing," he said, half-warning and half-dare. From how her boyfriend's eyes followed his exit Sasha knew the brother had terrorized all sixteen years of his existence.

"He says watch out because you're going to try to get pregnant," her boyfriend told her a few days later.

"What an asshole," Sasha said, she thought in sympathy. But mistrust had been planted and every stray comment or misheard tone watered it. He planned to go to college; she was a year younger than him, and he began to suspect her of conspiring to keep him in town. Soon he was scared to have sex with her. They'd get high in his room when his parents were out and she'd stroke his cock until he'd panic and pull his pants up.

He left for the tech school nearby. On his first break home he bumped into one of his brother's friends at a dive; two months later she was knocked up. He dropped out and for the second half of her senior year Sasha saw him dragging himself around town as if on a forced march.

*

In college, Sasha dated a French major, studious and quiet. During the week the two read assignments in each other's laps, smoked cigarettes on the balcony as he translated love poems with undercover irony. But on the weekends she wanted to head out with friends, to house parties off-campus, dances in basements. He found reasons not to go, complained that she came home drunk and door-slamming, berating him over nothings. Sasha loved him but felt a captive of his inwardness.

After they'd been living together two semesters his brother showed up and crashed on their couch. He was a few years older, had dropped out of a more prestigious university in his final semester after some nervous breakdown, though he called it a protest. He was taciturn like her boyfriend, but more intense, as if he were drawing in sound and light, like a black hole. In bed Sasha whispered to her boyfriend whether he liked his brother. "He's the smartest person I've ever met," he replied, and turned to his side.

Near as Sasha could tell, the brother did nothing all day but devour books on neuroscience in their living room, so when she offhandedly invited him to a party one night he surprised her by bounding up from the couch. She led him to a crowded backyard, where he expertly pumped the keg; downstairs, old Motown blasted; he turned out to be a kinetic dancer, all that sound and light he'd amassed jolting his limbs. Sasha sweated

against him. He grabbed her hips as they ground into the next song. She was entranced by this sudden emergence of a second person, felt elect to be the one who lured it out of him. Who knew how many beers in she said, "You're so much more fun than your brother."

Four in the morning they finally stumbled home; she passed out next to her boyfriend, the night already blinking away. Two days later the brother left without having spoken another word to her. Her boyfriend was more detached than usual, muttering through his end of conversations. They persisted like that for another few weeks, until one day, when she was haranguing him to go out for her friend's birthday dinner, he snapped, "Why don't you just take my brother? You sure enjoyed fucking him."

Sasha never discovered whether his brother had lied, or told him some version of the truth that had crawled like ivy up her boyfriend's mind. When she asked he spat long streams of French, talkative at last.

*

Visions of the brother lingered like sunspots. Her senior year Sasha went out with a man whom she later realized she'd been attracted to because he matched that intensity. He taught at the local community college, where she took a psychology class to fulfill a credit; more eager than the other students, she seized the young professor's eye; after finals the two met for drinks, then back to his place. He was a cauldron of information, more facts and tales than he could get out, associative; every sentence was interdisciplinary. He was the type of person, atomic with knowledge and curiosity, she'd always wanted to be with.

But his temper was savage, booby-trapped by alcohol. He'd lost a younger brother when he was twelve, who'd gotten a bicycle for his birthday and, when the future professor was supposed to be watching, went speeding down the driveway into the street. The oncoming car never saw him.

Now he got blindingly drunk once, twice a week, and if Sasha didn't call or text to tell him exactly where she was and what she'd been doing he'd become apoplectic. Eventually he struck her. She received a letter from him a month later, sixteen scrawled pages; he'd never forgiven himself for what had happened to his brother, he explained, and so feared letting down those he loved that it erupted; when he hit her, he was really hitting himself.

Sasha trashed the letter, which was not as insightful as she would have thought, though it did contain multiple references to Adler and Kant.

*

Over the next couple years, as she got a job first as a research assistant and then librarian at her alma mater, Sasha barely dated. A friend might arrange a meet-up, or she might go home with someone from the bar, hardly noticing whether he called the next day. Only after pressure from her parents, and from some already-married friends who adopted a faux-adult tone when confiding they were "worried" about her, did she attempt some online dates. After the fourth or fifth Sasha hit it off with a man her age who worked on the

town's grounds crew, cultivating parks and arboretums. He was outdoorsy—not her thing, but she learned to enjoy it. He happily accompanied her to happy hours or late-night dancing downtown, so long as she was fine with him waking to watch bizarrely early soccer games. He didn't read, really, except guidebooks, or follow the news, but she decided her friends and colleagues satisfied her intellectually. She loved instead how he returned home every day dirt-caked, sweat running private patterns down his skin.

They'd been dating a year when he took her to a family wedding. He was the second-youngest of seven; Sasha quickly gave up remembering the names of siblings, wives, husbands, children, brothers-in-law and the rest. She made admirable small talk, waltzed with her boyfriend's father, helped their grandmother with the cake. After her boyfriend declared he'd been defeated by the open bar and retired to bed she wound up smoking an illicit cigarette on the hotel patio with the eldest brother, fourteen years her senior, father of two toddlers she'd seen running about in lavender mini-tuxes. He'd been a social worker, he told her, now did research on child development, had the weary but affable demeanor of someone who'd seen worse than most yet had protected his humor, an equilibrium she respected after bouts of intense men. They talked for hours, that expansive sunrise chatter.

Days after the wedding Sasha received a package containing a book on neurobiology he'd recommended. She emailed a thank you; he asked how she liked it; soon she was spending hours at work crafting responses to his messages. She meant several times to tell her boyfriend what a good conversation she was having with his brother, but found excuses not to; she'd heard him refer to his sibling as *the intellectual*, part disdain, part envy; she knew his pride in his job was shared by her but not by his family.

As her emails got longer his became more personal, bemoaning the pull of his family on work, the ideas he was too busy to chase; he swore he could write a book had he the time. *I'm so relieved I can talk to you about this*, he wrote. *My wife doesn't get it. We've never really met on that level.*

He began calling her. At first Sasha thought something was wrong, but usually he just wanted to expound, sometimes for hours, on a new article on cognitive development. She detected the slur of whisky in his voice. The calls strayed later into the night. ("Who are you talking to?" her boyfriend asked; she just said a friend.) He told her he and his wife rarely made love since the birth of their second child almost two years ago. "She doesn't get me mentally, she doesn't get me sexually," he said through a bitter laugh unsweetened by his prior humor.

He asked her what she was wearing. She told him it was none of his business. He told her he was looking at the pictures from the wedding, how lovely she'd been in her purple dress. Sasha heard a ruffling sound, increasing in pace, and realized he was masturbating to her. She threw the phone across the kitchen.

Her boyfriend was asleep in the next room. Sasha said nothing to him, but became sullen at any mention of his family; he invited her another wedding and then a family reunion, but she improvised excuses. He grew suspicious.

The brother texted her photos of his erect penis that she deleted as soon as she saw them.

That night her boyfriend went from kissing her neck to working her skirt off and finally pulled out his own cock from his soccer shorts. She recoiled at its sight. He knocked on the locked bathroom door, pleaded to know what was wrong.

Sasha showed him the next image his brother sent. He turned away, back toward it, away again. "So you two have been fucking around?" he said, not looking at her. She swore they hadn't, that it had started so innocently, and now regretted not telling him about the initial emails.

He didn't mention it for a week, then another. Finally she confronted him as he scrubbed the day's dirt from his forearms at the kitchen sink. "He's in rehab," her boyfriend growled, as if she'd caused all this. "He and Pauline are going to work through some stuff. They don't want the rest of the family to know."

He turned the hot water up, seethed from its touch.

"That's it?" Sasha asked.

"What else is there?"

"An apology would be nice."

His head bent in the curtain of steam. "I don't think he knew what he was doing."

"Aren't you upset?"

"He's sick." Her boyfriend bit his lip, angry and bewildered. "He's my brother."

After she moved out, some mutual friends said he'd been telling people they just didn't have that much in common.

*

Several weeks after she returned home Sasha spotted her high school boyfriend in the aisle of the grocery store. He was stunned, then thrilled to see her, stated babbling in the aisle. She learned he was divorced, drove a forklift at the local surplus store. He was balding now; the reedy strands of hair over his skull flesh brought that beer-reek back to Sasha's nose. He asked if she had any kids yet, shook his head when she said no, as if at last, after all these years, doubting his brother's wisdom.

Sasha was readying her exit when his two boys came chasing each other down the aisle. He introduced the eight and the four-year-olds; they dutifully mouthed hellos, antsy. One gave the other a tiny shove, out of sheer excess energy. "All right," their father said. "You two don't get up to nothing."

They burst off, brushing Sasha's hip, nearly toppling a display case as they cleared the aisle.

A Walk on Sunset

Paul Patane

Charlie, an obese and high-on-'shrooms twenty-three-year-old with shaggy brown hair, walked with his Aunt Mary down Sunset Boulevard, trying to make it to In-n-Out Burger. They had gotten off the subway at the Vermont/Sunset station. What the pair didn't realize was that the subway station was nearly three miles from the restaurant. Had they been from Los Angeles, Charlie and his aunt would have known to get off at the West Hollywood stop instead. Passing the Church of Scientology after a couple blocks, they stopped for a breather on the sidewalk out front. Spotlights on the facade of the church's cream and blue exterior brightened the entire block. The air was cool and dry, clouds and smog masking any stars they may have seen in the urban metropolis.

"I didn't realize it was so far away," Charlie said, looking down at an old wad of dirt-crusted bubblegum. "Are you sure you want to do this?" The sidewalk was littered with garbage and dried patches of motor oil. Most of the city looked parched, but the grass in front of L. Ron Hubbard's church was as green as a jungle. Charlie grabbed a dented pack of Camel's from the cargo pocket on the side of his pants.

Aunt Mary bent over, took a deep breath, and pulled a cheap red lighter from her suede purse. She took a Camel from her nephew and lit it, holding the cigarette between her lips. Her hair was dyed black and she wore a green and white checkered blouse that looked as if it came from the cover of a *Coldwater Creek* catalog. "We're committed to the cause now," she said. Aunt Mary passed the lighter to Charlie. She reached into her jeans, pulling out her iPhone. She unlocked the screen and tapped a few icons before biting her lower lip. "If only I knew how to use this damned thing." Her eyes narrowed, studying the phone's screen. "I can text and call but maps are beyond me."

Charlie grinned and straightened himself out, stretching his lower back to either side, showing off his keg-shaped belly. "How hard can it be? We just keep walking down the street until we run into it." He smirked, thinking about the subway ride over. A homeless Muslim woman had sat behind Charlie and his aunt in the train car, shouting in broken English at a trans person who sat across from her about God hating gays. At the time, Charlie was relaxed from eating 'shrooms, but even high, he was mildly insulted for the poor soul who kept quiet.

The floral aroma of his aunt's perfume pulled Charlie back into the moment. "Ready?" He lit his cigarette and began to smoke, stowing the lighter and pack of smokes in his shorts.

Aunt Mary shrugged and said, "Let's hit the bricks."

Charlie began for the crosswalk, looking before committing to the open side street they needed to pass. As they got further and further away from the Scientology church, the artificial lighting began to dissipate, leaving them in the dark of the night. "Hang on," Charlie said, twisting his body to take another look at the church. "I can't resist, sorry Aunt Mary." He began to walk back toward the light of the church, cigarette dangling from his lips.

"What is it, Charlie?" Aunt Mary said, following Charlie back the way they had just come.

He could hear his aunt's soft footsteps from behind. "You'll see," he called out.

They stepped off the city sidewalk, trekking across a mostly empty parking lot, passing a row of palm trees. A few sedans and coupes were scattered, highlighted by spotlights. Under a light pole, Charlie spotted a heavysset astronaut, fully illuminated. The astronaut wore a white space suit with a NASA patch across the upper torso, with his helmet's black shield pulled down. Even though Charlie couldn't see the man's face behind the shield, he liked to think the astronaut was smiling at him. Charlie walked to the entrance and looked at the large glass windows that covered the church's exterior facade. Unable to find the fat astronaut's reflection he looked over his shoulder. No astronaut. He paused near the Scientology entrance and took a deep breath, studying a no smoking sign etched into the window. Aunt Mary caught up and stopped by his side, giving a puzzled look.

"Let me do the talking," Charlie said, putting out his cigarette on the cement outside the entrance.

Aunt Mary scratched at an itch on her neck with her long, carefully manicured fingernails. "Are you sure you want to go in here? I watch a lot of *E!* news and there's always weird stories about Scientologists disappearing and stuff. You heard about what that actress from *King of Queens* said, right?" She flicked her cigarette away from the entrance, back onto the sidewalk.

Charlie glanced at his aunt. "I don't like that show. Fat guy physical humor is overrated." A breeze came through, wafting the top of the nearby palm trees, sending a chill down his neck.

"I'm not talking about Kevin James." Aunt Mary cleared her throat and continued, "I was trying to tell you about the pretty one, Leah Remini. She said she left the church to protect her daughter and spend more time with her family." Aunt Mary extended her arms out in frustration, looking up at the sign above them. "Then church leaders came out blasting her in the media, saying she was just bitter and that they were meaning to expel her."

Charlie held out the palm of his hand. "All the more reason to do what I'm about to." He reached for the door handle in front of him and pulled. The transition from the night into the brightly lit lobby wreaked havoc on Charlie's eyes. After a few seconds, he got his bearings and from across the spacious room, noticed an attractive woman with blond hair dressed like a secretary sitting behind a desk. She looked right at him, but seemed intent on not speaking from such a distance.

He began for the woman's desk, his aunt following behind. "Excuse me," Charlie said, stopping in front of the desk while jamming his hands into his pants pockets.

The woman glanced at Aunt Mary before settling her eyes on Charlie. "Welcome, how may I help you tonight?" Her eyes were a deep shade of blue and she had a soothing, delicate voice.

"I need to see him," Charlie said, looking down. He noticed a tablet computer, phone and a stack of brochures on the marble desk the woman sat behind.

"Pardon me?" She raised an eyebrow.

Charlie reached his arms forward, resting them against the desk. "You know," he whispered, leaning in. "The man. Brian Flanagan. Cole Trickle."

The woman gave Charlie a cold stare.

He continued, "Maverick?"

"I don't follow," the woman said. Her cheeks began to turn red.

Charlie sighed. "Jerry Maguire?" His voice got louder as he continued, "Don't you see any movies from your most famous alum? Shit lady, I'm talking none other than the loony jumping up and down on Oprah's couch, Tom Cruise."

From behind, Charlie heard his aunt snicker.

The woman pulled herself from her chair and stood, arms folded across her chest. "You think I haven't heard a Tom Cruise joke before? You need to leave, *now*."

Charlie took a few steps back laughing, almost stepping into his aunt.

"Let's get out of here," Aunt Mary said. Her voice had grown firm, resonant.

From out of the corner of his eye, Charlie noticed a rental cop coming toward him. The rental cop was thin, muscular, and tightly held onto a flashlight and Taser. Looking at the guard, Charlie said, "Don't worry, we're leaving."

After leaving the Church of Scientology in a hurry, Charlie's hunger rekindled his quest for In-n-Out Burger. He began to think of all the delicious beef delicacies that must have been waiting for him. Pondering much too hard about food, his mind wandered as he led his aunt to the nearby sidewalk.

Everybody Talks by Neon Trees began to loop through Charlie's brain, like a CD track set to repeat. Whispering the song in his mind, he thought of the band's name and how it was in honor of the group's love for In-n-Out. Without realizing, he began to dance like the band's front man, Tyler Glenn would if he were accompanying Charlie and his aunt on their mission. Charlie imagined himself on stage, strutting around, spinning in circles, all while wearing slick sunglasses and skinny jeans.

By the time Charlie noticed what he was doing, he was caught up in the moment.

Aunt Mary clapped to his steps. "Go for it," she said.

He froze in place. "Sorry, kind of impromptu." Charlie was short of breath and rested his hands on his hips.

Aunt Mary pulled a cigarette and a new lighter from her purse. "Don't apologize," she said, tucking the cigarette between her lips. "But you're as high as a kite." She lit up and began to inhale. "I hope you haven't eaten all the 'shrooms. I want some after dinner."

"Of course not," Charlie said, scratching his belly. "What kind of nephew would I be if I did that?"

"A crappy one." She took a deep breath.

"We better pick up the pace. My phone said In-n-Out closes at one."

They walked in silence for a few blocks, on occasion slowing to get a look at the bums sleeping on street corners and church steps. One was still awake, pushing a shopping cart filled with salvaged garbage down the sidewalk. The cart's plastic wheels made a terrible squeal against the cement as it rolled by.

As they passed LA Grace Church, Charlie heard a voice call from behind. "Hey buddy, stop for a sec." Unsure if he was the person being spoken to, Charlie turned to his aunt who walked alongside him. She seemed unfazed and continued to move at a steady pace. "Hang on," the voice called again, confidently.

Charlie stopped in his tracks and turned back, seeing none other than Tyler Glenn standing in front of him. Tyler had bleached white hair, wore sunglasses and a purple suit with a faux fur cape draped across his backside. The other Neon Trees band members formed a semi-circle behind him. The drummer, Elaine Bradley, sat behind a hot pink drum kit wearing a short green dress, waving a drumstick over her shoulder length blond hair. Chris Allen had short, combed over blond hair, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and jeans with his

guitar strapped to his back. Branden Campbell stood farthest from Charlie, looking relaxed in a fitted silver suit while gripping his white and black Fender.

"Where you off to in such a hurry?" Tyler asked.

Charlie buried his hands in his pockets. "In-n-Out."

Tyler grinned and took off his sunglasses, tucking them into his interior suit pocket. "That's our favorite restaurant, you know."

Shrugging, Charlie studied Elaine and wondered how she got her drum kit set up on the city block so quickly. "Of course, I'm a big fan." He pulled his hands from his pockets, holding a plastic bag filled with 'shrooms in his left hand. "You guys doing a concert or something out here?"

"Something like that," Tyler said. "You want us to play you a song?"

"You take requests?"

Tyler turned his head away, looking to his band. Charlie saw the band members nod their heads while whispering back and forth. After a moment, Tyler turned back to Charlie and pulled his sunglasses from inside his suit, putting them back on. "What do you want to hear?"

Charlie scratched at his chin, disappointed he didn't have more facial hair after not shaving for three consecutive days. He took a deep breath and said, "Shit, I don't know." Looking up at the sky, Charlie took a deep breath. "Play something sweet, but not too cute. Lay off that Mormon shit you guys usually play for the coeds."

"First the Scientologists and now us? You need to get laid, kid." Tyler clapped his hands together twice and proclaimed, "*Sleeping with a Friend* it is."

Chris and Branden began playing chords on their Fender's while Elaine threw down some percussion. Charlie had seven years' experience playing electric guitar, so he knew Chris was playing: *G /// Am / Dm / G /// Am / Dm /* on repeat.

Tyler looked down at the street, snapping his fingers and bobbing his head. The front man began to slide across a section of sidewalk, swaying back and forth. He began to sing, "All my friends..."

Charlie closed his eyes for a moment, snapping his fingers while listening. Afraid that the band may disappear, he re-opened his eyes slowly, praying the concert would continue.

Tyler was doing a Moon Walk, sliding his legs and feet back while swinging his arms up as he sang.

The song had begun to reinvigorate Charlie's senses and fortitude. It felt like Tyler had plugged Charlie into a socket and his battery had become fully charged, instantly.

He felt a cold hand touch his shoulder. Charlie jumped to the touch, eyes shooting open. Neon Trees was no longer performing on the sidewalk, all remnants of the alternative rock group had vanished. There was only Charlie, Aunt Mary, his bag of 'shrooms and darkness.

"Sorry sweetie, you zoned out on me," Aunt Mary said. She smiled wide and removed her hand from Charlie's shoulder. "We need to keep moving. I'm hungry, it's past my bedtime and I'm going to be pissed if we don't get there before closing." She coughed, covering her mouth with sunburned hands.

"I was just thinking." He dug his hands into his pockets and walked down the street, looking face down, counting the cracked seams in the dirty cement. *One...ten...twenty...* After the first hundred, he lost count. Aunt Mary kept pace while Charlie led the way, smoking. A

breeze blew a puff of smoke back into his face, temporarily blinding him. "Christ," he muttered.

Aunt Mary laughed and coughed simultaneously, clearing her throat, "Don't be such a baby. If your lungs can take it, so can your eyes."

Charlie stopped and scratched his chin. As sincere as possible, he said, "I'm pretty sure my lungs can't take it."

Holding out her arms, Aunt Mary said, "You never know, I've been a smoker for over thirty years and I'm still here. God willing, I've got plenty left in the tank yet."

As if searching for a deep meaning that wasn't really there, Charlie settled on the idea that his aunt was meant to defy logic and reason. "Maybe that's your legacy. The aging woman who smoked forever, giving lung cancer and all the haters the finger after getting her AARP card."

After what felt like an entire evening, Charlie and Aunt Mary made the long trek over the Hollywood Freeway. They walked across a seemingly ominous under-lit bridge, leaving Charlie to feel like he was going to get attacked by an army of hobos for the few dollars and Metro pass he kept in his wallet. He fondly remembered a time when his aunt moved quicker than he did, but in recent years, Aunt Mary's body had begun to deteriorate, leading to a knee replacement and leaving her with two speeds: slow and a little slower. Short of breath and feet beginning to ache, negativity began to overtake Charlie even though he had managed to avoid an imminent hobo attack. Perhaps all the drifters had fallen asleep already with it being so late at night. While on their journey for fast food, Charlie noticed many of them curled up in oversized jackets and in sleeping bags, but he was careful to avoid making eye contact, unsure of proper street etiquette. Committed, the duo continued to make progress as they headed west on Sunset.

Before he could ask for a break, Aunt Mary pulled ahead of Charlie by a few steps and called, "Look Charlie, the CNN building."

Halting next to his aunt, Charlie looked up at the tower, taking in the large red CNN logo displayed across it. The impressive structure dominated the surrounding block, reminding Charlie of all the reasons he hated cable news. He never cared for things that got too real and cable news in particular always seemed so negative. Aunt Mary didn't seem fond of it, either.

"Pretty impressive," she said. "You know, I used to have a crush on Piers Morgan." She looked at Charlie, raising an eyebrow.

"I bet it was the Queen's English that suckered you in," he said.

Aunt Mary smiled so wide Charlie couldn't help but fixate on her coffee-stained teeth. "It didn't hurt, but then I realized what a liberal high-and-mighty prick he really is." She pointed up at the logo. "It's not much is it?" Mary took a deep breath. "Three red letters in an ugly, oversimplified font."

Charlie could see his aunt moving her index finger, as if she were tracing the letters from afar. "I've never given it much thought. You know I'm not one for cable news."

Aunt Mary shifted her attention to Charlie. "What do you like Charlie?"

A black Escalade roared down the street. Charlie noticed the wide rims reflecting intermittent streetlight. After he could no longer see the SUV, he re-examined the building, looking up. "You know what I like, Aunt Mary. Good movies, scripted television, comic books and snacks." He looked down, finding his aunt's stoic stare. "Getting by and having fun, it's the little victories that keep me going."

"That's not what I meant." She had another coughing fit, grabbing at her chest with her left arm. Charlie began to approach, but she held out her free arm, palm out. "I'm fine," Aunt Mary said, regaining her posture, "I was talking about what you want to do. You're only twenty-three, but somehow I feel like you're wasting time."

Charlie shrugged, "Well I don't really like delivering pizzas, if that's what you mean."

Aunt Mary walked up to her nephew, hugging him. "I know you don't, but I was trying to get at something deeper."

Pulling away, Charlie said, "I don't understand."

"I know you don't, honey. It's all right."

Looking back at the CNN building, Charlie reached into his pocket and pulled out his pack of cigarettes and lit a Camel. Scanning the building from top to bottom, he noticed a beige sofa on the sidewalk outside the tower. There was a man with small stature jumping up and down on the couch, wearing all black. Charlie took a drag and walked to the couch, realizing the man in black was Tom Cruise. He must have heard about Charlie's visit to the Scientology church and had caught up with him.

Charlie nervously said, "Tom Cruise?"

Tom jumped down from the sofa cushion. Charlie noticed he stood a couple inches taller than Tom. "You must be Charlie. I've been waiting for you." He held out his arms, pulling Charlie in for an informal and uncomfortable hug. "It's a pleasure."

Pulling away, Charlie said, "This is incredible. When I came to LA I knew I wanted to meet you, but you know, millions of people." He grew even more nervous, admitting, "I'm star-struck."

Grinning, Tom said, "When you came looking for me earlier, I knew you had to be special."

Charlie ran his fingers through his hair. "I know it's none of my business, but I'm sorry about what happened with you and Katie."

Tom smiled, pulling Charlie in for another hug. "Thank you. Thank you so much." Tom pushed his new friend back a couple steps, holding Charlie's hands in his. "That's why I'm here." His teeth were as white as a spacesuit, and even though he had been exercising in front of the CNN building there wasn't a misplaced hair on his head. "We can help each other out, you know, like friends do. Help me help you."

Trying not to laugh, Charlie took a step back. "I'm sorry, that's great and all, but I didn't expect you to channel Jerry Maguire on me."

Tom held out his arms as wide as he could, "That's all right, Charlie. But try to pay attention, because you don't want to end up like me, like some kind of fucking case study."

Charlie took his hands out of his pockets. "You mean when you went on Oprah's show?"

Tom nodded. "There I was, opening up to all those people. It was supposed to be fun and I was ridiculed. Take it from me, don't waste time worrying about other people and what they might think." He lowered his voice, raising his right hand to his face. "The truth is they're all afraid. Afraid to love. Afraid to fail. Afraid to even succeed." Tom took a step closer and raised his voice, "I'm cloaked in failure, but that's all right. I wouldn't be where I am otherwise." He stepped around Charlie, moving to his side. "You're like me. That's what makes you special."

Exhausted physically and emotionally, Charlie had gone through most of the night dwelling on little, obscure things. Television shows, what he would eat for dinner, how he

would survive another mile of walking, but Tom's words added clarity to a situation that already felt rather clear. The truth was things hadn't been so clear after all. "I appreciate a motivational speech as much as the next guy, Mr. Cruise, but I don't know what you mean. How am I like you?"

Tom pulled Charlie in for another hug, patting his hands against Charlie's back. "You'll know when you know."

A rusted blue Taurus drove down Sunset, making a horrible rumbling noise. As it passed, Charlie noticed its muffler dragging along the street, creating sparks. He turned back to thank Tom Cruise and offer to take him with his aunt to In-n-Out, but Charlie's new friend and the couch had vanished.

Charlie and Aunt Mary walked in silence. They were both worn out and in need of hydration, however there was a confident, silent agreement in place as they took each step. They were bonded in their journey, nothing denying them. Once Charlie decided he couldn't possibly be more uncomfortable, he noticed Hollywood High School creep into view. With it being so late, the campus was as dead as a cemetery, but Charlie smiled as he walked by, imagining all the people that fill the halls on school days. It wasn't long ago he roamed halls with teenagers and classmates of his own. Charlie's personal experiences probably couldn't hold a torch to what the students in Hollywood went through, but he was fine with that. Ultimately, Charlie thought, high school had to be a pretty universal experience, regardless of geography or popularity.

He stopped in front of the school. "I bet there are some pretty glamorous rich people who go there."

Charlie's aunt stopped next to him, staring at the school like a movie poster. "I suppose, but you would know better than me. High school was a lot different for my generation."

"What do you mean?" Charlie asked.

Aunt Mary shrugged. "When I was in high school the world was changing, and it happened real fast. But as crazy as things got, we didn't have to worry about all the crazy shit, like the World Trade Center being attacked, or psychopaths with automatic weapons." She looked her nephew in the eye. "It's scary. I don't know how your generation does it. I worried about the prom, not whether or not I'd get taken out by an active shooter."

Charlie scanned the campus, trying to take it all in. "I never thought of it like that before."

"How did you think of it?" She looked at her watch and took a deep breath. "Walk and talk. We need to keep moving."

Charlie began to walk west again. Turning back to his aunt, he said, "I didn't. I guess sometimes it's easier to deal with things if you don't dwell on them."

The school began to fade away and across the intersection, In-n-Out came into view. Charlie wasn't sure what he had expected: a castle, a restaurant floating on a cloud in front of the gates of heaven, spotlights and a DJ pumping house music, it didn't really matter because it wasn't what he saw. It looked so simple. Even though the restaurant appeared plain and ordinary, Charlie clutched onto the feeling that something special was waiting inside. Through large windows, Charlie could see a long line snaking back to the entrance. Every seat he could see looked filled by happy people, consuming their burgers and fries. It was as if none of them had a care in the world, at least not while they sat inside the In-n-Out.

Last Train from New York
K. Marvin Bruce

“Yep. That’s blood.”

Blood on a Monday morning commute always spells trouble. I’m slaloming toward the Seventh Avenue escalators at Penn Station. Everyone’s in a rush. Escalator’s shut down.

I rush by a group of maintenance men standing around the bottom of the faulty conveyance. They’ve got some of the treads off and are peering down into the gaping cavity beneath. “Yep. That’s blood,” one of them says as I hurry up the stairs. Guys on the job.

What’s more basic than a job? Everyone’s gotta work. It’s performance evaluation day.

“Chameleons survive by pretending to be what you want them to be. What do you want me to be?” I suppose I shouldn’t have said that. Honesty’s seldom the best policy.

It doesn’t help that it followed my comment that companies hiring high-performance individuals shouldn’t try to claim them all for themselves. “I need to have a life—all of my time is spent at or commuting to and from work. Is it wrong to want to direct my own destiny?” My destiny was directed elsewhere.

As I’m cleaning out my cube, Aldrich remarks that careers are like trying to steer a train. Railroaded to profitability. For someone else.

When the sidewalk sways so precariously, I know I’ve had a little too much to drink. Broadway is New York’s gift to those who occasionally need to bend elbows with Poe at the Vault at Pfaff’s. Although I ambled down the stairs at 2 p.m. it was already dark inside. The bar shone like the north star, and after curling up with a Melville’s Ghost or two, the brick walls and moodily shadowed corners with trendy chairs began to feel like old friends. The air cloaked with anticipation, that stunning blonde on the red velvet hassock is actually flirting with me. Knees apart, tongue on her perfect teeth. Something’s about to happen amid the glistening bottles and proud draught taps.

As usual, I leave alone. The steep stairs back to the street wobble dangerously, and the sky has grown dark in earnest while I allowed myself the innocuous thrill of an iniquitous daydream. Unemployed. Again.

Students in chattering knots scatter through the Village from their parties, and the cold air on my face entices me to walk to Penn Station rather than struggle through the subway. Broadway will lead me home. The yellow cabs weaving around pedestrians and the foolish drivers of private cars radiate a carnival atmosphere in the city darkness punctuated by a billion lights. Like a rigged game at the fair, the gullible wonder who’s not going to make it across with the walking man icon this time. Like a chalk-outlined body rendered in tiny white lights—go on, take a chance.

Union Square is still crowded, and preoccupied people flow around me like a stream around a drunken salmon. I regain Broadway at Andy and continue to the Flatiron. It looks odd from this angle, and I stare dubiously to make certain it really is the Flatiron after all. What other wedge-shaped buildings are around? A tired breeze wafts the tinge of burning chestnuts. The sounds of the city are dulled and melodic. The galaxy of lights scintillates, each exuding a cozy halo around those working late. Working at all.

At Penn Station I'm glad to ride the escalator down for a while. I don't live in Manhattan, I only work here. Worked. A guest in Gotham. The station's nearly empty at this hour. I'll catch the last train from New York toward the stark inevitability of New Jersey.

The monitor reads "All Board" as I run down the final escalator that moves too slowly. I burst out right beside the engine just as the warning bell is ringing. The last train of the night. I dash for the closing door. The heavy rubber gums in their metal jaws clench shut on my right ankle before apologetically sliding back open. Wincing with the pain, I limp to the first seat inside the door and nurse my bruised joint. The door slams shut again and we jerk into motion.

This is one of those double-decker train cars. They usually look new with their artfully variegated blue paneling appearing as though it's been sponge painted. The heavy, molded, off-white plastic cushions the steel casket. The blue seats of industrial canvas and vinyl. The brushed metal rails smoothed from thousands of commuter fingers. As I settle back for the two-hour ride to the end of the line, I notice this car isn't as pristine as most.

I'm just outside the conductor's cabin, across from the electronic access compartment. I'd rather take a regular cabin seat, but my leg is throbbing. Rubbing my ankle, I notice deep, jagged gashes across the heavy plastic floor. That stuff is virtually indestructible—what's been here before me? Banging like a shutter before a storm, the wide panel hiding the electronics across from me repeatedly slips open and slams shut with the rocking of the train. Adjacent to the swinging door is the illuminated button to open the conductor's box. The window into the cabin is covered with a Johnny Walker Double Black poster. Maybe Johnny is hiring?

Slowly, the flimsy panel door across from me creaks open again. My glazed stare falls on the heavy batteries, complicated wiring and components I can't fathom. This isn't intended to be seen by your average passenger. An electric hum, dangerous and low, emanates from the shallow chamber. On the door itself is a box reading "torpedoes and fusees" in red. Rescue equipment. The entire mechanical compartment with its foreign noises and heavy, industrial machinery, looks neglected. The smell of burning dust, like the first day the heating kicks on, fills the air. Wider, wider, the door creaks open, suddenly swinging back on its axis, slamming shut. Just like the job I've lost today.

The usual sound of drunken laughter on the last-call train is absent. Am I alone in this car? From the far end on the upper level I can hear the approach of the ticket collector. The uneven, slow step limps forward. Unhurried. No one to throw off the train tonight.

I've never seen an injured conductor before. These guys work with tons of sharp, heavy, metal moving with entrepreneurial efficiency every day. Accidents are bound to happen, I remind myself. "Yep. That's blood."

I've commuted for years, hoping for something better. Tonight I'm wounded.

Step-drag. Step-drag. Step-drag—I hear his approach up the car. Nervously I glance at the top deck. The lights are muddy and dim. A large chunk has been smashed out of the jaunty blue paneling, revealing the cold metal skeleton beneath. The train rolls on slowly. I look out the scratched and grimy window behind me. The passing lights move at a leisurely pace. I glance at my watch. Two-eighteen.

Step-drag. Step-drag. Step-drag. I strain my eyes hoping for the familiar shape of a ticket-taker, neat pillbox hat atop a friendly head with a conservative haircut and often ironic grin. Backlit against the feeble light, instead I see a slump-shouldered figure slowly approaching with a cloud of unspoken menace. A catastrophe in chiaroscuro. Nervously I pat my pockets seeking my pass. My throat is dry and the pleasant martini buzz has worn down to a general anxiety. A ponderous, heavy foot lands on the first step churning a wave of threat. I can't reach the doors now; besides, I'm on a moving train. To my left, the inviolable conductor's door. The panel to the mechanical room creaks back open. A person can't fit in there. Another heavy step. I try to look down, but my curiosity inevitably draws my eyes back up.

This conductor is injured. Badly. His tattered uniform is torn at the shoulder. Bleeding flesh shows through, his arm barely intact. His face, frozen between rage and agony, wears an unholy sneer. Repulsed, I look up with a weak smile. Pity me—I've just lost my job. The horror before me shudders my shoulders. His eyes are sunken too deep to see. A fresh scar bisects his anemic face. His left ear has been ripped off, fresh blood still oozes. There's damp blood on his uniform. He reaches out a disfigured hand with fingers are bent at impossible angles, dripping on me. When he opens one half of his mouth to whisper, "Ticket," I see that his teeth are canted in odd directions and broken off sharply in his mouth as if his face has been smashed in. I hold my monthly pass up before me like a crucifix.

He draws the flimsy card-stock from my hand and stares at it a moment. Slowly he rips the ticket down its center line, as if pulling apart a butterfly. "Hey," I protest, despite my fear, "I'll need that tomorrow!" Wait. I have no job tomorrow. "What am I supposed to do tomorrow?"

Step-drag. He turns to lumber down to the lower deck. His left foot is badly mangled, and seems to be holding onto his leg by ligaments and odd shreds of flesh. He leaves a trail of smeary blood.

The slamming of the panel startles me like a gunshot. I want to be home. Or even in that god-forsaken office, being fired again. The train trundles along at a leisurely pace. I decide I'll get out at Union. There'll be no more trains tonight, and even though I'm unemployed, I'll pay for a cab. No ghastly ticket collectors.

I hear the conductor's uneven gait all the way to the far end of the vacant car. My own leg still aching wildly, I grab a tarnished rail and hobble over to peer down the lower deck. Empty. Painfully stepping up, the grim light reveals no other passengers on the upper deck. At the far end, I hear the slow return of sullen, heavy steps. Quickly I back to my torn and ratty seat. I'm trapped.

The train rocks like a demonic mother. Step-drag. Step-drag. Step-drag. Through the top deck. Determined to force normality, I stare out the damaged window. Hell is an average part of my daily itinerary.

Step-thump. Step-thump. Step-thump. Step-thump. The nearly detached foot bangles down the steps. It feels like a ghost as he passes by. I smell necrotic tissue. Gangrene. I feel his stare. His fractured hand presses the glowing green button to open the conductor's cabin. "Fine night for a ride, Frankie," the unfeeling voice of the ticket-taker observes as he steps in. The door lingers open. I spy the driver. He sits on the right side of the cabin, his torso and head hidden from view. The panel of electronic instruments, their glass faces fractured and spider-webbed, hosts a single throttle handle like an apocalyptic joystick. A gloved hand grips it. I see only his left arm with its mysterious gloved hand, and leg, heavily booted, emerging from the blind spot recessed in the cabin. The voice that responds to the mangled ticket-taker is high and willowy. Eerie with sinister intent.

"Great night! Great night!" the thready voice giggles, like Mickey Mouse dangerously overdosed on meth. "Who's the stiff?" The door slides shut on their conversation. Johnny Walker Double Black.

I don't recall Union Station being so far. I peer through the scarred window, aching for some sign of hope, wishing I weren't so tipsy. Grasping the pole, sticky with some foul residue, I pull myself up and hobble to the heavy doors. The pain in my ankle throbs menacingly. I hope it's not broken. I'll just stand until we reach Union.

The rhythmic clacking of the train wheels over the spacers ticks like a millennium clock winding down. The cabin door opens to a shrill, mirthless laughter, and the bleeding conductor steps out and advances toward my back. I cringe, trying not to show it. His smell is nauseating. Finally I spy Union Station ahead. The train doesn't break pace. "Doesn't this train stop at Union?" I ask the implacable door.

"Your ticket's for the end of the line," a foul breath whispers behind me.

"I'm not feeling so great. I'd like to get off sooner." I wish my voice wasn't so tremulous.

"This is an express train," the hollow voice behind sighs. "Last train from New York, to the end of the line." I stare down, willing him to leave. I need to be alone to think. He remains as firm as a ghost of a childhood trauma. There's no escaping a moving train. I'm afraid to look at him; the jingling of his keys a diabolical reminder that I'm a prisoner.

As I slowly turn back, he moves as well, a levy guiding the waters where predetermined gullies channel them. His escorts me to my torn seat. The door to the

mechanical room swings open again. A grotesquely misshapen fist punches the door shut, but my guardian doesn't lock it. "Yes," he mumbles airily. "Express train to the end of the line." With a bashed-in sneer the ragged conductor presses the green button to open the cabin door. I glimpse the driver with the eldritch voice. Arm and leg, gloved hand, booted foot. New York is racing away in the fractured window facing backward. Ticket-taker slips inside. "We've got a reluctant passenger, Frankie," the broken man monotones. In response the weird, high laughter of the driver.

"We sure do! It's time to—" the timer slides the door shut mid-sentence.

I've got to get out of here. With the pain in my ankle I can't run. I didn't notice how many cars were on the train when I dashed on. Furtively, nursing my injured right leg, I pull myself up by the slimy rails, and quietly ease myself into the murky bottom deck. I shuffle as quickly as I can to the far end and make my way painfully up the short stairs there. More outside doors, but we are moving, and the only way to open the door is with the key sequestered on that zombie conductor. Scrambling further back, at least I can cross into the next car, give myself a chance to hide before he notices I'm missing. A glowing green button usually stands between cars, but this one flares red. I punch it anyway. The door doesn't budge. Step-drag. Step-drag. Step-drag. In desperation, I punch the button again and again. I hear him lurching closer.

The noisome stench is overwhelming. "There're no other cars on this train, friend. You'd best stay in your seat." I need his keys. They jingle as the train rocks. I see them, covered with gore from his gashed abdomen. Inside his verminous coat. Hopelessly, I trudge painfully down the stairs and back up to the front of the car. "We're not so different, you and me," he muses. "We're on the same train."

The cadaverous conductor presses the green button, the cabin door slides open. The driver's gloved hand chokes the throttle. Dirty sleeves and unwashed trousers. "He has spirit," the somber voice intones.

"A live wire, a sparkler," giggles the soprano of the driver, hovering between genders, unnerving me further. I try to read our speed through the cracked face of the screen. The door slides shut before I get a fix on it. The swaying of the train has loosened the panel of the mechanical compartment again. Slowly it creaks open, revealing grimy, heavy hardware. As it swings back with a bang, I peer out into the darkness to try to figure how long I have left. Netherwood.

Danger has sobered me up. My mouth is parched. Somewhere in my mind my own death has introduced itself. With no job I have no tomorrow. No one controls their own destiny on public transit.

I can't hear their conversation in the sealed cabin. Johnny Walker looks nonplused, happily striding across the bottom of the poster. His drinking leads to better results than mine.

The mechanical room panel creaks open again. Torpedoes and fusees. I know nothing about train emergency equipment, but torpedoes must explode, mustn't they?

Stopping the door open with my left foot, I pull myself to the jagged floor and crouch painfully beside the box on the bottom of the panel. Inside are two compartments. One contains thick wads of heavy, red paper with straps. In the dim light, I pull a package close to my face. "Danger: contains explosives." The most promising words I've encountered all day.

The cabin door shushes open. I stuff the red paper packet into my jacket pocket. The mangled face stares me down. "Shoe's untied," I weakly lie. The train lurches, knocking me over. The gouges on the floor lacerate my hands. I can feel the sticky blood, mingling with his.

The mutilated conductor steps around me, like dog fouling the sidewalk. Step-drag. Step-drag. He climbs the stairs. Dropping in the first seat, he throws his crippled arms over the dented rail and stares me down from above. My disfigured angel. "Life on the last train's not so bad," he muses. "You'll fit in." The torn plastic cutting into my hands forces me back to the ripped seat.

My mind writhes like a bowl of worms. Explosives. My tacky fingers explore the packet in my pocket. There's got to be some way to use these. There were more in that box. My exposed hand smears blood on my trouser leg. I could use some gauze. I hold up my bloody hands to the conductor. "First aid kit?" I ironically ask.

"In the door there," he nods. The train has picked up speed, rocking violently on the tracks. I kneel by the panel that's still swinging on its hinges. Blocking his view with my back, I crouch and pull the rest of the red packets from the box before fumbling with the first aid kit. Surreptitiously I peer in the second chamber of the torpedo and fusee box. Cylindrical tubes of heavy red paper. Railroad flairs. I can't take them now. Not with him watching.

I open a bottle of alcohol to clean the wounds, but an unexpected lurch of the car spills it all over me. My palms sting mercilessly. I make a show of wrapping a roll of cotton gauze around and around my gashed hands. It smells like alcohol. The cloth stains red instantly. The grim, uneven mouth grins from above. Flairs get hot, I force myself to think. Too hot to hold. Railway flairs have to be seen farther than roadside flairs. My fingers count the explosive packets in my pocket. Six. I'm not sure if they are torpedoes or fusees, but that point is merely academic now. Will a flair work?

Feeling the pull of the gauze against my shredded palms, I peel off my sports coat. The unearthly face above watches. Boldly, I step to the swaying door and stoop to pull out a flair. I light it and the conduct bolts upright. Bright red flames jet out. Already I can feel the heat building.

The conductor moves with unexpected speed, leaping down the stairs into a flying tackle. His weight sends me back against the cabin door. My elbow slams the glowing green button. I'm on the floor next to the unseen driver. My bleeding hand fumbles with my sports coat to find the bulge of heavy red paper pads.

The flash is incredibly bright and loud, and it takes a few seconds for the searing pain to slam me. My hands are on fire! The flame laps up my silk tie, and my flailing hands only fan it onto my alcohol-stained shirt. I'm screaming as the fire blisters the flesh of my neck. I feel the bubbles form and burst as my skin boils. My face melts in agony, the alcohol fueling a human inferno. I scream as my face dissolves into my hands. A smothering blackness. So this is death. This is death.

Two a.m. Penn Station. My gloved hand grips the throttle as I stare out through a charred, cracked windshield. A train can't be steered. I can't see where I'm going, but I have a job to do. And I love my job. I smile at the thought of empty track ahead. Awaiting a passenger on the last train from New York. For the first time in my life, I really love my job.

Found

Josh Rank

My first thought was of self-preservation. If Rebecca knew I let the dog get out, she would eviscerate me. The fact that it wasn't my fault, the wind took the screen door while I grabbed the Jehovah's Witness flyer from the handle, wouldn't matter to her. All she would see is a dog-less house, and me standing around with my thumbs up my ass. So I rolled up the leash before I left and stuck it in my back pocket. I didn't want my neighbors to see me walking around with an empty leash. That would be a little too suspicious.

I crunched my way down our crumbling suburban road, glancing between houses and studying bushes for any dog-shaped movement. The afternoon had faded into evening and most of my neighbors were home from work. Bill, two doors down from us, was washing his car in the driveway. A couple of kids at the end of the block, I didn't know their names, were playing basketball on a hoop with no net. I wasn't about to ask any of them if they saw a mid-size hound go cruising past; it would be far too easy for them to tell Rebecca the next day. Secrecy was the magic word. And then Bill turned and smiled at me as I walked past. I gave him a quick wave and he dropped the hose. I turned my head the opposite direction and cursed.

"Nice night out, eh?" he said as he walked down the skirt of his driveway.

I slowed down but tried to keep moving. "Oh, yeah. Beautiful." He was right, but I couldn't care less. It could have been a snow storm or a tornado, and all I would have been thinking about was finding the dog.

"Can you believe that?" he said and nodded toward the end of the block. The basketball had rolled into the road and one of the kids ran to grab it. I didn't know what he was talking about.

"No?"

"Even with what happened to that Parker kid, they're still letting their kids outside by themselves."

A vague recollection of a news story flashed through my head.

"You know, you see people hanging up those little posters for their lost dogs," he continued. I stopped walking and focused on him for the first time. "But you don't see it for missing children. You'd think they'd want any kind of help they could get." Bill crossed his arms and shook his head.

Now I remembered. A boy had been playing by himself in his front yard a few weeks earlier. His mother went inside to answer a phone call and when she came back, all she found was a shoe. With no witnesses and no leads, the police said they should wait around

to be contacted for a ransom. Two weeks later, Tommy Parker was found dead by the train tracks that ran through the neighborhood.

“Oh god,” I said.

An awkward silence followed.

“So,” said Bill. “Just taking a stroll, eh?”

“Yeah, yeah just walking around.” My initial goal came back into focus and I realized I had to get moving. “The car’s looking good,” I said and slowly started walking.

“Alright then,” said Bill with a cheeriness that would have been appropriate had we been discussing a baseball game and not a child’s murder.

I waved at the basketball kids as I passed, but they didn’t pay me any attention. They were too focused on their game, which is probably the same mistake Tommy Parker made. However, I didn’t have time to consider the fate of neighborhood children; I had to find my dog before nightfall. Rebecca would be home from work soon after the streetlights came on.

Our road came to a T at the end, with the intersecting road acting as the barrier to the train tracks. A row of houses that must have been inhabited by deaf tenants were our only buffer to the train horn that attempted to warn off children as it rumbled its way through. Animals congregated near the tracks because it was wooded and quiet until the behemoth machine came through like an avalanche. I listened to the kids bouncing the ball and glanced around the otherwise quiet neighborhood. The sun was still peeking through the trees, but its descent was quickening. The train tracks were a straight shot from my house and a frequent direction of our daily walks. It would be a perfectly reasonable place for the dog to go. The trees and resulting seclusion would offer me the opportunity to find the dog without the neighbors being able to see, but if it wasn’t there, I’d lose sunlight by the time I made it out to search the rest of the neighborhood. It was a gamble, but I thought the tracks were my best shot. I walked away from the basketball kids, through someone’s yard, and down a narrow path until my feet felt the unsteady support of the rocks surrounding the tracks.

I couldn’t hear anything besides the leaves of the trees rustling in the damn wind that started this whole thing, so I allowed myself to quietly call the dog’s name.

“Harper?” I said as if it was an incorrect answer to a question I didn’t know. I walked along the rails and continued calling for the dog, each time growing in volume. Between each call, I would pause and listen, hoping to hear a rustle followed by a brown dog with a white head. Instead, after maybe four or five calls, I heard something to my right and saw a small boy emerge from the woods.

“Are you lost?” asked the boy. He couldn’t have been more than six-years-old, and looked vaguely familiar.

Startled, it took me a moment to catch my breath. “No, no I’m just out for a walk,” I told him. I thought it weird that he would be near the tracks by himself.

“I know this area pretty well,” he said.

“Oh, good for you.” I continued looking around and hoped the boy would wander off.

“Are you looking for something?” he asked.

“No, I’m just...” I didn’t bother to finish my sentence.

“You’re never going to find anything if you don’t look for it.”

I turned back to the boy and studied him. What the hell was he talking about?

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

“Tommy,” he said.

The pictures on the news. That’s where I had seen him.

Holy shit.

My mind went into overdrive but didn’t end up anywhere useful. Had they made a mistake? Had he been alive this whole time? No, they had a funeral. They found his body. There was no mistake. Tommy Parker had a broken neck and had been found, shit, probably two hundred yards from where I stood. My mouth went dry and my hands tingled. I was having trouble controlling my breath.

“My dog,” I managed to say.

Tommy nodded and looked down the tracks to his left. He stood in between me and the woods, with the tracks directly behind me. Strangely, I felt a slight sense of relief at telling someone about Harper, but that was overshadowed by the fear and confusion at seeing a dead boy standing in front of me. His skin was clear of blemishes, his head wasn’t twisted around, he looked completely normal. But I knew what had happened, and it seemed like he did, too.

“I’ve seen a lot of dogs out here,” he said. He spoke with an unaffected tone, like he was simply killing time until his mother called him home.

“Have you seen any tonight?”

“Just one. With a white head.”

The fear and confusion now battled with a growing sense of hope within my chest. The combination simply felt like sharp ice.

“That’s her,” I said.

Tommy walked toward me and I froze. I don't know what I expected to happen, but he simply walked past me and over the tracks. He paused at the other side and said, "This way." I followed him into the trees on the other side.

There was another small path that led down a short embankment. The sky was a solid orange on one side and approaching blue on the other. The trees made it seem later than it actually was, but I knew I didn't have much time left. If I was going to pull this off, I would need to head home immediately. But this wasn't what I was thinking about. I focused on the child in front of me, gladly leading me through the woods. We came around a curve and to a small clearing in the trees, where Harper was happily lying in a patch of dirt and gnawing on a moss-covered branch. Her tail started wagging when she saw me, but she didn't pause on the branch.

Tommy stopped walking and turned around. "Is this your dog?" he asked.

"Yeah." I nodded. "Yeah, this is her. Thank you so much." I pulled the leash out of my back pocket and clipped it to the dog's collar.

Tommy simply smiled and turned around. He started walking into the woods.

"Hey, Tommy?" I called.

He paused for a second, but continued walking without turning around.

I watched him for a moment, but the fading sun made it hard to see too far into the trees. A cold chill ran through me as the adrenalin wore off, and a blatant fear crept in.

"Let's get the hell outta here," I said to Harper. She grabbed her stick and we followed the trail back to the train tracks, then across, then back through the woods, between the houses, and to the road. We walked in the front door after I took the stick out of Harper's mouth and left it on the porch. Rebecca pulled up as Harper drank all of the water from her bowl. The front door opened and the dog came running into the room. This time, however, she ran up to Rebecca instead of bolting out the door.

"Oh hello!" said Rebecca, laughing. I sat on the couch. She finally walked past the dog, hung her keys on the key holder, and slid her purse from her shoulder. "How's it going?" she asked.

I took a deep breath, unsure of what to say. It had only been a half hour, but I felt like I could either talk for the rest of the night, or not say anything at all. The whole point of the secrecy was to shield Rebecca from worry, as well as shielding myself from the fallout. Something had changed down by the train tracks. I couldn't be sure if it was something Tommy had said, the swiftness with which he helped, or simply the fact that I had seen him at all (I had seen him, right?). Whatever it was, the only thing I could say after drawing in that deep breath was:

"The dog got out tonight."

Sex, Nail Polish & Convicts

R.E Hengsterman

I once fucked a woman that I'd met in a nail polish factory, as her towheaded toddler ran around the bed yelling, "*Daddy, Daddy.*" (It was as awkward as it sounds.) It became even *more* awkward because the whole event took place with me on my back, staring at the tips of my white athletic socks, while a pendulously-breasted woman writhed back and forth, until a moan escaped her in a climax. At least, that's how my memory recalls the events... Right before I sprinted from the house for my very survival.

In life there are places we land, and places we land awkwardly. In the summer of eighty-six, I landed sideways on the doorstep of an Armenian nail polish factory in the heart of the city. I was a young teen serving community service for some testosterone-fueled assault charges. My life was a thin film of social transgressions.

For six months I was relegated to the seedy underbelly of the nail polish world; peppered with Armenian rants, assembly-line malfunctions, and a learning curve that was much steeper than I could have imagine. I don't say this lightly. Bottles were hurled, tears flowed, and what I experienced nearly cost me my life.

But before I am allowed your pity we need to explore. Imagine a warehouse: squat, heavy, and damp, like a wet cardboard box; odorous and unduly dark all hours of the day. In the belly of the dilapidated structure, a long serpentine conveyor belt snaked from end to end.

Now, let me explain how the relevance of this plays into my near demise. Silently standing along the metallic snake were about a dozen women. Six on either side spaced about 4-5 feet apart. A horn would sound, and the tiny uncapped bottles would flow like blood from a sliced vein. By hand, and at an impossible speed, each bottle moved down the line, fingers flickering in and out like pale fireflies as metal rollers cried click-click-click-clack until an error occurred and a low-buttoned bare-chested Armenian hurled something at your head. In a nutshell, this was the job. Eight hours a day. Five days a week. Other, less important nuances may have dripped from my memory. And others purposely ejected due to real discontent. Nevertheless, I think you have the idea.

But... I must confess I have told a lie - or a *mistruth*. Maybe more like a 'misrepresentation' of why I'm telling this story. I guess in many ways it's more accurately a confession of sorts. When I said I fucked woman, well that's grossly inaccurate.

You see, working a job that produced callouses so big and painful that I was unable to unbutton my pants for days on end produced a curious byproduct. Eleven women and a sixteen-year-old boy took turns buttoning and unbuttoning each other's pants so we could find relief in desperate sprints to the restroom. And these are not exaggerations. Enter Mrs. Robinson. (I can hear your laughter now, but before you judge, that was her real name.)

One day, Mrs. Robinson tucked her fingers a little deeper than the rest. You can imagine what that does to a teenage boy. The touch of her long slender fingers started a process I was incapable of stopping. It wasn't but two days later that I found myself on her couch, dressed in

my best leather and heavily doused in cheap cologne. That towheaded toddler I spoke of? This is where we first met.

Mrs. Robinson introduced me to sex in a very particular way. I'd like to think of it as open and nurturing, but it was just highly dysfunctional. You see, Mrs. Robinson had a bunch of kids. And, at any given time, they ran wild through the house. The time I remember vividly was the time she stripped me naked, tossed me on the bed, and rode me until she exhausted herself. I never came; I was terrified. I was sixteen, she was in her late forties. The flashing of toddlers in and out of the bedroom asking for this and that, well - it's slightly unnerving.

You'd think this situation would be a teenager's dream. And it was, right up until the point that I realized the towheaded sucker yelling "*Daddy, Daddy,*" as his mother's breasts slapped against her skin like slabs of steak, really meant "*Daddy's home.*"

This is where things get sideways quick. Apparently, Mr. Robinson was an avid hunter, evident by the crossbow mounted near the entry door. Mrs. Robinson? Well let's just say she was *equally* the hunter. So, in the midst of breasts slapping and toddlers toddling, Mr. Robinson enters the equation. He takes one look at me, then at her, and sprints towards the door. I assumed he was leaving. I have no idea why. Nevertheless, I stayed still, actually frozen beneath his wife, until the first arrow *thwacked* the headboard. Mrs. Robinson yelled something in his general direction at a level that did not meet my panic. More like a "*Donny, what are you doing? You're going to kill the poor boy!*"

My cue to leave was clearly defined.

I sprinted from the room, still hard, being sixteen and all. Two more *thwacks* from the crossbow stuck the door and nearby sheetrock. By this point, I'd picked up that my life was in jeopardy, palming the forehead of one toddler as I hurdle another with the skill of OJ Simpson. The noise in the house picked up considerably in the meantime, but not the "*Daddy's going to kill this poor boy,*" kind of sound, more like a general fervor over the unfolding events. It appears this sort of thing was not out of the ordinary in the Robinson household.

I met the backdoor in a full-on sprint, with my arms and legs moving at speeds incompatible with my level of coordination. Miraculously I cleared the door, the porch, and the steps, wearing only my white athletic socks. Another arrow struck the door frame a split second before I crossed all three. I hit the grass in full stride, my socks grabbing mud in clumps. I sprinted into the pasture never to look back.

Through an open window, I hear the faint; *Daddy, Daddy, Daddy* from the towheaded toddler. I disappear into the woods, bare ass naked, landing sideways in a place I never imagined, accumulating mud, grass, and briars in epic proportion.

The Northern Line

Mike Lee

The rain came down hard, staccato on the tin roof. You could smell it—like burnished steel burned with a blowtorch. The clouds thundered as I stood on the porch listening to its call. Everything looked so green and lush—a tropical riot. Hard to believe that it’s only mid-afternoon, and I am thinking about how I’m going to make the rent.

* * *

A 1958 Studebaker Lark, kicking up clouds of dust as I haul ass on bald whitewalls down Jim’s Branch. Sentiments focused on the transmission sliding out of gear and my cigarette burning too close for my fingers to hold. Dr. Pepper bottles litter the floor and the radio doesn’t work. I’m humming a Ruts tune—out of key, as usual. I have too much time to spare. The engine begins to misfire and I have a creepy feeling that I’m not going to make it home tonight.

* * *

The last time I was in Texas, I met a woman who told me: “A photographer took pictures of me when I lived in Dallas last summer. He let me wear my favorite clothes, you know, like I have this really nice sweater . . . and this sexy black and white skirt. I wouldn’t let him take any dirty pictures of me, but I felt really sexy. He paid me \$1800.”

Pause.

“He really did. I cashed the check.”

I watched her walk away with my friend Edward. They went to score dope from a guy I knew from high school. I stood by the car and waited a couple of minutes before leaving. I never called Edward again.

* * *

Central Park November Afternoon. The sky is gray and listless, interlaced with clouds with the consistency of wafting smoke. The breeze is cold, and cuts like the razor wire from my favorite scene from *Suspiria*.

I take six steps and cut across the packed earth. The football comes in at a tight spiral, just like in half-time highlights.

I jump and reach with both hands—perfect position. I snare the pass and hit the ground without missing a step. Without breaking my stride, I turn the corner and head to the ersatz end zone untouched. I spike the ball and look up at the sky. The clouds are over all of us, yet it doesn’t rain.

* * *

The dull flash of fireflies in the sky. Christmas Eve and it's 75 degrees. Unusual, even for Texas. I look over the cliff and stare down at the lake. I consider the risks of jumping. I wonder if I'll float before I land. I realize that I'd probably drop like a rock—and without hope of reflection before sudden death. I mull over the tendency I have to think about such concepts when bored. No big deal.

* * *

I took an IQ test out of a book the other day. I only scored 110 on the visual section.

Didn't have my glasses on.

I bought the book on the street for fifty cents. Never buy from bums. After I took the test, I started to work on my novel. Quit after writing three run-on sentences in a row. I realized that I have a problem. I'm not as good with first drafts as I thought. I might not be as good an editor as I believed. I might write in first person too much, or none of characters show the right amount of personal growth. Or none. My memory doesn't retain the correct amount, or type, of information. I stared at my typewriter, worried that I'm no good.

I did what I had to do. I picked up the book and threw it out of my window. It bounced off the rusted fire escape, and fluttered endlessly out of sight, perhaps landing somewhere in a pile of debris: candy wrappers, beer cans, wood, glass, old tires, ruined clothing and tossed toys. I put on a Nick Cave album and light another smoke, consoled by what the cleaning lady at the office told me as she cleaned out my ashtray, which is that you have to die from something.

* * *

All tomorrow's parties. It is August of 1981. She hates me and I don't blame her. I went to see Gary at his house and he told me that women are evil. I called his bluff and told him that I hated men more than women. He laughed and replied that I'd feel different if my mom had left before I was born instead of my father. I stared at him for a minute as the entire room erupted into laughter. It's true; I take life too damn seriously.

I sat there wishing I could tell Marie that I loved her just one more time. Then afterward I was going to jump off the parking garage on Lavaca. That way I won't give her more pain—she would be free of me forever. It would give her the release she needed. It's all that I can give her.

Instead, I got drunk and Gary took me home. I leaned out the door and threw up as we sped down the Interstate, the lights of the city dropping off far in the background.

* * *

I was with Sherry and Helen at an outdoor show in Hays County. After my band played, we wandered off to the swimming hole nearby.

Sherry and I stood on the edge and looked down. Marie was sunbathing on the beach on the opposite side, while her new boyfriend floated on a raft nearby. Sherry and I glanced at each other. I gave her a knowing smile and she clutched my hand. We jumped off the cliff, dropping some forty feet and when our feet touched the water I closed my eyes. We had missed the edge

by inches. An hour later the bass player for the band preceding mine broke his neck jumping from the same spot.

* * *

Andy's first ex-girlfriend. I forgot her name, but once she invited me to a Christmas party at her apartment. It was a stucco garage apartment set behind a neat row of oak trees. I found it to be a rather charming little apartment, with a wrought iron fence attached to the second-floor balcony.

I didn't know anyone at the party. After I overcame my initial shyness, I discovered most of them were friends and co-workers from her job at the Texas Deaf School. The remainder were guys with a perpetual nervousness on their drawn-in faces, and dressed in a combination of Dixie Mafia and skinny-tie new wave.

I got into the spirit of the occasion by drinking Bombay Gin and tonics. Gin smells like pine needles—reminding me of my childhood in the southern Appalachians.

Within an hour I decided to liven up the party by calling attention to myself, an old hobby of mine. I stepped onto the balcony and hung, arms outstretched, from the railing. Soon, I realized that everyone was too drunk, stoned, stupid or wrapped up in their egos to notice me. However, this act raised my self-esteem.

I clambered back, kissed the hostess, said good night, and left. I walked home thinking of hopes and dreams and tombstones.

* * *

I saw Marie at the Continental Club the same night Jimmy threw his guitar at my feet and asked me to play in his stead. I talked him out of it.

We sat behind the club, holding each other tightly. I felt I had a grave responsibility suddenly thrust upon me. I played good guy and didn't try to neck. The sensitive big brother type is a role I know all too well.

Afterward, she admitted she didn't know what she would do if I had thrown a pass at her.

Now she's back with her boyfriend and I'm sitting here on my bed, trying to write while Edward and Teena are fighting and the baby is screaming. Stan and Melanie are screwing in the walk-in closet and Jimmy's passed out drunk on the couch behind me.

I'm holding her again. My hand is reaching up to her cheek and my lips are moving toward hers. Marie might not be the answer to any of my problems but at least I could have someone intelligent to be with who isn't bats.

* * *

I almost fainted from the heat while the road crew spread a thin layer of asphalt onto the highway. The foreman yelled at me to turn the radio off.

As I bent down to switch off the volume, a scream reverberated down the line.

When I turned around to see what had happened, I realized that the sprayer had slipped from Jimmy Fields' hands and spun wildly out of control, showering hot tar on two workmen who had settled down for lunch on the embankment nearby. They screamed like trapped animals, arms flaying helplessly as they attempted to peel the coating of burning tar from their backs.

I reached back and turned the radio back on, this time with the volume full blast. WISE-AM was playing my then-favorite song, "Should I Stay or Should I Go" by The Clash.

"My God," A voice called out from behind me. "Ain't no one here gonna help them?"

I noticed that the fire ants were already crawling over my recently discarded sandwich.

I quit the next morning. The foreman handed me my pay, in cash. I carefully counted the bills while trying to ignore the man's annoying gum-popping.

"I was told they have third-degree burns," the foreman said. He expressed the sincere concern of someone covering his ass.

I nodded with a shrug. I was happy they didn't short me for the week.

* * *

PROCEED TO THE LEFT AND DON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER AS YOU CAN SEE ABSOLUTE FAILURE IS FAILURE ABSOLUTE SO WHY THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HANGING AROUND HERE?

Laura had a real sense of humor. That was from the note she taped to the rock she threw through my bedroom window.

I placed the rock on my desk. It made a fine paperweight. I carefully folded the paper and slipped it in my journal, vowing never to go out with blondes again.

* * *

If learning to shoot pool well is a sign of a wasted youth, then what is learning to shoot well at twenty-five? Not something I want answered right now, because I'm kicking some serious butt. Four games in a row before I finally lost to Clay, who's always going to be a level ahead of me, no matter how hard I try.

Last night I beat Laura three out of three. Put together a streak and dominated the table—I mean I *ruled*.

I knocked the eight on a corner bank—the true icing on the cake. Never made anything close to it before and I stayed as cool as a soul singer on the lush and shot with nary a thought, as if I've been born with a 16 stick in my left hand.

Laura tossed her cue on the table in disgust and walked outside. She has a very severe face; high cheekbones, a big nose and cold green eyes that clashed with her corn-colored hair. What was spooky about her is that she looks like my mother. That fact kept me from getting serious.

It's rather scary, yet so is running a pool table for over an hour. I watched Laura get on her bike and pedal away into the night. I wasn't worried. She'll be back. But I won't.

* * *

My employment agency was a roll of quarters and a telephone rack on the southwest corner of Union Square.

I moved to New York with hopes of getting an editorial position within two weeks. I wound up waiting tables for nearly a year. Indeed, arrogance has its awards.

I've been to twenty interviews and fifteen of them didn't pan out. A shudder comes every time I think of the remaining five. Getting close is worse than being dismissed out of hand.

Most people give up. I didn't. Thanks to my persistence, I wound up throwing my back out during a double shift. Waiting tables in Manhattan is hard work.

My girlfriend back then said my fiction had many problems. The characters, she said, showed no personal growth. I agreed, nothing that they did walk out of the story the same way they came in. From my experience, that's the way people are. I wonder what reality she comes from.

I walk through the park staring longingly at the *Village Voice* sign painted on the side of the building above. There is nearly ten dollars in quarters jangling in my pocket.

It was in moments like this when I had cause to wonder which reality *I* came from.

* * *

I overheard this in a restaurant: "The older I get, the more I travel backward." I believe that when you reach a certain age, and combined with the right level of spiritual stagnation, one always finds a way to return to the house of your past. Myself—I'd do it more often than most, except I have to pad my memories with so much subterfuge to make my life more palatable for me to take that getting sentimental is a painful chore in itself.

The only reference point I can go on is the classic frozen moment; usually it's only in reality a few hours, but with some padding and convenient shifting of memory files. I'm able to ruminate stupid as well as the next romantic. However, the only problem is that my memories, like short stories, have swift conclusions. In my case, many of them have unhappy endings.

Sure, it's boring, and kind of kills the imagination, but it beats therapy.

* * *

"Are you going to be there?" The question burns a hole in my soul; fitting, considering the situation at hand. I should go back to sleep, I'm tired and I don't want to hear anything she has to say.

Sherry has it in for me. That was for certain. As I lay back on her bed I thought of dying. This is what I usually obsess over in situations like these.

While Sherry made those sickening motions with her mouth, I imagined it to be the first kiss of the worm as I putrefied in the cold, dead ground. My mask of flesh, already corrupted by a few short years of abuse and neglect, began to take on a life of its own as I felt the crawling feeling of a thousand blind, idiot maggots grubbed for their personal stake on my hand.

Automatically, my hand went to my cheeks. However, Sherry is still there—her face a riot of banality. She hovers over my face, invading my personal space. That’s entertainment. Maybe I should stop reading Lovecraft.

Sherry sticks another stick of gum into the red wound that passes for her mouth. The habit annoyed me; she chews like a horse, smacking like the sound of a rubber band snapping. She lit a cigarette, which doubled my annoyance factor. What I had seen in her I chalked up to a mental breakdown I forgot to have several months ago.

* * *

Phil’s house on Palma Plaza: Drinking and playing cards. Down to my last two hundred bucks and was a hand away from using my roommates’ rent money.

Looked at the pile of wadded bills and excess change in the middle of the table. About four thousand in all. Reached into my shirt pocket for a cigarette, gazing at the hungry faces in front of me, trying to read their looks.

Phil’s guessing I’ll pass, and Richard probably thinks it’ll be another ace. Meanwhile, Tommy really believes my luck is due for a bad spin—

My eyes went back to the pair of cards in front of me. Nine of clubs. Ace of spades. Under the table my fingers fumbled as I attempted to recreate the previous drops.

No faces yet. At least one ten . . . probably open. No lows . . .

I caught a glimpse of the movie poster for *The Manchurian Candidate* behind Richard and saw my way out. Biting my lip, I called, my voice thick as syrup from all the cigarettes of the evening. I felt it was worth a shot.

“Ace high.”

My hands went to the table, slick with perspiration and beer.

“For the pot.”

Richard flipped the next card from the deck, leaving it face down in front of me. With a moment’s pause, I turned the card over.

Queen of diamonds.

* * *

Those damned fireflies again. I looked up from my perch on the tree limb and watch as the northern line rides past. The train clangs by, on its way to Asheville, then north to Knoxville,

and then onward to Chicago. I raised my fist in the air, hoping that even through the summer darkness the bums I see huddled on the empty flatbeds would see me.

A couple of them do, and return my gesture. I will remember later that it was the only time in my life when reality and dreams merged into something I could find palatable.

I sat in the tree, watching the Northern Line disappear behind the mountain. I wanted to get on it, and go to my heart's desire. I vowed I would, someday.

The Storm That Carries Us Home

John Stadelman

You were born to a red evening, on the break of a storm that settled from ice-water rainfall to chill heraldic autumn winds. The skies opened when you emerged from your feverish mother, streaks of sunset fire that cut open the purple sky like gashes on the skin of some nameless god. Your wails pitched shrill down the empty hospital hallways, and when your father held you, your first deep intake of this ascetic or contaminant air sounded more to him like a gathering battle cry.

You might have been the first child, or you might have been the last. There was a mobile home beyond moon-kissed rusted tracks, and then a ranch house that stood in a field surrounded by second-growth forest. You played with pets, maybe, or siblings, or you played with no one because your father might have always been working and your mother might have killed herself. Or she ran away. If there had been a brother, then he would have died in the womb. A sister, she would have slunk off after your mother in the dead height of afternoon, when your father wasn't there to stop her and you were too young to know. And if they left, and had even stayed behind long enough to be known to you and thus missed, then each left you with snacks, and with the television on your favorite channel. But you found your way outside, you always did. And sat in the ditch in the front yard playing in the muck under a hungry sun. When your father returned home he found you dehydrated and red. If there had been a rock in that ditch, then it was paired with a centipede. And that centipede would have been ground between rock and muck, until or long after the crackling of its exoskeleton finished reverberating up your child-arms and its viscous insides mixed with the muck that ran between your fingers.

If you had bothered to go, then most of everything before high school you blocked out, due to either your father's distance or the way your mother once slammed you against the kitchen wall and screamed simple-syllable words like *fuck* and *stupid* and *mistake* into your face with her forearm shoved lengthwise across your throat. But probably, the amnesia of your first years came down to developmental negligence. You loved a girl, or a boy, who was beautiful, and later grew into a beautiful adult. You could have been one, too, if she or he hadn't rejected you and so did seemingly every other to whom you expressed interest in afterward. Although, perhaps they did express interest in you and you were never able to tell? Because the assumption that had been taught to you was that nobody had wanted you before, and so why should you have ever believed otherwise in any other moment?

Or maybe you weren't rejected? Perhaps you gave or received that intimate gift, the first, to or from your adolescent ideal? Perhaps that gift bore fruit and that fruit saw its first day as fire slashed across the autumn sky?

Though that would not have suited you, to be father or mother of seed, because points of origin were never enough—not yours, not those of others. Something in either who they saw you as, or in who you knew yourself as, propelled you forward into a world in which you would find some meaning or grand task to distract from *fuck* and *stupid* and *mistake* and centipede gore-muck running through your fingers. The world was too large—and if in all that largeness there wasn't a place that could, or would, accept you, then perhaps in one of the empty spaces between those places you would be allowed to remove the burden of your presence from a world you did not deserve.

But the plans of youth slip away on impassive and unimpressed winds—impassive to your place in the passenger seat of a truck that raced backroads under sun as summer hills rose to one side, and a sparkling mud-bedded lake dropped away on the other. You may have been there.

Or if instead, gripping a cold rail on a rocking deck and watching the blue plains foam in every direction for what?

Or if instead, navigating the asphalt beds of skyscraper-walled canyons, part of a many-currented river of feet and bodies. Photosynthesizing the lights of bars and venues that strove in concordance to the aromatic, tantalizing gestures of restaurants whose names you could not pronounce.

Or if instead, strung-out and lonesome at a crossroads with brooding graybeard mountains on the west horizon, and the stench of bayou still trailing its reeking grasp after you from the east. Around all, grasses to your waist, thin alone, but as a whole they were a sea that howled, flattened as rip-current winds drove down on you. Determined patterns of wind-pressed grass that seemed less wind and more the only indicator of the flyways of invisible gliding behemoths, wandering an untouched heartland that would never be fully tamed and that tamelessness was the only freedom.

But still. Still, when the harbinger trumpets sounded and deep groans as of old gods awakening shook your world, his world and hers, their world, our world, when they came you drowned the children because their mothers were unable. They knew what was to come and what a mercy a prolonged baptism would be against the rage that approached from over those mountains. And yet still they could not do it themselves. Murmurings of souls to save.

So you offered because you didn't care about souls—yours, theirs—and the mothers stood in a line and held out their squalling, or babbling, or sleeping, or smiling infants. Progeny, the feelers of deep-dug roots that had struck too far into the earth and starved themselves trying to suck nutrients from the roofs of concrete bunkers. Stunted and stubbled. You crouched in the muck of a ditch alongside a dirt road and held their faces into it as their mothers wailed and were held back by all mothers, restraining each other, a great self-regulating organism wailing over your burned shoulder. You marveled at how easy it was, so easy that you did it again, and again, as the coming firestorms rent apart the plains in a veil of your birth-sky colors.

There was a war and that is one of the few absolutes. There is always a war. Either against a hellbent father and *fuck stupid mistake* mother for the lives of your maybe-siblings, or against men with guns burning the roads on which you had traveled lonesome and free, or in a kitchen on a spring morning against a lover with mouths firing the bullets that are all words, or against the chemicals that were offered which at first erased the children in the muck from your mind and then more and more replaced the glue that held together the fragments of what was left of you. There is always a war. But the outcome is dependent.

You probably died alone. You did die alone. Your children didn't take, and your husband or wife and your true love were not the same person, although they existed within the same moment of your life. But nothing imploded. Neither found out about the other. Were you bound to one by a sense of duty, and to the other because she or he existed in defiance to everything you had ever believed? Was that why you did it, even though you hadn't believed love was real—or, that if you did believe in it, you also believed that you weren't deserving? You thought that it was better than you, love, that amorphous and far-flung concept. That all of those beautiful people—and even those who were not beautiful—everybody who wasn't you, who held and were held, were better, were human. And thus, that you were subhuman and you earned it by merit of original sin *fuck stupid mistake* birth. But your true love fought those notions and held

you on the nights when you declared yourself ugly and worthless, admonishings to which your wife or husband remained silent and that silence was agreeing and agreeable truth. Your lover was soft-voiced but adamant of your worth, of all of it. Perhaps if you had spoken of the muck and of the war, then you could have made the truth be seen.

Did the two of you run away? Race in a flight as sweet in its devotion as it was biting in its intensity and betrayal? Did you keep running—slept in hotels across the world and photographed all of the skylines? Did you find a god in sheets tangled between bare legs and silhouettes that rocked synchronous in the dark? Did you walk hand-in-hand through docks filled with fog like smoke? Did you stand on balconies and watch flames rise from slums across the world? Did you look onto those visages of unrest with concern or sympathy? Or did you take the soma?

Or did you let your true love go? Due to duty? Does it matter, if those nights which could have been spent in embrace on the road and embracing the road were instead cast away in beds on opposite ends of the room? Because that room was made of only those beds—all the backdrop surroundings melted away from that great negative space. Did you twist with longing for a body that had moved to others? Or did you remain lying on your side, staring at the moon through your curtains and counting its cycles?

Did you drink like your mother or did you work like your father? You never had children, and for that you felt blessed. Felt that you had saved them from becoming you. From loving you.

Did you run into your mother at a shrimp-stand in a city where you would never return? Or find her grave after a call placed to next-of-kin took you halfway across the country? Did your father accompany you? Was he even still alive by then?

Did he punish you for playing in the muck? Or did he pick you up, take you inside and wash and cool your reddened skin with aloe before noticing his wife's absence? Was she his true love? Was he hers? No? Then in the face of fate and some notion of true love, what supreme cosmic bastard did that make you?

God did not create the world and you knew this. Your grandmother either struck you when you said as much, or covered her face with her remaining hand and wept for your soul.

You either shot that man or you didn't. He either insulted you after too many drinks or he beat his wife and you happened to love her.

If you created art or left bastards mewling in your wake you never knew it, you just rode those gale force winds end over end like a damn fool, or a roadhouse saint, or a throat-opener, or a harlot with a golden heart and a machinegun for a leg. There were decades and you died alone in either an alley behind a bar or in a gunfight in the mountains or as a withered patient, statistic, dispelled by the wave of a hand of a tired god who never existed. *Where* didn't matter, because the last absolute is that you died. And it was without company. There was no creator, but in the last moment you wondered if you were returning to the fires that had plumed the sky under which you had been born.

You rode those winds and they sent you screaming through every house until only strewn rubble and kindling-lives remained, and home-wrecked the victims raised their hands to the sky and shouted praise for the storm that carried them home, praise praise all ye praise, until you snatched them up in passing and carried them so high that they could see all of the plains and mountains stretched out unconquerable below them. Maybe they could see the trajectory of their lives etched out in concentric or erratic circles like shadows, stamped or wavering over their heartlands. And then you dropped them, and either laughed or wept for their plummet.

When You Return to Dust
Caroline Griego

When the cat started to speak, Larry knew it was time to stop. Besides, the colors of the room had ceased to pulse through him, and he could no longer dissolve into the vibrations rising through the floor from the strip club below. His growing awareness was slow, hampered by the thick fog of dust surrounding him; thick enough to be somehow solid. Larry was sure his hands could part it, like one of those beaded curtains around in the seventies. It was time to end this seedy solitude.

“That’s enough,” he said out loud, his voice rusty after three days of silence.

“Enough?” said the cat with more than a little detectable scorn. “I can’t recall you ever saying that, Larry ma’ boy.” The cat, whose name escaped Larry at that moment, sat with regal boredom on the windowsill, pulling a spiky tongue through long grey matted fur. Languid and aloof.

“Well, first time for everything and all that,” Larry responded to the cat with confusion but without surprise; it seemed reasonable after his three-day-substance-retreat for the edges of reality be a little blurred.

“Oh, please,” said the cat, with the air of only mild interest. “I thought you were above such clichés.” If it were in human form, it would have been examining its nails when deigning to utter these words. Larry thought of a feline Noel Coward.

“Well, it turns out I’m not as original as either of us thought,” Larry responded, running his tongue over his teeth, hoping to dislodge the furry film of surface scum. Where was his toothbrush? The bathroom? He attempted to rise from the floor upon which he had been sprawled for God knows how many hours. It had been dark then, and it was either still dark, or dark again now. The room was indeterminate, its lines undefined and in constant motion. Larry grasped about for something solid, permanent. Rising now on rickety legs, he grabbed the waist of his jeans before they slid below his protruding hip bones. A distant chorus from way back: *The hip bone’s connected to the back bone.*

“How attractive,” sneered the cat.

“Shut up,” Larry crumbled to the floor; his dry bones failed him.

“No, really! There are plenty of girls who find emaciation sexually attractive. It brings out maternal desires. It’s all very Oedipal of course... or is it Elektral? But it’s not like you’re not one to be fussy are you, Larry ma’ boy?”

Larry, attempting to hoist his insignificant form using the coffee table as leverage, raised his pink-rimmed eyes to the cat with a look he hoped would silence it. The cat continued:

“So, you’re sure it is time to stop?” The cat now reclined on a red velvet cushion (where the hell had that come from?) and was bathed in an emergency-red light of the strip club sign, flashing directly below the window. It was the strip joint in which Skinny Tony held court, and dispatched substances from his perfectly-balanced apothecary scales. With every flash of this red light, Larry was reminded of the how deeply he had sunk.

“Are you sure, Larry ma’ boy? After all, there remains a single serving of your pharmaceutical of choice upon the coffee table,” purred the cat. “The very table against which you are attempting to support your meagre weight. I think you’ll find more than enough to meet your... err, artistic needs.” The cat stretched luxuriously. Larry saw the works set out like sacred instruments before him. He must have set these up before the last hit. He *must* have.

“No,” he said with fake resolve, “that’s enough.”

“If you say so, Larry,” said the cat, taking a long drag from a cigarette in a long black holder. (Had it always been smoking?) “After all, the stuff has yet to serve its purpose. You’ve hardly produced the work this self-imposed exile was intended to bring forth now, have you? Aren’t those canvasses still bare? Or are they expressions of your nihilistic worldview, ma boy?” The chuckle was diabolic. Larry lifted his boulder-heavy head to face the three blank canvasses, purchased directly before his appointment with Skinny Tony, least he be tempted to cross the dealer’s palm with the last of his scant funds. Upon these he was to transpose the inner visions, the filth and noise of his fevered, substance fueled dreams. He would skirt the edge of death, his synapses on fire, receptive to the divine, to the atomic universe, and all this would spill out through the fibres of his soul, a soul as defined and permanent as an additional limb, onto the canvas in an ecstasy of creation. All who saw it would gasp at the simple complexity with which he, Larry The Artist, had conveyed exactly what they were all feeling and thinking. That was the plan, anyway.

The canvasses endured in the dirty space between Larry’s dishevelled bed and a collapsed bookshelf. But there had been a purpose. There had been a *purpose* to holing himself up in his apartment; this small, depraved space above a strip club.

“Which you still insist on calling your ‘studio’,” chuckled the cat, responding to an unspoken thought, sending a cold jolt of fear through Larry’s fragile form. He stared hard at it now, concentrating on its perfect sleek structure, recognizable but strange. Did he have a cat?

There *had* been a purpose. A noble purpose: to create art. To transpose experience through art. It would have been spectacular.

“What - like the last effort, Larry? The last pathetic attempt. How did that one go again?”

If the cat had been enjoying taunting Larry before, it was now positively ecstatic, giddy with joy. (Had it grown?) It’s fur more luxurious than before. Luminous. It defeated Larry with scorn. Because the demonic thing was right. His last “work” plunged to a new depth of failure. Even friends, loyal members of his artistic circle had expressed concern with his “new direction.” To convey the complex relationship between art, and, well something else he couldn’t quite remember in his current state, Larry had created an eight-foot papier mâché Jesus, complete with loin cloth and thorny crown, crucifixion-style, using paper imprinted with the recurring image of Charles Manson. He had splattered the statue with pig’s blood and, instead of weeping women at the feet of the slain messiah, Larry scattered the carcasses of the very same pigs whom had given their blood in the name of art. No one would show it. Former supporters questioned its “artistic validity.” So Larry, in a desperation he wouldn’t admit, had displayed the piece, titled *Spot the Swine*, outside St. Margaret Mary’s Catholic Church downtown himself. When he was asked to move it, he did so only as far as Christ the Redeemer Presbyterian on 6th Street, and then again onto St. Paul the Apostle on West 59th.

His arrest outside St. Francis of Assisi’s on West 31st for failing to comply to city ordinances and disturbing the peace would serve as the ultimate epilogue to the work; it would add to its anarchic tone. The media coverage would surely generate interest, increase his profile, maybe even land him an agent. Except no one was interested. Larry was released less than three hours later, wrists lightly slapped, onto an empty street. The sculpture was gone. The Police claimed not to know what happened to his... “art.” Not a single pig’s ear remained amid scattered pictures of Charlie Manson swirling about in tiny eddies.

“Oh ma’ boy,” the cat purred seductively. “Perhaps you are doomed to only have your genius recognized post-mortem, eh?” Larry had no answer as he stared at the cat through the haze of red dust. He registered a rise in the room’s temperature, but couldn’t work out why.

“Martha is doing well though,” the cat yawned with extravagance. The cigarette had gone, and the cat took to inspecting its extended claws one at a time. “A wonderful review of her show by Cotter in *The Times*. Did you see it?”

Through gritted teeth, Larry grimaced. You know I did, he thought.

“Yes, I know you did,” the cat’s voice had now taken on the more sinister aspect of a villainous Jeremy Irons. “*New darling of the art world* as I recall. How marvellous for her. You must miss her so, Larry.” The cat stretched again, and rose to its four paws. “Lucien’s new commission sounds awfully lucrative too. Album covers for Madonna indeed! Imagine, Larry, she actually asked for him by name. Isn’t that simply marvellous?”

The room was fluid and Larry could no longer make sense of it; he had no understanding of how he came to be sitting facing the coffee table, almost at eye level with the works. He must have set them up, mustn’t he? Right before sinking into the chemically-induced coma supposed to regenerate his artistic talents, but which had produced nothing but malnourishment and a growing sense of his own filthy worthlessness.

“Stop it!” Larry’s eyes fixed on the syringe. “I know what you’re trying to do.” The heat was rising steadily now; the red light pulsed, and the cat chuckled disgustingly.

“Just enough left for one more. What if that’s the shot that does it, eh?”

“I said shut up!”

“What if this one on your little altar, leads to your vision.”

“No.”

“The vision which creates the piece. The piece which raises you from this death.”

“No. I said...”

“The one that makes you immortal, Larry. Just like Martha.”

The cat’s fur was longer, wafting around it in a non-existent breeze, a glowing color Larry couldn’t name. The electric hum of the flashing red sign vibrated through him, and Larry sweated and shivered in the stifling dust. But he met the cat’s malicious, laughing eye.

“I won’t do it. I don’t need it. I am an artist.”

At this the cat whooped and hollered. And for quite some time. Its left paw pounded the soft red cushion in a grotesque parody of human hysterics. Its eyes glowed.

“Oh Larry... that was a good one. Yes, a good one ma’ boy.”

“I am. I am an artist!” Larry was defiant and his anger boiled into indignant fury. This stupid rat-catcher. Who was it to mock him? To question his artistry?

“And do you know why I’m an artist?” he shouted.

“Oh, do tell,” the cat grew larger in its enthusiasm.

“Because I’m human.”

“What?”

“Because unlike you, fleabag, I’m human. I am an artist because I am a human being!”

“Oh...but Larry, Larry ma’ boy,” the cat tutted in pity, “That is precisely why you are *not* an artist. It is the reason you are no good. In fact, Larry, it is the reason you are *bad*.” The cat’s derision was palpable, and Larry looked at it with the horror of a person who has just witnessed his own death. “I do hope that was not your *I’m Spartacus* moment, Larry. Truly, I hope not.”

With that, the cat leapt with Nuryevean-grace from beneath the flickering red light, but somehow brought the light with it, and Larry understood the light came from within the cat. It prowled lazily towards Larry with menacing disinterest.

“You are filth, Larry.” The cat took on the voice of Anthony Hopkins’ Hannibal Lecter, and Larry feared it. Its whiskers brushed against Larry’s sunken cheek, its breath heavy with the

stench of death. “You have no talent, Larry. Just like your professor told you. You are nothing. Perhaps now is time to just, well... quit.”

Larry didn't realize he had enough energy to cry, let alone sob, as he was doing now. Great gulping snotty sobs. The cat must be sitting on his legs to be so sickeningly close, but he couldn't feel the pressure of its presence on his outstretched limbs. What if he were paralyzed? What if he had no legs? Or hands?

“Wouldn't it be better Larry? To forget this nonsense and return home. To your father? Tell him he was right?”

“No,” Larry cried, hearing the terror of his eight-year-old self. “I can't go back to him... to that.”

“Oh, now Larry. You know that only happened when he drank. He wouldn't do that anymore, I'm sure.”

“But I left there. I came here to...”

“To what Larry, to what?”

“To...”

“To blow Skinny Tony off for another serving of your regular tippie?”

“No!” Larry hollered.

“Or was it to slip your fine artists fingers between the cracked windowsills of those lower level housing projects, eh? Tell me, did the loot from the old lady's purse furnish this weekend's magnificent feast?”

“I needed... I just needed,” Larry voice, weak and young, sounded with a desperation of a child maintaining a false innocence.

“I don't blame you Larry, ma' boy. Not like Martha and her faux saintliness. I will not abandon you. Not like she did.”

There was a softness. The cat was caressing his face, stroking his forehead and cheek, a comfort unlike any Larry had experienced, a liquid, intoxicating tenderness. He allowed himself to sink into it.

“I understand the lengths you were driven too. No jury in the land would convict you when they understood all other possibilities had been exhausted.” Each sentence added a layer of vindication. Of solidarity, even. He could trust this cat.

“I know you tried. I mean, how many of Skinny Tony's boys availed themselves of your pretty mouth and tight little behind?”

“I don't...”

“And was it your fault, my poor, poor boy, that they ceased to find you appealing when you skin fell from your bones and your bowels became, well... let's just say, unpredictable?”

“No, it wasn't!”

“The old woman. How much time did she have left anyway?”

“I...”

“She wasn't supposed to be home. And if she had just acquiesced to your very reasonable demand, if she had just given you her purse, well... you had no choice. Especially when she started screaming that way. No. No jury in the land my poor dear boy. My poor dear Larry.”

It was then Larry realized his tears had stopped. He was calm. A feeling not unlike the seconds following the needle's release. A peace and a certainty of himself. Of his blamelessness. Thank God for this cat.

“That’s right, my dear boy. My dear, dear Larry. So how about one last try? Think about how much better you’ll feel when you produce the piece you were destined to create; the one which brings you everlasting life.”

Maybe it was the fact he was inhumanly hot, yet still shivered which alerted Larry to the direness of his situation. Or perhaps it was the coldness accompanying the absolute certainty he was about to pee himself. At the edge of the cat’s caresses, he detected the presence of claw. Like a swimmer catching sight of a sleek, grey, triangular fin, slicing the ocean towards him, Larry understood his impending doom.

“Oh God! Oh God!” Buoyed by the rush and energy of physical terror, Larry found his voice and limbs. He squirmed and scuttled, a cockroach trapped under a glass.

“Oh Larry,” the cat shook its mane. “You know better than that.”

The cat came closer. And closer still. It advanced with the menace of a nameless and terrible authority, and bore down on Larry until it was inside him. Internal scratchings and grotesque purring in his gullet, Larry’s throat bulged. He gagged and convulsed with a violence that rattled his fragile, dry bones.

The backbone connected to the shoulder bone.

Somehow Larry was on all fours, coughing to the rhythm of the song playing in his head, or was it from somewhere else? He wretched up his emptiness.

The shoulder bone connected to the neck bone

Now hear the word of the Lord.

The red light burned in his throat with an intensity that would surely end in death. Great globules of mucus on the floor. Blood and bile. And cat hair.

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.

Muscles contracting, veins in his neck bulging under his rigid jaw, Larry writhed and convulsed, stiffening as though struck by a demonic electric current, desperate to expel the presence of the cat. The brutal force of his body’s spasms ripped sinew from bone, and wrenched joints from skin which shed, snakelike, onto the floor. Bursting under the pressure of his own pulse, Larry fell into the red light.

Then there was nothing. Until the familiar post-episode fatigue. He was in bed. A bed. In a room that was not his. Lying upon starched white sheets, naked but for a pair of white boxer shorts he didn’t recall owning. And there was light. Daylight. Tiny dust motes circulating in slanted lines of sun, floating out through open window above him. Clean air. The purple painted walls were vaguely familiar. He’d been here before.

Lifting his head was painful at first, but he slowly rose onto his elbows.

The elbow’s connected to the ...

He shook his head and dislodged the melody, causing the bedsprings to squeak and alert someone from beyond the room. The swift patter of bare feet.

“Thank god!” a female voice exclaimed.

“Martha?” he whispered through cracked lips. Martha’s apartment.

“Oh God, oh God, Larry!” she rushed to the bed. Kneeling at his head, she took his hand in both of hers and kissed it. Her tears flowed over his fingers. “I knew you wouldn’t die, I knew it. Lucien wanted to take you to the hospital, but Skinny Tony said it was too risky. He had some guy come over and give you, well... something to counteract the.... Oh, Larry!” she sobbed. “If there hadn’t been the fire, we may not have found you in time.”

“Fire?” the word was gravelly in his parched throat.

“At Tony’s. Only small, but enough to set off the alarm and the sprinklers. Tony called Lucien when you didn’t show on the street with everyone else who’d evacuated the building.” Laying back on the crisp cool sheet, Larry felt the lightness of relief. Of liberation. It felt so good not to care. An unfamiliar sensation he was able to identify later as hope. OK, so he had done bad things. The worst things. But he was reborn, he was clean, pure, he was...

“The cat!” He sat upright with a speed that left him dizzy.

“What?”

“Did you see the cat? Did you? The cat!” Larry’s voice was reedy, but loud.

Martha recoiled. “Cat? I didn’t know you had ...”

“I don’t!” The clarity was unbearable. “Oh God, Martha... I don’t, I don’t have a cat!”

“OK, lie back... you’re burning up...”

Larry retreated into sleep.

It was dark when he awoke and Martha spooned a warm colorless liquid into his mouth. It met with some sort of resistance as it trickled down his throat, causing him to make the alarming noise of a pig in distress, and sending Martha into a flurry of fear. After he finally reassured her he was not about to choke on his own vomit, she pressed him gently back to the pillow and stroked his forehead and cheek. A sensation Larry found unpleasant but didn’t know why.

“My stuff...?”

“Oh, the paintings? Don’t worry. The sprinklers didn’t damage them. Strange, really,” Martha smiled. Her head, angled to one side, black hair cascading over her shoulder, Larry thought of her recent roaring success, and how it had somehow enhanced her beauty. He was aware her phone had not stopped buzzing while she sat at his bedside, feeding and gently tending to him. She’d dismissed each call with a casual glance. Martha was in demand and shone with the promise of fame. How he hated her. But what was that she said?

“Paintings?”

Her voice solemn, reverent, “Larry, they are remarkable.”

“What? Paintings?”

“Now, don’t get upset. You’re still sick and probably don’t remember much about the last day or so. But Larry... they’re ... extraordinary.”

The sound of a door closing. Both looked up to see Lucien, face flushed, breathing rapidly, smelling of the city.

“Thank God you are awake. Larry, I have important news.” Lucien bounced with excitement on the soles of expensive shoes.

“Now, Larry. Don’t be mad. But I had to do it. The paintings. As soon as Martha and I saw them, well, we just... knew how amazing... so I took them to my agent. The guy who got me the Madonna gig, and other very, and I mean *very*, lucrative work besides. You’re not mad are you? I just had to. I mean, Larry,” Lucien knelt at Larry’s head, “the work’s exquisite.”

The dirty fog of the last three days came down like a veil. Larry remembered an unsettling experience in Skinny Tony’s back room, but little else beyond his buoyant ascension to the studio apartment.

“The paintings?”

“Took my breath away,” Lucien whispered.

Martha said, “I tried to tell you Larry, I’ve never seen such life in a work. Such...”

“Soul,” finished Lucien.

“Yes! That’s it. Soul.”

“So I took them to my guy,” Lucien smiled, “Almost told him they were mine!”

“Lucien!” Martha playfully slapped at him.

“He made me promise not to take them to anyone else. Told me he was certain a show would be organized soon. And he wants more, Larry. He wants to offer you a commission; dammit Larry he wants to offer you the moon!”

“What...?”

“I told him you were getting over a bout of flu, that you’ll be in touch when you’re better. When I left, he was on the phone to The New Yorker. Larry, you’ve done it.”

Martha couldn’t stop him getting up now. Despite subconscious concerns his leg bones would snap under the slightest weight, Larry staggered successfully towards Lucien, who rushed forward to support this fully grown newborn.

“Where?” Larry was breathless.

“The living room. Martha, get them?”

She laid them on the floor. Three. One for each day of filth and exile. Lucien and Martha sank to their knees, and a quiet reverence settled in the bedroom. Larry stood between them, breathing audibly. Emaciated and, but for the underwear that wasn’t his, still naked. Looking from above at a maelstrom of furious color, an anger and desperation in the compositions. Flames, paper, bones, desert, rocks, more bones, a hooded figure, more flames, sand, a decrepit female figure, splayed out, red light flowing from her head, white chalk surrounding her body, more rocks on a winding road, a pig’s skull. And a cat.

Larry has never had a cat.

He stood firmly now. There *had* been a purpose.

“I’m going to take a shower.”

Neither Lucien nor Martha stirred as he left the room. Larry caught brief snatches of their in church whispers:

“...the light permeates...”

“...it’s remote, but relatable ...”

“...it’s death *and* life...”

“...rebirth...”

Warm water cascaded onto his dry, cracked skin, turning it a peachy pink where it had been an ashen grey. Larry laughed and thought, “God, I hate artists.”

The Real Primo
Mark A. Rayner

Would you believe me if I told you Buddha had the set up all wrong?

It didn't dawn on me right away. One moment I was in my rental car, minding my own business, and the next, there are headlights shining in my face. The driver looked up at the very last minute, shock on his face. Thinking about it, he was probably texting, or maybe working on his laptop, but he was definitely not paying attention to the road. He'd slipped across lanes, in the dark, doing about 60 miles an hour. His massive truck intersected with my non-upgraded, economy rental car - a Chevy Spark "or similar" made out of tissue paper and paint. That was the underwhelming end of both the car and what you might think of as my life.

There was a horrible screeching sound of metal and machine disintegrating, a flash of terrifying light and a moment of exquisite, transcendent pain. It was more than just a physical pain. It was a feeling of loss, of absolute tragedy; but also, mixed in with the sadness, a feeling of warmth and love. There wasn't time to remember anything. There was a blurry light, and the sound of a baby crying.

"It's a boy," I heard a voice say above the wailing baby. "And he has very healthy lungs."

"Congratulations Mrs. Saluzar, you have a fine, healthy boy."

"Thank you doctor," I heard a voice say. Was it familiar? Yes, it definitely was; it was my mother's voice!

I couldn't see much – a blurry sort of vision of what I imagined to be a hospital delivery room. I was shaking, like I was cold, but I knew I wasn't. I *knew* I wasn't cold, but I could *feel* it. The feeling felt second-hand, as though I was remembering the *sensation* of being a cold. A pair of hands washed me, and wrapped me in a warm blanket. I was in my mother's arms. I'd just been born.

My vision swam and, through half-lidded eyes, I saw my mother's younger face. I'd seen pictures of her of course, but in person she was beautiful. She looked exhausted, but radiant. The nurse took me away, and I heard the crying again.

Then I realized *I* was the one crying. But I didn't even want to cry! I wanted to ask my mother ... I don't know. It was weird. Was it 1969, the year I was born? Or was this something else? But I couldn't talk yet. (That would take many years.)

At first, it was so frustrating not being able to talk. My body was ridiculous: it wouldn't do anything I wanted it to. In fact, it seemed like my conscious self actually had nothing to do at all with the strange little automaton in which I lived. The body cried, pooped, was fed. I'd been wracking my brain (*my* brain?) trying to remember when my mother had said I'd started talking, and I was pretty sure it was early, around the time I turned two. Given the situation, it was kind

of hard to tell, but I'd been born in the spring, and now I was working on my third summer, so it seemed likely that I could start to talk any day. That was my hope, anyway.

The two years of infancy had been challenging to my sanity. There was no other way to put it. Can you imagine how boring it is? Sure for the parents it's all "Look, he's discovered his foot," and "How cute; he burped," but when you're stuck inside the baby observing, it's not as much fun. My baby body was a little robot, and I didn't have the remote control. It did things of its own volition. Maybe it was a good thing; could you imagine how terrifying it would be for my parents if I suddenly started walking around and asking to read the newspaper?

I was getting a little stir crazy in there. My belief was that, as an infant, I really didn't have the brain wiring yet to deal with this full-on adult consciousness that was hitching a ride. Speech would be a first big step to allowing that consciousness – *me* – to get out.

"Ba ba," my infant body said, pointing to the sky.

"Yes, sweetie," my mother said, "we call that blue. Blue sky. Can you say blue sky?"

"Ba ba," I repeated.

"Blue," she said.

"Ma ma," I said, pointing to her.

She melted in happy tears. I was nonplussed. I did not say "mama" - that is, the consciousness that is telling you this story. *I* didn't say that. The little demon automaton I inhabited said it. And then it ate a bug. And spat it out. And cried.

By second grade it was obvious I was not going to be able to have any direct influence on my body. In fact, I was getting so used to the idea that I thought of it as "his" body. There was the actual me, Peter Saluzar, telling you this story, and the robot me, Peter Saluzar, who is eight and a horrible speller. Lexicography aside, the eight-year-old Peter wasn't a bad little dude. He was sweet with his parents and his younger sister, open-hearted and full of wonder, and he liked the feeling of sunlight on his face with his eyes closed. (I don't even remember doing that when I was a child.) And, somewhere in there, the younger Peter had some wisdom.

But, he was also an idiot. He seemed to learn best by making mistakes. I suppose we all do – but some of the mistakes were potentially deadly. Like the time he was playing on the train tracks, or even when he stuck his finger in a light socket. Not even to *mention* the time he got badly burned trying to use the stove. It wasn't like I was *just* an observer – I felt the pain from all those near misses. I could sense all the things he sensed, in a detached and almost vague sort of way, but I couldn't *do* anything about them.

It was frustrating. It was boring. School lessons were unbearable. Imagine having to watch your idiot younger self learn the times table wrong the first time, only to then spend six months correcting that initial mistake.

"No, you dope! Peter! Listen! Let help you. Six times nine is easy: it's like five times nine, I know you know that. 45. Then add another nine!" 52, he fills in the blank, confidently.

Chump.

Third grade was when I discovered girls. I played doctor with a cute little red-haired girl named Sally, and we weren't even caught. It was sweet and creepy all at the same time, watching that little bit of medical malpractice unfold. Remember: I am still a middle-aged man, even if I'm trapped in the body of a little boy.

I felt like a voyeur after that, and then I finally remembered some stuff that was about happen. Bad stuff. And I realized that I wouldn't want to be there for that. It wouldn't be for another year, so I put it out of my mind, and tried to enjoy the last year of pure, blissful childhood. Grade three seemed pretty good then, school wasn't boring, really. And even though Sally and I stopped playing doctor, and entered a martial courting phase, where boys flicked the girls they liked and girls punched the boys they liked, and everyone pretended that they didn't like boys or girls. It was idyllic.

But there was no escape. The year passed. The bad man hurt young Peter. And there wasn't a damned thing I could do to stop it.

After that, his life changed. He didn't do very well in school. He lost interest in girls and sports. He did a lot of reading. To be honest, I don't remember myself what was about to happen in those years; I had blocked it all out. The years rolled by, and high school came around, and there was some form of a recovery. My family moved that year, so there was a chance to begin anew, which my younger self wisely seized.

The past was forgotten, or at least, left alone in that dark place, and the automaton sprang back to life. Though he would never be the same. Something had been lost. Not lost: taken.

Through all those dark years, it was as though I, too, was slumbering. I'd forgotten how painful they had been. I was only feeling the pain second hand, seen distantly, as though through a pair of spectacles unearthed at an archeological dig, it was brutal. I had nowhere to hide. The books about Tarzan, and Pellucidar, and the Hardy Boys were no respite for *me*, even if they helped him.

When he sprang back to life, so did I, and I resolved to try again, to have an impact on the young man's life. There were so many ways that I could make it better for him. If I could only talk to him, mind to mind, there was a few things that he should know. He was young. He was beautiful. He was bright, and he could, if he set his mind to it, do anything. He needed to know that all the fears and insecurities he had were shared by those around him. They weren't talking about him – well, sometimes they were – but for the most part what he did and said when unnoticed. He could be bold and he would be glad of it someday. But he was a teenager, and I doubt he would have listened to an old man, even if it was himself.

The point was moot, because I had no way of communicating with him. He was deaf and blind to me and my fate. His fate too, I suppose. Somewhere up the road, thirty-four years or so, there was a texting trucker with his name on it.

Strangely, this gave me some hope.

I began to believe that when he died, he would join me in the ride. Or perhaps this replay would end. Maybe this was just a version of having your life flash before your eyes? Maybe I was still being compressed between my Chevy Spark's engine and my seat. Maybe these were memories, squeezing out of my mind like toothpaste out of a tube? That too, gave me a sense of hope.

He made some good friends in high school. He had a girlfriend, to whom he admitted his terrible secret. She had a similar secret, which she shared. They wept together, and then made love. And that was a kind of hope too.

The next few years would be fun. University. Though there was more alcohol involved than I remembered, and strangely, that had an effect on me too, though again, it was distant. More uncomfortable in some ways. He broke up with the high school girlfriend, and then sowed some wild oats. He made some good decisions, some bad. As I watched him I saw that his life – my life – was an existence not much different from any other.

In grad school, he met the woman he would marry, have children with, and then divorce. He started a career thereafter, and the marriage, kids and drawn-out legal proceeding began.

It was impossible for me to be unconscious, even when he was sleeping.

Sometimes I would try to remember what was going to happen next, and then he'd be restless. Sometimes I would try to meditate, or at least, do what I thought was meditation. In that Buddhism class we'd taken, they called Zen meditation "just sitting." I couldn't sit, but I could be still, and let my thoughts wash over me until they were gone and something like a kernel of myself remained. On those nights, he slept.

Time really does go faster as you age. I can confirm it. I felt ashamed about how little I had enjoyed my kids. And I realized that my father had done the same thing. And as soon as I realized that, they were grown up, and headed to university themselves.

And there I was, in the Chevy Spark. It was almost over. I was thankful then. To whom? I don't know. I'd yet to see any evidence of God. Or Vishnu. Or Odin the Wise, for that matter. (Which would have been cool, though I think that might have disappointed me, to know the destruction of the world was around the corner.)

My own personal Ragnarök certainly was. There was the truck. I could get a better look this time, and yes, that stupid son-of-a-bitch was texting! He looked up, and I could see an expression of pure horror in his face. He may actually survive this crash, as he's in a pretty giant vehicle. Well, he'll have to live with my death, but that wasn't my problem anymore. Now there wouldn't be any problems. Just silence.

The crash was as violent and painful as I remembered, even at once removed. Things went dark, and I felt . . . content, I suppose.

And then there was a blurry light, and the sound of a baby crying.

"It's a boy," I heard a voice say above the wailing baby, and then the voice said, "and he has very healthy lungs."

"Congratulations Mrs. Saluzar, you have a fine young boy. He's healthy too."

"Thank you doctor," I heard a voice say. Was it familiar? Yes, it definitely was. It was my mother's voice!

I couldn't see much – a blurry sort of vision of what I imagined to be a hospital delivery room. I was shaking, like I was cold, but I knew I wasn't. I *knew* I wasn't cold, but I could *feel* it. The feeling felt second-hand, as though I was remembering the *sensation* of being a cold.

No, no, no, no, no, I thought. *Again?*

They cleaned me up and handed me to my mom, and I tried to sense the presence of the devil. Surely this was hell? But no. There was nothing but the soft breathing of my newborn lungs, the cooing of a few nurses, and the gentle whisper of my mother's voice, "Welcome to the world, Peter."

So maybe that Buddha guy didn't have it wrong, after all. Maybe the cycle is just not as pleasant as he imagined. Well, at least I hadn't come back as a texting trucker.

I determined to do better this time around. I'd correct some of the things I'd done wrong. I'd make the life count for more. Maybe it would get me out of the loop/ But there was no free will for me. Oh, I was free to *think* anything I wanted, but I couldn't interact with the body. *My* body. I wasn't going to fall into the trap of thinking of the body I was riding around in as *his* body anymore. It was mine.

I tried to jettison all that I knew, and experience things again, as though through the first time. I meditated every night when the body – my body – went to sleep. It helped keep me centered and focused on the goal: to interact with the world. It really wasn't about correcting the past anymore, because, well . . . *was* it the past? It was happening in the moment. The moments were ticking by. I was already in kindergarten. God I love finger painting! The squishiness of the paint, the way the bright colours mix together to become other colours, what's not to like? Plus if you make something beautiful then the teacher will like it, and give you a star. And so, I was able to experience things again, not exactly as though new, but close. Not even one step removed. Just a quarter pace.

The meditating during sleep time helped.

I couldn't get over how gorgeous the sky was that summer. How intense the colours were. There were so many shades of green in the grass that my dad seemed to enjoy mowing, the

plants that my mom loved to tend in her garden, and the trees. I could lie there for hours and watch the verdant arcs of leaves shimmer in the wind, under an endless blue sky.

Most days I could stay in the state of mind, riding along the childhood days. It occurred to me, just about the summer before grade two, that I couldn't hear the thoughts of my younger self. They were a mystery to me, apparently as much as I was a mystery to him.

Once in a while, he would talk to someone who wasn't there. I think it was his concept of God, though it could've been me, I suppose.

"Why does the sad happen?" he asked, once.

It startled me, because I'd been having a bad day, actually. I was not enjoying the moments as much, because it was coming, I realized. It was nearing the end of grade three. Soon the "uncle" would hurt my younger self, irrevocably, I now realized.

Because of the pain in the world, I thought.

His eyes started to cry a little, though I hadn't caused the tears, it felt . . . related.

Then it was time to go to the beach with mom and dad, and the sadness was forgotten. For a time.

The intrusion came and went.

For me, this time around, it wasn't as bad. I meditated at night. And during the day, when my body's emotions were likely to upset my mind, I was able to meditate then as well. I started to see the emotions as being like thoughts. Like thoughts, they could wash over me, surround me, but always there *was* a kernel that was not those thoughts or emotions.

I spent much of this second time around focused on this activity. It seemed that this was my chance. When I got to the course on Buddhism again, I tried to pay greater attention, and I realized that it was not focus on my feelings and thoughts, but awareness of my thoughts, and denial of the world – right mind – that would be my salvation. And thus I corrected my awareness, and hoped that before the truck and its murderous texting driver came around again, I could achieve *Nirvana*. No mind.

But I never really got beyond the detachment of my meditations, and by the time the screeching of metal turned into my newborn cry, I realized that I'd failed. Nirvana was not the answer either.

"Welcome to the world, Peter," my mother whispered.

Wouldn't it be funny, I thought, if I could say, "Sorry, but this is my third time around, lady - it's getting to be old hat."

I could see the headline: "World's first talking baby says there is life after death!"

Of course, this was not a new concept: The idea that you live your life over and over again. Reincarnation is a core concept of many religions. But the idea of living exactly the same life over and over again seemed familiar. Maybe it was one of the science fiction stories I'd read. I'll keep an eye out for it this time around. You have Google, and I have time.

So this was my third time around, post-death. Technically my fourth life, if you include the first life when I didn't know that I was going to have to relive every choice I made.

As this one unwound, I could see that a lot of the so-called choices I made were actually non-choices. I tried to interfere. I remembered what was about to happen next, so I created an image of that in my mind, and this did seem to have an effect.

"Whoa," my previous self said, after I tried to show him how to not get his heart broken by Cindy McLean in grade 11, "*Déjà vu.*"

It's funny. As soon as he said it I realized that I used to have *déjà vu* on a regular basis, and then I realized that it was coinciding with my attempts to communicate with the First Me. Let's call him Primo.

Primo was susceptible to *déjà vu*, but he never listened to it. He would shake it off as easily as forgetting to buy that thing. You know, that thing that you came into the store to get, before you got a bunch of other stuff, but not that thing you forgot? Even though you feel like you're forgetting something as you pay for the other stuff. It was like that. And it was infuriating.

This time around I felt Primo's anger. He was an angry young man. He had a chip on his shoulder, even though he was basically that kid full of wonder and imagination underneath. I couldn't change his anger either, even if it affected me less. That was the only good news about the third time around, up until about a week before the texting trucker.

I had been mediating, and the thought that perhaps this third extra viewing of my life would be the last – three is a magic number, right – I thought how it sucked that I couldn't explain anything to Primo. Then I realized, I had never tried to explain anything to him while he was asleep. It had only been while he was awake!

Maybe I could prevent the accident.

I replayed the scenes leading up to the end. The business trip. The crowded airport. The plane's malfunction and the emergency landing in Pittsburgh. My decision to rent a car to drive to Chicago overnight, rather than catch the next available flight in the morning. That was the point where I could easily change the outcome.

Take the free hotel room. Reschedule your meeting in Chicago and take the early flight.

Every night I replayed it. I showed the accident. The crappy rental car. The texting trucker. I showed the end. And then, I showed a comfy bed in Pittsburgh, an easy morning flight, and a successful meeting in Chicago. Both options, again and again.

The morning of the flight, Primo got out of bed, went to the bathroom and stared in the mirror. He looked terrible. His girlfriend, Tara, came in and said, "What's wrong, hon?"

"Crazy dreams. I can't quite remember them, but they're foreboding as hell."

"Dreams are dreams," she said, and then sat down on the toilet.

He looked at himself in the mirror and I felt like shouting: "They're not just dreams! I'm trying to tell you, don't rent the car!"

Later that night, when the truck hit Primo, it made me sad to think that the sound of Tara pissing was the last intimate moment they shared.

Fourth time I sulked. I couldn't sleep, avoid the whole shemozzle, but Primo was an asshole. He wouldn't listen, so what was the point? I watched his pathetic life and I was happy when Death Trucker ended it all.

That was stupid, I realized as my mother welcomed me to the fifth time. The sixth, actually, if you count the first go-round when I didn't know shit.

I still didn't know shit, but at least I could enjoy it more, right?

It was possible to reduce the feeling of watching a life, and living it more like the first time around. The secret was forgetting that you were there, and that you'd seen it all before, and that you had no free will or ability to control what happened to you. That made it better, on the level of feeling more involved. It was harder when the bad things happened. The family friend and his terrible betrayal was more real this time around, for instance.

I felt the loss of my first dog more. The loss of my first love. Loss was more intense, but so was joy. On the whole, it was a better way to go than being surly, and waiting for the end.

I also rediscovered dreams. Instead of using them to affect the future, what if I used them for a bit of fun?

It seemed that when Primo's consciousness was in sleeping mode, I could run the show. I could make his subconscious see and do whatever it liked. And this was freedom.

My will ruled again in the dreams. I made stories. Adventures. Crazy shit. Anything I could think of I could make happen in his dreams. Early on, I just liked messing with physics and he really enjoyed the childhood dreams of flying – he seemed to like it best when flying was like swimming. Occasionally I'd let him fall just to keep it real. But as the life progressed, I played out scenarios that he'd experienced that day – that material was the freshest because all the memories were right there for the manipulation. And then there were the fictions. He didn't seem to remember them very well, but I enjoyed them more than the remixes of memory.

This made it all seem more bearable and when the end came, I had a momentary feeling of panic. What if this was the actual end? What if this was a final death?

"Welcome to the world, Peter," mom whispered.

I was relieved. That last bit of fear on repeat six made seven (eight, if you count the first time around) better. Even the bad parts were okay, because they were all life. Existence. I continued to exist, and I had the dreams. The fictions.

And so, many, many lifetimes passed.

I lost count of them. I started to anticipate the moments Primo experienced with an emotion akin to sadness, but worn out. It was weariness. My consciousness felt thin, and stretched out. And then one day, I just felt like I'd had enough.

I'd made up all of the things I could think of in dreams. I'd tried to influence Primo's life and that was clearly not something I could do, with all my tricks and imagination. I wanted it to end, but at that last moment – the moment of exquisite pain and loss – there was always a stab of fear. That this was it.

The loss was not just because my life was ending. The loss was more than that, I came to understand. It was an echo from the future, I decided. It was an echo of the grief of those who loved me. There weren't a lot of people, I realized to my great dismay. My children, my parents, who would outlive me, a few close friends and Tara. I couldn't know for sure, because I didn't get to see their sorrow. I could feel it though, and I focused on them. Enjoying the moments of love we shared. (Always wishing I'd been more effusive, more loving, when the opportunities arose, but accepting that I couldn't change that now.)

And when I'd experience every erg of love I could, probably from a hundred replays of Primo's life, I knew it was time to go. But I couldn't. Always that stab of fear at the end. And then the baby crying.

One day, while I listened to Professor Watts describe the Buddhist concept of how the world is illusion, I noticed my seat mate next to me doodling. He had written "no self" in the margins of his notebook, next to a drawing of a little chubby Buddha with fairies and Vikings playing electric guitars around him.

No self.

That was nirvana, I thought. Releasing the idea of self. I felt the old familiar stab of fear at the idea of non-existence. But I didn't listen to the fear.

I realized I needed to let go of the *idea* of self. There was Primo. But *I* was an illusion. I knew, then, that I had been on the right track when I was meditating all those lifetimes ago. When I was spinning my dreams in which there was no me, only an endless series of the idea of me.

So there was no Primo. There was no

The Golden Dogshit
William Barton

Rutherford's hosted an after-party following the auction, the sort where no one was invited, yet those who stood in the golden glow of the room knew on instinct it was theirs. Standing in the center of the room, surrounded by a covey of the disinterested and untouchable, was Nicholas Setchelle, former New York hedge fund manager and arguably the most important American contemporary art collector of the early portion of the twenty-first century. He was glossy eyed, looking for a tiny sandwich coddled by the banquet servers. Just as Setchelle reached for one of those delicious little sandwiches a young man burst into the gala, grabbed a glass of water, and threw it in Nicholas' face.

"Fuck you, Setchelle," the young man said.

The young man, an art student at an overpriced university, grabbed a handful of the tiny sandwiches and threw them at Nicholas' tuxedo. Those around Nicholas gasped, pulling their drinks close to their chests, and staggering backwards. Nicholas was alone in the center, facing the judgement of the firing squad, pelted with squished sandwich parts, meat juice coating his collar, and mustard slinging onto the white of his shirt. The sandwiches hit him in slow motion, his hands down by his side, his glass of scotch spilling on to the floor, twenty five years in a barrel, wasted and seeping in the porous marble floor of the Rutherford's Auction House Secret Party Room. The glass shattered, the crash cascading from the walls.

The art student had grabbed, squished, and thrown all of the tiny sandwiches, and was now breathing heavily with balled fists and heaving shoulders.

"Art isn't a monopoly," he said.

Nicholas brushed off a morsel of bread from his shoulder, lifted his eyes from a mustard stain, his mouth open.

"Why?" He asked.

A security force stormed into the room, radio's blazing with beeps, and chased after the art student as he made for the exit. The art student ran out of the Secret Party Room, into the foyer of the Rutherford's Auction House. Each step roared, the thundering steps behind him like the impending white water of a crashing wave. The art student saw the buzz of downtown Manhattan traffic just outside the glass front door. He threw his hip toward the door to fling it open. The security force, in close pursuit, front-flipped through the glass in a flawless tumble, sprinkling crumbled bits over the sidewalk. With the sound of horns upon him, brakes squealing, engines and combustion, the young art student ran feverishly, narrowly avoiding pedestrians. He careened around a corner, wild eyed, where he was awaited by a police force in riot gear, knees planted on the ground with levelled shotguns. The simultaneity of the shotgun blasts shook the nearby buildings and riddled the student's body so totally that to a casual observer, the student completely exploded. Several bystanders on the street were shocked and said things like:

"Woah."

In the Rutherford's Auction House Secret Party Room conversation had slowly begun again. Nicholas took his responsibility as possibly the foremost American contemporary art collector of the early portion of the twenty-first century very seriously, and felt it his duty to resume the night in a casual manner, as if these sorts of interruptions came with the prestige. He laughed and used a napkin to wipe off as much of the sandwich residue as possible.

“Nicholas, I want to congratulate you on your new piece,” a man with coat tails, a top hat, pocket watch, monocle, bushy white muttonchops, and a jeweled sceptre said.

Nicholas perked up.

“*The Thread of Ariadne?*” Nicholas asked. He knew, of course, that the man was referring to this piece, but the title felt crisp on his lips and he was still trying to settle into the idea of its ownership.

“Yes, an iconic Ricard Fromage, he truly is the Michael Jordan of post-war American sculpture,” the man said.

A swell rose in Nicholas’ chest, the same feeling he’d fallen in love with as a child after using his week’s allowance to buy new train sets. The other boys coming to school with silly things like chewed bubble-gum or ripped comic books.

“I’ve talked to Ricard,” Nicholas said, “he says he’s found inspiration to continue the piece into a series.”

“More golden dog shit?”

“No, he aims to explore goats, wolves, turtles, an examination of the relationship between predator and prey.”

“Stunning. You *must*” the man’s red face jiggling forcefully, “have them.”

“We will see if Ricard can maintain his passion,” Nicholas said.

The group erupted with laughter-- the man with the jewelled sceptre laughing so much that he turned purple and excused himself to lay down.

Nicholas remembered the hobby store where he went to use his allowance, it’s walls filled with plastic dinosaurs, cowboys, paratroopers, rubber balls, towers of endless wonder. What struck him, though, was the train that wound around the shop, mysteriously gliding behind shelves, moving up through the ceiling, only to reappear at the front register and swim by at shin-level. Nicholas saved for weeks, meticulous and protective, and when he asked the shop owner for that train, the owner simply said:

“That one’s not for sale.”

Nicholas walked about in the golden haze, peeking into conversations to be congratulated and accepting the praise with a gesture of false modesty. He took a bow and sauntered to the next group.

“Wonderful work on *Ariadne*,” they said. Nicholas lifted his glass and nodded his head.

Between groups, Nicholas laughed to himself. He hadn’t thought of where he was going to put the sculpture. Never had he won a piece without knowing first where it would go. Suddenly, the dim bustle of the room became too loud for Nicholas as he struggled to imagine the corners and long adobe walls of his villa. Nicholas was overwhelmed with the feeling he needed to be alone.

Nicholas took his glass of scotch and made his way unattended through a series of long marble hallways. He stopped at an imposing metal door and leaned over to have his retinas scanned by a green laser. The door slid open and revealed the Underground Art Bunker of the Rutherford Auction House. Nicholas walked slowly through the gallery of the Underground Art Bunker, savoring each click made by his heel on the marble floor. The walls were lined with impressionists, baroque, pop art, renaissance, all paintings that were being held in secret for one reason or another. Mostly, they were to be sold again in the approaching years, though there was one piece Nicholas knew was too rare, too precious to be sold.

Nicholas drank in the works of art thought lost to the world, stopping to note the uninhibited brushstrokes of certain impressionists, the staunch discipline of the renaissance painters. He stalked through the gallery for as long as he could manage before he allowed himself once again to be arrested by the truest masterpiece: *Winter*, by D.H., the artist's self-amputated penis mounted in a glass case. He gazed in awe, tears coming to bathe in the soft glow that flooded his eyes, *what tasteful and refined symbolism*, he thought, and finished his glass of scotch.

Charlemagne

Joe A. Oppenheimer

Since forever, Dad was the first one awake. Long before he had to show up at Rossetti's Auto Shop, he'd brew himself the day's first espresso. Then he'd grab the paper from the yard, sit on the old plaid sofa, and watch the sunrise. Of course, he'd be petting Charlie. After that ritual was completed, and before the sun would be full up over the neighbour's roof, he'd stand, stretch, and put Charlie on his leash. By then other early risers would be up, walking their dogs.

Charlie would get his first social hour of the day. He was always more ready to socialize than Dad was. Dad never even knew the names of our neighbours - even Mrs. Polakoff who lived just two doors down and walked a fancy Bichon Frisé that she was always cleaning. Charlie, on the other hand, knew all his neighbours - maybe not by name, but he sure was up close and personal with them. He'd tug at the leash furiously when he'd see the McDaniel's Dachshund who, if I remember rightly, was called Schnitzel.

Charlie was a handsome and tall Golden Lab. The sheen of his coat and his proud, youthful posture was a contrast to Dad's slouch and quiet demeanor. The picture caused many a passerby to steal a second glance of my father's stocky, dark, central-European frame. Some say Golden Labs are the friendliest (and dumbest) of all the breeds. Charlie sure was friendly. I don't think he ever had an enemy in the world. But I never thought he was dumb.

Most days they'd be gone a full hour. You couldn't miss their return; with Charlie's happy barking and my father's loud "Good fella, there, good boy!" he could have woken up Grandfather who was lying two miles away and six feet under. We'd all be up and Mom would have breakfast started.

Dad was a welder at Rossetti's. They gave him a steady income and fed his addiction to espresso. If he'd been more sociable, he might have used the bragging rights he earned by working only a few miles from home in a town full of commuters. He could leave at a respectable hour and come home pretty early most evenings. Of course, as soon as he'd get home, he'd grab the leash and walk Charlie.

No doubt about it, Charlie was Dad's dog. I mean, Charlie certainly tolerated me and Cal as we grew up. He was obedient whenever we took him on his afternoon walks. But inside the house, he'd move into another room away from us. Sure, he'd wag his tail at Mom as she put down his bowl of water. And Fridays evenings, when she'd serve a chicken for the Sabbath, Charlie would be far more expressive as she gave him the extra schmaltz. But it never lasted. When Dad was at work, Charlie would wait patiently on a scatter rug, ignoring all of us. He never barked at the mailman, and left most of the other humans alone as they entered the door. But when he'd hear Dad close the garage, Charlie would jump up, move to the front door and bark wildly. When younger, Charlie would get up on his back legs, put his front paws on Dad's shoulders and lick Dad's face. In return, Dad would always greet Charlie first, then nod to the rest of us. As Charlie would get down, Dad would kiss and then scratch Charlie's big blonde head.

When Charlie died, sometime after I followed Cal to college, Dad fell into a deep funk.

But after some months, he got another - this time a mutt; a Lab/terrier mongrel. He called it Chuckles. Chuckles was also good natured and, unlike Charlie, he was rotund, a bit swaybacked, and lower energy. Dad still took those morning walks. I suppose the two of them looked more fitting together – Dad no longer being shown up by a lean, blonde, athletic type.

Without Cal and me at home it was mom who walked Chuckles in the early afternoon when Dad was at work. Dad would then take him out in the evenings and nights. All the dogs we ever had were always really Dad's. He loved his pets.

Once he retired, Dad was the one who walked Chuckles, almost always. He had his preferred routes. Most mornings he'd go around a few blocks, so Chuckles could say good morning to everyone. He thought that like Charlie, Chuckles needed a strong social life. This was in sharp contrast to himself. Dad never seemed to need more companionship than he got out of his dogs. He'd sit at the table with us, eating our meals. But aside from taking scraps and giving them to Charlie I can't recall him having any sustained social communication with a living member of the household at the table.

Maybe that's a slight exaggeration; if we weren't respecting Mom, we'd know Dad wasn't going to tolerate it. There just wasn't much more than that. I know that sounds pretty extreme. Maybe I've forgotten a time or two. I'd have to check with Cal. Aside from meal times, I can't remember him talking to Mom *about* anything. I mean, you could hear a 'yes' or a 'no', or some short answer to a question, and of course there'd be the standard questions:

"Did you see Chuckles' leash?" or "Have you seen the car keys?" or "What'cha cooking, Rachel?"

That's not to say they weren't happy. He'd smile; they'd hug. Sometimes if the radio played just the right song they'd get up, laugh and dance. But talk? Really *talk*? I doubt it. I don't remember them ever having a conversation. Not in front of us boys, anyhow. So can you imagine my surprise hearing him talk to her after she passed? I'd come home for a holiday, or something, and I'd hear him say things like, "Rachel, don't you concern yourself none anymore. All your boys, David, Cal and me, we're truckin' just fine. They got themselves good jobs now, just like you always wanted."

Another time it was about the garden: "Don't you be too worried about me anymore. I got the bulbs in just how you like and the garden is going to be real pretty this year. You'll love it - we'll be able to look out the window and see all the flowers. Just you and me."

I was so surprised that I called Cal first chance I had, and he could hardly believe it. He made me tell him the story two times before he accepted it as 'real' information.

Big dogs may be fun, but they don't live long, most times. And sure enough, not long after Mom died, so did Chuckles. Chuckles' death highlighted just how alone Dad was. It marked the beginning of his real downturn.

He was inconsolable. But, when Mom died and Cal and I came home- and neither of us thought about going home for Chuckles. We probably should have. Maybe Cal was too far away – I'm not exactly sure where he was that day we each got the call from Dad. As a journalist he could have been sent anywhere. Maybe Cal was already in Libya, maybe he was

just getting set to go. But I was in Chicago working for Sears. It took me a few weeks to realize how depressed Dad was. I mean, I'd call home in the morning and he wouldn't pick up. Even at noon he'd just say he had been sleeping and was just then getting up. It seemed like he'd never go out except to get food.

I got worried and asked for a transfer from Ohio to be nearer to Dad. They set me up to manage the store in New Rochelle - it wasn't the best of places, just the same sort of store with the same sort of problems, but it was just what I needed. I took an apartment in Larchmont. That gave me plenty of time to see Dad. At first, I'd get to his place and fix him breakfast so it'd be ready about an hour after sunup, like Mom would have done, to fit his natural schedule. I tried my best to fit it into the schedule he followed when he had a dog. But without a dog, he'd no interest in getting up, even with me there. Since I had to go to work, I didn't even see him those mornings.

I changed my routine. I stopped going by in the morning and instead went by to make supper. At first Dad would just sit there, his once black hair now snow-white. Usually unshaved. Always quiet. Happy to see me though - I could tell. He'd get up, sometimes even give me a hug and a pat on the back.

Then one day, out of the blue, he said it, "Son, I gotta get me a pet. My life isn't complete without me helping someone."

"Sure, let's get you a dog, Dad."

"I don't want a dog."

"What d'ya mean, you always had a dog."

"Too much responsibility."

"Well, we can go to the rescue and get one that's older. House broken already. A dog will get you out of your funk."

"I don't think so."

I didn't listen. I went out and got him a mutt from the pound. It seemed to be a sure bet. But some days later, when I came one evening to make dinner, I noticed the dog wasn't in the room.

"Where's the dog?"

"I told you, I don't want a dog."

"Maybe I should have let you pick your own dog, Dad. You do need a pet. So let's go on Saturday. This time, you do the selecting. You said it yourself, 'I've always had a dog.' It'll get you out of the house, get you talking with the neighbours again."

"I never talked to neighbours. And I ain't starting now. I don't even know if I'd like them."

"You've walked your dogs for more than 20 years in this place. What do you mean you

don't know the neighbours? That's impossible."

"I'll get my own damn pet."

And so it was that one day the next week, I came over to cook dinner, and when I got there I noticed that the kitchen was a bit cleaner than usual. There were only a couple of dishes in the sink and no grease or crumbs on the counters. When I mentioned the cleanliness, my father, just smiled. Then he added, "I got me some new responsibilities now, and I take 'em seriously."

That got me thinking about his needing a dog again. And after we were sitting down to eat, I raised it again.

"I thought you were going to pick out your own dog. When are we going to do that?" Dad just nodded in the direction of the bookshelf off to the left behind me. I knew he had a few books, including a couple on dogs. So I figured he was telling me he was reading up on breeds.

"Jesus, Dad. You don't need to *read* about them, just get one." Again, Dad didn't say anything. He just shrugged me off and again nodded toward the bookshelf. I was annoyed, but didn't turn around. After some more long silences, I picked up the dishes. Turning and getting up to put them in the sink, I couldn't miss the addition to the bookshelf.

"You got yourself a gold fish, Dad?" I turned back around. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"She's Charlemagne. And she ain't a gold fish. She's a Sailfin Molly."

I exhaled and took in his seriousness. "Well, so much for the house-breaking and dog walking."

A few days later I arrived and Dad's welding gear was on the kitchen table. The rest of the kitchen was still clean. Dad still looked scruffy but seemed less depressed - almost alert. "Hey Dad, are you selling this gear?"

"Hell no, David. I'm using it."

I didn't think to ask for what. But over the next days, the projects proliferated. First there was a ramp up the stairs to the front porch. I wondered about that. Dad certainly didn't seem headed for a wheel chair anytime soon. When I asked why he built it, he just shrugged. Soon thereafter I found the welding gear outside, along with my old American Flyer red wagon.

My attempts at communication about the changing debris on the porch yielded no response. Of course, this aroused my curiosity. Over the next week a rather extensive steel and glass project was being built as an attachment to my wagon. When it was done it had a sealable top. It occupied the entire base of the wagon. A few days later not a trace of Charlemagne was left on the bookshelf.

"Where'd the molly go, Dad?"

"Front porch. She wanted to watch what's happening."

"Fish don't watch what's happening."

“Charlemagne does.”

I got worried. My Dad was always a bit different, but this was extreme. I thought of contacting Cal. He knew I was seeing Dad regularly, but he was so far away, he couldn't really get involved. So I let it go. And then, for about a week, maybe more, I couldn't get back to the house. I was dealing with complaints about customer service in the appliance department. That was the meat and potatoes for Sears and Chicago had called about it. All I could do is phone. I'd ask how things were and I'd get a one-word answer. I hoped the calls were telling him that I was there if he needed me.

A couple more weeks went by and I got a call from Mrs. Polakoff's son in law. He and his wife had moved in after Mrs. Polakoff had died. Ed was worried that my father had lost his way. Neighbours noticed that Dad had returned to walking every morning, afternoon, and evening. They were concerned because he was wheeling his fish in an aquarium attached to an old wagon, apparently talking to the fish as if it were a dog while he walked it around the neighbourhood. I told Ed I'd get back to him.

As I ratcheted up my worries about Dad, the customer service problems had to be put on hold. I couldn't deal with two emergencies at once. First, I called Cal. But the call didn't go well. After the filial pleasantries and preliminaries, I remember something like this:

“Tell me again, why are you concerned, David?”

“Dad's walking his fish around the neighbourhood and talking to it like a dog.”

“Is he hurting or disturbing anyone? Destroying property?”

“No.”

“Is he disoriented in other ways?”

“No.”

“How does he possibly walk a live fish?”

“He built an aquarium. Welded it, you know, and then welded the whole contraption to my old wagon.”

Perhaps Cal's silence reflected his absorption of this detail, but I rather think he was suppressing a laugh. “Well he surely doesn't exhibit dementia, does he?”

“No, probably not. I don't know.”

“Dad walking his fish around the neighbourhood hardly cuts it as a reason for me to get off assignment at this moment. Good luck David! And thanks for being there for us.” Then he hung up.

I got to the house that night. Dad was well shaved, fully dressed and in good spirits.

Digging into the tomato soup I'd made I began, “Dad, I hear you're taking Charlemagne out for walks.”

“Yup. She loves it.”

“How do you know?”

“She’s much more lively and less depressed. Her colour is better.” I put down my spoon and walked out the front door and checked. There was the fish, still atop her red American Flyer throne. The molly did seem perky, but I couldn’t see a change in her colour. I came back in.

“Dad, do you really think the fish is better off with the walks?”

“Of course. Fish are social animals. They live in schools. You know that. She’s got to know her neighbours.”

“But fish don’t even live out here in air. They only know the world in water.”

“Of course. Charles is in water. Always.”

I hadn’t heard him call her Charles before. “You mean Charlemagne?”

“Who else would I be talking about? Look, she needs her social time. You can’t just isolate a pet.”

“But her social time would be with other fish, under water.”

Dad just sat there, taking this in. Then he said “Isn’t there gonna be more than soup?”

“Aren’t you concerned about what the neighbours think? I mean taking a fish for a walk could – you know - be seen as a sign something... being wrong.”

“I don’t even know the neighbours. Why would I care if they thought I was crazy? What’s for the rest of this meal? Stop giving me the fourth degree.”

“We got tuna salad, and it’s the ‘third degree’.” I dropped it.

The next day I called Ed and told him not to worry; my Dad was doing fine, better than any time since my Mom died, in fact. Then I went back to my store’s problems.

The weeks that followed were easy; things went smoothly at Sears, Charlemagne was getting her socials, and Dad was getting out and getting exercise. So what if he had some idiosyncrasies? He wasn’t out to win the esteem of his neighbours.

But then one day, while working on a sales projection report, I got a call from the Mamaroneck police. “We’ve got your Dad. You’ve got to come down and get him.”

“What? Is he locked up?”

“We didn’t lock him up, we pulled him out of the Long Island Sound.”

“Jesus, is he alright?”

“Well, he’s a bit damp behind the ears. He may need a little care.”

“But where? Was he swimming?”

“Just get down here and then we’ll discuss it. Be sure to bring him some dry clothes. Oh, and a warm blanket if you can.”

So I went down to the police station. Dad was a sorry sight.

“What happened Dad?”

“They left Charlemagne in the middle of the Sound. She’s going to die if we don’t pull her out.”

The police dispatcher rolled her eyes. “Who the fuck is Charlemagne?”

“A fish,” I replied.

“Well, your father was drifting off the Larchmont Manor Park shore. He was holding onto something that had weighed him down. A crowd of people had gathered and were telling him to come back. He said he couldn’t get out because of…” She looked twice at the report in front of her, “A wagon?” She rolled her eyes. “Mr. Plixit jumped in to help him to shore but he started fighting Mr. Plixit. Nearly drowned the guy. They called the police, and we got him out. I don’t know what this wagon crap is all about. You’d better make sure he gets into some kind of home – gets evaluated, if you know what I mean.”

After Dad got on the dry clothes we left the station and I got Dad’s side of the story. Plixit wouldn’t help him pull out the wagon, and tried to force him to let it go.

“David, we’ve got to rescue Charlemagne. She’s out beyond the gazebo. About 10 feet, I think. We should be able to find her.” He looked desperate. All the improvement I had witnessed was lost.

“Why’d you do it Dad? Why’d you put the wagon in the water?”

“You told me I had to. You were right. Charlemagne wasn’t interested in her neighbour’s dogs. She needed the sea.”

So of course we went to Abe’s sporting goods, picked up a scuba mask and then went to the Manor Park. As I stripped to my skivvies, I specified my conditions.

“Look Dad, I’m doing this for you. Not for Charlemagne. But you have to agree, if I save her, you don’t go into the water with her anymore. Deal?”

“You help me get her, and it’s a deal.”

I looked into his eyes: he was sincere. I waded in. It was cold, but bearable. There was a lot of sea weed, and not much light. It took a good fifteen minutes or so to locate the wagon. It was only visible when the sun peaked out from the clouds for a minute and shone on the stainless steel frame of the aquarium.

I dived down, found the handle and struggled to get it to come toward the shore. Once it got close I realized it was far too heavy to pull over the rocks. Luckily, a crowd had gathered

around Dad, and when I got the wagon up on the first rocks, about half out of the water, they stared in amazement. I must have been a sight. Balding, greying at the temples, already with a beer belly more appropriate for someone twenty years older, pulling on a wagon handle, over the barnacles. Dressed in my skivvies and a big black diving mask with a yellow breathing snorkel.

I looked at them and asked for some help. After a half a minute of hesitation, a couple of young guys pulled off their shoes and pants and came down into the water. The three of us were able to land that weird contraption welded onto my American Flyer. Once up on the grass, I inspected Charlemagne. She was quite alive.

The next day I began to look into nursing homes. I even visited a few. But - what can I say? - I couldn't do it. We all know what those places are like. But I'm a manager, someone who is supposed to think creatively. So I tried putting an ad on Craig's list.

“Free room and board for dog walker who is willing to take elderly man on walks, call Sears in New Rochelle (914-698-4300) and ask for the store manager or dial extension 073.”

The ad got a lot of bites. I interviewed about five or six of them and chose Debbie. She was 67, strong, healthy and fourteen years younger than my father.

She cooked lasagne, meatloaf, sauces, desserts; a far better cook than I am. Dad put on weight again. They got along. I even heard them talking a few times. She walked with my father. Pretty soon she was walking most of the dogs in the neighbourhood, and Dad went along. Charlemagne was still healthy, and I moved on.

When Sears offered to put me in charge of a K-Mart back in Ohio I took it. It may not be my preferred reassignment, but it removed me from the everyday watch of my Dad. I worried less.

I saw Debbie and Dad about once a month. It was just be for an overnight so I didn't witness all the day-to-day routines. Because I hadn't witnessed it, or heard about it, I assumed Dad had given up some of the more bizarre behavior that had brought on the crisis. But last time we got together it was for a big shindig organised by Dad for Charlemagne's third birthday. Cal even went, flying in from somewhere abroad. There was cake and ice-cream, and Cal's imported Prosecco. He also brought some kind of fancy fish food for Charlemagne. She seemed pleased with her treat. Dad even swore he could see her wag her tail. After Cal presented Charlemagne with her birthday present, he popped open the Prosecco, poured each of us a glass and toasted the fish:

“Here's wishing you, and your master, a wonderful year of companionship!” We all assented and drank up.

Soto voce, Debbie informed Cal and myself that we should get a second fish now, before Charlemagne's demise, “After all, what do you think the life expectancy of a goldfish is?”

“A molly,” I corrected.

“Whatever.” But she had a point. So I made the next toast.

“Happy birthday, Charlemagne. Here’s hoping we find you a wonderful partner and tank mate to keep you social and happy during your fourth year.” Dad did not take my toast well. He was dead set against my implication of another fish.

“What are you talking about, David? How can you expect someone my age to take care of two pets?”

“Well, you’d have my help,” Debbie pointed out.

“What do you mean you couldn’t feed two fish?” chimed in Cal.

“It’s not the feeding, Cal. It’s the walking. I might not be able to build another tank or even if I could, I couldn’t handle two tanks on that little wagon. What if Debbie gets sick or we’re snow bound? I can’t do it.”

Cal and I glanced at each other in surprise. This was the first we heard that Dad was still walking the fish. But before anything more could be added, Debbie said a second fish would take some pressure off; after all, it would let Charlemagne be social all the time, even on days she wasn’t walked.

“I’ve heard with more than one fish in a tank, the more aggressive ones kill the others. What makes you think Charlemagne won’t be eaten alive by your ‘partner’?” countered Dad.

“Or even that Charlemagne might be the most aggressive?” I put in.

“Don’t be ridiculous, David. Charlemagne is obviously not aggressive.”

Taking out his phone, Cal said this was precisely what one could discover on the web. “Let’s see now. Is the plural of Mollys ‘y-s’ or ‘i-e-s’?”

“You’re supposed to be the one in the word business.”

“Don’t be a smart ass – you know it’s all video now. Ahh, i-e-s. Mollyfish.com - nifty. And there it is! I can click directly on ‘tank mates,’ what could be easier?” He read whatever information was on his screen. “Debbie’s right. Right here it says your Molly could be getting lonely, if you can believe it.”

“Come on Cal, let me see that,” insisted Dad. Cal handed him the phone. Of course, Dad didn’t have the right glasses on, but Debbie grabbed the phone and read it out loud. Then she got to the part about how some fish, including mollies, give birth to live, swimming babies. I was amazed.

“Yeah, but what about the aggression factor?” Dad asked.

“It discusses that too,” continued Debbie. “Here it says mollies are very laid back and easy to get along with. They’re communal.”

“Just like us,” Dad said.

Cal and I glanced at each other, raising our eyebrows. Debbie gave us a thumbs up.

Home to Phil

Andrea Wyatt

Anita reads about Todd Browning's movie *Freaks* and decides to take a bus to NYC to see it. The original tagline--*Can a full grown woman truly love a MIDGET?*--is what gets her attention.

Her boyfriend Phil runs the Circle Movie Theater concession five nights a week, running along a wooden plank, on an incline from the high popcorn machine to the low display case, selling popcorn, coke and candy. Anita works at Moonstone, a mystery bookshop in a crumbling Victorian house near Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. They live in an upstairs apartment where they spend their time eating, reading, writing and making love on a splintery porch off their bedroom.

Phil is writing cantos about the Cofan, Guardians of the Rain Forest. A couple of his poems have been published, one in *The Tennessee Review*, another in the *Colgate Alumni Magazine*. He dreams of a literary life, a fellowship, maybe, a house in the Virginia suburbs. He's careful not to let Anita in on his reveries. One, he's pretty sure she would ridicule him, and two, just because he's LP, he's no different from any guy, he thinks maybe he could do better.

Phil is a Little Person like his parents, who had to put up with a lot of shit, he remembers, but he won't put up with it. He can be nasty, pugnacious and a little scary if somebody calls him a midget. He's trying to get everybody to change that word to LP.

"I wish you'd come with me. Listen to what the *New Yorker* says; it's a masterpiece, it influenced Bunuel," says Anita.

"Screw the *New Yorker*. I don't need to see any damned movie about midgets," he said, with a twist to his mouth.

"The Museum of Modern Art paid to have *Freaks* restored."

"Screw the Museum of Modern Art, those elitist bastards."

"You always like to see movies at the Thalia, It's so dark, and we can go to Hop Lee for Chinese food after."

"Screw the Thalia and Hop Lee."

"I'll get the late bus back."

"Screw you, too."

When Anita gets to 95th and Broadway, she encounters a crowd of little people with picket signs exit a Greyhound bus parked in front of the Thalia.

One sign, with a picture of Eldridge Cleaver, reads "The Chickens is Coming Home to Roost,"

The LP carrying that sign tells Anita to go home.

"But I've always been with you, I'm a supporter, I live with one of you."

"Always stealing our men, you mean," shouts a tiny female.

"Stick with your own kind. We don't need you!"

"But I understand you! I know what you've gone through," Anita protests.

They turn away disgusted and begin to board the bus. Once the bus pulls away, she buys a ticket for the next showing.

Anita stands on the corner and thinks about the movie. *Freaks* was a huge disappointment. It was so old and creaky, and the characters were disgusting. It's a warm October night though, and she thinks, there's nothing better than autumn in New York. She starts walking to the 86th Street subway stop. She can take it all the way down to Mott Street. Maybe she'll pick up some Shrimp with Lobster Sauce to bring home to Phil.

Twist of Fate

Mitchell Waldman

Fate is a funny thing.

Okay, so, imagine this: Hitler didn't join the Bavarian Army at the outbreak of World War I in 1914, didn't go on to a life as the world's most evil, notorious killer, but, instead, after receiving the remainder of his dead father's estate in 1913, boarded a freighter headed for America, wound up at Ellis Island, found a small walk up apartment in Brooklyn, started learning a trade, and met a nice American woman who he married soon thereafter.

And, ten years later, he was a plumber. A guy everyone liked.

But he could have been so much more. This he was thinking as he put the last of his tools away, wiped the grime off his clear lens glasses and placed them back in their case. Then he picked up the toolbox, which seemed to be getting heavier every day, and walked up the basement stairs.

The woman was standing in the kitchen by the sink.

"Everything okay, Adolf?" she asked.

"All taken care of, Mrs.," he said, giving her a small smile, checking the clock over the sink. It was half an hour past the time he'd told Lois he would be home. She would be mad, but he didn't care. He had his job to do.

"Do you mind?" he asked, his hand on one of the kitchen chairs, and she gestured, said, "No, of course, go ahead," so he pulled his invoice book out of his back pocket, sat down at the round white kitchen, wrote up the damages, and handed her the copy off the top.

She stared at the invoice and said, "That's very reasonable, Adolf, I don't know what we would do without you."

He let out a burst of laughter. "I don't know. Maybe be without the hot water?" he said, smiling at her, pushing back the swath of hair that was falling over his eyes. She had a nice, pleasant face, he thought.

She held a check book, leaned down on the table, filled in the check, tore it out and handed it to him. He took it, examined it, looking for something in there, something in her smile, then sighed. Then he stood up in a shot, picked up his toolbox, and hesitated, saying, "We'll be seeing you," gave her a half wave, then headed for the front door.

"Thanks, again, Adolf," she said, as he turned the knob.

He opened up the back of his truck and tossed the tools in, closed the door, then got in the vehicle and headed home.

When he came through the door his littlest one, Heinrich, jumped on him immediately, begging him to pick him up, so, laughing, what else could he do? He picked him up high in the air, making the boy giggle with delight, then set him down again, after which he said, "Agin, agin."

The other two boys stood around, grabbing his legs, smiling up at him, and behind them stood Lois smiling, arms crossed.

They had a pleasant dinner, the boys and Lois talking about their days, Adolf smiling, preoccupied, half-listening.

Later, after finishing his beer while listening to the news, the children already asleep in their beds, and Lois having already retired, he got up, shut the radio off, left the empty by the kitchen sink, then trudged up the stairs. He quietly took off his clothes in the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and stared at himself in the mirror – he was thinking of maybe growing a mustache, something different, but he wasn't sure yet, it was something he was just thinking about.

And then, picking up his pile of clothes, walking down the hall in his underwear, he made his way to the bedroom, where Lois was already breathing the slow heavy breath of the near dead. He dropped his clothes on the floor next to his side, and carefully eased into the bed, positioning his pillow in just the right place, stared over in the dark at Lois, a black mass, no face, thinking, I could have been more, so much more, then, exhausted, quickly fell asleep, dreaming dreams of world domination, large bands of heavily-armed men in uniform marching alongside squealing earth-crunching tanks, through gray gutted cities, past rivers of blood.

Hail to the Elephant King

Cathy Ulrich

Helen's brother has become the king of elephants. The kids at school don't care when Helen tells them. It would be better, they say, if he were king of the lions. They say the lion is the king of the jungle.

Helen doesn't think that's right. She asks her brother when she gets home.

He says: *Lions live in the savanna.*

He says: *Elephants are better than lions.*

The local newspaper sent a reporter out to interview Helen's brother. He asked: *How does one get to be the elephant king?*

Helen's brother said: *How does one get to be anything?*

I went to journalism school, mutters the reporter, but Helen's brother just smiles.

Elephants trek to Helen's house and prostrate themselves before her brother. He caresses their trunks and declares them loyal subjects. He takes to wearing a bowtie.

You never wore a bowtie before, says Helen.

Now I'm royalty, says her brother.

Only for elephants, says Helen.

Her brother smiles. *Elephants,* he says, *are magnificent creatures.*

Helen's mother doesn't like when the elephants make the pilgrimage to their house. Usually, it's only one or two at a time, but sometimes it's a whole herd of them, a parade.

Look at the mess they've made of the flowerbed, sighs Helen's mother, and gets down on her knees to repair it.

When the elephants come up the street, the neighbors all go to their windows to watch, but nobody goes outside ever since Mr. Takeda was gored when he tried to shoo an elephant from his mailbox. Mr. Takeda's death weighs heavily on Helen's brother. He posts signs round the neighborhood: *Elephants are wild animals. Be cautious.*

After the funeral, Mrs. Takeda comes to visit Helen's brother. She waits until the elephants have gone and stands stiffly at the front door.

I would like his necktie back.

Helen's mother had washed the necktie. Because it was silk, she hung it over the shower rod to dry, clucking her tongue over the place it had been torn by elephant tusks.

Such fine fabric, she said. Helen liked the sailboat pattern on it best.

Mrs. Takeda waits in the doorway while Helen's brother goes to retrieve the tie. Helen's mother offers her cookies. Mrs. Takeda shakes her head. Helen's brother returns with the necktie and places it into Mrs. Takeda's waiting hands. He leaves his empty palms floating in front of her. Mrs. Takeda folds the tie tenderly.

How will you make up for this?

Helen's brother says: *I don't know.*

Mrs. Takeda dips her head down, then up again abruptly. *Maybe*, she says, *maybe you could stop being the elephant king.*

From outside, Helen hears the trumpeting of elephants.

How do you stop being the elephant king, says Helen's brother, *once you've begun?*

There Once Stood a Castle in this Room

Gary Priest

The morning after, they inhabit this castle of the dead. Last night they made love in the highest turrets, raised flags of red and pink and white and sunk into dungeons dug into the skin of the earth. They became glory and herald. Stone and metal forged into the tip of empires.

Yet, how quickly empires perish. How soon the turrets tumble into polite kisses. How simple the complicated garlands of red and pink and white are lost among the vestments of morning. When the sun shakes the room into a sober four walled reality they lose almost everything. Dungeons are nowhere to be seen.

“I enjoyed you.”

“Same here.”

The cockiness has left these lovers. That self-assured thuggery that trampled through the smoke and the music and sewed them together in the sweat of midnight. That confident swagger that made them howling fiends of back breaking sin has gone.

This castle of shadow and liquid they made is now a parched grey ruin. They are the corpses in the crypt. The ghosts of carnality.

“Call me?”

“Yeah, sure.”

They had created a castle. With sex and heat and words. Falling out of their mouths, all spittle slick and direct. There were foundations laid across stomachs, drawn with fingernails and concreted with tongues. There were secrets twisted and delinquent spread across lips. There were promises spun into dark silken moments after their flesh had stopped changing colour and their breaths were back inside their mouths.

Not that this castle was anything special. It was just another Friday night fortification. Yet both of them had believed it. They had buried the jaded pantomime horse of seduction at the foot of the bed and found a hard equine pulse of need running through them. It was true. Every drop of every promise, every splinter of every sigh. True.

Still, as they dressed and moved awkwardly out of each other’s eyelines that truth was the rubble of liquor bottles, cigarettes and condoms. The father, the son and the holy spirit of the one-night stand.

“You need a lift, somewhere.”

“I can get the bus.”

“You sure?”

Both are dressed now. Armoured and unreachable. All the victories of passion and surrender are wiped clean, thrown in laundry baskets, washed away in lukewarm showers.

One leaves, not looking back. Not kissing or saying goodbye.

One left behind. The debris clinging to the skin. Each time becoming harder to wash off.

A cigarette. Left by the other. Not the brand usually smoked. Tastes like the cotton wool they used to put in aspirin bottles. But it is still a smoke. It still dulls the edges. Fogs the debris in smoke.

One last look around the room. It is still early. Three hours until checkout. It seems a waste to leave the cable TV and the air conditioning and the smell of sex slowly evaporating in the August sun.

Another cigarette. The last one in the pack. Tastes a little less like medicine.

When it is done, it feels as if TV and AC are small comforts for the hollow sounds of haunting inside this already decaying castle of the dead.

Rising and purposefully not looking in the mirror. Stepping out into the heat and looking for change for the bus. The door left half open.

An hour later the cleaner comes and the sheets are changed and the towels are rearranged and no one would ever know that once there stood a castle in this room.

The Youngstown Striker
Elias Andreopoulos

Wilton Weston III was a successful man, the CEO of Matlock Savings Bank. At my last Google of his salary, his yearly compensation topped ten million dollars. I could have destroyed him. I just didn't need the stress that accompanied the endeavor.

But that changed.

I turned on the television one day and "Undercover Boss" was on. The premise of the show is an out of touch CEO works as a bottom level associate under disguise. An employee is assigned as their supervisor and they are extra accommodating when the CEO fails to execute the work that bottom level associates complete regularly. The inner pain section of the episode follows where the CEO and the employee share a heartfelt moment about the employee's monetary hardships. The episode culminates when the CEO reveals their identity gives the employee something special like a cruise or a check for 10k.

The episode with Wilton Weston III, who from this point will be labeled Asswipe, followed the same script. A lovely lady named Bernice mentored Asswipe. Whenever Asswipe messed up, Bernice fixed his error while giving encouragement and reassurance. During the inner pain section, Bernice said it was her dream to open a rape crisis center because she was raped and didn't know how to deal with it. Asswipe cried crocodile tears and they shared a made for television hug. For the gifts section, he gave her a raise of 8k and promised to build a "Matlock Savings Bank Rape Crisis Center," which would offer discounted therapy to rape victims.

There was a problem.

Asswipe raped me when I was drunk in college. It was idiotic that I let myself reach to the point of disorientation and projectile vomit. Still, I didn't deserve that. I was fine with letting it go for more than half of my life. I did not want to be pitied and judged, nor be labeled a poor victim. I needed to maintain my identity and put it behind me. But his name all over a rape crisis center for it to be associated with healing changed my mind. He wasn't helping these people out of regret of his atrocity against me. It was all to grow Matlock Savings Bank. And when the venture was no longer profitable, the doors would shut with a well worded corporate memo as justification.

I decided to travel from my hometown of Youngstown, Ohio to the Matlock Savings Bank headquarters in New York City to confront the bastard. It was the only option to put his atrocity behind me. After eight hours, my GPS led to me to the Matlock Savings Bank headquarters in the heart of Manhattan. Never before had I seen traffic like that with taxis, buses, trucks and livery cabs interchangeably speeding and jamming the brakes as pedestrians walked in droves, putting their lives on the line to reach their destinations.

The headquarters was immaculate with cutting edge technology, it felt like I walked onto the Starship Enterprise. Employees dressed in high end clothing entered and exited the building, all in a rush with money to be made. I approached the information desk where sat an attractive young lady. "How may I help you?" she asked.

"I like to speak Mr. Weston," I said, exuding all the confidence I could.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

“Carmella Gaudio.” I used my real name because there was a greater chance of him speaking to me than a Jane Doe without an appointment.

The receptionist looked at her computer, presumably his calendar. “I don’t see you on his schedule.”

I had to be confident. “This is a very important meeting! Call him! Mention Carmella Gaudio and he’ll send me right up.”

The receptionist was about to sigh, then realized I could be someone important and held it in. She smiled and picked up her phone. “Sorry to bother you Mr. Weston, Carmella Gaudio is here to see you.” She hung up the phone almost immediately. “He doesn’t know who you are. If you don’t leave the building, I’m calling security.” Her tone carried such arrogance, like I was a peasant.

For so long I wanted to forget him, but I couldn’t shake the shame, and I was too terrified to get help. He destroyed my life and forgot who I was. I thought his repugnance against me remained in the back of his mind, obviously it didn’t hinder him from achieving greatness, but I thought it bothered him occasionally. I walked out with my head down, too embarrassed to look at the receptionist. I would return to Youngstown. All the money and time wasted was not best to think about, a difficult task on the lonely ride back. I stared up at the skyscrapers. I thought about a taxi going off the road and killing me. Nobody would miss me.

“Wait! Ms. Gaudio!” the receptionist yelled as she ran towards me. “Mr. Weston wants to speak to you!”

He probably remembered me. But I couldn’t go to him after being rejected like that. I wanted to be in control. It was time to go public with his crime. I didn’t need a phony apology. I gave him a chance and it was time for me to exact my revenge.

“I must decline,” I said and walked away, feeling proud of myself.

I Believed

Charlie Taylor

Sophie had finally lost her capacity for belief.

The April morning matched her mood. A watery sun glanced shyly from behind a cloud and Sophie found herself in one of those inescapable moments of perfect aloneness. There was little point in maintaining the everyday charades; less point in lying to herself.

Her religion had been discarded years ago, before college even. Her faith in her parents' wisdom was never strong enough to inspire. So, she created what she liked to call her belief case and she carried it with her everywhere, stuffing it full of everything from teenage fads and cult classics, fashion and music, culture and cuisine, to radical politics and equality issues. There were sexual adventures, university, career moves, and then... And then a passionate affair with Jonathan.

Her belief case was stuffed to overflowing. She could hardly get the thing to close, even when sitting on it. Even with Jonathan's help, cautioning as he did occasionally against hopes becoming expectations.

"Let's just see how it goes," he said. "Let's just take it easy and allow things to develop at their own pace. No pressure. On either side."

She didn't hear him. She crammed everything she could into her case. She believed in everything and everything had to fit in. It simply had to. Every damned thing. She believed in the sun and the moon and the animals and the earth and the people and in spirituality and in peace and karma and music and truth and light and goodness and... and love. Especially love. Who cared if the case was too small! She could still carry it. She believed she could. She knew she could. And told him so.

Jonathan left her.

Not abruptly, which made it all the worse. Slowly and by degrees. Exquisite torture for both of them, although he never intended it to be that way. He turned the temperature down on their affair quite deliberately. It was the only way he could cope. His calls became less frequent, his passion less insistent, his excuses more obvious. Living together was not talked about any more.

"I really respect you, Sophie. I respect and admire you and I want us always to be friends, no matter what. There's nobody else, you know that. I just can't stand to be so central to your happiness, to your faith in life. It's too much of a burden. Too much responsibility."

She sat on her stairs in her faded blue toweling robe, phone in hand, and wept. She put the phone down, opened her belief case and started shredding the contents. Then she locked it and threw away the key.

When she met David some months later she confided in him, "I'm always so dreadfully disappointed in people

"Always."

"Why's that?" he said.

"Because the time always comes when I can't believe in them anymore. They let me down. I can't trust them."

"I wouldn't let you down," he said. "Ever. Believe in me."

Sophie married David and they had three beautiful children and theirs was the perfect marriage. David was a good provider, a faithful husband, a more than adequate lover, and he was true to his word. He was a constant and true friend. He was someone Sophie could believe in. So she did. At least, she pretended to believe in him. Even to herself. She believed in him and in the family and in happiness and holidays and dinner parties and in fidelity and in stability and sensibleness and in companionship and in the foolishness of passion and silliness and love. Every day, every single day of her married life, Sophie sat in front of her dressing table mirror and said these words to her reflection: "David is a good man and I believe in him."

"Don't they make a wonderful couple!" said everybody in the world who met them. "Yes they do. So right for each other. They're never apart."

And David was happy. Blissfully so. And Sophie believed she was happy too. She certainly acted that way.

But the last of the children, Rebecca, had left for university in September and now it was an April morning. All it had taken was one phone call at Christmastime just gone. A friend wishing her Happy Christmas. That's all. One phone call from an old friend. And it was enough to stop her sitting in front of her dressing table mirror each morning. It was enough to stop her saying these words to her reflection: "David is a good man and I believe in him."

She picked up the phone and dialled.

"I just can't do it any longer," she said. "And I feel so guilty."

"Guilty about what?" said the voice at the other end.

"Guilty about everything. Guilty about us, obviously. But guilty also at being as disappointing as everybody else in this damned world."

"Being human, you mean?"

"If you like, yes. Being weak."

"Weak?"

"Too weak to sustain my beliefs. Too weak not to betray."

"You're too hard on yourself?"

“Too weak to sustain my belief in God, in politics, in family, in... in love... to betray love.”

“Ah, love!”

“But, ultimately, you want to know what’s the worst thing?”

“Go on...”

“I can no longer believe that I can believe in anything. I believe in nothing, including me. Especially me. I don’t believe in me. I can’t make myself believe anymore. Not in David, not in anything. I can’t pretend any longer.”

“You can believe in me. This time.”

“You’re twenty-five years too late, Jonathan. I respect and admire you and I want us always to be friends, no matter what. But I can’t do this. Not with you, not with anybody. You’d better believe me.”

She sat on her stairs in her beautiful new blue toweling robe, phone in hand, and wept. Then she dried her eyes, dressed and, when she walked out the door, she left behind the empty idea of her belief case.

Hash
R.E Hengsterman

On any given day I put myself in a position of catastrophic failure. If you spend any time reading my words, you need to be keenly aware of this fact. And if you've invested any time in me, I am likely to disappoint. I only ask that you don't deprive me the beauty of my destruction.

I would also say, don't be too secure in your own normalcy. What happens to me could easily happen to you. And on this day, I wandered from one particular bad situation into another.

I notice her from a distance, across the street, through the crowd, and past the rush of life, standing solitary at a payphone. Yes, a payphone, one of few that remained. I suppose that was a sign in itself. But there was something more to her. Something I couldn't shake.

It was her hair, a deliberate shade of red.

Enough so that my eyes follow the curves of her dress impulsively. There is taut fabric gathering among clenched fingers, and a slender, pale thigh.

Just beneath her neck, three buttons lay undone over the slope of her breast, causing no apparent concern. I watch her lips twist under the burden of cumbersome words, pushing anger into the phone. The witness of this leaves me feeling voyeuristic and dirty.

I see her look up in disgust. Then down in shame, her face flickering flush with panic, before emptying paleness onto the concrete. She shifts restlessly. Her feet bare, her body closed.

I move in her direction, and then stop; her eyes pinned to mine like sharpened tacks. There's a dismissive shrug as she throws her hair into the sunlight, wispy shadows scattering across her face before the payphone slams the receiver. I catch sight of her alabaster skin glistening under the charge of emotion, fresh moisture pushing across the freckles that mark her chest. As I watch with curiosity, her body opens with a simple twist of shoulder and torso in opposition.

In a burst, she closes the distance, leaving space for our words to move slow and intimate.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She hesitates, manipulating the buttons on her dress between the tips of her fingers, before the hint of need escapes. I am willingly pulled deeper into the distraction. And I realize we have no past.

"I need a ride," the stranger says to which I respond with a quick nod.

Ten minutes pass before another word is spoken. I lean my head against the window and watch the buildings shadow long and ominous under the penetration of headlights. Doubt slowly creeps.

"You have any money?" she inquires.

"A little," I answer.

Two stops later her motivation leads me to a house just off the main street. It sits odd but ordinary under the withdrawal of light. Together we cross the walk and hurry the stairs. A rusted rail groans but forgives my eager grasp.

Inside mirrors the out.

It was no time before the newly acquired product finds the coffee table, previous contents spilling onto the stained carpet, her oil-stained fingers moving with an efficiency that heightens my sensibilities. Within minutes of my third inhale, all feelings of connection leave my body. I float above the couch, above the house, above everything.

When I finally awake, the sun is pounding on my neck. My arms, outstretched and numb, drape the couch like a bird frozen in flight. My pants tangle my ankles, my cock sideways and limp. When I could, I swallow dry and unforgiving. A bottle of Jim Beam stands sentinel at my feet. The room is empty. The streets hum low, and the shadows retreat under the mounting sun. The darkness is now long absent.

Reality surfaces from the fog, she is gone; along with my wallet, keys, phone and unconsumed hash. It takes 45 minutes to force myself upright; the residual numbness muddling my limbs uncontrollably frantic. I navigate the hallway, stumbling onto the street to stop the first stranger who crosses the decaying sidewalk. The man pauses, peers deep into me with emptiness, and stands mouth half-cocked. A small amount of dried saliva paints the corners of his lips like a pale, dry clown.

When I ask the day, he mutters reluctantly "Tuesday," drawing out the word as he stumbles, brushing my shoulder with annoyance and pity, his presence leaving a stain on my conscious.

I realize filth has emerged, something previously camouflaged by darkness and anticipation. I have lost time to this place, to this person. I have lost a piece of myself.

When I return to salvage my dignity days later, I find myself rapidly shuffling faces like a deck of cards; each stranger on display in a frantic search for something purposely red.

It was a good hour into the hunt that my body turns cold in contrast to the midday sun.

Motionless, I stand and watch the familiar unfold.

It was her hair he would notice first. Then her tight clothing drawn between clenched fingers exposing a slender, pale thigh.

I watch him; his eyes quickly moving down her dress.

In a blink, they drifted from sight. I sift through the crowd of humanity to the payphone. I lift the receiver. The phone is dead, the cord dangling free in the air.

His Teeth Did Brightly Shine
Andrew Davie

Heavy number three.

Ignacio's entourage.

Bouncer.

How many times, bouncer?

"ID?"

His only line. At least it got him a SAG card.

Stunt double for Brian Bosworth. To think, that was the high.

Then the amphetamines.

Erick pulled the olive colored tank top over his shoulders and watched the material stretch, so it barely covered his engorged frame.

"Looking good Rolfe, five minutes."

The Stage Manager always called him a different German name. Face like a Jelly donut, and body to match, he was an alright guy by beer number three.

When Erick took the gig, it was only going to be for a few months; just until he got himself straightened out. Year five was almost here playing "The German Mechanic," in "The Indiana Jones Stunt Spectacular." Of course, it wasn't so bad. He got laid pretty often and found enough crank to keep his teeth sharp.

Then Janice got the part of Marion.

Like Erick, she'd had her share of Pyrrhic victories. Love wasn't the word for what they had. Maybe radioactive. Most importantly, though, each time he performed the crowd's animosity fed through his body. At night, he would sometimes replay the scene in his head in which The Mechanic eats a right cross from Jones only to lean his head back and laugh in defiance. It would never last long enough.

He fastened the laces on his Doc Martens, and stretched, then made his way out into the hangar. It was packed as it always was on a Saturday. He introduced himself to the crowd and explained the scene they were about to perform, going through how each move had been carefully choreographed and rehearsed. It was complicated but even through the pyrotechnics, whirring propellers, fighting, backstabbing, and betrayal, safety was the number one concern.

He smiled and waved. The crowd ate it up. Erick stepped back and eyed Jason, who stepped forward to say his part.

Indiana Jones

The Star.

College trained.

Here as a stepping stone.

Scumbag of the highest order.

It wasn't long before he'd snaked Janice away.

Erick hit his mark and waited for the scene to begin, slow enmity building within his cavities. He crossed within a few feet of the spinning plane as the crowd screamed. The hot air from an explosion caressed the side of his face.

"Was sind du machst?" Erick said, after "discovering" Indy hidden behind a crate.

What are you doing?

Jason slowly arose, much to the crowd's delight. He threw a looping right hand which missed Erick's nose by a good three inches but from the crowd's perspective appeared to hit the

target; the sound of wet meat slapping the countertop. Erick feigned taking the blow, then laughed. He threw a jab and left hook, which ricocheted off Jason's cheek and forehead.

"Jesus, what the Hell are you doing," Jason said, when he regained his feet.

"Was sind du machst?" Erick spat out through gritted teeth.

"Is this some new improv?" Jason said while circling away, keeping his mic covered with his hand ever the consummate pro. He glanced over to the stage manager looking for some confirmation they'd deviated from the script. Erick kicked him in the chest with the tip of his steel toed boot. Jason toppled backward; the fedora went flying.

Erick picked Jason up off the ground, gripping him by the leather jacket lapels.

The crowd rose to a fever pitch.

"Was. Sind. Du. Maschst?"

He loaded up a right hand. Flawless bicuspid no more. Across the way, Janice watched with indifference. Erick only realized now how much her departure meant to him, another good thing gone.

The buzzing grew louder; the crowd now inflamed.

Tomorrow Erick would be canned. Possibly worse. But tonight, the spotlight would stay on him, if only for a brief while. He lorded over his foe ready to deliver the final blow with the heel of his boot. The buzzing shook the ground. His knee was at a ninety-degree angle when the plane's propeller went through his mind.

Man Painting a Fishing Shack on the Pier
Domenic J. Scopa

There's the possibility, of course, you'll plummet off the scaffold,
yet as always, as I walk here every morning, thinking of something else—
how lobsters navigate the mystifying forests of the seas,
or how the water reflects the final strands of sunlight,
reflects all that's left—

I see the stubborn progress of your brush.

But I beg for you to keep in mind:

if you slip and plummet, swallowed by the ocean's
constant folding and unfolding,

I cannot hurl myself out there to rescue you
in swells like that. Surely you can understand?

I can't be the fisherman to hook and pull you up,
drowned, covered in seaweed—

It can't be me searching in all directions for help,
alone, hearing the *shush* of high tide decompose
the pier's wooden support beams little by little
the way, perhaps, downpours decomposed the swing set
in your backyard, while your mother's voice called you in.

And if you do die, don't make me try to confess
what every moment of your life—
all the heartbeats, all the grinding forward, inch by inch,
of your body through every second—
signifies, when I'm only twenty-four, so overwhelmed,
like a sea lion plucking, floating bits of food,

then suffocating with surprise
when the torpedo frame of a great white launches from below.
Do I really need to tell you why it all matters?
I mean, you'd be dead,
and a crowd would crane to see your corpse
rolling in the waves without breath,
which somehow escaped from you in all your carelessness...
Clearly, it would be cruel—You wouldn't be ready.
But would you recognize it works that way for everyone?
My being there would be cruel, too,
because of my unpreparedness, my shock,
my lack of anything to say except:
you drowned, you drowned,
I didn't help, I didn't help.

Why Are People So Obsessed With Softness?
Kerenza Ryan

I just want to kiss you in the morning,
When the gritty coffee you drank
Makes my mouth as bitter as yours.

I want to rub my face against your stubble,
Have even your skin claw to hold onto me,
Because the day alone will be just as rough.

I want your lips chapped,
Scraping the place where my neck meets my shoulder,
The red lines something to remember you by.

Because, when night comes,
The sheets will be too soft without you in them
And I'd rather have my rugged cop
Than downy feathers.

Real Love Is Steering a Shipwreck to Shore
Justin Karcher

Last few months

I've been gathering filthy barnacles

From the shipwrecks she keeps under her bed

Broken jewels of drowning that show off whatever's left

Of her beauty

She would kill me if she knew but I don't care

The tragedies we cling to are the only things we really own

What separates us from other animals

And this isn't something we need to feel sorry about

Because everybody else is rotting under the weight

Of no dignity

But not us

Never us

And when the time's right

I'll build her a glittering castle

Out of those filthy barnacles

Just to prove

That you can still steer a shipwreck to shore

Because whatever is true

Whatever is noble

Whatever is right

Whatever is pure

Whatever is lovely

Whatever is admirable

Was once stuck in dirt and grime

Sex Before Ash

Ron Androla

On fire

I suck

her bubblegum

nipple

sugared & caramelized

by dream sweat lust.

The sun sifts

& shakes tiny

kief stars like

microscopic

pyramids made of

rain, bells, & scents

down her soft electric belly

-flesh pouring into a wild

flower, a liquid

bowl. Punctured

petals balloon & pull.

My tongue licks low creamy

sky & sour barbed kites. Thorns

inside ripe juices whirlpool & cut.

I drink calcified Cleopatra
whispers from mummified
ammonia-edged moondust.
I cum like hot tar honey, too.

The Star Exhales One Final Breath
James Croal Jackson

I've written the last
I can about you.

No more spirits in this blue and gray
jacket with the familiar coffee stain.

Out of poetry and time to spare,
like December's brisk spit of snow.

The lack of wonderment
and truth.

Exoskeleton
Melissa Fitzgerald

I wonder if lobsters feel lucky
having the extra protection
arthropods do.

Their pink, raw insides sheltered
by tough blackened shells. Must be nice,
I think, to keep such vulnerability covered
and still be known for one's meat.

I have a skeleton too, but it's on the inside,
its strength and breaks sequestered
under skin pale and pink. On the other hand,
I don't get boiled alive,
so I suppose that's lucky, too.

The Glassmaker
Seth Jani

Every moment we are sinking
Into the labyrinth of burnished light.
Into the place where the leaves
Are like contrails,
smudged dragons of smoke.
If this is the same place
That sleep takes us
With its weighted necklace,
Perhaps it is also
The upper echelon of death,
The blue apartment where
Consciousness flicks its moth-like
Wings into silence, into shuddering nights.
On the other side, will we even remember
The textures of fear and longing?

Will we recall how we wished
For crystal bodies impervious to the wind?

What is solid in us
Is also just a veil,
Thin as the delicate stamen
In the glassmaker's imitation rose.

Not a Flowerpot
Richard King Perkins II

Not a flowerpot
but a cast iron cauldron
for soups and stews
and when it begins to rust
it becomes a chamber pot
for different soups and stews
and when it begins to stink
I fill it full of dirt
and grow flowers in it
and when it rusts through
I bury it in a garbage heap
and draw a picture of it
and paint it full of fat flat flowers
to remind me of simpler days
and inspire others
to know what I know
but they can't smell
the flowers or the stink
and most will never taste
the ephemeral blend
of art and soup and stew.

Clandestine Chemistry
Richard King Perkins II

His breath dies, forcefully pushed out by a trick of flames.

Desperate to find a way out of his garage,
trying to exchange the charred energy in his lungs
for the sweet, rich relief of cul de sac air,
he trips over a pile of anti-freeze containers.

The howl of his pit bulls underscores the pitiful drama
and he glances at the living world one final time.
The flexible tubes, Drano, and Epsom salts,
the complexity of ammonia and fuels—

he was so to near creating his finest blend yet.

Bio's:

Domenic Scopa is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee and the 2014 recipient of the Robert K. Johnson Poetry Prize and Garvin Tate Merit Scholarship. He holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. His poetry and translations have been featured in Poetry Quarterly, Reed Magazine, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, Reunion: The Dallas Review, Belleville Park Pages, and many others. He is currently an adjunct professor for the Changing Lives Through Literature program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, New Hampshire Technical Institute, and Plymouth State University. His first book, *Walk-in Closet* (Yellow Chair Press), is forthcoming in 2017. He currently reads manuscripts for Hunger Mountain and Ink Brush Publications.

Kerenza Ryan is a student at Cairn University studying English. Her work has also been published in Blue Lake Review, Peeking Cat Poetry, Poetry Quarterly, and other literary journals. She can be found writing about writing on twitter @KerenzaRyan, or writing her way through college in Bristol, PA.

Justin Karcher is the author of *Tailgating at the Gates of Hell* from Ghost City Press, <http://ghostcitypress.tumblr.com/gcp003>. Recent works have been published in 3:AM Magazine, Plenitude Magazine, Foundlings, The Black Napkin, 63Channels and more. He is the editor-in-chief of Ghost City Review. He is the winner of the 2015 Just Buffalo Literary Center members' writing competition. He tweets @Justin_Karcher.

Ron Androla is a poet/writer who lives with his wife, Ann Androla, a novelist, in Erie, PA. He's written many books (some available for purchase on Amazon), & his writings have been widely published, in print & in cyberspace, in multitudes of odd places since the 1970's. He considers his work as being underground the underground. He hopes so, anyways. He likes to smile & laugh.

James Croal Jackson's poems have appeared in magazines including *The Bitter Oleander*, *Lines+Stars*, and *Columbia College Literary Review*. He is the winner of the 2016 William Redding Memorial Poetry Prize via The Poetry Forum. He lives in Columbus, Ohio. Visit him at jimjakk.com.

Melissa Fitzgerald is a student/writer/Game of Thrones enthusiast. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Leopardskin & Limes*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, and *Star 82 Review*. Her dream guy would be a pirate alien with purple eyes and a knack for well-aimed compliments, but he is yet to appear on Tinder.

Seth Jani currently resides in Seattle, WA and is the founder of Seven CirclePress (www.sevencirclepress.com). His own work has been published widely in such places as *The Coe Review*, *The Hamilton Stone Review*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *VAYAVYA* and *Gravel*. More about him and his work can be found at www.sethjani.com.

Richard King Perkins II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, IL, USA with his wife, Vickie and daughter, Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee whose work has appeared in more than a thousand publications.

Andrea Wyatt is the author of three poetry collections. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Copperfield Review, Gargoyle and Gravel. Wyatt's poem Sunday Morning Gingerbread was nominated for a 2015 Pushcart. She works for the National Park Service in Washington, DC and is associate editor of poetry journal By&By

Mitchell Waldman's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in numerous publications, including *The Waterhouse Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Houston Literary Review*, *Fiction Collective*, *The Faircloth Review*, *Epiphany*, *Wilderness House Literary Magazine*, *The Battered Suitcase*, and many other magazines and anthologies. Waldman is also the author of the novel, *A Face in the Moon*, and the story collection, *Petty Offenses and Crimes of the Heart* (Wind Publications), and has served as Fiction Editor for *Blue Lake Review*. (For more info, see his website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>).

Cathy Ulrich wouldn't want to live in the savanna. Her work has been published in a variety of journals, including *The Aironaut*, *Star 82 Review* and *Fiction Southeast*.

Gary Priest writes short fiction and poetry both of which have been published online and in print. He lives in the UK at the end of a dead-end road, which may explain everything.

Reggie Mills lives in Toronto, Canada where he is addicted to vaporwave.

Nicholas Bernier was born in Newton, MA, and will be attending Williams College in the fall of 2016. He enjoys writing short pieces of fiction that focus on internal conflict, the reality of anxiety, and the interpretation of our most vivid human observations. He wrote "Work at Hylyne" during his last days of high school, trying to get his reader to question the stigma of slip-ups in the human mind – and how emotional observation can be.

Fiction and poetry by Robert Joe Stout has appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Interim*, *Wilderness House Review* and *Prick of the Spindle*, among other magazines. His novel *Where Gringos Don't Belong* recently was issued by Anaphora Literary Press. He also has published the creative nonfiction *The Blood of the Serpent: Mexican Lives* and the nonfiction *Why Immigrants Come to America* and *Hidden Dangers*. He lives in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Evan McMurry received a degree from Reed College and an MFA from Texas-State University San-Marcos. His fiction has appeared in *Post Road* and the *American Drivel Review*, and is forthcoming in *Euphony*. He is currently an editor with ABC News.

Paul Patane is a fiction writer, journalist and screenwriter. Originally from Washington, D.C., he lives in Minneapolis and likes to drink scotch, line edit and go to rock concerts. He's been published in *The Quaker* and *Runestone*, among other places. Paul has a BFA from Hamline University and is in the MFA program at Pacific University.

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Human-shaped, simian-obsessed, robot-fighting, pirate-hearted, storytelling junkie, Mark A. Rayner is an award-winning writer of satirical and speculative fiction. His fiction has appeared in dozens of magazines and ezines, including such publications as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *Broken Pencil*. His most recent novel is *The Fridgularity*.

William Barton is a high school teacher in San Francisco. He was the winner of the 2014 Poets Eleven award presented by former SF poet laureate, Jack Hirschman.

Joe Oppenheimer assists a writers' group in Progress Place, a center for the homeless in Silver Spring, Maryland. He writes both fiction and poetry. Some of each have been published including, recently, the award winning story "Salvation Army," in *Origins*. Earlier he was a mathematically oriented social science professor.